



RELIGIONS IN DIALOGUE | 20

Carola Roloff, Wolfram Weisse,
Michael Zimmermann (Eds.)

Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Societies

WAXMANN

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edited by Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse
Academy of World Religions,
University of Hamburg

No. 20

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Content

<i>Carola Roloff, Wolfram Weisse & Michael Zimmermann</i> Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Societies	7
<i>Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi</i> Manifesting the Buddha Dharma in a Secular Age	17
<i>Michael von Brück</i> Dialogue or Communion? What Buddhists and Christians Can Contribute in Responding to the Crisis of Humankind	33
<i>Sallie B. King</i> Otherness as a Challenge to Buddhism	47
<i>Volker Küster</i> The Arts of Buddhist-Christian-Encounter	63
<i>Mario Poceski</i> Philosophical Reflections, Identity Formations, and Buddhist Responses to Religious Diversity	85
<i>Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā</i> Reflections on Truth and Experience in Early Buddhist Epistemology	101
<i>Jay L. Garfield</i> Buddhist Contributions to Contemporary Moral Reflection Selflessness and Moral Responsiveness	135
<i>Yangsi Rinpoche</i> Words Like Gold Reflections on Bringing Dharma to the West	153
<i>Thea Mohr</i> Traditional Buddhism in Asia and Modern Western Buddhism A Cultural Reflexive Approach	165
<i>Sander G. Tideman</i> Buddhist Economics Could Buddhism provide the intellectual foundations for designing a sustainable economic system?	185

B. Alan Wallace

Restoring a Spirit of Radical Empiricism in Science and Religion:

A Buddhist View 213

André van der Braak

Reimagining Buddhism in a Secular Age: Stephen Batchelor's Secular Buddhism . . 231

Huimin Bhikshu

Challenges of Buddhism in this Era of Disruptions

The Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (DILA) and its Focus on

“Mind-Life and Environment” (心靈環保) 245

Miao Guang

Chinese Buddhism in Contemporary Society

Revitalization and Innovation 261

Jan-Ulrich Sobisch

Buddhism and Science – Doing the Splits? 279

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Matching Concepts, Transgressing Boundaries:

Buddhist Transmission Strategies in the International Buddhist

Women's Movement 297

Authors and Editors 307

Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Societies

Introduction

The growing religious and cultural pluralization of European societies means that we are neighbors to both an increasing number of Buddhist immigrants and ‘Western’ converts. Buddhist Studies is the fastest-growing subdiscipline of religious studies in the world. Germany, for the past two centuries, has been a leader in Buddhist Studies. Therefore one would expect that German institutes of world religions would be the leaders in innovative studies. Surprisingly, however, and different from Islamic, Alevi, and Jewish theologies, so far no course in Buddhist – or Hinduist – “theology” has been established at *any* European university (cf. Roloff, 2020).

In the West Buddhists are not only engaged in the teachings, philosophies, and practices of Buddhism to enrich their way of life. The Buddhist influence on Western culture is strong in arts and social action, in environmentalism, psychotherapy, and pedagogics, and has even found its way into colloquial language and many people’s everyday lives where meditation and mindfulness exercises help them develop a greater calm and mental stability. This is the field where we find the main intersection with Buddhism so far, i.e., in the neurosciences and psychology relating to mindfulness and meditation which are increasingly applied in the secular field.

In the West, Buddhism is often merely understood as a kind of philosophy and lifestyle, but actually, it is an immensely diverse system of beliefs and practices, which under the impact of global social changes and the latest findings in science and technology, finds itself confronted with great challenges: On the one hand, it is met with great interest. On the other hand, it is undergoing vast internal changes which prohibit simplistic stereotypes and anachronistic definitions (cf. Roloff, Weisse, Zimmermann 2011).

In Europe, Buddhism is confronted with a very different Judeo-Christian-based culture as well as with the values of European enlightenment and human rights. Therefore the transfer as a religion needs a relation to already existing values which can only take place through a process decisively supported by dialogue (cf. Roloff & Weisse 2015). Interreligious dialogue – or dialogical theology (cf. Amirpur, Knauth, Roloff, Weisse 2016) – has not only proven to be an important element for a deeper understanding of one’s faith, but it also makes it possible to learn from each other as equals.

Against this background, in June 2018, the Academy of World Religions and the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Hamburg (Germany), in cooperation with the *Studienstiftung für Buddhismus (Foundation for Buddhist Studies)*, invited top scholars and representatives of the three mainstream traditions

of Buddhism, i.e., Theravāda, East Asian Buddhism (including Zen), and Tibetan Buddhism, to discuss, for three days, questions such as:

- Does Buddhism matter today? Can the teaching and practice of Buddhism enrich the world today? And if so, what would this contribution look like?
- Where and to what degree can and must Buddhism adapt to its new context? Which are the sociological and intercultural aspects that have to be considered in the process of establishing Buddhism in a new non-Asian context?
- What is considered to be the core teaching or practice that cannot be subject to revision or adaptation? Which elements of Buddhism already exist, perhaps in a new look, in our Western heritage? And what is really new or very different in Buddhism and therefore deserves our special attention? And what is perhaps missing?

This volume is based on the papers presented and discussed during this conference and has the full and extended papers including individual reflection on the discussions during the conference and its outcomes.¹

In the long-term – similar to Islamic and Alevi theologies – the Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg may offer an interdisciplinary course on Buddhism and Dialogue. The organizers had hoped that during the conference they would be able to also discuss which competencies/skills should be acquired by the students attending such a course, and how we could get there methodically. Unfortunately this was not possible due to a lack of time. Moreover, such a discussion may need a different setting; perhaps a one-week intensive workshop on religious hermeneutics in contemporary societies attended by 20–25 experts from the different world religions, philosophies, and history of religions. As far as Buddhism is concerned, it became clear that the transmission of Buddhism to the West necessarily involves engagement with canonical, hermeneutical practices and the development of new hermeneutical approaches to reconcile multiple Buddhist traditions or, at least, to mediate between them and to provide compelling interpretations of Buddhist doctrine for people today. Hence there is a need both to assess critically canonical Buddhist approaches to hermeneutics and to develop cross-cultural hermeneutical methods for the contemporary interpretation of Buddhist ideas.

Of special interest for this volume is: how far Buddhism can give impulses within the following areas:

- Intra-Buddhist and Interreligious Dialogue – Buddhism in the Area of Tension Between Tradition and Modernity
- Philosophy and Applied Ethics
- Ethics and Meditation: Aggression, Violence, Conflict Solution and Peace

1 For a complete video recording of the conference including the discussions see Lecture2go – the University of Hamburg – Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Societies: <https://lecture2go.uni-hamburg.de/l2go/-/get/v/23252> (22.10.2020).

- Impulses for Secular Domains – Mindfulness, Psychotherapy, Education, Spiritual Care/Chaplaincy, Medical Applications
- Engaged Buddhism – Contemporary Issues.

Not all themes and questions raised could be answered during the conference, but we can take what was presented as a first insight into the current state of research and discussion on which further research projects can be based.

Contributions of the publication

Intra-Buddhist and Interreligious Dialogue – Buddhism in the Area of Tension Between Tradition and Modernity

SALLIE B. KING, in her essay “Otherness as a Challenge to Buddhism” discusses whether ethics are rooted in the idea of the intrinsic interconnectedness of human beings or in respecting otherness and difference, and what this means concerning Buddhism. She puts forward the thesis that the idea of otherness is an important dialogical concept for Buddhism. Referring to a famous Buddhist text by Śāntideva, she demonstrates that in Buddhism difference and otherness are recognized, but not emphasized, and asks whether the Buddhist approach excluded the admiration of otherness, which brings out difference and distinction. Based on this she reflects the importance of otherness from a sociological point of view as well as from the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ view. For her, this is a profound challenge for Buddhist thought and at the same time a rare opportunity for substantial growth. King finally highlights the relevance of two questions: how contemporary Buddhists deal with women in general and with those women who wish for full ordination in particular, and how Buddhists deal with the Rohingya in Myanmar.

MICHAEL VON BRÜCK, in “Dialogue or Communion? What Buddhists and Christians Can Contribute in Responding to the Crisis of Humankind”, argues that the potentials of Buddhist analysis and practice and Christian hope and mental conversion are not yet exhausted, but might be developed by a new understanding of communion and cooperation in developing human life in such a way that a sustainable future is possible. He points out that Buddhism as well as Christianity are pluralistic and reflects on the change that has been taking place within Buddhism during the last few centuries in Asia as well as in the West. Discussing individualism, based on self-aggrandizement and self-centeredness rooted in fear and anguish, he argues that one of the great potentials of Buddhism and Christianity is to provide mental training (including the cultivation of emotions) to educate human beings most thoroughly. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of deepening interreligious dialogue with the three Abrahamic traditions on a grassroots level to shape Buddhism’s future direction, especially since many of the teachers now spreading the *dharma* have a Jewish or Christian background.

VEN. BHIKKHU BODHI, in “Manifesting the Buddha Dharma in a Secular Age”, as a contemporary witness, reflects on what made Buddhism so attractive to many people in the West in the 1960s. He identifies three contemporary approaches to Buddhism and argues that this interest came from a predominantly secular orientation rather than from a religious quest. He then describes the split into “Traditional Buddhism” and “Secular Buddhism” and sets up the thesis that this dichotomy conceals a third alternative that may be *the most prevalent expression* today. He calls it “Immanent Buddhism”. These three modes of contemporary Buddhist practice would not be fixed constants, but rather fluent. He underlines that Buddhists can offer practices to the secular world that help people to deal more skillfully with the problems of modern life and concludes with a self-critical reflection on the need for Socially Engaged Buddhism and what Buddhists can learn from Christianity and Judaism.

VOLKER KÜSTER, in “The Arts of Buddhist-Christian-Encounter” points out that Christian dialogue initiatives are often regarded with suspicion by representatives of other religions because they suspect a hidden missionary agenda and a continuation of the colonial enterprise. Against this background, he reflects on the relationship between dialogue and mission and introduces a typology of interreligious – especially Buddhist-Christian – encounter through the visual arts, drawing on terminologies and theories from Intercultural Theology and Comparative Religion. He distinguishes between syncretism and fundamentalism as the two extreme positions of interreligious encounter. In the arts, syncretism finds its expression in iconographic exchange, often referred to as accommodation, inculturation, or contextualization. He emphasizes the potential of arts for creating a third space for dialogue. This applies to religious art as well as to religiously autonomous artists. Küster demonstrates how syncretism happens wherever religions meet, often subconsciously, and that iconoclasm cannot only be found in Abrahamic faith but also in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Philosophy and Applied Ethics

MARIO POCESKI, in “Philosophical Reflections, Identity Formations, and Buddhist Responses to Religious Diversity”, analyzes the intersections and mutual influences among three major areas of Buddhist thought and practice: 1. philosophical reflection on the nature of reality and the meaning of life, 2. the formation of distinct religious identities, and 3. the engagement with other religious traditions. He also explores possible Buddhist contributions to ongoing efforts towards tackling some of the major challenges brought to the fore by notable increases in religious and cultural diversity, observable in a wide range of contemporary societies in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. He points out that although there is a tendency to overestimate the importance of specific doctrines concerning everyday practice, doctrines are still able to exert subtle influences on groups and individuals alike, in terms of shaping their worldviews, identities, and behaviors. In his view, a special potential

of Buddhism for dialogue and comparative analysis is the philosophy of pragmatism as formulated by William James. For Poceski a basic prerequisite for genuine understanding and fruitful engagement in interreligious dialogue is the rebuttal and rejection of rigid dogmatism, along with the questioning of all absolutist truth claims, religious or secular.

VEN. BHIKKHUNĪ DHAMMADINNĀ, in “Reflections on Truth and Experience in Early Buddhist Epistemology”, highlights the soteriologically informed character of the Buddha’s claim to truth. She points out that when truth, identical with Nirvāṇa, is fully realized, ethical perfection becomes spontaneous and is no longer a moral imperative. In Buddhist understanding, truth is not unfalsifiable, but can be verified. She further argues that whereas in early Buddhism an epistemic dichotomy between conventional and ultimate truth does not exist, a clear distinction is made between what is epistemically and soteriologically true and false. Ven. Dhammadinnā also discusses the ‘experiential’ dimension of truth and highlights the fact that early Buddhist thought considers pure sense perception and conceptual activity of the mind as interrelated processes which bring forth the subjective experience of the world. She further discusses the experiential nature of Nirvāṇa and the early Buddhist notion of contact which explains the idea of attaining the cessation of contact with the realization of Nirvāṇa. Finally, she reflects on the intersubjective validity of the Buddha’s liberating knowledge and on the early Buddhist choice to refrain from adopting a rhetoric of subjective experience.

JAY L. GARFIELD, in “Buddhist Contributions to Contemporary Moral Reflection: Selflessness and Moral Responsiveness”, focuses on what Buddhist moral reflection can contribute to the West. He cites three conditions for dialogue to become fruitful and addresses three aspects of ethical thought in which dialogue can be expected to be beneficial. Garfield argues that in the case of ethical dialogue between the Buddhist and Western traditions for most Western moral theorists ethical cultivation is primarily concerned with “what we *do*,” while for most Buddhist moral theorists it is primarily concerned with “how we *see*.” He points out that the Buddhist approach to ethics rejects the “image of an autonomous self independently giving rise through mysterious free agent causation to actions.” The Buddhist metaphysical account of the person begins with the doctrine of no-self, the view that we are nothing but a continuum of psychophysical processes in open causal relation with the external world, with no core, no independent basis, and no supernatural existence. Finally, Garfield sharpens the question of why he thinks that Buddhist ethics can be a useful conversational partner for the Western ethicist in the following way: Why should a committed egoist care about morality?

YANGSI RINPOCHE, in “Words Like Gold: Reflections on Bringing Dharma to the West”, explores how Tibetan Buddhism can be adapted in a Western context holistically at the level of philosophy, practice, and institutional structures to build healthy and long-lasting roots in the West. He includes reflections and suggestions from his personal experience as a Geshe and director of the Buddhist Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon, which integrates the disciplines of traditional Tibetan Buddhist

education, modern Western academics, and a commitment to active social service. In his view, using logic and reason and applying this to one's situation is the key to positive inner transformation and to overcoming negative habitual tendencies. He points out that Christianity has well-established structures and institutions to serve its community from birth to death and suggests that Buddhists should be flexible and create similar structures so that Buddhism can deeply take root. Instead of shying away from its Judeo-Christian heritage, the West should take inspiration from its background and relate to Tibetan Buddhism as far as it seems advisable.

Ethics and Meditation: Aggression, Violence, Conflict Solution and Peace

THEA MOHR, in "Traditional Buddhism in Asia and Modern Western Buddhism – A Cultural Reflexive Approach", analyzes various aspects and influences of the long process of reviving the nuns' ordination in the Tibetan tradition from a perspective of cross-cultural studies. She argues that Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, founded in 1987, in the three decades of its development, has faced and resolved numerous cross-cultural conflicts and that understanding these challenges and approaches to resolve them may help us to also understand other cross-cultural conflicts whether related to religion or not. Mohr describes and reflects on certain central developments during the "First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Saṃgha: Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya and Ordination" (Hamburg 2007). She explains how the Western approach and expectation to solve the conflict of the nuns' full ordination rights is more of a legalistic approach, whereas the Tibetan nuns themselves consider the important ritual aspect as embedded in an existential act within their spiritual growth. The question is whether and how these different positions can be considered two sides of the same coin.

SANDER TIDEMAN, analyzes whether Buddhism, taking the four Noble Truths as a framework, could enrich and expand the scope of our economic thinking and help foster the leadership needed to usher in a new economic system. He points out that conventional economic thinking falls short in dealing with the multiple challenges society is facing, at the level of macroeconomics (nations) as well as at the level of microeconomics (business). Tideman analyzes the problems of our current economic model from a Buddhist point of view and maps out the economic ideas that are based on a misperception of reality (ignorance) and how they should be adjusted to accord with reality (wisdom) to alleviate continued economic suffering. He argues that these adjusted ideas could serve as the foundations for designing a more sustainable economic system: one that takes the needs of all forms of life seriously, not just the material needs of humans. In Tideman's view, the Buddhist worldview of interconnectedness and its extensive models of cause and effect, as well as the central role that our mind plays in determining outcomes, offer an intellectual framework that can expand the scope of our contemporary economic thinking.

BRUCE ALAN WALLACE, who was a participant and interpreter at the first Mind and Life Conference in 1987 and continued in this capacity through 2009, claims

in his paper “Restoring a Spirit of Radical Empiricism in Science and Religion: A Buddhist View” that originally not only science, but also Buddhism had “embraced the ideals of open-mindedness, empiricism, and rationality to explore the nature of reality”. For a contemporary rapprochement of these two disciplines, he suggests a “return” to their roots of radical, self-critical empiricism as it is understood by William James (1842–1910) and which stands in direct opposition to dogmatism. He criticizes the modern, materialistic scientific view of the universe and the place of humanity in it which excludes consciousness and all other non-physical phenomena. In his view, modern physics has reached a point where meaningful dialogue and joint research between scientists and contemplatives can take place. For the first time, the scientific approach of exploring reality from the outside can be united with the contemplative approach of exploring reality from the inside, which may lead to a nondualistic view of ourselves and the intertwined worlds around us. In this context, he discusses the foundations for any kind of dialogue between different traditions such as science and Buddhism.

Impulses for Secular Domains – Mindfulness, Psychotherapy, Education, Spiritual Care/Chaplaincy, Medical Applications

ANDRÉ VAN DER BRAAK, in his paper, “Reimagining Buddhism in a Secular Age: Stephen Batchelor’s Secular Buddhism”, illuminates the encounter of Asian Buddhist traditions with Western modernity over the past century and the Western academic distinguishing between the “two Buddhisms”, i.e., immigrant or ethnic Buddhism versus convert or “white” Buddhism.² Taking the post-academic training program for Buddhist Chaplains at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 2012 as an example, having Charles Taylor in mind, he explores the possibilities for reimagining the Buddhist tradition for our Western secular age and identifies three approaches to reimagining Buddhism in the West: (1) Secular Buddhism, (2) Existentialist Buddhism, and (3) Traditional Buddhism. In this context, van der Braak analyzes to what extent and in what sense Batchelor’s “Secular Buddhism” is secular, and to what extent and in what sense his reimagining of Buddhism as “Secular Buddhism” can be placed in Taylor’s first category of secular humanism. Van der Braak thinks that a new Buddhist path has to lie beyond transcendence and immanence. It has to be a path that aims at directly addressing and transforming global and social conflict just as much as individual suffering.

VEN. HUIMIN BHIKSHU, in “Challenges of Buddhism in this Era of Disruptions: The Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (DILA) and its focus on ‘Mind-Life and Environment’ (心靈環保)”, emphasizes that the ongoing encounter between Buddhism and contemporary global societies has already made a lasting mark on both

2 It remains unclear whom this refers to and whether this includes black Buddhists in America today. See, for example, <https://www.lionsroar.com/power-heart-black-and-buddhist-in-america/>

sides. He discusses the relatively recent development of “Secular Buddhism” and “Buddhist-inspired mindfulness practices” penetrating medical fields while seeing Buddhism as a more rational and “less religious” religion. He argues that the crisis of ecological systems is related to human behavior and that needs and wants lead to ecological disruptions. As a solution, he first demonstrates how Buddhist thought and practice have been inspiring the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (DILA) in Taipei to construct links in the educational field between individual and social action and how the Institute implemented educational (training) methods in the field of “new religious services”. This contribution points to the remarkable fact that the National Taiwan University Hospital and Dharma Drum Institute of the Liberal Arts introduced a “Buddhist Chaplain Training Program” and a “Natural Burial” as a case that might reflect caring for the environment and allow future generations to enjoy a sustainable environment.

Engaged Buddhism – Contemporary Issues

VEN. BHIKṢUṂĪ MIAO GUANG, in her contribution “Chinese Buddhism in Contemporary Society. Revitalization and Innovation”, against the background of Western definitions of religions, explains why in her view religion in the 21st century is simply a genuinely inseparable part of daily life. She discusses the orientation shifts between traditional Buddhist practices and modern Humanistic Buddhist approaches which are increasingly popular in Taiwan. She starts identifying several characteristics of what she calls “Pre-humanistic Buddhism” during the last 400 years in Taiwan: the combination of Buddhism with folk beliefs, the rising of vegetarian sects (administered by laypeople), and the effects the Japanese occupation had on creating today’s Taiwanese Buddhism’s specific identity. She explains how her master, Venerable Master Hsing Yun, founder of Fo Guang Shan Monastery, in 1967, succeeded in bringing about an orientation shift to Buddhism by revitalizing Buddhist tradition and installing reform measures. These measures placed a strong emphasis on improving one’s own life in the here and therefore showed their relevance for contemporary society.

JAN-ULRICH SOBISCH, in “Buddhism and Science – Doing the Splits?” against the background of a new movement of “Secular Buddhism”, asks three questions concerning traditional Buddhism: how open it is for scientific discoveries in the material world, whether its practice methods are open to a critical examination, and whether these methods can be investigated with objective (i.e., scientific) methods. Furthermore, he discusses some aspects of the role of empiricism in this context and the significance of scientific and Buddhist ideas of truth. The latter includes a sub-theme, namely the problem of the relation between Buddhist practice, experience, and theories. He argues that in Early Buddhism – as well as in later Buddhism – one can find the same idea of an ultimate insight that is independent of the presence of a Buddha. From a Buddhist point of view, the fundamental nature of reality is accessible to anyone who takes the trouble to search for it. Sobisch suggests to those

strongly interested in Buddhist empiricism to search above all for expressions of experience and instructions derived directly from them rather than from theoretical debates *about* them.

VEN. BHIKṢUṆĪ KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO, in “Matching Concepts, Transgressing Boundaries: Buddhist Transmission Strategies in the International Buddhist Women’s Movement” seeks to identify key strategies that Buddhist women have developed and deployed to achieve their goal of an enlightened society. Since 1987, Buddhist women from around the world have been uniting on a grassroots level, taking more active roles in working for the welfare of human society. Today, the Buddhist women’s movement Sakyadhita, which is transgressive by its very nature and breaks through social, cultural, and conceptual boundaries and barriers, has become a highly dynamic forum representing the interests of over 300 million women worldwide. The author argues that against all odds, Buddhist women have demonstrated how human beings – when they unite their talents, resources, and efforts – can change attitudes toward a frequently disparaged social category and help reconfigure social and religious structures.

Attempting to implement Buddhist ideals of loving-kindness and understanding, along with liberal doses of respect and mutual appreciation, the movement Sakyadhita has exceeded all expectations to become a successful example of women’s enormous potential for global transformation.

Impulses

The contributions in this volume make it clear that indeed Buddhism matters in the West and has already a strong impact on contemporary societies, making its contribution to major global challenges of the 21st century. Some spheres in which Buddhism can give new impulses for research have been identified and the authors, from their long-term engagement with Buddhism, discuss what the contribution can look like, but not without relating to the new context. To this end, the various professional perspectives on Buddhism in research and practice must be brought together in a transdisciplinary way to facilitate dialogue, networking, cooperation, and rearrangement. Buddhist thought and practices in educational processes require an expanded, research-based offer for professionalization in the sense of applied science. There is an ongoing interest in Buddhist theories and techniques in society as a whole for which universities should make space.

Acknowledgment

This publication depended on the work of and cooperation with many, to whom we would like to express our gratitude at this point.

First and foremost, we would like to thank the colleagues who are represented in this volume by their contributions.

Many thanks also go to the organizers and moderators of the international and interdisciplinary conference “Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Societies” in 2018. It was jointly held by the Academy of World Religions and the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Hamburg in cooperation with the Studienstiftung für Buddhismus (Foundation for Buddhist Studies), co-funded by the following foundations: Gustav-Prietsch-Stiftung, Garchen-Stiftung, intersein stiftung, and Dr. Nelly Hahne-Stiftung.

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Manifesting the Buddha Dharma in a Secular Age

1. Trouble in paradise

While Western interest in Buddhism may have blossomed during the Sixties, Westerners had been attracted to Buddhism even as far back as the late nineteenth century, when translations of authentic Buddhist texts started to appear. In the early decades of the twentieth century, before jet airliners made cross-continental travel easy, seekers from the West endured the hardship of journeying by sea to distant Asian lands, some to be ordained as Buddhist monks. In the U.S. interest in Buddhism gradually grew in the 1950s, but it was only in the 1960s that attraction to Buddhism – and for many, a total commitment to the Dharma – took off at an exponential rate. Why this sudden spurt of interest in Buddhism at just this time?

My concern here is not with historical specifics, but with the changes in consciousness that opened many Westerners to the Dharma and eventually led them to embrace Buddhism. Among the factors responsible were the loss of faith in the established religions of the West, the breakdown of a unified narrative about the place of humankind in the cosmos, the spread of existentialist modes of thought into the general culture, the increasing interest in psychology as providing a scientific understanding of the mind, and the use of psychotherapy to deal with the tension, perplexity, and alienation of modern life.

Psychotherapy had undergone a process of evolution that took it from the psychoanalytical system of Freud, with its mechanistic premises and dark pessimism, to more optimistic forms that affirmed the positive side of human nature. Humanistic psychologists encouraged clients to change their state of mind and behavior from compulsive reactions to healthier ones with more productive self-awareness. In the late 1960s humanistic psychology gave birth to transpersonal psychology, which endeavored to integrate the spiritual and transcendent dimensions of human experience with a scientific understanding of the mind. Psychedelic drugs, too, had opened up hidden dimensions of the mind and stimulated interest in Eastern spirituality.

Once those in the cultural vanguard came to see the mind as the ultimate source of meaning and purpose, of wellness and happiness, at least a few realized that to fully tap the mind's potentials a more radical method of inner transformation was needed than psychedelic drugs or psychotherapy could provide. Some explored meditation as the means of inner change, and as part of this eastward turn interest in Buddhism expanded and gradually culminated in the appearance of Western manifestations of the Dharma.

2. Three contemporary approaches to the Dharma

This brief survey of the factors behind the upsurge of Western interest in Buddhism during the 1960s shows us why Western Buddhism has taken on a largely secular shape focused on existential and psychological issues rather than the pursuit of liberation in the sense advocated in the texts of classical Buddhism. It has taken this shape, I would argue, because the Buddhist pioneers of the 1960s approached it from a predominantly secular orientation rather than as the solution to a religious quest. Buddhism could exercise this kind of appeal because its nontheistic teachings seemed to be exceptionally “secular” from the outset. It laid down a clear analysis of human suffering and a program of mental training that could be adopted independently of any belief system and could lead to such goals as self-knowledge, inner peace, happiness, and elevated states of consciousness.

As an increasing number of Westerners took up Buddhist practice, a complex tapestry began to appear among Western Buddhists that extended even beyond the divisions between the major Buddhist traditions into Theravāda, East Asian Mahāyāna, and Tibetan. The complicating factor was the introduction of various modernizing and secularizing strands into each of those traditions. Of course, modernized versions of the Dharma were already being constructed by the intellectual elite among Asian Buddhists, who responded to the challenges posed by the West, especially Christian missionaries, by depicting Buddhism as scientific, rational, psychological, and socially progressive.¹ But there was still a significant difference between the roles modernizing interpretations played in Asian Buddhism and in newly emergent Western Buddhism. In Asia, the modernizing trends were superimposed on a well-established foundation of Buddhist tradition, which served as the substratum for the modern interpretations. Modernized interpretations were partly a defensive maneuver intended to defend the Dharma against external criticism and partly a way to make Buddhism an attractive alternative to seekers from the West disenchanted with both Christianity and secular materialism.

In the West, on the other hand, the substratum for the modernizing tendencies was a montage made up of various secular strains of thought, and the task faced by the young Western interpreters was to integrate the intellectual content of the Dharma with the dominant secular worldview. In the initial stages the secularized approach probably occurred imperceptibly, as Westerners brought their own horizons of understanding into their encounters with the Dharma, which perhaps appealed to many who were exposed to the more rationalized forms being offered by modern Asian interpreters. In time, however, a decisive breach with Buddhist tradition occurred when a version of the Dharma emerged that called itself Secular Buddhism. This approach is perhaps most clearly articulated in Stephen Batchelor’s works, as we will see below, but it is not confined to them.

I provisionally call the two camps “Traditional Buddhism” and “Secular Buddhism.” Although there are problems with these expressions, I use them as terms

1 On this, see in particular McMahan, 2008, pp. 61–116.

of convenience, as representing not fixed and easily definable categories but as the end points of a spectrum of possibilities that may blend in any given person's relationship to the teachings. The two categories primarily diverge from each other over their different perspectives on the human condition. Traditional Buddhism sees human life as literally embedded in the beginningless chain of rebirths called *saṃsāra*, which includes not only past and future lives but multiple planes of existence above and below the human plane. Life in all realms is *dukkha*. The Buddha appeared in the world to discover the way out of this predicament, the way that leads to *nirvāṇa*, which does not mean merely a state of sublime peace and bliss experienced in this life but a state of irreversible release from the beginningless round of rebirths.

Most practitioners in the traditional mode hope to make gradual progress from one life to the next until their faculties are mature enough to realize the final goal. Those with more mature faculties may aspire to cut the ties binding them to the round of rebirths and win the bliss of *nirvāṇa* within this life itself. Followers of the bodhisattva vehicle, the traditional Mahāyāna path, seek to develop the *pāramitās* or transcendent virtues over many eons until they qualify to attain Buddhahood. But what is common to all these practitioners is an acceptance of the classical Buddhist framework of rebirth and karma, understood as a moral force with consequences extending beyond the present life.

Secular Buddhists, in contrast, claim to begin with our immediate existential situation, without relying on beliefs about past and future lives. They generally do not accept the teachings of rebirth and karma or acknowledge any state of liberation other than a relative freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion that can be achieved through Buddhist practice. Most regard rebirth merely as a plank of ancient Indian metaphysics that has to be deleted in order to bring the Dharma into accord with the naturalistic worldview of the present age.

I believe this dichotomy of Traditional Buddhism and Secular Buddhism conceals a third alternative that may actually be *the most prevalent expression* of the Dharma today. This is what I will call "Immanent Buddhism," by which I mean an approach to the Dharma that avoids doctrinal issues to focus almost entirely on existential and psychological aims. Those who fall within this category see in Buddhism a practical means of inner transformation, for recovering our connections with our own inner depths, with other people, and with the natural world. The Dharma, as practiced in this mode, is essentially a set of tools for transforming the mind and healing our inner wounds.

While proponents of Secular Buddhism explicitly reject traditional Buddhist beliefs, those who adopt the "immanent" mode simply treat these beliefs as irrelevant. They see no need to reject them on rational grounds or to ponder whether they are true or false, valid or invalid. Whereas the secularists study the texts of classical Buddhism and try to interpret them in purely secular terms, those who follow the "immanent" approach seldom struggle to determine their relationship to formal Buddhist doctrine. Rather, they randomly draw from the canonical texts whatever

teachings serve their purposes, often blending meditation with techniques derived from more humanistic models of psychotherapy.

Although I have given this approach a distinct designation, I must emphasize that *Immanent Buddhism is not a self-defined movement* but an orientation that operates below the threshold of conscious recognition. While this orientation may be shared to some extent by all forms of contemporary Western Buddhism, the focus on immanent concerns may be most apparent in the Western offshoot of the Theravāda tradition called Vipassana Buddhism.

The transmission of Vipassana meditation from East to West has led to something more than a simple repackaging of the practice in American cultural forms and language. It has brought about a change in the premises and the goal of the practice itself, transposing it from the sphere of transcendent realization to the domain of purely immanent aims and objectives.

One support for this approach, commonly cited by contemporary Western teachers, is the Kālāma Sutta,² a discourse in which the Buddha tells a group of inquirers not to rely on external authorities such as tradition, lineage, scriptures, and charismatic teachers, but to determine for themselves which things are unwholesome and which are wholesome, which things lead to happiness and which to suffering. Such instructions could be read as justifying agnosticism about ideas in the canonical texts that do not match one's personal experience, particularly statements about karma and rebirth.

Another theme that lent itself to an immanent interpretation was the Buddha's insistence that what he teaches is not a speculative system but just suffering and the end of suffering, a program laid out in the four noble truths. While the four truths are promulgated against the background of a worldview that includes rebirth, modernist Western exponents of the Dharma have given precedence to a psychological understanding of the truths, an approach that resonated well with the pivotal role that psychology came to play in Western culture in the late twentieth century.

Traditional Theravāda aims at *vimutti* (Skt. *vimukti*), liberation from the mind's defilements and from the cycle of repeated birth and death. In contrast, teachers of Immanent Buddhism emphasize the freedom to participate more actively, joyfully, and spontaneously *in the world*, to participate in the dance of life with calm and clear awareness. As Jack Kornfield puts it, with awakening "we are now truly alive, able to care, to work, to love, to enter life fully, with an open heart." (Kornfield, 2008, p. 395)

It is likely that the basis for this shift from the transcendent orientation of Asian Buddhist tradition toward a type of Buddhism focused on immanent aims was the convergence of various secularizing trends in Western culture that occurred during the late 1960s. Even the language used by experimental psychology during this period seems to anticipate the kind of terminology the early Western teachers of insight meditation used to describe the practice they had learned in Asia. For instance, Fritz

2 Aṅguttara Nikāya I 188–93. References to Pāli texts are to the editions of the Pāli Text Society.

Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, stressed the need to be fully aware of “the present moment” as a way to get “in touch with thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they occur from moment to moment.” (Perls, 1947, quoted in Janov, n.d., n.p.) Such styles of expression must have been picked up by the early Buddhist pioneers of the Sixties and then used to explain the Dharma they learned from their Asian masters. It was in this way that the practice of meditation, particularly insight meditation, came to be seen primarily as a program for anchoring attention in the present, devoid of any religious basis or transcendent aim.

Since the naturalistic worldview rejects all beliefs in an objective moral order etched into the cosmos, it is quite understandable that those who subscribe to this worldview would be disposed to a purely immanent approach to Buddhist teachings. This immanent disposition does not function primarily as an explicit conceptual ground for understanding and practicing the Dharma. Rather, it is tacitly assumed, ticking in the background as an implicit “operating system” for the ways contemporary Westerners approach and appropriate the Dharma.

While the framework seems self-evident, impervious to questioning, it is actually the product of various strains of thought that came together in the middle and late Sixties, molding the outlook and expectations of the pioneers of contemporary Western Buddhism. Thus, if Westerners who come to the Dharma today find immediate rapport with a purely immanent interpretation, this is because they share the same modernist worldview as those who teach it. Approaching the Dharma with the premise that scientific naturalism holds the key to knowledge and truth, and that psychological transformation is the key to happiness, they see in the Dharma a system of thought and practice that, with a few revisions, could easily be brought into alignment with those premises.

The above discussion shows that the division of contemporary Western Buddhists into two opposed camps, Traditional Buddhism and Secular Buddhism, is an oversimplification. What we find rather are three broad modalities that run largely parallel but often intersect or shade into each other, yielding great diversity. These three modalities constitute different life worlds in which Buddhist practitioners dwell, three ways in which they encounter the Dharma and live their lives through its lens.

The three are not sealed off from one another, and people may casually migrate among them. In practice, all three modalities will largely be occupied with immanent concerns. Such concerns are not the unique preserve of those I am calling Immanent Buddhists – not by a long shot. Where they differ is in the background against which they pursue these ends and the ultimate purpose that guides their efforts. The traditionalist will see them as part of their long journey through *saṃsāra*, as stepping stones toward a transcendent goal, whether conceived as *nirvāṇa* or as Buddhahood. The secularist and immanent practitioner will pursue them against a naturalistic backdrop of understanding and focus on the immediate concrete benefits they yield.

3. Toward a critical assessment

Given these three modes of contemporary Buddhist practice, I now want to inquire whether they are equally viable as vehicles for carrying the Buddha's teaching forward into the modern world. Secular Buddhists certainly claim that their version of the Dharma best meets the needs of modernity. Batchelor, for instance, is apprehensive that if we do not cast off the belief structure of Asian Buddhism "the dharma might find itself condemned to an increasingly marginal existence in mainstream culture, catering only to those who are willing to embrace the worldview of ancient India." He even argues that "the cultural divide that separates traditional Buddhism from modernity is so great" that it may not suffice merely to modify a traditional form of Buddhism to better meet the needs of contemporary practitioners. He sees all forms of traditional Buddhism, from Theravāda through Zen and Shin to Vajrayāna, as based on the same "operating system," the soteriology of ancient India, which he calls "Buddhism 1.0." He proposes replacing this with a new operating system, one based on a naturalistic worldview, which he calls "Buddhism 2.0." (Batchelor, 2012, p. 90) Other secularists may not go as far as Batchelor, but virtually all hold that the doctrinal framework of Traditional Buddhism is no longer relevant to people struggling to make sense of their lives in our secular modern world.³

Gil Fronsdal may be taken to represent the approach of Immanent Buddhism. His position partly corresponds with that of the secularists, but it avoids their polemical tone and drastic attempts at revision. Although he is an avid student of the Pāli suttas, he stresses that the benefits of Buddhist practice are accessible even without adherence to a framework of traditional beliefs.⁴ He sees four key practices of Buddhist tradition as central to contemporary life: mindfulness (*sati*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), ethics (*sīla*), and generosity (*dāna*). Cast in this mold, he says, the Dharma functions "as a form of therapy from which practitioners can benefit in their current lives." (Fronsdal, n.d., "Insight Meditation in the United States", n.p.)

As a proponent of a more traditional point of view, I want to challenge the presuppositions that underlie the modernizing project of Secular Buddhism and the ambivalence toward classical Buddhist doctrine adopted by Immanent Buddhists. In insisting that certain core elements of Traditional Buddhism should be preserved, however, I don't want my position to be construed as a rigid conservatism. I believe that the course of historical development through which Buddhism has passed has been immensely fruitful, bringing to manifestation new facets of thought and practice that were not immediately apparent in the more ancient expressions of the Dharma. These range from the analytical schemes of the Abhidharma to the contemplative techniques of the Vajrayāna.

3 An example of a more conservative approach to Early Buddhism that still suspends belief in rebirth is that proposed by Doug Smith, Study Director of the Secular Buddhist Association, in his essay (2013), "A Secular Evaluation of Rebirth."

4 See, for example, Fronsdal's online essay, "Should I Believe in Rebirth?" (n.d.)

Perhaps one can argue that Secular Buddhism is the next step in the evolution of the Dharma, a step brought to light by the secular spirit of our era. However, I would seriously question this supposition. Against the assertion that Secular Buddhism marks a step forward in the evolution of the Dharma, I would maintain that to the extent that it jettisons the underpinnings of the traditional Buddhist worldview, Secular Buddhism could be putting in jeopardy the future of the Dharma as a genuine path to liberation.

I see the secularists as guilty of a double error. The *first* is that they discard too much that is central to the Dharma as an organic whole, thereby tearing away the archaic root of the Buddhist heritage. Despite the arguments of some secularists, the ideas of *samsāra* as the round of birth and death, *nirvāṇa* as an ultimate state of liberation, and karma and rebirth as fundamental dimensions of the human condition are not monastic fabrications, but are all derived from the canonical texts, which are not at all ambiguous about their meanings. The *second* is that they place too much trust in the assumption that naturalistic science – science conducted according to materialistic premises – exhausts the methods for accessing verifiable truth. They take as indubitable a version of science that operates with a two-dimensional picture of reality, neglecting the multiple dimensions of reality and intricate intersections between these domains testified to by contemplatives from various traditions, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. I believe that if we are to preserve the Dharma as an integral program for resolving the deepest problem at the heart of the human condition, we have to be extremely cautious about what we cast away. Otherwise, in our eagerness to enhance the contemporary relevance of the Dharma, we may actually cut off the bloodline that keeps the Dharma alive.

In response to those disposed to an immanent approach to the Dharma, I would say that if we are to responsibly represent the Dharma in its fullness and its depth, it is not sufficient to extract the practice from its roots in Buddhist faith and formal doctrine and merely focus on the temporal benefits the practice is capable of delivering. Rather, we should strive to widen our perspectives toward those revealed by the Buddha on the basis of his supreme enlightenment. We must make an effort to clearly grasp the context in which the practice is situated, the underlying premises, and the ultimate aim of endeavor along the path. Certainly, as Buddhists, we can offer the secular world practices that help people better understand themselves, better relate to each other, and deal more skillfully with the problems of modern life. But it would be more prudent to offer this as a pragmatic program of training *derived from Buddhism*, not as a new and more highly evolved form of the Dharma.

In regard to both contemporary approaches, secularist and immanent, we also have to be extremely careful not to fall into a subtle cultural arrogance that tells us that because we are Westerners – mostly white, middle-class, educated Westerners – we therefore understand the Dharma better than those nurtured in a traditional Buddhist culture. We should not look down at them as mere “religious Buddhists” who seek from the Dharma little more than “a belief system” and a source of “spiritual

consolation.”⁵ If the Dharma is to retain its integrity, it must at minimum preserve the doctrinal imprint that has been central to Buddhism’s self-identity through the centuries.

Since scientific naturalism is now taken to be the one valid criterion for the assessment of truth claims and the determination of values, the question may be raised why contemporary Buddhists should adopt and disseminate such ideas as karma, rebirth, and other planes of existence, ideas that don’t easily fit into this paradigm. I would offer the following answers to this question.

The most persuasive reason, in my view, is the fact that the Buddha himself taught rebirth, taught it on the basis of his direct experience, and made it one of the pillars of his teaching. The texts of Early Buddhism consistently describe his enlightenment as involving the attainment of three “clear knowledges”: of his own past births; of the rebirth of beings in accordance with their karma; and of the destruction of the *āsavas* (Skt. *āsravas*), the primordial defilements that sustain the round of rebirths. After each breakthrough, the Buddha declares: “Darkness was dispelled and light arose, ignorance was dispelled and clear knowledge arose” (Majjhima Nikāya I 23). Attainment of this last knowledge culminated in the realization that rebirth has been ended and there is no coming back to any state of being.

The quest that the Buddha successfully completed serves as a model for others, and the texts report that numberless disciples also attained the threefold knowledge. Are we to dismiss these claims to supernormal knowledge as mere beliefs entertained by ancient Indian monks who subscribed to the presuppositions of Indian metaphysics? Or should we take them as the texts present them to us, as truthful assertions made by those who have reached the pinnacle of wisdom, the heights of realization? If we do take them to be truthful assertions, shouldn’t they also influence our understanding and practice of the Dharma?

A second reason for a professed follower of the Dharma to accept the twin ideas of rebirth and karma is also related to claims made by and about the Buddha. In the canonical texts of all schools of Buddhism, the Buddha is said to possess ten “Tathāgata powers,” powers of knowledge that entitle him “to claim the place of a chief bull, roar a lion’s roar in the assemblies, and set rolling the supreme wheel” (Majjhima Nikāya I 69–71). At least six of these involve a grasp of the workings of karma and their relation to different spheres of rebirth. If we reject these knowledges because they do not resonate with the premises of a philosophical naturalism, we will wind up with a greatly diminished conception of the Buddha. He may emerge as a sage, even in some respects a holy man, but would fail to match the claims he makes about himself.

Still a third reason the ideas of rebirth and karma should be preserved in contemporary representations of the Dharma is because they are essential to the unity of the Dharma as an integral path of understanding and practice. They are integral to right view, the forerunner of the path, which guides the development of the other factors. They underlie the four noble truths and the twelvefold formula of dependent

5 For examples of this, see Batchelor, 1997, pp. 18–19, 81.

origination. They give substance to the four stages of realization. Each of these stages is described in two ways, first by way of the particular cluster of defilements eliminated at that stage, and second by way of the number and sphere of rebirths that remain. Thus the very distinction among these four stages only makes sense when the idea of rebirth is taken into account.⁶

Still a fourth argument in support of the twin ideas of karma and rebirth hinges on moral reflection. Consider the following scenario involving two individuals. One is the CEO of a corporation that manufactures weapons of war that he knows will be used in devastating attacks against the civilian population of other countries. The other is an American medical doctor who goes to serve in a war-torn country. While treating wounded civilians in a decrepit hospital there, she is killed in a bombing raid, falling victim to one of the bombs that the CEO's company had sold to the aggressor nation. Now on the premises of materialistic naturalism, at death both these individuals – the CEO of the weapons company and the self-sacrificing medical doctor – meet the same fate. From the materialist point of view, both are obliterated, snuffed out into eternal oblivion, a consequence that seems strongly counter-intuitive.

Although such reflection cannot *compel* a belief in survival of death, it seems to me that the scenario I depicted flies in the face of the heart's yearning for some kind of moral order to prevail in the world. It may well be the case that tragedy has the final say, that our moral intuitions are purely subjective and do not have any foundation beyond our personal desires. But the contrary, affirmed in some way by most religions, may in fact be true. It could well be that our yearning for the cosmos to operate in accordance with certain norms of moral equilibrium actually reflects the way the cosmos does work. And it could be that our sense of moral justice is not a vain fantasy but a subjective reflection of this objective principle.

Now if it is the case that good and bad deeds produce results that correspond to their moral quality, as the doctrine of karma holds, consciousness must in some way continue beyond death; for it is obvious that in this present life people's fortunes do not usually correspond with the moral quality of their lives. The bad flourish; the good suffer. Wrongdoers escape the arm of the law; the innocent are subjected to the cruelest fate. If consciousness does survive death, it may do so in one of two ways: one is by reaping an eternal reward (perhaps after a temporary spell in purgatory) or eternal punishment for one's conduct; the other is by passing through a series of lives in which past deeds produce results that, like the deeds themselves, are of finite strength and duration. I would contend that since any morally significant deed, no matter how evil or how good, necessarily arises from an act of volition that has finite psychological force, its fruition must also be finite, eventually due to end when it has exhausted the force of the original deed. In my view, the one framework that can reasonably accommodate such a relationship between deeds and their fruits is that provided by the tenets of karma and rebirth. And since deeds flow from volitions,

6 For a more detailed account of the relationship between the teaching of rebirth and other crucial teachings of Early Buddhism, see Anālayo, 2018, chapter 1.

from states of mind, this entails a view of the cosmos in which consciousness and material processes are bound together in a much more intimate relationship than that envisaged by the materialistic interpretation of modern science, by a “scientism” that sees the mind as a fluke of nature, a chance byproduct of bare material processes.

A final argument in favor of the twin principles of karma and rebirth hinges on the supposition that the spiritual life must aim at some kind of closure. Both the canonical collections of Early Buddhism and the Mahāyāna sūtras see the path as pointing toward a transcendent goal in which it reaches completion. For Early Buddhism this is arahantship and the attainment of nirvāṇa; for Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is Buddhahood. But both secular and immanent modes of Buddhism rule out the possibility of closure. It may be that this concept of closure to the spiritual life is “ancient Indian soteriology,” but that does not undermine its validity. The ancient Indian Buddhists may have had it right. If the spiritual life reached culmination in the Buddha’s time, then it would seem that such a culmination remains a valid possibility at any time, and that those who make sufficient effort in any age should be able to achieve it.

Central to the idea of closure in Early Buddhism is completion of the “four tasks.” In his first discourse, the Buddha not only speaks of those four tasks as jobs to be done but declares that he himself had completed them. He has fully understood the truth of suffering, abandoned its origin, realized its cessation, and cultivated the path. And it was precisely this achievement – the completion of the four tasks – that entitled him to proclaim that he had achieved unsurpassed enlightenment. The same set of tasks that the Buddha himself completed are laid down as the duties for the disciples, and many of these declare in the texts that they succeeded: “Done is what had to be done.” Yet for such a declaration to have any meaning, two conditions are necessary as grounds for its cogency. One is the state of bondage to the round of rebirths that the path is intended to overcome. The other is a state of liberation that is ever-present, always available to us, that has to be realized by the practice of the path.

In retrospect, the problem that I see with both Secular Buddhism and Immanent Buddhism is that they consider the purpose of Buddhist practice to be simply the achievement of a kind of human flourishing: stable happiness, inner peace, equanimity, greater awareness, and practical wisdom in dealing with the challenges of life. This flourishing is, of course, superior to the pursuit of wealth, sensual pleasures, high position, and other worldly goals. But it is still a flourishing of the empirical person within the bounds of contingency, a flourishing that can fit into our usual categories of understanding.

However, while the full cultivation of the Buddhist path in the traditionalist mode also leads to this type of flourishing, the latter is not its goal. The goal is *a state of holiness*, and that can only be achieved by breaking through the bounds of contingency in order to realize, experience, and dwell in a dimension that is not conditioned, not contingent, not perishable. Within the system of Early Buddhism,

that dimension is *nirvāṇa*, the deathless, and its full realization is arahantship. For Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is called suchness, emptiness, Buddha nature, or the peak of reality (Skt. *bhūtakoti*), the experience of which turns one into a true bodhisattva. In either case, the prospect of holiness is achieved by rising above and beyond the bounds of finitude and contingency and touching a reality that transforms us in a most fundamental way at the very base of our personal being.

The Buddha noted that our views influence our motivations, which in turn influence our conduct. If we adopt the views prescribed by the Buddha on the basis of his unsurpassed enlightenment, our motivation will be to attain the goal prescribed by his teaching: according to Early Buddhism, liberation from the cycle of repeated birth and death; according to the Mahāyāna, the enlightenment of a Buddha. If we reject the idea of rebirth as a literal fact, its corollaries, liberation from the cycle of rebirths and Buddhahood, become untenable, even unintelligible except perhaps as metaphors. In that case, we will turn to other aims as the mainstay of our practice: living with wisdom, clarity, and kindness; dwelling mindfully in the present; experiencing happiness, joy, and calm within the bounds of this present existence. As worthy as these goals may be in their own right, we should ask whether they are worthy of replacing the goals laid down for us in the canonical texts. To set them up in this role would, in my view, entail a serious impairment of the Dharma.

4. A wider sense of responsibility

I have sketched three broad orientations among contemporary Western Buddhists: the Traditional, the Secular, and the Immanent. While I distinguish Immanent Buddhism as a distinct modality, I also noted that Buddhists who fall into each of these three modalities can entertain immanent aims and may even give them precedence in their practice. Thus Buddhists following all three modes may give primacy to the “immanent” task of navigating their way through today’s chaotic and perplexing world. In the West, however, those who adopt Buddhism as a spiritual path have tended to focus mainly on the enrichment and deepening of their personal life rather than on applying Buddhist values to the task of transforming the larger structures under which we live – the political, social, and economic structures responsible for the suffering of war, hunger and poverty, racism and ethnic hostility, ecological devastation, and sexual and gender-based violence.

This trend poses a risk that the Dharma may foster a purely private type of spirituality pursued mainly by educated, upper middle-class people in the tranquility of their meditation halls and Dharma centers. While Socially Engaged Buddhism has served as an antidote to this tendency, coordinated projects of social engagement have won relatively limited support among Buddhists, whether in the East or the West. Though Buddhism elevates loving-kindness and compassion to the highest ranks in the moral life, we seldom see Buddhists undertaking the truly self-sacrificial risks on behalf of vulnerable populations that we see among conscientious Christians, Jews, and even non-religious people.

It is here perhaps that Buddhists have much to learn from Christianity and Judaism. Christianity has enunciated a social gospel that calls on the faithful to serve the poor, the sick, the homeless, and the hungry – the wretched of the earth – to undertake not only deeds of charity but daring acts of political and social resistance on behalf of justice and human dignity. As manifestations of their faith, Christians have created impressive humanitarian organizations that save the lives of millions. Yet Buddhists have lagged behind in such undertakings. We do make our contributions, to be sure, for instance through the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (based in the U.S.), the Tzu Chi Foundation (based in Taiwan, with U.S. branches), the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (based in Sri Lanka), and Buddhist Global Relief (based in the U.S.), as well as an umbrella organization, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (based in Thailand), that brings together disparate Buddhists to share insights and engage in common projects. But these efforts have been far outweighed by the offering of courses in mindfulness as the cure for all the ills the world is facing.

The reason for this feeble responsiveness to collective suffering may be partly rooted in Buddhist doctrine. The Buddhist scriptures are filled with praise of kindness and compassion and exhortations to act for the good of all sentient beings, yet seldom do they advise Buddhists to actively strive for social justice, to resist tyranny, or to stand up against the degrading material and social conditions that afflict disadvantaged and marginalized communities. Through the centuries, Buddhists have largely pursued kindness and compassion as internal meditative states or as guidelines to personal ethics rather than as spurs to action aimed at wider dimensions of transformation. Yet I believe that if Buddhism is to fulfill its potential as a positive moral force in today's world, it must draw upon its ancient insights and ethical values as incentives to transformative action, even radical action in promoting a different kind of world. The need for such action has become especially urgent with the rise over the past few years of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the United States – regimes that attempt to consolidate their hold on power by inciting hatred, violence, and bigotry.

At present, the global community faces two overwhelming challenges, both of which must be tackled if we are to avoid horrific consequences. One is to preserve an ecologically safe space for humanity to survive and thrive, a space constantly under threat from chemical pollution, ocean acidification, diminishing sources of fresh water, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and above all, escalating climate change. The other is to ensure that all people everywhere can obtain the basic requisites they need to live a dignified life, particularly adequate food, clean water, housing, healthcare, education, political rights, and a safe environment. These two challenges put our collective future at risk, yet instead of effectively addressing them, we have been thoughtlessly and even spitefully aggravating them.

While it may seem that the Buddhist emphasis on compassion and generosity would contribute to an ethic of active social concern, certain long-standing attitudes and ideas widespread among Buddhists may actually be hindering the manifestation

of a cogent Buddhist program of social change. If Buddhism is to unleash its potential as a force for positive transformation, these attitudes and ideas may have to be critically reassessed.

One is Traditional Buddhism's overriding orientation toward transcendence of the mundane world, an orientation that, despite philosophic differences, is shared by virtually all schools of Buddhism. Once the supreme good is located in a state, dimension, or domain that lies beyond the limits of the phenomenal world, in a transcendent *nirvāṇa* – or even at its heart, in the essence of mind, Buddha nature, or the emptiness of all phenomena – the need to secure the temporal welfare of living beings in this world of contingent events may tend to be overshadowed by the effort to realize the final aim of striving. This obstacle appears in a different guise among Secular and Immanent Buddhists. While these latter do not recognize transcendent liberation, they still largely locate the aim of their practice in personal transformation to be achieved through an inward focus.

As a Traditional Buddhist, I do not wish to maintain that the Dharma should discard its transcendent orientation in favor of an agenda of social and political reform. For Buddhism to be true to its origins, the experience and attainment of a transcendent state must be the final aim. However, I believe that to manifest the full breadth of the Dharma as a liberative teaching, we have to strike a balance between transcendent and socially transformative goals.

It is possible too that the teaching of *anattā* (Skt. *anātman*), non-self, when extended beyond its proper context, may become an obstacle to transformative action. While this teaching definitely doesn't mean that persons as such do not exist, the denial of the substantial reality of human persons and their relegation to the sphere of conventional reality may have the unintended consequence of diminishing the claims they make on us as subjects meriting ultimate concern. A similar problem perhaps arises from the teaching of emptiness as expounded in the Mahāyāna sūtras and treatises. Although it is said that the truth of emptiness must be balanced by the conventional truth that affirms the phenomenal reality of sentient beings and conditioned dharmas – that it is only their inherent existence that is denied – it is possible that the rhetoric of emptiness undermines the claims of beings to an existential status sufficient to generate an ethic committed to promoting the good of people in the social and communal aspects of their lives.

It is true that the bodhisattva vows to deliver all sentient beings, and this could be taken as a ground for promoting social and economic policies that ameliorate the suffering of others. However, when beings and phenomena are said to be like magical illusions, like a mirage, like a flash of lightning, and so forth – when, it is said, a “being” or “person” or “dharma” is not to be apprehended – then, from one angle, it seems that the moral claims these beings make on us, claims that might motivate us to take action to address the structural causes of their very real suffering, are left without an adequately strong foothold. Mahāyāna Buddhism has the resources to avoid this pitfall through its stress on compassion and the altruistic vow, but histor-

ically, it seems, this vow has too often been eclipsed by the language of emptiness, which weakens its role as a motive for social engagement.

Still another historically obstructive factor that Buddhism must address if it is to become a positive force in promoting social justice is a passive and almost resigned interpretation of the doctrine of karma. While the workings of karma are not inevitable and thus an appeal to karma cannot be relied upon to validate violations of social justice, still, even in the suttas, the doctrine is used to explain glaring disparities in wealth, power, status, bodily health, and physical disabilities, and so is not altogether innocent of rationalizing social injustices. Thus, even with a fairly liberal interpretation – one that avoids any kind of predetermination – the teaching of karma can still be seen as discouraging concerted efforts to abolish oppressive social systems and change toxic policies that today privilege some, especially in the North, while consigning millions, mainly in southern Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, to unbearable misery.

The persistence of poverty and the escalating climate crisis, along with war, militarism, racism, and other kinds of violence, should sound a call of conscience to Buddhists, no matter what orientation we may adopt. The Dharma potentially provides us with tools for developing a critical diagnosis of the pressing problems we face as a global community. We know that the suffering we face in our personal lives originates from the greed, aversion, and delusion that obsess the mind and propel us into harmful courses of conduct. Today, however, these mental defilements have spread beyond the confines of individual minds. They have infected institutions and social systems, driving reckless policies that bring short-term gain to a privileged few but spell calamity for billions of others. To emerge intact we must first clearly recognize the dangers inherent in these systemic embodiments of greed, aversion, and delusion; then, with insight and courage, we must come forward to tackle them, not only in the depths of our minds but also in the massive systems that are crushing the lives of millions of people around the globe.

To promote more just and benign alternatives is, I believe, a task that should unite Buddhists of all three geographical traditions – South Asian, East Asian, and Himalayan – a task that should also unite those of the three orientations, Traditional, Secular, and Immanent. But to succeed, we will have to look closely and critically at long entrenched attitudes and a disposition to passive resignation. It is only by taking such steps, I believe, that we can best manifest the vital relevance of the Dharma in this secular age.

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