

# **Buddhist Studies Reader**

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Compiled & Edited by Jeff Wagner

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# Buddhist Studies Reader

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## **The Practice of Mindfulness by Thích Nhất Hạnh**

*from Lion's Roar Magazine, 2010*

Our true home is not in the past. Our true home is not in the future. Our true home is in the here and the now. Life is available only in the here and the now, and it is our true home.

Mindfulness is the energy that helps us recognize the conditions of happiness that are already present in our lives. You don't have to wait ten years to experience this happiness. It is present in every moment of your daily life. There are those of us who are alive but don't know it. But when you breathe in, and you are aware of your in-breath, you touch the miracle of being alive. That is why mindfulness is a source of happiness and joy.

Most people are forgetful; they are not really there a lot of the time. Their mind is caught in their worries, their fears, their anger, and their regrets, and they are not mindful of being there. That state of being is called forgetfulness—you are there but you are not there. You are caught in the past or in the future. You are not there in the present moment, living your life deeply. That is forgetfulness.

The opposite of forgetfulness is mindfulness. Mindfulness is when you are truly there, mind and body together. You breathe in and out mindfully, you bring your mind back to your body, and you are there. When your mind is there with your body, you are established in the present moment. Then you can recognize the many conditions of happiness that are in you and around you, and happiness just comes naturally.

Mindfulness practice should be enjoyable, not work or effort. Do you have to make an effort to breathe in? You don't need to make an effort. To breathe in, you just breathe in. Suppose you are with a group of people contemplating a beautiful sunset. Do you have to make an effort to enjoy the beautiful sunset? No, you don't have to make any effort. You just enjoy it.

The same thing is true with your breath. Allow your breath to take place. Become aware of it and enjoy it. Effortlessness. Enjoyment. The

same thing is true with walking mindfully. Every step you take is enjoyable. Every step helps you to touch the wonders of life, in yourself and around you. Every step is peace. Every step is joy. That is possible.

During the time you are practicing mindfulness, you stop talking—not only the talking outside, but the talking inside. The talking inside is the thinking, the mental discourse that goes on and on and on inside. Real silence is the cessation of talking—of both the mouth and of the mind. This is not the kind of silence that oppresses us. It is a very elegant kind of silence, a very powerful kind of silence. It is the silence that heals and nourishes us.

Mindfulness gives birth to joy and happiness. Another source of happiness is concentration. The energy of mindfulness carries within it the energy of concentration. When you are aware of something, such as a flower, and can maintain that awareness, we say that you are concentrated on the flower. When your mindfulness becomes powerful, your concentration becomes powerful, and when you are fully concentrated, you have a chance to make a breakthrough, to achieve insight. If you meditate on a cloud, you can get insight into the nature of the cloud. Or you can meditate on a pebble, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can see into the nature of the pebble. You can meditate on a person, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can make a breakthrough and understand the nature of that person. You can meditate on yourself, or your anger, or your fear, or your joy, or your peace.

Anything can be the object of your meditation, and with the powerful energy of concentration, you can make a breakthrough and develop insight. It's like a magnifying glass concentrating the light of the sun. If you put the point of concentrated light on a piece of paper, it will burn. Similarly, when your mindfulness and concentration are powerful, your insight will liberate you from fear, anger, and despair, and bring you true joy, true peace, and true happiness.

When you contemplate the big, full sunrise, the more mindful and concentrated you are, the more the beauty of the sunrise is revealed to you. Suppose you are offered a cup of tea, very fragrant, very good tea. If your mind is distracted, you cannot really enjoy the tea. You have to be mindful of the tea, you have to be concentrated on it, so the tea can reveal its fragrance and wonder to you. That is why mindfulness and concentration are such sources of happiness. That's why a good practitioner knows how to create a moment of joy, a feeling of happiness, at any time of the day.

### **First Mindfulness Exercise: Mindful Breathing**

The first exercise is very simple, but the power, the result, can be very great. The exercise is simply to identify the in-breath as in-breath and the out-breath as the out-breath. When you breathe in, you know that this is your in-breath. When you breathe out, you are mindful that this is your out-breath.

Just recognize: this is an in-breath, this is an out-breath. Very simple, very easy. In order to recognize your in-breath as in-breath, you have to bring your mind home to yourself. What is recognizing your in-breath is your mind, and the object of your mind—the object of your mindfulness—is the in-breath. Mindfulness is always mindful of something. When you drink your tea mindfully, it's called mindfulness of drinking. When you walk mindfully, it's called mindfulness of walking. And when you breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing.

So the object of your mindfulness is your breath, and you just focus your attention on it. Breathing in, this is my in-breath. Breathing out, this is my out-breath. When you do that, the mental discourse will stop. You don't think anymore. You don't have to make an effort to stop your thinking; you bring your attention to your in-breath and the mental discourse just stops. That is the miracle of the practice. You don't think of the past anymore. You don't think of the future. You don't think of your projects, because you are focusing your attention, your mindfulness, on your breath.

It gets even better. You can enjoy your in-breath. The practice can be pleasant, joyful. Someone who is dead cannot take any more in-breaths. But you are alive. You are breathing in, and while breathing in, you know that you are alive. The in-breath can be a celebration of the fact that you are alive, so it can be very joyful. When you are joyful and happy, you don't feel that you have to make any effort at all. I am alive; I am breathing in. To be still alive is a miracle. The greatest of all miracles is to be alive, and when you breathe in, you touch that miracle. Therefore, your breathing can be a celebration of life.

An in-breath may take three, four, five seconds, it depends. That's time to be alive, time to enjoy your breath. You don't have to interfere with your breathing. If your in-breath is short, allow it to be short. If your out-breath is long, let it to be long. Don't try to force it. The practice is simple recognition of the in-breath and the out-breath. That is good enough. It will have a powerful effect.

### **Second Mindfulness Exercise: Concentration**

The second exercise is that while you breathe in, you follow your in-breath from the beginning to the end. If your in-breath lasts three or four seconds, then your mindfulness also lasts three or four seconds. Breathing in, I follow my in-breath all the way through. Breathing out, I follow my out-breath all the way through. From the beginning of my out-breath to the end of my out-breath, my mind is always with it. Therefore, mindfulness becomes uninterrupted, and the quality of your concentration is improved.

So the second exercise is to follow your in-breath and your out-breath all the way through. Whether they are short or long, it doesn't matter. What is important is that you follow your in-breath from the beginning to the end. Your awareness is sustained. There is no interruption. Suppose you are breathing in, and then you think, "Oh, I forgot to turn off the light in my room." There is an interruption. Just stick to your in-breath all the way through. Then you cultivate your mindfulness and your

concentration. You become your in-breath. You become your out-breath. If you continue like that, your breathing will naturally become deeper and slower, more harmonious and peaceful. You don't have to make any effort—it happens naturally.

### **Third Mindfulness Exercise: Awareness of Your Body**

The third exercise is to become aware of your body as you are breathing. “Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body.” This takes it one step further.

In the first exercise, you became aware of your in-breath and your out-breath. Because you have now generated the energy of mindfulness through mindful breathing, you can use that energy to recognize your body.

“Breathing in, I am aware of my body. Breathing out, I am aware of my body.” I know my body is there. This brings the mind wholly back to the body. Mind and body become one reality. When your mind is with your body, you are well-established in the here and the now. You are fully alive. You can be in touch with the wonders of life that are available in yourself and around you.

This exercise is simple, but the effect of the oneness of body and mind is very great. In our daily lives, we are seldom in that situation. Our body is there but our mind is elsewhere. Our mind may be caught in the past or in the future, in regrets, sorrow, fear, or uncertainty, and so our mind is not there. Someone may be present in the house, but he's not really there, his mind is not there. His mind is with the future, with his projects, and he's not there for his children or his spouse. Maybe you could say to him, “Anybody home?” and help him bring his mind back to his body.

So the third exercise is to become aware of your body. “Breathing in, I'm aware of my body.” When you practice mindful breathing, the quality of your in-breath and out-breath will be improved. There is more peace and harmony in your breathing, and if you continue to practice like that, the peace and the harmony will penetrate into the body, and the body will profit.

### **Fourth Mindfulness Exercise: Releasing Tension**

The next exercise is to release the tension in the body. When you are truly aware of your body, you notice there is some tension and pain in your body, some stress. The tension and pain have been accumulating for a long time and our bodies suffer, but our mind is not there to help release it. Therefore, it is very important to learn how to release the tension in the body.

In a sitting, lying, or standing position, it's always possible to release the tension. You can practice total relaxation, deep relaxation, in a sitting or lying position. While you are driving your car, you might notice the tension in your body. You are eager to arrive and you don't enjoy the time you spend driving. When you come to a red light, you are eager for the red light to become a green light so that you can continue. But the red light can be a signal. It can be a reminder that there is tension in you, the stress of wanting to arrive as quickly as possible. If you recognize that, you can make use of the red light. You can sit back and relax—take the ten seconds the light is red to practice mindful breathing and release the tension in the body.

So next time you're stopped at a red light, you might like to sit back and practice the fourth exercise: “Breathing in, I'm aware of my body. Breathing out, I release the tension in my body.” Peace is possible at that moment, and it can be practiced many times a day—in the workplace, while you are driving, while you are cooking, while you are doing the dishes, while you are watering the vegetable garden. It is always possible to practice releasing the tension in yourself.

### **Walking Meditation**

When you practice mindful breathing you simply allow your in breath to take place. You become aware of it and enjoy it. Effortlessness. The same thing is true with mindful walking. Every step is enjoyable. Every step helps you touch the wonders of life. Every step is joy. That is possible.

You don't have to make any effort during walking meditation, because it is enjoyable. You are there, body and mind together. You are fully alive, fully present in the here and the now. With every step, you touch the wonders of life that are in you and around you. When you walk like that, every step brings healing. Every step brings peace and joy, because every step is a miracle.

The real miracle is not to fly or walk on fire. The real miracle is to walk on the Earth, and you can perform that miracle at any time. Just bring your mind home to your body, become alive, and perform the miracle of walking on Earth.

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## **Like a Leaf, We Have Many Stems** **by Thích Nhất Hạnh** *from Peace is Every Step, 1990*

One autumn day, I was in a park, absorbed in the contemplation of a very small, beautiful leaf, shaped like a heart. Its colour was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I spent a long time with it, and I asked the leaf a number of questions. I found out that the leaf had been a mother to the tree. Usually we think that the tree is the mother and the leaves are just the children but as I looked at the leaf I saw that the leaf is also mother to the tree. The sap that the roots take up is only water and minerals, not sufficient to nourish the tree. So the tree distributes that sap to the leaves, and the leaves transform it with the help of the sun and the air, and send it back to the tree for nourishment. This communication between leaf and tree is easy to see because the leaf is connected to the tree by a stem.

We do not have a stem linking us to our mother anymore, but when we were in her womb we had a long stem, an umbilical cord. The oxygen and the nourishment we needed came to us through that stem. But on the day we were born, it was cut off, and we had the illusion that we became independent. That was not true. We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have many other mothers as well.

The earth is our mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our Mother Earth. There are stems linking us to the clouds: if there are no clouds, there will be no water for us to drink. We are made of over seventy percent water, and the stem between the cloud and us is really there. This is also the case with the river, the forest, the logger and the farmer. There are hundreds and thousands of stems linking us to everything in the universe, supporting us and making it possible for us to be. Do you see the link between you and me?...

I asked the leaf whether it was frightened because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me "No. During the whole Spring and Summer I was completely alive. I worked hard to nourish the tree and now much of me is in that tree. I am not limited by this form. I am also the whole tree, and when I go back to the soil I will continue to nourish the tree. So don't worry at all. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her 'I will see you again very soon'"

That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float to the soil, dancing joyfully because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head knowing I have a lot to learn from that leaf.

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## **Mindfulness Must Be Engaged by** **Thích Nhất Hạnh** *from Peace is Every Step, 1990*

When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both—to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. Otherwise, what is the use of seeing?



We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help. If we maintain awareness of our breathing and continue to practice smiling, even in difficult situations, many people, animals, and plants will benefit from our way of doing things. Are you massaging our Mother Earth every time your foot touches her? Are you planting seeds of joy and peace? I try to do exactly that with every step, and I know that our Mother Earth is most appreciative. Peace is every step. Shall we continue our journey?

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### **Interbeing by Thích Nhất Hạnh** *from Peace is Every Step, 1990*

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, inter-be.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. Without sunshine, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper too. This is not

difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, it is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. We cannot just be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper” elements. And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

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### **Looking Deeply by Thích Nhất Hạnh**

*from Peace is Every Step, 1990*

We have to look deeply at things in order to see. When a swimmer enjoys the clear water of the river, he or she should also be able to be the river. One day, during one of my first visits to the United States, I was having lunch at Boston University with some friends, and I looked down at the Charles River. I had been away from home for quite a long time, and seeing the river, I found it very beautiful. So I left my friends and went down to wash my face and dip my feet in the water, as we used to do in our country. When I returned, a professor said, “That’s a very dangerous thing to do. Did you rinse your mouth in the river?” When I told him yes, he said, “You

should see a doctor and get a shot.” I was shocked. I hadn’t known that the rivers here were so polluted. Some of them are called “dead rivers.” In our country the rivers get very muddy sometimes, but not that kind of dirty. Someone told me that the Rhine River in Germany contains so many chemicals that it is possible to develop photographs in it. If we want to continue to enjoy our rivers—to swim in them, walk beside them, even drink their water—we have to adopt the nondual perspective. We have to meditate on being the river so that we can experience within ourselves the fears and hopes of the river. If we cannot feel the rivers, the mountains, the air, the animals, and other people from within their own perspective, the rivers will die and we will lose our chance for peace.

If you are a mountain climber or someone who enjoys the countryside, or the green forest, you know that the forests are our lungs outside of our bodies, just as the sun is our heart outside of our bodies. Yet we have been acting in a way that has allowed two million square miles of forest land to be destroyed by acid rain, and we have destroyed parts of the ozone layer that regulate how much direct sunlight we receive. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of the comfortable conditions for this small self, while we destroy our large self. We should be able to be our true self. That means we should be able to be the river, we should be able to be the forest, the sun, and the ozone layer. We must do this to understand and to have hope for the future.

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## **Turn Your Thinking Upside Down** **by Pema Chödrön**

*from Practicing Peace in Times of War,*  
2006

On a very basic level all beings think that they should be happy. When life becomes difficult or painful, we feel that something has gone wrong. This wouldn’t be a big problem except for the fact that when we feel something’s

gone wrong, we’re willing to do anything to feel OK again. Even start a fight.

According to the Buddhist teachings, difficulty is inevitable in human life. For one thing, we cannot escape the reality of death. But there are also the realities of aging, of illness, of not getting what we want, and of getting what we don’t want. These kinds of difficulties are facts of life. Even if you were the Buddha himself, if you were a fully enlightened person, you would experience death, illness, aging, and sorrow at losing what you love. All of these things would happen to you. If you got burned or cut, it would hurt.

But the Buddhist teachings also say that this is not really what causes us misery in our lives. What causes misery is always trying to get away from the facts of life, always trying to avoid pain and seek happiness—this sense of ours that there could be lasting security and happiness available to us if we could only do the right thing.

In this very lifetime we can do ourselves and this planet a great favor and turn this very old way of thinking upside down. As Shantideva, author of *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, points out, suffering has a great deal to teach us. If we use the opportunity when it arises, suffering will motivate us to look for answers. Many people, including myself, came to the spiritual path because of deep unhappiness. Suffering can also teach us empathy for others who are in the same boat. Furthermore, suffering can humble us. Even the most arrogant among us can be softened by the loss of someone dear.

Yet it is so basic in us to feel that things should go well for us, and that if we start to feel depressed, lonely, or inadequate, there’s been some kind of mistake or we’ve lost it. In reality, when you feel depressed, lonely, betrayed, or any unwanted feelings, this is an important moment on the spiritual path. This is where real transformation can take place.

As long as we’re caught up in always looking for certainty and happiness, rather than honoring the taste and smell and quality of exactly what is happening, as long as we’re always running away from discomfort, we’re going to be caught in a cycle of unhappiness and

disappointment, and we will feel weaker and weaker. This way of seeing helps us to develop inner strength.

And what's especially encouraging is the view that inner strength is available to us at just the moment when we think we've hit the bottom, when things are at their worst. Instead of asking ourselves, "How can I find security and happiness?" we could ask ourselves, "Can I touch the center of my pain? Can I sit with suffering, both yours and mine, without trying to make it go away? Can I stay present to the ache of loss or disgrace—disappointment in all its many forms—and let it open me?" This is the trick.

There are various ways to view what happens when we feel threatened. In times of distress—of rage, of frustration, of failure—we can look at how we get hooked and how shenpa escalates. The usual translation of shenpa is "attachment," but this doesn't adequately express the full meaning. I think of shenpa as "getting hooked." Another definition, used by Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, is the "charge"—the charge behind our thoughts and words and actions, the charge behind "like" and "don't like."

It can also be helpful to shift our focus and look at how we put up barriers. In these moments we can observe how we withdraw and become self-absorbed. We become dry, sour, afraid; we crumble, or harden out of fear that more pain is coming. In some old familiar way, we automatically erect a protective shield and our self-centeredness intensifies.

But this is the very same moment when we could do something different. Right on the spot, through practice, we can get very familiar with the barriers that we put up around our hearts and around our whole being. We can become intimate with just how we hide out, doze off, freeze up. And that intimacy, coming to know these barriers so well, is what begins to dismantle them. Amazingly, when we give them our full attention they start to fall apart.

Ultimately all the practices I have mentioned are simply ways we can go about dissolving these barriers. Whether it's learning to be present through sitting meditation, acknowledging shenpa, or practicing patience,

these are methods for dissolving the protective walls that we automatically put up.

When we're putting up the barriers and the sense of "me" as separate from "you" gets stronger, right there in the midst of difficulty and pain, the whole thing could turn around simply by not erecting barriers; simply by staying open to the difficulty, to the feelings that you're going through; simply by not talking to ourselves about what's happening. That is a revolutionary step. Becoming intimate with pain is the key to changing at the core of our being—staying open to everything we experience, letting the sharpness of difficult times pierce us to the heart, letting these times open us, humble us, and make us wiser and more brave.

Let difficulty transform you. And it will. In my experience, we just need help in learning how not to run away.

If we're ready to try staying present with our pain, one of the greatest supports we could ever find is to cultivate the warmth and simplicity of bodhichitta. The word bodhichitta has many translations, but probably the most common one is "awakened heart." The word refers to a longing to wake up from ignorance and delusion in order to help others do the same. Putting our personal awakening in a larger—even planetary—framework makes a significant difference. It gives us a vaster perspective on why we would do this often difficult work.

There are two kinds of bodhichitta: relative and absolute. Relative bodhichitta includes compassion and maitri. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche translated maitri as "unconditional friendliness with oneself." This unconditional friendliness means having an unbiased relationship with all the parts of your being. So, in the context of working with pain, this means making an intimate, compassionate heart-relationship with all those parts of ourselves we generally don't want to touch.

Some people find the teachings I offer helpful because I encourage them to be kind to themselves, but this does not mean pampering our neurosis. The kindness that I learned from my teachers, and that I wish so much to convey to other people, is kindness toward all qualities

of our being. The qualities that are the toughest to be kind to are the painful parts, where we feel ashamed, as if we don't belong, as if we've just blown it, when things are falling apart for us. Maitri means sticking with ourselves when we don't have anything, when we feel like a loser. And it becomes the basis for extending the same unconditional friendliness to others.

If there are whole parts of yourself that you are always running from, that you even feel justified in running from, then you're going to run from anything that brings you into contact with your feelings of insecurity.

And have you noticed how often these parts of ourselves get touched? The closer you get to a situation or a person, the more these feelings arise. Often when you're in a relationship it starts off great, but when it gets intimate and begins to bring out your neurosis, you just want to get out of there.

So I'm here to tell you that the path to peace is right there, when you want to get away. You can cruise through life not letting anything touch you, but if you really want to live fully, if you want to enter into life, enter into genuine relationships with other people, with animals, with the world situation, you're definitely going to have the experience of feeling provoked, of getting hooked, of shenpa. You're not just going to feel bliss. The message is that when those feelings emerge, this is not a failure. This is the chance to cultivate maitri, unconditional friendliness toward your perfect and imperfect self.

Relative bodhichitta also includes awakening compassion. One of the meanings of compassion is "suffering with," being willing to suffer with other people. This means that to the degree you can work with the wholeness of your being—your prejudices, your feelings of failure, your self-pity, your depression, your rage, your addictions—the more you will connect with other people out of that wholeness. And it will be a relationship between equals. You'll be able to feel the pain of other people as your own pain. And you'll be able to feel your own pain and know that it's shared by millions.

Absolute bodhichitta, also known as shunyata, is the open dimension of our being, the completely wide-open heart and mind. Without labels of "you" and "me," "enemy" and "friend," absolute bodhichitta is always here. Cultivating absolute bodhichitta means having a relationship with the world that is nonconceptual, that is unprejudiced, having a direct, unedited relationship with reality.

That's the value of sitting meditation practice. You train in coming back to the unadorned present moment again and again. Whatever thoughts arise in your mind, you regard them with equanimity and you learn to let them dissolve. There is no rejection of the thoughts and emotions that come up; rather, we begin to realize that thoughts and emotions are not as solid as we always take them to be.

It takes bravery to train in unconditional friendliness, it takes bravery to train in "suffering with," it takes bravery to stay with pain when it arises and not run or erect barriers. It takes bravery to not bite the hook and get swept away. But as we do, the absolute bodhichitta realization, the experience of how open and unfettered our minds really are, begins to dawn on us. As a result of becoming more comfortable with the ups and the downs of our ordinary human life, this realization grows stronger.

We start with taking a close look at our predictable tendency to get hooked, to separate ourselves, to withdraw into ourselves and put up walls. As we become intimate with these tendencies, they gradually become more transparent, and we see that there's actually space, there is unlimited, accommodating space. This does not mean that then you live in lasting happiness and comfort. That spaciousness includes pain.

We may still get betrayed, may still be hated. We may still feel confused and sad. What we won't do is bite the hook. Pleasant happens. Unpleasant happens. Neutral happens. What we gradually learn is to not move away from being fully present. We need to train at this very basic level because of the widespread suffering in the world. If we aren't training inch by inch, one moment at a time, in overcoming our fear of

pain, then we'll be very limited in how much we can help. We'll be limited in helping ourselves, and limited in helping anybody else. So let's start with ourselves, just as we are, here and now.

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## **Beginning Anew by Thích Nhất Hạnh**

*from Teachings on Love, 1995*

Beginning Anew is not to ask for forgiveness. Beginning Anew is to change your mind and heart, to transform the ignorance that brought about wrong actions of body, speech, and mind, and to help you cultivate your mind of love. Your shame and guilt will disappear, and you will begin to experience the joy of being alive. All wrongdoings arise in the mind. It is through the mind that wrongdoings can disappear.

At Plum Village, we practice a ceremony of Beginning Anew every week. Everyone sits in a circle with a vase of fresh flowers in the center, and we follow our breathing as we wait for the facilitator to begin.

The ceremony has three parts: flower watering, expressing regrets, and expressing hurts and difficulties. This practice can prevent feelings of hurt from building up over the weeks and helps make the situation safe for everyone in the community.

We begin with flower watering. When someone is ready to speak, she joins her palms and the others join their palms to show that she has the right to speak. Then she stands, walks slowly to the flower, takes the vase in her hands, and returns to her seat. When she speaks, her words reflect the freshness and beauty of the flower that is in her hand.

During flower watering, each speaker acknowledges the wholesome, wonderful qualities of the others. It is not flattery; we always speak the truth. Everyone has some strong points that can be seen with awareness. No one can interrupt the person holding the flower. She is allowed as much time as she needs, and everyone else practices deep listening.

When she is finished speaking, she stands up and slowly returns the vase to the center of the room.

In the second part of the ceremony, we express regrets for anything we have done to hurt others. It does not take more than one thoughtless phrase to hurt someone. The ceremony of Beginning Anew is an opportunity for us to recall some regret from earlier in the week and undo it.

In the third part of the ceremony, we express ways in which others have hurt us. Loving speech is crucial. We want to heal the community, not harm it. We speak frankly, but we do not want to be destructive. Listening meditation is an important part of the practice. When we sit among a circle of friends who are all practicing deep listening, our speech becomes more beautiful and more constructive. We never blame or argue.

Compassionate listening is crucial. We listen with the willingness to relieve the suffering of the other person, not to judge or argue with her. We listen with all our attention. Even if we hear something that is not true, we continue to listen deeply so the other person can express her pain and release the tensions within herself. If we reply to her or correct her, the practice will not bear fruit. We just listen. If we need to tell the other person that her perception was not correct, we can do that a few days later, privately and calmly. Then, at the next Beginning Anew session, she may be the person who rectifies the error and we will not have to say anything. We close the ceremony with a song or by holding hands with everyone in the circle and breathing for a minute. Sometimes we end with hugging meditation.

Hugging meditation is a practice I invented. In 1966, a woman poet took me to the Atlanta Airport and then asked, "Is it all right to hug a Buddhist monk?" In my country, we are not used to expressing ourselves that way, but I thought, "I am a Zen teacher. It should be no problem for me to do that." So I said, "Why not?" and she hugged me. But I was quite stiff. While on the plane, I decided that if I wanted to work with friends in the West, I would have to learn

the culture of the West, so I invented hugging meditation.

Hugging meditation is a combination of East and West. According to the practice, you have to really hug the person you are hugging. You have to make him or her very real in your arms, not just for the sake of appearances, patting him on the back to pretend you are there, but breathing consciously and hugging with all your body, spirit, and heart. Hugging meditation is a practice of mindfulness. “Breathing in, I know my dear one is in my arms, alive. Breathing out, she is so precious to me.” If you breathe deeply like that, holding the person you love, the energy of care, love, and mindfulness will penetrate into that person and she will be nourished and bloom like a flower.

At a retreat for psychotherapists in Colorado, we practiced hugging meditation, and one retreatant, when he returned home to Philadelphia, hugged his wife at the airport in a way he had never hugged her before. To be really there, you only need to breathe mindfully, and suddenly both of you become real. It may be one of the best moments in your life.

After the Beginning Anew ceremony, everyone in the community feels light and relieved, even if we have taken only preliminary steps toward healing. We have confidence that, having begun, we can continue. This practice dates to the time of the Buddha, when communities of monks and nuns practiced Beginning Anew on the eve of every full moon and new moon. I hope you will practice Beginning Anew in your own family every week.

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## **The Four Immeasurable Minds by Thích Nhất Hạnh**

*from Teachings on Love, 1995*

The Buddha taught that it is possible to love twenty-four hours a day in a state of love. Every movement, every glance, every thought, and every word can be infused with love.

During the lifetime of the Buddha, those of the Brahmanic faith prayed that after death

they would go to Heaven to dwell eternally with Brahma, the universal God. One day a Brahman man asked the Buddha, “What can I do to be sure that I will be with Brahma after I die?”

The Buddha replied, “As Brahma is the source of Love, to dwell with him you must practice the Brahmaviharas: love, compassion, joy, and equanimity.” *Vihara* means abode or dwelling place, so a brahmavihara is the dwelling place of Brahma.

The Four Brahmaviharas are also called the Four Immeasurable Minds, because if you practice them, they will grow in you every day until they embrace the whole world. You will become happier, and everyone around you will become happier, also.

The Four Immeasurable Minds are the four elements of true love: *maitri* — loving kindness (the desire to offer happiness); *karuna* — compassion (the desire to remove suffering from the other person); *mudita* — joy (the desire to bring joy to people around you, and allowing their happiness to bring you joy); and *upeksha*, equanimity (the desire to accept everything and not to discriminate). When you love because living beings need your love, not because someone belongs to your family, your nation, or your religion, then you are loving without discrimination and practicing true love.

When you dwell in these elements, you are living in the most beautiful, peaceful, and joyous realm in the universe. If someone asks your address, you can say the Brahmaviharas, the homes of Brahma, also known as the Four Immeasurable Minds of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. There are five-star hotels that cost more than \$2,000 per night. Yet the abode of Brahma offers more happiness than these. It’s a five-thousand-star hotel, a place where we can learn to love and be loved.

The Buddha respected people’s desire to practice their own faith, so he answered the Brahman’s question in a way that encouraged him to do so. If you enjoy sitting meditation, practice sitting meditation. If you enjoy walking meditation, practice walking meditation. But preserve your Jewish, Christian, or Muslim roots. That is the way to continue the Buddha’s spirit. If

you are cut off from your roots, you cannot be happy.

According to Nagarjuna, the second-century Buddhist philosopher:

*“Practicing the Immeasurable Mind of Love extinguishes anger in the hearts of living beings. Practicing the Immeasurable Mind of Compassion extinguishes all sorrows and anxieties in the hearts of living beings. Practicing the Immeasurable Mind of Joy extinguishes sadness and joylessness in the hearts of living beings. Practicing the Immeasurable Mind of Equanimity extinguishes hatred, aversion, and attachment in the hearts of living beings.”*

If we learn ways to practice love, compassion, joy, and equanimity, we will know how to heal the illnesses of anger, sorrow, insecurity, sadness, hatred, loneliness, and unhealthy attachments. In the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha teacher, “If a mind of anger arises, the *bhikkhu* (monk) can practice the meditation on love, compassion, or equanimity for the person who has brought about the feeling of anger.”

Can the Brahmaviharas put an end to suffering and afflictions? The Buddha believed so. One time the Buddha said to his beloved attendant Ananda, “Teach these Four Immeasurable Minds to the young monks, and they will feel secure, strong, and joyful, without afflictions of body or mind. For the whole of their lives, they will be well equipped to practice the pure way of a monk.” On another occasion, a group of the Buddha’s disciples visited the monastery of a nearby sect, and the monks there asked, “We have heard that your teacher Gautama teaches the Four Immeasurable Minds

of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Our master teaches this also. What is the difference?”

The Buddha’s disciples did not know how to respond. When they returned to their monastery, the Buddha told them, “whoever practices the Four Immeasurable Minds together with the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path will arrive deeply at enlightenment.” Love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are the very nature of an enlightened person. They are the four aspects of true love within ourselves and within everyone and everything.

### **LOVE (Maitri/Metta)**

The first aspect of true love is maitri (metta, in Pali), the intention and capacity to offer joy and happiness. To develop that capacity, we have to practice looking and listening deeply so that we know what to do and what not to do to make others happy. If you offer your beloved something she does not need, that is not maitri. You have to see her real situation or what you offer might bring her unhappiness.

Without understanding, your love is not true love. You must look deeply in order to see and understand the needs, aspirations, and suffering of the one you love. We all need love. Love brings us joy and well-being. It is as natural as the air. We are loved by the air; we need fresh air to be happy and well. We are loved by trees. We need trees to be healthy. In order to be loved, we have to love, which means we have to understand. For our love to continue, we have to take the appropriate action or non-action to protect the air, the trees, and our beloved.

Maitri can be translated as “love” or “loving kindness.” Some Buddhist teachers prefer “loving kindness,” as they find the word “love” too dangerous. But I prefer the word “love.” Words sometimes get sick and we have to heal them. We have been using the word “love” to mean appetite or desire, as in “I love hamburgers.” We have to use language more carefully. “Love” is a beautiful word; we have to restore its meaning. The word “maitri” has roots in the word mitra which means friend. In

Buddhism, the primary meaning of love is friendship.

We all have the seeds of love in us. We can develop this wonderful source of energy, nurturing the unconditional love that does not expect anything in return. When we understand someone deeply, even someone who has done us harm, we cannot resist loving him or her. Shakyamuni Buddha declared that the Buddha of the next eon will be named “Maitreya, the Buddha of Love.”

### **COMPASSION (Karuna)**

The second aspect of true love is karuna, the intention and capacity to relieve and transform suffering and lighten sorrows. Karuna is usually translated as “compassion,” but that is not exactly correct. “Compassion” is composed of com (“together with”) and passion (“to suffer”). But we do not need to suffer to remove suffering from another person. Doctors, for instance, can relieve their patients’ suffering without experiencing the same disease in themselves. If we suffer too much, we may be crushed and unable to help. Still, until we find a better word, let us use “compassion” to translate karuna.

To develop compassion in ourselves, we need to practice mindful breathing, deep listening, and deep looking. The Lotus Sutra describes Avalokiteshvara as the bodhisattva who practices “looking with the eyes of compassion and listening deeply to the cries of the world.” Compassion contains deep concern. You know the other person is suffering, so you sit close to her. You look and listen deeply to her to be able to touch her pain. You are in deep communication, deep communion with her, and that alone brings some relief.

One compassionate word, action, or thought can reduce another person’s suffering and bring him joy. One word can give comfort and confidence, destroy doubt, help someone avoid a mistake, reconcile a conflict, or open the door to liberation. One action can save a person’s life or help him take advantage of a rare opportunity. One thought can do the same, because thoughts always lead to words and actions. With compassion in our heart, every

thought, word, and deed can bring about a miracle.

When I was a novice, I could not understand why, if the world is filled with suffering, the Buddha has such a beautiful smile. Why isn’t he disturbed by all the suffering? Later I discovered that the Buddha has enough understanding, calm, and strength; that is why the suffering does not overwhelm him. He is able to smile to suffering because he knows how to take care of it and to help transform it. We need to be aware of the suffering, but retain our clarity, calmness, and strength so we can help transform the situation. The ocean of tears cannot drown us if karuna is there. That is why the Buddha’s smile is possible.

### **JOY (Mudita)**

The third element of true love is mudita, joy. True love always brings joy to ourselves and to the one we love. If our love does not bring joy to both of us, it is not true love. Commentators explain that happiness relates to both body and mind, whereas joy relates primarily to mind.

This example is often given: Someone traveling in the desert sees a stream of cool water and experiences joy. On drinking the water, he experiences happiness. Ditthadhamma sukhavihari means “dwelling happily in the present moment.” We don’t rush to the future; we know that everything is here in the present moment.

Many small things can bring us tremendous joy, such as the awareness that we have eyes in good condition. We just have to open our eyes and we can see the blue sky, the violet flowers, the children, the trees, and so many other kinds of forms and colors. Dwelling in mindfulness, we can touch these wondrous and refreshing things, and our mind of joy arises naturally. Joy contains happiness and happiness contains joy.

Some commentators have said that mudita means “sympathetic joy” or “altruistic joy,” the happiness we feel when others are happy. But that is too limited. It discriminates between self and others. A deeper definition of mudita is a joy that is filled with peace and



contentment. We rejoice when we see others happy, but we rejoice in our own wellbeing as well. How can we feel joy for another person when we do not feel joy for ourselves? Joy is for everyone.

### **EQUANIMITY (Upeksha)**

The fourth element of true love is upeksha, which means equanimity, nonattachment, nondiscrimination, even-mindedness, or letting go. Upa means “over,” and iksha means “to look.” You climb the mountain to be able to look over the whole situation, not bound by one side or the other. If your love has attachment, discrimination, prejudice, or clinging in it, it is not true love.

People who do not understand Buddhism sometimes think upeksha means indifference, but true equanimity is neither cold nor indifferent. If you have more than one child, they are all your children. Upeksha does not mean that you don’t love. You love in a way that all your children receive your love, without discrimination.

Upeksha has the mark called samatajñana, “the wisdom of equality,” the ability to see everyone as equal, not discriminating between ourselves and others. In a conflict, even though we are deeply concerned, we remain impartial, able to love and to understand both sides. We shed all discrimination and prejudice, and remove all boundaries between ourselves and others.

As long as we see ourselves as the one who loves and the other as the one who is loved, as long as we value ourselves more than others or see ourselves as different from others, we do not have true equanimity. We have to put ourselves “into the other person’s skin” and become one with him if we want to understand and truly love him. When that happens, there is no “self” and no “other.”

Without upeksha, your love may become possessive. A summer breeze can be very refreshing; but if we try to put it in a tin can so we can have it entirely for ourselves, the breeze will die. Our beloved is the same. He is like a cloud, a breeze, a flower. If you imprison him in a

tin can, he will die. Yet many people do just that. They rob their loved one of his liberty, until he can no longer be himself. They live to satisfy themselves and use their loved one to help them fulfill that. That is not loving; it is destroying.

You say you love him, but if you do not understand his aspirations, his needs, his difficulties, he is in a prison called love. True love allows you to preserve your freedom and the freedom of your beloved. That is upeksha.

For love to be true love, it must contain compassion, joy, and equanimity. For compassion to be true compassion, it has to have love, joy, and equanimity in it. True joy has to contain love, compassion, and equanimity. And true equanimity has to have love, compassion, and joy in it.

This is the interbeing nature of the Four Immeasurable Minds. When the Buddha told the Brahman man to practice the Four Immeasurable Minds, he was offering all of us a very important teaching. But we must look deeply and practice them for ourselves to bring these four aspects of love into our own lives and into the lives of those we love.

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## **The Three Turnings of The Wheel of Dharma by Jay L. Garfield**

*from a public talk in Berlin, 2011.*

*Transcribed by Mark Wehrmann.*

*Corrections by Losang Tenkyong.*

I don’t know very much, and so everything that I do have to say today is something that I owe to the goodness and the grace of my teachers, and I also know that there will be many mistakes. You can give the credit for what is useful to my teachers and you can blame the mistakes on me. I sometimes say things that I know are not orthodox, and so sometimes you will hear me very consciously deviate from things that are commonly said even within the lineage within which I have received teachings. That is because basically my background is in Western Philosophy, and for me the model of a Western Philosopher is always Aristotle, who said when

he criticized his own teacher Plato: “Well, we love our friends dearly; we love truth all the more”, and so sometimes I maintain things in directions that you might find surprising, and it’s okay for you to criticise me.

I’ve been asked to talk about the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma and why they are each important to all of us. I’m happy to be talking about that because it is a question very close to my own heart, and that I think is important for us both in terms of scholarship coming to understand Buddhism, and also very deeply to anybody involved in Buddhist practice.

Many of you consider yourselves practitioners of the Mahāyāna. Few of you read suttas and commentaries in the Śrāvakayāna tradition, from the Pali tradition. I’m not happy about that, so this is where I want to begin. I think that there is a great danger for many of us who practice in the Mahāyāna tradition that we sometimes develop an attitude – and it’s an attitude which is not altogether beneficial either in terms of our scholarship or in terms of our practice – and that is the attitude of deprecating the teachings of the first turning, the teachings in the Śrāvakayāna vehicle. That deprecation is sometimes explicit: we say: “I only read Mahāyāna texts. These are just for people who are not wise enough to read the Mahāyāna”; or implicit, where we might not necessarily speak or explicitly think negatively about Śrāvakayāna texts, but they just don’t turn up on our desk: we just don’t read them; we don’t study them. We say: “Oh, I’m too busy with my important Mahāyāna texts to read that”.

Sometimes we even use that word “Hīnayāna”. Even if we don’t mean it that way, it’s important to remember that in using that word we are always explicitly deprecating because the word “hīna” means “inferior” or “lower”. It is as though we talked about people around us saying: “Oh, I have my great friends and I have my inferior friends. I’m not saying bad things about my inferior friends, they are just inferior”. That would be problematic.

But let me say that things go even further, because many of us who are Mahāyāna practitioners rarely even read Yogācāra texts or

Yogācāra sūtras. And these are even Mahāyāna texts, because again we are taught very often that the highest teaching is the Madhyamaka teaching, the teachings of the second turning of the wheel following the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, and we think to ourselves: “I should concentrate on the very highest teaching and not worry about the teachings that I think of as lower”. That of course is also a form of deprecation.

Of course this isn’t our fault, we are not bad people, but this is a natural outgrowth of the way that these texts are often talked about within the tradition. When we talk about the three turnings of the wheel in much Indian and Tibetan and often Chinese hermeneutics, we are often told: “Well, the first turning of the wheel was taught for people of lower capacity and the second turning of the wheel was taught for people of much higher capacity and the third turning was, well, that was taught for people who thought they were of high capacity but then it didn’t quite work and so they had to slip back to this other one, so they are really kind of medium”; and we all know, each of us knows that: “Really I’m a person of very high capacity, and without any pride, and because I have absolutely no pride, and very high capacity, I don’t need those lower teachings”.

Very often, the reason in the tradition, the reason that this understanding of the three turnings of the wheel as being teachings for people of different capacities comes to be, is because of the need to resolve apparent inconsistencies in the Buddha’s teachings. For instance in the Sandhinirmocana Sūtra, which is a very classic Yogācāra text but also a very classic text that Je Rinpoche appeals to in his understanding of how to think about the vehicles, it’s put this way: the Bodhisattvas say: “Hey, listen Buddha, sometimes you said there is a self, sometimes you said there is no self. Sometimes you said things are empty, sometimes you said things aren’t empty. This seems to be contradictory: what’s going on?”; and the way to resolve these has often been to distinguish the teachings into different cycles and say “Well, some people need to hear this, some people need to hear this, and some people are able to hear

this. In Sanskrit this distinction is drawn in terms of teachings that are neyārtha versus teachings that are nītārtha: teachings that require interpretation or commentary or supplementation versus teachings that can be taken literally, just as they are.

So let me begin by asking you this question: When we think about the three turnings of the wheel, are they each or are they not each Buddhavaccana, the speech of the Buddha? And of course the answer is that all this is all Buddhavaccana. Even when we look at the texts that all of us might regard as the most profound, most definitive: the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, and in particular the Mother Sūtra, the eight-thousand-line Prajñāpāramitā; when that text asks: “What is Buddhavaccana?” “What is the speech of the Buddha?” The answer is given: “The speech of the Buddha is anything spoken directly by the Buddha, anything inspired directly by the Buddha, anything spoken in the presence of the Buddha and approved of by the Buddha, or anything that is fully consistent with the intent of the Buddha.” So a question we each need to ask ourselves, maybe every day, is: am I too good, am I too smart, am I too realised to listen to Buddhavaccana? If the answer to that is yes, go, enjoy the sunshine! But if the answer to that is no, then we need to take Buddhavaccana seriously, regardless of which turning of the wheel it is comprised of. To help us do that I would like to suggest to you a different way of thinking about the relationship between the three turnings of the wheel, not in terms of neyārtha and nītārtha, not in terms of higher or lower or medium, but rather in terms of three different subject matters, or three different ways of looking at the world: in terms of which the Buddha chose to teach. I think you will see that each of these ways of looking at the world is important, and I find the sūtras and the shastras contained in each of these approaches to be extremely beneficial.

The idea that I am going to be outlining in the next few minutes is not, I don’t think, at all original to me. I was led to it by a remark His Holiness the Dalai Lama made in a teaching where he set out this idea that it was time to pay

more attention to all three turnings because they seem to approach these different domains, and I went home and thought a lot about that idea and went back to these teachings, to these different sets of texts in that light, and I’ve come to believe that His Holiness is absolutely right about that, and that when His Holiness says that, it really calls us to a complete re-appraisal of how many of us – myself included – have thought about these teachings and how they are often treated in commentarial literature.

So let me set this out in brief, and then we will work in more detail. In brief, we can say that the teachings of the first turning set out for us the general characterisation of the nature of reality, the general characterisation of Samsara, its causes, and the means for release from Samsara; the second turning teachings set out the nature of emptiness from the side of objects of knowledge, and the third turning teachings set out an understanding of emptiness from the side of the subject of knowledge. I think that if we see things this way, we see the three sets of teachings as complementary to one another rather than as in competition with one another and therefore as important to each of us.

### **First Turning**

Now let us begin by thinking about the teachings of the first turning. The first turning of the wheel of Dharma by the Buddha took place at the site of Sarnath outside Varanasi, and it was accomplished through a sutta known as the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the sutta of, or the Discourse of the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma that was delivered to the Buddha’s five initial disciples – I am sure you all know this, and of course the initial teachings of that sūtra are elaborated in enormous detail by the succeeding Pali texts: the discourses that the Buddha gave for the next forty-five years of his human life on earth, as well as in the Pali commentaries and scholastic texts. I want to focus for the next few minutes just on two texts within that tradition: one, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta itself, and the second a later commentarial text called the Questions of King Milinda that records a possibly

historical, part possibly fictional interaction between the monk Nāgasena and a Bactrian king.

If you have not read the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, you should do so immediately. This is the sutta where the Buddha first announced the Four Noble Truths and delivered the results of his insight and awakening. This is the most important sutta in the entire Buddhist literature. If you are sent to a desert island and you get to take one text with you and you are trying to decide whether to take the Heart Sūtra or the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, give the Heart Sūtra to your best friend and take the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, because that will guide your practice.

So, in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta the Buddha begins by teaching “This entire world is characterized by suffering”. When a lot of people hear this they say: “Oh my God! That’s so depressing! What a depressing religion! What a depressing philosophy! I wanna go some place else. The world is actually very nice: there are blue skies, nice people, I am young and healthy, and life is basically good”. They must say “Shut up Buddha! This is just a total downer”, But ... it’s not. And in fact when the Buddha articulates in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta that the world is characterized by suffering, he makes that very specific: he says that not being able to get what we want is suffering – and of course as the Rolling Stones said “You can’t always get what you want.” Having things that you don’t want is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering, separation from those that you love is suffering; and anybody who honestly believes that he or she is living in a world where you are always going to get what you want, you are never going to get what you don’t want, you’re going to be perpetually young and everybody is always going to be nice to you and you will never suffer loss, then you really do need to wake up to the reality of the world; and even if you believe that the life that you have right now is pretty good, just think about what’s happening maybe only a few kilometers from here, or maybe a few doors from here where people really are living lives in great pain, lives of great privation, lives of great uncertainty, lives of sadness; and then you have a

choice. You can decide: “Well, that’s them, not me. So I’m not suffering, they are”; or you can suffer the pain of knowing that that’s happening. If the latter, then you too are suffering. If the former, you are suffering from serious mental illness.

The Buddha continued that suffering doesn’t just happen, it’s not a random event, but suffering, like everything else, is brought about by causes and conditions. The immediate conditions of suffering, the Buddha argued, are desire, attraction and aversion, but those attractions and aversions are based on a more fundamental confusion about the nature of reality. That confusion, he taught, isn’t just an absence of knowledge, but a positive superimposition of a false view of reality over the reality that we experience.

We find ourselves in a world in which all phenomena, including ourselves, are impermanent and constantly changing; in which all phenomena including ourselves are dependently originated and depend upon countless causes and conditions for their reality; a world in which all phenomena including ourselves are selfless and don’t have any core or essence; nonetheless, we attribute permanence to things; we attribute independence to things; we attribute substantial existence to things. That’s an act of cognitive superimposition.

I think of this as a mental reflex: something wired into our brains, but which by doing we cause suffering for ourselves because we take ourselves to be separate from other things, substantially existent, going on forever, independent and important. And we teach each other this. We teach our children: “You have to be independent! Stand on your own two feet!” But of course, nobody is independent; nobody stands on their own feet. Where did you get your feet? You got them from your parents. We build this kind of structure of independence, substantiality, difference from the world, a longing to be permanent, that drives the cosmetics industry for instance, and that becomes our source of suffering.

That’s all the bad news, the first two truths, but then there is some better news. Given

that we live in a world constituted by suffering, suffering that we bring about ourselves by our own cognitive activity, there is a way to cease suffering. There is a way to escape suffering, and that is to reverse that cognitive activity; and the reversal of that cognitive activity requires fundamental transformation of our minds.

In order to accomplish that, in the fourth Truth the Buddha lays out what we call the Eightfold Path to Nobility. The eightfold path is not a set of eight commandments instead of the Ten Commandments; it's actually a very interesting structure. I think of it from a Sanskrit point of view as being eight vastus, eight domains, eight areas of concern. What the Buddha doesn't tell you to do is to do this, don't do this, do this, don't do this, but rather: pay attention to these things. Pay attention to your action: your action can either cause suffering or cause happiness; pay attention to what you say, to your speech: your speech can either cause suffering or cause happiness; pay attention to how you earn your living: some ways of earning a living are conducive to happiness and release of suffering, some cause more suffering; pay attention to your views: the way you think about the world is not morally neutral.

A lot of people are puzzled by that: why is the right view part of an ethical discipline? Think about it for a minute. There are certain things that are simply immoral to believe, right? Beliefs that cause pain and suffering. Suppose, for instance, that I think that women are basically dumb and useless and can't study: then as a teacher I am horrible; I have got an immoral view; I have got a view that causes suffering to those around me. Or if I am a decent feminist then I have got a positive view that can actually benefit the world. So the Buddha emphasised that all of these things: the way we think, the way we meditate, the amount of effort we put into things, the way we earn our livelihood; all of these things are things that we do that can cause happiness or cause suffering. The Eightfold Path asks us to examine our lives constantly, reflectively through thought, and meditatively through deep kinds of concentration that actually transform the way we take up with the world, in

order to achieve a release from suffering and to enable others to be released from suffering.

This is but the briefest summary of one very small sutta in the Pali canon, but you can begin to see that here what the Buddha is doing is laying out for us the general framework within which to think about our lives and practice. It is a very profound framework, a framework that challenges us to think and live in ways that are very contrary to those in which many of us live. I think none of us is too good to pay attention to this.

I am going to only mention some things that happen in the Questions of King Milinda so that I can move on to the second and third turnings. In this beautiful little text a number of metaphors are introduced for understanding the ideas developed in the Pali Canon, and that can really deepen our understanding. For instance when the king asks Nāgasena: "Gee, you Buddhists teach this doctrine of no-self. If there is no you, who should I pay homage to? Who wears the robes? Who does the practice?"

And Nāgasena famously asks: "Hey king, how did you get here? Did you walk or did you come in a chariot?" and of course the King says: "Well, I came in a chariot." Then Nāgasena says: "So was the chariot identical to the wheels? Was it identical to the axle, identical to the seat? Where was the Chariot that you came in? Was it all of these pieces together? What was it?" Then of course the king says: "No, the chariot isn't the wheels, the chariot isn't the seat, the chariot isn't the axle and so forth: the chariot is just a name that we use to talk about all of those things when they are assembled and functioning together." Then Nāgasena says: "Just so, I'm not my hair, I'm not my teeth, I'm not my feet, I'm not all of these pieces, I am not different from all of these pieces: then my name is just a designation that I use to talk about all of these things when they're functioning together." By doing this, The Questions of King Milinda gives us a wonderful understanding of what it is to exist, but to exist selflessly.

There are many other beautiful and very useful similes in this text, which I suggest that you read, but I mention this one only because

many of us who study in the Mahāyāna are familiar with this chariot simile. We find it in Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra in the sixth chapter, and many of us think: "Aha, this is a definitively Mahāyāna idea." But I mention this to point out that Candrakīrti is taking it from the Śrāvakayāna. Candrakīrti isn't so arrogant as to say: "I won't read Śrāvakayāna texts." He is happy enough to read them and to borrow from them. And if Candrakīrti can read them, so can you.

## Second Turning

Now having convinced ourselves that we should all be reading first turning texts, let's turn to the second turning and understand what some of its characteristics are. As I said, we can think of the second turning as setting out the idea of emptiness from the standpoint of objects of knowledge. The second turning also involves an understanding of ethics from the standpoint of compassion grounded in an understanding of this emptiness. I want to mention briefly some of what we can learn from two important second turning texts. The first is the Heart of Wisdom Sūtra which is a wonderful sūtra to read because it is a nice condensation of the much longer and sometimes more difficult eight-thousand-line Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra. The second text I'll mention just a little bit about is one that I have to mention anytime I talk, and that is Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, but I'll just talk about a couple of verses in that text.

Now, maybe I should say a word or two about the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras themselves, the foundation texts for the second turning. The foundation texts for the first turning are the Pali sūttas. For the second turning they are the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, as well as a few other sūtras such as the Vimalakīrti. All of these arose some time around the beginning of the first millennium, about one hundred years before the Common Era, and they seem to have been pretty much in the current form by about the second century of the Common Era.

Of course, what I have just said is a bit heterodox. Within the tradition, these texts are regarded as having been taught by the Buddha

pretty much simultaneously on Vulture Peak while the Buddha was on retreat there, but there is always a bit of a difference between the way these texts are regarded traditionally and the way that, shall we say boring academic people who study texts think about their origin, and it's your choice. You can think of them canonically as having been spoken by the Buddha on Vulture Peak, that's fine, or you can think of them more historically as having been composed some six or seven hundred years after the Buddha's death, as this new philosophical movement was being generated in India. It's your choice.

For myself I will say that I believe deeply that Buddhism calls us to be critical and to think and weigh all evidence, and I believe that accepting that these texts were composed by great sages later on does nothing to undermine their authenticity, their profundity or their holiness; but that is just my view. To get even more heretical, I'll point out that most contemporary scholars believe that the Heart Sūtra was in fact composed in China and translated back into Sanskrit, so things even get more complicated, but it's still a beautiful, profound and very holy text, and I still want to talk to you about it because it is a text that is of the utmost importance to understanding Madhyamaka.

When we encounter the scene of the Heart Sūtra, the scene is set on Vulture Peak, which is this wonderful place you can visit in Bihar, a very wild and beautiful spot. The Buddha is there with an enormous assembly of Bodhisattvas and celestial beings, and the Buddha is engaged in a very particular meditation. We usually translate the name of this meditation as "the meditation on the enumeration of phenomena", that is he is really considering the enormous diversity of constantly arising and ceasing dependent phenomena in the world.

Then the disciple Śāripūtra asks a question to a very particular bodhisattva. All of you know the Heart Sūtra: you might not know the Dharmachakrapravartana, but you know the Heart Sūtra. Which bodhisattva does Śāripūtra address? Chenrezig; Avalokiteśvara. This is a really important moment in the Heart Sūtra. It's

significant that it is Avalokiteśvara. You might expect, given that this is a perfection of wisdom sūtra, to find Mañjuśrī brandishing his sword somewhere in the Sūtra because it is Mañjuśrī who is the bodhisattva of perfect wisdom, but Avalokiteśvara, Chenrezig is the bodhisattva of compassion and I take it to be a very important message of the Heart Sūtra that here at the heart of a sūtra on wisdom we have the embodiment of compassion: that the only motivation for developing the kind of wisdom that is being articulated in the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras that is worthy at all is the motivation of compassion: that we try to gain wisdom in order to be able to benefit sentient beings, not just to say get a good grade in a course or to get a Ph.D. or to become a great scholar. The motivation for wisdom is compassion.

The question Śāripūtra asks Avalokiteśvara is “How should somebody who wants to practice the profound perfection of wisdom practice? How should you practice if this is what you want to do?” And inspired by the Buddha, Avalokiteśvara replies: “Somebody who wants to practice the profound perfection of wisdom should see phenomena in the following way:” And then of course we encounter the four famous lines at the center of the Heart Sūtra: you should see that “form is empty, that emptiness is form, that form is not different from emptiness and that emptiness is not different from form”.

We could spend many days talking about the Heart Sūtra because there is so much to say, but we do not have many days, so I am going to say a few very specific things. When we begin by talking about form and the other aggregates, we are talking about the objects of our knowledge, the things that we encounter, things around us. When we say that form is empty, we are saying that these things are empty. But empty of what? They are empty of essence, empty of inherent existence, empty of independence. And we can say that they’re empty in a number of ways. These things are empty because they lack essence; these things are empty because they arise only in dependence on causes and conditions and disappear in dependence on those causes and conditions; these things are empty

because they are merely conceptually imputed; because the identity that they have, like the identity of the chariot, is an identity that comes from the side of the subject, from our imputation, not from themselves. There is nothing from the side of the object that makes it the object it is, and that remains permanent and independent. That’s the fundamental reality of objects of experience.

But why then say that emptiness is form? That is a very different claim, because you might say: “My gosh, form is empty! This microphone – the one in my hand – is completely empty! That means it doesn’t exist! That means there is no microphone in my hand!” That would be wrong, because the emptiness of the microphone depends upon the microphone. We do not want to say the microphone is illusory but its emptiness is real: that the microphone doesn’t exist inherently but its emptiness does. If there is no microphone in my hand, there is no emptiness of any microphone in my hand. Emptiness is not some thing hidden behind here. I can’t say: “Here, you take the microphone, I’ll keep the emptiness”, because emptiness is a property of the microphone. Because it is, it tells us that we can’t reify the emptiness because to reify emptiness would be to deprecate form, to deprecate real things; so the second line in the Heart Sūtra says take reality seriously! It might be empty but it’s the only reality you’ve got! To grasp the emptiness, as if it’s the reality behind it, is to toss away the only world you have.

The Sūtra continues with these third and fourth lines “Form isn’t different from emptiness, emptiness isn’t different from form.” What does that mean? It’s not just that form happens to be empty and that emptiness happens to be the emptiness of form. Try to understand what it is to be a physical thing like a microphone: what is it to be made of stuff, to be physical. It is to be made up of parts and to depend for its existence on parts. That is part of what it is to be a physical object. No parts, no object. It’s to depend upon causes and conditions. That’s part of what it is to be a physical object: if you don’t make a microphone, you don’t get a microphone.

It's also to be dependent on imputation, because anything like that is part of a vast continuum of things. To carve it out as a single entity in my consciousness is a cognitive activity. So to be a microphone is to be empty. In general, to be physical is to be empty. But then let us ask ourselves "Well, what is it to be empty?" Well, to be empty is to depend upon parts; to be empty is to depend upon causes and conditions; to be empty is to depend upon mere imputation. But that's just what we said to be physical form is. Form and emptiness don't just happen to be related. They are the same thing. This is the profound unity of the two truths in Madhyamaka that tells us what the character of objects of knowledge is. To be an object of knowledge is to be conventionally, empirically real, and to be ultimately empty. That's the lesson we get from the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras.

It is very good that I am now holding an empty microphone because if I'd been given a non-empty microphone I would have been in real trouble. It would be causally inert, incapable of being acted upon, or of acting. Now, Nāgārjuna picks up these points in a very profound way in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. In the twenty-fourth chapter of Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, in the eighteenth and nineteenth ślokas, Nāgārjuna says: "Whatever is dependently originated, that's emptiness: that being a dependent designation is the Middle Way. Since there is nothing that is not originated dependently, there is nothing that is not empty." In saying this, Nāgārjuna is emphasizing that emptiness and dependent origination are not two distinct characteristics of objects of knowledge: they are the same characteristic of objects of knowledge; that once again when we understand what it is to be an object, what it is to be a phenomenon, something that we can know, whether our self or something external to us, every object of knowledge can be known only because it is dependently originated, only because it depends upon causes and conditions, only because we can impute an identity to it: that is, only because it's empty. That doesn't mean that phenomena don't exist. Emptiness isn't non-existence: it's the only mode of existence that phenomena can have.

In the fortieth and final verse of that chapter Nāgārjuna says: "Whoever understands dependent origination understands suffering, and its origin, and its cessation, and the path." There Nāgārjuna is drawing this profound connection between the understanding of dependent origination and the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. He says that if you understand dependent origination, you understand the Four Noble Truths; but since dependent origination and emptiness are the same thing, that also means that if you understand emptiness, you understand the Four Noble Truths. It also of course means that if you don't understand emptiness and dependent origination, you don't understand anything. Now, notice that Nāgārjuna at the end of this very important chapter comes back to the Four Noble Truths, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta was something Nāgārjuna took seriously: he was not too good to read that text. If Nāgārjuna wasn't too good to read that text, we're not too good to read that text.

Now, Śāntideva in the Bodhicaryāvatāra, maybe the most beautiful text composed in the Mahāyāna, draws explicitly the very profound connection between an understanding of the emptiness of the objects of experience and the cultivation of compassion. Śāntideva – and this is a long and complex story, one we don't have time to tell tonight but we'll tell more of tomorrow night – emphasises that we don't need to ask the question: "Why should I be compassionate?" Rather the question that we need to ask is: "Why would I ever want to be egoistic?" We all know that suffering is bad, so you don't need a reason to think that you want to eliminate suffering; but you would need a reason to think: "When I look all over the vast universe of sentient beings there's actually only one of them who's suffering is important enough to eliminate. Guess who it is? It's not you. It's me. I'm the only one who has suffering that's worth eliminating."

Well, people tend to fight about who that unique individual is whose suffering is worth alleviating. Śāntideva's point is that you actually



need a reason to believe that you are so important, and in fact we all give ourselves a reason. The reason that we give ourselves is the reality of the distinction between self and others, our substantial existence and difference from everybody else: the fact(sic) that my happiness doesn't depend upon your happiness, that I am completely independent, and this very reasonable view that I am permanent, independent, substantial and the rest of you are just a bunch of stuff.

Śāntideva points out that that's the only reason you could be rationally egoistic, and so the way to dissolve egoism is not to sort of say: "Let's everybody be nice now!" – it doesn't work – but rather to cultivate the view of emptiness, to cultivate the understanding of the emptiness of all objects and phenomena because then egoism doesn't have a ground to stand on, and then compassion naturally arises because what compassion is the commitment to alleviating suffering. That we already have: we know that suffering is bad. The only trouble is the construction of the barrier between ourselves' and others' suffering. That's a conceptually constructed barrier. That's a barrier that's only possible if you don't understand emptiness, and so that's why there is this deep connection in the Mahāyāna between the understanding of the nature of all phenomena as empty, and the spontaneous development of compassion.

It should be clear why we should all study second turning texts: second turning texts are important for developing the profound view of emptiness, for developing the profound understanding of the nature of our objects of experience, and for cultivating the very best possible moral sentiments we have. But notice: nothing that we have talked about in the second turning is inconsistent with anything we talked about in the first turning; it's rather supplementary. It deepens the idea of view, it extends the idea of path, but it does not in any way undermine or reject anything taught in the first turning suttas.

### Third Turning

Now, the third turning of the wheel of Dharma is often called the turning characterised by the teaching of Mind Only, and the foundational texts for that turning are the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra and the Lankāvatāra Sūtra, which the scholars believe came to be composed a few hundred years after the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, probably in about the third or fourth century of the Common Era – canonically they are held to be taught by the Buddha during his lifetime, again you can think about this any way you like – and a set of very important philosophical texts composed by philosophers like Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Vasubandhu and Asanga, with the view really articulated most deeply by Vasubandhu and Asanga, who were half-brothers, and by their great commentator Sthiramati (Loten in Tibetan), who really did a great deal to systematize the teachings of the masters.

Often when we hear the term "Mind Only," we tend to think that the way to understand this view is that the mind is real and nothing else is real, that only the mind is real. It is possible to read those texts that way and that is certainly one of the interpretations we can adopt, but it is not by any means the only or maybe even the most useful way to understand the term. We can also think of the phrase "Mind Only" as saying the mind is the only thing you need to worry about, or the mind is the only thing you can actually work on, or the actual nature of your experience is only the experience of mind; and if we think about it this way we suddenly discover a very profound teaching about the nature of our own subjectivity.

By the way, when we think about it this way we see an important analogy between the third turning and certain second turning texts. In the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra when the question is asked "How do you purify a Buddha field?" the answer that the Buddha and Vimalakīrti give is: "You purify your mind." That is if I want to make the world I experience into a world of pure Buddha action, I don't do that by transforming each of you and providing some psychotherapy and a little cosmetic surgery here and there and

maybe beautifying the environment, I transform myself. I am the only thing I can work on. My mind is the only thing I can work on.

In the Bodhicaryāvatāra when Śāntideva says: “The world is covered with thorns and rocks and it’s very painful to walk on: I could cover the whole world with leather or I just could put on a pair of shoes,” Śāntideva is pointing out that the transformation that we are after when we are involved in moral transformation is fundamentally the transformation of ourselves. In this way when we think of Mind Only as saying: “The only thing you need to worry about is your mind and in fact the only thing you can transform is your mind,” we see a teaching that is much more consistent with the second turning. Now we’ll begin talking about how to understand that in more detail.

Let’s turn now to one of the chapters of the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra, and this is the Paramārthasamudgata chapter where the bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata asks the Buddha: “Hey Buddha, you’ve said these things that seem to me to be contradictory, because you’ve said that sometimes things have the nature of arising from causes and conditions, that sometimes things have the nature of having these particular kinds of characteristics, and sometimes you say things are empty of any nature. What were you talking about? It sounds like you were being inconsistent.”

In his answer the Buddha says: “That was a great question, Paramārthasamudgata! Let me explain!” and he explains by distinguishing three natures that phenomena have, and three naturelessnesses, or three kinds of emptiness that phenomena have, arguing that each of the natures that things have are coupled with one of the naturelessnesses: one of the kinds of emptiness. In doing this he provides a very deep explanation of the nature of our experience, that is of what emptiness is like from the side of the subject, an examination of what our minds do to phenomena.

This account of the three natures is developed in much more detail by Vasubandhu in two very important texts. One is his treatise in thirty stanzas Trimśikākārikā. The other is his

treatise Trisvabhāvanirdeśa or discourse on the three natures, and in those texts he develops this theory in much more detail. What I’m going to do is to step back from the details and talk about what the three natures are and the three kinds of emptiness, and show you how those provide a model of how our mind works and/or emptiness looks from the subject side.

The three natures are these: the first one is in Sanskrit called the parikalpita-svabhāva or the imagined nature, the second one paratantra-svabhāva or the dependent nature, and the third one the pariniṣpanna-svabhāva or the perfected or the consummate nature. The three kinds of emptiness distinguished in the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra are: emptiness with respect to characteristics, emptiness with respect to production, and ultimate emptiness. Now what we need is a good example, so we’re going to take the cup. In particular what we are going to look at is how I actually experience the cup, and I want to do this just in a very ordinary, boring way from the standpoint of modern science for a moment.

So here I am gazing fondly at this beautiful cup, and instinctively I think that I am experiencing immediately an external object that is smooth, round, has beautiful flowers on it, contains water and so forth; and if I asked you, if I were right you would say: “Yes, you’ve got it exactly!”. But on reflection, even if we haven’t studied a word of Dharma, we know that that’s wrong. I am going to tell you a sad story. In fact here’s what’s happening. Light is bouncing off some object out there, it’s being bent by the lens of my eye, passed through a bunch of liquid in my eyeball, where it’s causing electrical activity among nerve cells on the back of my eye. I’m not making this up: it’s in scriptures that we all trust, the scriptures of modern science!

What then happens? Nerve impulses go up my optic nerve into my brain. They go into my occipital cortex, where various visual processing happens, and they interact with the parts of my brain that are involved with language and with motor control to give me the labeled cup and to get my hand to grasp it. I want to make it clear that in order to see this cup I need some light but

it is very dark in my brain. So whatever's happening in my brain, I don't have a cup in there; and the cup itself is not penetrating my skull and if it did I'd be in big trouble; so where I take myself to be directly experiencing an external object, all that's really happening is bunch of complicated brain activity that is generating an image and a word and a bunch of action based upon some electrical activity in the back of my eye caused by some thing or other.

This is actually extremely profound, even though it's just science, and this is actually what the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* and Vasubandhu are talking about. The imagined nature of the cup, the way that I imagine the object of my experience to be, is that it is external and that it is dualistically related to me as subject, that it is different from my subjectivity. But that's merely an imagined nature. That's something that I project, because all I immediately experience is an image and a name. The image and the name are somewhere in my brain not outside. You can't drink water from an image and a name, but I think that what I am grasping is something from which I can drink water. That's the imagined nature. I imagine my experience to be external to me, by a mental reflex I project it outside of me but that projection is not part of what I experience at all. What I experience is mind only. It's only in my mind. Where else could experience be? Experience can't be somewhere outside of me – that would be crazy.

That's the first nature of the cup – its imagined nature – and it corresponds to the first emptiness of the cup. When it's called emptiness with respect to characteristics it means that the cup I experience is empty of all of the characteristics I ascribe to the external cup. I think the external cup is solid and round and beautiful and can be seen; but the cup I experience is something happening in my brain. All those neurons firing are not solid, are not round, are not particularly beautiful and cannot be seen. So the cup that I experience is empty of the characteristics that I attribute to it, and that is emptiness with respect to characteristics and it constitutes the imagined nature of the cup.

But we can say more about my experience of the cup: it depends upon countless causes and conditions, many of which are not made of porcelain. Many of those causes and conditions have to do with my own eyes, with the fact that there is light in the room, with the way that my brain works, with blood pumped by my heart ... all of those causes and conditions. So, we also say that the cup has a dependent nature. My experience of the cup depends upon all these phenomena, even though I don't recognize that dependency in the cup as I perceive it, and that corresponds to the second emptiness of the cup: the emptiness in terms of causality, the emptiness in terms of dependence. So, the cup that I experience is causally dependent, whereas the cup that I take, that I posit, is empty of all of those phenomena. It seems to be a porcelain thing outside of me. I continue to think that I'm experiencing external objects when in fact I am experiencing something that arises due to all of these causes and conditions.

Now, in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* and in the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* we read that the consummate nature, the final nature of the cup, is that the dependent nature is empty of the imagined; and so what we now say is that experience of the cup that depends on all of these conditions is empty of that imagined external cup: the dependent cup in my mind is empty of subject-object duality, it's not separate from me, it is empty of externality; and so we say that that is the ultimate emptiness of the cup. The ultimate emptiness of our experience is that even though we always take our experience to be constituted by something outside of us, in fact, if we pay attention to science or to Buddhism, if we pay attention, what we experience is our experiences: just mind.

Of course this has implications for practice and for ethics as well. The more we practice, especially the more we practice the kind of mindfulness that we are encouraged to practice in the Pāli canon, the more we see that what we attribute to our experience is different from the experience itself; and so when I find somebody who I find really annoying, who starts to make me really angry, and I say: "That person

is an annoying person, that person causes anger”, I can direct myself back to my experience, and ask “Where does that experience come from?” That experience depends upon internal causes and conditions. The person I experience is not external to me. The experience of the person is mind only. I can’t change the external person. The only thing I can change is my mind, the person I experience. Mind is all I have to work with. Mind is the basis of practice, and that’s why Yogācāra, the third turning is so important, and once again nothing we’ve said about the third turning is inconsistent with anything we said about the second turning. One gives us an understanding of objects, the other gives us an understanding of the subject. Each of them is consistent with everything we saw in the first turning, which gives us the general framework, or the structure, of reality within which we exist.

So I’m suggesting that we really drop the whole *neyartha-nītārtha* distinction, the idea of definitive texts and texts that require interpretation; the whole idea of one wheel as being Buddhism for dummies and the other being Buddhism for middle-sized people and the other one being Buddhism for us; that we stop deprecating any *Buddhavaccana*; and that we recognize that when the Buddha taught these things he meant every word of it and that every word of it is important for us, not just important for us theoretically, but deeply important for our practice because we all live in a world constituted by suffering and constituted by the sources of suffering and we all need a path of liberation from that suffering; we all live in a world in which that path requires us to understand the objects of our experience, and we all live in a world in which the only way that we can practice that path is by working on the only thing we have: our own minds.

The final thing I want to say is that for me this also illustrates why study is so important to practice. Sometimes people say: “I don’t have time to study those texts, I need to do my practice.” And other people say: “I don’t have time for practice. I’ve got to study, I need to learn these texts.” Study is practice and practice is a kind of study. Just as I don’t want anybody here

to ever disparage a single syllable of *Buddhavaccana* I don’t want anybody to ever disparage the practice of study as part of the Buddha’s path. The Buddha offered all of these teachings. All of us are accustomed to taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. If the refuge prayer isn’t hollow, than to take refuge in the Buddha is to actually care about what the Buddha taught. To take refuge in the Dharma is to actually read it.

It’s one thing to show respect for books by circumambulating them, but you really don’t learn very much by circumambulating books! It’s one thing to show respect for the Buddha by prostrating, but the Buddha didn’t teach so that you would prostrate, the Buddha taught so that you would hear. And when we show respect for Sangha, it’s a wonderful thing to prostrate and to stand when our teachers enter the room, but to show respect for a teacher is actually to listen what he or she says and to think about it. I teach at a college. If my students came in and prostrated to me and then walked around their books and then went to sleep while I talked, what use would it be showing up for work? So my final message is this: if all *Buddhavaccana*, first turning, second turning, third turning is important, open the books and read!

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### **Why I Sit by Paul R. Fleischman, M.D.**

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This morning the first thing I did was to sit for an hour. I have done that religiously for many years, and have spent many evenings, days and weeks doing the same. The English word “meditate” until recently had a vague meaning, referring to any one of a set of activities like extended deep thought, or prayer, or religious contemplation. Recently, “meditation” gained a pseudo-specificity: “T.M.,” deep relaxation, or alpha-wave conditioning, with connotations of Hinduized cult phenomena like mantras, gurus, and altered states of consciousness. To “sit” is a

basic word, with connotations ranging from chicken-coops to boredom and sagacity, so it forms a neutral starting point for an explanation of why I have spent thousands upon thousands of hours “sitting,” and why I have made this activity the center of my life.

## I

I would like to know myself. It is remarkable that while ordinarily we spend most of our lives studying, contemplating, observing, and manipulating the world around us, the structured gaze of the thoughtful mind is so rarely turned inwards. This avoidance must measure some anxiety, reluctance, or fear. That makes me still more curious. Most of our lives are spent in externally oriented functions that distract from self-observation. This relentless, obsessive drive persists independently of survival needs such as food and warmth, and even of pleasure. Moment for moment, we couple ourselves to sights, tastes, words, motions, or electric stimuli, until we fall dead. It is striking how many ordinary activities, from smoking a pipe to watching sunsets, veer towards, but ultimately avoid, sustained attention to the reality of our own life.

So it is not an intellectual intrigue with the platonic dictum that leads me to sit, but an experience of myself and my fellow human as stimulus-bound, fundamentally out of control, alive only in reaction. I want to know, to simply observe, this living person as he is, not just as he appears while careening from event to event. Of course, this will undoubtedly be helpful to me as a psychiatrist, but my motives are more fundamental, personal, and existential.

I am interested in my mind, and in my body. Previous to my having cultivated the habit of sitting, I had thought about myself, and had used my body as a tool in the world, to grip a pen or to chop firewood, but I had never systematically, rigorously, observed my body—what it feels like, not just with a shy, fleeting glance, but moment after moment for hours and days at a time; nor had I committed myself to observe the reciprocal influence of mind and body in states of exhaustion and rest, hunger, pain, relaxation,

arousal, lethargy, or concentration. My quest for knowing is not merely objective and scientific. This mind-and-body is the vessel of my life. I want to drink its nectar, and if necessary, its sludge, but I want to know it with the same organic immersion that sets a snow goose flying ten thousand miles every winter and spring.

It seems to me that the forces of creation, the laws of nature, out of which this mind and body arose, must be operative in me, now, continuously, and whenever I make an effort to observe them. The activity of creation must be the original and continuing cause of my life. I would like to know these laws, these forces, my maker, and observe, even participate in, the ongoing creation.

Newton founded modern science with his assumption that there is one continuous world, one unbroken order, one set of laws governing both earth and sky; so along with this great tradition, and along with the ancient religions of India as well, I assume that the physics of the stars is the physics of my body also. The laws of chemistry and biology, predicated on the laws of physics, are also uniform throughout nature. Since these laws operate continuously, without reserve or sanctuary, but uniformly and pervasively, I deduce that eternal, unbroken laws operate in me, created me, and create me, that my life is an expression of them continuously linked by cause and effect to all that antedated, all that follows, and all that is coexistent; and that, to the extent that I am conscious and capable of learning, a systematic study and awareness of creation's ways is available to me if I live with attention to this field.

Even if I am frequently incapable of actually observing the most basic levels of reality, at least the mental and physical phenomena that bombard me are predicated on nature's laws, and must be my laboratory to study. I want to sing like a bird, like a human. I want to grow and rot like a tree, like a man. I want to sit with my mind and body as they cast up and swirl before me and inside me the human stuff which is made of and ordered by the matter and laws governing galaxies and wrens.

Because the harmony in me is at once so awesome and sweet and overwhelming that I love its taste yet can barely compel myself to glimpse it, I want to sit with the great determination that I need to brush aside the fuzz of distraction, the lint of petty concerns. To sit is to know myself as an unfolding manifestation of the universals of life. A gripping, unending project. Hopefully one I can pursue even when I look into death's funnel. For me, this knowing is a great force, and a great pleasure.

## II

I sit because of, for, and with, an appreciation of daily life. The great poets sing of the omnipresent ordinary, pregnant with revelation—but I know how easily and recurrently my own life yields to distraction, irritation, tunnel vision. I do not want to miss my life the way I once missed a plane at La Guardia airport. It may be ironic that simply to wiggle free of daydreams and worries I need a technique, a practice, a discipline, but I do; and I bow to that irony by doing what I must do to pry my mind off ephemeral worries, to wake to more dawns, to see my child unravel through his eddying transformations.

It may be contrary that I must work so hard to be at peace with myself, but I do; and I have become increasingly convinced, learning as I sit and live and sit and live, that “being at peace” is not a state of mind, but a state of mind and body. At the core of my life is a receptive drinking in. The simple beauty of things keeps flooding in to me. I live for this draught, and build my life around it. Yet it slips away. I can try to crash back through by taking dramatic journeys—to India, or to lakes at tree-line in the Rocky Mountains—but this kind of breath-taking beauty is only an interlude, a punctuation mark. It reminds me of what I intended to emphasize in my life, but like an exclamation point, it has limited use.

The clear direct sentence—the death sentence, the sentence of love—ends with a mere period. This declarative beauty is more like looking up over the slums of Montreal to see the moon wearing a pendant of Venus in 4:00 a.m.

darkness. I am describing not what is sought or built, but what I discover when the walls fall away. Similarly when I walk alone in the autumn forest, up and down gneiss and schist hills and ridges of Vermont, and I become confused whether that intense pulsating drumming is the “booming” of grouse wings, or my own heart, strained by the last climb. This is an experience that is a metaphor also. We sometimes feel our bodies, our lives, beating in recognition. We absorb a dimension of reality that is the same inside and outside, an inner, lawful pulse to things. The tuning fork of my life hums in response to the living world.

This receipt—like a parent accepting back a soggy, half-eaten cracker—requires, for me, a framework, a matrix in my body, that simple as it should be, I do not simply have. This knowing requires a bodily preparation. I sit to open my pores—skin and mind both—to the life that surrounds me, inside and outside, at least more often if not all the time, as it arrives at my doorstep. I sit to exercise the appreciative, receptive, peaceful mode of being filled up by the ordinary and inevitable. For example, the sagging floorboards in the crooked bedroom where I am a husband. Or my two-year-old son, tugging one splinter at a time, to help me stack firewood in new January snow.

## III

I feel a need for a rudder, a keel, a technique, a method a way to continue on course. I need ceaselessly increasing moments of self-control (though not constriction, deadening, or inhibition). It seems to me that the best of human life is lived on a narrow ledge, like a bridge over a stream in Nepal, or like a trail in the Grand Canyon, between two chasms. On the one side is desire, on the other side is fear. Possibly it is because of my work as a psychiatrist, often with essentially normal people, who are nonetheless pushed and pulled about by their inner forces like tops, that I feel so sensitized to these faults that can send seismic shudders through apparently solid lives. But my own life has ground enough for these observations.

Sitting is, among other things, the practice of self-control. While sitting one does not get up, or move, or make that dollar, or pass that test, or receive reassurance from that phone call. But military training, or violin lessons, or medical school, are also routes to self-control in this ordering and restrictive sense. Sitting is self-control around specific values. Observation replaces all action. What is the point of committing one's life to this practice, only to spend the time with erotic daydreams, or anxious yearnings for promotion and recognition? Of course, those will happen anyway. They are part of the human make-up. Cultures would not have proliferated the ubiquitous moral codes, the Ten Commandments, if we were not so replete with ten million urges.

But moral invective, preaching, always seemed feeble to me—possibly just a measure of my wild horses and snails. I need a constantly useable, constantly renewable lens to see through my yearnings into my loves, to see through my anxieties into my faith. What is a bedrock feeling, the core of my identity, and what is a titillation that will ultimately be discarded? What characters walk in front of the mirror of my soul day after day, year after year, and who are the clowns that steal the stage for a scene?

An hour of sitting is one thing; longer periods another. Once a year, under the guidance of a teacher, I sit for ten days, all day. That kind of practice induces pain. To face pain has become a regular, inescapable part of my life. It is for most people— laborers, poor, infirm, cold, infected, hungry people throughout the world. But I have not elected sentimental, identificatory masochism. I am looking at another side of myself. While I spontaneously seek to avoid pain, a higher wisdom than knee-jerk reaction tells me that, in Socrates' words: "...pain and pleasure are never present to a man at the same instant, and yet he who pursues either is compelled to take the other; their bodies are two, but they are joined by a single head." (Phaedo)

Just how serious am I about being who I said I was? How integrated do I want to be with this screaming body that has to be fed, slept, positioned just right, or it howls unbearably? I sit

because I know I need a self-control that does not lecture or stomp on my tendencies, but reorganizes desire into love, and pain and fear into faith.

#### IV

As I understand it, love is not an emotion, but an organization of emotions. It is not a room, but a dwelling; not a bird, but a migratory flyway. It is a structure of emotions, a meta-emotion. This is in contrast to love understood as a sentimental gush of attachment, or as romantic sexuality. Sitting has helped me to find love, to live by love, or at least, to live more by love. It has helped me come alive as a husband, father, psychiatrist, and citizen, within the bounds of my character and capabilities. It has pried me open beyond either my previous sentimental position or my rational moral knowledge and has given me a tool, a practice, an activity expressive of love. For me it is both crowbar and glue.

As Erik Erikson has written, it is only "ambivalence that makes love meaningful—or possible." In other words, it is only because we are both separate, and united, that love exists. If we had no individual existence, no personal drives, there would be merely the homogeneous glob of the world, devoid of emotion, unknowing, like a finger on a hand. Yet if we were irreconcilably separate there would only be self-maintaining cold stars coexisting in dead space. I understand love to mean the organization of human emotions into those complex states where separation and merging, individuality and immersion, self and selflessness paradoxically coexist. Only an individual can love; and only one who has ceased to be one can love. Sitting has helped me develop both these poles. It breaks me open where I get stuck; and where I fall off as a chip, it sticks me back on to the main piece.

Sitting pushes me to the limit of my self-directed effort; it mobilizes my willed, committed direction, yet it also shatters my self-protective, self-defining maneuvers, and my simple self-definition. It both builds and dismantles "me." Every memory, every hope, every yearning, every fear floods in. I no longer can pretend to be one selected set of my memories or traits.

If observed, but not reacted upon, all these psychic contents become acceptable, obviously part of myself (for there they are in my own mind, right in front of me); yet also impersonal, causally-linked, objective phenomena-in-the-world that move ceaselessly, relentlessly, across the screen of my existence, without my effort, without my control, without me. I can see more, tolerate more, in my inner life, at the same time that I am less driven by these forces. Like storms and doves, they are the personae of nature, crossing one inner sky. Psychic complexity swirls up from the dust of cosmetic self-definition. At the same time, the determination and endurance I have to muster to just observe, grow like muscles with exercise. Naturally the repetition of this mixture of tolerance and firmness extrapolates beyond its source in sitting, out to relationships.

There is little I have heard from others—and it is my daily business to hear—that I have not seen in myself as I sit. But I also know the necessity of work, training and restraint. Dependence, loneliness, sensuality, exhaustion, hunger, petulance, perversion, miserliness, yearning, inflation are my old friends. I can greet them openly and warmly in people close to me, both because I know them from the inside and therefore cannot condemn them without condemning myself; and also because I have been learning to harness and ride their energy. To love, I try to hold the complex reality of myself at the same time that I try to catch the complex reality of another.

I have known my wife for decades. We have dated and swam, married and fought, traveled, built cabins, bought houses, delivered and diapered together; in short, we have attained the ordinary and ubiquitous. In a world of three billion people, this achievement ranks with literacy, and would have no bearing on why I sit, except that it does. Even the inevitable is fragile. I, we, am, and are, buffered by un-shy thanks. We are sharpened by life with an edge.

I sit and life moves through me, my married life too. This sphere also takes its turn before my solitary, impeachable witness to my own existence and its eternal entanglements. As

a married man, I sit as if in a harbor from my selfish pettiness, where the winds of my annoyance or anger have time to pass; I sit as a recipient of a generous outpouring of warmth that I have time to savor; I sit as a squash or pumpkin with his own slightly fibrous and only moderately sweet but nonetheless ample life to lay on someone else's table; I sit as one oxen in a team pulling a cart filled with rocking horses, cars, and porches that need paint; I sit knowing myself as a sick old man of the future awaiting the one person who can really attend, or as the future one whose voice alone can wave death back behind someone else's hospital curtain for another hour; I sit as a common man of common desire, and as a dreamer who with the bricks of shared fate is building a common dream; and I sit alone in my own life anyway.

How fortunate to have this cave, this sanctuary, this frying-pan, this rock, and this mirror of sitting, in which to forge, drop, haul, touch, release my love and not get lost. To sit is the compass by which I navigate the seas of married love. It is also the string by which I trip up the fox on his way to the chicken coop. To live is a deep yearning and hard work. It cannot be done alone! There are many ways to receive help, and many ways to give it. Martin Buber says that men and women cannot love without a third point to form a stable triangle: a god, task, calling, or meaning beyond their dyadic individuality. What about two who just know the pole star?

There is a joke in the comic strip "Peanuts": "I love mankind. It's just people that I hate." I think love is concrete and abstract. If it is only an amorphous generalized feeling, it remains a platitude, a wish, a defense against real entanglement. This is what sounds hollow in the pious, sanctimonious "Love" of some churches and martyrs. But if love is only concrete, immediate, personal, it remains in the realm of possession, privatism, materialism, narcissism. This is the paternalistic love a person has for his house, cars, family. My understanding is that actual love expands outward in both spheres. Riding the wings of the ideal, it sweeps up and carries along those who are encountered.



I sit to better love my wife, and those friends and companions with whom I share even a day's journey on my flight from the unknown to the unknown. It is difficult to love the one with whom my fate is most closely entangled during those moments when I would like to batter down the corridors of that fate. But it is easy to love her when we sweeten each other's tea. It is easy to feel affection for friends I encounter on weekends devoted to family life and outdoor play; it is difficult to let our lives, our health and finances entangle. Such an embrace threatens private safety. And it is more difficult still to try to place this way of being, first among all others, and risk myself over and over again.

Shall I keep all my money, or risk it on a charitable principle? Shall I study the text sanctioned by the authorities, or sing out from my heart? When I sit, money does me little good; approval evaporates; but the tone of the strings of my heart, for better or worse, is inescapable. I sit to tie myself to the mast, to hear more of the song of elusive and unavoidable love.

## V

A baby looks fragile, but if you neglect his meal or hold him the wrong way, your eardrums will have to reckon with an awesome wrath! Anger springs from and participates in the primary survival instinct of the organism. Yet how much trouble it causes us in daily life, not to mention large-scale social relations! Probably the height of inanity would be to sit, angry. What is the point of such impotent stewing? I sit to grow up, to be a better person, to see trivial angers rise up and pass away, arguments on which I put great weight on Thursday morning fade by Thursday noon; and to be compelled to reorder, restructure, rethink my life, so that, living well, my petty anger is orchestrated ahead of time into flexibility, cooperation, or the capacity to see other viewpoints. Sitting helps me to transcend the irritable, petulant infant in me.

But that only solves the periphery of the problem. I am no longer angry about my diapers. I am angry that my votes and taxes have been turned to oppressing other nations; I am angry that I will be judged for the rest of my life by

multiple choice exams; I am angry that research is ignored and dogma is used to coerce one religion's point of view; I am angry that mountains are scoured for energy to manufacture throw-away soda cans. I sit also, then, to express my anger, and the form of expression is determination. I sit with force, will, and, when the pain mounts, something that feels fierce. Sitting helps me harness authentic anger.

I have been sitting at least fifteen hours a week for years, and when, as often happens, I am asked how I find the time, I know that part of the certainty in my aim is an anger that will not allow the rolling woodlands and hilltop pastures of my psyche to be bulldozed by TV, non-nutritional food, fabricated news, tweed socialization, pedantic file-cabinets of knowledge, or loyalty rallies to leaders, states, gods, and licensures. The voices of the herd will not so easily drive me from my forest cabin of deeply considered autonomy and honest talk, because I have had practice in this sort of firmness. A child's anger is the kindling of adult will. I can stay true to myself yet mature, be willed but not willful, by sitting in the spirit of Woody Guthrie's song: "Don't you push me, push me, push me, don't you push me down!"

## VI

As I understand it, the lifelong disciplined practice of sitting is not exactly religion, but is not not a religion either. For myself, I am not bound to scriptures, dogma, hierarchies; I have taken no proscriptions on my intelligence, or on my political autonomy; nor have I hidden from unpleasant realities by concretizing myth. But I have become increasingly aware of the inextricable role of faith in my practice.

The faith I have been discovering in myself is not blind, irrational, unsubstantiated, or wishful ideas. Following the definitive clarification of these English terms by Paul Tillich, I would call those former "beliefs." I hope sitting has helped me to free myself from my beliefs even further than my scientific education did. Nor does faith mean what I live for—goals, personal preferences, commitments, and loves. These are ideals, visions, tastes—very important

—but not faith. Faith is what I live by, what empowers my life. The battery, the heart-pump, of my becoming. It is not the other shore, but the boat. It is not what I know, but how I know. It is present, rather than past or future, and is my most authentic, total reaction, a gut reaction deeper than my guts. Tillich defined faith as a person's ultimate concern—the bedrock of what we in fact take seriously. I would like to describe faith, as I have found it, to be the hunger of my existence.

Hunger springs up from my body. It antedates my mental and psychological life, and can even run havoc over them. I do not eat because of what I believe or hope or wish for, or because of what an authority prescribes or what I read. I eat because I am hungry. My body is a dynamic, metabolizing system, an energy exchanger, constantly incorporating, reworking, remolding—this is the vitality intrinsic to the life of any oak, deer or human. This creature I am consumes, reworks, then creates more emotional, spiritual life. Not what I digest, but the ordered process in me that gives coherence and direction to this continuous organism, constitutes faith.

Faith is not something I have (e.g., “I believe!”); it is something that I realize has already been given to me, on which the sense of “me” is predicated. I find it or receive it, not once, but intermittently and continuously. It is not a set of thoughts, and it provides no concrete, reducible answers. Who am I? What is this life? Where does it come from? Where is it headed? I don't know. On these important questions, I have no beliefs. Yet no day has shaken this strange bird from his perch!

I sit with impassioned neutrality. Why? This activity is not in order to get answers with which to live my life. It is my life. Bones are not in order to hang skin and muscle on. (In scientific thought, too, teleology—goal-directed thinking—leads nowhere. Who knows the goal of the universe? Then what is the goal of any part of it?) I eat, I read, I work, I play, I sit. If I have no big intellectual belief by which I can justify my day, myself, my life, my supertime, I eat anyway! Usually with pleasure.

I am neither an existentialist, a Marxist, nor an anorectic. Hunger is a spontaneous action of life in me. The hunger of my existence also demands sustenance daily. The nourishment I take becomes my body; the sustenance I take becomes the unfolding process of “me.” To be alive, to be alert, to be observant, to be at peace with myself and all others—vibrating in ceaseless change—unmoving: I find this is my sustaining passage through the incandescent world doing the same.

As a scientific fact, I know I am alive only inside the body of life. Physically, I am aware of myself as a product of other lives—parents, ancestors. I breathe the oxygen created by plants, so that, as I breathe in and out, I am a tube connected to the whole life of the biosphere, a tiny, dependent digit. Through digestion and metabolism I biotransform the organic molecules created by plants and animals, which I call food, into other biochemicals with which I mold this form called my body, which is constantly, continuously being remolded, reformed, like a cloud. And this form will eventually cease its regeneration and vanish, as it arose, from causes, forces in nature.

It is easy for me to comprehend this description of physical reality, which is so obvious and scientific. But my person, my psychological reality, is also a product of causes: things I have been taught, experiences I have had, cultural beliefs, social forces. This uninterrupted web of causality—physical, biological, psychological, cultural—connecting from past to future, and out across contemporaneousness, is the ocean in which the bubble of my life briefly floats. Death must be inevitable for such an ephemeral bubble. Yet while it is here, I can feel how vital is this breathing, pulsating being, alive, resonant in exchange with past and future, people and things—transducer and knower.

The faith that underlies my practice is not in my mind, but is the psychological correlate of animation. I experience faith not as a thought, but as the overwhelming mood which drives this thrust upward of emerging. By sitting I can know, assume, become, this direct hum of

energy. Retrospectively, verbally, I call this “faith.” When I am bored, pained, lazy, distracted, worried, I find myself sitting anyway, not because I believe it is good, or will get me into heaven, nor because I have particular will power. My life is expressing its trajectory. All mass is energy, Einstein showed. My life is glowing, and I sit in the light.

## VII

Sitting enabled me to see, and compelled me to acknowledge, the role that death had already played, and still continues to play, in my life. Every living creature knows that the sum total of its pulsations is limited. As a child I wondered: Where was I before I was born? Where will I be after I die? How long is forever and when does it end? The high school student of history knew that every hero died; I saw the colors of empires wash back and forth over the maps in the books like tides. (Not me!) Where can I turn that impermanence is not the law? I try to hide from this as well as I can, behind my youth (already wrinkling, first around the eyes, and graying), and health insurance: but no hideout works.

Every day ends with darkness; things must get done today or they will not happen at all. And, funny, rather than sapping my appetite, producing “nausea” (which may be due to rich French sauces rather than real philosophy), the pressure of nightfall helps me to treasure life. Isn’t this the most universal human observation and counsel? I aim each swing of the maul more accurately at the cracks in the oak cordwood I am splitting. I choose each book I read with precision and reason. I hear the call to care for and love my child and the forest trails that I maintain as a pure ringing note of mandate. I sit at the dawn of day and day passes. Another dawn, but the series is limited, so I swear in my inner chamber I will not miss a day.

Sitting rivets me on the psychological fact that death is life’s door. No power can save me. Because I am aware of death, and afraid, I lean my shoulder into living not automatically and reactively, like an animal, nor passively and pleadingly, like a child pretending he has a father

watching over him, but with conscious choice and decision of what will constitute each fleeting moment of my life. I know that my petals cup a volatile radiance. But to keep this in mind in turn requires that an ordinary escapist constantly reencounters the limit, the metronome of appreciation, death.

I sit because knowing I will die enriches, and exorciates my life, so I have to go out of my way to seek discipline and the stability that is necessary for me to really face it. To embrace life I must shake hands with death. For this, I need practice. Each act of sitting is a dying to outward activity, a relinquishment of distraction, a cessation of anticipatory gratification. It is life now, as it is. Some day this austere focus will come in very, very handy. It already has.

## VIII

I sit to be myself, independent of my own or others’ judgments. Many years of my life were spent being rated, primarily in school, but, as an extension of that, among friends and in social life. As much as I tried to fight off this form of addiction, I got hooked anyway. As often happens, out of their concern for me, my parents combed and brushed me with the rules of comparison: I was good at this, or not good, or as good, or better, or worse, or the best, or no good at all.

Today I find that sitting reveals the absurdity of comparative achievement. My life consists of what I actually live, not the evaluations that float above it. Sitting enables me to slip beyond that second, commenting, editor’s mind, and to burrow in deep towards immediate reality. I have made progress in becoming a mole, an empty knapsack, a boy on a day when school is canceled. What is there to gain or lose as I sit? Who can I beat, who can I scramble after? Just this one concrete day, all this, and only this, comes to me on the tray of morning, flashes out now.

I am relieved to be more at home in myself, with myself. I complain less. I can lose discussions, hopes, or self-expectations, more easily and much less often, because the talking, hoping, and doing is victory enough already.

Without props or toys or comfort, without control of the environment, I have sat and observed who I am when there was no one and nothing to give me clues. It has happened that I have sat, asked for nothing, needed nothing, and felt full. Now my spine and hands have a different turgor. When I am thrown off balance, I can fall somewhat more like a cat than like a two-by-four. When I sit, no one—beloved or enemy—can give me what I lack, or take away what I am.

So as I live all day, I can orient myself into becoming the person I will have to live with when I next sit. No one else's commentary of praise or blame can mediate my own confrontation with the observed facts of who I am. I'm not as bad as I thought I was— and worse. But I'm definitely sprouting and real. It's a pleasure to relinquish yearning and fighting back, and to permit ripples. And I sit to share companionship with other spring bulbs. I feel like one leaf in a deciduous forest: specific, small, fragile, all alone with my fate, yet shaking in a vast and murmuring company.

## IX

Sitting is a response to, and an expression of, my social and historical conditions. Although I practice an ancient way that has been passed on from person to person for two and a half millennia and must be useful and meaningful under a variety of conditions, I sought and learned this practice for reasons particular to myself.

One of the most powerful forces that pushed my life into the form it has taken was World War II, which ended, almost to the day, when I was born. It was a backdrop, very present in my parents' sense of the world, and in other adults around me, that left little scope for hope. Fear seemed the only rational state of mind, self-defense the only rational posture. Cultured, civilized men had just engaged in an extended, calculated, concerted sadism the scope of which is incomprehensible. Victory by goodness had brought reactive evil: nuclear weapons. The worldview I was taught and absorbed was to study hard, save my money, and build my own self-protective world, using the liberal, rational,

scientific cultures as stepping stones to an anxious fiefdom of private family life. It was only in that private space that the sweet kernel of affection and idealistic aspiration could be unveiled. I did that well, and to some extent it worked.

Yet at the same time I had been guided to, and later chose to, spend my summers in the woods learning about white-tailed deer, mosquitoes, freedom, and canoes, surrounded, it seemed, by a primal monistic goodness that I located in nature and those who lived close to it. I read Thoreau the way many people read the Bible. The world of cold streams running under shady hemlocks, and its ecstatic prophets, seemed an antidote to the haunted, dull, convention-bound, anxious lives of my immediate environment. Moving between these two worlds, I learned a dialogue of terror and ecstasy, survivorship and care, that filled me with an urgency to find the middle way. This motivated a search that led through intense intellectual exploration in college, medical school, and psychiatric training, and finally to the art of "sitting," as taught by S.N. Goenka, a Vipassana meditation teacher from whom my wife and I first took a course near New Delhi in 1974. Those ten days of nothing but focusing on the moment-by-moment reality of body and mind, with awareness and equanimity, gave me the opportunity ironically both to be more absolutely alone and isolated than I had ever been before, and at the same time to cast my lot with a tradition, a way, as upheld, manifested, explained, and transmitted by a living person. I am continuously grateful to Goenka for the receipt of this technique.

Vipassana meditation was preserved in Asia for two thousand five hundred years since its discovery by Gotama, the historical Buddha. His technique of living was labeled, by western scholars, "Buddhism," but it is not an "ism," a system of thought. It is a practice, a method, a tool of living persons. It does not end its practitioner's search. For me, it provides a compass, a spy glass, a map for further journeys. With daily practice, and intensive retreats mixed into the years, I find the marriage of autonomy

and heritage, membership and lonely continuity. Vipassana is the binoculars—now I can search for the elusive bird.

Before I received instructions in how to sit, my journey through life was predominantly intellectual. I had found lectures and books to be inspiring, suggestive, artful, but evasive. One could advise, one could talk, one could write. But sitting is a way for me to stand for something, to sit as something, not just with words, but with my mind, body, and life. Here is a way to descend by stages, protected by teacher, teaching, technique, and practice, into the light and darkness in me, the Hitler and Buddha in me, the frightened child of a holocaust world riding a slow bus in winter through dark city streets, and the striding, backpacking youth wandering through sunlight cathedrals of Douglas fir, who, shouting or whimpering, spans the vocabulary of human potentials from sadism to love.

I now can see that I carry the whip and boots of the torturer, I suffer with the naked, I drink from mountain streams with poets and explorers. All these lives live in me. And I find ways, often covert and symbolic, to express these psychological potentials in me as overt actions in my daily life. Everything I am springs from the universally human. I cause myself, I express myself, as the conditions of the world roll through me. I see this fact, as I sit, as clearly as I see the impact of history and the inspiration of vision. I sit in clear confrontation with everything that has impinged on me and caused me to react, and in reacting, I mold myself.

Life begins in a welter of conditions; mere reactions to these conditions forge limitations; awareness of and conscious response to conditions produces freedom. This clarity regarding my choices enables me to return from sitting to action as a more focused, concentrated vector of knowing, empathic life.

Sitting itself transforms my motives for sitting. I started in my own historical circumstances, but I was given a technique that has been useful in millions of circumstances over thousands of years. I started with personal issues, and I have been given timeless perspectives to broaden my viewpoint. My search

is particular, but not unique. The transmission of this tool has made my work possible. Because others have launched the quest for a fully human life, because others will follow, my own frailty, or villainy, can become meaningful, because these are the soil which I must use to grow. And my own efforts, however great they feel to me, are in the shadow of the much greater efforts of others.

I can flower as one shrub in a limitless forest of unending cycles of life. To flower, for a human being, is to work on the science of honest observation that enables a true picture of humanity to be born. Even coming from my conditioning of nihilism and dread, without the comfort of simple beliefs, aware of awesome human evil and hatred, of wars that kill decamillions, I can be, I will be, an expression of contentless faith. I cannot be much but I can root deep into what is true, how to see it, and how to pass it on.

In response to the overwhelming sense of evil, fear, meaninglessness, and paranoid privatism of my times, and in response to the hope, idealism, and pregnant sense of eternity of my youth, I learned to sit, to better stand for what I found most true. This helps me live out what had before been an unconscious faith. It helps me express something healing, useful (in both my personal and professional life), and meaningful to me despite apparently absurd conditions, because it is a link to the universal. It puts me in touch with the fundamentally human that is present in every gesture of mine, and every action of other people, in each immediacy. This in turn has enabled me to join with the generative dance of nature. I practice knowing myself, and make that the workshop of the day. I refrain from measuring events by my own inchworm life. I frequently forget time, and so join history.

## X

I sit in solitude to lose my isolation. What is least noble in me rises up to the surface of my mind, and this drives me on to be more than I was. When I am most shut into my dark self I find the real source of my belonging.

Freud claimed that the bedrock of human fear is castration anxiety. This, he felt, is more feared than death itself. I understand castration anxiety to mean physical pain, bodily mutilation, and social isolation, ostracism, loss of membership, generativity, continuity in the cycle of generations. The two greatest difficulties I have, in fact, faced while sitting for extended hours or days are physical pain, and the loss of the social position that I had previously seemed headed for and entitled to in the community of men. Pain that starts in the knees or back can flood the whole body and burn on and on. The self-protection of calculated membership, and its comfortable rewards, are lost to me in those aching, endless hours.

I imagine my other options: a better house, winter vacations in the tropics, the respect of colleagues listening to me speak as I climb the career ladder. I imagine the financial crises I am less prepared to withstand. I imagine the humiliating rejection that crushes the refugee from poverty or racism or any form of powerlessness, all of which are in my heritage and possibly in my future (and in anyone's heritage or future if you look far enough). Why do I sit there? A thrush hops onto a low limb at the edge of a wooded clearing and shatters the Vermont evening with triumphant song. Knowing yet staying, I am an inheritor and transmitter, flooded with gifts from those who loved and left their trace; and this still, glowing, posture is the song of my species.

Sitting helps me overcome my deepest fears. I become freer to live from my heart, and to face the consequences, but also to reap the rewards of this authenticity. Much of what I called pain was really loneliness and fear. It passes, dissolves, with that observation. The vibrations of my body are humming the song that can be heard only when dawn and dusk are simultaneous, instantaneous, continuous. I feel a burst of stern effort is a small price to pay to hear this inner music—fertile music from the heart of life itself.

It has been my fortune along the way to find and follow many friends who, like long unobserved mushrooms, no longer can be shaken

from the stump because their roots have reached the heartwood. From them I have caught a glimmer of two lights: devotion and integrity. And it has been an extra pleasure—and sometimes I think a necessity—to be able to sit beside my wife. Even the stars move in constellations.

## XI

I sit to find mental freedom. I was lucky to be able to think rationally, logically, scientifically, in a culture where focused, aggressive thought is the sword of survival. But even Reason's greatest apologist, Socrates, balanced himself with equal reverence for mythopoetic knowing. In fact, many Socratic dialogues point towards the limits of logic and the essential role of myth. As I sit, a million thoughts cross my mind, but in keeping with the traditions passed on from ancient India's great teachers, I attempt to let all of them go, to let them pass like clouds, like water, like time. Needless to say, I often get caught and find myself spinning around one point like a kite trapped by the uppermost twig. But eventually boredom, exhaustion, will-power, or insight—the wind—spins me free and I'm off again.

Sitting gives me a way back to fluctuant, preformed mind, the pregnant atmosphere in which metaphor, intuition, and reason are sparks. Surrounded by a culture of intellectual conquest, I have a preserve of wholeness, a sanctuary in which the wild deer of poetry and song can slip in and out among the trunks of medical cases and conferences. In this sense, sitting is also a nag, tattletale, a wagging finger, reminding me as well as enabling me. I've got to return to the potential, because any one tack is just a shifting situational response to the originless wind.

## XII

I sit to anchor my life in certain moods, organize my life around my heart and mind, and to radiate out to others what I find. Though I shake in strong winds, I return to this basic way of living. I can't throw away my boy's ideals and my old man's smile. The easy, soothing comfort and deep relaxation that accompany intense

awareness in stillness, peel my life like an onion to deeper layers of truth, which in turn are scoured and soothed until the next layer opens. I sit to discipline my life by what is clear, simple, self-fulfilling, and universal in my heart. There is no end to this job. I have failed to really live many days of my life, but I dive again and again into the plain guidance of self-containment and loving receipt. I sit to find and express simple human love and common decency.

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## **What Exactly is Vipassana Meditation? by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana**

*from Tricycle Magazine*

The distinction between Vipassana meditation and other styles of meditation is crucial and needs to be fully understood. Buddhism addresses two major types of meditation. They are different mental skills, modes of functioning or qualities of consciousness. In Pali, the original language of Theravada literature, they are called Vipassana and Samatha.

Vipassana can be translated as “Insight,” a clear awareness of exactly what is happening as it happens. Samatha can be translated as “concentration” or “tranquility.” It is a state in which the mind is brought to rest, focused only on one item and not allowed to wander. When this is done, a deep calm pervades body and mind, a state of tranquility which must be experienced to be understood.

Most systems of meditation emphasize the Samatha component. The meditator focuses his mind upon some items, such as prayer, a certain type of box, a chant, a candle flame, a religious image or whatever, and excludes all other thoughts and perceptions from his consciousness. The result is a state of rapture which lasts until the meditator ends the session of sitting. It is beautiful, delightful, meaningful and alluring, but only temporary. Vipassana meditation addresses the other component, insight.

In Vipassana mediation, the meditator uses his concentration as a tool by which his awareness can chip away at the wall of illusion that cuts him off from the living light of reality. It is a gradual process of ever-increasing awareness into the inner workings of reality itself. It takes years, but one day the meditator chisels through that wall and tumbles into the presence of light. The transformation is complete. It's called Liberation, and it's permanent. Liberation is the goal of all Buddhist systems of practice. But the routes to the attainment of that end are quite diverse.

## **The Oldest Buddhist Meditation Practice**

Vipassana is the oldest of Buddhist meditation practices. The method comes directly from the Satipatthana Sutta [Foundations of Mindfulness], a discourse attributed to the Buddha himself. Vipassana is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. It proceeds piece by piece over a period of years. The student's attention is carefully directed to an intense examination of certain aspects of his own existence. The meditator is trained to notice more and more of his own flowing life experience.

Vipassana is a gentle technique. But it also is very, very thorough. It is an ancient and codified system of training your mind, a set of exercises dedicated to becoming more and more aware of your own life experience. It is attentive listening, mindful seeing and careful testing.

We learn to smell acutely, to touch fully, and to really pay attention to the changes taking place in all these experiences. We learn to listen to our own thoughts without being caught up in them. The object of Vipassana meditation practice is to learn to see the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of phenomena.

We think we are doing this already, but that is an illusion. It comes from the fact that we are paying so little attention to the ongoing surge of our own life experience that we might just as well be asleep. We are simply not paying enough

attention to notice that we are not paying attention. It is another Catch-22.

### **Meditation As Discovery**

Through the process of mindfulness, we slowly become aware of what we really are down below the ego image. We wake up to what life really is. It is not just a parade of ups and downs, lollipops and smacks on the wrist. That is an illusion. Life has a much deeper texture than that if we bother to look, and if we look in the right way.

Vipassana is a form of mental training that will teach you to experience the world in an entirely new way. You will learn for the first time what is truly happening to you, around you and within you. It is a process of self-discovery, a participatory investigation in which you observe your own experiences while participating in them as they occur.

The practice must be approached with this attitude: “Never mind what I have been taught. Forget about theories and prejudices and stereotypes. I want to understand the true nature of life. I want to know what this experience of being alive really is. I want to apprehend the true and deepest qualities of life, and I don’t want to just accept somebody else’s explanation. I want to see it for myself.”

If you pursue your meditation practice with this attitude, you will succeed. You’ll find yourself observing things objectively, exactly as they are-flowing and changing from moment to moment. Life then takes on an unbelievable richness which cannot be described. It has to be experienced.

### **Vipassana & Bhavana**

The Pali term for Insight meditation is Vipassana Bhavana. Bhavana comes from the root bh, which means to grow or to become. Therefore Bhavana means to cultivate, and the word is always used in reference to the mind. Bhavana means mental cultivation. Vipassana is derived from two roots. Passana means seeing or perceiving. Vi is a prefix with a complex set of connotations. The basic meaning is “in a special

way.” But there also is the connotation of both “into” and “through.”

The whole meaning of the word is looking into something with clarity and precision, seeing each component as distinct, and piercing all the way through so as to perceive the most fundamental reality of that thing. This process leads to insight into the basic reality of whatever is being inspected. Put it all together and Vipassana Bhavana means the cultivation of the mind, aimed at seeing in the special way that leads to insight and to full understanding.

The method we are explaining here is probably what Gotama Buddha taught his students. The Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha’s original discourse on mindfulness, specifically says that one must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena which arise.

We sit, watching the air going in and out of our noses. At first glance, this seems an exceedingly odd and useless procedure. Before going on to specific instructions, let us examine the reason behind it.

### **Why Focusing Is Important**

The first question we might have is why use any focus of attention at all? We are, after all, trying to develop awareness. Why not just sit down and be aware of whatever happens to be present in the mind? In fact, there are meditations of that nature. They are sometimes referred to as unstructured meditation and they are quite difficult.

The mind is tricky. Thought is an inherently complicated procedure. By that we mean that we become trapped, wrapped up, and stuck in the thought chain. One thought leads to another which leads to another, and another, and another, and so on. Fifteen minutes later we suddenly wake up and realize we spent that whole time stuck in a daydream or sexual fantasy or a set of worries about our bills or whatever.

We use breath as our focus. It serves as that vital reference point from which the mind wanders and is drawn back. Distraction cannot be seen as distraction unless there is some



central focus to be distracted from. That is the frame of reference against which we can view the incessant changes and interruptions that go on all the time as a part of normal thinking.

### **Taming Wild Elephants**

Ancient Pali texts liken meditation to the process of taming a wild elephant. The procedure in those days was to tie a newly captured animal to a post with a good strong rope. When you do this, the elephant is not happy. He screams and tramples, and pulls against the rope for days. Finally it sinks through his skull that he can't get away, and he settles down.

At this point you can begin to feed him and to handle him with some measure of safety. Eventually you can dispense with the rope and post altogether, and train your elephant for various tasks. Now you have got a tamed elephant that can be put to useful work.

In this analogy the wild elephant is your wildly active mind, the rope is mindfulness, and the post is our object of meditation, our breathing. The tamed elephant who emerges from this process is a well-trained, concentrated mind that can then be used for the exceedingly tough job of piercing the layers of illusion that obscure reality. Meditation tames the mind.

### **Why Breathing?**

The next question we need to address is: Why choose breathing as the primary object of meditation? Why not something a bit more interesting? Answers to this are numerous. A useful object of meditation should be one that promotes mindfulness. It should be portable, easily available, and cheap. It should also be something that will not embroil us in those states of mind from which we are trying to free ourselves, such as greed, anger, and delusion.

Breathing satisfies all these criteria and more. It is common to every human being. We all carry it with us wherever we go. It is always there, constantly available, never ceasing from birth till death, and it costs nothing.

Breathing is a non-conceptual process, a thing that can be experienced directly without a need for thought. Furthermore, it is a very living

process, an aspect of life that is in constant change. The breath moves in cycles-inhalation, exhalation, breathing in, and breathing out. Thus, it is a miniature model of life itself.

Breath is a phenomenon common to all living things. A true experiential understanding of the process moves you closer to other living beings. It shows you your inherent connectedness with all of life. Finally, breathing is a present-time process.

The first step in using the breath as an object of meditation is to find it. What you are looking for is the physical, tactile sensation of the air that passes in and out of the nostrils. This is usually just inside the tip of the nose. But the exact spot varies from one person to another, depending on the shape of the nose.

To find your own point, take a quick deep breath and notice and point just inside the nose or on the upper tip where you have the most distinct sensation of passing air. Now exhale and notice the sensation at the same point. It is from this point that you will follow the whole passage of breath.

### **Not Always Easy**

When you first begin this procedure, expect to face some difficulties. Your mind will wander off constantly darting, around like a bumble bee and zooming off on wild tangents. Try not to worry. The monkey mind phenomenon is well known. It is something that every advanced meditator has had to deal with. They have pushed through it one way or another, and so can you.

When it happens, just note the fact that you have been thinking, day-dreaming, worrying, or whatever. Gently, but firmly, without getting upset or judging yourself for straying, simply return to the simple physical sensation of the breath. Then do it again the next time, and again, and again, and again.

Essentially, Vipassana meditation is a process of retraining the mind. The state you are aiming for is one in which you are totally aware of everything that is happening in your own perceptual universe, exactly the way it happens,

exactly when it is happening; total, unbroken awareness in present time.

This is an incredibly high goal, and not to be reached all at once. It takes practice, so we start small. We start by becoming totally aware of one small unit of time, just one single inhalation. And, when you succeed, you are on your way to a whole new experience of life.

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## **The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing**

When individuals becoming members of the organization, they take the vows of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings in a formal ceremony.

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings are the very essence of the Order of Interbeing. They are the torch lighting our path, the boat carrying us, the teacher guiding us. They allow us to touch the nature of interbeing in everything that is, and to see that our happiness is not separate from the happiness of others. Interbeing is not a theory; it is a reality that can be directly experienced by each of us at any moment in our daily lives. The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings help us cultivate concentration and insight which free us from fear and the illusion of a separate self.

### **The First Mindfulness Training: Openness**

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. We are committed to seeing the Buddhist teachings as guiding means that help us develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for. We understand that fanaticism in its many forms is the result of perceiving things in a dualistic and discriminative manner. We will train ourselves to look at everything with openness and the insight of interbeing in order to transform dogmatism and violence in ourselves and in the world.

### **The Second Mindfulness Training: Non-attachment to Views**

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We are committed to learning and practicing non-attachment to views and being open to others' experiences and insights in order to benefit from the collective wisdom. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Insight is revealed through the practice of compassionate listening, deep looking, and letting go of notions rather than through the accumulation of intellectual knowledge. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.

### **The Third Mindfulness Training: Freedom of Thought**

Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others, we are determined not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever – such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, or indoctrination – to adopt our views. We are committed to respecting the right of others to be different, to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, learn to help others let go of and transform fanaticism and narrowness through loving speech and compassionate dialogue.

### **The Fourth Mindfulness Training: Awareness of Suffering**

Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop understanding and compassion, we are determined to come home to ourselves, to recognize, accept, embrace and listen to suffering with the energy of mindfulness. We will do our best not to run away from our suffering or cover it up through consumption, but practice conscious breathing and walking to look deeply into the roots of our suffering. We know we can realize the path leading to the transformation of suffering only when we understand deeply the roots of suffering. Once we have understood our own suffering, we will be able to understand the suffering of others. We are committed to finding

ways, including personal contact and using telephone, electronic, audiovisual, and other means, to be with those who suffer, so we can help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy.

### **The Fifth Mindfulness Training: Compassionate, Healthy Living**

Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, we are determined not to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying nor to take as the aim of our life fame, power, wealth, or sensual pleasure, which can bring much suffering and despair. We will practice looking deeply into how we nourish our body and mind with edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness. We are committed not to gamble or to use alcohol, drugs or any other products which bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness such as certain websites, electronic games, music, TV programs, films, magazines, books and conversations. We will consume in a way that preserves compassion, wellbeing, and joy in our bodies and consciousness and in the collective body and consciousness of our families, our society, and the earth.

### **The Sixth Mindfulness Training: Taking Care Of Anger**

Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering, we are committed to taking care of the energy of anger when it arises, and to recognizing and transforming the seeds of anger that lie deep in our consciousness. When anger manifests, we are determined not to do or say anything, but to practice mindful breathing or mindful walking to acknowledge, embrace, and look deeply into our anger. We know that the roots of anger are not outside of ourselves but can be found in our wrong perceptions and lack of understanding of the suffering in ourselves and others. By contemplating impermanence, we will be able to look with the eyes of compassion at ourselves and at those we think are the cause of our anger, and to recognize the preciousness of our relationships. We will practice Right Diligence in order to nourish our capacity of

understanding, love, joy and inclusiveness, gradually transforming our anger, violence and fear, and helping others do the same.

### **The Seventh Mindfulness Training: Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment**

Aware that life is available only in the present moment, we are committed to training ourselves to live deeply each moment of daily life. We will try not to lose ourselves in dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or craving, anger, or jealousy in the present. We will practice mindful breathing to be aware of what is happening in the here and the now. We are determined to learn the art of mindful living by touching the wondrous, refreshing, and healing elements that are inside and around us, in all situations. In this way, we will be able to cultivate seeds of joy, peace, love, and understanding in ourselves, thus facilitating the work of transformation and healing in our consciousness. We are aware that real happiness depends primarily on our mental attitude and not on external conditions, and that we can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that we already have more than enough conditions to be happy.

### **The Eighth Mindfulness Training: True Community and Communication**

Aware that lack of communication always brings separation and suffering, we are committed to training ourselves in the practice of compassionate listening and loving speech. Knowing that true community is rooted in inclusiveness and in the concrete practice of the harmony of views, thinking and speech, we will practice to share our understanding and experiences with members in our community in order to arrive at a collective insight.

We are determined to learn to listen deeply without judging or reacting and refrain from uttering words that can create discord or cause the community to break. Whenever difficulties arise, we will remain in our Sangha and practice looking deeply into ourselves and others to recognize all the causes and conditions, including our own habit energies, that have

brought about the difficulties. We will take responsibility for the ways we may have contributed to the conflict and keep communication open. We will not behave as a victim but be active in finding ways to reconcile and resolve all conflicts however small.

### **The Ninth Mindfulness Training: Truthful and Loving Speech**

Aware that words can create happiness or suffering, we are committed to learning to speak truthfully, lovingly and constructively. We will use only words that inspire joy, confidence and hope as well as promote reconciliation and peace in ourselves and among other people. We will speak and listen in a way that can help ourselves and others to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations. We are determined not to say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people, nor to utter words that might cause division or hatred. We will protect the happiness and harmony of our Sangha by refraining from speaking about the faults of other persons in their absence and always ask ourselves whether our perceptions are correct. We will speak only with the intention to understand and help transform the situation. We will not spread rumors nor criticize or condemn things of which we are not sure. We will do our best to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may make difficulties for us or threaten our safety.

### **The Tenth Mindfulness Training: Protecting And Nourishing the Sangha**

Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the realization of understanding and compassion, we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal power or profit, or transform our community into a political instrument. As members of a spiritual community, we should nonetheless take a clear stand against oppression and injustice. We should strive to change the situation, without taking sides in a conflict. We are committed to learning to look with the eyes of interbeing and to see ourselves and others as cells in one Sangha body. As a true cell in the Sangha body,

generating mindfulness, concentration and insight to nourish ourselves and the whole community, each of us is at the same time a cell in the Buddha body. We will actively build brotherhood and sisterhood, flow as a river, and practice to develop the three real powers – understanding, love and cutting through afflictions – to realize collective awakening.

### **The Eleventh Mindfulness Training: Right Livelihood**

Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. We will do our best to select a livelihood that contributes to the wellbeing of all species on earth and helps realize our ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of economic, political, and social realities around the world, as well as our interrelationship with the ecosystem, we are determined to behave responsibly as consumers and as citizens. We will not invest in or purchase from companies that contribute to the depletion of natural resources, harm the earth, or deprive others of their chance to live.

### **The Twelfth Mindfulness Training: Reverence for Life**

Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence, compassion, and the insight of interbeing in our daily lives and promote peace education, mindful mediation, and reconciliation within families, communities, ethnic and religious groups, nations, and in the world. We are committed not to kill and not to let others kill. We will not support any act of killing in the world, in our thinking, or in our way of life. We will diligently practice deep looking with our Sangha to discover better ways to protect life, prevent war, and build peace.

### **The Thirteenth Mindfulness Training: Generosity**

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, we are committed to cultivating

generosity in our way of thinking, speaking, and acting. We will practice loving kindness by working for the happiness of people, animals, plants, and minerals, and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. We are determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. We will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.

### **The Fourteenth Mindfulness Training: True Love**

[For lay members]: Aware that sexual desire is not love and that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness but will create more suffering, frustration, and isolation, we are determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual understanding, love, and a deep long-term commitment made known to our family and friends. Seeing that body and mind are one, we are committed to learning appropriate ways to take care of our sexual energy and to cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness for our own happiness and the happiness of others. We must be aware of future suffering that may be caused by sexual relations. We know that to preserve the happiness of ourselves and others, we must respect the rights and commitments of ourselves and others. We will do everything in our power to protect children from sexual abuse and to protect couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. We will treat our bodies with compassion and respect. We are determined to look deeply into the Four Nutriments and learn ways to preserve and channel our vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of our bodhisattva ideal. We will be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world, and will regularly meditate upon their future environment.

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## **Buddhism and the New Age by Vishvapani**

On May 25th 1880 Madame Helena Petrova Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, took the three refuges and the five precepts from a Buddhist priest in a temple in Galle, a coastal town in Sri Lanka, before a large crowd of Sinhalese. 'When we had finished the last of the Silas and offered flowers in the customary way', Olcott wrote in his diary, 'there was a mighty shout to make one's nerves tingle'.

He and Blavatsky were the founders of the Theosophical Society, one of the most influential religious movements of the late 19th Century and in this ceremony Olcott became the first American and Blavatsky the first European formally to convert to Buddhism. The twin legacies of Theosophy are the introduction of Buddhism to the West and the amorphous set of beliefs and practices which have come to be known as 'the New Age'.

Buddhism and the New Age have been associated ever since, converging spectacularly in the counter-cultural movements of the 1960's. In a recent paper Denise Cush concludes that 'there is a close, entangled and ambiguous relationship between British Buddhism and the New Age' which 'can be traced back to a common ancestor in Theosophy'. This entanglement has led to popular identifications of Buddhism as a part of the same movement as the New Age; the assumption on the part of many 'New Age' people that Buddhism supports their views; and the subtle influence of New Age attitudes and assumptions on Buddhists' understanding of their own tradition.

Nonetheless, Buddhism and the New Age are very different. They have emerged from very different histories, traveling on different historical trajectories and based on different philosophical assumptions. Cush identifies a changing relationship over the last two decades between British Buddhist groups and New Age activities from 'closeness to a conscious differentiation, followed by a diversification of approaches'. The initial closeness derived from

the influence of the counter-cultural trends of the 1960s is thrusting both Buddhism and the New Age to prominence. The period of separation occurred as Buddhists sought, in the 1970s and 1980s to establish their own identity. But by the 1990s alienation from conventional religion, party politics and the conditions of consumer-capitalist society have generated renewed interest in both movements throwing them together once more. With the increased size and confidence of Buddhist movements in the West, Buddhists are in a position to explore ways of working alongside others and the last few years have seen a number of Buddhist initiatives in New Age venues. But what are the issues involved in this renewed encounter?

### 1. THE NEW AGE

The indefinability of the New Age is at the heart of its nature. Is it a coherent entity, or simply a catch-all phrase describing essentially separate developments? There is no definitive set of beliefs or practices which are held in common by everyone to whom the term may be applied, but something is clearly happening. What are the distinguishing characteristics of the phenomenon we call New Age? What are the underlying attitudes and assumptions of which New Age practices are expressions?

Most commentators date the emergence of a distinctive New Age philosophy from the work of the American Theosophist Alice Bailey (1880-1949) which blended occultism, spiritualism and apocalyptic vision with the prevailing Zeitgeist. As Dell deChant comments

*'The New Age is the product of mid-20th century America. It becomes noticeable in the late sixties and ever more pronounced since then as its chief carrier, the 'baby-boom' generation' continues to experiment with beliefs and ideologies which are, at best, distinct from those of capitalism, mainline Christianity and participatory democracy. Its most obvious origin is found in the work of Alice A Bailey'.*

Many New Age activities found in Britain have their origin in the USA and the UK has, in any case been subject to similar trends. But rather than attempting to account for the forms the New Age has taken or comparing New Age activities with Buddhist ones it is more important to discern their respective philosophical bases and underlying attitudes. A British New Age Creed is offered by William Bloom of St. James Piccadilly, which gives a starting-point for deducing these.

- "1. All life-all existence-is the manifestation of Spirit, of the Unknowable, of that supreme consciousness known by many different names in different cultures.*
- 2. The purpose and dynamic of all existence is to bring Love, Wisdom, Enlightenment into full manifestation.*
- 3. All religions are expressions of this same inner reality.*
- 4. All life, as we perceive it with the five human senses, or with scientific instruments, is only the outer veil of an inner, causal reality.*
- 5. Similarly, human beings are two-fold creatures-with an outer temporary personality and a multi-dimensional inner being (soul or higher self).*
- 6. The outer personality is limited and tends towards materialism.*
- 7. The inner personality is unlimited and tends towards love.*
- 8. Our spiritual teachers are those souls who are liberated from the need to incarnate and who express unconditional love, wisdom and Enlightenment. Some of these beings are well-known and have inspired the world religions. Some are unknown and work invisibly.*
- 9. All life in all its different forms and states, is interconnected energy-and this includes our deeds, feelings and thoughts. We therefore work with spirit and these energies in co-creating our reality.*
- 10. Although held in the dynamic of cosmic love, we are jointly responsible for the*

*state of ourselves, of our environment and of all life.*

*11. During this period of time the evolution of the planet and of humanity has reached a point when we are undergoing a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness. This is why we speak of a 'New Age'.*

### **The Religion of the Self**

Bloom's creed is characterised by its emphasis on 'inner reality' as the source of meaning and value. But in what sense, one might ask, is this reality 'inner'? It must be that it pertains to experience and in this way it overlaps with the 'inner personality'. But experience has been universalised and, with the substitution of a capital letter, love becomes 'Love' and wisdom, 'Wisdom'. This implies a substratum of existence which is 'Unknowable' and indescribable, but at the same time is crucial to the philosophy which follows (which is the cause of the vagueness and indeterminacy of so much New Age discourse). These are mystical beliefs which are neither rationally elaborated nor theologically defined, but which may-possibly-be experienced. 'Spiritual' qualities are separated from the 'outer' world of actions and ethics except where that world is redefined in spiritual terms: 'All life-all existence-is the manifestation of Spirit, of the Unknowable, of that supreme consciousness'. In a similar way 'all religions are expressions of this same inner reality'.

This, then, is the 'religion of the self'. At its heart is a Rousseau-esque sanctification of 'Inner being' which is outside history, innocent, pure, but nonetheless authoritative. And there is plainly no question of examining the assumptions out of which 'inner being' might be constructed. In practice, this results in a recurrent concern with personal experience. In psychological terms, the New Age speaks the language of individualism while in philosophical terms it speaks the language of immanence, at times implying a monistic metaphysic. These characteristics underlie its remaining features.

### **Eclecticism**

The variety and all-inclusiveness of New-Age activities is perhaps its most remarkable feature. Organisationally there is deep mistrust of institutions and a preference for non-hierarchical models of operation. This is informed by a bias against rational thought or systems of belief and towards intuition and 'holistic paradigms'. But in practice the extent of New Age eclecticism suggests that the particular activity a New Ager chooses to participate in is secondary to the question of what they get from it, what it does for them, how it makes them feel.

### **New Age as a Market Sector**

Another factor influencing the eclecticism of the New Age is its role within consumer society. Ethnic art and music, traditional medicines, handicrafts and clothes expand the range of consumer options. Markets exist in ideas (which can be obtained via books, magazines and seminars) and in experiences (which can be bought through workshops, therapies and retreats). And market forces will define as 'New Age' whatever can be sold as such (or alternatively, whatever cannot be sold as anything else).

For the consuming New Ager these phenomena offer the prospect of perpetual novelty on one's own terms. If you don't like the goods, you find another supplier. Where there is an acknowledgement that commoditisation means a qualitative erosion there is a compensatory stress on compression and intensity.

### **Enlightenment in a Weekend Workshop**

Carrying this a stage further, one branch of the New Age discards counter-cultural orientations in favour of 'prosperity teachings' (money as energy, life and empowerment; poverty as self-hatred). As the Sanyassin slogan had it 'Jesus saves, Moses invests, Bhagwan spends'. This is spiritualised materialism masquerading as materialised spirituality.

## **Neo-Paganism-the Decontextualisation of Tradition**

New Age-ism is predicated on dissatisfaction with Christianity and an attempt to find alternative forms of spirituality. It is informed by the revival of non-Christian spiritual traditions such as Wiccan, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, Egyptian religion and the Eastern traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Sufism all of which are cheerfully added to the eclectic mix.

But eclecticism should not be confused with openness. The self-orientation and spiritual consumerism of the New Age impose their own agenda and its approach to paganism as natural religion and animism is informed by modern perspectives. Thus the sense of the sanctity of the natural world augments both ecological concerns and the view of the self as natural and pure. The pagan notion of the immanence of gods, powers and spirits coheres with modern (and sometimes quasi-scientific) interest in psychic phenomena. Ancient mythologies inform psychologically derived 'personal myths' and the cult of the Goddess provides feminism with a deity. Gaia does all these things for everyone.

## **The New Apocalypse**

A final strand is the belief that mankind is or may be entering a New Age-a golden age of spiritual awakening governed by new paradigms of thought. This can be seen as an outgrowth of Christian apocalypticism shorn of the Christian eschatological imagery-Armageddon, the return of Jesus and images from the Book of Revelation. In its place are symbols from (for example) astrology (the Age of Aquarius), biology (the evolution of the human race), parapsychology (harmonic convergence), occultism (the influence of the spiritual masters of Theosophy and Scientology who preside over the world) and science fiction (where the spiritual masters may inhabit UFOs).

Some of the judgmental qualities of traditional eschatology live on in the notion that we are faced with a choice between a New Age and ecological or nuclear catastrophe. For the most part, however, there is a utopian and

optimistic sense that the movement into the next phase of mankind's development is inevitable. In this respect the New Age is reminiscent of the Marxist and socialist utopias and indeed they have historical roots in common. However, the New Age has turned against the Marxist philosophy of revolution and socialist engagement. Alienation from conventional politics has been one of the principal factors in its development which displaces its idealism into an inconceivable future to be attained, in Bloom's words, by 'a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness' rather than through tangible reforms. In the UK the political movements which have influenced the New Age have mainly been concerned with protest and opposition-especially CND, Animal Liberation and the environmental pressure groups.

## **Philosophical Underpinnings**

Christian theology distinguishes between immanence and transcendence as ways of describing the manner in which God is related to the world. Immanence denotes God's indwelling and omnipresence in the world while transcendence indicates a God who is infinitely above and beyond it. As Bloom's concern with 'inner reality' suggests, New Age discourse tends to be expressed in terms of immanence. 'Self-religion' finds meaning within; paganism sees the world as ensouled while apocalyptic utopianism envisages a variation on the theme of heaven on earth.

## **2. BUDDHISM AND THE NEW AGE**

Theosophy and its New Age offspring have been central influences in the construction of Western views of Buddhism which Mme. Blavatsky favoured as 'incomparably higher, more noble, more philosophic and more scientific than any other church or religion'. In particular the esoteric interests of the Theosophists underlie the contemporary attraction of the tantra and Tibetan Lamas-whose true progenitors are perhaps the Mahatmas who communicated telepathically with Mme. Blavatsky. As AP Sinnet wrote in true orientalist fashion in *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883),



'Ceylon concerns itself merely with morals, Tibet, or rather the adepts of Tibet, with the science of Buddhism'. The Buddhist Society of London was founded in 1924 as a lodge of the Theosophical Society and Christmas Humphreys, its president, retained a commitment to Mme. Blavatsky's teachings throughout his life. Sangharakshita, too, was decisively influenced by Theosophy through his reading, at the age of fourteen, of Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* which brought him to a realisation that 'I was not a Christian—that I never had been and never would be'. However, enthralled as he was by the book, its effect was 'almost entirely negative' and it was overwhelmed by his reading of Buddhist texts on which he realised 'that I was a Buddhist and always had been'. This set him on an Eastward trajectory, to encounters with Buddhism in the land of its origin.

When Sangharakshita and other experienced Buddhist teachers arrived in the West in the 1960s they had been preceded, and in some respects pre-empted, by the Theosophically-influenced versions of Buddhism popularised by Humphreys and Alan Watts and enthusiastically travestied by Lobsang Rampa and the Beats. In these ways, Buddhism overlapped with the New Age which, in many respects has continued to support its spread. Buddhist books are sold in New Age bookshops, Buddhist teachers frequently appear in New Age magazines and meditation has become widely popularised. In return Buddhism has provided New Age thinkers with a wealth of images, terms, concepts and texts.

The two movements were also connected by their counter-cultural principles. This association was deeply invigorating for British Buddhism and enabled the FWBO, for example, to cast off the staid and middle-class character of the previous generation of British Buddhists and distance itself from the ossification of much Eastern Buddhism. Buddhism is intrinsically 'alternative' in the West in that it offers an alternative to Christianity and to the many forms of materialism. For this reason a kinship exists between Buddhists and the world-views and counter-cultural experiments of the New Age.

But 'identity is the vanishing point of resemblance', as Wallace Stevens says, and this kinship should not be allowed to obscure the profound differences. In an atmosphere of eclecticism, minorities can thrive: vegetarians are no longer considered cranks and neither are Buddhists. But Buddhists should beware of being added to the New Age soup-vegetarian or not.

If it is difficult to define the New Age, it is perhaps no less difficult to define Buddhism, but unless we can be clear what is distinctive about Buddhism we will be at the mercy of endless compromises and obscurations. I suggest that at the heart of the many expressions of the Dharma is a concern with the Truth, the full realisation of which is conterminous with Enlightenment. This emphasis runs contrary to the common Western perception of Buddhism as a path of progressively intensifying spiritual experience. That is to say, Buddhism is seen as a form of mysticism and mysticism is understood in terms of experience. In an address to a conference of 'scientists and mystics' Sangharakshita was at pains to stress that he identified himself with neither party:

*"To me as a Buddhist, terms such as 'mystic' and 'mystical' are in fact quite strange, even alien, not to say repugnant, and in speaking and writing about Buddhism I prefer to avoid them"*

This does not mean that Buddhism is not concerned with experience, but it does not see experience—even mystical experience—as an end in itself. When mysticism is turned into a philosophy it becomes monism—the belief in an underlying unity between all phenomena within the context of a metaphysical absolute, mysticism being the personal experience of such an absolute. Buddhism seeks to avoid all such absolutisation and reification and to understand experience in a broader, non-dualistic context:

*'One might say Science represents an extreme of objectivity and reason whereas Mysticism represents an extreme of subjectivity and emotion... Science seeks to*

*reduce the subject to the object, Mysticism to absorb the object in the subject. Buddhism, following here as elsewhere a Middle Way, represents a dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy in a blissful non-dual Awareness wherein... 'that which is exterior coincides with that which is interior'.*

In a similar vein, in a lecture on 'Enlightenment as Experience and Non-Experience' Sangharakshita proposes that we think of the spiritual life not in terms of experience, but in terms of the metaphors of growth, work and duty. The 'Truth' to which a Buddhist aspires has to be lived, felt and seen and it is likewise the Truth of his or her experience, but this is not the same as saying that it is experience. This is a crucial point of divergence from the New Age, as 'the religion of the Self'. For Buddhism there is no abiding Self or soul which is not subject to change.

The Buddhist concern with Truth is fundamentally at odds with the eclecticism and relativism of the New Age and Buddhists have to make distinctions between teachings and traditions which the New Age is happy to mix together. 'Truth' here does not refer to the various doctrinal expressions of the Dharma which Buddhist tradition does not consider to be ultimately 'true' in themselves. But such expressions are nonetheless considered indispensable means to Enlightenment and for this reason Right Understanding is the starting point of the Eight-fold path. It is therefore incumbent upon Buddhists to clarify their own views and to distinguish which of the views they encounter are compatible with the Dharma.

Thus a Buddhist cannot agree that 'all religions are essentially expressions of the same inner reality'. Sometimes this stance is urged on Buddhists with the coercive pressure of a theological correctness, but Buddhism does not even regard itself as 'an expression of reality'. It sees its own teachings and practices as means of creating conditions which conduce to the perception of reality and Buddhists will judge other teachings by the same criterion. Where

there are differences of belief and practice Buddhists need to ask (in the ample spirit of friendly dialogue and tolerance) whether other religions, philosophies and spiritual paths are based, ultimately on one of the two essential 'wrong views': nihilism and eternalism. For example, in his belief in 'spirit' and 'the Unknowable' Bloom proposes a metaphysical substratum underlying and uniting all phenomena. A Buddhist analysis will see this, like Bloom's belief in a 'soul or higher self', as a form of eternalism—not to say as disguised theism. Alternatively, some manifestations of the New Age proceed on the assumption that true happiness is possible if we can but change to this diet, use this ethnic medicine, align these energies using those crystals, amulets, or charms, or take up a particular form of alternative medicine, martial art, or therapy. The suggestion that ultimate satisfaction can be found in a physical training or a particular form of therapy is essentially materialist and a Buddhist analysis will interpret them as a form of nihilism.

Similarly problematic is the belief that all religions are simply differing forms of 'spirituality'. Such an approach will see the Buddhist tradition as one resource among others from which an individual can draw. But why should one chose Buddhist spirituality rather than Christian, feminist or 'earth' spirituality when they are all just different kinds of experience and are all equally true/false/useful? If we simply take what we want from Buddhism we are in danger of ignoring the aspects which are uncomfortable and challenging—in other words, those parts of the tradition which will force one to change.

For this reason it is important that Buddhism is presented in a way which makes it clear that it cannot be incorporated into a life which is otherwise unchanged or subsumed innocuously into a New Age mix. Like the New Age, Dzogchen, Tantra and Zen tend to use the language of immanence: the doctrine of Buddha nature, the idea that we are already Enlightened—and the approaches to practice which follow from this—are all examples. In a cultural context which asserts subjective experience above universal

values and where consumption is a primary mode of being such teachings are open to misinterpretation. An alternative approach—using the language of transcendence—asserts that we are not presently Enlightened (and, in fact that we are primordially deluded), that we need to change ourselves if we are to become Enlightened and that Buddhism is a path from delusion to Enlightenment, from Samsara to Nirvana. Some approaches will work and others will not, but one cannot say, with the New Age, that all approaches are equally valid. Buddhists cannot agree that they are helping to prepare for the Golden Dawn and the Age of Aquarius. A Buddhist approach to politics and society has to rest on *pratiitya samutpaada*, the principle that “all things arise in dependence upon conditions”. Speaking of the FWBO Subhuti writes in *Buddhism for Today*:

*'there are... no millennial illusions. No golden age is at hand. The modern world is too complex and too pluralistic to be transformed in that way'.*

However, Buddhists can work for meaningful change. As at any other time in history it is possible to create conditions which are more conducive to human well-being and allow the possibility of spiritual development. But this development takes place individually, not en masse in the manner of a totalitarian state or imperial expansion. As Subhuti says, 'empires deny individuality and breed their own expansion'. There is a Buddhist saying that 'Samsara is endless' and any belief that a utopian full-stop can be placed at the end of history will strike Buddhists as naïve escapism, speaking more of the fin de millennium fear of social collapse than of spiritual aspiration.

In spite of this the theosophical heritage lives on among contemporary Western Buddhists in the continuing idealisations of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, which Donald Lopez dubs 'new age orientalism'. He has in mind the fantasy version of Tibet:

*“exalted as a surrogate self endowed with all that the West lacks. It is Tibet that will regenerate the West by showing us, prophetically, what it can be by showing us what it has been. It is Tibet that can save the West, cynical and materialist, from itself. Tibet is seen as a cure for the ever-dissolving West, restoring its spirit”.*

This Tibet is shrouded in snows and mystery in equal measure, secreted behind the Himalayas in the most inaccessible region of the world: the last abode (now cruelly displaced in its turn by the Chinese shadow of Western materialism) of legendary beasts, magical powers and perennial wisdom. To the extent that Western followers of Tibetan Buddhism perceive it in this way they merge into New Age appropriations of that tradition. The Dalai Lama, the Bardo Thödol and, to a lesser extent, the idea of tantric initiation all figure prominently in New Age mythologizing.

As an articulation of fantasy compensations for psychic inadequacy the New Age movement is not a cure so much as a symptom. Over fifty years ago W.H. Auden prophesied a New Age apocalypse in a long work called “For The Time Being”. Herod is contemplating the impending massacre of the innocents. He does not want to issue the order because, as he says “I am a liberal. I want everyone to be happy”. But civilisation is already crumbling:

“I have tried everything. I have prohibited the sale of crystals and ouija boards; the courts are empowered to sentence alchemists to hard labour in the mines; it is a statutory offence to turn tables or feel bumps.”

What he fears is a future where:

*“Reason will be replaced by Revelation.... Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions-feelings in the solar plexus induced by under-nourishment, angelic images generated by fevers or drugs. Whole cosmogonies will be created out of some forgotten personal resentment, complete epics written in*

*private languages, the daubs of school-children ranked above the greatest masterpieces.... Idealism will be replaced by Materialism. Life after death will be an eternal dinner-party where all the guests are only 20 years old... Divine honours will be paid to silver teapots, shallow depressions in the earth, names on maps, domestic pets. The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively of hermits, bums and permanent invalids”.*

This is the icy hell of subjectivity whose inmates, relativizing truth, can speak only to themselves or of themselves to each other. Is it a portrait of the New Age? So elusive a phenomenon can never be adequately defined, but the characterisation I have suggested implies an ideology of underlying assumptions-the religion of the self, eclecticism and social fantasy-whose influence extends far beyond the many-tentacled reach of its institutions and organisations. Buddhism, too, contains underlying assumptions and has a distinctive approach which derives from them. These distinctions must be insisted upon however useful Buddhism and the New Age may be to each other and however much certain formulations of Buddhism may conceal the differences. This is not to say that the people one meets in New Age contexts are necessarily definable in its terms: the New Age is where people start looking when they want an alternative to conventional society. There may well be ways in which the two can live together. Buddhists might see the New Age as a kind of contemporary ethnic religion which can co-exist with Western Buddhism as tribal and national traditions co-exist with Eastern Buddhism. But Buddhists must retain a sense of the universality of their own tradition and of the extent to which it surpasses the New Age frameworks which will seek to define it. One has only to think of the absorption of Indian Buddhism by Hinduism to see how such a relationship can break down. Denise Cush suggests that the New Age, needing to be grounded in a tradition, “could root itself in a Western form of non-sectarian or Mahayana

Buddhism”. One sees something of the sort already taking place in the USA. However, Buddhists will insist that what passes as Buddhism is true to its name.

Finally the New Age is not paganism. It is a modern (or even a post-modern) phenomenon; it is a symptom of rootlessness, not a restoration of roots. The New Age seeks to consume traditions such as Buddhism as resources for personal experience. In these respects it embodies a *reductio ad absurdum* of contemporary liberalism in the realm of religious belief and practice. A New Age Buddhism would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Buddhist tradition; it would be a Buddhism constructed from Western fantasies of the East and post-Christian yearnings for salvation. As Stephen Batchelor comments:

*“Today the fear of invasion is more one of psychological and social breakdown than of external invasion. instead of Theosophy, there is now the New Age, another resurgent Gnostic/Romantic fantasy that claims Buddhism as its own, just as Mani did in the Third century and Mme. Blavatsky in the 19th. But the Dharma will remain unheard as long as its voice is drowned out by the clamour of these irrational and eclectic yearnings.”*

Buddhism in the West is growing out of old traditions, but it should not simply consume those traditions according to modern agendas and discard them as worthless husks. Western Buddhists are attempting to create a new tradition - a tradition of Western Buddhism within which individuals can develop beyond subjective experience, can grow through activity and engagement and finally come not just to follow the Truth, but to embody it.

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## Three Translations of The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra

*or The Heart of the Prajnaparamita Sutra  
(Ārya-bhagavatī-prajñāpāramitā-hridaya-  
sūtra)*

**1. Translated from the Tibetan**, consulting the Indian and Tibetan commentaries and previous good translations, by Gelong Thubten Tsultrim (George Churinoff), the first day of Saka Dawa, 1999, at Tushita Meditation Centre, Dharamsala, India. Amended March 8, 2001 in the New Mexico desert.

Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavan was dwelling on Mass of Vultures Mountain in Rajagriha together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas. At that time, the Bhagavan was absorbed in the concentration on the categories of phenomena called “Profound Perception.”

Also, at that time, the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara looked upon the very practice of the profound perfection of wisdom and beheld those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.

Then, through the power of Buddha, the venerable Shariputra said this to the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara: “How should any son of the lineage train who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom?”

He said that and the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara said this to the venerable Sharadvatiputra. “Shariputra, any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom should look upon it like this, correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.

“Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness are empty.

“Shariputra, likewise, all phenomena are emptiness; without characteristic; unproduced, unceased; stainless, not without stain; not deficient, not fulfilled.

“Shariputra, therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no visual form, no sound, no odor, no taste, no object of touch, and no phenomenon. There is no eye element and so on up to and including no mind element and no mental consciousness element. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so on up to and including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Similarly, there is no suffering, origination, cessation, and path; there is no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment.

“Shariputra, therefore, because there is no attainment, bodhisattvas rely on and dwell in the perfection of wisdom, the mind without obscuration and without fear. Having completely passed beyond error, they reach the end-point of nirvana. All the buddhas who dwell in the three times also manifestly, completely awaken to unsurpassable, perfect, complete enlightenment in reliance on the perfection of wisdom.

“Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the unequaled, the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering, should be known as truth since it is not false. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is declared:

Tadyatha Om Gate Gate Paragate  
Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha

“Shariputra, the bodhisattva mahasattva should train in the profound perfection of wisdom like that.”

Then the Bhagavan arose from that concentration and commended the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara saying: “Well said, well said, son of the lineage, it is like that. It is like that; one should practice the profound perfection of wisdom just as you have indicated; even the tathagatas rejoice.”

Bhagavan having thus spoken, the venerable Sharadvatiputra, the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara, those surrounding in their entirety along with the world of gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas were overjoyed and highly praised that spoken by the Bhagavan.

**2. Translated by Thích Nhất Hạnh, September 2014.** This English translation is based on a 2014 Vietnamese translation by Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Avalokiteshvara  
while practicing deeply with  
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore,  
suddenly discovered that  
all of the five Skandhas are equally empty,  
and with this realisation  
he overcame all Ill-being.

“Listen Sariputra,  
this Body itself is Emptiness  
and Emptiness itself is this Body.  
This Body is not other than Emptiness  
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.  
The same is true of Feelings,  
Perceptions, Mental Formations,  
and Consciousness.

“Listen Sariputra,  
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;  
their true nature is the nature of  
no Birth no Death,  
no Being no Non-being,  
no Defilement no Purity,  
no Increasing no Decreasing.

“That is why in Emptiness,  
Body, Feelings, Perceptions,  
Mental Formations and Consciousness  
are not separate self entities.

The Eighteen Realms of Phenomena  
which are the six Sense Organs,  
the six Sense Objects,  
and the six Consciousnesses  
are also not separate self entities.

The Twelve Links of Interdependent Arising  
and their Extinction  
are also not separate self entities.  
Ill-being, the Causes of Ill-being,  
the End of Ill-being, the Path,  
insight and attainment,  
are also not separate self entities.

Whoever can see this  
no longer needs anything to attain.

Bodhisattvas who practice  
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore  
see no more obstacles in their mind,  
and because there  
are no more obstacles in their mind,  
they can overcome all fear,  
destroy all wrong perceptions  
and realize Perfect Nirvana.

“All Buddhas in the past, present and future  
by practicing  
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore  
are all capable of attaining  
Authentic and Perfect Enlightenment.

“Therefore Sariputra,  
it should be known that  
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore  
is a Great Mantra,  
the most illuminating mantra,  
the highest mantra,  
a mantra beyond compare,  
the True Wisdom that has the power  
to put an end to all kinds of suffering.  
Therefore let us proclaim  
a mantra to praise  
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore.

Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!  
Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!  
Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi  
Svaha!”

**3. Published in *The Heart of Understanding* by Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1987.**  
Presumably translated by Thích Nhất Hạnh. The

following two commentaries included in this booklet quote from this version.

The Bodhisattva Avalokita, while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding, shed light on the five skandhas and found them equally empty. After this penetration, he overcame all pain.

"Listen, Shariputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

"Hear, Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing. Therefore, in emptiness there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor mental formations, nor consciousness; no eye, or ear, or nose, or tongue, or body, or mind, no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realms of elements (from eyes to mind-consciousness); no interdependent origins and no extinction of them (from ignorance to old age and death); no suffering, no origination of suffering, no extinction of suffering, no path; no understanding, no attainment.

"Because there is no attainment, the bodhisattvas, supported by the Perfection of Understanding, find no obstacles for their minds. Having no obstacles, they overcome fear, liberating themselves forever from illusion and realizing perfect Nirvana. All Buddhas in the past, present, and future, thanks to this Perfect Understanding, arrive at full, right, and universal Enlightenment.

"Therefore, one should know that Perfect Understanding is a great mantra, is the highest mantra, is the unequalled mantra, the destroyer of all suffering, the incorruptible truth. A mantra of Prajnaparamita should therefore be proclaimed. This is the mantra:

"Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha."

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## Empty Of What? by Thích Nhất Hạnh

*from The Heart of Understanding, 1987*

*"The Bodhisattva Avalokita, while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding, shed light on the five skandhas and found them equally empty."*

Bodhi means being awake, and sattva means a living being, so bodhisattva means an awakened being. All of us are sometimes bodhisattvas, and sometimes not. Avalokita is the name of the bodhisattva in this sutra. Avalokita is just a shorter version of Avalokitesvara. The Heart of the Prajnaparamita Sutra is a wonderful gift to us from Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. In Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, we translate his name as Kwan Yin, Quan Am, or Kannon, which means the one who listens and hears the cries of the world in order to come and help. In the East, many Buddhists pray to him, or invoke his name. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva gives us the gift of nonfear, because he himself has transcended fear. (Sometimes Avalokita is a man and sometimes a woman.)

Perfect Understanding is prajnaparamita. The word "wisdom" is usually used to translate prajna, but I think that wisdom is somehow not able to convey the meaning. Understanding is like water flowing in a stream. Wisdom and knowledge are solid and can block our understanding. In Buddhism knowledge is regarded as an obstacle for understanding. If we take something to be the truth, we may cling to it so much that even if the truth comes and knocks at our door, we won't want to let it in. We have to be able to transcend our previous knowledge the way we climb up a ladder. If we are on the fifth rung and think that we are very high, there is no hope for us to step up to the sixth. We must learn to transcend our own views. Understanding, like water, can flow, can penetrate. Views, knowledge, and even wisdom are solid, and can block the way of understanding.

According to Avalokitesvara, this sheet of paper is empty; but according to our analysis, it

is full of everything. There seems to be a contradiction between our observation and his. Avalokita found the five skandhas empty. But, empty of what? The key word is empty. To be empty is to be empty of something. If I am holding a cup of water and I ask you, "Is this cup empty?" you will say, "No, it is full of water." But if I pour out the water and ask you again, you may say, "Yes, it is empty." But, empty of what? Empty means empty of something. The cup cannot be empty of nothing. "Empty" doesn't mean anything unless you know empty of what. My cup is empty of water, but it is not empty of air. To be empty is to be empty of something. This is quite a discovery. When Avalokita says that the five skandhas are equally empty, to help him be precise we must ask, "Mr. Avalokita, empty of what?"

The five skandhas, which may be translated into English as five heaps, or five aggregates, are the five elements that comprise a human being. These five elements flow like a river in every one of us. In fact, these are really five rivers flowing together in us: the river of form, which means our body, the river of feelings, the river of perceptions, the river of mental formations, and the river of consciousness. They are always flowing in us. So according to Avalokita, when he looked deeply into the nature of these five rivers, he suddenly saw that all five are empty. And if we ask, "Empty of what?" he has to answer. And this is what he said: "They are empty of a separate self." That means none of these five rivers can exist by itself alone. Each of the five rivers has to be made by the other four. They have to co-exist; they have to inter-be with all the others.

In our bodies we have lungs, heart, kidneys, stomach, and blood. None of these can exist independently. They can only co-exist with the others. Your lungs and your blood are two things, but neither can exist separately. The lungs take in air and enrich the blood, and, in turn, the blood nourishes the lungs. Without the blood the lungs cannot be alive, and without the lungs, the blood cannot be cleansed. Lungs and blood inter-are. The same is true with kidneys and blood, kidneys and stomach, lungs and

heart, blood and heart, and so on. When Avalokita says that our sheet of paper is empty, he means it is empty of a separate, independent existence. It cannot just be by itself. It has to inter-be with the sunshine, the cloud, the forest, the logger, the mind, and everything else. It is empty of a separate self. But, empty of a separate self means full of everything. So it seems that our observation and that of Avalokita do not contradict each other after all.

Avalokita looked deeply into the five skandhas of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, and he discovered that none of them can be by itself alone. Each can only inter-be with all the others. So he tells us that form is empty. Form is empty of a separate self, but it is full of everything in the cosmos. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

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## **Long Live Emptiness by Thích Nhất Hạnh**

*from The Heart of Understanding, 1987*

*"Listen, Shariputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness."*

Form is the wave and emptiness is the water. You can understand through that image. The Indians speak in a language that can scare us, but we have to understand their way of expression in order to really understand them. In the West, when we draw a circle, we consider it to be zero, nothingness. But in India, a circle means totality, wholeness. The meaning is the opposite. So "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" is like wave is water, water is wave. "Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness," because these five contain each other. Because one exists, everything exists.



In the Vietnamese literature there are two lines of poetry made by a Zen Master of the Ly Dynasty, Twelfth Century. He said:

If it exists, then one speck of dust exists.  
If it doesn't exist, then the whole cosmos doesn't.

He means that the notions of existence and nonexistence are just created by our minds. He also said that, "The entire cosmos can be put on the tip of a hair, and the sun and the moon can be seen in a mustard seed." These are images that show us that one contains everything, and everything is just one. You know that modern science has perceived the truth that not only matter and energy are one, but matter and space are also one. Not only matter and space are one, but matter, space, and mind are one, because mind is in it.

Because form is emptiness, form is possible. In form we find everything else—feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. "Emptiness" means empty of a separate self. It is full of everything, full of life. The word emptiness should not scare us. It is a wonderful word. To be empty does not mean nonexistent. If the sheet of paper is not empty, how could the sunshine, the logger, and the forest come into it? How could it be a sheet of paper. The cup, in order to be empty, has to be there. Form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, in order to be empty of a separate self, have to be there.

Emptiness is the ground of everything. Thanks to emptiness, everything is possible. That is a declaration made by Nagarjuna, the Buddhist philosopher of the second century. Emptiness is quite an optimistic concept. If I am not empty, I cannot be here. And if you are not empty, you cannot be there. Because you are there, I can be here. This is the true meaning of emptiness. Form does not have a separate existence. Avalokita wants us to understand this point.

If we are not empty, we become a block of matter. We cannot breathe, we cannot think. To be empty means to be alive, to breathe in and to breathe out. We cannot be alive if we are not empty. Emptiness is impermanence, it is change.

We should not complain about impermanence, because without impermanence nothing is possible. A Buddhist who came to see me from Great Britain complained that life was empty and impermanent. (He had been a Buddhist for five years and had thought about emptiness and impermanence a great deal.) He told me that one day his fourteen-year-old daughter told him, "Daddy, please don't complain about impermanence. Without impermanence, how can I grow up?" Of course she is right.

When you have a grain of corn, and you entrust it to the soil, you hope that it will become a tall corn plant. If there is no impermanence, the grain of corn will remain a grain of corn forever, and you will never have an ear of corn to eat. Impermanence is crucial to the life of everything. Instead of complaining about impermanence, we might say, "Long live impermanence!" Thanks to impermanence everything is possible. That is a very optimistic note. And it is the same with emptiness. Emptiness is important because without emptiness, nothing is possible. So we should also say, "Long live emptiness!" Emptiness is the basis of everything. Thanks to emptiness, life itself is possible. All the five skandhas follow the same principle.

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## **Smokey The Bear Sutra by Gary Snyder**

Once in the Jurassic about 150 million years ago, the Great Sun Buddha in this corner of the Infinite Void gave a discourse to all the assembled elements and energies: to the standing beings, the walking beings, the flying beings, and the sitting beings—even the grasses, to the number of thirteen billion, each one born from a seed, assembled there: a Discourse concerning Enlightenment on the planet Earth.

"In some future time, there will be a continent called America. It will have great centers of power called such as Pyramid Lake, Walden Pond, Mt. Rainier, Big Sur, Everglades, and so forth; and powerful nerves and channels such as Columbia River, Mississippi River, and



Grand Canyon. The human race in that era will get into troubles all over its head, and practically wreck everything in spite of its own strong intelligent Buddha-nature."

"The twisting strata of the great mountains and the pulsings of volcanoes are my love burning deep in the earth. My obstinate compassion is schist and basalt and granite, to be mountains, to bring down the rain. In that future American Era I shall enter a new form; to cure the world of loveless knowledge that seeks with blind hunger: and mindless rage eating food that will not fill it."

And he showed himself in his true form of

### **SMOKEY THE BEAR**

A handsome smokey-colored brown bear standing on his hind legs, showing that he is aroused and watchful.

Bearing in his right paw the Shovel that digs to the truth beneath appearances; cuts the roots of useless attachments, and flings damp sand on the fires of greed and war;

His left paw in the mudra of Comradely Display-- indicating that all creatures have the full right to live to their limits and that of deer, rabbits, chipmunks, snakes, dandelions, and lizards all grow in the realm of the Dharma;

Wearing the blue work overalls symbolic of slaves and laborers, the countless men oppressed by a civilization that claims to save but often destroys;

Wearing the broad-brimmed hat of the west, symbolic of the forces that guard the wilderness, which is the Natural State of the Dharma and the true path of man on Earth:

all true paths lead through mountains--

With a halo of smoke and flame behind, the forest fires of the kali-yuga, fires caused by the stupidity of those who think things can be gained and lost whereas in truth all is contained vast and free in the Blue Sky and Green Earth of One Mind;

Round-bellied to show his kind nature and that the great earth has food enough for everyone who loves her and trusts her;

Trampling underfoot wasteful freeways and needless suburbs, smashing the worms of capitalism and totalitarianism;

Indicating the task: his followers, becoming free of cars, houses, canned foods, universities, and shoes, master the Three Mysteries of their own Body, Speech, and Mind; and fearlessly chop down the rotten trees and prune out the sick limbs of this country America and then burn the leftover trash.

Wrathful but calm. Austere but Comic. Smokey the Bear will Illuminate those who would help him; but for those who would hinder or slander him...

## **HE WILL PUT THEM OUT.**

Thus his great Mantra:

Namah samanta vajranam chanda maharoshana  
Sphataya hum traka ham mam

**"I DEDICATE MYSELF TO THE  
UNIVERSAL DIAMOND BE THIS RAGING  
FURY BE DESTROYED"**

And he will protect those who love the woods and rivers, Gods and animals, hobos and madmen, prisoners and sick people, musicians, playful women, and hopeful children:

And if anyone is threatened by advertising, air pollution, television, or the police, they should chant **SMOKEY THE BEAR'S WAR SPELL:**

**DROWN THEIR BUTTS  
CRUSH THEIR BUTTS  
DROWN THEIR BUTTS  
CRUSH THEIR BUTTS**

And SMOKEY THE BEAR will surely appear to put the enemy out with his vajra-shovel.

Now those who recite this Sutra and then try to put it in practice will accumulate merit as countless as the sands of Arizona and Nevada.

Will help save the planet Earth from total oil slick.

Will enter the age of harmony of man and nature.  
Will win the tender love and caresses of men, women, and beasts.

Will always have ripened blackberries to eat and a sunny spot under a pine tree to sit at.

**AND IN THE END WILL WIN HIGHEST  
PERFECT ENLIGHTENMENT**

...thus we have heard...

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