

Voice of the Amida Order and Friends of the Amida Order: Pureland Buddhism

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RUNNING TIDE



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Issue 32: Buddhism: East vs. West

RUNNING TIDE

Running Tide offers a voice for faith and practice, as well as critical, existential and socially engaged enquiry within the broad framework of Pureland Buddhism.

We publish short articles, poetry, pictures, interviews, comment and Buddhist resource materials.

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EDITORIAL

It is a very exciting time in the Amida World at the moment. A couple of weeks ago, Padmaghosa publicly announced the plans to purchase a building in Malvern, UK for use as an Amida Centre. As I write it seems to have made local news in Malvern. I am very excited about this project and hope it all goes ahead smoothly. It feels like a new stage of life for Amida in the UK.

In this issue, I wanted to explore the transmission of Buddhism from the East to the West and to think about how Buddhism has been influenced by modern western culture. Dharmavidya has written about Buddhism as a religion and how it has been re-imagined as something else by many practitioners in the West. Richard Ollier has given us a brief biography of Chögyam Trungpa, often credited with bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the USA. Justain Whitaker, PhD Candidate in Buddhist ethics at Goldsmiths, University of London, has thought about the relationship between Buddhism and philosophy. Kusumavarsa has shared some of her thoughts about death and written about how attitudes to death and dying differ in the East and West. Finally, Kaspalita has drawn on his experience of teaching mindfulness classes to consider its value and potential.

Thank you to all of those who have contributed or helped in any other way to make this issue possible.

Namo Amida Bu

—Adrian Thompson

GETTING THE WRONG END OF THE SNAKE

Dharmavidya David Brazier

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In the East, Buddhism is, was and always has been a religion. In the West, however, Buddhism has spread and prospered on the slogan that it is not a religion. This is substantially because there has been a degree of rebellion against religion in the West and so by saying that it is not a religion it has been able to attract interest. Anything paradoxical can hold the attention for a time. However, it is questionable whether this could be a solid basis for a long-term future. One of the characteristics of religion is that it holds people's loyalty at a profound level, profound enough to challenge their self-interest. Without this we only have what Trungpa called spiritual materialism. In our democratic age, however, we have become less interested in profundity and more interested in chasing big numbers so anything that sells Buddhism to larger numbers of people initially seems like a good thing. However, people who vote for you today can readily vote for somebody else tomorrow. One true friend or ally is worth a hundred fans.

Something similar happened when Buddhism first went to China. It enjoyed great popularity for a while. Then there was a swing back. Initially the new foreign philosophy was seen as fulfilling some indigenous hopes, but when the real difference eventually sank in there was a counter-movement and



Buddhism was persecuted for a time. During this period most of the original following fell away. However, some few had been touched more deeply and from them eventually emerged a more genuine Chinese style of real Buddhism. It is often said that Buddhism is adaptable and can accommodate to different cultures. This is true but it is a mistake to then conclude that Buddhism will abandon its essence in the process and simply adopt the attitudes of the new cultures. It may appear to do so for a time, but then there will be a swing back and a struggle.

In the East, most Buddhists have not been meditators in the sense of doing a technique called meditation as a kind of self-treatment. Having a religious sensibility, they have reflected on the nature of things, they have observed



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life, they have had a sense of transcendent presence, but they have not sat on a certain kind of cushion for a prescribed period doing a method. They attend the temple, make offerings, pray, and receive consolation; they involve themselves in socially useful activities, practise hospitality and generosity. They go about their daily life keeping Buddha in mind and

feel an assurance through faith. In this way they believe they are creating a good long term prospect for themselves and others. In the West, however, refuge is little understood and Buddhism is widely thought to be about living in the here and now and practising meditation techniques. We Westerners like techniques—our faith is in technology.

In the past, only a small minority practised meditation extensively and this was as monks or nuns. They were the people who were set on attaining nirvana and completely renouncing this world. Meditation fitted into this scheme as a way of renouncing the attachments of the mind and so carrying the renunciation of material things to a deeper level. Most Western meditators, however, have no real intention of renouncing the world and generally they own and intend to continue owning a lot more than the seven requisites

allowed to a traditional sramanera. Meditation in the West has been fitted into a completely different frame that is more to do with personal effectiveness in the world than renunciation of the world. I feel sorry for those in the West who sincerely try to live a full world-engaged life and do the disciplines of a monk at the same time. It is not practical. It is not good for their marriage or their children. It is too much of an attempt to have your cake and eat it too. I know, I've been there. In saying this I am not criticising meditation; meditation is wonderful and if you find it wonderful then by all means do it, but don't do it in order to get something — you have too much already.

In history, in Asia, most Buddhists have been so in the hope of a better rebirth in their next life, either in this world or one like it, or, alternatively, in a heaven or, even better, a Pure Land of one of the Buddhas. Most Western Buddhists, however, are sceptical about other lives and do not see their practice in terms of such a long-term view. They are focussed on this life and what can be achieved within it. The Asian Buddhist feels at ease because they are less fearful of death; whereas the Western Buddhist can be anxious to get as far as possible along the spiritual path in the short time available. Whether there are other lives and other worlds or not, spirituality is surely about taking the longer view, living fully in this life yet with a peace that comes from confidence about the bigger picture.

All this means that Buddhism has, throughout its history until it arrived in the West, had a deeply religious sensitivity. It is not so much that the actual beliefs that people have held are important, it is the attitude that goes with them that matters vitally. Many Westerners think they have rejected the framework of traditional Western religion but still have all the attitudes that go with such a framework so the mere assertion of an intellectual change is not enough.

By turning Buddhism into a self-help strategy focussed on meditation the West has created something completely new. However, the attitude behind this new creation is not new: it is very recognisably similar to a set of attitudes that have dominated Western culture, or at least Anglo-Saxon culture, since the Reformation. These are concerned with self-salvation by one's own effort. They are related to an idea that God helps those who help themselves and judges those who don't and so those who are successful in this world



are demonstrating their credentials for the next one. Here too we can see that even though many Western people no longer believe the metaphysics that underlie their attitudes, the attitudes persist and even persist through a supposed change of religion.

What this means is that to a large extent Western “Buddhists” have not really converted to Buddhism, but have remodelled Buddhism to fit into the attitudes that they take for granted as being the right ones. They have not allowed themselves to be challenged at a sufficiently deep level to grasp what Buddhism has traditionally really been all about. In the most typical Eastern attitude, Buddhism is a faith. In many ways it is a faith in faith. The actual beliefs are supports. Whether a person is a devotee of Quan Shi Yin or Amitabha or the Medicine Buddha or places trust in the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum or the Nembutsu or the litany of a Zen Temple does not matter that much. The celestial powers can take any form and we are deluded beings anyway so what do we know about the real forces at work? Nonetheless, traditional Asian Buddhists have never had any doubt that such forces were at work. Nor do they doubt that they are compassionate and not punitive. We benefit from that help and blessing.



19th Century Medicine Buddha mandala: Wikimedia Commons

What goes with this is a modesty about self. It is a question of humility in the genuine sense of the word.

All religions have good things to offer and all people have the possibility of good-heartedness. While we can learn a certain amount by contrasting East and West we should not polarise the situation too much. Asians can be proud, prejudiced and cruel, or modest, wise and kind, just as Europeans or Americans can. We can all learn from each other, but it is most important to try to learn from the greatest sages and that means being willing to go beyond our taken for granted assumptions. It was a Western sage who said that the unexamined life was not worth living and all advise us to reflect deeply on what is true.

When we assert that we have the only right practice, only right object of worship, only true lineage, perfect scripture, etc, we are in great danger of falling into conceit and becoming spiritually stranded on an island cut off from the spiritual mainland. This is just as true for those whose holy book was written by Darwin as for Middle Eastern fundamentalists and the danger of sectarianism in Western Buddhism is a real one.

Now there are a wealth of abstruse speculations in Western Buddhism about emptiness and the lack of self-essence in Dharmas, but little of this brings home the basic point that to give up self even to a small degree involves, on the one hand making a more realistic, which is to say modest, assessment of one's own life and, on the other, placing some trust in the sources of refuge.



In the Snake Simile Sutta, the Buddha uses the image of catching a snake. Presumably one would want to catch a snake in order to milk it of venom in order to use this as medicine. The imagery of turning poison into medicine is a powerful one. However, the main image that the Buddha



wants to use on this occasion is the simple one that if you get hold of the snake at the wrong end it will climb back up its own length and bite you. The venom will then not cure you, it will kill you. The Buddha spoke this simile when reprimanding a monk Arittha who asserted that when the Buddha said that worldly attachments impede spiritual progress this did not really mean what it says. Buddha made it clear that he meant what he said.

It does appear that Buddha taught monks and lay people differently. For monks, who were few, there was the path of complete renunciation, leaving this world behind totally. For lay people there was faith, generosity, gratitude, community, and altruism, much of it collectively expressed through ritual, pilgrimage, pastoral care, offerings. It was quite clearly a religion. It has gone on evolving over history as a religion and has been successful in many cases in creating peaceful, loving communities.

Whether the snake will bite us remains to be seen, but it does seem likely that we shall not get the medicine until we can tell which end is which. I imagine that what will happen is that a wide variety of hybrids will emerge and then some natural selection will take place. Our own community is one such hybrid. I think that it is a little closer to the Asian model than many others that are currently around, but inevitably it must also encompass some Western attitudes since everybody new who joins us brings some of those attitudes along with them. We meditate, but we do not see meditation as the be-all and end-all. We give a central role to refuge and we each try to understand and practise it as best we can. We are all learning. As we experience the love and generosity of spirit in this community our faith deepens and we grow in confidence that we are engaged in doing something worthwhile. Where this will lead in the future we cannot tell, so we proceed in faith and celebrate that faith together whenever we can. By being true friends to one another we allow the Dharma to take root in our midst and do its work. The powers that be will protect us whether we understand them or not.

I feel that such an attitude is liberating. We say the nembutsu—very simple, very Asian, very freeing, a blessing on all we do, a solace for all our failings—and then we see what happens. We each explore our spiritual path as it unfolds and then we share our stories with one another. This is surely close to the way of those who gathered around Shakyamuni of old. ■

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA AND THE WEST

Richard Ollier

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The attempt to write fairly and objectively about Chögyam Trungpa, the teacher credited with “bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the West”, can only be likened to walking blindfold across a minefield: so controversial a figure was he that every step risks detonating an explosion of contrary, often extreme opinions. It is very difficult to separate truth from fiction and genuine concern from scandalised gossip-mongering. On the one hand, devotees have written of their genuine adoration and respect for their revered teacher, while at the opposite pole, the poet Kenneth Rexroth is said to have claimed that Trungpa did more harm to Buddhism in the USA than anyone else. Yet again, some people seem to have held apparently contradictory views of Trungpa at the same time. For example, Rick Fields, historian of Buddhism in the USA, wrote: “Trungpa caused more trouble, and did more good, than anyone I’ll ever know.”¹ It certainly seems to be true that even those who didn’t like his methods often, at some level, felt gratitude for his teaching and that, on balance, Trungpa’s coming to the West and setting about waking our sleeping hornets with his big Tibetan stick, was more than worthwhile.

So, what was all the fuss about? Well, it is difficult to see anything controversial when viewing a brief outline of his life and work.



There is some minor dispute about whether Chögyam Trungpa was born in 1939 or 1940, but after that the narrative is plain sailing.² He was born in Kham province in Tibet, and identified as an infant as an incarnation in the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism. He was instructed in philosophy and meditation, and received full ordination in 1958. Following the 1959 uprising against the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Trungpa followed the Dalai Lama across the Himalayas on the dangerous, exhausting journey into exile in India. He was subsequently appointed spiritual advisor to the Young Lamas' Home School in Dalhousie.



Mariusz Kluzniak: Creative Commons

Then came the first stage of his journey West. Between 1963 and 1967, he studied Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Fine Arts at Oxford University in the UK. In 1967, he co-founded the Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery and Tibetan Centre in Dumfrieshire, Scotland.

Following a serious car accident in 1969, in which he was partially paralysed, Trungpa moved to the USA and started a meditation centre in Vermont and a Buddhist Community in Boulder, Colorado. It is well known that this was an exciting time for Buddhism in North America, when Zen in particular was starting to gain a higher profile. In 1970, for example, Shunryu Suzuki (not to be confused with DT Suzuki, respected Japanese Buddhist teacher to a slightly earlier generation of Americans), who had founded the Zen Centre in San Francisco, published his hugely influential *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. In the wake of the "Summer of Love", the ongoing Civil Rights

protests, the anguish of America's involvement in the Vietnam War, and all the rest of the cultural and political turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies, many young Americans were to seek an answer to their existential quest in Buddhism.



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Colorado was to be the centre of much of Trungpa's work in the USA. For example, he founded a Buddhist university in Boulder in 1974, and hosted a visit of the Dalai Lama to Colorado in 1981.

Chögyam Trungpa died in Halifax, Nova Scotia (where he had set up a traditional monastery for western students), in 1987.

Such is a brief outline of his life, but such a sketchy chronology hardly does justice to a larger-than-life figure. It may tell us, for example, that he brought Tibetan Buddhism to the West, but it doesn't explain how he did it, and this is where the real fascination—and controversy—lie.

It is with some trepidation that I go on to write more candidly about someone who died relatively recently, who may have been known personally by more than a few readers of this article, and who arouses such strong feelings. I know only what I have read about him, but it seems clear to me that his life can teach us a lot about how religions change and adapt as they spread across the world, and about the stresses that such changes place on the relationship between tradition and innovation.



Trungpa appears to have decided early on in his occidental career that Buddhist teachings would only flourish in the West if they dropped their traditional Tibetan trappings. So off came his robes, and on came a modern American style business suit. He thought carefully about how the Dharma could be transmitted in a culture radically different from that in which his tradition was rooted. For example, Jeffery Paine describes how Trungpa omitted from his teaching the standard Tibetan injunction to treat all sentient beings as though they had once been one's mother: he had heard that many Americans hated their mothers! He did hold on to traditional practices if he felt their utility, however (he maintained the value of meditating in cemeteries, for example), and there is some indication that he came back to more "authentic" Tibetan modes of practice as he got older.

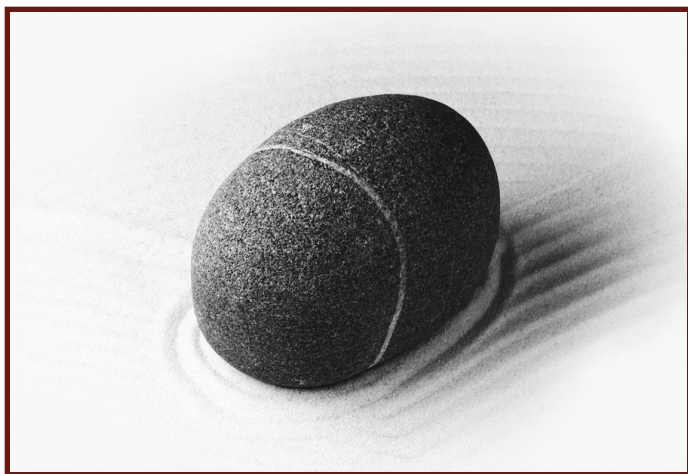
Trungpa seems to have felt that the "ego" (the big problem for all of us) was an especially big problem for Americans, whose every desire was mercilessly exploited by a ruthlessly materialistic consumer society. In *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*³ he showed how this consumer ethos could infect even spiritual life: "enlightenment" became just another thing to be achieved, another target to meet, something else to possess in a totally goal-oriented society.

So, as a good Buddhist, Trungpa set out to help Americans get rid of their attachment to ego. He seems to have been particularly skilled at demonstrating to people just how attached to things they really were even when they protested that they weren't! Trungpa taunted the poet Allen Ginsberg about his attachment to his beard. Ginsberg disappeared into the washroom during one of Trungpa's lectures and re-emerged clean-shaven into the auditorium, at which point Trungpa shouted from the stage "He took off his mask!" Trungpa didn't like students to be too comfortable with themselves, he wanted them to wake up to what was actually going on in their lives. If his style was sometimes confrontational, it could also, it seems be playful and cheerful.

So far, so good. It seems to me, however (and this is a very personal view), that in some ways Trungpa's "plain clothes Buddhism", his struggle to make Buddhism comprehensible and relevant to the West, seriously backfired. He sailed too close to the wind. There were allegations against him of sexual

impropriety and drunkenness. He is said to have given teachings when under the influence of alcohol, and to have turned up on one occasion to give a lecture clutching a bottle of scotch and with a mini-skirted girl on each arm. It looks as if he may have seen such behaviour as yet another attempt to shock Americans out of their complacency, to challenge their notion of what a Buddhist teacher should look like but, if true, such incidents may have a darker edge to them: it could be argued that they show Trungpa succumbing to the “western disease” of consumerism and sensuality. So, had Trungpa conquered America, or had America conquered him? He was holding a mirror up to America and showing it its worst excesses. If this was part of a strategy for introducing Buddhism to the west it was, at the very least, a high-risk one.

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Greatly loved for his kindness by many, he was also criticised by some for bullying and intimidation in his attempts to break through people’s egoistic armour with his “crazy wisdom.” At an infamous Halloween Party at Boulder in 1975, the poet W.S. Merwin and his girlfriend were allegedly stripped and humiliated at Trungpa’s insistence, and the incident received national coverage in a lurid article in Harper’s magazine.

What are we to make of things like this? I personally have long been wary of the confrontational, cruel-to-be-kind teacher. Of course, we all have to have our assumptions challenged, and if we only ever remain in our comfort zones we never learn anything. Nevertheless, modes of teaching which believe that the end justifies the means can leave a lot of carnage in their wake, and a



Eddy Tsai: Creative Commons



very bitter taste—at the point where real suffering is caused to real people the whole process starts to feel deeply problematic and unethical.

So, when looked at from a vantage point nearly thirty years after his death, what does the life of Chögyam Trungpa teach us? It's a very mixed picture. We certainly have to thank him for his undoubted contribution to making Buddhism more widely known in the West. In some quarters, however, he may have made Buddhism infamous rather than famous, and some of his practice can seem abusive and exploitative in hindsight. On a personal level, though, reading about him has certainly brought home to me yet again just how timid I sometimes am in my reluctance to break the rules, and how fruitless is any quest for total security in this life. Also, I have been delighted to discover how close much of what he had to say is to Pureland thinking, particularly in regard to the Bodhisattva Vow which, he believed, can take us beyond our limited selves, beyond our ego defences, into vulnerability in service of the other. Such resonances are everywhere, particularly in Trungpa's determination to see the Dharma in action in all aspects of cultural life. In the 1970s he worked inspirationally in the areas of film, theatre, dance, education and psychology through Shambhala International and the Nalanda Foundation. If we're seeking the origins of Western Culturally Engaged Buddhism, we need look no further.

He also seems to have cherished the value of Sangha as refuge, and this is very close to all our hearts. Dharmavidya quotes Trungpa in *Zen Therapy*: “Let us begin to create a body of people moving about and carrying their own light.”⁴ Great image, great call to action!

Perhaps his most important teaching was an unintended one: he teaches us not to expect perfection in others, including our teachers. Just as we are accepted just as we are, so too is everyone else. He reveals unsparingly to us our propensity to judge rather than show compassion; a very Pureland revelation. It has been suggested that he was an alcoholic, but we are all addicted to something. His struggles show our own to us. When I think of Trungpa, I am reminded of some words of Leonard Cohen about having to fight against the bottle but having to do it drunk, when I think of Trungpa (not that I recommend that as a strategy for coping with addiction). My point is that Trungpa was a human being and had embedded in him similar insurmountable-seeming difficulties to those we all experience. His humanity does not forfeit our gratitude; it increases it.

After Trungpa’s death, Allen Ginsberg wrote a heart-rending poem beseeching his guru to return to us, reborn, to continue the work of relieving the sufferings of us all.⁵ Whatever the undoubted controversies, we can all, I would hope, find a way to say amen to that. ■

NOTES

1. Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Boston, Shambhala: 1992).

2. Jeffery Paine, *Re-enchantment; Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West* (New York, Norton: 2004). Donald Lopez, ed. *Modern Buddhism: Readings for the Unenlightened* (Pennsylvania, Diane: 2002). The main sources of biographical information on Trungpa for this article were Paine and Lopez.

3. Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1973).

4. David Brazier, *Zen Therapy* (London: Constable & Robinson, 1995).

5. Allen, Ginsberg, “Supplication for the Rebirth of the Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche.” In *Collected Poems 1947–1997* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009).



THE BUDDHA'S PHILOSOPHY: FROM EAST TO WEST

Justin Whitaker

As a philosopher who has gravitated toward what we commonly call “Eastern Philosophy” in general and “Early Buddhism” in particular, I have at times found myself rather awkwardly stretched, one leg firmly planted in the Greco-Roman-Euro-American tradition in which I was born, one leg gingerly seeking firm philosophical ground somewhere East of the Indus valley. To call anything “over there” in philosophy means, as has been often pointed out, imposing a purely Western concept or ideal. Of course the same can be said of those wishing to use the term “religion” or to use any other non-native word, especially one with the baggage of centuries of disputation and debate, with shifting borders and shifting roles in society.



Plato and Aristotle by Raphael: Wikimedia Commons

However, as Pope’s saying goes, “fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” So let’s talk about the Buddha’s philosophy and its place for us today. We can begin in good analytic fashion by asking: what is Buddhism and what is philosophy?

Buddhism



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The Buddhism I refer to is the system of thought and practice that traces itself back to Siddhartha Gotama, who lived approximately 480–400 BC. Our evidence for his life and thought is vast; there are volumes written in the Pāli canon as well as translations from Sanskrit still surviving in Tibetan and Chinese. However, much of that evidence is late, some pretty clearly showing fabrication of the sort of story that followers would want to hear hundreds of years after his death.

One later story, the Sri Lankan “Great Chronicle” (Mahāvamsa) includes him going all the way to Sri Lanka—by air—and leaving a footprint in a mountain.

Here we are already looking at something that looks more like a religion than a philosophy. And indeed there is no reasonable argument I could think of for claiming that Buddhism is not a religion. However, as we continue our journey through the texts, we do find stories of a man not flying or imprinting his



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foot in rock, but rather engaging in dialogues, drawing out arguments, and showing the faults in other ways of thinking. The most famous discourse in the West for seeing this side of the Buddha is the Kālāma Sutta, in which the Buddha advises a clan or confederation of people called the Kālāmas:

Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence [of a speaker], or because you think: “The ascetic is our guru.” But when you know for yourselves: “These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to welfare and happiness, then you should live in accordance with them.” ¹

This advice, which seems to suggest a sort of empiricism and reasoned reflection with a touch of virtue ethics (seeking out the wise) isn’t the whole story of the Buddha or Buddhism either. For the whole story we still need to keep in mind the fantastical stories of the Buddha and his lived-world, often occurring alongside terse philosophical debates. And we also need to accept the changes that have occurred over the 2400 years after the Buddha’s death. The great body of teachings and practices left behind by the Buddha helped



spawn a national, and soon continental, and eventually global movement. But as I mentioned earlier, my interest leads me to set as much of that aside as I can, as I try to determine what the man, Siddhattha Gotama, actually said and did.

Philosophy

This brings us to our second term: philosophy. Etymologically, it is simply the love (philos) of wisdom (sophia). However, philosophy today is often either relegated to a mere academic discipline, locked away behind ivory covered walls, or reduced to a synonym for a simple way of thinking about or attitude toward things, for example: “What is your gardening philosophy?” In both of these ways of thinking about philosophy the distinctive notion of “wisdom”, so central to many actual philosophers through the ages, seems to be lost.

In antiquity, the central motivation question in philosophy was “What sort of life ought I to live?” As the contemporary scholar Damien Keown has observed, this too is what Buddha himself taught. For both the Buddha and early Western thinkers, central emphasis was placed on seeking out the good life or the development of eudaimonia (literally a good-soul). The French Classicist Pierre Hadot, has done great work to revive interest in this practical aspect of Western philosophy. As he writes:

We may get some idea of the change in perspective that may occur in our reading and interpretation of the philosophical works of antiquity when we consider them from the point of view of the practice of spiritual exercises. Philosophy then appears in its original aspect: not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way. It is an attempt to transform mankind. Contemporary historians of philosophy are today scarcely inclined to pay attention to this aspect, although it is an essential one. The reason for this is that, in conformity with a tradition inherited from the Middle Ages ... they consider philosophy to be purely abstract-theoretical activity. ²

The lineage of spiritual exercises did not completely die out with the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages, however, as numerous of our great thinkers found their inspiration in the life-transforming philosophies of antiquity. Rene Descartes (1596–1650), for instance, wrote his *Meditations*, not as a dry analysis on metaphysics, as it has so often been read, but literally as meditations, to be practiced by a reader over a period of time. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), that giant of speculative philosophy, himself proclaimed that “all interest is ultimately practical and even the interest of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone.”³

Buddhism as Philosophy

I hope that so far I have convinced you that philosophy can be seen as a global and life-transforming practice and that there was at least a hint of a philosophical side to the Buddha’s teaching. As an awakened being in an age of religious and social change, where many different philosophies competed for the allegiance and material support of the people, the Buddha needed and employed a variety of “skilful means” toward instructing those who came to him. To step out of our western-centric viewpoint for a moment, it might be beneficial to ask: what word might the Buddha have used to describe philosophy, be that of his own or that of some of his rivals. Though there may be a few good candidates, I would propose that *ditthi*, the Pāli word for “view”, comes closest.

The Buddha differentiated his own “right-view” (*sammāditthi*) from the many “wrong-views” (*micchāditthi*) of his day. This right-view is so important to the Buddhist path that he tells his monks, “I do not see even a single thing on account of which unarisen wholesome qualities arise and arisen wholesome qualities increase and expand so much as right view.”⁴

In the first discourse of the *Digha Nikāya*, the Buddha gives sixty-two views concerning the self and the world that were prevalent in his day.



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In rejecting all of these philosophical standpoints, the Buddha established his own.

In the very next discourse, called “The Fruits of the Contemplative Life”, King Ajatasattu asks the Buddha, “What are the fruits of the contemplative life, visible in the here and now?”¹ The King had asked several other reputable recluses the same question, each time dissatisfied with the answers. One of them, Saṅjaya Belatthaputta, answered so nonsensically that the King declared that he, of all the ascetics and Brahmins, is the most stupid and confused. In a time when a king’s support could make or break a religious movement (both the Jains and Buddhists enjoyed the court’s favour at different times), this kind of assessment could be costly. In his own answer to the King’s question, the Buddha paints a comprehensive portrait of the Buddhist path of training, illustrating each stage of the training with vivid similes. This path, variously enumerated in the discourses, comes down to the threefold path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom.

Today we join over two thousand years of tradition in trying to interpret and understand this path for ourselves. Many of these teachings, such as the workings of karma and the totality of impermanence clash with certain of our own understandings of the world. And while practice is most certainly foremost in the Buddha’s teachings and in the tradition that has followed, this practical concern can also be found in much of Western philosophy. Bringing the two traditions together, with careful attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), I believe we can develop both a deeper understanding of our own philosophical and cultural heritage and a broader grasp of what the Buddha and his teachings have to offer. ■

NOTES

1. AN 3.65
2. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 107.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 155.
4. AN 3.107
5. DN 2

DEATH MATTERS

Kusumavarsa Hart

Arkady Zarubin: Wikimedia Commons



Benjamin Franklin once said “In this life nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.” Yet why do so many people avoid the subject of dying? In a recent survey of the population of Wales by The Dying Matters Coalition it seems death is still a very taboo subject. 85% of those surveyed were not comfortable talking about death, and 46% were unaware of their partners end of life wishes. Buddhist teachings tell us that everything in samsara is impermanent and while those of us in the West who embrace Eastern thought and meditation practice may be more accepting of this idea, how many of us have really truthfully accepted this as a “fact?” Do you have a will? Have you written down the things that you would like to happen to your body, when you die? Are you really ready for death? And when I mean ready, I mean really practiced in the art of dying? In the Tibetan tradition a good death is a peaceful one and the person dying will have spent a great deal of time in meditation, practicing techniques that help to prepare them for the journey from this life to the next. Under spiritual instruction from a Lama one can learn the technique known as “ejection of consciousness” or powa. This ancient practice ensures the best trajectory of the mind as it leaves the body and moves on to the next life. In other practices one might chant the Buddha’s name or that of Quan Yin visualising them at our mind and our hearts. Then at the time at which we pass we should recognise them and move with them to the Pureland, thus escaping rebirth in a lower realm. So what happens if you are not a Buddhist or have no interest in Eastern thought? What if you have no God at all? How do we support those around



us who aren't spiritually engaged, to prepare for their own death? A Buddhist Chaplain can be called to provide pastoral care to people of all walks of life. What do we do and say to help those who want support on their deathbed, when they have no obvious spiritual practice in place?

In the book *Medicine and Compassion* Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche gives some very simple advice to those of us in a caring role looking to support someone in having a good death. ¹ He asks the person the question: what do you trust in or believe in? The answers to such a question gives the caregiver or chaplain an idea of what has given meaning to that person's life. This can then help in cultivating memories of good things in their lives that will bring positive karmic changes. If the person has lapsed from a spiritual path then he suggests reminding them of their spiritual practice. He also suggests that giving the person who is dying the space in which to speak the truth is a very powerful and transformative act.

The doctor or nurse can encourage the person to let go of burdensome feelings and worries. You can tell them it is possible to let go: "Yes you can. You can let it go." But you can't let go for them. They have to let go themselves. Your duty is just to assist in the best of your ability. ²



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Fear is the greatest barrier to a good death and it is something we all need to release ourselves from both as the person dying and as the caregiver. If we cannot openly talk about death and learn to accept impermanence then how can we help ourselves and others prepare for the inevitable?

The teachings on impermanence are the single most valuable tool that Western Society can embrace in encouraging people to openly discuss "endings." It is when we hold on to the idea of anything being permanent that dissatisfaction and tensions arise. This is evident in the final days of someone's life, for example when family members bring their suffering in to the room, telling the dying person "Please don't go." In my experience of working in Palliative Care I have seen patients in a great deal of pain, tired and ready to go, holding on not for themselves but for their family members.

Yet if those around them were able to accept that death is inevitable and support the person in releasing their own attachments and fears then a peaceful end would surely come.

Modern day medicine is continually finding new ways to try and extend life. This has influenced both countries in the East and the West and people's attitudes to life and death; so many of us put faith in modern medicine and its ability to cure. Death no longer feels like it is inevitable when there is so much available to extend it! Perhaps this is why so many people refuse to talk about death, surely when the time comes it won't really happen. I have sat with patients who right until the very end, still did not believe that they would soon take their last breath.



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It is only two generations ago that deaths in the family were commonplace. In my own family both my great grandmothers lost several of their children to sickness, other family members died before they reached sixty. Death was a part of life, and the ways in which those deaths were mourned for differed to today. I remember my own grandmother spending her last two weeks of life being comforted and cared for at home by her daughter. On the day of the funeral her open coffin sat in the living room so that family members could say their last goodbyes. These days very few people get to die at home or with family around them. Far too many people die unnecessarily in hospital when, with the right support from community nursing and family members they could die more comfortably at home. A death in hospital is very clinical rather than spiritual. We can see evidence of this in cultures where traditionally people used to die at home. In Thailand for example,



where industrialisation is changing the way people live, this modernisation is bringing with it a new problem: industrial diseases. More people are being seen in hospital with complicated conditions that need to be managed with greater intensity than before. While their physical needs are being met, their social, psychological and spiritual are not. This change means Thai families are no longer able to respect traditional ceremonies and care for the dying at home.

When even doctors and nurses shy away from talking about death and the subject of spirituality, what hope is there for the rest of us? In my time working as a therapist in a hospice, patients would regularly ask me the tough questions that for some reason they didn't feel they could discuss with a doctor or a nurse. Almost all of them would ask me if I believed in God or did I think there was an afterlife? The exceptions were few but those who were living their last days without such questions were those patients who either had a religion or were lifelong meditators. Those patients who practiced meditation or who engaged in Reiki therapy sessions were able to gain some sense of something other than themselves and this experience seemed to bring a great sense of peace. I remember one man who was filled with fear and anxiety about death when I first met him, and who became very at ease after three sessions of Reiki. He seemed less attached to family members and able to accept more the process of decay that was quickening in his body. To me the most powerful moment of all was when he described a sense of a landscape outside of himself that he had been able to travel to in his mind. In those moments he had felt pain free and reached a deep sense of peace.

Death is often described as the unknown, but to those of us who follow the Buddhist path, who have spent time chanting and in meditation, we have already experienced a life beyond this. Through our spiritual practice God and Buddha are not an unknown, we feel them in our hearts, therefore how can death be an unknown, as both reside in that space beyond death? As long as we can hold within us a sense that our consciousness is something that extends beyond our physical body then death is not the end, it is the return to something we already are without our physical body.

If the Tibetan ideal is to be believed then we must prepare for our death through meditation, gaining a sense of our deeper states of consciousness in

preparation for that moment when the white light appears. But what happens if you don't meditate? What happens if you are a small child? Increasingly Reiki is being used in hospitals and hospices to help patients reach deeper states of consciousness. As for the small child who cannot grasp such concepts as meditation, perhaps just experiencing the sound of the words of Namō Quan Shi Yin Bosat or seeing an image of her, is enough to stimulate a change in consciousness so that when the time comes they will see the great Bodhisattva enveloped in white light and know her face.



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While I have not experienced it yet, I know that one day as a chaplain I will sit with someone close to death, who is afraid and restless. I cannot say to them anything to reassure them that there is a life beyond this; they must feel that connection for themselves. No doubt there will be moments when I'll feel inadequate, but there is one thing for certain that I can say "Have a true heart." If the heart is pure, then God or Buddha will see it. Creating the conditions for honesty, love and compassion is something that all of us can manifest whether we see ourselves as spiritual or not.

There are many tools from eastern religion and philosophy that can have transformative effect on the way we see life. Perhaps when we have learnt how to die only then will we really learn how to live. ■

NOTES

1. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, *Medicine and Compassion* (Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications 2006).

2. Ibid.



MINDFULNESS IN THE WEST

Kaspalita Thompson



I've been teaching mindfulness meditation courses here in Malvern for a year now; riding the crest of the mindfulness wave with some success. Where did this wave of popular mindfulness appear from? And is it a good thing?

In the late 19th Century meditation practice suddenly became popular with lay people in South East Asia, and around the same time Buddhism began to align itself with the burgeoning naturalistic movement.

Erick Braun has described how it was the fear of religious oppression from the British Empire that led to the widespread practice of meditation by lay people in Burma. ¹ In the late 19th C. Buddhist teachers in Burma were afraid their teachings would die out and began to teach meditation to lay people as well as monks and nuns. It wasn't until this time, Braun suggests, that meditation was seen as the essential element of Buddhist practice.

At around the same time Buddhists in South East Asia felt under threat from Christian missionaries. They looked to a force they could align themselves with to help them withstand the wave of Christianity and found in the West the growing scientific atheist movement. The new Gods in the West were Darwinism, naturalism and determinism. Contemporary Buddhists highlighted the similarities between this new movement and Buddhism. Today we'd call this kind of activity "spinning".

David L. McMahan quotes Dharmapala from a speech he gave at the 1883 world's fair:

“The message from the Buddha that I bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heaven, hells and other theological shibboleths . . .”²

This description stands in contrast to Buddhism as it was practiced on the ground in Ceylon, but it was just what Westerners were looking for.

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Whilst many scientists today will refute the 19th Century naturalistic view of the world, we have nonetheless inherited an idea of progress from that time. Pankaj Mishra calls this a “belief in history”³. It is the idea that we can use technology as an aid to the evolution of the human race. Whilst this is, in Mishra’s words, “... devoid of wisdom”, it has gifted us the perfect culture in which to grow a popular form of mindfulness meditation: a set of exercises which you apply to the mind, and which give you something better than what you had before.

One common critique of this meditation-scientific-way-of-life-philosophy is that it misses out so much of what is crucial to Buddhism that it is not worth having. Another is that it is dangerous: it teaches people to concentrate more without channelling that concentration into something good, or it teaches them to manage anxiety without addressing its selfish roots.

And yet if it wasn’t for this neutered Buddhism, I wouldn’t be where I am



today, wearing robes, offering incense and chanting the Buddha's name continually for six hours last Saturday.

Back in my twenties I was an unhappy worshipper of the Gods of scientism. It was only the aligning of Buddhism with Science and the claim that it wasn't a religion that allowed me to take the first step; to open the dharma door a crack, and peek through.

Ron Purer and David Loy say that one shadow of this kind of popular mindfulness is that, "stripping mindfulness from its (Buddhist) ethical foundations may simply allow it to be used to reinforce greed, aversion, and delusion (the three roots of suffering that Buddhists seek to eliminate)." ⁴

Whilst the courses I teach do include elements of ethics, and teachings on compassion and selflessness, I find myself suspicious of the view that mindfulness without Buddhist ethics will necessarily lead to selfishness. Or rather I am sure that any spiritual teaching or practice can be subverted by the ego; can be taken into service by self-protectiveness and support greed, hate and delusion.

Even our own nembutsu practice has its shadow: the teaching of salvation for all beings led to the licensed evil debate in medieval Japan and our modern egos can take the teaching in same way, "Amida is going to save me so I don't need to worry about keeping the precepts."



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If mindfulness meditation is taught as a single practice where does it lead? As our mind quiets down and the usual cloud of frenetic thoughts begins to dissipate we might choose to dwell in that state of calm, or we might begin to explore reality from a less clouded position. We might notice how causes and conditions create consequences both in our thinking patterns and

in the world, and if we can see (like the Buddha saw) that it's better to feed compassionate thoughts and not put energy into selfish thoughts we might find that we start to walk the Bodhisattva walk. Somewhere along this journey we might even catch a glimpse of Amida, or of some other Buddha, or of the Pureland.

If we go down this journey Mara will follow our every step: defensiveness, short termism and selfishness will work hard to keep us from love.

Single practice schools are powerful. The core practice of our own school is a single "essential" practice. These single practices can plant the seed of enlightenment in us.

Just like real seeds however, some conditions are better for germination and growth than others. If there is any wisdom in the critique of popular mindfulness it is this. Human beings rarely, if ever, become enlightened without being surrounded by the right conditions and we have a responsibility as teachers, Buddhists, fellow-human-beings to support each other in the best way we can on the path toward freedom.

Secular Buddhism opened the door to me and it may do so for countless others. It is our job to create the best conditions we can for those people so that they don't fall back into Mara's realm. Or at least not for too long. ■

NOTES

1. Eric Braun. "Meditation en Masse," *Tricycle* 23, no. 3 (2014).
2. David McMahan. "Modernity and the Scientific Discourse of Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 2, no. 4 (2004): 897–993.
3. Panka Mishra. "Disappearance of the Spiritual Thinker," *Tricycle* 16, no.3 (2007).
4. Ron Purser and David Loy, *Beyond McMindfulness* [online]. Available from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html (2003)



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Amida Mosaic (Ontario, Canada) is a community of spiritual friends. Amida Mosaic Sangha activities are held in London Ontario under the leadership of Prajnatara T. Bryant, a Gankonin with the Amida Order.

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Red Fuji

South Wind, Clear Sky



Katsushika Hokusai [Public domain]; Wikimedia Commons

The original and sacred vows
Are the unique and essential path
To enter the Pure Land.
Therefore, with body, speech and mind,
We are devoted to the teachings
That all may attain the state of bliss.