Being Buddhist

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Why I Am A Believer
Personal reflections on
nine world religions

Edited by
ARVIND SHARMA
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When I first encountered the Buddhist teachings, they vastly expanded my evolving ideas about life and helped me to recognize the limitations of my own perceptions. As a child, I suspected that perception was an individual process and that misunderstandings between people were based on different perspectives. Human beings’ backgrounds and experiences seemed so diverse; it came as no surprise that they saw the world differently. Buddhist views on perception not only confirmed my suspicions, but also explained in depth the processes involved in human cognition and the ways in which our personal biases and preferences colour our images of the world. Learning about Buddhist theories of cognition and how perceptions are linked to human emotions helped me understand more about how the mind works and how it can be disciplined to achieve greater happiness.

My own experiences as a child taught me that human beings can be both exceptionally kind and incredibly cruel, and in some people these opposite states of mind can occur in rapid succession. How is it possible to rely on human beings, when their behaviour can be so mercurial? How is it possible to love people unconditionally, when their affections are so unreliable? I became firmly convinced that human beings could live in a better way. No matter how brutally or selfishly people behaved, I felt certain that there must be a way for human beings to live with more love and compassion.

Growing up in California, I was presented with two dominant belief systems. One was a literalist Christian world view in which anyone who did not accept Jesus Christ as lord and saviour was doomed to eternal hellfire and damnation—a conviction that precluded any further inquiry or introspection. The other was a scientific materialist world view that precluded consideration of the spiritual dimension of life. This view took reality to be as it appeared and placed value on all the pleasures that money could buy. These two conflicting belief systems dominated my cultural environment, which was rife with alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, child neglect, and domestic conflict. The suffering and violence I witnessed in the very affluent segment of society I was raised in caused me to doubt the validity of both these perspectives. Paradoxically, the experiences of my privileged childhood awakened a spiritual yearning.

As a child, I was strongly attracted by the spiritual ideal of Jesus. His teachings on compassion, humility, peace, and loving kindness, especially toward the needy and oppressed, were deeply moving, but I did not see anyone living these values. Jesus was very outspoken in denouncing hypocrisy, but no one I knew seemed ready to heed his advice and give up all he had in order to follow him. Despite the maxim, ‘It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to go to heaven,’ the people around me did not seem to notice the contradiction between their luxurious lifestyles and the teachings of Jesus. I began to notice differences between the reported words of Jesus and the way his message was being interpreted.

As I grew older, a number of philosophical questions perplexed me. First, I had difficulty believing in the existence of God. What was the nature of God and how could God’s existence be verified? For a while, I held to my own childish
version of Pascal's wager: If I believed in God and it turned out God existed, I would win; if it turned out God did not exist, I would not have lost anything. Gradually, however, I decided that falsely declaring a belief in God was worse than being honestly agnostic.

Second, I had trouble understanding the Christian theory of redemption. How could a loving father send his only son to be killed and how could the death of Jesus save others? Even if Jesus had the power to save sinners, why would he save people who professed faith but continued to commit evil deeds? A person with a cruel heart would think nothing of lying to get into heaven, so why would God be fooled by a simple declaration of faith? Third, although the idea of life after death made sense to me, I had trouble believing that there were only two options, heaven and hell. Since the deeds that human beings commit vary widely in terms of good and evil, this notion of only two alternatives for an afterlife seemed overly simplistic.

When I encountered Buddhism at the age of twelve, I found a philosophical system in which no belief in God is required. Buddhism holds that the world evolves in accordance with the natural law of cause and effect, with no supreme being necessary for the process. Living beings take rebirth in accordance with their actions, or karma, and many different futures are possible. A person may be human in one lifetime and a god, animal, hungry ghost, or hell being in the next. All living beings are responsible for their own actions and future well being. No one, not even the Buddha, can save them from the consequences of their own deeds. The Buddha’s teachings offer guidelines, but each of us must discover the meaning of life for ourselves. This empirical approach to philosophy opened up a fresh path of inquiry and personal discovery for me.

The appeal of Buddhism was not purely philosophical, however. Growing up in an abusive and violent family, I found the idea of inner peace equally appealing. As a teenager, I sought information about meditation from a wide assortment of books and began sitting quietly to achieve some measure of calm. Meditation was both a refuge and a window into a boundless inner space. As I surfed along the California coast, the natural environment also nurtured this introspection. Drifting between waves, I felt inseparable from the ocean and the beauty of all life. In 1964, I felt disillusioned by the materialistic values of American society and frustrated by the overcrowded beaches; so I packed my surfboard, guitar, and a change of clothes, and journeyed by ship to Yokohama, Japan. While surfing the Chiba coast, I encountered a way of life that was entirely new to me and the kindness of the Japanese villagers restored my faith in human nature. When the weather got cold, I sought out a Zen monastery and began meditation in earnest. The images of serene and contemplative Buddhas and bodhisattvas on the altar expressed an inner peacefulness that seemed the worthiest of goals.

A year later I set off by ship for Singapore, then on to Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, India, and Nepal in search of a monastery. Nowhere did I find a monastery that was open to women. Although the majority of the devotees at Buddhist temples were women, the great teachers were all male. Presumably, the Buddha’s teachings were equally helpful to women and men, but gaining access to teachings and monasteries was certainly more difficult for a young woman than for a man. It seemed as if women were invisible in the monastic tradition but, at the time, it never occurred to me to question why.

The more I read about Buddhism, the more it confirmed the initial resonance I had felt as a child. The values of loving kindness and compassion that I had learned from the Christian scriptures while growing up were also central Buddhist teachings and, along with equanimity and wisdom, were guidelines for everyday life. At the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s, these values demanded to be translated into action, in
both social and political spheres. The ethos in Berkeley was not an isolated phenomenon, but reflected the nation's growing social consciousness. The civil rights movement in the South, protests across the nation against the Vietnam War, and popularist protests around the world alerted the public to the injustices of racism, poverty, and militarism. Civil rights abuses in the United States and ongoing human rights abuses resulting from US military intervention in South-east Asia impelled me to social action. Although Buddhism is often portrayed as quietistic, with meditation at its core, it also provides a strong foundation and justification for social activism. For some, Buddhism was a philosophy that not only fostered self-awareness, but could also be put directly into practice in the world.

After graduate school, I found my way to Dharamsala and became immersed in an intensive Buddhist studies programme. The main focus of the Buddhist texts was how to understand the mind, eradicate mental and emotional afflictions, and cultivate wholesome mind states. Putting the teachings into practice truly helped me nurture a more balanced state of mind. Meditation practices, in particular, provided helpful tools for dealing with greed, anger, desire, pride, jealousy, and other neuroses. Meetings with inspiring Buddhist teachers like His Holiness the Dalai Lama demonstrated to me that practising the Buddhist techniques of mental cultivation was effective in producing wise and compassionate human beings.

UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN CONDITION

The most fundamental reason the Buddhist teachings resonate for me is that they are logical. These teachings are not a creed, much less a dogma. The Buddha advised that his teachings should be tested, just as gold is tested before purchase. To this day, students of Buddhism are encouraged to investigate and verify the truth of the teachings for themselves. My early life experience taught me that life is full of disappointments; so when I learned about the four noble truths that the Buddha discovered, they validated my life experience. The first noble truth, on the unsatisfactory nature of the human condition, or duhkha, rang true. This truth helped me understand that unhappiness and dissatisfaction are not unique to particular individuals, but are a natural component of human existence.

The second noble truth, the idea that sufferings and dissatisfaction have causes, also impressed me as logical. If physical phenomena are subject to the laws of cause and effect, as in Newtonian physics, why not psychological states? If psychological states also have causes, then human beings are not helpless victims of woe, but can face their misfortunes and change their responses. The theory of karma explains that our actions and life experiences are subject to the natural process of cause and effect. We begin to understand the cause of mental and emotional distress as the consequence of patterns that we ourselves have set in motion, and thereby we become more aware of the roots of our ignorance and confusion.

The Buddha’s third noble truth, that human beings can free themselves from suffering and dissatisfaction, is not a promise of another, better world or some transcendent reality, but an affirmation that change and liberation are possible in this lifetime. The fourth noble truth, the path to liberation, is a set of practical guidelines for everyday living that help free us from the problems we create for ourselves. Known as the noble eightfold path to liberation, it explains how we can deal directly with eight aspects of our lives—our motivations, attitudes, speech, actions, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration—to attain peace and happiness.

In the various Buddhist traditions, critical thinking is actively encouraged. The philosophical thought evident in Buddhism is just one stream in a rich Indian philosophical tradition that is alive and well. I treasure the discussions of
philosophy and religion that can last for hours in the trains and tea shops of India, and the animated stories of famous pundits and saints. As legend has it, at the time of the Buddha, and for centuries afterwards, followers of various religious and philosophical traditions travelled from village to village, challenging any comer in philosophical debate. The visitor erected a staff in the centre of the village commons and the villagers delegated their finest debater to take up the challenge. Traditionally, the loser of the debate would recognize the superior logic of the victor and adopt his or her point of view. This philosophical heritage endures even today, especially in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, where philosophical debate is highly prized and practised with great energy. Monks in the great Tibetan monastic universities, now re-established in Karnataka, South India, dispute philosophical issues for hours everyday. Nuns are also now rising to the challenge. Critical thinking is acknowledged as the most likely method for arriving at a credible claim to truth.

The Buddha’s teachings are not simply abstractions or dogmas to be blindly accepted, but are guidelines for dealing more skilfully with everyday life. The idea is to verify the teachings through our own personal experience, to ‘make them our own.’ If the teachings are ineffective, illogical, or incompatible with our own lived experience, they should be rejected. For example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has stated that he would be willing to relinquish the whole of traditional Buddhist cosmology if science proves that it is inaccurate. On another occasion, he said that, if it can be ascertained that consciousness does not enter the womb at the time of impregnation, but some later time, Buddhists could legitimately revise the traditional view that life begins at conception. An open-minded attitude that is willing to accept new evidence, even if it contradicts long-cherished beliefs, is pragmatic. An attitude that is both compatible with the empirical method of scientific inquiry and also flexible in addressing contemporary social, economic, and political problems has a greater chance of survival in the modern world. Instead of clinging to fixed views, an open mind is willing to question its own certitudes and weigh its opinions against the evidence. This makes it possible to consider even vastly different viewpoints with respect and make space for dialogue, reconciliation, and harmony. Although some Buddhist schools are more open to innovation than others, this pragmatic approach makes Buddhism amenable to adaptation in new cultural environments, including those in the West.

THE UNIVERSE FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Buddhist cosmology pre-dates the scientific world view by twenty-five centuries, yet some ideas appear strangely modern. References to enormous expanses of time and space, and the birth and death of world systems within them, can be correlated with theories of time, and the birth of stars found in contemporary physics and astronomy. Other ideas, such as karma, rebirth, and the possibility of liberation from birth and death, may be less familiar. All these ancient theories about the universe did not originate with the Buddha, of course, but existed in India for a very long time before his birth. The Buddha simply accepted those theories that he could verify through his own experience and adapted prevailing religious practices that were congruent with these theories. Many of the assumptions that underlie the Buddha’s teachings provide insights into the social, cultural, philosophical, and religious environment of his time.

The environment in which the young prince Siddhartha was raised influenced his thinking considerably. So it is natural that he framed his teachings within his culture’s world view. He accepted the ideas of karma and rebirth, but often gave
these ideas a new spin. In explaining the law of karma (‘action’, the law of cause and effect), for instance, he rejected a deterministic interpretation and instead emphasized the importance of the intention that motivates the action. S. N. Goenka, an Indian-Burmese teacher of vipassana meditation, illustrates this idea by telling the story of two people, each of whom kills another human being, but with very different motivations. One person—a thief—kills a man during a bungled robbery attempt; the other person—a doctor—kills a man during surgery while unsuccessfully attempting to save his life. Although the action of killing a human being is essentially the same in both scenarios, the motivations behind the two actions are very different. In the first case the motivation is greed and anger, whereas in the second case the motivation is compassion. In accordance with these vastly different motivations, the karmic consequences of the two actions will also be very different.

The Buddha did not accept every idea he was raised with, however. For example, he was not concerned with purity of the body or with caste, but only with integrity and purity of the mind. He rejected the practice of animal sacrifice, teaching that each living being values its own life. He did not accept the notion of a cosmic consciousness or divine reality, such as Brahman or God. He was not concerned with the idea of a creator god and rejected the practice of worshiping and supplicating gods, emphasizing that human beings were responsible for their own liberation. During meditation, he observed that the gods were still cycling in the wheel of rebirth (samsāra), just like humans and other sentient beings, and therefore considered them unqualified to be an ultimate refuge. The Buddha did not assert the existence of any ultimate reality or divine source of the universe, explaining instead that a thorough understanding of the theory of cause and effect is the key to human happiness.

The Buddha’s views on the nature of living beings also departed somewhat from the traditional Indian outlook. He rejected the concept of a divine essence (ātman) or eternal soul within living beings. Instead he proposed the theory of no-self (anātman), contending that beings possess no independent or permanent identity, but arise in dependence on causes and conditions. He explained this theory by using the example of a cart. A ‘cart’ is nothing more than a label assigned to the sum of its pieces; there is no intrinsic cart left when the component parts are disassembled. The theory of no-self proposes that all phenomena (including ourselves) lack any core of independent reality. This understanding counters our grasping at self. Living beings are not regarded as divine creations, but simply as impermanent constructions that lack any essential core. Understanding our existence as temporary and provisional helps us to address the innate tendency to seek our own interest, often at the expense of others. The elements of personality are known as the five aggregates (skandhas): form (rūpa), feelings (vedanā), perceptions (saṃjñā), compositional factors (saṃskāra), and consciousness (vijnāna). All together, we label these aggregates ‘My self’ and develop likes and dislikes on the basis of our own self-interest. But as we investigate further, we are unable to find any essence or independently existing self.

Of all the Buddha’s teachings, the doctrine of no-self is perhaps the most difficult to grasp. The idea is controversial and frequently misinterpreted. Ultimately, the no-self theory is something to be realized through personal meditation practice, but in the philosophical milieu of ancient India, the theory became a focus of ongoing intellectual dispute. Some critics claimed that the lack of a self or soul proves that Buddhism is nihilistic. Others claimed that the consciousness is, in fact, a covert equivalent of a self, soul, or ātman. But the Buddha carefully explained the dangers of nihilism, a position that raises both logical fallacies and moral dilemmas, since it obviates the
law of cause and effect. The Buddha also explained the fallacies implicit in an eternalistic concept of self and went to great lengths to emphasize the impermanent nature (anitya) of all compounded phenomena.

The most difficult question raised by the theory of no-self is: 'What happens to a person after death?' The Buddha accepted the idea that sentient beings migrate in the cycle of birth and death (samsāra), and refuted the theory of an independent self (ātman) or soul. But this raises an important question: If there is no self or soul, what takes rebirth?

The easiest way to understand this is to imagine that each moment of consciousness carries the impressions of the actions we have created. Like seeds that are planted, these impressions ripen at some future point in time, giving rise to the consequences of our actions. Consciousness continues through many rebirths, experiencing rebirth in different forms in accordance with the karmic seeds planted in the past, until eventually liberation is reached. The mechanics of this process are not easy to understand and, because life is short, cultivation of the mind is regarded as more valuable than metaphysical speculation. It is far more urgent for us to purify the mind, create wholesome deeds, and also to avoid even the slightest harmful action. With diligent effort, consciousness evolves from ignorance and confusion to awareness and insight.

The Buddha taught ethical guidelines that can serve as a foundation for personal, social, and political life. The five precepts of the laypeople are one such set of guidelines: to avoid killing (taking life), stealing (taking what is not given), dishonesty (untruthfulness), sexual misconduct (adultery), and intoxicants (alcohol and drugs). Living by these guidelines creates trust and stability in human interactions and avoids many problems that can lead to carelessness, misunderstandings, anger, fear, and violence. Extended to the political level, the principles of non-violence, truthfulness, and respect at the local, national, and international levels can prevent corruption, exploitation, and violent conflicts. Extended to the global level, the principles of tolerance and understanding can help forge policies that will promote peaceful solutions to human problems.

The Buddhist teachings can be applied to address some of the pressing problems of society today. The Buddha taught qualities for building lasting, harmonious families, friendships, and communities that are as timeless as they are pragmatic. The four ‘sublime abodes’ (brahmavihāras), for example, are loving kindness (wishing all beings to be happy), compassion (wishing all beings to be free from suffering), joy (rejoicing in the virtues and good fortune of others), and equanimity (maintaining emotional balance despite the ups and downs of life). The six perfections (pāramitās)—generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, concentration, and wisdom—are practical guidelines for creating congenial human relationships and peaceful, prosperous nations. The Buddha also set forth principles of good governance and the qualities of a virtuous ruler (cakravartin) that are as applicable now as they were 2,500 years ago.

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF THE MIND

Buddhist psychology is based on understanding the true nature of the mind or consciousness. The cultivation of consciousness through various meditation practices, particularly mindfulness practice, enables human beings to develop an awareness of the present moment. When our minds remain preoccupied with memories of the past or plans for the future, and other similarly distractive thoughts, we are unable to experience the preciousness of the present moments. The untrained mind is constantly chattering and flitting between one idea and the next, so each moment flashes by without our being fully aware of it. We live largely like automatons, mechanically, with predictable
responses and behaviours. Rarely do we fully experience the present, because of our habitual tendency to be lost in a world of preconceptions about reality. Not all of our thoughts are frivolous, but they often lack immediacy and relevance. Instead of paying attention to the present moment, we habitually superimpose our expectations and judgements on the experience, rendering it a mere shadow of reality. Since shadows are poor replicas of direct experience, we feel cheated, confused, and dissatisfied, and when our expectations are not met, we become disillusioned, discouraged, and discontent. Involved in this syndrome, we miss the precious moments that will never come again. These moments pass swiftly, and soon, often without warning, we find ourselves at the end of our lives.

In the Buddhist teachings, the key to liberation from the cycle of birth and death is in learning to control unwholesome attitudes and impulses, since without any control mechanisms, these attitudes and impulses can involve us in unwholesome actions with unpleasant consequences. Learning to control the mind requires training, mindfulness, and discipline. We cannot become enlightened by continuing to let our minds run wild and indulge in afflictive emotions. We begin to understand how these negative emotions distort our perceptions, cause us to lose our temper, and impel us to behave in ways that undermine our own happiness. With this understanding, we can make an effort to transform deeply ingrained habit patterns that are rooted in greed, hatred, and ignorance. We learn to pay attention and to transform counterproductive emotions like pride, jealousy, and attachment into wholesome attitudes like love, compassion, awareness, patience, and wisdom.

Buddhist meditation methods are useful for getting in touch with the calm state that manifests when our mind is free of emotional afflictions. Meditation is the process of uncovering our own basic sanity, free of the projections and expectations that inevitably lead to our discontent and irritation. There are many kinds of Buddhist practices, but meditation is the most effective means of achieving a calm and clear state of mind. Before his awakening, the Buddha learned a variety of meditation methods from some of the most accomplished masters of his day and, after mastering these methods, developed even more meditation techniques of his own. He taught single-pointed concentration (samādhi) to stabilize the mind, calm abiding (samatha) to counter emotional agitation, and insight (vipassanā) to sharpen the mind’s innate wisdom. He taught mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati) as a means to focus awareness and general mindfulness (sati) to bring awareness into every aspect of daily living. In addition, he taught methods of meditation for nurturing peace, loving kindness, and compassion. All of these meditations are practical means for achieving an inner equilibrium that is not only beneficial for oneself, but also for one’s family and community, as well as for global peace and harmony.

Of course, developing mental equilibrium takes practice, but from another perspective, it is simply a matter of discovering the true nature of our own mind, unobscured by self-interest. Typically, we impute certain qualities to the things we perceive; these perceptions may be completely mistaken. Sometimes, we become so convinced of the validity of our perceptions that we may even be willing to die for them. The process of mistakenly perceiving phenomena is related to our attachment to a false sense of self. Out of attachment to this mistaken concept of self, we throw dispassion to the wind and distort reality in accordance with our own interests. As long as our perceptions are clouded by self-interest, our constructions of reality will be biased, and cause us many problems, such as jealousy and endless bickering. In relationships, we set ourselves up for disappointment by creating an image of the person we want to see, and then unfairly cast blame when that person
does not meet our expectations. These habitual patterns of thought and behaviour erode our own happiness and the happiness of those around us. The syndrome continues until we are able to understand that we are responsible for our own attitudes and, therefore, ultimately to create our own happiness and disappointments.

To free ourselves from these self-defeating patterns, we need to change the way we view ourselves and the world, which means we need to cultivate our mind. Mental cultivation (bhāvanā) does not simply include sitting, walking, and other formal meditation methods, but means putting the teachings into practice in every aspect of daily life. For beginners, it may be difficult to pursue the spiritual path while living in the workaday world, but it is not necessary to live in a cave to practise Dharma. Living as a householder and being active in society can also be crucibles for awakening. Although everyday life poses many challenges, a sincere practitioner can use these experiences as the perfect opportunity to practise values like compassion, equanimity, and loving kindness. The Buddha recommended a life of renunciation as the ideal environment for spiritual practice, but made it clear that a virtuous life is also possible for working people with families and other responsibilities.

Happiness is a mental state that does not necessarily depend on external conditions. Even people who have plenty of money, a great job, and a wonderful family may feel restless and dissatisfied. Instead of assuming that happiness depends on wealth, achievements, or the affection of others, the ideal is to develop a tranquil state of mind that can be maintained regardless of external conditions. With diligent training, even when things get difficult, we shall be able to find a place of peace and contentment in our own mind. Instead of becoming angry and resentful in stressful situations, we can transform our attitude and respond constructively. By cultivating the mind in this way, a person becomes more skilful at remaining unruffled even in irritating and unpleasant circumstances, generating patience, sympathy, and loving kindness, rather than antipathy and hostility. We can learn to replace jealous feelings with an attitude of rejoicing in the qualities and good fortunes of others. Transforming negative emotions through mental cultivation is a very practical means of achieving a calm and joyful attitude, using even challenging situations as an opportunity for practice.4

It is true that leisure is very important for intensive spiritual practice, but leisure in itself does not guarantee a peaceful state of mind. More leisure may just lead to boredom and dissatisfaction. Despite increased conveniences, many people feel that their lives are more complicated and stressful than ever before. Instead of bringing the satisfaction we desire, a materialistic lifestyle may just bring disappointment and discontent. Luxuries and modern conveniences may simply lead to more desires and more complications. For many people, material wealth has failed to fulfil its promise of bringing happiness. The recognition that peace of mind is not dependent on external things often sets off a search for meaning that leads to the spiritual path.

LINKING ETHICS AND PSYCHOLOGY

The Buddhist teachings are not only helpful in the search for meaning but, in a time of widespread corruption in business, government, and personal life, they also provide clear suggestions for making ethical decisions. Although the Buddha did not lay down any absolute dictates, he offered clear ethical guidelines for living a happier life. These guidelines were based on his insight into the law of cause and effect, the principle that individuals are responsible for their actions and the result of those actions. Wholesome actions lead to pleasant
consequences and unwholesome actions lead to unpleasant consequences, either in this or some future lifetime. Because all actions of speech and body proceed directly from the mind, the focus of Buddhist ethics is the mind. As we learn to work with our minds and purify our thoughts, we gain control over our words and actions. Instead of spiralling out of control into unwholesome deeds and painful results, we can learn to live more wholesome, happy, and meaningful lives.

Buddhist ethics and psychology are closely related. Gaining insight into the nature of consciousness, cognition, and perception provides us with tools for dealing with certain mental disorders and emotional problems, without relying on therapists and drugs. Psychotherapy and psychiatric medication may be advisable in some instances, but for the ordinary problems of everyday life, the Buddhist teachings offer many valuable resources and practical antidotes. They speak about human emotions like anger, desire, and jealousy, and how to transform them. In this way, we nurture our own mental health. The Buddhist teachings and meditation practices can be used to address self-doubt, depression, and anxiety, in ways that are relevant to everyday life. If these teachings are applied skilfully, they can also help us understand our own mind, discover the causes of our discomfort and discontent, and help create healthy relationships. They can help us cease from clinging and grasping, the root of many internal and interpersonal conflicts.

Buddhist psychology and ethics are integrally related in the Buddhist view of the world. This view is based on the idea that sentient beings (beings with consciousness) take rebirth depending on their actions (karma), until they achieve liberation from the wheel of samsāra. Wholesome actions lead to fortunate rebirths, whereas unwholesome actions lead to unfortunate rebirths. By purifying the mind of unwholesome mental states, it is possible to become liberated from suffering and rebirth altogether. What happens after liberation is unknown, but liberation is described as a state free from suffering and delusion. To me, this theory seems as plausible as any other, and more plausible than most. The processes of purifying one’s mind and purifying one’s karma are interrelated: as the mind becomes purified of unwholesome thoughts, this is reflected in one’s actions; as one becomes more mindful of one’s actions, this helps to purify the mind.

The practice of mental cultivation is therefore interdependently related to Buddhist ethical guidelines. These guidelines are not dictated by some higher authority, but are simple principles that help human beings determine which actions of body and speech are wholesome and which are to be avoided. The noble eightfold path—right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—provides one set of guidelines. The five precepts for laypeople—to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants—provide more specific injunctions. Taken together, these guidelines provide a clear moral framework that can be applied when making ethical decisions. Changing our ingrained patterns of behaviour is not something that occurs overnight, of course, but requires training and patience. Living by the precepts and studying the Buddha’s teachings are methods for developing the wisdom and compassion we need to make ethical choices. Meditation practice helps us develop the mindfulness needed to live a moral life and the mental flexibility to consider the implications of complex ethical decisions.

Buddhists do not regard any human being as originally sinful or inherently evil. Non-virtuous actions are understood as mistakes that result from human ignorance. Ordinary beings are imperfect, but all are capable of transformation and, therefore, of becoming perfect. Everyone has the capacity to purify his or her own mind, since the stains of anger, attachment, and confusion are not indelible. Buddhism rejects
the essentialist type of thinking that brands any individual as beyond redemption. All human beings have the capacity for violence, desire, vengeance, pettiness, and rage, and all have the capacity for compassion, selflessness, kindness, wisdom, and love. Enlightenment is an attainable goal for anyone who strives to overcome the delusions of the mind. The three trainings—in ethics (sīla), meditation (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā)—are ways to purify the mind and thereby improve the quality of one’s actions.

The ethical guidelines contained in both the eightfold path and the five precepts may be applied to practically any dilemma, whether personal, interpersonal, financial, or political. Problematic issues of daily life, as well as issues of global significance can be evaluated by viewing them in light of these basic ethical instructions. Certain issues, such as the ethics of capital punishment, are easy to assess; the first precept is to refrain from taking life, especially the life of a human being. In regard to issues of corruption, if all parties observed the precept to avoid taking what is not given, corruption in business, finance, and government would be easily remedied. The overall framework is based on avoiding causing harm to oneself and others. Actions such as killing harm others directly, since all living beings value their life above all. But to kill a sentient being also harms oneself, since the consequences of actions eventually manifest in one’s own life, through the workings of cause and effect. Although making moral choices is left to the individuals concerned, to measure difficult decisions against the yardstick of Buddhist values helps make decision-making simpler.

Not all ethical issues are easy to resolve, of course, since there may be many dimensions to a question, each with conflicting moral claims. Issues of bioethics, such as end-of-life issues, often involve competing values that must be weighed carefully in order to reach a decision. A case in point is the terminally-ill patient in agonizing pain who expresses a wish to die. If the pain can be assuaged without endangering the patient’s life, the matter is easy to resolve; there is no Buddhist proscription against pain medication in reasonable doses. If the pain cannot be treated by medication, a dilemma arises that requires the patient’s relatives and caregivers to weigh the interdiction against taking human life against the value of compassion for all that lives. The dilemma is not easily resolved.

BUDDHIST ADVICE FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

The teachings of the Buddha contain practical advice that, if properly applied, can help people live a more meaningful life. Always seeking our own benefit is very stressful. The understanding that self-centered behaviour is rooted in ignorance—the delusion that I am inherently more important than others—can relieve stress and reduce interpersonal conflicts. This understanding can be expanded to the social and political spheres to address issues of economic exploitation, poverty, corruption, and environmental degradation. Buddhists do not reject material things altogether, as is often assumed, but they do note the connection between individual greed, hatred, and ignorance, and broader social problems.\

A Buddhist analysis of materialism traces the relationship of material values to greed, greed to desire, and desire to the cycle of dissatisfaction. Desire for more things leads to discontentment and this constant dissatisfaction makes us unhappy. Contentment with what we have leads to true happiness. This line of thinking is also environmentally friendly. Consumerism is closely linked to waste and pollution that contaminate the environment, and the destruction of the environment leads to sickness, death, displacement, and suffering among the earth’s inhabitants. Consumerism also contributes to greed and to exploitation of land and natural resources, which leads to conflicts, as is abundantly evident in
the world today. Contentment and self-sufficiency, ideals promoted by Gandhi as well as the Buddha, advance human happiness and help avoid the tendency to exploit other human beings and their land and resources.

The Buddha taught renunciation, though the idea was not originally his, and expanded the concept of non-attachment to include renunciation of the entire cycle of birth and death. In the narrative of the Buddha’s life, the young prince Siddhartha Gautama left behind the luxuries of the palace on a quest to discover what lay beyond his privileged existence. On the way, he encountered four sights that he had never seen before: a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and a mendicant (śramaṇa). These encounters with sickness, old age, and death made a major impact on the young prince, since they were his first experiences of human suffering. He was equally impressed by the serene demeanour of the mendicant, which aroused his curiosity about the renunciant lifestyle. Not long after these encounters, as the story goes, he decided to abandon his family and the comforts of the palace to follow the spiritual path. Through extensive meditation, he recognized that sickness, old age, and death are painful and inevitable experiences for all living beings. Eventually, he discovered a path of mental cultivation, compassion, and wisdom that brought a more enduring happiness. The recognition of these realities of the human condition and the methods developed to cope with them are therefore a central feature of all the Buddhist traditions.

Buddhist practice helps people cultivate the ability to stay mindfully aware in every precious moment of human existence. The ability to focus attention and be fully present in the moment is more valuable now than ever before. Today, many people have made their lives so busy and complicated that the ideas of peace and contentment may seem impossibly remote. Even as life becomes more comfortable, desires proliferate, creating more work and more stress in everyday life. The more people have, the more they want and the more they fear losing the possessions they have. Milarepa, the great Tibetan yogi, rejoiced when he broke his only clay pot, illustrating that, through the eyes of realization, contentment is the greatest wealth. In the age of consumerism, it is easy to see how greed and attachment increase in proportion to wealth. The New York Times recently reported that hairstyling in Manhattan can cost $800 and prices are rising for other products and services to enhance physical appearance, even as tens of thousands of people starve to death worldwide everyday. Even in a nation of plenty like the United States, many people feel deeply unsatisfied with their lives. Suicide, depression, eating disorders, and stress-related health problems are increasingly common, particularly among the younger generation.

No matter how much wealth people possess, the sufferings of sickness, aging, and death are inescapable. Acquiring more possessions cannot cure mental sufferings and may simply lead to more frustration and anxiety. The commodification of every aspect of human experience in consumer societies has left many people feeling frustrated and unfulfilled, despite the gleaming array of new products that are touted as the means to human happiness. Even love has become commodified, as if the affection of friends and family depended on owning the latest car or home appliance. In consumer societies, love, sexual attraction, and material consumption have become so deeply confused in the popular imagination that many people are experiencing a crisis of meaning. In such an environment, the ability to create a peaceful space in the mind becomes not only useful, but an essential coping strategy for dealing with stress and dissatisfaction. The Buddhist teachings explain the psychological mechanisms that desire, greed, and attachment set in motion and how these mental states complicate our lives by creating more desires and more frustration. The teachings provide valuable resources, not only for understanding this frustrating syndrome and coping with
the resulting emotional distress, but also for reversing the proliferation of desires and frustrations.

The teachings about the preciousness of human rebirth are relevant here. The Buddhist texts discuss the difficulty of achieving a human rebirth, among myriad other far less pleasant possibilities. Further, they emphasize the importance of developing spiritually in this lifetime, because a human rebirth is the most conducive state for spiritual development. Not only is a human lifetime difficult to achieve, but life is also fleeting and there is no way to guarantee what state of rebirth we will achieve the next time around. For this reason, Buddhist teachers counsel their students to reflect on impermanence and to use this extraordinary human opportunity to maximum advantage. Because the body is impermanent and will become totally useless at the time of death, they warn against wasting our time in trivial pursuits. Because human life is both precious and extremely fragile, it is important to use our time and energy in the most effective ways: helping others, doing good deeds, and cultivating our minds.

COPING WITH DYING

All Buddhist traditions acknowledge that the experiences of sickness, old age, and death are common to all living beings, as set forth in the Buddha’s first noble truth. The four sights the Buddha encountered during his first foray outside the palace walls figure prominently in art, literature, drama, and stories in Buddhist societies. Buddhist practitioners contemplate the sufferings of life not only as a reminder of the precariousness of the human condition, but also as a reminder of the fleeting nature of life. Rather than frittering time away in laziness and meaningless activities, they emphasize the importance of making each instant of life an opportunity for awakening.

Death is a special focus of contemplation among Buddhist practitioners. Contemplation on death and impermanence serves as an antidote to attachment and also, by reminding us that death can come at any time, a reminder of the urgency of dharma practice. As the Buddhist traditions developed, this unflinching attention to death has given rise to a variety of practices intended to aid in coping with the suffering of dying and the loss of loved ones. Generosity by the dying person in giving donations is practised in order to sever attachment to material possessions. Compassion and loving kindness are the central principles practised in caring for the dying and the bereaved. A calm atmosphere is created, to prevent emotional agitation in both the dying person and the loved ones gathered around. The moment of death is considered a pivotal moment in determining a person’s future rebirth, so it is critical to avoid disturbing the dying person’s consciousness. Chanting of scriptures, recitation of mantras, and meditation help still the mind and create merit for the dying and deceased.

As a child, I was intrigued by the question of what happens to us after we die. I had many questions about death, but it was impossible to get any information. Death was a taboo topic and children were sheltered from contact with the dying. Death was portrayed as something very dark and scary, so when my dog died, I was unprepared to cope with the loss and was utterly devastated. When I went to Dharamsala years later and began studying at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, I finally found an explanation of death that made sense to me. This explanation was based on the theory of rebirth, but seemed more logical to me than the Western secularist notion that living beings cease to exist when they die. Located within the vast expanses of time and space that comprise the Buddhist understanding of the cosmos, sentient beings, all those living beings who possess consciousness, take rebirth time and again.
The conditions of their rebirth depend upon their actions of body, speech, and mind. These actions give rise to experiences of pleasure and pain in future lives, so the quality of consciousness is of utmost importance, particularly the quality of consciousness at the moment of death. Since the last moment of consciousness at the time of death is the immediate cause of the first moment of the after-death state, and hence to the next rebirth, particular care should be taken to nurture a calm, attentive, and wholesome state of mind as death approaches.

Since the quality of consciousness at the moment of death is the result of causes created in the course of everyday life, wholesome states of mind must be cultivated from moment to moment. Through formal meditation practice, we gradually develop the ability to concentrate and become aware of thoughts as they arise in the mind. Regular practice helps us to subdue our minds and learn to transform unwholesome mental tendencies into more wholesome tendencies, such as loving kindness, wisdom, and compassion. Mental calm and dexterity, developed through consistent meditation practice, are precisely the skills needed for facing death with confidence and equanimity.

Many Buddhist teachers recommend meditation on death and dying as a daily practice. Meditation on death helps us realize the impermanence of things and thereby eliminate attachment, which prepares us to navigate the dying process without clinging to this life. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there are texts that clearly explain the physical and psychological phenomena that a person experiences as the body declines and consciousness becomes increasingly more subtle. These texts provide expert advice on how to maintain mental alertness and skilfully negotiate the process of dying as the physical body and the sense faculties gradually disintegrate. Cultivating an understanding of death helps dispel fear by familiarizing the practitioner with the stages of the dying process. Simulating the experience of dying, as if it were actually happening, is almost like a rehearsal for the moment of death, so that death is no longer viewed as morbid or horrifying. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for example, meditates on death seven times a day and jokes that, at the moment of death, he will find out whether his practice has been effective. This light-hearted attitude indicates how conscientious meditation practice on death can lift the anxiety and foreboding that are normally associated with dying. Facing death squarely, through regular contemplation, will also prepare us to be more understanding and compassionate in caring for the ill and dying.

When I was bitten by a poisonous snake in an overgrown forest in India and hospitalized for three months, I learned how valuable the Buddhist teachings about death can be. Since I had not seen the snake, there was no question of getting the anti-snake venom, since injecting the wrong strain could mean instant death. As a result, I suffered from severe trauma and almost died of gangrene. During three months of torturous treatment, I drew upon all the Buddhist resources I had. The teachings on death and impermanence hit home directly; I could never have anticipated coming suddenly so close to death. The fragile and precious nature of human life was no longer an abstract concept. The teachings on loving kindness and compassion took on new meaning, as I lay in the hospital, helplessly dependent on the good will of strangers. My monastic training proved very valuable, since it helped me face the dreadful hospital conditions with patience and gratitude. As I faced the immanence of death and the likelihood of multiple disabilities, the practice of non-attachment helped me let go of expectations and cope with numerous uncertainties.

Most importantly, perhaps, my meditation training helped me deal with the mental agitation and confusion that can accompany severe physical injuries. Although at first it was extremely difficult to calm or control my mind, due to the intense pain of my injuries and the barrage of medications prescribed,
eventually the various meditation techniques I had learned became my refuge. The simplest of all meditations, mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati), became a means to help settle the onslaught of confused thoughts and emotions, and the waves of sloth and torpor that at times threatened to overwhelm me. Rather than bemoaning my fate and blaming my pain on others or myself, I was able to cope with tremendous pain, neglect, and appalling medical malpractice without giving in to despair. From this very traumatic near-death experience, I developed a deep appreciation for the spiritual resources Buddhists can draw on when faced with life-and-death situations. The experience left me firmly convinced that these resources will be immensely valuable at the moment of death.

NON-VIOLENT IDEALS AND REALITIES

The Buddha taught a way of life that values peace—inner peace, interpersonal peace, and societal peace. Taking these teachings to heart, Buddhist societies have attempted to foster peace by pointing out the causes of violence, the results of violence, and ways to prevent violence. The causes of violence (greed, anger, attachment, hatred) are all said to be rooted in ignorance—ignorance of the true nature of things and ignorance about what will bring about human happiness. The results of violence are not difficult to see: widespread destruction and suffering, increasing animosities, and a seemingly endless spiral of violence that can continue to spark conflicts for centuries. There are many ways to prevent violence: fostering mutual understanding, learning constructive methods of negotiation, and promoting reconciliation, for example. But ultimately, preventing violence requires uprooting the attitudes that are responsible for violence in the first place.

The Buddhist approach may sound idealistic or unrealistic, but when we read the newspapers and analyse political events, it is clear that a failure to abide by these very basic ethical principles is at the heart of most international crises. Most Buddhists would oppose violence of all sorts, from domestic violence to nuclear proliferation, and support efforts at the personal level, such as calm abiding meditation (samatha), respectful listening, and skilful negotiations, to create peace on the most fundamental level. Unfortunately, Buddhist nations are not free from violence—witness the violence being perpetrated in Sri Lanka by Sinhalese Buddhists in recent years—but the Buddhist texts do provide copious resources to resolve conflicts, if only human beings have the political will to use them.

The ideal of non-violence in Buddhism extends to all sentient beings—human and non-human, visible and invisible. This raises legitimate questions about food choices, since eating meat naturally entails violence against animals. Evidence suggests that the Buddha refused to legislate vegetarianism. Even though one could argue that a vegetarian diet is logically entailed by the value of ahiṃsā (non-harm), he left food choices to the individual. The Buddha very clearly stated that taking the life of sentient beings is non-virtuous, and since eating meat entails the killing of sentient beings, it seems to me that eating meat is non-virtuous, at least to some degree. If no one ate meat, animals would not be killed for meat, so, logically speaking, to eat meat is to be complicit in the killing of animals. Yet the Buddha never explicitly prohibited the eating of meat.

In early India, the mendicant lifestyle involved gathering alms from villagers and townspeople before noon each day. The Buddhist nuns and monks were therefore dependent upon the generosity of the laypeople and were expected to accept whatever type of food was offered. The monks and nuns were not allowed to make requests for special foods, but were expected to accept the offerings with equanimity and a sense of gratitude, whether the food was vegetarian or not. According
to the texts, the Buddha allowed the mendicants to eat meat as long as they did not see, hear, or suspect that the animal had been killed especially for them. Later on, as Buddhism spread to China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam, going for alms was not compatible with local customs. Instead, lay donors brought offerings of food that could be cooked in the monasteries, and strict vegetarianism became widespread. In most countries today, individuals decide for themselves whether or not to eat meat, except in the monasteries of Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, where vegetarianism is strictly observed. Environmental concerns, in addition to respect for life, may lead many Buddhists to prefer a vegetarian diet, but as with all ethical decisions, the decision to eat meat or vegetables remains a personal choice.

LIFESTYLES AND ATTITUDES

A compelling aspect of Buddhism is the wide variety of lifestyles, beliefs, and practices offered by the different Buddhist traditions. Today a Buddhist may be a traditional monastic practitioner meditating in a forest retreat, a lay intellectual teaching at a university, or a person who is ‘neither lay nor ordained’, working on prison reform. These three lifestyles—solitary meditation practice, scholarship, and social activism—are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but they sum up three typical dimensions or directions that Buddhists may choose to pursue in life. In many countries, a variety of Buddhist temples and centres can be found—Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and more. These temples and dharma centres offer an assortment of philosophical views, meditation practices, and social service opportunities. All the Buddhist traditions are based on similar foundations and each tradition is regarded as a complete, integrated system of beliefs and practices. At the same time,

each tradition has its own unique emphasis, be it specific meditation techniques, careful monastic discipline, systematic study programmes, skilful monastic organization, aesthetics, or other special features. The followers of diverse philosophical traditions may practise in noble silence and in solitary retreats or amidst the hustle and bustle of a modern metropolis, singly or communally, according to ancient custom, or in forms adapted to contemporary life. This wide diversity of belief systems, practice styles, and living situations gives Buddhists today the flexibility to discover a tradition or traditions that resonate with their own values and priorities.

In a religiously plural world, there are also people who may draw from more than one religious tradition. Although many people feel a natural kinship with the religious beliefs and practices they were raised with, some may feel a closer affinity with a different tradition and decide to convert. Some people may feel confused by the vast array of religious alternatives, but others may find that these alternatives help them expand their thinking in new directions and find their spiritual home. Most people who grow up in Buddhist homes prefer to stay within their own tradition, even if they do not fully understand it. At the same time, Buddhists believe that the variety of religious options reflects human beings’ different emotional and intellectual propensities and therefore enables seekers to find a path that is compatible with their own inclinations. Buddhists generally respect all spiritual paths and feel that each religious tradition makes a valuable contribution to human society.

Not only can seekers select from a multiplicity of religious paths, they can also combine them. Today, in a time of convenient travel and communications, some people may consider themselves Jewish and Buddhist, Christian and Hindu, agnostic and Taoist, or some other combination. Some may retain the religious identity of their birth and simultaneously
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Another reason that Buddhism is compatible with life in the modern world is that it recognizes the importance that many people today place on independent thinking and empirical verification of knowledge. Many value creativity and autonomy over the traditional hierarchies and expectations of 'organized religions'. In this social climate, some people are attracted by the paradoxical spirit of Zen or the independent thinking encouraged by the analytical Buddhist schools, rarely realizing that the Buddhist traditions still retain their own patriarchal, hierarchical, and sometimes authoritarian structures. These structures often enforce stricter rules for ordained individuals than for members of the lay community, however. For example, abortion and homosexuality are prohibited in the monastic precepts of a fully ordained (celibate) monk or nun, but there are no categorical proscriptions against these practices for the general (non-celibate) public. The absence of explicit answers to many controversial issues in modern society means that human beings must apply their own critical thinking skills in interpreting Buddhist ethical principles. This way, individuals are free to make their own decisions, with the understanding that they are responsible for the results of their actions, according to the law of cause and effect. Moral agency thus rests with the individual, whose own welfare depends on making ethical decisions. Buddhist ethics rely on familiarity with Buddhist teachings and principles, but leave individuals free to reason independently in determining which course of action will result in the least harm and greatest benefit to themselves and other living beings.

The Vinaya texts that regulate the daily life of Buddhist monastics are pragmatic and democratic. The fundamental guidelines for community decision-making are harmony and consensus, in accordance with the monastic codes and the ethical principles of loving kindness and compassion. Each
monastic community functions more or less independently. There has never been a hierarchically organized structure comparable to the Vatican that issues doctrinal decrees or policy statements. Individual Buddhist communities make decisions independently, based on the guidelines set forth in the *Vinaya* texts. This model of organization continues to the present day, extending also to Buddhist centres in Western countries. Buddhist institutions are not entirely egalitarian or individualistic, of course. Elements of hierarchy can be found in the regulations that structure Buddhist monasteries, based on monastic seniority and qualifications. The regulations that are most hierarchically organized are those that regulate relations between the monks and nuns, a gender-based ordering that does not find resonance in the new global ethic of gender equality. These regulations are tempered by two equally important values, loving kindness and compassion, which may take precedence over *Vinaya* regulations under exceptional circumstances.

AN ETHIC OF COMPASSION AND KINDNESS

The virtues of compassion and loving kindness are a central feature of the Buddhist path. In the *Metta Sutta*, the Buddha extols these virtues and exhorts his followers to regard all living beings with love and compassion, just as a mother cares for her beloved only child. The wish that all beings be happy and free from suffering not only encourages human beings to have loving hearts, but also creates a more compassionate, pleasant society. All Buddhists are advised to set aside their animosities and grudges and to treat both human beings and animals with kindness and compassion, just as they themselves would like to be treated. These injunctions are not simply platitudes, but are supported by practical techniques for becoming a more kind and compassionate person.

Meditations on loving kindness help to equalize feelings of love toward loved ones, enemies, and strangers alike. First, we generate love toward ourselves. If we harbour anger, hatred, and aversion toward ourselves, this is a big stumbling block in learning to love others. So we begin by visualizing our own hearts filled with loving kindness and compassion in the form of light that fills every molecule of our bodies and minds. We forgive ourselves for our inadequacies, let go of the painful emotions of guilt and resentment, and replace these emotions with feelings of peace, contentment, and boundless love. Next, we contemplate the thought that all living beings want to be happy and loved, just like we do. With this realization, we then generate feelings of kindness and compassion toward all the people who are close to us—family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. Gradually, we expand these kind and loving feelings to everyone in our neighbourhood, town, state, country, and the whole world. Eventually, we extend our loving kindness and compassion to all living beings without exception—humans and animals, large and small, visible and invisible—both in this world and in all world systems, by offering, 'May all beings be happy. May they be peaceful. May they be free from suffering."

Through meditation on loving kindness—morning, evening, and throughout the day—our minds become more peaceful and we are gradually able to deal with people in more loving and compassionate ways, even in cases of conflict. Cultivating our minds in this manner is a major step toward creating a culture of peace. Through meditation on compassion, our feelings of sympathy begin to extend beyond our own circle of loved ones to suffering beings throughout the world. Not only do we sympathize more with the suffering of living beings, but we begin to see the importance of helping relieve their suffering in tangible ways. Buddhists everywhere must raise their voices to support human rights by developing what His Holiness
the Dalai Lama calls ‘a sense of universal responsibility’. As Martin Luther King implored, we must ‘rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity.’

In the early Buddhist texts, the link between wishing living beings to be happy and free from suffering and actively working in the world to relieve their suffering is implied, but not explicit. In the later Mahayana texts, the basis for a programme of social action is more clearly delineated. Not only should we avoid harming sentient beings, but the qualities of loving kindness and compassion should translate into direct action to benefit them. The highest goal is to help sentient beings achieve freedom from suffering, or nirvana. For this reason, teaching the dharma is considered the greatest form of generosity and the surest way to create spiritual merit. Because the suffering of living beings is limitless, relieving their suffering on a day-to-day basis may be seen as an endless task. In recent years, many people have come to believe that contributing energy toward this task is equally or perhaps even more important than attaining personal liberation. This has led to the emergence of Engaged Buddhism, a path of compassionate social action in which people work actively in the world to alleviate suffering and to correct social injustices.\(^{11}\)

THE BODHISATTVA ETHIC

According to legend, for many lifetimes before the Buddha took birth as Siddhartha Gautama and manifested his awakening in Bodhgaya, he was a bodhisattva, an altruistic being determined to liberate all beings from suffering. A bodhisattva is a rare individual characterized by great compassion, an individual who has so thoroughly realized the miseries of living beings that he or she makes the resolution to become a perfectly awakened being in order to liberate all. After developing great compassion toward all living beings, such a person generates bodhicitta, the enlightened aspiration to achieve perfect awakening (Buddhahood) in order to help liberate all beings from the sufferings of saṃsāra. Generating bodhicitta for even an instant creates enormous virtue; putting this noble intention into practice expands that virtue exponentially. Having renounced saṃsāra, developed genuine bodhicitta, and achieved direct insight into emptiness, the bodhisattva then embarks on the stages of the path to perfect awakening.

The process of becoming a bodhisattva involves eradicating self-interest and replacing it with a pure motivation to work for the welfare of others. After generating the bodhicitta, the enlightened attitude to free all beings from saṃsāra, the fledgling bodhisattva begins a process of accumulating merit and wisdom that takes ‘three countless aeons’. Eliminating self-concern and working purely and skillfully for the benefit of others is called the accumulation of merit. Uprooting every trace of ignorance by cultivating knowledge and insight is called the accumulation of wisdom. The practitioner traverses the ten stages (bhūmis) of the bodhisattva path that ultimately culminates in the perfect awakening of a Buddha. At each stage of the path, he or she accumulates merit and wisdom through the practice of the ten perfections (pāramitās): the perfections of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, concentration, wisdom, skillful means, aspiration, power, and exalted wisdom.

Not everyone wishes to embark on the long and arduous path of the bodhisattva, however. Since sentient beings are numberless and some can be quite intractable and unpleasant, the work of deflecting all of these beings away from their self-destructive course is not easy. Many Buddhist practitioners regard themselves as incapable of the hardships entailed in liberating all beings from suffering and frankly state their desire to free themselves from suffering as quickly as possible.
Liberating even one person is hard enough, they say. And besides, what assurance is there that a person is capable of perfect Buddhahood? All Buddhists are taught to cultivate love and compassion as antidotes to hatred and harmfulness and as the highest benefit to society. The Buddhist traditions are all methods for benefitting living beings, whether this is expressed through meditation or through active engagement in the world. The essential point is the purity of our motivation and the purest motivation of all is the intention to benefit sentient beings. To paraphrase Shantideva, the great Bengali Buddhist scholar, monk, and poet, 'All the joy in the world comes from the desire for others' happiness, and all the suffering in the world comes from the desire for one's own happiness.'

For this reason, the bodhicitta attitude of wishing to become enlightened for the welfare of all is considered the key to all attainments, awakening the mind to its fullest potential and working for the highest good of the world.

In the Tibetan tradition, there is a practice that goes beyond being thankful for whatever good fortune we enjoy; it is a meditation that visualizes repaying the kindness of all living beings. This meditation is one stage of a Mahayana practice to develop the altruistic attitude of wishing to free all beings from suffering (bodhicitta). The first stage of the meditation is to imagine that all sentient beings throughout all space and time have been our own loving mothers at some time in the immense cycle of samsāra. Second, we remember the kindness that each of these beings, as our mother, has shown us. Third, we generate a determination to repay the kindness of all these mother-like sentient beings. Fourth, we generate feelings of compassion toward all these beings, remembering the immeasurable sufferings that each one of them is enduring: ‘May all beings be free from suffering!’ Fifth, we generate loving kindness toward all these beings, wishing that each and every one of them experience joy: ‘May all beings be happy!’ Sixth, we generate an attitude called ‘the special thought.’ We ask ourselves who will take the responsibility to liberate these beings from suffering, and conclude by making a firm resolution to take the responsibility upon myself. Finally, we generate the bodhicitta itself. We recognize that, although we would like to liberate all beings, at present we do not have the capacity to do so. That realization propels us to take on the responsibility of the bodhisattva, by resolving to achieve the perfect awakening of a Buddha in order to free all sentient beings from suffering.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE NATURE OF THINGS

Awakening the mind to its fullest potential requires not only compassion, but also wisdom. Perfect enlightenment is conceptualized as the wisdom to know all things as they are. Ordinary beings are portrayed as confused and ignorant, deceived by their mistaken perceptions of reality. We confuse our perceptions with reality and then make decisions on the basis of our own mistaken assumptions. According to Buddhist epistemology, our perceptions are inaccurate because they are distorted by self-interest and preconceptions. We perceive the world through our senses (what we see, hear, smell, taste, and feel) and then process it through our mental faculties, identifying, labelling, and evaluating what we perceive. But we cannot completely trust the information received through our senses, because, until perfect enlightenment is reached, our desires and aversions cloud the way we process sensory data. When we are hungry, food looks appealing; when we become ill from overeating or discover extra pounds on our hips, we may begin to see food in a new, less attractive light. Our mind states, clouded by desire, aversion, and ignorance, greatly influence the choices we make. Acting on distorted perceptions of the world around us is the source of many problems, from interpersonal conflicts to the escalation of war.
The mechanics of perception and the distinction between fiction and reality have always fascinated me, so when I began reading about Buddhist theories of perception, I found them very useful. The various Buddhist philosophical schools advance different theories about knowledge and reality. One such theory postulates that the very first moment we sense things—before the process of identifying, labelling, and evaluating begins—is a moment of pure perception. The process of distortion begins with conceptualization; that is, direct perceptions are pure experience, but concepts about those perceptions are distorted. One school of thought suggests that phenomena exist as they appear, whereas another contends that phenomena exist only as they appear to the mind. The Buddha rejected the extremes of eternalism and nihilism, namely, that things either exist ultimately and eternally or do not exist at all. The later Buddhist philosophical schools expanded upon this by proposing the theory of two levels of truth: phenomena exist, but they do not exist as they appear to. The theory of emptiness (Sūnyatā) provides that even the smallest molecule or atom lacks independent reality, yet phenomena function conventionally as they appear to. The theory that phenomena do not exist ultimately or eternally helps us question our strong attachments and aversions to people, possessions, and ideas, yet allows us to function in the everyday world. Questioning the ontological status of phenomena relaxes our tendency to concretize our experience. Reflecting on the epistemological process by which we know things allows us to develop a more flexible view of the world.

Investigating these different theories on the nature of reality often stretches the mind beyond its comfort zone. A thorough consideration of these theories confirms that what we call ‘reality’ is ambiguous, taking shape according to our preconceptions. In the same way that a bottle may appear half empty or half full, our everyday assessments of appearances and events may be partially true and partially false. And although this thought is disconcerting at first, it is also reassuring. Acknowledging the ambiguous nature of reality helps us to erode the fixed views of the world that can entrap us and open the mind to new realms of thought and experience. A certain survival instinct may impel us to grasp at certainties, but the world is actually far less predictable than our minds would have it. As we open our eyes and let go of the obsessive fear and acquisitiveness with which we normally construct a seemingly secure and even rigid, view of the world, new vistas will open for us.

SOCIAL IDEALS AND ACTIVISM

Buddhist values such as loving kindness and compassion can be implemented to advance social reform: first by generating empathy for the needy and oppressed; second, by addressing the structural causes of the social and economic disparities that are the cause of their sufferings. The Buddha probably did not set out to be a social revolutionary, but because he taught women and people of the spurned lower castes and admitted them into the monastic order, his humanistic example can be used to support the struggle for social justice. The Buddha taught about the interdependence of all life and the interrelatedness of all sentient beings. If living beings have been involved in the wheel of birth and death since beginningless time, we have all been each others’ relations countless times—as mothers, fathers, children, siblings, teachers, and lovers. Since these sentient beings have treated us with kindness for lifetimes without number, we owe them boundless kindness in return. The interdependence of all life can also serve as a philosophical foundation for constructing conscientious methods for dealing
with today’s most pressing issues. Environmental, socio-economic, and bioethical issues could all benefit from the application of this perspective.

In today’s increasingly interrelated global community, international cooperation has increased, but so have conflicts and misunderstandings. As the human family is brought closer together through modern technology and telecommunications, injustices in one part of the world have begun to have more visible consequences in other parts of the world, ultimately affecting us all. Resolving differences among members of the human family has therefore become a matter of utmost concern, affecting the well-being and survival of humankind. Just as with the members of a family, an increase in intimacy among the members of the international community requires greater mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect if friendly global relations are to be maintained. Social, economic, political, and racial injustices are not simply local problems, they are issues that affect everyone and require our full attention. Over-consumption in affluent countries has become linked with economic exploitation, social inequities, and political unrest in poorer countries. If these injustices remain unaddressed, they fuel aggression, conflict, and further exploitation. As the situation escalates, certain parties may attempt to resolve the conflict by force, which leads to armed aggression and wars that endanger the entire global community. As a matter of survival, human beings need to establish genuine dialogue, based on understanding and a commitment to work for our mutual well-being. Otherwise, tensions will continue to mount and result in increasing violence. The more closely human beings are drawn together, the more responsibly we must behave in order to create a peaceful world.

Spiritual values and practices can play an important role in our increasingly intertwined global community. Today, people in both technologically advanced and developing countries face unprecedented levels of stress in their lives. High levels of stress not only endanger physical and psychological health on an individual level, but also threaten the health and well-being of our communities. Many people are turning to Buddhism for guidance on how to cope with these greater stresses and challenges. In a world full of violence and corruption, individuals need ways to gain some measure of inner peace and sanity. The Buddha’s teachings contain many practical meditation techniques for calming anger, controlling desire, overcoming fear, and creating harmonious relationships. Many find solace, inspiration, and wisdom in the Buddha’s teachings on non-violence, contentment, loving kindness, and compassion. Many Buddhists also find that helping others by implementing these ideals in social action can lead to a more meaningful existence.

In the modern world, new scientific and technological advances—space exploration, nuclear fission, genetic engineering, reproductive cloning—require people to reconsider what it means to be human. The hectic pace of life, proliferation of desires, heightened expectations, and alienation that are trademarks of contemporary society have caused many people to pause and question where it all leads. When human beings get caught up in artificial lifestyles, distant from the earth that sustains them, they often lose their balance and experience a sense of meaninglessness in their lives. Alcohol, drugs, despair, domestic violence, and community conflicts are often symptomatic of the spiritual poverty that afflicts the modern world. When spiritual well-being reaches its nadir, human beings naturally seek a path to more meaningful engagement with the world. Buddhism offers spiritual resources that are universal in their appeal. As a result, Buddhist centres are springing up in cities and towns all over the world.

To be relevant today, Buddhism must not only answer people’s spiritual needs and provide alternatives to materialistic, stressful ways of living, but must also address current social
problems. With 10 per cent of the world’s population on the verge of starvation, it is not enough to simply teach meditation, prayers, and personal development, as important as these are. Buddhists must not remain isolated from the very real problems of the world, but must demonstrate their commitment to peace and human happiness by working actively to correct economic inequalities and social injustices. In a world plagued by domestic, communal, and international conflicts, Buddhism teaches valuable methods for non-violent conflict resolution. In an age sadly in need of moral leadership, Buddhism offers clear ethical guidelines and living exemplars of principled behaviour.

On an international scale, Buddhism sends a timely message of tolerance, compassion, harmony, peace, and loving kindness. But Buddhist practitioners worldwide must also become more actively engaged in eliminating racism, sexism, domestic violence, militarism, and economic exploitation. There is reportedly more human slavery in the world today than at any other point in human history. Precisely because Buddhists profess a determination to relieve the suffering of the world, they must share the resources that Buddhism offers. They must clearly address the ways in which power and wealth lead to violence and subjugation. They must work harder to understand the cycle of violence in which social injustices lead to stark inequalities and humiliation, which in turn lead to violence, terrorism, and the agonies of war. Expanding their awareness and commitment beyond the theoretical, Buddhists must mobilize to work for the eradication of sexual servitude, drug addiction, land mines, global warming, torture, and all the distressingly familiar horrors of modern life.

To make a lasting contribution and provide effective moral leadership, Buddhism needs to live up to its ideals by making sure its own institutions are fair and harmonious. The early Buddhist communities of India were among the world’s first examples of democratic institutions and shared decision-making.

Now Buddhists must be attentive to the voices of under-represented groups and work to ensure that there is fairness in decisions that affect them. Today, because of highly improved communications technology, the world’s religious traditions have an unprecedented opportunity to forge new alliances, learn from each other, and cooperate in addressing a pantheon of social ills. Ideological differences must be set aside and historical misunderstandings resolved in an effort to ensure humanity’s survival. Those who love peace, and are willing to work for it, must become models for social justice and peaceful coexistence.

Buddhists in many countries are still plagued by suffering and problems resulting from recent political upheavals—the millions murdered, injured, and brutalized in Cambodia, China, Laos, Mongolia, Tibet, and Vietnam. The enlightened attitude that Buddhism teaches—to awaken and liberate living beings from suffering—is timely, more than ever before. Buddhism teaches us to cultivate peace in our hearts and work to relieve the misery of all living beings without exception. Now, in this time of fear and uncertainty, the gentle message of peace and compassion offers solace and sanity to a troubled world. These good intentions need to be conjoined with a daring and viable plan of action.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND ROLES
To actively address the enormous challenges that humanity faces in the modern world, the energies and wisdom of the entire human family are needed. For many women and men, an important factor in selecting or retaining a religious affiliation is the position of women within the tradition. Women today are casting a critical eye on patriarchal institutions and drifting away from religions that bar women from equal participation and leadership. Of an estimated 300 million Buddhist women in the world today, most are laywomen, and nearly 100,000
follow the monastic path of a nun.\textsuperscript{14} The Buddha is frequently credited with improving women’s status in society and opening new possibilities for women’s spiritual development. To be truly egalitarian, however, modern Buddhist communities must not limit women to supportive roles. Women must be allowed full access to education, ordination, and positions of leadership within the tradition. Women have begun questioning their roles within Buddhism, acknowledging the gender inequalities that exist, and working to ensure women’s full equality in Buddhist societies and institutions.

Buddha Śākyamuni asserted that women are capable of realizing the final goal of Buddhist practice—the ‘fruit of the path’—and, after some hesitation, approved an order of nuns, the Bhikkunī Saṅgha, as a counterpart to the order of monks. Verses of spiritual realization and biographies of enlightened women in Buddhist history attest to women’s equal potential for liberation.\textsuperscript{15} These examples of spiritual attainment have inspired generations of women to persevere in fulfilling their own spiritual potential and to endure, even in the face of great hardships. In Buddhist societies, women have often met significant challenges in obtaining the freedom, acknowledgment, and support they need to fully realize their potential. Buddhism’s egalitarian ideal must be extended to ensure women’s personal, spiritual, economic, and political equality. Opportunities for women’s education and ordination on par with those available to men must also be included.

Among the world’s religious traditions, Buddhism is relatively progressive in recognizing the rights of women to make their own decisions and to achieve the highest spiritual goal. Although traditional Buddhist cultures are patriarchal and women do not always enjoy complete personal and social independence, the Buddhist texts make it clear that all human beings have the right and responsibility to make their own moral choices, which has translated to considerable freedom for women in Buddhist societies. From a contemporary feminist perspective, there is still much work to be done to protect women from sexual and economic exploitation and ensure their health, education, and spiritual well-being. Buddhist meditation and other skills for learning to transform the mind can help women develop confidence, awareness, and wisdom that will enhance their abilities to work for the welfare of themselves and others. With encouragement, women can apply these skills to their own social and psychological development, and become leaders in the political and economic spheres as well.

When I became a nun more than thirty years ago, I did not realize that there was no lineage of full ordination in many Buddhist traditions. Fortunately, lineages of full ordination for women still exist and thrive in the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese traditions and women are working diligently to reinstate full ordination for women in those traditions that lack it. Determined to make changes, an international Buddhist women’s movement began in 1987. Thus far, great strides have been made by this movement in redressing the gender imbalance that still exists in Buddhist societies and institutions.\textsuperscript{16} Even among conservatives, attitudes are changing in response to a new global ethic of human rights that recognizes and celebrates women’s rights and potential.

Respecting the Buddha’s affirmation of women’s spiritual capacity, adherents of all Buddhist traditions recognize that women are capable of achieving enlightenment, whether they define that as liberation from samsāra or the perfect awakening of a Buddha. Despite this recognition, however, Buddhist women have rarely enjoyed equal opportunities for religious education or support for the contemplative practice. As a result, relative to men, few women in Buddhist history have taken visible roles as teachers and religious leaders. Given equal access to education and training, women can not only fulfill their spiritual potential, but can become leaders in social welfare,
community development, education, and other fields as well. In order to develop as spiritual leaders, women must be fully recognized by religious institutions and given every opportunity to develop their potential. In this regard, there is still much work to be done in the various Buddhist traditions. Failure to address the inequalities that women face is not only hypocritical in a tradition that claims equal opportunity, but also contravenes the new global ethic for women’s empowerment. Women’s energy is a valuable resource for peace in the world. Awakening women to their own potential and encouraging them toward positions of leadership will result in innumerable positive changes and contributions on the global level. Enlightened social transformation will not only benefit women, but will also help create a peaceful legacy for future generations.

BUDDHISM AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

For humanity to cooperate, survive, and thrive, we need to utilize all the spiritual resources available. Buddhist ideas can be useful in a number of ways. In a world full of strife, methods for developing loving kindness can help create more peaceful individuals and more harmonious families, communities, and societies. Techniques for understanding the nature of the self and the way we perceive others help us understand how tensions arise as the result of clinging to fixed notions of identity. Techniques for developing compassion and loving kindness toward all living beings can help foster harmony, mediate disputes, and prevent violent conflicts from arising. Encouraging a simple lifestyle can help preserve this beautiful planet and prevent the gross disparities of wealth that are at the heart of so many human problems. Buddhism has the potential to play a strong role in furthering dialogue among the wonderfully diverse members of the human family.

NOTES

1. These ideas are explained in James P. McDermott, ‘Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism,’ in Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (ed.), Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, pp. 165–192.
2. ‘After ordination, the caste origin of a monk was of no further consequence: just as the great rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Aciravati, Sarabhu and Mahi lose their name and identity as soon as they flow into the sea, so too the members of the four castes lose their identity in the Buddha’s Sangha, and are henceforth known as Sakiya Sons (AN [Anguttara Nikāya] 8.19). The monk was a member of a casteless monastic society.’ H. W. Schumann, The Historical Buddha: The Times, Life and Teachings of the Founder of Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2004, p. 166.
An entire chapter of the Dhammapada is devoted to the theme of the brahmin, redefining the term to mean a person of noble character. A typical verse says:

Brahmins do not arise because of caste,
Because of knots of hair or lineage.
Those who possess truth and dharma
Are the clean ones: they are Brahmins.

5. See, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, et al., For a Future to be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Mindfulness Trainings, Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1948.


9. ‘Neither lay nor ordained’ is a newly devised category of serious practitioners who are single, perhaps even celibate, but not ordained in the traditional Buddhist definition.

10. *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, Sutta Nipata 1.8 (also Khuddakapatha 9). An English translation by Thannissaro Bhikkhu, with links to alternative translations, can be found at: www.accesstoinsiuht.org/canon/sutta/khuddaka/suttanipata/snp1-08.html


13. Further information about these philosophical schools as understood in Tibet can be found in Daniel Cozort and Craig Preston, *Buddhist Philosophy: Losang Gönchok’s Short Commentary to Jamyang Shayba’s Root Text on Tenets*, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, N.Y., 2003.


16. The beginnings of this movement are described in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Sakyadhitā: Daughters of the Buddha*, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, N.Y., 1989; Indian Books Centre, Delhi, 1998. Other books on Buddhist women edited by her include: