

Back to the Source

An Interview with John Peacock

John Peacock has been an academic and meditation teacher for 25 years, including monastic training in both the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions. He currently teaches Buddhist studies and Indian religions at the University of Bristol, and leads meditation retreats both in the United States and Britain.



“How do we live the change that is happening?”

How did you first enter the stream of the Dharma?

I became interested in Eastern religions and philosophy at about the age of eleven, and started reading around Indian thought, Nietzsche, all sorts of stuff. When I was very young, I used to take myself off to Sunday school and was inspired by the stories of Jesus, but could never buy into the theistic thing at all. At age seventeen, I went overland

to India, as many of us did in those days in Britain, and knowing very little about the climate arrived at the peak of the hot season. Seeing my distress, someone suggested I go to Dharamsala, which was a hill station and somewhat cooler. It turned out to be the center of the Tibetan Buddhist scene, of course, and as I began to learn more about it I became very intrigued. I had only intended to be in India for three months, and was there for about a year and a half. This was in 1970.

The Dalai Lama was extremely accessible then. You could knock on his door and ask for an interview, which was what I did, and I had something like a two-and-a-half hour meeting with him. I was struck by the way the Tibetan people somehow seemed to be sustained by their Dharma practice—smiling, happy, and relatively relaxed—whilst having lost just about everything. That was very inspiring to somebody my age.

Later I went down to South India, ordained as a monk, and ended up staying there for a long, long time, both in monasteries and outside the monastery. I wanted to immerse myself entirely in a Tibetan speaking environment and engage in a traditional course of study, which I was able to do. Eventually I went to Sri Lanka and ordained in the Theravada tradition.

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What led you to make the move from a Tibetan monastery to become a Theravada monk?

I went to Sri Lanka partly because I had a keen interest in the Abhidhamma and wanted to learn more about it. Tibetan studies focus almost entirely on commentarial literature; they don't read the primary texts. I had heard, "Oh, Abhidhamma, it's so boring," but I wanted to find out for myself. Going to Sri Lanka was quite a revelation, because you got to actually look at the original text.

That has really characterized my dharma practice as well as my academic study, the movement back to the source of things. Tibetan material still influences the way I teach—the stories and analogies the Tibetans have given me really help to illuminate the teachings. But I find myself not quite so convinced now about some of the later developments in Tibetan thought. For example, the study of emptiness becomes much ado about nothing—literally! It's an enormous scholarly tradition, but for me has somewhat the flavor of "How many angels can you get on the head of a pin?"

Besides plunging deeply into the Abhidhamma, I learned quite a bit from the early texts about the relationship between *samatha* [tranquility] and *vipassanā* [insight]. Both are important, but I think *samatha* is just a tool for the development of *vipassanā*, which is more transformative.

So how did you get from a Buddhist monk living in Asia to a British professor?

After I first came back to England, at the suggestion of a good friend, I did a degree in philosophy at Warwick University, and went on to do a PhD. My thesis was on a mixture of philosophy and Buddhist studies: ethics in

Heidegger and Long Chen Rab Jam Pa. The common premise was the idea that ethics, as a prescriptive form, was a metaphysics. How do you have an ethics which is based, in the *Dzogchen* tradition, on *karunā*? And *karunā* translated not as "compassion," but as "responsibility and responsiveness." I still stress the importance of ethics in my Dharma teaching.

One of the ways I usually explain Buddhist ethics to Western students is: Forget your prescriptions, your "thou shalt, thou shalt not." The precepts are rules of training, guidelines, and everything is context sensitive. Buddhist ethics actually relies heavily on *sati*, on mindfulness, because what is appropriate in one context is not necessarily transferable to another. You could be completely moral, by following some rules of behavior, but from a Buddhist point of view also be completely unethical because of the intention in your mind at that moment. Ethics, more broadly regarded, is a dialectic between your culture, which represents the moral sphere of activity, and your individual ethical conscience.

So ethics is more an enacting of one's wisdom, than a preparation for meditation?

Exactly, and insight is the key. The default is to use the precepts as a rule. But every situation, here and now, is an ethical situation. How we act depends on the amount of awareness we can bring to the situation. I like to point out that the *sīla* [virtue] dimension of the practice is not an optional extra. You need to develop *paññā* [wisdom]; that becomes the foundation. But *sīla*, the deep integrity one brings to each moment, is one of the dimensions that is often missing in Western practice. So much more emphasis is placed upon meditation, *bhāvanā*.

In the West there is a lot of clinging to rites and rituals [in the form of] a particular style of meditation.

What kind of response do you get when you say that to your Dharma students?

It's a bit of a wake-up call to a lot of people. In the current Buddhist environment in the West, in my opinion, there is a lot of clinging to rites and rituals—and rites and rituals here means meditative practice, a particular style of *vipassanā* or *Dzogchen* or whatever it might be. The lack of the *sīla* dimension has left a lot of Western Buddhism ungrounded. Buddhist practice has to do with the engagement with ordinariness, not with some kind of transcendental, mystical state. It's more about, "How can you go out and be kind, or just a little bit kinder, to the person you find really irritating?"

What about the traditional two-part model we sometimes hear about: that the Buddha taught a low-grade morality to householders, "Obey five precepts and give generously to support the monks" so that they, in the monastery or on the hill, can practice intensive meditation and reach for higher states of consciousness?

Well to begin with, I don't think the five precepts are particularly low-grade. The monastic disciplines, apart from the relevant changes made to account for celibacy and things like that, are really just an extrapolation of the five precepts. The precepts are tools for investigating the whole of our ethical lives, and for examining very carefully the subtleties of our consciousness. That's why they are deliberately hazy.

Take the first precept, for example: "I undertake a rule of training to refrain from harming living beings." It obviously implies not killing, but in the Western Buddhist context most people are not going to be killing deliberately. More deeply, it is saying, "You do a lot of harm, living in this world; look more closely at the other forms of harm you do." That might relate, for example, to

speech, or to taking what is not offered. All of the precepts are inter-dependent. They are actually very high grade, if taken seriously.

As another example, we might notice that the third precept is mistranslated most of the time. It's not just about restraining from inappropriate *sexual* activity, but refers to all forms of sensual indulgence—which is a much more broad and sensitive area for us modern lay Buddhists.

One reason I found the Abhidhamma to be such a wonderful teaching is that its primary division is ethical: ethically variable factors, neutral factors, and then you have the *kusala* and *akusala*, the wholesome and the unwholesome, dimensions of the mind. It shows us how to practice in ways that recognize and cultivate one set, while recognizing and eliminating the other.

One of the themes of your teaching is sensitivity to the context of ancient India, and your understanding that the Buddha was really quite a radical.

Yes, because it makes us look at our own culture. The Buddha's engagement with his own culture in fifth century India BCE is total. He utilizes every tool, including the language and the religious discourse of his period, in order to subvert it. I find very few words in Pali which you cannot trace back to a Vedic context or to an Upanishadic context. He knew as much about them as the Indian pundits of the period did themselves. He parodies things like the "Hymn of Creation" in the *Rig Veda*, and offers a brilliant send-up of the oldest of the Upanishads, *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Understanding these things helps us see his teaching more clearly.

So what was radical about the Buddha's teaching, beyond the sociology of it all?

The Buddha is encouraging us to be fearless in the face of radical contingency.

It's about the radically contingent nature of everything that leaves us with nothing left to grasp onto. Dependent Origination, in its universal form and in its sense of human becoming, is unique to world thought and utterly undermining of every other system of thought. It is so challenging, in fact, that both in early India and in current Buddhist teaching, few are able—or willing—to get it totally.

Can you say more about this?

Some of the movements and trends we see in Western Buddhism actually are akin to what was going on in the ancient period—a reification of some element of thought or experience. First there was an attempt to treat the notion of a person, a *puggala*, as somehow privileged metaphysically, much like with the modern psychological self. Even after Nagarjuna reiterated the absolute emptiness of *any* thing, very soon after we begin to hear that “everything is empty except for one thing,” the mind. A whole metaphysics of the mind springs up, first around a storehouse consciousness (*alaya*), and then around a primordial or perfected consciousness (*rigpa*). These ideas of course resonate easily with both Judeo-Christian, Romantic era, and New Age notions in the Western tradition and thus have great popular appeal in modern Dharma teaching.

Even if these ideas came initially as a report on experience, which I believe many of them did, it shows a tendency of the human mind to grasp after something to hold onto and to solidify it. This is what is getting us today, “Just fall back on your awareness, just be aware of awareness itself.” When awareness is used as a noun like this, it ends up looking strangely like some Upanishadic Brahman.

But the Buddha's final words in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* are “Everything

is evanescent; strive on diligently.” He is encouraging us to be fearless in the face of radical contingency. He knows that we are going to go running away to the safest haven we can just as quickly as possible. In fact if we try to create a false haven for ourselves, we end up just *dukkharing*, creating more suffering for ourselves. I think that is the absolute radical nature of it—impermanence so profound and far reaching there cannot be any fixed notion of the self.

Are we really suited for this radical emptiness?

When you begin to really take these teachings seriously, they are literally liberating. Not immediately, in the Buddhist sense of final liberation, but they can liberate us from looking for fixity, for certainty. This search for certainty has been the Western obsession since the 17th century. It began with the search for solid foundations for science with Descartes. The Buddha is helping us immensely by saying, “Give up this task of looking for certainty, and live. Be.”

Consider the amount of time and energy expended in looking for that which is not going to change. I use the example of human relationships, because that is the payout in all this. We put a burden onto the other—which the other can never actually live up to—of being certain, of being unchanging. In fact love has to do with negotiating change.

But how do you deal with the natural tendency of the mind to flip back to the opposite, to a kind of despair or radical relativism that concludes “nothing really matters”?

That is the movement that happened in the course of Buddhist history. People can't help but think “It either is or it isn't.” Either there is love which is the same forever, for example, or there isn't. The Buddha is

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To this the Buddha says: "Nonsense."



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really saying "Nonsense." It's a changing phenomenon, just like anything else. It's not a question of either nihilism or eternalism. This again is an example of the Buddha's radical message—"it goes on or it doesn't," this is rather simplistic. Rather the question is "How do we live this change that is happening?"

We have a huge literary romanticism around words like love here—all the pop songs, and the literary tradition going back to the medieval period, seek the reification of love: "love is eternal" is its favoured maxim. Then it's a heartbreak when it's not there. The Buddha is seeing it as a far more down to earth quality. *Mettā/māitri* is what brings relationship, where its opposite doesn't. Most of the *akusala*, the non-virtues, are dissonances which break relations with others, whereas the virtues, the *kusala cetasikas*, the wholesome mental factors, are that which bring about relationship. So one opens, and the other blinds.

We even generate romantic ideals around the words we use in Buddhism all the time, words such as "love," "fearlessness," and "compassion." But that's not an experience of what they are. This is another radical thing about the Buddha's teaching: it is entirely practical. But the practicality got left out at a very early stage, since it was far easier to talk about it than to do it.

So what is beyond the compelling ideas; what has Buddhist practice got to do with it?

Meditation practice, *vipassanā* practice, is about really investigating the basic teachings to an incredible depth. It involves investigating those things you think you know about, such as the four ennobling truths, the ennobling eightfold path, dependent origination, the aggregates. These are elements of lived experience.

I used to apologize for going back to the early teachings. I don't do that now at

Do you trust the teachings enough not to want to import psychotherapy into it?

all. Even if people are never going to learn the canonical languages, we can be aware of how they work. For example, a lot of the things that appear to be nouns in English are actually verbs in the Pali form. When the Buddha is talking about the aggregates (*khandhā*), he's not talking about static states but processes. The Buddha is always asking *how* is it, rather than *what* is it. The "What is it" question generates an essentialist answer, whereas the "How is it" question gives us an answer in terms of processes and experience. The mantra for *vipassanā* practice should be, "What's going on?" This question does not have an answer; it invites the close investigation of experience.

Is this radical message managing to get through our conventional ways of thinking?

I think it is to a certain extent, although I find it gets into fusion with so many other disciplines. I asked a group recently "Do you trust the teachings enough not to want to import psychotherapy into it? To import varieties of *Advaita* [non-dual Hinduism]? Or any other discipline?" Because in the radical nature of the Buddha's teaching, everything is there that you really need. It's not for any kind of accident that he says "In this handful of leaves is everything that you need." It is very easy to import suppositions into your practice that he actually spoke out against.

Classical *Advaita*, the *Advaita* espoused by Shankara, for example—and there is no way of getting away from it—is an absolutism, in the sense that it's talking about one thing which is not dependent on causes and conditions, called Brahman. Brahman is described as being of the nature of "pure consciousness." Yet one thing the Buddha makes absolutely clear is that there is no consciousness without it being conscious of—there is no thing that can be without being dependent on causes and conditions.

Both conceptions are ruled out very strongly by the Buddha in the texts of the Pali Canon.

So the Buddha is saying, in all compassion, "If I thought letting you rest there would end suffering for you, I would let you rest there."

That's right. The Buddha's message is not comforting. He is trying to get us to see that there is an optimum way to live this life, and there is a very debased way. This has nothing to do with transcendent realities. I find this echoed in Nagarjuna's "*Samsāra is nirvāna!*" You have the choice. This is it. This is your *samsāra*, this is your *nibbāna*. How do you want to be?

If you look at the *Nikayas* [the early literature of the Pali Canon], not everybody's convinced by the Buddha. Some of the Brahmins, having been presented with all the consequences of their thinking, go away shaking their heads, saying "What's he going on about? I still prefer to hold onto what I do." Others respond to what he says, "Okay, if those are the consequences, perhaps it's better to move towards the Buddha-Dharma."

We try to make things cozy, but there is nothing cozy about the Buddha's teaching.

But we're cozy people living cozy lifestyles in a cozy environment.

That's the big, big problem. It becomes cozy in wanting to have the Buddhadharma and have our cake as well. One of the things I often explore with groups is that the Buddha's teaching comes from a *sāmaṇera* tradition, a renunciate tradition. What are you gonna have to give up? People ask, "Is there another word we can use for renunciation?" (laughs).

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Is there a way to integrate all this into a meaningful life for a modern person?

I think there is. When the Buddha, for example, has the injunction to his monastics, “Be content with little,” I think we really have to examine that in terms of our own lifestyles. I don’t think there is an overall blanket, “Well, you’ve got to give up this, you’ve got to give up that.” It’s a progressive vision. In terms of meditation practice, you know, renunciation is required in that. You might have to renounce half an hour in bed, or a little bit of TV. It’s not a matter of “What do I have to do?” it’s a matter of what you value. If you value something sufficiently you will make space for it.

Could the Buddha be trying to teach us to be comfortable with our existential discomfort, rather than trying to make it go away?

There is no zone of comfort—anywhere. So relax in your discomfort, instead of trying to fight it, or shore it up, or escape it. Buddhadhamma is not a hobby, something we do to make ourselves feel good. I think we do it a disservice if we think it’s about feeling good. Now, good factors arise, to be sure! But they are not to be clung to, because they are impermanent as well. In many ways the most elemental aspect of the teaching for me is *upekkhā*, equanimity. I see *upekkhā* almost—and this is why I feel the *Brahma vihāras* are a path to awakening—as a synonym for *nibbāna*.

We seem to have this reflex to take what’s flowing past us and try to nail it down. The word for that impulse is desire, and it is the cause of suffering. I think the French philosopher Michel Foucault has a wonderful phrase for it. He speaks of “the eye that cadaverizes life and then looks for its frail nerve.” Put in more contemporary terms, I think it’s the eye that takes the butterfly and pins in down, and then says how beautiful it is. So we take this wonderful dynamic world—and

I don’t mean anything outside of ourselves, but the world in our fathom-long bodies—and we look for fixity in what is actually a marvelous flux. We don’t have to do that, and we’re better off not doing it.

