

Insight Journal Spring 2006

What the Buddha Taught
Editor's Essay

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An Interview with Gregory Kramer

Getting the Message
Ajaa Thanissaro

Poems From the Community

Truth
Sutta Studies

Grounded by the Earth
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Remembering Friends

Fully Quenched
Pali Poetry



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Insight involves an intuition of mind and heart that takes us beyond knowledge toward wisdom. It has to do with deeply understanding the nature of things, rather than with knowing a lot about them.

In the Buddhist tradition wisdom is nurtured by the deep investigation of experience. This involves the careful integration of both study and practice—the study of dharma (the Buddha's teachings), coupled with the practice of meditation.

This journal is dedicated to exploring some of the insights that such a balanced inquiry uncovers about ourselves, our world, and our fellow beings. Welcome to the discussion.



The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to bringing together teachers, students, scholars and practitioners who are committed to exploring Buddhist thought and practice as a living tradition, faithful to its origins and lineage, yet adaptable and alive in the current world. The center's purpose is to provide a bridge between study and practice, between scholarly understanding and meditative insight. It encourages engagement with the tradition in a spirit of genuine inquiry and investigation.

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Photos on pages 10, 20, and 29 are of home altars. Photos on pages 1, 32: Buddha in our garden; 12: empty zafu in the Dharma Hall; 15: a student in the Dharma Hall; 23: nearby marsh; 26: nearby sign (taken by Sumi Loundon). Photo on page 31 by Shen Pauley.

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What the Buddha Taught

One question that often comes up for the modern student of Buddhism is “What did the Buddha teach?” The short answer, it seems to me, is something like “Who knows?” It’s kind of like asking “What is a tree?” (or any other question, for that matter). There is just no getting at what something *really* is. All that can be said is what it looks like from this perspective or that point of view, which, when you think about it, is saying far more about ourselves than about the tree, or about what the Buddha really taught.

We can look at a tree in terms of its biology or chemistry, its shape, species, or color, or the evocative beauty of its shimmering leaves in the autumn twilight breeze. It’s a home to the squirrels, a threat to the foundation of a nearby home, a dinner platter for a host of insects and the many birds who feed off them. It’s one thing to the carpenter, another to the developer, and something else entirely to the ten year old boy with some old boards and a handful of nails. I could go on, but I think the point has been made. It’s all a matter of how you look at it.

The same is very much the case for our understanding of what the Buddha taught. Just as the scientist might feel that he has a more definitive, “objective” perspective on the tree, so also the scholar of religion tends to wield a certain authority on the teachings of the Buddha, at least in her own mind. Even with a sophisticated grasp of the hermeneutical issues, an expansive appreciation of the historical context, and a near mastery of ancient linguistic nuance, there is no escaping the pivotal insight of the post-modern world: all meaning is locally constructed. At the end of the day all constructions of knowledge are merely constructions.

An understanding of what the Buddha taught is spread across everyone who has ever heard and construed those teachings, because such an understanding is a local event taking place in a specific moment of interpretation by a particular individual. That individual may be trained in the study of religion, or steeped in the meditative arts, or embedded in a specific agenda, or inept at thinking outside a limited comfort zone...or all of the above. In fact, the only thing certain is that everyone trying to understand what the Buddha taught will be coming at the question from a specific and limited perspective. Actually, there is another thing that is also certain: none of these perspectives stands much chance of getting at what the Buddha *really* taught.

This is not to merely say that “everything is relative” and, therefore, “whatever.” How each one of us constructs our local world of meaning is a matter of ultimate concern. Indeed, there is nothing more important or deserving of care. Whether we construct ourselves and our world skillfully or unskillfully determines whether or not we suffer.

What guidelines did the Buddha leave to help us understand as best we can what it is he taught?

To begin with, he seems well aware of the problem. Even during his lifetime, people were regularly misconstruing his teaching, either inadvertently or deliberately. “Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the dhamma in *that* way?” he says to Ariṭṭha, the former vulture-killer who tries to say obstructions are not really obstructions (M 22), and to Sāti, the former fisherman who thinks his consciousness will survive his death (M 38). From the earliest times he seems to have been regularly misrepresented by those “who declare as spoken or uttered by the Tathāgata what has not been spoken or uttered by the Tathāgata.” (A 2:3.3).

The Buddha was therefore quite careful about how his teachings were to be handed down, stating, “Two things incline to establishing the non-confusion and non-disappearance of true dhamma: correctly laying down the words and phrases, and correctly interpreting their meaning.” (A 2:2.10) And, we are told, whenever in doubt about whether a teacher is accurately conveying the doctrines of the Buddha, “Their words and phrases should be carefully studied and compared with the *suttas*, and reviewed in the light of the practice.” (D 16:4.8).

The first part of this advice is a matter of historical accuracy, critical scholarship, and a certain degree of common sense. But the second part, dealing with “correctly interpreting the meaning” and “reviewing in the light of the practice” is another matter entirely, and calls for a different set of skills.

The dhamma is meant to be *enacted*. It is a blueprint for how to reorganize the function of the mind and body in the present moment, and as such its meaning can only be recovered if it is put to use. The best answer to the question of what the Buddha taught, therefore, will be found not in the texts but in experience. It is important to direct attention in a particular way within experience, and the instructions for how to do that are to be found in the texts. But the *meaning* of the Buddha’s teaching, which is ultimately found in the insights yielded from that right view, will only manifest when his wisdom is enacted locally, in the transformation of a person.

As he famously tells the Kālāmas, “When you *know for yourselves* that these things are wholesome...these things, when entered upon and undertaken, incline towards welfare and happiness—then, Kālāmas, having come to them you should stay with them.” (A 3:65) So the best way to discern what the Buddha taught is to become what the Buddha taught. Carefully build the raft, diligently paddle it to the other shore, and become one who knows.

—Andrew Olendzki



Deep Listening

An Interview with Gregory Kramer

Gregory Kramer is the director of Metta Foundation in Portland, OR, (www.metta.org) and teaches Insight Dialogue meditation and Dharma Contemplation worldwide.

Any application of the practice can be a door that, when opened, reveals something important about grasping and freedom.

I presume you didn't graduate high school saying to yourself, "I'm going to spend my life teaching Dharma." Might there have been a few steps between there and here? How did you get into all this, Gregory?

Actually, I did graduate high school feeling a close affinity to the internal life. That's just how I was as a kid. I didn't have a word for it at the time, but I have always had a strong interest in how things actually are—what in Buddhism is called wisdom. It took some of the manifestations you would expect, given the shape of society in that era, like psychology and poetry. When I read *The Three Pillars of Zen* at the age of 17, I actually felt a kind of crisis, wondering if I should become a monk. After some soul searching, I realized I wasn't ready for it. I had work to do in the world so I followed my inclination to be a musician.

Let me guess...electric shakuhachi?

Close. Privately, I was a pianist, but my public face was as an electronic

music composer/performer. I was part of the downtown New York avant garde electronic music scene in the 70s. I was doing music for modern dance and films, performing concerts, that kind of thing. It wasn't rock and roll—I performed and sculpted noise. That led to an interest in music technology, and I spent some time as an inventor, developer—a different kind of creativity—and ersatz businessperson. My work with sound, particularly a complex musical controller I was building with Bob Moog, led me into science, of all things. I was dealing with all this complex control, then found myself at the Santa Fe Institute exploring how sound could be used to represent complex systems, so I began to research sonification, and edited the first book on auditory displays. But throughout all that, my heart was centered in meditation and the dharma. I was studying and practicing in various ways, having been trained by my first teacher, Anagarika Dhammadina, and then later by Venerable Ananda Maitreya, Achan Sobin, and Punnaji Mahathera.

How did you run into your teachers?

In 1974, I happened to be attending a one-week seminar with a yoga teacher at an ashram in Canada, when one day at lunch some people mentioned there was a Buddhist nun living up the road; would I like to go visit her? I didn't really know what a Buddhist nun was, but I went along, and trundling up from her garden was this woman dressed in brown. It was Anagarika Dhammadina, who immediately struck me as profoundly clear, wise, and present. The next day, I went back to visit her alone to kind of drink up whatever was going on here. I was already in the throes of discovering mindfulness by then: I'd read a lot of spiritual literature available at the time and visited some communities. I could see that the spiritual path was about being awake, and I was trying in my own awkward way to wake up. And it was awkward! So when I met her, I recognized how present she was and that she was clearly drawing from a tradition that was centered on being awake.

There was nothing theoretical or abstract about her: she was an astonishing combination of an earthy Austrian peasant woman living on the land in Canada, and profound mystic talking about liberation. Her first job with me was to help me be a decent person. I was your typical, completely self-centered, Western, middle-class kid. She would have nothing to do with that. She made no bones about knocking me upside the head because, to her, there was no distinction whatsoever between being a decent person and being awakened. She was as much a tough grandmother as she was a spiritual teacher.

And she taught you meditation?

Yes, she taught me vipassana, and soon added a good deal of dharma and abhidhamma. I would not see her very often; in fact, her first instructions to me took about ten minutes. But for the next year, and from there on out, I practiced diligently in between our meetings. She had no particular urge to be a teacher and was more interested in continuing her own path, so she would invite teachers from elsewhere, both for her own sake and for her students. In this way, she introduced me to my other three primary teachers. First, Ananda Maitreya Maha Nayaka Thero, then Ajaan Sobin. At the time of her death, she introduced me to and I began working with Ven. Punnaji Mahathera. So over a twenty year period, my study was a wonderful *mélange* of Theravada teachings from Sri Lanka and Thailand.

It sounds like an unusual and fortunate dharma education.

It was incredible! It had this quality of going back to the source. It was outside the Western vipassana tradition, yet was very much in the Theravada tradition. As respected as these teachers were, it was clear that each, in their own way, was also a kind of iconoclast. It was

remarkable to me to discover over time just how diverse the tradition could be. You might think that when you go back to the root tradition, everyone would be teaching the same thing. But each of the teachers not only had their own personality, and therefore a unique way of expressing the teachings, but the teachings themselves also seemed to be open to a vast range of understanding and interpretation, dependent upon how you translate a key term or what aspect of the teaching is emphasized. Venerable Punnaji, in particular, radically re-approached and re-translated key dharma terms in brilliant and spot-on ways. I was indeed fortunate to have been exposed to so many subtly diverse perspectives and to be led to the core—the suttas and direct personal experience—from where all of it came.

Insight Dialogue is the extension of silent meditation into the interpersonal sphere.

At some point you made some kind of transition, from dhamma practice being a part-time concern that went parallel to other things in your life, to it becoming a primary focus. Can you say something about that?

I can, because the transition was actually quite explicit. Though dhamma was my deepest love and concern, I intentionally avoided making teaching my vocation in the world because I was concerned that my tendency towards accomplishment or self-making might take over. I had seen the teacher role affect a lot of people in negative ways, and knew I could well run into the same problems. But the centrality of the dharma in my life was a trend that wouldn't hold back. In the nineties, my primary scientific research was in

sonification and perception, but my growing interest in questions of human transformation and consciousness studies brought the dharma more front and center. I embarked upon a Ph.D. project having to do with ways of bringing the qualities of mind cultivated in vipassana meditation to being in dialogue using online communications. This is when Insight Dialogue first began to emerge.

What is Insight Dialogue, in a nutshell?

It's the extension of personal, silent meditation practice into the interpersonal sphere. The technique, the qualities cultivated, and the intentions of the vipassana tradition are all maintained—*sati* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (concentration), and *sammā ditṭhi* (right view) remain central to the process—and these qualities are brought to the interpersonal engagement with others. Just as you carefully attend to sense data and bring awareness to mental states during silent vipassana retreats, you can also attend to the words being spoken to you by others, along with all sorts of nonverbal signals that come along with communication. The heart vibrates, the organism vibrates, and this is known.

What is the precedent for this practice in the early tradition?

The evidence is everywhere in the discourses, but the most striking, clear statement of it is right there in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the *Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*. In the refrain repeated again and again in that text, the Buddha speaks about observing the whole range of phenomena *internally, externally, and both internally and externally*. This passage is so often glossed over, and emphasis is usually placed upon an introspective and even introverted approach to vipassana meditation. But as I understand

the instructions here, the practice is not complete unless one learns to attend just as carefully and precisely to external, or perhaps objective, phenomena. This must include interpersonal phenomena, a huge aspect of our lives as relational, social beings. I discovered only gradually how powerful and deeply rooted in the tradition this way of practicing really is.

Let's take mindfulness as an example (though we could take almost any aspect of the dhamma). Internally, I'm mindful of this body as I'm sitting here talking to you: I'm mindful of the pleasant and unpleasant sensations, of my mind states and emotions. I might also be mindful of the hindrances or the enlightenment factors as they arise in this heart-mind right now. I might also open and extend my awareness from the internal and personal to the mutual, or shared, moments. I might be mindful of the words being spoken, of your body and how you're moving your body. I might be mindful that I'm turning back internally to my reactions to what you've said, and to my aversion and craving, my concerns, my fears. Then I could turn outward again, noticing the impermanence of what's external, which, right now, is you. You are changing moment to moment as you speak, as you look at me, and so on. Then, I can reflect upon both what's internal and external. The heart/mind becomes flexible, calm and alert. We begin to see things as they are.

Looking at mindfulness meditation in the way I've come to understand and implement the teachings, the internal *and* external refers to the entire relational moment, to what Martin Buber called *the between*. It involves finding a whole notion of interpersonal contact—this voice of mine speaking and reaching your ears; a moment of ear contact; then you speak to me and your voice reaches my ears. Out of this language there is mind contact. There is visual contact and other kinds of energetic contact, and a relational

moment unfolds, with both internal and external aspects. Indeed, it often becomes difficult to say where one leaves off and the other begins. The rigid boundaries between self and other—built up since infancy or even before it—begin to soften. This, of course, reveals and challenges the whole enterprise of constructing duality. This can be directly experienced in Insight Dialogue, where we meditate together.

Look at what a tremendous amount of our suffering is interpersonal.

It's true that many people—students and teachers both—don't know what to make of the external part of the instruction, especially when it comes to feeling tones or mental objects. It sounds like you may be opening up, and completing, an important but overlooked part of the classical teachings here.

It feels solid and not just an opportunistic interpretation, especially when you look at the rest of the Buddha's teachings in this interpersonal light: interpersonal doubt and lust, relational grasping, energy and fear, all the way down to the ways dependent origination unfolds in the presence of others. As I began teaching this way, and the practice got deeper and deeper, the insights people were having got more profound and beautiful. As I immersed myself in the suttas, I saw that the whole dispensation of the Buddha, when construed to cover the interpersonal, had that same depth interpersonally that it does personally.

The noble truth of suffering is another example that easily comes to hand. Yes, suffering is personal, including as it does bodily pain and aging and death, and the existential issues of what am I doing with my life and so forth. But

look at what a tremendous amount of our suffering is interpersonal. Not only are others often the source of my pain (have you ever been in relationship?), but so much of what I do causes suffering to others, either directly or quite indirectly—we discern the seeds of compassion.

Then you go on to say, if that's the case, then the cause of this interpersonal suffering must also be interpersonal *tanhā*, that is, craving, hunger. You look inside your life, you look inside your own heart, and you don't have to look very far to find it. Yes, I've got interpersonal hungers going on. I do hunger for interpersonal pleasure. I do fear interpersonal pain. I do hunger to be seen, to exist, to be acknowledged, interpersonally. I also fear nonbeing. I do hunger to escape. These are the cravings for existence and non-existence, understood interpersonally. All these hungers together are the roots of my suffering.

Of course, if you've gone that far, you can't help but take the next step and ask, is the third noble truth true, interpersonally? What might my life look like with the cessation of interpersonal hunger? Might the stillness and love I cultivate be continually available to others? Might their love be available to me? Can I live with others in the world with the expansiveness, openness, availability, and tranquility of heart that comes from the cessation of these social or interpersonal hungers, and the grasping they create? Lovingkindness and compassion are not theory: they are lived experience.

Is it a matter of greater intimacy?

You know, that's an interesting word, and it obviously comes up in my retreats or the practice groups that form. I've learned to distinguish two important facets of intimacy. One is constructed intimacy, which is what we usually think of when we use the word

intimacy. Perhaps we've constructed a life together, as husband or wife, as business partners, or in a long-term friendship. This is intimate in the sense that we feel familiar, close, understood, and safe. We feel this way because the fibers woven between us are so refined, so numerous, so deeply set in our neurological structure.

But, there is also a quality of intimacy that is unconstructed, that is found in the absence of all of that. We are intimate because there is nothing in between us. This is what arises in meditation when we have direct contact with experience, and that experience encompasses another person, or other people. Not only is my direct contact with experience occurring in my own internal meditation—seeing is seeing, hearing is hearing, and so forth—but it is also happening while being present with another, with eyes open, with ears open, having stepped outside the whole constructed sense of self and other. This is unconstructed intimacy.

Unconstructed intimacy is not built around a sense of self—or of non-self, for that matter. It is not built at all. It is the essence of impermanence, of emptiness, the essence of *anatta*, of *shunyata*. *Shunyata* extends to the whole of our lives, even this place—human relationships—where it is usually most obviously absent. The third noble truth, interpersonally understood, thus reveals a quality of being with others. It is a quality of coming to rest without clinging and seeing things as they actually are.

I've certainly noticed that a number of people, many with extensive experience of silent, personal meditation, find the Insight Dialogue work quite remarkable.

Isn't that amazing? It inspires me deeply. I'll tell you why that is, as I understand it. It's well-acknowledged by many people involved in this work that in traditional practice it's possible to bypass

a lot of issues and thereby miss a lot of insights. The mind is very powerful, and can protect those places of tension, confusion, and hurt from being known. But a lot of that hiding becomes impossible when you bring the practice out into the open air with others, where every moment of interpersonal practice is met by, supported by, and even challenged by others. Experience is met with unfettered receptivity, which is the essential nature of awareness, internally and externally. This quality of openness is the essence of the transformative moment—clinging is released and hungers diminish. This includes but is not limited to identified, psychological release. It extends to the mystery of awakening.

Whether we're with one other person or twenty others, all are attending to the very same moment, providing a bright beacon of mindfulness, care, and compassion. So we are waking each other up to these qualities. There's very little room at these retreats for lethargy. So an Insight Dialogue retreat tends to be challenging in the early stages, a real crucible for the practice, and then blissful in the later stages as a stillness develops from letting go. We regularly encounter capacities for relational peace, joy and insight that we did not know existed.

One of the many interesting places this leads is towards understanding the constructed nature of our issues with such things as race, ethnicity, gender and power. With interpersonal meditation, the nature of our constructs of self and other become very clear, just as in personal meditation our self-constructs become clear. One sees



Careful listening has always been for me a mindful experience of impermanence.

those constructs in dynamic, IMAX cinematography. You really see how you're constructing yourself to others, and constructing a sense of who they are as well. It can be appalling; it can be pretty funny; it can be freeing.

This could have a dramatic impact on things, given that so many of the world's problems are caused and exacerbated by a lack of ability to communicate.

It's an inability to know that while we're communicating we are doing all this constructing, and that we end up communicating through our constructs and our constructed sense of the other. In interpersonal meditation, you see that in real time. You actually see yourself doing it because you're bringing mindfulness and tranquility to it.

This work can give us a deeper understanding of what it is to live with others and be with others in ongoing, intimate relationships. What might it bring to my relationship to my father and mother, or my sons or daughters, to my spouse or my housemates, or to my work partners? We learn how our hungers for pleasure, or to be seen, or to hide, impact all of our relationships. Things can unbind in those relationships, and they become

opportunities for awakening and freedom rather than tying tighter the knots of our interpersonal habits and fears.

That sounds both frightening and compelling at the same time.

It's not trivial work. But then again, the dhamma is both compelling and frightening at the same time, isn't it? It's the interpersonal face of the same thing. As it is with personal practice, we live out the wisdom that comes from this meditation. Also, we can apply the practice per se, for example in therapy, conflict resolution, education, substance abuse work, or artistic collaborations. Ultimately, though, any particular application can be another door that, when opened, reveals something important about grasping and freedom. Personal and interpersonal practice are not in conflict, they are profoundly synergistic.

You've been moving in some new directions recently, haven't you? What can you tell us about Dharma Contemplation?

What I am calling Dharma Contemplation can be understood as the interpersonal practice of right view. It has grown from my own experience of the richness of the Buddha's teachings, which is to say my encounters with the suttas, the words of the Buddha recorded in the earliest literature of the Pali Canon. As I was reading a discourse, I would come upon something that struck me as profound and important, and I would just stop. I would soak in the words, settle into the phrases, and dwell in what the text was saying on many levels—intellectually, emotionally. I would ask the question, "How does this really touch my life?" As I did so it felt as if the teachings would almost move into my body, into my heart, and saturate my whole mind state. It was a deep learning.

When I came upon the Christian practice of *lectio divina*, a formalized way of bringing the words of Jesus and the New Testament scriptures to life in many layers, I took that as an inspiration. The Jewish practice of Midrash, and the secular experience of reading poetry, also infiltrated the practice. I began to develop a form of encountering the words of the Buddha that unfolded in stages, like *lectio divina*, and adapted it to dialogue practice, where wisdom comes from many, not just one.

Dharma Contemplation is primarily a group practice that can take place either face to face or online. We take small segments of the Buddha's teachings, translated into English, and go gradually through several phases. First, we just absorb the teachings, we listen to them just like when they were first spoken. Then, we speak out to the group whatever words strike us in some way. Silence, or online pauses, surround the words. We begin to internalize them, even memorize them. Next, we explore their meaning with the intellect, asking what certain words, phrases, or metaphors actually mean.

Then we shift to the heart and explore our emotional responses, noticing more subtle resonances we might have to words like, say, "relinquishment" or "abundance." After exploring meaning and emotion in the text, we enter into dialogue about how this truth manifests now, in our lives. This is the in-the-moment experience of the Buddha's teaching. This moves us towards silence. Eventually we settle into personal, internal contemplation, and just let the teachings ripen inside us.

What these two practices, Dharma Contemplation and Insight Dialogue, seem to have in common with your earlier life in music and auditory displays is that all involve very careful listening. All you life's pursuits center around savoring the textures and

bringing out the nuances of sound, in the broadest sense of the word.

I think you are right: it's a matter of being attuned to contact with the world, and also of being awake in the moment of experience. Careful listening has always been for me a mindful experience of impermanence. As I listen, I am energized to remain in that moment as it unfolds. If I am performing music, whoever else is listening is invited to ride that moment of living experience with me. We are joined, you might say, dialogically: with other musicians or the audience when performing, with other meditators in Insight Dialogue, and with other students of the Buddha's teaching in Dharma Contemplation. Touching the same moment. This moment.

In sonification, as you listen intently to the aural transmission of complex data sets, you are forming mental models shaped by that data, and based on that perceptual experience, understanding arises. Being fully present in that moment and attuning to these sensations and perceptions, one becomes utterly present—much like meditation, right?

Any last thoughts, Gregory?

Just the reminder that interpersonal meditation practice, just like personal meditation practice, goes well beyond mindfulness. We can talk about mindfulness in society—and that is a great start. But when we really drop down, with meditative insight, and have the entire scope of the dharma to apply directly to our encounters in society, it becomes vast. Not only is it a matter of how can I cultivate mindfulness when I'm in conflict, but how can I cultivate right effort, how can I cultivate right view, how can I develop wisdom? It's both daunting and inspiring to catch glimpses of how much wider and, I dare say, deeper, the teachings can be applied to our entire lives.



The Buddha is famous for having refused to take a position on many of the controversial issues of his day, such as whether the cosmos is finite or infinite, eternal or not. In fact, many people—both in his time and in ours—have assumed that he didn't take a firm position on any issue at all. Based on this assumption, some people have been exasperated with the Buddha, accusing him of being wishy-washy and indecisive, while others have been pleased, praising him for being tolerant and refreshingly free from ideas of right and wrong.

Both reactions, however, are misinformed. The early texts report that a group of wanderers, in a discussion with one of the Buddha's lay disciples, once accused the Buddha of not taking a position on any issue, and the disciple replied that they were mistaken. There was one issue on which the Buddha's position was very clear: what kind of behavior is skillful, and what kind of behavior is not. When the disciple later reported the conversation to the Buddha, the Buddha approved of what he had said. The distinction between skillful and unskillful behavior lies at the basis of everything the Buddha taught.

In making this distinction, the Buddha drew some very sharp lines:

What is unskillful? Taking life is unskillful, taking what is not given... sexual misconduct... lying... abusive speech... divisive tale-bearing... idle chatter is unskillful. Covetousness... ill will... wrong views are unskillful. These things are called unskillful....

And what is skillful? Abstaining from taking life is skillful, abstaining from taking what is not given... from sexual misconduct... from lying... from abusive

speech... from divisive tale-bearing... abstaining from idle chatter is skillful. Lack of covetousness... lack of ill will... right views are skillful. These things are called skillful.—MN 9

Killing is never skillful. Stealing, lying, and everything else in the first list are never skillful. When asked if there was anything whose killing he approved of, the Buddha answered that there was only one thing: anger. In no recorded instance did he approve of killing any living being at all. When one of his monks went to an executioner and told the man to kill his victims compassionately, with one blow, rather than torturing them, the Buddha expelled the monk from the Sangha, on the grounds that even the recommendation to kill compassionately is still a recommendation to kill—something he would never condone. If a monk was physically attacked, the Buddha allowed him to strike back in self-defense, but never with the intention to kill. As he told the monks,

Even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handed saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of good will, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with good will and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with good will—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.—MN 21

Photo artwork by Chris Talbott



When formulating lay precepts based on his distinction between skillful and unskillful, the Buddha never made any allowances for ifs, ands, or buts. When you promise yourself to abstain from killing or stealing, the power of the promise lies in its universality. You won't break your promise to yourself under any conditions at all. This is because this sort of unconditional promise is a powerful gift. Take, for instance, the first precept, against killing:

There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the first gift, the first great gift—original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning—that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & brahmans.—AN VIII.39

If you make exceptions in your promise to yourself—trying to justify killing in cases where you feel endangered or inconvenienced by another being's existence—your gift

of freedom is limited, and you lose your share in limitless freedom. Thus the gift of freedom, to be fully effective, has to be unconditional, with no room for exceptions, no matter how noble they may sound, of any kind.

The dynamic of this kind of gift, of course, depends on an important principle, the teaching of karma and rebirth: If you act on unskillful motivations, the act will result in your suffering, now or in lives to come; if you act on skillful intentions, the act will result in your happiness now or in lives to come. If you don't kill anyone, you are not creating the circumstances where anyone or anything will cut short your life span. Your past karma may still leave an opening for your murder or accidental death—you can't go back and undo what you've already done—but once you make and follow through with the promise not to kill again, you are creating no new openings for having your life cut short. As the Dhammapada says,

If there's no wound on the hand,
that hand can hold poison.
Poison won't penetrate
where there's no wound.
There's no evil
for those who don't do it.—Dhp 124

This is why the Buddha listed virtue as one of a person's greatest treasures. Kings and thieves can steal your material belongings and even take your life, but they

can't take your virtue. If it's uncompromising, your virtue protects you from any true danger from now until you reach nirvana.

Even if you're not ready to accept the teaching on karma and rebirth, the Buddha still recommended an absolute standard of virtue. As he told the Kalamas, if you decide to act skillfully at all times, harming no one, then even if it turned out that there was no life after death, you'd still come out ahead, for you would have been able to live and die with a clear conscience—something that no amount of money or political influence can buy.



So the Buddha's position on the precepts was uncompromising and clear. If you want to follow his teachings, there's absolutely no room for killing, stealing, or lying, period. However, in our current climate of terrorism and counter-terrorism—where governments have claimed that it's their moral duty to lie, kill, and torture in order to prevent others from lying, killing, and torturing—a number of Buddhist teachers have joined in the effort, trying to find evidence that there were some occasions, at least, where the Buddha would condone killing or offer a rationale for a just war. Exactly why they would want to do this is up to them to say, but there's a need to examine their arguments in order to set the record straight. The Buddha never taught a theory of just war; no decision to wage war can legitimately be traced to his teachings; no war veteran has ever had to agonize over memories of the people he killed because the Buddha said that war was okay. These facts are among the glories of the Buddhist tradition, and it's important for the human race that they not be muddied in an effort to recast the Buddha in our own less-than-glorious image.

Because the Pali Canon is such an unpromising place to look for the justification of killing, most of the arguments for a Buddhist theory of just war look elsewhere for their evidence, citing the words and behavior of people they take as surrogates for the Buddha. These arguments are obviously on shaky ground, and can be easily dismissed even by people who know nothing of the Canon. For example, it has been argued that because Asian governments claiming to be Buddhist have engaged in war and torture, the Buddha's teachings must condone such behavior. However, we've had enough exposure to people claiming to be Christian whose behavior is very unchristian to realize that the same thing can probably happen in the Buddhist world as well. To take killers and torturers as your guide to the Buddha's teaching is hardly a sign of good judgment.

On a somewhat higher note, one writer has noted that his meditation teacher has told soldiers and policemen that if their duty is to kill, they must perform their duty, albeit compassionately and with mindfulness. The writer then goes on to argue that because his teacher is the direct recipient of an oral tradition dating back to the Buddha, we must take this as evidence that the Buddha would give similar advice as well. This statement, of course, tells us more about the writer's faith in his teacher than about the Buddha; and when we reflect that the Buddha expelled from the Sangha a monk who gave advice of this sort to an executioner, it casts serious doubts on his argument.

There are, however, writers who try to find evidence in the Pali Canon for a Buddhist theory of just war, not in what the Buddha said, but in what he didn't. The arguments go like this: When talking with kings, the Buddha never told them not to engage in war or capital punishment. This was his tacit admission that the king had a justifiable duty to engage in these activities, and the kings would have understood his silence as such. Because these arguments cite the Pali Canon and claim a historian's knowledge of how silence was interpreted in the Buddha's day, they seem to carry more authority than the others. But when we actually look at the Pali record of the Buddha's conversations with kings, we find that the arguments are bogus. The Buddha was able to communicate the message to kings that they shouldn't kill, but because kings in general were not the most promising students of the Dhamma, he had to bring them to this message in an indirect way.

The Buddha's position was uncompromising and clear. If you want to follow his teachings, there's absolutely no reason for killing.

It's true that in the Pali Canon silence is sometimes interpreted as acquiescence, but this principle holds only in response to a request. If someone invited the Buddha to his house for a meal and the Buddha remained silent, that was a sign of consent. However, there were many instances in which the Buddha's silence was a sign, not of acquiescence, but of tact. A professional soldier once went to the Buddha and said that his teachers had taught the existence of a heaven awaiting soldiers who die in battle. What did the Buddha have to say about that? At first the Buddha declined to answer, but when the soldier showed



the sincerity of his question by pressing him three times for a response, he finally replied:

When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, his mind is already seized, debased, & misdirected by the thought: ‘May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist’: If others then strike him down & slay him while he is thus striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the hell called the realm of those slain in battle. But if he holds such a view as this: ‘When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, if others then strike him down & slay him while he is striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the company of devas slain in battle,’ that is his wrong view. Now, there are two destinations for a person with wrong view, I tell you: either hell or the animal womb.—SN XLII.3

The soldier then broke down and cried—not because he felt that the Buddha’s words were cruel, but because he believed their truth and was upset at his earlier teachers for having lied to him. In this case, the Buddha’s reticence and tact helped to make his teaching effective. A similar set of events happened when an actor asked the Buddha if there is a special heaven reserved for actors. The Buddha’s

reticence and tact in informing the actor of a hell for actors who incite their audiences to greed, anger, and delusion inspired the actor to respond in the same way as the soldier.



If the pride of soldiers and actors required special handling, even more care was required in the handling of kings, for their pride was often coupled with an unrestrained sense of power. A remarkable feature of the Pali Canon is that even though the Buddha was a member of the noble warrior caste, the discourses generally show a low regard for the spiritual standing of kings. In many passages, kings are mentioned in the same breath with thieves: They confiscate property and show little regard for the rule of law. The Canon does recognize exceptions—King Bimbisara of Magadha achieves stream-entry the first time he hears the Dhamma, and he never engages in war—but for the most part, kings are depicted as spiritually stunted. King Ajatasattu, on first seeing the Buddha sitting surrounded by monks, can’t tell which person in the assembly is the Buddha, a sign of his spiritual blindness; this blindness is later proven by his asking the Buddha’s advice on how to defeat his innocent neighbors in war. As one of the discourses suggests, this sort of blindness is an occupational hazard for rulers, in that the unfair exercise of power can make a person unfit for learning the truth.

Because of having wrongly inflicted suffering on another person through beating or imprisonment or confiscation or placing blame or banishment, [with the thought,] ‘I have power. I want power,’ when told what is factual, he denies it and doesn’t acknowledge it. When told what is unfactual, he doesn’t make an ardent effort to untangle it [to see], ‘This is unfactual. This is baseless.’—AN III.90

Even King Pasenadi of Kosala, the king most closely associated with the Buddha, comes across as well-meaning but somewhat dense. An entire discourse, MN 90, is a satire of how his royal position has thwarted his ability to learn the Dhamma. He can’t phrase his questions properly, has trouble following a discussion for more than a few sentences, and is unable to come to any certain conclusions about the truth. Still, in other discourses he has his occasional moments of spiritual clarity, and the Buddha uses those moments as opportunities to teach the Dhamma. The Buddha’s approach here is twofold: to try to expand the king’s perspective on life at times when the king is willing to be frank; and to encourage the king when the latter gains insights on his own.

Spiritual blindness is an occupational hazard for rulers: the unfair exercise of power can make a person unfit for learning the truth.

For example, there's the famous discourse (SN III.25) where Pasenadi comes to visit the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asks him what he's been doing, and the king replies—in a moment of rare and wonderful frankness—that he's been involved in the sort of activities typical of a king intoxicated with his power. The Buddha takes this moment of frankness as an opportunity to teach the Dhamma. Suppose, he says, that four mountains were rolling in inexorably from the four directions, crushing all life in their path. Given that the human birth is so rare and hard to achieve, what should be done? The king's reply: What else should be done but living in line with the Dhamma? The Buddha then draws the lesson: Aging and death are rolling in inexorably. Given that the human birth is so rare and hard to achieve, what should be done? The king draws the obvious conclusion that, again, the only thing to be done is to live in line with the Dhamma. He then goes on to make the observation that when aging and death are rolling in inexorably, there is no role for armies, wars, clever advisors, or great wealth to prevent their rolling in. The only thing to do is to live in line with the Dhamma.

In another discourse, Pasenadi comes to the Buddha and reports his own independent observation:

Those who engage in bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, & mental misconduct leave themselves unprotected. Even though a squadron of elephant troops might protect them, a squadron of cavalry troops, a squadron of chariot troops, a squadron of infantry troops might protect them, still they leave themselves unprotected. Why is that? Because that's an external protection, not an internal one. Therefore they leave themselves unprotected. But those who engage in good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct have themselves protected. Even though neither a squadron of elephant troops, a squadron of cavalry troops, a squadron of chariot troops, nor a squadron of infantry troops might protect them, still they have themselves protected. Why is that? Because that's an internal protection, not an external one. Therefore they have themselves protected.—SN III.5

It's highly unlikely that Pasenadi would have come to this conclusion if he hadn't spent time in conversation with the Buddha. From that conversation, he would have learned the meaning of good bodily, verbal, and mental conduct: the ten forms of skillful action. As a

tactful teacher, the Buddha simply concurred with the king's insight. The discourses suggest that this strategy encouraged the king to spend time in reflection of this sort, for in other discourses the king reports many similar insights for the Buddha to confirm.

We learn that the king did not always follow through with his insights, but that's not because the Buddha encouraged him to view killing as his duty. In fact, there is one striking example where these insights had at least a partial effect. Ajatasattu once attacked Pasenadi's kingdom, and Pasenadi responded by raising an army to fight him off. After an initial setback, Pasenadi was able to capture Ajatasattu. He could have killed him in revenge, for that was allowable under the rules of engagement during his time. But he chose not to, and it's hard not to see the Buddha's impact on this decision. When told of the battle, the Buddha said:

A man may plunder
as long as it serves his ends,
but when others are plundered,
he who has plundered
gets plundered in turn.

A fool thinks,
'Now's my chance,'
as long as his evil
has yet to ripen.
But when it ripens,
the fool
falls
into pain.

Killing, you gain
your killer.
Conquering, you gain one
who will conquer you;
insulting, insult;
harassing, harassment.
And so, through the cycle of action,
he who has plundered
gets plundered in turn.—SN III.15

Benighted as he was, Pasenadi still got the message. The question is, why can't we?

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The Retreat Center*(In Celebration of IMS' 30th Anniversary)*

Unobtrusive, yes.
 Just an ordinary country road,
 At the top of a rise,
 Not too far from some small town.

You'd never know it
 driving past:

Here,
 Countless times—like breaths—
 Awareness falls in love,
 with inhalation,
 with exhalation,
 with single leaves, whole trees,
 and,
 I've heard it said,
 with toilets.

You might not know it
 as you cross the threshold of a homely hall:

Here,
 the union of letting go and diving down
 begets
 again and again and again
 a single moment of peace.

You'll know it as it happens,
 know it like your hand,
 like the back of your hand
 turning
 to reveal the palm of your hand:

Here,
 the heart opens,
 and the soul slips softly
 around the bitter-sweet stuttering—
 Birth, death. Birth. Death.
 Birthdeath—

—*Eowyn Ahlstrom*

i'm glad i like potatoes
 when that is all there is to eat today.
 it's easy when you have no preferences.

—*Eleanor Ames*

If I Should Ever

If I should ever see you again—
 First I would have to sit through this pain

“The Ridgen Kings... Tilo, Naro...”
 Crouched in my contorted knee;
 Let the needled shoulders be
 No aversion.

Having the key of non-acquisitiveness
 It is still sure to follow
 The end...and so
 Where is the escape from sorrow?

We live only this instant
 Brought more alive by the suffering
 Of sitting pain.

—*James Besig*

The Truth

Just now in the med hall
 I sat with Myoshin
 And started to wonder,
 What's in Fragrance-Free lotion?

So as Buddha said
 I went to see for myself.
 I walked to the bathroom,
 Took the jar off the shelf.

While in the latrine
 Noting ingredients in the cream,
 I thought, “Might as well review
 Directions for how to shampoo;
 There's no I, me or mine,
 But this hair could still use some more body and shine.”

Five more minutes 'till the bell
 (That last sitting was hell)
 And who can resist lunch's savory smell?
 Besides, if I got up early, who's gonna tell?

So I set aside queries of soul, or no-soul
 And if all phenomena cannot be controlled.
 It's nice to have questions more easily answered—
 Now where was this toilet paper roll manufactured?

—*Laura Sideman*

*The heart-self of the world,
 born & evolved
 through imaginary time*

this knot of habits, this
 tangle of nervous twitches,
 strange familiar floating
 world, upside-down heart,
 buried heart, strangled heart,
 angled, angered heart,
 essence of illusion.

Dogen's three-headed, eight-
 elbowed Buddha being-time.

Thoughts as the frost
 on quantum-to-particle,
 atom-to-molecule,
 chemical-to-copulate,
 replicate-to-cogitate,
 nerves-to-nervousness,
 phototrope to fear,
 cell-wall-to-skin-prick-
 to-flight, thus
 boundary-to-leap-to-self,
 self-to-selfishness,
 so on to society, so
 many hearts in hiding,
 so here we are, again.

This diastole & systole,
 cardiac balloon of selves,
 watch, it floats & fears.

=ct=

Homage to the Elder

Homage to you,
The Venerable, The Teacher, The Elder.
Homage to you...

I have met you before
I can't remember when or where
It has been a long journey.

I have been with you
Noble Silence as our guide
Hope is not in our thoughts
mind and matter
reside in our thoughts
"What if" is not here
"What is," here:

Lying on your bed
you are not here
but a you *is* there.

"The sun is hot," you said.
I heard, "The sun is hot,"
but you meant
your heart is hot.

the night sound
louder than our heartbeat
day becomes night, night becomes day
and neither is true
time is irrelevant
but breath *is*

5/19/05: back to the hospital
again
a different world
a different language—numerical:
temperature 101.4, oxygen level 91
numbers are up, numbers are down
numbers are down, numbers are up
the voices of X-rays sheets wake us up

What we know is that we don't know.
We both know
the truth is unsureness.
We both know
"waiting" is nothing to do with us.
"Watching" is in our heartbeat.

As I hold your warm hand I may go first, instead of you,
and you may hold on to my cold hand or
you may go with your cold hand.
Warm and cold; constant changing of one sensation to another,

which you taught me: "Know the change, be aware of change,
no need to act or react. Let it go by itself."
Everything comes and goes
there is no control, we both know

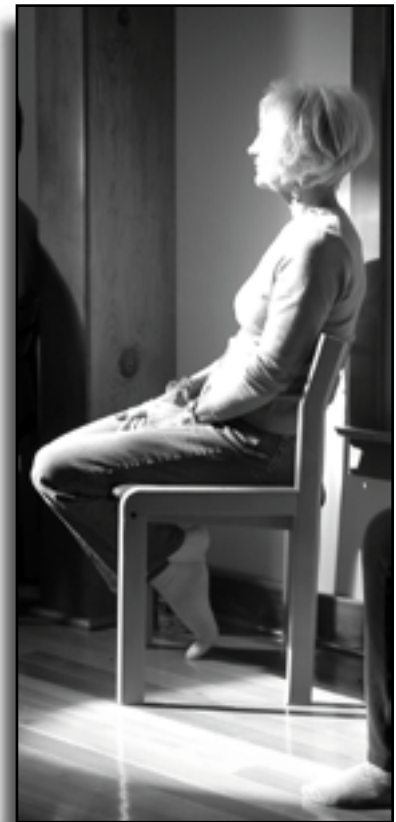
If you go first,
the sky will be below
the earth will be where
the sky used to be
but

I know
where to keep you:
in my Heart.

I pay homage to you, Sayadaw Gyi
I pay homage to you, Sayadaw Gyi
I pay homage to you, Sayadaw Gyi

—*Theikdi*

[For Sayadaw U Silananda,
who passed away in 2005.]



This page contains material sent in by our readers. If you have a poem, drawing or photograph you would like to share with others, relating to your meditative insights or retreat experience, please send it to the editors at BCBS.

TRUTH

❶ *There are five things that may turn out in two different ways here and now. What five?*

FAITH

(*saddhā*)

Something may be well accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false.

Something else may not be well accepted out of faith, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken.

If a person has faith, he preserves truth when he says: “My faith is thus;” but he does not yet come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.”

APPROVAL

(*ruci*)

Something may be well approved of, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false.

Something else may not be well approved of, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken.

If a person approves of something, he preserves truth when he says: “My approval is thus;” but he does not yet come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.”

ORAL TRADITION

(*anussava*)

Something may be well honored in oral tradition, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false.

Something else may not be well honored in oral tradition, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken.

If a person honors something in oral tradition, he preserves truth when he says: “My honoring of oral tradition is thus;” but he does not yet come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.”

REASONED CONSIDERATION

(*ākāra-parivittakka*)

Something may be well considered with reason, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false.

Something else may not be well considered with reason, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken.

If a person considers something with reason, he preserves truth when he says: “My reasoned consideration is thus;” but he does not yet come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.”

REFLECTIVE ACCEPTANCE OF A VIEW

(*ditṭhi-nijjhāna-kkhanti*)

Something may be well accepted upon reflection, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false.

Something else may not be well accepted upon reflection, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken.

If a person accepts a view upon reflection, he preserves truth when he says: “My acceptance of a view upon reflection is thus;” but he does not yet come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.”

❷ *In this way there is the preservation of truth. But as yet there is no discovery of truth.*

This sort of structured discourse found in the Pali literature can seem like linguistic sleight-of-hand, but when one examines it closely and works with it in experience it shows itself to be an insightful and practical guide for finding one's way among the tangle of views and opinions passing for truth in our world. We cannot help but base much of our belief on insubstantial grounds, but we can avoid the pitfall of regarding our knowledge as definitively true until we have verified it directly. In terms of understanding the dharma, we can see that the first crucial step is gaining confidence in the integrity of a teacher by means of careful investigation. The rest can develop naturally, but is bound to be a gradual evolutionary process. What we see here is not so much a circular argument as a feedback loop that cycles over and over as wisdom gradually emerges from a life of diligently investigating truth.

3 In what way is there the discovery of truth?

A teacher may be living in some village or town. A person goes to him [or her, throughout] and **investigates** him in regard to three kinds of states: states of greed, hatred and delusion.

"Are there in this teacher any states based on greed, hatred or delusion such that, with his mind obsessed by those states, while not knowing he might say, 'I know,' or while not seeing he might say, 'I see,' or he might urge others to act in a way that would lead to their harm and suffering for a long time?"

If when he investigates him he comes to know: "There are no such states based on greed, hatred or delusion in this teacher; the bodily and verbal behavior of this teacher are not those of one affected by greed, hatred or delusion; and the Dhamma that this teacher teaches is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise; this Dhamma cannot easily be taught by one affected by greed, hatred or delusion," then he places **faith** in him.

Filled with faith he **visits** him and **pays respect** to him.

Having paid respect to him, he **gives ear**.

Giving ear, he **hears the Dhamma**.

Having heard the Dhamma, he **memorizes** it.

He **examines the meaning** of the teachings he has memorized.

When he examines their meaning, he gains a **reflective acceptance** of those teachings.

When he has gained a reflective acceptance of those teachings, **zeal** springs up.

When zeal has sprung up, he **applies his will**.

Having applied his will, he **scrutinizes**.

Having scrutinized, he **strives**.

Resolutely striving, he realizes with the body the ultimate truth and sees it by penetrating it with **wisdom**.

4 In this way there is the discovery of truth. But as yet there is no final arrival at truth.

The final arrival at truth lies in the repetition, development, and cultivation of these same things.

From the *Canki Sutta (Majjhima 95)*; following Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom (1995).

5 What is most helpful for the final arrival at truth?

Striving is most helpful for the final arrival at truth. If one does not strive, one will not finally arrive at truth; but because one strives, one does finally arrive at truth. And what is most helpful for striving?

Scrutiny is most helpful for striving. If one does not scrutinize, one will not strive; but because one scrutinizes, one strives. And what is most helpful for scrutiny?

Application of the will is most helpful for scrutiny. If one does not apply one's will, one will not scrutinize; but because one applies one's will, one scrutinizes. And what is most helpful for application of the will?

Zeal is most helpful for application of the will. If one does not arouse zeal, one will not apply one's will; but because one arouses zeal, one applies one's will. And what is most helpful for zeal?

A **reflective acceptance** of the teachings is most helpful for zeal. If one does not gain a reflective acceptance of the teachings, zeal will not spring up; but because one gains a reflective acceptance of the teachings, zeal springs up. And what is most helpful for a reflective acceptance of the teachings?

Examination of the meaning is most helpful for a reflective acceptance of the teachings. If one does not examine their meaning, one will not gain a reflective acceptance of the teachings; but because one examines their meaning, one gains a reflective acceptance of the teachings. And what is most helpful for examining the meaning?

Memorizing the teachings is most helpful for examining the meaning. If one does not memorize a teaching, one will not examine its meaning; but because one memorizes a teaching, one examines its meaning. And what is most helpful for memorizing the teachings?

Hearing the Dhamma is most helpful for memorizing the teachings. If one does not hear the Dhamma, one will not memorize the teachings; but because one hears the Dhamma, one memorizes the teachings. And what is most helpful for hearing the Dhamma?

Giving ear is most helpful for hearing the Dhamma. If one does not give ear, one will not hear the Dhamma; but because one gives ear, one hears the Dhamma. And what is most helpful for giving ear?

Paying respect is most helpful for giving ear. If one does not pay respect, one will not give ear; but because one pays respect, one gives ear. And what is most helpful for paying respect?

Visiting is most helpful for paying respect. If one does not visit [a teacher], one will not pay respect to him; but because one visits, one pays respect to him. And what is most helpful for visiting?

Faith is most helpful for visiting. If faith [in a teacher] does not arise, one will not visit him; but because faith [in a teacher] arises, one visits him.

GROUNDED BY THE EARTH

Anne Carolyn Klein

These remarks have been excerpted from a program offered at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies on November 13, 2005.

We did a few different things together just now. We observed our breath. We used a certain kind of attention to incorporate the breath into a purifying practice, which is common in many Buddhist, especially Tibetan, traditions. And we were open to whatever images or memories or thoughts might arise for us.

Then we began to focus on what we can, in general, call *grounding*, which is to say we became open to being aware of the power of support which is holding us in this beautiful room. We were opening to a certain sensitivity to the solidity of this floor, lest it go unnoticed. Then we experimented for a moment with taking this sense of solidity in more deeply, to more subtle areas of our bodies. From a peripheral sense of grounding, which is easy to sense, we moved to internalize this and bring it to a deeper, more cellular level in the body. Finally, we became open to the possibility of bringing that sense of grounded stability to our own mental focus.

The grounding part of our practice is drawn from my work in teaching *Buddhism in the Body*© retreats and workshops with Phyllis Pay (Director, Center for Intuitive Processing in Berkeley); the grounding practices she uses are implicit, but rarely clearly stated, in traditional Buddhist practice.

Our sensing the solidity of the earth is drawn from Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's teachings on the elements,¹ and the *Om* chant is a synopsis of and entry to Vajrayana, given to me to use in such introductory contexts by Adzom Paylo Rinpoche.² Any one of these elements could be the focus of an entire retreat.

Regarding the elements, you are probably well acquainted with the Buddhist teaching that we are composed of the five aggregates of mind and body. There is also a parallel narrative, important in the Tibetan traditions, that we are constituted by the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind or air, and space. Each of these has its own particular quality. Today we are focusing upon the power of earth and its capacity to ground us and help us be more steadfast.

Many traditions honor the earth for her power of nurturing. There is a healing energy that comes to us from the earth. And there is an enormous ground to settle upon and to settle into. In Buddhist traditions the earth is used as an example of equanimity and great patience. All kinds of filth gets plopped into the earth; she doesn't mind, she takes it in and recycles it. The earth is a model of how anything that occurs can be transformed through patience and equanimity. And just as it can be

The earth is a model of how anything that occurs can be transformed through patience and equanimity.

1. See his book *Healing with Sound and Light* or visit Ligmincha.org.

2. See www.dawnmountain.org; *Buddhism in the Body* programs listed here as well.

Good morning everybody. It's nice to see you all here. Let's start with a morning meditation. Let me suggest that for the first part of this silent meditation you do whatever part of your meditation practice is more on the calming and focusing line of things. For example, if you typically watch your breath, please do that. We'll sit in silent meditation for just a bit and then I will begin a guided meditation which will meditatively introduce some of the themes we'll be talking about today.

So just take a moment to take your posture—with your spine long, straight, your neck tucked down a little bit, which also serves to lengthen your spine. Rest comfortably and deeply on your cushion or on your chair; settle into the bottom of your body and allow yourself to be really held by your cushion; allow your awareness to rest on its focus, such as your breath.

[Silence.]

As you continue to breathe, be aware of your breath as an entering into your being of refreshing air, clarity, that clarity taking the form of light as you inhale. Feeling that your breath, along with the clarity and purification it brings, actually moves through your body all the way down to the bottom of your spine. In this way your breath is a clarifying gift for you. And as you exhale, you are exhaling all the way from the bottom of your spine. Exhale into the distance anything untoward that you may carry at this moment emotionally, energetically, somatically, physically, anything that you may carry that is an impediment, a resistance, to your practice. Especially anything connected with desire, hatred, ignorance. Take three deep breaths in this way: inhaling clarifying and purifying light; exhaling desire, hatred, ignorance and any other impediment you feel you carry at this time.

[Silence.]

And as you continue to breathe in your own natural rhythm, feel the breath, the sensation of it moving over your upper lip and also through your nostrils and also coming down through your lungs, opening your chest, opening your heart, your presence, and descending all the way down energetically to the bottom of your spine. As you feel the sensation of your breath moving through your body in this way, see if you are aware of anything in your body, in your field, in your mind, in your energy, that impinges on you at this moment, that you would like to exhale or allow to dissolve. And if so, since we're still in this purification of breathing part of our meditation, exhale it, far into the distance, till it disappears. If images come to you, memories, be aware of them and allow them to flow out with your breath if you do not need them.

[Silence.]

And continue to feel the sensation of your own breath gliding through your body, refreshing you, allowing you to empty out what is stale and old. Breathing continuously down to and from the bottom of your spine, let your awareness settle there for the moment. The bottom of your spine. And feel the sensation of your cushion, your chair, against the bottom of your body. With your awareness, gently inquire in your muscles if there is any part of you that would like to relax a little more. And allow this cushion, this floor, this earth, to support you more completely. Perhaps you've been doing something to hold yourself up in a way that now seems to you excessive effort, perhaps coming in part from a lack of trust that this earth can actually hold you. You can sit on it now in a different way, and allow it to support you.

[Silence.]

So even though your spine is straight, soaring up from the bottom of your body like a radiant, supple plant, still at the

bottom of your body is trusting, receiving support from the earth, not strained, not tight, not ready to take flight, but here.

[Silence.]

Feel, through your own relaxed sitting, the supportive power of this floor, held as it is by the layers of earth directly beneath us and those further layers beneath and beneath and beneath. The depth of our seat is as deep as this planet. Feel that solidity really emerging from the entire globe of earth itself. Feel its impact on you in this moment, coming through the bottom of your body. The earth is unmoving, unjudging. Once you can feel the sense of solidity which it provides in the outer contours of your body, see if you can also begin to allow this sense of steadiness, concreteness to come in more subtly through your skin, entering more deeply inside the tissues of your body, steadying you, cell by cell.

[Silence.]

And as cell by cell this sense of support becomes contagious, this sense of presence and solidity—which, if you lose the feeling for a moment, you can always tap back into the solidity that is supporting your body right now—see if it can move, layer by layer, continuously more deeply into your tissues, your bones, your marrow. All celebrating their affinity with the earth element. And so, in a very natural way, bringing also deep steadfastness to your mind.

[Silence.]

And bring your steadfast awareness again to the bottom of your spine, meeting and greeting again this supportive solidity, and feeling into the bottom of your spine, this first chakra area, so connected with your embodied presence. Almost there's a yearning for it to connect with the large body that supports your own. So that from the bottom of your spine there is an energetic extension, which might image itself to you as a rope or a chain or a tree trunk, moving down and extending from the bottom of your spine, through your cushion, through this floor, through the layers of earth supporting us, directly beneath us, gliding down, anchoring us more concretely in the present. Gliding down 50 feet..., 500 feet..., 5,000 feet...coming to rest and connecting us with the very center of the earth directly beneath you. And take a moment to breathe down to the center of the earth, to feel the support coming to you from the center of the earth, to hold you and support you in carrying forward your intention for this day and for your life purpose. Then just continue to breathe. Feel your breath moving through your body. Feel the support that comes to and through this seat on which you sit—that you are held, in fact, by the entire earth, directly connected with, and sitting directly above, the center.

[Silence.]

And in closing let your awareness move up the center of your body to rest now at your heart, feeling the alignment of your heart with the bottom of your spine, with the center of the earth. And your crown is in alignment, too. And so from the very center of this point of alignment, from your very heart, the sound of steadfastness and gathering into presence, the sound "Om", just that—"Om"—and we'll sound this sound together three times. And just feel whatever you feel as this sound emanates from the center of your heart, touching each fiber and cell of your body and being, harmonizing you.

Om (everyone sounds it together)

Om (everyone sounds it together)

Om (everyone sounds it together)

[Bell.]



transformed at the level of earth, so also can it be transformed at the level of energy and mind.

In order to heighten the grounded inclination, we focus some awareness at the bottom of our spine. This is a place that tends naturally to resonate with issues of awareness of suffering, mortality, death, and very basic questions of why I'm here. It is also the seat of our energetic presence, and we might even recognize in this part of our bodies a natural longing for steadfastness and connection with the stability of the earth.

I know this is not the sort of language one hears in the early *sutras* of the Theravada tradition, but even there we find the powerful symbol of Buddha sitting under a tree. And experientially, we often seek in our practice to become like a tree in the sense of growing deep roots. We send down, in a manner of speaking, from the bottom of our spine the grounding cord, something that extends deep into the earth and gives us a channel of connection with the earth and its powerful stability. We do these visualization exercises in order to discover the earth as a resource for enhancing our capacity for steadfastness.

If we feel rational thinking is the only access we have to information, then we may lose out on the information present in our knowing body.



Many spiritually inclined people are not interested in their bodies and are not so happy to even have them. Many of us find on our own path that we have issues about our bodies—how they look, how they function—which may impede connecting with the wisdom of our own bodies. If we feel rational thinking is the only access we have to information, then we may lose out on the information present in our knowing body. I was such a person—a practicing head—for many years. I was fascinated by the intellectual brilliance of many of the systems of Buddhist philosophy, and implicitly felt that enlightenment was something that would occur in or through my head.

When I was just starting to hear about Buddhism in high school and college, there was not much information available, but I was fortunate early on to come into the brilliantly luminous field of some outstanding teachers from the Tibetan tradition. My earliest teachers were from the Gelug tradition, which quite rightly takes pride in its intellectual acumen and the things it can tell you about how to practice. It is a very well formulated teaching, and for this I was

grateful. But, through no fault of theirs, I was largely feeding my head, my brain, my intellect with this information. I was studying the teachings and learning Tibetan, but this enhanced what was already a deep inclination in me to ignore or forget my body.

All this changed dramatically when I went to Tibet for the first time. At that point, I had already been involved in Tibetan practice for 17 years. As you know, Tibet was not open to foreigners until the early 1980s. When I finally got there, I found it was a startlingly powerful and visceral experience to walk around those mountains, to see those glaciers gliding down to the road. There is a lot of earth element in Tibet—even *I* had to notice it. Now perhaps Tibet has been over-idealized in some ways, but it really is a different kind of place than, say, Texas or Massachusetts. The earth is shooting up all around you to 20,000 feet, and it's all solid, strong, *rock*. The earth element is powerful there, and it constantly brings you back to your body and your embodiment.

When I got back from that first trip to Tibet, many people told me I looked different. I *was* different—I realized I had a body. This led to more involvement with energy work, which has been an ongoing project ever since. I began to discover the energies of the body were absolutely integral to my meditation practice, and though I had a lot going on in the upper three *chakras* of the heart, throat and crown, I didn't have much going on in the lower part of my body. I was unanchored. No wonder I had trouble focusing my mind.



When you have a human body, you have—we have—the capacity to connect profoundly with the earth. Just like that tree the Buddha was sitting under, with its roots going deep into the ground, its willingness to be held and nourished by the earth allows it to grow and allows its flowers to open to the sky. So too when our body is grounded, it

allows our mind to be steadfast, present, and, finally, really open at the crown. It can be easy for us to understand mindfulness as a way of engaging the mind as if it were separate from the body, but mindfulness is really a full body practice. It's an embodied practice. When we are unable to stay focused it is not just a fault of mind. There is also an energy associated with the mind in resistance for whatever reason.

When seeking to be mindful, we are seeking to be grounded in the present. It sounds simple enough. So why do we fight it so hard? Why don't I just sit down, have everything fall away, and just feel connected to and supported from the center of the earth? The Buddha just sits, doesn't he? It's not like he's half ready to jump and answer the telephone, get on e-mail, or make shopping lists of all the things he has to do tomorrow. Look at the statue here. There he is, just sitting. You see it in the images, you see it in your teachers, and sometimes you see it in yourself. You know what that is, to just *sit* and be there. Yet there is so often such resistance to this. Much of this resistance has to do with the resistance to what I'm also calling *grounding*.

In Tibetan medical traditions, as well as in tantric and Chinese traditions, the mind is said to be like a lame person, with wisdom and eyes but no legs. What carries the mind is the energy—*lung* or *prana* or *chi*—and they always go together. Tibetans also use the image of a horse and rider, where the mind is the rider and the horse is the energy. So when you are taming your mind, you are also taming the energies of your body. Asian teachers take this for granted, so they don't always talk about it. It took me fifteen or twenty years to recognize this. So it has been very helpful to me, in my practice and also in my overall understanding of what we're trying to accomplish as practitioners, to take account of the body and its energies.

This is not just a Tibetan thing. Similar experiences are discovered in the

With a human body, we have the capacity to connect profoundly with the earth.

body sweeping exercises taught by Goenka-ji, the Indian vipassana teacher from Burma. After cultivating some *shamatha* (calming) by observation of the breath, one takes the heightened or sharpened awareness very slowly and methodically through your entire body, just seeing and feeling what you see and feel. It's really simple; and it's really powerful. All these things start happening. People shake; people shout; your body dissolves; all kinds of things happen. And this is not happening just in your mind. It is happening because, in the language I'm using today, your energy is actually beginning to spit out some of the things it's been holding, things that have been keeping you in resistance.



If we are not grounded in the present, where are we? We're not in our bodies. But there is really no other place to be. I know what it is like to be always leaning forward to get to the next thing, living my life at a sort of 30 degree tilt. But what are we leaning into, and why are we doing it?

The thing about sitting down, about being grounded, is: there we are with ourselves. That's the good news and that's the bad news. We are all intimately immersed in the existential issues Buddhism likes to put in our face but which we don't always welcome. Here we are dying from one moment to the next, and we don't like to face that. Maybe we think, "Oh, I'm just going to try to be mindful today." But mindfulness will bring up mortality and other existential issues like, "Why am I here?" or even, "Am I here?" None of us know when we'll die. And that's really hard to get. It's one of those things that's intellectually so simple we glide right over it. "I know, I'm mortal." But to actually come to grips with our own mortality is a whole meditation unto itself. Usually, if I don't know why I'm here, or if I don't like the challenges of being in a mortal body, then I can focus instead on what I have to do tomorrow. Then I won't notice my fragility, my poignant vulnerability, that is present at every moment.

Yet this is, in fact, our human condition. It's *true*. And it's *grounding* to recognize that. Buddha sat under the tree and remembered

many of his past lives, his births and deaths. He saw the round of beings taking birth, dying and being born. It's one of the great visions of all time. And, you know, he got it, that this is how things work. And then he touched the earth. Traditional Buddhist teachings on the preciousness and vulnerability of life are fundamentally grounding contemplations. They establish us in the reality of our actual situation, and from there we can address our natural, inevitable human resistance to these facts by cultivating an energy of being grounded, as we did in our meditation today.

We clothe ourselves in stories about the past and future. These can be very comfortable clothes to wear because in them we know just what to do. But in all that *doing*, am I losing some of my *being*? Am I losing some of what I actually am without all that stuff? We're asked to take off some of that clothing when we practice meditation, and it makes us feel naked. It can be very scary to take off the layers of self representation that comes with relinquishing the stories. I remember, in the first retreat I ever did coming back from India, holding on for dear life to the stories I loved so much. No matter what else we do in meditation, just by the fact of sitting down and giving up the tasks with which we normally clothe ourselves, we are challenging our very sense of self. We're testing the possibility of giving up these roles and just being what we actually are.



This takes trust. You have to trust yourself to the ground when you sit on it. You have to trust yourself to the practice, to let yourself be held by it and give up, surrender. You want to say, "I've got to do something." But you can't *do* this. We can't, finally, *do* our practice, just as we can't *do* ourselves into a state of calm or a state of keen discernment. We can set up the conditions for it to arise, and that's where grace or blessings or inspiration comes in.

Something arises out of the wisdom that is inherent in the practice itself; inherent, I would even say, in our bodies themselves. When we get grounded, we are reaching a

If we are not grounded in the present, where are we?



New England Zen garden (marsh on a road near the study center)

state that is actually very natural to us. We just haven't trusted it enough to simply be there. We feel assaulted by the world and feel the need to construct these various self representations, and to some extent of course that's true. But then we buy into and believe we really *are* these selves we have constructed in relationship to our circumstances as we grow up in this world. We need a kind of trust in something greater than anything we have yet imagined, because this isn't going to be something we can or necessarily even want to imagine. This is going to be something we enter into through the direct experience of our practice, without knowing ahead of time how it is going to be.

You can't relax into your nature, relax into your wisdom, relax into your awareness, unless there is some trust. One reason we come to a protected place like this to practice is because we know there is something trustworthy about Barre, about its teachers, about its tradition. We know there are no busy

city streets, and we can relax a little bit. We don't have to defend ourselves in quite the same way. We can be here without some of our usual defenses. But of course, stuff comes up when we just "be here." It's not all that glorious sometimes.

The mindfulness we all practice is deeply challenging to us as an organism. It's a challenge psychologically, because stuff comes up and we have to sit with it. And it's a challenge to us energetically, because we're used to running our energy in a scattered, defensive, untrusting way. But it helps to know intellectually that with mindfulness come many attendant positive good qualities. This is axiomatic in all the Buddhist traditions: when you cultivate mindfulness you cultivate a wholesome state, and other wholesome states immediately and necessarily attend upon it. When our bodies sit in a different kind of energy, grounded by the earth, practice begins to open for us.

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WORKING WITH ANGER

BUDDHIST PRACTICE IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Harvey Aronson

These thoughts have been extracted from a program offered at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies on November 12, 2005.

One thing psychotherapy and Buddhist practice have in common is that they are both attempting to uncover our subjectivity and allow us to access a kind of emergent knowledge. A lot of the time we walk around with preconceptions about everything; we know how we're going to be, we know how other people are going to be. Buddhist practice works to help us get out of these conceptual boxes, to the immediacy of our experience, in order to see more clearly what is going on. The Buddhist approach is to cultivate very careful mindfulness and attention. In psychotherapy we work through the narratives of our lives, the stories we tell, and explore things with an open attitude of inquiry. This too allows things to emerge in a new way. Many of us here are treading one or both of these paths and are seeking an emergent knowledge with respect to our experience.

Most people in the United States today unfortunately don't have much of a cross-cultural perspective. The reality is that many of us now study with American teachers who have studied with American teachers and are reading books that are written by American teachers who have studied with American teachers. So we are getting a particular vision of Buddhist practice, which is useful in many ways, but which is not allowing us to confront traditional Buddhism directly. The good news is that this makes the teachings easier to assimilate. The bad news is that we're not exposed to things that somebody else, because of their inclinations, decided should be excluded. It is inevitable that we filter what we learn through a whole set of predispositions and inclinations, through our likes and our dislikes. The more it is filtered the further away we are getting from Asian Buddhism; yet in the process we are getting a better reflection of who we are as Americans.

There is a cultural issue here, but there is also a psychological issue. Richard Schweder, a cultural psychologist, says that in the enterprise of studying another culture we eventually reach a stage when *we become aware of ourselves engaging with the other*. To the extent we learn more about the other, we learn more about ourselves; and the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about the other. Those of us interested in meditation in a deep way are trying to become less bound by our sense of self as we currently construe it. One of the things that cross-cultural reflection can do is make us aware of our sense of self in a more transparent way. Most of us, especially if we haven't traveled or considered other cultures very closely,

Those of us interested in meditation in a deep way are trying to become less bound by our sense of self.

are immersed in or identified with a certain sense of self. By reflecting on other cultures, and by seeing how they do things differently, we can begin to see how much of a constructed event the self really is. There is nothing universally true about valuing individuality to the extent we do as a hyper-developed construct. This is not a given of human reality, but is a development of a particular strand of human possibility in the twenty-first century. It is an artificial construct, due to time and cultural conditioning, and it is something that can be penetrated by the insights that come with deep Buddhist practice.



The topic I want to bring attention to today is anger, and I would like to frame this in a larger, cross-cultural context. Doing so can not only be pragmatically useful in understanding ourselves, but can also make a deep spiritual contribution to our practice. Let me begin by creating a stark contrast on anger. On the one hand we have a quotation from a classical sutta:

Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handled saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Herein you should train thus: “Our minds will remain unaffected, and we shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving-kindness, without inner hate.” (M21:20)

Contrast this with the words of Leigh McCoullough Vaillant, a psychotherapist here in Boston:

Angry feelings have evolved in response to our need to prevent intrusions, to right wrongs, or to obtain something that is lacked. If patients are not able to set limits when attacked, give voice to what is wanted or not wanted, feel deserving of things desired, or walk into a room with their head high and feel a right to be there, they have missed a huge component of healthy, adaptive functioning.

These passages demonstrate the chasm I have experienced when my therapist encouraged me to express my anger while my Buddhist teachers had clearly discouraged me from expressing anger. How does one make sense of all this? How can one both be involved in Buddhist practice in a profound way and also make good use of what psychotherapy has to offer?

Let's start with the matter of translation. It's not a big technical issue, but when they talk of anger in the Buddhist context they're really talking about hate. Anger is usually defined as the wish to harm somebody. We have this meaning in English too, but we also have several others that fall somewhat short of this. Sometimes it's really just a strong reaction of dislike. When the caterers burn the food, one might say “I was so angry, I screamed at them in front of the guests.” Then there's anger that has to do with assertiveness, independence and the affirming of boundaries. “My roommate assumed I wanted the same pizza she did. I got angry and made it clear she should have called to check instead of trying to read my mind.” There is also the sense of protesting injustice. “We were angered by the bigoted behavior of that organization and decided to create an informational picket.” The assertiveness and strong dislike might have elements of harmfulness and wishing to harm someone else, but it might not. Protesting injustice is interesting. Both His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have expressly said that they don't consider people protesting injustice to be necessarily acting out of anger. We use the word anger as the cause of our protest, but it can often simply refer to an appropriate form of behavior.

My therapist encouraged me to express my anger, while my Buddhist teachers had clearly discouraged this.



Sign near the study center

Another step we might take, as Westerners wanting to follow Buddhist teachings and interested in therapy, is to ask the basic question, “What is an emotion?” Turning again to the cultural psychologist Richard Schweder, it might help to look at a (paraphrased) definition he offers of emotion: *an interpretation of feelings and physical sensations that arise in response to events that we experience, and the actions we envision as a response.* When you insult me, I feel heat in my face, and perceive that you are threatening me, and in response to this perception and sensation, I react with an impulse to insult you back. This is one description of an emotion.



In considering an emotion in a cross-cultural context, we have to understand a little bit about how we differ from our Asian cousins. In general, at least in traditional cultures, there was a holistic, societal interdependence wherein parts of the whole depended on one another. There were rules and roles that determined how the various parts of the whole interrelated, and there was often a great deal of joy in fulfilling these rules and roles. We in the West have evolved

tremendously from this model. We have ideas of entitlement in our culture that stem from the major democratic revolutions in the 17th and 18th centuries, where the word “rights” or “right” become operative. This is not the case in traditional cultures; they don’t talk about rights. They talk much more about duties, rules, and roles.

Individuality, too, is something that has emerged over the last four or five hundred years; it is a very interesting thing to trace. It stands in stark contrast to more traditional cultures, where family, kin, or the area you’re from are much more important than who you are individually. For example, when I’d walk into a store in Nepal and bump into a Tibetan monk, the first thing he’d ask me is, “Which lineage of Tibetan Buddhism do you study?” He’s not interested in who I am, or in my particular life experiences; he wants to know what team I’m on. He lives in a team culture. It’s important for a Tibetan monk to know what team you belong to, but the fact that you have unique thoughts and experiences is far less interesting to him.

Generally speaking, the expression of anger in the West has to do with expressing difference, autonomy, and personal rights. When our rights, goals, or needs are obstructed, we feel entitled to express our upset. This is in line with our appreciation of independence and the articulation of what is due us. For example, one of the things I reflected upon during a recent trip to Nepal is that there are few lawsuits to speak of in Asia. Here, if I trip, I’m entitled to \$400,000; it’s a business proposition. But if I trip in Nepal and get gangrene and die, then hey, that’s life. There is no one to sue. It’s a very different worldview.

Because of our deep love of independence, we value difference between individuals. We approve of anger in the sense of vigorous expression of difference, because this is a vehicle for us to embody our value of maintaining separateness and individuality while retaining contact with one another. Schweder points out ways in which it is even part of our earliest intimations of a self: “Anger, in the sense of forceful disagreement within a relationship, is part of what helps us in the West develop into discrete, individual selves.”

Anger is a vehicle for maintaining separateness and individuality.

Our cultural context of anger is seen in bold relief when we contrast it with aspects of Asian culture. For example, Japanese society places great significance on building relationships and attending to the needs and goals of others. The emphasis is on attunement and alignment between individuals. Anger, in the sense of a strong, disharmonious expression of individuality, is understood to disturb the sought-after sense of interdependence and is viewed very negatively. Thus, one sense of anger, the emphatic assertion of difference, has a potentially positive connotation here, but a distinctly negative connotation in Japan. And some similar appreciation of social harmony is part of most traditional Buddhist cultures.



Another interesting observation the cultural psychologist Richard Schweder makes goes something like this: all of us, around the world, can wake up on a given day and feel terrible. But the stories we tell ourselves about why we are feeling terrible are very different. He says there are four major narratives. 1) There are those people who wake up feeling terrible and would explain it as due to karma. This is actually a large proportion of the world's population. Something I did in the past is leading me to feel miserable in the present. 2) Another large proportion of the world's population believes in bewitchment. I wake up feeling terrible this morning and I have a strong suspicion that somebody wishes me ill and has done something magically to make me feel crummy. Many people believe this. 3) Some people believe that I'm waking up feeling crummy this morning because there's something wrong with the physiology or the chemistry of my brain. This is the somatic explanation. 4) And then some people believe that I'm waking up feeling crummy this morning because something probably occurred in a relationship in the last two or three days, something with my boss or my lover, that's making me feel terrible right now.

So reflect for a moment: if you wake up feeling crummy one morning, what explanation do you give yourself? Is it your karma? Probably not, aside, perhaps, from some of you here from India. Or do you wake up and feel that somebody stuck a needle in a doll and bewitched you? Also, probably not. But I suspect a lot of you, when you wake up in the morning feeling crummy, might think there is something wrong with your brain cells right now—maybe the neurons are swollen—and think about taking an aspirin. Or you might search back in your memory to reflect upon what happened with your boss a few days ago, or perhaps it was that talk you had with one of your friends. These are different ways of making sense of our experience, and it's important to recognize how variously people around the world do this.

When anger is being discussed in Asia, particularly in the Buddhist context, it is framed in the karmic frame. And if we're honest with ourselves, most Westerners find a difficulty with that language frame. It's not immediately transparent to our experience. So if you've been exposed to an Asian teacher, you are likely to hear that the reason not to get angry is because in the immediate present anger obstructs the mind, is a hindrance to meditation, and occludes and darkens our clarity. Not only is this a hindrance to meditation, but you are also sowing seeds, with harmfulness, of future pain. That's the big deal. You don't want to experience pain in the future, so don't get angry in the present. This is the major context for understanding anger.

By contrast, the Western discussion of anger is typically occurring in the somatic or psychological framework. It's a completely different context, which is important to understand. Along with these various narratives, people respond to life differently. The Harvard cultural anthropologist Arthur Kleinman did some interesting research

When anger is discussed in the Buddhist context, it is framed in the karmic frame.

in Taiwan, and the same type of research has been done in India, which shows how people experiencing life stressors in those cultures typically respond with somatic symptoms called neurasthenia—headaches, fatigue, dizziness, insomnia, weakness, or muscle tension. The bible for mental health professionals in the West, known as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, identifies as indicators of stress-related problems such things as depression, sadness, hopelessness, guilt, trouble with concentrating, and so forth. In response to stress, they have something going on in their body, while we typically psychologize or emotionalize our experience. This is, I think, a big deal.

The story was told recently in the New York Times of a psychiatry conference about depression in developing countries. The essence of the lectures was that people in those areas commonly express depression as physical symptoms. They somaticize their depression, to use medical parlance, complaining of malaise, stomach aches, dizziness, and other symptoms that are hard to pin down. Techniques were discussed for dealing with the patient who insists their only problem is a heavy head or a squeezing sensation in the belly, but who is clearly depressed. Toward the end of the meeting, a doctor from India stood to speak. “Distinguished colleagues,” he said, “have you ever considered the possibility that it is not that we in the third world somaticize depression, but rather that you in the developed world psychologize it?” This comment, apparently, was met with stunned silence.

If you are interested in this type of discussion, I recommend Richard Schweder’s book *Thinking Through Cultures*. He’s got a chapter on Arthur Kleinman’s work, and makes the case against essentializing what is going on in other cultures. Why not just understand, perhaps, that with unique causes, with unique experiences, and with unique narratives, people have really different emotional experiences. This would suggest that when people in Asia are saying not to get angry they are talking about one thing while we might be talking about something else entirely.

I can imagine myself sitting next to a Chinese student, saying my life is meaningless. I’m sad, sort of tired, and feeling unhappy. She might tell me she feels as though she has tired blood, is a little bit dizzy, and her head is hurting. She is talking in physical terms, while I am using emotional terms. Furthermore, I might be thinking in my mind that it is all due to a difficult discussion I had with my wife yesterday, while she’s attributing her ailment to oppression that occurred at work. I feel I need to have another conversation to try to resolve my situation with Anne, and she is making plans to take an herbal medicine. Meanwhile, a traditional Indian gentleman sitting nearby with a similar problem would probably say that it’s his karma. Are we talking at all about the same experience? These are very different worlds.

If you haven’t lived in Asia and haven’t been around traditional culture much, it is hard to appreciate this, but at least amongst traditional Asians, if the teacher says “Just quiet down now and be happy,” it’s got an unimaginable force. I’ve actually seen this happen: an Asian on the verge of psychosis goes up to a teacher and the teacher basically says, “Get a grip.” It’s sort of like the earth moves. We just don’t have that belief in authority here, and we don’t want to make use of authority in that way. Our bumper sticker says “Question Authority.” From our psychological framework we can actually see anger as a doorway to enriching relationship, whereas in Asia, typically, it was something that was not to be felt, not to be experienced. It was understood in a karmic framework in which teachers would teach people “Don’t be angry,” and they could make use of great moral authority in doing so.

We can see anger as a doorway for enriching relationship; in Asia it was something not to be experienced.

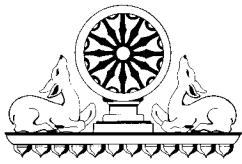


So, how to put this all together with respect to anger? Individuals in many traditional Buddhist cultures may have been more likely to produce physical symptoms rather than emotions in response to the ups and downs of life. Furthermore, these cultures did not encourage individual expression of feelings as we do, or to an extent that produces disharmony. The Buddhist narrative about anger is primarily concerned with explaining suffering in terms of moral cause and effect. The meaning of anger in this context is harmfulness, and it is historically the subject of moral instruction by teachers to students, who took such instructions quite seriously. We in the West are much less familiar with and open to moral guidance than those in traditional cultures. We are also much less likely to respond unquestioningly to a teacher's moral authority. To work constructively with feelings of harmfulness, Westerners require something other than time-honored prescriptions from a venerable spiritual tradition.

Buddhist and modern Western uses of anger make it evident that we must consider a variety of interventions for dealing effectively with this emotion. Given our preference for dealing with things in emotional terms, interventions that acknowledge our psychological reality will be most effective for us today. Our Western contribution for working with difficult feelings is the understanding that they may be opened up through carefully structured discussion into a means of connection. I've not seen anger used in this way in traditional Buddhist cultures.

This is a truncated version of Harvey's talk. If interested in further reflections on anger from the perspective of Buddhism and psychotherapy, consult his recent book Buddhist Practice on Western Ground, where two chapters are dedicated to this issue.

Harvey Aronson is a psychotherapist and teacher of Buddhist psychology in Houston, Texas, where he is founding co-director of Dawn Mountain, Tibetan Temple, Research Institute, and Community Center.



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BCBS Forum: Buddhist Responses to Collective Delusion

David Loy, Don Swearer, Mark Unno, Chris Queen, et al.

Saturday, September 16th

Students of Buddhism are familiar with teachings that show in some detail how individual delusion inevitably contributes to suffering in our lives. All Buddhist traditions have much to say about how this delusion can be defined, examined, understood, and, ultimately, brought to cessation or transformed into wisdom. Less carefully investigated, however, is the extent to which this same dynamic manifests on a collective level.

Many people with considerable personal insight into the workings of delusion nevertheless acquiesce to institutionalized forms of greed, hatred and delusion that are having a huge impact on shaping our nation and world. There are many social forces that work to distract and minimize our awareness: educational systems increasingly focused on job skills; compromised corporate media more concerned with profit than truth; TV, films and advertising promoting consumerism; government propaganda; etc.

Can Buddhist training in meditation and insight into the nature of interdependence help us understand and challenge such expressions of collective delusion? If the answer is yes, how can we encourage and support the growth of collective wisdom? If the answer is no, then does the world need something other than Buddhism just now?

There is a natural tension in the Buddhist tradition between “being with what is happening here and now” without interfering, and widening one’s awareness to understand the wholesome and unwholesome effects all phenomena have upon one another. Learning how to integrate these two foci is a real challenge, and our response to this problem will help to shape how both Buddhism and our world unfold in the decades to come.

Overview of 2006 Courses

May

14—19	A. Olendzki, Taraniya Ambrosia, et al.	Essentials of Buddhist Psychology
21	Ajahn Candasiri, Sister Cittapala	Dhammapada Wisdom Teachings
22—26	Andrew Olendzki, Claire Stanley, et al.	Program for College-Aged Students
27	Alan Wallace	The Way of Shamatha

June

2—9	Community Dharma Leaders Program, with Bhikkhu Bodhi, et al. (Closed program.)	
16—18	Advanced Study and Practice Program, Group A. (Closed program.)	
23—25	Advanced Study and Practice Program, Group B. (Closed program.)	

July

14—16	Taitetsu Unno & Mark Unno	Shin Buddhism
21—23	Mu Soeng	Lack and Liberation
28—30	Nona Olivia & Andrew Olendzki	Touching the Deathless

September

1—3	Advanced Study and Practice Program, Group A. (Closed program.)	
8—10	Advanced Study and Practice Program, Group B. (Closed program.)	
16	David Loy, Donald Swearer, Mark Unno, Chris Queen, et al.	BCBS Forum: Buddhist Responses to Collective Delusion
17	Mark Unno	Buddhism & Psychotherapy Across Cultures
22—24	Jan Willis	Women and the Feminine in Buddhism
30	Sharon Salzberg	The Power of Right Speech

October

1—8	Gregory Kramer	Insight Dialogue: Knowing the Self-World Split
14—21	DaeJa Napier	The Brahma Vihāras & Vipassanā (Bhāvana)
28—Nov 3	Andrew Olendzki & Taraniya Ambrosia	Understanding the Āsavas (Bhāvana)

November

5—10	A. Olendzki, Taraniya Ambrosia, et al.	Essentials of Buddhist Psychology
18	Narayan & Michael Liebenson Grady	Your Life is Your Practice
19	Kate Lila Wheeler	The State of Mind Called Beautiful
26—Dec 1	Mu Soeng	Nonduality in the Mahayana (Bhāvana)

December

8—10	Mark Hart	Suffering and the End of Suffering
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January 2007

7—12	Andrew Olendzki	Abhidhamma: Classical Buddhist Psychology
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REMEMBERING FRIENDS

This new section of the *Insight Journal* honors the memory of members and friends of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies who have recently passed away.

Days and nights go hurtling by
‘Till our lifetime comes to an end.
The life of mortals slips away
—Like the water of tiny streams.
Therigatha 145

Dawn over Mt. Wachusett as seen from the study center.

Brian Kelley, February 2006.

Many of our readers may know of Brian Kelley through his cartoon “Me & Joe Buddha,” which we have featured in these pages for the last four years. We were greatly saddened to hear that Brian unexpectedly passed away this February. Brian came to many of our courses and was a devoted student of the *suttas*. His cartoons narrating the challenges of understanding the Buddhist tradition were humorous, insightful, and down-to-earth. A number of dharma teachers have expressed the joy of working with Brian, who was known as a sincere and hard-working yogi. Brian’s partner Gini Conard is also a friend of the study center. We will greatly miss Brian’s friendly, out-going presence in the *Journal*, on campus, and in our circle of close friends.



“Brian was the most loving, caring, compassionate, gentle, generous person I ever met.” —Gini

J. Fred Pfeil, November 2005.

Fred Pfeil of Hartford, a long-time practitioner and supporter of BCBS, passed away this past November. Fred was a professor of English at Trinity College and was suffering from a brain tumor at the time of his death. Fred combined his abiding commitment to meditation practice with equal interest in textual explorations. He spent one of his sabbatical years at Sharpham College of Buddhist Studies in England to combine study and practice in a sustained manner. As a teacher/student of Buddhist meditation, Fred started a meditation group on the Trinity campus, led many meditation workshops, and hosted a weekly sitting at his home. Fred’s commitment to the practice of peace and justice were evident in his work as a facilitator and trainer with the Alternatives to Nonviolence Program in Connecticut’s prisons, with the Help Increase the Peace Project in Hartford middle schools, and by his involvement in numerous anti-war and anti-corporatist movements and organizations including VOID, HAFTA, Laura, and Fair Shake. His work towards peace and social justice was recognized with a lifetime achievement award from American Friends Service Committee in 2005. He authored numerous works of fiction, including the 1994 Pushcart Award for *What They Tell You to Forget* and *Goodman 2020*, as well as several books of criticism, including *White Guys*. His wife Elli Findly, a scholar of Buddhism at Trinity, has also long been a friend of BCBS. Fred was deeply loved and he will be greatly missed.



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Fully Quenched

Cullavagga 6:4.4

sabbadā ve sukhaṃ seti
brāhmaṇo parinibbuto
yo na lippati kāmesu
sītibhūto nirūpadhi.

Indeed the sage who's fully quenched
Rests at ease in every way;
No sense desire adheres to him
Whose fires have cooled, deprived of fuel.

sabbā āsattiyo chetvā
vineyya hadaye daraṃ,
upasanto sukhaṃ seti
santiṃ appuyya cetaso 'ti.

All attachments have been severed,
The heart's been led away from pain;
Tranquil, he rests with utmost ease,
The mind has found its way to peace.

When Anathapindika, the wealthy merchant from Savatthi, visited Rajagaha one time on business, he found the household of his wife's family in great commotion and unable to greet him with their characteristic style. He was told by his host that the Buddha had been invited for a meal the next day, and all the preparations were for this momentous event. The sound of the Buddha's name, we are told, stopped Anathapindika in his tracks. "Did you say 'Buddha'?" he asked three times, as if sensing some great karmic confluence. He was so thrilled at the prospect of meeting him that he awoke three times during the night, thinking that dawn was at hand.

He got up so early the next morning that it was still dark as he made his way out of the city to the Cool Grove where the Buddha was pacing back and forth in his morning walking meditation. He approached with fear on account of the darkness, the hair standing up on the back of his neck. After all this Anathapindika could manage no more than a conventional greeting to the Buddha of "I hope all is well with you, Sir?" whereupon he received these magnificent two stanzas in reply.

The poem simply but elegantly expresses the nature of the Buddha's awakening. It would have been uttered shortly after the event, and well before he gathered a large following. Notice how the language is expressing a psychological transformation rather than a cosmological event. All eight lines of the poem say something about the cessation of suffering, the relinquishing of desire, the discovery of peace—here and now. There is nothing about former or future Buddhas, nothing about the workings of karma, and nothing about the end of rebirth or the fulfillment of a destiny.

The rest, of course, is history. Anathapindika is taught dharma there and then by the Buddha, immediately attains stream-entry, and becomes one of the Buddha's most generous supporters to the end of his days.

—A. Olendzki