

# *Insight Journal* Winter 2006

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David R. Loy

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The Case Against Racism  
Sutta Studies

Seeking the Seeker  
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Poems From the Community

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Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia

Program Information

Beyond Joy and Sorrow  
Pali Poetry



Barre Center for Buddhist Studies





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**New Publishing Schedule:** The *Insight Journal* will now be published on a Winter and Summer schedule (previously, the *Journal* came out in the Spring and Fall). The Spring 2007 *Journal* will be available in late June.

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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.

## *This World Is Not Yours*

In a discourse about the teaching of non-self, the Buddha offers the following illustration: “Bhikkhus, what do you think? If people carried off the grass, sticks, branches, and leaves in this Jeta Grove, or burned them, or did what they liked with them, would you think: ‘People are carrying us off or burning us or doing what they like with us?’” “No, venerable sir. Why not? Because that is neither our self nor what belongs to our self.” (M 22)

As we hear this example today, however, we have to admit that it is no longer entirely true. If that grass were being burned in the Amazon forest, for example, or if those sticks were being carried off from the foothills of the Himalaya mountains, there may well be a great number of people who would be quite disturbed. Why is that? Because one of the fundamental axioms of the modern environmental movement is that the entire planet is the precious possession of us all. The very thing that provides for the preservation of the world’s resources is to extend to every blade of grass the same care and diligent guardianship that we would bring to bear upon our most intimate possession. In short, it seems that extending the range of the self to expand and cover the entire earth is the only way to protect it from harm. The whole world is mine, and if you dump your nasty toxins on it I will take it personally and be deeply offended.

Throughout his many teachings, however, the Buddha points out that great harm and suffering emerges from our tendency to define and then protect the self. The self is a flawed strategy, born in ignorance, nurtured by craving, and perpetuated by endless moments of grasping in which we pull toward us that which we like to consider part of ourselves and push away that which we don’t like and consider to be “other.” Might it be that by enlarging the self to embrace the world we are setting up the conditions for greater attachment and suffering?

This is not to say the rainforest should not be protected, but to suggest that the attitude one brings to the task makes a big difference. There is a lot of work ahead of us as we endeavor to rescue the planet from ourselves, and we are likely to be at this work for a very long time. Perhaps we could come at it from the wisdom of the non-self perspective, rather than the passions of the “world is mine” point of view. As the Buddha says elsewhere in the same text, “Whatever is not yours,

abandon it; when you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time.”

The Buddha had a penetrating insight into human nature. Among the things he noticed is that while some of our best qualities, such as caring, nurturing and protecting, are directed to the things we feel we possess or own, it is also the case that our worst tendencies, rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, organize too around whatever is taken to be “mine” or possessed by “me.” It can be a useful point of view in the short term or from a narrow perspective, but in the end the self is the source of more harm than good. History offers a sad parade of examples of things being destroyed precisely because they are valued.

If this world is not mine, then what is it? The Buddha’s reply: “The instructed noble disciple attends carefully and closely to dependent origination itself thus:

*When this exists, that comes to be;  
with the arising of this, that arises.  
When this does not exist, that does not come to be;  
with the cessation of this, that ceases.”* (S 12:37)

This is the universal formula of dependent origination. It provides a model for understanding the profound inter-relationship between all things, but it is a model that allows for no self. Nothing belongs to anybody; nobody has any self to protect; everything just co-arises with everything else.

If the whole world is my self and someone comes along and burns the forest, it is likely that I will respond with anger, hatred and an urge for revenge. If on the other hand the same action occurs in the context of an attitude of non-self, one still discerns the causal relationship between the action and the suffering it brings to many others inhabiting the same matrix of cause and effect. I can still put a stop to the activity, hold the perpetrator legally and morally responsible for the act, and put in place various safeguards to prevent it from happening again. Now, however, my response is more likely to be guided by wisdom and compassion, and to be grounded in a larger view.

I think the Buddha would argue that one is a more skillful response than the other. And considering how much is at stake, we need all the skillfulness we can muster.

—Andrew Olendzki



## THE THREE INSTITUTIONAL POISONS

### *Challenging Collective Greed, Ill Will, & Delusion*

David R. Loy

**T**he historical Buddha Shakyamuni lived at least 2,400 years ago. Buddhism began as an Iron Age religion, and all its important teachings are pre-modern. So can Buddhism really help us understand and respond to contemporary social problems such as economic globalization and biotechnology, war and terrorism (and the war on terrorism), climate change and other ecological crises?

What the Buddha did understand is human *dukkha*: how it works, what causes it, and how to end it. *Dukkha* is usually translated as “suffering,” but the point of *dukkha* is that even those who are wealthy and healthy experience a basic dissatisfaction, a dis-ease, which continually festers. That we find life dissatisfactory, one damn problem after another, is not accidental, because it is the nature of our unawakened minds to be bothered about something.

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*This past September, BCBS held a forum titled “Buddhist Responses to Collective Delusion,” with David Loy as the first speaker. This article is drawn from his remarks at the forum.*

According to Pali Buddhism, there are three types of *dukkha*. Everything we usually identify as physical and mental suffering—including being separated from those we want to be with, and being stuck with those we don’t want to be with—is included in the first type of *dukkha*.

The second type is the *dukkha* due to impermanence: the realization that, although I might be enjoying an ice cream cone right now, it will soon be finished. The best example is our awareness of death, which haunts our appreciation of life. Knowing that death is inevitable casts a shadow that usually hinders our ability to live fully and live now.

The third type of *dukkha* is more difficult to understand. It is *dukkha* due to “conditioned states,” which is a reference to *anattā* (non-self). My deepest frustration is caused by my sense of being a self that is separate from the world I am in. This sense of separation is illusory—in fact, it is our most dangerous delusion. A modern way to express this truth is that the ego-self has no reality of its own because it is a psycho-social-linguistic construct. This fact is very important because it allows for the possibility of a deconstruction and a reconstruction—which is what the spiritual path is

about. We are prompted to undertake such a spiritual quest because our lack of reality is normally experienced as an uncomfortable hole or emptiness at our very core. We *feel* this problem as a sense of inadequacy, of *lack*, which is a source of continual frustration because it is never resolved.

In compensation, we usually spend our lives trying to accomplish things that we think will make us more real. But no matter how hard I try, my anxious sense-of-self can never become a *real* self. The tendency is to identify with and become attached to something in the world, in the belief that it can make me feel whole and complete. “If I can get enough money... if I become famous... if I find the right lover...” and so forth. None of these attempts succeeds, however, because the basic problem is spiritual and thus requires a spiritual solution: realizing the true nature of the emptiness at my core, which transforms that core and enables me to stop clinging.

But what about *collective* selves? Don't we also have a group sense of separation between ourselves “inside” and the rest of the world “outside”? We Americans (Japanese, Chinese, etc.) *here* are separate from other people *over there*. Our country (culture, religion, etc.) is better than their country.

This insight has a startling if uncomfortable implication. If my individual sense of self is the basic source of my *dukkha* because I can never feel secure enough, what about collective senses of self? Is there such a thing as collective *dukkha*? Collective karma?

In fact, many of our social problems can be traced back to such a group ego, when we identify with our own gender, race, nation, religion, etc., and discriminate our own group from another group. It is ironic that institutionalized religion often reinforces this discrimination because religion at its best encourages us to subvert such problematic dualisms between self and other. In contrast, Buddhist nondiscrimination does not involve privileging *us* over *them*. Selflessness provides the foundation for Buddhist social action, too. In some ways, however, our situation today has become quite different from that of Shakyamuni Buddha. Today we have not only much more powerful scientific technologies but also much more powerful social institutions.

### The Three Roots of Evil, Institutionalized

The problem with modern institutions is that they tend to take on a life of their own as new types of collective ego. Consider, for example, how a big

corporation works. Even if the CEO of a transnational company wants to be socially responsible, he or she is limited by the expectations of stockholders. If profits are threatened by his sensitivity to environmental concerns, he is likely to lose his job. Such corporations are new forms of impersonal collective self, which are very good at preserving themselves and increasing their power, quite apart from the personal motivations of the individuals who serve them.

There is another Buddhist principle that can help us understand this connection between collective selves and collective *dukkha*: the three unwholesome roots, also known as the three poisons—greed, ill will, and delusion. The Buddhist understanding of karma emphasizes the role of intentions, because one's sense of self is composed largely of habitual intentions and the habitual actions that follow from them. Instead of emphasizing the duality between good and evil, Buddhism distinguishes between wholesome and unwholesome (*kusala/akusala*) tendencies. Negative motivations reinforce the sense of separation between myself and others. That is why they need to be transformed into their more wholesome and nondual counterparts: greed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, and delusion into wisdom.

This brings us to a very important question for socially engaged Buddhism: do the three poisons also operate collectively? If there are collective selves, does that mean there is also collective greed, collective ill will, and collective delusion? The short answer, I believe, is yes. Our present economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism institutionalizes ill will, and our corporate media institutionalize delusion. To repeat, the problem is not only that the three poisons operate collectively but that they have become institutionalized, with a life of their own. Today it is crucial for us to wake up and face the implications of these three institutional poisons.

*Our present economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism institutionalizes ill will, and our corporate media institutionalize delusion.*

**Institutionalized greed.** Despite all its benefits, our present economic system institutionalizes greed in at least two ways: corporations are never profitable enough, and people never consume enough. To increase profits, we must be conditioned into finding the meaning of our lives through buying and consuming.

Consider how the stock market works. It tends to function as an ethical “black hole” that dilutes responsibility for the actual consequences of the collective greed now fueling economic growth. On one side of that hole, investors want increasing returns in

*Things we think are natural and inevitable (and therefore should accept) are in fact conditioned (and therefore can be changed).*

the form of dividends and higher share prices. That’s all most of them care about, or need to care about—not because investors are bad people, but because the system doesn’t encourage any other kind of responsibility. On the other side of the black hole, however, this generalized expectation translates into an impersonal but constant pressure for profitability and growth, preferably in the short run. The globalization of corporate capitalism means that such emphasis on profitability and growth are becoming increasingly important as the engine of the world’s economic activity. Everything else, including the environment and quality of life, tends to become subordinated to this anonymous demand for ever-more profit and growth, a goal that can never be satisfied.

Who is responsible for the pressure for growth? That’s the point: the system has attained a life of its own. We all participate in this process, as workers, employers, consumers, investors, and pensioners, with little if any personal sense of moral responsibility for what happens. Such awareness has been diffused so completely that it is lost in the impersonal anonymity of the corporate economic system. In short, greed has been thoroughly institutionalized.

**Institutionalized ill will.** Militarism continues to plague the modern world. The United States has been an increasingly militarized society since World War II. In the twentieth century at least 105 million people, and perhaps as many as 170 million, were killed in war—most of them non-combatants. Global military expenditures, including the arms trade, amounted to the world’s largest expenditure in 2005: over a trillion dollars, almost half spent by the U.S. alone. To put this into perspective, the United Nations including all of its agencies and funds spends about \$10 billion a year.

From a Buddhist perspective, the “war on terror” looks like an Abrahamic civil war. Despite being on opposite sides, George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden share a

similar understanding about the struggle between good and evil, and the need to destroy evil. Ironically, however, one of the main causes of evil historically has been the attempt to get rid of evil. Hitler, Stalin and Mao were all attempting to purify humanity by eliminating its negative elements (Jews, kulaks, landlords).

Most recently, the second Iraq War, based on lies and propaganda, has obviously been a disaster, and the war on terror has been making all of us less secure, because every “terrorist” we kill or torture leaves many grieving relatives and outraged friends. Terrorism cannot be destroyed militarily because it is a tactic, not an enemy. If war is the terrorism of the rich, terrorism is the war of the poor and disempowered. We must find other, non-militaristic ways to address its root causes.

**Institutionalized delusion.** Buddhism is literally “wake-up-ism,” which implies that we are usually dreaming. How so? Each of us lives inside an individual bubble of delusions, which distorts our perceptions and expectations. Buddhist are familiar with this problem, but we also dwell together within a much bigger bubble that largely determines how we collectively understand the world and ourselves. The institution most responsible for moulding our collective sense of self is the media, which have become our “group nervous system.” Genuine democracy requires an independent and activist press, to expose abuse and discuss political issues. In the process of becoming mega-corporations, however, the major media have abandoned all but the pretence of objectivity.

Since they are profit-making institutions whose bottom line is advertising revenue, their main concern has to do with whatever maximizes those profits. It is never in their own interest to question the grip of consumerism. Thanks to clever advertisements, my son can learn to crave Nike shoes and Gap shirts without ever wondering about how they are made. I can satisfy my coffee and chocolate cravings without any awareness of the social conditions of the farmers who grow those commodities for me, and, even more disturbingly, without any consciousness of what is happening to the biosphere: global warming, disappearing rainforests, species extinction, and so forth.

An important part of genuine education is realizing that many of the things we think are natural and inevitable (and therefore should accept) are in fact conditioned (and therefore can be changed). The world doesn’t need to be the way it is: there are many other possibilities. The present role of the media, however, is to



foreclose most of those possibilities by confining public awareness and discussion within narrow limits. With few exceptions, the world's developed (or "economized") societies are now dominated by a power elite composed of the government and big corporations, including the major media. People move seamlessly from each of these institutions to the other, because there is little difference in their world view or their goals, which is primarily economic expansion. Politics remain "the shadow cast by big business over society," as John Dewey put it a long time ago. The role of the media in this unholy alliance is to "normalize" this situation, so that we accept it and continue to perform our roles, especially the frenzied consumption necessary to keep the economy growing.

Realizing the nature of these three institutional poisons is just as spiritual and just as important as any personal realization we might have as a result of Buddhist practice. In fact, any individual awakening we may have on our meditation cushions remains incomplete until it is supplemented by such a "social awakening." Usually we think of expanded consciousness in individual terms, but today we must dispel the bubble of group delusion to attain greater understanding of dualistic social, economic, and ecological realities.

If this parallel between individual *dukkha* and collective *dukkha* holds, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the great social, economic and ecological crises of our day are also spiritual challenges, which therefore call for a response that must also have a *spiritual* component.

### A Buddhist Solution?

So much for the problems, from a Buddhist perspective. What can Buddhism say about the solution to them? We can envision the solution to social *dukkha* as a society that does not institutionalize greed,

ill will or delusion. In their place, what might be called a dharmic society would have institutions encouraging generosity and compassion, grounded in a wisdom that recognizes our inter-connectedness.

So far, so good, but that approach does not take us very far. Is a reformed capitalism consistent with a dharmic society, or do we need altogether different kinds of economic institutions? How can our world demilitarize? Can representative democracy be revitalized by stricter controls on campaigns and lobbying, or do we need a more participatory and decentralized political system? Should newspapers and television stations be nonprofit or more carefully regulated? Can the United Nations be transformed into the kind of international organization the world needs, or does an emerging global community call for something different?

*Any individual awakening we may have remains incomplete until it is supplemented by a "social awakening."*

I do not think that Buddhism has the answers to these questions. There is no magic formula to be invoked. The solutions are not to be found, they are to be worked out together. This is a challenging task but not an insuperable one, if men and women of good will can find a way to work together, without the deformations of pressure groups defending special privileges. Needless to say, that is not an easy condition to achieve, and it reminds us of the transformative role of personal spirituality, which works to develop men and women of

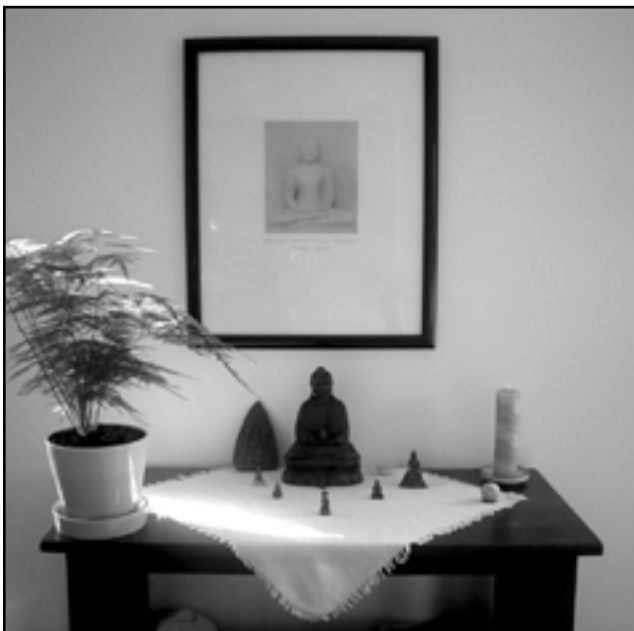
Sometimes bodhisattvas need to manifest their compassion in more politically engaged ways.

good will. But Buddhist principles can contribute to the development of solutions. For example:

***The importance of a personal spiritual practice.***

The basis of Buddhist social engagement is the need to work on oneself as well as on the social system. Why have so many revolutions and reform movements ended up merely replacing one gang of thugs with another? If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill-will and delusion, our efforts to address their institutionalized forms are likely to be useless, or worse. If I do not struggle with the greed inside myself, it is quite likely that, if I gain power, I too will be inclined to take advantage of the situation to serve my own interests. If I do not acknowledge the ill will in my own heart as my own problem, I am likely to project my anger onto those who obstruct my purposes. If unaware that my own sense of duality is a dangerous delusion, I will understand the problem of social change as the need for me to dominate the sociopolitical order. Add a conviction of my good intentions, along with my superior understanding of the situation, and one has a recipe for social as well as personal disaster.

***Commitment to non-violence.*** A nonviolent approach is implied by our nonduality with “others,” including those we may be struggling against. Means and ends cannot be separated. Peace is not only the goal: it must also be the way. We ourselves must be the peace we want to create. A Buddhist awakening reduces our sense of duality from those who have power over us. Gandhi,



for example, always treated the British authorities in India with respect. He never tried to dehumanize them, which is one reason why he was successful. The Buddhist emphasis on delusion provides an important guideline here: the nastier another person is, the more he or she is acting out of ignorance and *dukkha*. The basic problem is delusion, not evil. If so, the basic solution must involve wisdom and insight, not good destroying evil.

***Awakening together.*** Social engagement is not about sacrificing our own happiness to help unfortunate others who are suffering. That just reinforces a self-defeating (and self-exhausting) dualism between us and them. Rather, we join together to improve the situation for all of us. As an aboriginal woman put it, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together.” The point of the bodhisattva path is that none of us can be fully awakened until everyone “else” is, too. The critical world situation today means that sometimes bodhisattvas need to manifest their compassion in more politically engaged ways.

To sum up, what is distinctively Buddhist about socially engaged Buddhism? Emphasis on the social *dukkha* promoted by group-selves as well as by ego-selves. The three collective poisons of institutionalized greed, institutionalized ill will and institutionalized delusion. The importance of personal spiritual practice, commitment to non-violence, and the realization that ending our own *dukkha* requires us to address the *dukkha* of others as well.

Present power elites and institutions have shown themselves incapable of addressing the various crises that now threaten humanity and the future of the biosphere. It has become obvious that those elites are themselves a large part of the problem, and that the solutions will need to come from somewhere else. Perhaps a socially-awakened Buddhism can play a role in that transformation. If Buddhists do not (or cannot) participate in this transformation, then perhaps Buddhism is not the spiritual path that the world needs today.

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*David Loy is professor of religion/ethics and society at Xavier University and is the author of several books. He is a longtime student of Zen and is qualified as a Zen teacher in the Sanbo Kyodan lineage.*





# Teaching Buddhism in America

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

I have been thinking about the discussion we had yesterday on the problems you've encountered in teaching Buddhism in America. I would like to offer a few of my own thoughts on this subject. As we go along, I will also share with you the general outlines of one scheme I've worked out for pulling the Buddha's teachings together into a single, all-embracing whole.

In my view one of the major errors that is being made in the teaching of Buddhism here in the U.S. (and more broadly in the West) is the flat identification of Buddhadhamma (the teachings of the Buddha) with meditation, especially with insight meditation. I see the Dhamma as having a much more extensive range. It involves at least three essential components, which I would call right faith, right understanding, and right practice. The practical side is also extensive, and might be summed up in the famous verse of the Dhammapada (183): "To abstain from all evil, to cultivate the wholesome, and to purify one's mind: that is the instruction of the Buddhas." These three principles, stated so simply, are quite compressed. They can be elaborated in diverse ways at great length.

At the very root of all proper Dhamma practice, in my view, is proper faith, which is expressed by the act of going for refuge to the Triple Gem. By going for refuge, one reposes faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as one's supreme ideals. This expression of faith

should be grounded in understanding what the Three Gems represent. Thus faith, understanding, and practice are intricately interwoven.

Now, the importance of going for refuge can be grasped by raising the question: "What connects a person to the Buddhadhamma from one life to the next?" Is it keeping one's mind on the breath? Is it, when you hear sounds, noting "hearing, hearing"? Is it, when you're walking, noting, "right step, left step," or "lifting, putting down, lifting, putting down"? Of course, these practices are good. They lead to calm and insight, but on their own they are insufficient. What keeps one tied to the Buddha's teaching life after life, until one reaches the stage of irreversibility, is the act of sincerely and earnestly going for refuge to the Three Jewels: "*Buddham saranam gacchāmi, Dhammam saranam gacchāmi, Sangham saranam gacchāmi.*" Going for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha is like placing a block of iron in one's heart, so that the magnet of the Dhamma will attract one as one fares on from life to life.

Right faith gives birth to right understanding. When one accepts the Buddha as the supremely Enlightened One, one opens oneself up to his disclosures on the human condition and on the fundamental principles at work behind the visible order of events. This means that one is prepared to accept his teachings on the basic ethical lawfulness of the cosmic process as it unfolds in human life and throughout all sentient existence. This lawfulness is expressed in the teaching on karma and its corollary, rebirth. The background to authentic Buddhist practice, even to the Four Noble Truths in their deeper dimensions, is this teaching of karma and rebirth. Yet

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*Excerpted from Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's remarks to the Community Dharma Leaders program at BCBS, June 29, 2006.*

many teachers find it embarrassing to talk about these principles that underlie the whole system. But to short-circuit the Dhamma in this way seems to me to be bargaining one's trust in the Buddha. It's almost as if one is half-guessing the Buddha as the Enlightened One.

*If one is a Dhamma teacher, one has to teach more than what one experiences in meditation.*

**Student:** When we finished our original training and various teachers were giving us advice, especially on how to teach with authenticity, one said, "Teach what you know to be true based upon your own experience. Do not teach what you do not know." For most lay teachers in the West, it is relatively uncommon to have personal knowledge of previous lives. This presents something of a conundrum. For those who don't have that personal knowledge, it becomes merely theoretical knowledge.

I would agree with this advice in so far as it pertains to one's role as a meditation instructor. I agree that when one is giving instructions in meditation, one shouldn't make pretensions to have experienced things that one has not personally experienced. However, if one is a Dhamma teacher, one has to teach more than what one experiences in meditation. One also has to explain the theoretical framework that underlies and supports the practice, and this is where these teachings on karma and rebirth enter in. If one is going to teach the Dhamma correctly, one has to teach on the basis of *sammāditṭhi*, right understanding or right view, which includes understanding cyclical existence: how past lives, the present life, and future lives are interwoven and penetrated by the law of karmic causation, which is above all a law of moral causation.



If one intends to teach Dhamma without teaching this, I have to say very frankly one is not teaching the Dhamma correctly; one is not teaching the Buddhadhamma. One is basically teaching Buddhist meditation practices uprooted from their original foundation, integrated with transpersonal psychology, and grounded on a secular humanism. I should add that I don't have any gripe with secular humanism as the foundation for our social and political life; in fact, I think that in any multi-religious, multi-cultural society, it is the best basis for political and social institutions. But we should not use secular humanism as a lens through which to interpret the Buddhadhamma. Let's instead take it on its own terms.

Very few of the monastics in Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka have recollections of previous lives, but when they teach the Dhamma, they explain the teachings of karma and rebirth. How is that? If we are going to understand our existence correctly, we have to take account, not just of the present—in what I call its vertical immediacy—but also of the ground out of which the present moment arises and against which it rests. This means that one has to locate the present in relation to its spatial and temporal horizons. If we want to understand this little

black dot here on the whiteboard, we can't just take this dot and separate it from the rest of the board. To understand this black dot, we have to see it in relation to the whole whiteboard: in relation to this point here, and that point there, and that point over there. If I'm going to explain to somebody what this black dot is all about, I'm going to have to situate it in relation to the whole board.

**Student:** Bhante, the principle of karma is a difficult one for a Westerner who doesn't have the background of Asian culture. Even from my own experience the idea of karma was so foreign that it was hard to get my mind around it. Over the years of doing my practice, I began to understand that karma is a central principle, but to introduce it to someone who hasn't had it in the culture....

One has to change the culture! The question is, do you capitulate on the Buddhadhamma to fit the culture, or do you provide an opportunity for the culture to be changed by the Buddhadhamma?

**Student: It's not that most Western teachers don't want to teach the true Buddhadhamma. We struggle to find graduated teachings to bring people along. With a new group of students, I'm a little reticent to begin laying out the cosmology in terms of rebirth. For me it's a question of timing.**

I agree that if somebody comes in and asks, "What is Buddhism about?" one shouldn't begin with a detailed lecture on Buddhist cosmology, or even on karma and rebirth. I myself would be reticent about introducing the teaching of karma and rebirth at the very beginning. I think it is best to let people see the clear existential truth in the Dhamma first, those aspects that are immediately visible. But when the time is ripe, explain the real Dhamma. One can lead them on to see that the same causal relations that explain suffering in the here and now can be extrapolated to explain the unsatisfactory nature of the cycle of existence. Don't be afraid to teach the real thing. Don't think that you're going to frighten people off by doing so. If you teach the Dhamma straight and direct, people will come to it and drink it up. They'll delight in the taste of the real Dhamma.

Many people turn to fundamentalist Christianity because they're teaching something straight, direct, and clear. Even though their doctrines are dogmatic and intellectually shaky, people are drawn to them because they are straightforward, clear, and ethically consistent. From what I have seen, much of Buddhism as presented in America has been ambiguous and apologetic. It's almost as though we are half-hiding the truth about the Dhamma, saying it's not really this, it's not really that. It's almost as if we are trying to put it across in a pleasant disguise, fitting it out in a nice skirt and blouse, with falsies and lots of makeup. With one side of our mouth we pay homage to Gotama the Buddha as our original teacher; with the other side, we make the teaching sound not much different from that of a transpersonal psychologist with a shaved head and saffron robes.

There is a popular saying nowadays: "The Buddha didn't teach Buddhism, he taught the Dhamma." This saying is a half-truth, and a misleading half-truth. Of course, the Buddha didn't teach "Buddhism," because that is a word of Western coinage, and it has come to

*If you teach the Dhamma straight and direct, people will come to it and drink it up. They'll delight in the taste of the real Dhamma.*

include all the cultural and social phenomena that have arisen in the course of Buddhist history. But the saying is used to suggest that as long as you do a meditation practice stemming from the Buddha, you need not uphold a particularly Buddhist faith or subscribe to Buddhist doctrines: you're practicing Dhamma. And thus a follower of any religion—a Christian, Hindu, Jew, or Muslim—who practices insight meditation or mindfulness of breathing is just as much a "Dhamma-practitioner" as a Buddhist is. Now this is highly misleading. It tends to undermine and subvert the strong emphasis on "faith in the Tathāgata" and the acquisition of right view that we meet so often in the Buddha's discourses.

What the Buddha actually taught, according to the suttas, is called "the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata," and this is comprised of a doctrine and training unique to the Buddha, not found outside his system. Those of other faiths can certainly practice Buddhist meditation techniques, for "the Tathāgata doesn't have the closed fist of a teacher." Anybody who wants to make use of the Buddha's teachings can do so. They can take whatever they want from the tool kit of the Dhamma, and if it's beneficial, make use of it. But please don't say that there is no such thing as a distinctive Dhamma unique to the Buddha with its own unique goal. Don't say that one can have faith in another religious teacher or another religious doctrine and be practicing Dhamma in the same way, with the same intention, with the same view and conviction, as someone who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem.

**Student: Bhante, when I first came to the Insight Meditation Society, I was so disillusioned with organized religion that if there had been anything that really seemed religious, I probably would have left. But through years of practice, the levels of the teaching gradually reveal themselves as one sees experience match what the teaching says. The concept of karma over many lifetimes remains a difficult one for me, though.**

I'm aware that there have to be different approaches to the presentation of the Dhamma in the U.S., and I wouldn't want all to present the same "religious" front. I

appreciate the use of different “dharma doors” for people with different inclinations and aptitudes. For many who have turned against traditional religion, a non-religious presentation of the Dhamma will be more appealing. But this doesn’t mean that one should abandon the core insights at the heart of the teaching just to be more accommodating. Perhaps one can emphasize the “immediately visible” aspects of the Dhamma, while also keeping the “world-transcending” aspects in view.

*One should not abandon the core insights at the heart of the teaching just to be more accommodating.*

Of course, karma is a difficult subject to teach, especially in light of *anattā* (non-self). In the commentaries it is said that it isn’t easy to explain the technical details of how a rebirth takes place without a being that’s reborn.

**Student: Are you saying it would be unskillful of us to present the Dhamma and to not include teachings on karma?**

Of course, the teaching on karma and rebirth can be misused. I am hesitant to explain peoples’ personal troubles in terms of past life retribution. Generally, I prefer to seek concrete causes in this present life and to work out present-life solutions. It’s hard to give one simple recipe for how one should bring in the teaching on karma. When I teach an introductory class, I usually begin with the enlightenment of the Buddha, and then I have to teach truthfully what the Buddha realized on the night of his enlightenment. Am I going to hide, out of embarrassment, the fact that he recollected his previous lives and saw the death and rebirth of beings according to their karma? That would be a cover up, a *bowdlerized* version of the teaching.

And these knowledges weren’t unique to the Buddha himself. During the Buddha’s time, many of his disciples also realized these

knowledges, and there are indeed meditators even today who attain them. These knowledges don’t serve the purpose of entertainment, either, but contribute towards the destruction of the *āsava*s (taints, influxes, outflows). When one sees one’s many past lives, one sees how one repeatedly goes through the cycle of birth, aging and death; how one takes up so many false, transient identities, gives each one up, goes through growth, romance, relationships, separation, then decay and death. Everything appears as an ever-changing, shifting stream of appearances and forms. When one sees with the divine eye the death and rebirth of beings as a process governed by their karma, how they fall from higher realms to lower realms, and then rise up, and fall again, one obtains an extraordinarily vivid picture of *samsāra*. This strengthens the understanding of *dukkha*, the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and thereby the understanding of all four noble truths.

That truth of suffering isn’t just about: “When I miss the bus, I get upset.” “When my children don’t follow my instructions, I get annoyed.” “When I stub my toe, I get angry.” “When I have to sing in front of a group, I feel embarrassed.” Of course, all that is *dukkha*, but the deeper meaning of *dukkha* is this ever-changing, empty flow of five aggregates, a changing kaleidoscopic of empty phenomena, the rolling on of bare “formations” (*sankhārā*) from life to life.



The scheme for arranging the Buddha’s teaching I would like to share with you today is based on a short text in the Anguttara Nikāya:

*Monks, abandon the unwholesome. I tell you it is possible to abandon the unwholesome. If it were not possible to abandon the unwholesome, I would not tell you to do so. But it is possible to abandon the unwholesome. Therefore, I tell you, abandon the unwholesome. (A 2:2.9)*



Unwholesome conduct is summed up in the ten unwholesome deeds of body, speech and mind, which are explained in many places (e.g., M 41). Then there are unwholesome states that constantly arise in the mind, in day-to-

day life, that have to be dealt with through meditation. One list is the sixteen *upakkilesas*, sometimes called the “minor defilements” of the mind (listed, e.g., in M 7), followed by the five hindrances, which we find in many texts. At the deeper level there are the three (in early lists) or four (in later lists) *āsavas* and the seven dormant tendencies (*anusaya*).

But I don't want to dwell on the unwholesome types just now. This might reinforce the perception of Buddhism, especially Theravada Buddhism, as negative, over-obsessed with the dark side of human nature. You probably have students who have left the Protestant fold after being told, “All sinners are condemned to hell,” or who have left the Catholic church after hearing, “You are stamped with original sin.” If they turn to Buddhism and are immediately told, “You have seven underlying tendencies, four *āsavas*, five hindrances, three unwholesome roots, and ten fetters,” they'll conclude: “Wow! Perhaps I should just settle for the one original sin.”

I suggest instead that we place more emphasis on developing what I call “the power of the wholesome,” taking joy in the wholesome. This Anguttara text encourages us to do just that:

*Develop the wholesome. It is possible to develop the wholesome. If it were not possible to develop the wholesome, I would not tell you to do so. But because it is possible to develop the wholesome, therefore, I tell you develop the wholesome. (A 2:2.9)*

I have taken the wholesome qualities and put them into three main categories, each governed by a different principle.

### *The Bases of Merit*

The first group of wholesome deeds in Buddhism is called the ten bases of merit. The suttas speak of three bases of merit; the commentaries then extend the list to ten:

- 1) Giving or generosity (*dāna*).
- 2) Moral conduct (*sīla*).
- 3) Meditative development (*bhāvanā*). Here, meditative development is considered as a cause or basis for merit that leads to a favorable rebirth rather than as a means to enlightenment. Meditative development of this sort is considered principally as the devotional meditations, such as recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, or as the four divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*).

4) Reverence: toward those worthy of reverence, like honoring the Buddha, stupas, elders, venerable monks and nuns, and one's parents.

5) Service: doing service to others, anything helpful and beneficial to others, any kind of self-sacrificial labor for the good and benefit of others. In a way, service is an extension of giving, but the commentaries make it an item in its own right.

*I suggest we place more emphasis on taking joy in the wholesome.*

6) Sharing one's merits with others. When one does meritorious deeds, one invites other beings to rejoice in one's meritorious deeds. One can't actually transfer the merits to others, but one mentally requests others to acknowledge one's deeds and rejoice in the merits.

7) Rejoicing in the merit of others: When one sees or hears about others doing good deeds, one rejoices in those meritorious deeds, or tries to help them and support them in those meritorious deeds.

8) Listening to the Dhamma. In ancient times, this was the way one learned because there were no printed books. But today we can even include studying the Dhamma in this base of merit, if one is studying with the aim of understanding the Dhamma as a guide to life and not just as a subject of research.

9) Teaching the Dhamma.

10) Straightening out one's view, which can be done by listening to the Dhamma, studying the Dhamma, reflection, and by insight meditation.

The Bases of Merit are governed by what I call “the principle of fortunate retribution,” the law that wholesome activities create wholesome karma, and this in turn leads to fortunate results in the future. Wholesome activities will lead to a fortunate rebirth, and to fortunate circumstances within that rebirth.

### *The Perfections*

The perfections (*pāramis*) are ten qualities that one has to develop both in daily life and through meditation practice. These qualities are seen primarily as contributing to the development of a noble character, to the upliftment and transformation of character. They

enable one to bring one's character into accord with the noble ideals of the Dhamma. They are:

- 1) generosity,
- 2) moral conduct,
- 3) renunciation,
- 4) wisdom,
- 5) energy,
- 6) patience,
- 7) truthfulness,
- 8) determination,
- 9) loving-kindness and
- 10) equanimity.

The one who fulfills the *pāramis* to the ultimate degree is the perfectly enlightened Buddha (*sammā sambuddha*), who has become like a perfectly crafted diamond, with each *pārami* in balance with the others, just as

*I encourage you all to bring at least as much attention to the cultivation of what is wholesome as to the abandoning of the unwholesome.*

each facet of the diamond is balanced with every other facet. Disciples fulfill the *pāramis* to different levels, but everyone who wants to reach the liberating path has to develop them to a sufficient degree. So these *pāramis* provide a useful scheme for understanding the wholesome qualities we need to implement in our daily lives in order to develop as worthy human beings in the noble Dhamma. The *pāramis*, in my scheme, represent “the principle of conservation of energy” in the spiritual domain. As one continually develops these qualities and pursues the goal of enlightenment by the practice of the *pāramis*, the energy inherent in wholesome qualities is conserved and accumulates from life to life until it is sufficient to permit a breakthrough to realization.

**Student: Is it true the *pāramis* are not mentioned together in any sutta?**

That is so. One doesn't find the *pāramis* mentioned in the old Nikāyas. They first appear in a later stratum of the Sutta Pitaka, in such texts as the *Cariyāpitaka* and the *Buddhavamsa*. The idea of the *pāramis* probably arose in the early Buddhist schools even before the rise of the Mahayana. This idea was originally introduced

to schematize the virtues a bodhisattva perfects to reach Buddhahood, but it was later extended to signify the qualities that have to be developed by any practitioner in order to reach any kind of enlightenment. The *pāramis* explain how our moral qualities build up an inner force from life to life, gain momentum, and then become integral components of our character.

### *The Aids to Enlightenment*

Now we come to the third group, the thirty-seven *bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*. These are thirty-seven states, factors, or aids to enlightenment, arranged in seven groups. The popular name for them now has become “wings to enlightenment,” though this is not literal. Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has published a helpful book about them called *The Wings to Awakening*, which collects numerous sutta passages on each of the seven groups. These are the things that initially contribute to enlightenment, and then, at the most advanced stage, become the factors that precipitate the experience of enlightenment itself. I'm sure you're familiar with the basic groups: 1) the four foundations of mindfulness; 2) the four right efforts; 3) the four bases for spiritual potency; 4) the five faculties; 5) the five powers; 6) the seven factors of enlightenment; and 7) the eight factors of the noble eightfold path.

Of these thirty-seven factors, four occur repeatedly in the different lists: energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. It is these factors, rooted in faith or trust, that bring realization of the Dhamma. First they bring gradual insights into dependent origination, impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). Then, at the peak of their development, they bring the breakthrough beyond the conditioned to the unconditioned—*nibbāna*.

**Student: I wonder if you could say more about the way faith is understood in Buddhist context. So often in a western context it's associated with belief and dogma, but I know in Buddhism there is also the sense of confidence.**

The Pali word *saddhā*, which I translate as “faith” rather than “confidence,” doesn't suggest belief in dogmas. I know some people who come from Christian backgrounds struggle with “faith” as a translation, but for me this word has a richer emotional nuance than confidence. In my translation scheme I use the word “confidence” to render the Pali word *pasāda*, which seems to fit well. *Pasāda* suggests the clarity and tranquility of



*Full moon and branches, Thanksgiving 2005.*

mind that come when one meets a teacher whom one trusts. I take *saddhā*, faith, to be faith in the Triple Gem, particularly in the Buddha as the Fully Enlightened One, the one who has fully understood the ultimate truths that bring the resolution of our existential predicament. It also means trusting confidence in the Dhamma as the teaching that discloses the truth about the existential predicament and its solution, as well as the path that leads to that resolution; in other words, the path that leads to enlightenment and liberation. And faith in the Sangha, that is trusting confidence in the community of noble ones, the confidence that those who have followed the teaching have personally gained wisdom and purified themselves of defilements.

Faith, as I see it, has three interwoven components: one is intellectual, one volitional, and one emotional. Of course, such separation is somewhat artificial, but with this qualification one can still speak about them separately. The intellectual component is a willingness to accept on trust the truths that the Buddha discloses, even though they might go contrary to our own habitual ways of understanding. It doesn't mean blind belief. The way we arrive at this faith is to first test and verify for ourselves certain things the Buddha teaches that come within range of our experience. So we try out the Buddha's teaching and find that it does bring well-being and happiness. It changes our lives for the better, so instead of being miserable, wretched, and degraded, we now feel wholesome, healthy, and strong, on the way to peace, bliss and liberation. So even though we cannot, right now, verify everything for ourselves, we have confidence that as we advance, when we develop

the required faculty of wisdom, we'll be able to validate the crux of the Dhamma and gain liberation from all suffering. That is the intellectual component of faith.

The volitional component means that faith acts upon the will, motivating one to undertake the training, to make a resolution, a commitment, a determination to follow this path without turning away, and to follow this path, not only in this life, but as long as it takes to reach the goal.

The emotional component of faith is love and devotion directed towards the Buddha, by reason of his exalted, incomparable qualities; towards the Dhamma, by reason of its beauty, purity and profundity; and towards the Sangha, by reason of the excellent qualities of its members.

To summarize briefly, I encourage you all to bring at least as much attention to the cultivation of what is wholesome as to the abandoning of the unwholesome. And you may find it a more complete and skillful means when teaching the Dhamma to others. I have sketched a very broad outline of how this might be done, and invite you to continue your own investigation of the teachings with clarity and diligence.

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*Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is a Buddhist monk originally from New York City. He lived altogether for 23 years in Sri Lanka. His publications include several translations from the Pali Nikayas and most recently an anthology, In the Buddha's Words (Wisdom 2005). He currently resides at Bodhi Monastery in northwest New Jersey.*

# The Case Against Racism

The Assalāyana Sutta  
Majjhima Nikāya 93

The tendency in human nature to discriminate against people because of their skin color, social standing, or birth, and to consider one racial group to be more pure than another, is probably as old as mankind itself. Racism was alive and well in ancient India, where pale-skinned Indo-European brahmins placed themselves at the pinnacle of a caste system that included nobles, merchants, workers and the universally denigrated outcasts.

In this discourse the Buddha offers a series of cogent arguments against this indefensible view. The first and most compelling of these is simply asking, "On the basis of what might one regard oneself better than another?" He then proceeds to offer objections raised from the perspectives of biology, ethnography, the laws of karma (which treat all people equally), psychology, common sense, physics, genetics and social custom.

The brahmins, of course, are shown up to have no legitimate basis for their assumed superiority, which is called by the Buddha simply a "pernicious view." By the end of the discussion we are told that the brahmin Assalāyana "sat silent and dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, and without response."

On one occasion a large group of brahmins from diverse provinces were staying at Sāvattihī for some business or other. Then those brahmins thought: "The recluse Gotama describes purification for all the four castes. Who is there able to dispute with him about this assertion?" So the brahmin Assalāyana went with a large number of brahmins to the Buddha and said:

Master Gotama, the brahmins say thus:  
"Brahmins are the highest caste, those of any other caste are inferior;  
brahmins are the fairest caste, those of any other caste are dark;  
only brahmins are purified, not non-brahmins;  
brahmins alone are the... offspring of Brahmā...."  
What does Master Gotama say about that?

*The Buddha replies:*

On the strength of what, or with the support of what, do the brahmins say this?

1) Now, Assalāyana, the brahmin women are seen having their periods, becoming pregnant, giving birth, and giving suck. And yet those who are born from the wombs of the brahmin women say thus: 'Brahmins are... the offspring of Brahmā....'

2) Have you heard that in Yona [=Ionia; i.e., Greece] and in other outland countries there are only two castes, masters and slaves, and that masters become slaves and slaves become masters?

—So I have heard, sir.

3) Suppose a noble were to [misbehave ethically]. On the dissolution of the body, after death, would only he reappear in... an unhappy destination..., and not a brahmin?

—No, Master Gotama.

4) Suppose a brahmin were to [behave ethically]. On the dissolution of the body, after death, would only he reappear in... a happy destination..., and not a noble, or a merchant, or a worker?

—No, Master Gotama.

5) Is only a brahmin capable of developing a mind of loving-kindness towards a certain region, without hostility and without ill will, and not a noble, or a merchant, or a worker?

—No, Master Gotama.

6) Is only a brahmin capable of taking bath powder, going to the river, and washing off dust and dirt, and not a noble, or a merchant, or a worker?

—No, Master Gotama.

7) Suppose a king were to assemble here a hundred men of different birth and say to them: "Come, sirs, let any here who are [high-born] take an upper fire-stick of [refined] wood and light a fire and produce heat. Also, let any here who are [low-born] take an upper fire-stick of [common] wood and light a fire and produce heat." What do you think, Assalāyana? When a fire is lit and heat is produced by someone in the first group, would that fire have a flame, color, and a radiance, and would it be possible to use it for the purposes of fire, while [this would not occur for the other group]?

—No, Master Gotama.



*Not by birth is one an outcast,  
not by birth is one a brahmin.  
By deed is one an outcast,  
by deed is one a brahmin.  
(Sutta Nipāta 136)*

8) Suppose a brahmin youth were to cohabit with a noble girl, and a son were to be born from their cohabitation. Should the son born from a brahmin youth and a noble girl be called a noble after the mother or a brahmin after the father?

–He could be called both, Master Gotama.

Suppose a mare were to be mated with a male donkey, and a foal were to be born as the result. Should the foal be called a horse after the mother or a donkey after the father?

–It is a mule, Master Gotama; since it does not belong to either kind. I see the difference in this last case, but I see no difference in either of the former ones.

9) Suppose there were two brahmin students who were brothers, born of the same mother, one studious and acute, but immoral and of bad character, and one neither studious nor acute, but virtuous and of good character. Which of them would brahmins feed first at a... feast?

–On such occasions, brahmins would feed first the one who was neither studious nor acute, but virtuous and of good character, Master Gotama; for how could what is given to one who is immoral and of bad character bring great fruit?

*The Buddha then tells a story in which a group of brahmins who make a similar claim to superiority are asked by a sage the following questions:*

1) Sirs, do you know if the mother who bore you went only with a brahmin and never with a non-brahmin? –No, sir.

2) Sirs, do you know if your mother's mothers back to the seventh generation went only with a brahmin and never with a non-brahmin? –No, sir.

3) Sirs, do you know if the father who begot you went only with a brahmin and never with a non-brahmin? –No, sir.

4) Sirs, do you know if your father's fathers back to the seventh generation went only with a brahmin and never with a non-brahmin? –No, sir.

5) Sirs, do you know how the conception of an embryo in a womb comes about? –Yes, sir. There is a union of the mother and father, and it is the mother's season, and the being to be reborn is present. The conception of an embryo in a womb comes about through the union of these three things.

6) Then, sir, do you know for sure whether that being to be reborn is a noble, or a brahmin, or a merchant, or a worker?

–No, sir.

7) That being so, sir, then what are you?

–That being so, sir, we do not know what we are.

The Buddha's own view on the matter is of course quite different. Since a person most fundamentally is to be understood as a self-less, dependently arisen confluence of five aggregates, processing transient phenomena through six sense doors in a moment-to-moment construction of virtual experience, the matters of skin color, race, social status, and even gender, are of relatively little consequence. He is famous for insisting there be no caste distinctions in his sangha of monks and nuns.

A very interesting issue is raised in this exchange with brahmins in the additional story: How do we understand ethnicity and caste in light of the teachings around rebirth? Is the "being to be reborn," whether construed as a soul or as a bundle of dispositions, in any intrinsic way a member of a caste? I think the Buddha points out here how utterly secondary such distinctions are.

In the end, the brahmins are reduced to admitting that they are not really very clear at all about who or what they are. This is good, for it is only after we unlearn our prejudices that we can begin to learn much about the Dharma.

—A. Olendzki

# Seeking the Seeker

Jack Engler

*I once asked my teacher, Anagarika Munindra-ji, "What is the dharma?"  
He said, very simply, "Dharma is living life fully."*

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When we practice mindfulness meditation, many things arise in awareness. We typically turn our attention to each thing in turn—different thoughts, feelings, body sensations, states of mind. We often don't turn our attention to that which is doing the observing, that which seems to be doing the thinking, that which is aware. This is what I want to do today—to actually seek, in a very practical way, who it is that is doing the seeking, who it is that is practicing. Of course, you say, I am seeking, I am practicing. But who is this I? Can you show it to me? When we turn to look for it, what do we find?

The Buddha said he taught one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering. What did he mean when he talked about ending suffering? What kind of suffering? He wasn't talking about the suffering we bring to a therapist's office. He wasn't directly talking about conflicts in relationships, or difficulties in communicating with our spouses or teenage children. He wasn't talking about finding a better direction for our life. He was interested more in the great existential suffering we all experience by virtue of being alive. The world is on fire, he said. The mind is on fire. And the only thing that matters is quenching that fire, putting it out. To do that we have to find the source of the fire and the fuel that feeds it, which he identified as a certain kind of ignorance or culpable not-knowing. We burn because we don't really know who we are. Today we will try to get closer to knowing who we are.

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*This article is drawn from a daylong course offered by Jack Engler at BCBS this past April.*

The seeker is seeking liberation from suffering. Yet meditative inquiry reveals that suffering is largely self-generated. More to the point, at the core it reveals that suffering arises from grasping or clinging to notions of a self. The technical term for this in Buddhist thought is *ahamkāra*, which literally means "making a self." If we want to do something about it, we must get to the root of how we make ourselves into a self that can be grasped.

The only thing that matters is stopping the grasping. It doesn't really matter how we do it or what the point of leverage is. In traditional Buddhist practice, there are said to be three doors to liberation: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). A profound enough experience of any one of these fundamental marks of existence can catapult the mind into finally letting go. It cannot continue to hold on to the view of self as something that can be grasped once its transitory and illusory nature has been revealed. At a certain stage of formal practice, this is exactly what happens, though it can happen outside meditation as well. The scriptures are full of accounts of individuals awakening as the result of a direct, profound encounter with one of these realities. Each of us, it turns out, will have a predilection for one of these doors as our passageway to awakening.

Of the three doors to liberation, the most difficult one to grasp in direct experience is *anattā*. I'm not sure what your own experience has been, but it's not so hard to experience the moment-to-moment flow and change of things. The constantly changing nature of experience is apparent every day, every moment actually. Neither is it particularly hard to experience the discomfort inherent in just being alive—the underlying discontent, the

unease, the nagging restlessness which we can't pin to any one thing, the insecurity of life. Approaching liberation through the door of *anattā*, emptiness of self, however, is more difficult, in part because we are so thoroughly conditioned to construct our experience around some sense of I, me, and mine. It's the most deeply conditioned impulse in us, the hardest to see through, and the most difficult to relinquish.



The idea for this workshop arose two years ago when I began to wonder if there was a way to get at the experience of *anattā*, this experience of emptiness of self, more directly than the way it comes up in normal vipassana (insight meditation) practice. Today is still something of an experiment. I'd like to suggest we enter into it in that spirit. We'll start with the question, "Who am I?" It is the great question of spiritual inquiry. It's not asking, "Who do I take myself to be?" but "Who, really, am I?"

We could talk about this for hours, but I suspect that by five o'clock we'd be no further along than we are right now. I suggest we try to get at it by doing a series of short meditations to try and generate some actual experience of *anattā*. Then perhaps we'll feel like something has actually shifted in our sense of self by the end of the day. We'll come at this issue of the self like a jewel with many facets. We'll start each segment with a practice period structured around a question for meditative inquiry, follow it with reflection and discussion of our experience, then turn the jewel to another facet and pose another question for meditative inquiry.

This practice will involve using vipassana in a somewhat different way than you may be accustomed to. Those of you who have practiced here in Barre know that basic mindfulness practice involves being a silent witness or observer of all that arises and passes away moment by moment, without reaction or judgment. Here we will

use mindfulness to mount a focused and active inquiry into a series of questions about the self. We will still be allowing whatever arises into awareness with openness and acceptance. But we will investigate each moment of awareness for what it may tell us in response to a question we put to it about the self. The great Japanese Zen master Dogen, who brought Soto Zen from China to Japan in the thirteenth century, was uncompromising on this score: "Great questioning, great enlightenment; little questioning, little enlightenment; no questioning, no enlightenment." So we're going to take Dogen at his word and engage in great questioning.



The first question for the first sitting will simply be, "Who am I?" In the midst of this arising and passing away, who am I? Who is the I that is witnessing this arising and passing away? Let's try to really go after it and seriously try to find it, and we'll see what we find.

*Begin mindfulness practice as we usually do, paying attention to the breath as it comes and goes, making no effort to control it. Letting each breath be.... Gradually turning your attention to whatever arises in awareness and letting it be. If it calls for attention, turning your attention to it. Just allowing all, accepting all, rejecting nothing.... And now begin to put that question, that great*

*question, in the midst of all this coming and going, arising and passing away—breath, thoughts, feelings, body—Who am I? Not trying to think about it, not analyzing it. Just holding it as a question. Letting it guide your attention in a penetrating way. Repeating it to yourself from time to time.... Keeping it fresh and focused. Who am I? Investigate. Who am I?*

---

Silence for 20 minutes.  
"Who am I?"

---



One way to understand what we are doing here is that we are using our mind to go beyond mind. That's what these great questions do. They engage us on a certain level, but that level keeps deepening. The result is that you are eventually forced to go beyond mind in a way your mind cannot describe. We are using these questions, not to come up with verbal or conceptual answers, although some may suggest themselves to us along the way—that's fine. We are using these questions to push deeper and deeper into the nature of our own experience. What is the nature of the self? Let's see if that has something to do with ending suffering.

I'm aware of the breath. Is there somebody breathing? Am "I" breathing? See if you can find out who it is that's breathing. I'm aware of thoughts. Try to find the thinker. Who it is that's thinking? The same with everything that arises—every feeling, body sensation, sound, sight, taste, smell. Who is feeling? Who is sensing? Who is hearing? Who is seeing? Who is tasting? Who is smelling? Let's put that question to every experience that arises. Remember, great questioning, great enlightenment. Who is thinking?

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Silence for 20 minutes.  
*"Who is breathing/thinking/sensing?"*

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We are so used to formulating these questions in a subject/object framework. If there is intentionality, there has got to be someone who is intending, right? I'm inviting us to investigate to see if that is really the case. It certainly feels like that is the case. We've lived our whole life on that assumption. That's why pursuing these kinds of inquiries can be deeply unsettling. We are here to challenge the whole structure of experience, the whole way of organizing ourselves around the core belief that we are somehow separate from what is happening.

So let's turn the jewel to yet another facet. The next inquiry comes at this same issue in a slightly different way. In each moment of experience, ask, "To whom is this happening? Or, "Who is experiencing this?"

---

Silence for 20 minutes.  
*"To whom is this happening?"*  
*"Who is experiencing this?"*

---

One thing this process of inquiry helps us do is notice what we identify with as our own, what we take as defining who we are. We have all kinds of internal representations of ourselves, some conscious and some unconscious. These are notions of who we are, or who we aren't but we would like to be or ought to be, or who we are and shouldn't be—it can get to be quite a complex mix of views about ourselves. We have all sorts of fearful and self-limiting identifications. "I" can't do this. "I" am stupid. "I" am unattractive. No one likes "me". Of course we have positive, inspiring, sometimes grandiose views of ourselves as well, which are limiting in their own way. I'm really good at what I do. I get this, my colleagues don't. That was a great piece of work—I hope I get some recognition for it. Look Ma, no hands!

The next meditative inquiry brings these identifications to the surface. In inquiring into them, you realize that in my normal "I"-mode, I identify with all of those attributions, and many more. Most of the time I'm not even conscious of it. I take it for granted that that's simply who I am—the sum total of all these representations of self—all these attributes, traits, behaviors, personal history. As you persist with the inquiry, you may begin to see that you are none of these things in any final or definitive sense. Maybe who you really are is not in the mix of identifications at all. Put the question to each moment of experience: Is this who I am? Or conversely: Is this not who I am? They are actually the same question. Each gets at the root of how we construct self.

Accepting nothing, taking nothing for granted, accepting nothing as final, this deep questioning can lead us towards ending our self-grasping and our imprisonment.

---

Silence for 20 minutes.  
*"Is this who I am?" "Is this me?"*

---



Energy is usually low after lunch. It's hard to rouse the same level of commitment to inquiry. To reenergize us and turn the jewel to still another facet, we'll do an interactive mode of inquiry this time. We'll break into pairs and use the repeating question method that is central to the Diamond Approach of the Ridwan School of Hameed Almaas, where it is also used as a method of meditative inquiry. One member of each pair

puts the question to the other. After the other finishes responding, the person putting the question thanks him and gently puts the question again. I think you'll find that repeating the question again and again drives the inquiry deeper and deeper. After fifteen minutes, the pair switch roles. We are continuing the inquiry into self-identifications with the repeating question, "Who do you take yourself to be?"

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Repeating practice. 30 minutes.  
*"Who do you take yourself to be?"*

---

In that open field of awareness, we next want to see how pervasive the "I" actually is. We normally have little idea because it's the air we breathe, invisible to us. This time, try to see directly how most moments of experience are structured as some sort of "I" experience: I am doing something—thinking, observing, breathing, worrying, judging, feeling. Or something is happening to me: there is pain in my knee, this person won't leave me alone, lunch isn't what I expected. In or behind what is happening, I implicitly take myself to be the doer or the done-to, the agent or the recipient. Whatever I am experiencing tends to refer to "me" in some way. It's unnerving to actually see, moment by moment, how self-referential so much of our experience is.

I had a psychotic patient tell me once, "I am the sun and all of you are planets who orbit around me." That delusional belief is not so different from what we all tend to assume all the time. Somewhere in the moment of experience is a sun called I or me, around which everything else is orbiting. Let's take a few minutes to observe this particular facet of the jewel. See if you can pick up this pervasive I around which everything implicitly orbits. No judgment about it. Just see if you can pick it up.

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Silence for 20 minutes.  
*Notice how pervasive the I is, explicitly or implicitly, in most moments of experience.*

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You often hear people talk about transcending the ego or getting rid of it: "You have to lose your ego to be free." That's actually a mistaken way of thinking. The ego was never there to begin with. You can't lose what you do



not have. This ego, this I, this self, is not a thing. It's not some entity. It's a mental construct that comes into play under certain conditions. The two main conditions that evoke it, that bring this sense of being a separate entity into play, are conflict and anxiety. When we're anxious or feel conflicted, we contract into this sense of being separate, and the full catastrophe unfolds from there.

The Buddha never denied that we have personalities. Of course we have a personality. The person you are is different from the person I am. We each have a particular history, a particular set of attributes, interests, capabilities, defenses and so forth, and each of us is on a unique trajectory. All that is fine. It's when we start attaching that to some fixed entity called the self that the problems start because then we have to protect it, defend it, secure it, worry about it, try to impress others with it, hold on to it for dear life. Our practice is not about getting rid of personality; it is about letting go of the grasping that builds up around mistaken notions of personality.

This brings us to the next meditation. Having seen how pervasive the sense of I is, the crucial question now is, what are the consequences of holding that particular belief and acting as if it were real?

What we perceive are not things in themselves, not objects "out there", or states "in here". It only seems that way, because we tend to confuse what we perceive with what we think about what we perceive. It is our thinking that creates "things" or "objects". When we perceive something "out there", object to our subject, we are actually perceiving our own thinking, our concepts of things. Now this has its utility in everyday life, but deep down it creates enormous problems. Self, for instance, reveals itself to be just such a concept. But it is probably

the most potent one of all, since it creates such problems for us. This is the empirical and experiential question we will be sitting with next. You have to be convinced about the consequences that ensue from your own deep experience, or you'll continue to create your world the way you do. Understanding the idea, which is difficult enough, won't do it; only deep realization of the actual cost/benefit, moment by moment, of organizing our life around this concept will begin to change things for us.

So I encourage you in this next sitting to really go into, to really pursue the inquiry that lives in, the question: "What are the consequences of constructing my experience around I, me or mine?" Follow that process, moment by moment, as you find yourself constructing your experience in that way. You'll be able to detect and experience the impact directly on your body and mind. Repeat the question from time to time. Let it guide your inquiry. Again, not thinking, but directly observing the consequences on body and mind as you experience them.

Alternatively, you can also ask of each body and mind state that arises with a self-referential quality—which will probably be most—"Does this make me happy?" "Does this bring me peace of mind?"

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Silence for 20 minutes.

*"What are the consequences, moment by moment,  
of bringing in I, me, or mine?"  
"Does this bring me peace of mind?"*

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The Theravada Buddhist tradition has a particular way of describing the awakening that comes from the practice of vipassana. Awakening is said to occur in four distinct stages or path-moments. What distinguishes them is not the subjective experience—that is described as basically the same. The difference is the set of unwholesome mental factors called "fetters" that are said to be extinguished at each stage. These mental factors are termed fetters because they bind us to *samsāra* as the root causes of our suffering. There are ten fetters in all, and once they are extinguished from the mind, it is said they will never be experienced again. According to traditional Theravada teaching, one's rebirth status also changes as a result of each stage of awakening. Asian teachers actually see this as the most important outcome, but this cosmology is still pretty alien to us so we tend to focus on how awakening roots out the sources of suffering. What is so interesting about this model, in light of the kind of practice we are doing today, is that

one of the very last of these obstacles to freedom is the subtle, deeply-ingrained tendency to compare self with others. That is, to behave as if there were a self separate from, independent of, and competitive with others, even after belief in such a construct has been abandoned as a result of first awakening. That's how deeply rooted the attachment to self is—it's the last thing that gets extinguished. Once it takes root it is very hard to uproot, but it is inspiring to know that, in principle, this is possible.

It might help to remind ourselves of all of those moments, and there are many of them, when we have "lost ourselves" in something. It takes only a bit of reflection to realize that we actually function pretty well when we surrender the need for a separate self directing the show. We can lose ourself in a piece of music, a work of art, a sport, a prayer, an experience of love. In a state of absorption the sense of being separate from our experience, the director behind the scenes, just drops away. "We" aren't there; there is just there-ness. Actually not even there-ness or here-ness. Just is-ness, or suchness.

And, surprise of surprises: "I" am not even missed! Because "I" am not needed or necessary. Everything is going along just fine, thank you very much. Better, in fact. Buddhist and other practice traditions call this non-dual awareness. It ranges from very ordinary moments, when we respond spontaneously to some situation without any thought of self or self-consciousness reflection, right up to the most profound and transformative level of non-dual awareness, which is enlightenment, which is freedom. We have experiences like this all the time, but we somehow put them aside,



forget about them... and then come back to our normal mode of self-conscious awareness organized around a sense of self that is separate from its experience with all the ills that attend it.

I remember the way the tennis player Arthur Ashe described his experience of winning Wimbledon in 1975. He called it “being in the zone.” It’s a phrase that athletes use all the time now. As he described it, for two weeks he was in a zone of awareness in which “he” wasn’t there. Everything that was happening took place in slow motion—himself, his opponent, the flight of the ball, all in a perfect dance. The ball looked as big as a grapefruit as it came across the net. Returning it was effortless. The racket just went to the ball without conscious intent or purpose, but with perfect pace and timing “He” wasn’t directing it. “He” wasn’t “hitting” the ball. The ball was just coming into contact with the racket. That’s a state of non-dual awareness, when self just kind of drops out. Dogen called the most profound level of non-dual awareness “the dropping off of body and mind.”

We actually function more efficiently in those states, don’t we? If we look closely, we will find that we “make a self” only when we’re anxious in some way. The self is the owner of anxiety. It’s when we’re anxious that we become self-conscious or feel we need to be self-assertive, or want to impose our will on others. In *Circe du Soleil*, they say, “Self-consciousness is something you have to let go if you expect to take flight.” The self by nature is fearful. By nature it’s selfish. This entity, separate from what is happening, causes a lot of conflict. Because it has to protect, defend and aggrandize itself in a world full of other separate selves who are doing the same thing. No wonder friendship, love, and collaboration are hard. But when we’re just there, completely intimate with experience, this self drops away. We experience without an experiencer. Let’s see if we can get a taste of that, “The dropping off of body and mind.”

So let’s do one last short sitting. Let’s take the inquiry one last step—not that it’s the very last step, but it is our last step together for today. The inquiry this time comes from Ajahn Chah, a wonderful teacher in the Thai forest tradition who taught many Westerners. He used to say that stopping the grasping-after-self was like putting down a rock. It’s as if we’ve been carrying this huge rock on our shoulders all the time, and he is inviting us to consider what it might feel like to put that rock down for a moment. Let’s try sitting quietly for a bit, just putting that rock down, and see what it feels like. I don’t mean throwing the rock away and all it stands for—just

putting it down. In Tibetan practice they call this a “glimpse”—a glimpse of what it would really feel like to put down the burden for good.

*So sit comfortably, relax your body, and breath deeply but normally as mindfulness becomes established. Now try putting down the burden of being a self for a few moments. Just cease holding on to yourself, defining yourself, judging yourself. See what experience feels like without self-grasping. Notice the moments of calm, spontaneous awareness that arise when there is no grasping at self. Let yourself take that in... feeling what it’s like.... Moments of just being, without being someone.*

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Silence for 15 minutes.

*“What does it feel like to ‘put the burden down?’”*

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Very early on in my path, thirty-five years ago in Calcutta, I asked one of my teachers, Nani Barua, whom most of us know as Dipa Ma, the sort of question that can only occur to a beginner: “When you become awakened, doesn’t everything become sort of grey and blah? If you’ve eliminated strong feelings, sense desire, and all the rest, where’s the *chutzpa*, where’s the juice?” Instead of answering, she broke out laughing. She laughed and laughed. Eventually she said that staggering under the burden of grasping after self is what is so bland and repetitive and boring. When you put that rock down, when you relinquish your hold on all the baggage of self-attachment, every moment is new and vividly alive. As I came to know her and spend time with her, I saw this aliveness and zest in everything she did. Everything. It was so obvious. No answer she could have given would have been as convincing as her laughter and delight at my question.

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## Mind Monkeys

In the heat of the jungle  
 a storm is brewing;  
 Monkeys swing  
     from branch to branch; tree to tree  
 Apes, baboons, and chimps...  
     squealing like a Jane Goodall documentary

they are agitated  
 because  
 they are fearful, anxious

They  
 Sense  
 Danger.

Cataclysmic Prophetic Apocalyptic Danger.

mind-monkeys are SCREAMING:  
 "Danger, Danger, Will Robinson!"  
 and running scared  
 bouncing off trees

armies of apes from all planets  
 armed with Angry weapons  
 loaded with  
 pessimism  
 skepticism  
 cynicism  
 ready to fight  
 and erect walls around  
 Fear of destruction

And then....  
     a Stillness comes;  
 the raging storm subsides

The monkeys, chimps, apes and baboons  
     Stop

Settle.  
 They lovingly groom one another:  
     Stroking

Nurturing  
 Caring  
     Touching  
     Calming

Soothing  
 Monkey love and hugs.

REFUGE

Sangha

STILLNESS

—*Mirah Riben*

## Winter moon

Going  
 to a retreat  
 the moon followed me

Returning  
 home

I followed the moon

—*Theikdi*



## Dhamma

In the world of Satipatthana Vipassana

there is no one that speaks,  
 no one that hears

there is no one that sees  
 there is no one that smells  
 there is no one that tastes  
 there is no one that feels

there is no one that thinks

there is no one that laughs  
 there is no one that cries

there is no one that lives,  
 no one that dies

—*Theikdi*

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.



# There's More to Giving Than We Think

Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia



A number of years ago, I taught several workshops on the theme of generosity (*dāna*) as a spiritual practice. The audience was a group of volunteers at a community meditation center. It was a bit of a rude awakening for all of us to discover that only a few of the volunteers saw their service as an integral part of their spiritual practice. A majority of the volunteers said that they offered their time and energy because they didn't have much money and volunteering was a way to attend the meditation programs and retreats for free. In their minds, they emphasized what they were getting and not what they were giving. Others said that they volunteered because it fit in with their political philosophy. "Serving" was seen as the politically correct thing to do. They weren't particularly noticing how it felt. Still others didn't quite understand the relationship between the service they offered at the meditation center and *dāna* as a spiritual practice. They thought *dāna* simply meant offering money to teachers at the end of retreats.

One might be surprised at how these volunteers seemed to be missing their experience. It was as if the happiness of their giving lay hidden in the dark reaches of their minds waiting to be brought into their hearts—and enjoyed. But I think these apparent missed opportunities are completely understandable when we consider that, while intellectually we may know the importance of offering our time and energy to things we value, most of us are novices when it comes to taking these acts to heart.

And I suspect that few of us have given much thought to why generosity figures so prominently in the Buddha's teaching. We know that giving is a good idea and can give of ourselves when the need arises, but are we accurately reflecting on the significance of giving in terms of spiritual awakening? One renowned Theravada teacher said, "As worldliness pursues getting, which is the root of greed in action, so giving is the way to *nibbāna*."

*Dāna is not a tangent to the spiritual path; it is deeply fundamental.*

## Generosity as a Practice

When preaching to a newcomer, the Buddha always started on his graduated exposition of the Dhamma with generosity. And many believe that he placed it first on his list of spiritual perfections (*paramis*) because it is the basis for developing those that follow. Because it is listed first, I think there can be a tendency to downplay it, to see it as a preliminary practice, or to want to step over it completely so we can get to the good stuff. "Yeah, yeah, let's get on with it." But *dāna* is not a tangent to the spiritual path; it is deeply fundamental. It is the foundation upon which all else is built.

One of the senior monks in the Ajahn Chah lineage said that Buddha talked about *dāna* first because if someone didn't

understand the value of basic generosity, they weren't even teachable. If we don't have a sense of its significance, and don't have some degree of maturity in our experience of it, then other forms of practice—*sīla*, *bhāvanā*, *mettā*—won't even get off the ground. There has to be a malleability of heart, a softness, a diminished self-absorption, before the

engines can even get started! And this softness is developed largely through our increasingly mature direct experience of *dāna*.

It is not a stretch to suggest that correct understanding of generosity represents one of the first big hurdles we have to jump, however gently, along the path to freedom. One of three things abandoned at the first stage of enlightenment is clinging to rites and rituals, precepts and practices. When it comes to the practice of generosity, clinging to rites and rituals is taken to mean acting out of our conditioning or social values in such a way that we never get beyond the standards and habits of our culture or of our youth. It means getting so caught up in ideas and notions of giving, or acting so compulsively, that we go through the motions of generosity but fail to notice what is going on in our hearts. We never reflect on what *dāna* is all about; thus, we fail to experience what is possible through it.

*We seldom reflect on what dāna is all about; thus, we fail to experience what is possible through it.*

These are deep teachings. I think the Buddha is trying to help us see how clinging to views and ideas about giving can stand in the way of what we are endeavoring to realize on this path. On the one hand, we can get so heady about what we are doing that we miss our heartfelt motivations. Like the volunteers at the meditation center, we short-change ourselves. Or we cling to (and act upon!) superficial ideas of goodness, expecting that mere compliance, without deep investigation of the mind and heart, will set us free.

Ajahn Mun said that Dhamma would not serve us if all we do is comply with rules or follow directions. In other words, if we just follow the standards and practices of the people around us, or act compulsively without reflecting on what we are doing, we'll miss the great benefit to be derived from giving.

So how do we work with generosity as a spiritual practice? The answer is this: by being attuned to our motives for giving and learning from the experience itself.

#### Being attuned to our motive

There are two suttas in the Anguttara Nikāya wherein the Buddha offers pointers to help us notice the ways we give and our reasons for giving. As presented, these suttas outline a broad range of means and motivations—some apparently less mature than others. But we want to take care when looking at such lists. Used incorrectly, we could easily feel deflated because our

giving may not be as clean and pure as we would like. The more skillful approach calls for an impartial examination of our actions and motivations in each act of giving. The idea is to notice our experience so that we can discover for ourselves what feels best, what makes us happy.

With generosity as a spiritual practice, we notice that sometimes we give with

#### Ways of Giving (A 8.31)

There are, O monks, eight ways of giving. What eight?

1. One gives spontaneously;
2. or one gives out of fear;
3. or because of thinking, "He too has given me a gift";
4. or because of thinking, "He will give me a present, too";
5. or because of thinking that it is a good idea to give;
6. or because of thinking, "I cook, but they (being ascetics) do not; since I cook, it would not be proper for me to refuse giving a meal to those who do not cook";
7. or because of thinking, "By giving such a gift, I shall earn a good reputation";
8. or one gives because it ennobles the mind, adorns the mind.

annoyance, out of exasperation, or as a way of offending or insulting the recipient (such as to teach someone a lesson). If someone pesters us because they want something from us, for example, we may give in. “Here! Take it!”

We may give out of fear or shame, as was the case a number of years ago when, despite the fact that I had very little money at the time, I made a generous offering at the end of a retreat. I was too ashamed of my financial situation and tried to offset that with an offering that I could not afford.

Sometimes our giving has a tit-for-tat quality. For example, we may know that someone gave to us and so we give in return for the favor. This is quite common in social settings wherein we might invite someone to dinner because they invited us at an earlier time. It’s a pay back. Or, perhaps we are giving in hopes of getting something from them in return.

Sometimes our views come into play and we give because we “think” it’s a good idea. Look and see: this kind of giving is based more in the head than in the heart. We latch onto a good idea and don’t realize that we are actually clinging to an idea. In practice we notice that, relatively speaking, this identification with thought manifests as a shallow experience of giving.

Over the years, I have spent a significant amount of time at the monasteries in the lineage of Ajahn Chah, serving the monastic community. When I first went to the monastery, I had an automatic response to serving and supporting. You go to the monastery and this is what you do: you fix a meal, weed a garden, paint a building. I did all this without a flicker. Looking back, I can see that much of my actions were compulsive. For many years, I wasn’t paying attention to what was going on in this experience of offering. I was too focused on doing the right things, in the right ways.

Then about six years ago I had the opportunity to serve one of the members of the monastic community for a six-week retreat. It wasn’t until I served in this more solitary way, away from the hustle and bustle

of the monastery and the giddiness of giving, that I really began to learn about generosity. In this solitary context, I could more easily see what was driving my actions. I observed that I had a great appreciation and respect for the monks and nuns—people who had chosen to forego sensual pleasures in the interest of liberation—and I wanted to support that in any way I could. In this more solitary setting, I could more clearly see these beautiful motivations and observe what generosity was doing to my heart. It was a leap from compliance and compulsion to really taking my actions to heart, and it was lovely.

I think this is a good example of the genius of the Buddha. In setting up this special relationship between lay people and monastics, he put in place a structure that makes it possible to practice and examine our experience of generosity on a daily basis: the alms round. One would have to be emotionally insensitive or out of touch not to notice how good it feels to place food into the bowls of people who are worthy of such offerings. At the monastery, giving is an integral part of our daily routine.

*I could more clearly see what generosity was doing to my heart.*

#### **Reasons for Giving (A 8.33)**

There are, O monks, eight ways of giving. What eight?

1. People may give out of affection;
2. or in an angry mood;
3. or out of stupidity;
4. or out of fear;
5. or because of thinking: “Such gifts have been given before by my father and grandfather and it was done by them before; hence it would be unworthy of me to give up this old family tradition”;
6. or because of thinking, “By giving this gift, I shall be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world, after death”;
7. or because of thinking, “When giving this gift, my heart will be glad, and happiness and joy will arise in me”;
8. or one gives because it ennobles and adorns the mind.

Sometimes we give to gain a good reputation. As if to encourage this, when I was a young girl our church made a point of publishing a list of parishioners and the dollar amount of their offerings at Christmas and Easter.

*At its best, dāna has to do with purification of the heart.*

The Buddha said that sometimes we give to gain heaven after death. This

can be tricky because he clearly encouraged giving as a way of ensuring a happy rebirth. In the *Cūlakammavibhanga Sutta* (M 135) he described the benefits of giving gifts to recluses and brahmins as a happy rebirth and/or prosperity in one's next human birth. But one wants to take care. Ajahn Chah often discouraged people from giving only for this reason. Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo said this kind of giving does not reach the essence of the virtue of generosity. It goes no further than simply clinging to beliefs, customs, and conventions.

We can give out of altruism, our sole intention being to help those in need. The Buddha noted that this kind of giving is one of the blessings of having enough wealth to share with others. But the Buddha said that the last item in the lists above is the most excellent motive for giving—that is, to beautify and ennoble the mind. Most other forms of giving contain some form of intention for gain or comfort. Even giving for altruistic purposes can be filled with views and craving. The Buddha said that at its best dāna has to do with purification of the heart. In order to enhance our ability for enlightenment, we rid the mind of the ugliness of greed and selfishness. He said that we should actually be doing it for that purpose. “Having given thus, not seeking his own profit, not with a mind attached [to reward], not seeking to store up for himself, ... but with the thought, ‘This is an ornament for the mind,’ ... [one] does not come back to this world.” (A 7.49) Literally, one is a non-returner.

There's a wonderful story in the Vinaya (*Mahāvagga 8:15*) about a very generous laywoman who lived at the time of the

Buddha. As the story goes, she wanted to give a large gift to the community—lifetime gifts of food, clothing and medicinal requisites. Before agreeing to receive this offering, the Buddha asked Visakhā why she wanted to make such a generous offering. Her reply may surprise you. She said that when she sees the monks and nuns she will know that they are wearing robes made out of the cloth that she offered, etc., and it will make her very happy. Thus, her mind will be calm and her meditation will go well. As if to say, “Yes, that's the right answer,” the Buddha accepted her gift.

### The fruitfulness of giving

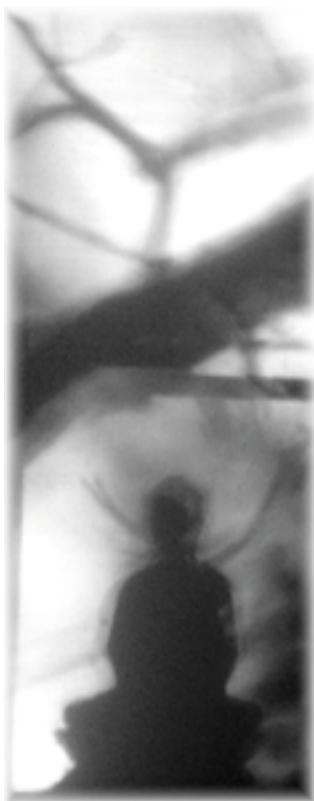
As we endeavor to understand dāna as a spiritual practice, we may also have to overcome ideas about who is most worthy of our gifts. According to the Buddhist teachings, the greatest benefit in giving comes from giving to those who are free from greed, hatred and delusion.

*Just as crops are ruined by weeds,  
People are ruined by wishes.  
Therefore it yields greatest fruit  
To give to those without wishes. (Dh 359)*

I declare that offerings made to the virtuous bring rich fruit, and not so much to those made to the immoral. (A 3.57)

You may be surprised to learn that it is more meritorious to give to a person who is highly developed than to those less developed. But we can understand this if we realize that what's most important is our state of mind in the act of giving. When giving to one who is less developed, too easily the state of mind can be one of conceit, arrogance, and even pity. These are not wholesome states, as they are filled with self-view. In the act of giving to one who is more developed, our hearts are less self-absorbed.

This does not mean, however, that we should not give to those who are less fortunate. All acts of generosity are considered positive acts. As the Buddha put it, “...Even if one throws away rinsings from



General Siha went to the Buddha and asked,  
*Is it possible, lord, to point out a fruit of generosity visible in the here and now?*

“It is possible, Siha,” replied the Buddha. “One who is generous, is dear and charming to people at large.... Furthermore, good people, people of integrity, admire one who is generous.... Furthermore, the fine reputation of one who is generous, a master of giving, is spread far and wide.... Furthermore, when one who is generous, approaches any assembly of people—noble warriors, brahmins, householders, or contemplatives—he does so confidently and without embarrassment.... Furthermore, at the break-up of the body, after death, one who is generous reappears in a good destination, the heavenly world.”  
—from the *Siha Sutta* (A 5.34)

a pot or cup into a village pool or pond, wishing that the living beings there may feed on them—even this would be a source of merit.” (A 3.57)

Elsewhere we learn that, while all gifts must be righteously obtained, it is not the gift itself that determines the benefit derived from giving: it is also the intention and state of mind of the giver and the purity of the receiver. If both the giver and the receiver are developed, the gift rises to its fullest benefit and fruition.

*When a virtuous person to a virtuous person gives  
With trusting heart a gift righteously obtained,  
Placing faith that the fruit of action is great,  
That gift, I say, will come to full fruition.*

(M 142)

The practice of generosity is not as simple as it may sound. The idea is to be attuned to the motive—whatever it is—and to learn from our direct experience. Ajahn Chah said we begin doing away with selfishness through giving. Selfishness leads to a sense of discontent, and yet people tend to be selfish without realizing how it affects them. A selfish heart takes us in the direction of self and separation from happiness. On the other hand, a selfless heart is one of the most powerful tools we have for overcoming the suffering states of greed, hatred and delusion. We override self-absorbed impulses and replace them with concern for the welfare of other people.

As a spiritual practice, *dāna* is about learning from the giving and from the holding back—to see for ourselves which feels best, to learn the subtle attachments

that cause us to hold back or to think only of ourselves, and to know the release of letting go.

*In this world, monks, there are three things  
[of value] for one who gives.  
What are these three things?*

*Before giving, the mind of the giver is happy.  
While giving, the mind of the giver is made peaceful.  
After having given, the mind of the giver is uplifted.*  
(A 3.6.37)

When we get into the groove of generosity it is as if we are getting in tune with a natural and innate human quality, working with it instead of against it.



This may be of particular value at the end of our lives. At the time of death, *dāna* sustains us. As Phra Khantipalo tells us, “The generous man will never regret his life as he lays dying nor will his mind be beset by fears regarding his future, for he can review all his generosity, all his kindness, all his support of what is good. The reviewing is called *cāgānussati*, the recollection of generosity. And when one recollects excellent conduct, even though it be a deed done many years ago, then the mind becomes quiet, peaceful and set in the way of Dhamma.”

*“We begin to do  
away with selfishness  
through giving.”*

—Ajahn Chah

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*Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia has been teaching Dhamma since 1990 and is a student of the Western forest sangha, the disciples of Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Chah.*



## Barre Center for Buddhist Studies

### 2007 Courses Offerings

<b>January</b>	7—12	Andrew Olendzki	Abhidhamma: Classical Buddhist Psychology
	13	Rajesh Kasturirangan	Buddhism & Cognitive Science
	14	Sumi Loundon	Teaching Meditation to Children
	19—21	Chris Queen & Anthony Stultz	Lessons of the Blue Mountain Lotus Society
	26—28	Mu Soeng	Time and Being
<b>February</b>	2—4	Claire Stanley	Mindfulness for Educators
	9—11	Christina Feldman	Demystifying Nibbāna
	16—19	Ajaan Thanissaro	Questioning the Great Divide
	23—25	Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara	Zen Koans as Means to Wake Up!
<b>March</b>	1—4	Bill Morgan, Susan Morgan, Ron Siegel	Meditation for Psychotherapists
	9—11, 16—18	Advanced Study and Practice Program	(Closed program.)
	23—25	Gregory Kramer	Dharma Contemplation: Right Speech
	31	Ellison Findly	Buddhist Art
<b>April</b>	1	Myoshin Kelley	The Ease of Simply Knowing
	6—15	Leigh Brasington	Satipathāna and Jhāna
	20—22	DaeJa Napier	The Kālāmas' Dilemma
	23	Bhante Gunaratana	Jhānas (Meditative Absorptions)
	27—29	Shinzen Young	Meditation and Emotional Intelligence
<b>May</b>	5	Ajahn Amaro	Exploring the Nature of Nibbāna
	6	Ajahn Amaro & Taraniya Ambrosia	The Fourfold Family of the Buddha
	7—12	Andrew Olendzki & Taraniya Ambrosia	Essentials of Buddhist Psychology
	13—18	Paul Fulton, Trudy Goodman, et al.	Meditation & Its Clinical Applications
	27	Rabbis Jeff Roth & Sheila Weinberg	Exploring Meditation in a Jewish Context
<b>June</b>	1—3	Sayadaw U Tejaniya	Don't Look Down on the Defilements
	8—13	Ajahn Sucitto	Sankhāra: The Dynamics of Experience
	15—17, 22—24	Advanced Study and Practice Program	(Closed program.)
	29—Jul 1	Karma Lekshe Tsomo	Buddhism and Gender Identity
<b>July</b>	7	Sharon Salzberg	TBA.
	8—13	Charles Genoud	Compassion in Mahayana (Bhāvana)
	15	Kate Lila Wheeler & Jess Row	Writing Buddhist Fiction
	20—22	Taitetsu Unno & Mark Unno	Shin Buddhism
	27—29	Jason Siff	Learning Meditation from Within
<b>August</b>	Jul 31—5	Mu Soeng	Mind Only (Bhāvana)
<b>September</b>	3—8	IMS & BCBS Teachers	Teachers' Training (Closed program.)
	9	Joseph Goldstein	Liberating Practice in Daily Life
	14—18	Steve Armstrong	Refined Knowledge, Subtle Wisdom
	29	Narayan & Michael Liebenson Grady	Investigating the Nature of Fear
	30	Jack Engler	What is Enlightenment?
<b>October</b>	6—10	Martine Batchelor	Breaking Free of Habits
	12—14	DaeJa Napier	Overview of the Brahma Vihāras
	20—27	Gregory Kramer	Insight Dialogue: Contact
	28—Nov 2	Andrew Olendzki & Taraniya Ambrosia	Essentials of Buddhist Psychology
<b>November</b>	4	James Ford	Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?
	9—11	Chip Hartranft	Yoga and Dhamma
	16—18	Mark Hart	Relaxing the Compulsion to Control
<b>December</b>	1—8	Andrew Olendzki & Taraniya Ambrosia	The Five Indriya (Bhāvana)

For complete course descriptions, teacher biographies and registration information, please contact us for a free program catalog or visit our website.



## About the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies

The Farmhouse



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.

The study center offers a variety of study and research opportunities, lectures, classes, seminars, workshops, conferences, retreats and independent study programs. Its program is rooted in the classical Buddhist tradition of the earliest teachings and practices, but its vision calls for dialogue between different schools of Buddhism and discussions with other religious and scientific traditions. All BCBS courses involve some level of both silent meditation practice and conscious investigation of the teachings.

The Dharma Hall



Located on 90 acres of wooded land in rural, central Massachusetts, just a half mile from the Insight Meditation Society, BCBS provides a peaceful and contemplative setting for the study and investigation of the Buddha's teachings. A 225-year-old farmhouse holds a library, offices and a dining room that provide a comfortable setting for students, staff and teachers. A dormitory and classroom/meditation hall provide space for classes, workshops and retreats, and three cottages provide secluded space for independent study.



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## Beyond Joy and Sorrow

*Samyutta Nikaya 2:2.8*

Kakuddha:	nandasi samanā ti	Are you delighted, wanderer?
Buddha:	kiṃ laddhā āvuso-ti	What is it, friend, that I've received?
Kakuddha:	tena hi samaṇa socasī ti	Are you grieving, then, wanderer?
Buddha:	kiṃ jiyittha āvuso ti	What is it, friend, that I have lost?
Kakuddha:	tena hi samaṇa n-eva nandasi na ca socasī ti	Is it, then, wanderer, that you're Neither delighted nor grieving?
Buddha:	evam āvuso ti	Friend—it is just so.
Kakuddha:	kacci tvam anigho bhikkhu atho nandī na vijjati kacci tam ekam āsīnaṃ aratī nābhikīratī ti	I hope that you don't tremble, monk, Since no delight is to be found. I hope that you can sit alone, Without being consumed by regret.
Buddha:	anigho ve ahaṃ yakkha atho nandī nābhikīratīti atho mam ekam āsīnaṃ aratī nābhikīratī ti	Indeed I do not tremble, sprite, Since I'm consumed with no delight. And so it is I sit alone, Without being consumed by regret.
Kakuddha:	kathaṃ tvam anigho bhikkhu kathaṃ nandī va vijjati kathaṃ tam ekam āsīnaṃ aratī nābhikīratī ti	How is it you don't tremble, monk, How is it no delight is found? How is it that you sit alone, Without being consumed by regret?
Buddha:	aghajātassa ve nandī nandījātassa ve aghaṃ anandī anigho bhikkhu evaṃ jānāhi āvuso ti	Delight only follows distress; Distress only follows delight. Neither delighted nor distressed, Friend—this his how to know a monk.
Kakuddha:	cirassaṃ vata passāmi brāhmaṇaṃ parinibbutaṃ anandim anighaṃ bhikkhuṃ tiṇṇaṃ loke visattikaṃ ti	At long last I see a brahmin Whose fires are fully quenched; a monk, Neither delighted nor distressed, Who's traversed the world's attachments.

These bantering verses, exchanged between the Buddha and Kakuddha, the “son of a deva” or a forest sprite, are replete with subtlety, word play and double meaning. Notice the matching structure of the verses, a very common device of early Buddhist poetry. The fourth stanza mirrors the third, line by line, and the theme is echoed again in the fifth stanza. The Buddha follows the poetic lead of the sprite, but reverses the meaning of his words. ☸ Kakuddha assumes delight (*nandi*) to be the requisite of happiness, while the Buddha identifies the same delight as the cause of unhappiness. This is because delight refers not to pleasant feeling but to an intentional response—the savoring of pleasant feeling, which is doomed to pass away and be replaced by distress (*agha*). The Buddha instead describes a state of equanimity, beyond joy and sorrow, that allows for the full experience of pleasure and pain without the attachment and resistance that normally accompanies them. ☸ The deepest possible state of well-being ensues when the fires of both delighting in and being distressed by experience are quenched. The word for this is *nibbuta*, another form of the word *nirvana*. —A. Olendzki