

# A Buddhist's Reflections on Religious Conversion

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# Chapter 1

## No self: The Foundation of Buddhist Identity

### 1.1 Introduction

In one of the most influential scholastic treatises in classical Indian Buddhism, Vasubandhu begins the final chapter by asking the blunt question: “Is there liberation elsewhere [than in Buddhism]?” He answers his own question with the equally blunt response “There is not.” The reason he gives for why there is no liberation through any other system of thought and practice than Buddhism is because all other religions and philosophies are undermined by a false view of self. All other systems of thought, he goes on to say, either impose the notion of self onto the transitory body or the mind, or they imagine that there is an eternal self outside the temporary body and mind. Buddhism, says Vasubandhu, is unique in realizing that there is no self at all, either in the body-mind complex or anywhere else.

In Vasubandhu’s opening gambit we can identify a number of features in Buddhist thought that should be borne in mind throughout all the discussions that take place during the rest of this program. Because these points are of such importance in discussions concerning religious conversion and personal sense of religious identity, I shall devote the entirety of this first lecture to them. For those of you who are already quite familiar with Buddhism, please bear with me as I set the stage by placing all the well-worn furnishings and props into place; no doubt I will not set the stage quite as you would have done, but I hope the resulting scene is at least workable enough to allow the ensuing drama to unfold in both predictable and unpredictable ways.

The first aspect of Vasubandhu’s opening worthy of comment is his statement of the central problem of Buddhism, and indeed of all religions as understood from

a Buddhist point of view. The central issue is liberation (*mokṣa*), specifically, liberation from all the various forms of bondage that are experienced as dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*). This is not only the *central* problem in Buddhism, but perhaps the *only* problem. In numerous canonical texts, for example, the Buddha is portrayed as dismissing all manner of potentially interesting questions by saying that their answers do not matter. When people ask, for example, about the beginnings of the world, the end of the world, the physical extent of the world, the temporal extent of history and so forth, the Buddha typically responds by saying “I do not teach about such things. I teach only about the nature of dissatisfaction, the causes of dissatisfaction, the fact that dissatisfaction can be brought to an end, and the method for so doing.” All other considerations, insofar as they have no direct bearing on this central issue of being liberated from dissatisfaction, are of no interest to the Buddha. Time and again, the Buddha is portrayed of pulling people’s attention back to this single issue: how does one become liberated from dissatisfaction?

As anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Indian religions knows, Buddhism was by no means unique in seeing dissatisfaction as the central problem. Liberation from dissatisfaction was a very hot topic in ancient India, and it continued to be a hot topic for the millennia that followed. So in being concerned with this issue, the Buddha was not at all unique. What makes him unique in the eyes of Buddhists was his putatively unique insight into the fundamental reason why we are all, to varying extents, dissatisfied. Others had, to be sure, offered their explanations as to why we are dissatisfied. But only the Buddha had given the right explanation. Some of the rest of this lecture will be to try to explain what that explanation was.

The second point in Vasubandhu’s opening that is noteworthy is the confidence of his claim that no one other than the Buddha had given a workable solution to the problem of how to become liberated from bondage to the conditions that we all find unsatisfactory. He was clearly not interested in coming to a round-table discussion of representatives of other religious traditions in the hopes of learning from them. His only interest in talking to practitioners of other religions would be to explain to them why they are barking up the wrong tree. My own agenda is not to try to convince others that they are barking up the wrong tree, but I hope to be able to give at least some insight into why someone like Vasubandhu would be so confident that Buddhism has not only identified the only truly interesting problem of life but has also supplied the only workable solution.

The third remarkable point about Vasubandhu’s opening statement is that the key that unlocks the shackles that bind us to patterns of dissatisfaction is a correct understanding of self. That correct understanding, of course, is that ultimately we do not have a self. It is falsely believing that we do have a self, and then lavishing attention to that imagined self, that leads us into being dissatisfied. This is a point

I shall do my best to explain in more detail in just a moment.

One final observation that can be made about Vasubandhu's claim about the Buddhism's monopoly on having the correct solution to the central problem of life is that this claim is by no means unique to Vasubandhu. On the contrary, the doctrine of no self (*anātman*) quickly became, and has remained, the shibboleth for Buddhists. Buddhists who skated too near any doctrine that could be perceived as smuggling a doctrine of self into Buddhism were quickly denounced as distorting the True Dharma. Those Buddhists who went in for strong language would even accuse such smugglers of being thieves who had stolen their follower's only hope of attaining liberation. None of this sounds very promising for Buddhist participation in inter-religious dialogue, but I hope that before this lecture is finished I will have shown that, these exclusivist rumblings notwithstanding, there is plenty of room for fruitful discussion, at least about issues that from a Buddhist perspective do not really matter very much.

## 1.2 Doctrine of No-self in early canonical works

The doctrine of no-self is articulated in several places in the Pali canon, the canon of the Theravāda school of Buddhism. The narrative framework in which this doctrine is given shows the importance placed on this teaching. The narrative portrays the newly liberated Buddha as seeking out his former comrades in asceticism to tell them that he has finally achieved the goal that they had once been seeking together. He has found the truth that they were all seeking, namely, the truth that unbinds the shackles of dissatisfaction. When he finds his former colleagues, they greet him as one greets a friend of equal social status. He immediately corrects them, saying he is no longer their equal but should now be addressed with all the respect due to a liberated sage. After making this point of etiquette, the Buddha gives two short talks. These talks contain the core of all subsequent Buddhist teachings, which can be seen as elaborations on the themes articulated here.

In the first talk, the Buddha outlines the four points mentioned earlier: the nature of dissatisfaction and so forth. Dissatisfaction is defined simply as being in the presence of what we do not like and being separated from what we do like. Both getting what one does not like and not getting what one likes involves having preferences. So in the second point, having preferences is designated as the root cause of all dissatisfaction. This fact of having preferences is poetically called thirst, and thirst is said to be of three kinds: desire for comfort and dislike of discomfort; desire for survival or for extinction; and desire for prosperity. The third point is that the potential for dissatisfaction can be eliminated only when thirst is completely eliminated. The fourth point is that dissatisfaction can be eliminated by

following a method that comprises eight practical components, the details of which we need not go into here.

At the end of this first talk, the Buddha makes the proclamation “This is my last birth. After this life I shall never be reborn again.” Upon hearing this brief discourse, the ascetic Kondañña reportedly said “Whatever comes into being surely passes out of being.” Immediately after that, a chorus of celestial beings shouted “Truly the Lord has founded the highest kingdom of truth, which neither ascetic nor priest nor god nor Mara [the personification of death] nor [the supreme god] Brahma can overturn.” The Buddha’s first talk to his five fellow ascetics outlines what have come to be called in English the Four Noble Truths. However much Buddhists around the world may have come to differ from one another in practice and in subtle points of doctrine, these four principles are accepted by every Buddhist. To see the world through a Buddhist framework is to set all other issues somewhere within the context of these four principles.

Immediately after hearing the first talk, the five ascetics with whom the Buddha used to practice as an equal declare themselves to be his disciples. They go to the Buddha for refuge, and they go to the Dharma for refuge. As we shall see in more detail later, part of what is involved in officially being a Buddhist is to go for refuge to the Dharma. The primary meaning of going for refuge to the Dharma is seeking nirvana, the cessation of all frustration, which ultimately means the cessation of rebirth and its inevitable consequence of death. A secondary meaning of going for refuge to the Dharma is heeding the teachings in texts that explain how to achieve nirvana.

The explanation of the Four Noble Truths to these five ascetics is said to be the first public discourse on the dharma given by the Buddha. The first discourse given to his newly converted disciples explains the principle of no-self. In this very simple discourse, the Buddha tells the newly ordained monks that if the physical body were the self, it would not be subject to disease, injury and death. If the body were the self, it would be whatever shape we wished it to be, and it would be in whatever condition we wished. The notion of self is clearly defined with reference to that over which there is complete control. For this reason, some modern Buddhist commentators, such as the Burmese master U Sīlānanda Sayadaw, explain the doctrine of no-self as the doctrine of non-mastery. If it sounds too jarring to say that the body is not the self, it may help to recall that the message is really that the body is something that cannot be fully controlled or mastered by the will.

In addition to this issue of being out of control of the will, the Buddha also observes that the physical body is perishable, subject to pain and subject to change. Because it is subject to change, it does not always remain the same. If it is borne in mind that the Latin word for sameness is *identitas*, we can take this observation of constant change in the body as a reminder that the body cannot be the locus of

our identity, our being the same thing over a long course of time. After making these observations about the body being out of our control, perishable and subject to constant change, the Buddha then says:

Therefore, monks, whatever physical body has been, will be, and is now, whether it belongs or does not belong to a sentient being, whether it is gross or subtle, whether it is inferior or superior, whether it is here or elsewhere, no physical body is mine, nor is it me, nor is it my self.

Once it is established that the body is not the locus of personal identity, the Buddha then applies the same formula to physical and psychological sensations, to cognitive processes, to personality factors and to all modes of awareness of the external world and of the internal psyche. Taken together, the formulae clearly state that no aspect of the body or of the mind (or soul, if you prefer that language), taken individually or collectively, constitute the self. None of these serves as a locus of personal identity. They obviously rule out the elements that currently make up the body and the mind in this life in this world. But they also rule out any other physical body and every other mental state. No act of awareness of any kind, whether in this world or another, where coarse or refined, whether inferior or superior, is a self. In other words, no matter where we look, we cannot find our identity. There are events and processes, but, to use the constant refrain of Buddhist texts, there are none of them about which one can say “I am this. This is mine.” In one of the scriptures of Mahāyāna, this point is put in much more emotional terms: “No matter where I may stand, whether in this world or another other, I am not at home.” Very few people, says this same text, can say this without feeling terror in their hearts.

### **1.3 Theory of two truths**

Everything that has been said so far is expected to sound somewhat shocking. According to traditional Buddhist accounts, the Buddha initially decided there would be no point in taking his message out into the world, because the message that no one has an identity and that the only method of avoiding disappointment is to eliminate all desires would surely come as bad news to almost everyone. The news is usually described as being so bad that most people will need quite some time to absorb it and accept it at the emotional level. It can be said without exaggeration that every aspect of Buddhist practice is aimed in some way at helping people recognize that the Four Noble Truths are indeed truths but that the news is not quite as bad as it could be. There is, after all, the good news that disappointment and affliction can be eliminated; nirvana is possible in this very life. And there is also

the good news, although it is not explicitly stated in anything that we have seen so far, that as one progresses towards the final goal of nirvana, one's contentment and well-being steadily increase.

One of the principal ways that people are expected to react to the Buddha's declaration that no one has an identity is to flatly deny that it is so. It is obvious to most of us that we in fact do have a rather strong sense of identity. Most of us are prepared to say in a fair amount of detail who we are and perhaps even why we are the way we are. Given this strong sense of who I am, it is absurd to claim that in fact I have no identity. Is it not the case that every morning I wake up with the feeling that I am the same fellow who went to bed last night and that even people whom I have not seen for several decades can recognize that despite a few superficial changes I am the same man I was when I was much younger?

Buddhist teachers have traditionally responded to these considerations by allowing that all these feelings of personal identity do have some foundation. There is a reality to them. They are not entirely ungrounded fantasies. In the technical language of Buddhism, these intuitions of personal identity are conventional truths (*sammatti-sacca*). It would be impossible to function in the world, and especially in the social world, without all these various factors by which we all establish our personal identity. They have an undeniable practical, utilitarian value. If, however, one looks at them with care and inquires deeply into what one's personal identity is based upon, one will find that it is ultimately groundless, or at least that it is grounded only in constantly shifting factors. There is no firm ground upon which to stand. There is no place to call home.

In the commentarial literature of Buddhism, there is constant reference to this phenomenon that there is a practical conventional truth that when examined carefully must give way to the ultimate truth of homelessness. Every proposition is examined and assigned to one of these two levels of truth, the conventional or the ultimate. While there is, as one might expect, considerable difference of opinion as to which propositions belong to which level of truth, there is nevertheless a remarkable consistency among Buddhists in holding the general conviction that conventional truths are those that enable one to function as a social animal, and therefore are indispensable to social life, but if one is to reach the ultimate goal of nirvana, it is necessary to break free from these social conventions. Society provides comfort and nourishment but not liberation. When one turns towards liberation, one must, to at least some extent, turn one's back on society. One must, to use the traditional language of Buddhist texts, go forth (*pabbajati*) from the social world to the homeless life. One must be an island unto oneself, depending on no other island, taking refuge in no one but oneself. In the most conservative forms of Buddhism, it is considered most advisable literally to leave family life, and every other form of social life, behind altogether and to become a homeless wanderer. In

the most widely practised forms of Buddhism, however, it is believed to be sufficient to take leave from domestic life at a more symbolic level. That is, one may literally stay in the world, have a family and a career and so forth, but these will not be one's ultimate concerns, nor will one identify with them in any more than a provisional way.

With this brief introduction to core teachings of Buddhism as a backdrop, let me now turn to questions concerning the theme of this colloquium, namely, the affirmation of religious identity, religious conversion and the holding of multiple religious identities. I shall do my best to describe how these arguably modern or even post-modern concerns might look from the traditional Buddhist perspective that I have outlined up to this point.

## **1.4 Not-self and modern notions of individuality and identity**

It is possible that it has never been easy to talk about the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, but I think it has become especially difficult in modern times. Ours is a time when questions concerning what it is to be a person and to have an identity have taken on extraordinary complexity—and possibly even a degree of confusion. Since modern Europeans have set about to understand Buddhist doctrines, quite a number of views have emerged as to what exactly the Buddha was saying we do not have when he said we do not have a self. Before going to other issues, therefore, I'd like to consider some of the modern interpretations that I think are particularly unhelpful and even misleading.

Some Western interpreters of Buddhism, especially those drawn to a perceived affinity between Buddhism and modern science, have suggested that the Buddha was denying the existence of a soul or a spirit. The very first talks I ever heard on Buddhism were delivered at a Unitarian church by a gentleman from Thailand who was in the United States doing some kind of scientific research. He was eager to show how very modern Buddhist doctrine is, and how little potential or actual conflict there is between scientific method and Buddhism. One of the many points that he used to make this point was that classical Buddhism, like modern biological science, has no need for the hypothesis of a spiritual soul that lives independently of the physical body. Buddhism, according to one version of this claim, has never accepted a Cartesian mind-body dualism. For those who like to make of Descartes the scapegoat on whose head all the sins of modernity can be placed, and who would make Buddhism the antidote for our Cartesian blues, this point has an obvious appeal. Since that first talk, I have seen and heard such a point made many times. Because this view seems to be going out of fashion

these days, I need not dwell on it for long. It is enough to say that most Buddhists in history talked of mental events in ways strikingly similar to how ancient Greeks, then Hellenists and eventually other Europeans, talked about the various faculties of the soul. Those Buddhists who did not accept a mind-body dualism tended to favour accepting only mind as real and saw the physical world as a figment of the mind's vivid imagination—a view strikingly unlike the physicalism of some modern neuro-physiologists. So I would submit that even though the Sanskrit word '*ātman*' does sometimes mean the soul as a seat of consciousness and mental events, the Buddha was not denying the existence of a soul when he denied the existence of an *ātman*.

One of the most influential Asian Buddhist teachers to teach Westerners of my generation was the Tibetan guru Chogyam Trungpa. Trungpa was careful to present Buddhist theory in terminology familiar to most Westerners, throwing in just enough Tibetan and Sanskrit words to give an intriguing touch of the exotic to the apparently familiar doctrines. He and his followers tended to place their emphasis on the evils of ego. So in Trungpa's view, when the Buddha was denying an *ātman*, he was denying the legitimacy of ego. To attain nirvana in this view was to become liberated from the confining boundaries of the ego. If one hears this sort of talk through the ears of a Jungian, it could be taken as meaning that the Buddha was a proficient analytic psychologist who helped his patients see beyond the ego, understood as the centre of consciousness, into the larger domain of the self, understood as the psyche as a whole, which comprises not only consciousness but the behavioural impulses of which we are normally unconscious. While it may be true that the Buddha or a Buddhist teacher *does* achieve some of the results as a modern psychotherapist, it would be a mistake to think that the Buddhist goal of nirvana is essentially an anticipation of Jung's notion of what he called individuation or psychological integration. For this reason I would urge caution against seeing the Buddhist no-self theory in Jungian terms of putting the ego into proper relation with the self. Nor should the Buddhist doctrine of no-self be construed as saying that in the final analysis we have no ego of the sort that Freud discussed when he wrote of *das Ich*.

These warnings notwithstanding, I think there are some important parallels between a Buddhist view of the psyche and a Jungian view of the Self. Many Jungians speak of the self as being polycentric; that is to say, there is no single persona who is the centre of consciousness. In the lively metaphor of Connie Zweig, the psyche or self is like the round table of King Arthur's court, a place where many voices are heard, each presenting a somewhat different perspective on commonly perceived events, a place where sometimes differing voices even disagree as to which events have taken place at all. This depiction of the self as complex beyond our reckoning, and as pluriform and at times undermined or impaired by

its own inner conflicts, comes rather close in many important ways to the classical Buddhist view of the mind. The mind in Buddhism is portrayed as a constantly changing *mélange* of the thoughts and intensions of countless beings internal and external, each one of which could be thought of, for convenience sake, as a person. The mind is seen as a stream that carries along with it all the influences, both positive and negative, of a past so long as to be seen by us as beginningless. Somehow, out of all that staggering complexity, we create at every moment of life some sense of who and what we are. But, says classical Buddhism, this sense of who we are is never perfectly fixed, never at rest, never a finished product. No sooner is a sense of who we are made than it is replaced by something slightly foreign. Like a piece of modern software, the self is upgraded just when we have begun to get the hang of how to use it efficiently, and we have no choice but to accept the upgrade, bugs and all, until the next one comes along.

## **1.5 Group affiliation as an aspect of identity**

Among the many factors that contribute to one's ever-changing sense of self, many of them are certainly social. In India at the time of the Buddha, as in most societies in the history of the human race, to be a person was to be a member of particular collections of people. One's identity was inextricably tied to one's family, clan, tribe, caste, kingdom and so on. Not to be part of a group of people was tantamount to not existing at all. The exact structures of the society in which the Buddha operated is not understood with precision, nor is it known to what extent his society resembled the societies that have occurred on the Indian subcontinent since his time. But the exact structures of his society do not matter too much to us today. What is more important to us is just the general fact that an individual person's sense of self was intimately bound up with where one was situated in relation to other people, and where one was situated was bound up with where and in whose family one was born.

In an age such as ours, where we take for granted the sense of individualism and independence that has come down to us from the architects of the European enlightenment, it may be difficult to appreciate how thoroughly a person at the time of the Buddha was defined by his or her affiliation with larger social groups. Consequently, it may be difficult to appreciate just how radical it was for the Buddha to tell people that ultimately they had no fixed identity and could therefore reinvent themselves and become other selves than they had been at birth. Similarly it is difficult to appreciate how challenging it might have been to be told "You should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your

refuge.”<sup>1</sup>

Being an island unto oneself and taking oneself as a refuge did not (and does not) necessarily entail being a solitary recluse, although some Buddhists have taken this approach for varying lengths of time. Indeed, there is an often-cited passage in the Pali canon in which the Buddha’s cousin, Ānanda, who was the Buddha’s constant companion for the last twenty-five years of his life, is portrayed as saying “Half the holy life is good friendship.” The Buddha responds by saying “Don’t say such a thing, Ānanda. Good friendship is not half the holy life. It is all of the holy life!”

That this statement was not an outburst of uncharacteristic enthusiasm for companionship is shown by looking at the Vinaya, the code of regulations for the monastic life. Even a cursory examination of the rules and the extensive discussions of how they came into being will show that maintaining social harmony among the monks and nuns, and keeping good relations between the monastic communities and the mainstream society, was of utmost importance. The procedures for ordination are spelled out in detail, and among the many items discussed there are the newly ordained monk’s relations with an *ācārya*, a senior monk who is assigned the responsibility of teaching the junior monk and establishing the optimum conditions for him to cultivate virtue and make progress towards nirvana. In return for receiving this guidance, the junior monk has a responsibility to reciprocate in kind; that is, he must strive to establish the optimum conditions for his mentor to cultivate virtue and make progress towards nirvana.

In many Buddhist texts it is said that dissatisfaction arises from craving and that craving can be traced back to incorrect views about the ways things are. In at least one text, the Buddha is asked where the incorrect views come from. The Buddha replies that our views in general are fostered by the company we keep. They are promoted by society at large, by companions and by family. If one is fortunate enough to be born into a family of wise and compassionate people, then one’s family will provide good guidance and provide an environment that will encourage one to cultivate virtue. Such families, however, are difficult to find. If one is serious about becoming virtuous and attaining nirvana, then one is best advised to leave one’s biological family behind and join forces with people who are truly committed to the same ideals. The religious community, then, becomes one’s new family. It is no accident that a Buddhist monastic is called the son or daughter of a good family, a noble family of which the Buddha is the *paterfamilias*.

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<sup>1</sup>Mahāparibbāna Sutta 2.26. DN ii.100. For an English translation, see Walshe (1987, pp. 231–277).

## 1.6 Identifying oneself as a Buddhist

Taking ordination as a monk or a nun is not the only way to join the noble family of which the Buddha is the honorary father. Another way is simply to go for refuge to what are called the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. This is the one ritual action that all Buddhists of every school have in common, whether they are monks or laity. What exactly it means to go for refuge to each of these jewels can vary from one school to another. At the most basic and common level, what is meant by going for refuge to the three jewels is having a conviction that the Buddha is someone who became liberated from his inner sources of dissatisfaction and became an unsurpassed teacher of gods and men; that the Dharma can be verified in this very life by intelligent people who are willing to explore it; and that there are disciples of the Buddha who have followed the teachings and become of upright conduct and worthy of respect.

Formally becoming a Buddhist need involve no more than reciting three times that one goes to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha for refuge. Traditionally, this is done before witnesses who are themselves Buddhists, but it is said that it is equally valid if one does it by simply conjuring up an image of the Buddha in one's mind and saying the words to oneself in one's own mind. Traditionally, going for refuge also involves forming a resolve to undertake to abstain from five kinds of harmful activity: taking life, taking property that has not been freely given, having wrongful sexual relations, telling lies and becoming careless as a result of intoxication.

In the particular Buddhist community to which I belong, which is not atypical among Buddhists in this respect, it is said that going for refuge is something than one strives to do constantly. Over the course of time it is hoped that one's manner of doing so will become increasingly refined and wholehearted. A child born into a Buddhist family, for example, may go for refuge somewhat automatically and without much understanding. Such a person may go for refuge relatively superficially and largely as a result of subtle (or not so subtle) social pressures. A person who has practised for many years, on the other hand, may be able to go for refuge without even a trace of reservation, holding back nothing at all from the practice of Dharma. It is assumed that the vast majority of Buddhists who have gone for refuge will take quite some time before they have fully grasped the implications of what they are doing and have resolved all inner conflicts about it. And needless to say, it is also assumed that one's resolve and capacity to live a harmless life will increase gradually over the years.

Although going for refuge is something that one ideally does with greater conviction and understanding as time goes by, the fact remains that it is something that one must choose to do and take some initiative in doing. No one is born a

Buddhist. No one is automatically a Buddhist by association with others who are Buddhists. Every Buddhist is a convert, and that conversion is typically a long and gradual process. Most Buddhists that I have talked to can recall when they were first attracted to Buddhism, but it is very difficult for them to say at what point they felt as if they were effectively going for refuge. There is, they recognise, quite some distance between having an affinity for Buddhist teachings or a general approval of Buddhism and actually taking the step of going for refuge by proclaiming one's conviction that no one else, whether human or divine, has given wiser counsel than the Buddha. There is a great difference between midnight and noon, but it is not always easy to know at precisely what time night turned into day.

## **1.7 Identifying oneself with more than one community**

Now that I have given some idea of what is involved in being a convert to Buddhism, let me turn finally to the question of whether one can identify both as a Buddhist and as a member of some other community. The short answer to that question, I think, is that at the beginning stages of one's practice of Buddhism, it would be rather easy to combine being a Buddhist with being something else. The farther one pursues one's practice, however, the more one is likely to encounter decisions that have to be made. Whether one can make these decisions to one's own satisfaction, I should imagine, is something that varies from one person to another. Having given the short answer, let me now give a somewhat longer answer.

At the beginning of one's decision to join a Buddhist community by going for refuge, there are not likely to be many obstacles, from the Buddhist side at least, to being both a Buddhist and a member of some other community whose members are dedicated to cultivating individual and collective forms of goodness. Hardly any religious community is in favour or promoting killing, theft, careless sexuality, lying and intoxication. The only potential stumbling block may be the matter of seeing the Buddha as an unsurpassed teacher. Even that potential obstacle can be avoided for some time if one takes it to mean not that the Buddha is absolutely the best teacher, but rather than no one else is better. A robust religious pluralist, for example, might very well hold the position that all religions that have survived have excellent teachings to offer and that there are no criteria by which one could decide that any one set of teachings is on the whole better than any other.

On the social or insitutional level, there is nothing in Buddhism that requires that one renounce one's family or mainstream society or that one abandon all other religious paths. It is considered a good idea to avoid bad company, and it could very well be that one's family is bad company that one would be well advised to avoid having too much contact with. But such cases are thankfully relatively rare,

so for most people becoming a Buddhist would involve abandoning nothing more than a few bad habits. If one looks at Asian societies in which Buddhism has been a major influence, one sees that Buddhist temples almost invariably have shrines for popular local deities and that Buddhists are also strongly influenced by both folk practices and beliefs and relatively systematic systems of values and practice such as Confucianism or some form of Brahmanical Dharma. The empirical record alone suggests that there is very little standing in the way of being both a Buddhist and a Hindu, or a Confucian, or a Taoist or a follower of Shinto or perhaps some eclectic combination of all the above. Why then do I say that eventually one might have to make some difficult decisions?

The two most prevalent metaphors used within Buddhism are the metaphor of healing and the metaphor of taking a path that leads to a particular destination. Let me examine both of these in a little more detail.

The medical metaphor portrays the Buddha as a physician who has correctly diagnosed our disease and prescribed the right course of treatment. Both the disease and the cure are decidedly on what Jung would call the introverted side of the spectrum. To run the risk of being simplistic, when there is an incongruity between one's expectations and what the world delivers up, Buddhism advises spending most of one's energy on making adjustments to one's expectations rather than on making the world deliver up something more palatable. Some religions, or at least some forms of some religions, may be considerably more extraverted in their approach. That is, they may demand that one's energy be placed more on changing the world than on changing oneself. This clash between a relatively introverted and a relatively extraverted strategy can be a source of real conflict for many people. As I will say in a subsequent lecture, I see this especially among American Buddhists, since America tends to be, in Carl Jung's words, "extraverted like hell."

The metaphor of Buddhist practice as the road to a particular destination is one where we may be able to see the potential conflicts somewhat more clearly. The ultimate destination, as I said earlier, is nirvana, the cessation of passions during this life and the cessation of further rebirth after this life. Any religion that describes its ultimate goal as something other than the dispassionate condition known as nirvana is clearly going to pose a conflict to anyone who takes seriously the destination of nirvana. But even if we forget the ultimate destination for a moment and think only of the path, there may be a conflict. Buddhism speaks not only of a main road (*mārga*) but of access roads (*upāya*), that is, minor roads that lead one to the main highway. In practice, the way that Buddhist tolerance for other religious paths is usually achieved is to regard the other religions as being minor roads that provide access to the main highway, which is Buddhism itself. This way of looking at things may eventually require a person to clarify in his or

her own mind just which path is the main highway and which is an access road. If someone is a Jewish Buddhist, for example, she may have to decide in her own mind whether Jewish observances are one of the many means by which she can get on the highway to nirvana, or whether Buddhist practices are one of the many means by which she can deepen her commitment to becoming obedient to divinely revealed law. To phrase this matter in the language of the theory of two truths, a Jewish Buddhist might ultimately have to decide whether Jewish doctrines are conventional truths that will ultimately give way to the ultimate truth of Buddhism, or whether Buddhist doctrines are conventional and Jewish doctrines ultimate.

In my subsequent lectures I shall look at particular case studies of people who have made the decision to join a Buddhist community, and I shall look in much more detail at how those conflicts may be experienced, and how people have either resolved them or learned to live with conflicts that they find unresolvable.

## Chapter 2

# Conversion as Repudiation

### 2.1 Bor Dharan, India

In January of this year, I attended an ordination retreat held at a Buddhist retreat centre run by an organisation known in India as the Trailokya Bauddha Mahāsaṅgha, often called simply the TBM. This particular retreat centre is situated near the village of Bor Dharan, which is located about an hour and a half from Nagpur, Maharashtra. The centre, called Hsuan Tsang Dharma Kendra, was built with the help of an infusion of money from a Taiwanese Buddhist organisation that is trying to promote the revival of Buddhism in India.

Since I was among the people who were ordained on this retreat, it had a special significance for me personally, but it was also a fascinating experience to observe close up a movement about which I have read and heard a great deal over the years. A few days after returning, I wrote a long e-mail addressed to several friends. Let me quote a few paragraphs from that message:

The vast majority of members of the TBM are from former untouchable families that converted to Buddhism when Dr. Bhim-rao Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in Nagpur in October 1956. On every altar of a TBM centre, one finds just below the Buddha image a photograph of Ambedkar. It takes very little time to discover that these Buddhists regard Ambedkar as the most significant Buddhist of modern times, since it was he who liberated the untouchable from castism and brought Buddhism back to its homeland. On the altar next to Ambedkar, one finds a photograph of Sangharakshita, the British Buddhist monk who spent seven years after the mass conversions helping the converts to Buddhism learn something about the doctrines and practices of the religion to which they had so suddenly

converted. Sangharakshita also founded the Western Buddhist Order (WBO), the Western wing of the TBM.

On the retreat I was on there were about fifty men, all of them either ordained into the TBM/WBO or seeking ordination into it. Of those fifty men, twelve of us were slated for ordination on this retreat. Of those twelve, four of us were from the west: a Scot living in England, an Englishman living in Spain, an Englishman who grew up in South America and has spent much of his life living in Africa, and me. Of the Indians, the vast majority had never been more than a few hours away from their small villages. Some were obviously very poor and barely literate; others were highly educated and relatively well-paid professionals. At 54 I was the oldest being ordained; the youngest was a man exactly half my age. Most of them were around the age of 40.

The men on this retreat ranged in age from 27 to about 65; the majority were mature men well over the age of forty. Every one of them that I talked to had a fascinating life story and a blazing determination to help their people improve their lot in life. The Indian Buddhists, like Ambedkar himself, tend to fall strongly on the rationalistic end of the spectrum and have a deep suspicion of any Buddhist practices that remind them too much of Hinduism or seem in any way superstitious. They place a fierce emphasis on the precepts and on clean and honest living and hard work. None of them drink alcohol or use tobacco or drugs. They meditate regularly. They pride themselves on making sure their wives and daughters also get away to retreats a few times a year, for they take very seriously Ambedkar's warning that the oppressed people of India will never be liberated until their women are fully liberated and educated and independent. They are also very proud of the fact that they do things on what they call "Buddhist time" (clock time) and not on "Indian time." Every event starts punctually on the minute; the only people who were ever late to anything on this retreat were the Westerners, and we were quickly scolded for failing to be precisely on time. All things considered, I couldn't help noticing a certain resemblance to Mormons and to some fundamentalist Christians I have known, especially in poor parts of the rural American Southwest. (This particular part of India reminded me so much of my native New Mexico as it was fifty years ago, and in many ways still is, that I felt immediately at home.)

The public ordination ceremony . . . took place under a large pandal, a brightly multi-coloured canopy, at noon (sharp!) on January 26,

India's Republic Day. This Republic Day was the fiftieth anniversary of the day when Dr. Ambedkar delivered the Indian constitution into the hands of Jawarhalal Nehru. Public ordinations are an important event to the Indian Buddhist community, so an estimated 5000 people turned up from the villages of Bor, Amaravti, Wardha and the city of Nagpur, to see the new crop of Dhammacārīs. Proud fathers and mothers and siblings and sons and daughters and friends of the new dhammacārīs burst into tears and applause as their own favourite man received his kesa. Gasps of delight and approval moved through the crowd as the new names were revealed. And when the ceremonies were finally over, everyone tucked into the elaborate tiffins they had spent the evening preparing. The new dhammacārīs were fed to the bursting point, saluted, prostrated to, hugged and generally admired. Parents pushed shy children forward to offer a flower petal and say "Jai Bhim!" to anyone wearing a blue shirt and a white kesa (the official uniform of TBM order members).

The drama described in that message to my friends was only one very small event in the context of the Buddhist revival movement in India. The revival movement itself has been controversial from the beginning and continues to be far too complex and fraught with ambiguities to allow for adequate treatment. What I hope to do in today's lecture is to cover just a few aspects of one small corner of this phenomenon and to try to give some background to it.

## **2.2 Conversion as renunciation**

My first personal contact with followers of the Indian Buddhist revival movement was not with the TBM in India, but in Canada with a group that has no connection with the TBM. In the 1980s I was active in the Zen Buddhist Temple, an organization founded by a Korean Zen master named Samu Sunim. Sunim frequently asked me to attend meetings of the Toronto Buddhist council and to go to inter-religious events as a representative of the Zen Buddhist Temple. In the course of attending such meetings I became friends with a man named Darshan Chaudhary, who was president of the Toronto chapter of the Ambedkar Mission. Every year I was invited to give talks at special events of the Ambedkar Mission, and occasionally I was invited to ceremonies at which members of his community formally became converts to Buddhism. The ceremonies were performed by a Sri Lankan monk named Bhante Puññaji, who was then living in Toronto. The first time I witnessed one of these conversions, I was in for a surprise. The people who were becoming Buddhist recited the familiar refuge formula three times: *Buddha*

*saraṇaṃ gacchāmi* etc. “I go to the Buddha for refuge. I go to the Dharma for refuge. I go to the Sangha for Refuge.” They then recited the customary five ethical precepts. Normally the ceremony stops there. But this one continued. The language switched from classical Pali to modern Panjabi. Bhante Puññaji quietly moved aside, and Darshan Chaudhary took over to recite further vows and to invite the new converts to repeat after him. I was given an English translation of the extra vows so that I could understand what was taking place. Altogether there were twenty-two extra vows. There is no need to go through all of them now, but let me cite some of them just to give an idea of what was taking place.

- I shall have no faith in Brahman, Vishnu and Mahesh, nor shall I worship them.
- I shall have no faith in Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, nor shall I worship them.
- I shall no faith in Gauri, Gaṇapati and other gods and goddesses of the Hindus, nor shall I worship them.
- I have no faith in the belief that god has taken an incarnation.
- I do not believe that the Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Viṣṇu. I believe this to be irrational and grossly false propaganda.
- I shall not perform any of the Hindu rituals for the dead.
- I shall not invite a brahmin to perform any rituals.
- I renounce my old religion, Hinduism, which is harmful for the advancement and development of the individual and which regards some people as unequal and inferior, and I hereby embrace Buddhism.
- I am taking a new life, so I declare.
- I solemnly affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha.

My initial reaction to all these explicit renunciations of Hindu deities was one of puzzlement. I was especially put off by the strong language of some of the vows, for example. When I asked about this, Darshan Chaudhary and Bhante Puññaji explained that this measure of firmly renouncing Hinduism was necessary for these men and women, because they had been so deeply indoctrinated into the belief that they themselves, as members of India’s lowest castes, were inferior. The only way to purge themselves of that feeling of inferiority was to explicitly reject the religion

whose doctrines had assigned them to a position of inferiority. And the only way to reject their former religion was to reject all its ritual practices, all its deities and all its myths and symbols. Only if these people did all that, I was told, could they really begin to understand that they were now Buddhists and that Buddhism is not merely one of the uncountable legitimate ways of being a Hindu. I understood the reasoning, but I still felt uneasy about the practice. It seemed as strange to me as if a divorced man were to remarry and to include in the marriage vows a scathing denunciation of the character of his former wife.

### **2.3 Ambedkar**

It was only some years later that I learned more about these extra twenty-two vows. These vows had been recited on 14 October 1956, on the day when Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar formally converted to Buddhism in Nagpur by reciting the tradition three refuges and five precepts administered to him by U Candramaṇi, the most senior Buddhist monk then in India. Ambedkar and his wife, Savitā, recited the formula whereby one officially becomes a Buddhist, and then they bowed and made the traditional offering of flowers before an image of the Buddha. By those actions he became a Buddhist. Ambedkar, however, had vowed that although he had been born a Hindu, he would not die a Hindu. And therefore, to make it clear to everyone that he was no longer a Hindu, he recited these twenty-two declarations, making it explicit that he would have no more to do with any of the Hindu deities, or with Hindu priests, or with Hindu rituals or with the doctrines that supported the caste system.

B.R. Ambedkar was born in 1891, the fourteenth child of parents who were members of the Mahar caste, one of the lowest castes in central India. Although the conditions of his birth as an untouchable would have traditionally entitled him to have no rights to a formal education, or to own property, or to work at any but the most menial of jobs, Indian society was changing. Ambedkar's father served in the Indian army, a service that enabled him to receive a modest education in English and Marathi. Convinced that education was the key to rising from the bottom of society, the senior Ambedkar strongly encouraged his children to study and learn by whatever means they could and did everything in his power to enable his children to attend schools. Bhimrao Ambedkar proved to be a gifted and determined student, and through a series of remarkable turns of fortune he was eventually able to attend Bombay University and enter in the civil service of Baroda State. He was granted a scholarship by the progressive ruler of Baroda, which enabled him to study abroad. He managed to earn two doctorates during his studies abroad, one from Columbia University and one from London School of Economics. When he

returned to India at the age of 32, he did so with a determination to bring about social and political reforms that would improve the lot of India's most depressed classes. From 1923 until the time of his death in December 1956, Ambedkar worked for this goal. When India became independent from British rule, Ambedkar was appointed president of the committee that drew up the new constitution of India, a constitution that formally outlawed the institutions of untouchability and provided for pro-active measures aimed at giving greater access to education, employment, governmental representation and human rights to the people in the lowest strata of society.

## **2.4 Ambedkar's Buddhism**

While Ambedkar came to be best known for his political achievements, he also wrote treatises on a wide range of topics, including religion. His collected works, which have been published recently, come to some fourteen volumes. One conviction that drove him during his adult years was that religion had the potential either to give people hope and dignity or to make people slaves. He became increasingly convinced that Hinduism is a religion that gives some people hope and dignity but makes many people slaves—indeed, in one of his writings he argues at some length that the lot of untouchables in India was far worse than the lot of African slaves in America. Nowhere, he said, could anyone find a people more systematically oppressed than the lowest castes and the untouchables of India, and the engine of that oppression, he argued with increasing forcefulness, was the Hindu religion. He portrayed the religion as one that weakened the moral sensibilities of people by encouraging them to worship gods whose lives as recorded in sacred Hindu writings were, by any reasonable accounts, the lives of scoundrels with uncontrolled sexual appetites, attended by such vices as anger and jealousy and pride and pettiness of gigantic proportions. Both gods and human heroes are depicted as monsters with a lust for power that led them into brutal military campaigns. In the entire pantheon of Hindu gods, said Ambedkar, one cannot find a single character who would be regarded as an admirable human being. Moreover, the Hindu religion is based on countless mythological stories that drive home the point that social inequality is part of the very fabric of the cosmos.

While it was very obvious to Ambedkar that Hinduism did not hold anything of value for the downtrodden classes of India, it was less obvious to him what the alternative might be. Throughout his life he studied the various religions of the world. The religion in which he found the most that appealed to him was Buddhism. The Buddhism that appealed to Ambedkar, however, was a highly interpreted version of materials carefully selected from the Pali canon. His posthu-

mously published tome on Buddhism, entitled *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, has become a bible to many of India's new Buddhists; for many of them, it is the only work on Buddhism with which they are familiar.

*The Buddha and His Dhamma* is a work that sets out to tell a coherent and systematic story of the Buddha's life and his teachings. It proceeds by selecting passages from various Buddhist texts, both canonical and post-canonical, and accompanying them with Ambedkar's commentary. The book is laid out in such a way that it is often very difficult to tell where canonical text ends and where commentary begins. The exact locations in the vast corpus of Buddhist literature of the texts chosen for comment are not given, so that checking his version against a canonical source is a task so monumental that only a very few are likely ever to try it. In his introduction to this work, Ambedkar explains to his reader that his book is one that will explore four important issues. In each one of these issues, he says, Buddhist tradition has distorted the record and therefore distorted the actual teachings of the Buddha. He promises to read between the lines and to uncover the true story that has become buried beneath pious myth, because, he says, the account of the Buddha's life and teaching that is traditionally given "is not plausible and does not appeal to reason."

The first of the questions that has been wrongly answered by Buddhist tradition is that of why he left the householder's life and became a wandering renunciate. The second area of distortion is the traditional emphasis on the Four Noble Truths as the heart of the Buddha's teachings. These doctrines, says Ambedkar "deny hope to man" and "make the gospel of Buddhism a gospel of pessimism" and for this reason one must question whether they were really part of the original teachings of the Buddha. A third area is the doctrine of karma and rebirth. These doctrines, he says are quite incompatible with the Buddha's denial of the soul. Therefore, the Buddha cannot have meant by these teachings what Buddhist tradition, under the influence of Hinduism, has taken them to mean. So what did he mean by them? The fourth problematic area is the Buddha's reasons for establishing an order of monks, who have become, in effect, parasites who feed upon and weaken mainstream society.

Ambedkar's answers to all these questions are interesting, but it is the fourth that has probably had the most practical consequence for Ambedkarite Buddhists. The original community of monks, claims Ambedkar, was founded to serve the needs of the people. The purpose of becoming a monk was not to withdraw from society, he said, but to simplify one's life so that one could devote all of one's time and energy to teaching people, befriending the weak and the poor and providing moral guidance to the rest of society. Therefore, the true Buddhist monk is not someone who shaves his head, dons yellow robes and begs for a living, but the person who dedicates his or her life to serving others.

## 2.5 Enter Sangharakshita

Ambedkar died just six weeks after his conversion to Buddhism. It is estimated that within a few months of his conversion to Buddhism, some four million other low-caste Indians embraced Buddhism, the vast majority of them also formally renouncing Hinduism as he had done. Given the very small number of Buddhist monks or teachers living in India in 1956–57, the sudden mass conversions left the vast majority of new Buddhists without very much direction at all. They knew they were no longer Hindus, but few of them had any idea at all of what was actually involved in being a Buddhist, aside from reciting a few simple words in a ceremony that magically converted them from having one label to having another. Unfortunately, not many Buddhist monks, even among those who were in India and were capable of teaching, took much interest in the new Buddhist converts, perhaps because many sensed the conversion were more politically motivated than religious in nature.

One Buddhist who did take an interest in the Ambedkarite Buddhists was a young British monk named Sangharakshita. He had met Ambedkar several times before his death and had been impressed by the man's intensity. Bhante Sangharakshita also witnessed the almost overwhelming sense of loss that the new Buddhists felt when Ambedkar died. Moved by the plight of the new converts, Sangharakshita resolved to give them as much direction and instruction as he could. In the four days following Ambedkar's death, Sangharakshita gave thirty-five public talks, sometimes addressing tens of thousands of people at a time. For the next seven years, Sangharakshita spent half of each year in Maharashtra, tending to the fledgling Buddhist community. Then, after having lived in India for twenty years without returning to his native country, Sangharakshita returned to England in 1964. There he founded a new Buddhist community, which he called the Western Buddhist Order. Several of the British Buddhists who joined this movement decided to go to India to resume the work that Sangharakshita had been doing with the Ambedkarite Buddhists there. Eventually, an Indian branch of the WBO was founded under the name Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, the TBM to which I referred at the beginning of this lecture.

In all honesty, it has to be said that the Ambedkarite movement made a much larger impact on Sangharakshita than he made on that movement. This is to be expected. It has been estimated that approximately one-fifth of India's one billion people are members of one of the classes of people officially designated as depressed or backwards. It would be impossible to determine what percentage of those consider themselves followers of Ambedkar. It would be even more difficult to determine what percentage of those who are Ambedkarites are Buddhists of some kind. Official census figures indicate that fewer than half a million peo-

ple in India considered themselves Buddhist twenty-five years after Ambedkar's conversion, and almost all of those were in the state of Maharashtra. So only a fraction of Ambedkar's current admirers are Buddhists. And of those, only a very small percentage are affiliated with the TBM. At present there are only about 200 ordained members of the TBM; it is impossible to estimate how many Indian Buddhists they reach out to and influence. The fact that around 5000 people came to the ordinations this past January, and that this was considered an unusually light turn-out, may give some idea. In the remaining part of this lecture, I shall try to say a little about how some of Ambedkar's ideas have influenced Sangharakshita and the WBO, and then I shall briefly outline ways in which the TBM differs from other Indian Buddhists.

## 2.6 Ambedkarite Buddhism's impact on Sangharakshita

It was noted above that Ambedkar's contention was that the Buddha had found a community (*saṅgha*) to serve the needs of people, not to retire from the world. Whether or not that claim has merit as an historical observation, as a statement of values it had a considerable impact on Sangharakshita. The Western Buddhist Order that he founded in England is not an order of world-renouncing monks, but rather an order of *dharmacārīs*, most of whom work for a livelihood in some enterprise that provides social services, and most of whom also donate much of their time to some sort of volunteer work. Although many *dharmacārīs* live in small communal dwellings with other Buddhists, many others are married and have families. In whatever way they live, *dharmacārīs* prepare for several years, usually between four and eight, for their ordinations by studying, attending retreats and undergoing a daily practice of meditation and other religious exercises. When a person is considered ready for ordination, he or she is invited to an ordination retreat, such as the one I attended in Bor Dharan, India. The ordination process for women is the same as that for men. Usually, but not always, ordination retreats are single-sex events. Men give ordination to other men, while women are ordained by female preceptors.

The meditation program on WBO/TBM ordination retreats is carefully structured. The day begins with an elaborate visualisation of the TBM refuge tree. This practice is adopted from Tibetan Buddhism, and the WBO/TBM version of it has elements from most of the major schools of Buddhism. Theravādin teachers are situated next to Mahāyāna teachers, and there is a mixture of Indian, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese lineages. Among modern teachers, prominence is given to Ambedkar and Sangharakshita, and to several Tibetan *ris-med* (non-sectarian) lamas, and to Anagarika Dhammapala, and to a Theravādin monk from Sri Lanka. Every

aspect of the refuge tree is meant to underline the principle that all Buddhists are to be honoured and that no one tradition or lineage can claim superiority over the others. The refuge-tree visualisation and prostration practice takes about an hour. During a typical day there are several periods set aside for meditation. One usual exercise is the traditional *mettā-bhāvanā*, an exercise done in both Theravādin and Mahāyāna, in which one cultivates feelings of friendship towards oneself, and then towards loved ones, and finally towards enemies. A third type of meditation done on ordination retreats involves analysing the person into impersonal elements and contemplating the emptiness of self and the interconnectedness of all dharmas. People who are in the last stages of ordination usually spend at least an hour a day with their preceptor and receive instructions in the visualisation practices that they will be expected to do every day for the rest of their lives.

The ordination itself takes place in two stages. First, there is a private ordination which represents the ordinand's personal commitment to the Dharma; the idea is that even if no one else in the world were going for refuge, he or she would still do it alone. The private ordination ceremony involves only the ordinand and a preceptor. There one is formally initiated into a personal meditation practice by the preceptor and given a new name. In my letter to friends after my ordination, I described it as follows:

The last four days of the retreat were spent in total silence (except for the pūjās and our private interviews). On the day of our private ordinations, we were ritually bathed and anointed with the oils that are used to prepare a corpse for cremation. This ceremony of last rites symbolised our death from the world. We were not to be spoken to again until the day of the public ordinations, when our new names were revealed to the world.

On this retreat the private ordinations took place at night under a bodhi tree during the full moon. One by one, we had to walk into the jungle away from the retreat centre to find our preceptor. And there we were formally initiated into our personal meditation practice by the preceptor and given a new name. The private ordination ceremony is simple but very powerful (especially under a full moon in the jungle under a bodhi tree). After the private ceremony, the ordinand returns to join the other men, who are sitting silently in the meditation hall. One man after another leaves the hall to receive his private ordination and then returns. After all the private ordinations were finished, one of the Indian ordinands was so overcome with emotion that he stood in front of the Buddha statue and sobbed uncontrollably as one of his brothers after another silently stepped forward to offer him a flower

and a hug. Before long, there wasn't a dry eye to be found among the fifty men on the retreat.

Several days after the private ordinations take place, there is a public ordination ceremony, which in the WBO/TBM represents the ordinand's commitment to a life of public service. Here the new dharmacārī is unveiled to the public and introduced by his new religious name. In Buddhist circles, at least, he will never again be known by his secular name.

Because the WBO ordination bears more resemblance to the ordination of a Protestant minister than to the ordination of a Buddhist *bhikkhu*, and because men and women who take ordination may be married and have families, some scholars (and Buddhist purists) have described the Western Buddhist Order as a form of Protestant Buddhism. This label has been a source of considerable irritation to Sangharakshita. To explain why, I must discuss one other way in which Sangharakshita has been influenced by Ambedkar. This has to do with the explicit rejection of one's former religion at the time of converting to Buddhism.

## 2.7 Therapeutic blasphemy

When Sangharakshita returned to his native England and began to teach Buddhist meditative practices and the theory behind them to Westerners, he noticed immediately that some Buddhist ideas were almost impossible for his disciples to understand. Their intellectual grasp of the doctrines was fine, but their reflexes did not match their intellectual grasp. The most obvious example of this problem is in the doctrine of karma. Most Western Buddhists, even those who have never been Christians or Jews, still tend to think of karma in legalistic terms. It comes most naturally for them to see the Buddhist precepts as laws or even commandments given by the Buddha. When one breaks a precept, they think, then one is doing a bad karma. The painful consequences that come from breaking that law are then commonly viewed as punishment or as retribution. When being instructed in the Buddhist precepts, it is most natural for Western Buddhists to approach the precept as a kind of law, the limitations of which are to be tested through casuistry. So, for example, if a Western audience is told that the first precept is not to take life, it is almost inevitable that someone will ask whether this means that as a Buddhist she is no longer allowed to let the landlord into her flat to spray for cockroaches. Or is one allowed to eat meat? And if not, then what should one do if one is invited to dinner at a non-Buddhist's house and the host serves roast beef? The questions are endless, and it soon becomes apparent that most people have not quite got the point. Buddhist precepts are not laws or commandments at all; rather, they are

observations about what kinds of things usually (but not always) lead to contentment. They are seen as being similar to the advice given by a physician, who might say “You’d probably feel a bit better if you quit smoking, took off a few pounds, got more exercise and drank less coffee.” If one does not follow the doctor’s advice and continues to feel, say, prone to fatigue, the fatigue is not the doctor’s punishment for failing to follow her orders. Rather, fatigue is the predictable consequence of not following a healthy diet and getting sufficient exercise. Although Western Buddhists can grasp this conceptually, their tendency is to fall back again and again to thinking of karma in legalistic terms. And because of thinking in this way, they were still prone to feelings of guilt, sometimes quite severe guilt. This is but one of the many “hangovers” that a Western Buddhist might experience as a result of previous religious conditioning.

In dealing with the problems that his Western disciples brought to him, Sangharakshita began to feel that a person cannot effectively convert to Buddhism until he or she has worked at reversing some of the effects of previous religious and social conditioning. To some extent, this can be done at the conscious level, but a great deal of one’s conditioning is unconscious. The conscious conditioning can be reversed to a large extent by study and thinking of the sort that religious scholastics have always done. The unconscious part, however, can be dealt with only by the same methods by which it was acquired in the first place, through such things as rituals. Sangharakshita’s thinking on this issue became crystallized in 1977. The occasion was an incident in England that led to someone being charged with blasphemy and found guilty in a court of law. This led to an animated debate in England as to whether laws against blasphemy, essentially a religious matter, still belong within the operative legal structure of a modern secular nation. Sangharakshita entered into the debate with the observation that for some people, blasphemy is a necessity, in that it enables them to attain or to maintain a healthy psychological balance. Writing on this issue, Sangharakshita said:

In order to abandon Christianity completely—in order to liberate himself from its oppressive and stultifying influence—it may be necessary for the ex-Christian not only to repudiate Christianity intellectually in the privacy of his own mental consciousness but also to give public expression in words, writing, or signs to his *emotional* rejection of Christianity and the God of Christianity, i.e. it may be necessary for him to commit blasphemy. Such blasphemy is therapeutic blasphemy.<sup>1</sup>

In this notion of “therapeutic blasphemy” one clearly sees an echo of Ambedkar’s

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in Subhuti (1994, p. 132).

explicit repudiation of Brahma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Gaṇesh and other Hindu deities.

What are we to make of this notion of “therapeutic blasphemy”? I personally find that both Ambedkar’s twenty-two resolutions and Sangharakshita’s notion of therapeutic blasphemy make me uneasy. Seen from the point of view of individual psychology, the enterprise of purging oneself of all childhood conditioning strikes me as quixotic. It is a hopeless task. Fortunately, I think, it is probably also, for most people at least, an unnecessary task. There is really no need to be exclusively a Buddhist without any influence from any non-Buddhist source. It could be argued that no one in the entire history of Buddhism has been purely a Buddhist without any admixture of any other system of thinking. A great deal of what is involved in being an effective Buddhist is just to work with the materials that one has, to work with one’s conditioning as it is and to learn to use it with greater skill and with less harm to oneself and others.

While it may generally be good advice to work with the conditioning that one has, what are we to make of those situations where a person has been damaged by childhood conditioning? If for example, someone has had a particularly bad experience with Hinduism or Christianity and has been undermined by it, should one not then try to purge oneself of those negative influences and conditions? The answer to this is obviously Yes. What I suspect, however, is that when one looks carefully at the negative conditions in one’s life, they will turn out to be particular human attitudes and habits of thought that are evenly distributed throughout the human race, including within that part of the human race that is religious. The task that a practising Buddhist faces is not to stop being a Christian or a Hindu, but rather to stop being an angry, embittered, guilt-ridden human being who blames others for one’s misfortunes and disappointments. One danger that I see in this strategy of therapeutic blasphemy is that one could become stuck in that stage and not move on to more the more positive aspects of conversion.

## **2.8 Degrees of Repudiation**

Fortunately this concept of therapeutic blasphemy is a very minor aspect of Sangharakshita’s approach to Buddhism. Indeed, it is in fostering the more positive aspects of conversion to Buddhism that I see Sangharakshita’s greatest contribution to the Ambedkarite Buddhists of India. Over the past twenty years I have had contact at various times with several different sorts of Ambedkarite, ranging from those who were entirely opposed to religion to those who were followers of Sikhism or Buddhism. Those who are the most humanistic and least religious in their orientation go so far as to say that they see Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism as a tactical blunder on his part—the worse mistake he ever made—, for it

had the effect of dividing Dalit against Dalit.<sup>2</sup> In the enterprise of liberating men and women from the conditions of oppression, they say, religion should never be the principal focus, since all organised religions have an abysmal track record in providing comfort to the poor and oppressed. What is needed now, they say, is not a religion that promises liberation but rather liberation from religion itself.

Among the more religious Ambedkarites, I have met several groups in Canada and the United States who are followers of Sikhism. Typically these people point with pride to the Muslim mystics and Hindu *bhakti* poets who influenced Guru Nanak and who, like him, celebrated God's impartial love of all men and women. They have a long tradition of irenic rhetoric to point to and an infectious spirit of hope. At the same time, one senses a decided tendency to blame Hinduism for nearly every injustice that can be found in India, and when the topic of Hinduism comes up, the reactions range from impatience to hostility.

Among the Ambedkarites who have converted to Buddhism, I have observed a difference between the members of the TBM and other Ambedkarite Buddhists. It should be borne in mind that these observations are purely anecdotal and are based on very limited contact. One of the features of TBM Buddhists that struck me was that most of them have managed to learn quite a lot about Buddhist theory and practice. Even more striking to me was the fact that all but a few of them seem to have moved well beyond the stage of "therapeutic blasphemy." Their focus is on teaching literacy and other skills to poor people, and on helping families find solutions to such afflictions as alcoholism, gambling and domestic violence, all of which are serious problems. Their admiration for Ambedkar is evident in everything they do, but for the time being they seem to be focusing much more attention on his emphasis on education and on improving the lot of women than on repudiating Hindu deities. Having said that, these people make it very clear that they are not Hindus. They are Buddhists. Most of them do not like such terms as "out-caste" or "ex-untouchable" or the now fashionable "dalit". As one of the newly ordained Indian said to me during one of our conversations "It makes me feel very sad to hear such words as 'out-caste' and 'ex-untouchable' and 'dalit' and 'depressed classes' and 'scheduled castes' and so forth. All those words draw too much attention to hardship. I like words that make me think of friendship and joy. That's why I say to people 'Please, if you have to call me something, just call be a Buddhist.'"

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<sup>2</sup>"Dalit" is a term that means oppressed and downtrodden. It is preferred by some political activists in India.

## Chapter 3

# No Faith Please—We’re Buddhist

### 3.1 Introduction

Several years ago, I was invited to meet with a course that my colleague, Katherine Young, was teaching. During the semester, she had invited a number of people to meet with her class to discuss their conversions to their respective religions, so she asked me to talk about what had led me to become a Buddhist, not just an admirer of Buddhist thought or what Thomas Tweed has called a “nightstand Buddhist”, but someone who openly goes for refuge to the three jewels. After I gave my presentation, Katherine smilingly asked me something she confessed she had always wanted to ask me: “Richard,” she said, “do you have Buddhist emotions?”

I knew immediately what she was asking. It was a brilliant question, and in some ways a daring question. By way of replying I told the class about the time I had been in a huge Buddhist temple in Kyōto or perhaps Nara. At the time I was studying in Japan and working on a translation of a key text by the Indian Buddhist epistemologist, Dignāga. The Japanese friend who was taking me to visit temples knew what I was working on, and, wearing a big smile, he led me to a rather old and drab wooden statue in one of the minor hallways of the temple. I looked at the statue uncomprehendingly. My friend said “Well, aren’t you going to bow? This is a statue of Vasubandhu, the teacher of Dignāga. If you are working on Dignāga, you really should show some respect to Dignāga’s ācārya.”

This simple incident before the statue of the teacher of the man who became my teacher, by virtue of writing a book that I was working on translating some fifteen hundred years later, taught me in an instant how uneducated my sense of piety was. Not only did I not recognize the iconographic features of Vasubandhu as depicted in wood, but quite frankly it never would have occurred to me to bow to a wooden

statue of any great teacher. I bowed anyway. But my heart was really not in it. I bowed for the reason that I did all sorts of other things in Japan; I had learned that in Japan, one does things because those things are done. One bows to statues. So I bowed to this questionable wooden likeness of Vasubandhu, despite the fact that he looked much more like a Chinese patriarch than an Indian ācārya. But I would have bowed with just as much conviction to a wooden Indian in front of an American cigar store.

That was all more than twenty years ago. Since then I have become somewhat more educated in the ways of Buddhist piety. But if I am being completely honest, which unfortunately my Buddhist practice requires of me, I have to admit that I am much more moved by a statue of Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln than by a statue of any Asian teacher, and my eyes still fill with tears when I see a child sitting shyly on Santa Claus's lap. One never outgrows the icons and heroes and bogey men of one's childhood. When one converts to another religion, the ghosts of childhood invariably come along for the ride. And with them come a whole range of attitudes and beliefs and values that may be questioned but are never entirely dropped. This is true whether those values are religious or, like mine, entirely secular.

What I would like to talk about in today's lecture is conversion not from one religion to another, but conversion from no religion at all to a religion. It is my contention that all the difficulties involved in being a dual religious citizen, such as Jewish Sufi or a Zen Catholic, are also involved in being a Buddhist Secular Humanist. Today I would like to explore what some of those difficulties are. At the risk of seeming narcissistic, and at the even greater risk of certainly being to some extent self-deceived, I will use my own case as the basis of my study for this topic. I suspect that what is true of me is true of quite a large number of North Americans of my generation.

### **3.2 The non-religion of my father**

My parents were so secular that I didn't even know that other people had religions until I went to grammar school. One day my second-grade teacher went around the room and asked everyone what their religion was; I think the exercise was meant to show us that that we lived in a democratic society in which religious tolerance was strongly encouraged. Most of the children in my class were Baptists or Methodists or Presbyterians. There may have been one or two Lutherans and perhaps a couple of Mormons. There were no Catholics; they went to another school. And there were no Jews; in those days they did not dare to live in small-town New Mexico near the Texas border. When my turn came to tell everyone what my religion was, I had no idea at all. The question barely made any sense to me. That night, I

went home and asked my parents. My father quickly told me, with uncharacteristic fervor for his phlegmatic nature, that we were atheists. My mother just as quickly broke in and said “He can’t tell people at school he’s an atheist!” Turning to me she said “Just tell them you’re a Protestant. If they ask you what kind, say you’re not sure. All you know is that you’re a Protestant. That always works for me.” And so I had my first lesson in the importance of dissembling when among the pious. The problem was, I had been trained always to tell the truth, and I had not yet learned the subtle but important distinction between dissembling and lying. So the next day I went to school and told my classmates that I was an atheist. The shocked reaction that my announcement provoked among my friends was enough to convince me that my mother was right. In small-town New Mexico it’s probably better to say that one is a Protestant.

For the rest of the time that I lived with my parents, I hardly even stepped inside a church, except to attend meetings of the Boy Scouts that were held in the basement of one on Monday evenings. Eventually I learned more about my family’s history and came to understand why such a hard rejection of religion had come about. My grandfather Hayes had at one time been a Congregationalist minister in New England. His father and grandfather and great-grandfather had all been Congregationalist ministers in various states in New England. They had also been professors in some of the numerous liberal arts colleges located throughout New England. My grandfather worked as a minister for only three years as a young man before realizing he had little interest in either pastoral work or in preaching. For most of his working life he taught economics and sociology in Montana, Illinois and Michigan. In the 1920s he became especially caught up in the controversies between Evolutionists and Creationists. During the Depression, while working at a small Christian college in Illinois, he had a severe falling out with his dean, a conservative Christian, over the issue of what it is appropriate to teach in a college classroom. Life became so uncomfortable for him that he resigned his post in 1935 and moved to New Mexico to recover his health after a serious nervous breakdown. He spent the last thirty years of his life doing volunteer work for various civic and non-governmental organisations doing work in race relations, fair housing practices and human rights. Although he never formally gave up his ordination, and still preached occasionally when invited to do so, he made it clear to friends and family that he could no longer believe any aspect of Christian dogma except the Golden Rule and the commandment to love thy neighbour as thyself. He sometimes said that considered himself a Unitarian, but as far as I know he never formally joined that church.

Somehow my grandfather’s difficult experiences with a Christian Fundamentalist became crystallized in my father as a firm conviction that all religious people are Fundamentalists. Fundamentalists come in various flavours, of course: Chris-

tian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist, but basically they are all the same. To be religious at all was, and still is, in my father's eyes to be irrational, driven by emotions, intellectually damaged, quite possibly dangerous and almost surely a Republican. In my father's household the only discussions about religion that ever took place were based on observations made by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Ironically, in his black-and-white dismissal of all religions as groundless anti-scientific superstitions, my father bore no small resemblance to the Fundamentalists who in his eyes were the declared enemies of truth.

### **3.3 The Unitarian-Universalists and friends**

In 1964, the year that Goldwater ran for president of the United States, my father became convinced that the religious right were about to take over America and that no federal government employee who did not belong to a church would have a secure job. Given that my father was a geologist employed by the US Geological Service, this was a frightening thought. With that ominous cloud hanging over him, he and my mother became members of the local Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship, a membership they kept active until my mother died nearly thirty years later. By this time they were living in the suburbs of Denver, and I was going to college in Wisconsin.

The Jefferson County Unitarian-Universalist Church, to which my parents belong, had informal ties to a Reform Jewish synagogue and the local chapter of the Buddhist Church of America. Several times a year the congregations of these three churches got together for services; more commonly, members of the three churches worked together on various committees dedicated to charitable and humanitarian enterprises. Every so often, the minister of the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship would turn his podium over to visiting speakers from the other two organizations in the trio of communities that had little in common except a rejection of the Trinity. In 1967, while I happened to be visiting my parents' home, the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship had an entire month dedicated to exploring Buddhism. Every Sunday of that month a Buddhist speaker came. The little bookstore in the church suddenly became filled with books on Buddhism. And every Wednesday evening there was a reading circle that got together in the church and read and discussed Buddhist readings. I attended all these events. By the time the month was finished, I felt half certain that I was a Buddhist and quite certain that I wanted to learn much more about it.

In retrospect I can see that the Buddhism taught in the Unitarian Church was a very carefully selected set of perceptions, few of which were representative of much of the Buddhism that I would encounter during the course of the next thirty

years. Buddhism was presented as a version of scientific rationalism and humanism, remarkably similar in all its contours to the key features of the European Enlightenment. My first impression of Buddhism was that it was an Asian religion that had somehow anticipated and embodied all the values I had imbibed during my formative years. Perhaps Buddhists in America had learned to present themselves this way for the very same reason my mother had learned to present herself as a generic Protestant in the American Bible-belt.

### **3.4 Protestant Buddhism**

In his study of the American encounter with Buddhism in the 19th century, historian of American religions Thomas Tweed observed that the Americans of a century ago who became fascinated with Buddhism fell into four broad categories: 1) rationalists, who had grown disenchanted with the irrational and anti-rational elements that they perceived in Christianity, 2) spiritualists and occultists, who were reacting against what they perceived as an excessive rational skepticism and humanism in mainstream society, 3) Transcendentalists, who were looking for the common core shared by all religions and 4) Romantics, who tended to be drawn to the aesthetic qualities of Buddhist, especially Japanese Buddhist, fine arts. Not surprisingly, members of these four camps rarely saw Buddhism in the same way. They tended either to ignore one another altogether or engage in heated and acrimonious exchanges with one another, each side predictably accusing the others of completely misunderstanding the teachings of Buddhism and hijacking Buddhism for their own purposes. Tweed's balanced report of 19th century Buddhism was enough to convince me that all four parties were correct in saying that the other three had hijacked Buddhism and carefully selected parts of the whole to support their own agendas. American Buddhists were remarkably similar to the proverbial blind men who fought bitterly with each other, and eventually came to blows, over the nature of an elephant. Sadly, the situation in the year 2000 is not much different from the 19th century situation that Tweed describes.

One of the four movements within American culture that hijacked Buddhism were those who had a broad sympathy with rational skepticism or scientific method as described by Charles Saunders Peirce, the founder of a way of doing philosophy that he called Pragmatism and later renamed Pragmaticism. In retrospect it is clear to me that the first people from whom I ever heard anything about Buddhism were of this type. Several of the first lectures I heard on Buddhism were given by Theravādin Buddhists who were putting forward a view of Buddhism that Richard Gombrich and others have called Protestant Buddhism, a kind of Buddhist reform that took place in Sri Lanka and to a lesser degree Thailand. One of the

characteristics of this reformed sort of Buddhism was a marked tendency to prefer early Buddhist scripture to all subsequent scholasticism. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, the return to the earliest sources was accompanied by a striking tendency to focus most attention on those texts in which the Buddha was critical of the beliefs and practices of his day, dismissing them as laughable and vain dogmas, unsupported by experience and flying in the face of reason.

The single text that best characterizes the spirit of the reformed Protestant Buddhism was a very short and minor text that had received hardly any attention during the first twenty-five centuries of Buddhist history. In English this small text came to be known informally as the Kālāma Sutta. In this text the Buddha tells the residents of a small town that they should believe nothing simply because it is taught to them by someone who is learned in scriptures and has been hailed as a great teacher. Rather, one should believe something only after considering it for oneself and examining it in the light of one's own personal experience. This text resonated with the anti-clerical and generally anti-authoritarian mood of Europeans and of some European-educated Asians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It should come as no surprise that this very same Kālāma Sutta was heavily stressed in several of the talks on Buddhism that I heard in the Unitarian-Universalist Church. Buddhism, said the men who gave these lectures, knows nothing of blind faith. It is therefore not at all like Western religions. Indeed, they said, it might be better not to think of Buddhism as a religion at all. My reaction on hearing a midrash or two on this text was one of almost explosive enthusiasm. Here at last was a system of thought and practice that was in no way in conflict with the principles of the Peircean and Popperian scientific rationalism and the democratic and egalitarian political values that had been part of my childhood indoctrination. Moreover, since Buddhism was not a religion, it was not a form of Fundamentalism, so it would be welcome in my father's household. I was immediately convinced that what the European Enlightenment had done for the advancement of the sciences that led to systematic and objective explorations of the external world of nature, the Buddha's Enlightenment had done for the advancement of sciences that led to systematic and unbiased explorations of the inner world of the human mind. Moreover, while Western science in its Peircean-Popperian form is entirely value-free, Buddhist science is based on strong ethical values and therefore complements science without contradicting it.

### **3.5 Stephen Batchelor**

One of the most articulate and influential spokesmen of the non-religious brand of Buddhism that has grown up in the West (and has, to some extent, been emulated

in Asia) is a Scottish-born Buddhist teacher and author named Stephen Batchelor. His orientation is captured very well in the titles of three of the books he has published during the last two decades. The earliest of these books, published in 1983, was called *Alone With Others: An Existentialist Approach to Buddhism*. The second, published in 1990, was called *The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty*. His most recent exploration, published in 1997, is called *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*. Batchelor, who is within a year or two of my age, went to India and was ordained a Buddhist monk in a Tibetan religious order. He later lived in Korea, where he trained for some time as a Zen monk. After ten years living in Asia, he left the monastic life and married a French-born woman who also lived for many years in Korea, training as a Zen Buddhist nun. At some point during his life, Batchelor went to Zurich and trained as a Jungian analyst. He is, in short, a fairly typical Western Buddhist of his generation.

Like many Western Buddhists, Stephen Batchelor was first attracted to the science-friendly image of Buddhism as a system of values and psychological exploration founded on reason and experience rather than on faith and revelation. Like many Western Buddhists, he was in for quite a shock when he encountered Buddhism in Asia. And, again like many Western Buddhists, he emerged from his experiences in Asia with a conviction that Asians had for the most part missed the point of Buddhism and smothered it in popular superstitions and folk practices. He still considers himself a Buddhist, but he has now distanced himself from all formal Buddhist organisations and associated with a small but dedicated group of about a dozen individuals who share his conviction that Buddhism might still be salvageable, but only if it returns to its largely anti-authoritarian roots, its uncompromising agnosticism, its inward-looking meditative practices and its strong commitment to cultivating good character—character endowed with such foundational virtues as universal love and compassion. The tone of Batchelor’s presentation can be gathered from the following quotation from his *Buddhism Without Beliefs*

Despite the Buddha’s own succinct account of his awakening, it has come to be represented (even by Buddhists) as something quite different. Awakening has become a mystical experience, a moment of transcendent revelation of the Truth. Religious interpretations invariably reduce complexity to uniformity while elevating matter-of-factness to holiness. Over time, increasing emphasis has been placed on a single Absolute Truth, such as “the Deathless,” “the Unconditioned,” “the Void,” “Nirvana,” “Buddha Nature,” etc, rather than on an interwoven complex of truths.

And the crucial distinction that *each truth requires being acted on*

*in its own particular way*. . . has been relegated to the margins of specialist doctrinal knowledge. Few Buddhists today are probably even aware of the distinction.

Yet in failing to make this distinction, four ennobling truths to be acted upon are neatly turned into four propositions of fact to be believe. . . . At precisely this juncture, Buddhism becomes a religion. A Buddhist is someone who *believes* these four propositions. In leveling out these truths into propositions that claim to be true, Buddhists are distinguished from Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, who believe different sets of propositions. The four ennobling truths become principal dogmas of the belief system known as “Buddhism”.

The Buddha was not a mystic. His awakening was not a shattering insight into a transcendent Truth that revealed to him the mysteries of God. He did not claim to have had an experience that granted him privileged, esoteric knowledge of how the universe ticks. Only as Buddhism became more and more of a religion were such grandiose claims imputed to his awakening. In describing to the five ascetic what his awakening meant, he spoke of having discovered complete freedom of heart and mind from the compulsions of craving. He called such freedom the taste of the dharma.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.6 Secular Buddhism?

While Stephen Batchelor was off in Asia encountering a religious Buddhism that he apparently found increasingly repugnant, other Westerners were in India discovering a religious Buddhism that they found quite charming. They were, paradoxically, captivated by the Buddhist promise of liberation. Whereas for Batchelor, the Buddha’s awakening was a liberation from the limitations of dogmatic thinking and uncritically received cultural prejudices, for others the Buddha’s awakening was a liberation from the limitations that prevented him from being fully omniscient and omnipotent and all-compassionate. For these Westerners, the discovery of Buddhism was not a continuation of the general Western flight from religion, but rather a re-entry in the religious mysteries that Batchelor decried and even ridiculed. Needless to say, much of the reaction to Batchelor’s book from this quarter took the form of scathing denunciation. Batchelor, they said, had reduced the magnificent tradition of Buddhism to a few pedestrian, common-sense principles that have enjoyed a degree of fleeting popularity in Western modernity for the past few decades. He had made Buddhism into an agnostic, secular form of

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<sup>1</sup>Batchelor (1997, pp. 4–5).

humanistic, existential psychotherapy. If one wants only that sort of thing, said his critics, why not just go down to the local bookstore and randomly pick two or three pop psychology self-help books off the shelf? Why pretend to be a Buddhist at all? Why not be more honest and just call oneself a modern secularist? Batchelor (who must have had the same father I had) has responded by calling such critics Buddhist Fundamentalists. At least one of them has replied by calling Batchelor a Secularist Fundamentalist. The battle lines have clearly been drawn.

Although many of the reactions to Batchelor's Buddhism have been more strident than subtle, there have, fortunately, been several reflective and thought-provoking proponents of religious Buddhism who have addressed some of his points, even if not in direct response to him. I would like to consider three of these responses, namely, those of Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ayyā Khemā and Lewis Richmond.

### **3.7 In defense of faith: Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ayyā Khemā**

Bhikkhu Bodhi was born in 1944 in New York City and has been a Theravādin Buddhist monk since 1972. He is currently the president and editor of the Buddhist Publication Society. In an untitled cover essay of the Autumn 1985 edition of the *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter* Bhikkhu Bodhi observed:

On first encounter Buddhism confronts us as a paradox. Intellectually, it appears a freethinker's delight: sober, realistic, undogmatic, almost scientific in its outlook and method. But if we come into contact with the living Dhamma from within, we soon discover that it has another side which seems the antithesis of all our rationalistic presuppositions. We still don't meet rigid creeds or random speculation, but we do come upon religious ideals of renunciation, contemplation and devotion; a body of doctrines dealing with matters transcending sense perception and thought; and—perhaps most disconcerting—a program of training in which faith figures as a cardinal virtue, doubt as a hindrance, barrier and fetter.

He goes on to say that every Buddhist is faced with the challenge of trying to make sense of these two apparently irreconcilable aspects of Buddhism. On the one hand we are to be told to investigate everything for ourselves and to take nothing on anyone else's authority, and on the other hand we are assured repeatedly that when we do these independent investigations we will arrive at exactly the same conclusions that the Buddha arrived at, but only if we first dispel our doubts and place our trust in the Buddha and his Dharma. He writes:

One way we can resolve this dilemma is by accepting only one face of the Dhamma as authentic and rejecting the other as spurious or superfluous. Thus, with traditional Buddhist pietism, we can embrace the religious side of faith and devotion, but shy off from the hard-headed world-view and the task of critical inquiry; or, with modern Buddhist apologetics, we can extol the Dhamma's empiricism and resemblance to science, but stumble embarrassingly over the religious side. Yet reflection on what a genuine Buddhist spirituality truly requires, makes it clear that both faces of the Dhamma are equally authentic and that both must be taken into account. If we fail to do so, not only do we risk adopting a lopsided view of the teaching, but our own involvement with the Dhamma is likely to be hampered by partiality and conflicting attitudes.

Bhikkhu Bodhi goes on to argue in this short essay that the key to reconciling these two aspects of Buddhism is to remember that the goal of all Buddhist doctrines and practices is to eradicate dissatisfaction. This is a complex project that requires working at all levels of one's being, the intellectual as well as the emotional. As long as one keeps this goal firmly in mind, he says, the empiricist and the religious agendas will never be in conflict. Rather than being two different faces, he says, they will appear as the left and the right side of a single face. Bhikkhu Bodhi is one of the many Buddhists who wrote a review of Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. In a gently-worded but nevertheless strongly critical appraisal of the book, Bhikkhu Bodhi said that he found Batchelor's approach seriously flawed, precisely because it fails to provide the balance of intellectual rigour and piety that Buddhist practice requires.

Another influential Western Buddhist was Ayyā Khemā, who was born in Germany as Ilse Lederman in 1923, the same year my father was born. Right up to the time of her death in 1997, Sister Khemā devoted her life to practicing Buddhist meditation and teaching it, especially to women. She was active in reviving interest in monastic living among women of both Asia and the West. She founded a centre for Buddhist contemplative women on Parappuduwa Island in Sri Lanka. Her talks have inspired women, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, around the world. In one of her sermons, entitled "*Dukkha* for Knowledge and Vision" she wrote about a tendency in the modern Western psyche that she saw as particularly debilitating:

Sceptical doubt is the harbinger of restlessness, joy begets calm. We need not worry about our own or the world's future, it's just a matter of time until we fathom absolute reality. When the path, the practice and effort mesh together, results are bound to come. It is essential to have

complete confidence in everything the Buddha said. We can't pick out the ideas we want to believe because they happen to be in accordance with what we like anyway and discard others. There are no choices to be made, it's all or nothing.

In this and other sermons, Ayyā Khemā observes that the habit of turning every proposition over in the mind, and examining it from every possible angle, and accepting nothing until it has been firmly established, can lead to a kind of paralysis of the spirit. Because one is overwhelmed with plausible choices but has no criterion by which to choose one over all the others, one makes no commitments at all to anything. But, she says, no one can do anything as important and as difficult as getting rid *dukkha* if one does not have a very strong resolve and commitment. I personally find that she makes some excellent points about the importance of commitment, but I find myself baffled and dismayed by the apparent inflexibility of her strong wording when she says “It is essential to have complete confidence in everything the Buddha said. . . . There are no choices to be made, it's all or nothing.”

### **3.8 Lewis Richmond's observations**

Another proponent of religious Buddhism is Lewis Richmond, an American who is an ordained disciple of the late Japanese Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. In a short but provocative article called “Ten Reasons Why Western Dharma May Fail,” Richmond begins by saying:

Whether Western Dharma will fade or succeed is unknown at this point. It is not even clear what would constitute success. If it follows the pattern of the first wave of interest in Eastern spirituality in the 1920's, its more accessible doctrines and practices will be absorbed into the popular mainstream and watered down as Yoga was, while its traditional forms will persist only as an exotic interest of the committed few. Or it may blossom into a permanent new influence. It is comforting to imagine that Dharma in the West is here to stay, but history teaches that promising new religious movements often wane away after a couple of generations. If Dharma does subside, I can think of ten reasons why that might happen.

This is not the time to discuss all ten of Richmond's points, but let me draw attention to a few that are particularly relevant to our discussion. At the top of his list, Richmond places the tendency of Western converts of my generation to cling

to counter-cultural values, such as a “distaste for business, government, and mainstream institutions of local and national community.” Significant changes have taken place in American society since 1967, says Richmond, and the baby-boomers have been slow to accept these changes. As a result, many American Buddhist centres are now experiencing the same phenomenon as many Christian churches: one looks in vain for a head of hair of any colour other than grey or white.

One of the specific forms of the general counter-culturalism of hippie-generation American Buddhism is the third item on Richmond’s list: Lack of Intellectual Dialogue. Although an entire generation of very well-trained academic specialists in the Buddhist tradition has come into place since 1967, Richmond observes that “many Dharma centers display little interest in what they have learned.” Not only is there little interest among many American Buddhists in learning what might have to teach them, in many quarters there is a decided atmosphere of suspicion and contempt, the default assumption being that academics are more interested in destroying Buddhism than in promoting it. This anti-intellectualism in the West, argues Richmond, is reinforced by an intellectual stagnation in Asian Buddhism.

Christianity and Judaism have re-invented themselves time and time again as the world around changed and grew, but Buddhism, in the words of PrajnaParamita scholar Dr. Edward Conze, “hasn’t had a new idea in over a thousand years.”

A third item that can be seen as closely related to the two we have discussed so far is Richmond’s fifth point. Western Buddhism, he says, may fail because of a general lack of appreciation of other traditions, both Eastern and Western. It is common, he observes, to see among Western Buddhists an astonishing lack of respect, even an open contempt, for Christianity and Judaism. Says Richmond:

I find it curious that Western Buddhists who have no problem bowing thousands of times to some Tibetan deity recoil in revulsion when the word God is mentioned. The idea that “God” in Western terms might be as much a mind-created form of spiritual practice, as bowing to that tutelary Tibetan deity, seems not to occur to the devotee. As long as Buddhism is just a place for the disaffected religious of the West to project their conflicted religious feelings outward onto something exotic and foreign, it will never truly take root.

Closely associated with this willful ignorance of Christian and Jewish beliefs and practices, says Richmond, is a tendency to ignore most of the forms of Asian Buddhism that have proven to have the greatest survival value.

The core adherents of Western Dharma are typically interested in personal transformation through meditation practice, and forget that the vast majority of the world's 300 million Buddhists do not practice meditation, but rather some form of "faith" practice—chanting, devotional prayers, ritual observance, and precepts. How many Western Dharma students have ever studied the teachings of any of these schools, or attended services at any of the ethnically based Buddhist temples in every major city in the U.S. and Europe? How many have absorbed the populist teachings of Shinran, the founder of Pure Land in Japan? How many know that by far the most popular form of Buddhism in the West is not Zen, or Tibetan Buddhism, or Vipassana, but Sokka [sic] Gokkai, an offshoot of Nichiren Buddhism that teaches the pious repetition of the name of the Lotus Sutra—Nam' Myo Ho Renge Kyo? These so-called "faith" schools arose centuries ago to fill the void left by a monk-dominated religion. They are among Buddhism's best efforts so far to adapt to a more lay-oriented modern world. These traditions may very well contain some good ideas for Western Dharma's long term success and survival.

Every one of the observations that Richmond makes conforms to what I have observed, and I am sure that Batchelor has observed exactly the same things. While Richmond appears to be much more willing than Batchelor to explore the possibilities of retaining the religious aspects of Buddhism, he acknowledges at several points in the article that that popular practices might ensure the survival of Buddhism, but they could just as well smother it or at least obliterate all traces of what makes Buddhism distinct. If American Buddhism becomes indistinguishable from liberal Protestantism and Reform Judaism and indeed from what some people call Secular Humanism, one might ask, has it really survived at all? Or have we simply added another synonym for modernity to the English vocabulary?

### **3.9 Forever Jung**

My own encounter with Asian forms of Buddhism had quite a different effect on me than Batchelor's had on him. Much to my surprise, I found myself strongly attracted to rituals and the various imaginative meditative practices that complement the rigorous scholasticism that first attracted me. I never saw them as practices that replaced or in any way threatened the integrity of the rationalistic agnosticism that can be found throughout Buddhist tradition; on the contrary, for me they provided a welcome balance. They added a dimension of celebration and joy and gratitude that had never been in abundant supply in my life before. They opened up

new vistas for me initially in Buddhism itself, but once these vistas were opened I came to be open also to similar practices in other religions. Rather than seeing the religious dimension of Buddhism a limitation, I saw them as the means by which I was liberated from the fear and loathing of religion that so dominated my childhood home.

The road to my present state of feeling at ease with Buddhist rituals and devotional practices has been anything but straight. At times I have taken a position very similar to Batchelor's, perhaps even more hostile to religious practices than he has been. Like Batchelor, I have always been uneasy with such terms as "faith" and have never much liked using such terms as "mystery" and "transcendental" and "soteriology" in a Buddhist context. Like Batchelor, I far prefer to see Buddhist doctrines as hypotheses that one tests that as a creed that one believes. On the practical level, I have sometimes been one of those people whom Richmond describes when speaks of those who "forget that the vast majority of the world's 300 million Buddhists do not practice meditation, but rather some form of 'faith' practice." For one period following a painful parting of the ways from the Zen Buddhist Temple in Toronto, I went through an iconoclastic phase attended by a conviction that I could sustain a practice based on nothing but Buddhist meditation and environmental activism. The experiment was a failure. Reflecting on that period of life I later wrote:

It is possible to reduce the total weight of a cart by removing all the wheels, but this does not make the cart easier to pull. Similarly, one can reduce the bulk of the burden of the mind by removing all fantasies, unwarranted beliefs, and half-thought ideas, but this does not necessarily accelerate the process of becoming disencumbered of ignorance and confusion. On the contrary, by using fantasy creatively and imaginatively, I found, one may actually speed up the process. The process of liberating the mind from its own fetters is long and complex—far too complex for anyone to understand.<sup>2</sup>

In writing this, I was admitting that I had finally learned what most other people had known all along, namely, that the religious life is at its most effective when it incorporates not only rigorous intellectual training but also imagination and fantasies of the sort that educate and refine the emotions.

This brings me back to Katherine Young's excellent question about whether my emotions are Buddhist. My response to this question reminds me of Carl Jung's concern that when Europeans converted to Asian religions they ran a serious risk of doing their psyches a disservice. The symbols and stories and rituals that one

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<sup>2</sup>Hayes (1998, p. 262.).

learns in early life, he argued, for the basis of a psychological nexus from which one never escapes. If one converts as an adult to an exotic religion that has an entirely different set of myths, symbols and rituals, then one may lose touch with a nexus of meaning that can never be fully replaced. The myths and symbols of the adopted religion will always seem somewhat alien, and one's grasp of them will always be more superficial than they would have been had one learned them as a child.

I think Jung was right. For this reason, I agree with the Dalai Lama when he repeatedly warns Western audiences that they are much better off staying with Christianity or Judaism than converting to Buddhism. They are quite welcome, he says, to adapt whatever they find of use in Buddhism, but their basic framework should be the religion of their childhood. Only if someone had no religion as a child, he has said, might they be better off adopting Buddhism than remaining without any religion at all.

Since Buddhism was the first religion about which I learned anything at an experiential level, I feel that my best option now is to stay with it. To switch to another religion after thirty-three years of spending most of my energy on learning the ways of Buddhism would be daft. At the same time, I am reminded of something a Welsh-Canadian friend of mine said recently as he was reflecting back on his twenty-five years of living as a Buddhist monk in various Tibetan monasteries in India. "My life would have been so much easier, and probably much richer," he said "if only the first religious teacher to make a positive impression on me had been an Anglican!" I did not know whether to say "Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!" or "Amen." I remained silent.

## Chapter 4

# The Buddhist Challenge: The Experience of Two Jewish Women

### 4.1 Sara's Tears

Every May I teach an intensive academic course at a Buddhist retreat centre in New England. This year the theme of the course was the theory and practice of Buddhist meditation. I have learned from previous experience that it is wise to set aside a few hours of every day for meeting with students on an individual basis. On the fifth day of this year's course, a student asked for an appointment. Let me give her the fictitious name Sara. It was obvious from her manner that she had an issue of some urgency to discuss. When we met later that day, she started off by saying "I vowed that I wasn't going to get emotional about this," and then she promptly burst into tears. Sensing that she was embarrassed about her emotional reaction, I told her just to go ahead and feel what she was feeling and let it come out in whatever way it had to come out. It was obvious that there was a strong intensity to what she was experiencing.

When Sara was ready to express the thoughts and feelings behind her tears into words, she began by saying "I feel as though everything I stand for and believe in has been under attack from the moment this retreat started." She then elaborated on what had been bothering her. The main issues were the following:

1. She had just finished a degree in analytic philosophy, where she had learned the value of reason and scientific method, but from the very first lecture of the course, the very idea of truth had been under attack.
2. She found the exercise of focusing on the breath extremely challenging. She knew she was supposed to be sitting quietly and developing serenity, but her

body was never comfortable, and her mind was always racing with thoughts, many of them angry and unpleasant.

3. In cultivation of friendship exercise that we did at the beginning of every day, she absolutely balked at the instructions to try to extend feelings of love towards her enemies. She had a burning passion for social and economic justice and for environmental issues, but the friendship exercises seemed to be saying to accept everyone just as they are and to love them.
4. She came from a Jewish home and had a deeply ingrained aversion to idolatry, and it pained her to see me and the other Buddhists on this retreat bowing to images of the Buddha. "It's just a hunk of plaster," she said. "How can you think that lighting incense before a stupid chunk of dead matter is going to help you or anyone else? I find this really confusing!"
5. She had a nagging feeling that the very idea of being Jewish was really not acceptable to a Buddhist. It's not that she sensed any kind of anti-Semitism in the air, but rather she sense that Buddhists do not regard it as ultimately meaningful and acceptable and helpful to identify oneself as a member of any ethnic group, or any nation, or any people.

Sara ended her discourse by saying that she could never be a Buddhist. I assured her that that was perfectly acceptable. There is no need to be a Buddhist. If she was finding anything at all of value, I said, she was welcome to take it. If she found nothing at all of value, then at least she knew that Buddhism was something that she wanted to know nothing more about.

This last statement brought on more tears to her eyes. She fought them back for a moment and then said explosively "That's the whole problem! I *do* want to know more about all this stuff. All my life I have been hearing people talk about loving your neighbour as yourself. But until coming here I had never met people who really *act* that way, who really listen to what others are saying, who just listen and don't instantly make judgements and jump in with advice, who just let you work things out for yourself and let you know they're there for you. I want to know how you guys *do* all those good things that everybody else just talks about all the time." There was a long pause, and then she said "For me it's not a question of becoming a Buddhist. I'm quite happy being Jewish. But I hope you realise that now that I know about all this stuff, I can't just forget about it. Now I really have to understand it."

The interview with Sara was a particularly intense example of a kind of conversation I have had with various people for more than twenty years. For some reason that only God knows (if there is a God), a disproportionately high percentage of

Westerners who take up the practice of Buddhism come from Jewish backgrounds. Some of them give up Judaism altogether, or at least say they have done. Others take quite a serious interest in Buddhism, sometimes for many years, but never come to the point where they feel that they are officially Buddhists. They remain what Thomas Tweed has called “Night-stand Buddhists”—people who have a few books on Buddhist meditation on their bedside tables and who read a little bit before going to sleep at night, and who may even go on a Buddhist meditation retreat from time to time. My guess is that Sara will be a night-stand Buddhist. And then some of the Jewish Buddhists I have known have found a way to be both Jewish and Buddhist, although most have experienced at least some degree of conflict along the way.

The purpose of my lecture today is not to try to sort out who does and who does not convert to Buddhism for which reasons. Rather, I should like simply to report what some people have said to me, and then offer a few comments in response to the issues they have raised. In order to keep this task manageable in the time allotted, I will obviously have to be very selective. I have already reported on some of what Sara said. Let me report on one more Jewish woman’s reactions to Buddhism and then try to comment on some of what she and Sara said.

## **4.2 Ruth’s Rage**

One of the other women to attend the summer course on Buddhism meditation was someone we’ll call Ruth. Unlike Sara, Ruth had taken at least one university course on Buddhism and had shown a keen interest for some time in Buddhist meditative practices. She was eager to take the course from the minute she heard about it and had done some background reading to prepare herself for it. So whereas Sara’s reactions were those of someone seeing Buddhism for the first time, Ruth was already a veteran night-stand Buddhist.

Interestingly, Ruth was drawn to Buddhism for one of the reasons that Sara was repelled by it. Ruth has been influenced by post-modern thinking, and particularly by its responses to political and sociological injustices and to the environmental crisis. Post-modernism, she observes, has offered a refreshing challenge to such notions as “objectivity” and to the primacy of reason. Moreover, post-modern thinkers have challenged the traditional definitions of man and woman, and all the social roles assigned to the respective genders. Many dimensions of society traditionally taken uncritically as given and as fact have come in for serious examination in post-modern thought in its relentless challenge of various kinds of essentialism. Much that was once taken as objective fact has come to be seen as subjective perception, fantasy and wishful thinking. What Ruth found particularly exciting about

Buddhist tradition is that it has also challenged all these definitions, often in ways that anticipated the ways they have been challenged in post-modern thought. Most exciting of all to Ruth was the Buddhist way of dismantling the very idea of self or personal identity, and all the notions related to personal identity, such as gender, ethnic affiliation and nation.

More important to Ruth than the apparent compatibility between traditional Buddhism and Western post-modernism is the Buddhist emphasis on the interconnectedness of all beings, the way in which all beings so influence one another that the boundaries between self and other ultimately break down. This recognition of interrelatedness, combined with the observation that no one has mastery over anything, and that nothing can ever be owned by anyone else, observed Ruth, gives Buddhism an edge over most other traditional religions and philosophies in being of some use to people interested in reversing some of the damage being done to the environment. Yet even this edge would not be significant were it not for the fact that Buddhism also offers specific meditative exercises that help people actually experience their interconnectedness with others. In an essay written for this course, Ruth wrote:

Buddhism is particularly attractive because not only is it in keeping with contemporary belief but also offers solutions, or at least gives practice to theory. Meditation, Buddhist practice, has potential to cultivate mindfulness. This mindfulness goes beyond an intellectual understanding that the earth must be cared for. Rather, it is a full-bodied awareness of the rising and passing away of everything, by extension conditionality and impermanence. Thus, there is awareness that [to quote Morny Joy] ‘we are, quite literally, part of each other’ and of one’s own ability to inflict suffering.

Ruth acknowledges that she has spent far too much of her life consumed in rage. She has felt enraged by the worldwide devastation of the environment. She has felt enraged by political turmoil. She has felt angry with Judaism as she has experienced it so far, because it seems to offer her little more than the opportunity to serve men. Because she is Jewish, she has felt particularly enraged and disappointed by much of what she has read about Israel and experienced in Israel during her travels. Having witnessed the futility of constantly being preoccupied with external enemies, she finds herself drawn to the Buddhist advice to spend one’s greatest efforts in eliminating the internal enemies of greed, hatred and delusion. She cites a passage from Rodger Kamenetz’s book, *The Jew in the Lotus*, in which Zalman Schachter is quoted. Kamenetz quotes Schachter as saying the following:

“Shlomo Carlebach said something that deserves attention. He quotes a Hasidic master, Rabbi Mordecai Joseph, the Izhbitzer Rebbe,

who asks: ‘Why is it that a *kohen* isn’t supposed to go near a dead body?’ ” According to the law enunciated in Leviticus 21:1–3, 10–12, the *kohen* or Jewish priest, is forbidden to make contact with a corpse. Thus, a Jew today who knows he is a *kohen* cannot go to the cemetery except for the funeral of a close family member.

The Izhbitzer Rebbe, in his midrash, takes off from the text in Leviticus and uses it to find a spiritual message.

“So the short of it is,” Zalman explained, “when you see a corpse, you can’t help but be angry with God. ‘Why did He have to make it that way? That that’s the door you have to go through? It’s terrible.’ Now the *kohen* is supposed to be the gentle teacher of the people, so if he is angry with God, he’ll have a real bad time talking about God because what will show will be his anger”<sup>1</sup>

Kamenetz reports that Zalman Schachter then went on to say that Shlomo Carlebach extended this midrash of Rabbi Joseph, saying “Ever since the Holocaust we are all like priests who have been contaminated by death. It’s hard for people who are looking for a loving, living God to find him among the angry voices. They go to people who at this point don’t have any anger about God.” These people who have no anger towards God may be found in a variety of places, Ruth observes, but one favourite source of such people has been among Buddhists. She then adds:

I suggest pushing this story still further. In this age of globalization, when we in the West are made quite aware of human suffering everywhere because of technology, it is as if we are all priests at the graveside. Most Westerners have presumably seen hundreds of corpses on their TVs. Additionally, Vaclav Havel suggests that in the storm of scientific and technological advancement, people have become alienated from themselves. . . . This alienation from a conceived self, like an alienation from God on the sight of death, spurs anger.

Because of her experience with this gnawing and largely impersonal anger, Ruth was particularly grateful for being introduced to the traditional Buddhist meditation exercise known as *mettā-bhāvanā*, the cultivation of friendship. In this exercise, with which our retreat began every day, everyone spent about fifty minutes in a guided meditation in which feelings of friendship were extended outwards for oneself, to loved ones, to strangers and finally to enemies in the human realm, and then outwards to all living beings in this world and in any world where there may be life. In just a week she began to see that this exercise, when done daily, can help bring about changes in one’s perceptions.

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<sup>1</sup>Kamenetz (1994, pp. 156–157).

Ruth, like Sara, seems unlikely to me to be a candidate ripe for formal conversion to Buddhism. Although much more angry with Judaism than Sara, Ruth's anger is a very Jewish anger, and it is one that she says she is determined to work with in a creative way. She is more interested in finding a viable way of being Jewish than in giving up altogether and finding another religion. Given her continuing commitment to Buddhist meditation, however, I expect that for some time to come her night-stand will have Buddhist books alongside the writings of Judith Butler, Virginia Woolf and Marica Falk. It would not surprise me if her Buddhist books included many written by such Jewish Buddhist celebrities as the late Nyanaponika Thera, as well as the quick Jack Kornfield, Mark Epstein, Joseph Goldstein, or Sylvia Boorstein.

Be that as it may, let me offer my reaction to some of the points made by Sara and Ruth. Let me do that by responding to some of the ways in which Sara said that she felt assaulted and challenged by her experiences with Buddhist contemplative theory and practice.

### **4.3 The assault on reason**

The first of the ways in which Sara reported that she felt assaulted was in what she perceived as a relentless attack on reason, even on truth itself. It is not at all difficult to see how she got this impression, since the first six lectures had been devoted to a theme that is very commonly found in Buddhist texts. In my opening lectures I began with quotations in which the Buddha says that all disputes, ranging from small quarrels to wars among nations, are ultimately connected to the overconfidence people are prone to have in their own systems of belief and their own systems of values. People take their own experiences in life to be normative for all of humanity. People take their own beliefs to be knowledge, and by extension they take whatever disagrees with their beliefs to be falsehood. People often believe that their own beliefs have come down to them not from their own thinking or from the thinking of their ancestors, but from a superhuman source, such as God. Because people are overconfident in their own beliefs, they invite disappointment upon themselves and inflict hardships on those who disagree with them.

As an antidote to the hardships that people undergo in the name of truth, the Buddha frequently pointed out the limitations on our understanding. No one, no matter how learned and experienced, he says, can go through life without being challenged. Every authority on every topic, from the most trivial to matters of the greatest importance, is challenged by someone who claims to have even more authority. When authoritative experts disagree, then we are thrown back on our own resources. But our own resources are pathetically inadequate, for our experi-

ences are so limited. Therefore, if we are to be fully honest and realistic, we must begin by acknowledging how vast our ignorance is. We know nothing of the universe as a whole. We can only guess how big it is, how old it is, how long it will be here. But never mind the world as a whole; even of ourselves, of our own minds, we understand very little. And if we are honest, we will see that no matter what we do, this condition is unlikely to change except in the most minor ways. The only thing of which we can be certain is that it is very likely that most of life will come as a surprise and a mystery to us. And therefore, the only thing that one can do to avoid great disappointment and dissatisfaction with life, is to learn to accept surprises. This in a nutshell, is the Buddha's strategy.

This theme of our radical uncertainty, our sheer vulnerability, our constant precariousness, is one that Buddhist authors seem to take an almost perverse delight in describing again and again. The Buddha was, to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, not an evangelist, a bringer of good news, but an dysangelist, a bringer of dismal news and bad tidings. This, in any event, is how it seems if one only reads as far as the first and the second of the Four Noble Truths. If one is not going to read a Buddhist text to the end, the part where the good news finally comes, it is probably better not to begin reading at all. One of my favourite Buddhist texts begins with the words:

Call forth as much as you can of love, or respect and of faith!  
Remove the obstructing defilements, and clear away all your taints!  
Listen to the Perfect Wisdom of the gentle Buddhas,  
Taught for the weal of the world, for heroic spirits intended!<sup>2</sup>

The Buddhas may be gentle, suggests this text, and their wisdom may be for the welfare of the world, but it requires a heroic spirit to hear them out. The text then goes on to assure the reader that there is no wisdom to be gained anywhere, nor is there any such thing as awakening to truth and being liberated from delusion, and if one is strong enough to face this daunting news, then one is ready to undertake the practice of Buddhism, a practice that enables one to stride confidently through this vast cosmos, knowing that no part of it is home and no part of it offers even a moment's security.

Sara's reactions to the Buddhist texts were probably just about exactly what the authors of the texts were hoping to achieve. The texts are meant to be challenging; they are designed to strip us of all defenses so that we are forced to re-examine every aspect of experience all over again, from the ground up—except that there is no ground, and it is not always clear which way is up.

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<sup>2</sup>Conze (1973, p. 9).

## 4.4 The challenge of sitting still

Sara's discomfort with the materials she was confronted with was accompanied by a physical discomfort associated with the practice of sitting meditation for about an hour at a time several times a day. She reported feeling restless and uncomfortable in her body. She was somewhat reassured to learn that almost everyone feels this way at the beginning and that even seasoned meditators sometimes go through periods of discomfort, restlessness and uneasiness. One eventually learns not to be deceived by how serene a Buddhist meditator looks from the outside. It is difficult to sit still for a long period of time, and it is very difficult to focus the mind on a single thing for long, because the mind's nature is to be restless and curious and active. When it is not given something to do, it makes up work of its own. A great deal of what meditation is all about is watching the mind think up crazy things for itself to do. Once one witnesses that process up close, one begins to see that the mind is always thinking up crazy things to do, even when we give it plenty of work. Much of what we experience is the result of this wild work the mind gives itself to do. Part of the purpose of meditation is to become more aware of that and to take it into consideration. In other words, the act of sitting in meditation provides on an experiential level more of what the texts provide at the theoretical level. There is a gradual erosion of over-confidence, until our level of confidence is in proportions commensurate with the ability of the universe to meet all of our expectations.

Years ago, a Toronto television station came around to interview Samu Sunim, the Zen master of the Zen Buddhist Temple to which I then belonged. The woman asked Sunim why Buddhists usually sit cross-legged on the floor rather than in chairs. Sunim replied "Because sitting on the floor is uncomfortable." The Buddha used to say that most conflicts among human beings can ultimately be traced to differences in doctrine. Once when he was asked where doctrines come from, the Buddha replied that they ultimately stem from feelings of comfort and discomfort. People accept those doctrines that make them feel good, and they feel hostile to doctrines that make them feel bad. So if one really wishes to overcome the attachment to doctrines, one should learn to overcome the habit of insisting on feeling comfortable. Learning to sit through discomfort without resisting it eventually results in learning to tolerate other doctrines without resisting them. Similarly, learning to experience pleasure without clinging to it enables one to develop the habit of enjoying pleasure while it lasts. It may even enable one to learn to find pleasure even in things that once seemed uncomfortable.

Once all this was explained to Sara, she did not feel much better, but at least she felt better about the fact that she was not feeling better. And I am happy to report that she came to me after the very next meditation period and told me that it had become a very positive experience for her, even though she still found it difficult

to sit still. She remained in high spirits for the rest of the course and has continued practising meditation all summer. She has also reported taking a renewed interest in Judaism.

#### **4.5 The challenge of universal friendship**

The third challenge for Sara was the traditional Buddhist exercise of *mettā-bhāvanā*. It is interesting that this exercise, which is difficult for almost everyone either at the beginning or later on, was experienced so differently by Sara and by Ruth. Ruth saw it as a welcome way out of her anger, a way to remain aware of injustices and inequities while at the same time realising that in an imperfect world the distinction between oppressor and oppressed, is not entirely clear cut. Everyone, whether victim or victimiser, is hurting in some way, and therefore everyone is to be included in one's wishes that all beings be relieved of their pains and afflictions. For Sara, on the other hand, the invitation to love the enemy, and to wish the aggressor to be free of the afflictions that lead to aggression, felt too much like letting the wicked get away with their wickedness. She admitted to me that she really did not mind seeing people suffer if she felt they really deserved it. She really did not like the idea of forgetting about the whole question of whether pain is justly deserved by anyone. The Buddhist suggestion that one just focus on pain and wish that it be alleviated, regardless whose pain it is, simply did not make any sense to Sara. Even after talking this issue through, she said that she would rather agree to disagree with Buddhism on this issue. I told her that was fine. She could be excused from the *mettā-bhāvanā* practices if she found them counterproductive. Knowing that she had the freedom not to come, she came to the rest of them anyway.

#### **4.6 The challenge of idolatry**

Sara's discomfort with Buddhist rituals was an issue about which I have heard a number of Western people express similar sentiments. In the post-Protestant secularism of my own childhood household, all rituals were equally suspect; everything from a religious person's genuflection to a patriot's singing the national anthem was seen as an abridgment of human rationality and a habit that could lead only to a diminished capacity to face reality squarely. In an atheistic household, the taboo against idolatry had nothing to do with being disobedient to God. It had more to do with being stupid. Only some kind of idiot would bow before a statue. So, although the reasoning was somewhat different, the conclusion that Sara drew about the value of offering incense and flowers to an image of the Buddha brought

back a few childhood memories of parental diatribes. At the same time, it has been so long since I have felt any uneasiness about Buddhist rituals that I found it somewhat difficult to understand the depth of Sara's aversion to them. After all, on the very first day of the course and on every day afterwards I had made the point that no student taking the course should participate in any activity that made her feel uneasy or in any way compromised. On the third day of the course, everyone was invited to observe a Buddhist *pūjā*, and once again I made it clear that people could participate if they wished, but it was perfectly acceptable to watch. On that occasion, only the Buddhists ended up participating, so five people did a religious service while fifteen people watched. Incidentally, one of the Buddhists who participated was a Jewish student who has formally converted to Buddhism and has practised it for about four years but while still considers himself to be an observant Jew.

It did not surprise me in the least when Sara said she could not bring herself to participate in the Buddhist *pūjā*. What took me somewhat by surprise was Sara's report that even watching others do the ritual made her feel somewhat challenged, because it bothered her to see people whom she had come to respect doing something that she felt in the marrow of her bones was so wrong. What took me even more off-guard was her admission that, despite her uneasiness, she saw a real beauty in the ceremony and felt certain that it was an integral part of everything else the Buddhists were doing. Somehow, she said, she had a feeling that part of what made the Buddhists so pleasant to be around was the very fact that they could do these rituals. No sooner did Sara admit that she felt these rituals were part of the training that made Buddhists people whom she could admire, than she added that it made her feel very guilty to see anything positive in the rituals. At this point she began giggling and explained to me that feeling guilty was the principal practice of a Jew. "Buddhists," she said, "cultivate friendship. That's your practice. Jews cultivate guilt. That's ours."

There was something about Sara's struggle to come to terms with this whole issue that I found profoundly moving. I felt sheepish (but not guilty!) about the fact that I had not been more sensitive about this matter beforehand. Perhaps I had been lulled into complacency by the fact that I have practised Buddhism for decades in the company of Jews who had no problem at all offering flowers, burning incense and prostrating to images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. I did recall several conversations with Jewish Buddhists who told me that this had been the single biggest obstacle for them to overcome. Even secular Jews who said they were atheists and had never really participated in any Jewish rituals after the bar mitzvah ceremony confessed that they were overcome with uneasy feelings at the prospect of bowing to an image in the likeness of a human being. Everyone who had ever talked to me about it, though, had said that they found it liberating to work with their uneasiness,

because it forced them to take a hard and critical look at their own mentality.

It so happened that the final evening of this course on Buddhist meditation fell on the night of the full moon in May, the night during which Buddhists celebrate Wesak, the Buddha's birthday. The tradition of the Buddhist community to which the retreat centre belonged where we were doing the course has a custom of having a special *pūjā* on Wesak, which includes a repentance ceremony. After talking matters over with the other members of the team who were helping me give this retreat, we decided to go ahead and conduct the usual ceremonies but to make it very clear that no one had to participate or even to attend it if they would rather not. When the night of the ceremony came, I noticed that everyone was there. So I gave a short talk about the significance of the Buddha's life to us Buddhists. And I finished by saying that as I get older, I find myself feeling increasingly grateful for the practices that have helped me become more contented with myself. To me the image of a Buddha is concrete reminder that somebody or other, perhaps many people, discovered these practices, and I have benefited by them, or at least I think I have. Because I have benefited and would very much like to be able to thank the people who first thought of these practices but cannot do so directly, I find it helpful to express my gratitude symbolically. This is how Buddhist rituals were explained to me by my former Zen master, and it is how I have heard numerous other Buddhist teachers explain them, and it makes sense to me. After giving that short explanation, I began conducting the ceremony. To my amazement, the shrine room was suddenly filled with the sound of voices as everyone there joined in the chanting. As the ritual progressed, every person on the retreat eventually came forward and made an offering of incense, including Sara. I could not help wondering how much guilt she might be feeling, but somehow I had a great confidence that she would handle it with the same remarkable maturity and self-awareness with which she had handled everything else.

#### **4.7 The assault on ethnicity**

The fifth source of difficulty for Sara was her nagging feeling that Buddhist doctrine really does not condone feelings of ethnic solidarity, and therefore it is ultimately not acceptable for a Buddhist to identify herself as Jewish. I was very impressed with Sara's powers of perception. She had never taken a course in Buddhism, had never read anything about Buddhism and had hardly known any Buddhists before coming on this summer course that was, in effect, a Buddhist meditation retreat. Everything was new to her, and her senses were wide open. Like a newborn infant, she was taking in everything around it and trying to make sense of it. It was interesting to me that she had hit upon this issue, which I think

could very well be the greatest single stumbling block that many people—not only Jews—face in appropriating Buddhist attitudes and practices.

Buddhist attitudes towards ethnicity are complex. At the risk of oversimplification, it could be said that the fundamental attitude that seems to be expressed in the teachings of the Buddha is that there are no natural or essential divisions among human beings. It is true that people think that certain kinds of divisions are natural, that is, that we acquire them at birth and retain them until death. Among these divisions, the ones that most concerned the Buddha were those features of Indian society that are today called caste. One of the Sanskrit words commonly translated as “caste” is “*jāti*,” which, like the Latin word *natura*, literally means birth. In the society with which the Buddha was most familiar, a person was born into the classes of priests, or the class of warriors, or the class of merchants, or the class of labourers. Moreover, there was a natural hierarchy among these classes, so that one’s social status was fixed by birth. It was considered part of one’s nature. Tied to this nature there were various obligations and rights. Each class had its own natural duties and attendant privileges. The most prestigious classes were those with the most privileges and duties.

One of the teachings for which the Buddha was most famous was his insistence that all of these divisions that people take as natural are in fact the artifices of the human imagination. In reality, he said, there are no natural classes within the human race. This means that no one is naturally higher on the social scale than anyone else. What makes one person more praiseworthy than another is nothing to do with the conditions into which the two people were born; rather, it is to do with how the people behave during their lives. People who help others and treat them as they wish to be treated are respected. People who are abusive are feared and despised. So if one wishes to be respected by others, the best strategy is to place all of one’s energy into cultivating feelings of kindness and love towards everyone, without exception. Typical of this attitude are the following verses, attributed to the Buddha:

In the same way that a mother would risk her own life to protect her only child, one should cultivate loving thoughts towards all living beings.

Let one’s thoughts of unrestricted love embrace the whole world, above, below and across without any obstructions, without any hatred or enmity.

Whether one is standing, walking, sitting or lying down, every moment that one is awake one should cultivate this feeling. Than this

there is nothing more noble in this world.<sup>3</sup>

In commenting on this text, it is common for commentators to interpret “unrestricted love” to mean love that is not confined to one’s own family, friends, clan and social group. Conversely, a particular regard for one’s kith and kin and fellow caste members is seen as an obstacle to true nobility. Later Indian scholastics took this whole discussion a step further by arguing that the very idea of any natural division (*jāti*) among human beings was a delusion and *ipso facto* a cause of suffering and affliction for oneself and for others. As Buddhism moved outside India, into societies that did not have systems of caste, interpreters applied these same arguments to other divisions among people that are commonly regarded as natural. For this reason, one can find in Buddhist texts a robust discourse against the very ideas of race, ethnicity and even gender as categories of the natural world. Rather, they are all portrayed as examples of the human mind gone slightly mad. To heal the mind, to make it a vessel capable of containing happiness and joy, is, according to Buddhist texts, to learn to stop building one’s life on the shaky foundation of such ideas as ethnicity and gender.

When Ruth perceived in Buddhism a congruence with the post-modern attacks on essentialist views of ethnicity and gender, she was seeing this Buddhist discourse on the ultimate invalidity of categories popularly deemed as natural. To her this was a positive aspect of Buddhism. Sara, seeing exactly this same aspect of the Buddhist tradition, perceived it as a threat to her Jewishness, even as an assault on her sense of religious legitimacy.

#### **4.8 Jewish mother, Buddhist son**

What, if anything, can we conclude from the reactions to Buddhism of these two Canadian Jewish women, aged twenty-two? They are, after all, only two people, and I have no idea how representative their reactions are even of themselves as individuals, let alone of other people. I am not a sociologist, and these two case studies are not meant to be grist for any sociologist’s mill. Having said that, I suspect that there are elements of their conversations with me that reflect issues considerably broader than their own personal temperaments. In fact, I know from having spoken to dozens of Jewish enthusiasts of Buddhism over the years that both Sara and Ruth, as different as their reactions were, were each saying things that I had heard many times before. Rather than summarising those things, however, I would like to close by offering a few words of reassurance to any of you who may be concerned by the strong interest that so many Jewish people seem to be showing

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<sup>3</sup>Sutta-nipāta 149–151. For an alternative translation see Saddhatissa (1985, p. 16).

in Buddhism. I have heard from numerous sources that this is a source of worry to some people. As Rodger Kamenetz quips in *The Jew in the Lotus*, it is every Jewish mother's worse nightmare that she will open the door one day and find her son standing there with a shaved head and orange robes. This, he says, she will take as a sure sign that she has utterly failed as a mother. She may even turn it into an opportunity to feel guilty.

It would be dishonest to say that there is no risk at all that this nightmare may come true for some people. After all, Mrs. Kornfield's boy, Jack, found himself in orange robes for a few years. And Rodger Kamenetz encountered several Jewish Buddhist monks and nuns in monasteries in India. Nightmares, like dreams, do sometimes come true. I will say more about that in a moment. In the vast majority of cases, however, Westerners who take an interest in Buddhism are content to remain night-stand Buddhists. That is, they never formally convert to Buddhism at all, let alone take ordination as monks or nuns. Buddhists are not at a rule interested in winning converts to Buddhism. They tend to be far more interested in doing what they can to help people come to terms with whatever afflictions they have, and helping people find peace and happiness and meaning on their own terms, within the frameworks of their own social conditioning. This has been the pattern historically in most Asian countries, and it continues to be the pattern today in the West. If one enquires at any Buddhist centre about numbers, one is likely to find that over the course of a decade, perhaps a few thousand people will come around for workshops or meditation classes. Of those, perhaps a hundred will continue coming by regularly after they have found what they wanted. Of those, ten or twenty will convert to Buddhism. So the odds are very much against even someone with a keen interest in Buddhism actually becoming a Buddhist.

Even among those who do become Buddhists, however, a very small percentage will be pressured by other Buddhists to abandon their former family values. Some people will feel such pressure from within, of course, but if they go to seek a Buddhist teacher for counsel, they are most likely to be told to work with their feelings and to come to a better understanding of their psychological conditioning, whatever it may be. Most Buddhists, I think, would agree with the Dalai Lama's advice to Westerners that they stay with their childhood religions, rather than trying to adopt an exotic religion such as Buddhism. Or they would agree with Geshe Wang-gyal's characterization of Buddhism as a vast medicine cabinet that has some remedy for every ill. Anyone who needs a remedy is welcome to come and take what they need and leave the rest. All that any Buddhist would ask of them is that they leave the medicine cabinet intact for others who may come along in search of a cure for what ails them.

Even though the odds are very much against any Jewish mother having to endure the heartbreak of a son or daughter coming home with a bald head and

orange or red robes, it does happen. Even when that does happen, however, it is rarely the disaster that one might imagine it could be. Let me end by relating an anecdote about a Jewish woman to whom this did happen. Her son actually became a Buddhist monk. This woman came to see me in the mid-1980s. She was attending an academic conference in Toronto and somehow it came about that she wished to speak to an academic specialist in Buddhism, just to reassure herself that Buddhism is really nothing to worry about. I agreed to meet with her and followed my usual policy of letting her do almost all the talking.

The woman told me that her son had become a Buddhist monk several years ago. In the early days of his career as a monk, his devotion was so intense that she thought he had joined a cult and been brainwashed or something. She really didn't know what to think exactly, but she was terribly concerned. Her son had become a monk in a community affiliated with a Tibetan sect known as Karma Kagyu. The leader of this sect is known as the Karma-pa. At that time, the leader was the 16th Karma-pa, and he was coming to Chicago, where this woman and her son lived. Her son the monk was very eager for her to see the Karma-pa give teachings. Now it so happened that several other important lamas had been to the same venue, and they had sat on high stages. Since the Karma-pa was more important than the other lamas who had been there before him, the stage for him had to be even higher. The stage was built so high that there was barely room for him to fit between the throne and the ceiling. He was performing a ceremony that required him to put on a large black hat, the symbol of his authority. It is a very dramatic moment that represents the culmination of this sacred ritual. When it came time for him to place the black hat on his head, however, the Karma-pa discovered that his throne was much too high and the ceiling much too low. When he tried to put his hat on, it bumped the ceiling and fell unceremoniously to the floor. Some people gasped, with shocked horror. The Karma-pa, however, roared with laughter and then sat there giggling like a little boy, most amused to see the somber ceremony take such a ridiculous turn. On seeing the Karma-pa laugh in this way, the mother could not help laughing, and then she turned and saw her son, who was also giggling. "When I saw my son laughing like that, just the way he did when he was a child," said the mother "I knew everything was all right. He was still my son. And he still had a wonderful sense of absurdity and slapstick comedy. What mother could wish for more than that?"

Let me end with a very short traditional Buddhist blessing: *sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*—"May all living beings have contented hearts." And let me add to that: May all living beings have gurus who know when to giggle and mothers who know how to understand.

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