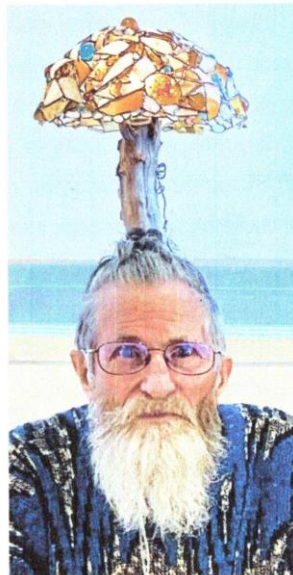


DOES THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING STILL HAVE RELEVANCE?

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We seek to live meaningful lives. For many of us, modern life is unbearably bleak. If a person is living in a war-torn country, life might be like a hell-realm. If a person is poor or addicted to drugs, their life might be compared to the existence of a hungry ghost. Those of us who are better off are caught up in the time-consuming activities of work and family, and there remains a gap between our aspirations and our lived reality.

Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, told me, “The buddhas of the past attained liberation through the practice of meditation; the buddhas of the present attain liberation through meditation; and the buddhas of the future will attain liberation through meditation.” According to Harvard University research, “Although the practices of mindfulness and meditation are thousands of years old, research on their health benefits is relatively new, but promising.” (<https://www.harvard.edu/in-focus/mindfulness-meditation/>).

Some equate 10,000 hours of meditation to “a PhD in happiness.” (<https://liveanddare.com/how-meditation-changed-my-life/>). Can the Buddha's teaching still have relevance today? Yes, enlightenment is a worthy goal. Are there downsides? Yes, several. I only have space here to address a few. Are we appropriating another culture's spiritual tradition (which attempts to deconstruct the concept of a “self”) to enable a person in our culture to maintain a stressful, egocentric lifestyle? Can the Buddhist path become overly dogmatic and

possibly lead us away from a fruitful expression of ourselves? Also, who has time for 10,000 hours of meditation?

Cultural appropriation. Some people adopt Buddhist practices without fully understanding the cultural context of those practices. In choosing a spiritual path outside of the religious framework I was raised in, I risked ostracism from my family and my peers. I was baptized a Presbyterian within the Protestant faith, and my parents were also members of the Masonic framework (Free and Accepted Masons and Eastern Star). Although the fellowship of Masons accepts the validity of all religions, there is a belief in God, and Protestants believe in the Ten Commandments, the first of which is: “You Shall Have No Other Gods!” The central figure in Buddhism is Gautama Buddha (500 BCE). His teachings are recorded in *The Dhammapada*. Although Buddhists do not consider Buddha to be a God, he appears to many to be ameliorated to that extent. As a Buddhist I can in good faith be a Christian, but as a Christian, I can’t be a Buddhist.

Trained in the western philosophical tradition, I can entertain diverse, contradictory concepts in my mind, but when a mid-life crisis confronted me, a series of (what I believe to be) auspicious occurrences led me to take up the path of Dzogchen (or “Great Perfection” yoga) which is a tradition of teachings in Tibetan Buddhism. Dzogchen is regarded as a direct path to attain the state of *enlightenment* (perfection of insight) in one lifetime. To accomplish this feat, one must, as they say, “put the pedal to the metal.”

Lama Tsultrim Allione, author of *Women of Wisdom*, a book that pushes against the idea that only men attain high levels of realization, gave me the refuge name of Jampa Dorje, which means Indestructible Loving-kindness. She is an American woman. one of the first women to be ordained a Tibetan nun, who had a vision of establishing a center for people to accomplish a traditional three-year, solitary retreat in a mountain wilderness and to create a living environment that incorporated Tibetan practices taught by Tibetan meditation masters. After studying with many Tibetan Lamas spanning a period of thirty years and completing a traditional Tibetan Three-year Retreat at Tara Mandala Retreat Center in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, between 2009 and 2013 (approximately 10,000 hours of meditation), I lived with a Tibetan Lama and his family within a community of Tibetans in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In this manner, I immersed myself in Tibetan practice without having to journey to Tibet.

Activism. Buddhists, as a group, are accused of not taking stands on social and political

issues. While living in Santa Fe, on two occasions, I joined the local Tibetans on Tibet Day marches from their Community Center to the Town Plaza, carrying signs reading “Free Tibet” and “Save Tibet from Burning.” The Free Tibet sign references the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and the Save Tibet from Burning sign references the self-immolation of Tibetan monks who protest the conditions of Tibetans living under Chinese rule. Regarding environmentalism, I was asked to consult with Adzom Paylo Rinpoche about his reforestation project in the Tibetan Province of Kham because I have experience as a tree planter. These are examples of engaged Buddhism.

Dogmatism. While Buddhism emphasizes the importance investigating one’s own beliefs, there is also a possibility of a Buddhist community becoming rigid in the way the teachings are applied. This can lead to a rejection of perfectly good ideas from other cultures. I was attracted to Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism because of the sensual richness of its practices, the colors of the costumes, the sounds of the mantras and ritual musical instruments, the smell of incense, the feel of meditative bliss-emptiness—all encapsulated in *one taste*. Intellectually, I was enticed by the magic and mystery of this religious culture that had been hidden in the snowy climes at the top of the world, a mythical place with a unique history, existing without anyone knowing much about it until the twentieth century.

I practice the art of poetry. I have dabbled in occult philosophy. I have a weakness for exotic ideas. Wandering through the streets of Berkeley in 1960, I saw Tibetan ritual implements in a curio shop, a thigh-bone trumpet, a skull cup, a statue of a wrathful deity, a copy of the *Bardo Thodol* (the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*), and I was informed that China had invaded Tibet, and refugees were arriving in the United States. My interest was piqued. At a gathering of theosophists, I heard a reading from *100,000 Songs of Milarepa*. Jetsun Milarepa (12th c.) is considered Tibet’s greatest yogin and poet. He was a murderer who changed his ways and became an enlightened being. He is the inspiration on my spiritual quest.

My mind was open to new ideas. I read many books about Tibetan yoga, but I did not practice meditation in a systematic way until I met Sogyal Rinpoche (author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*), in 1989, and attended a Dzogchen Retreat in Oakland, California. To perform Vajrayana Buddhist practices requires utilizing mantra recitation, creative visualization, and yogic breathing techniques that lead to a psychological paradigm shift in one’s understanding of the cosmological structure of the universe, as well as one’s understanding of

the self in relation to that universe. I let myself be seduced.

Even a pure land with a retreat center is a *mini-samsara* (the transient world we live in on a small scale). My practices and studies of Tibetan Buddhism included self-doubt, skepticism, and critical analysis in tandem with the rigors of meditation, but at a certain point, I had a karmic break where “demons” found a way to violate my mental temple. A gold-plated statue was stolen, and a nun was accused of allowing the thieves to accomplish the theft because she had not done a protectors’ practice correctly. I was fully aware that Tibetans take their demonology very seriously and that practices are designed to prevent harmful influences and obstacles, but I did not expect westerners with a high degree of empirical knowledge to be completely superstitious and fall prey to Buddhist fundamentalism. I was shocked by this realization, and I decided to return to the world of Facebook and cellphones and find ballast for the wobbling vehicle taking me to the far shore.

I try to believe what is believable and not believe what is unbelievable, but to really know what I know and how I know it, it behooved me to move beyond my original belief system and take up a new belief system to, finally, find the Buddha’s middle way.

Detachment. It is supposed that if a person loses their self they become overly detached from life. I suppose this can be so, especially if one practices asceticism, but now, at 82, having returned from long retreat, I don’t feel disengaged from my life. I have lived a life full of romance, mystery, and adventure. The other night at a Good Life presentation at the Hal Holmes Center, I met Bruce Simpson who is a CWU Employer Outreach Liaison, and he and I agreed that what we called our “essential core” had not changed. There have been times of disruption in our lives, and occasionally we had to “re-invent” ourselves, but somehow, we are still the same beings we were when we were young. I admit I have deconstructed myself into five personas based on the Tibetan Dakini mandala principle, and I have peeled the layers away, like the layers of an onion, and found no essence to the self, but still I remain in my ontological guise, humbled, diminished in health, but strong in spirit, a radical eudaemonist resting in radiant splendor.

ADDENDUM:

The following reflections are an excerpt from my chapbook, *70,000 Fathoms of Bliss* (Kapala Press, Ellensburg, 2018).

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, ruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.

—Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Gay Science*)

“God is dead. . .”

I have a nit to pick with Nietzsche. Nietzsche realized that the context for a God-centered society had shifted, but to make his point he alludes to a 6th century BCE, buddha (Buddha Gautama) as being a god. Buddhas come and go. There were buddhas before Buddha Gautama, buddhas after him, and there will be buddhas in the future. Buddha Gautama is revered because he taught the dharma, an epistemological and methodological approach to a “a state of consciousness,” known as Buddhahood. Even though Buddha Gautama disavowed being a god, as Buddhism evolved into a religion, some sects worshipped The Buddha as an omniscient divinity; however, it would be more accurate to consider Buddhism as a form of psychology, or a spiritual philosophy, since it discards the notion of an Absolute Creator God, or Judge. In this absence, Buddhism differs from other religions.

As I have been taught by my lamas, Buddhism puts its emphasis upon a personal path of ethical precepts, the use of various meditational techniques, and, ultimately, the contemplation of the nature of mind (one’s buddha nature). The path, known as the middle way, tries to avoid all dualistic traps. Buddha Gautama articulated the path; his disciples got the message and passed it on. There is the path of the yogi, the monastic path, and the path of the householder. Buddha Gautama lived as a prince, as a skin-and-bones ascetic, and as a knight errant, or mendicant.

Nietzsche wants us to vanquish the gruesome shadow of Buddhism, but what I feel he is really railing against is asceticism and passivity, the life-denying direction some take to escape the world. Buddhism seems like a life-denying approach to our human condition by initially revealing that sentient beings suffer; however, there is a corollary truth that much of this suffering, this angst, can be eliminated. The Buddha directs us towards ourselves, in the here and now, as the locus for our investigations. We are not the result of a creator god; we are not a creation of randomly colliding atoms; we are embodied minds. No God, therefore no sin, therefore no pangs of guilt;—this aspect of Buddhism piqued Nietzsche’s interest, but he blurs the distinction between The Buddha and God.

“ . . . his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow.”

The transmissions of The Buddha’s doctrine could be construed as flickering shadows of a belief system, handed down through tradition. I am, also, reminded of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, where the people in the cave believe the shadows of objects they see are the true reality. Or, the shadows might be my own present state of neurological happenstance, forcing these semiotic fragments into intelligible form. What Nietzsche is getting at is that we are a gullible herd and easy prey to a plethora of ever-evolving scams, whether it’s religious mumbo jumbo or pesky advertisements in the virtual domain. Indeed, it seems that we unconsciously do it to ourselves to fool ourselves out of believing that the universe is meaningless. As P.T. Barnum succinctly put it, “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

