

## **How Contemporary Buddhist Practice Meets the Secular World in Its Search for a Deeper Grounding for Service and Social Action**

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Many people today who are deeply concerned about the world's suffering inhabit a secularized worldview in which it is assumed that religious understandings of salvation or spiritual liberation are irrelevant to the material needs and ways of thinking prevalent in our time. Such people, of course, do not see religious disciplines as a resource to help them respond to the suffering. And although moral teachings of mainstream Western religious traditions today continue to inspire their faithful to serve others in need, such traditions have largely lost touch with contemplative disciplines that were earlier maintained in monastic institutions. As many members of mainstream religions themselves report, the modern emphasis on service to others in their churches and synagogues can mask a lack of spiritual grounding necessary for such service to realize its fuller potential to empower, heal and liberate both those who serve others and those served by them.

Yet, even as the world has become increasingly secularized in its rejection or forgetting of religious resources, people also increasingly long for what religions (at their best) have provided: access to a primal power of goodness that transcends the world's limiting attitudes and structures of greed, apathy, and prejudice, that liberates people to discover a greater potential in themselves and others, and that empowers wise, compassionate and creative responsiveness to the world's needs. This yearning to rediscover our connection to the primal or unconditioned ground of our being, so as to live, act and serve others in a more deeply grounded way, takes expression in a host of modern desires that the materialism of the modern world does not address: the search for deep rest from the freneticism of modern life; the desire for a much deeper healing of body, mind and spirit than health-spas can provide; the wish to find a sustaining power of love for self and others in a hyper-competitive world; the desire for a renewed spirituality within or beyond mainstream religions; the urge to protect nature from the predations of our own consumerism; the desire to relieve suffering and establish lasting peace and justice in a world of increasing possessiveness, apathy and violence. Although many people today believe they have transcended religious ways of thinking, and indeed many blame religion as a major cause of the world's current problems, the same people often long for a deeper grounding for their lives and actions, the kind of grounding that was accessed in the past through the spiritual disciplines of religious traditions.

The longing for a more grounded source for living and serving also manifests in the pressing needs that are commonly voiced by people who work to address the sufferings of the world in all areas of social service: the need to find a place of deep inner rest and replenishment so as to heal from dynamics of burnout; the need for a more unconditional attitude to self and others that would sustain our service beyond "compassion fatigue" and empower others to see their potential for change; the need to become more fully present to those we serve to better discern and evoke their hidden strengths; the need for the wisdom, compassion and courage to challenge oppressive

structures without losing touch with the essential humanity of everyone involved. As Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Thich Nhat Hanh taught, to bring more goodness into the world, we need to be in touch with the deepest goodness of our selves and others. To help people find much more peace and wellbeing in their lives, we need to come from a place of deepest peace and wellbeing in ourselves. But such a grounded way of being and serving is not accomplished just by longing for it. Gandhi, King, Nhat Hanh immersed themselves in disciplines of spiritual traditions that put them in touch with the depth of their being, from which they could respond to others in the depth of their being—helping many others to see themselves as deeply worthy and capable of great good.

A big challenge of our time, then, is to find access to the primal power of goodness that comes from the ground of our being within a secularized world that largely rejects traditional religious ways of doing so. It is for this reason, I think, that people of varying backgrounds and diverse faiths now take increasing interest in spiritual disciplines of Buddhism. In a way, thousands of years of Asian Buddhist history have prepared Buddhism to meet the modern longings and needs noted above. Although the Buddha's teaching has been interpreted diversely in different Asian cultures, early systematization of the teaching in Abhidharma traditions (purportedly modeled on practices of the Buddha's early disciples) framed samsara and nirvana as a simple dualism. In these traditions, nirvana, an unconditioned (*asamskrta*) dimension of deepest freedom and peace, was said to be attained through the eight-fold path that liberates people from deluded emotions and karma that fuel samsara, freeing them from the round of birth and death. To become enlightened in this paradigm, then, involved putting a stop to one's participation in the conditioned world of suffering by a decisive realization of the unconditioned that frees beings from that world.

In early centuries BCE, diverse Mahayana Buddhist movements of India gave renewed attention to an alternative early paradigm that has taken on a new relevance for the world in our time: the bodhisattva path of the Buddhas. Drawing upon a variety of developments in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, ritual, and cosmology, early Mahayana movements conceptualized the bodhisattva path as a synergy of practices that liberated persons for enlightened participation *in* the world rather than a final release from the world. According to these traditions, all phenomena of life and experience are empty of separate, independent existence; lacking a reified, isolated mode of existence, since they arise only inter-dependently. Just as the impermanence of transitory things itself does not change, the empty nature of things (suchness), the basic space of reality that penetrates all things (*dharmadhatu*) is unconditioned, unchanging. To realize the empty, unconditioned nature of this world (the nirvanic nature of samsara, or Buddha nature) was to see deeply into the world's patterns of reification, karmic reaction, individual and social suffering, liberating the bodhisattva from such patterns while empowering her compassionately to respond to such patterns in others (skillful means). In other words, to realize the unconditioned, empty ground of being (*dharmadhatu*) was to be liberated into a power of unconditional love and compassion for the world. The bodhisattva in Asian cultures was said to draw on ritual and meditative disciplines to realize the unconditional compassion and creative energy of the empty ground of his being, both to impart ways of enlightenment to others and to direct the power of ritual and meditation to help meet deep-felt needs of Asian peoples: for protection, healing,

help in dying and rebirth, to avert epidemics, floods, famine, and pestilence, to promote harmony in society and the cosmos, to promote prosperity, to provide ethical systems for social stability and wellbeing, to support beneficial new kinds of learning in literature, poetry, medicine, philosophy and the arts. Since, within the bodhisattva paradigm, nirvana is found in the empty nature of all worldly phenomena, the bodhisattva was said to disclose beneficial powers of nirvana for living and dying by drawing on the full range of human experience and learning. In this sense, Buddhist traditions have been tutored for centuries by Asian societies in how to re-formulate teachings and practices so as to help people of diverse backgrounds and cultures gain access to creative powers for good that come from the very ground of their being.

Part of the meaning of skillful means in bodhisattva traditions, then, is the ability developed through spiritual disciplines to draw on the *unconditioned* (empty) ground of being for access to *unconditional* powers of love compassion, energy, and creativity—the very powers for service and action that so many people now seek in a secularized world that has forgotten how to access them.

During the past ten years I have been asked to teach meditation practices of compassion and wisdom from Tibetan Buddhism in adapted forms made newly accessible for people of diverse backgrounds and faiths. Besides offering such practices in Buddhist retreat settings, I have offered them in a variety of secular and inter-faith settings: for social workers, educators, therapists, healthcare givers, hospice volunteers, prison chaplains, community development workers, and social justice activists. These include people who work with at-risk families and youths, addicts, prisoners, secondary and college students, the mentally ill, the physically ill, the dying, and those who work to protect people who live in oppressive conditions and the natural world. Many of these people tell me they attend such retreats because they seek, through Buddhist practice, a way they can seriously consider, engage, and open to a deeper dimension of their being beyond the reactivity of everyone's egos, to find refuge in a more reliable and stable source of inspiration, inner peace, and power to serve others than their secular educations and socially conditioned habits of reaction have permitted.

Many who attend such retreats tell me that they have found the theistic religions in which they were brought up oppressive, that they have rejected religion, and that they are attracted to Buddhism, in part, for its lack of theistic dogmas. Many others who attend these retreats, in contrast, are devout Christians or Jews who seek from Buddhism rigorous contemplative disciplines of a sort unavailable in their churches and synagogues. Through such disciplines they hope to find an experiential encounter with the deepest reality of their being and world (understood by them as God) that would replenish their spirit, strengthen their motivation and empower greater discernment for serving others in need.

There is a renewed yearning in our time to find greater access to the depth of our being, to find within us a source of profound wisdom, loving connection and creative responsiveness. From my Buddhist perspective, this is a yearning to return to the empty ground of our experience (suchness) where all conditioned patterns of self-clinging thought and reaction are discovered to be already embraced in the primal energy of unconditional compassion, the energy of primordial Buddha nature. There, all such patterns can be deeply healed and self-released in the ground of our awareness, where a potential for deep inner freedom lies. This is the *unconditioned* (empty) ground of our

being that makes *unconditional* love and compassion for self and others possible. From this ground can emerge a purer vision of people that senses their intrinsic worthiness, great potential, and fundamental mystery, beyond all the reductive labels and ideologies of our societies. It is from this place that we can sense our underlying unity with others, commune with them in the original goodness of their being, listen deeply to them, respond creatively and wisely with reverence. But to find access to such depth requires immersion in disciplines that repeatedly turn our attention to the unconditioned ground of the depth of our being, to help us become increasingly transparent to its qualities.

Something analogous is posited in many world religions, which teach variously that there is, at the core of our being, an unconditioned ground that empowers us to respond in unconditionally ethical and creative ways to our suffering world. The word “God” in theistic traditions refers, in part, to the unconditioned ground of all creation (and thus all creativity), in light of which humans can find their deepest purpose as creatures in working for the benefit of all creation. Analogously, Buddhist traditions speak of unconditioned suchness, Buddha nature, dharmakaya as that which empowers us to realize our lives as finite expressions of an infinite reality of wisdom and compassion—fullest enlightenment. As a Buddhist teacher in frequent interaction with religious Christians and Jews involved in social service, as well as with committed atheists, it seems clear to me (as a Buddhist) that they are searching for the unconditioned ground of their being to empower a more unconditional attitude of love and responsiveness for themselves and others. For this reason, I believe, when Buddhist teachers find new ways to help people of diverse faiths and backgrounds open toward that ground, they are not merely introducing people to Buddhist ideas, but implicitly reintroducing them to the deepest source of compassionate and creative energy that their own spiritual and religious heritages have drawn upon. It is for this reason from my point of view, that when I share Tibetan methods for people to tap the innate potential of compassion and wisdom in the ground of their experience (their Buddha nature), people of diverse faiths frequently report that elements of their religious formation as Christians or Jews suddenly return to them—rediscovered in light of Buddhist practice as newly meaningful and life giving. This is not uncommon at all. I hear from many other Western and Asian teachers of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Pure Land and other Buddhist traditions that the same phenomenon of inter-religious revelation is a frequent occurrence in their teaching settings as well.

For example, after learning practices adapted from Tibet to find rest in the unconditional compassion of the mind’s ultimate ground, many Christians and Jews have told me they discover more of the meaning of their relationship to God and neighbor. One young Christian woman reported in her journal: “Today after meditating, I spontaneously wrote: ‘If you steer from fear, and cling to no thing, you’ll find freedom to give and joy to sing. You’ll know who you are, held from above; you’ll know the Truth that God Is...you’ll know God is Love.’” An older Catholic man told me of his long anger at a local Church official who had been accused of allowing child abuse to occur under his watch. After immersing in practices of compassion and primal awareness adapted from Tibet, he reported that, to his amazement, he found himself holding the same official and all others involved in the situation in an unconditional wish of compassion that had the power to challenge the official’s actions without any trace of hatred for him. After years of rage and blame, he felt as if he was being reintroduced,

through Buddhist methods, to the divine unity of love and justice of his Christian tradition! In another example, a Jewish scholar who had attended many retreats on Buddhist meditations of love and wisdom introduced these practices to Jewish groups in his area. He did so, he said, to further inform and empower Jewish commitment to “repairing the world,” and to help Jews experientially re-engage ancient teachings like Rabbi Akiba’s, which identified love for neighbor as “the greatest principle of the Torah.” He had been returned to resources of Jewish tradition with new eyes through Buddhist practice, he said, and was helping other interested Jews do the same.

In sum, although many people in our modern, secularized world have rejected religious ways of thinking, or have lost touch with spiritual resources previously available in their religious traditions, they search for a deeper grounding for living and serving which only spiritual disciplines can provide. When we adapt Buddhist teaching and practice for widening participation by people of diverse backgrounds and faiths, non-religious people have the chance they seek to explore more of their human potential for impartial compassion, profound discernment and creative responsiveness to the world’s needs. And devout people of non-Buddhist faiths can experientially rediscover, in light of their Buddhist practice, a life-giving potential and depth in their own traditions that was previously unavailable to them. When such people speak from a place of fresh awakening (through Buddhist practice) to elements of their non-Buddhist faiths, they point out to us, as Buddhists, ways that the creative, liberating potential of our own tradition (as in past centuries) is opening people’s hearts anew, transforming their lives and their world.