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*A Contemporary Guide  
to Awakening*

STEPHEN BATCHELOR

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## G R O U N D

*Do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or  
with legendary lore or with what has come down in  
scriptures or with conjecture or with logical inference or  
with weighing evidence or with liking for a view after  
pondering over it or with someone else's ability or with  
the thought "The monk is our teacher." When you  
know in yourselves: "These things are wholesome,  
blameless, commended by the wise, and being adopted  
and put into effect they lead to welfare and happiness,"  
then you should practice and abide in them. . . .*

—The Buddha

*Kalama Sutta*

## AWAKENING

*As long as my vision was not fully clear . . . regarding four ennobling truths, I did not claim to have realized authentic awakening. . . .*

—The Buddha

LET'S GO BACK to the beginning: to the awakening of Siddhartha Gautama, aka the Tathagata, Shakyamuni, the World Honored One—the Buddha himself. He was the one who set the wheel of dharma spinning in the first place. He was the one who pointed out the central path (the famous “Middle Way”). He was the trailblazer. His are the footprints we will find at the end of the track.

Let's start with the Buddha's first discourse, delivered to his five former ascetic companions in the Deer Park at Sarnath, near Benares. It was here, several weeks after the

awakening and his ensuing ambivalence about saying anything at all, that compassion moved him to embrace the anguish of others. Plunging into the treacherous sea of words, he "set in motion the wheel of the dharma."

This short discourse can be summed up as follows: The Buddha declares how he has found the central path through avoiding indulgence and mortification. He then describes four ennobling truths: those of anguish, its origins, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Anguish, he says, is to be understood, its origins to be let go of, its cessation to be realized, and the path to be cultivated. And this is precisely what he himself has done: he has understood anguish, let go of its origins, realized its cessation, and cultivated the path. Only through knowing these truths, knowing how to act upon them, and knowing that he has acted upon them can he claim to have found "authentic awakening."



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 upon in its own particular way* (understanding anguish, letting go of its origins, realizing its cessation, and cultivating the path) has been relegated to the margins of specialist doctrinal knowledge. Few Buddhists today are probably even aware of the distinction.

Yet in failing to see the truth that the four propositions of fact to which the Buddha refers are "Suffering"; the "origins"—and so on—comes a religious dogma of the four propositions that claim to be the Truth. Christians, Muslims, and others of proposition dogmas of the

The Buddha's shattering insight into the nature of him the mystic experience that of how the universe and more of a his awakening, awakening to freedom of he. He called such

THE BUDDHA's fusion. So should he initially as understand his unconscious was how the I well as everyone the questions metaphysical brought both and unanticipated

Yet in failing to make this distinction, four ennobling truths to be acted upon are neatly turned into four propositions of fact to be believed. The first truth becomes: "Life Is Suffering"; the second: "The Cause of Suffering Is Craving"—and so on. 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 ascetics 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.

THE BUDDHA AWOKE from the sleep of existential confusion. So shocking and unexpected was this experience that he initially assumed that were he to speak of it no one would understand him. A person who is asleep is either lost in deep unconsciousness or absorbed in a dream. Metaphorically, this was how the Buddha must have seen both his previous self as well as everyone else he had known: they either were blind to the questions of existence or sought consolation from them in metaphysical or religious fantasies. His awakening, however, brought *both* the questions *and* their resolutions into vivid and unanticipated focus.

The Buddha woke up to the nature of the human dilemma and a way to its resolution. The first two truths (anguish and its origins) describe the dilemma, the second two (cessation and the path) its resolution. He awoke to a set of interrelated truths rooted in the immediacy of experience here and now.

The Buddha experienced these truths as ennobling. Awakening was not just the acquisition of a more enlightened viewpoint. It granted a natural integrity, dignity, and authority to his life. Although the five ascetics had vowed not to acknowledge their apostate former companion, as he entered the Deer Park in Sarnath and came toward them, they found themselves standing up to offer him respect. In spite of themselves, they were unable to resist the authority of Gautama's presence.

AN UNAWARENED EXISTENCE, in which we drift unaware on a surge of habitual impulses, is both ignoble and undignified. Instead of a natural and noncoercive authority, we impose our will on others either through manipulation and intimidation or by appealing to the opinions of those more powerful than ourselves. Authority becomes a question of force rather than of integrity.

Instead of presenting himself as a savior, the Buddha saw himself as a healer. He presented his truths in the form of a medical diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. If you have a pain in your chest, you first need to acknowledge it. Then you will go to a doctor for an examination. His diagnosis will both identify the cause of pain and tell you if it is curable. If it is curable, he will advise you to follow a course of treatment. Likewise, the Buddha acknowledged the existential condition of anguish. On examination he found its origins to lie in self-centered craving. He realized that this

could cease, embracing all treatment.

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could cease, and prescribed the cultivation of a path of life embracing all aspects of human experience as an effective treatment.



WHILE "BUDDHISM" SUGGESTS another belief system, "dharma practice" suggests a course of action. The four ennobling truths are not propositions to believe; they are challenges to act.

There is a passage in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in which Alice enters a room to find a bottle marked with the label "Drink Me." The label does not tell Alice what is inside the bottle but tells her what to do with it. When the Buddha presented his four truths, he first described what each referred to, then enjoined his listeners to act upon them. Once we grasp what he refers to by "anguish," we are enjoined to *understand* it—as though it bore the label "Understand Me." The truth of anguish becomes an injunction to act.

The first truth challenges our habitual relationship to anguish. In the broadest sense, it challenges how we relate to our existence as such: our birth, sickness, aging, and death. To what extent do we fail to understand these realities and their implications? How much time is spent in distraction or oblivion? When we are gripped by a worry, for example, what do we do? We might struggle to shake it off. Or we try to convince ourselves that things are not the way they seem, failing which we seek to preoccupy ourselves with something else. How often do we embrace that worry, accept our situation, and try to understand it?

Anguish maintains its power only as long as we allow it to intimidate us. By habitually regarding it as fearful and threatening, we fail to see the words etched on it by the Buddha: "Understand Me." If we try to avoid a powerful wave looming above us on the beach, it will send us crashing

into the sand and surf. But if we face it head-on and dive right into it, we discover only water.

To understand a worry is to know it calmly and clearly for what it is: transient, contingent, and devoid of intrinsic identity. Whereas to misunderstand it is to freeze it into something fixed, separate, and independent. Worrying about whether a friend still likes us, for example, becomes an isolated thing rather than part of a process emerging from a stream of contingencies. This perception induces in turn a mood of feeling psychologically blocked, stuck, obsessed. The longer this undignified state persists, the more we become incapable of action. The challenge of the first truth is to act before habitual reactions incapacitate us.



A SIMILAR PROCEDURE can be applied to the other truths. Just as the presence of anguish is an opportunity for understanding, so the presence of the self-centered craving that underlies it is an opportunity for letting go. Such craving is manifest in a variety of ways: it extends from simple egoism and selfishness to that deep-seated, anxious longing for security to fear of rejection by those we love to the compulsion to have a cigarette. Whenever such feelings arise, the habitual reaction is either to indulge them or to deny them. Which again blinds us to the phrase stamped on them by the Buddha: "Let Go!"

"Letting go" is not a euphemism for stamping out craving by other means. As with anguish, letting go begins with understanding: a calm and clear acceptance of what is happening. While craving (the second truth) may be the origin or cause of anguish (the first truth), this does not mean they are two separate things—any more than the sprout is separate from the daffodil that emerges from it. Just as craving crystallizes into anguish, so does understanding flower into letting go.

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Letting go of a craving is not rejecting it but allowing it to be itself: a contingent state of mind that once arisen will pass away. Instead of forcibly freeing ourselves from it, notice how its very nature is to free itself. To let it go is like releasing a snake that you have been clutching in your hand. By identifying with a craving ("I want this," "I don't want that"), you tighten the clutch and intensify its resistance. Instead of being a state of mind that you have, it becomes a compulsion that has you. As with understanding anguish, the challenge in letting go of craving is to act before habitual reactions incapacitate us.

By letting go of craving it will finally cease. This cessation allows us to realize, if only momentarily, the freedom, openness, and ease of the central path. This sudden gap in the rush of self-centered compulsion and fear allows us to see with unambiguous immediacy and clarity the transient, unreliable, and contingent nature of reality. Dharma practice at this moment has relinquished the last traces of belief; it is founded on authentic vision born from experience. It no longer requires the support of moralistic rules and religious ritual; it is grounded in integrity and creative autonomy. In revealing life in all its vulnerability, it becomes the doorway to compassion.



IN THE CESSATION of craving, we touch that dimension of experience that is timeless: the playful, unimpeded contingency of things emerging from conditions only to become conditions for something else. This is emptiness: not a cosmic vacuum but the unborn, undying, infinitely creative dimension of life. It is known as the "womb of awakening"; it is the clearing in the still center of becoming, the track on which the centered person moves. And it whispers: "Realize Me."

But no sooner is it glimpsed than it is gone. Cessation of

craving is like a momentary gap in the clouds. The sun shines brilliantly for a few moments, only to be covered over again. We find ourselves back in the humbling fog of anguish, craving, habit, restlessness, distraction. But with a difference: now we know where this track goes. We have set foot in the territory for which these words are just a map.

We realize that until this point we have not really been on the path at all. We have been following hunches, heeding the words of those we respect, exploring blind alleys, stumbling and guessing. No matter how strong our resolve and conviction, all along there may have been a nagging unease that we didn't really know where we were going. Each step felt hesitant and forced, and we were terribly alone. The difference between then and now is like the idea of sex and the first experience of it. On the one hand, the act is a momentous and irrevocable step; on the other hand, it is just a part of life.

Henceforth, resolve to cultivate this path becomes unwavering yet entirely natural. It is simply what we do. There is no longer any sense of self-consciousness, contrivance, awkwardness, or hesitation. Awakening is no longer seen as something to attain in the distant future, for it is not a thing but a process—and this process is the path itself. But neither does this render us in any way perfect or infallible. We are quite capable of subverting this process to the interests of our far-from-extinct desires, ambitions, hatreds, jealousies, and fears. We have not been elevated to the lofty heights of awakening; awakening has been knocked off its pedestal into the turmoil and ambiguity of everyday life.

There is nothing particularly religious or spiritual about this path. It encompasses everything we do. It is an authentic way of being in the world. It begins with how we understand the kind of reality we inhabit and the kind of beings we are that inhabit such a reality. Such a vision underpins the values that inform our ideas, the choices we make, the words we utter, the deeds we perform, the work we do. It provides the

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ethical ground for mindful and focused awareness, which in turn further deepens our understanding of the kind of reality we inhabit and the kind of beings we are that inhabit such a reality. And so on.

To cultivate these diverse elements of our existence means to nurture them as we would a garden. Just as a garden needs to be protected, tended, and cared for, so do ethical integrity, focused awareness, and understanding. No matter how deep our insight into the empty and contingent nature of things, that alone will do little to cultivate these qualities. Each of these areas in life becomes a challenge, an injunction to act. There is no room for complacency, for they all bear a tag that declares: "Cultivate Me."



THE ACTIONS THAT accompany the four truths describe the trajectory of dharma practice: understanding anguish leads to letting go of craving, which leads to realizing its cessation, which leads to cultivating the path. These are not four separate activities but four phases within the process of awakening itself. Understanding matures into letting go; letting go culminates in realization; realization impels cultivation.

This trajectory is no linear sequence of "stages" through which we "progress." We do not leave behind an earlier stage in order to advance to the next rung of some hierarchy. All four activities are part of a single continuum of action. Dharma practice cannot be reduced to any one of them; it is configured from them all. As soon as understanding is isolated from letting go, it degrades into mere intellectuality. As soon as letting go is isolated from understanding, it declines into spiritual posturing. The fabric of dharma practice is woven from the threads of these interrelated activities, each of which is defined through its relation to the others.

THE BUDDHA'S FIRST discourse convinced the five ascetics that he was onto something. So they stayed with him, listened to his teaching, and came to awakening themselves. They too understood anguish, let go of craving, realized cessation, and embarked on the cultivation of the path. They too achieved freedom of heart and mind from the compulsions of craving. The words used to describe their awakening are the same as those used to describe the Buddha's own. Henceforth, at the conclusion of the Buddha's discourses, it would often be reported not only how many people had come to awakening through that particular teaching but to what degree.

The early discourses suggest that awakening was a common occurrence among those who listened to the Buddha and acted upon what he said. A difference in degree was acknowledged between those who had experienced the initial moment of awakening and entered the path, and those who had further cultivated the path and even reached the point where the habit of craving was extinguished. But access to the process of awakening itself was relatively straightforward and did not entail any great fuss.

Yet as Buddhism became institutionalized as a religion, awakening became progressively more inaccessible. Those who controlled the institutions maintained that awakening was so exalted that generally it could be attained only with the detachment and purity of heart achieved through monastic discipline. Even then, they admitted, it was rare. To explain this state of affairs they appealed to the Indian idea of the "degeneration of time," a notion that regards the course of history as a process of inexorable decline. According to this notion, those who lived at the time of the Buddha were simply less degenerate, more "spiritual," than the corrupted mass of humanity today.

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Periodically, however, such views were challenged. The doors of awakening were thrown open to those barred from it by the strictures and dogmas of a privileged elite. Laity, women, the uneducated—the disempowered—were invited to taste the freedom of the dharma for themselves. Awakening was not a remote goal to be attained in a future lifetime. No: awakening was right here, unfolding in your own mind at this very moment.

To put it bluntly, the central question Buddhists have faced from the beginning is this: Is awakening close by or far away? Is it readily accessible or available only through supreme effort? If its proximity and ease of access are emphasized, there is the danger of trivializing it, of not according it the value and significance it deserves. Yet if its distance and difficulty of access are emphasized, there is the danger of placing it out of reach, of turning it into an icon of perfection to be worshipped from afar.

Doesn't the question itself deceive us? Aren't we tricked by its either/or logic into assuming that only one option can be true? Couldn't the ambiguous logic of both/and be more appropriate here? Awakening is indeed close by—*and* supreme effort is required to realize it. Awakening is indeed far away—*and* readily accessible.

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Or is it?

## AGNOSTICISM

*Suppose, Malunkyaputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say: "I will not let the surgeon pull out the arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow; whether the arrow that wounded me was hoof-tipped or curved or barbed."*

*All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die. So too, Malunkyaputta, if anyone should say: "I will not lead the noble life under the Buddha until the Buddha declares to me whether the world is eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite; whether the soul is the same as or different from the body; whether or not an awakened one continues or ceases to exist after death," that would still remain undeclared by the Buddha and meanwhile that person would die.*

—The Buddha

**I**F YOU GO to Asia and visit a *wat* (Thailand) or *gompa* (Tibet), you will enter something that looks very much like an abbey, a church, or cathedral, being run by people who look like monks or priests, displaying objects that look like icons, which are enshrined in alcoves that look like chapels and revered by people who look like worshippers.

If you talk to one of the people who look like monks, you will learn that he has a view of the world that seems very much like a belief system, revealed a long time ago by someone else who is revered like a god, after whose death saintly

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individuals have interpreted the revelations in ways like theology. There have been schisms and reforms, and these have given rise to institutions that are just like churches.

Buddhism, it would seem, is a religion.

Or is it?



WHEN ASKED WHAT he was doing, the Buddha replied that he taught "anguish and the ending of anguish." When asked about metaphysics (the origin and end of the universe, the identity or difference of body and mind, his existence or nonexistence after death), he remained silent. He said the dharma was permeated by a single taste: freedom. He made no claims to uniqueness or divinity and did not have recourse to a term we would translate as "God."

Gautama encouraged a life that steered a middle course between indulgence and mortification. He described himself as an openhanded teacher without an esoteric doctrine reserved for an elite. Before he died he refused to appoint a successor, remarking that people should be responsible for their own freedom. Dharma practice would suffice as their guide.

This existential, therapeutic, and liberating agnosticism was articulated in the language of Gautama's place and time: the dynamic cultures of the Gangetic basin in the sixth century B.C.E. A radical critic of many deeply held views of his times, he was nonetheless a creature of those times. The axioms for living that he foresaw as lasting long after his death were refracted through the symbols, metaphors, and imagery of his world.

Religious elements, such as worship of the Buddha's person and uncritical acceptance of his teachings, were doubtless present in the first communities that formed around Gautama. Even if for five hundred years after his death his

followers resisted the temptation to represent him as a quasi-divine figure, they eventually did so. As the dharma was challenged by other systems of thought in its homeland and spread abroad into foreign cultures such as China, ideas that had been part of the worldview of sixth-century-B.C.E. India became hardened into dogmas. It was not long before a self-respecting Buddhist would be expected to hold (and defend) opinions about the origin and the end of the universe, whether body and mind were identical or different, and the fate of the Buddha after death.



HISTORICALLY, BUDDHISM HAS tended to lose its agnostic dimension through becoming institutionalized as a religion (i.e., a revealed belief system valid for all time, controlled by an elite body of priests). At times this process has been challenged and even reversed (one thinks of iconoclastic Indian tantric sages, early Zen masters in China, eccentric yogins of Tibet, forest monks of Burma and Thailand). But in traditional Asian societies this never lasted long. The power of organized religion to provide sovereign states with a bulwark of moral legitimacy while simultaneously assuaging the desperate piety of the disempowered swiftly reasserted itself—usually by subsuming the rebellious ideas into the canons of a revised orthodoxy.

Consequently, as the dharma emigrates westward, it is treated as a religion—albeit an “Eastern” one. The very term “Buddhism” (an invention of Western scholars) reinforces the idea that it is a creed to be lined up alongside other creeds. Christians in particular seek to enter into dialogue with their Buddhist brethren, often as part of a broader agenda to find common ground with “those of faith” to resist the sweeping tide of Godless secularism. At interfaith gatherings, Buddhists are wheeled out to present their views on everything

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This transformation of Buddhism into a religion obscures and distorts the encounter of the dharma with contemporary agnostic culture. The dharma in fact might well have more in common with Godless secularism than with the bastions of religion. Agnosticism may serve as a more fertile common ground for dialogue than, for example, a tortured attempt to make Buddhist sense of Allah.

THE FORCE OF the term "agnosticism" has been lost. It has come to mean: not to hold an opinion about the questions of life and death; to say "I don't know" when you really mean "I don't want to know." When allied (and confused) with atheism, it has become part of the attitude that legitimizes an indulgent consumerism and the unreflective conformism dictated by mass media.

For T. H. Huxley, who coined the term in 1869, agnosticism was as demanding as any moral, philosophical, or religious creed. Rather than a creed, though, he saw it as a *method* realized through "the rigorous application of a single principle." He expressed this principle positively as: "Follow your reason as far as it will take you," and negatively as: "Do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable." This principle runs through the Western tradition: from Socrates, via the Reformation and the Enlightenment, to the axioms of modern science. Huxley called it the "agnostic faith."

First and foremost the Buddha taught a method ("dharma practice") rather than another "-ism." The dharma is not something to believe in but something to do. The Buddha did not reveal an esoteric set of facts about reality, which we can

choose to believe in or not. He challenged people to understand the nature of anguish, let go of its origins, realize its cessation, and bring into being a way of life. The Buddha followed his reason as far as it would take him and did not pretend that any conclusion was certain unless it was demonstrable. Dharma practice has become a creed ("Buddhism") much in the same way scientific method has degraded into the creed of "Scientism."



JUST AS CONTEMPORARY agnosticism has tended to lose its confidence and lapse into scepticism, so Buddhism has tended to lose its critical edge and lapse into religiosity. What each has lost, however, the other may be able to help restore. In encountering contemporary culture, the dharma may recover its agnostic imperative, while secular agnosticism may recover its soul.

An agnostic Buddhist would not regard the dharma as a source of "answers" to questions of where we came from, where we are going, what happens after death. He would seek such knowledge in the appropriate domains: astrophysics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, etc. An agnostic Buddhist is not a "believer" with claims to revealed information about supernatural or paranormal phenomena, and in this sense is not "religious."

An agnostic Buddhist looks to the dharma for metaphors of existential *confrontation* rather than metaphors of existential *consolation*. The dharma is not a belief by which you will be miraculously saved. It is a method to be investigated and tried out. It starts by facing up to the primacy of anguish, then proceeds to apply a set of practices to understand the human dilemma and work toward a resolution. The extent to which dharma practice has been institutionalized as a religion can be gauged by the number of consolatory ele-

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An agnostic Buddhist eschews atheism as much as theism, and is as reluctant to regard the universe as devoid of meaning as endowed with meaning. For to deny either God or meaning is simply the antithesis of affirming them. Yet such an agnostic stance is not based on disinterest. It is founded on a passionate recognition that *I do not know*. It confronts the enormity of having been born instead of reaching for the consolation of a belief. It strips away, layer by layer, the views that conceal the mystery of being here—either by affirming it as something or denying it as nothing.

Such deep agnosticism is an attitude toward life refined through ongoing mindful awareness. It may lead to the realization that ultimately there is neither something nor nothing at the core of ourselves that we can put a finger on. Or it may be focused in an intense perplexity that vibrates through the body and leaves the mind that seeks certainty nowhere to rest.



IN A FAMOUS parable the Buddha imagines a group of blind men who are invited to identify an elephant. One takes the tail and says it's a rope; another clasps a leg and says it's a pillar; another feels the side and says it's a wall; another holds the trunk and says it's a tube. Depending on which part of Buddhism you grasp, you might identify it as a system of ethics, a philosophy, a contemplative psychotherapy, a religion. While containing all of these, it can no more be reduced to any one of them than an elephant can be reduced to its tail.

That which contains the range of elements that constitute Buddhism is called a "culture." The term was first explicitly defined in 1871 by the anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett

Tylor as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Since this particular culture originates in the awakening of Siddhartha Gautama and aims to cultivate a way of life conducive to such awakening, Buddhism could be described as "the culture of awakening."

While Buddhism has tended to become reductively identified with its religious forms, today it is in further danger of being reductively identified with its forms of meditation. If these trends continue, it is liable to become increasingly marginalized and lose its potential to be realized as a culture: an internally consistent set of values and practices that creatively animates all aspects of human life. The challenge now is to imagine and create a culture of awakening that both supports individual dharma practice and addresses the dilemmas of an agnostic and pluralist world.

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## A N G U I S H

*No conditions are permanent;  
No conditions are reliable;  
Nothing is self.*

—The Buddha

**I**T IS SAID that until Siddhartha Gautama was in his late twenties, his father, King Suddhodana, kept him immured within palaces. Suddhodana did not wish his son to be distracted from his duty by the disquiet that reigned beyond the palace walls. The young man became restless in his incarceration and longed to go out. Suddhodana arranged tours of the town and countryside, making sure everything was perfectly arranged and nothing distressing passed before the boy's eyes. Despite these precautions, Siddhartha chanced upon a person disfigured by disease, another crippled by age,

a corpse, and a wandering monk. He became uneasy upon returning to the comforts of home. One night he stole away. For six years he drifted around the land, studying, meditating, subjecting himself to punishing ascetic rigors. The conventional options exhausted, he sat down at the foot of a tree. Seven days later he had an awakening in which he understood the nature of anguish, let go of its origins, realized its cessation, and brought into being a way of life.



PRINCE SIDDHARTHA'S DILEMMA still faces us today. We too immerse ourselves in the "palaces" of what is familiar and secure. We too sense that there is more to life than indulging desires and warding off fears. We too feel anguish most acutely when we break out of our habitual routines and witness ourselves hovering between birth and death—our birth and death. We discover that we have been thrown, apparently without choice, into a world not of our making. However painful the exit from the mother's uterus, it is mercifully forgotten. But in achieving consciousness, we realize that the only certainty in life is that it will end. We don't like the idea; we try to forget that too.

Everyone collaborates in everyone else's forgetting. Parents seek to prepare their offspring for life. Social and political institutions are there to benefit the living, not the dead. Religions largely offer consolation: perhaps there is a chance that we won't *really* die after all.

In one way or another, we manage to avoid the questions that existence raises, treating birth and death as physical events in time and space: the gasping of the first breath, the expelling of the last. They become isolated facts, problematic but manageable, kept at a distance from the here and now, where we are safe in the business of getting through the day.

Life becomes an exercise in the management of specifics.

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We seek to arrange the details of our world in such a way that we feel secure: surrounded by what we like, protected against what we dislike. Once our material existence is more or less in order, we may turn our attention to the psychomanagement of our neuroses. Failing which, the worst anxieties can be kept at bay by a judicious use of drugs.

This approach works well enough until the unmanageable erupts again as sickness, aging, sorrow, pain, grief, despair. No matter how expertly we manage our lives, how convincing an image of well-being we project, we still find ourselves involved with what we hate and torn apart from what we love. We still don't get what we want and still get what we don't want. True, we experience joy, success, love, bliss. But in the end we find ourselves once more prone to anguish.

We may know this, but do we understand it? We see it, are even awed by it, but habit impels us to forget it. To cover it over and flee again to the lure of the tantalizing world. For were we to understand it, even in a glimpse, it might change everything.



TRY THIS EXERCISE. Find a quiet, comfortable place. This may be just the corner of a bedroom or study. Then settle into a chair or, if you prefer, sit cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. Make sure your back is unsupported and upright but not tense. Incline your head downward, so your gaze naturally falls about three feet in front of you.

Shut your eyes. Rest your hands in your lap or on your knees. Check to see if there are any points of tension in the body: the shoulders, the neck, around the eyes. Relax them. Become aware of your bodily contact with the ground. Make sure that you are steady and balanced. Notice the subtle polyphony of sounds around you, take note of any sensations in the body, be conscious of your mood of the moment. Don't

judge these things or seek to change them: accept them for what they are.

Take three long, slow, deep breaths. Don't imagine the breath as some invisible stuff entering and leaving your nostrils; notice the bodily sensations (even the trivial ones like the shifting contact of your skin with your undershirt) that make up the act of breathing. Then let the breathing resume its own rhythm, without interfering with or controlling it. Just stay with it, letting the mind settle into the swell of the breath, like a small boat at anchor, gently rising and falling with the sea. Do this for ten minutes.



THIS EXERCISE MAY not be as straightforward as it seems. No matter how strong your resolve to be present and concentrated, it is difficult to keep the mind from wandering off into memories, plans, or fantasies. Several minutes may pass before you even *notice* that you have become distracted.

Normally we are unaware of the extent to which we are distracted, for the simple reason that distraction is a state of unawareness. This kind of exercise can force us to recognize that for much of the time we fail to register what is happening here and now. We are reliving an edited version of the past, planning an uncertain future, or indulging in being elsewhere. Or running on automatic pilot, without being conscious at all.

And instead of a coherent personality that stretches back in an unbroken line to a first memory and looks forward to an indefinite future, we discover a self ridden with gaps and ambiguities. Who "I am" appears coherent only because of the monologue we keep repeating, editing, censoring, and embellishing in our heads.

The present moment hovers between past and future just as life hovers between birth and death. We respond to both in

similar ways. Just with birth and death, so we flee from the. Flight is a reluctance implies. Something impervious to anger be painlessly anni

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similar ways. Just as we flee from the awesome encounter with birth and death to the safety of a manageable world, so we flee from the pulse of the present to a fantasy world. Flight is a reluctance to face change and the anguish it implies. Something in us insists on a static self, a fixed image, impervious to anguish, that will either survive death intact or be painlessly annihilated.

Evasion of the unadorned immediacy of life is as deep-seated as it is relentless. Even with the ardent desire to be aware and alert in the present moment, the mind flings us into tawdry and tiresome elaborations of past and future. This craving to be otherwise, to be elsewhere, permeates the body, feelings, perceptions, will—consciousness itself. It is like the background radiation from the big bang of birth, the aftershock of having erupted into existence.



SHOULD YOU PERSIST in watching the breath, you may find that after a while your mind begins to settle. You experience longer spells of concentration before a distracting thought whisks you away. You become more adept at remembering to come back to the present. You relax and discover a poignant tranquility. This is a centered stillness from which you can engage attentively, caringly, with the world.

All of life is in ceaseless mutation: emerging, modifying, disappearing. The relative constancy of still, centered attention is simply a steady adjustment to the flux of what is observed. Nothing can be relied upon for security. As soon as you grasp something, it's gone. Anguish emerges from craving for life to be other than it is. It is *the* symptom of flight from birth and death, from the pulse of the present. It is the gnawing mood of unease that haunts the clinging to "me" and "mine."

It would perhaps be better if life did not bring change—if

it could be relied upon to provide lasting happiness. But since this is not true, a calm and clear understanding of what is true—that no conditions are permanent or reliable—would weaken the grip in which craving holds us. Craving can vanish in awakening to the absurdity of the assumptions that underlie it. Without stamping it out or denying it, craving may be renounced the way a child renounces sandcastles: not by repressing the desire to make them but by turning aside from an endeavor that no longer holds any interest.



WHEN THE RESTLESS mind is stilled, we begin to encounter what is unfolding before us. This is both familiar and mysterious at the same time.

In one sense, we already know this world: in rare moments with nature, a lover, a work of art. Yet it also comes without warning: when strolling down a busy street, staring at a sheet of paper on a desk, forming a pot on a wheel. This sense of the world vanishes as suddenly as it appears. It is something we can neither manage nor control.

When we stop fleeing birth and death, the grip of anguish is loosened and existence reveals itself as a question. When Siddhartha encountered a person disfigured by disease, one crippled by age, a corpse, and a wandering monk, he was not only struck by the tragedy of anguish but thrown into questioning. Yet the questions he asked were not the sort he could stand back from, reflect on, and arrive at a rational answer to. He realized that he himself was subject to disease, aging, and death. The questioner was nothing other than the question itself. The pivotal moment of human consciousness: it becomes a question for itself.

Such a question is a mystery, not a problem. It cannot be “solved” by meditation techniques, through the authority of

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As this kind of question becomes clearer it becomes more puzzling too. The understanding it generates does not provide consoling facts about the nature of life. This questioning probes ever deeper into what is still unknown.

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## D E A T H

*Like a dream,  
Whatever I enjoy  
Will become a memory;  
The past is not revisited.*

—Shantideva

**A** GAIN FIND A comfortable place to sit, so that your back is upright, your body steady and balanced; then close your eyes and watch your breath. Feel the air enter your nostrils, expand your lungs and diaphragm. Pause, exhale, contracting diaphragm and lungs, then feel warmer air leave the nostrils. Sustain this attention for ten minutes, following each breath from beginning to end.

Reflect on your resolve: What has led me to this point? Why am I sitting here? Try not to get caught up in trains of associative thought that lead off into distraction. When the mind is calm and focused, consider this question:

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*Since death alone is certain and the time of death uncertain,  
what should I do?*

Run this over in your mind, letting its import and challenge sink in. See if the question resonates in the body, triggers a nonverbal mood, a gut feeling. Give more attention to the bodily tone it evokes than to the thoughts and ideas it generates. If you feel such a tone, silently rest in it until it fades.

While you find the question intellectually stimulating, it might otherwise leave you cold. Or it may provoke only a pale hint of its implications. The aim of this meditation is to awaken a felt-sense of what it means to live a life that will stop. To deepen the question, the following reflections may help.

*Since death alone is certain . . .*

THINK OF THE beginnings of life on this earth: single-celled organisms dividing and evolving; the gradual emergence of fish, amphibians, and mammals, until the first human beings appeared around five million years ago; then the billions of men and women who preceded my own birth a mere handful of years ago. Each of them was born; each of them died. They died because they were born. What distinguishes me from any one of them? Did not they feel about the uniqueness of their lives just as I feel about the uniqueness of mine? Yet birth entails death as surely as meeting entails parting.

This miraculous organism, formed of an inconceivable number of interdependent parts, from the tiniest cell to the hemispheres of the brain, has evolved to a degree of complexity capable of the consciousness needed to make sense of these words. Life depends on sustaining this delicate balance, on

the functioning of vital organs. Yet I feel it changing with each pulse of blood, slipping away with each breath. I witness my aging: the loss of hair, pain in the joints, wrinkling of skin. Life ebbs from moment to moment.

It is as though I am in a boat that floats steadily downstream. I gaze over the stern, admiring the landscape that spreads out behind the vessel. So absorbed am I in what I behold that I forget that I am drifting inexorably toward a waterfall that drops for hundreds of feet.



... and the time of death uncertain ...

WHEN I TRY to turn my head around to find how close the waterfall is, I cannot. I can see only what is unfolding before my eyes. I can see the death of others but not my own. The time will come for me too, but I don't know when.

Consider that while statistics assure us that we have a good chance to live to an "average" age, probability is not certainty. There can be no guarantee that I will live until next week, let alone for many years. Who do I know of my own age who has died? Was there anything about that person that made him a suitable candidate for a sudden or early death? How does he differ from me? I imagine myself in his shoes. Death does not happen only to others. Nor when I want it to.

This body is fragile. It is just flesh. Listen to the heartbeat. Life depends on the pumping of a muscle.

Anything can happen. Each time I cross a road, set out on a journey, descend a flight of stairs, my life is at risk. No matter how cautious I am, I cannot foresee the absentmindedness of the man in an approaching car, the collapse of a bridge, the shift of a fault line, the course of a stray bullet, the destination of a virus. Life is accident prone.

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WHAT AM I here for? Am I living in such a way that I can die without regrets? How much of what I do is compromise? Do I keep postponing what I "really" want to do until conditions are more favorable?

Asking such questions interrupts indulgence in the comforts of routine and shatters illusions about a cherished sense of self-importance. It forces me to seek again the impulse that moves me from the depths, and to turn aside from the shallows of habitual patterns. It requires that I examine my attachments to physical health, financial independence, loving friends. For they are easily lost; I cannot ultimately rely on them. Is there anything I can depend upon?

It might be that all I can trust in the end is my integrity to keep asking such questions as: *Since death alone is certain and the time of death uncertain, what should I do?* And then to act on them.

A REFLECTION LIKE this does not tell you anything you do not already know: that death is certain and its time uncertain. The point is to consider these facts regularly and slowly, allowing them to percolate through you, until a felt-sense of their meaning and implication is awakened. Even when you do this reflection daily, sometimes you may feel nothing at all; the thoughts may strike you as repetitive, shallow, and pointless. But at other times you may feel gripped by an urgent bodily awareness of imminent mortality. At such moments try to let the thoughts fade, and focus the entirety of your attention in this feeling.

This meditation counters the deep psychosomatic feeling

that there is something permanent at the core of ourself that is going to be around for a while yet. Intellectually, we may suspect such intuitions, but that is not how we feel most of the time. This feeling is not something that additional information or philosophy alone can affect. It needs to be challenged in its own terms.

Reflective meditation is a way of translating thoughts into the language of feeling. It explores the relation between the way we think about and perceive things and the way we feel about them. We find that even the strongest, seemingly self-evident intuitions about ourselves are based on equally deep-seated assumptions. Gradually learning to see our life in another way through reflective meditation leads to feeling different about it as well.

Ironically, we may discover that death meditation is not a morbid exercise at all. Only when we lose the use of something taken for granted (whether the telephone or an eye) are we jolted into a recognition of its value. When the phone is fixed, the bandage removed from the eye, we briefly rejoice in their restoration but swiftly forget them again. In taking them for granted, we cease to be conscious of them. In taking life for granted, we likewise fail to notice it. (To the extent that we get bored and long for something exciting to happen.) By meditating on death, we paradoxically become conscious of life.

How extraordinary it is to be here at all. Awareness of death can jolt us awake to the sensuality of existence. Breath is no longer a routine inhalation of air but a quivering intake of life. The eye is quickened to the play of light and shade and color, the ear to the intricate medley of sound. This is where the meditation leads. Stay with it; rest in it. Notice how distraction is a flight from this, an escape from awe to worry and plans.



AS THE MEDITATION draws to a close, return to your breath and posture. Open your eyes and slowly take in what

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you see in front of you. Before standing up and returning to other activities, reflect for a few moments on what you have noticed or learned.

These reflections may prepare us to encounter the actual death of others. The death of someone upsets the illusion of permanence we tacitly seek to sustain. Yet we are skilled in disguising such reactions with expressions and conventions that contain death within a manageable social frame. To meditate on the certainty of death and the uncertainty of its time helps transform the experience of another's death from an awkward discomfiture into an awesome and tragic conclusion to the transience that lies at the heart of all life.

Over time such meditation penetrates our primary sense of being in the world at all. It helps us value more deeply our relationships with others, whom we come to regard as transient as ourselves. It evokes the poignancy implicit in the transitoriness of all things.

## REBIRTH

*"But if there is no other world and there is no fruit and ripening of actions well done or ill done, then here and now in this life I shall be free from hostility, affliction, and anxiety, and I shall live happily." This is the second comfort acquired. . . .*

—The Buddha

RELIGIONS ARE UNITED not by belief in God but by belief in life after death. According to religious Buddhism we will be reborn in a form of life that accords with the ethical quality of actions committed in this or a previous life. A similar principle is followed in the monotheistic religions, although the postmortem options tend to be limited to heaven or hell. Throughout history, religions have explained that death is not the end of life but that some part of us—perhaps all of us—carries on.

The Buddha accepted the idea of rebirth. It is said that as

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part of his awakening he recalled the entire chain of births that preceded the present one. Later he described, sometimes in detail, how actions committed in the past determine experiences in this life and how actions committed now will determine the quality of one's afterlife. He spoke of the process of awakening in terms of how many rebirths remain until a person is freed from the cycle of compulsive birth and death. Although he taught dharma practice to be meaningful whether or not we believe in rebirth, and speculation about future and past lives to be just another distraction, the evidence does not suggest that he held an agnostic view on the matter.

Yet while religions may agree that life continues in some form after death, this does not indicate the claim to be true. Until quite recently religions maintained that the earth was flat, but such widespread belief did not affect the shape of the planet. In accepting the idea of rebirth, the Buddha reflected the worldview of his time. In common with Indian tradition, he maintained that the aim of life is to attain freedom from the anguished cycle of compulsive rebirth. (It's a curious twist that Westerners find the idea of rebirth consoling.) This view was endorsed by subsequent generations of Buddhists in much the same way as we would now endorse many scientific views, which, if pressed, we would find hard to demonstrate.

The Buddha found the prevailing Indian view of rebirth sufficient as a basis for his ethical and liberating teaching. Subsequently, religious Buddhism emphasized that denial of rebirth would undermine the basis of ethical responsibility and the need for morality in society. Similar fears were expressed at the time of the Enlightenment by the Christian churches, who feared that loss of faith in heaven and hell would lead to rampant immorality. One of the great realizations of the Enlightenment was that an atheistic materialist could be just as moral a person as a believer—even more so. This insight led to liberation from the constraints of

ecclesiastical dogma, which was crucial in forming the sense of intellectual and political freedom we enjoy today.



IT IS OFTEN claimed that you cannot be a Buddhist if you do not accept the doctrine of rebirth. From a traditional point of view, it is indeed problematic to suspend belief in the idea of rebirth, since many basic notions then have to be rethought. But if we follow the Buddha's injunction not to accept things blindly, then orthodoxy should not stand in the way of forming our own understanding.

A difficulty that has beset Buddhism from the beginning is the question of what it is to be reborn. Religions that posit an eternal self distinct from the body-mind complex escape this dilemma—the body and mind may die but the self continues. A central Buddhist idea, however, is that no such intrinsic self can be found through analysis or realized in meditation. Such a deep-seated sense of personal identity is a fiction, a tragic habit that lies at the root of craving and anguish. How do we square this with rebirth, which necessarily entails the existence of something that not only survives the death of the body and brain but somehow traverses the space between a corpse and a fertilized ovum?

Different Buddhist schools have come up with different answers to this question, which in itself suggests their views are based on speculation. Some claim that the force of habit-driven craving immediately reappears in another form of life; others posit various kinds of nonphysically based mental consciousness that may spend several weeks before locating a suitable womb.

These kinds of speculations lead us far from the Buddha's agnostic and pragmatic perspective and into a consideration of metaphysical views that cannot be demonstrated or refuted, proven or disproven. Even if irrefutable evidence for rebirth were to appear one day, it would only raise other,

more difficult questions. They entail any ethical or political implications. Demonstrating that rebirth is not the same as reincarnation is in hell and a salvation.

The idea of rebirth is only insofar as it is a physical doctrine of "karma." While it is accepted that one is intended to emphasize the moral implications of rebirth: i.e., a moral thought, speak, or action come to understand the nature of behavior, which is the essence. In contrast to the Buddhists, he denies the origin of rebirth.

All this has nothing to do with (or otherwise) the fact that a practice of rebirth should be a physical theory of consciousness. The Dharma practice is not because it is a finding but because it is validating or invalidating the nature of existence.

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more difficult questions. The mere fact of rebirth would not entail any ethical linkage between one existence and the next. Demonstrating that death will be followed by another life is not the same as demonstrating that a murderer will be reborn in hell and a saint in heaven.

The idea of rebirth is meaningful in religious Buddhism only insofar as it provides a vehicle for the key Indian metaphysical doctrine of actions and their results known as "karma." While the Buddha accepted the idea of karma as he accepted that of rebirth, when questioned on the issue he tended to emphasize its psychological rather than its cosmological implications. "Karma," he often said, "is intention": i.e., a movement of the mind that occurs each time we think, speak, or act. By being mindful of this process, we come to understand how intentions lead to habitual patterns of behavior, which in turn affect the quality of our experience. In contrast to the view often taught by religious Buddhists, he denied that karma alone was sufficient to explain the origin of individual experience.

All this has nothing to do, however, with the compatibility (or otherwise) of Buddhism and modern science. It is odd that a practice concerned with anguish and the ending of anguish should be obliged to adopt ancient Indian metaphysical theories and thus accept as an article of faith that consciousness cannot be explained in terms of brain function. Dharma practice can never be in contradiction with science: not because it provides some mystical validation of scientific findings but because it simply is not concerned with either validating or invalidating them. Its concern lies entirely with the nature of existential experience.



WHERE DOES THIS leave us? It may seem that there are two options: either to believe in rebirth or not. But there is a

third alternative: to acknowledge, in all honesty, *I do not know*. We neither have to adopt the literal versions of rebirth presented by religious tradition nor fall into the extreme of regarding death as annihilation. Regardless of what we believe, our actions will reverberate beyond our deaths. Irrespective of our personal survival, the legacy of our thoughts, words, and deeds will continue through the impressions we leave behind in the lives of those we have influenced or touched in any way.

Dharma practice requires the courage to confront what it means to be human. All the pictures we entertain of heaven and hell or cycles of rebirth serve to replace the unknown with an image of what is already known. To cling to the idea of rebirth can deaden questioning.

Failure to summon forth the courage to risk a nondogmatic and nonevasive stance on such crucial existential matters can also blur our ethical vision. If our actions in the world are to stem from an encounter with what is central in life, they must be unclouded by either dogma or prevarication. Agnosticism is no excuse for indecision. If anything, it is a catalyst for action; for in shifting concern away from a future life and back to the present, it demands an ethics of empathy rather than a metaphysics of fear and hope.

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## RESOLVE

*When crows find a dying snake,  
 They behave as if they were eagles.  
 When I see myself as a victim,  
 I am hurt by trifling failures.*

—Shantideva

LIFE IS NEITHER meaningful nor meaningless. Mean-  
 ing and its absence are given to life by language and  
 imagination. We are linguistic beings who inhabit a reality in  
 which it makes sense to make sense.

For life to make sense it needs purpose. Even if our aim  
 in life is to be totally in the here and now, free from past  
 conditioning and any idea of a goal to be reached, we still  
 have a clear purpose—without which life would be mean-  
 ingless. A purpose is formed of words and images. And we  
 can no more step out of language and imagination than we  
 can step out of our bodies.

THE PROBLEM IS not that we lack resolve, but that it so often turns out to be misplaced. The meaning-laden feelings do not last. We resolve to become wealthy and famous, only to discover in the end that such things are incapable of providing that permanent well-being we initially projected onto them. Wealth and success are all very well; but once we have them their allure fades. It is like climbing a mountain. We expend great energy and hope on reaching the top, only to find when we get there that it is dwarfed by another even higher ridge.

In a changing, ambiguous world is anything worthy of total commitment? It is tempting to appeal to a purpose-giving God outside of time and space, a transcendent Absolute in which ultimate meaning is secured. But is this appeal not an urge for the consolation of religion? Is it not falling prey to the bewitchment of language? Dharma practice starts not with belief in a transcendent reality but through embracing the anguish experienced in an uncertain world.

A purpose may be no more than a set of images and words, but we can still be totally committed to it. Such resolve entails aspiration, appreciation, and conviction: I aspire to awaken, I appreciate its value, and I am convinced it is possible. This is a focused act that encompasses the whole person. Aspiration is as much a bodily longing as an intellectual desire; appreciation as much a passion as a preference; conviction as much an intuition as a rational conclusion. Irrespective of the purpose to which we are committed, when such feelings are aroused, life is infused with meaning.

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solation in something permanent and reliable, in a self that is in control of things, in a God who is in charge of destiny. The irony of this strategy is that it turns out to be the cause of what it seeks to dispel. In yearning for anguish to be assuaged in such ways, we reinforce what creates anguish in the first place: the craving for life to be other than it is. We find ourselves spinning in a vicious circle. The more acute the anguish, the more we want to be rid of it, but the more we want to be rid of it, the more acute it gets.

Such behavior is not just a silly mistake we can shrug off. It is an ingrained habit, an addiction. It persists even when we are aware of its self-destructive nature. To counter it requires resolve of equivalent force to live in another way. This is unlikely, though, to lead to an immediate change in the way we feel. A smoker may fervently resolve to give up cigarettes, but that does not prevent the tug of longing each time he enters a smoke-filled room. What changes is his resolve.

Dharma practice is founded on resolve. This is not an emotional conversion, a devastating realization of the error of our ways, a desperate urge to be good, but an ongoing, heartfelt reflection on priorities, values, and purpose. We need to keep taking stock of our life in an unsentimental, uncompromising way.



SOMEONE MIGHT SAY: "I resolve to awaken, to practice a way of life conducive to that end, and to cultivate friendships that nurture it," but he may feel exactly the opposite much of the time. We are often content to drift from day to day, follow routines, indulge habits, and hang out, dimly aware of the background echo of our deeper resolve. We know this is insincere, unsatisfying—yet still do it. Even in meditation we may go through the mechanics of practice, lapse into fantasies, get bored. Or become self-righteous and pious.

shun the friendship of those who might help dispel the conceit that traps us in yet another cycle of anguish.

Self-confidence is not a form of arrogance. It is trust in our capacity to awaken. It is both the courage to face whatever life throws at us without losing equanimity, and the humility to treat every situation we encounter as one from which we can learn.

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## INTEGRITY

*A monk asked Yun Men, "What are the teachings of a whole lifetime?" Yun Men said, "An appropriate statement."*

*—The Blue Cliff Record*

THE RESOLVE TO awaken requires the integrity not to hurt anyone in the process. Dharma practice cannot be abstracted from the way we interact with the world. Our deeds, words, and intentions create an ethical ambience that either supports or weakens resolve. If we behave in a way that harms either others or ourselves, the capacity to focus on the task will be weakened. We'll feel disturbed, distracted, uneasy. The practice will have less effect, as though the vitality of resolve is being drained.

Ethical integrity is rooted in the sense of who we are and

what kind of reality we inhabit. That we are isolated, anxious creatures in a hostile world may not be a conscious philosophical view but a gut feeling buried beneath the image of the compassionate and responsible person projected to the world. Only when one is frightened or overwhelmed by greed or hate is this underlying attitude revealed. Then each one experiences himself pitted against the rest of the world: one desperate soul struggling to survive among others.

There are many ways to hurt others when we feel like this: from killing or injuring them physically, or depriving them of what is rightfully theirs to abusing or taking advantage of them sexually; from lying to them, speaking unkindly about them behind their backs, or uttering cruel and barbed remarks to wasting their time with senseless chatter. Integrity entails not merely refraining from overt acts of this kind, but also recognizing how we contemplate such behavior in our thoughts, repeat it through fantasy, or prepare for it even though we lose our nerve before carrying it out.



THERE ARE ALSO moments when we experience ourselves not at odds with others but as participants in a shared reality. As empathetic beings in a participatory reality we cannot, without losing our integrity, hurt, abuse, rob, or lie to others.

Ethical integrity originates in empathy, for then we take the well-being of others to heart and are moved to be generous and caring. Our thoughts, words, and deeds are based on a sense of what we have in common rather than what divides us. But just because we feel deeply for someone's plight and are motivated by the noblest intentions, this does not ensure that what we do will be for the best. Empathy alone will not prevent us from making mistakes.

While rooted in empathy, integrity requires courage and intelligence as well, because every significant ethical choice

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entails risk. And while we cannot know in advance the consequences of the choices we make, we can learn to become more ethically intelligent.

Ethical intelligence is cultivated by learning from concrete mistakes. We can discern when a reactive habit kicks in and prompts us to adopt the familiar path of least resistance. We can notice when empathy capitulates to fear or self-interest. We can be alert for face-saving words and gestures that give an impression of empathy while letting us off the hook. And we can recognize when we are evading the crises of risk.

How often do we refrain from acting, out of fear of how our actions might be received? To let such a moment slip away can be agonizing. To combat such fear requires the courage to live in a less self-centered and more compassionate way. However daunting a situation may seem, as soon as we say or do something, it is suddenly transformed. When the door of hesitation is unlocked, we enter a dynamic, fluid world, which challenges us to act and act again.

The most soul-searching meditation on ethics leaves the world intact; a single word or deed can transform it forever.

ETHICAL INTEGRITY REQUIRES both the intelligence to understand the present situation as the fruition of former choices, and the courage to engage with it as the arena for the creation of what is to come. It empowers us to embrace the ambiguity of a present that is simultaneously tied to an irrevocable past and free for an undetermined future.

Ethical integrity is not moral certainty. A priori certainty about right and wrong is at odds with a changing and unreliable world, where the future lies open, waiting to be born from choices and acts. Such certainty may be consoling and strengthening, but it can blunt awareness of the uniqueness of each ethical moment. When we are faced with the

unprecedented and unrepeatable complexities of this moment, the question is not "What is the right thing to do?" but "What is the compassionate thing to do?" This question can be approached with integrity but not with certainty. In accepting that every action is a risk, integrity embraces the fallibility that certainty disdainfully eschews.

Ethical integrity is threatened as much by attachment to the security of what is known as by fear of the insecurity of what is unknown. It is liable to be remorselessly buffeted by the winds of desire and fear, doubt and worry, fantasy and egoism. The more we give in to these things, the more our integrity is eroded and we find ourselves carried along on a wave of psychological and social habit. When responding to a moral dilemma, we just repeat the gestures and words of a parent, an authority figure, a religious text. While moral conditioning may be necessary for social stability, it is inadequate as a paradigm of integrity.

Occasionally, though, we act in a way that startles us. A friend asks our advice about a tricky moral choice. Yet instead of offering him consoling platitudes or the wisdom of someone else, we say something that we did not know we knew. Such gestures and words spring from body and tongue with shocking spontaneity. We cannot call them "mine" but neither have we copied them from others. Compassion has dissolved the stranglehold of self. And we taste, for a few exhilarating seconds, the creative freedom of awakening.

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## FRIENDSHIP

*Just as the dawn is the forerunner of the arising of the sun, so true friendship is the forerunner of the arising of the noble eightfold path.*

—The Buddha

DHARMA PRACTICE IS not just a question of cultivating resolve and integrity in the privacy of our hearts. It is embodied in friendships. Our practice is nourished, sustained, and challenged through ongoing contact with friends and mentors who seek to realize the dharma in their own lives.

We were born alone and will die alone. Much of our time is spent absorbed in feelings and thoughts we can never fully share. Yet our lives are nonetheless defined through relationships with others. The body is witness to parents and endless

generations of forebears, language witness to fellow speakers, the most private thoughts witness to those we love and fear. Simultaneously and always, we find ourselves alone with others.

We are participatory beings who inhabit a participatory reality, seeking relationships that enhance our sense of what it means to be alive. In terms of dharma practice, a true friend is more than just someone with whom we share common values and who accepts us for what we are. Such a friend is someone whom we can trust to refine our understanding of what it means to live, who can guide us when we're lost and help us find the way along a path, who can assuage our anguish through the reassurance of his or her presence.

WHILE SUCH FRIENDSHIPS occur naturally between peers with similar aspirations and interests, certain crucial friendships are also formed with those we respect for having achieved a maturity and understanding greater than our own. Such people offer guidance and reassurance through each aspect of their being. The way they move their body and hold our gaze with their eyes, the cadences of their speech, their response to sudden provocation, the way they rest at ease and attend to daily chores: all these things tell us as much as they tell us in words. And we too are called upon to respond in such ways. In this kind of relationship we are no mere recipients of knowledge. We are invited to interact, to challenge and be challenged.

These friends are teachers in the sense that they are skilled in the art of learning from every situation. We do not seek perfection in these friends but rather heartfelt acceptance of human imperfection. Nor omniscience but an ironic admission of ignorance. We should be wary of being seduced by charismatic purveyors of Enlightenment. For true friends

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who draw forth what is waiting to be born. Their task is not  
to make themselves indispensable but redundant.

These friends are our vital link to past and future. For they  
too were nurtured through friendships, in many cases with  
those who are dead. Dharma practice has survived through a  
series of friendships that stretches back through history—  
ultimately to Gautama himself. Through friendships we are  
entrusted with a delicate thread that joins past with future  
generations. These fragile, intimate moments are ones of  
indebtedness and responsibility. Dharma practice flourishes  
only when such friendships flourish. It has no other means of  
transmission.

And these friends are our vital links to a community that  
lives and struggles today. Through them we belong to a  
culture of awakening, a matrix of friendships, that expands  
in ever wider circles to embrace not only "Buddhists" but all  
who are actually or potentially committed to the values of  
dharma practice.

THE FORMS OF this friendship have changed over history.  
The dharma has passed through social and ethnic cultures  
with different ideals of what constitutes true friendship. Two  
primary forms have emerged: the fellowship model of early  
Buddhism and the guru-disciple model of later traditions. In  
both cases, friendship has become entangled with issues of  
religious authority.

Before the Buddha died he declared that the dharma  
would suffice as one's guide. In the early community, friend-  
ship was founded in common adherence to the rules of  
discipline the Buddha devised to support dharma practice.  
The community was a fellowship of brotherhood and

sisterhood, under the formal guidance of a paternal or maternal preceptor. While the system reflected the hierarchy of an Indian extended family, in which everyone deferred to seniority, the final authority lay not in a person's position in the hierarchy but in the rules of discipline. True friendship was modeled on the relationships among siblings and between child and parent, with the difference that all were equal in the eyes of the dharma and subject to its law.

After about five hundred years, the Indian guru-disciple model was adopted by certain schools. Here the teacher became a heroic figure to whose will the student surrendered as a means of accelerating the process of awakening. This relationship reflected that between master and servant or feudal lord and subject. The different degree of power between guru and disciple was utilized as an agent of personal transformation. Elements of dominance and submission (and with them the concomitant danger of coercion) came to characterize the notion of true friendship. If, after close examination, you accepted someone as your teacher, then you were expected to revere and obey him. In varying degrees, the authority of the dharma was replaced by the authority of the guru, who came, in some traditions, to assume the role of the Buddha himself.

Despite the contrasting nature of these models, in practice they coexisted. As a follower of the Buddha's rules of discipline, a true friend was accountable to the community and the dharma, but as a guru was impervious to any critique formulated by the deluded mind. Most traditions of Buddhism today represent one of these ideals of friendship or a blend of the two.



IN CONTEMPORARY SECULAR, democratic societies, such traditional models of friendship are bound to be challenged.

For we may not accept the hierarchy of submission to the need to wear a mask. Exotic name-drawings of religious endorse the assumption of explicit commitment.

It is not just about the nature of that we notice consciousness itself is able to maintain since the time of evolve distinctively. It has survived creatively to change.

What features affect the concept of creative autonomy? The precedence over autocratic authority would be to imagination. Such as Martin French Catholic "ability" for an of psychotherapy allows an encounter and healing. model the re skills are developed technical com

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of a paternal or maternal hierarchy of authority. No one deferred to someone's position in the hierarchy. True friendship was between equals and between people who were equal in status and power.

Indian guru-disciple relationships. Here the teacher and student surrendered to each other in a process of mutual awakening. This relationship was not one of master and servant or of unequal power but of mutual respect and submission (and mutual coercion) came to the fore. If, after close relationship with a teacher, then you could assume the role of a teacher in varying degrees, by the authority of the teacher to assume the role of a teacher.

models, in practice the teacher's rules of discipline in the community and submission to any critique of the traditions of Buddhism. Friendship or a relationship of friendship or a

ic societies, such as the Buddhist, to be challenged.

For we may no longer feel at ease in friendships defined by the hierarchy of an extended family, the rule of law, or submission to the will of another. We may no longer feel the need to wear a uniform or in any way sacrifice our ordinariness. Exotic names, robes, insignia of office, titles—the trappings of religion—confuse as much as they help. They endorse the assumption of the existence of an elite whose explicit commitment grants them implicit extraordinariness.

It is not just different circumstances that raise questions about the nature of true friendship. Of greater significance is that we *notice* that circumstances are different. Historical consciousness itself makes the difference. It is no longer possible to maintain that dharma practice has remained unaltered since the time of the Buddha. It has evolved and continues to evolve distinctive forms peculiar to the conditions of the time. It has survived precisely because of its ability to respond creatively to change.

What features of contemporary life are most likely to affect the concept of true friendship? Mutual respect for the creative autonomy of individual experience would take precedence over submission to the dogmas of a school or the autocratic authority of a guru. The responsibility of a friend would be to encourage individuation, self-reliance, and imagination. Such friendship might be informed by notions such as Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship and the French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel's ideal of "availability" for another. Its practice may draw on the experience of psychotherapy, in which a "free and protective space" allows an encounter that is simultaneously trusting, opening, and healing. For learning and training, it may take as its model the relationship of artist and apprentice, in which skills are developed so that creativity can be realized with technical competence and expertise.

Whenever Buddhism has become a religion, true friendship has tended to be compromised by issues of power. Both

the fellowship and guru-disciple models have given rise to large, impersonal, hierarchic, and authoritarian bodies governed by professional elites. In many cases, these institutions have become established churches, sanctioned and supported by sovereign states. This has often led to rigid conservatism and intolerance of dissent.

This process is not inevitable. It is also possible to imagine a community of friendships in which diversity is celebrated rather than censured. In which smallness of scale is regarded as success rather than failure. In which power is shared by all rather than invested in a minority of experts. In which women and men are treated as genuine equals. In which questions are valued more than answers.

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