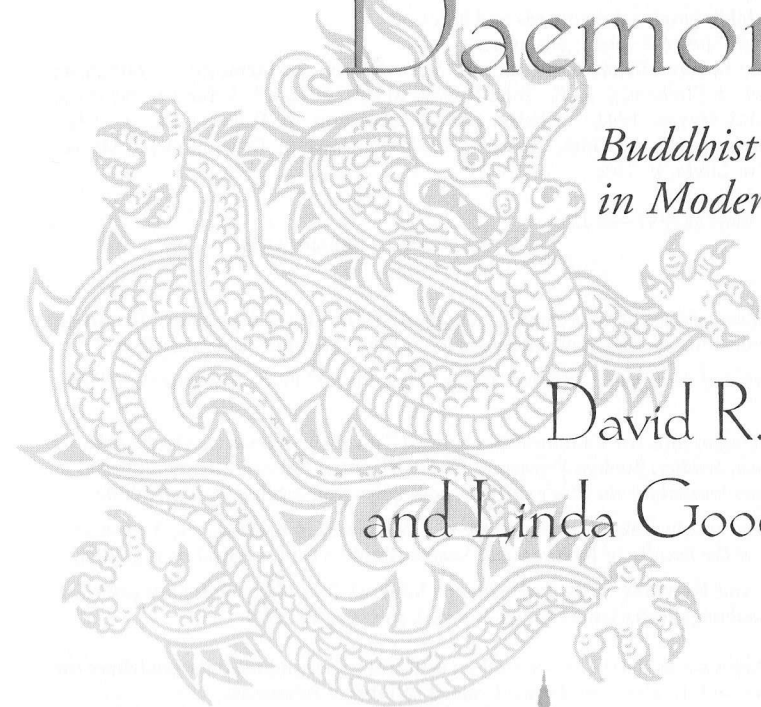


THE
Dharma
OF Dragons
AND Daemons

*Buddhist Themes
in Modern Fantasy*

David R. Loy
and Linda Goodhew



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*To our fantastic mothers
Irene Loy and Margaret Goodhew
and their grandson
Mark Loy Goodhew
who loves fantasy*



Fantastic Dharma

Fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living.

—Ursula K. Le Guin

IN ORDER TO LIVE, we need air, water, food, shelter...and stories. One of the ways language makes us human is by enabling us to create and share stories about what the world is, who we are, and what we are to do while we are here. Our minds seek their sustenance as much as our bodies seek food. Consciously or unconsciously, stories order a complicated, often confusing world and give us models of how to live in it. They include creation myths, folk and fairy tales, legends about gods and heroes, Homeric epics and Norse sagas, Greek tragedy and Japanese Noh dramas, histories of kings and kingdoms, novels and radio plays, movies and television soap operas, some video and Internet games, and fantasies of strange people in strange worlds “long ago and far away.”

Until a few millennia ago, almost all stories were oral, and even a few centuries ago they were more often heard than read. Widespread literacy created new possibilities: the novel, most notably, along with shorter variants available in other forms such as magazines, newspapers, and comic books. Radio, then movies, television, and now the Internet have inundated us with new stories, largely because they have become commodities to be bought and sold (or dangled as bait by advertisers). With stories too, mass production and consumption encourage the lowest common denominator. Just as fast-food franchises beckon us with their high-sugar, high-fat snacks, so do video cassettes and DVDs of highly sexed and violent films lure us whenever boredom threatens the attention of an increasingly jaded audience.

The best stories, however, are more than entertainment. Traditionally the most important ones have been religious. According to the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, religion is the metaphysics of the masses, but it is just as true to label philosophy the religion of intellectuals. Theologians like to argue about doctrines, and religious institutions elevate those claims into dogmas, but for most of us it is chiefly the *stories* that we find meaningful, because stories speak to us and move us in ways that concepts do not. The birth of Jesus in a manger, because there was no room in the inn; the Last Supper, followed by the betrayal of Judas and Christ's agony on the cross; his resurrection, victorious over death—these narratives are what most Christians relate to, not the niceties of the Nicene Creed. Until recently, at least, Bible tales from the Old and New Testaments served as the “core stories” of Western civilization. Allusions to

them were embedded everywhere: Renaissance sculpture and painting, Bach's cantatas and Handel's oratorios, the epic poetry of Milton and Blake. The success of Mel Gibson's “The Passion of the Christ” reminds us that these stories have not lost their attraction.

Buddhism, too, can be seen as a collection of stories. The life of Shakyamuni Buddha forms the core, especially such crucial incidents as his leaving home and his great awakening under the Bodhi tree. According to legend, his father surrounded young Gotama with healthy youthful people, so it was utterly shocking when he eventually encountered a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and finally a world-renouncer—which led him to renounce his own royal position and become a forest ascetic. The power of this story is not affected by the fact that it does not seem to be literally true.¹ Historical or not, it remains a deeply moving myth, dramatically reminding us not to repress awareness of illness, aging, and mortality, but to allow that awareness to motivate a spiritual quest for the meaning of our life and our death.

What was the great awakening that crowned this quest? What did the Buddha realize that led to his liberation? The necessary ambiguity of his enlightenment, for us, makes his realization less a doctrine than a myth—the central myth—of Buddhism. To be a Buddhist is to be gripped and motivated by this myth, to attempt to live up to the Buddha's quest as one's own core story.

Myths do not gain their meaning because the incidents they describe actually occurred. If they are “true,” it is because they evoke something essential about who we are. J.R.R. Tolkien believed that what he wrote in *The Lord of the Rings* was true, because “legends

and myths are largely made of ‘truth,’ and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear.”² The theologian Paul Tillich distinguished “unbroken myth” (understood to be literally true) from “broken myth” (no longer believed to be historically true, but still held to have deep significance). In place of broken myth, however, the Anglican bishop Richard Holloway has suggested that we think in terms of *breaking open a myth*. The meaning of a myth is something contained within it, and often obscured by the details of the story, so if we want to taste its fruit we need to break through its skin. To reach the living heartwood we must penetrate the hardened bark.

We need such myths to live by, as the mythologist Joseph Campbell put it. They are not crutches for those who cannot take too much reality, for we need them to figure out what is real and important about the world and our being in it. From a spiritual perspective, then, the point is not to get rid of our myths but to become more aware of what they are. Myths change us: when we live a myth, that myth is also living us. One of the most pernicious myths is the myth of a life without myth. A few people become spiritually ill because they lose their myth and do not know how to find another one, but for most people the myth of no myth means they have been captured by the dominant myths of their culture—myths so prevalent that they are unaware of them, like the fish that does not notice the water it swims in.

The Pali canon—the earliest record we have of the teachings of the historical Buddha—is full of stories. The Buddha taught for

forty-five years, and many incidents in his long career are preserved in its “three baskets” (*Tipitaka*). The third basket, the Abhidharma, attempts to summarize his doctrine into a more succinct and abstract philosophy, but the Sutras and the Vinaya—the other two baskets—always present the context for each of his talks: where it occurred and who was there. “Thus have I heard...” If those stories are often no more than the occasion for a teaching, each teaching is nevertheless placed within a larger narrative involving people who gather together to hear what the Buddha has to say. When we study the earliest records of the Buddhadharma, we read stories.

Buddhism has many other stories, of course. The non-canonical Jataka tales teach moral virtues by recounting the previous lifetimes of Shakyamuni, when he was developing his wisdom and selfless compassion as an animal *bodhisattva* (a “Buddha-in-training”). Later scriptures such as the Lotus Sutra and the Avatamsaka Sutra are basically long narratives that present their teachings by embedding stories within stories, often in the form of parables. Few Tibetans could explain anything about the basic Madhyamika-Yogachara philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, yet most of them are familiar with stories about its founding fathers: tales from the lives of Padma-sambhava, Marpa, Milarepa, and many others. The same is true for Japanese and Chinese people with regard to Chan/Zen Buddhism. Many who have never done any Zen meditation are familiar with its foundational legends about Bodhidharma and the sixth patriarch.

How many of these stories are literally true? Historical scholarship raises questions about most of them, yet the basic issue, for

Buddhists at least, is whether a myth inspires and empowers us to follow the Middle Path in a fruitful way. The problem with myth is not historical veracity but the tendency for stories, like more conceptual teachings, to fossilize and lose their ability to speak meaningfully. That is all the more likely to happen, of course, when teachings and stories are translated into very different cultures. Buddhism changed radically when it spread to China and Tibet, but at least both of those host societies were also premodern. The challenge involved in adapting what was originally an Iron Age religion to our postmodern high-tech world is of a different order of magnitude. In many cases, teachings need to be revived by finding new vocabularies to express their core truths, perhaps even new methodologies to help realize those truths.

In the case of Buddhist myth, however, we wonder if new stories are needed that relate more directly to the experience of (post)modern people living in the twenty-first century. Where do we find those myths today?

This book is about such Buddhist stories: not about stories to be found in Buddhism, but about the “Buddhism” to be found in some modern stories. More precisely, it is about the Dharma—the basic teachings of Buddhism—as presented in some of the classics of contemporary fantasy: in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, in Michael Ende’s children’s novel *Momo*, in some animated films by Japan’s *anime* master Hayao Miyazaki, in Philip Pullman’s trilogy *His Dark Materials*, and in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series. With one insignificant exception (in the conclusion to Pullman’s fantasy), none of these makes any reference to Buddhism, but that

is hardly a shortcoming. On the contrary, it makes their Buddhist resonances all the more interesting and important, given our concern to re-present the Dharma in modern forms—in “Buddhist” myths that speak to our present condition, depicting it symbolically and emotionally as well as intellectually.

The need for such stories is not new. Buddhism, first introduced to Europe in the late eighteenth century by William Jones, Friedrich Schlegel, and other scholars, quickly began to influence philosophers such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Naturally these thinkers emphasized its doctrinal implications, for theory was what they and other European intellectuals were interested in. Europe was in the midst of its own religious crisis—soon to be aggravated by Darwinism—and it was Buddhism’s more rational attributes that were so attractive to those seeking to separate its metaphysical and ethical core from the magical and superstitious elements. Later Asian proselytizers such as Dhammapala and Soen Shaku were also eager to stress the scientific nature of Buddhism, while D.T. Suzuki focused on aspects of Zen that were consistent with contemporaneous Western thinking in psychology and philosophy.

Despite the debt that Western Buddhists owe to many of these figures, something was lost in that initial translation, or left behind: the role of stories, which for most Asian Buddhists continues to be the aspect that speaks most directly to them. Of course, we now have the Jataka tales and the songs of Milarepa, the Lotus Sutra and the Sixth Patriarch Sutra, which have become widely available in Western languages. Yet they remain *Asian* stories, which Westerners inevitably view through a cultural filter. Coming as they do from

very different places, times, and cultures, they fascinate us—but their exoticism also distances us. That such myths are foreign to our civilization is both their attraction and their limitation. Perhaps the real challenge, for a westernizing Buddhism, is not only to express traditional Buddhist teachings in modern categories, but to find or create Dharma stories that resonate deeply with our contemporary Western spiritual inclinations. This book discusses some outstanding recent examples.



The Lord of the Rings may not seem very susceptible to a Buddhist reading, given its uncompromising dualism between good and evil and its evident endorsement of violence against those who are evil (our topic in Chapter 4). Nevertheless, Chapter 2, “The Dharma of Engagement,” presents Tolkien’s story as a spiritual quest readily understandable in Buddhist terms. In addition to an essential thread of nonviolence that also runs through the tale (most notably in the repeated sparing of Gollum’s life), Tolkien’s trilogy provides us with a timely myth about social engagement. When Frodo leaves home, it is not to slay a dragon or win some treasure but to *let go* of something. His renunciation of the Ring is not done for any selfish purpose but to save the world—the defining characteristic of a bodhisattva. Moreover, the “karmic structure” of Middle-earth (namely, that good intentions lead to good results, while evil intentions are self-defeating) suggests that karma need not be understood as some inevitable calculus of moral cause and effect, as a teaching about how to control what the world does to us. Rather, karma is about our own spiritual development: how

our lives are transformed when we transform the motivations of our actions. Karma is not something I *have*. It is what I *am*, and what I am is changed by what I choose to do, even as Frodo is changed by what he chooses to do.

The Ring shows this. Gollum may think he uses it freely, but using it transforms him. It corrupts anyone who uses it. The Ring of Power also highlights the challenge for engaged Buddhism. Traditional Buddhism has not had much to say about power, but today the root social problem seems to be the individual and collective craving for power (or money, which can be understood as “congealed” power). This craved-for power tends to destroy whatever it touches and whoever is infected by it, as happened to Midas. Lust for it motivates the greed, ill will, and delusions that drive the plot in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien shows us the suffering that results from a quest for power lacking morality; Buddhism emphasizes the suffering that results from seeking or wielding power without wisdom and compassion. In contrast to the imperialistic, militaristic, and technological will to power expressed by Sauron and Saruman, Frodo and the rest of the Fellowship feel no need to dominate Middle-earth. For them it is enough to be a part of Middle-earth, because it is their home. We may need to recover their sensibility if we are to make it through the darkness that has begun to descend on our world.

The German writer Michael Ende is better known for *The Neverending Story*, another classic fantasy, but *Momo* makes a more pointed, Zen-like critique of our obsession with time. What would life be like if we could actually deposit extra time in a Time Bank,

akin to the way we deposit money? That provocative notion allows Ende to exaggerate our preoccupation with saving time, to reveal why time cannot be saved and what we lose when we try to do so. The world of the eponymous title character, a homeless street child, is turned upside down when mysterious gray men start persuading people to deposit their saved time in the Timesaving Bank. As Momo's friends become caught up in the general rush to save time, life for everyone becomes hurried and fraught. When she discovers who the gray men really are and what they are doing with all that saved time, Momo decides to take them on, with the assistance of a magical tortoise and Professor Secundus Minutus Hora.

Chapter 3, "The Dharma of Time," offers a Buddhist reading of this charming fable with the help of a thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master. Dogen's *Shobogenzo* offers some of the most insightful Buddhist reflections on the dualism we usually experience between ourselves and the objective, external time we are "in." That delusive duality is not real but mentally constructed, which means it can be deconstructed. Dogen undoes it by demonstrating that things *are* time and, conversely, that time *is* things. That is also true of us. We are not *in* time because we *are* time—which is why we cannot save time. When we try to do so, instead of gaining something we just lose the here-and-now.

The acclaimed Japanese *anime* master Hayao Miyazaki has directed many classic films that deserve to be better known outside Japan, but two of them are particularly fascinating because they offer a Buddhist-like perspective on what has been called the "myth of redemptive violence." Chapter 4, "The Dharma of Nonviolence,"

develops that perspective by discussing and comparing *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds* and *Princess Mononoke*. While highlighting the destructive effects of human society on nature, both storylines are motivated by hatred and revenge, which different groups use to rationalize their violence against others. Both plots challenge the assumption that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict, and both depict an alternative that questions our usual duality between good (us) and evil (them).

For Buddhism, too, the duality between good and evil is another example of delusive thinking. We distinguish between them because we prefer one to the other, but we cannot have one without the other: the meaning of each depends upon (denying) its opposite. In the case of good versus evil, the temptation is to demonize the *other* in order to feel that *we* are good. To stop the self-defeating cycle of violence that results, *Nausicaa* and *Mononoke* both point toward a more insightful distinction between what might be called two modes of being in the world. We can either try to control our world, to make it less threatening, or open ourselves up to the world, which involves letting go of the need to dominate it. Fear or love: the basic choice that confronts each of us.

In Chapter 5, "The Dharma of Death and Life," the fear of death—a constant but submerged theme in the previous chapters—becomes the main focus as we turn to two fantasy series that climax with remarkably similar visits to the Land of the Dead, both of which involve liberating the dead from death. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy turns the Biblical story of Adam and Eve's Fall upside down, in order to criticize religious superstition and repression.

His two main characters are Lyra and Will, children from different dimensions who travel to a Hades-like afterworld where harpies torment the ghostly shades of the dead, by constantly reminding them of all the bad and stupid things they did while they were alive. Created by a despicable “God,” the afterlife turns out to be an endless purgatory without any possibility of expiation. Will uses his magic knife to cut a “window” into another world, yet the dead who step into that world dissolve back into the elements that compose them, something most of them are nevertheless eager to do. Life and death, Pullman implies, should not be seen as opposites. To live we must embrace both. Repressing the fear of our inevitable death casts a shadow over our life. To be unable to die is to be unable to live. This suggests a possible solution: perhaps we can learn how to live by learning how to die, by letting go of ourselves right now. *Satori*, the term for enlightenment in Japanese Zen, is sometimes called the Great Death.

Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* books are set in an island world where institutionalized magic serves much the same role as modern technology for us. The main character in the first three novels is Ged, a young boy training as a wizard who eventually becomes the Archmage. His first visit to the afterworld occurs before he is mature enough, and ends up releasing a horrible shadow into Earthsea, which haunts and attacks Ged until he confronts it and becomes one with it, in the realization that it is his own death. A later visit to the same afterworld—like Pullman’s, a Hades-like realm of sad, staring ghosts without passion or hope—is in response to the failing Equilibrium that threatens Earthsea. The problem is caused by

another mage who has managed to gain immortality by rupturing a barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead. Ged shows Cob that death is the price of our life and all life, and that his immortality is a hollow nothingness that can never be filled. With great difficulty, and at the cost of his own powers, Ged is able to close the hole between the worlds.

In the final and most memorable novel, Ged plays a minor role, but the whole series climaxes in the shocking realization that the timeless realm of the afterworld was originally created by wizards unable to accept their own mortality. The dead, we learn again, yearn not for life but for death: to rejoin and become one with the earth again. At the conclusion, a stone wall separating the living from the dead is knocked down, and—just as in Pullman’s climax—the dead cross that barrier to dissolve and return to the earth, to be reborn in various ways as different beings.

Buddhism also denies that wall, and the Middle Path gives us another way to break it down. For Dogen too, birth and death are not opposites, and his *Shobogenzo* emphasizes that we should not seek a liberation that involves transcending them. Rather, we need to realize that birth is no-birth, death is no-death. Birth is not something that leads to death, and death is not something that birth has led to. If there is no self that is living, there is only the process of living. And if there is no self that dies, then there is only the process of dying. When our final, dying gasps are whole and complete in themselves, because there is nothing to gain or lose, then our own death becomes no-death. Death loses its sting in “just *this!*” (*tada* in Japanese, *tathata* in Sanskrit).

By no coincidence, all the stories discussed in this book are fantasies aimed especially at children and young adults, who can appreciate and benefit from them without necessarily understanding them intellectually. As adults, most of us eventually settle, comfortably or not, into a constructed world that we accept as reality; children are more open to the possibilities that fantasy expresses imaginatively—alternatives that offer a very different perspective on our world. The best fantasies depict people and situations in ways that we find strange yet still basically familiar. Like the warped images reflected by a carnival mirror, their exaggerated realities reflect and highlight something about the human condition. The Lord of the Rings is set in a Middle-earth largely derived from the Nordic and Germanic mythologies of northern Europe, but Frodo's selfless quest nevertheless provides a model for the socially engaged spirituality we need in our world today. Momo starts out on the fringes of a modern Italian-like city, but soon slips into a world where time can be saved like money and gray men live by smoking it up, a clever conceit that is used to expose our own preoccupation with saving time. Both of Miyazaki's films gain their perspective on this world by being placed in distant times. In Nausicaa's post-apocalyptic future, military holocaust and ecological collapse have left the earth poisoned and fragmented into warring tribes, while Mononoke is set at that critical moment in the medieval past when villages are learning how to exploit nature in order to make iron. In both cases environmental destruction provides the context for plots that expose and challenge the myth of redemptive violence (the belief that aggression is the way to purify the world of its evil)

embedded and cherished in so many of our other stories. As a way to challenge the dualisms and repressions of Western religious consciousness, Pullman's trilogy is set in a "multiverse" (a multi-dimensional universe) where windows can be cut between countless worlds, one of them ours and some others similar to ours. And Le Guin's *Earthsea* series takes place in a seafaring world where magic serves as technology—ultimately, with the same baneful consequences.

Of course, there are many other fantasies that offer us more than entertainment. The ones discussed in this book are valuable because they reveal something important about the real world, even as this world for many of us has become a fantasy. According to Buddhism, *samsara*—this world, our world—is not only full of suffering and craving, it is a realm of delusion. The problem is deeper than the ignorance and indifference now cultivated by "infotainment" disguised as news. To understand it, we need only look at the most popular stories today: that is, the stories we consume and live by, which therefore karmically consume and try to live through us.

Many of us now live in a fantasy world where the actualities of our own daily lives are less meaningful than the larger-than-life images that dance on big screens and small boxes. Reality has been turned inside out: the attractive, self-assured media personalities we watch are more real than we are, the rest of us having become bit players in their drama. Television does not reflect reality, it determines it. From watching so many films and TV stories, we have learned to think that life has, or should have, the same narrative structure: beautiful people get the main roles; it is always obvious who the bad guys are; violence is necessary to resolve conflict and

it works just fine; what is most valuable in life is physical prowess, sexual attraction, and wit; the really important issue is whether to have sex with someone; and good guys deserve to consume—er, live—happily ever after. We consume these stories and want to live them ourselves, and we are disappointed when this myth does not want to become our reality.

Of course, we really know the difference between television/movies and real life...or do we? Why was the draft dodger John Wayne awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor? He was never a hero, but he played one in enough movies until he eventually became one in the eyes of many. Ronald Reagan, the “acting president,” was another notable beneficiary of our collective inability to distinguish image from reality, and more recently the people of California have chosen a cinematic cyborg to be their governor—although he seems to have no qualifications whatsoever for the job except that his films have conditioned us to believe that he must be a hero.

There are many variations on such media-induced collective fantasies, of course. For men, especially, there is the annual cycle of professional and collegiate sports. It is a safe bet that more men know who won the Superbowl or World Series than can identify their representative in the U.S. Congress. Yet it really does not matter who wins the championship; it is meaningless in the sense that it has no significance outside itself. It is a story whose only function is to absorb our excess time and attention, and provide a venue for advertising. Some people see through these fantasies only to fall into an older one, the classical American myth of the tough, self-made, self-sufficient individual looking out for Number One, a perspective often influenced by vague social Darwinist stories about the survival of the fittest.

To wake up from such samsaric myths, which tend to reinforce our ignorance, craving, and therefore our suffering, we recommend—in addition to the Middle Path—the insightful and liberative myths of Tolkien, Ende, Miyazaki, Pullman, and Le Guin.

Of course, the Buddhist perspectives that follow are no substitute for reading (or viewing, in the case of Miyazaki’s *anime*) the original fantasies themselves. As particularly excellent examples of contemporary spiritual myth, they deserve to be appreciated without being filtered through our Buddhist take on them. If you have not yet experienced these stories yourself, we hope that the following chapters will encourage you to do so. Personal familiarity will place you in a better position to understand, and reflect upon, how profoundly Buddhist these fantasies are.