

MONEY

SEX

WAR

KARMA

NOTES FOR A BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

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## Introduction

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**N**ow that Buddhism has come to the West, how are they changing each other?

Half a century ago the British historian Arnold Toynbee predicted that their encounter would be a major event in world history. According to one account he even claimed that the arrival of Buddhism in the West “may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century.” Given everything else that’s happened in the last hundred years, one hesitates to agree with him, yet today we can appreciate better that the arrival of Buddhism does mark something special. For the first time, most of the world’s major civilizations—I’m thinking of India, China, Japan, and the West—are not only interacting militarily and economically but their world-views are in serious conversation with each other.

Nothing like this has ever happened before. Thanks to the density and speed of interaction provided by modern information and transportation technologies, the global dialogue between East and West is opening up possibilities that we cannot anticipate. This encounter also challenges Buddhism in new ways. If the Dharma is to fulfill its liberative potential, it must make the transition from being an Asian tradition (more accurately, several Asian traditions) into a teaching that speaks more directly to the spiritual needs of modern people living in a globalizing world.

What does that imply about the ways contemporary Buddhism is being taught and practiced?

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Buddhism is the oldest of the world's three big missionary religions, the other two being Christianity and Islam. Each was so successful because it became the religion of an empire (in the case of Buddhism, the empire of Ashoka in the third century B.C.E., which included most of South Asia). This does not mean that Buddhism spread by the sword. Its expansion to Ceylon and Southeast Asia, and later north of the Himalayas, seems to have been a peaceful affair. In accord with its own emphasis on insubstantiality and interpenetration, Buddhism spread by infiltrating other cultures, subverting their religions to its own purposes. Native mythologies were not suppressed but *reinterpreted* in Buddhist terms. In China, for example, Mahayana Buddhism resonated with Taoism and their intercourse gave birth to Chan (Zen). In Tibet, tantric Buddhism merged with Bön shamanism and the fruit was Tibetan Buddhism.

This adaptability did not always work to Buddhism's advantage. There were many factors that led to the eventual disappearance of Buddhism in its birthplace, India, but one of them, ironically, was its influence on Brahmanism and other local traditions. Buddhism became more dispensable once some of its key elements had been absorbed. As the art historian and philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy put it, "Brahmanism killed Buddhism with a fraternal embrace." For example, the Buddhist understanding of *nirvana* influenced Hindu notions of *moksha* liberation, and Buddhist innovations such as the two-truths doctrine were adopted and adapted by Vedanta.

This history is worth remembering as Buddhism faces its biggest transition yet. To influence the modern world, Buddhism must adapt to it. But is its present popularity another fraternal hug? The threat today is not Western religions but psychology and consumerism. Is the Dharma becoming another form of psychotherapy? Another commodity to be bought and sold? Will Western Buddhism end up all too compatible with our individualistic consumption patterns,

with expensive retreats and initiations catering to over-stressed converts eager to pursue their own enlightenment? Let's hope not, because Buddhism and the West need each other.

Despite its economic and technological dynamism, Western civilization and its globalization are in trouble—which means all of us are in trouble. The most obvious example is our inability to respond to accelerating climate change as seriously as it requires, if humanity is to survive and thrive over the next few centuries. There's no need to go on at length here about the other social and ecological crises that confront us now, which are increasingly difficult to ignore; many of those are considered in the following chapters. It's also becoming harder to overlook the fact that the political and economic systems we're so proud of seem unable to address these problems. One must ask: Is that because they themselves are the problem?

Part of the problem is leadership, or the lack of it, but we can't simply blame our rulers. It's not only the lack of a moral core among those who rise to the top, or the institutional deformations that massage their rise. Economic and political elites (and there's not much difference between them anymore), like the rest of us, are in need of a new vision of human possibility: what it means to be human, why we tend to get into trouble, and how we can get out of it. Those who benefit most from present social arrangements may think of themselves as hard-headed realists, but as self-conscious human beings we remain motivated by some such vision whether we're aware of it or not. As "Why We Love War" points out, even secular modernity is based on a spiritual worldview—unfortunately a deficient one, from a Buddhist perspective.

The Dharma talks and essays that follow offer examples of how Buddhist teachings can illuminate our situation. Yet influence is a two-way street. The exotic names, robes, and rituals of Asian Buddhism are attractive to many of us, but sooner or later we must begin to distinguish the imported forms that we appreciate from the essential

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Dharma that we need. Buddhism needs to take advantage of its encounter with modern/postmodern civilization—offering a greater challenge than Buddhism has ever faced before—to engage in a self-examination that attempts to distinguish what is vital and still living in its Asian versions from what is unnecessary and perhaps outdated.

This is dangerous, of course. There is always the possibility of throwing out the baby with the bathwater—but the alternative is to keep immersing ourselves in waters that have become tepid and muddied. We should accept that the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions we have learned so much from are particular historical, culturally contingent forms that the Dharma has taken in pre-modern Asia. Buddhism might have evolved differently, and today it needs to continue evolving, in order to find the ways of teaching and practices that work best for us.

I am not talking about changing the Dharma but adapting its forms, as they must always be adapted so the Dharma may thrive in a new place and time. Buddhist emphasis on impermanence (*anicca* in Pali) and insubstantiality (*anatta*, *shunyata*) allows and indeed obliges this adaptability. The writings of the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen are so insightful because he challenged old metaphors that had gone stale by taking advantage of the creative possibilities of the Japanese language. Does the challenge of modernity require anything less from us? Buddhism can provide what the modern world most needs: the spiritual message that may yet awaken us to who we are and why we as a species have such a penchant for making ourselves unhappy. For that message to have its full impact, however, the Dharma must find new modes of expression that speak more directly to us, including those who may not be much interested in Asian cultures. When transplanting an exotic species into a new environment, it may be helpful to bring some of the original soil entwined with the roots. Eventually, however, the plant must become able to root itself in new ground.

The interdependence of our globalizing world implies that the evolution of Western Buddhism will also reflexively interact with Asian Buddhism. In fact, this is already happening, and that is just as well. To some extent Asian Buddhism is stuck, in much the same ways that all religious traditions tend to get stuck. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama—in many ways an inspiring example of how a religious institution can begin to change in new circumstances—has mentioned that by the time of the Chinese invasion Tibetan Buddhism had begun to fossilize, and that in some ways Tibetan Buddhism has benefited from exposure to the West. The situation of Buddhism in other Asian societies is quite different, of course, but many of the problems are similar.

As religions begin to develop so too do tensions between the founder's salvific message and the institution that arises to preserve that message. Although an organization is necessary, it's not easy to avoid a shift in focus from the original message to preserving and enhancing the status of the institution. We see this in the evolution of Buddhism as well. Shakyamuni created the Sangha as a fellowship of serious practitioners, but I wonder if he anticipated what would happen to it. Although it began as a community of wandering mendicants, thanks to many donations the Sangha eventually became quite wealthy and influential, as also happened to the medieval church in Europe.

This changed the relationship between monastics and laypeople. The Pali Canon makes it quite clear that lay men and women can also attain liberation, although they have more responsibilities and distractions to cope with. The basic challenge for them is exactly the same as for monastics: practicing the Dharma to awaken, and living a life of compassion that manifests that awakening. In much of Asian Buddhism, however, a self-defeating split has opened up between the Sangha and the laity. Today the main spiritual responsibility of lay Buddhists is not to follow the path themselves but to support *bhikkhu*

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monks (and, less often, *bhikkhuni* nuns). In this way lay men and women gain *punna*, “merit,” which can lead to a more favorable rebirth next time, or, even better, winning the lottery this lifetime. (See “How to Drive Your Karma.”)

Such spiritual materialism has had a negative effect on the Sangha too. In some cultures its main social role today is not to spread the teachings, or even to set a good example, but to serve as a “field of merit” that provides opportunities for laypeople to gain merit. According to popular belief, the more spiritually developed a *bhikkhu* is, the more merit a donation deposits into one’s spiritual bank account. The most important thing for *bhikkhus*, therefore, is to follow the monastic rules and regulations (the *Vinaya*) strictly, and to be *seen* doing that, so that one is a worthy recipient of lay support. The result is that some Asian Sanghas and their lay supporters are locked into a co-dependent marriage where it’s difficult for either partner to change.

A rather different situation exists in Japan, where many temple monks had common-law wives and children before 1872, when they became legally permitted to marry. The task of providing for them eventually transformed temples into family businesses, and the oldest son is still expected to become a priest to keep that temple business in the family, regardless of whether he has any religious inclinations. As a result, Japanese Buddhism today is, in very large part, a thriving (and lucrative) industry focused on funerals and memorial services—and not much else.

Ironically, Shakyamuni Buddha himself seems to have been quite relaxed about rules. During his lifetime many regulations were formulated to keep order among the rapidly growing monastic community, but just before he passed away the Buddha emphasized that only the major rules were important; the rest could be discarded. Unfortunately no one thought to ask him which were the major rules, so afterward the Sangha ignored his hint and decided to keep



them all. We are reminded that the Buddha was more flexible and open-minded than the institutions that developed to preserve his teachings. Today we find ourselves in a situation where that flexibility needs to be recovered.

To sum up, the encounter that Toynbee had such high hopes for is between a West in crisis and a Buddhism that has its own problems. This does not diminish the importance of their interaction. Quite the opposite: it means that both sides need each other. Each has much to learn from the other as well as to offer the other. On the Buddhist side, we need to do more than translate traditional categories into modern terminology. Today some Buddhist teachings are more comprehensible to us than they could have been in the Buddha's day. The Buddhist emphasis on *anatta*, "not-self," makes more sense to modern psychologists who understand the ego-self as a mental construction. (See "The Suffering of Self.") Linguists and philosophers have caught up with Nagarjuna's realization that language constructs reality, and usually deceives us in the process. (See "The Second Buddha.") Our understanding of Buddhism can benefit from these modern developments. On the other side, some things make less sense to us today. Although we can understand better the Buddha's critique of ritual and his emphasis on motivation and intentions, we need to rethink our often inconsistent views of karma and rebirth. (See "How to Drive Your Karma.")

The essays that follow try to do more than wrap the Dharma in modern clothes. What is most illuminating is when two different ways of thinking encounter and interrogate each other sympathetically, in a mutual search for new understanding. The results have significant implications for each side. We can begin to see more clearly what is essential about the Buddha's Dharma, and we also begin to see more clearly its extraordinary implications for the situation we find ourselves in. As the Buddhist path is demythologized, its relevance today becomes more apparent.

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Of course it's presumptuous to talk about "liberating Buddhism," but there's something to be said for the *double-entendre*: a more liberated Buddhism is a more liberative Buddhism. Although both concerns are present in each of the chapters that follow, "liberated Buddhism" is the main focus in the first half of this book, which offers some innovative ways of expressing the Dharma. "Liberative Buddhism" is emphasized in the second half, where the Dharma offers us fresh ways to understand the fix we're in today. In every chapter, however, it is my hope that each perspective benefits from the other.

"The Suffering of Self" goes to the heart of what is most distinctive about Buddhism: the link it reveals between our inability to enjoy life and our delusive sense of self. How are they connected, and how can the delusion of self be overcome? The sense of self is shadowed by a sense of *lack* that we feel but do not understand, so we usually try to resolve it in ways that just make things worse. Since this problem is basically spiritual—in fact it's *the* spiritual problem, at the root of many, perhaps most other, problems—the solution must also be spiritual. We need to stop evading the emptiness at our core and realize its true nature.

"Lack of Money," "The Great Seduction," and "Trapped in Time" use that perspective to understand how our ways of thinking about money, fame, and time have become delusions that "bind us without a rope." Why do we never have enough of them? The desire for money is often obsessive because money functions as a kind of symbolic reality that can fill up our sense of lack. Money as a social construct is of course valueless in itself—you can't eat or drink a dollar bill—but as our medium of exchange it is the most valuable thing of all. Inevitably, then, it has come to represent abstract happiness. Remember Midas? Today there's a bit of him in most of us. There is nothing wrong with having money if you know how to use it well,

but we're in for trouble when we expect something from it that it can't provide.

Is the same true for fame? We tend to assume that fame, like money, is a universal craving, but neither of them was very important in the European middle ages. Modern fame requires modern media: television and film, newspapers and magazines, and so forth. Why has the prospect of fame become so attractive to us? To understand that we also need to consider the alternative: what Leo Braudy calls the "living death" of anonymity in a world increasingly dominated by electronic media. The collective attention of so many unknown people seems to offer us a potent way, perhaps the best way, to feel more real. Since it can't really make us more real, however, this possibility is better understood as a collective delusion.

An even more troublesome issue for many of us is time, or the lack of it. Is our lack of time also connected with our lack of self? Not only is there never enough time to do everything we want, there never *can* be enough time, because we know our time is limited and we know what is going to happen at the end of it. Buddhism doesn't promise immortality in the usual sense—living on and on, forever—but it offers a different solution to our time-stress, which involves a new understanding of time. Time isn't something I have, it's something I am, and if I *am* time then I can't be trapped *by* it. Paradoxically, to *become* time by realizing my nonduality with it—what Dogen called *uji*, "being-time"—is to live in an eternal present.

Our usual way of thinking about time, and how we get trapped "in" it, is a good example of how we make conceptual distinctions that we then get stuck in—for example, the delusive distinction between *me* and *my time*. The ancient Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, generally agreed to be the second most important figure in the history of Buddhism, wrote about such dualisms and how they deceive us. What he had to say is very important but his philosophical style

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is condensed and not easy to understand. “The Second Buddha” offers an overview of his teachings and how modern philosophers are finally catching up with what he realized almost two thousand years ago.

One of the most important issues for contemporary Buddhism is *karma*. How should it be understood today? As impermanence implies, karma too has a history, and that history comes with its own baggage. The most common literal interpretation implies that social justice is built into the moral fabric of the universe: someone born blind or poor is reaping the consequences of deeds in a previous lifetime. Unlike *anatta*, “not-self,” and many other Buddhist teachings, however, there is no modern support for such a view; science has discovered no such force or mechanism. That in itself does not refute such an interpretation but it does suggest that we should consider other explanations. The problem, again, is that karma is usually understood as something that the self *has*, rather than something that the sense of self *is*. “How to Drive Your Karma” presents this “new” perspective. For the Buddha the most important point about karma was that it’s the key to spiritual development, because it reveals how our lives can be changed right here and now by changing the motivations behind what we do.

Another issue that many contemporary Buddhists are confused about is sex. Is Buddhism compatible with contemporary attitudes toward sexuality and gender? Although celibacy is not necessary for laypeople, it is required of monastics. Does that have implications for those who are not monastics but who also take their practice very seriously? Is it better for our spiritual development if the rest of us are celibate too? “What’s Wrong with Sex?” tries to answer that question by considering why celibacy has been so important for Buddhist monastics. Just as important, we need to think about what we today expect from romance and sex, especially our continual hope that they can somehow fill up our sense of lack.

Our world is quite different from the Buddha's. If he were living today, what would the Buddha do? That question is not easy to answer yet it's not one that we can ignore either. The globalization of economic, military, and ecological crises gives new meaning to the Buddhist emphasis on interdependence, and calls for new types of bodhisattvas—for all of us to respond as best we can. But if everything is “empty,” what's the urgency? In order to really help the world, shouldn't we focus on our own awakening first? Or do those objections misunderstand the Buddhist path? “What Would the Buddha Do?” takes up these questions.

“The Three Poisons, Institutionalized” reflects further on what distinguishes our situation from that of the Buddha. He emphasized the importance of transforming the three unwholesome motivations: greed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, delusion into wisdom. Today we also have to address their collective versions: our economic system institutionalizes greed, militarism institutionalizes ill will, and the media institutionalize delusion. Any personal awakening we might have on our cushions remains incomplete until it is supplemented by a “social awakening” and a social response to these institutionalized causes of widespread suffering.

Buddhist awakening liberates our awareness from grasping fixations. As well as institutionalized greed, ill will, and delusion, today we are subjected to new types of *attention traps* that are discussed in “Consciousness Commodified.” Our awareness is conditioned in new ways: fragmented by new information and communication technologies, commodified by advertising and consumerism, and manipulated by sophisticated propaganda techniques. Who owns our collective attention, and who has the right to decide what happens to it?

Although you wouldn't know it from the news media, no problem today is more important than global climate change and related

ecological crises that threaten the continuation of civilization as we know it. Why are we so incapable of responding to these challenges with the seriousness they deserve? “Healing Ecology” offers a Buddhist perspective based upon the delusion of self and the lack that haunts it. If my fundamental personal problem is the delusion of separation from others, is that also true collectively? If the parallel holds, our alienation from the rest of the biosphere must be an ongoing source of collective anxiety for us, and our attempts to secure ourselves are just making things worse. Why is our GNP never big enough? Why do we never have enough technology?

“The Karma of Food” offers an example of how a Buddhist perspective might help us evaluate new technologies, specifically the benefits and dangers of genetically modified (GM) food. Although at least one Buddhist organization has condemned GM food as unnatural, there is little concern for “being natural” in traditional Buddhist teachings. A better way to address this issue is to remember Buddhist emphasis on the karmic consequences of motivation. How much are food corporations focusing on what is beneficial for consumers and the biosphere, and how much are they motivated by institutionalized greed and delusion?

“Why We Love War” reflects on the unfortunate paradox that, although everyone professes to hate war, we keep doing it. Is that because war is yet another way of trying to resolve our sense of lack? Do we have to fight against the bad guys *over there* in order to feel good about who we are *here*? Historically, the attempt to get rid of evil people has usually ended up creating more evil. Isn’t that also true of the War on Terror? If terrorism is the war of the poor, war is the terrorism of the rich. Perhaps we can’t understand the enduring attraction of war or terrorism until we understand the festering sense of lack built into secular modernity, which seems to offer us different ways to become happy but can’t explain why they don’t actually make us happy.

It's relatively easy to see the problems. How can Buddhism help us solve them? "Notes for a Buddhist Revolution" argues that socially engaged Buddhism does not imply a distinctive social movement. Along with other engaged spiritualities, however, it may have an important role to play in what has become a global movement for peace and social justice. Buddhism contributes an emphasis on personal spiritual practice, commitment to non-violence, the flexibility implied by impermanence and nonsubstantiality (*anatta* and *shunyata*), along with the realization that ending our own *dukkha* requires us to address the *dukkha* of everyone else as well.

These have many implications for how we engage, but what should socially engaged Buddhists focus on? While we certainly need to address the militarization of our society and the ecological impact of our economy, Buddhist emphasis on the liberation of awareness suggests a more distinctive critique of the ways that our collective awareness has become trapped and manipulated. Does that also imply where we should focus our efforts?