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THE NATURE OF 'LACK'

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These talks are previews of some chapters of David Loy's next book, forthcoming from Wisdom Publications in Spring 2008.

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The Nature of ‘Lack’

*When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that’s wisdom.
When I look outside and see that I am everything, that’s love.
Between these two my life turns.
Nasargadatta Maharaj*

The Suffering of Self

If someone asked you to summarize the teachings of the Buddha, what would you say? For most Buddhists, probably the first thing that would come to mind is the four noble (or “ennobling”) truths: *dukkha*, its causes, its cessation (*nirvana*), and the eightfold path that leads to cessation. Shakyamuni Buddha himself is believed to have emphasized those four truths in his first Dharma talk, and those of us who teach Buddhism find them quite helpful, because all his other teachings can be included somewhere within them.

Nevertheless, there is nothing exclusively or distinctively Buddhist about any of the four noble truths.

Buddhism has its own take on them, of course, but in their basic form the four noble truths are common to many Indian religious traditions. *Dukkha* is where most of those spiritual paths begin, including Jainism and Sankhya-Yoga. There is also wide agreement that the cause of *dukkha* is craving, and that liberation from craving is possible. Moreover, they all include some sort of way to realize that liberation. Yoga, for example, teaches a path with eight limbs that is quite similar to Buddhism’s eightfold path.

So what is truly distinctive about the Buddhist Dharma? How does it differ from other religious traditions that also explain the world and our role within it? Foremost is the fact that no other spiritual path focuses so clearly on the intrinsic connection between *dukkha* and our delusive sense of self. They are not only related: for Buddhism the self *is dukkha*.

Although *dukkha* is usually translated as “suffering,” that is too narrow. The point of *dukkha* is that even those who are wealthy and healthy experience a basic dissatisfaction, a dis-ease, which continually festers. That we find life dissatisfactory, one damn problem after another, is not accidental—because it is the very nature of an unawakened sense-of-self to be bothered about something.

Pali Buddhism distinguishes three basic types of *dukkha*. Everything we usually identify as physical and mental suffering—including being separated from those we want to be with, and being stuck with those we don’t want to be with (the Buddha, it seems, had a sense of humor) is included in the first type.

The second type is the *dukkha* due to impermanence. It’s the realization that, although I might be enjoying an ice-cream cone right now, it will soon be finished. The best example of this type is awareness of mortality, which haunts our appreciation of life. Knowing that death is inevitable casts a shadow that usually hinders our ability to live fully now.

The third type of *dukkha* is more difficult to understand because it’s connected with the delusion of self. It is *dukkha* due to *sankhara*, “conditioned states,” which is sometimes taken as a reference to the ripening of past karma. More generally, however, *sankhara* refers to the constructedness of all our experience, including the experience of self. When looked at from the other side, another term for this constructedness is *anatta*, “not-self.” There is no unconditioned self within our constructed sense of self, and this is the source of the deepest *dukkha*, our worst anguish.

This sense of being a self that is separate from the world I am in is illusory—in fact, it is our most dangerous delusion. Here we can benefit from what has become a truism in contemporary psychology, which has also realized that the sense of self is a psychological-social-linguistic construct: *psychological*, because the ego-self is a product of mental conditioning; *social*, because a sense of self develops in relation with other constructed selves; and *linguistic*, because acquiring a sense of self involves learning to use certain names and pronouns such as *I*, *me*, *mine*, *myself*, which create the illusion that there must be some *thing* being referred to. If the word *cup* refers to this thing I’m drinking coffee out of, then we

mistakenly infer that *I* must refer to something in the same way. This is one of the ways language misleads us.

Despite these similarities to modern psychology, however, Buddhism differs from most of it in two important ways. First, Buddhism emphasizes that there is always something uncomfortable about our constructed sense of self. Much of contemporary psychotherapy is concerned with helping us become “well-adjusted.” The ego-self needs to be repaired so it can fit into society and we can play our social roles better. Buddhism isn’t about helping us become well-adjusted. A socially well-adjusted ego-self is still a sick ego-self, for there remains something problematical about it. It is still infected by *dukkha*.

This suggests the other way that Buddhism differs from modern psychology. Buddhism agrees that the sense of self can be reconstructed, and that it needs to be reconstructed, but it emphasizes even more that the sense of self needs to be *deconstructed*, to realize its true “empty,” non-dwelling nature. Awakening to our constructedness is the only real solution to our most fundamental anxiety. Ironically, the problem and its solution both depend upon the same fact: a constructed *sense* of self is not a real self. Not being a real self is intrinsically uncomfortable. Not being a real self is also what enables the sense of self to be deconstructed and reconstructed, and this deconstruction/reconstruction is what the Buddhist spiritual path is about.

Why is a constructed sense of self so uncomfortable? “My” sense of self is composed of mostly habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and acting. That’s all. Those impermanent processes interact with others and give rise to a sense of being a self that is separate from other people and things. If you strip away those psychological and physical processes, it’s like peeling off the layers of an onion. When you get to the end, nothing is left. There’s no hard seed or anything else at the core, once the last few layers have been peeled away. And what’s wrong with that? *Nothing*. The basic problem is that we don’t like being nothing. A gaping hole at one’s core is quite distressing. Nothing means there’s no-thing to identify with or cling to. Another way to say it is that my nothing-ness means my constructed sense of self is ungrounded, so it is haunted by a basic sense of unreality and insecurity.

Our English word *person* comes from the Greek *persona*, “mask.” The sense of self is a mask. Who is wearing the mask? Behind the mask (form) is nothing (emptiness). That there is nothing behind the mask is not a problem—but the persona does not usually know this.

Intellectually, this situation is not easy to understand, but I suspect that most of us actually have some innate awareness of the problem. In fact, if our sense of self is truly empty in this way, we *must* have some basic awareness of this problem—yet it’s a very uncomfortable awareness, because we don’t understand it or know what to do about it. I think this is one of the great secrets of life: each of us individually experiences this sense of unreality as the feeling that “something is wrong with me.” Growing up is learning to pretend along with everyone else that “I’m okay; you’re okay.” A lot of social interaction is about reassuring each other and ourselves that we’re all really okay even though inside we feel somehow that we’re not. When we look at other people from the outside, they seem quite solid and real to us, yet each of us feels deep inside that something is not right—something is wrong at the core.

Here another modern psychological idea is helpful: repression. Although Freud’s legacy has become quite controversial, his concept of repression, and “the return of the repressed,” remains very important. Repression happens when I become aware of something uncomfortable that I don’t want to deal with, so it is “pushed away” from consciousness. Freud believed that our main repression is sexual desires. Existential psychology shifts the focus to death: our inability to cope with mortality, the fact that our lives will come to an end, and we don’t know when—maybe soon. For Buddhism, however, fear of death focuses on what will happen in the future, while there is a more basic problem that we experience right *now*: this uncomfortable sense of unreality at our core, which we don’t know how to deal with. Naturally enough, we learn to ignore or repress it, but that doesn’t resolve the problem. The difficulty with repression is that it doesn’t work. What has been repressed returns to consciousness one way or another, in a disguised or distorted fashion. This “return of the repressed” is thus a *symptom* of the original awareness that we didn’t want to deal with.

Our repressed sense of unreality returns to consciousness as the feeling that there is something missing or lacking in my life. What is it that’s lacking? How I understand that depends upon the kind of person I am and the kind

of society I live in. The sense that something is wrong with me is too vague, too amorphous. It needs to be given more specific form if I'm to be able to do something about it, and that form usually depends upon how I've been raised. In modern developed (or "economized") societies such as the United States, I am likely to understand my lack as not having enough money—regardless of how much money I already have. Money is important to us not only because we can buy anything with it, but also because it has become a kind of collective *reality symbol*. The more money you get, the more real you become! That's the way we tend to think, anyway. (When a wealthy person arrives somewhere his or her presence is acknowledged much more than the arrival of a "nobody.") Because money doesn't really end *dukkha*—it can't fill up the bottomless hole at one's core—this way of thinking often becomes a trap. You're a multi-millionaire but still feel like something is wrong with your life? Obviously you don't have enough money yet.

Another example is fame. If I am known by lots and lots of people, then I must be real, right? Yet the attention of other people, who are haunted by their own sense of lack, can't fill up our sense of lack. If you think that fame is what will make you real, you can never be famous enough. The same is true of power. We crave power because it is a visible expression of one's reality. Dictators like Hitler and Stalin dominate their societies. As their biographies reveal, however, they never seem to have enough control to feel really secure.

This understanding of *anatta* gives us some insight into karma, especially the Buddha's take on it, which emphasized the role of motivations and intentions. If my sense of self is actually composed of habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and behaving, then karma isn't something I have, it's what I *am*. The important point is that I change my karma by changing who "I" am: by reconstructing my habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and behaving. The problematical motivations that cause so much trouble for myself and for others—greed, ill will, and delusion, the three unwholesome roots—need to be transformed into their more positive counterparts that work to reduce *dukkha*: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Whether or not you believe in karma as something magical, as an objective moral law of the universe, on a more psychological level karma is about how habitual ways of thinking and acting tend to create predictable types of

situations. If I'm motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, then I need to be manipulative, which alienates other people and also makes me feel more separate from them. Ironically, I'm busy trying to defend and promote the interests of something that doesn't exist: my self. (And because the sense of self is not a real self, it's always in need of defense and support.) Yet acting in that way reinforces my delusive sense of self. When I'm motivated by generosity and loving-kindness, however, I can relax and open up, be less defensive. Again, other people tend to respond in the same way, which works to reduce *dukkha* for all of us.

Transforming our karma in this way is very important, yet it is not the only goal of Buddhist practice. Fundamentally, Buddhism is about awakening, which means realizing something about the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core. If changing karma involves *reconstructing* the sense of self, *deconstructing* the sense of self involves directly experiencing its emptiness. Usually that void at our core is so uncomfortable that we try to evade it, by identifying with something else that might give us stability and security. Another way to say it is that we keep trying to fill up that hole, yet it's a bottomless pit. Nothing that we can ever grasp or achieve can end our sense of lack.

So what happens when we don't run away from that hole at our core? That's what we're doing when we meditate: we are "letting go" of all the physical and mental activity that distracts us from our emptiness. Instead, we just sit with it and as it. It's not that easy to do, because the hole gives us such a feeling of insecurity, ungroundedness, unreality. Meditation is uncomfortable, especially at the beginning, because in our daily lives we are used to taking evasive action. So we tend to take evasive action when we meditate too: we fantasize, make plans, feel sorry for ourselves . . .

But if I can learn to not run away, to stay with those uncomfortable feelings, to become friendly with them, then something can happen to that core—and to me, insofar as that hole is what "I" really am. The curious thing about my emptiness is that it is not really a problem. The problem is that we think it's a problem. Our ways of trying to escape it make it into a problem.

Some Buddhist sutras talk about *paravritti*, a "turning around" that transforms the festering hole at my core into a life-healing flow which springs up spontaneously from I-know-notwhere. Instead of being

experienced as a sense of lack, the empty core becomes a place where there is now awareness of something other than, greater than, my usual sense of self. I can never grasp that “greater than,” I can never understand what it is—and I do not need to, because “I” am an expression of it. My role is to become a better manifestation of it, with less interference from the delusion of ego-self. So our emptiness has two sides: the negative, problematic aspect is a sense of lack. The other aspect is being in touch with, and a manifestation of, something greater than my sense of self—that is, something more than I usually understand myself to be. The original Buddhist term usually translated as emptiness (Pali *shunnata*; Sanskrit *shunyata*) actually has this double-sided meaning. It derives from the root *shu*, which means “swollen” in both senses: not only the swollenness of a blown-up balloon but also the swollenness of an expectant woman, pregnant with possibility. So a more accurate translation of *shunyata* would be: emptiness/fullness, which describes quite well the experience of our own spiritual emptiness, both the problem and the solution.

These two ways of experiencing our emptiness are not mutually exclusive. I think many of us go back and forth, often bothered by our sense of lack, but also occasionally experiencing our emptiness more positively as a source of spontaneity and creativity, like athletes do when they are “in the zone.” The point isn’t to get rid of the self: that’s not possible, for there never has been a self. Nor do we want to get rid of the *sense* of self: that would be a rather unpleasant type of mental retardation. Rather, what we work toward is a more permeable, less dualistic sense of self, which is more aware of, and more comfortable with, its empty constructedness.

The two aspects of the spiritual path, deconstructing and reconstructing one’s sense of self, reinforce each other. Meditation is letting-go, getting back to the emptiness/fullness at our core, and this practice also helps to reconstruct the sense of self, most obviously by helping us become more mindful in daily life. Each process assists the other indefinitely. As the Japanese proverb says, even the Buddha is only halfway there. Buddhist practice is about dwelling in our empty core, which also reconstructs us into less *self*-ish, more compassionate beings devoted to the welfare and awakening of everyone.

The Lack of Money

What is money? Can Buddhism help us understand it?

These seem like silly questions. After all, we use money every day, so we must have some basic understanding of what it is . . . but is that really so? Perhaps our familiarity with it has the opposite effect, keeping us from appreciating just how unique and strange money actually is.

Take out a dollar bill and look at it. What do you have in your hands? A piece of paper, obviously. You can't eat it, ride in it, or sleep on it. It can't shelter you when it rains, or warm you when you're cold, or heal you when you're ill, or comfort you when you're lonely. You could burn it, but an old newspaper would be much more useful if you want to start a fire. In itself that dollar bill is less useful than a blank sheet of paper, which at least we could use to write on. In and of itself, it is literally worthless, a *nothing*.

Yet money is also the most valuable thing in the world, simply because we have collectively agreed to make it so. Money is a social construction that we tend to forget is only a construct—a kind of group fantasy. The anthropologist Weston LaBarre called it a psychosis that has become normal, “an institutionalized dream that everyone is having at once.” As long as we keep dreaming together it continues to work as the socially agreed-upon *means* that enables us to convert something (for example, a day's work) into something else (a couple of bags of groceries, perhaps).

But, as we know, money always has the potential to turn into a curse. The temptation is to sacrifice everything else (the earth becomes “resources,” our time becomes “labor,” our relationships become “contacts” to be exploited, etc.) for that “pure means.” To some degree that's necessary, of course. Like it or not, we live in a monetized world. The danger is that psychologically we will reverse means and ends, so that the means of life becomes the goal itself. As Arthur Schopenhauer put it, money is abstract happiness, so someone who is no longer capable of concrete happiness sets his whole heart on money. Money ends up becoming “frozen desire”—not desire for anything in particular, but a symbol for desire in general. And what does the second noble (or “ennobling”) truth identify as the cause of *dukkha*?

The Greek myth of Midas and his golden touch gives us the classic metaphor for what happens when money becomes an end in itself. Midas was a Lydian king who was offered any reward he wanted for helping the god Dionysus. Although already fabulously wealthy, his greed was unsatisfied and he asked that whatever he touched might turn to gold. Midas enjoyed transforming everything into gold—until it was dinnertime. He took a bite—*ching!* It turned to gold. He took a sip of wine—*ching!* He hugged his daughter—*ching!* She turned into a golden statue. In despair, Midas asked Dionysus to deliver him from this curse, and fortunately for him the god was kind enough to oblige.

Today this simple yet profound story is even more relevant than it was in ancient Greece, because the world we live in is so much more monetized. Nowadays Midas is socially acceptable—in fact, perhaps there is a bit of Midas in all of us. Living in a world that emphasizes instant convertibility tends to de-emphasize our senses and dull our awareness of them, in favor of the magical numbers that appear and disappear in bank accounts. Instead of appreciating fully the sensuous qualities of a glass of wine, often we are more aware of how much it cost and what that implies about us as sophisticated wine-drinkers. Because we live in a society which values those magical numbers as the most important thing of all, most of us are anxious about having enough money, and often enough that anxiety is appropriate. But what is enough, and when does financial planning become the pursuit of abstract happiness? Focusing on an abstraction that has no value in itself, we depreciate our concrete, sensuous life in the world. Often we end up knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. Can Buddhism help us understand why such traps are so alluring?

Today money serves at least four functions for us. For better and worse, it is indispensable as our medium of exchange. In effect, as I've said, this makes money more valuable than anything else, since it can transform into almost anything. What's more, because of how our society has agreed to define value, money has come to symbolize *pure value*.

Inevitably, then, money as a medium of exchange evolved into a second function. It is our storehouse of value. Centuries ago, before money became widely used, one's wealth was measured in cows, full granaries, servants, and children. The advantage of gold and silver—and now bank accounts—is that they are incorruptible, at least in principle, and invulnerable to rats, fire, and disease. Our fascination with gold has much to do with the fact

that, unlike silver, it doesn't even tarnish. It is, in effect, immortal. This is quite attractive in a world haunted by impermanence and death.

Capitalism added an addictive little twist, which brings us to the third function of money. It's something we take for granted today but which was suspicious, not to say immoral, to many people in the past. Capitalism is based on *capital*, which is using money to make more money: Invest your surplus and watch it grow! This encouraged an economic dynamism and growth that we tend to take for granted today yet is really quite extraordinary. It has led to many developments that have been beneficial but there is also a downside, when you always re-invest whatever you get to get even more, on the assumption that you can never have *too much*. Capital can always be used to accumulate more capital. Psychologically, of course, this tends to become the much more insidious problem that you can never have *enough*. This attitude toward money is in striking contrast with the way that some premodern societies would redistribute wealth when it reached a certain level—for example, the potlatch of native communities in British Columbia. Such societies seem to have been more sensitive to the disruptive effects of wealth-accumulation on social relationships.

The other side of capital investment is debt. A capitalist economy is an economy that runs on debt and requires a society that is comfortable with indebtedness. The debt is at least a little larger than the original loan: those who invest expect to get more back than their original investment. When this is how the whole economy works, the social result is a generalized pressure for continuous growth and expansion, because that is the only way to repay the accumulating debt. This constant pressure for growth is indifferent to other social and ecological consequences. The result is a collective future orientation: the present is never enough but the future will be (or *must be*) better.

Why do we fall into such obsessions? The *anatta*, “not-self,” teaching gives Buddhism a special perspective on our *dukkha*, which also implies a special take on our hang-ups with money. The problem isn't just that I will someday get sick, grow old, and die. My lack of self means that I feel something is wrong with me right now. I experience the hole at the core of my being as a sense of lack, and in response I become preoccupied with projects that I believe will make me feel more “real.” Christianity has an explanation for this lack and offers a religious solution, but many of us don't believe in sin anymore. So what is wrong with us? The most popular

explanation in developed or “economized” societies is that we don’t have enough money. That’s our contemporary “original sin.”

This points to the fourth function of money for us. Beyond its usefulness as a medium of exchange and a storehouse of value and capital for investment, money has become our most important “reality symbol.” Today money is generally believed to be the best way to secure oneself/one’s self, to gain a sense of solid identity, to cope with the gnawing intuition that we do not really exist. Suspecting that the sense of self is groundless, we used to visit temples and churches to ground ourselves in a relationship with the Divine. Now we invest in “securities” and “trust funds” to ground ourselves economically. Financial institutions have become our shrines.

Needless to say, there is a karmic rebound. The more we value money, the more we find it used—and the more we use it ourselves—to evaluate *us*. Money takes on a life of its own, and we end up being manipulated by the symbol we take so seriously. In this sense, the problem is not that we are too materialistic but that we are *not materialistic enough*, because we are so preoccupied with the *symbolism* that we end up devaluing life itself. We are infatuated less with the things that money can buy than with their power and status—not so much with the comfort and power of an expensive car as with what owning a Mercedes Benz says about *me*. “I am the kind of guy who drives a Mercedes / owns a condo on Maui / and has a stock portfolio worth a million bucks. . .”

All this is a classic example of “binding ourselves without a rope,” to use the Zen metaphor. We become trapped by our ways of thinking about money.

The basic difficulty, from a Buddhist perspective, is that we are trying to resolve a spiritual problem—our “emptiness”—by identifying with something outside ourselves, which can never confer the sense of reality we crave. We work hard to acquire a big bank account and all the things that society teaches us will make us happy, and then we cannot understand why they do not make us happy, why they do not resolve our sense that something is lacking. Is the reason really that we don’t have enough *yet*?

I think that Buddhism gives us the best metaphor to understand money: *shunyata*, the “emptiness” that characterizes all phenomena. The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna warns us not to grab this snake by the wrong end, because there is no such thing as *shunyata*. It is a shorthand way to

describe the interdependence of things, how nothing self-exists because everything is part of everything else. If we misunderstand the concept and cling to *shunyata*, the cure becomes worse than the disease. Money—also nothing in itself, nothing more than a socially agreed-upon symbol—remains indispensable today. But woe to those who grab this snake by the tail. As the Heart Sutra teaches, all form is empty, yet there is no emptiness apart from form. Preoccupation with money is fixation on something that has no meaning in itself, apart from the forms it takes, forms that we become less and less able to truly appreciate.

Another way to make this point is that money is not a *thing* but a *process*. Perhaps it's best understood as an energy that is not really mine or yours. Those who understand that it is an empty, socially-constructed symbol can use it wisely and compassionately to reduce the world's suffering. Those who use it to become more real end up being used by it, their alienated sense of self clutching a blank check—a promissory note that can never be cashed.

The Great Seduction

Why would anyone in his right mind want to become famous—I mean *really* famous? I know that fame is often convertible into other things that we crave: money (selling your story to the newspapers), sexual attraction (people throwing themselves at your feet), power (fame is roughly equivalent to success for actors and politicians). But what's enjoyable about being so well-known that you can't walk down a sidewalk without the risk of being mobbed?

You might enjoy such attention the first time, yet the need to protect yourself would soon make it burdensome, and sometimes dangerous. The nuisance of stalkers points to a bigger problem. Not everyone will be satisfied to admire you from afar. You can't simply turn off your celebrity when it is inconvenient, because it doesn't belong to you. Your appearance, words, and actions are publicly available and scrutinized. Famous people can't help getting caught up in our fantasies about who they (and we) are. People relate not to you but to what you mean for them. Remember what happened to John Lennon?

Lennon's kind of fame is a relatively recent development. It requires modern media such as newspapers, magazines and television. Word of mouth isn't enough. Of course, from the very beginning of civilization there have always been some famous people, usually rulers and conquerors. Kings had bards to compose songs celebrating their achievements. In those days that was the only way to record one's exploits for posterity. There were also religious teachers such as Jesus and the Buddha. One of the most famous figures in pre-modern Europe was Saint Francis of Assisi. He was renowned because of his sanctity—that is, his close relationship with God. His fame was a side-effect of what he was believed to be.

We can wonder about whether fame was a burden for Saint Francis, but what was life like for all those other people during his time who were not famous, and who probably never saw anyone who was? Today we tend to suppose that everyone longs for personal fame, yet according to historians medieval people had no such desire. Our assumption reveals more about us than about them, and encourages us to reflect: why has the prospect of fame become so seductive to us? Why are so many people eager to make fools of themselves on *Big Brother*? And why are the rest of us so keen to watch them?

New technologies offer new possibilities. It's no coincidence that the modern world began roughly the same time as the printing press. Print offered not only a new medium for fame but also a new kind of fame: the bestselling author. As with Saint Francis, Shakespeare's reputation was a side-effect of something else—in his case, an unparalleled literary imagination. Today, in contrast, we have *celebrities*: people who are famous mainly for being famous, since most of us have forgotten how they became famous. No one questions this because fame is now accepted as an end in itself. Celebrities continue to be celebrated because the media need them as much as they need the media. Television, like politics, thrives not on stories or ideas but on personalities.

In the last century the number of famous people has rapidly proliferated because everyday life has become so much more dominated by the media. We spend increasingly large portions of our time plugged into one or another of the electronic media, which now function as our collective nervous system. At the same time, desire for fame has become so ubiquitous that we no longer notice it, any more than fish see the water they swim in. It has infiltrated all the corners of our culture, including

Christmas carols (“Then how the reindeer loved him/ As they shouted out in glee,/ ‘Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer/ You’ll go down in history!’”) and spaghetti sauce bottles (see the label on Newman’s Own Spaghetti Sauce).

What does this fascination with celebrity mean for those of us who aren’t famous? How has it affected our own self-image? Instead of taking this collective obsession for granted, we’d do better to ask where it comes from. We can’t make sense of it, I think, unless we consider the alternative. We don’t understand the attraction of fame until we realize what is unattractive about being not-famous. In a culture so permeated by print and electronic images, where the media now determine what is real and what is not, being anonymous amounts to being no one at all. To be unknown is to feel like we are nothing, for our lack of being is constantly contrasted with all those *real* people whose images dominate the screen, and whose names keep appearing in the newspapers and magazines. In his book *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy sums it up well: “the essential lure of the famous is that they are somehow more real than we and that our insubstantial physical reality needs that immortal substance for support . . . because it is the best, perhaps the only, way *to be*.”

If self-justifying fame is the way to become more real, then one way to become real is to be really bad. “How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?” wrote a serial killer to the Wichita police. Only with his sixth murder, he complained, had he begun to get the publicity he deserved. More recently, the Virginia Tech gunman Seung-Hui Cho succeeded in making himself into someone who will not soon be forgotten. According to Braudy such fame “promises acceptability, even if one commits the most heinous crime, because thereby people will finally know who you are, and you will be saved from the living death of being unknown.”

People in low-tech medieval times had their own problems, but *the living death of being unknown* was not one of them. Since fame was so rare and not really a possibility for anyone except a few rulers, anonymity was not the curse that it has become for us.

“How can he be dead, who lives immortal in the hearts of men?” mused Longfellow about Michelangelo. Freud defined immortality as “being loved by many anonymous people,” yet our desire for such widespread, impersonal love reveals just as much about our craving for fame right here

and now. What makes that person on the screen seem more *real* to us, if not that we're all looking at her?

The basic problem is that preoccupation with fame plugs all too easily into the sense of *lack* that haunts our sense of self. That it's a construct means the sense of self is always ungrounded and insecure. That it's a product of psychological and social conditioning means that it develops in response to the attention of others, especially parents, siblings, and friends. Even as adults, therefore, we quite naturally try to reassure ourselves with the approbation of other people. Much of the value of money for us is due to its supposed effects on the opinion of others. As much as Donald Trump may enjoy his wealth, he obviously craves public admiration as much, if not more.

One difference between medieval people and us is that they believed in a different kind of salvation. If they lived as God wanted them to, He would take care of them. Today fewer people believe in God or an afterlife, which makes us more susceptible to secular solutions that promise to fill up our sense of lack right now.

The irony of a celebrity-obsessed culture is that, whether you're famous or a nobody, you are equally trapped if fame is important to you—that is, if you accept that it's a way to become more real. The duality between fame and anonymity is another version of the dualistic thinking that Buddhism cautions us about. We distinguish between them because we want one rather than the other, but we can't have one without the other because they are interdependent. The meaning of each depends upon the other, since each is the opposite of the other. If I want to live a "pure" life (however that is understood), I need to keep avoiding impurity. In the same way, to the extent that I desire to be famous then I am equally worried about not being famous.

It makes no difference whether I actually *am* famous. In either case, I'm trapped in the same dualistic way of thinking. If I'm not famous, I will worry about remaining that way. If I am famous, I will also worry about remaining that way—that is, about losing my fame. Although the media need celebrities they are readily replaced. Even if my celebrity continues, I can never be famous *enough*—because no one can ever be famous enough, any more than one can ever be rich enough or thin enough. When fame symbolizes becoming more real, disappointment or disillusionment is

inevitable. No amount of fame can ever satisfy if it's really something else that I am seeking from it, which it cannot provide.

As Lewis Lapham says, "Because the public image comes to stand as the only valid certification of being, the celebrity clings to his image as the rich man clings to his money— that is, as if to life itself." But some rich people do not cling to their money. The issue, again, is whether we use money or it uses us. If we understand what money is—a social construction that is valueless in and of itself—we need not be ensnared by it. Is the same true for fame?

Unless you are very rich indeed, money can still leave you anonymous and relatively invisible, whereas fame does not. Otherwise, however, the parallel still holds. If you realize that fame, like money, cannot make you more real, you can escape the trap of trying to use it to become someone special.

For an example, consider the situation of the Dalai Lama. He has received the Nobel Peace Prize, perhaps humanity's highest honor, and he needs bodyguards (mainly because of his difficult position as an exiled head of state). Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama serves as an admirable example of how fame, like money, can be valuable when employed as a skilful means. He is such a fine Dharma teacher because he has evidently not been personally affected by his reputation as Buddhism's foremost Dharma teacher.

The Time Trap

A lot of our *dukkha* has to do with time. We feel trapped by it. More precisely, we're trapped *in* it. Occasionally we don't know what to do with ourselves when we have a free afternoon, but more often we can't find the time to do everything that needs to be done, or all the things we want to do. Although we'd like to be able to slow down and enjoy the moment, right here and now, there's just too much that's waiting to be done. Maybe tomorrow, or next week.

But there's a more sinister problem with time. The fact that we never seem to have enough of it points to a bigger predicament, that we *can't* ever have enough of it. What time we have will sooner or later come to an end, and that may be sooner if we're not careful—and maybe even if we are. Like everything else that lives, we're born at a certain time and pass away

sometime later, yet something in us screams in denial: *No!* Not only do we want to keep living forever, we feel as if we *should* live forever. Awareness of our inevitable fate is part of what being self-conscious means. How lucky unselfconscious animals are: when it's time for them to die they die, but they don't seem to spend their whole lives worrying about it.

Many religions provide an escape that distinguishes body from soul. The body dies but the soul lives on. Buddhism, however, offers a more paradoxical solution. Time and eternity are not incompatible. In fact they are like two sides of the same coin. The eternity we seek is something we already experience. We just need to realize the true nature of time.

Buddhism distinguishes two truths, the relative truth and the ultimate truth. Just as *samsara*, the world of suffering, is not different from nirvana, so the relative truth does not refer to a different reality than the ultimate truth does. The relative truth is the way we usually experience the world, as a collection of separate things—including *us*—that arise and pass away. This occurs in time that is experienced as objective and external. The ultimate truth is realizing the way things really are, that they are not separate from each other and therefore are not really *things*. What does that imply about the time they are supposed to be *in*?

According to the relative truth you and I are also in time, and since we were born we will someday die; that is our *dukkha*. Death is the opposite of life, the end of life. But what if life and death too are two sides of the same coin? According to the ultimate truth we do not escape death because we have immortal souls but because we were *never born*. That is the sense in which we are literally immortal, not subject to death. That is what *anatta*, “not-self,” means. The sense of duality usually experienced between myself *inside* and the rest of the world *outside* is a delusion.

One way to dispel that delusion is to look for the “I” that is supposed to be inside. Hui-k'o complained to Bodhidharma that he had no peace of mind. “Show me your mind,” Bodhidharma replied, “and I will pacify it for you.” “I can't find it,” said Hui-k'o. Bodhidharma: “Then I have pacified it for you.” Recognizing there is no such mind to be grasped, that no such self can be found—that is true peace of mind. Needless to say, this higher truth is not something we can simply read about and agree with. We have to seek for that self until we realize for ourselves why it can't be found.

What does this mean for the ways we experience time right here and now, moment by moment? How can we *at the same time* be living in eternity?

Perhaps the problem is that we don't understand what *eternity* means. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote a short story called "The Immortal," about a man who achieves immortality and then suffers from it. In the first half of the story he searches for the spring whose water grants eternal life. In the second half he searches ceaselessly for the water of another spring that would grant him death. Is eternity in that sense—an immortality that just goes on and on forever—what we really want? Wouldn't life eventually become a burden that we would want to get rid of?

As much as we may chafe at the limited time we have, we are dependent upon those limitations. If my time never came to an end then the meaning of my life would also balloon until I had no reason to do anything right now, especially anything effortful. Want to play the piano? Speak Chinese? When there's no time restriction you can do or learn anything you want—but then what would motivate you to get started today, knowing that there's never any need to hurry . . . and that would be just as true tomorrow, and next year, and the next century. What's the rush? Perhaps I shouldn't generalize for everyone but I'm pretty sure that I would become even lazier. Nor would it help if I decided to be hedonistic. I like chocolate a lot, but a life devoted to eating it wouldn't be fun for long. That's also true for the other pleasures I can think of. A couple days, maybe a week or so, okay . . . but after that?

Margaret M. Stevens, in Claude Whitmyer's anthology *Mindfulness and Meaningful Work*, tells the following story:

"There was a man who died and found himself in a beautiful place, surrounded by every conceivable comfort. A white-jacketed man came to him and said, "You may have anything you choose: any food, any pleasure, and kind of entertainment." The man was delighted, and for days he sampled all the delicacies and experiences of which he had dreamed on Earth. But one day he grew bored with all of it, and calling the attendant to him, he said, "I'm tired of all this. I need something to do. What kind of work can you give me?" The attendant sadly shook his head and replied, "I'm sorry, sir. That's the one thing we can't do for you. There is no work here for you." To which the man answered, "That's a fine thing.

I might as well be in hell.” The attendant said softly, “Where do you think you are?”

This story gives new meaning to the old idea that each of us creates his own heaven or hell.

For Buddhism our real problem isn't inability to keep living forever. The more basic problem is right here and now: that our sense of self isn't real, which gives us, again, a sense of lack that manifests as insecurity and ungroundedness. Since we don't feel real enough, and nothing we acquire or achieve ever makes us feel real enough, we long for immortality as a kind of substitute reality that can postpone the problem indefinitely. Buddhism offers a different solution to that longing. To realize the true nature of the self is also to realize a liberating truth about time.

What's that truth? Time is not something I have, it's what “I” *am*. It turns out that (lack of) time itself was never the problem, but rather the false sense of a distinction between *me* and “*my*” *time*. Both sides of that duality are delusive, because each seems to exist separately yet actually they depend upon each other. To express their nonduality Zen Master Dogen coined the term *uji* “being-time.” My being and my time are not distinguishable.

Hui-k'o realized that there is no *me* to be found that is separate from the world I am *in*. In the same way, time is not something external to me. Instead of me being *in* space and time, it's more accurate to say that I am what space and time are doing, right here and now.

What's liberating about that? If I *am* time, then it makes no sense to say that I am trapped *in* time. Paradoxically, to *be* time is to be *free from* time, because time cannot constrain or contain me if it is not separate from me. What does that mean for how time is actually experienced? One way to express it is that my life/time is always present-tense. What is present is always changing, but it's always the present. When I remember what happened earlier I'm remembering *now*. When I plan for the future I'm planning *now*.

What is the difference between that kind of present and our normal understanding of the present? The present time that I *have* immediately fades away into the past, moment by moment, but the present that I *am* never falls away to become the past, and is therefore the same as eternity.

As the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, “If by eternity we mean timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.” An *eternal present*. I can realize this when that present is not haunted by my fear of death.

Since this is not easy to understand, a couple of thought-experiments may be helpful. Pick up a coffee or tea mug. Is the mug something that’s *in* space, or is it a *form* of space? If the cup itself is separate from space, then we could imagine removing it from space—but what could this mean? A cup needs to be spatial to be a cup. A cup is a way of separating inside space (where the liquid goes) from outside space (where it shouldn’t go). No space, no cup. The cup is what space is doing in that particular place.

Not only what space is doing in that particular place, but what space is doing in this particular moment, because it’s the same with time. Time isn’t something external to things that they just happen to be in. We might have a mental image of a timeless cup but the cups we drink from can’t be removed from time. No time, no things. And, like cups, we too are not separate from our space and time. We are some of the forms that space-time (or being-time) takes.

How does that make our lives eternal? Time for another spatial analogy. Think of a small island—a coral atoll, let’s say—by itself in the middle of the sea, far from any other land. There is an ocean current, which flows steadily from west to east. How fast does that current flow? To measure its movement accurately, a fixed, unmoving perspective is needed, which the island provides. We could set up a device on the coral reef to measure the speed of the current as it flows past. But *what if there is no such unmoving perspective?* Suppose that, instead of being on an island, we were in a light rubber dinghy, which was moving along with the current, as fast as the current. How could we measure the speed of the current then? We couldn’t. For us in the boat there would be no sense of a moving current. There’s awareness of a current moving only if there is something else that’s not moving—perhaps another island in the distance. It’s the relationship between the two perspectives that provides a sense of movement.

Again, it’s the same with time. The fixed island is like our sense of self. The current is time, and we suffer because we fear that sooner or later our own current will stop. But the notion that there is something which doesn’t move is a delusion, a mental-construction. As Buddhism emphasizes,

everything is impermanent. Nothing has a “self-being” of its own apart from its time. All of us are actually part of the same current. My sense of self is composed of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and reacting—all of them being temporal processes, different forms that time takes.

If the flowing current includes everyone and everything, our normal understanding of time as something external to us is misleading. Often it’s convenient to distinguish things from their time, but that is the relative truth. According to the ultimate truth, things can’t really be distinguished from their temporality, and when things are experienced that way then time is really not different from eternity. Thus eternity becomes not a state in contrast to time, but an eternal present that always stays the same—it’s always *now!*—even as it always changes.

How to Drive Your Karma

What are we going to do about karma?

There’s no point in pretending that karma hasn’t become a problem for contemporary Buddhism. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us aren’t sure how to understand it. Along with its twin, rebirth, karma has always been an essential Buddhist teaching, but we don’t know how literally these two should be interpreted. Karma is perhaps most often taken as an impersonal and deterministic “moral law” of the universe, with a precise calculus of cause and effect comparable to Newton’s laws of physics. This understanding, however, can lead to a severe case of “cognitive dissonance” for modern Buddhists, since the physical causality that modern science has discovered about the world seems to allow for no such mechanism.

Some important Buddhist teachings make more sense to us today than they did to people living at the time of the Buddha. What Buddhism has to say about *anatta*, “not-self,” for example, is consistent with what modern psychology has discovered about how the ego-self is constructed. Likewise, what Buddhist thinkers such as Nagarjuna have said about language— how it works and how it often misleads us—is consistent with what many linguists and philosophers have recently been emphasizing. In such ways, Buddhism can fit quite nicely into modern ways of understanding. This is not the case with traditional views of karma. Of course, this by itself does

not disprove anything. It does, however, encourage us to think more deeply about karma.

There are at least two other big problems with the ways that karma has traditionally been understood. One of them is its unfortunate implications for many Asian Buddhist societies, where a self-defeating split has developed between the Sangha and the laity. Although the Pali Canon makes it quite clear that laypeople too can attain liberation, the main spiritual responsibility of lay Buddhists, as popularly understood today, is not to follow the path themselves but to support the monastics. In this way, lay men and women gain *punna*, “merit”—a concept that makes karma into a commodity. By accumulating merit they hope to attain a favorable rebirth, which for some offers the opportunity to become a *bhikkhu* next time. More often, though, lots of merit means rebirth into a wealthy family, if not winning the lottery this lifetime. This approach makes Buddhism into a form of “spiritual materialism,” because Buddhist teachings are being used to gain material rewards.

Unavoidably, this has had a negative effect on the Sangha too. Visitors to Buddhist societies such as Thailand can be forgiven for concluding that the Sangha’s main social role is not to teach the Dharma, 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 monastics, therefore, is to follow all the Vinaya rules and regulations strictly, and to be seen to do that, so that one is a worthy recipient of lay support. The result is that many Asian Sanghas and their lay supporters are locked into a codependent marriage where it’s difficult for either partner to change. This preoccupation with karma is as unfortunate as the preoccupation of many Christians with sin—in fact they are mirror-images of each other, the first usually understood positively, the second definitely negative. But there is much more to the teachings of both Jesus and the Buddha.

As if that were not problematic enough, there is an even greater issue that has important implications for how Buddhism will adapt to a more global role in the future. Karma has been used to rationalize racism, caste, economic oppression, birth handicaps, and everything else. Taken literally, karma justifies the authority of political elites, who therefore must deserve their wealth and power, and the subordination of those who have neither. It

provides the perfect theodicy: If there is an infallible cause-and-effect relationship between one's actions and one's fate, there is no need to work toward social justice, because it's already built into the moral fabric of the universe. In fact, if there is no undeserved suffering, there is really no evil that we need to struggle against.

I remember a Buddhist teacher's reflections on the Holocaust in Nazi Germany during the World War II: "What terrible karma all those Jews must have had . . ." This kind of fundamentalism, which blames the victims and rationalizes their horrific fate, is something no longer to be tolerated quietly. It is time for modern Buddhists and modern Buddhism to outgrow it by accepting social responsibility and finding ways to address such injustices.

In the *Kalama Sutra*, sometimes called "the Buddhist charter of free inquiry," the Buddha emphasized the importance of intelligent, probing doubt. He said that we should not believe in something until we have established its truth for ourselves. This suggests that accepting karma and rebirth literally, without questioning what they really mean, simply because they have been part of the historical Buddhist tradition, may actually be unfaithful to the best of the tradition. This does not mean disparaging or dismissing Buddhist teachings about them. Rather, it highlights the need for modern Buddhism to *interrogate* those teachings. Given what is now known about human psychology, including the social construction of the self, how might we today approach these teachings in a way that is consistent with our own sense of how the world works? Unless we can do so, their power to emancipate will for us remain unrealized.

One of the most basic principles of Buddhism is interdependence, but I wonder if we realize what that implies about the original teachings of the Buddha. Interdependence means that nothing has any "self-existence" because everything is dependent upon other things, which are themselves dependent on other things, and so forth. All things originate and pass away according to causes and conditions. Yet Buddhism, we believe, originated in the unmediated experience of Shakyamuni Buddha, who became an "awakened one" when he attained nirvana under the Bodhi tree. Different Buddhist scriptures describe that experience in different ways, but for all Buddhist traditions his enlightenment is the basic source of all Buddhist teachings, which unlike Hindu teachings do not rely upon anything else such as the ancient revealed texts of the Vedas.

Although we usually take the above account for granted, there is a problem with it. That enlightenment story, as usually told, amounts to a myth of self-origination—something Buddhism denies! If the interdependence of everything is true for everything, the truth of Buddhism could not have sprung up independently from all the other spiritual beliefs of the Buddha’s time and place (i.e., Iron-Age India), without any relationship to them. Instead, the teachings of Shakyamuni must be understood as a *response* to those other teachings, but a response that, inevitably, also *presupposed* many of the spiritual beliefs current in that culture—for example, popular Indian notions of karma and rebirth, which were becoming widespread at that time.

Consider the insightful comment that Erich Fromm made about another (although very different!) revolutionary, Sigmund Freud:

“The attempt to understand Freud’s theoretical system, or that of any creative systematic thinker, cannot be successful unless we recognize that, and why, every system as it is developed and presented by its author is necessarily erroneous. . . . the creative thinker must think in the terms of the logic, the thought patterns, the expressible concepts of his culture. That means he has not yet the proper words to express the creative, the new, the liberating idea. He is forced to solve an insoluble problem: to express the new thought in concepts and words that do not yet exist in his language. . . . The consequence is that the new thought as he formulated it is a blend of what is truly new and the conventional thought which it transcends. The thinker, however, is not conscious of this contradiction.”

Fromm’s point is that even the most creative and revolutionary thinkers cannot stand on their own shoulders. They too remain dependent upon their cultural context, whether intellectual or spiritual—which is precisely what Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and causal interdependence implies. Of course, there are important differences between Freud and Shakyamuni, but the parallel is nevertheless very revealing. The Buddha too expressed his new, liberating insight in the only way he could, using the religious categories that his culture could understand. Inevitably, then, his Dharma (or his way of expressing the Dharma) was a blend of the truly new (for example, teachings about *anatta*, “not-self” and *paticcasamuppada*, “dependent origination”) and the conventional religious thought of his time

(karma and rebirth). Although the new transcends the conventional, as Fromm puts it, the new cannot immediately and completely escape the conventional wisdom it surpasses.

By emphasizing the inevitable limitations of any cultural innovator, Fromm implies the impermanence—the dynamic, developing nature—of all spiritual teachings. In revolutionizing the spiritual path of his time the Buddha could not stand on his own shoulders, yet thanks to his profound insight those who followed could stand on his. As Buddhists, we tend to assume that the Buddha understood everything, that his awakening and his way of expressing that awakening are unsurpassable—but is that fair to him? Given how little we actually know about the historical Buddha, perhaps our collective image of him reveals less about who he actually was and more about our own need to discover or project a completely perfect being to inspire our own spiritual practice.

Another basic teaching of Buddhism is impermanence, which in this context reminds us that Hindu and Buddhist doctrines about karma and rebirth have a history that *they have evolved over time*. Earlier Brahmanical teachings tended to understand karma mechanically and ritualistically. To perform a sacrifice in the proper fashion would invariably lead to the desired consequences. If those consequences were not forthcoming, then either there had been an error in procedure or the causal effects were delayed, perhaps until your next lifetime (hence implying reincarnation). The Buddha's spiritual revolution transformed this ritualistic approach to getting what you want out of life into a moral principle by focusing on *cetana*, “motivations, intentions.” *Cetana* is the key to understanding how he ethicized karma. The Dhammapada, for example, begins by emphasizing the pre-eminent importance of our mental attitude:

“Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.”

To understand the Buddha's innovation, it is helpful to distinguish a moral act into three aspects: the *results* that I seek; the *moral rule or regulation* I am following (for example, a Buddhist precept or Christian commandment; or ritualistic procedures); and my mental attitude or *motivation* when I do something. Although these aspects cannot be separated from each other, we can emphasize one more than the others—in fact, that is what we usually do. By no coincidence, in modern moral philosophy there are also three main types of theories. *Utilitarian* theories focus on consequences, *deontological* theories focus on general principles such as the Ten Commandments, and *virtue theories* focus on one's character and motivations.

In the Buddha's time the Brahmanical understanding of karma emphasized the importance of following the detailed procedures (rules) regulating each ritual. Naturally, however, the people who paid for the rituals were more interested in the results. We have already noticed that, unfortunately, the situation in some Buddhist countries is not much different today. Monastics are preoccupied with following the complicated rules that regulate their lives, while laypeople are preoccupied with accumulating merit by giving gifts to them. Both of these attitudes miss the point of the Buddha's spiritual innovation, which emphasized the role of intention.

Nevertheless, some Pali Canon texts do support a largely deterministic view. (Is it a coincidence that most of these passages work to the material benefit of the Sangha that has preserved them?) For example, in the *Culakammavibhanga Sutra* (*Majjhima Nikaya* 135) karma is used to explain various differences between people, including physical appearance and economic inequality. However, there are other texts where the Buddha clearly denies moral determinism, for example the *Tittha Sutra* (*Anguttara Nikaya* 3.61) in which the Buddha argues that such a view denies the possibility of following a spiritual path:

“There are priests and contemplatives who hold this teaching, hold this view: “Whatever a person experiences—pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful—that is all caused by what was done in the past.” . . . Then I said to them, “Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings because of what was done in the past. A person is a thief . . . unchaste . . . a liar . . . a divisive speaker . . . a harsh speaker . . . an idle chatterer . . . greedy . . . malicious . . . a holder of wrong views because of what was done in the past.” When one falls back on what was done in the past as being

essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], “This should be done. This shouldn’t be done.” When one can’t pin down as a truth or reality what should and shouldn’t be done, one dwells bewildered and unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative.”

In another short sutra (*Sutta Nipata* 36.21), an ascetic named Shivaka asked the Buddha about the view that “‘whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action.’ Now, what does the revered Gotama [Buddha] say about this?” To which the Buddha replies:

“Produced by (disorders of the) bile, there arise, Shivaka, certain kinds of feelings. . . . Produced by (disorders of the) phlegm . . . of wind . . . of (the three) combined . . . by change of climate . . . by adverse behavior . . . by injuries . . . by the results of karma—(through all that), Shivaka, there arise certain kinds of feelings. . . . Now when these ascetics and Brahmins have such a doctrine and view that “‘whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action,’” then they go beyond what they know by themselves and what is accepted as true by the world. Therefore, I say that this is wrong on the part of these ascetics and Brahmins.”

While we take the words of the Buddha seriously, we should not overlook the humor of this passage. I can even imagine the Buddha passing wind, and then asking Shivaka, “Was *that* produced by karma?” Perhaps the important point to be gleaned from comparing such passages is that the earliest Buddhist teachings about karma are somewhat ambiguous. If they are insufficient by themselves as a guide for understanding karma today, I think that we should return to the Buddha’s revolutionary emphasis on the motivations of our actions. How should we today appreciate the original insight of his approach?

The original Sanskrit term *karma* (*kamma* in Pali) literally means “action” (*vipaka* is the karmic result of action, also known as its *phala*, “fruit”), and as this suggests the basic point is that our actions have consequences—more precisely, that our morally relevant actions have morally relevant consequences that extend beyond their immediate effects. In most popular understandings, the law of karma and rebirth is a way to get a handle on how the world will treat us in the future, which also implies, more immediately, that we must accept our own responsibility for whatever

is happening to us now, as a consequence of something we must have done earlier. This misses the revolutionary significance of the Buddha's reinterpretation.

Karma is better understood as the key to spiritual development: *how our life-situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of our actions right now*. When we add the Buddhist teaching about not-self—in modern terms, that one's sense of self is a mental construct—we can see that karma is not something the self *has*, it is what the sense of self *is*, and what the sense of self is changes according to one's conscious choices. "I" (re)construct myself by what "I" intentionally do, because "my" sense of self is a precipitate of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Just as my body is composed of the food eaten, so my character is composed of conscious choices, "I" am constructed by my consistent, repeated mental attitudes. People are "punished" or "rewarded" not for what they have done but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. An anonymous verse expresses this well:

*Sow a thought and reap a deed
Sow a deed and reap a habit
Sow a habit and reap a character
Sow a character and reap a destiny*

What I do is motivated by what I think. Intentional actions, repeated over and over, become habits. Habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and reacting construct and compose my sense of self: who I am. The kind of person I am does not fully determine what occurs to me but strongly affects what happens and how I respond to it.

Confession and repentance are so important because they are our way of acknowledging, both to others and to ourselves, that we are striving to not allow something we have done to become (or remain) a habitual tendency that forms part of our sense of self.

Such an understanding of karma does not necessarily involve another life after physical death. As the philosopher Spinoza expressed it in the last proposition of his *Ethics*, happiness is not the reward for virtue; happiness is virtue itself. We are punished not for our "sins" but by them. To become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different way. When your mind changes, the world changes. And when we respond differently to

the world, the world responds differently to us. Insofar as we are actually nondual with the world, our ways of acting in it tend to involve feedback systems that incorporate other people. People not only notice what we do, they notice why we do it. I may fool people sometimes, yet over time my character becomes revealed as the intentions behind my deeds become obvious. The more I am motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, the more I must manipulate the world to get what I want, and consequently the more alienated I feel and the more alienated others feel when they see they have been manipulated. This mutual distrust encourages both sides to manipulate more. On the other side, the more my actions are motivated by generosity, lovingkindness, and the wisdom of interdependence, the more I can relax and open up to the world. The more I feel part of the world and genuinely connected with others, the less I will be inclined to use others, and consequently the more inclined they will be to trust and open up to me. In such ways, transforming my own motivations not only transforms my own life; it also affects those around me, since what I am is not separate from what they are.

This more naturalistic understanding of karma does not mean we must necessarily exclude other, perhaps more mysterious possibilities regarding the consequences of our motivations for the world we live in. There may well be other aspects of karmic cause-and-effect that are not so readily understood. What is clear in either case, however, is that karma-as-how-to-transform-my-life-situation-by-transforming-my-motivations-right-now is not a fatalistic doctrine. Quite the contrary: it is difficult to imagine a more empowering spiritual teaching. We are not enjoined to accept the problematic circumstances of our lives. Rather, we are encouraged to improve our spiritual lives and worldly situation by addressing those circumstances with generosity, loving-kindness and nondual wisdom.

What's Wrong with Sex?

As Buddhism infiltrates the West, one of the important and interesting points of contention is sexuality (of course!). Buddhism in Asia has been largely a cultural force for celibacy (among monastics) and sexual restraint, so how is Western Buddhism adapting to the sexual revolution?

Today many people in contemporary Western societies are sexually “liberated”—liberated, however, in a somewhat different fashion than the

Buddhist tradition has usually understood liberation. We still have many problems with sex, but nowadays they are less likely to involve guilt and repression than various types of obsession such as addiction to pornography. Since the 1960s our lifestyles and customs have become very different from those with which patriarchal societies regulated sexual urges—often providing outlets for men while strictly controlling women and procreation. Our culture is saturated with sexuality, not only because sex has become a commodity in every possible way (being indispensable for grabbing our attention) but also because preoccupation with sexual gratification helps to fill up the void left by the collapse of any larger meaning. The importance of sex has ballooned because we are not sure what else is important in a God-less world that often seems intent on destroying itself.

This is not to demean the pleasures of sex, or the libidinal freedoms we enjoy today. Despite new kinds of social pressure, most of us benefit from many more options. The liberation of sexual preference means that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals can come out of the closet, leading to an important reduction in collective social *dukkha*. Premarital sex is more or less taken for granted, and marriage itself is no longer a matter of course. It has become a decision that many choose not to take, or to take and retake. Thanks to effective contraception, children too have become a matter of choice. Some people decry the selfcenteredness of those who decide not to raise children, and some others decry the selfcenteredness of those who do. Buddhism is unique among the major religions in not being pro-natalist. There is no doctrinal encouragement that we should have lots of children, which is another aspect of the Dharma to appreciate, given our overpopulation of the earth. The emphasis on monasticism works the other way, encouraging an alternative to procreation. The Buddha, like Jesus, was not a big proponent of “family values.”

But how does Buddhism fit into our freewheeling ways today? Well, many of us aren't sure. Western monastics continue to follow the established regulations of their own tradition, or at least appear to do so (like some of their Asian counterparts, no doubt). However, most serious practitioners in the West, and probably in Asia, are lay. Since sexual morality is also a matter of karma rather than God's commandment—“Do this or else!”—for the most part we continue to do what we want to do. And is there anything wrong with that?

The issue, I think, is not whether we should or shouldn't "be faithful" to the sexual mores of Asian Buddhist cultures. Instead, this is another opportunity to interrogate the Buddhist traditions: to ask why they had certain rules and guidelines about sex, which can help us determine how relevant those policies remain for us today. Needless to say, evaluating such an intimate topic is a delicate matter, yet such an examination cannot be avoided without risk of hypocrisy on the one side or merely yielding to established tradition on the other. We need to find the middle way between doing the same as pre-modern Buddhism, simply because that's what they did, and another extreme that simply accepts what has become acceptable to many people today. It is the tension between these two perspectives that can be so illuminating. If Buddhism is to realize its potential to be emancipating in our modern, globalizing world, such challenges cannot be evaded.

The rapid change in sexual morality has been uncomfortable for many, but for Buddhism the pelvic issues are mostly secular matters. The third precept is often translated as "sexual misconduct," which for laypeople is usually understood to exclude casual relations, "sex without commitment." Since the crucial concern for Buddhism is always *dukkha*, the most important thing is avoiding sex that harms others or causes them pain. That covers a lot of ground, yet it also leaves a lot of possibilities. There is no blanket prohibition of non-marital sex in the Pali Canon or its commentaries. One should not have sexual relations with someone married or engaged (to someone else), or with those who are under the protection of parents or guardians, but especially today many women (and men) do not fall into those categories, including sex workers. Although apparent tolerance of prostitution makes early Buddhism seem more broadminded than many modern Buddhists, this acceptance can also be understood as an aspect of patriarchy that we have outgrown, or should have outgrown.

There is, however, an important exception to this pelvic freedom. Abortion is killing. According to the Pali Canon, the Buddha said that it breaks the first precept to avoid killing or harming any sentient being. Any monastic who encourages a woman to have an abortion has committed a serious offense that requires expiation. We may wonder how much the Buddha knew about the genetic physiology of conception and pregnancy, but the textual prohibition is unambiguous. This absolute rule in early Buddhism is a source of discomfort and embarrassment to many Western Buddhists, and is often ignored by those who are aware of it. Abortion is common in

many Asian Buddhist societies, perhaps most of all in Japan, where it has become widely accepted as a form of birth-control (partly because oral contraceptives were not legal until recently). Again, karma relativizes even this prohibition: to break the precept against harming others may create more suffering for yourself, yet that is your own decision—a flexibility precious to many liberal-minded Western Buddhists.

So can we conclude that, except for this exception of abortion, there is no problem reconciling basic Buddhist teachings about sex with our own proclivities today? It's not so simple, I think. There is another monastic offence that needs to be considered: the strict prohibition of sexual activity. Any *bhikkhu* whose penis enters a woman is “defeated” and expelled from the Sangha. (The rule is somewhat stricter for *bhikkhuni* nuns: any sexual activity is grounds for expulsion.) Of course, this prohibition does not apply to laypeople, so why should the rest of us be concerned about it? Because it raises issues that are relevant to anyone who is concerned to follow the Buddhist path.

First and foremost, we want to know why the rule is so absolute. In most ways, Buddhism is a very pragmatic religion (or, if you prefer, spiritual path). There is no God or god that must be obeyed, nor did the Buddha set himself up as one. In place of punishment for sin, our unskilful intentions and deeds accumulate bad karma: more suffering for ourselves. But if sexual activity is an offense it is usually a victimless crime. One moment of physical weakness and you are out of the Sangha for good—that's a heavy penalty to pay for a natural urge, isn't it?

In short, we shouldn't ignore this issue just because we are not monastics. The distinction between lay and monastic has become somewhat different in the West, and outside Asia today there are many more laypeople than monastics who are conscientiously practicing a meditative path aimed at awakening. What does it mean for us, then, that the Buddha strictly prohibited any sexual activity for his most serious and devoted followers? Understanding this issue may be crucial for our own spiritual development. It is not enough to say that “the Buddha said it, and that's enough for me.” Since the Buddha himself was so pragmatic, we need to understand what is pragmatic about that strict rule, the better to preserve and practice his Dharma today—and sometimes the best way to preserve a teaching is by modifying it. To be true to Buddhism's own emphasis on impermanence and insubstantiality, maintaining the Dharma in very different times and

places means we need to take into account what motivated the Buddha in his own time and place.

So, once again: why did Shakyamuni Buddha strictly prohibit sex for Sangha members? Evidently sexual purity was not an issue, as it has been for Catholicism, for example, with its emphasis on the Virgin Mary and the asexuality of Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus had no family of his own, but the Buddha had a wife and son, whom he deserted. The courtesan Ambapali was much respected for her gift of a mango grove to the Sangha; later she became a celibate *bhikkhuni* and after her awakening an esteemed teacher. The Buddhist tradition did not condemn or patronize her for her background as a high-class prostitute.

So what's the problem with sex?

Obviously sexual desire is a good example—the “best” example?—of *tanha*, “craving,” which according to the four ennobling truths is the cause of *dukkha*. Nevertheless, we still want to know: is that because sex is somehow bad in itself, or is sex bad because it interferes in some way with the path to liberation? If the former, why is sexual activity intrinsically such an awful thing? The answer is not obvious, at least not to me. After all, our continuation as a species—not only physically but culturally, including spiritual traditions such as Buddhism— depends upon the reproduction of each generation. If, on the other hand, sex is bad because it interferes with following the path, precisely how does it obstruct? Is it a distraction? A bad habit? But then it's hard to see why a single offense is so serious: one strike and you're out.

Is it a physiological issue? According to the tantric traditions, it's important to sublimate sexual energy and direct it up the kundalini to the higher chakras, where it can blossom into enlightenment. That would make sexual activity unwise during periods of intense practice, when that energy is needed for other purposes, but not necessarily a bad thing during other times, such as after enlightenment.

If craving is the cause of *dukkha*, however, isn't sexual desire incompatible with the deep serenity of nirvana? Even if unawakened monks still have such urges, it is important that they endeavor to live the dispassionate life that their practice is aiming at.

That may well be the most important reason, but I wonder if such an argument reflects the Theravada perspective better than the Mahayana. The Mahayana emphasis that form is no other than emptiness (and vice-versa) challenges any duality between *samsara* (this world of *dukkha*) and nirvana. Nirvana is simply the true nature of this world, when our non-dwelling awareness is not fixated on particular forms . . . including attractive sexual ones. According to the Mahayana teachings, we should not reject form by dissociating it from our emptiness. Instead, awakening liberates us to dance freely with forms and between forms, without getting stuck on any. The difference is instructive. When a friend dies, for example, I might respond by dwelling in that quiet, empty place at my core where there is no life or death, no gain or loss, no joy or sadness. Yet I might also respond not by denying or resisting my feelings of grief but by “becoming one” with them and allowing the process of mourning to run its natural course, confident that I will not remain stuck there.

What does that difference in perspective imply about sexual desire? As we know all too well, it’s very easy to get fixated on the object of our passion, or become obsessed with sexual pleasure generally. Nonattachment to forms does not mean recommending promiscuity over monogamy (or vice-versa), for the issue is the relationship between one’s non-dwelling awareness and sexual drive. According to the tantric tradition the energy of that urge can be used in a liberating way. Can attention retain awareness of its intrinsically non-attached nature, even while engaged in sexual activity? The normal tendency, of course, involves an increasingly urgent focus on the future release that is orgasm. In contrast, formless nondwelling awareness is not driven to go anywhere or do anything, because it has nothing to gain or lose in itself. In climax, can one become more aware of that which does not climax, does not get peak or decline? Failure means becoming more entangled in the craving that leads to more *dukkha*. Success may mean freedom from addiction to pleasure, which is not the same as avoiding pleasure.

Such tantric practices are not found in the Pali sutras or in Theravada. Although the Theravada tradition should not be automatically identified with what the Buddha himself taught, its texts are the closest we get to those original teachings. Still, I can’t help wondering if the sexual puritanism now found in the Pali Canon is an historical artifact, resulting from a general disparagement of the physical body that seems to have become common in India and some other places. The Axial Age that

developed in several civilizations during the first millennium B.C.E. involved a stronger sense of transcendence, which included greater tension between that “higher world” and this material one. The duality between them opposed the immaterial spirit to the corruptions of the flesh, denigrating nature, women and sex—perhaps because they are associated with death? Our animal bodies remind us of our mortality . . . so let’s make the soul immortal!

Such an explanation might help us understand some Pali Canon passages that seem excessive in the ways they disparage physical bodies as impure because they are composed of unattractive things such as urine, faeces, pus, mucus, and so forth. A soul/body dualism doesn’t quite fit Buddhism—on the contrary, Buddhism’s emphasis on impermanence and not-self suggests a reaction against it—but such attitudes were apparently part of the cultural milieu the Buddha was raised in. Or did they arise afterwards, and were they inserted into the Canon later?

Whether or not such metaphysical considerations were a factor, other, more basic issues must have been important. Some of them are obvious and have already been mentioned. Monastic sexual activity would be a distraction, to say the least, and expend a lot of energy that would be better used in other ways. It is not only a matter of awakening the kundalini: think of how much time and effort sexual affairs and liaisons can involve, even when they are not secretive. Add to that all the tensions and jealousies that would be created within the Sangha.

Already it becomes apparent that having a more relaxed attitude towards sex would be fatal to the spiritual focus of the community. However, at least two other concerns must also have weighed heavily.

We tend to forget that until the 1960s there was really no reliable contraception. Since Buddhism prohibited abortion and infanticide, sex meant babies, and all the work of caring for them and raising them—especially the unremitting daily task of providing enough food, which is incompatible with a mendicant life. The consequences of this can be seen in the cautionary tale of Japanese Buddhism. Japanese culture has always viewed our natural urges as . . . well, natural. That very much includes the sexual urge, and many if not most temple monks had common-law wives and children before they were legally permitted to marry after the Meiji Restoration. The task of providing for them eventually transformed

the temple into a family business, with the oldest son expected to become a priest to keep that temple business in the family, regardless of whether he had any religious inclinations. As a result, Japanese Buddhism today is a thriving (and lucrative) industry focusing on funerals and memorial services, and not much else.

One more factor may have been the most important of all. Buddhist monastics are traditionally dependent on lay support. This means that the Sangha must be sensitive to the expectations of their supporters. For example, Chinese monks and nuns became vegetarian not because their vows required it but because the laity began to expect it. Also, needless to say, it wouldn't do to have monks seducing their supporters' daughters or wives. Moreover, laymen and women would not look kindly upon sharing their hard-earned food and other resources with renunciants who, instead of devoting themselves to their spiritual practice, spend time dallying with lovers. Even today, when monks in southeast Asian countries like Thailand are discovered with girlfriends, it's often the local lay community that takes the initiative in forcibly disrobing them.

To sum up, there are many strong reasons for the Buddhist Sangha to be strictly celibate. Which of these were the important factors? Early Buddhist texts do not help us decide among them, but my guess is that all of them were.

How does this list shed light upon our situation today? If it is more or less inclusive, there are major implications for Western Buddhism, because few if any of those reasons for celibacy are valid for lay practitioners today.

Yes, there are still times (periods of intensive practice) and places (within practice communities) when sexual abstention is obviously wise to observe. Few Western Buddhists, however, still look upon nature, women and sex as impure entanglements to be avoided. Most of us don't have to worry about what our lay supporters think, because we don't have any, at least not in the traditional sense. Today we have access to effective means of birth-control, so babies usually aren't an issue unless and until we want them to be. A new category of Buddhist has become common in the West: less than monastic in lifestyle (hence not subject to Sangha vows or regulations) but also more devoted to practice than laity have usually been. This creates more distractions, since we must provide for ourselves, but most Western converts are middle-class folk able to find some balance between their

careers and their Buddhist practice—that is, between periods when it is suitable to be celibate and times when that is not important.

So . . . does that mean we can breathe more easily now, as we accept and enjoy the new sexual mores? Not quite yet. There is another aspect of sexual relationships that we need to be aware of, and it's one that is not usually acknowledged.

*Earlier I raised questions about soul/body dualism, and how it encouraged the devaluation of nature, of our material bodies, of women and sexuality. Today it is easy for us to disparage such dualisms, which seem historically dated, but we should also become attentive to our own preconceptions. Our own cultural perspective should not be taken for granted, as if it provided some universal standard. Present Western attitudes are historically conditioned too, in this case by a myth about romantic love that evolved in late medieval Europe, originating in troubadour songs and the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Prior to that, European society, like most traditional societies, subordinated love to marriage, which was not merely a bond between individuals but a relationship between families, which is why the preferences of the young couple themselves were often not a decisive factor.

Despite what we are led to expect from all the media images that intrude upon us, traditional marriage is not primarily about sex but about babies. Pleasant though it be, the act of procreation is brief, while the activity of raising kids involves intense responsibility for many years. In the last couple of generations the almost inevitable link between sex and babies has been somewhat severed, but most of us take for granted an important, often essential link between sex and personal happiness. Today some of the emphasis has shifted from finding the right spouse to finding the right sexual partner, yet there is still the same expectation of personal fulfilment whether through romance or sexual intimacy. Buddhism questions that conscious or unconscious expectation, just as it challenges other myths that predispose us to seek happiness—the end of *dukkha*—in an unskillful way.

Sexual intimacy is a source of pleasure and gratification, and a very nice one it can be; it can also help create and sustain deeper, more meaningful relationships. Nevertheless, the sex drive is basically biological. Sex is an appetite. We do not use our sexual organs; they use us. That is why there is ultimately something delusive about the myths of romantic love and sexual fulfilment. Sex is nature's way, and marriage is society's way, to reproduce

the species. Genuine happiness—that is, the end of *dukkha*—for any of the parties involved has little if anything to do with it.

We don't like to hear this, and we don't want to believe it when we do. "Those intense feelings I have towards my partner make our physical and emotional bond *unique!* We are swept up in something wonderful that helps each of us transcend our individual sense of isolation and open up to something other than ourselves." Yes, your relationship is special, but that is simply because it is yours and not someone else's. It is part of the game that nature/biology/evolution plays with us, and if we don't understand this we are in for a fall and more *dukkha*.

The fall is the disillusionment that later occurs: the discouraging fact that, whether or not one marries, the relationship never quite works out to be as satisfying as expected, whether or not one eventually separates. We should recognize the uncomfortable truth that sex and romance cannot provide the long-term fulfilment—the end of *dukkha*—that we usually hope for. Sex is always nature's trick, and romance a cultural gloss on it. We anticipate that our partner will somehow make us feel complete, but that never happens, because no one else can ever do that for us.

The myth of romance encourages a delusive cycle of infatuation and disappointment followed by a different infatuation. The romantic high has faded? Then obviously he (or she) was not really the right one for me. Time to separate and try again with someone else!

This also helps us understand the painful transition that couples endure when they have children. The semi-official myth—a widespread social belief that no one dares to contradict publicly, or to warn new parents about—is that the great joy of having children brings mother and father closer together, as they beam down at their little offspring. The near-universal reality is that the unremitting stress of nuclear couples having and raising kids cannot but affect the relationship between the parents. The stronger the expectation of marital bliss, the greater the interpersonal difficulties—hence the high divorce rate among younger parents not yet mature enough to make the transition to a different type of child-centered relationship. To meet the persistent and ever-changing needs of young children, parents end up relating to each other mostly through the kids and their requirements. That's tough for those still trying to live the romantic myth.

Since babies are no longer inevitable, is that a reason for not having kids? Sometimes. Given the population crisis, we should think twice and thrice before we decide to reproduce. But sexual relationships tend to have a dynamic of their own, and—*surprise, surprise!*—the urge to have children becomes stronger as couples age and the woman’s biological clock starts ticking more loudly. Mothers usually seem to make the transition more easily from focusing on the spouse to focusing on the baby, while many of us men have difficulty coping with that, especially the woman’s reduced interest in sex. That change that is also natural: sex isn’t the biological process that needs to be emphasized anymore. Needless to say, however, none of this accords with the over-sexualized images of gratification that surround us today: *Sex is the way to become happy!*

None of this is an argument for celibacy or against sex, nor am I making an argument against (or for) marriage. A committed sexual relationship, married or not, has much to offer. So does the celibate life of a monastic. The issue is what we expect from those relationships. Without the myth of self-fulfilment through romance and/or sex, we would be less obsessed with sexuality and therefore suffer less when our expectations are frustrated. When we assume that sex is what can really make us happy, that my partner can and should complete me, we expect too much of it. Consciously or unconsciously we hope that romance and sex will fill up our sense of lack, but they don’t and can’t. The Buddhist path offers us a better understanding of our situation and a more effective way to resolve our *dukkha*.

The Three Poisons, Institutionalized

Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, lived at least 2400 years ago. Buddhism began as an Iron Age religion and all its teachings are pre-modern. So can Buddhism really help us understand and respond to contemporary social problems such as economic globalization and biotechnology, war and terrorism (and the war on terrorism), climate change and other ecological crises?

What the Buddha understood is human *dukkha*: how it works, what causes it, and how to end it. *Dukkha* is usually translated as “suffering,” but as previous chapters have discussed it’s better understood as a basic *dis-ease*,

for it is the nature of our unawakened minds to be bothered about something. The fundamental insight of Buddhism is the connection it emphasizes between such *dukkha* and the self. My deepest frustration is caused by my sense of being a self that is separate from the world I am in. This sense of separation is illusory—in fact, it is our most dangerous delusion.

What does this imply about *collective* selves? Don't we also have a group sense of separation between ourselves "inside" and the rest of the world "outside"? And if my individual sense of self is the root source of my *dukkha*, because I can never feel secure enough, do collective senses of self also mean that there is such a thing as collective *dukkha*? Collective karma?

In fact, many of our social problems can be traced back to such a group ego, when we identify with our own race, nationality, religion, etc., and discriminate between ourselves and another group. Historically this has been a perpetual problem, but in some ways our present situation has become quite different from that of Shakyamuni Buddha. Today we have not only much more powerful scientific technologies but also much more powerful social institutions.

From a Buddhist perspective, the problem with modern institutions is that they *tend to take on a life of their own as new types of collective ego*. Consider, for example, how a big corporation works. Even if the CEO of a transnational company wants to be socially responsible, he or she is limited by the expectations of stockholders. If profits are threatened by his sensitivity to environmental concerns, he is likely to lose his job. Large corporations are new forms of *impersonal* collective self, which are very good at preserving themselves and increasing their power, quite apart from the personal motivations of the individuals who serve them. John Ralston Saul, in *The Doubter's Companion*, describes this as the "amorality" of modern organizations:

AMORALITY: A quality admired and rewarded in modern organizations, where it is referred to through metaphors such as professionalism and efficiency . . . Immorality is doing wrong of our own volition. Amorality is doing it because a structure or an organization expects us to do it. Amorality is thus worse than immorality because it involves denying our responsibility and therefore our existence as anything more than an animal.

There is another Buddhist principle that can help us understand this connection between collective selves and collective *dukkha*: the three unwholesome motivations, also known as the three poisons—greed, ill will, and delusion. The Buddhist understanding of karma emphasizes the role of these motivations, because one’s sense of self is composed largely of habitual intentions and the habitual actions that follow from them. Instead of emphasizing the duality between good and evil, Buddhism distinguishes between wholesome and unwholesome (*kusala/akusalamula*) tendencies. Negative intentions reinforce the sense of separation between myself and others. That is why they need to be transformed into their more wholesome and nondual counterparts: greed into generosity, ill will into lovingkindness, and delusion into wisdom.

That brings us to a very important question for socially engaged Buddhism: Do the three poisons also operate collectively? If there are collective selves, does that mean there are also collective greed, collective ill will, collective delusion? To ask the question in this way is to realize the answer. Our present economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism institutionalizes ill will, and our corporate media institutionalize delusion. To repeat, the problem is not only that the three poisons operate collectively but that they have taken on a life of their own. Today it is crucial for us to wake up and face the implications of these three institutional poisons.

Institutionalized Greed. Despite all its benefits, our economic system institutionalizes greed in at least two ways: corporations are never profitable enough, and people never consume enough. To increase profits, we must be conditioned into finding the meaning of our lives in buying and consuming.

Consider how the stock market works. It tends to function as an ethical “black hole” that dilutes the responsibility for the actual consequences of the collective greed that now fuels economic growth. On the one side of that hole, investors want increasing returns in the form of dividends and higher share prices. That’s all that most of them care about, or need to care about—not because investors are bad people, but because the system doesn’t encourage any other kind of responsibility. On the other side of that black hole, however, this generalized expectation translates into an impersonal but constant pressure for profitability and growth, preferably in the short run. The globalization of corporate capitalism means that this

emphasis on profitability and growth are becoming increasingly important as the engine of the world's economic activity. Everything else, including the environment and the quality of life, tends to become subordinated to this anonymous demand for ever-more profit and growth, a goal that can never be satisfied. The biosphere is converted into "resources," and people into "human resources."

Who is responsible for the pressure for growth? The system has attained a life of its own. We all participate in this process, as workers, employers, consumers, investors, and pensioners, with little if any personal sense of moral responsibility for what happens. Such awareness has been diffused so completely that it is lost in the impersonal anonymity of the corporate economic system. In other words, greed has been thoroughly institutionalized.

Institutionalized Ill Will. Many examples of institutionalized ill will spring to mind: racism, a punitive judicial system, the general attitude toward undocumented immigrants—but the "best" example, by far, is the plague of militarism. In the twentieth century at least 105 million people, and perhaps as many as 170 million, were killed in war, most of them noncombatants. Global military expenditures, including the arms trade, amounted to the world's largest expenditure in 2005: well over a trillion dollars, about half of that spent by the U.S. alone. To put this in perspective, the United Nations spends only about \$10 billion a year. The United States has been a militarized society since World War II, and increasingly so.

Most recently, the second Iraq War, based on lies and propaganda, has obviously been a disaster, even as the war on terror has been making all of us less secure, because every "terrorist" we kill or torture leaves many grieving relatives and outraged friends. Terrorism cannot be destroyed militarily because it is a tactic, not an enemy. Again: if war is the terrorism of the rich, terrorism is the war of the poor and disempowered. We must find other ways to address its root causes.

The basic problem with war is that, whether we are "the good guys" or "the bad guys," it promotes and rationalizes the very worst part of ourselves: we are encouraged to kill and brutalize other human beings. In doing these things to others, though, we also do them to ourselves. This karma is very

simple. To brutalize another is to brutalize myself—that is, to become the kind of person who brutalizes.

This is the sort of behavior we would never do by ourselves, except for a very small number who receive our heaviest social retribution. In war, however, such behavior is sanctioned. Why? Because it is always justified as collective self-defence. We all accept the right and necessity to defend ourselves, don't we? If someone invades my home and attacks me, it's okay to hurt them in self-defence, even kill them, if necessary. War is national self-defense, and, as we know all too well today, national defence can be used to rationalize anything, including torture and what is euphemistically called "preventive war." And just because we ourselves are not the soldiers sent overseas to do the dirty work does not mean that we remain innocent of the consequences. Our society as a whole is responsible, and we are part of that society.

It's curious that our national self-defence (US) requires us to have at least 737 (the official number in 2005) overseas military installations, in 135 countries. It turns out that, in order to defend ourselves, we (the USA) have to dominate the rest of the world. While we insist that other nations do not develop nuclear weapons, we spend almost \$18 billion a year to maintain and develop our own stockpile today equivalent to about 150,000 Hiroshima-size bombs. (Since 1997 the U.S. has conducted 23 "subcritical" nuclear tests to help design new nuclear weapons.) Using even two or three percent of those bombs would end civilization as we know it! No matter how hard as we try, no matter how many weapons we have, it seems like we can never feel secure enough.

In sum, our huge military-industrial complexes institutionalize ill will. Our collective negativity has taken on a life of its own, with a self-reinforcing logic likely to destroy us all if we don't find a way to subvert it.

Institutionalized Delusion. The Buddha is literally "the awakened one," which implies that the rest of us are unawakened. We live in a dream-like world. How so? Each of us lives inside an individual bubble of delusions that distorts our perceptions and expectations. Buddhist practitioners are familiar with this problem, yet we also dwell together within a much bigger bubble that largely determines how we collectively understand the world and ourselves. The institution most responsible for moulding our collective sense of self is the media, which have become a

kind of “group nervous system.” Genuine democracy requires an independent and activist press, to expose abuse and discuss political issues. In the process of becoming megacorporations, however, the major media have abandoned all but the pretence of objectivity.

Since they are profit-making institutions whose bottom-line is advertising revenue, their main concern is to do whatever maximizes those profits. It is never in their own interest to question the grip of consumerism. We will never see a major network TV series about a happy family that decides to downsize, to live more simply so they can have more time together. And, thanks to clever advertisements, my son can learn to crave Nike shoes and Gap shirts without ever wondering about how they are made. I can satisfy my coffee and chocolate cravings without knowing about the social conditions of the farmers who grow those commodities for me, and without any awareness of what is happening to the biosphere.

An important part of genuine education is realizing that many of the things we think are natural and inevitable (and therefore should accept) are in fact conditioned (and therefore can be changed). The world doesn't need to be the way it is; there are other possibilities. The present role of the media is to foreclose most of those possibilities by confining public awareness and discussion within narrow limits. With few exceptions, the world's developed (or “economized”) societies are now dominated by a power elite composed of the government and large corporations including the major media. People move seamlessly from each of these institutions to the other, because there is little difference in their worldview or their goals—primarily economic expansion. Politics remains “the shadow cast by big business over society,” as John Dewey once put it. The role of the media in this unholy alliance is to “normalize” this situation, so that we accept it and continue to perform our required roles, especially the frenzied production and consumption necessary to keep the economy growing.

It's important to realize that we are not simply being manipulated by a clever group of people who benefit from that manipulation. Rather, we are being manipulated in a self-deluded way by a group of people who (mistakenly) think they benefit from it—because they also buy into the root delusion that their ego-selves are separate from other people. They too are victims of their own propaganda, caught up in the larger webs of collective illusion that include virtually all of us. (The Austrian writer Karl Kraus: “How do wars begin? Politicians tell lies to journalists, then believe what

they read in the newspapers.”) According to Buddhism *samsara* is not only a world of suffering, it is just as much a world of delusion, because delusions are at the root of our suffering. That includes collective fantasies such as the necessity of consumerism and perpetual economic growth, and collective repressions such as denial of global climate change.

Realizing the nature of these three institutional poisons is just as important as any personal realization we might have as a result of spiritual practice. In fact, any individual awakening we may have on our meditation cushions remains incomplete until it is supplemented by such a “social awakening.” Usually we think of expanded consciousness in individual terms, but today we must dispel the bubble of group delusion to attain greater understanding of dualistic social, economic, and ecological realities.

If this parallel between individual *dukkha* and collective *dukkha* holds, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the great social, economic, and ecological crises of our day are also *spiritual* challenges, which therefore call for a response that must also have a spiritual component.

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