

It's all very simplistic this Buddhism stuff

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Introduction

It's all very simplistic, this Buddhism stuff ...

said a friend of mine.

Contorting my mind one minute, boring it the next. That the cause of suffering is desire (or craving) seems a little simplistic.

And my friend is correct; this is mother's knee wisdom, what is so special about this Buddhism stuff?

The extent to which a set of beliefs, attitudes, or practices is made meaningful is dependent on the degree to which they can penetrate into the unquestioned assumptions of a cultural order. Here in Australia I cannot escape the last few hundred years of secularising rational science and Enlightenment humanism and the stories that come from them to explain my existence. These modes of reasoning champion the individual and have devised forms of government and education that encourage prosperity. They are also tied into the sacred stories belonging to the tradition of the Christian/Abrahamic God. Certainly in my case, by way of the words and curses I utter, and the repressions I harbour.

In his article 'A Buddha for the Blue States,' Donald Lopez asks:

what, then, can be said about the alternative Jesus depicted (as his advocates like to point out) sitting in solitary meditation beneath a tree rather than nailed to a wooden cross? ... Like Jesus, he wrote nothing himself. But unlike Jesus, his teachings were written down, not thirty-five years after his death but 350, and not in the land of his life and teaching, India,

but on the island of Sri Lanka. What can possibly be said with any confidence about the Buddha's words and thoughts?¹

What can be said with confidence about Buddhism is that it is fast becoming popular in many Western countries. Among many Western Christians there is an enthusiasm for stories that might reinvigorate their faith. The supposed similarities in the character of The Christ and The Buddha and the rediscovery of Christian meditation traditions are examples of this interfaith enthusiasm. I am interested in the recovery of religious experience and practice such that human being-ness may be reintroduced where formerly only the gods dominated. Carl Jung argued that humans can outgrow the form of religion that may be of their tradition, and when that religion no longer can embrace them, the psyche becomes something that cannot be dealt with by 'the measures' of the church.² Picking up on this, Joseph Campbell has added that 'the closest thing he knew to an 'archetypal mythology' was Buddhism.'³

A complication with the search for meaning in different traditions is that one may simply be an observer: looking in, trying to determine the similarities and places where 'belief' might take hold; hoping, I suspect, that if one could truly believe in Buddhism, as I was asked to do with Christianity, then there would be some infallible access to this tradition. What I expect from Buddhism is ultimately what I want for myself. What I say and think about Buddhism is what I want things to be like. I have to be careful when I say that Buddhism means this or that to me because by describing Buddhism, even to myself, I cannot transcend my cultural background. What I want seems disorderly

¹ There is some debate as to the date when the first of the Christian Gospels may have been written. In this paper the author chooses to leave Donald Lopez's quoted date unaltered. D S Lopez, 'A Buddha for the Blue States' in *The Nation*, 21/2/05, 26-29.

² C G Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, London, 1933, 206.

³ J Campbell and B Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, New York, 1988, 22.

because my Protestant religious heritage and experience remain, but not intact.

The disorder I speak of is primarily psychological. I have not proposed for myself a conversion into some ethnically specific Buddhist community. It is possible, living in a modern Western country, to imagine the Buddha and his teachings without ever meeting a person who may have been brought up in a Buddhist country. My Western Buddha is born of the European Enlightenment and bears the signs of the Age of Reason. The way I imagine the enlightened Buddha is as a creation of modernism interpreted by way of a philosophical adventure marked by empirical observations, egalitarianism, secularism, and cosmopolitanism and in somewhat of a contrast, romantic; in line with ideas about sacred ecology. Some process of hybridisation is underway, experienced as a dilemma. This is the dilemma that accompanies someone when they cannot claim to belong to another tradition and when they are in doubt about 'the tradition' to which they may have once belonged.

This essay is concerned primarily with the psychologically difficult idea of impermanence. Buddhism is the name given to a great array of social and cultural phenomena that have clustered and developed around the teachings of the historical personage called The Buddha. It was eighteenth century European scholars and officials who first coined the name. The author uses the words 'Buddhism' and 'Buddhist' knowing there are many understandings as to how they may be interpreted and experienced. Many Buddhist texts touch on the theme of impermanence. The implications of impermanence within Buddhist doctrine over the centuries have been convoluted and contested; but simply put, impermanence has meant that all beings, all things, having arisen, pass away:

'Oh monks,' said the blessed one 'all karmically constituted things are impermanent; they are not fixed, not comforting, and are characterized by constant change.'⁴

Buddhism as a religion and philosophy is derived from the discourse of a spiritual doctrine and practice known on its own ground as '*Buddha Dharma* ... the way of the Buddha.'⁵ Historically, Buddhism in any society and culture expresses a particular local character without necessarily replicating an interest or knowledge of Buddhism from another place.⁶ So the many who study and practice what can be called Western Buddhism in a country like Australia create a version that is local and imbued with some of our contemporary concerns such as ecology, psychology, feminism, family, democracy and science. Today we are also much better informed about Buddhism: migration alone has brought people face to face and Buddhism has now made it to the suburbs.

A popular misapprehension is that Buddhism alleviates suffering. This is understandable because the first of the four Noble Truths that the Buddha taught his disciples was that life is *Dukkha*; suitably translated as suffering or distress and more recently as a general unsatisfactoriness. This first Noble Truth implies that to simply be born is to be conjoined with *Dukkha*. This is the nature of existence. Importantly though, *Dukkha* is neither a curse or some divine imposition, nor a punishment. Nonetheless Buddhism does not flinch from life. It does not offer any illusion that life is not fundamentally difficult when it comes to physical decline, physical pain and eventually death. In this process there will always be sadness too: the death of a loved one or the suffering of the sick and dying will always be difficult to bear.

⁴ J S Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, Belmont, 2002, 91.

⁵ R Robinson, W Johnson and B Thanissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, Belmont, 2005, xix.

⁶ S Muramoto, 'Continuing a Conversation from East to West: Buddhism and Psychotherapy' in *Awakening and Insight: Zen Buddhism and Psychotherapy*, P Eisendrath and S Muramoto, editors, East Sussex, 2002, 1-12.

This is the only eternal truth about the human experience.

I am of the nature to grow old ...

I am of the nature to have ill health ...

I am of the nature to die ...

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.

My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.⁷

Most neurosis is of the nature that would try and set fire to a river because it is psychologically very hard to accept the fundamental reality that one's life is just this life. Right here, right now, and to compound that even more so one can quite easily think that somehow this life is not right, not good enough. The environment is a mess, my parents got it wrong, my partner does not understand, the boss is difficult, the kids are a disappointment. I am not what I desire.

The way the Buddhist treatise on suffering (as articulated in the Four Noble Truths) is constructed is to point out the reality and nature of suffering and to then discuss ways and means by which we each may live more effectively with this reality. With the understanding that life involves each one of us in suffering, it is then explained that there is a cause of this suffering. We are then

⁷Thich Nhat Hanh's version of the Five Remembrances (Anguttara Nikaya Verse 57) cited in a 'Dharma Talk' given by Thich Nhat Hanh on April 5th, 1998 in Plum Village, France. [cited 23/11/06]. Available from <http://www.plumvillage.org/teachings/DharmaTalkTranscripts/spring98/1998%20April%205%20%20Knowing%20the%20Better%20Way%20to%20Live%20Alone.htm>. Reference to these ideas in Mitchell Stephens's blog site *Without Gods: Buddhism and Atheism*, 'All that comes into existence is impermanent; it is born and it dies. But the very essence of what 'I' am -- the Buddha-nature -- is unborn and undying....' [cited 12/11/05]. Available from www.futureofthebook.org/mitchellstephens/archives/2006/06/buddhism_another.html

told it is possible to alleviate this suffering and how this might be done.

Buddhism counsels us to realize that there is a means by which we can work with our suffering. But a fundamental complication in Buddhist philosophy, a complication especially confounding for many people who seek a personal salvation, is that *Dukkha* rises endlessly. No sooner does one calm one's suffering Self than one enters into suffering once again. Paradoxical indeed! So the realisation necessary in understanding suffering is to note that it is endless. There is no permanent state of grace. This seems to demand an imaginative step into another way of understanding existence.

The popular television program *Desperate Housewives* has provoked some dinner table conversations whereby some people are making a connection between matters of general social anxiety, understood more or less as a sort of cultural neurosis, and the lack of a religious, philosophical story that suits a society which has very few survival needs left to fulfil. Whether the women from Wisteria Lane, in *Desperate Housewives* are brainy enough, glamorous enough or indulged enough, some things remain incomplete, unfulfilled, unsatisfied in their lives.

A Difficulty with Reality

Psychoanalytic psychology at the turn of the twentieth century, in summary, was mainly dealing with sexual inhibition. By the 1950s, it was primarily about identity; people not knowing who they were while believing that they should know. Now, analysts are seeing more and more people who feel a kind of despair about the pointlessness of their lives or an impossibility about sexual relationships. Or, they feel a generalised phobia, an anxiety about the instability of ordinary things.

A characteristic of human biological evolution has been the amazing capacity to extend our consciousness in such a way that it has shifted us out of what we might call essential biology.⁸ At some point it became possible to comprehend that we were able to see, that we could feel and discuss our feelings, and that our reality was to be invented. For better or for worse this has become our existence; we human beings live inside a world of our own creation. Congruent with this is our astonishing imagination. Our capacity with language far outstrips the simple function of being able to communicate names and orientation, and what has come to pass is an aptitude, some might even say a gift, to name an existence that does not reflect the reality of that domain we continue to call nature. Extended consciousness may not be limited to human beings alone on this planet, but as far as we can see, and make meaning of, humans, unaccompanied, invent their existence to serve the purpose of a symbolic satisfaction. This way of structuring our feelings enables us to form a sense of ourselves, and of ourselves as part of a symbolic order.

Buddhist discourse over the centuries has organized this symbolic order into groups or phenomenal aggregates, called the five *skandhas*. The first of these refers to the material nature of our bodies, its solidity, fluidity, heat, and motion and these bodily characteristics make possible the five sense organs and their faculties, the eyes, the ears, nose, tongue, and the body's sense of touch. The second *Skandha* group refers to the sensations produced through the contact of the five senses with the mind and the external world. We see and we recognise that we are seeing and we then name the world.

The third group is our capacity to distinguish feelings such as pleasure, gloom, indifference; psychological experiences

⁸ Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, emotion and the making of consciousness*, London, 2000, 195-233.

triggered off by the senses as they identify and name the world. We constantly classify these experiences in terms of the first person pronoun: 'I love that,' 'that confuses me,' 'I feel hurt by that.' The fourth *Skandha* recognizes that these experiences or feelings provoke desires, longings; ambitions upon which we act. Sometimes the action may be passive, a type of mind game. The fifth *Skandha* recognizes that we have thought and sense, we can call this the recognition of self-consciousness.⁹

Buddhists now make a radical empirical finding. These five *Skandhas* are causally connected and interdependent. In other words each causes the other's existence and none exists independently of any other. Bodily phenomena or functions give rise to feelings, feelings give rise to naming the feelings, naming the feelings gives rise to action, action gives rise to awareness of action, awareness of action gives rise to bodily functions. Buddhists say that there can be no unchanging self or 'I' in any or all of these phenomenal groups because they change constantly and most importantly they have no independent existence. There is no consistent 'I' or a developing self but rather a continual flow, this is what Buddhists call consciousness.¹⁰

This is quite a different way of understanding reality to that which insists on a cultural story beginning one way or another with the foundational question 'who am I?' It can be put differently, such as 'know thyself' or 'the unexamined life is not worth living.' Nonetheless, these seem to be some of my most persistent psychological yearnings. My psychological and religious understanding has been that, bit-by-bit, the experiences of life leave traces that grow into a personal story, an autobiographical self. In large part it is an internal story; a story that more or less begins with 'me' and extends out to 'them,' and takes up the

⁹ R Robertson, W Johnson and T Bhikkhu (G DeGraff), *Buddhist Religions A Historical Introduction*, 5th Edition, Belmont, 2005, 14-17

¹⁰ Ibid.

shape of a story line, a plot, and is composed of what we have come to call fictional aspects and factual aspects.¹¹ Herein lies a clue as to why 'life' is sometimes such a maddening riddle: if it can be incredibly hard to tell the difference between them, what is fact and what is fiction? Nonetheless I insist on drawing together all this interesting stuff into my own myth. The essential me. By myth I mean a story that helps us make meaning of the questions 'who am I' and 'who am I in community?'

The European Reformation gave the individual authority within him or herself to determine a personal relationship to their life with (or without) God, and this was linked, by the time of Descartes, with an understanding of the self as a thinker who could also, by way of reason decide the factual nature of reality and not accede to the authority of some traditional model of absolute knowing. Western psychology and philosophy took this further, and supported ideas of Self development. Jungian psychology goes so far as to suggest that the Self becomes God and that the God/Self is the motivating force that transforms and directs ego-consciousness in every one of its developmental shifts on its individuating path to wholeness.¹²

These are important philosophical developments insofar as the self is of this world; the consequence of a life being lived. The Self here is not only a thinker but also a feeler, the arbiter of aesthetics and the judge of goodness and beauty. So the Self has taken responsibility for goodness and beauty, and also for cruelty and hatred, and tends to make no change in the assumption that such a Self is compelled by way of a purpose to evolve. The Self, with or without God, considers itself as having a purpose and so remains consistent even while aspects of its character becomes more sophisticated. Because these are matters of cultural significance they fascinate, and therefore it

¹¹ J Hillman, *Healing Fictions*, New York, 1983, 10-15.

¹² This union is the project Jung called individuation ... and individuating.
P S Romain, 'God, Self and Ego,' [cited 12/6/06]. Available from www.shalomplace.com/view/godselfego.html

remains psychologically very difficult to shift our habit of mind away from our high regard for purpose, accounting I'm sure, for the appeal of the Abrahamic religions.

Differing Religious Stories

Abrahamic religions assert the existence of a universal ground, a primary cause or Godhead that is the unitary source of all things. Common to these religions is the idea of a substantive Being; real and unchanging. Fundamental to this view is the concept that each individual person is endowed with a substantial self, a soul, which cultivates its own rewards at some time in the future. This self is other than the world of change. It is this 'self' that is considered to have a vision of God, and experiences the Absolute, a sort of greater something which remains pure and unchanging. It is also important to note that this self is not embodied.

In contrast Buddhism, while affirming the multiplicity and plurality of things, including symbolic stories, turns the metaphysics of existence around and suggests that there is no underlying unity, ground, or God that supports our moment-to-moment encounter with the world. Buddhism proposes a world that denies the reality of any substantive being, either of the self or the Absolute. It is an interpretative religion that adapts endlessly to changes in understanding about these metaphysical ideas: that existence is harmonious, vast and interdependent and is infinitely variable. At the core of Buddhist teaching as it has unfolded, is the understanding that life is complex and it is not frightening; nonetheless being a human is mysterious. We are made of the stuff of the universe, of elemental stuff and yet we are sustained by love, a love that however intimate is also a love that is not exclusively human. By way of this 'we' enter the sacred mysteries and recognize that such a global love may exceed human understanding, but is it necessarily the God-factor? The need for something *other*, transcendently other, to explain

numinous experience has been historically structured into my meaning making stories.

But contemporary developments in neuroscience points to the need to rethink how we humans make sense of our lived experience. For example, in the 2003 Reith lectures, neurobiologist Professor V D Ramachandran (Director of the centre for Brain and Cognition, UC, San Diego) made the observation that the possible permutations and combinations of brain activity in an individual (that is the number of brain states) '... exceeds the number of elementary particles in the known universe.'

He goes on to say that it never ceases to amaze him

that all the richness of our mental life – all our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts, our ambitions, our love life, our religious sentiments and even what each of us regard as his or her own intimate private self – is simply the activity of these little specks of jelly in your head, in your brain. **There is nothing else.**¹³

When asked whether he could identify something like a 'God Process' in a person's brain function, the neurobiologist James H Austin¹⁴ replied that, again all he discovered was the brain (in a Zen sense, the 'just this-ness' of the brain) and its extraordinary capacity to function.¹⁵

A vast, fathomless, variable and harmonious existence has not seemed compatible with a creator whose personality may at times be jealous, vengeful or even loving. But such an existence is also confounding and it remains psychologically very difficult

¹³ V D Ramachandran, 'Phantoms in the Brain', (Lecture 1) in *The Emerging Mind* on the Reith lectures, 2003, BBC Radio 4. (Emphasis mine.)

¹⁴ Who works with people in deep states of meditative activity.

¹⁵ J H Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Towards an understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*, Cambridge and London, 1999.

for someone born into Abraham's flock to shift their habit of mind away from a sense of self as being shepherded and guided by an all-loving God to an untroubled acceptance of transience and emptiness. It is also interesting that as Buddhism has evolved in different places, some schools have reintroduced ideas of underlying principles of purpose in the guise of such notions as 'One Mind,' 'Foundation Consciousness,' and 'Buddha Nature,' thus reifying and subtly deifying 'Mind.' The energetic pull of purpose, of *telos* seems to implicate an order for things in the way caterpillars become butterflies or daffodils shoot from wizened bulbs. The metaphorical appeal of *telos* is in the way a metamorphosis seems to emanate from the future, the purpose towards which something is attracted, and not subjected to past events of cause and effect. There is undoubtedly a great human enthrallment with purpose, it has powered the miracle of cultural diversity and 'high' civilisation, in Buddhist cultures no less than our own.

But there is a trap and Freud reminds us in *Civilization and its Discontents* that an individual and his or her cultural community are always in conflict. It is a personal conflict, what Freud calls *ordinary neurosis*, felt as a discontent, which can manifest itself as depression when confronted with impermanence. He describes this quandary as an 'aching despondency' and its aversion a 'rebellion against the facts'.¹⁶ Impermanence - the ghost in the machines of culture. Yet life in society is the inescapable obligation for most humans and Buddhism like all wise social religions counsels the development of moral skilfulness. Still it is cautionary to remember that while we may wish our complex symbolic order to shield us from contingent circumstances which constantly erupt (in the way of a private salvation) the fact remains that we are bound into nature in that we are born to die.

¹⁶ S Freud, 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,' in vol 20 of *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, J Stachey, editor and translator, London, 1957, 305

... Through a Glass Darkly

It is not the case that one would live eternally by holding the view that the world is eternal. Nor is it the case that one would live the spiritual life by holding the view that the world is not eternal. Whether one holds that the world is eternal, or whether one holds that the world is not eternal, there is still birth, ageing, death, grief, despair, and pain.¹⁷

The concern that there may be a lack of a religious, philosophical story that suits our contemporary society has been with us for much of the twentieth century. In 1930 Carl Jung said that 'Christianity has become so debilitated that even the Buddhists think it is time they sent missionaries to Europe.'¹⁸ Over time a popular argument has been put that Asian religions and philosophies offer alternatives to the rationalist materialism which we in a place like Australia are supposedly consumed by, and they also propose an alternative to the transcendental determinism of the various Abrahamic faiths. In the late nineteenth century Sir Edwin Arnold, in his poem *The Light of Asia* (1879), explicitly advanced the case that Buddhism with its tolerance, its rejection of blind faith and its invitation for all to test its doctrines in the light of experience, was a much better religion than Christianity to heal the breach between reason and religion.

One can appreciate the desperate desire for a religious faith that promotes a transcendent mind or self but the reality is that nature has laws but no intentions; no sense of responsibility to your or my welfare. Nature is organised but not designed: it does not have what we call a 'mind of its own,' something akin to human intelligence. Nor does nature have a project for us, it does not have anything 'to say' about how to live or what to do with our lives. As Freud points out, 'the intention that man should be happy has no part in the plan of creation.'¹⁹ But we have come to

¹⁷ The Buddha's words in Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *Majjhima Nikaya*, translated as *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 2nd edition, Boston 2001.

¹⁸ C J Jung quoted in *Jung on the East*, J J Clarke, editor, London, 1985, 44.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud quoted in A Phillips, *Darwin's Worms*, London, 1999, 29-30.

want happiness to matter, and happiness here entails pleasures to do with justice, for instance, as much as the pleasures of sexual satisfaction, and the possibility that kindness should somehow be made compatible with our vitality. Once we insist on taking happiness and kindness seriously in this way then the relationship between the cultures we have invented and the nature in which we dwell becomes problematic.

So if nature has no plans, culture certainly does, most often described as truths and argued for as rational accounts of how best to live. I certainly do not disparage the benefits fashioned in a well managed civilization and the way it privileges our egoselves, the development of which has been understood as necessary to handle life as an individual. Such privileging is clearly important; there is a need for a psychic energy at the ready for each one of us to carry out many daily tasks. Getting to work on time, to look after households, to manage new information, to negotiate personal needs and so on. We also know that this ego driven psychic energy can easily be inflated, tending to obscure one from the reality of others, and, I suspect, as most psychoanalysts would attest, it tends to make one ill at ease.

Consciousness

Most of the books I read about consciousness acknowledge that no definitive explanation can be made as to what it might be. But obviously we experience something. We are conscious of the external world: it is shaped and structured in ways that allow us to make meaning and negotiate day-to-day behaviour. Additionally, there is an internal world where we spend time talking to ourselves, engaging in fantasy and allowing our imagination to roam unguided. It is experiential, describable and necessary too, because it helps in the negotiation of meaning. Consciousness unfolds with our living.

Because our brains are wonderfully equipped at allowing our minds to play with ideas, we do not necessarily have to take religious practice at face value. It is not necessary to be literal. As my consciousness becomes more mature, more aware of its own unfolding then in turn my ways of worship become more aware. Worship is another evolving practice, it is revealed only through the world of human experience. It appeals to me that a religion in its most mature and sophisticated state would not be concerned with life after death but rather life with death. It would try to make my life hospitable to the passing of time and the inevitability of death and help sustain for me an image of this world as a place of interest, a place in which to be at ease, and a place to love. Transience should not be a cause for mourning. Making sense of my life as bound by mortality and not being seduced by a wish for transcendence requires a sense of history, not leaps and bounds of faith. Yet this is not that easy because symbolic systems that appeal to the way consciousness can seem to promote an anticipated future are comforting. It requires a great imaginative leap with our intellect to take on Buddhist ideas like impermanence.

A characteristic of Western Buddhism is the emphasis and practice of meditation whose purpose is to draw the mind from the pull of the phenomenal world, and indeed from the pull of the mind itself, towards the dropping away of body and mind. The work is beginningless, passing on through endless futures, it is never complete. Along the way there are milestones, but as the Buddha found out under the Bodhi tree, they are no more than milestones, they are not any kind of ultimate revelation. Buddhism is a process it is not an end in itself.

But if there is no other world and there is no fruit and ripening of actions well done or ill done, then here and now in this life I shall be free from hostility, affliction and anxiety.²⁰

²⁰ Buddhism Portal/Basic Buddhism Content The Buddha from *Paticcasamuppada*, [cited 19/12/05]. Available from www.e-sangha.com/14,76,0,0,1,0.html

The gradual inclusion of Buddhist ideas into western thought has meant that Buddhism is subjected to a western critical analysis, in particular enlightenment humanities and secular science. Interestingly *New Buddhism* as it emerged in Japan in the late nineteenth century took a lead from the European enlightenment to include such ideals as humanism, cosmopolitanism and social responsibility.²¹ Such notions more or less advocate a rational, empirical analysis of existence that allows for the complexity of human experience to be understood as a human phenomena and not the subject of some transcendent, otherworldly or supernatural process. Because Buddhism locates our human psychological experiences right here, right now in this life it appeals to what is fundamentally a secular and humanist society. Buddhist practice is about the mind and how it develops, it is consciousness that is primary in Buddhist psychology. More precisely it is a psychology about the mind with the body, and that is a body not possessed of an original stain.

So, as the secular becomes religious it has to involve a different psychological process; but importantly, the secular has to hold out. Because the gains made in the name of humanism have been significant, science, which is realistic and pluralistic in the way it considers empirical phenomena, must not be absorbed into an unreconstructed religious discourse. The fact that so many people's faith has lapsed has to be taken seriously and seen as a God-send, it is not simply an aberration, or a human fault. It is more radical than that – it is a fault, at least for me, in the Abrahamic traditions, which are no longer prophetic.

A Western Buddhist teacher has told me about the quite different needs of inmates in a number of our metropolitan gaols. Among the Indo-Chinese men there is great interest in having Buddhist stories retold, especially those which have a miraculous quality, and also, stories to do with the precepts and moral behaviour.

²¹ R Robinson, W Johnson, and T Bhikkhu (G DeGraff), op cit, 261.

Many of these men have had only a fleeting association with the religion of their ancestors, because a calamity of migration has often been the loss of the stories told by grandparents and other community elders. Western men in the gaol, however, want to know how to meditate and how to be mindful. For them the Buddhist stories are foreign and strange. Nonetheless their needs seem to be about finding an inner story; how to connect, possibly even how to pray. My friend who does this work tells me that the gaol has become a forum for these men who come to his 'classes' and they continue talking afterwards. I suspect something will 'hatch and brood' from these experiences with Buddhism because the unfolding of a religious experience always matters. The discovery of religion in your life, Jung suggests, is part of the human adventure.²²

The establishment of Buddhist centres in the West in the latter half of the twentieth century has seen a raft of changes to what Buddhism might be. Some call these reforms, although it is probably just as relevant to understand these changes as the result of globalisation; globalisation comes and goes in many directions. In Sydney, in the last twenty years, many Buddhist temples have been established, some of them great and elaborate. Most of these temples are supported by a particular ethnic community; for example the Lao community, or the Cambodians, Sri Lankans, Tibetans, Vietnamese and so on. These communities help compose the way a complex multicultural society like Australia experiences globalised migration with the understandable establishment of different religious buildings and practice.

Along with this, Buddhism has gradually globalized its philosophical appeal. An early example of this would be D T Suzuki's explanation of Zen Buddhism. His writings and talks

²² M Stein and Robert M, editors, *Jung's Challenge to Contemporary Religion*, 1987, [cited 9/9/05]. Available from www.chironpublications.com/religion.html

offered two contradictory categories: Zen could not be properly understood or practiced outside of the Buddhist context, while at the same time he said that the essence of Zen was transcultural. That is 'Zen is the ultimate fact of all philosophy, that final psychic fact that takes place when religious consciousness is heightened to extremity. Whether it comes to pass in Buddhists, in Christians, or in philosophers,' it makes no difference.²³ What has come to pass is that interfaith dialogue is now widespread. Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Jews of all traditions maintain a pragmatic borrowing from the many and various religious *Dharmas*.

I make these points because it is necessary to notice that Buddhism has come into our consciousness, and as the *Dharma* wheel turns, to employ this wonderful metaphor, so the understanding that is Buddhism might be conceived anew. Buddhist ideas are opened up by way of these pragmatic borrowings interlacing itself into my cultural stories. The insightful ways of thinking about how the mind works with the body is a case in point. In some part, the mystery of life is in being **this** body with **this** mind, and that this is an ongoing privilege and challenge in my daily living.

In the *koan* tradition of Zen Buddhism there is a question. 'Why are perfectly realized saints and bodhisattvas attached to the vermilion thread?'²⁴ This is a direct question and it plainly has something to ask about the phenomenal world. The vermilion thread refers metaphorically to the lacework in undergarments that prostitutes wear, and so to be attached to this thread clearly means that the saint or *bodhisattva* has found him/herself

²³ D T Suzuki, in *Buddhist religions. A Historical Introduction*, op cit, 300.

²⁴ Zen *koans*, most of them more than a thousand years old, exist in numerous translations. The author is reliant upon the *koan* translations used in private circulation in Diamond *Sangha* circles, originating from Robert Aitken Roshi. See the Sydney Zen centre web site for more details on the Diamond *Sangha*; thesydneyzencentre@yahoo.com

hooked, caught by the thread and pulled into their sexual passions and desire. And it's important to acknowledge that they have 'found themselves' in their desire once again, desire is endlessly attractive. The *koan* is making the point that to be alive is to be attached. It is through our desires that we turn the wheel of life and death. The *koan* does not cast aspersions, it does not castigate the wayward saint. In answering this *koan*, a student is encouraged to honour their passions, to recognise their place and power in the way they play out in our lives.

So here is a religious story. It is profoundly realistic. It speaks of our passions and desires and it does not judge them. Passions and desire are real, in the same way that atoms are real; they affect the world. Like atoms, passions change and recombine into the endlessly shifting patterns that emerge in our lives; they are, however, only provisional. The Buddhism suggested in this *koan* can be interpreted as a philosophical appreciation of both the body and the mind and is realist in orientation. This is important because there is clear evidence that by adopting practices like meditation and mindfulness we can become aware of our passions and their power and transformations in mental and physical health can be achieved. Meditation and mindfulness techniques are now widely applied in the care of people who experience distress of all sorts, from the physical discomfort of childbirth, to the management of cancer symptoms or the alleviation of anxiety caused by time in gaol or with border line personality disorder. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and nation wide projects in Australia like 'Beyond Blue,' an intervention strategy for young people suffering depression, have all adopted mindfulness and meditation in their treatment regimes.

Another popular idea is that Buddhists hope to reach or find *Nirvana*. This fantasy may have some appeal in that *Nirvana* could have some correspondence with the idea of heaven. But Buddhism philosophically is about 'waking up,' waking up to an active engagement with living this life-time's experience. The

perennial problem for many human beings is our sometimes wilful ignorance as to the nature of reality. The wake up call is to nothing other than the world of our daily experience.

May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease. Joseph Goldstein²⁵

Life provides the opportunity to accept certain constraints, constraints that give us each a chance to grow, to become aware: to wake up, as Zen master Dogen says. To wake up from what Jung calls the repetition syndrome, repeating over and over again the same neurotic behaviour. Neurotic suffering is not biological in essence and therefore cannot be alleviated by psychosomatic drugs. So in what way then can a person find release from suffering? The Buddha is clear that it is not through the performance of ritual or sacrifice, or indeed through knowledge, but rather through moral action, and we each must grasp what this is in a free act of understanding. The ten *Paramitas* outline a code for living. Like all Buddhist teachings they have unfolded with experimentation over time. They are derived from the three-part teachings of Classical Buddhism: *Shila* (morality) *Samadhi* (Absorption) and *Prajna* (wisdom). The intention here is to guide each one of us down the Eightfold Noble Path of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.²⁶

²⁵ Buddha's words on Lovingkindness, the Metta Sutta in Joseph Goldstein, *How to Understand?* [cited 12/6/05]. Available from www.dharma.org/ij/archives/2001b/jg_understand.htm-14k Unidentified publication.

²⁶ Robert Aitken, *The Practice of Perfection*, Washington DC 1994, 1.

At the risk of seeming apologetic, I approach Buddhism with reticence, but nonetheless respond to the experience it offers, especially the way it has calmed my need for certainty. There is also an essential freshness in the way it reveals, for me at least, the mysterious wonder of time and change. I conclude this essay again with a poem then from the Zen tradition: After your body has separated into the four elements – earth, water, fire and wind, where do **you** go?²⁷

As with those already quoted, it is straightforward, yet undoubtedly difficult to answer from a self-centred perspective. Especially if one's self would wish to retain some quality of integrity beyond the grave, or indeed from moment to moment through out a lifetime. This *koan* calls on us to know in our bones the truth of Buddha's words when he speaks about life and death. Before my body has completely separated into the four elements, I can enjoy the experience of knowing action and express a sensual response to the world. There is often delight in this. There is a mindfulness-of-the-body while being in the body. The truth of Buddhist philosophy, however, maintains that from the beginning the mind and body are one. It is therefore against reason to assert that the mind can survive the disintegration of the body. We have to hold our life the way we would hold a butterfly, unrestrained, with an open hand. We risk it flying away; losing it any moment. This is the basic Buddhist belief that the Self, just as it is, is living out the life that pervades it and the whole universe. So when we pass away, we will no longer exist. Not that we go anywhere, any more than the sound of the bell goes anywhere as it fades away.

All composite things are like a dream, a phantasm, a bubble and a shadow, like a dew drop and a flash of lightning; they are thus to be regarded.²⁸

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²⁸ Ibid.