

CHAPTER TWENTY

CONCLUSION

While statues of a serene, introspective Buddha, perhaps with a Zen fountain gurgling nearby, are de rigueur for many upper class apartments and homes, to most Americans the word “Buddha” still conjures up the image of a little fat guy sitting with a silly grin on his face or worse, an emaciated, grim looking man who looks like he never had a friend in his life. “Buddha” triggers a deflector shield that automatically rises to protect us from worshiping a false idol. God forbid that our faith should be contaminated by some alien deity. We of the Judaic-Christian culture are programmed to reject heathen gods: “Thou shalt have no other Gods before thee.” That programming has been extraordinarily and terribly successful in all religions on earth, including, sad to say, many Buddhist sects that smugly claim superiority over other Buddhist traditions.

I can never quite get my mind around this. In *The Bare Bones of the Buddha's Teaching*, we have been studying the insights of a man who said that his only purpose was to show us the reality of suffering and the way to end our suffering. He never once claimed to be divine (Mahayana Buddhism notwithstanding). Indeed, before he died he urged his followers to make the Dharma their light, rather than some childish worship of him. This man called Buddha, the awakened one, ranks in the highest pantheon of teachers who ever walked the face of this earth, and yet his teaching remains a distant echo, unheard in the hearts of most humans.

The Buddha-dharma does not threaten one's faith in Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Krishna or Moses. It speaks a universal language, telling us that all dysfunction, all hatred and greed are products of our own wild little minds. And it teaches us that the solution to our mental disorder is actually quite simple. We must gain control over these crazy minds. To coin a phrase, "It's your mind, stupid."

The Buddha's message is not about belief. He did not demand that you believe in this or in that. I think he would have been okay if you worshiped a chicken. To the Buddha, the journey begins with *practice*, not belief. You can believe in the Big Chicken and light candles and incense to him/her. But in the meantime, how about learning to quiet this mind and work skillfully with the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion? How about investigating the core of our own ignorance, seeing how it gives birth to desire? My personal astonishment at our spiritual poverty only comes home to roost as I face the truth that ignorance begins with me, not with you. What is it that despises ignorance, if not ignorance?

If I accept the Buddha's teaching that it is *avijja* (ignorance) that got me here in the first place, rather than an accident of birth, and if I accept his teaching that this is the universal condition of the human mind, leading inevitably to greed and hatred, why should I be astonished at the endless stupidity that runs rampant over this earth? "Why would he do that?" we ask in amazement. "Why would she do that?" "How could a dictator be so cruel?" "How could priests be so lecherous?" "How could people be so stupid?" How could politicians be caught with their pants down, over and over? As if it were a mystery! The Buddha carefully explained these things twenty-five hundred years ago.

One wonders if we have changed that much since the Buddha's time. Since the day of his passing, are we more conscious? Are we more compassionate? Do we have more wisdom? Are we able to live with more kindness and understanding as we relate to one another? We have psychotherapists who help us raise our self-esteem, preachers, rabbis and mullahs who help us cleanse our souls, a United Nations to help member nations interact less aggressively. And it is not clear that we are maturing as a species.

We humans have inhabited planet earth for many thousands of years, and while we have consistently destroyed ourselves, the earth, and other animals, until recently our reach was relatively limited. Science was not "advanced" enough to help us destroy the entire world. Now, the game has changed dramatically. One can see the gathering storm as ancient India and China move inexorably toward world power again. And now they both have atomic missiles in their arsenals. In the Middle East a monumental confrontation between Israel and Iran seems inevitable. And soon Iran will have atomic missiles in its arsenal. A third great conflict that seems on automatic pilot is that between Islam and Christianity. It has always been this way, man against woman, father against son, nation against nation and religion against religion. Hatred has not diminished, only our power to destroy has grown. The bare bones of the Buddha's teachings are more urgently needed today than at any time in human history.

The Buddha was a revolutionary then, and, in truth, he is a revolutionary now. His teaching is as dangerous to mindless, robotic behavior now as it was then. He had no use for metaphysical questions about God, or a First Cause, or Evil, or Heaven or Hell. He had no interest in questions such as: "Do I have a soul? Where do I go after death? Do I

reincarnate?” He had no interest in dead, reified belief systems. Neither was he interested in proclaiming one set of beliefs to be superior to another. Indeed, he asserted that opinions are nothing but a way to solidify the delusion of self. How hard it is for the ego to get its mind around his suggestion that opinions, *all* opinions, are a bramble bush filled with thorns. The Buddha’s focus was relentless: “You’re stuck in that hole and asking me what caused you to fall? Let me ask you a question: Are you in a hole? Are you suffering? Yes? Well then, let’s find a way to get you out of there!”

After asking us if we are suffering, if he saw that we had enough sense to recognize that fact, the Buddha would not have hollered down to us, “Now let’s all turn to page 780 in our Sacred Book and start praying together.” Nor would he say, “In order to get out of that hole, you must first believe in a higher power.” Instead, he would have analyzed the problem of this particular hole, its depth, the possible places to establish our footing, etc., and he would look around for what was immediately at hand in order to help you climb out. And let it be said, he knew from his own personal experience that the only person who can climb out of a hole is the one who fell in the hole in the first place.

If a person needed to believe that a higher power would give him the strength to escape from the prison of his mind, the Buddha would have worked with that belief too. This is called *upaya*, or skillful means. In other words, the Buddha was willing to speak in our individual language, and work with from where we are, not where we think that we should be. The Eightfold Path is a most elegant *upaya* instruction book for climbing out of the hole that ignorance has dug for us.

The Eightfold Path is a dharma wheel of eight spokes.

Right Understanding, the first spoke, colors every facet of the Buddha-dharma, but, most especially, it begins with the First Noble Truth.

I acknowledge that suffering is hard-wired into my brain.

From the First Noble Truth comes the Second:

When I am oblivious to desire, my desire sinks back into the unconscious and turns into craving, which causes suffering.

From the Second Noble Truth comes the Third:

If I can break the chain before my craving has turned to clinging, I can be free of suffering, at least momentarily.

From the Third comes the Fourth:

The Eightfold Path is a blueprint for constructing the spiritual laboratory that eventually can produce an end to all clinging, thus an end to all suffering.

Once, when I complimented a client on the depth and intensity of her psychological work, she replied simply, "It's because I am desperate." I will not forget the expression on her face. It was a look of recognition. Her situation terrified her; it bewildered her; but it also gave her the courage and strength to get off the dime. As I observed the sincerity on her face, I was reminded of the Zen saying that we must practice as if our hair is on fire. She knew that her hair was on fire, and what made her work so powerful is that she knew, without a doubt, that I could not save her. If she was to find psychological healing, it would be through her own

effort. This is the Buddha's teaching par excellence.

The hard message of Right Understanding is that no one can, and no one may, save us but ourselves. This stands in contrast to most religions which posit that our salvation comes from some external power, if our faith is strong enough. Most of us stay in the prison of our heads – a world with the width of approximately six inches - waiting for someone to come and rescue us. We decorate our cells as best we can and soon forget that in fact we are living in the prison of our minds. The unconscious fantasy of rescue is a core delusion; it is the death of the healing process in psychotherapy as well as in our spiritual practice.

I recently reminded a client of a dream that he had brought to a session years ago. In it, he saw himself as a teenager who had been beaten up by school thugs. In the dream, he realized that he literally took pleasure in being beaten to a bloody pulp because he hoped and prayed that someone would see his terrible condition and come and hold him, nurture and comfort him. In that session, he looked at me and said, "So all my life I have waited for someone to come and help me?" I said, "Yes., but perhaps you are now able to become your own hero." If we discover that our hair is on fire, that we have *no* time to wait for a loving mama or divine savior to rescue us, we grab what is available and start climbing out of our particular hole. We rescue ourselves.

If the first spoke of the dharma wheel is the meaning of the Buddha-dharma, the second spoke is the content of that meaning. Martin Luther King said that we should judge someone not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character. Right Thought is the content of our character, pure and simple. This is why I much prefer "right thought" to "right intention" for the second spoke of the wheel. If my

thoughts are filled with ill will and envy, or if I am relentlessly self-loathing, what is the point of my high-toned Buddhist understanding of anicca, anatta or the Twelve Nidanas? Who cares if I can quote the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path in Pali, Sanskrit or Greek, if the content of my thought is a total mess?

The third spoke is the immediate expression of that content, Right Speech. The fourth and fifth spokes, Right Action and Right Living, are the manifestation of my practice through my daily interactions with others. I love the way the Dharma Wheel curves in an outward direction here. Earlier, we discussed the linear path of Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga, the steady movement of interiorization. The Eightfold Path however, is circular. It curves in and it curves out, a constant turning toward truth even as it appears to move away from it.

The last three spokes of the wheel are the meditation (dhyana) ones. Right Effort, Right Sati and Right Samadhi are the core of our meditation practice. What chance do we have to observe the crazy movie in our heads, to create the wedge that gives us a precious moment of release from being lost in the content, without intense mind training? Who among us does not have a wild nature? Our minds are literally the Wild West, the last true frontier, but without a hero on the horizon. (Or perhaps mindfulness becomes our true hero.) How do we work with our own wild nature without the tools of meditation? An answer does not readily come to mind. And yet, what is the point of a meditation practice if we do not have its context? What is the point of sitting on a cushion, becoming deeply still if, two hours later, we have completely forgotten that clinging causes us to suffer? Dharma wisely guides meditation.

This is the meaning that I gleaned from the story of

Georg, the Shanghai Jew. He first endured; then he learned the new language. Unlike Georg, most of us want to skip the boring details and get to the reward of a thing. But what if the meaning of a thing rests within its context? What then for those of us who are too impatient to learn the new language? In the Ch'an tradition, it is said that *the wise enshrine the miraculous bones of the ancient teachers within themselves*. This is what it means to learn the language: to give our heart and soul, blood and guts, to that which can transform our lives. Incorporating the teaching of the ancient masters means that we are willing to absorb it in our bones, not in our heads. Learning the language is grounded in faith and nurtured in humility. If we are to open our minds to the unknown, we must leave our comfort zone, where layers of memorized facts have created a false sense of security and certainty, and enter a world that is new and unfamiliar. Sad to say, the line to purchase that ticket is not very long.

As we come to the last spoke of samadhi and the wheel turns, an amazing truth is revealed about the Eightfold Path. Like prospectors panning for gold, we find, through our practice, the essence of sati shinning at the bottom of the pan. At the same time, the set of mirrors (samadhi) becomes ever more clear and capable of magnifying sati even deeper down to the roots of greed, hatred and delusion. Now, Right Understanding opens into far more subtle levels of knowing. This level of knowing illumines and purifies as the wheel turns again and again into Right Thought and on to Right Speech. From this constant turning comes even greater depth of insight.

Eventually, we discover that the dharma wheel of the Eightfold Path is not a circle at all. In fact, it was always a spiral of development, guiding us with the sure eye of the most seasoned sailor. It can take us across the ocean of

unconscious existence, where, until now we have been caught between joy and misery, clarity and confusion, yes and no, before and after. This ascending spiral spreads in all directions, but it dives deep down as well as soaring into unimagined heights. It takes us beyond the relentless subtext of life, death and suffering, to a distant shore of liberation. The Buddha teaches us that this spiral is our birthright. It is an urge within each of us, a deep unease knocking at our door, asking us all to come home.