DHAMMA STREAM:
A GARLAND OF WRITINGS ON
DHAMMA, SELF AND SOCIETY

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DHAMMA AND PERSONAL LIBERATION
What is Dhamma? Part 1

When we seek to identify "Buddhism", we are faced with a bewildering array of forms of Buddhism, each with their inextricably encrusted (or so it seems) cultural and religious baggage - Sri Lankan, Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Tibetan etc. So much so that some have argued for speaking of many "Buddhisms" rather than one monolithic world religion of Buddhism. Each of these Buddhist traditions would claim authenticity for itself, while acknowledging a common foundation shared with others, sometimes as a gesture of good public relations, sometimes as a pragmatic necessity of presenting a united front to non-Buddhists. Whether adherents of the various traditions truly believe and uphold what they publicly espouse about Buddhist ecumenical unity is another question altogether. But it seems they would all agree on one thing: that Buddhism is a "religion" and a global one at that, with 350 million or more adherents throughout the world. But are they right to say this? Is "Buddhism" indeed a "religion"?

My pocket Oxford dictionary defines "religion" as "particular system of faith and worship; human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship; effect of such worship on conduct etc." When juxtaposed against the many Buddhisms we see in the world today, this definition seems to fit quite well, as long as we replace the terms "God", "gods", and "superhuman controlling power" with their Buddhist equivalents of "buddhas", "bodhisattvas", "arahants", "deities/yidams", "gurus/lamas". But does this apply to the Dhamma, the teachings of the historical Buddha?

Some would argue that the Dhamma as taught by the Buddha needs to be rescued and reclaimed from the quagmire of religious mumbo-jumbo that has over the course of history distorted and disfigured what Gotama the Buddha actually taught. In the discourse of modernity, we see a cry for a Buddhism without beliefs, a secular Buddhism that deconstructs the layers of quasi-dogmatic embellishment of supernatural faith and worship to reveal the kernel of Dhamma that comprises what is truly distinctive about the good Gotama's teachings. Such pristine Dhamma would be one that sets him apart from all his religious contemporaries in middle India in the 6th century BCE. There is much to be said for such an approach, and I would not be too hasty in dismissing it outright out of spite, knee-jerk ridicule, dogmatic purism, or traditionalist protectionism. Yet, while seeking to strip Buddhism bare of the unessentials, we run the real risk of jettisoning the baby with the bathwater, if the process of inquiry and methodology of critique is flawed or unsoundly applied. This is a project best done with due attention paid to reflexive skepticism and critique, intellectual honesty, phenomenological sensitivity, hermeneutical dialogue, and careful review and assimilation of credible reputable scholarship in the field of Buddhist studies.

Be that as it may, my personal reflection is this: can we seek the heart of Dhamma by careful thorough examination of its roots (mūla), steering clear of extremist exclusionary
thinking and imbued with honest self-reflection? Can we avoid both "Mahayana elitism" and "Theravada purism" (as aptly articulated by respected Pali scholar Bhikkhu Bodhi), and might I add "modernist secularism" as we attempt to discover the Dhamma afresh?

At the outset, it is crucial to understand that the conceptual category of "religion" is alien to the thought-world of ancient Indian discourse. "Religion" is a European construct that has been conveniently and somewhat misleadingly applied to the legacy of the Buddha. In the Buddha's time, each wandering ascetic or teacher would teach their own "Dhamma", where the term "Dhamma" is a multi-ordinal linguistic complex that encompasses within its semantic field a wide range of meanings and connotations. It includes within itself what we now know as philosophy, psychology, ethics, epistemology, ontology, soteriology, praxis, aesthetics, cosmology, religion, and probably more. Thus, what the Buddha taught was the Dhamma of the Buddha, the Buddha Dhamma for short. Not Buddhism. Certainly not a religion. Or not just a religion.

There is more to say on this topic, but I'll leave it to another post for now.

What is Dhamma? Part 2

In this post, I am not attempting to detail the Dhamma the Buddha actually taught. Not just yet. Rather I offer some preliminary reflections on what it means to be a student of the Buddha and to practice the Dhamma he taught. I do this through examining the rich and vast Buddhist textual collections, from Pali through Sanskrit to Chinese to Indo-Tibetan texts. Without going into debates around textual authenticity and canonicity, suffice to say that the most uncontested textual collection, widely regarded as the earliest historical record of the Buddha's spoken discourse, is the Pali Nikayas and their Agama counterparts preserved in Chinese translation. But first, some methodological remarks to follow.

In focusing on early Pali-Chinese texts, I am not discounting all historically later texts - e.g. Mahayana Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese etc. - as inauthentic or false. They may well contain core truths and even authentic teachings of the Buddha preserved by various itinerant monastic communities from the Buddha's own lifetime, but buried within layers of linguistic artistry and literary licence. Rather, it is fair to say that much of these later compositions show interpolations, elaborations, embellishments, and for commentarial literature, exegetical interpretations and doxological considerations, that very likely go far beyond what the Buddha might have possibly said or meant in his direct communication with his earliest disciples. Within Buddhist traditions, such historical critical and contextual factors are often and consistently (even conveniently) ignored, resulting in a dogmatically conservative and inward-gazing attitude to textual interpretation. Such attitudes to texts of their own traditions and the systematic construction of what each school regards as the proper hierarchy of the Buddha's philosophical view, whatever other purposes they might serve, do perform one important function - polemical self-definition, i.e. defining itself against other competing views of the same texts or otherwise.
The key point is this: if it is crucial that we practice the Dhamma unmistakenly so as to arrive at the unmistaken goal of liberation from anguish, then it is imperative we gain unmistaken certainty about what is and what is not the path of practice. For this to happen, isn't it essential we examine textual interpretations very carefully and critically, taking into account traditional perspectives but going beyond them to include rigorous scholarly and historical perspectives as well? Otherwise, we run the risk of being the proverbial blind person following the blind, as we rush giddily with romantic devotionalism towards some charismatic, traditionally Buddhist teacher we seem to have 'fallen in love' with. If the teacher and their path of practice are sound and reflective of the Buddha's own path, well and good. If not, or if the path does not actually destroy all of one's defilements without remainder, or worse, leads to religious superstition and cultural ritualism instead of genuine freedom, one may well need some good Dhamma rehabilitation before being able to move forward wholesomely in the Dhamma.

In relation to Dhamma practice, I have observed in various Buddhist traditions an emphasis on ritual performance and cultural preservation, each according to their own traditional modes of expression, inescapably taking precedence over or at least clouding Dhamma teaching and meditation. It is my view that whatever positive function they might serve, such ritual and cultural performative acts cloud rather than clarify, obscure rather than unveil, detract from rather than enrich, the quintessential Dhamma of the Buddha. Don't get me wrong - I'm not against chanting or prostrating or making simple offerings at all. In fact, I can see the meditative value and transformative significance of these practices. But more often than not, such religious-ritual performances go overboard and become excessively complex, long, almost obsessive, even expensive, and are indulged in at the expense of good old meditation itself. Has not the Buddha admonished us: "There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Meditate ... do not delay or else you will regret it later." (MN i 46)

From a social justice viewpoint, it seems utterly wasteful to spend all that money on ritual performance (or for that matter, on ostentatious temple buildings, religious statues and monuments), instead of feeding the hungry, saving the environment, housing the homeless, healing the sick, educating the poor and illiterate, constructing and sustaining a simple but comfortable residential meditation centre, or sponsoring the sincere meditator to attend Dhamma teachings or retreats. An entire 'buddhology' of ritual merit in later tradition seems to have evolved out of the ostensibly simpler seed idea of meritorious acts (puñña) in early texts, to legitimize and buttress the practice of expensive merit-making activities. From a Habermasian critical perspective, such buddhological justification strikes one as religiously self-serving, open to criticisms of exploitation of the beguiled masses who financially underwrite these religious undertakings.

Enough for now. In the next instalment, I shall discuss the question of whether it is possible to practice the Dhamma without belief in rebirth; as well as reflect on the currently fashionable trend of inter-religious dialogue. On the latter, I will draw the distinction
between Dhamma as liberative practice and "Buddhism" as religion, and allude to what this distinction would imply for such dialogue.

What is Dhamma? Part 3

The late Venerable Yin Shun, one of the greatest modern Chinese Buddhist scholars of the 20th century, has warned against "deification" of the Dhamma on the one hand, and "secularisation" of the same on the other. His prescient comment hits the mark, in my view. I could not agree with him more.

Over the course of history, the deification of Dhamma into what we now know as Buddhism is plain for everyone to see. Whether in Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, Japan, or Tibet, one finds much evidence showing religious piety and worship of buddhas and the like, as if they are divine beings in some celestial realm able to answer prayers in the way God or gods do. For many Buddhists, such religious worship and piety often forms the substance of their practice of Dhamma, with little if any real knowledge and understanding of the Buddha's central message. Even for those who do have some Dhamma knowledge, religious activities seem to capture more interest and investment than actual meditation, where devotionalism (not devotion) trumps emancipatory praxis. Just look at the rush of money and fervour that gets behind the next large-scale, opulently decorated temple, pagoda, or statue, and the comparatively paltry lukewarm support for small-scale residential meditation centres that actually heal hearts and liberate minds, in accord with the Buddha's core instructions.

Yet, there are a few notable exceptions within traditional Buddhism that, I believe, have shone out from behind the clouds of cultural fetishism to exemplify the pristine spirit of the Buddha Dhamma. Within Chinese Buddhism, for example, I find the Dharma Drum Mountain and Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies (pioneered by the late Ch'an master Venerable Sheng-Yen) and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Foundation led by the inspirational nun Venerable Cheng-Yen) to be worthy of admiration, respect, and emulation. These exemplary Dhamma expressions contrast with other Buddhist religious initiatives that seem more intent on promulgation of Chinese cultural forms and values than actual Dhamma transmission itself. In some cases, one wonders if global projection of Chinese soft power (in the wake of a rising China) funded by Chinese state money is the real agenda here.

As the Dhamma encounters modernity in both Asia and the West, there comes a push from some quarters for a "secular Buddhism" stripped of religious and cultural elements alien to the pure Dhamma. In doing so, proponents of secular Buddhism speak of a Buddhism without beliefs. Closer examination of such Buddhism without beliefs, however, show up, contrary to its core premise, the ubiquity of a network of beliefs underpinning such a project. These are beliefs pertaining to the cultural and intellectual ethos of a modern industrial and information societal milieu. Be that as it may, I find secular Buddhist criticisms levelled against the hierarchical, often feudalistic, ossifying institution of religious Buddhism
whether modernized and globalized or conservative and localized) resonant with my own observations over 41 years of exposure to traditional Buddhist culture. Clearly, I am not alone in my observations nor can these criticisms be glibly shunted aside. In this regard, I find both illuminating and refreshing the clear-eyed critique of current Theravada tradition by Bhante Shravasti Dhammika in his book "The Broken Buddha: Critical Reflections on Theravada and a Plea for a New Buddhism.” Again, many of the criticisms expressed in that book echo my own observations over the years.

I would now like to look more closely at one important and often discussed issue within modern Buddhism: Does one have to believe in rebirth in order to practice the Dhamma? Put another way, the question is whether belief in rebirth is necessary for one to be a practicing Buddhist. For secular Buddhists, the answer is pretty obvious - a big resounding NO. For strict traditionalists, the answer is probably YES. For others sitting on the fence, a MAYBE or DON'T KNOW. For me, the answer is not so clear-cut, but after some careful reflection, I would have to say my personal view is NO. No, one does not need to believe in rebirth in order to practice the Dhamma. But does rigorously-examined, rationally-supported (not passively-accepted or blindly-endorsed) belief in rebirth facilitate and support progress in Dhamma practice? My answer is YES. In saying yes, I am saying that contrary to what some secular Buddhists might claim, the concept of rebirth is not irrelevant to Dhamma practice but is intimately relevant to engaging in the full scope of Dhamma training. I will show how this is so a bit later on in the piece.

But first, contrary to what some strict traditionalists might think, I do not find evidence in the early discourses to suggest that prior belief in rebirth is a must for genuine Dhamma practice. It is possible for skeptics and believers alike to embark upon the practice of ethical discipline, basic loving-kindness and compassion, meditation practices such as mindfulness of breathing and basic insightful examination of the body and mind, without subscribing to any metaphysical belief system whatsoever. What is key is finding sufficient impetus and imperative to engage sincerely and consistently in such Dhamma practice. That impetus can come from belief in rebirth or it can come from somewhere else. It does not matter. For one faced with the question of rebirth, what most if not all of us can know for sure is this: we either believe in it; we don't believe in it; or we sit on the fence. In any case, we do not have to postpone our Dhamma practice until we are convinced enough of rebirth to believe in it. What does matter though is this: does or can carefully considered belief in rebirth support, enrich, and deepen one's practice of the Dhamma? My answer to this is yes. How so? First, it is clear from unbiased examination of Pali Nikaya and Chinese Agama sources that the Buddha did indeed teach the doctrines of rebirth, kamma, and samsara (repeated cycle of birth and death.) He formulates his entire liberative teaching within an overarching cognitive framework geared towards solving the problem of repeated samsaric rebirths. He had ample opportunities to deny rebirth or to reformulate this Indian notion in existential, psychologized ways, but he did not do so. While a common notion at that time, it is not true to say that rebirth was a universally accepted doctrine within the brahminical and samanic cultures of
the Buddha's time. Many competing viewpoints were advocated by competing teachers and their communities, including what we in our time could call "scientific materialist" ones, as evidenced by accounts such as the Sammanaphala-sutta (DN i 47-86). There is a clear reason for this, and it is my view that the Buddha actually experienced the truth of rebirth for himself, shown in accounts of his enlightenment experience, e.g. the three knowledges (tevijja) attained just prior to onset of full awakening. Cross comparisons with numerous similar accounts in both Pali and Chinese versions give further support for this view. Thus, for one sincere about taking the Buddha and his message seriously, it would be prudent and intellectually honest at least to consider the place of the rebirth doctrine in one's practice, and not simply dismiss it as religious exotica or irrelevant article of faith by virtue of its apparent incompatibility with one's modernist preconceptions. Secondly, wise consideration of the rebirth theory can provide a powerful sustaining impetus for Dhamma practice, and guard one's meditation from short-term hedonic desires pertaining to the eight mundane concerns (gain, loss, praise, blame, fame, disrepute, pleasure, pain). A solely this-worldly, this-life perspective for Dhamma practice, while not inevitably subject to hedonic agendas provided sufficient wisdom and compassion is present, does lend itself, often unknowingly, to an ego-based pursuit of narcissistic fulfillment and vitality centred around the question: "What's in it for ME (and possibly MY loved ones), NOW?" A long-term view that does not promise immediate gratification (though immediately apparent benefits can certainly be seen from application of the timeless Dhamma) and that cautions one against getting caught in mundane agendas causing repeated lifetimes of continuing anguish, can serve as a potent motivating force for sustained, disciplined, razor-sharp practice. Thirdly, there is a wide range of deeply transformative practices in the Dhamma that presuppose reasoned belief in rebirth, practices that would otherwise not be utilized or engaged in, to the detriment and loss of the secular fundamentalist. For example, such practices as the four immeasurables, great loving-kindness and great compassion, thought-transformation (lojong), sevenfold cause-effect and equalizing and exchanging self and others instructions for fostering bodhicitta (jang-chub-sem), taking and upholding the bodhisattva and tantric vows, are based on the assumption of all beings as one's mother/father/kind benefactor due to infinite lifetimes of relational mutuality. Also, practice of advanced meditations of highest yoga tantra, mahamudra, and dzogchen, all presuppose a solid grounding in bodhicitta that affectionately sees all beings as one's kind mother/father/benefactor, without which such practice is either harmful or at best ineffectual. The classical instructions derive their potency from a belief in countless rebirths over countless lifetimes, a fact that confers all our relationships with all beings with a deep sense of kinship and close connection. Even if one does not believe in rebirth, it is possible to take a pedagogical stance and try on such practices for size, observing without self-deception how belief in rebirth can potentially transform and expand one's Dhamma practice in the here and now, and potentially into the future.

And you know what? One is not consigned to perpetual belief in rebirth either. The earliest texts proclaim with confidence that if one is to undertake disciplined, rigorous training in meditative concentration and insight, it is possible for one to personally verify for themselves the truth or falsity of rebirth, workings of kamma over multiple lifetimes, and reality of other
cosmological dimensions of existence. Are we up to the challenge?

One might argue that these practices cited above do not feature in the earliest strata of Buddhist texts, and are therefore suspect or purely "later Mahayana" innovations that do not derive from the historical Buddha. Maybe. But this is far from conclusively established, in my view. The vicissitudes and historical fluidity of transmission of the Dhamma would give caution to anyone seeking to close that argument prematurely. Suffice to say, for now, that even if these practices are indeed complete fabrications of later Dhamma scholar-practitioners, that does not automatically divorce them from the stamp of authenticity, especially given that whatever is not in contradiction to the Buddha's words (as preserved in early texts) and that conduce to stilling, dispassion, insight, kindness, and liberation can be validly regarded as true to the Dhamma.

I would like to conclude this post by quoting the words of respected Pali scholar Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, who wrote eloquently on the Kalama-sutta and what it does or does not profess to teach: "The fact that such texts as ... the Kalama Sutta do not dwell on the doctrines of kamma and rebirth does not mean, as is sometimes assumed, that such teachings are mere cultural accretions to the Dhamma that can be deleted or explained away without losing anything essential. It means only that, at the outset, the Dhamma can be approached in ways that do not require reference to past and future lives. The Buddha's teaching has many sides, and thus, from certain angles, it can be directly evaluated against our concern for our present well-being and happiness. Once we see that the practice of the teaching does indeed bring peace, joy, and inner security in this very life, this will inspire our trust and confidence in the Dhamma as a whole, including those aspects that lie beyond our present capacity for personal verification. If we were to undertake certain practice - practices that require highly refined skills and determined effort - we would be able to acquire the faculties needed to validate those other aspects, such as the law of kamma, the reality of rebirth, and the existence of supersensible realms." (Bodhi, 2005, In the Buddha's Words: 85-6)

I agree wholeheartedly.

Ps: I realize at the end of this post that I've forgotten to write about Dhamma, Buddhism, and interfaith dialogue. This is best left to the next post.

What is Dhamma? Part 4

Now, I will comment on the currently fashionable trend of inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue, from the perspective of having distinguished Buddhism as religion and Dhamma as emancipatory praxis. I have alluded to this distinction and described aspects of what I see are not Dhamma, i.e. cultural accretions and religious distortions, in the first three posts of this series on Buddhism/s, Religion, and Dhamma.

I have participated in quite a number of inter-religious/inter-faith functions over the years,
met several nice people along the way, and heard much about what many faiths have to say about a wide range of things, from values such as tolerance, kindness, harmony etc. to revered sayings of the many faiths' respective founders and luminaries. I have also witnessed colourful and often quite charming displays of religious uniforms, paraphernalia, ritual and sacred objects, sacred books with nice covers, and musical-cum-cultural performances of various shapes and sizes. While the stated goals of interfaith-dialogue sound noble and worthwhile, one wonders whether these lofty goals are ever achieved.

One would hope that inter-faith dialogue and action might focus on tackling pressing social issues (e.g. climate change, asylum seekers, reconciliation, closing the gap, societal mental health problems), address inequitable distribution of global wealth, fight global poverty and contribute to disasters relief, for example. It would be encouraging to see members of different faiths really tasting the contemplative depths of other faith traditions with a genuine spirit of inquiry and openness. Or perhaps working together to excavate the deep resources of contemplative traditions to innovate, design, trial, and test new programs that might enhance the way we deal with work stress, post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, addictive behaviours.

Whatever the agenda is, it might be fair to say that Buddhism as a religion certainly has a role to play in such dialogues, as it has illustriously done in events past. But what about the Dhamma as emancipatory praxis? Does it fit into the framework of "inter-faith" dialogue? I would say yes, but it fits not as a faith but as a contemplative wisdom and science.

One of the strongest Buddhist advocate for inter-faith dialogue in our world today is perhaps His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He has been personally involved in many such dialogues and exchanges, spoken and written much about it, and encouraged many to support such worthwhile efforts. I have a lot of respect for the Dalai Lama, but I cannot help but find the idea of the Dhamma as one "faith" amongst other faiths partaking in interfaith dialogue to be quite odd. Odd because the Dhamma is better described as a wisdom rather than a faith tradition, though Buddhism as a deified, encrusted version of the Dhamma may be justifiably bracketed under the label "religion/faith". The Dhamma, if it is to be correctly classified, would be more a contextually-arisen (as opposed to theologically revealed or buddhologically inspired) contemplative and practical philosophy with strong ethical underpinnings. Its ethos is not one of worshipful faith in any super-agency (comforting though such a belief might be) but of constant critical inquiry, exploration, experimentation, and practical action - action via contemplative development and engagement with suffering in all its forms through the twin engines of wisdom and compassion. As such, for a student or practitioner of the Dhamma to participate in any "inter-faith" dialogue, it would be more coherent and potentially more fruitful to do so from the ground of Dhamma as contextual philosophy and science of mind, rather than from the place of culturally located religiosity of Buddhism.

Coming back to one of my initial questions: What does inter-faith dialogue hope to achieve? Well, the answer depends on what people think inter-faith dialogue really is. If the
goals of inter-faith dialogue are worth our attention and effort, one would expect far greater investment - economic, emotional, intellectual, physical - from multiple faith quarters than we are currently seeing. Perhaps our obscured intellectual perspective, penchant for feel-goodism, and emotional entanglement in hidden self-seeking agendas are obstructions to what can potentially be an innovative exercise in human collaborative action and meaning-making. Is there a future for inter-faith dialogue? If so, what sort of future do we want? My personal inclination is to deconstruct the whole concept of “inter-faith” altogether, to get inside and under the crux of what (human) consciousness really is all about. I would like to investigate the nature and potentials of consciousness as it expresses itself in so many forms, in endless architectures of thought and behaviour, some of which can be called religious while others cannot.

It might perhaps be more grounding, contextually relevant, and fruitful to create Diversity Centres rather than Multi-faith Centres; to invent new intellectual, social, and contemplative spaces for peoples of all persuasions - faith traditionalists, scientists and researchers, secular humanists and atheists, social and peace activists, artists and philosophers, dhamma contemplatives, political leaders, to name a few - to come together to explore the mystery and manifestations of life in all its dimensions; and out of this collaborative journey of intellectual and emotional exploration, experiential immersion, contemplative inquiry may come concrete practical wisdom-based initiatives that seek to address, in contemplatively mature ways, the urgent, challenging problems of our time. And should society find this a worthwhile goal, it is incumbent on all parties, from multiple faith groups to corporations to government alike, to put their money where their mouths are and fund such cutting-edge efforts. It is best to attract multiple sources of funding rather than being funded by a single source, such as this or that religious organization, deep-pocketed though they might be. This is more prudent from a risk management and innovation perspective, and circumvents the potential problems of conflict of interest and of being beholden to the agenda of any one party.

These are just some random thoughts of a Dhamma practitioner and contemplative scientist. If there are those with sufficient courage and imagination to walk this vision as I have painted with broad brush strokes, perhaps then will we see a creative future for "inter-faith dialogue" ... but this, I'm afraid, is far from being certain, living as we are in this age of cynical monetization of faith, science and education and the dominant trend of ethical freefall.

What is Dhamma? Part 5

After a rather long, convoluted excursion through the terrains of Buddhism/s, religion, and Dhamma in my previous posts, I would now like to open up a new dialogue space with some preliminary remarks on what I see as the Dhamma, the teachings of the historical Buddha.

Before launching into that, a few comments on methodology is warranted. I'll be the first to admit that all I write here is thoroughly embedded within a context - the field of terms and meanings, linguistic and conceptual frameworks conditioned by my personal history and life
experience. As such, I am not claiming to write about the Dhamma from some epistemologically neutral ground devoid of all cultural, historical, social influences. Such a transcendent enterprise within the fluid field of discourse is simply impossible, for me and for all who attempt to write or speak about the Dhamma. As a writer, I am inescapably embedded within the flow of history, and my horizon as a writer and interpreter is shaped by the myriad streams of influence on my life thus far - immersion and training in multiple traditions of Buddhism; academic and professional training in health science, international relations, neurosemantics, and studies in religion; familial upbringing in Asia and young adulthood in Australia; so on and so forth. As I approach the texts that I read, encounter the practices that I learn, and live my life in continual application of the Dhamma, I engage in a dialogical 'fusion of horizons' between the reader and the text, learner and the learned. The horizon of the text and tradition that confronts me, and with which I wrestle, engage, apply, challenge, and play, is at the same time engaging, playing, wooing, and confronting me as a reader and practitioner. Out of this dynamic, dialectical, dialogical interplay emerges the production of meaning and understanding - a hermeneutical moment or moments where knowledge manifests, sometimes vivid and sharp, other times tentative and obscured. I do not claim privileged knowledge of Dhamma or Buddhism, but am simply seeking to reveal the truth for myself (and perhaps for others) and thus speaking to the world with the truth as I see it. So here goes.

In my previous posts, I've spoken of the need to avoid the Scylla of deification and Charybdis of secularisation with respect to the Dhamma, as well as stressing the importance of listening not only to tradition but also to the critical voice of reflexive scholarship, as we attempt to get to the heart of what the Buddha actually taught. Some might say, in line with the deconstructionist zeitgeist of postmodernism, that this attempt to discover the intent of an ancient author is an impossible task. Given the ruptures of history, the flux in which we are all inevitably and inescapably caught up, and thus the complete absence of any possible ontological or epistemological grounding for knowledge, one can never find the truth of what we seek, a truth that stands as the absolute arbiter of knowledge. Suffice to say I do not subscribe to such a view. Even if the author's intent and the audience's assimilation of that intent appear to constantly shift over time, it remains possible in my view to endeavour to uncover the initial impulses of meaning the historical Buddha communicated that his direct disciples received, within the context of that particular moment in time, space, and history. This process requires careful examination of historical and textual evidence, critical reflection, sensitive hermeneutics, and experiential realisation, within a context of free unconstrained discourse where interpretive communities and individuals act freely without fear, power distortions, and capacity constraints.

With all of the above in mind, what do I see the Dhamma as? What is the Dhamma the Buddha taught and which we might conceivably practice and apply? First and foremost, I see the Dhamma as emancipatory praxis, a practical philosophy and science of living that seeks to set us unconditionally free. The heart of Dhamma that sets us free is nothing less than a wisdom so primordial and pure that it can never be reified as anything whatsoever. While
wisdom liberates, it is nevertheless preceded by faith - a reasoned, affirming, grounded, and verifiable faith that is empirically friendly and open to doubt. Such wisdom is inseparable from compassion. Compassion is the natural ceaseless responsiveness of wisdom, which wells up from the depths of reality seamlessly united with the wisdom perceiving it. Compassion seeks the welfare and alleviation of suffering of all living beings without boundary or constraint.

Thus, I see the Dhamma as an emancipatory praxis of wisdom and compassion, supported by reasoned faith, leading to unconditional liberation where the mind is permanently freed of all suffering and constraints. Has not the Buddha, in the Alagaddupama-Sutta, spoken of his teaching thus: "What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering"? (MN 22; M i 130) The Buddha cautions against shortchanging the intent and potential of the Dhamma, even as he speaks stirringly and directly in favour of nothing less than personal verification of truth itself - truth that once completely seen will set us irrevocably free:

"I tell you this: let an intelligent person come to me who is sincere, honest and straightforward, and I will instruct him, I will teach him Dhamma. If he practices as he is taught, then in seven years he will attain in this very life by his own knowledge and vision that for the sake of which young men go forth from home to homelessness, and he will abide in it. Never mind seven years; he will be able to do it in seven days. Now you may think: 'The recluse Gotama only says this in order to get disciples.' But this is not so; let he who is your teacher be your teacher still. You may think: 'He wants us to give up our way of life.' But this is not so; continue to live your way of life. Or again you may think: 'He wants us to practice things that are wrong or not practice things that are right. But there are unskilful things not yet given up, things tainted, leading to rebirth, fearful, of painful result in the future, things associated with birth, decay, and death. And it is for the giving up of these things that I teach Dhamma. However, if you practice correctly, these tainted things will be given up, and the things that lead to purification will grow and develop. In this very life you will attain the fullness of perfected wisdom by your own knowledge and vision, and abide in it." (DN iii 55)

In my next and subsequent posts, I will flesh out more of the Dhamma as I see it, and touch on various aspects of Dhamma practice.
Engaging with the Dhamma

The Buddhadhamma is rich and profound. There are layers and dimensions to the Dhamma, requiring correspondingly diverse modes of engagement from those who seek to comprehend it [1]. We seek to comprehend the Dhamma so that we could embody it. We embody it so that we can taste the fruit of authentic realisation. We stabilise these realisations so that they transform into lucid certainty that cuts through all unskilful perplexity. And lucid certainty expands and flows into freedom beyond falsehood, imbued with unhindered capacity to benefit sentient beings caught in deluded suffering. But first, what are these aspects of the Dhamma requiring diverse modes of engagement?

First, the Dhamma is thoroughly empirical. In the earliest historical records of the Buddha's teachings, e.g. the Pali suttas and Chinese agamas, we find a spirit of experiential observation and inquiry distinctive to the Buddha's approach to truth and spiritual freedom. In the Kalama Sutta, for example, the Buddha spoke highly of the need for critical investigation and personal experience, tested against credible sources of truth, rather than simply relying on blind faith, emotional appeal, or dogged rationalisation alone. In these texts, the Buddha's approach to ethical and meditative training makes empirical sense, requiring no leap of faith into metaphysical beliefs for us to begin practice. For example, teachings on the "four noble truths" of anguish, its origins, its cessation, and the way to its cessation point to our ubiquitous human experience and can be personally verified with some careful unbiased observation. Likewise, the core analyses of the human personality into dynamic processes of the "five aggregates" - form, feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness - are amenable to personal observation and discovery. The methods of meditative training involving synergistic cultivation of stable calm attention and sharp insight require no ontological pre-commitment except the pragmatic assumption that one is able train one's attention. The guidelines and tools for such training as given by the Buddha once again are accessible to empirical trial and error for anyone who wishes to embark upon them. In short, the empirical aspect/dimension of the Dhamma evokes, from the side of the student/practitioner, an empirical mode of engagement with the Dhamma. This empirical facet is exemplified in the teachings belonging to the First Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma, though not exclusively so.

Second, the Dhamma is philosophically robust and intellectually rigorous. This facet is best exemplified in the teachings belonging to the Second Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma - found in the Perfection of Wisdom (prajñaparamita) literature. These teachings pertain to the rigorous and careful analysis of the nature of reality, the realisation of which is key to the central task of irreversibly liberating consciousness from its afflictions. Here we find the Buddha expounding on the emptiness of persons and things with dialectical reasoning and striking metaphors. This is supplemented heavily by commentarial exegeses of eminent scholar-masters such as Nagarjuna, Bhavaviveka, Buddhapalita, Chandrakirti, Shantaraksita and others. Related to the perfection of wisdom, along similar lines of inquiry into the ontological foundations of mind and reality, is the Abhidhamma (Higher Knowledge) genre.
texts, both within the Pali and the Sanskrit traditions. These texts include the seven books of the Pali Abhidhamma-Pitaka attributed by tradition to the Buddha himself, though regarded as products of gradual evolution by modern critical scholarship. Other texts by Buddhist scholar-masters include those by Acariya Anuruddha (7th to 12th century author of the Abhidhammatha Sangha), Asanga (5th century author of the Abhidharma-samuccaya), and Vasubandhu (5th century author of the Abhidharma-kosa). Taken together, these texts represent finely honed, rigorously executed, profound analyses of the nature, function, and structure of consciousness and physicality. Related to these are the texts belonging to Buddhist epistemology - the theory of valid cognition (pramana). Scholar-masters such as Dignaga (5th century CE) and Dharmakirti (7th century CE) authored treatises on valid cognition (e.g. Pramana-samuccaya and Pramana-varttika) that continue to be prodigiously studied by contemporary Tibetan monastics in training. All in all, the combined literature of the Prajñaparamita, Abhidharma, and Pramana collections showcases a facet of Dhamma that is articulated through an exercise of logical analysis and inferential reasoning. This facet of Dhamma is best engaged by students/practitioners using the faculty of philosophical and analytical reasoning, an essential capacity to be systematically developed (not prematurely abandoned, as is often misunderstood by Dhamma enthusiasts with limited knowledge of the total scope of the Buddhadharma) as part of the path of wisdom.

Third, the Dhamma is deeply intuitive. Intuition in this context refers to a gut-level sense of the real that is more than a hunch or speculation. Intuition does not entail blind dogmatic faith as such but requires an inner sensitivity and receptivity to truth, manifesting experientially as a sympathetic resonance of the heart with creative intuitive expressions of the Dhamma. Intuition does not occur in a cognitive vacuum but is nestled in a creative epistemic space made vibrant by the sparks of empirical and intellectual inquiries. This intuitive facet is best exemplified in the teachings pertaining to the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma. The core concept and narrative is that of "buddha-nature" - the primordial and innate potential within all minds to actualize awakening or buddhahood. Such awakening is seen as the realisation of consummate benefit for self and others, where wisdom and compassion are both perfected in synchrony and where skilful capacity to benefit others emerges spontaneously out of such perfection. The concept of buddha-nature is meant not so much a doctrine philosophically constructed and designed to intellectually persuade its audience of its veracity, but more a soul-stirring and heart-nourishing metaphor with profound inspirational value. (This is not to discount Buddhist philosophical attempts that have been made to reconcile the apparent substantialist overtones of buddha-nature with the non-reifying, a-realist, nominalist stance of mainstream Middle Way dialectics).

Buddha-nature is known by other names such as tathagatagarbha, dharma-kaya, and sugatagarbha. In tantric literature, buddha-nature is designated variously as innate mind of clear light and pristine awareness, and personified as Samantabhadra or Vajradhara. In Sin0-Japanese Buddhism (e.g. Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen), the notion of buddha-nature plays a crucial role in their respective paths of "sudden awakening." The ultimate purpose of Ch'an and Zen practice is to fully access this innate buddha-mind, draw out its full awakening.
potential, and manifest infinite buddha-activity for the benefit of all sentient beings. The classical texts of Ch'an such as Platform Sutra of Sixth Patriarch Hui-Neng and the poetic writings of Ch'an masters such as Hongzhi Zhengjue (12th century CE), Dahui Zonggao (12th century CE), Gaofeng Yuanmiao (13th century CE), and Yongjia Xuanjue (7th century CE) can be said to belong to this genre of intuitive insight. In Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, texts such as Tathagatagarbha-Sutra, Lankavatara-Sutra, and Ratnagotrabhanga-Sastra of Asanga-Maitreya are some fine examples of the same. To fully engage with the intuitive dimension of the Dhamma requires a challenging but potentially fruitful mode of inquiry that is intuitive, creative, spontaneous, heartful, devotional. This intuitive mode of Dhamma expression and inquiry is none other than the process of buddha-nature speaking to buddha-nature, buddha-nature responding to buddha-nature. It is an intuitive inquiry and engagement built upon the epistemological foundations of empirical and intellectual modes of inquiry, embedded within a context of correct view, pure motivation, and ethical conduct. Intuition emerges out of the deepest dimension of consciousness, and magnetizes us back into the deepest dimension of consciousness - our final home.

The challenge of engaging with the Dhamma thus includes empirical, philosophical, and intuitive modes of orienting and utilising consciousness in the service of unconditional liberation and awakening. To do this successfully is an act of dynamic and fluid traversing of cognitive boundaries. We will have to unlearn rigid patterns of reacting to environmental stimuli and responding to knowledge claims. We also need to adopt a deep flexibility that is simultaneously horizontal (cutting across domains of knowledge), vertical (flowing through and between levels of experience), non-linear and omni-directional (global and specific, meta-level and embedded, integrative and analytical, inferential and poetic, sequential and spiralling, evolution and involution etc), and integral. This goes far beyond mere "psychological flexibility". If we can rise to this challenge, I think we will stand a better chance of deriving the full benefit of the Dhamma of liberation that the Buddha has so kindly bequeathed to us in his compassion and wisdom. Why not make a start?

Notes:
[1] The discussion in this post is drawn from key points I have heard from B. Alan Wallace in one of his recent teachings. I have taken the liberty to expand and elaborate on these points in my own way. Any and all faults are solely my own.
The Teacher-Student Relationship in the Dhamma

As the Dhamma is transmitted from its Asian heartland to Australia and starts taking root here, it seems timely to revisit one important element of Dhamma practice in these changing contemporary times. This is the often vexed issue of the teacher-student relationship. In this post, I'd like to address this topic with reference to (1) nature and function of a teacher of Dhamma; (2) criteria for being a Dhamma teacher; (3) qualities to look out for in a Dhamma teacher; and (4) cursory look at the phenomenon of scandals (sexual/financial) among Buddhist teachers contrasted with what wholesome, mutually beneficial relationships between Dhamma teachers and students could possibly look like. I will base my analysis mainly on the Pali texts (historically earliest and most uncontested account of what are, in most likelihood, the Buddha's own words) and authoritative texts in later Buddhist tradition.

First, the nature and function of a Dhamma teacher. The prototypical ideal Dhamma teacher is the Buddha himself, a fully awakened being with all defilements extinguished and all immaculate qualities perfected, highly skilled in leading others to the same liberation he experienced. How do we know this? In a preliminary way, we know this through careful and thorough observation of textual accounts of the Buddha's sayings, conduct, and example, offering a window into his insights on mind, experience, and methods of mental training for liberating experience. Through further reasoning and analysis of ideas, through rigorous application of practice methods, and through careful evaluation of the results of practice, we gradually come to an increasing sense of confidence in the Buddha as an exemplary teacher. So, what sort of exemplary teacher was he? Following Jootla (1998), I outline the Buddha's qualities as a teacher as follows:

(1) We need to remember that the Buddha is a teacher that is neither a guru-figure demanding unquestioning obedience and conferring liberation to anyone who blindly believes, nor is he a dispensable instructor of information modules with narrow focus and limited value. He is a teacher of the Middle Way beyond extremes and as a perfected individual who has transcended all suffering, is perfectly capable of designing and drawing the map to the same liberation he himself has experienced. He is an energetic teacher who could skilfully explain the broad strokes and fine details of the path to liberation for anyone seeking his guidance.

(2) The Buddha refers to himself as a good friend (kalyana-mitta) who is trustworthy, reliable, knowledgeable and caring of those he helps. He is a helper and guide with unique abilities to mentor others due to his omniscience - ability to perceive without obstruction the predispositions, historical baggage, latent potentials within the hearts of those he teaches.

(3) He is compassionate for the wellbeing of all, teaching the Dhamma unstintingly and open-handedly to all who wish to listen and apply what they learn, with firmness and gentleness, wisdom and wit. He exhorts his students thus: "What should be done for his disciples out of compassion by a teacher who seeks their welfare and has compassion for them, that I have done for you, Cunda. There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Meditate,
Cunda, do not delay or else you will regret it later. This is our instruction to you." (MN 8: i 46)

(4) The Buddha teaches in a gradual way, systematically and clearly, without spin or hype, according to the needs and dispositions of his audience. He generally begins from the basic common ground shared with other spiritual traditions and progressing up to the highest insights unique to his own Dhamma. Listen to this sutta account (Ud 5.3): "Then the Lord saw Suppabuddha the leper sitting amongst that group of people, and on seeing him he thought: 'This one here is capable of understanding Dhamma.' For the sake of Suppabuddha the leper he then gave a progressive talk, that is, a talk on generosity, on virtue, on heaven; he made known the disappointment, degradation, and corruption of sense-desires and the benefit in renouncing them. When the Lord knew that the mind of Suppabuddha he leper was ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated, and purified, he then made known the Dhamma-teaching special to the Buddhas: suffering, origination, cessation, and the path."

(5) The Buddha gave priority to the Dhamma itself instead of to any specific individual teacher. As Jootla says in Transmitting the Dhamma: The Role of the Teacher in Buddhism, "The Dhamma itself is always the fundamental teacher. Even while the Buddha was available in person, his followers were liberated by their understanding and practice of his message" (1998, p. 11). As the Buddha emphatically declares: "Ananda, it may be that you will think: 'The Teacher's instruction has ceased, now we have no teacher!' It should not be seen like this, Ananda, for what I have taught and explained to you as Dhamma and Discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher." (DN 16: ii 154). This same sentiment is echoed in the hermeneutics of later Buddhist tradition as stated in the Four Reliances: "Do not rely on the individual, but rely on the teaching. Do not rely on the words alone, but rely on the meaning underlying them. Do not rely on the provisional meaning, but rely on the definitive meaning. Do not rely on ordinary consciousness, but rely on wisdom awareness."

Next, what are some key criteria for being a Dhamma teacher? Apart from emulating the sterling example of the Buddha as aforementioned, what we need in a Dhamma teacher are qualities of wisdom, compassion, skill in teaching, and dedication to upholding the integrity of the Dhamma as taught by the Buddha. The best teachers are those who are themselves fully awakened like the Buddha or those who have directly realised the ultimate truth of the Dhamma in their being - these people are known as ariyas: whether non-returner (anagamin), once-returner (sakadagamin), steam-winner (sotapanna) of savaka or paccekabuddha lineages, or arya-bodhisattvas on any of the ten noble grounds (bhumi) who have directly realised suchness (tathata), emptiness (sunyata), liberation (nirvana). It may be difficult to locate an ariya/arya being but if one observes a guide carefully over time, subject any potential candidate to scrutiny and due diligence in various settings and over an extended duration, one may be able to deduce that he or she is an ariya/arya. Qualities that one would expect of an ariya/arya would bear resemblance to and concordance with the qualities of the Buddha himself.
The next best Dhamma teacher, in the absence of an ariya/arya, would be one who knows all or some part of the Buddhist texts by heart. Such a teacher needs to be one who "guards the heritage, and protects the tradition. ... [following] the opinion of the wise rather than his own opinion." (Vism iii 61-64 cited in Jootla 1998, p. 13). A good teacher needs to be vigilant against warping the truth with their own personal biases and thicket of views based on cultural, social, and historical conditioning. An honest spirit of self-examination enables such teachers to constantly check their own understandings by referring back to their own teachers in cases of uncertainty. They also confer with the Buddha's discourses and authoritative commentaries as well as highly respected Dhamma elders, critically investigate deep meanings beyond surface appearances, and show uncompromising honesty in evaluating one's own meditative experience. As Jootla (1998) aptly puts it: "People who teach meditation but do not take these precautions are liable to dilute, distort, misrepresent or override the pure Dhamma. This might be due to their own pride, views, or greed. They might misrepresent the teachings due to modern circumstances, pressure of time, the demands of their students, or even from misplaced compassion. ... If this happens, the 'Dhamma' they teach does not have the power to eradicate suffering." (p. 15)

A good authentic Dhamma teacher teaches from a ground of pure motivation and clarity of thought, as pointed out by the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, any bhikkhu who teaches the Dhamma with thoughts like this: 'Oh that they may listen to the Dhamma from me! Having listened, may they gain confidence in the Dhamma! Being confident, may they show their confidence to me! The Dhamma teaching of that bhikkhu is impure. But that bhikkhu who teaches the Dhamma to others with the thought: 'The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise. Oh, may they listen to the Dhamma from me! Having listened, may the understand the Dhamma! Having understood, may they practise accordingly!' Thus he teaches the Dhamma to others because of the intrinsic excellence of the Dhamma; he teaches the Dhamma to others from compassion and sympathy, out of tender concern. Such a bhikkhu's teachings of the Dhamma is very pure." (SN 16:3, ii 199).

Third, what are core qualities of a credible and qualified teacher of Dhamma? In the text attributed to Asanga-Maitreya entitled Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras (Mahayana-sutralamkara), it is stated: “Rely on a Mahayana teacher who is disciplined, serene, thoroughly pacified; has good qualities surpassing those of the students; is energetic; has a wealth of scriptural knowledge; possesses loving concern; has thorough knowledge of reality and skill in instructing disciples; and has abandoned dispiritedness.” These ten qualities collectively serve as a sort of ‘teacher checklist’ that students can use to observe and evaluate any potential teacher, underscoring the importance of applying critical thinking and careful observation to the spiritual endeavour just as one would in any mundane endeavour (e.g. choosing the best health insurance fund etc.). This advice fully accords with the Buddha’s attitude of free inquiry which he exhorts his disciples to develop in relation to his own teaching and to himself as a teacher.
In his magnum opus *Lamrim Chenmo*, Tsong Khapa (1357-1419) explains that ‘disciplined’ means training in ethical discipline, i.e. sense restraint and strong effort at wholesome actions and precept observance; ‘serene’ means accomplishment in the training of meditative concentration through mindfulness and vigilance, resulting in a serviceable mind; ‘thoroughly pacified’ means accomplishment in the training of wisdom – analysing the meaning of reality – on the basis of meditative serenity; ‘wealth of scriptural knowledge’ refers to being erudite concerning the three scriptural collections – Sutra, Vinaya, and Abhidharma – and the like; ‘knowledge of reality’ refers to special training in wisdom – knowledge of the selflessness of phenomena either perceptually or through scripture and reasoning; ‘having good qualities surpassing those of students’ is self-explanatory – pertaining to wholesome qualities like patience, generosity, knowledge, insight, kindness and the like; ‘skill in instructing disciples’ refers to being skilled in the process of leading students and causing them to understand; ‘possessing loving concern’ refers to having a pure motivation for giving teachings, namely love and compassion free from desire for gain, respect and so on; ‘energetic’ means constant delight in others’ welfare, caring for them with constancy over the long haul; ‘abandoning dispiritedness’ refers to never tiring in teaching the Dhamma, giving explanations, again and again for the benefit of sentient beings even when this is challenging.

Together with the guidelines of the Buddha as described in previous paragraphs above, this set of ten qualities form a bedrock of sanity and due diligence that any student of Dhamma can use to choose one’s teacher. From the side of the student, there is also need for reciprocal credibility. Students, in order to fully benefit from the Dhamma, are advised to honestly self-reflect on their suitability to be students of Dhamma and to seek to develop any qualities lacking therein. What are these qualities that a student should possess? Aryadeva writes in his Four Hundred Stanzas (*Catuh-sataka*) that: “It is said that one who is non-partisan, intelligent, and diligent is a vessel for listening to the teachings. The good qualities of the instructor do not appear otherwise nor do those of fellow listeners.” Being non-partisan means not taking sides, not being swayed by one’s own biases. In this way, one is able to perceive the good qualities of a truly qualified teacher and qualified fellow students. One is also non-attached to one’s religious system and non-hostile to those of others. Having intelligence means being able to discern good explanations from bad ones, and discarding the bad while retaining the good, and in doing so being able to adopt what is productive and abandon what is unproductive. Being diligent means striving diligently at the teachings, applying them well. In addition, one needs to focus the mind when listening to the teaching, as well as have great respect for the teaching and the teacher. When through self-evaluation, one finds that these qualities are complete within oneself, delight and rejoicing are encouraged. But when one finds these qualities incomplete, effort should be made to develop them. In his way, both teacher and student, replete with good qualities, will grow and mature in the Dhamma together.

Fourth, in modern times, news of scandals involving spiritual gurus and their disciples, whether financial or sexual or both, have created shock waves rippling through spiritual communities and the public at large. Buddhism too has had its fair share of scandals,
particularly but not exclusively in the modern West. A preliminary investigation of reported scandals and allegations of misconduct can be done quickly and conveniently through an internet search. Using search terms such as "Buddhist teachers" and "scandals" throw up many relevant sites including these ones involving Zen and Tibetan teachers:

http://behindthethangkas.wordpress.com/
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/jul/01/lama-sex-abuse-sogyal-rinpoche-buddhist

These issues, to some extent, were discussed during a meeting of a group of Western Buddhist teachers with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, arguably the most prominent and well-known modern Buddhist authority on the globe, in Dharamshala in the 1990s. For information on this event and the consensus reached regarding an Open Letter on the issues discussed:


Suffice to say, the foregoing cursory discussion points to one inevitable conclusion at least: that we owe it to ourselves to conduct a due diligence process with an eye to critical evaluation and honest self-examination, when choosing our commitment to (if at all) to any Dhamma teacher/guru/lama/roshi. This is something we normally would do with our mundane choices such as choosing a financial advisor or medical specialist or car insurance or the like. Why is it that when it comes to spiritual affiliation in general and Dhamma teachers in particular, we so often leave our intelligence behind and throw out our brains altogether? It is clear that as Buddhists, we must not remain silent on such issues. In the meeting mentioned above, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in accord with the Western Buddhist teachers present on the need to go public and transparent about cases of misbehaviour and abuse amongst Dhamma teachers. Nor should we shrink from asking the tough questions. We have a duty of care towards the sentient beings we seek to support by being honest and public about potentially harmful or proven cases of harmful teachers, as well as taking steps towards some form of assurance of ethical and beneficial conduct amongst Dhamma teachers and their communities. This is an issue that requires much substantial thinking and action beyond the scope of my current post.

If we were to examine how a wholesome healthy teacher-student relationship would look, what would we see? Are there any pointers and guidelines on this important relationship given in the authoritative texts of Buddhism? Yes, there are. And in spite of malpractice
and scandals around this issue, there have been and continue to be examples of healthy mutually beneficial relationships between teachers and students, just as there are examples of ethical wholesome professional relationships between doctors and patients, professors and students, therapists and clients in our modern context. What are some of these guidelines and pointers?

In the Sigalovada Sutta (DN 31), the Buddha likens the relationship between spiritual mentors and their students to the spatial direction of Zenith. In that spatial context, ‘protecting the Zenith’ then refers to establishing a healthy, mutually beneficial relationship between Dhamma mentors and students. Specifically, he speaks of how students should treat their Dhamma teachers in five ways: (1) by kind actions; (2) by kind speech; (3) by kind thoughts; (4) by keeping their house open to them; (5) by providing them with material needs. In return, Dhamma teachers should treat their students by (1) restraining them from doing wrong; (2) encouraging them to do what is right; (3) showing them compassion; (4) teaching them what they do not know; (5) clarifying what has been taught; (5) showing them the way and guiding them in spiritual practice. When teachers and students treat each other in this way, the Zenith is protected and spiritual places made peaceful and secure. As we are relational beings living in an inescapable network of mutuality, being in ongoing relationship with others and with our environment (ecology, society, culture etc.) is a given. As such, the question is how we can create and maintain positive growth enhancing relationships rather than detrimental ones, not whether to be in relationship or not.

The relationship between Dhamma teacher and students is arguably the single most important relationship for anyone embarked upon the path to awakening, given the instruction, guidance, counsel, inspiration and blessing that one may receive from a pure teacher of Dhamma. In Buddhism, the teacher (garu; guru) is a person who imparts skills or knowledge and a disciple (savaka; sisya) is one who learns from a teacher (Dhammika, 2006). In Buddhism A to Z, Dhammika (2006) writes: “In some religions, and even within the Vajrayana branch of Buddhism, the disciple is expected to dedicate him or herself totally to the teacher and obey him unquestioningly. This is very much at odds with what the Buddha both taught to and required from his disciples.” (pp. 149-50). Dhammika goes on to describe how to navigate the relationship between teacher and student thus: “He [the Buddha] advised that before learning under a teacher, and even while receiving instruction, the disciple should maintain a respectful but questioning and discriminating attitude. First, the disciple should investigate (vimamseyya) the teacher by watching and listening to see if his or her behaviour is consistent with what they teach. Continuing to investigate over a period of time, the disciple should try to see if the good qualities the teacher appears to have are internalised or only the result of making an effort or trying to impress. Other things that might indicate a teacher’s true worth are seeing if they act differently in public than in private and whether they are affected by fame and success (MN i 318-20).

The Buddha approved of respect and reverence by a disciple towards a teacher. He said: ‘A teacher should look upon his student as a son [or daughter]. A student should look upon his
teacher as a father. United by this mutual reverence and deference and living in communion with each other, both will achieve increase, growth and progress in this Dhamma and Discipline’ (Vin. iv, 45). However, the truly sincere teacher wants his disciple to attain the same level of virtue and knowledge as him or herself or even to surpass it, and this can only be done in an environment where questioning and free expression are encouraged.” (p. 150).

In Vajrayana Buddhism and perhaps to a certain extent in Zen Buddhism, the teacher may take on a numinous superhuman quality that confers upon him or her a commanding authority over students. In the practice of Tantra in particular, there is a widespread belief and common practice that the teacher is none other than the Buddha in person and thus deserving of total obedience and submission. But as we've seen earlier, the Buddha never required his disciples to have unquestioning faith in his personality and blind submission to his authority. So why should relating to one's guru as if relating to the Buddha himself be any different from the clear intelligent approach we would adopt with the Buddha in person? The belief of uncritical obedience to one's guru can bring with it a risk of misuse of power and abuse of the teacher-student relationship, if one is not careful. The common misunderstanding is that the student has to obey and submit to the tantric master with unquestioning blind faith, even if what the teacher has instructed transgresses the ethical code taught by the Buddha. This is a mistake, in my view. It is within the right of the student to refuse to carry out any instruction that goes against ethical code and conscience, or is contradictory to the entire ethos and context of the Dhamma.

The so-called ‘crazy wisdom’ rationalisation for morally transgressive behaviour on the part of tantric masters (e.g. deceitful sexual liaisons with students causing harm and anguish) are often nothing more than quick-footed religious legitimation of personal affective emotions and drives (e.g. overpowering sexual appetite, addiction to power and control, lack of moral shame). As is pointed out in the reformist Gelug tradition (as exemplification and not out of sectarian bias), the advanced and normally secret practices of tantric sexual yoga are not permitted for celibate monastics and only open to suitably qualified lay yogis who have reached a particular level of attainment where one has no attachment to the bliss of sexual activity. Even then, such practices are not seen as indispensable for awakening. For lay teachers, there is certainly no justification whatsoever and no grounds for supporting violation of the third precept - sexual misconduct is sexual misconduct, however one wishes to spin it. True to the tantric guidelines, anyone who claims to be able to transmute the bliss of sex into a vehicle for awakened consciousness must also have equal capacity to consume faeces and urine without aversion and with similar delight!

In the context tantric meditation, there is a profound recognition of the power of relationship – one that is healthy, beneficial, skilful – and harnessing this power in the service of growth and awakening in the Dhamma. All the guidelines and principles discussed hitherto form the bedrock of such relationship. On this foundation, one then trains in perceiving one’s mentor as an enlightened being replete with good qualities (many of which would have been ascertained to be present in one’s mentor after due diligence and careful observation over a
long period of time). One trains in internalising these same enlightened qualities through a series of meditative exercises called guru yoga, whereby a process of simultaneous absorption and unveiling of good qualities is activated in the student’s consciousness. In essence, the sterling qualities of pure awareness that the disciple seeks to develop are none other than the deepest qualities of his or her own innermost awareness projected outwardly onto the teacher who himself manifest those same qualities. This innermost and subtlest awareness is what is termed primordial consciousness or pristine awareness that indivisibly realises the ultimate reality of emptiness. In other words, we are speaking of buddha-nature – that of the teacher and of the student (though ultimately buddha-mind or rigpa transcends all dualistic conceptual frameworks). Perhaps it is with this intent in mind that Je Tsong Khapa admonishes: "correct reliance on the teacher is the root of the path."

In Mixing Minds: The Power of Relationship in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism, Pilar Jennings makes a cogent point about the kind of students best placed to succeed in this internalising transformative process of guru yoga. These are students who are psychologically stable, mature, self-confident, and able to simultaneously see both the fallibility of their teacher (without condemnation or aversion or convenient denial) and the sterling qualities of their teacher’s mind. In other words, the humanity of the teacher is not subsumed and sublated into the presumed ‘divinity’ of their enlightened nature. Rather, a dialectical tension of human fallibility and primordial perfection are held in one’s gaze without one suppressing the other. This is a contemplative feat that is not as easy as it may sound, requiring psychological flexibility, skill, mindfulness, vigilance, receptivity, critical reflexivity, and inner strength, amongst others. Yet the potential fruit of such transformative practice is profound, vast, and liberating.

Personally, I have found my relationships with my teachers to have been clarifying, inspirational, joyful, and profoundly transformative, though not without usual challenges of negotiating my personal melodramas and life situations. But with passing years also come ever-deepening, ever-increasing relational transparency, crispness, and purity of vision. Thus far, the virtue and credibility of my teachers combined with my heartfelt trust and respect (generated in the best way I know how) have been a source of tremendous blessings in my life. I suspect this is probably true for all who have had the good fortune to encounter and train with qualified virtuous teachers, in whatever Buddhist tradition.

When I see my teachers, I see through them to the Buddha. When I see the Buddha, I see through him to the ultimate truth of the way things are. And ultimate truth - the suchness of persons and phenomena - is blissfully radiant with unconfined pristine awareness beyond all reification and conceptual elaboration. And pristine awareness (rigpa) ceaselessly and spontaneously manifests in the myriad displays of samsara and nirvana, in an unborn, unceasing, ongoing flow of cognisance and responsiveness. One’s guru is none other than the inseparability of these three bodies - the empty essence of dharmakaya, the luminous cognisance of sambhogakaya, and the manifold capacity of nirmanakaya. This, in the final analysis, is the ‘ultimate guru’; the ‘guru’ that is not reached save through the long hard road.
of honest inquiry, balanced evaluation, moral conscience, clear confidence and trust, self
confidence, reflexivity, and in the rightness of time and conditions, the unembellished non-
dual blending of teacher and student: one heart, one taste, one freedom.
Dhamma in the 21st Century: Science and Praxis of Liberation

During his recent Australian teaching tour, His Holiness the Dalai Lama made strong points about the need to return to the purity and totality of the Buddha Dhamma, and to remember the roots of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in the august tradition of Nalanda University in classical India. In its heyday, Nalanda University attracted thousands of earnest and bright students from across Asia and elsewhere to study the Dhamma within its compounds, an intellectually rich and spiritually vibrant place where all major schools of Buddhism co-existed in harmonious dialogue and mutual learning. Nalanda University flourished between the 5th and 12th centuries, and was a major seat of learning way before its counterparts in the West like Cambridge and Oxford came into being. A Wikipedia entry on Nalanda notes: "The complex was built with red bricks and its ruins occupy an area of 14 hectares. At its peak, the university attracted scholars and students from as far away as China, Greece, and Persia.[4] Nalanda was sacked by Turkic Muslim invaders under Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1193, a milestone in the decline of Buddhism in India. The great library of Nalanda University was so vast that it is reported to have burned for three months after the invaders set fire to it, sacked and destroyed the monasteries, and drove the monks from the site. In 2006, Singapore, China, India, Japan, and other nations, announced a proposed plan to restore and revive the ancient site as Nalanda International University."

The Dalai Lama stressed the need to re-establish the pure Nalanda tradition in contemporary Dhamma, removing outmoded extraneous religious trappings that obfuscate more than they illuminate, the liberative teachings of the Buddha. His words resonate with what I have been contemplating for a while now, and validate much of what I have spoken and written about in recent years. He gave special recognition to the historically earliest foundations of the Dhamma as preserved in the Pali textual corpus, as he did with the Chinese tradition, a tradition he saw as an 'elder' to his own Tibetan one. At the same time, there is much that has been preserved in the Tibetan textual and practice traditions that are absent in the Pali and Chinese traditions, giving the Tibetan Dhamma heritage a richness and comprehensiveness sometimes lacking in the historically earlier ones.

Be that as it may, the Dalai Lama emphasised again and again the Four Noble Truths forming the bedrock and core of the entire Buddha Dhamma, urging us to re-envision the Dhamma in terms of its meta-structure. First, he spoke about Buddhist science - the science of reality derived through rigorous, concentrated, vivid and precise investigation of how things exist (i.e. interdependency and absence of inherency) which transcends religious labels and institutions. Then, he mentioned Buddhist philosophical concept - the range of ontological, epistemological, ethical ideas (e.g. impermanence, kammic causality) that seek to explicate our world of experience based on the findings of Buddhist science. Finally, he spoke about Buddhist spirituality or religion - the applied, lived, practical expressions of Buddhist science and philosophy in the everyday, including all aspects of moral ethics, contemplative practice, and mind training. I find his analysis of the Dhamma into science, philosophy, and spirituality to be a useful heuristic for approaching 21st century Dhamma. I would prefer the
use of the term 'emancipatory' or 'liberative praxis' rather than either 'religion' or 'spirituality' due to unwanted and potentially misleading connotations of these latter terms.

What I glean from His Holiness's comments is a gentle confirmation of my own intuitions and reflections on the critical need for 'Buddhism' to divest itself of accretions and distortions that confuse and mislead rather than clarify and guide. This process of emancipating the Dhamma in the 21st century has profound implications for its continued relevance, survival, and flourishing into the future. As I see it, to misappropriate the Dhamma for the purposes of cultural identity-building, ethnic consolation and comfort, preservation of cultural norms, forms, and ritual performances, perhaps out of a sense of dislocation and anomie in the postmodern world or out of a reactive angst concerning a runaway younger generation, is neither pragmatically skilful nor authentic to the intent of the Buddha. The Dhamma was taught not for propping up of ego-identity, whether personal, social, cultural or religious, but for the total transcendence of the delusive self that is the root of all our anguish and limitations. In my view, to mis-use the Dhamma for the exact opposite of what it is meant to be used, to worship the representations of Dhamma as religious idols for comfort and security of the self, and to bolster ethno-cultural pride under the guise of Dhamma, is to go far away from the original imperative of unconditional liberation of mind that the Buddha so fully embodied and taught. The Dalai Lama made a cheeky comment that if the Buddha was alive today and visited Tibet (or any traditional Buddhist country for that matter, as I see it), he might be quite shocked at what he saw. I could not help but smile in agreement.

Let us not forget what the Dhamma is all about: the Dhamma is, borrowing from the threefold category used by the Dalai Lama, first and foremost, a science of reality born of deep investigation, out of which emanates factually concordant concepts about the patterning of this reality, which then manifests as an ethically-based, contemplative, meditative system of liberative practice aimed at nothing less than perfect awakening (samma sambodhi) of consciousness itself. In short, the Dhamma is the science, philosophy, and ethically-based practice of liberation.

Notes:
Practising the Dhamma [1]: Heart Advice on Meditation from the Dalai Lama

In his preliminary teachings to the Kalachakra Empowerment in Washington DC just days ago, His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke on the need for cultivating shamatha (calm abiding/single-pointed attention) in order to progress on the path. I just received a slightly edited transcript on this heart advice from my teacher B. Alan Wallace, who has kindly given his blessings for this to be shared with anyone I like. I hope that my readers, especially sincere Dharma practitioners, will enjoy this teaching and pay heed to its message:

“The wisdom arising from meditation is not only through investigation but from familiarization so that it is something living, it automatically develops, and that is the counterforce [to mental afflictions]. In order to achieve that, our mind must be controlled, not by force, but by mental effort, which only comes voluntarily, never through force. That single-pointed mind you call ‘shamatha’ is common in India for thousands of years in all traditions, a common practice. Sometimes I do feel that we Tibetans are a little bit negligent on that. We make excuses, and that is a mistake. Now in terms of my own experience, I think I have some experience of shunyata as a result of almost 50 years of effort. Even before I left Tibet, I’d already developed genuine interest in that. After I came to India, I made regular effort to study, to think, to analyze. So now when I think of that view, or reality, there is some sort of feeling there. But due to a lack of single-pointed mind, it cannot go further. The Heart Sutra mentions, “gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate.” Unless you experience single-pointed meditation, the “gate, gate” is meaningless. So if you’re really serious about “gate, gate” (“go, go”), then you must start the practice of samadhi. This is very important—a single-pointed mind.

Now the main method for single-pointed meditation is the cultivation of mindfulness and introspection. Here mindfulness means that the object on which your mind concentrates is thoroughly held. That means the image or picture of that must be held in mind. That means mindfulness. Then, not only that, but the mind must be very sharp, fully alert. If the object is a bit hazy and your mind is slack, that is a great danger for proper samadhi. The mind must not only hold the object of your meditation, your mind must be fully alert. You must have a very sharp mind. Whether such obstacles occur or not, you need introspection to monitor that. These two are the main instruments for developing a single-pointed mind. For that reason in our daily life, even in our dreams, some sort of mindfulness of what is right must be sustained. Then you watch whether your mental action, verbal action, physical action go in the wrong direction. Constantly watch. That is training in ethics, a constant watching to see whether your physical action goes the right direction or not. Constantly check. And likewise for speech, check whether it goes the right way or not. Among the three trainings, training in ethics is the basis. That develops these two: mindfulness and introspection. Then the second practice is single-pointed mind. Once we experience that, then no matter what we focus on—whether conventional things, or mind itself, or shunyata—wherever your mind is put, it remains there single-pointedly. That is immensely helpful for penetrating your object of meditation, in this case, shunyata. Those are the three trainings, the main method to achieve...
moksha, or liberation. That is the Theravada tradition and the Bodhisattva tradition—all the same. Without that, you cannot go further. You can train, you can study, you can develop altruism, but you cannot go on the actual path without samadhi, without wisdom. That is how to achieve liberation.”

“When you stop memories about the past and don't let in hopes and visions of the future, then in that moment you get the feeling of nothingness, empty. That is not emptiness. We are normally so caught up in feelings and images. While you prolong for a little while that sense of emptiness, then you get a sense of sheer luminosity. It mirrors appearances but is itself nothing. It is nothing in particular, but reflects everything. That is the conventional reality of the mind. It is neutral, just pure luminosity. Then concentrate on it as long as you can. Then once that becomes familiar, then take that as an object and further investigate the reality of that. The mind must be designated on the continuation of that experience…so what is the mind? Through further investigation, you can’t find it. Then you touch the ultimate reality of the mind.

Then to practice something subtler than focusing on an external object but coarser than focusing on the mind as the object of meditation, it’s best to focus on the in- and out-breath. So single-pointedly concentrate on your breathing, just coming and going. You can count 20, 50, 100 breaths. This is one way of training the mind that is so scattered. This gives it some discipline…As you discipline the mind, you can begin with a coarser object like the breathing, and then go to subtler objects.” (With compliments of B. Alan Wallace, Ph.D.)

**Practising the Dhamma [2]: Balancing All the Factors of Awakening**

In our Dhamma practice, whether as beginners or experienced meditators, we can encounter times when our practice feels blocked, or when a sense of discomfort, resistance, or apparent lack of fit seems to overwhelm us. As a result, we may feel demotivated and get stuck in stories about how 'bad' we are as meditators or how 'useless' Dhamma practice is or how 'unenlightened' our teachers are for not seemingly liberating us from all our problems! This is not often expressed in public but I think quite commonly experienced amongst dedicated seasoned and beginning practitioners alike.

So what to do? What's going on?

First, no need to be surprised. This is natural. This is a sign and symptom of our habitual deluded patterns rising up to meet us. It is good for it gives us the chance to stretch beyond our comfort zones. It allows us to reflect more deeply, to enquire more profoundly, to get even more intimate with our own minds and hearts. Out of this increasing intimacy with ourselves can come the possibility of authentic insights and the freedom that ensues from such insights.

Second, areas of blockage, resistance, discomfort in our practice are often areas that offer the
most potential for transformation, liberation. It may well be that we have remained stuck in these zones of inner life for a long time now, only to be aware of their existence when brushed up against the chisel of dharma wisdom. Can we be open to the possibility of deep change through exploring these blockages, experimenting with practices and meditative methods that we might not be immediately drawn to or even actively resist?

Third, it is instructive to remember the Buddha's advice on cultivating the seven factors of awakening (e.g. MN i 11-12) and the five faculties (e.g. MN i 480) in their totality. These seven factors and five faculties are essential to drawing out the full potential of the mind and leading one to highest awakening. What are they? The seven factors are mindfulness (sati), investigation of states(dhamma-vicaya), energy (viriya), rapture (piti), tranquillity (passadhi), concentration (samadhi), and equanimity (upekkha). The five faculties are faith (saddha), energy (viriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (panna). Examining our own minds, we might observe that we feel naturally disposed towards some of these factors and faculties but not towards others. We might even feel resistant to having some factors or faculties in our hearts. Our conditioning and meaning-making processes throughout our lives may also predispose us towards comfort with certain emotions and avoidance of others. As a result, practices that evoke and nourish certain factors or faculties appeal to us, while other practices do not. In fact, these latter practices may even repel us, for fear of evoking emotions that we desperately wish to avoid. Thus we get stuck, we feel blocked, and we desperately cling to our practice comfort zones and refuse to explore Dhamma approaches that we are conditioned to resist.

One very salient example is that of faith (saddha). For whatever reasons, many in modernity find faith anathema, instinctively reacting to any mention of faith as a primitive return to blind dogmatic allegiance to authority. This is a sad misconstrual of what is actually a soaring and beautiful mental factor of uplifting yet serene confidence in what is true, good, and potentially verifiable through testing and experience. Be that as it may, faith in the Dhamma is immensely helpful in lifting the heart out of self-complacency, laziness, and dullness, as well as pacifying unrealistic fear and anxiety on the path. Traditionally and for very good sound reasons, faith is cultivated in relation to the Buddha, his Dhamma, and the Sangha (the threefold refuge) and to some extent, in the spiritual mentor or virtuous friend who guides the student on the Buddha's path. A predisposition towards excessive skepticism, paralytic doubt, and pride often prevents one from appreciating and cultivating faith. Also, proclivity towards wisdom and tranquillity factors may bias one away from the emotionally vivifying quality of faith. As a result, one's practice becomes lop-sided and emotionally flat, lacking the inner power to overcome life's ceaseless range of inner and outer obstacles. Finally, one gives up on the practice, which is sad indeed.

Conversely, one may be so full of faith, so entranced by faith and devotion that one loses one's clear-headedness. Faith gets sabotaged by craving and clinging and loses its authenticity and clarifying power. Wisdom is left neglected and equanimity is not nourished, resulting in emotionalism and perhaps unquestioning fanaticism. Again, one loses sight of the
Dhamma and one’s meditation falls into a ditch.

Another example is that of studying the Dhamma. Many people these days are interested in meditation (e.g. attracted to rapture, tranquillity, concentration, equanimity) but find studying the Dhamma (e.g. investigation of states, wisdom deriving from study and reflection) boring, difficult, and unattractive. This attitude is actually quite wrong and pose as an obstacle to further growth in the Dhamma. In an instructive discourse found in both Pali and Chinese versions, the Buddha emphasized the key importance of wide learning in the Dhamma for successful meditation practice. In this Simile of the Border Town (AN 7.63 and MA 3), the Buddha compared wide Dhamma learning to an armoury of all sorts of weapons such as spears, bows and arrows, swords etc. A noble disciple who has wide Dhamma learning, deep familiarity with the concepts, principles, and techniques of the Dhamma, has at his or her disposal a huge pool of resources to draw upon in working with his or her mind towards awakening. Such a disciple can forge a path to awakening through mastery of Dhamma knowledge and skill in applying these Dhamma tools to know shape, and free the mind.

Therefore, to negate such Dhamma learning in sole favour of meditation, to stubbornly refuse to read, study, listen widely, and reflect on the Dhamma one has heard or studied, is to sabotage one's own journey to liberation. For if one does not know what to meditate on, how to meditate unmistakenly, how to deepen one's meditation through paying heed to the words of the Buddha and his enlightened lineage of teachers, then what are one's chances of walking on the path without sinking, vacillating, or getting lost?

By the same token, one can also get so enchanted with concepts and thinking about Dhamma that one forgets or refuses to meditate. Or one may meditate using conceptually discursive and complex visualization techniques but neglect non-conceptual, non-discursive meditation. Or one may be so absorbed in Dhamma textual study and chronic philosophizing that one loses touch with the immediacy and unfolding of moment-to-moment experience. All this points to blindspots that can emerge in one’s Dhamma practice, losing sight of the need for complementary Dhamma practices that can synergistically benefit the mind. Instead, one is trapped in the prison of dogmatic confused allegiance to this guru or that vippassana technique, for instance. Needless to say, a rigorous and sound investigation of any potential teacher is absolutely crucial. A teacher-student relationship must never be rushed, coerced, or seduced into, but must always be grounded in careful, unhurried, critical examination using a list of tested criteria (the Buddha and Tsong Khapa have given some excellent advice in relation to what these criteria might be).

In short, be awake and alert to all the factors and faculties of awakening, taking care to attend to each and all of them, weaving them all into a synergistic symphony of enlightening melody that heals and transforms the heart, calms and sharpens the mind, and invites the dawning of unmistaken awakening for the peace and benefit of all.
Mind or consciousness can never be destroyed or created. What fears destruction is ego-grasping and self-cherishing. Ego is nourished not only by concepts, but by all our sensory, emotional, and even so-called spiritual experiences. The problem is not with concepts or experiences per se, but in the way we wrongly relate to them, through identifying and holding on to them, using them to feed our pride and sense of identity.

In the context of awakening, it is better to have a balanced approach of mindful study, mindful reflection, and mindful meditation, guided by qualified and pure spiritual mentors so as not to get sidetracked, harm one's practice, or waste unnecessary time in blind alleys. Conceptuality and non-conceptuality are complementary, not contradictory. Intellect and silence complement each other and inter-nourish. There can be stillness in thinking and thinking in stillness. How? Be mindful of how one relates to, uses, and applies one's thinking and intellectual abilities. Thinking itself is not the problem. Unmindful, fixated, compulsive thinking is. Thus, the solution (mindful thinking imbued with wisdom) is at a very different level from the problem (unmindful ego-based thinking). Throwing out the baby (wise intellect) with the bathwater (ego-based thinking) is definitely not recommended.

The terms "mind", "ego grasping", "self-cherishing", "conceptual", and "wisdom" have very specific, precise meanings in the Buddha's teachings. Without some mindful and clear-headed study, we are at risk of using them mistakenly and vaguely in a way that does no justice to the Buddha or to oneself. Of course, in the end, when the time is ripe, all concepts give way to direct perceptual realization of reality. But premature evacuation of all concepts without any discernment whatsoever can limit one's capacity to know and see insightfully. Perhaps that is why the Buddha takes pain to stress the blending of *samadhi* (unifying absorption) and *prajna* (clean-clear, sharp insight into reality), and not to erroneously mistakes *samadhi* for *prajna*; mere non-conceptual, vivid one-pointedness for penetrative non-fabricating insight. This mistake seems to happen not infrequently, even amongst highly experienced meditators and masters. This is my understanding of the advice of the Buddha and realized masters of the Buddhist tradition.
Dhamma Awareness and Meditation [1]

Dhamma Awareness and Meditation Training 2012 began in earnest yesterday. Our little but cosy sangha came together to read the Dhamma of liberation, following a structured collection of texts reflecting the 2,500 year-old historical evolution of Buddhism. These texts are structured according to the following: (1) Pali foundations - Early Buddhism and Theravada; (2) Ch'an/Zen - Sino-Japanese flowering; (3) Nalanda tradition - Indo-Tibetan developments; (4) Vajrayana tradition - Tibetan culmination; (5) global Buddhism - evolving Dhamma. Our Dhamma study and reflection is based on an organically unfolding ethos and vision of contemporary Buddhism growing from the ground up. This vision can be likened to a cultural experiment, a piece of social artistry, a prototype of 'presencing' and critical reflexivity. We call it evolutionary buddhism with a small 'b' or (eb) for short. But more on (eb) in future postings.

For starters, we mindfully recited chants in Pali, Chinese, Tibetan and English, corresponding roughly to the flow of historical evolution of the Buddha-dhamma. It was a reminder of this historical legacy we now inherit and continue as 21st century Australian Buddhists. It was also a chance to dip into the tremendous stream of blessings embedded in these resonant chants, allowing the deep energy and meanings of these sonorous soundwaves to shift our mindspace towards wholesome joy, confidence, and altruistic intent in the Dhamma. It is time for us to have a distinctively Australian Buddhism that reflects our integral diversity and shared values. Ethnic Buddhism(s) - Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Sri Lankan, Thai, Tibetan - still have their place, though defining Buddhism exclusively in traditional cultural and religious terms is no longer a viable option in this globalized modern and increasingly secular world.

We began reading the first chapter of Bhante H. Gunaratana's "Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness" exploring such issues as: (1) why and how mindfulness is only one part of the Buddha's path to awakening; (2) the nature and role of faith (saddha) in the Dhamma; (3) the types of happiness possible in life - lesser worldly happiness, higher spiritual happiness, and the highest happiness of liberation (nibbana); (4) skillful and proper perspective on the teacher-student relationship. With much current confusion around how Dhamma disciples should relate to their teachers and vice-versa - a confusion made worse by calls for 'unquestioning devotion' in some Buddhist quarters - it was helpful and refreshing to examine what the Buddha personally had to say about this important issue. For clear-headed and sensible information on the teacher-student relationship and the issue of faith in Buddhism, see http://buddhismaw2z.com/content.php?id=133 and http://buddhismaw2z.com/content.php?id=412

We engaged in careful listening, remembering, and application of key meditation instructions on mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati) and recollection on generosity (caganussati). Salient points supportive of good meditative practice and progress were discussed. The atmosphere was one of kind attentive imparting and learning, a mutuality of
presence that can be likened to a profound transmission of the Dhamma. With such auspicious beginnings, our little heart essence sangha at Dhammalaya walks together the ancient path, leading to the ancient city of freedom, shown to us by an ancient traveller and pioneer, Gotama Buddha. Could this be a small flame playing its part in the dawn of a new culture, a new civilization of awakening built not on edifices of brick and mortar, but on pure simple qualities of innate wisdom and compassion, born of rigorous ethical and contemplative endeavour? Time will tell.

**Dhamma Awareness and Meditation [2]**

Once again, we began our session with mindful and heartfelt chanting reflecting the spectrum of Buddhist traditions - Pali, Chinese, Tibetan and English.

Today, our discussion centred on (i) the recurrent cycle of cause and effect, attraction and aversion, leading eventually to anguish, dissatisfaction, suffering, dukkha; (ii) reversing this cycle through clear recognition of the path, and applying ourselves to the gradual training of all eightfold path factors; (iii) the spiral-like nature of the eightfold training process; (iv) four important supports for our practice - (a) simplifying our lives; (b) exercising self-restraint; (c) cultivating goodness e.g. generosity, patience, faith and other virtues; (d) finding a teacher and exploring the teachings. These are things we need to do over a period of years - or even lifetimes - in order to progress towards utter freedom of the mind.

In our sharings, we mused on the fact that decision-making can be skillful or unskillful, depending on the context in which it takes place. When enmeshed in the context of attachment, craving, clinging and possessiveness, decision-making that serves to protect essentially unstable and unreliable sources of pleasure is unskillful and can lead to harmful consequences if not careful. When inspired by a context of awakening with honest aspiration for dispassion, coolness of mind, and kindness of heart, our decision-making can be immensely beneficial and skillful. Without firm decision to embark upon the path of Dhamma, there is no hope of ever being awakened is there?

We also spent some time clarifying English translations for terms such as samma-ditthi, samma-samkappa, and sankhara. What Bhante G translated as 'skillful understanding' and 'skillful thinking' are often translated as 'right view'and 'right intention' in other texts. And the term 'sankhara' has been translated in so many ways that it can easily confuse the English-language reader. Just bear in mind that terms like 'compositional factors', 'volitional formations', 'formative elements', 'mental formations' (to name a few) all point to the same Pali term 'sankhara'.

We meditated on mindfulness of breathing, consolidating key instructions from last week and adding new nuances to the practice. We then practiced the recollection on virtue (silanussati), focussing initially on forgiving oneself and others for past non-virtue and resolving our hearts towards goodness. All in all, a deeply refreshing and mind-shifting time for us all.
Dhamma Awareness and Meditation

Following our customary mindful chanting in Pali, Chinese, Tibetan and English, we continued our study and discussion of Bhante G's Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness.

We considered Bhante G's description of mindfulness as "a unique method for cultivating moment-by-moment awareness of the true nature of everything experienced through the body and mind" and its synonymity with so-called "vipassana meditation." While this statement is generally true, it is only so in the context of the 'modern vipassana movement' with roots in the Burmese and Thai Theravada traditions. When taking into account the entire Buddhist tradition as a whole, including sutta and abhidhamma accounts and Mahayana perspectives of Asanga-Maitreya, sutra and tantra mahamudra, and dzogchen, one would come to a somewhat different conclusion. In these variant accounts, mindfulness is understood in broader and more nuanced terms, including recollection and deliberate conception, prospective and retrospective memory, sustained non-forgetfulness of familiar object, protective and introspective awareness, and effortless naked awareness - deconstructed, non-reifying, and non-fabricating.

We reviewed some good old-fashioned advice for sitting meditation practice: (1) selecting a good time, e.g. early morning; (2) choosing a good sustainable posture that is "natural and supple, not stiff"; (3) keeping the posture without unnecessary movement; (4) determining length of session prior to sitting; (5) letting the mind settle and become clear; (6) discerning the type of pain that is experienced and applying appropriate remedies if required; (7) observing, being with, and merging into the pain that has been identified as "normal, healthy" pain not due to physiological injury or illness; (8) not identifying with pain as 'mine'; (9) staying with psychological pain without pushing away; (10) allowing 'breakthrough' to occur so that pain disappears and is replaced by great relief, peace and relaxation, even bliss; (11) seeing the pain in perspective, e.g. as small compared to previously experienced pain in the past, or as not so bad compared to the great pain others are experiencing right now (sickness, hunger, famine etc.); (12) adjusting posture mindfully when all else fails; (13) being especially sensitive to ankles and knees to prevent unwanted injury to tendons; (14) cultivating patience; (15) nourishing loving-kindness with recommended script; (16) focusing on beginning, middle and end of each inhalation and exhalation, including brief pauses between breaths; (17) noticing calm and peace ensuing from progressive calming and subtlety of the breath; (18) using silent direct awareness rather than cognitive labelling; (19) practicing one-minute meditation for one minute of every hour throughout the day, resolving to do so as regularly as possible and building up enthusiasm for the practice; (20) establishing a meditation space in one's home and wherever one might be staying even while travelling; (21) reframing changes to daily routine, e.g. having to travel for work, as a 'travelling retreat' to imbue the mind with meditative attitudes; (22) establishing new neural circuitry for supine meditation (i.e. lying on one's back) by consciously practicing mindful attentiveness in supine posture at times other than just prior to sleep or just after waking up (due to these two periods being so behaviourally conditioned with dullness of sleep).
We also inquired more deeply into what is commonly called 'bare attention', recognizing that, at best, such bare attention is only relatively bare in so far as it is not crowded with thinking and chronic reactivity we are all so familiar with in day-to-day consciousness. On a more subtle and fundamental level, however, bare attention is already imprinted with layers of implicit, unconscious, subliminal networks of reification which, in grosser forms, also plague our day-to-day consciousness. These networks of reification obscure our bare attention and make it not so 'bare' after all. In other words, bare attention is loaded with preconscious ignorance. Without first generating a sharp clear appearance of non-reification - ranging from absence of permanent, unitary, autonomous self, through absence of self-sufficient substantially existing self, absence of subject and object being of separate substances, absence of being truly established or established by way of its own character, absence of inherent existence or existence from its own side - to counteract the tacit reifying tendencies of bare attention, it is not possible to have a pure naked attentiveness that is truly free of distortion. This clear appearance of non-reification is at first conceptual but gradually deepens and clarifies into direct perceptual insight through relentless study, reflection and meditation. Without undistorted vision, it is not possible to see things as they really are. Without seeing things as they really are, it is not possible to realize genuine liberation through wisdom -nibbana, the unshakeable deliverance of mind (akuppa-cetovimutti).

Thus for us meditators, the task is clear - develop an unmistaken understanding of reality through rigorous inquiry, probe deeply the immediacy of experience imbued with the wisdom of deconstruction, and soar into the sky of freedom with a pristine awareness truly free of fabricated thought-forms and fabricating tendencies. This is our challenge and our hope.
A Chat on Calm and Insight

Very often, I come across questions and comments on the distinction between calm abiding (shamatha) and deep insight (vipassana) which seem confused and mixed up. Some might say that in order to progress on the path to awakening, one must do calm before insight. Others might say one must do insight first and bare insight alone is enough. Yet there are those who swear on the simultaneous 'doing' of of calm and insight. In all these cases, the assumption is that there are specific 'calm' techniques and specific 'insight' techniques. Or that calm is or comes from concentrative meditation, and insight is or comes from mindfulness meditation. Or that calm is merely a focused stable mind while insight is merely the clarity of that mind that can see and know clearly. The trouble is that these assumptions find no support in the ancient most uncontested Pali suttas, the Sanskrit sutras and sastras, the Asanga-Maitreya Indo-Tibetan tradition of meditation (1500 years old at least), and in the authoritative instructions of the world's most well-respected Buddhist contemplatives both past and present.

The historical Buddha did not teach 'calm techniques' as opposed to 'insight techniques', nor did he say one must do calm first or insight first or calm alone or insight alone. There is no textual evidence to suggest that calm is concentration alone or that insight is mindfulness alone, however much modern proponents might want to say so. Both the faculties of concentration and mindfulness are required for calm. Both faculties are similarly required for insight. Mindfulness and concentration are conjointly developed in the process of attaining calm abiding. Mindfulness and concentration are conjointly deployed in the process of gaining deep insight. In both cases, vigilant introspection or clear comprehension is allied with mindfulness to enable sustained attention without distraction, without grasping.

There is also no evidence to suggest that calm abiding is mere one-pointedness while deep insight is mere clarity of knowing. If one looks at classical descriptions of the jhanas (meditative concentrations) given by the Buddha in the Pali suttas, it is evident that as one traverses the progression from first to the fourth jhanas, consciousness becomes increasingly one-pointed and lucid and equanimous. The utter lucidity and equipoise of the fourth jhana, for instance, is said to be most conducive to insight knowledges. As the Buddha often describes (e.g in the Samannaphala-sutta and elsewhere), the lucid malleability of fourth jhana consciousness is subsequently deployed in the activation of insight into reality. In other words, the fourth jhana, as an instance of right/skillful concentration (samma samadhi) and also a type of calm abiding (shamatha), is characterized by both one-pointed calm and lucid clarity. So, clarity of knowing is thus a feature of calm abiding and not to be equated with deep insight (vipassana).

In this connection, Je Tsong Khapa explains the key features of calm abiding very clearly in his Small Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba). In this seminal text, Tsong Khapa cites source references from Sanskrit sutras attributed to the Buddha such as the Samdhinirmocana-sutra, Ratnamegha-sutra, and
Sanskrit treatises such as *Bhavanakrama, Bodhisattvabhumi*, and *Prajnaparamitopadesa* attributed to classical contemplative scholars like Asanga and Kamalashila. Tsong Khapa's discourse presents calm abiding as characterized by non-dispersion of attention to external objects, with inward focus on meditative object, without attentional laxity, and with *potency of clarity*. I'd like to quote a lucid commentary to Tsong Khapa's words as aptly presented by B. Alan Wallace here:

"... Tsongkhapa refutes various misconceptions concerning the distinction between quiescence [calm abiding or shamatha] and insight. One misconception is to assert that quiescence and insight are distinguished by the fact that quiescence is focused solely on the conventional or phenomenal truth; while insight is solely focused on the ultimate nature of reality. Tsongkhapa counters that there are many types of insight, some concerned with the diversity of phenomena and others concerned with the ultimate nature of phenomena. Thus, insight may be either mundane or supramundane. When quiescence is focused on the relative nature of phenomena, it is mundane; and when it is conjoined with supramundane insight focused on the real nature of phenomena, or emptiness, it is supramundane.

"A second misconception is to identify quiescence with non-conceptual attentional stability, and to identify insight with the potency of attentional clarity. Both attentional stability and clarity are indispensable elements of genuine quiescence: if the former is lacking there is no true samadhi, and if the latter is absent, the mind has succumbed to laxity. Thus, radiant clarity and luminosity of the mind are integral features of quiescence and are by no means confined to insight alone.

"A third misconception is to maintain that any samadhi characterized by joy, clarity, and non-conceptualization necessarily realizes thatness [emptiness]. Tsongkhapa emphasizes there are many types of samadhi bearing those attributes, but not all of them involve a realization of ultimate truth. Joy and clarity are key elements of both mundane and supramundane quiescence, and the fact that the mind enters a state free of conceptualization does not necessarily mean that it fathoms ultimate truth transcending all conceptual frameworks. It is not enough that the tendency of grasping onto signs and of reifying objects is temporarily suspended during samadhi; rather, by means of critical investigation and analysis one must realize the absence of an intrinsic nature of phenomena, and conjoin that insight with the non-conceptual stability and clarity of quiescence. Thus, as mentioned previously, quiescence temporarily inhibits the manifestation of a certain range of mental afflictions; but only insight conjoined with quiescence can irreversibly eliminate delusion and its derivative afflictions." (Wallace, 2005, pp.116-7).

It can be discerned (from careful survey of the Indo-Tibetan system of meditative training across diverse lineages) that deep insight results from (1) "critical investigation and analysis" with the aid of undistracted discursive reasoning; and - although neither Tsongkhapa nor Wallace says it here - (2) careful, probing, nondiscursive inquiry that is sharp, sustained. Tsongkhapa and Wallace mentions the first option above. In another place
(I cannot recall the source right now), Wallace mentions the second option. This second mode of arriving at deep insight via non-discursive probing inquiry is, if I might add, most closely aligned with the 'essence mahamudra' and 'dzogchen' approaches within Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (this is another discussion for another time). One also finds resonance of this nondiscursive inquiry approach in the Sino-Japanese Ch’an/Zen practice of huatou (critical phrase) and gong-an/koan (public record). In any case, the strategy is the same: conjoin calm abiding/quiescence with insight whether via critical analysis or non-discursive inquiry; flush out and destroy deep proclivities to conceptual grasping and reification of objects; and free one's mind from all cognitive and afflictive obscurations and the anguish that follows therefrom. Therein lies our liberating freedom and taintless bliss: nirvana.

Reference:
Q and A on Enlightenment and Tradition

Q. "Isn't enlightenment all about the subtraction of concepts, not the addition of ideas, rituals, prayers, mantras, visualisations, and doctrinal themes? Buddhist tradition, with its plethora of prayers, mantras, doctrines etc., seems to be antithetical to enlightenment, as I understand it. Should we not jettison all that traditional rubbish?"

A. "Yes, subtraction and deconditioning of the mind is a key aspect of the process of awakening. But it is not the be all and end all of it. We subtract to emerge from cyclical reactive mind; we subtract to dissolve concrete, deluded conceptions that are out of line with reality; we subtract to release destructive emotions that afflict us and others, that spoil our environment. But this is just the beginning, not the end. Subtraction creates space for deep transformation to erupt. Such transformation emerges from using the mind wisely and skilfully by immersing itself in gems of wisdom and method transmitted through traditional lineages of Dharma. These wisdom gems are none other than crystallisations of enlightened intent, energy, and cognition: aggregations of nanoseconds of primordial awareness spontaneously engaged in compassionate responsiveness for the benefit of sentient beings. They come from the ocean of awakened awareness of buddhas. They are in a sense manifestations in idea, image, vocalisation, gesture, and conduct of the latent potentials of enlightened awareness, actualised in buddhas and innate in all of us. When we imbibe them and meditate on them, with them, from them, in them, through them, as them, they act as catalysts to draw out our innate potentials of enlightened wisdom. We grow in wisdom and compassion as our buddha-nature activates, blazes forth, and becomes increasingly obvious and effectual in our day to day lives.

"So, such ideas, concepts, prayers, visualisations, mantras, koans, postures, gestures etc. are not simply accumulations of dead knowledge or senseless ritual adding to our deluded conceptual ego - personal, social, or cultural. They are much, much more, and at once radically much less than that. They belong to a radically different sphere - a world transcending and liberating mode of pragmatic endeavour. Traditional Buddhist themes and practices (often misconstrued as blind religious ritual) do not recondition the mind; rather they serve to dig in, moisturise, nourish, warm up, bring forth, and empower the mind in its essence, nature, and responsiveness. They let us come out fully as the awakened beings we fundamentally are and could be. We come back home to ourselves as we really are. And from our home that is anywhere, everywhere and nowhere, we can un-self-consciously bless and benefit intrinsically empty yet dearly beloved sentient beings beyond apparent confines of space and time. Let us first seek to understand the 'other', the 'traditional rubbish', before rashly jumping to wrong conclusions instigated by our preconceived notions of modernity and supposed rational superiority."
DHAMMA: ADAPTATIONS AND DISTORTIONS
Dhamma, Professional Packages, and Academic Studies

In modernity, one sees a variety of offerings in 'Buddhism' - from bare-bones Dhamma focused on authentically transmitting the pristine teachings of the Buddha; to professional packaging of therapeutic models, educational and clinical programs based on or inspired by Buddhist ideas and practices such as mindfulness; to academic courses offered at graduate and postgraduate levels in the internationally-recognized discipline of Buddhist studies. What are we to make of all this?

First, it is interesting to note that in the transmission of Dhamma, a wide variety of approaches abound - saffron-clad monastic Theravada teachings, Theravada-derived secular lay insight teachings, regimented and/or laid-back contemporary Zen offerings, culturally rich and engaged Chinese Buddhism(s), colourful and exotic Tibetan platters combining meditation, study and empowerment ceremonies unique to its brand, and so on. Some of these items on the menu are offered freely with no strings attached, where the audience voluntarily offers donations for the teachings they receive. Others are far more slick and fancy, with attractive marketing and promotional strategies that entice and cajole. So much so that even before one actually gets to meet the famous 'highly enlightened' lama or roshi or master that is heading into town, one has already formed a rather skewed image of the precious godly being that is about to descend onto earth. And when one finally meets the bloke (it usually is male for one reason or another), it begs the question of how much of one's impression of the teacher is fantasy and how much is reality. If one's mind has already been saturated with subliminal messages of supposed divinity of the master, is it any wonder that one would be predisposed to perceiving him as such? Thus, is one seeing the teacher as he really is, or is one seeing him as constructed by the hypnotic power of glossy marketing? In any case, suave advertising often comes with a high price tag as well. One often sees prices of hundreds and thousands of dollars for the so-called 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity to receive this teaching or that empowerment, this retreat intensive to achieve these super-jhanas or those breakthrough insights, this unexcelled meditative technique or that mind-boggling blessing. The crass commodification of Dhamma in such instances seems so at odds with the Buddha's admonition to "not make a business of Dhamma." It is quite funny that celebrity Dhamma events like these follow the contemporary sales pitch of Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze Passes, reminiscent of banks flogging their credit cards and operatic performances selling tiered tickets to privileged audiences with high disposable incomes. Even if fees charged at some Buddhist centres may not be exorbitant, the fact remains that attaching a price tag to any Buddhist teaching necessarily creates a retailer-consumer relationship between provider and recipient of Dhamma, no matter how much one may try to rationalize this away. Of course, if operational costs need to be covered (e.g. board and food fees for a residential retreat), these fees need to be made transparent, open to scrutiny, and designated as such in any event announcement. It is also incumbent on organizers to ensure that any fee charged to cover costs must be fairly, honestly calculated with no desire for profit. It would be a travesty indeed to embed hidden amounts of profit within the apparent 'cost' of a Dhamma event. In short, the gift of Dhamma should always be
free, transcend the all-consuming religion of capitalist 'moneytheism' (source: Piya Tan), and remain a true gift.

Yet there are signs of authenticity and non-selling amidst all this flurry of commercialism, particularly within the modern Theravada or Theravada-inspired circles in both Asia and the West. Here you find all Dhamma offered free of charge, free of strings attached, and embedded within the economy of gifts, not of the market. Incidentally, such authentic practice can also be found within Tibetan Buddhist circles, though rare. One sterling example that comes to mind is the School of Buddhist Science - Tashi Khangmar Samdrup Ling (TKSL) established and pioneered by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Tashi Tsering in Brisbane. All teachings at TKSL are free of charge, totally reliant on voluntary donation (dana), and offered to all in a spirit of integrity and open compassion. In the interest of full disclosure, I must declare that Khen Rinpoche is my teacher but be that as it may, I make the above comment with no prejudice and without guile. It is a mere statement of fact, one that has inspired and still inspires my utmost respect for this genuine teacher of tremendous intellectual, heart, moral and spiritual qualities.

Second, pristine Dhamma offered as a gift to one and all must be distinguished from professional repackaging of Buddhist ideas and practices in the form of a therapeutic model, clinical program, psycho-educational modality, corporate training, or professional and educational conference presentations. Some examples of such professional repackaging that come to mind include the current fashionable mindfulness-based/derived/inspired/centred psychotherapeutic programs, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), mindfulness-based cultivating emotional balance (CEB), and corporate-based mindfulness training (CBMT) and so on. Such professional packages often combine Buddhist ideas and practices with a range of constructs and tools from other intellectual sources, e.g. behavioural science, cognitive science, psychological theory etc. They are legitimate sources of professional knowledge and expertise, and are legitimately situated within the economy of the market where buying and selling of packets of professional information is standard operating procedure. As such, one can note the stiff price tag that often accompanies this professional training or another. But professionals invest in their ongoing professional development, which is perfectly acceptable and encouraged, and they pay for it, which is also perfectly acceptable and reasonable. And this is so because mindfulness-based professional training is not Dhamma in the true sense of the word.

Third, we have academic studies of the historical-social-cultural-religious-intellectual phenomenon we call 'Buddhism'. The academic discipline of Buddhist studies is young compared to the millennia old tradition of Dhamma. From the pioneering scholarly efforts of European scholars in the 19th century like Henry Thomas Colebrooke, Brian Houghton Hodgson, Alexander Csoma de Koros, Eugene Burnouf and their intellectual heirs, three schools of mainstream western Buddhist studies emerged: Anglo-German (led by T.W. Rhys
Davids and Hermann Oldenberg), Franco-Belgian (e.g. Louis de La Vallee Poussin and Etienne Lamotte), and Leningrad (e.g. Edward Conze, F. Stcherbatsky and E. Obermiller) schools. American scholars like Paul Carus, Henry Clarke Warren and Charles Rockwell Lanman pioneered the field of Buddhist studies in America in their time (Prebish and Keown: 2006). In modern Asia, Buddhist studies flourished in Taiwan and Japan where prominent modern scholars such as Yinshun and Maso Abe stand amongst the luminaries of the discipline. Nowadays, scholars of Buddhist studies can be found around the world, with Indo-Tibetan Buddhist scholarship gaining a stronghold in the United States and recent emergence of a new 'specie' of scholar-practitioners in Buddhist studies. The key thing to note here is this: academic study of Buddhism in the form of Buddhist studies is, like professional training in mindfulness-based therapies, not Dhamma per se. Rather, it is a critical, reflexive, intellectual investigation of a multi-faceted, multi-layered historical phenomenon with the tools of academically rigorous philological, linguistic, philosophical, hermeneutic, phenomenological, sociological, anthropological and emerging empirical (e.g. cognitive- and neuro-scientific and first-person methodologies) analyses. As such, conclusions drawn from academic Buddhist studies may differ in some respects from conclusions derived from lived experience, study, and practice within the Buddhist tradition itself. Such variances can but need not be sources of conflict between traditionalists and critical scholars. Instead, differences in opinion can be harnessed into sources of creative reknowing of truth in the service of universal pragmatic benefit.

Having said all that, academic Buddhist studies are offered at University faculties around the world including in Australia, some housed within studies in religion, some in the humanities, some in philosophy or Asian studies or the like. Others, if they are lucky, may have a school of Buddhist studies in their own right. And as part of the University system, Buddhist studies courses would be offered in the same way as other courses offered by universities, either as full fee paying courses or government-funded/subsidised/loaned courses, with distinct fee rules for domestic and international students. Here again, Buddhist studies as an academic discipline and module of knowledge transfer belongs legitimately to the marketplace and thus attracts a monetary value commensurate with standard practice in the tertiary education sector.

At Dhammalaya, our goal is very simple: to know Dhamma and make Dhamma known in a pristine non-commodified way, remaining as true to its nature and intent as we possibly can. Together let us make this possible, not only here at Dhammalaya but also in Dhamma centres everywhere, for the continued flourishing of the Dhamma in this century and beyond, in honour of the profound spirit of the Buddha - our ultimate refuge, liberating guide, shining example, and teacher par excellence.
Problems with “Western Buddhism”

With the Christmas holidays in the horizon and some free time in hand, I feel it might be timely to pen down a few thoughts on some problems I see with Western Buddhism. I have in other posts critiqued the commodification and corporatisation of Dhamma in the modern West, so I will not do that again here. I acknowledge the slippery challenge of pinning down exactly what is Buddhism, let alone "Eastern" or "Western" forms of the same. But without launching into a long academic discourse on this, let me just define Western Buddhism simply as the sort of teachings and writings you get from certain prominent purportedly Buddhist voices in America, UK, Europe and perhaps Australia, where the predominant cultural, religious, intellectual and historical baggage is that of the Judeo-Christian and modern scientific materialist traditions. The names that come to mind in Western Buddhist circles can include teachers such as Jack Kornfield, Stephen Batchelor, and the like. At risk of oversimplification, let me just say that what follows is not a personal indictment of any personality or any Buddhist group per se. Rather, it seeks to bring into sharper focus what I see are some mistakes and shortcomings of Western Buddhism (or at least one significant and vocal strand of it) as it pertains to the ongoing transmission of the Dhamma in the 21st century. To be fair, this post needs to be read in conjunction with the awareness that in more recent times, several Western Buddhist teachers have emerged whose voices are reclaiming the centrality of meditative quiescence (shamatha or samadhi or jhana) in Dhamma practice (see e.g. Ajahn Brahmavamso, Shaila Catherine). But for now, I am focusing my critique on what continues to be a major influence on the thinking and praxis of many modern meditators in the West.

At the beginning, I will not be writing in my own words. This is because someone else had already articulated these ideas in a way that is so cogent and salient that my words would only create more noise. Thus, I want to share with you what progressive Buddhist scholar and meditation teacher B. Alan Wallace has so incisively and eloquently written in his book "Buddhism with an Attitude" (2003) as published by Snow Lion. Here are selected paragraphs from pages 96-99:

"Buddhist practices for the cultivation of contemplative insight into the nature of reality are designed to overcome our fundamental ignorance about the nature of our own identities and reality as a whole. And this insight, when unified with the stability and vividness of meditative quiescence, is said to bring one to nirvana, an irreversible state of freedom from all mental afflictions and their resultant suffering. Some Western Buddhists, however, have recently called this claim into question, stating that Buddhist accounts of irreversible spiritual awakening or enlightenment, are misleading. This conclusion is based on the personal experiences of a number of Western meditation teachers who have dedicated as much as forty years to their spiritual practice. Those interviewed concurred that their realisations and awakenings do not last. They pass, and those meditators have found that they invariably return to the world of change, and this brings with it the wounds of pain. ...
"... The observation that many senior Western Buddhist meditators have not achieved any lasting state of liberation should lead us to question not only the authenticity of traditional accounts of achieving nirvana, but also the nature of our own spiritual practice. I have heard of many Western Buddhists' reports of their deep insights into the nature of reality through the practice of insight meditation, but I have never heard of any of them report that they have accomplished quiescence as it is described in authoritative Indian Buddhist treatises on this practice. On the other hand, I have heard one Tibetan contemplative, Lobsang Tenzin, give a personal account of his fifteen years of intensive continuous meditation in solitude, resulting in what he called a 'state of immutable bliss that was constant, carrying through both during and between his formal meditation sessions.' I have never heard of any Western Buddhist who has dedicated him- or her-self to such awesome practice under such adverse circumstances. But if, through diligent practice, one person can achieve a state of permanent liberation, this holds out the possibility for others who have not yet risen to that level of insight.

"The Buddha made it very clear that the achievement of nirvana depends upon the union of both quiescence and insight, for without the stabilising influence of quiescence, all insights will be fleeting, and their transformatve and liberating effects will not last. However, a recent school of Buddhist meditation, originating in Burma, has proposed that achievement of the high degree of attentional stability of genuine quiescence or meditative stabilisation is not necessary for the realisation of nirvana. It is enough, they claim, to realise the ultimate nature of reality or nirvana with the support of mere 'momentary stabilisation'. Many Western Buddhists have followed this advice, and even the most senior of them, it seems, have not achieved any lasting state of liberation. The very notion that a momentary glimpse of the actual nature of reality, or even many of them, should be enough to permanently overcome the fundamental affliction of delusion seems dubious. As an analogy, if a person is suffering from acute paranoia, a mere glimpse of the groundlessness of his fear will not likely heal him forever. Why then should anyone expect that a mere glimpse into the true nature of reality as a whole will forever overcome our delusions, which are far more deeply rooted than any psychosis?

"If we are to exercise healthy skepticism, we should be just as skeptical of our own spiritual understanding and practice as we are of the reports of enlightenment of those who have preceded us. Otherwise, instead of ascending to the heights of Buddhist contemplative realisation, we are prone to slide back to the commonplace Freudian assumptions that humans are inevitably subject to suffering ... The Buddha claimed to have made an extraordinary discovery and his findings have purportedly been corroborated by many later generations of Asian contemplatives. If we are to make this discovery for ourselves, let us bear in mind the observation of the historian Daniel J. Boorstin, who refers to the 'illusions of knowledge' as the principal obstacles to discovery. 'The great discoveries of the past, he declares, 'had to battle against the current 'facts' and dogmas of the learned.' The Buddha encouraged his followers to be skeptical of his teachings and test them both rationally and experientially. The dogma of our society is that to be human is to be intrinsically subject to mental affliction and
suffering. Maybe the time has come to wage a sustained battle against that dogma.

"If all we are after is a temporary alleviation of our mental afflictions and the resultant suffering, there are a great number of avenues we can pursue. And if Buddhist meditation is presented as just one more way to achieve a transient easing of our distress, with no hope of a complete and irreversible cure from all mental afflictions [i.e. poisons of attachment, hostility, ignorance, pride, jealousy, deluded doubt, wrong views, and their diverse derivatives], then it is reduced to the status of one more matrix of psychological techniques [or models of therapy]. But this is not what the Buddha himself was pursuing in his quest for enlightenment, and it is not what he claimed to offer to the world."

Now, for some personal thoughts. At the outset, let me say that I do not wish to give the impression that all Burmese styles of meditation are devoid of mastery of meditative quiescence. On the contrary, a well-respected Burmese meditation master Pa-Auk Sayadaw is one of the most vocal advocates of accomplishment in shamatha and samadhi, having given extensive teachings on the nuts and bolts of training in what the Buddhist texts call the form and formless jhanas.

For me (and I suspect for many Buddhist practitioners), it is unmistakably inspiring to know of, through authoritative texts and practice traditions, the incredible possibilities of enlightened awareness totally and irreversibly liberated from afflictions and their roots, unobstructedly knowing and responsive to the needs of all sentient beings. It is even more inspiring to know, personally, living embodiments of such impeccability and luminosity in the form of my teachers. Rather than making me feel small and unworthy or dejected that I remain so far away from the heights of Buddhist contemplative realisation, the knowledge I glean of my potential for genuine liberation - from texts, tradition, reasoning, experience, and personal relationships with my teachers - has afforded me incontrovertible confidence in the Buddha's discovery of a permanent enlightenment beyond anything humanity has conceived of before. More than that, through personal experimentation and rigorous intensive praxis, I have been offered a taste of refreshing freedom from perplexity, a clear insight into what is and what is not the real deal - the Buddha's path to genuine freedom.

I suspect that for many Western Buddhists, it is cognitively and emotionally hard to accept the daunting realisation that one might not be as close to enlightenment as one might like to think. This gnawing dissonance creates the pressure to either quickly elevate one's practice to the heights of Buddhist contemplative realisation, or more commonly, to insidiously bring the heights of genuine liberation down to the level of experience that they are at. In other words, this dissonance is relieved through a mere sleight of hand, by re-interpreting textual passages and traditional instructions in ways that dumb down their import so as to match these teachings with their commonplace experiences of day-to-day affliction and suffering. But this simply cannot do. Not only is this a kind of intellectual dishonesty, it also smacks of intellectual and moral arrogance. More than that, it does not do justice to the Buddha and 2,500 years of Buddhist contemplatives, upon whose shoulders we now stand. Western
Buddhism can do far better than this. Western Buddhism should do far better than this. Not to do so would be unfair, remaining stuck in the discredited mindsets of Eurocentrism and Orientalism.

For Western Buddhism to mature and flourish in the 21st century, I believe it has to grow out of its infantile rejection or at least skepticism of the further reaches of the Buddha's contemplative path. It has to stop watering down the message of irreversible liberation and resist the temptation to psychologise and reduce the Dhamma to nothing more than fashionable therapy for temporary alleviation of distress. It has to refrain from de-ethicising and de-moralising the inescapably ethical and moral nature of the Buddha's path to liberation. And it has to grow up, as it were, from its adolescent-like rebellion against the foundation of vows and precepts that guide the meditator through the ups and downs of intense meditative endeavour. It may sound hip and savvy to propound blanket acceptance of all states of mind regardless of ethical or moral import in the name of proverbial "non-judgmentalism"; or to advocate a pseudo-meditative approach to Dhamma where mindfulness is co-opted to enjoy pleasant hedonic stimuli - often couched as "positive" experiences, but in what sense? Certainly not in the moral or spiritual sense, I suspect, but "positive" in terms of sensorial pleasure and elaborative storying of that pleasure. The flip side of such pseudo-mindful assimilation of the pleasurable is, contrary to any unexamined assertion otherwise, inexorable entrapment in attachment, affliction, and consequent dukkha. This is especially so when one fails to see the attractions and pitfalls of the hedonic trajectory. Such state of affairs is probably not too damaging in the context of short-term therapeutic alleviation, but does nothing for (and may in fact be detrimental to) realising nirvana as understood by the Buddha. Sutta textual accounts supporting this reasoning are too numerous to quote in full here (see e.g. MN i 346, MN i 454, AN iii 137, MN i 508), but suffice to hear this admonition of the Buddha:

"There are five strands of sensual pleasure. What five? Material shapes cognisable by the eye, pleasant, liked, enticing, connected with sensual pleasures, alluring. Sounds cognisable with the ear, smells cognisable with the nose, tastes cognisable with the tongue, and touches cognisable with the body, all of them agreeable, pleasant, liked, enticing, connected with sensual pleasures, alluring. These are the five strands of sense pleasure. Whatever happiness or joy arises as a result of these five strands of sense pleasures, that is called the happiness of sense pleasure - it is a common happiness, a happiness of the average person, an ignoble happiness. It should not be pursued, developed or emphasised. It is a happiness to be feared, I say." (MN i 454)

And again, the Buddha advises:

"Having seen a shape with the eye, smelt a smell with the nose, savoured a taste with the tongue, felt a touch with the body or cognised a thought with the mind, he is not entranced by its general appearance or its detail. For if he lived with the sense organs uncontrolled, attraction, repulsion and evil unskilled states of mind would grow. So, he controls the sense
organs, and having this noble control of the sense organs, he experiences within himself the happiness of being unruffled.” (MN i 346)

Intellectual vagueness, confused analysis, and ethical non-discernment is evident in much modernist rationalisation of hedonic attachment in the name of Dhamma. This is contradictory to the Buddha's admonitions and the purported corroborations of 2,500 years of Asian Buddhist contemplatives following him. It is also empirically suspect in so far as it begs the question of how and whether such amoral practice will ever lead to irreversible authentic liberation from afflictions and suffering - a liberation that the Buddha so powerfully speaks of and embodies in his being.

For Western Buddhism to meet its promise of genuine transmission of the Dhamma, it has to stop being complacent about its modernist superiority, transcend its colonialist condescension towards its Asian ancestors, begin to strip itself of its hypocritical rejection of "beliefs" and "rituals". (Even so-called "secularised" forms of Buddhism are full of implicit beliefs and rituals of modernity however hard they might insist they are "free" from them.) It has to start honestly and earnestly studying the many authoritative texts and practice instructions with the humility and openness of a beginner's mind, free from bias and preconceptions. It has to seriously undertake learning from only the most credible and qualified of teachers - many of whom have come from and trained in Buddhist Asia, the spiritual heartland of the Buddha Dhamma for over two and a half millennia. For that matter, learning to read and speak in the traditional languages of Buddhism - Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan etc. - has never been so imperative. But make no mistake: I'm not claiming that 'Asian Buddhism' is devoid of problems. As a cultural and religious institution, Asian Buddhism has its fair share of unedifying features, e.g. patriarchal sexism and male chauvinism, uncritical hierarchical subordination, cultural and ritual encumbrances, for example. I will write about these in future posts so I will desist from doing so here. My final question is simply this: In this Asian century, will Western Buddhists have the self-assuredness, honesty, and humility to meet the challenge of Dhamma-based maturation? We shall see.
I'd like to say a few things about some modern caricatures of Zen/Ch'an that are plainly wrong. In some respects, I suspect that such wrong caricatures may have played a part in contributing to the modernist re-interpretation of Zen/Ch'an (particularly in the West) as a kind of anti-intellectual, non-conceptual pragmatic mysticism and existential therapy. I also suspect that many modern Western psychological interpretations of "mindfulness" may have been influenced by such misrepresentations of Zen/Ch'an. Tracing these misrepresentations to their source, it seems to me that the problem might have begun in faulty translations of some key Zen/Ch'an texts. Without critically analysing whether such translations are sound, it is easy for non-specialist readers to get wrong or mistaken ideas of what Zen/Ch'an masters were actually saying. And just as the blind leads the blind, we fall into the trap of uncritically assimilating the mistakes of the past.

In this post, I like to pinpoint a few examples where I believe mistranslations and subsequent misreadings might have occurred, leading to the current predicament of unmindful distortion of mindfulness (and Zen). I do this with reference to a famous text by the Third Chinese Ch'an Patriarch, Seng-Tsan (禅宗三祖僧璨大师) who purportedly lived in 6th century Tang Dynasty China. This text is translated into English as Faith in Mind (信心铭). The original Chinese text comprises a total of 146 lines each of four characters, plausibly arranged in verses of four lines each (with the exception of the last two lines).

The first example I would like to highlight is this oft-quoted two lines from verse 10 commonly translated into English as:

"Do not seek the truth, only cease to cherish opinions."

When taken at face value, these lines sound quite avant-garde, even postmodern; seeming to suggest an attitude of non-dogmatic, non-judgmental acceptance free of any or all opinions. It also seems to advocate an a-ontological stance of not needing to find the unfindable truth; for all that one needs to do is to "cease to cherish opinions", i.e. have "no views" whatsoever about anything. It does not take very much to move from this vague and fuzzy, relativist and a-ontological appropriation of Seng-Tsan to populist (mis)understandings of Zen and mindfulness. With this move, Zen is seen as anti-intellectual, anti-textual nature mysticism and mindfulness as non-discriming, non-conceptual, amoral attention that uncritically accepts everything that is experienced. Nothing can be further from the truth. The bad news for such postmodern relativists is this: there is truth to be discovered - according to the Buddha and his authentic disciples that came after him. And the good news is: here is the evidence from Seng Tsan that the two lines quoted above have been mistranslated and read out of context. Let me explain:

前空转变，皆由妄见。不用求真，惟须息见。
"The previous emptiness is transformed; it was all a product of deluded views. No need to seek the real, just extinguish your views."

The two lines often misread as "do not seek the truth, only cease to cherish opinions" are 不用求真，惟须息见, which literally means "no need to seek the real/true, just need to extinguish your views." There is a vast difference in connotation between these two translations. The first actively suggests that one should not go seeking for the truth. This connotation is absent in the second translation. The second is the more accurate translation, in my view. This is the translation given by world-renowned Ch'an master the late Venerable Sheng Yen (through his translator Jimmy Yu/Guo Gu). "No need to seek the real" implies there is no need to go after truth in an ego-driven way, as if truth is some reified commodity that your ego-grasping self can seek to possess. It does not imply giving up the search for the true nature of reality or not actively seeking for truth altogether, which seems to be the intent behind the faulty first translation above. Unfortunately, this faulty translation seems to have captured the imagination of those who purport to write about mindfulness and Zen with any authority.

Furthermore, these two lines have to be read in the context of the two preceding lines in that verse. Here, 前空转变，皆由妄见 translates as "the previous emptiness is transformed, it was all a product of deluded views." What these lines imply is that the meditator should let go of previously-grasped notions of emptiness that have now been revealed to be mistaken. The line "the previous emptiness is transformed" suggests clearly that what one has previously conceived of as the true meaning of emptiness has now been "transformed" - that is, perceived differently. In other words, there is a progression from mistaken assumptions of the truth (i.e. emptiness) to a more correct conception or perception of the same. One then realises that one's previously held assumptions about emptiness were false and a product of delusion. When one does this, one also understands that there is no need to, with ego-driven attachment, hunt down what one mistakenly thinks is the truth. Rather, one simply needs to give up one's previously mistaken or less than accurate conceptions of truth so that a more valid cognition of truth can take their place.

This foregoing discussion has far reaching implications. How so? For one, it implies that Zen meditation is not (1) anti-intellectual or anti-conceptual; (2) about forsaking all effort at arriving at truth or valid cognition of truth; and (3) advocating a kind of vague, blanket acceptance of all views, all states of mind devoid of critical or discerning wisdom. The implications for the practice of mindfulness are profound. What this strongly suggests is that modern notions of mindfulness as nothing more than "nonjudgmental, open, accepting, bare attention to all experiences devoid of ethical discrimination or wisdom" is a mistake. It is a mistake that can have long-ranging consequences for one's practice and realisation of
irreversible liberation, let alone omniscient awakening.

The second example builds on the first and comes from lines 75-78 of the same text, which read:

欲取一乘、勿恶六尘。六尘不恶，还同正觉。

One English translation reads these lines as:

"If you wish to move in the One Way
do not dislike even the world of senses and ideas.
Indeed, to accept them fully
is identical with Enlightenment."

At first sight, these lines sound like music to the ears of those who are infatuated with the practice of non-judgmental, all-accepting mindfulness. For do they not say that "indeed, to accept them [the world of sense and ideas] fully is identical to Enlightenment"? Once again, this is wrong. Yes, there is indeed "right" and "wrong", "good" and "bad" in Buddhism, in the Dhamma. These notions may not exist inherently from their own side, so to speak, but they do nevertheless exist and function conventionally. What is seen not to exist, is seen not to exist inherently; but is not seen not to exist at all. This is an important point to understand. Coming back to these lines, my preferred translation (given by Master Sheng Yen with whom I generally concur) is:

"If you wish to enter the one vehicle,
Do not be repelled by the sense realm.
With no aversion to the sense realm,
You become one with true enlightenment."

Can you see the difference between these two competing translations, especially the third line? As an aside, I would translate the fourth line as "You return to unity with true realisation" which is not too different from Master Sheng Yen's version. Now, I am not sure how the notion of "wish to move in the One Way" was derived from the original Chinese 欲取一乘. The terms 欲取 can mean "wish to enter" or "wish to attain" and do not suggest, to me at least, any sense of moving anywhere. But more crucially, the third and fourth lines 六尘不恶，还同正觉 have been translated in the first instance as "indeed, to accept them fully, is identical with Enlightenment." This is incorrect. There is nothing in 六尘不恶 to suggest, even remotely, the notion of "acceptance" of the sense realm, let alone "accept them fully" as the translation says. Rather, 六尘不恶 means quite unambiguously non-aversion or non-hostility to the six sense realms - the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and cognitive. Non-aversion or non-hostility does not reduce to "full acceptance" in any way at all. In Buddhist logic, we say it like this: there is no pervasion between "non-aversion" and
"full acceptance". To "fully accept" the sense realm suggests a movement of "engulfing and taking in" of the sense realm that is dangerously close to, if not, identical to the attachment (tanha) and grasping (upadana) so carefully defined by the Buddha and later Buddhist contemplatives. Non-aversion or non-hostility here means not rejecting out of ill-will and is entirely consistent with the oft-cited pith advice given in Buddhist meditative tradition: "without accepting, without rejecting" and "resting freely like the sky, like the mirror." This reading of non-aversion thus passes the test of coherence. To rest freely like the sky or mirror, free from accepting and rejecting, is a whole lot more than simple "bare attention" or "mindfulness" as (post)modernists would like to call it. To meditate correctly in accord with authentic tradition requires sharp unmistaken insight into reality, demolishing ignorant grasping at the self of person and phenomena at its most subtle level of manifestation, i.e. self-powered inherency. And there are many degrees of subtlety of self-grasping, not consciously seen or thought of but nevertheless percolating into every moment of our sensory and cognitive experience. Without this basis of rigorous sustained inquiry into reality, it is fool's paradise to talk of meditating with a sky-like or mirror-like mind.

Therefore, the third and fourth lines above, taken together, say that the meditator abides without aversion or hostility towards the sixfold sense realm. This means to rest without acceptance or rejection in the sphere of emptiness and luminosity, free from attachment to and grasping at (as well as free from their derived opposites of hostility and resistance to) the sixfold sense realm. Only then can the meditator "return to unity with true awakening" - discovering primordial enlightened awareness itself, which though currently a potential in every cognitive moment can undoubtedly be expanded into the actual. This can happen, if and only if, an unmistaken path of authentic practice is undertaken. And for that to happen, we must begin with correct translation and reading of the texts that inform our practice.

I hope that my foregoing examples have illustrated the problem of "(post)modernist delusions of Zen" and their ramifications. If our meditative practice is backed up by and stems from mistaken understandings, this can have potentially unwelcome consequences for our journey towards genuine liberation. We can be meditating for forty, fifty, sixty years and still feel stuck in afflictions and suffering with no sight of the finishing line anywhere. We then feel the need to re-interpret credible texts, rationalise away or justify our shortcomings, turn a blind eye to possible distortions of the Dhamma we are guilty of in our haste to feel good about ourselves. Unwittingly, instead of eliminating our delusions, we may be perpetuating and even strengthening these delusions in the name of Buddhist meditation or therapeutic mindfulness. This forms part of the problem of Western Buddhism as it grapples with itself and its evolution in cultures alien to Dhamma's historical origins. But it is a problem that Western Buddhists need to confront head-on and resolve with intelligent reflexivity, wisdom, and compassion. Western Buddhists will need to relook at themselves, their self-understandings, and their understandings of the Dhamma with the diligent self-honesty and fearlessness of a bodhisattva warrior, respectful of the Buddha and his word (vacana).
DHAMMA AND SOCIAL LIBERATION
Dhamma and Society

The Buddha's central focus was liberation of consciousness from all its obscuring, defiling, and suffering-causing tendencies, revealing a freedom so pure and luminous that all may benefit from it. We might think that due to such focus, the Buddha would have nothing to say about relational, social, economic, and political conditions under which we humans live. But that is not so. The Buddha had spoken on these matters, though not quite as extensively as he did on matters of mind and transcendence. It would be a mistake to think that the Buddha and Buddhism are passive and indifferent to matters of society and the many ills that plague it. For such social ills - often in the form of injustice, oppression, moral degeneration, political corruption - are the life contexts in which we have to live and struggle with even as we endeavour to walk the noble eightfold path to nibbana and sambodhi. It is a fair question to ask "What sort of social conditions and structures conduce to this Dhamma-faring and what obstruct it?" It is also fair to ask "What vision of society, economics and politics are consistent with values of the Dhamma and thus should be promoted? And what social vision run antithetical to Dhamma and should be critiqued and abandoned?" Along these lines, Bhikkhu Bodhi has once again written a piece "Let's not abandon the poor and hungry" in the latest Buddhist Global Relief newsletter Helping Hands. I'd encourage you to read his article directly on this link Let's Not Abandon the Poor and Hungry. But I'd also like to quote Bhikkhu Bodhi rather extensively here as I think his message could not be more timely, salient, or cogent. Especially given the same sort of moral, economic and political vandalism we are seeing in the insidious resurgence of "everyman for himself; winner takes all; the powerful rich devour the poor and middle class" ideology in states and across nations.

"In the final analysis, the debate over how we should reduce the national deficit—whether by cutting social safety nets or by increasing revenues and shrinking defense spending—boils down to the bigger question of the kind of society we want to create. Our answer to this question in turn rests on two very different assumptions about human nature and the means to establish the good society.

In one vision, human beings are essentially self-interested agents driven by a narrow concern for their own well-being. The key to social progress is untrammeled competition in the global free market. When the free market operates without constraint, the talented will flourish and their prosperity will trickle down to those at the bottom. In this way, a free market also conduces to the moral good.

In the other vision, human beings are essentially social creatures who thrive best in community. Competition may be a spur to economic growth and technological innovation, but such values as compassion and cooperation, which express our essential interconnectedness, should take precedence. Society flourishes best when we all flourish together, and often this is only possible when government actively intervenes to safeguard the vulnerable from the vagaries of an unregulated market.
Between these two visions, it's the second that corresponds with Buddhist values and a Buddhist perspective on the role of the state, as seen in the ideal figure of the “wheel-turning king,” who protects all in his realm, ensuring that all citizens receive the basic material requisites of life. Transposed to a modern democracy, this task would naturally fall on the elected government, which is thus obliged to protect the vulnerable and alleviate poverty.

Of course, the final solution to the problem of poverty does not lie in programs that distribute provisions to the poor, but in good jobs that pay adequate compensation, along with guarantees that even the most menial types of work pay a truly living wage. The key to good jobs is opportunity, and in today’s world the doors of opportunity are opened by education. It thus falls to the government—whether at the federal or state level—to improve the standards of public education and guarantee that all children have access to good schools with rigorous programs and capable teachers. But for such social transformation to be possible, leaders with courage, vision, and conviction must step forth to fearlessly promote wise and compassionate policies. This above all is the crying need of our time."

And to Bhikkhu Bodhi's analysis, I'd like to add the other crucial dimension of social wellbeing, both for now and into the future - safe, high quality, equitable healthcare provided by highly motivated, clinically competent, good hearted, hard working healthcare professionals. The decimation of healthcare services and innovative healthcare talents in the name of morally ruthless, economically irrational (the economic argument against knee-jerk, ill-founded austerity measures can be found in the work of Nobel Prize winning economists like Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, as well as empirical evidence of austerity's abysmal failure to benefit societies in the Eurozone) and politically prejudiced budget cuts is not something anyone, least of all Dhamma practitioners, can support. Much more can be said, but enough for now.

May we sharpen our intellects and open our hearts to see things as they are, not as deceptions and rhetoric would have us believe.

May we have the bodhisattva courage to challenge and demolish social malaise and injustice wherever we encounter them.

May the Dhamma shine in the darkest of times and guide our conscience, even as "wheel-turning kings" (cakkavatti) emerge to lead the way.
On Economics and Politics: A Dhamma Critique

I may be right in saying that most people would not associate Buddhism or Dhamma, often unknowingly or knowingly caricatured as other-worldly, and introspectively meditative, with concern about mundane matters such as economics and politics. Even Buddhist practitioners and enthusiasts, particularly in the 'West', are often attracted to Buddhism for its presupposedly apolitical, asocial, and narrowly meditative focus for the purpose of stress-relief and therapeutic healing. I am about to tackle this myth that has quietly crept into Buddhism due to a complex nexus of causes and conditions, not least of which is the pressure to commodify, 'modernise', and 'westernise' an integral, organic, transcendent yet life-embedded Dhamma into something easily marketable and sold for a price (sometimes a rather hefty price). I will attempt to do this by focusing my arguments on two areas - areas that cannot be more mundane or this-worldly: economics and politics. I hope to show that the Buddha had something useful to say on these mundane matters and that the Dhamma has a unique critical contribution to make to the discussion on how best to structure our collective material and social life. My post will be somewhat cursory due to constraints of space and time. But my hope is that this will suffice in stimulating a more profound Dhamma-moved analysis of how we as Buddhist practitioners and students can better lead a more integral (not fragmented and pigeon-holed) Dhamma-centred life.

First, on economics. It is truism to say we live in increasingly uneasy times, as the global economy once again threatens to sink, armed conflicts and mass shootings capture headlines, and massive tsunamis of job cuts and so-called austerity measures in developed economies are threatening to turn the Global Financial Crisis into a Global Collective Depression. This trend has been seen in Eurozone nations, and now manifests spectacularly in Australia and most recently the state of Queensland. Therefore, I seek to offer a Buddhist analysis of these events through a classical Nagarjunian critique, in the tradition of the great Nalanda masters of India, on prevailing notions of "money."

Buddhist scholar Karl-Heinz Brodbeck (2011) critiques the global power of illusion in the way money is conceptualised, explained and utilised, cogently arguing for an economy of interdependence and compassion rooted in Buddhist wisdom. In this, he takes up the classical deconstructive analysis of Nagarjuna (2nd century Buddhist philosopher) to unpack and cut through the seeming solidity of money, seen as possessed by reified autonomous rational agents and transacted through and in reified markets that seemingly possess a life of their own, standing apart from (and axiomatically superior) to everything else. He quotes Adam Smith whose description of the prevailing economic ideology sounds toutingly familiar: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from regard to their self-interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love." In sharp contrast, Buddhist ethics, as expressed by Shantideva in the 8th century, prioritises the qualities of non-violence and compassion: "All those who suffer in the world do so because of their desire for their own happiness. All those happy in the world are so because of their desire for the happiness of others." Make no
mistake. This Buddhist view is no idyllic claim or utopic moral norm but stems from profound insight into the way distorted thinking creates suffering and how clear unmistakable perception engenders genuine happiness. As Brodbeck writes: "In so far as Buddhism deals with deluded forms of thought, it is a critical philosophy. ... Consequently, Buddhist teaching is described as 'the discriminative, differentiating, analytical or critical teaching' (vibhajjavada) (Nyanatiloka/Nyanaponika 1984, v.5, 133). 'Criticism is the very essence of Buddha's teaching' (Murti 1980, 8). 'Buddhism is criticism' (Hakamaya 1997, 56)." Brodbeck explains how the three poisons of "grasping at transient objects (greed) and the defending of objects grasped (hatred) on the basis of an illusory idea of the self (delusion)" (p. 121) lies at the heart of our personal and social oppression in the form of suffering. He shows why there is no value-neutral theory of human action, given that "each and every cognition of social processes hides a moral judgement, and so every theory that appears to be value neutral is, in truth, an implicit ethics" (p. 122). Thus, we do not have the "simple option of drawing a moral doctrine from the spirit of Buddha's teaching to place it alongside economic practice in order to tame the economy. ... Economic practice will always be shaped and governed by forms of thought which have suffering as their consequence, unless it takes the mutual interdependency of all social and natural phenomena as its foundation." (pp. 122-3). It is crucial to recognise that while we currently live in a society with a market economy, we do not and should not live in a market society. There is a stark difference between having control over (if that is even possible) and being controlled by the forces of the market. When we allow every aspect of our lives to be controlled by the invisible unrestrained hand of the market, blinded by the ideological chimera of egocentric freedom, we risk losing everything that is precious and alive in us. The cost is depression and loss of spiritual vitality and many other repercussions at once personal, social, and ecological. The cannibalising of healthcare, education, and even spirituality by market forces (e.g. just observe the mass marketing, retail and consumption of Buddhism among consumers with high disposable income), now seemingly rampant and trendy, is an example of such all-pervasive 'marketisation' and commodification of human society.

Given the samsaric nature of our habitual minds, our economic ideologies inadvertently come as little more than well-dressed monuments of personal greed. On this point of personal greed, Buddhism would have no qualms in adding that with every instance of greed is also an instance of delusion, with its near cousins of arrogance and narcissistic pride. Such delusion is self-grasping ignorance that utterly fails to see the pervasive dependency of all things and thus cherishes the narcissistic self to the detriment of others. Any economic orthodoxy based on greed and delusion is never benevolent, and can never contribute to the long-term flourishing of humanity, ecology, and the world. In the words of former US President Bill Clinton, such ideology can be described as “winner takes all, every man for himself”. Thus, a critical Buddhism of this age will need to honestly and directly confront the nature and role of economics in our shared lifeworld from the ground of Dhamma wisdom and values. This task requires deep contemplative maturity as well as inner vigour and actional dexterity, based not on standing in the sidelines seeking to tame the normative economic paradigm but to interrogate unconscious assumptions underpinning dominant views, so as to unfold from
the ground up a Dhamma-based vision of economics - replete with pragmatic design principles and strategies - that works for all living beings.

Second, on politics. The Buddha was no isolated forest hermit indifferent to the needs and ailments of his community and society. On the contrary, he was actively concerned for the wellbeing of his fellows, and though he himself led an itinerant lifestyle travelling by foot across the dusty plains of middle India, stopping for several months each year for his Rains retreat. Particularly, he admonished and guided powerful kings like Bimbisara, Pasenadi, and Ajatasatru, sometimes diplomatically but often times sharply and assertively if need be. In his discourses, the Buddha spoke of the good qualities a leader should possess in order to foster peace, harmony, virtue, justice and prosperity in society. The Buddha's teachings to kings (i.e. political leaders of our time) was formulated into the Ten Laws of Governance (dasa raja dhamma): generosity (dana), morality (sila), liberality (paricca), openness (ajjava), mildness (maddava), self-restraint (tapo), non-anger (akkhodha), non-violence (avihimsa), patience (kanti) and non-competitiveness (avirodhana) (Jataka I, 260; III, 274). In Buddhism A to Z, Dhammika writes: "The essence of all this and all later Buddhist political theory is the concept that 'the wheel of power turns in dependence on the wheel of justice' (balacakram hi nisraya dharmacakram pravartate), i.e. that power is only legitimate when it upholds and promotes probity, equality and the law" (2006: 59-60). Buddhist texts also uphold the ideal of the 'universal wheel-turning monarch' as a consummate political leader who governs by the power of righteousness and compassion, protecting the moral fabric of society with fairness, justice, virtue and ethical caring for the environment out of compassion. Only such leaders deserve the respect of the people and only such leaders have the capacity to bring about the wellbeing of society. When measured against such standards set by the Buddha, it is hard to see many of our current leaders meeting the mark, with the exception of a few. In the suttas, the Buddha spoke of the wheel-turning king (cakkavatin) who upholds the moral law, embodies universal love, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity, and governs the land with genuine regard for all people by the power of truth. The Buddha has clearly warned: “Prosperity in life is plain, decline in life is also plain: one who loves the Dhamma prospers; one who hates the Dhamma declines.” (Sutta Nipata 92)

As I survey the political landscape in Australia, it seems as if brutal persecutory assaults on public servants, firing rather than hiring, base politics of identity and gender, xenophobic ignorance, and a climate of nepotism and cronyism are the norm rather than the exception. Much of domestic politics seems driven by little more than ideological frenzy and economic irrationalism rooted in personal greed, narcissistic craving for power, and instinctual hatred for a genuine democracy where we flourish best when we flourish together. A resurgence of the easily touted mantra of individualism, while fashionable, masks a pernicious view of human nature as primarily silos of ego-fortresses. Make no mistake. I am not saying that individual initiative and responsibility are unimportant or to be jettisoned. Rather self-help must be core to any endeavour personal or collective. Yet accentuating the false ego-self at the expense of common good and knee-jerk resistance to structural change for collective wellness, highlights a deluded self-grasping seeking to thwart our compassionate conscience.
and better judgement. Socially, such delusion perpetuates itself in the oft-quoted mantra of ‘hands-off’ minimalist government where collective responsibility is shirked, public funds and problems outsourced to unaccountable local boards or committees outside the scrutiny of the electorate, and where politicians are paid handsomely to do nothing of real substance or benefit. A cursory examination of this line of argument would quickly show how unsustainable the illogic of governmental minimalism is. If it is true that the smaller the government the better it is for all, then by the same ‘logic,’ no government at all would be best. And if that is the case, why do we spend so much public money on electing our political leaders, who, by the logic of minimalism, is deemed superfluous anyway? A more sound and plausible approach, in line with Dhamma, is to realise the fundamental interbeing of all peoples and all life, allowing this vision to shape our discourse and politics, and in consequence to lend weight to the ideal of a community-oriented and socially-accountable cakkavatin(s) as the Buddha has envisioned.

To some extent, such political discourse is echoed by President Barack Obama in his 2012 Democratic Convention speech and often repeated at other occasions: “We insist on personal responsibility and we celebrate individual initiative. We're not entitled to success. We have to earn it. ... But we also believe in something called citizenship - a word at the very heart of our founding, at the very essence of our democracy; the idea that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another, and to future generations.” Again, in his 2012 Presidential election victory speech, Obama stressed: “This country has more wealth than any nation, but that’s not what makes us rich. We have the most powerful military in history, but that’s not what makes us strong. Our university, our culture are all the envy of the world, but that’s not what keeps the world coming to our shores. What makes America exceptional are the bonds that hold together the most diverse nation on earth. The belief that our destiny is shared; that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations. The freedom which so many Americans have fought for and died for come with responsibilities as well as rights. And among those are love and charity and duty and patriotism. That’s what makes America great.” The key point of collective caring and support to one another and to future generations strikes a note of accord with Dhamma’s emphasis on cherishing others and deep long-term vision, as the Buddha and Buddhist master Shantideva have both endorsed and embodied. One key difference, if I may hazard to guess, is that Dhamma’s articulation of the ‘individual’ rests not on assumptions of decontextualised inherency but on profound relationality and dependent arising beyond all notions of inherent ‘entity-ness’ and reified agency. The field of sunyata (emptiness), not modernist notions of reified agency, rests as the groundless ground of all conventional talk of individuality.

Very recently, Australia won a temporary seat on the UN Security Council for two years. One criticism directed against this win is that the bidding process came at a cost of 25 million dollars of taxpayer money. At first sight, 25 million dollars might sound like a lot, but when seen in its proper context, considering Melbourne spends 50 million dollars just to host a Grand Prix, the money spent in enabling Australia to have a robust voice in the world's
foremost security roundtable is money well-invested. This investment can give a big boost to the maintenance of regional and international peace, cooperation, and stability. This can have tremendous flow-on positive effects for Australia now and into the future. An important correlation of all this is the idea of a regional and global rules-based order where issues are discussed and potential conflicts resolved through dialogue instead of aggressive military force. In this regard, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd recently delivered a lecture on the possibilities of a Pax Pacifica for the 21st century at the University of Oxford (see http://kevinruddmp.com/). In this paper, he outlined the crucial and urgent need for creative multilateralism - a deeper intellectual and cultural engagement between Australia, China and other Asia-Pacific nations through intimate familiarity with diverse cultural mindsets and conceptual frameworks; a more complex network of confidence and security building measures amongst Asia-Pacific nations; and pragmatic analyses of Asia-Pacific's prospects for peace and security under the Obama administration versus the Romney administration. An important point made was the necessity of "a common conceptual language underpinning the overall project" of Pax Pacifica (not Pax Americana or Pax Sinica), citing the example of understanding Chinese foreign policy vision as one of 'a harmonious world' (hexie shijie), 'finding the Golden Mean' (zhongyong), and based on 'classical Chinese virtues' (daode). Such common conceptual language will minimise the risks of mistranslation and mis-steps leading to political temperature elevation and ultimately conflict in the world's most vibrant and fastest growing region where Australia inhabits.

What has this foregoing discussion got to do with Buddhism, you might ask? Well, the notion of multilateral dialogue and rules-based consensus is very much in line with the Buddha's advice on how to build a strong, cohesive, lasting community guided by Dhamma-centred constituents. In this regard, the Buddha praised the peoples of the Vajjian confederacy of his day in 5th century BC India for regularly coming together in harmonious dialogue and discussions, free from mistrust and rancour. While the Vajjian confederacy, being localised within northern India, was no internationalism of the United Nations of today, it nevertheless highlights the same principles necessary for any successful coming-together of a diverse group of people. The Vajjian confederacy was made up of several tribes, the most important of which were the Licchavis and the Videhas.

Of the Vajjis, the Buddha said, "Ananda, as long as the Vajjians hold regular and frequent assemblies, they may be expected to prosper and not decline. Have you heard that the Vajjians meet in harmony, break up in harmony, and carry on their business in harmony? ... Have you heard that the Vajjians do not authorise what has not been authorised already, do not abolish what has been authorised, but proceed according to what has been authorised by their ancient tradition? ... Have you heard that they honour, respect, revere and salute the elders among them, and consider them worth listening to? ... that they do not forcibly abduct others' wives and daughters and compel them to live with them? ... that they honour, respect, revere and salute the Vajjian shrines at home and abroad, not withdrawing the proper support made and given before? ... that proper provision is made for the safety of Arahants, so that such Arahants may come in future to live there, and those already there may
dwell in comfort? ... Ananda, as long as such proper provision is made, ... the Vajjians may be expected to prosper and not decline.” (DN 16, ii 73-75).

Sensitive and intelligent thinkers and activists from diverse disciplines and traditions have proposed social, economic and political alternatives worth considering. These are grounded in a profound spiritual outlook that does not reduce the complexity of human existence in its total context to a mere set of numbers. From the Buddhist perspective, such alternatives have to be based on correct insight into reality, seeing the basic non-inherency and mutual dependency of all things, lifeforms, and events in a process perspective that transcends reification. Only such deep insight can free our motivations from the toxins of greed, hatred and all derivative afflictions that plague the human mind and society. Buddhist thinker-activists such as Sulak Sivaraksa, Thich Nhat Hanh, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Ch’an master Sheng Yen, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Joanna Macy, David Loy and others have collectively begun a thread of socially engaged Dhamma that seeks to address the critical problems humanity faces in the 21st century.

From further afield, we hear of the Liberation Theology of Leonardo Boff and others, emerging from the marginalised and unheard voices of Latin America; the Progressive Utilisation Theory of Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, emerging from the indigenous tantric culture and civilisation of India; the Great Turning of David Korten; Theory-U and Presencing of Otto Scharmer; and others too numerous to mention. In the language of contemplative mysticism, the time has come for a view of the world and society that is thoroughly imbued with "radical vision, deep penetrative gaze, and prophetic imagination” (D’Arcy, 2012, personal communication), born of genuine inner transformation.

What is clear is this: as global citizens and inhabitants of our Asia-Pacific region, and particularly, as postmodern contemplatives in the Dhamma, we cannot afford to sit on our cushions and expect the world to liberate itself and in turn liberate us. The dukkha of our personal and social worlds can no longer afford our spiritual inertia and self-deceptive justification. If we are to be liberated, we will have to heed the call to awaken totally, not fragmentally; we will have to respond to the "inner" imperative to blow out our inner fires of greed, hatred and delusion while at once embracing the "outer" calling to challenge the forces of distorted thinking, unjust social structures, deluded economic stratagems and political machinations rooted in the same three poisons. We do this with the "weapons" of non-attachment, love and compassion, and penetrative wisdom, wrapped within the armour of generosity, ethics, patience, joyous effort, meditative concentration, skill in means, determination, strength, serene confidence and clear faith. Ultimately, we cut through all thick delusions with the "light sabre" of primordial awareness imbued with infinite primordial energy. Both inwardly and outwardly, we manifest the Dhamma to counteract affective delusions and deluded structures of society, supported by and supporting our community of fellow Dhamma contemplatives (Sangha).
Only then can we truly say we are walking the Path in its fullness for the total benefit of all sentient beings. This is what the Buddha did in his time and place, as evidenced in historical records of his teaching and ministry (see e.g. Pali Nikayas and Chinese Agamas). This is what the Buddha, in my estimation, would have done, in this present time and place, if he was physically with us now. Of course, I might be wrong. But what if I am right? Will we heed the clarion call of Dhamma?
Critical Dhamma for Critical Times

It is often said that as Buddhists, we can only save ourselves through our own inner work, that all we can ever hope for is liberating our minds from suffering and its roots. At best, we can only help others to the extent that we can teach them the liberating Dhamma. But they will have to do the inner work themselves. True as this may sound, this mindset can ever subtly blind us to the many things we can actually do right now to alleviate the pain of others. More than that, we can be insidiously duped by delusive grasping at our narcissistic yet ultimately false selves to think that: right, the world is in such a mess but it is the fault of others - those in the corridors of power, or those with fanatical religious rage, or those who are wealthy exploiters of the earth's resources, or those who abuse women and children, or those who pollute the atmosphere, or those ... and such worldly ailments have nothing to do with me, for I am a Dhamma practitioner, a meditator who is cleansing his or her mind from the fires of greed, hatred, delusion. We comfort ourselves, saying "I can only free myself, just as others can only free themselves. The Buddhas only show the way." That may be true, yet are we unwittingly using that same "reason" as an excuse for social inaction, uncritical assimilation of social injustice, blindness to allure of distorted thinking and ideological dynamics that sweep us all (plants, animals, humanity alike) into a cauldron of existential danger which we take to be postmodern normality?

In meditative stillness and clarity, we can see for ourselves how our personal greed, hatred and delusion create the quagmire of suffering not only for ourselves but potentially also for others. In the unbounded expanse of insight, we can also begin to see that greed, hatred and delusion do not respect borders or location. Their fires burn in minds of all shapes and sizes, here and there, in all degrees of subtlety and texture, razing the fields of peace wherever they burn. We see how these 'inner' fires manifest in ideologies, rhetorical cliches, social policies, economic truisms, institutions and structures that oppress rather than liberate, that bring anguish rather than joy, that bind persons and their worlds into prisons of samsaric addiction (to pleasure, power, money, status, material goods of every variety, perpetuation of the isolated wounded ego-self). And with this comes consequent depression following real or perceived lack of fulfilment of those addictions. All this points to the need for critical insight emerging out of deep clear meditative stillness, insight that can respond creatively and robustly to fires of globalised, often institutionalised greed, hatred, and delusion.

In this regard, I am heartened by the Dhamma work and activism of teachers such as Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, a gutsy socially-engaged Buddhist in his 70s both loved and loathed in his home country, well-known for his work in the Sathirakoses-Nagapradeepa Foundation, Spirit in Education Movement, and Thai Inter-religious Commission on Development, among others; the eco-philosopher and Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy and her work in engaged Buddhism, deep ecology/deep time, living systems, nuclear guardianship, The Great Turning, and The Work That Reconnects; and Zen teacher and Buddhist professor David R. Loy who does not shy away from connecting personal transformation with transformation of society and has written books such as Money, Sex, War and Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution.

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among others. I am also inspired by the work and writings of Bhikkhu Bodhi, a world renowned Pali Buddhist scholar and translator who is now involved in the work of Buddhist Global Relief. He has written another incisive piece, a contemporary commentary on the Buddha's famed Fire Discourse (SN 35:28) where he seamlessly links the inner fires of greed, hatred, delusion with the all consuming fires of exploitative ideologies, cultures, and practices that now threaten our planetary biosphere (obviously human communities are not exempt from this threat). Listen to what he has to say:

"... While rooted in the same essential insights enunciated in the Fire Sermon, the actions we take must match the magnitude of our global crisis. To emerge intact, we all have to become firemen, a global fire department working together to mitigate the national and trans-national fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. Such a project requires that we revisit the assumptions that underlie the prevailing economic model, which is geared toward the impossible ideal of perpetual growth. Instead, we must make our social institutions more equitable, so that we can provide everyone with the means to a dignified life. Our concept of the good life should emphasize contentment, generosity, and compassion rather than limitless production and consumption. We must learn to see the natural world as our home, our life-support system, and not merely as a source of raw materials for energy and industrial production.

"The work of Buddhist Global Relief is a small step in this direction. Starting from the premise that "hunger is the worst illness" and "the gift of food is the gift of life," we try to ensure that people everywhere can obtain access to sufficient quantities of healthy and nutritious food. Through education and training, we aim to give women and girls a chance at a better life. We seek to help the poor emerge from poverty, and to give those with means the opportunity to put compassion and generosity into action. Inspired by the Buddhist ideals of loving-kindness and compassion, we seek to fashion a social order that embodies justice and equity for all and a code of ethics that expresses concern for the most needy in our midst." See http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/newsletterArticles/2012SummerQuenchingTheFlames.html

An example of critical reflection on how Dhamma can respond creatively to the issues of our time is Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice, which is edited by Jonathan S. Watts. See http://www.inebnetwork.org/component/content/article/13-recommended/61-rethinking-karma
Dispelling the Darkness of Racism

I just read an article in ABC online by Jonathan Green on "Australia's political heartland: Hate, fear, and racism." It reminds me of a debate that to my memory seems to have been going on for eons. A debate that I was again privy to a few years ago during the Australia 2020 Summit in Parliament House. A debate on whether Australia is a racist country. I thought at that time (and still do) that this was a superfluous question, and the real and more urgent question is what do we do about the undeniable afflictions of hate, fear, prejudice, racism that dwell in the hearts and minds of sentient beings, Australians included. Jonathan's article reminds me of the reality on the ground, that such afflictive emotions and conceptions are alive and well in Australia, driving the voting intentions of Australia's political heartland and consequent political pandering by professional politicians. But the worse part is that our so-called leaders (on all sides of the political spectrum) seem to be playing to them and using these afflictions for political advantage, regardless of the social and moral impact this has on our sense of community, cohesion, peace, and wellbeing.

I have no doubt that hate, fear and racism is alive and well in Australia, as in many other parts of this troubled world. Since migrating to Australia nearly two decades ago, I've encountered my fair share of racist prejudice, career obstructionism, and outright abuse for no other reason than simply my skin colour and cultural difference. (Or maybe it's because I speak English with a tinge of Hokkien and stubbornly refuse to indulge in idle banter in social settings?) So the main question is this: how can we address the roots of hate, fear, and racism, and manifest a global, inclusive, social nirvana for all sentient beings?

Buddhists, together with many others, share this planet and have a role to play in creating a better world. This role is not limited to the propagation of Buddhist teachings, however sublime they are, but also includes the responsibility to speak truth to power, to engage in social debate on a good society, and to challenge structures of oppression, injustice, and human-made suffering rooted in craving, hostility and delusion. Structures perpetuated by ideologies of narcissism, individualism, egotism, consumerism, profit-before-people motivated by craving and delusion; and ideologies of xenophobic control, fascism, social and economic exclusion, occupational deprivation motivated by hostility and delusion. Polices, structures, and day-to-day rhetoric embedded in a moral-free zone and spiritual vacuum that we call (post)modern society. In this moral free, spiritually deprived context, it seems that character assassinations and vicious backstabbing have become the order of the day. We no longer value the spiritual calibre and moral fibre of those whom we choose as our leaders. Our democracy seems hijacked by the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion - an ignorant mess created by the ignorant mass.

For Buddhists, it is clear that without deep inner transformation born of unmistaken contemplative practice, the roots of our afflictions will remain unchecked and continue to cause grief on personal and social levels. To foster an ambience and environment of contemplative knowledge and practice, cradled within a fabric of wisdom, compassion, and...
moral conscience, is fundamental to any project of social amelioration. We need to create and sustain multiple sites of contemplative practice; infuse our social consciousness with the indelible need for and life-changing importance of the contemplative ethos; inform, inspire, and transform our economic, political, cultural spaces into hubs of wise, compassionate action; rewrite our economics and politics from the ground up on local and global levels, emanating from a wisdom-based perspective that takes seriously the nature, origins, and potentials of consciousness and its ethical implications. The task of teaching contemplative technologies and science will have to be accelerated and increased in frequency, quality, and scope. The focus on en-masse adoption of a contemplative life, supported by physical, geographic, temporal, financial, social, cultural resources, will be front and centre. Physically strong, psychological resilient, intellectually sharp and bright, morally developed, and spiritually awakened leaders will need to rise up to meet the challenge of our times - to face the oncoming darkness and dispel the fog of thick delusions with the sharp vajra of primordial luminosity. And when such leaders emerge, we need to get behind them and forge the noble path ahead - here, together, now.

In modern physics, in the field of cosmology, they speak of the singularity before the big-bang where space, time, matter, energy, and all laws of physics break down and are yet to exist. In this vision I propose, the "singularity" is that timeless, spaceless "point" where all afflictions and delusions of consciousness cease without remainder, never to re-arise again. Both personally and collectively, we are moved by and attracted to this singularity, if and only if we stop long enough to listen to its calling. When all is said and done, when we have had enough of all our childish hedonic indulgences and their attendant suffering, when we can see that the illusions of our world as currently constructed by deluded minds can give no ultimate meaning or refuge, when we realise from the core of our being that we are seamlessly entwined threads of a single fabric, that we flourish best when we flourish together, and when we can sing, "Oh boundless joy! Now I see, there is no [ultimate] happiness in this world!"[1], then perhaps it is time. Time for a new beginning. Time for us to get sane, get undeluded, get real, get lucid, and reboot our world into being: as a living mandala, a pure land of enlightened bliss [2].

As is spoken in Bahasa Melayu, "Ini Kalilah!": it's time! "Ubah": [for] change.

And this time, make sure we keep the change.

Notes:
[1] I acknowledge Patrick Kearney, a friend and Dhamma teacher, from whom I heard this said. The word "ultimate" is my insertion.
[2] I acknowledge B. Alan Wallace for use of the terms "singularity", "get sane", "get undeluded", and "get real".
PERSONAL MUSINGS ON DHAMMA
Remembering Godwin … 12 Years On

On March 22nd, I will pause to remember and celebrate the selfless life of my dear teacher Acarya Godwin Samararatne (1932-2000), who died peacefully 12 years ago in Kandy, Sri Lanka. For those who do not know him, Godwin was a much beloved, wise, compassionate, and skilful meditation teacher to thousands in his homeland and around the world. While resident teacher at Nilambe Meditation Centre in the hills of Kandy, Godwin travelled to teach meditation in Southeast and East Asia, South Africa, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Holland, upon invitation from his many Dhamma students and friends. His distinctively gentle style that makes life and meditation so seamless and whole endeared him to many who found their minds, hearts, and lives utterly transformed and illumined by the Dhamma he so freely gave. You can read Godwin's teaching transcripts, listen to Godwin speak, view photos of Godwin in action, and read the many tributes to Godwin from friends, students, and fellow teachers (e.g. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhante S. Dhammika) at his homepage http://www.godwin-home-page.net/. If you speak and read Mandarin Chinese, you can go to the website set up by the Association of Godwin's Spiritual Friends in Hong Kong for more information and teachings http://www.godwin.org.hk/.

Godwin was not only a meditation teacher but also a socially-engaged Dhamma worker concerned with the total wellbeing of his fellow beings. In this regard, Godwin assisted, in his own quiet way, many of the poorest high-need families and individuals in his local area with various forms of practical support, e.g. spectacle frames for those with poor vision, food and medicine supply, emotional counselling etc. This work continues on today and you can read more about it here at: http://www.godwinmemorialfund.org/index.php

Speaking from my own experience of Godwin, I have had the good fortune of spending much time with him in the early to mid-1990s, while he was a frequent visitor to Singapore. On many occasions when being with Godwin, I would notice something strange. In the midst of our conversations, during natural pauses, I would see Godwin silently close his eyes, tilt his head backwards very gently, and remain still for a while before opening his eyes and carrying on our conversation. After a few times of this display of seemingly odd behaviour, I could not resist it any longer and asked Godwin what was going on. He smiled his usual smile, and in an uncontrived, matter-of-fact manner, explained that from time to time, waves of bliss and silence would sweep through him and when that happened, he needed to close his eyes and feel it fully. To him, it seemed like a most natural thing to do, like breathing, eating, drinking, sleeping. The sense of transparency and luminous space that accompanied his presence, which I would experience without fail when with him, was testimony to me that Godwin was not being pretentious or proud, but simply stating the facts of his immediate experience.

On another occasion, I witnessed the deep impact Godwin had on those whom he counselled and taught. On this said occasion, I had brought a family member to see Godwin, as this relative was encountering many difficulties in financial and family matters, contributing to his heavy grief, sorrow, and despair. After a couple of hours with Godwin, my relative
appeared out of the room with a fresh demeanour and smiling face, suggestive of a positive shift in his mind and heart. He later told me how kind and patient Godwin was with him, and how Godwin's caring presence enabled him to share his deep regrets and anguish while receiving practical ideas on how to overcome his problems. Godwin came up to me and said how deeply touched he was when he heard my relative's story, and encouraged me to continue showing loving-kindness (*metta*) to him while thanking me for being a concerned relative. I was relieved to see my relative walking and standing with a newfound sense of confidence.

On this 12th anniversary of the passing of my teacher Godwin, I would like to express my immense gratitude to him who has taught me much, both through words and by his pure example. If I can embody even a few drops of his wisdom and compassion, and to teach my students (no matter how imperfectly) as he has taught me, I would be gratified and humbled. Finally, let me share this beautiful characterization of a "true man of old" as described by Chinese sage Zhuangzi, a characterization, I believe, fits Godwin very nicely ...

"The true men of old were not afraid when they stood alone in their views. No great exploits. No plans. If they failed, no sorrow. No self congratulation in success ... The true men of old slept without dreams, woke without worries. Their food was plain, they breathed deep ... The true men of old knew no lust for life, no dread of death. Their entrance was without gladness, their exit yonder, without resistance. Easy come, easy go. They did not forget where from, nor ask where to. Nor drive grimly forward fighting their way through life. They took life as it came, gladly; took death as it came, without care; and went away, yonder. They had no mind to fight Tao. They did not try, by their own contriving, to help Tao along. These are the ones we call true men. Minds free, thoughts gone, brows clear, faces serene. Were they cool? Only cool as autumn. Were they hot? No hotter than spring. All that came of them came quiet, like the four seasons."

Success

I do not often receive letters or cards from friends and family. In fact, I almost never do. But I do receive many letters and emails from my 'friends of the earth', with whom I've been in touch for years now - Oxfam, Medecins Sans Frontieres, World Society for the Protection of Animals, UNICEF, Good fortune Trust, and Buddhist Global Relief. Today, I received a letter from Fred Hollows Foundation, a charity I've supported and still support. Something that came with the letter in the envelope caught my eye. It was a bookmark. The bookmark had a kindly photo of the late Fred Hollows on one side, with part of the caption saying: "Fred pinned these words to the wall of his office, because he regarded them as a pretty good summary of what life is about." On the other side were the words Fred was talking about. These words came from Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they give much joy and inspiration. I'd like to share them with you:

"To laugh often and much;
to win the respect of intelligent people
and the affection of children;
to earn the appreciation of honest critics
and to endure the betrayal of false friends;
to appreciate beauty;
to find the best in others;
to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child,
a garden patch or a redeemed social condition;
to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.
This is to have succeeded."

In a world now dominated by images and ideas of success that seem utterly out of touch with reality, we often succumb to false prophets preaching the seductive message of acquisition, reputation, prestige, power, and naive realism. We uncritically allow them to define for us what it means to 'succeed'. And using a false yardstick, we may unwittingly find ourselves falling short of their expectations. We then beat ourselves up for failing to meet up to those expectations. Forgetting to question those assumptions of success in the first place, we may get stuck in the quagmire of self-denigration, self-blame, depression, grief. But both Emerson and Fred are telling us to wake up from this delusion, to come alive and breathe the fresh air of truth. To know that little everyday things - how we live each moment, how we care for others, how we look at the fragile and tender, what we bring to every encounter that leaves the one encountered breathing easier - are what really counts in the end. To know that we have helped even one life breathe easier is to have succeeded. And knowing this from the depths of one's being is to release into a natural freedom beyond 'budget surpluses' and 'triple A ratings' and all the 'false gods' of success.

For us, fixating on and living under the canopies of YOLO ('you only live once') and FOMO ('fear of missing out') and being driven uncontrollably by the modern disease of
OCDD ('obsessive compulsive delusional disorder') seem to be the pathological order of the day. On individual and societal levels, these afflictions trigger and energise much of our malaise and suffering. When we are obsessed by and compulsively jerked around by notions of AAA ratings imposed upon sovereign societies by ethically dubious credit rating agencies (amongst other voracious vested interests), we give up our power to determine the sort of futures we want for ourselves, our kids, their kids, and our delicate ecosystem. Notwithstanding the fact that these credit rating agencies now face massive class action for their unsavoury complicity in eliciting the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, we continue to let our national and international economies be dictated by unelected 'money/market fundamentalists' whose motives remain unclear at best.

If we can just stop, breathe, gaze upon each child with presence and care, smell each flower with delicate appreciation, and unlearn our crazy notions of success, then perhaps we might stand a chance of truly succeeding in the way that Emerson has so lyrically written and Fred Hollows has so eloquently demonstrated. Which reminds me - I've made a note in my diary to donate to Fred's Foundation in June ... something which I'm able to do thanks to the generosity of my students and supporters, who give so open-heartedly in response to my Dhamma teachings.

In this life, I've had many brushes with 'false friends' who made use of me when it was expedient to do so and later betray me when I'm no longer useful to them. But on the bright side, good-hearted friends in the Dhamma - my students and benefactors - have shown me the power of genuine humanity and virtue, and given me some hope in the future of our society. May the rays of pristine awareness call forth other rays, from all hearts, across nations and worlds, to illuminate for all entrapped in the darkness of narcissism the true meaning of 'success'.

Tell me, my friend, what does 'success' mean to you?
Poetry of Mind-less-ness

Thus have I heard:
"In the beginning was the Word
The Word was with God
And the Word was God."

Thus have I also heard:
"Form is empty
Emptiness is form
Form is not other than emptiness
Emptiness is not other than form."

When all is said and forgotten
What else remains?

O, weary heart!
Rest, forgetting
Rest, forgotten

In utter forgetfulness
The grass grows,
The wind blows,
The sun shines
In the
Cloudless
Sky

Rainbows encircle
Valleys below
Ah!

Haiku on Coolness

A hot summer’s day
Powder dry
Gulp!
The glass is empty.
Just for Laughs

At the mountainous border regions between China and India, there lived a Lama and a Ch'an master who roamed amongst the clouds and rested in solitary caves. They were often seen drinking oolong tea and munching mo-mos together, though just as soon as they were spotted, they seemed to dissolve miraculously into thin air.

One fine morning, as they were enjoying each other's company as usual, the Ch'an master shouted at the old Lama, "You crazy old fool, what's the point of chanting your mantras like a brainless parrot?" Without batting an eyelid, the Lama boomed back,"You're at least as crazy and foolish as I am, why fry your brain with a useless gong-an? My stone wok can do a better job!"

Their eyes met, intense and focused, sharp as a razor's edge.

Deep belly laughter resounded throughout the ten thousand worlds.

_Gong-an is mantra_  
_Mantra is gong-an_  
_When all is digested in one gulp_  
_What else remains?_

Rainbows illumine the sky. Flowers bloom out of season. Cool breezes caress their skins as old mates delighted in fragrant oolong tea and tasty vego mo-mos.

_(Dengfeng-Lu or Record of Ascent to the Peak 1:1)_
Your Faraway Journey: Remembering Sheng-Yen Shifu

I'd like to share this beautiful music video produced in memory of the late Ch'an master Sheng Yen (1930-2009), a world-renowned meditation master, Buddhist scholar, and lineage holder of both Cao-dong (Jp. Soto) and Lin-ji (Jp. Rinzai) schools of Ch'an/Zen. Known affectionately to his disciples as "shifu" (connoting both teacher and father), Venerable Sheng Yen describes himself simply as "an itinerant monk pressing forward through wind and snow." Master Sheng-Yen is a truly great disciple of the Buddha and in my view, one of the most highly realized Chan/Zen masters in our modern era. This music video features scenes of natural beauty and spiritual inspiration, a haunting tune that touches the heart, and Dhamma-filled lyrics sung with feeling and clear voice in Mandarin. I hope my readers will enjoy this piece as much as I did:

http://www.preciousteaching.org/blog/%e6%82%a8%e7%9a%84%e9%81%a0%e8%a1%8c-%e6%84%9f%e6%87%b7%e8%81%96%e5%9a%b4%e5%b8%ab%e7%88%b6-music-video/

I've taken the liberty to render the song’s lyrics into English. The song embeds the final Chan poem written by Sheng Yen Shifu before he died:

    Busy with nothing, growing old,
    In emptiness, weeping and laughing.
    Intrinsically there is no 'I'
    Life and death, thus cast aside.

Here is my initial attempt to render this song into English, for the benefit and convenience of my readers:

"In the darkness, you lit a bright lamp for us all,
Dispelling all mistaken, anxious, deluded thoughts and fantasies.
You have given us a pair of clear-seeing eyes,
Teaching us to see through
this illusory transient world.

Entrapped, you opened a window for us,
Awakening our feelings, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness - fainting, asleep, unknowing.
You have given us a strong pair of wings,
Teaching us to release all attachments
and fly free as we wish.

Your faraway journey
Like the wind suddenly stopping,
tree branches no longer swaying.
You once said -
	Busy with nothing, growing old,
	In emptiness, weeping and laughing.

Your departing farewell
Like the rain ceasing,
lily ponds no longer excitedly rippling.
You once said -
	Intrinsically there is no 'I'
	Life and death, thus cast aside.

Wishing you will always be
our window of wisdom -
No more sickness, no more ageing.

Wishing you will always be
our lamp of compassion -
Inextinguishable, unceasing."

........

Translated by:
江登峰 (Chris Kang)
13 February 2012 (Year of the Water Dragon 2139)
Brisbane City Library, King George Square.
About this Anthology

The writings in this anthology first appeared as regular postings on two blogs hosted by the author Chris Kang, Ph.D. over a two-year period from 2011 to 2013. The individual writings appeared in no structured sequence or apparent order, simply manifesting as extemporaneous responses to the unfolding events of everyday life both personal and social. In compiling this anthology, it became clear that some sort of order could be discerned in the chaos, not so much out of the need for neatness but more so for the purpose of facilitating ease of reader appreciation and understanding of emerging ideas. The writings themselves speak to four inter-related themes: (1) liberation of mind and heart for oneself; (2) authenticity (and efficacy) of Dhamma practice in the 21st century; (3) positive transformation of society as inextricable part of a total Dhamma practice; and (4) personal and idiosyncratic musings on Dhamma, as part of the creative process of living the Dhamma in the warp and woof of everyday life. The sole intent and purpose of this anthology is the emancipation from dukkha (dissatisfaction, suffering) on all levels, personal and collective, and the full flowering of the innate potentials of consciousness for wisdom, compassion, and skilful activity. May all readers find peace and genuine freedom, flourishing in the best possible way for the utmost benefit of all sentient beings!

About the Author

Chris Kang, Ph.D. began his Dhamma practice as a five-year old child. In his early teens in 1984, he immersed in formal Dhamma studies and practice within the Theravada (Pali suttas, Chinese āgamas, samatha and vipassanā), and later the Mahāyāna (Indian Nālanda and Chinese Ch'an) and Vajrayāna traditions (integrating Tibetan Gelug and Nyingma lineages). He holds the late Acarya Godwin Samararatne (1932-2000) from Sri Lanka as his heart teacher, with whom he trained from 1990 to 2000. From 2002 to 2012, He completed the Buddhist Studies Program with Khen Rinpoche Geshe Tashi Tsering. From 2009-2014, he trained in Dzogchen under the tutelage of Dr. B. Alan Wallace.

Holding a Ph.D. in Indian religion, a postgraduate degree in international relations and other professional qualifications, he co-edited The Meditative Way: Readings in the Theory and Practice of Buddhist Meditation (1997). He has published more than 40 peer-reviewed articles, educational blog posts and articles, books and a book chapter, and conference papers in Buddhist studies and related areas.

In 2008, he was one of the 1000 notable Australians invited by Prime Minister Hon. Kevin Rudd and Professor Glyn Davis to the Australia 2020 Summit. From 2008 to 2012, he was lecturer and then honorary research advisor in Asian Religions at The University of Queensland. From 2012 to 2013, he lectured and supervised in Applied Buddhist studies at Nan Tien Institute, NSW.
On “Critical Buddhism”

This anthology of writings is embedded in a larger context. That context is the evolution of a deeply contemplative, trans-sectarian, critically engaged Buddhism for the 21st century. "Critical Buddhism” is the tentative designation of this emerging movement, salient to this time and place yet casting its vision beyond to future spaces and times. In this vision, our study, meditation, practice, and way of life is solidly grounded in authentic tradition while being open to innovation and renewal. We are part of an astonishing, creative, unfolding experiment of core Buddhism rebooted for this time and place, and beyond.

The historically earliest texts of the Pali Nikayas (preserved within Theravada) and Chinese Agamas (preserving mainly Dharmaguptaka, Sarvastivada, Mahasamghika sources) are regarded as authoritative, indispensable, and foundational. Taken together and critically examined, these texts form the earliest and most reliable core that can illuminate a pre-sectarian Buddhism prior to the development of multiple Buddhist sects and schools. For now, this is as close to the historical Buddha’s teachings as we can ever get.

Later evolutions of the Dhamma are accepted as authentic but not uncritically so. For example, the Indo-Tibetan Nalanda tradition, Ch'an traditions of Caodong and Linji, and the major streams of Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug traditions of Tibet are to be studied with careful inquiry and grounded empathy as part of the total context of Dhamma. Critical Buddhism values the scholarly contributions of modern academic Buddhist studies to its interpretation, formulation, and application of Buddhist teachings. A spiral dynamic of theory, practice, application, realisation infuses this project.

Our Vision

Critical Buddhism’s approach is none other than plain old 'traditional’ Buddhism reinvigorated with its original spirit of critical inquiry and ethos of liberative praxis. Such critical spirit and liberative ethos inform and animate the theory, practice, and social engagement of Buddhism in the 21st century. Critical Buddhism transcends the secular-religious divide.

Critical Buddhism is immanent by way of its transformative social concern yet unreservedly open to the transcendent and the numinous (lokuttara). As such, critical Buddhism can also be said to be ‘secular’ in that it speaks directly to the concerns and issues of this age (saeculum) while utterly transcending the temporal world fashioned by delusion. It is a Buddhism that critically reflects on itself, valorises deep meditative praxis, partakes in ongoing self-renewal, gives context to the integration of contemplative and scientific methodologies, and challenges the institutionalisation of greed, hostility, and delusion in our social world.
Our Philosophy

Intellectual precedents for critical Buddhism envisaged here can be found in the current epistemes of Buddhayana, Engaged Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism (renjian-fojiao), Critical Buddhism movement in Japan, Mere Buddhism in Singapore, and the emerging Secular Buddhism and Contemplative Science.

Buddhayana (Shravasti Dhammika) and Engaged Buddhism (Thich Nhat Hanh) presage the trans-sectarian, non-dogmatic, and socially engaged nature of critical Buddhism. Humanistic Buddhism first pioneered by Taixu (1890-1947) and Yinshun (1906-2005) and later continued by eminent Chinese Buddhist teachers Hsing-Yun, Sheng Yen (1930-2009), Cheng Yen, and Wei Chueh, radically synthesises the contemplative and constructive aspects of a total Dhamma practice - in common with critical Buddhism.

The vision of Mere Buddhism (Piya Tan) affirms a non-religious Buddhism that proclaims the urgency and possibility of liberation in this very life - as does critical Buddhism. The nascent memes of Secular Buddhism (Stephen Batchelor), Contemplative Science (B. Alan Wallace), and Critical Buddhism (Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro) act as contemporaneous sources of noetic inspiration for an organically evolving critical Buddhism.

Our Invitation

Transcending rigid boundaries, maintaining fidelity to root sources and pith instructions, our "project" is an activity of love and wisdom that opens itself to the world, seeking its transformation away from structures of suffering towards oases of genuine flourishing. Pristine "buddha fields" or "pure lands" are not mere nebulous "pies in the sky when you die", but real living, breathing, inclusive mandalas - homes of awakened joy and luminosity - we can collectively build on this earth, in this dimension. Obviously, in the transcendent malleability of reality as we know it, mandalas simultaneously pervade all dimensions of space and time, accessible through modes of contemplative knowing beyond the ken of our current limited perceptions. We invite honest, sincere Dhamma practitioners to be part of this organically evolving movement.

Sabba maṅgalam,

Chris Kang