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Engaged Buddhism: A Buddhist Approach to Personal and Social Transformation

RAYMOND SAVERIO FALCONE

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On-cho Ng

Professor of History, Asian Studies, Religion, and Philosophy

Thesis Supervisor

Daniel Falk

Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies

Honors Advisor

ABSTRACT

Engaged Buddhism is a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1960s at the height of a series of wars that Vietnam experienced. At the time, the term was meant to ignite a Buddhist movement in Vietnam aimed at creating a sense of responsibility to engage and mitigate suffering caused by the injustices of war. The Vietnamese engaged Buddhist movement expanded the modern scope of Buddhism across the globe to include all greed, aggression, and indifference that cause suffering on a global scale through social, political, military, and religious institutions. An engaged Buddhist perspective acknowledges that suffering is embedded in our societal systems, and as members of planet earth and the human family we have an obligation to engage in the systems and transform the systems to ease the suffering of all beings.

Throughout this paper I will make a case for the following; that 1) although personal enlightenment and transformation is a fundamental and core aspect of the Buddhist path, it should not be the end of the path, and it should not overshadow the equally important elements of social engagement that have been a part of Buddhism since its inception, 2) understanding and embodying the Four Noble Truths uncovers the causes and conditions of our suffering and offers us the skillful means to transform it, creating a path towards liberation, and 3) Buddhist meditation practices such as *shamatha*, mindfulness of the body and emotions, and loving kindness practice grow the four divine abodes–compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity–inside us so that we can share and co-create a society founded on those four virtues.

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Chapter 1

Why Buddhism? An Ancient Antidote to Human Suffering

Three Buddhist traditions–Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana–offer unique moral, practical, and philosophical guides to help people and society flourish and thrive, but at the foundation of all three are the teachings of *Shakyamuni* Buddha. All Buddhist traditions agree that the man we know as Prince Siddhartha Gautama is the founder and primary teacher of Buddhism. Gautama was given the title "Buddha," meaning "the awakened one," because of a fundamental shift in his understanding of the phenomenal world. In a dream, people often are not aware that they are dreaming until they wake up in bed. Similarly, without knowing it, most people live in ignorance of the true nature of reality and misperceive the world until they die or are shocked out of their delusion. At the same time, every human has the potential to become aware of the dream while they are dreaming: a phenomenon called lucid dreaming. Gautama was given the title "Buddha" because he became lucid and woke up from the "dream" of ordinary reality.

Buddha is a legendary radical, one of the greatest to ever walk the earth. He was not a God, but a human being: A unique human being that discovered deep truths about the nature of reality. Just as it is inborn in every human to lucid dream, buddha-nature is also innate in every human, but it requires the acquisition of certain practices and skills. Thus, being a Buddha is not for a special few, but rather, it is a fundamental birth right of every human being on the planet. As I will demonstrate throughout this paper, being a Buddha involves more than personal enlightenment. Equally important is the participatory component, the ability to create within society as a social activist and leader of social justice. Just as the Buddha recognized 2,500 years ago, suffering is everywhere–that has always remained true–but today, we are also faced with

institutionalized and systemic suffering on a much larger scales than the Buddha knew. Oppressions of all kinds are baked into the fabric and structure of our society and no one can truly escape oppressive power dynamics–even those responsible for various inequalities in one context may feel the weight of similar inequal power dynamics in another context. Buddhism gives us hope that we can resolve the turmoil in our society because it is a powerful expression of human nature that offers a path to end the suffering of the world. Together we will continue to unravel the path Buddhism sets out in front of us in the next section, for in order for humanity to overcome the challenges of the 21st century, we must all walk this path together.

Chapter 2

Life of an Engaged Buddhist

Introduction

This section focuses on the life of the Buddha and his role as a social leader. According to written accounts of the Buddha's life, he was born an aristocrat to the king of the Shakya kingdom. His name was Siddhartha Gautama, and after turning 10 years old, his father led him into a life of ignorance. After witnessing old age, sickness and disease, death, and a meditating hermit, Siddhartha Gautama left his father's palace and the Shakya kingdom to live as a *Sramana*. Siddhartha Gautama visited spiritual masters across India but found that none of them could liberate him from *karma* and the world of *samsara*. Eventually, he sat down under a tree and became the master of his own mind. Siddhartha Gautama realized liberation and stayed in *Nirvana* for forty-nine days. After returning to the world, Siddhartha Gautama spent the next forty years of his life teaching, spreading the *dharma* and creating a *sangha*. While he taught, he realized his full potential as a human being, and was given the title "Buddha." Reflecting on the life of Siddhartha Gautama makes it clear that Buddhism is founded not only in Gautama's enlightenment but also in his decision to teach. One could understand how some Buddhist monks and scholars see Gautama's commitment to teaching as engaged from the very beginning, meaning that Buddhism has always been engaged; it has always been a path oriented towards social engagement and the liberation of humanity as a whole.

The Four Sights

Life of Buddha or *Buddha-Carita* written by Asvaghosa around the 2nd century CE is an epic poem that describes the life of Siddhartha Gautama–the Buddha (Asvaghosa, 1977). Gautama was raised an aristocrat in the *Kshatriya* class by his father King Shuddhodana. When

Gautama turned ten years old, a great sage named Asita came to his father's palace with transcendental news. The gods had spoken to Asita, and prophesied Gautama's awakening into the highest state of existence–*Bodhi*:

> Having forsaken his Kingdom, indifferent to all worldly objects, and having attained the highest truth by strenuous efforts, he will shine forth as a sun of knowledge to destroy the darkness of illusion in the world (Asvaghosa, 1977, 1.74)

King Shuddhodana became agitated at the thought of his son leaving the Sakya kingdom to become a great sage and ultimately non-attached to all worldly possessions; it was the opposite of the king's own goals for his son's life. Thereafter, Shuddhodana raised Siddhartha by smothering him in sensual pleasures and forcing him to live in a secluded area of the palace, away from any harmful influence, and, as the story is told, the king blessed Siddhartha with the presence of intelligent and beautiful women, the most of which was a woman named Yasodhara, whom he married.

After the birth of his son Rahula, Gautama experienced a paradigm shift. He began asking existential questions about life and "resolved to go out of doors, like an elephant long shut up in a house" (Asvaghosa, 1977, 3.2). Given any opportunity, Gautama would leave the palace and explore the city streets. In the first excursion, Gautama saw an old decrepit man and asked his driver about the old man's run-down body, hoping it was only a fluke mistake, a one-of-a-kind phenomenon. The driver informed Siddhartha that old age does not discriminate, it comes to us all in time. Siddhartha was shocked and disturbed by this news having been oblivious to the reality of aging in the castle. This event left Siddhartha unsatisfied with his life and motivated him to continue exploring the world. During the next two trips outside the palace, Gautama encountered a severely sick man and a dead corpse, the second and third of the "Four Sights"

(Asvaghosa, 1977). Realizing he had been living a life of ignorance, Siddhartha sunk into deep misery. He had been lied to his whole life; now that he knew the truth, he was fearful and overwhelmed by the horror. Gautama was ready to move on from life in the palace; he revoked his attention from all temptations that previously captivated him in desire. On his final trip before leaving the palace for good, Siddhartha met a religious hermit who was practicing meditation. Siddhartha sat down next to the hermit, and he began to teach Gautama about the laws of the universe (*Dharma*). An old man, a sick man, a dead corpse, and a meditating hermit: These are the so called "Four Sights" that led to Siddhartha leaving the Shakya kingdom to follow the life of a *Sramana* and manifest the *dharma* in his life.

Life as a Sramana

Now, having seen the "Four Sights" and comprehending the suffering and limitations of life, Gautama was ready to leave and seek realization of the *dharma*. Shuddhodana was outraged at his son's decision to leave and denied every argument his son made in favor of leaving the castle. During their final conversation, Gautama put forth a request that was impossible for the king to satisfy:

> Having heard these words of the king, he made his reply in a voice soft like a sparrow's: 'If thou wilt be my surety, O king, against four contingencies, I will not betake myself to the forest. Let not my life be subjected to death, and let not disease impair this health of mind; let not old age attack my youth, and let not misfortune destroy my weal (Asvaghosa, 1977, 5.34-35)

As much as Shuddhodana wished for his son to remain in ignorance, he could not reverse what his son had seen. A mind that has been stretched to a new dimension never assumes its

original shape, and after the four sights, Gautama's worldview had shifted and expanded. Neither his father, nor anyone else, could ever blind him again with the superficiality of life. That night, Gautama escaped the palace and rode off into the forest. He quickly encountered a group of *ascetics* and *Sramanas* and proceeded to join their hermitage.

Although his lifestyle at the hermitage brought Gautama some joy and realization, he ultimately struggled with the resolve of the *ascetics*. His goal was not to reserve a seat in heaven like the others, but for the cessation of *karma* and liberation from the painful cycle of *samsara*. In other words, his goal was not to become a religious follower, blindly following the authority of the Brahman caste. authority. He genuinely wanted to stop creating an endless cycle of suffering and live a life of flourishing and well-being.

Gautama left the hermitage and traveled for a very long time, making various stops along the way, until one day he arrived at the *ashram* of Arada, a very wise sage known throughout India. For years Arada and Gautama practiced and studied doctrine, but after some time, Gautama realized Arada's philosophy and practice could only take him so far:

> I have heard this thy doctrine, subtle and pre-eminently auspicious, but I hold that it cannot be final, because it does not teach us how to abandon this soul itself in the various bodies (Asvaghosa, 1977, 12.69).

This passage highlights the extent of Gautama's existential struggles with the various forms of asceticism he encountered throughout northern India. According to Easwaran (2007), the teaching of the Self, or *Atman*, is that there is a fundamental ground of being (*Brahman*) behind the world of multiplicity. *Brahman* is immanent and transcendent, permanent and permeates all things and all beings.

In the theory of the Self, *Atman* is *Brahman*, and therefore we all have a portion of permeance within us. But Gautama was not interested in *Atman* as long as it implied rebirth and the cycle of *samsara*. Gautama left Arada and continued his search, learning from different sages across India, but always left unsatisfied. He even joined a group of five *ascetics* and began practicing self-mortification, abstinence, and fasting. Gautama experienced extreme weakness in his body and mind from this lifestyle. Through self-experimentation, he discovered self-mortification made it even more difficult to realize his goal, and thus he broke his *ascetic* vow.

Through his experience of extreme deprivation, Gautama reached the conclusion that the means for achieving the highest stage of meditation is through providing the mind and body with proper nutrition and nourishment. After eating some food offered to him by a local villager, Gautama had the strength and the resolve to realize full awakening (*Bodhi)*, but his greatest challenge was still in front of him. According to Asvaghosa (1977), the evil spirit, Mara, a metaphoric representation of the ignorance and delusion in the world, tried to stop Siddhartha from attaining *Nirvana*. Mara and his three sons, Confusion, Gaiety, and Pride, and his three daughters, Lust, Delight, and Thirst, tempted Gautama. These temptations represent corruptive forces in the human mind that keep us in the cycle of suffering (*samsara*). Confusion, gaiety, and pride represent the human tendency to strive for power over others; lust, delight, and thirst represent ignorance and the desire for superficial pleasure.

Although Gautama was beguiled by these evils, he did not succumb to their temptations. Having failed to defeat Gautama with the six temptations, Mara called his entire army of demons to defeat him. Mara's army, a vast collection of abominable creatures, surrounded Gautama on all sides as he sat under the bodhi tree (Asvaghosa, 1977). From a contemporary view, Mara's army can be seen as the vast collection of corrupt corporations and manipulative forces aimed at

dehumanization and gaining wealth and power over the general populous. According to the story, this horrible gang of monsters lunged into attack, but miraculously, their onslaught completely vanished before ever reaching the prince. Gautama's compassion and single pointed focus to realize liberation was so strong none of the negative forces in the world could stop him:

> But amidst all these various sounds which they made, although all living creatures were shaken, the saint trembled not nor quailed, like Garuda at the noise of crows (Asvaghosa, 1977, 13.54).

As Asvaghosa's story goes, Mara, "having seen the unshaken firmness of the great saint," fled from the battle scene along with his army" (Asvaghosa, 1977, 13.70). Gautama was victorious over Mara and the cycle of suffering. He dove deep into the abyss of his mind; quickly advancing along the path to awakening through a Socratic method of question and answer. His questions, quickly as they arose, were instantaneously answered as his knowledge advanced in proper order.

It began: whose existence causes the approach of old age (*jara*) and death (*marana*)? He understood it to be birth (*Jati*). What does birth proceed from? Birth is produced from existence due to the power of the act (*karmabhava*). What is the origin of existence (*bhava*)? It is appropriation (*upadana*). From what cause does appropriation come? He understood it to be thirst (*trsna*). From what does thirst arise? The cause of thirst is sensation (*vedana*). What is the source of sensation? He understood it to be contact (*sparsa*), and contact is caused from the six organs of sense (*sadayatana*), and the origin of the six organs of sense is name-and-form (*namarupa*). But what is the cause of name-and-form? It lies in consciousness (*vijnana*). From what does consciousness come into being? It supports itself on name-and-form. *Namarupa* and *vijnana* are mutually dependent on one another, they arise together naturally.

Ultimately, Gautama came to the conclusion that all the functions of reality must be transcended by achieving the complete absence of ignorance (*avidya*). And by reaching complete absence of ignorance birth itself is destroyed. With this final realization, Siddhartha Gautama achieved *Nirvana* and from then onward was known as the Buddha.

The Birth of Engaged Buddhism

The Life of the Buddha by Asvaghosa represents the inner and outer challenges we experience on the path towards liberation; from the human mind and society, we are tempted to consume and behave in ways that cause us and those around us to suffer. Although Ashvaghosa's story ends here at the realization of *Nirvana*, life as a Buddha had only just begun for Prince Siddhartha.

Divergent biographies of the Buddha have been assembled with narratives of the forty-nine days the Buddha spent in *Nirvana* before returning. As the stories go Hanh (1998) writes, when Gautama returned, the evil spirit, Mara, was again waiting for him. Mara attempted to persuade Gautama not to return to the world of *samsara*, "Enjoy *Nirvana* for yourself! Do not waste your time on ordinary human beings." "No one will understand" Mara insisted "why even try?" Doubt threatened to swallow the Buddha whole, but after many moments, he remembered the fellow ascetics that participated in the journey of awakening with him. His journey to awakening would never have been possible without them, and now was his opportunity to return the favor and assist them towards the path to *Nirvana*. Finally, feeling *bodhicitta* (selfless altruism) and a strong connection to all living beings, Gautama resolved to share what he learned with all beings suffering in *samsara*.

This decision–and the forty-five years traveling India and sharing the *dharma*–are the defining aspects of the life of Buddha. Sallie King, Professor of Religious Studies at James Madison University, writes that awakening under the Bodhi tree is only the beginning of Gautama's transformation into a fully realized Buddha: "the wisdom gained beneath the Bo tree is only the first of the two defining characteristics of a Buddha" (King, 2009, p. 8). The second characteristic of a Buddha is compassion for all sentient beings suffering within *samsara*. In contrast, the path of a *pratyekabudda*–a spiritual possibility in some schools of Buddhism, such as the *Theravadin* school–is not the same path as the one followed by Gautama or any *bodhisattva*. A *pratyekabuddha*, or a "solitary" Buddha, realizes *nirvana* but does not return to teach humankind (King, 2009).

King (2009) believes the path traveled by the Buddha is the fullest embodiment and expression of Buddhism, and the kind of embodied Buddhism we need in the 21st century. The bodhisattva path is the expression of Buddhism we need to inspire in every sangha around the world. I consider the full life of Gautama when I think about the meaning of the bodhisattva path in the 21st century because the Buddha expanded human potential by the socially engaged life he lived. For him, the path of individual transformation was inseparable from social transformation; he dedicated his entire life to sharing the wisdom and compassion that he discovered. Buddha's individual transformation was augmented by the great social movement (*sangha*) he created and exemplified throughout his life. Ultimately, through an engaged Buddhist lens, a *pratyekabuddha* is not the fullest embodiment and expression of Buddhism.

Buddhism has always been Engaged

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, poet, and peacemaker, was nominated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 after being exiled from his country for opposing the Vietnam war. Once when Hanh visited America, he was asked a straightforward question by a member of the press: “why engagement?” He replied, “Buddhism has always been engaged. All of Buddhism is engaged because all of it addresses human suffering” (King, 2009, p. 8). The Buddha’s insights into human suffering (*duhkha*) constitute the main focus of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths–truths that light the way to liberation. Many westerners have interpreted the teachings of Buddhism to be very individual, focused on personal transformation and nothing else. But the recent emergence of socially engaged Buddhist movements has made many people reconsider the teachings of the Buddha. According to Sallie King, Thich Nhat Hanh, and other engaged Buddhists, Buddhism is equally focused on personal and social transformation and always has been: “…Buddhism is founded not only in Gautama’s enlightenment but also in his decision to teach, [thus] it is fair to say that it has always been engaged, always focused on the problem of *duhkha* and the overcoming of *duhkha*” (King, 2009, p. 9). Overcoming *duhkha*, whether individual or collective, is the way to transform ordinary humans into Buddhas and societies into *sanghas*. These quotes reinstate the point that, although personal enlightenment and transformation is a fundamental and core aspect of the Buddhist path, it should not be the end of the path, and it should not overshadow the equally important elements of social engagement that have been a part of Buddhism since its inception.

An additional lesson couched within the story of the Buddha is that of individual awakening as a necessary prerequisite for positive social change. Gautama did not begin to teach or attempt to create social change in India immediately after escaping Shuddhodana’s palace. First, he engaged in meditative practices to train attention, expand awareness, and elevate his

state of openness, compassion, and empathy. By doing so, he explored the true nature of reality and human suffering, gaining insight and compassion that would be expressed in the Four Noble Truths. Six years of intensive meditative practice created the conditions for an awakening on the night Gautama sat under the Bo tree. For forty-nine days, he was emersed in the nature of reality and the causes and conditions of human suffering. Buddha’s insight did not cease after that night but continued to accumulate as he interacted with people, began teaching, and maintained a disciplined practice of meditation with the *sangha* (King, 2005). The Buddha understood that ethical considerations and meditative practices must be an integral aspect of one’s lifestyle before they can alleviate suffering in the world and transform it into peace and equanimity. We cannot expect to transform others suffering if we have never touched our own. In succeeding chapters, I will unpack the intrinsic healing power of awareness, and how it can help us face suffering, embrace it, and integrate it into our state of being. As we heal suffering, consciousness begins a natural and spontaneous transformation into greater wholeness and awareness without the compulsion to judge or be critical. At that point, we have begun to venture down the path towards Buddhahood, and we can begin to help others do the same. Let us follow in the Buddha’s footsteps along this path towards an understanding of the relationship between individual awakening and communal healing in the next section.

Buddhism & Social Transformation

Awakening is a process with both gradual and sudden aspects. The capacity to alleviate suffering and create positive change is contingent on one’s “location” on the continuum of awakening. Also, the potential to alleviate suffering and transform life is limitless inasmuch as one’s true buddha-nature arises as the dominant way of being in the world. A fully awakened

Buddha may reside in a continuous stream of unconditioned mindful awareness, where no separate self exists. They are totally integrated into the world as an expression of the intelligent cosmos. A Buddha rests in the Eternal now and never clings to past or future; such a being is also known as a *tathagata*, one who is "thus come, thus gone" and embodies the attitude of nonresistance, non-attachment, and non-judgement towards all living beings (Eppsteiner, 1985).

When one is completely unfazed by any external situation and accepting everything with curiosity, open-mindedness, and compassion, even mental-emotional turbulence is transmuted in the light of pure awareness. Pure awareness is our true nature, and from within it, non-conceptual compassion and love arise and comprise the energy field from which a *tathagata* acts. In fact, nothing a *tathagata* does is fabricated; everything arises spontaneously to the demands of the present moment, and thus, all actions are faultless and effortless (Ray, 2020). Doubtlessly, A *tathagata* Buddha is fit to be a leader of social activism because they can be one with the present moment, unattached to ego-driven outcomes, and thus in touch with compassion for all life.

Stories of the Buddha demonstrate how he allowed inspiration to arise in the present moment. Sometimes words were used, but his primary way of teaching was through presence, compassion, and connection to Buddha-nature. The Buddha refrained from abstract speculation on some metaphysical questions and other topics he believed were of secondary importance (Eppsteiner, 1985). He greeted such questions with silence, often called "Buddha's noble silence," which is itself a pointing finger at what is primary: stillness, kindness, and mindful presence. Buddha's methods of teaching demonstrate how authentic wisdom and compassion arise spontaneously out of deep stillness within the present moment. All fabrications of the mind, unrooted in the stillness of mindful presence, inevitably create suffering. Surely, the Buddha's state of consciousness was always primary, and his verbal teachings secondary. The implication

of this for contemporary social activism is enormous: the state of consciousness from which actions arise is always primary, and the action itself is secondary. This is a defining characteristic of engaged Buddhism.

When we are identified with the mind and its forms–which is the basis for the false sense of self–we tend to live in a world of duality–of separateness and isolation–where mental judgements dominate, and self-serving attitudes and behaviors prevail (Eppsteiner, 1985). Any attempt to enact social change from a state of consciousness which has been hijacked by a false sense of self will only cause more suffering. The state of consciousness from which our actions arise relates to the idea of *karma* (King, 2005). *Karma* refers to the law of cause and effect, but it also literally means "action" in the most inclusive sense of the word. For example, *karma* manifests in the form of thoughts, words, and deeds, and it refers to the fact that negatively motivated actions, thoughts, or speech produce an equal and opposite negative result (King, 2009). The opposite is true for positively motivated karma. Thus, metaphorically speaking, one's actions "sow" karmic "seeds," which may develop over a long period of time or produce immediate consequences (King, 2009).

According to the law of *karma*, every outcome is contaminated with the state of consciousness embodied in the actions that led up to that outcome. If action was motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion– the three poisons of *samsara*–then equally contaminated "fruit" would be the result (Eppsteiner, 1985). Similarly, action motivated by generosity, loving kindness, and equanimity bring about positive consequences. In other words, every action contributes to a particular karmic energy field–either positive or negative–that accumulates as more and more thoughts, words, and deeds occur. The *karma* that accumulates–whether beneficial or negative–is conditioned by the state of consciousness from which that action

originated. By the time an outcome has been reached, it already holds within it the accumulation of karmic energy from all actions that led to it. This is also the Buddha's teaching of interdependent co-origination: All seemingly separate events are inseparably interconnected with each other (King, 2009). They are explicitly two, but implicitly one.

The way to transcend the accumulation of negative karma is to act without trying to force a desired outcome, then, accepting and fully embracing whatever happens as if you intended it. Even more specifically, transcending negative *karma* requires acting without rigid adherence to a specific goal or desired outcome. *Karmic*-less action is action that does not fixate on the future. Since the future is only a concept, verbal thinking can be an obstacle. A consistent practice of meditation allows us to acknowledge thoughts and peacefully allow them to pass on without getting caught in the stream of thinking. Without indulging in self-talk, the mind naturally settles and calms to our natural state–also known as buddha-nature. Total freedom from the golden chain of verbal thinking takes consistent practice for many years, but the practice is very simple and always the closest thing to you, so there is always an opportunity to practice and return to our original nature.

When we act with the future in mind, awareness becomes fragmented, with some of it trapped in concepts. One pointed attention is distracted from the present moment, and the quality of what we do is diminished. Inevitably, verbal thoughts arise, and attention becomes distracted from the primary task. In that situation, when we practice mindfulness, awareness can recognize verbal thoughts as mental activity and allow them to pass by, unprovoked. As quickly as those thoughts appeared in consciousness, they are gone, and we can reorientate our attention back to the primary task: non-judgmental awareness of the present moment.

Mindfulness improves the quality of every action and eliminates the accumulation of *karma*. *Karma* is created when our actions have selfish ulterior motives and expectations that we try to force onto our external situation. Mindfulness helps us become aware when we do that, for example, when we catch ourselves becoming upset or angry at a situation because it does not unfold in the ways we expected it to. With the practice of mindfulness, we can stop and practice accepting the suchness of things as they are.

In a state of mindful presence, there is an unknowing, which paradoxically, manifests a deeper knowing–a non-conceptual knowing. This is intuitive insight, seeing reality in its suchness or isness, free from conceptual labels. In short, mindfulness implies total engagement with the task at hand. Therefore, a Buddha's attention primarily focuses on what is happening now, and past and future exist as helpful tools–never blurring the prominence of the present moment.

Conclusion

To wrap up this section, let us revisit how far we have traveled along the path towards knowledge of Buddhahood. To begin, we considered how the life of Siddhartha Gautama illustrates personal spiritual development and social activism as complementary practices, placing necessary emphasis on the Buddha's twofold mission to satisfy the natural human desire for individual and collective actualization. We considered the perspective of engaged Buddhism as a social activism that must be supplemented with an inner responsibility; to give ones' consciousness loving attention and work to transform the suffering and trauma held within. Once one learns the skillful means of working with individual suffering, they can then begin to spread awareness and compassion through social engagement, and work to transform the suffering of

the world, going so far as to even create enlightened societies. How can one begin to shift suffering into liberation within themselves and others around them? To understand this, we must step forward on our path and unpack the relationship between *duhkha*, trauma, and *Nirvana*.

Chapter 3

Duhkha, Trauma, and Liberation

Introduction

The teachings of the Buddha offer those who follow it an opportunity to become aware, accept, embrace, and expand the interconnectivity of the world. We are not an island unto ourselves, our real connections and relationships make us who we are and allow for the healing of suffering to occur. Follow the Buddha's path with courage, diligence, and discipline, and you will experience suffering transform into loving kindness, joy, and equanimity.

The Buddha *dharma* arose out of insight into the nature of reality as a cosmic web, grounded in the principles of inter-being and impermanence. These two are the basis for the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. They are universally applicable for all people to practice. Even if the external manifestation of those practices differ, true *dharma* embodies an inner quality that is recognizable. The Four Nobel Truths help us to intimately relate to ourselves and the world by developing a deep understanding for what is real, important, and beneficial. The power of Buddha's teachings come alive when one realizes what once was obscure–always present and alive between us, but obscured–becomes apparent and unites us together.

The Four Noble Truths

The first truth of Buddhism and the main tenet of Siddhartha Gautama's teachings starts with recognizing the ubiquitous nature of *duhkha* (suffering) in ourselves and the world. The second truth seeks to recognize the causes and conditions of suffering so that we become aware of it when it arises. The third and fourth truths are about letting go of those behaviors that cause suffering and shifting our attention towards cultivating the path leading to liberation.

The Four Noble Truths are not about intellectualization, they begin when we step into action. A practitioner actively engages with the *dharma* by accepting responsibility for the role one plays in creating things as they are. When we read about the *dharma* and cultivate a conceptual understanding, we must take the next step and experiment with it in our life circumstances, otherwise the teaching is flat and lifeless. Transforming the teachings into action *dharma* is an essential step, without which one would not consider themselves to be follinw in step with the Four Noble Truths.

The Verities of Suffering

Buddhism recognizes several kinds of suffering: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of composite things, and the suffering associated with change (Hanh, 1998). Of the first type, the suffering of unpleasant experiences is the physical pain of an injury, or the psychological pain associated with guilt, anguish, fear, panic, loneliness, and helplessness. The suffering latent in all composite things and in change is exemplified by the inevitable decay and death of a human body; whatever comes together must change and eventually come apart. But to say life is suffering is too general, and the Buddha makes it clear that liberation from suffering is possible. The essence of the practice proceeds by calling our suffering by its true name and touching it deeply with mindful awareness and discernment; then we see its specific causes and the way to accept and disarm those causes.

When beginning to actively investigate *duhkha,* it is helpful to set intentions at the beginning of each day, such as: 1) not to inflict suffering on oneself or the world, 2) recognize when suffering arises in experience, 3) pause, close your eyes, and breath every hour you are awake, 4) in the midst of all activity, sustain a restful state, and 5) allow time at the beginning

and end of the day for contemplation. When setting intentions, pause before moving on and cultivate a felt sense that your intention is already so. Intentions help set a clear direction every day, one that will motivate us to practice the *dharma* the best we can.

Embracing Suffering

Yet, even without intentionally creating suffering, we will experience the bitterness of suffering, often daily. So why should we practice if suffering does not cease? A man asked the Buddha this question: “Why practice the *dharma* if suffering doesn’t immediately stop or sometimes even slow down?” “To suffer and not know that we are suffering” said the Buddha, “is more painful than the burden endured by a mule carrying an unimaginably heavy load” (Hanh, 1998, p. 78). If we are unaware of our suffering, or desire to avoid and escape suffering, then our suffering pushes us around and consumes us through our negative thoughts, emotions, and actions, and we enter an ever increasing cycle of suffering–*samsara*. The *dharma* asks us to embrace our suffering in order to change it. The more we take care of our suffering and the suffering around us, the more skillful we become at working with it directly and dissolving its negative impact. A first taste of the transformative power of awareness is all one needs to answer the question, “Why practice?”

As courage and compassion increase over time, we slowly touch and embrace more suffering–in ourselves and the world–without being overwhelmed. To touch suffering fully, we start by acknowledging and taking responsibility for the suffering in our minds and the suffering present in the world and throughout history. “Our suffering is us,” says Thich Nhat Hanh, “and we need to treat it with kindness and nonviolence. We need to embrace our fear, hatred, anguish, and anger” (Hanh, 1998, p. 47) Suffering is painful, and, initially, our first reaction may be to

escape from it. But if we are diligent and disciplined, we quickly see that to push away suffering is to fall into the cycle of *samsara* and does not lead to transformation. Without embracing suffering, we cannot grow, cultivate peace, equanimity, and joy. But with recognition, acceptance, understanding, and compassion, our suffering opens the path to healing and liberation.

Causes of Suffering

The Second Noble Truth is about recognition and understanding: by looking deeply and embracing *duhkha*, we clearly see how it came to be and why we are suffering. In action, the Second Noble Truth starts by mindfully analyzing the causes and conditions of suffering. Suffering is recognized as such and accepted: Then, we fully embrace our suffering and by doing so, we can understand it and move along the path towards complete transformation.

Understanding is the basis of love and compassion, so by understanding all the components of suffering, we embody love and compassion. Hanh (1998) says what makes someone a Buddha is their ability to transform suffering into joy: "Buddhas and bodhisattvas suffer, too. The difference between them and us is that they know how to transform their suffering into joy and compassion. Like good organic gardeners, they do not discriminate in favor of the flowers or against the garbage. They know how to transform garbage into flowers" (p. 43). Buddhas learn to compost their suffering; allowing it to decompose and transform into fertile soil.

Nothing inside or outside us can be labeled irrelevant, swept under the rug, or ignored. Nothing is left behind or forgotten in this practice, or else individually and collectively we become fragmented and incomplete. With understanding and compassion, we can fully accept

other people and the world as they are. We become something greater than any individual when we integrate with another being, and together, by differentiating and linking, combine our energy to create a new world. The second Noble Truth helps us cultivate wisdom, compassion, and understanding, so that we respond with skillful action and compassion to ourselves and the world.

Liberation

Practicing the first two Truths, *duhkha* inevitably decreases, and we enter into the third Noble Truth: the cessation of creating suffering. Thich Nhat Hanh explains, "When we direct our attention toward our suffering, we see our potential for happiness. We see the nature of suffering and the way out. That is why the Buddha called suffering a holy truth. When we use the word "suffering" in Buddhism, we mean the kind of suffering that can show us the way out." (Hanh, 1998, p. 39) This is good news; real happiness is possible! The Buddha did not make suffering the tenet of his teachings because he was not as nihilistic as many western academic philosophers have claimed. Quite the contrary, through realization, the Buddha found that only by means of actively caring for our suffering, can we enter onto the path of liberation. Once we stop creating the causes of suffering, we start to taste the sweetness of well-being and equanimity. It is with the energy of mindfulness that the path towards realization becomes clearer, and we stop ingesting the causes of our suffering and begin to cultivate that which nourishes us and makes us joyful. Therefore, the third Truth of Buddhism is also about enjoying the precious jewels already present here and now.

In the third Truth, we practice being grateful and glad for what we already have– happiness, health, safety, and peace. In order to cultivate a steady sense of contentment in our

lives, we take several moments every day to pause, be mindful, appreciate the beauty of the present moment, and contemplate the meaningful love received. Small is significant; we do not need to accumulate more possessions or achieve our future goals to be grateful and balanced. It takes only a few steps to practice gratitude: pause, enrich your experience by contemplating the meaning and significance the moment provides, and absorb it with 3 conscious diaphragmatic breaths. In moments of positive experiences, you can even practice linking the positive with negative material, which helps to heal our wounds and it makes it more likely that we will remember the positive next time a negative experience manifests. Basically, the practice of gratitude is in alignment with the middle way of Buddhism, found in the contentment of equanimity. Gratitude is mindfulness of the good, and it allows us to become aware of all the gifts life presents to us now; we recognize the beautiful suchness in life and learn to cultivate joy by simply being present to the moment. We no longer rely on getting and doing for our satisfaction.

When we practice both personal and social transformation as a collaborative path towards awakening, we engage in society in such a way that we present a new example and an alternative option to conventional behavior and ways of viewing reality. Others learn through listening and observation, and suddenly a new social movement arises. This is how the engaged Buddhist movement is becoming a transformative influence on society. We water seeds of contentment and well-being in ourselves, and it spreads across the world and into the collective. In the third Noble Truth, we stop creating the conditions of suffering and deeply embrace the beauty and joy already present right now.

The Realization of Nirvana

The Fourth Noble truth is the Eightfold Path that leads to well-being. In this stage, we have recognized the path and are ready to embody the Buddha's truths. Individually and collectively as a *sangha*, we encourage each other to practice and fully embody what we have learned. We precede on the path with patience, diligence, and discipline, and focus our energy on the practices that are oriented towards confronting suffering and transforming it into compassion. When we consistently change our behavior to stop creating suffering, old patterns are left behind and never return. New habits and traits are cultivated, consequently, our fundamental way of being and interacting in the world changes. This is the realization of the Four Noble Truths.

To wrap up this discussion on the Buddha's Noble Truths, let us focus our attention on the importance of understanding their interbeing nature. In actualizing any one of the truths, you necessarily create the conditions for the others to arise as well. Looking deeply at suffering, we see how it came to be, and how to end it. Practicing the path, we see the efficacy of the path and embody well-being. Linguistically, these truths are distinct, but in practice, they are one. Suffering must be present in order to see the path; "The origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering are all found in the heart of suffering" (Hanh, 1998, p. 45).

Trauma

Buddhists often offer alternative translations to the word *duhkha* that expand upon the one-world English translation of 'suffering'. Trauma is one such translation. Considering the Buddha did not speak Pali or Sanskrit, and certainly not English, taking into account alternative translations can help broaden our view of the Buddha's teachings beyond a single point of view. Expanding language may also enhance the *dharmas* applicability to larger groups of people and

open greater possibilities for collective transformation. Reginald Ray (2020), a contemporary Vajrayana Buddhist teacher, describes the ubiquitous nature of trauma in the human experience, and compares trauma to the *duhkha* described in the Four Noble Truths:

> The more we have come to understand trauma and work with it, the more evident indeed it is becoming that incapacity and trauma affecting some people is the extreme end of the spectrum; In fact, all of us suffer some degree of trauma, and more of us are coming to believe that simply to be human is to suffer violations of our person that we cannot handle (Ray, 2020, p. 112).

If trauma is a spectrum or continuum, then on the far-left side—the extreme end of the spectrum—is the classic cataclysmic event that incapacitates the individual, rending them incapable of living a meaningful or functioning life—also known as "shock trauma." In the middle of the spectrum is a less drastic degree of the first, but still encompasses the fundamental assaultive and violent nature of the human condition. On the far right of the spectrum is the large and small grinding of discomfort, dis-ease, the chronic and acute stress that builds in our body and mind overtime. In effect, all of us suffer from some degree of trauma, and most of us experience it daily. As a result, we become emotionally reactive to situations, and in some cases, internally fragmented, unable to accept and care for aspects of ourselves that have been cut off.

The Vajrayana tradition says that the human ego itself is a trauma response (Ray, 2020). Trungpa Rinpoche, as interpreted by his student Reggie Ray, says that when we meet any new experience, "we retract, withdraw, and freeze, assimilating only a tiny fraction of what the groundless ground of our soma knows; the rest is pushed out of awareness, down into the unconscious" (Ray, 2020, p. 24). This is to say that experience itself, just by its very nature, when received without filters and known directly by our body-mind, is so intense and boundless

that it surpasses our ego's ability to handle it in its totality. As a result, our experience is inherently filtered down into bit sized pieces for us to consume and create as our perception of reality. This filtering is constant, for all of us, just by virtue of being human.

Filtering increases in the midst of unbearable adverse experiences. Consequently, every traumatic experience that consciousness cannot handle in the moment does not just skip over us like a flat rock on the top of a lake, but instead sinks down into the depths of our body where it is stored like a huge meal that we do not have the capacity to digest (Ray, 2020). Avoiding and denying unprocessed trauma does not mean it goes away, for trauma continues to affect us through our non-conscious filters, patterns, and motivations. These non-conscious processes set up deep emotional and perceptual patterns of defense, which results in us recreating our past pain over and over again in a perpetual state of self-inflicted suffering. "Over time, trauma both rewires the brain to perceive and predict a dangerous world with few resources," says Dr. Abra Vigna, "…and it also erodes the body's immune system and organ functioning" (Vigna & Dunne, 2021, p. 5). If not consciously acknowledged and integrated, all the trauma we experience is stored in the body and epigenetically alters our DNA, nervous system, energetic body, and neurological architecture. By negatively impacting people's attention and awareness, Ray (2020) describes how repressed trauma expresses itself through people's actions, mental states, and altered traits:

> Anytime there is unconscious, unresolved trauma, it is not just our day-to-day experience but also our awareness that is inevitably compromised. This is because to maintain the kind of repression that keeps the traumatic material buried in our unconscious—so we don't have to experience it—a part of our awareness has to be split off and constantly on

> guard, moment by moment making sure that we do not have to feel the threatening material (Ray, 2020, p. 96).

Our awareness and day-to-day experience are inseparable; if the knowing of consciousness is negatively impacted by trauma, then all of experiences are biased by filters. The traumatic split in consciousness contributes greatly to our daily dose of *duhkha*. Like Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, Tsoknyi Rinpoche calls this repressed aspect of consciousness the shadow (Rinpoche, 2012). Both men are referring to a covered and hidden aspect of self, kept behind and away from our explicit personality which is consciously expressed outwardly to the world. This shadow self creates *duhkha* in our life by superimposing filters on our experience of reality which instigate fear and judgement in our every interaction. Our ability to experience reality in its suchness with an open and aware mind is greatly diminished. Not only can we not harness the full power of awareness, but we also end up fighting against our own projections, leaving us in a more damaged and dysfunctional state with every passing experience. Unacknowledged trauma is a major contributor to our *duhkha*, and it forces us to repeat over and over the same habitual patterns that keep us in the same downward facing spiral:

> In the past we have experienced hatred, we have been abused and maltreated. All these events have been buried in our consciousness and we have not been able to transform them. We chew the cud of our suffering, our despair, like the cows chew the regurgitated grass. Every time we think about being abused, we are abused once again. But actually, that is not happening now; It is all over. Thinking like this, we can be abused every day, even though our childhood may have had a great deal of happiness and sweet moments. We ruminate on our hatred, suffering, and despair and it is not healthy food (Hanh, 1998, p. 37)

A great way to gage progress along the path towards awakening is how frequently we uncover, engage, and work through our filters and traumas. The key to becoming a buddha is not to deny or repress harmful actions, emotions, and desires, but rather welcome and embrace them. “No matter the circumstances,” Jon Kabat Zinn insisted to our Science of Human Flourishing class, “put the welcome mat out for everything! And embrace what is true in every moment.” Transformation has the potential to occur in every moment if we recognize that every moment of life presents us with a unique and valuable aspect of being. Living is an opportunity to embrace any aspect of life with love and compassion. Care for everything, especially *duhkha*, just as parents care for their child no matter the circumstances.

The Four Noble Truths in Everyday Life

The Vajrayana Buddhist tradition is famous for practicing tantric yoga. To practice tantric yoga means to make every situation—no matter what it is—an opportunity to develop and expand awareness of self and reality (Ray, 2020). Rinpoche (2012) does exactly that as he reflects in the moment on his fear of crossing a glass bridge rooted in an adverse childhood experience:

> As a child, I'd taken a lot of risks, climbing to the tallest tree branches and scrambling up onto mountain overhangs that even goats feared to climb. In the course of my adventures, I'd taken my share of spills and the pain I’d felt had imprinted itself on my physical body. The physical pain generated a fearful emotional response to the possibility of falling. Taken together, these physical and emotional responses then crystallized into an idea that heights are dangerous. In simple terms, a pattern had evolved: a tightly woven knot of

physical, emotional, and conceptual reactions which, taken together, I'd accepted as fact, a bit of truth about who I was in the circumstances in which I found myself. First time I tried to step onto the bridge, my pattern had taken over completely. I had become my fear. My fear had become me (Rinpoche, 2012, p. 7-8).

Investigating the depths of his present fear, Tsoknyi realized that it originated from a childhood trauma. This is an example of how physical and emotional trauma concretizes itself into reactive patterns which remain with us and influence our thoughts and behaviors until acknowledged and transformed. A traumatic experience imprinted itself on Rinpoche's body-mind and created a pattern of fear that triggered the tendency in him to perceive reality as threating when engaging in a similar situation.

Tsoknyi describes how unobserved aspects of mind become part of ego, "I'd come to accept it as part of me, of who I believed I was and how I defined the world around me" (Tsoknyi, 2012, p. 8). This is a reflection on how he internalized the traumatic experience in his sense of self as a formation of unconscious behavioral and perceptional patterns. The second time he attempted to cross the bridge, again, he was taken over by his conditioned pattern of fear. This is how strongly engrained our psychosomatic patterns become, even with mindfulness, they heavily influence and alter our behavior. He wondered "What is wrong with me?" and at that moment a second realization struck him: he was treating his pattern with impatience and unkindness. His attitude was simply to get rid of his pattern without taking any time to learn and integrate it into consciousness. He was not caring for all of himself with compassion and understanding. Disowning an aspect of experience is harmful in the short and long term; such a response is problematic because negativity will continue to accumulate. Self-criticism adds additional pain to experience, and the conditioned pattern will continue to emerge and take

control of behavior in moments of stressful triggers. The Buddha offered a dramatic image to illustrate this kind of attitude:

> A dangerous murderer was captured and brought before the king, and the king sentenced him to death by stabbing. 'Take him to the courtyard and plunge 300 sharp knives through him.' At noon a guard reported, 'Majesty, he is still alive,' and the king declared, 'Stab him three hundred more times! In the evening, the guard again told the king, 'Majesty, he is not yet dead.' So the king gave the third order: 'Plunge the three hundred sharpest knives in the kingdom through him,' " Then the Buddha said, "This is how we usually deal with our consciousness." Every time we criticize or ruminate on the past, it is like stabbing ourselves with a sharp knife. We suffer, and our suffering spills out to those around us. (Hanh, 1998, p. 37)

Practicing several kinds of meditation–such as, *shamatha*, *vipassana,* and *metta*–nourish us and steady our mind in the joy of well-being, partly by helping to pull us out of criticism and allowing us to appreciate the beauty and safety of the present moment. Tsoknyi describes practicing the Noble Truths in the moment of being triggered. He recognizes the pattern, looks deeply into the trauma and sees the causes and conditions of his suffering. Then, he offers his conditioned pattern and traumatic memory kindness and compassion, embracing his fear and the emotional pain of his childhood trauma with mindfulness and understanding. His action *dharma* dissolved the *duhkha* and transformed his mind-body so that the next time he tried, he was able to walk with mindful steps all the way across the glass bridge.

Conclusion

This section focused on the foundational teachings of the Buddha, and the need to actively engage and experiment with them through our experience rather than merely intellectualize about them. The Four Noble Truths recognize that suffering of all kinds is ubiquitous, and we must cultivate compassionate awareness skills in order to face and transform inner and outer suffering. As we continue working with our suffering and the suffering of the world, compassion, loving kindness, and equanimity grow inside and enable us to share positivity and help co-create a society built on well-being. We considered Tsoknyi Rinpoche's story as an example of following the Buddha's path to liberation. He demonstrates that we must learn to understand all parts of ourselves, even the "scary monsters" that live inside before actualizing our potential and contributing to society. The truths he experienced are not special but available to all human beings. All beings hold traumatic experiences and house karmic seeds of fear, anger, desire, clinging, and attachment. Every one of us has been overpowered by conditioned patterns in stressful situations, but the point is not to ruminate on our pain and unskillful behavior, but rather to use our suffering as the path to liberation.

Chapter 4

Dhyana: The Direct Experience of Truth

Introduction

The first aspect of meditation (*dhyana*) on this leg of our journey is mindfulness of the body and emotions. Our emotions often guide our actions, and when we lose connection to this process, we are non-consciously pushed and pulled in the direction of our emotional reactions, and we lose the ability to make conscious choices. When we lose connection to our emotions, we begin reacting to life based on prejudice and conditioning of our past experiences. Through trauma and the process of socialization, we have unwittingly adopted many values, beliefs, preferences, identities, and attributes which are harmful to ourselves and others. When we are lacking in self-awareness, we are at the mercy of our automatic reactions, and we are doomed to repeat the same patterns repeatedly.

Meditation practice is a way of making friends with oneself, which points to the fact that is an experience of non-aggression. The practice of meditation is thus a way of experiencing one's basic being, beyond habitual patterns. Through the experience of *prajna* (wisdom), one begins to see directly and concretely how the mind actually functions, its mechanics and reflexes, moment to moment. Once we begin our meditation journey, not only do we reflect on the suffering we have received and caused in the past, but also, we practice by becoming aware in the moment and stopping the cycle of self-perpetuated suffering. Then we can begin to cultivate a stable meditative state that allows us to rest and heal. Eventually, we embody this state outside of formal meditation practice and begin to allow it to guide our actions and natural responses with empathy and compassion throughout our day.

Shamatha

As previously mentioned, one of the most valuable aspects of Buddhism to contemporary society is its rich practice and philosophy of meditation because it directly addresses the enormous amount of suffering generated in our society. In Buddhism, the practice of cultivating the capacity to apply and sustain attention is called *shamatha*. *Shamatha* means “calm abiding,” and when practiced correctly, it helps calm the waves of the mind and bring awareness to a restful state by focusing attention on one object for an extended period (Hanh, 1998). Calm abiding is the foundation of meditation practice in Buddhism and other contemplative traditions, and, in light of our social situation, is of the upmost importance for people living in the 21st century. Because *shamatha* is a practice that directly trains our attentional skillset of applying, sustaining, and monitoring attention, it is the practice par excellence for realizing liberation from the suffering of consumerism and the cycle of ingesting harmful stimuli of all kinds.

With the practice of *shamatha*, we can still use the internet and engage within society without accumulating suffering from harmful content. Our society is full of harm, but it also full of beauty, insight, compassion, and wisdom. *Shamatha* helps us withdraw our attention from what is harmful and redirect it towards wisdom and compassion. We can then deliberately cultivate these virtues individually and translate them into the fabric of society. Basically, *shamatha* gives us back the power to choose, and is therefore a method of enacting and directing individual and social transformation.

Mindfulness

Buddhist mindfulness practices help us cultivate a direct relationship with the body, still the mind, develop a large capacity to focus attention, and bolster deep inner listening, intuitive

wisdom, and insight. In general, mindfulness can be defined as an attentional skillset comprised of concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity (Roeser & Peck, 2009). Concentration is the ability to focus attention with intention on whatever you consider to be important, such as the sensations of the breath, the five-senses, the interoceptive sense, or mental activity and the mind itself. Attention directs energy and information flow like a funnel into awareness–the knowing of consciousness. Wherever our attention rests, the object it rests on flows into awareness, changes our phenomenal subjective experience, and changes our human nature.

Mindfulness of the Body

Becoming aware of the experience of the body with attention and somatic awareness is the first foundation of mindfulness (*sati*). For a practitioner, awareness of the body is a skill that can be developed through intentionally redirecting our attention away from mental activity and towards the sensations of our body. In order to transform suffering, we must engage in communication with it and discover why it is present with us in our experience. Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR) is an expression of Buddhist wisdom and practice in western medicine. Jon is an example of a westerner who followed the Buddha *dharma*, transforming himself, and in-turn, transforming our health care system. Even one person committing themselves to the Buddha's path can transform an entire system that supports tens of millions of people, helping them live healthier and happier lives.

A formal way of cultivating somatic awareness is through a body scan meditation. Scanning our body with awareness essentially involves directing awareness into particular regions of the body in a sequential way—top-down or bottom-up—in order to tune into our emotional state. During the scan, you may realize a certain area is tight and full of tension, this is

a way the body communicates stress. By consciously directing breath to that area, we can begin to release and relax the physical and psychological tension we hold. An added step to this practice is called earth descent, in which the meditator inhales and becomes aware of tension in the body, and on the exhale, releases the tension into the earth (Ray, 2020). This technique is particularly useful for cultivating a deep state of relaxation, in which deep exploration into the depths of the mind can commence.

Another somatic meditation in Vajrayana is central channel practice. Central channel practice first involves focusing attention on the space in the lower abdomen, what is referred to as the *hara* in Zen Buddhism (Ray, 2020). Once attention in the *hara* is firmly established, the meditator begins to slowly move his or her attention up the space along the spine. In the yoga tradition of India and the Vajrayana tradition of Tibet, the central channel space along the torso is where much of our repressed trauma is stored, and it creates blocks in the prana-energy body. By consciously breathing into this space and cultivating open, non-conceptual awareness, we can open these blockages, and gain access to currents of energy that were once blocked and repressed.

The *hara* is an extremely important area in Vajrayana Buddhism. It is considered the space from which our *nirmanakaya*, or body of transformation, first comes into being, our primordial soma (Ray, 2020). It is said that by directing attention and awareness into the primordial soma, all actions done in this manner will be perfect and in accordance with one's *dharma*. One cannot fully focus attention into the body while simultaneously fixing attention on the conceptual mind. Therefore, by directing attention into the lower abdomen and sustaining it during any action or activity, we connect into a direct and unconditioned experience of reality,

and thus spontaneously cultivate what the Buddhist call "non-conceptual compassion" (Ray, 2020).

Mindfulness of Emotions

Meditation helps us connect into the experience of the body, and as a result, we become more aware of our sensations and emotions. In mindfulness of emotions, we want to familiarize ourselves with our emotions and begin to understand how they work, why they appear, and how they influence our thoughts. Then, we can bring awareness and discernment to whether or not it makes sense to follow our emotions in any given situation. Awareness of emotions as they arise enables the understanding of why we act the way we do. It gives us back our freedom to make choices, rather than be dragged along by emotional reactivity. Once we develop a familiarity and sensitivity to our emotions, we are in the position to stop the self-inflicted suffering we add onto ourselves by emotionally reacting to our circumstances rather than responding with awareness and understanding.

Anxiety, anger, jealously, resentment: all of these are self-inflicted, and all of them have no utility for solving our original problem, whatever the problem may be. The 8th century Buddhist monk Shantideva once said, "If a problem can be solved why be unhappy? And if it cannot be solved, what is the use in being unhappy?" (Roeser & Peck, 2009, p. 131) Instead of shooting more arrows at ourselves—dragging ourselves deeper into suffering and further away from a solution—with mindful awareness we can create space to see our problem with more clarity and decide what to do next with open-mindedness. If there is a solution to our problem, we will capitalize on it. And if there is no solution, we know, "this too shall pass," remembering

that fundamentally life is impermanent. Ultimately, one cannot stop the emotional waves that arise in consciousness, but you can learn to move with them in the most genial way possible.

In this way, we learn to listen to our emotions while maintaining a dimension of awareness and conscious control that marries the two together. This is following the Buddhists path of the middle way. On average, many of us handle painful emotions by avoiding them, suppressing them, and pretending they do not exist, or we over-engage with them by adding fuel to the fire. This is detachment and attachment to emotions, and it manifests through a conditioned pattern of reacting to emotions. But to end unnecessary suffering, Gautama prescribed an attitude of non-attachment (*aparigraha*). The essence of a non-attached attitude is one of non-judgmental curiosity. *Aparigraha* is synonymous with Tsoknyi Rinpoche's description of dwelling in a state of Being, as opposed to doing or reacting:

> Being means not suppressing; not indulging; not using any special method; not ignoring. Then, you are handshaking with the beautiful monster. If you can do that, sooner or later the monster will open up. Why it became a monster in the first place is because we suppressed, indulged, or ignored (Rinpoche, 2017, 6:45).

This attitude or state of "Being" towards our neglected emotions is practiced and learned through meditation. We create habits when we suppress, indulge, or ignore our emotions, causing our awareness to become rigid and restricted. When we subject habits to the light of awareness, they can dissolve back into the flow of awareness. This is the process of development that leads to liberation.

Meditation on emotions requires us to pause in stillness and focus on the space from which our thoughts and emotions arise. Giving space to just exist without suppressing or indulging them is the key to the state of being. Practicing meditation and cultivating a stable state

of impartial awareness allows the individual to enter into the mindful attitudes of non-attachment, non-judgment, and non-reactivity, which brings clarity into the suchness (*tathata*) of the situation. Suchness is experiencing the present moment without any consideration to the past or future, but simply living for what is happening now (Rinpoche, 2017). Living in suchness often reveals the unreality of our predicament and the fabricated storyline we tell ourselves. Focusing on the details of our self-narrative gives power to our suffering, we can get caught in self-pity or righteousness when our focus is narrow and myopic. For this reason, when we zoom in and narrowly focus our attention, we must retain awareness of our zoomed in nature so that we bear in mind that there is so much more to our situation, which can be recognized with a holistic perspective.

As we see, we need to cultivate both focused attention and open awareness in order to properly integrate our emotions into our state of being. When working with emotions, it is crucial not to get stuck ruminating on a few thoughts and feelings, but rather, we recognize the whole situation that brought forth what we are feeling and thinking as an observer without judgement. From a holistic view, we come to wisdom and understanding of the true nature of our predicament, and often times the tiny annoyances fall away and lose their potency. By paying attention to the present moment with a full perspective, we welcome our emotions into awareness, and offer ourselves the opportunity to transform negative emotions into the wisdom that guides our personal and social transformation.

Loving Kindness

The practice of loving kindness and compassion has its roots in the interdependent worldview of Buddhism. Compassion is resonating and understanding the suffering of oneself or

another being, and then approaching the suffering and offering emotional support and encouragement in order to assist in relieving it. Loving kindness is the altruistic and spontaneous desire for others to be happy, safe, and peaceful.

Because compassion first emerged in human behavior as an evolved social mentality, it is often thought of as an action towards an external being, but Buddhism insists that compassion must always include oneself as well. Compassion also implies self-transcendence of the perceived separation of self and other. Practicing compassion, we give our strength and energy to the collective for we know that fundamentally we are one collective organism. But, without being compassionate to oneself, the potency of compassion extended to the collective is diminished. Therefore, Buddhist compassion and loving kindness meditation should begin or end by extending compassion and kindness to the inner sense of one's identity.

The basic practice consists in allowing a set of spontaneously arisen offerings of emotional support and kindness to be repeated and directed towards the object of meditation. Focused attention, repetition, and imagination are key aspects of loving kindness meditation. In basic practices, the meditator sustains attention on an object and repeats intentions of empathy and support. In other practices, the ability to create an image in the mind and sustain attention on it while offering affirmations and bringing them into your heart is important. Visualization is used often in Buddhism for it increases the nature of loving kindness meditation.

Loving kindness can be practiced informally as well, such as extending well-wishes to people you pass along the street. In any circumstance or situation, one can silently generate well-wishes for oneself or others, extending the practice beyond the meditation cushion and transforming ourselves and the world in the process. Informal loving kindness meditation is especially catalytic for the transformation of "out-group" members into "in-group" members.

When we reach out and touch the lives of those we typically see as "other" and avoid, we begin to break down prejudice and the psychological boundaries we create. The walls we put up begin to disintegrate, and eventually we come to a psychological space where fewer and fewer people are "out-grouped" and "othered."

Compassion Is the Antidote to Criticism

One way of integrating this practice into our paths of personal and social growth is by incorporating it into our daily life, especially in moments of criticism and hate. The nature of being human means that we are imperfect and have weaknesses. Inevitably, we encounter failure, disappointment, or rejection in our life, and sometimes our reaction is to engage in self-protective patterns of behavior. Reactivity often manifests from avoiding the truth or construing our failures in a self-serving way. In other situations, we might become attached to our inadequacies and create them into a negative self-narrative which leads to patterns of judgment and criticism.

Many times, we engage in all three of these unconscious patterns; we become consumed by self-protective patterns of behavior in order to make ourselves feel better. For example, I notice that when I receive negative feedback from a peer, fail to reach my own ideal, fail to follow the oughts and shoulds of society, when my weaknesses are exposed, I feel alone, I feel worthless, or interactions with others don't go the way I intended them to, my self-esteem drops, and I easily enter non-conscious patterns. These patterns comprise negative evaluation and judgement of self and others. If I fail to recognize them as misperceptions at the beginning of the pattern, I feed and perpetuate them by engaging in additional behaviors to try and recover from the pity, shame, and disappointment. This is not a recipe for transformation, it is the opposite.

The solution, I have found, is mindfulness and self-compassion. Mindfulness offers an expanded awareness into the origin of one's behaviors, enabling insights into the ways in which we create our own problems and stressors by perpetuating this cycle of self-hate and self-injury. Likewise, practicing self-compassion by offering patience, gentleness, understanding, and forgiveness rather than being highly critical and judgmental stops the cycle before it even begins to gain momentum. These practices apply equally to our relationships with ourselves as well as the people we interact with. Tsoknyi Rinpoche discusses how mindfulness and compassion are deeply rooted in the relationship between personal transformation and social transformation:

> Once we begin to open our hearts to the possibility that a situation is a little bit less certain than we initially supposed, we can begin to open our minds towards those whose behavior is abusive or antagonist. We cross a bridge. We begin to wonder why people don't see the same light, and we develop a desire to help them. The desire to help others, the desire to build relationships begins to grow. We start to see other's patterns, and when we do so we begin to understand people a little differently. We even begin to feel some sympathy towards them. We find ourselves more and more willing and able to engage—to say, in our own way, "stop screaming." Give them a chance to explain their behaviors, their beliefs. And in that moment, we offer ourselves and someone else a chance to open up in unexpected ways (Rinpoche, 2012, p. 15).

Distinct from self-protective patterns, self-compassion and mindfulness provide us an opportunity to open with compassion to any situation and truly experience our emotions fully so we can understand and learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others in such a way that catalyzes personal and social transformation. Self-compassion is not a means of making excuses for our behavior or the behavior of others. It is simply recognizing that transformation is a

process that requires patience and forgiveness for our mishaps. In conclusion, developing a deeper understanding of our own patterns, and cultivating compassion for ourselves will translate into the ability to understand and cultivate compassion for others and their reactivity. Consequently, we are no longer triggered by our own emotional pattern of reaction prompted by our own patterns or the patterns of other people. Instead, we can respond with kindness and compassion, giving all beings an opportunity to learn and grow together.

Mindfulness, Depression, and Education

In the section on mindfulness of the body, I mentioned Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR) and the influence and support it provided to the health care system in America. As a professor at MIT, Jon Kabat Zin created the Mindfulness based stress reduction program to work with a wide range of patients living with chronic pain and diseases that were designated by their doctors as "treatment resistant." This means that they have spent multiple years under the supervision of a doctor doing the conventional treatment, but they had not gotten better. Guiding treatment resistant patients through mindfulness practices, Jon taught them how to work through their pain and manage their symptoms with awareness. Later down the road, Jon teamed up with 3 clinical psychologists who together created the framework for Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn (2007). MBCT differs from conventional treatments because it teaches formal mindfulness meditation and ways of implementing mindfulness into everyday activities, in addition and in collaboration with talk therapy. It is specifically geared to work with people who suffer from depression, which includes hundreds of millions of people around the globe.

The failure of current medical interventions such as anti-depressant pharmaceutical substances and conventional talk therapy to treat depression successfully has opened the door for

alternative interventions to be explored. Because of this, MBCT is now one of the hottest topics and leading areas of research in psychology (Chiesa et al., 2015; Godfrin & Heeringen, 2010; Williams et al., 2014). I argue that loving kindness meditation and the ethics of Buddhist must also be incorporated into the training. With the collaboration of these Buddhist practices, we may begin to address the mental health crisis on this planet, which is an enormous endeavor. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Depression is now the leading cause of disability and ill health worldwide, with over 300 million people suffering (Abi-Habib & Luyten, 2013). Additionally, people who are depressed live an average of 9.6 years less than non-depressed individuals. Hundreds of millions of people suffering from depression are not sustaining healthy living or positive well-being, and the negative impact is being felt by our society.

So, what exactly is depression? In psychology, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 5th Edition (DSM-V) is used to diagnose people with depression, usually based on a person's affective state and behavior. The DSM-V identifies numerous types of depression, and a depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure must be present for at least two weeks in order to be diagnosed, but many times people can be depressed for many months, years, decades, or an entire lifetime. Feeling depressed happens on a continuum: On the mild end depression is a prolonged, severe mood of feeling despondent, down, and despairing. As depression intensifies it moves into feeling worthless and hopeless, with difficulty concentrating and loss of pleasure in activities (Cortright, 172). In either case, well-being and healthy living are at a minimum, meaning at least 300 million people globally are drowning in suffering. But who is depression affecting? According to Blue Cross Blue shield (BCBS), depression has spiked by 33% in just the past five years (2013-2018), across all age and gender groups. Basically, all kinds of people

are affected by depression, but it seems that the young are especially vulnerable. Between 2013 and 2018 depression has gone up 65% for adolescent girls, 47% for adolescent boys, and 47% among millennials (Cortright, 171).

The struggle of the younger generations is a sign that we need to implement mindfulness ethics and practices into our school system. Most public and private schools, and institutions of higher education lack any contemplative element. But the harmful effects of the internet and social institutions on the innocent attention of children is creating an urgent and necessary need for meditation and mindfulness to be taught in schools as part of the curriculum. Hence, in the past twenty years, educational psychology has begun introducing mindfulness to teachers and students in public and private schools across the country. This is a new idea in America, but schools in India have been doing it for much longer.

Roeser & Peck (2009) conducted a study in Pune, India to get insight on how the practice of meditation supports youth development in three private secondary schools. Participants were secondary school students from the ages of 12-15 years old; the demographic represented is middle class, English speaking, urban adolescents; and their religious affiliation was mostly Hindu. The results affirmed the researcher's hypothesis: students reported that the rest and concentration aspects of meditation personally resonated with them the most, and two-thirds of students reported some level of consistent active engagement of contemplative practice during school periods. In addition, the study showed meditation was associated with self-reported attentional control and diminished belief in intelligence as a fixed capacity; and school cultures appeared to relate to views of students regarding the purposes of these practices (Roeser & Peck 2009). There are hundreds of similar studies, but I choose this one because the notable finding demonstrates not only the efficacy of individual development in school children from the

practice of mindfulness, but also a social shift in the cultural environment of the whole school as a result of the training of mindfulness.

Young generations of people cannot be the only one's responsible for cultivating mindfulness and compassion; all people of the 21st century are responsible for bringing more awareness and compassion into the world. The training of attention and empathy are universally applicable for all people in all situations and contexts and can be utilized to transform all facets of our society. Because harmful stimuli reach us in our most private and intimate spaces, our living room, bedroom, and with our families, friends, and lovers, it is imperative that we remain vigilant. Media outlets, corporations, government, and the entertainment industry have intentionally created a society where twenty-four-hour stimulation is normalized. Ads are purposely designed to defile our attention into states of unconscious vulnerability.

Hundreds of millions of people unwittingly consume harmful things without the ability to discern helpful from harmful, concentrate on the helpful, and willfully redirect attention away from harm. Humanity has thus fallen to the mercy of social influences; attention has become extremely short, weak and compulsive; and what we regularly ingest is harmful and addictive. Therefore, the training of Buddhist meditation is not just relevant to school children, but all members of society. To become aware of the social climate and our disastrous predicament is to become aware of the healing potential of Buddhism in our society and why so many believe the practice and philosophy of Buddhism is key to transforming society.

Conclusion

Buddhist meditation practices such as *shamatha*, mindfulness, and compassion are universally applicable to all people in all situations, and the utilization of these practices for personal and social change is necessary to alleviate the collective pain of our global situation. Just like the Four Noble Truths, these Buddhist meditation practices are most effective when they are seen as complementary facets of one practice. Each prepares us to engage with the entire community on planet earth and listen deeply to each other's perspectives so that we work together to enact personal growth and social transformation throughout the globe.

Shamatha is a practice that directly trains our attentional skillset of applying, sustaining, and monitoring attention, it is the practice par excellence for realizing liberation from the suffering of consumerism and the cycle of ingesting harmful stimuli. Mindfulness offers an expanded awareness into the origin of one's behaviors, enabling insights into the ways in which we create our own problems and stressors by perpetuating this cycle of self-hate and self-injury. Practicing self-compassion by offering patience, gentleness, understanding, and forgiveness rather than being highly critical and judgmental stops the cycle before it creates more suffering.

Chapter 5

Final Reflections and a Call into Being

In Buddhist meditation, we are encouraged to bring all that we are and all that we experience. Bring the chaos; bring the confusion; bring the baggage. Do not leave anything out; do not push anything away. Bring it all; do not hang on to it but let it be and see what happens. With mindfulness we acknowledge the cultures of individualism and illusions of separation that contribute to our feelings of loneliness and despair. Making space for and discussing our individual and collective suffering is where we will find the wisdom to transform. In conclusion, the responsibility of engaged Buddhists of the 21st century is to cultivate inner transformation and allow it to guide the manifestation of justice, equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusivity within our society. Being a Buddhist is not about labels but about embodiment of truth through actions. We begin with ourselves and cultivate the ground of empathy and compassion through the practices of Buddhism. We become instruments of peace, then we engage with society and build one action at a time, because one action upon the next creates and builds a society that we envision and experience as a collective.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Raymond S. Falcone
Rvf5280@psu.edu
Raymondfalcone056@gmail.com

EDUCATION:

The Pennsylvania State University
Schreyer Honors College
Major: Psychology, B.S.
Minor: Religious Studies

ACADEMIC AWARDS:

Schreyer Honors College Member
Phi Eta Sigma – National Honor Society
Dean's List, All Semesters, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE:

Research Assistant, *Laboratory of Personality, Psychopathology, and Psychotherapy, Pennsylvania State University.*

- Involved in on-going NIMH and foundation grant funded research
- Investigated change in attachment representations during a randomized controlled psychotherapy trial
- Involved in the recruitment and running of participants, the transcription of semi-structured interviews, coding data, entering data, editing large data sets, and data analysis using SPSS and general lab functions.

Dates: August 2019 – July 2020

Principal Investigator: Kenneth N. Levy, Ph.D.

CERTIFICATIONS:

200-Hour Lila Yoga Teacher Training- Certification

State of Pennsylvania Mandated Reporter Training

Pennsylvania Child Abuse History Clearance

HIPPA Human Subject IRB Certification- Social Science and Biomedical Modules

NIH Certification- Protecting Human Research Participants

Certified Peer Education Coordinator

ORGANIZATIONS/SOCIAL ENGAGEMENTS

EDNA Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center: Enhancing Wellbeing with Yoga

Position: **Schreyer Honors College Ambassador** (Spring 2022)

- Responsibilities
  - Led the Honors College team in recruiting honors student and faculty
  - Facilitated yoga and meditation sessions for students, faculty, and staff
  - Initiated a partnership with the Human Health & Development College
  - Created an online media platform for remote students
  - Answered questions, circulated class information, and advertised for our upcoming yoga teacher training
- Feedback
  - Received positive feedback from students and faculty regarding their new awareness of focused attention, open awareness, and loving-kindness meditation practices.
  - Frequent reports of new capabilities and practices such as pausing to practice diaphragmatic breathing, connecting into the body and releasing tension, regulating stressful thoughts and emotions, and a general feeling of improved strength, agency, and well-being.

200 Hour Lila Yoga Teacher Training Certificate (Fall 2021)

- Schedule & Content
  - Instructor: Erica Kaufman
  - 5 months; 215 hours
  - Registered with the Yoga Alliance
- Experience
  - Lila yoga is a holistic energy based vinyasa aligning body, breath & intentions through affirmations
  - Developed my own unique Surya namaskar, Lila yoga vinyasa, and personal practices with Erica's guidance.
  - Taught public and private classes at Lila yoga

    - Studied yoga classics and science-based ergonomics

Meditation, Yoga, & Philosophy: The Vedic Society Club at Penn State

Position: **President** (2019-2021)

- Taught vinyasa ashtanga yoga and japa meditation classes at Pasquarelli Spiritual Center on Wednesday and Friday Nights
- Arranged and sustained transportation to and from campus 3x per week for club members and interested students
- Cooked vegetarian meals; sat and ate together in community after class
- Babysat Saturday nights

Students for Safe Drug Policy Chapter (SSDP)

Position: **Officer** (Certified Peer Education Coordinator)

- Educated members on harm reduction
- Specialized in entheogenic education

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Gita Nagari Eco Farm and Sanctuary

- Volunteered summer 2020
- Sustainable farming practices led by a Hindu community of Vaishnava monks and nuns.
- Practiced bhakti yoga, meditation, and read the *Srimad Bhagavatam*
- Six-hour days farming in the field
- Three-hour days cooking and cleaning the kitchen and temple
- Harvested and sold vegetables and milk to local Hindu communities in Philadelphia, DC, and New Jersey.

STUDENT ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

Varsity Letter: *Lehigh University Football*

- Pine Richland High School, contributed 122 catches, 2,464 yards, and 25 touchdowns to our State Champion Football Team
- Earned Full Athletic Division I Scholarship to play football at Lehigh University
- At Lehigh, improved to first team wide receiver freshman year

- Caught 13 receptions for 150 yards and 1 touchdown

REFERENCES

Rick Jacobs, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Penn State University; CEO of EB Jacobs, a consulting firm specializing in selection and assessment.

Email: rjacobs@psionline.com

Jake Shefa, Ph.D. in Transpersonal Psychology from California Institute of Integral Studies; Currently, the Program Direction & Counselor-Consultant at Desert Sands Unified School District.

Email: Jacob.shefa@desertsands.us