

WHAT'S AT STAKE AS THE DHARMA GOES MODERN?

An exploration of the background assumptions of the modern age and the unique challenges they present.

BY LINDA HEUMAN

In the summer of 2010, I sat a Dzogchen retreat at Garrison Institute with my teacher, a well-known Tibetan lama. He gave teachings during the day and then in the evening handed the microphone over to several academic luminaries who were also attending. In the morning and afternoon we received instructions on attaining buddhahood; in the evenings we heard lectures on how Buddhism's contact with the West was leading to cutting-edge advances in brain-science research, medicine, and psychology.

One hot night—this was July in New York State—a professor was addressing the excited crowd about developments in medicine based on laboratory studies of meditators. Maybe I was strung out on the heat, maybe it was the effect of keeping silence or of sitting over the course of days with an accomplished master, but something hijacked my better judgment, and when question-and-answer time came I raised my hand.

As I asked my question, the buzz in the room came to a sudden stop. For what seemed a very long time, there was dead silence. One hundred pairs of eyes turned toward me and stared. A few people fidgeted. Somebody laughed.

This was my question: "Given the depth of suffering in samsara and the possibility of a solution to it; given that the very texts we study outline a path to that solution; given that we have a realized master right here who is, we believe, capable of leading us on that path to that solution—why would we devote our precious human lives to exploring whether meditation can lower blood pressure?"

At least some of my fellow Buddhists who stared at me across the meditation hall were, I am pretty sure, puzzled at my puzzlement. Perhaps more than a few imagined they were meeting a Buddhist fundamentalist. Others might have considered me just naive, scientifically uneducated, or even rude.

But however clumsy my attempt, I was trying to put my finger on was a very real tension, a discord between what our Tibetan teacher had been saying and what the community seemed to be hearing. It was visible right there in the structure of the retreat, palpable in the response to my question, and familiar—at least to me, and I imagine to others as well—in everyday practice. This tension points to an issue of key significance in the transplantation and adaptation of the dharma to the modern West, to what is an often overlooked and important difference between Buddhism as it has been traditionally practiced and Buddhism as it is practiced in the West today.

The experience of being a modern Western Buddhist is different from the experience of all previous Buddhists in one crucial respect: we are contending with a radically different environment of faith. In discussions about Buddhism's transmission to the West, most of the discussion about belief has focused on particular beliefs. What has been off our radar for the most part is an appreciation of the very different background of assumptions within which belief itself—both ours and that of traditional Buddhists—is construed.

This difference has been overlooked not because it is unimportant but because it is hard to see. It is operating at a level that



is implicit, and therefore hidden. But our failure to acknowledge it threatens to sabotage a rich and meaningful dialogue with Buddhist tradition and in so doing to hinder significantly the fullness of Buddhism's transmission to the West.

We know this difference by its telltale sign—that familiar tension. It shows up most vividly when we consider big themes: how we understand the central project of Buddhism—the nature of our selves and our problem, and the purpose and possibilities of our practice. For example, for the first time in history, to suggest today in some Buddhist circles that the purpose of Buddhism is *exactly what the traditional texts tell us it is*—which is to say, that it is concerned with the transcendent—can be to come across sounding like a rube or to meet with condescension.

“Enlightenment” and “liberation” are tricky terms, and Buddhists have argued about what exactly they mean since the time of the Buddha. Nonetheless, all traditions throughout Buddhist history have identified our problem with reference to samsara—the cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth. The motivation for practice was to transcend that cycle—or to help others to do so. At the very least, a Buddhist might strive to attain a better rebirth as a step on the way. While the practice of dharma may (and often does) bring some comfort, enjoyment, and even hap-

public life and the dismantling of some ecclesiastical hierarchies have gone hand in hand with the rise of democracy and egalitarian values, including the protection of beliefs. Today, we who live in modern secular societies can, in principle, believe what we want—including Buddhism—or we can choose not to believe in any religion at all. So far, so good.

But there is a much deeper level of secularism. Our secular age is marked off from the earlier period of religious life not only by changes in belief but also, more profoundly, by shifts in the very *preconditions* of belief, the background within which both belief and disbelief are construed. Secularism in this sense sets the parameters, the limit conditions, for what kinds of crops can thrive in modernity's field of spiritual possibilities. It sets zone conditions: first frost, temperature lows, rainfall highs.

To get a sense of how radically different this ecosystem is from any to which Buddhism has adapted in the past, it is illuminating to draw on recent scholarship by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, a leader in the fields of secular studies and the history of subjectivity. Taylor's field-defining book *A Secular Age* (2007) traces the development of Western secular modernity from its roots in Latin Christendom.

Imagine for a moment living in Europe 500 years ago. How

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piness in this life, the seeking of these states has always been the very definition of what is *not* dharma practice. We seek these naturally, no practice required.

Consider then how strange it is that in modern Western Buddhism transcendent goals have become, for the most part, optional, and on top of that, they can oftentimes be—as I became more and more acutely aware, the longer I held the mike while the silence dragged on—the harder option to embrace. Meeting our religion head-on—by studying root texts and commentaries, participating in its ritual life, or adopting Buddhist narratives and doctrines—can even be regarded as anachronistic and naive.

I'd like to suggest that this difference is due not to culture or geography, as our commonly used “transplant and adapt” metaphor assumes; it is due to a difference in epoch. In entering modernity, Buddhism has crossed a boundary of a nature entirely different from any geographical, linguistic, and cultural barriers it has navigated historically. Buddhism has entered a secular age, and that's not just new soil—it's a whole new ecosystem.

To understand why this phase of dharma's evolution is an unprecedented shift, it is necessary to look very closely at the nature of the dharma's new secular environment. We might tend to think of secularism in terms of the separation of church and state. Depending on your perspective, this may seem like a positive development, and indeed, in many respects it is. The post-Enlightenment purge of religion from political institutions and

might you have experienced your moral, spiritual, or religious world? What might your sense of self have been like? Religion was then built into the very fabric of social, political, and private life—much as it has been, and in some cases still is, in Asian Buddhist cultures. The existence of God was not a belief you held; it was, quite simply and axiomatically, *the way things were*. In this “enchanted” worldview, people experienced an environment permeated with God's presence and with moral forces, including demons and spirits—a world in which power could hang out in objects like statues or relics, and sacred presence could be, as Taylor writes, “enacted in ritual, seen, felt touched, walked toward (in pilgrimage).” To be a person in this world was to be in interaction with these forces, both accessible and vulnerable to them. Taylor calls this type of subjectivity “porous.” For such people, there was, claims Taylor, “no distinction between experience and its construal.” In other words, in a world where ghosts are real, to see a ghost is to see a ghost, not to believe you see one.

But this changed in modernity. Our world became, in the sociologist Max Weber's famous term, “disenchanted.” Cartesian dualism and the rise of science chased the spooks from their haunts “out there” into a newly understood “in here.” In this newly constituted (Taylor calls it “buffered”) sense of self, we modern people experience moral forces both beneficent and demonic as private, internal happenings, not as facts about our

world. Our “natural” world is indifferent, value-neutral. For the first time in world history, people do not live *in* meaning; meaning lives *in* us.

Secular people sense the world to be self-sufficient and impersonal: our post-Galilean universe is governed by natural laws. We see our societies as human, not divine, creations; we follow moral laws put in place by people, not God. Our very frame of reference for making sense of our world and for participating in it is thus an “immanent frame,” says Taylor. Half a millennium ago, we couldn’t have made sense of the world without God; now it’s hard to make sense of it with him. The pre-Reformation experiences of being a believer or disbeliever are no longer available to modern people because the background context of belief has fundamentally shifted. Taylor holds that the modern age is an “entirely new context.” In this sense, he says, “secularity has to be described as the possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience in our age.”

In this new ecosystem of secularism, a new form of spiritual life is flourishing. To recognize it, it helps to note that religious sensibility comes in two types. One type of sensibility (Taylor calls it “closed”) understands the highest good and deepest sources of meaning to be located within this world; the other sensibility—an “open one”—seeks connection to the sacred in something beyond. In other words, says Taylor, all modern people living in the secular West share a common immanent frame of reference, but we can live within it either open or closed to the possibility of something beyond. In the history of religious life, this closed kind of religious sensibility is a newcomer. Until modernity, it wasn’t conceivable that the quotidian here-and-now could be all there was, so it was likewise unintelligible to imagine that a life lived meaningfully could orient itself in a fulfilling way to strictly immanent goals. Today, not only can we conceive of doing such a thing; we’re doing it en masse. The emergence of this new closed spiritual possibility marks the key difference between earlier times and the secular age.

To put this in Buddhist terms, in modern Western Buddhism, for the first time in Buddhist history, it is now possible to construe the purpose of dharma practice as the improvement of one’s psychological well-being or physical health, as a means to experience more harmony in one’s relationships, or as a way to build a more equitable, kind, and peaceful society. In this materialist-compatible version of Buddhism, death is the end, so the only problems are here and now. An endless cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth doesn’t exist, so freedom from it is a not a coherent goal. In today’s science-based world, a buddha’s omniscient cognition or emanative forms seem, frankly, superstitious—part of an ignorant and outdated worldview no more relevant to modern people than ghosts or demons.

In contrast to this closed form of Buddhism, there remains an open one, in which Western Buddhist practitioners still strive for transcendent goals that once made sense within a



traditional Buddhist world but that seem oddly incoherent against the backdrop of our daily secular lives. These spiritual practitioners (I include myself among them) experience a normative pull from the secular environment that makes it hard for us to take transcendent goals seriously, even as we actively practice to attain them. Those who seek transcendence in the context of the immanent frame have a brand-new disadvantage, one that Milarepa or Dogen never had to overcome. We have to perform a tug-of-war with ourselves that was never required of our spiritual predecessors. For Milarepa, to strive for awakening was to throw his weight *toward* the collective sense of cosmic order into which he was born. We, on the other hand, have to pull *against* ours. Our conviction can thus be double-headed. Like Dr. Dolittle’s pushmi-pullyu, many of us progress on our spiritual path two-steps-forward-one-step-back: straining ahead toward our highest spiritual

aspirations, drawn back by socially inculcated common sense. We don't have the wind at our back.

Wanting to eliminate the tension drives some practitioners to adhere to tradition in the manner of fundamentalists. They retreat from the complexities of modernity into an anachronistic fantasy. Others think redefining "awakening" will resolve the tension: they reconstrue the problem so as not to reference *samsara*, assuming that recasting the problem won't change the solution. Still others take on traditional Buddhist beliefs, but in so doing they extract these beliefs from the traditional Buddhist background context that supported them, and try to insert them into a modern secular background with which they are incompatible. It's as if these practitioners are trying to run software designed for Windows on a Mac.

Any of these convert Buddhist practitioners might have deeply transforming experiences. But because these experiences will occur against the backdrop of the view of self understood as private, walled-off, and interior, and the view of meaning as inhering within the mind, such experiences will then likely be understood as private, psychological states, brain states, or states of consciousness, or even as personal achievements. It must then be asked, might not such an approach end up reinforcing and vindicating a self-experience that is a product of secular modernity? And because these experiences will occur against the backdrop of the view of the self as autonomous—rather than contingent—might they not further strengthen an already problematic misapprehension of the nature of the self that our texts tell us is the precise point of Buddhist practice to abandon?

Seen in this light, the adaptation of Buddhism to the West has two aspects. On the one hand, there is the rising popularity of a closed sensibility of dharma practice—one in which we have made a clear break with all previous Buddhist traditions, relocating techniques and teachings from a background context in which they served transcendent goals into one in which they serve immanent ones. On the other hand, there is an open sensibility of dharma practice in which practitioners navigate a deep incongruity between their practice and how their world is construed; where conviction struggles to plant a foothold for leverage against a strong counter-pull of doubt; and in which one must wonder and then ask, are the transcendent experiences of liberation and enlightenment, traditionally the core goals of Buddhist life, no longer possible for us?

If we are to push on the "transplant and adapt" metaphor for the transmission of the dharma to the West, we ought to be ever on the alert for another very real possibility it entails. We know from evolutionary biology that sometimes a species adapts to a point where it is no longer recognizable as itself, as happened 400 million years ago when the first animals made their way from ocean to land. Swimmers morphed into crawlers, and thus new species emerged. As we reflect on the nature of the transmission to date, we should be asking ourselves some very difficult questions. If we think of the dharma as a form of spiritual life, has the nature of its adaptation to a secular modernity changed it unrecognizably? Is modern dharma a new species? If so, in what sense can we then consider our dialogue with tradition authentic or our transmission successful?

If you operate within a closed dharma sensibility, the question might seem puzzling. It might seem like I've just asked something nonsensical—like, now that we know the world is

round, have I lost the opportunity of jumping from its edge? Or maybe you're thinking this closed form of Buddhism *is* a new species. And that's a good thing! We've shrugged off all that superstition about reincarnation and karma, ghosts and demons, visions and relics—got the bugs out of the belief system. We've updated to Dharma 2.0.

Certainly it is true that throughout history Buddhism has always changed and adapted as it has moved from one culture to another. And we too, of course, have to make the dharma suit our culture—adapt it in a way that is authentic and relevant to our lives. We've worked hard to equalize institutional hierarchies and address women's rights, for example. But Western converts have also used this justification to "update versions": to omit or reinterpret doctrines that seem supernatural—like rebirth or karma, liberation or enlightenment; to downplay modes of knowing outside the bounds of instrumental reason—such as symbols and myths; and to discard practices that seem adventitious—like rituals. Here is why it is important to appreciate that there is more to Buddhism than a set of beliefs or tenets and to understand that beliefs are rooted within a context of implicit background assumptions that gives them sense, meaning, and force. If we fail to recognize the existence and importance of background context, we will consequently fail to see what is unprecedented about the transmission of Buddhism to the West. While Buddhism is indeed crossing between cultures, it is not doing only that: In entering secular modernity, it is also jumping historical epochs, and that makes for a much wider chasm. Buddhism is being pulled into the background contexts not just of Western culture but also of secular modernity—and in terms of the survival of a religion, the latter is a new and especially problematic threshold.

Updating the dharma to fit with our secular mindset isn't simply change on the order of dress and manners. We're not talking different taste or customs here. It is an attempt to fix the dharma, to make it *right*, which is to say, scientific. From the perspective of scientific naturalism, it makes sense to do this, because when one operates within that perspective, it seems that only *believers* are making leaps of faith. Secular humanists assume themselves to be commitment-free rationalists. But that is a profound misunderstanding. To assume "this is all there is" is also to make a leap of faith.

What is so difficult for us all to see is that we too have a worldview. We simply assume that the world we call "natural" is the *only* world, that the way we experience and think about things is the way things exist from their own side. Coupled with that assumption is another one: now we've got it *right*. Secular modernity has sloughed off the false beliefs and superstitions of our ancestors and uncovered the real truth, which is hard scientific fact. Taylor calls this progress myth a "subtraction story." These are powerful biases, hard to shake, not because they are true but because they feel so self-evident.

Reflect on the earlier discussion of the porous/buffered self and the enchanted/disenchanted world. Consider that the self, its environment, the possible relationship between the self and its environment, and the type of knowledge available to a particular kind of self in a particular kind of environment are all culturally construed and historically contingent. They cannot, therefore, be "objective" facts.

When we assume that our secular worldview is de facto true, we are confusing *conditions* for reality with *features* of it. This is a little like setting our online newsfeed parameters so that we just get local news, and then coming to the conclusion that all news is local. In exactly the same way, immanence is a precondition for what can count as real in secular modernity. Western convert Buddhists often tend to mistake this background assumption for a feature of reality, and then as a consequence have a hard time making sense of transcendence, which was, by definition, just ruled out.

Before it arrived in Western secular modernity, Buddhism never had to reckon with transcendence being problematic in this way. No previous Buddhist culture construed objectivity and subjectivity as we do, so neither did our predecessors banish values, purpose, and meaning to inner space—nor could they have conceived of spiritual or moral life as just a matter of personal choice or subjective judgment. To be unaware that reality has moral and spiritual dimensions has always meant, as our texts tell us, that one is out of touch with how things are. To ignore reality's moral and spiritual imperatives has a consequence—continued suffering. Buddhist practice, in its traditional context, is to align oneself more and more deeply with the cosmic order. Transcendence occurs when that coming into alignment is complete. In this paradigm, transcendence isn't ruled out by the definition of the real. It *is* the definition of the real.

Even among worldviews, which are all convincing to their adherents, secular humanism combined with scientific materialism has a particularly compelling normative force. The success

Reason is concerned with literal meaning—that is, “x is y.” Symbolic knowing is concerned with metaphorical meaning: “x is like y.” Thus, while reason hones in on facts, symbols explore *relations*. Reason demands one-to-one correspondence: either water is H₂O or it isn't. In contrast, symbols work with *multifaceted* meaning; the water offered on a Tibetan altar is at once flowers, incense, and light. Symbols govern intricate *patterns* of meaning. They condense many meanings into one. They expand one meaning into many. And they can even hold together discordant or contradictory meanings.

From the point of view of instrumental reason, ritual seems like purposeless action. But ritual too is working with another kind of knowing—the sense in which we know the floor is solid and the walls obstructive, which we discover by finding our way around—by walking on the floor or bumping into the wall. This type of knowledge is not theoretical in nature; it is how we live. And ritual can shape that level of meaning, articulate it in definite ways. Ritual doesn't represent meaning like rational propositions do; it enacts it. Bowing to the Buddha, for example, isn't just how you think about your faith; it is how you go about attaining it and how you live it.

Again, from the perspective of reason, myths are just bad theories or wrong propositions. But narratives can deeply shape our understanding—both intellectual and intuitive. They are deeply interwoven in our identities and can pull strings on our motivations—ask any psychotherapist, politician, or advertiser. Or ask yourself: Why do you practice Buddhism? Your answer will be a story.

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of instrumental reason in producing vast wealth, status, and power combined with obvious scientific and technological advances allows us to believe that this style of thinking and its discipline of science are not just efficacious but also indubitably and solely true. By these standards, other worldviews and other modes of knowing are unable to justify themselves and therefore seem invalid. But failure to satisfy the criteria by which secular modernity measures success is not a shortcoming of other worldviews and other modes of knowing; it is simply a result of applying our own criteria outside their ken. For the past 100 years, scholars across fields ranging from philosophy and cultural anthropology to the history of science, sociology, literary studies, and linguistics have questioned the assumptions that constitute the immanent frame. Unpacking why the immanent frame's subtraction story spin is so convincing has been and continues to be an urgent challenge for modern thinkers who are concerned about the ethical implications of unbridled individualism let loose in a value-neutral world.

The point here is not that a traditional Asian worldview (or some other) is right and ours is wrong, but that our secular and materialist convictions block us in certain critical ways from participating in what has always constituted a Buddhist form of life. Much of the meaning of a religion is conveyed in its symbols, rituals, and myths. Consider how our privileging of rational knowing gets in our way.

Our Buddhist tradition is like a meaning-symphony in which symbols, rituals, myths, and beliefs harmonize and counterpoint. Reducing the dharma to a system of rational beliefs and associated meditative techniques and discarding the rest is like covering one's ears so that only the percussion beats through. Listening to our tradition in that manner, we can't even tell what piece is playing. If then, on top of that, we toss out Buddhist beliefs that don't fit with materialism, it's as if we are only hearing that percussion line as a beat we already know. Is this an authentic dialogue with tradition? In what way are we to learn something new?

Certainly we cannot turn the clock back. There is no returning to a presecular world. We must reckon with our secular scientific background. What, then, is the way forward?

There are no easy answers. We might begin, however, by confronting our biases—indeed, our chauvinisms: our presumption that science has got it all figured out; that the modern worldview is a triumph over all past forms of understanding; and that today we are closer to a truer understanding of ourselves and our world than people of any other place and time. We need to start examining the immanent frame's background assumptions, which constrain our sense of the possible. As we hold each assumption up for examination—as we pull it from the background and into the foreground and subject it to analysis—

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something curious happens. In a certain sense it loses its power over us—its status as “the way things are”—and becomes one possible way among many ways that things could be.

Examining and even questioning the foundational assumptions of secular and scientific materialism doesn't mean we stop doing science or stop living in a technological world. Rather, it means we begin to see our worldview as *a* worldview, to appreciate how it, too, came to be constituted on the basis of a number of sleights of hand and is, as a result, no more universal or final or resting on solid ground than the worldviews of our medieval Western or traditional Buddhist predecessors. Like their worldviews, ours is a set of conventions. We can then understand that this is what it *means* to have a worldview: the human form of life operates within a vast web of implicit background understandings that limit what can count as valid beliefs and experiences.

The distinction between explicit beliefs and their implicit background context has been a critical one in our own Western philosophical tradition for the last century. Many of our most prominent thinkers—from Wittgenstein to Kuhn up to Taylor—have called attention to its importance and the problems that arise when it is overlooked. Although the understanding of background context emerged in the West, its implications lead us back home to one of the core teachings of Buddhist tradition—the two truths. When we as Buddhists consider that all our experiences, along with the objects of our experiences—and even subjectivity and objectivity themselves—arise within the

context of implicit background assumptions, we recognize what we call “conventional truth.” When we consider that therefore, as a consequence, no worldview can appeal to the objects of its own creation for its own validation—that no worldview rests on solid ground in this sense—we recognize “ultimate truth,” emptiness.

At some moment it could hit us that the liberative possibilities spoken of in Buddhist texts may not be superstitious fairy tales. They may be real possibilities. For the first time it may seem plausible, indeed credible, that just as our form of human life gave rise to the material accomplishments toward which it directed its aspirations—skyscrapers and Internet technology and the like—so too might another form of human life, operating within different background assumptions, with different aspirations and *with an understanding of its own conventional nature*, be capable of giving rise to spiritual accomplishments like liberation and enlightenment. Then with courage and genuine humility we might begin to look at our job as dharma pioneers differently. Our cutting-edge task is not to fit Buddhism into our world. Nor is it to adapt ourselves to fit a world that is no longer available to us as it might have been to our ancestors. It is to reach across a great chasm and to meet our tradition in a new place where it—and we—have never been before. ▼

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