SHARING WISDOM

A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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What Is Wisdom?

Wisdom in Buddhism is two kinds of things. First, it is experiential knowledge—as opposed to theoretical or intellectual knowledge—of the Dharma ("Dhamma" in the Pali spelling). The Dharma in Buddhism is Truth and Reality, and also the teachings of the Buddha, which are teachings on Truth and Reality. Second, it is a certain kind of character: negatively, it is freedom from craving, aversion and delusion; positively, it is selflessness, compassion, loving-kindness, deep non-violence and spontaneous morality.

These two aspects of wisdom are two aspects of the same thing, because what we know makes us who we are. As we grow in our experiential understanding of the nature of things, we grow in selflessness, compassion, and related virtues. As we learn more, we change in the profoundest possible way, in our very being.

Wisdom is experiential and non-verbal; it cannot be fully conveyed in words, even the words of the Buddha. The Buddha's teachings are guides to help one find experiential wisdom for oneself, as is taught in the text, the "Simile of the Raft."

From the Buddha: The Simile of the Raft (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta 22 Alagaddupama Sutta)

[The Buddha speaks first]

"Bhikkhus [monks], I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. Listen and attend closely to what I shall say…

"Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Then he thought: 'There is this great expanse of water…but there is no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and support by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore.' And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore. Then, when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me…Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with that raft?"

"No, venerable sir."

"By doing what would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Here, bhikkhus, when that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, it is by so doing that that

man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping."

Note: In this passage, the Buddha says that his teachings—the Dhamma—are like a raft. They are a tool, a means to the end of experientially realizing wisdom (the other shore). He says that this tool must be actively used, but not clung to. Moreover, one should not confuse what is a means and what is the true end.

Question 1:
Buddhism teaches that religious wisdom is something that cannot really be expressed in words; instead, it is experiential. Words are a tool that points us in the right direction to find the truth experientially. Do other religions agree with this? Do you?

Why Share?

The Buddha was primarily a teacher of wisdom. A famous story recounts how he decided to teach. According to the traditional life of the Buddha, after the Buddha experienced enlightenment, full experiential knowledge of Truth, he spent some time simply enjoying the bliss of enlightenment. He then considered whether he should teach, sharing the wisdom he had discovered. At first he hesitated, because he knew that the wisdom he had realized was subtle and difficult to understand, whereas humans generally were too wrapped in their delusions and attached to their pleasures to comprehend it. Then the god Brahma Sahampati begged the Buddha to teach,

pointing out that at least some could understand him and benefit from his teachings. The Buddha surveyed humankind and, seeing that there were those who would benefit from his teachings, decided to teach out of compassion for the sufferings of sentient beings (beings with awareness, that is, humans, animals and all beings that are reborn again and again in samsara). Compassion for those who suffer, then, is the motivation for sharing wisdom in Buddhism, in the sense of transmitting the Dharma.

But sharing wisdom is a two-way street; there is sharing with others what one has realized and there is receiving from others what they have realized. Contemporary Buddhists recognize at least two important reasons for sharing wisdom in this sense. The first is that it is seen as an essential part of peacemaking, of which two examples follow. In Sri Lanka, where ethnic and religious tensions between Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus are one of the roots of that country's ongoing civil war, the Buddhist organization Sarvodaya Shramadana has worked for five decades to eliminate poverty and, more recently, to make peace. The development work in each village begins with a "family gathering" where villagers decide on a project to pursue. At those gatherings, all the groups present prayers and songs; whichever group is in the minority is given the honor of going first, and all listen respectfully. This kind of relationship has become the foundation for Sarvodaya's current peacemaking efforts. Since ethnic and religious differences are foundational to the war, it was critical for Sarvodaya's peacemaking efforts that cordial relations with all the ethnic groups and religions already be in place; respectful hearing of each others' religions has been an essential part of those cordial relations. Here the sharing of religious wisdom is at work on two levels at once: the wisdom directly shared in the prayers and songs at the family gatherings (a kind of life wisdom), and the act of wisdom demonstrated in the act of sharing itself.

A second example can be seen in the work of American Zen master, Bernie Glassman. One of his projects has been to take groups to

Auschwitz on retreat. Those retreats are made up of Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, children of Nazis, survivors of the camps, children of survivors, children of German soldiers, and concerned people with no direct link to Auschwitz. They spend five days together, chanting the names of the dead, conducting religious services and rituals from the different religions present, and telling their individual stories. Glassman reports that it is out of hearing each other's stories and bearing witness to their differences that a kind of healing takes place. As Glassman says, Hitler tried to stamp out differences; it is through honoring differences that healing occurs.

A second reason for sharing wisdom that some Buddhists acknowledge today is that they learn spiritually from other religions. Again, we may consider two examples. Taiwanese Buddhist nun Venerable Cheng Yen, founder of the huge Buddhist charity movement Tzu Chi, had developed abundant compassion as a Buddhist, but it took something more for her to begin her charity work. She encountered Catholic nuns who challenged her, saying that there were many Catholic hospitals, schools and charitable enterprises but no Buddhist ones; what do Buddhists ever contribute to society? After this encounter, Ven. Cheng Yen reflected that, in the past, Buddhists haven't known how to implement the Buddha's teachings of wisdom and compassion in society. This showed her the way forward and she began the Tzu Chi organization, which gives free medical care to anyone who asks for it and in which millions of people are volunteers.

A second example is, again, American Zen master Bernie Glassman. Glassman tells a story from his early days as a teacher, when he was listening to a group of Catholic nuns speak of their meditation experience and what it means for their relationship with God. Glassman, who, as a Buddhist, does not believe in God, wondered to himself with dismay how they could still believe in God after meditating for so long. He immediately saw his own arrogance in those thoughts and realized that he himself didn't know as much as he thought he knew,

especially since his spiritual practice is based on inquiry and openness. He ultimately learned that there is no conflict between meditation and belief in God. He now is happy when his Zen students go to a local Sufi center for zikr (Sufi prayer—which, of course, involves God), in addition to their Zen Buddhist practice.

How Do We Share?

Context:

Although religions had clear identities, in the Asian countries where Buddhism found itself in pre-modern times, they did not strictly separate themselves from each other. There was always a tendency towards lots of give and take among religions. For example, Thailand was animistic before Buddhism arrived. When Buddhism came to the country, virtually all Thais became Buddhists (except some people in remote areas), but they did not give up animism. Today you will see the "spirit houses" that house the animistic spirits everywhere in Thailand, including on Buddhist temple grounds.

In China, Buddhism encountered another culture every bit as sophisticated as its native India, with highly developed religions in Confucianism and Taoism; in this case, relations were more complex. There was a great deal of competition and debate among the three great religious traditions, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, and a great deal of absorption of ideas from each other. Zen Buddhism, which came into being as Indian Buddhism adjusted to Chinese culture, is the product of Buddhism absorbing a great deal of Taoist wisdom. Neo-Confucianism absorbed a great deal from Buddhism. There was also a strong tendency, throughout East Asia, for people to simultaneously "be" more than one religion. In China, for example, there was the syncretistic "Three Religions" (Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism), which for centuries was the common faith of all. In Japan, most traditional people "were" both Shinto and

Buddhist—actually, people didn't think in these terms; they just practiced both religions, which they felt to be the Japanese ethos. These religions were often seen as complementary, rather than competing, i.e., dealing with different aspects of spirituality.

Imparting

As a teacher, the Buddha taught with great openness. He walked throughout his region of India from village to village, speaking with whoever wanted to hear him. Unlike some other teachers in his time, the Buddha taught "with an open hand," that is, without holding anything back from anyone. He taught people of both genders and all social classes and castes. If they wanted to hear what he had to say, he would share his wisdom. If they did not want to hear, he would go mildly on his way. The Buddha was happy to participate in discussions and debates on the basis of truth, as he said, and frequently did. Later Buddhists have done the same over the centuries.

As a universal religion (that is, a religion that believes its message is universal, appropriate for everyone), Buddhism has always welcomed converts. But the Buddha himself would not push hard for conversion. He simply would present the teaching, people responded to it however they did, and leave things there. In fact, the Buddha is on record as asking a man named Upali who wanted to convert to Buddhism from Jainism to think it over first and consider carefully before converting, because the man was such a prominent Jain. When Upali remained adamant about converting, the Buddha accepted him as a convert but told him that he must continue to support his former religion with donations (which was how such groups survived).

Though Buddhism is spreading rapidly in the West today, Buddhist teachers continue to follow the Buddha's example, simply presenting the teaching openly and letting people respond however they will. The goal is

typically not to get people to convert to Buddhism as such, but to spread the Dharma, which means to encourage people to seek wisdom and to cultivate compassion and loving-kindness. Some prominent teachers, such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, often discourage people from converting to Buddhism, saying the religions that people were born in are perfectly good forms of religious practice. Of course, some people in the West do convert to Buddhism and they are welcome, but many, many more Westerners continue to understand themselves to "be" Jewish or Christian but may do Buddhist meditation or read Buddhist books, taking these ideas and practices into their lives and their worldview. In some cases, they say that this brings greater depth, or new life, to their Judaism or Christianity.

Receiving

As discussed above, a great deal of giving and taking among religions was the norm in countries where Buddhism found itself. However, it is considerably rarer for Buddhists who were literate and erudite enough to be writing and sufficiently esteemed for those writings to be preserved, to say in writing what they learned from non-Buddhists. However, examples can be found.

In China, while there was a great deal of mutual esteem and two-way sharing between Buddhists and Taoists (at least when they weren't competing for imperial patronage), relations between Buddhists and Confucianists often tended to be less cordial, as the two religions initially had little in common. However, even here there are examples of Buddhist willingness to acknowledge Confucian wisdom. Buddhist monk Seng Chao (384-414) was a leading thinker during the period in which Chinese Buddhists interpreted Buddhism in Taoism terms. He was strongly influenced by Taoism and occasionally also had a good word to say about Confucianism, quoting both the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu and Confucius in his writings. In the Republican

period in China, the standard curriculum in Buddhist seminaries required mastery of the Confucian classics (the Four Books and the Five Classics). When the eminent monk Hsu-yun visited Ch'u-fu in 1900 he paid his respects at the temple and tomb of Confucius.[1]

In Japan, the great Japanese Zen master, Hakuin Ekaku, (1686-1786) was a lifelong devotee of the Shinto deity Tenjin (the deified Sugawara no Michizane, the god of learning) and, throughout his life, rose at 2:00 a.m. every morning to worship him.[2] Soto Zen monk Ryokan (1758-1831), though famed for his poetry and calligraphy, lived a life of intentional poverty and simplicity and practiced religion as the common Japanese people practiced it. He was famously nonsectarian and served for a time as caretaker of a Shinto shrine.[3] Both of these men were major figures, two of the most famous Japanese Zen monks of all time. Hakuin was a major reviver of Rinzai Zen and is often called the "father of modern Zen." Ryokan is intensely beloved and is often said to represent the "essence" of traditional Japan.

In modern times, Buddhists often express the value they have found in non-Buddhist teachings. Japanese Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe initiated and actively pursued dialogue with Christians from 1963 until his death in 2006. In 1989, he published a paper titled, "The Impact of Dialogue with Christianity on My Self-Understanding as a Buddhist." In it, he lists three areas in which dialogue with Christianity had altered his philosophical thinking.

Question 2:

Is it possible to take one particular teaching or practice from a religion without distorting either that religion or one's own? If so, what would be some examples of this?

First, he said, Christian inability to understand the core Buddhist concept of sunyata, translated into English as "emptiness," led him to clarify his own thinking on sunyata and emphasize the positive and soteriological meanings of sunyata, its dynamic function and openness. Second, in the area of ethics, he realized that Buddhism lacked a concept of justice. He suggested ways to bring out Buddhist ideas that express the idea of fairness, though he rejected connotations of judgmentalism and punishment associated with the Western concept of justice. Finally, he came to recognize that, due to its emphasis on a timeless wisdom, Buddhism's view of history is very weak, and he suggested that the idea of compassion, with which wisdom is paired in Buddhism, could be the foundation of seeing action within time as something of value.[4]

More typical of Buddhist learning from non-Buddhist religion in the modern world has been Buddhist learning about putting wisdom and compassion into concrete action in the world. Some of this we have already seen above, for example, in the Tzu Chi movement. The movement called "Engaged Buddhism," of which Tzu Chi is a part, exhibits considerable learning from other religions. This is a contemporary movement that aims to apply Buddhist principles in engagement with the social, political and economic issues of their societies. The greatest single influence on this group is Mahatma Gandhi. Sarvodaya Shramadana, discussed above, originated when its founder, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, studied in person with Gandhi's successor, Vinoba Bhave. The name, "Sarvodaya," is itself taken from the Gandhian movement, where it meant "the welfare of all"; Ariyaratne has re-interpreted it as meaning "the awakening of all." Gandhi is also important to His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, who has written of the great example that Gandhi is for him.

Process – Skillful Means and Advice

The experiential nature of wisdom in Buddhism means that it cannot be shared directly; it must be discovered experientially by each person. By its very nature, this wisdom transcends all words and images, anything that we might say or think of it. But what can be shared is the "finger pointing at the moon." The moon here represents the wisdom we are trying to realize. All of the Buddha's teachings, and the teachings of subsequent teachers, are fingers pointing at the moon. One consequence of this view is that one should not be attached to one's views since, no matter what they are, they can never be more than the finger pointing at the moon. One should take them seriously enough to be guided by them, and yet one must hold them lightly and be prepared to adjust or drop them as one grows in experiential understanding.

Three precepts of the Order of Interbeing, created by contemporary Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. (Being Peace)

First: Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.

Second: Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.

Third: Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even

education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness.

Note: In this contemporary statement, Thich Nhat Hanh urges Buddhists not to be attached to Buddhist teachings. Notice how this passage continues ideas from the Simile of the Raft passage.

Because wisdom cannot be stated adequately, the Buddha made a point of adjusting his teachings in relation to the capacity of his audience to understand him. Thus flexibility in the forms of expressing and communicating Buddhism became a principle that in the Mahayana schools is called "skillful means": one should adjust the form of the teaching as appropriate in order to communicate effectively. This principle greatly aided Buddhism as it spread from India into other countries, as it allowed it to adjust itself to different cultures.

In modern times, the idea of skillful means has been restated by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching has always stressed the importance of remembering that the forms in which the Dharma can be expressed must be flexible, since they are not the essential part (the Dharma is). The precepts of his Tiep Hien order echo the Parable of the Raft in sharply distinguishing between wisdom, or truth, and the means for realizing truth, between the pointing finger and the moon. He points out that, because reality changes from moment to moment, we need to remain alert to what is happening in the present, in order to know what is true right now. Thich Nhat Hanh cites the traditional saying that the Buddha opened "10,000 Dharma doors" (that is, he taught the Dharma in 10,000 ways), but says that we need to open even more!

Thai lay leader Sulak Sivaraksa differentiates between "big B" Buddhism and "little b" buddhism. The former is institutionalized Buddhism, which may be benign or may become aligned with potentially negative forces

such as nationalism. "Little b" buddhism is Buddhist values at their best—such values as selflessness, generosity and compassion. This does not imply that Buddhism "owns" these values in a way that other religions do not; to the contrary, Sulak and other leaders often emphasize that these values can be found in all the major religions. The important thing to share, they say, is the selflessness, generosity and compassion, and ways for developing them, not the "big B" Buddhism.

Responsible Sharing

In ancient India, where Buddhism originated, many religious views peacefully co-existing side-by-side; teachings, discussions, and debates about religion were common. With many different teachings being shared by wandering teachers, ancient India could be a challenging place to decide what one's religious views were! The Buddha gave some famous advice to the inhabitants of a village called Kalama about how to handle this situation. He told them that they should not accept any teachings on the basis of authority, tradition, the fact that it is given in a sacred text, or even logic, but only on the basis of what they know for certain for themselves in their own experience. He suggested a pragmatic test for what to believe: if something causes pain and suffering, he said, give it up; if it is wholesome and frees from suffering, practice it.

From the Buddha: Advice to the Kalamas (Anguttara Nikaya 3:65)

[Villagers from Kalama in Kesaputta speak first; the Buddha replies]

"Venerable sir, some ascetics and brahmins who come to Kesaputta explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, debunk revile, and vilify the doctrines of others. But then some other ascetics and brahmins come to Kesaputta, and they too explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, debunk, revile, and vilify the doctrines of the others. For us, venerable sir, there is perplexity and doubt as to which of these good ascetics speak truth and which speak falsehood."

"It is fitting for you to be perplexed, O Kalamas, it is fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter. Come, Kalamas. Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, 'The ascetic is our teacher.' But when you know for yourselves, 'These things are unwholesome; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to harm and suffering,' then you should abandon them…[And] when you know for yourselves, 'These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to welfare and happiness,' then you should engage in them."

Note: Here the Buddha speaks with villagers who confront many different religions and don't know how to choose among them. He advises them not to rely on tradition, or what authority figures say, but to decide pragmatically on the basis of which teachings lead to their greater well-being.

The Buddha found certain views to be particularly pernicious, and he warned his followers about them. These are: nihilistic materialism (the view that only material things exist and that after death there is nothing; which means there is no karma, and both human relations and religious action are meaningless), amorality (there are no consequences for good or bad deeds), non-causality (there is no real relation between cause and effect), and fatalism (no matter what you do, things turn out the same).[5] The effect of each of these views is to make following a religious life, as the Buddha understood it, pointless. It would be difficult for Buddhists to make common cause with any view that made the religious life pointless.

Four ways that negate the living of the holy life, taught by the Venerable Ananda on behalf of the Buddha. (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta 76, Sandaka Sutta)

The wanderer Sandaka asks a question and Venerable Ananda, a monk close to the Buddha, replies.

"Master Ananda, what are those four ways that negate the living of the holy life that have been declared by the Blessed One [the Buddha]…wherein a wise man certainly would not live the holy life, or if he should live it, would not attain the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome?"

"Here, Sandaka, some teacher holds such a doctrine and view as this: [1] 'There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world…A person consists of the four great elements…Fools and the wise are alike cut off and annihilated with the dissolution of the body; after death they do not exist.' [2] 'If one were to go along the south bank of the Ganges slaughtering, mutilating…and torturing…because of this there would be no evil and no outcome of evil. If one were to go along the north bank of the Ganges giving gifts…and making offerings…because of this there would be no merit and no outcome of merit.' [3] 'There is no cause or condition for the defilement of beings…there is no cause or

condition for the purification of beings...All beings, all living things, all creatures…are without mastery, power, and energy, moulded by destiny, circumstance, and nature…' [4] '…The round of rebirths is limited, there is no shortening or extending it, no increasing or decreasing it. Just as a ball of string when thrown goes as far as the string unwinds, so too, by running and wandering through the round of rebirths, fools and the wise both will make an end of suffering.'

…"These, Sandaka, are the four ways that negate the living of the holy life that have been declared by the Blessed One [the Buddha]…wherein a wise man certainly would not live the holy life, or if he should live it, would not attain the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome."

Note: On behalf of the Buddha, the Venerable Ananda teaches about four religious views existing at his time that negate the living of the holy life. According to the Buddha, these four views are of no possible spiritual value, because they make meaningless any spiritual effort. Making a spiritual effort is indispensable.

But because Truth is fundamentally ineffable, there is no strong reason not to make common cause with other religions, even if they see things somewhat differently, as long as living a good life, striving to improve oneself, and the like are considered worthwhile. However, Buddhists tend to see religions that are forcefully dogmatic or arrogantly convinced of their own superiority as quite wrong-headed and offensive.

In the contemporary world, Buddhists have new kinds of concerns. With globalization and Westernization hitting Buddhist Asia hard, many thoughtful Buddhists are concerned about their cultures and religions being overwhelmed by the seductive appeal of Western culture, with its combination of wealth and power and the allure of its television programs, movies, music, and an affluent, hedonistic lifestyle that seems to promise a life of greater pleasure and ease. The Thai lay leader Sulak Sivaraksa has been particularly active in his efforts to preserve traditional Thai culture from Westernization, while at the same time finding ways to reform and modernize Buddhism to make it more responsible to contemporary global conditions and needs.

Question 3:

Does globalization threaten religions? What is a skillful response to it, since it is not going to go away?

Some traditional Buddhists find distasteful the commodification of Buddhism, with Zen clocks and Tibetan wall calendars seeming to package and sell Buddhism in the West, though some traditional Buddhists find new avenues of livelihood in selling such products and may well see such work as Right Livelihood (a part of Buddhist practice for the layperson). On the other hand, globalization has also opened important new doors for Buddhists—Tibetan Buddhists, in particular, who had for centuries kept many teachings hidden, have in recent decades openly publicized some formerly hidden teachings for fear that they might be lost due to the occupation of the Tibetan homeland by the Chinese and the latter's active suppression of Tibetan Buddhism.

Another factor limiting some Buddhists' sharing of wisdom in the modern world is the concern of dalit Buddhists—persons formerly belonging to the "scheduled" castes, or so-called "untouchables"—who converted from Hinduism to Buddhism in an effort to shed their Hindu identities and the abysmally low social class that was an integral part of that identity. To these "new" Buddhists, it is important that they free themselves entirely of their Hindu habits and thought patterns. Their Buddhist identity is fragile and they feel a need for a clean break from Hinduism. When they convert to Buddhism, they take a vow neither to worship Hindu gods, nor to engage in Hindu practices, and they formally renounce Hinduism. They may be quite hostile towards Hinduism and are in no way open to the idea of sharing wisdom with Hindus. The fact that some Hindu nationalists consider the dalit Buddhists to be just another sect of Hinduism reinforces the dalits' sense of needing to insist upon their separation and difference from Hinduism.

Question 4:

Dalit Buddhists, former "untouchables" who converted from Hinduism to Buddhism to escape their low caste status, want nothing to do with Hinduism. Their religious identity is fragile and requires separation from Hinduism in order for them to establish themselves as Buddhists. Should their wishes be respected or do they need to learn to open up? Consider other cases of fragile religious identity.

Specific Wisdoms

To Offer

Buddhism at its best is able to differentiate between the means of realizing wisdom and wisdom itself, the raft and the other shore, as expressed in the Simile of the Raft. In this way, it is able to see itself as a path, a means of accessing wisdom, not as identical with that wisdom or as having exclusive possession of it. Of course, not all Buddhists think this way, but it is a teaching of the Buddha nonetheless. This view opens the door to a self-understanding and a modesty that seem very appropriate in a world of many religions, none of which can prove their claims to the satisfaction of the others!

Because it sees itself as a path to the realization of wisdom, Buddhism has developed many concrete practices that people can use to develop their spiritual lives, and Buddhists are happy to share them with non-Buddhists. Many of these are not particularly Buddhist per se, such as practices to develop inner peace, compassion or loving-kindness, and can be used by people of any, or of none. Mindfulness meditation practices stripped of all their Buddhist trappings are used in hospitals today to help people reduce their stress and handle chronic pain. From a Buddhist point of view, anything that helps to reduce suffering is good.

Question 5:

Many Buddhists are happy when Jews or Christians embrace a part of the Buddhist teachings or practices while remaining Jewish or Christian. What do you think of this Buddhist lack of concern about maintaining clear lines between religions?

To Receive

There is something of a consensus among contemporary Buddhists who participate in global discussions about religion that Buddhism has the most to learn from other religions in the area of learning how to put their compassion and loving-kindness into practice in concrete action in the world. This process involves developing forms of action, but it may also require a rethinking of the status and value of things such as human history and human relationships. Many important new forms of Buddhist social action were developed in the 20th century, but this process has farther to go. Also, partly as a result of its encounters with other religions and cultures, Buddhists are just beginning to re-examine and amend the status of women in Buddhist institutions, teachings and cultures; this process has much farther to go.

Forgiveness and Love

Buddhism counts wisdom and compassion as the two defining marks of a Buddha and, in fact, sees wisdom and compassion as two sides of a single coin, because wisdom is the realization that we are not fundamentally separate from each other. Anger is considered an unskillful and harmful response, no matter the provocation.

In Buddhist practice, one makes an effort to intentionally cultivate the states of being or character traits that the tradition holds as ideals. One set of practices cultivates a whole family of ideals related to wisdom and love called the "Four Immeasurables": loving-kindness, defined as wishing others well (this term is sometimes translated as "love" in English); compassion, or being concerned about the suffering of others; sympathetic joy or joy experienced in response to others doing well; and equanimity or imperturbability.

From the teachings of the Theravada tradition on the cultivation of metta, loving-kindness

First of all loving-kindness should again and again be developed for oneself, 'May I be happy, free from ill,' or, 'May I be free from enmity, free from injury, free from disturbance, and may I preserve myself at ease!'

Developing the wish, 'May I be well,' and taking himself as a witness, the disciple produces then the wish that other beings also should have well-being and ease, i.e., 'As I want to be happy, am averse to suffering, want to live and do not want to die, so also other beings.' In order that he may take himself as a witness, he must first of all radiate loving-kindness on to himself. Immediately after that…he should think of his dear, pleasant, respected teacher or preceptor, or of someone who is like him, as well as of his generosity, his friendly words, etc., which make him so dear and pleasant, and of his moral virtue, learning, etc., which make him so respected. And the disciple should develop loving-kindness for him, in this manner: 'May this good man be free from ill,' and so on…But the monk who is not content with just that…should immediately after that develop loving-kindness for a very dear person, then for an indifferent person, then for an enemy…If, while he directs his mind on to the enemy, aversion arises in him on remembering the offences that enemy has committed, he should again and again accomplish an attitude of loving-kindness towards the first three kinds of person. Then, emerging from that, he should dispel the aversion by again and again feeling loving-kindness towards that last person (i.e., the enemy)…

Then, as he feels loving-kindness again and again, he should achieve an even mind towards the four persons – i.e., himself, a dear person, an

indifferent person, a foe – and bring about the abolition of the barriers between them.

(Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa, translated by Edward Conze in Buddhist Meditation (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

(substituting the translation "loving-kindness" for "friendliness" in the original).

Note: This is an important meditation text for cultivating metta, or loving-kindness, culminating in the ability to overcome one's own feelings of enmity. One begins by cultivating loving-kindness towards oneself, and goes on to cultivate loving-kindness towards progressively more and more difficult people, ending with an "enemy," i.e., someone who has done one harm.

One develops these states gradually, starting by cultivating the particular state of being for a particular person to whom it is relatively easy to apply that posture, working through progressively more challenging individuals until one reaches the most difficult one. For example, you begin cultivating loving-kindness by focusing upon yourself, then move to someone who has done something kind for you; then to a very dear person, such as a beloved family member; then to an acquaintance towards whom one feels neutral; and, finally, to an enemy, or someone who has harmed you. The objective is to cultivate loving-kindness for each of these particular people until the loving-kindness that one feels towards each one of them is identical.

Question 6:

Are Buddhist practices related to forgiveness dependent on specifically Buddhist concepts or could they be practiced by anyone?

In 1981…we held a Buddhist ceremony for peace. At the end of the ceremony, a Khmer Rouge leader came up to me, very cautiously, and asked if I would come to Thailand to build a temple at the border. I said that I would.

"Oh!" thought many people, "he is talking to the enemy. He is helping the enemy! How can he do that?" I reminded them that love embraces all beings, whether they are noble-minded or low-minded, good or evil.

Both the noble and the good are embraced because loving kindness flows to them spontaneously. The unwholesome-minded must be included because they are the ones who need loving kindness the most. In many of them, the seed of goodness may have died because warmth was lacking for its growth. It perished from coldness in a world without compassion." …

I do not question that loving one's oppressors—Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge—may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But it is a law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we use love in all of our negotiations….

From Maha Ghosananda, Step By Step (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1992).

Note: Here the late Venerable Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda lives out the teaching of the Dhammapada passage cited above in the most difficult situation possible, genocide. The Khmer Rouge was responsible for the deaths of one to three million Cambodians. Maha Ghosananda avoids anger by recognizing that there were causes for why the members of the Khmer Rouge acted as they did.

Question 7:

Buddhist nun Venerable Dhammananda says, "You killed my son, therefore your son must die" is the wrong idea of justice. What do Buddhist ideas about non-anger and self-restraint imply about common ideas of justice?

Buddhism maintains high ideals of love and compassion, but it is also practical in developing concrete behaviors to help one to be able to be the kind of person who can love his or her enemy. Wisdom helps in this, by helping us to understand that people do harmful or "unskillful" things for reasons. As His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, often points out, all people are alike in wanting to be happy, but some people are very unskillful in the things that they do to try to gain that state. Moreover, we live in a karmic world, that is, one in which events occur due to the confluence of multiple causes and conditions. Some people have been raised in ignorance or fear or terrible need. Some have been taught from childhood to hate; others have experienced terrible tragedy or loss and have become embittered. Such people may find happiness in killing, having their revenge upon those who killed a loved one. When one understands the reasons, however twisted, behind a hateful action, one sees it very differently and reacts accordingly. This is one aspect of karma.; another is that one's own actions are sowing seeds that will construct one's own future experiences. If I act in a loving way, I construct a pleasant future for myself; if I act hatefully, I construct future suffering for myself. Therefore, even if someone does something hateful to oneself, one should not react in a hateful way, or one will only cause oneself further harm. One should practice in order to gain self-mastery.

From the Buddha

'He reviled me! He struck me!
He defeated me! He robbed me!'
They who gird themselves up with this,
For them enmity is not quelled.

'He reviled me! He struck me!
He defeated me! He robbed me!'
They who do not gird themselves up with this,
For them is enmity quelled.

Not by enmity are enmities quelled, whatever the occasion here.
By the absence of enmity are they quelled.
This is an ancient truth.

Dhammapada, verses 3-5. Translated by John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Note: This text makes several important points. (1) How you react to wrongs done to you is your own responsibility. One harms oneself by maintaining feelings of anger and resentment for two reasons. First, such feelings are painful; if one prolongs them, one is causing oneself unnecessary pain. Second, feelings of anger will cause one to behave unskillfully, inviting future suffering towards oneself. (2) Enmity or conflict cannot be overcome by aggressive acts. Responding to violence with violence simply continues a cycle of violence. Enmity or conflict can only be overcome by self-controlled and restrained behavior that rises above reacting out of anger and rationally looks for the best response.

Then, if and when something painful does happen to oneself, one's family, or one's community, one will have the self-discipline not to lash out blindly in a way that could make the situation worse and will certainly earn oneself bad karma. Instead, if one has self-control, one can examine the situation composedly and choose the best response under those particular circumstances. This is the idea behind the first two stanzas from the Dhammapada quoted above. The last stanza states that the law of karma is a law of the universe, according to which, hateful acts only produce more hateful acts in response. Whether an individual or a nation, if one strikes another, the one who has been hit will respond accordingly.

Question 8:

The Dhammapada declares that it is a law of the universe that enmity, or hatred, can only be overcome by non-enmity, since an aggressive act only produces another aggressive act in response. Can you think of examples where this has proven true? Are there any cases where it was not true?

From Thich Nhat Hanh, "Please Call Me By My True Names" in Being Peace (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987).

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
Because even today I still arrive…

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the
surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes,
arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the
clear water of a pond,
And I am also the grass-snake who,
approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
And I am the arms merchant, selling deadly
weapons to Uganda.

I am the 12-year-old girl, refugee
on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after
being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving…

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes
flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it
fills up the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
So I can hear all my cries and my laughs
at once,
So I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Note: This poem can be very challenging. It was written during the period of the Vietnamese "boat people," when many Vietnamese fled Vietnam on unsafe boats, encountering many deadly perils. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote this poem after learning that a 12 year old girl had died as described here. The poem is based upon non-separation not only from the victims of harm but also from those who cause harm. In his commentary on the poem, Nhat Hanh points out (much like Maha Ghosananda) that there were causes, such as poverty, behind the pirate's behavior. He says that if he had been born in the pirate's village, he might very well have grown up the same way as the pirate and done the same thing. This does not excuse the behavior but helps us to understand it, to control our anger, and to realize what we must do if we want to put an end to such attacks in the future. Condemning the pirate does not solve the problem.

The only possible way out of this situation is for an individual or a group to have the wisdom and self-discipline to rise above such angry retaliation and offer an alternative. Such peacemakers (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Yitzhak Rabin, and Martin Luther King Jr.) are often killed because there are still many "karmic seeds" of hatred that have been sown and are in the process of coming to fruition when such pioneers step forward. But they plant seeds of peace that make it easier for the next one who comes along, and the next.

CASE STUDY

From 1975 to 1979, the communist Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia. Their rule resulted in somewhere between one and three million dead (out of a population of approximately 7.5 million in 1975) from execution, torture, starvation, displacement and forced labor. Particularly targeted were Buddhist monks, who were almost entirely wiped out, and anyone who seemed to be an intellectual. The cities were emptied out and people forced to live in the countryside. Buddhist temples were used for torture and the storage of weapons.

When the Khmer Rouge era ended, the response of the Cambodian Buddhist leadership, particularly Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, was to focus on the healing of the wounds of the people and the reconciliation of the four mutually-hostile camps within Cambodia which were fully capable of continuing armed hostilities.

To help with the healing of the people's wounds, Maha Ghosananda entered the refugee camps reciting the Metta Sutta and verse 5 of the Dhammapada as people wept. He urged people to let go of the past and move forward in their lives. The Cambodian people generally bore in mind the teachings of karma and forewent seeking revenge as they saw this as only prolonging the cycle of suffering, and they did not want themselves, or their children, to suffer any further. Maha Ghosananda led the Dhammayietra movement which accompanied refugees home, visited isolated villages still threatened by violence, and supported the voting that made the institution of a new government possible.

Many people outside the country are critical of the fact that there was no pressure from the Buddhist leadership for a war crimes trial or truth commission in Cambodia (only in the summer of 2007 did an international

genocide tribunal begin to charge individuals with crimes against humanity). In general, the Buddhist effort has been to focus on healing and reconciliation rather than "justice," a concept that is not a part of Buddhist thinking.

Bear in mind that in Cambodia, even to this day, former Khmer Rouge members have leading positions in the government. In such circumstances, truth commissions are ineffective. Cambodia, including its judicial system, is notoriously corrupt. In such circumstances, trials can be meaningless. Poverty is rampant and international assistance has been a fraction of what has been needed. There are very few senior monks who survived the Khmer Rouge years.

Under all of these circumstances, was what was done the best that could be done? Was it the morally correct path?

Compare this response to the Cambodian genocide to the response to the Nazi Holocaust. They could hardly be more different. Does each response have something to say to the other and something to learn from the other, or are they incommensurate?

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Notes:

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