

# Forum: Too much meditation?

INTRODUCTION BY BARRY BOYCE



(LEFT TO RIGHT)

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**B**uddhism and meditation are often equated in the popular mind, and many people like to think of Buddhism as a kind of philosophy, or even spiritual technology, that stands apart from the cultural and religious trappings that have been attached to the way of Gautama Buddha over the centuries. The assumption is that one can become a Buddhist meditator without having to deal with the baggage that so often accompanies religion.

Part of the appeal of meditation techniques—often simply called mindfulness and stripped of nearly any association with religious tradition—is that they require the practitioner to do nothing more than pay attention and calm the mind. That is often the extent of the commitment. As a result, it is thought, a meditator will become a healthier, happier, and kinder person, and the world will be a better place.

Just as no one would argue that eating a good diet, getting plenty of rest, and keeping active are not good for you, so it is hard to argue that becoming more calm or centered through meditation is not helpful to one's health and well-being. But is a path that is focused on meditation and meditative ability complete, and will it lead to the

liberation that is the *raison d'être* of Buddhism? Are there any dangers to eschewing the rituals and rules that are often regarded in the West as just the packaging, not the essence, of Buddhism? Or are these stripped-down approaches actually returning to Buddhism's secular roots?

In this forum, four seasoned Buddhist teachers address these key questions about how Buddhism is thought about and practiced by many in the West. This inquiry naturally leads to a discussion of how much we can adapt and innovate in order to make inroads in a new culture.

I had the pleasure of moderating the conference call that resulted in the discussion you are about to read. I found it refreshing and stimulating to hear the different tones and takes of these four teachers, who stand in the no-man's-land between the wisdom of their forebears and the fresh faces of the eager students in front of them. From that touchy position, teachers—and by extension all of us who care deeply about bringing the dharma into the lives of as many people as possible—must present something that they feel in their bones is true, without the confirmation from on high that so many spiritual institutions rely on. A lot is at stake. When practitioners commit to a spiritual discipline, it can lead to big changes in their lives. We ought to be careful to ensure that what is taught is a path that can faithfully lead to what Buddhism promises.

There is no final answer to the question of what elements are required for a complete Buddhist path, but as long as we continue to scrutinize and be honest about what we see and where we agree and disagree, we will be following in the footsteps of the Buddha and his early disciples.

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): LIZA MATTHEWS; DEBORAH BOLDT; LUVINA APARICIO; RYSZARD FRACKIEWICZ

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Let's start with the basic issue, and then we can look at some of the specific practices in question. Do you think that here in the West we overemphasize personal meditation—practices such as mindfulness-awakening, zazen, mahamudra, or dzogchen that develop insight or wisdom—to the exclusion of other valuable practices?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** From the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, meditation is definitely a key to achieving freedom from our bondage in samsara. But attaining liberation also entails many other factors, such as getting the right instruction and merging teaching with experiential understanding. To fully support our meditation practice, we also need to engage in virtuous activities, which we refer to as accumulation of merit.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Your question has a “yes” part and a “no” part. Yes, it is true that we may get the impression that we are overemphasizing certain aspects of the Buddhist path focusing on self-realization. It is also true that we have been somewhat neglecting other aspects of the path, such as what we call *samu*, work-practice, and also begging for alms, which is not really allowed in the United States. However, if you consider the origin of Buddhism, Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment sitting under the bodhi tree. He was not doing anything else but

self-realization, and that is the root of Buddhism. So, overemphasizing is not appropriate wording. In fact, we can emphasize it even more!

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** There is often an overemphasis on personal meditation practice. Much of the Western mind-set tends to reduce meditation to a kind of spiritual technique, if not a kind of technology, whereby if one becomes adept in proceeding through a set of stages, one will get a guaranteed result. That is a distortion of what the Buddha presented, which is more usefully understood as a way of life. The eightfold path is the most useful paradigm for understanding where meditation fits in. The path entails everything about our life: the way we see the world, think, speak, act, earn our living, and so forth. Only at the end of the path does the Buddha bring in more formal exercises in meditation.

Traditionally, we sum this up as ethics (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and intelligence or wisdom (*prajna*). We can't actually separate these out without losing something of their wholeness and their integrity. Meditation can lead us to the kind of human fulfillment that the Buddha envisioned, provided it is embedded within an ethical framework, a certain understanding of the world, a kind of critical thinking that goes along with that



understanding, and attention to how we act and how we relate to others.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** These are big questions involving big words, like Buddhism and meditation, that mean many different things to many different people. In the case of meditation, the word to me includes koan practice, and koan practice doesn't make the distinction between meditation and the rest of your life. It's one whole thing going on all the time. Koan practice is a way of inquiry, a way of engaging with the world with warmth and curiosity. Sometimes you do that quietly on a cushion and sometimes you do that at the breakfast table or at work.

So are we emphasizing meditation too much? Not from that perspective. What we're really trying to do is encourage people to have an attitude of interest in their lives and the greater life of all of us all the time. Realization means both to understand something, the prajna part, and to make real or actual in the world, the compassion part. I don't know how to separate those two faces; they need each other.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Some teachers, in particular Tulku Thondop Rinpoche, have talked about the need for Buddhist practitioners in the West to embrace what are called in the Tibetan tradition merit-making or accumulation-of-merit practices. Do you share this concern?

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** I don't find the word "merit" itself particularly helpful. It leads into a kind of quantitative thinking: the accumulation of merit. Merit, as I understand it, is simply the consequence of living an ethical life focused on realizing the paramis of generosity, ethics, tolerance, and so forth. Indeed, meditation alone is not enough, but I don't know whether merit necessarily is accumulated through doing certain kinds of ritualistic behavior. Perhaps that may be the case for some people, but the broader context of merit is effectively living a life in which you seek to embody the paramis.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** ROSHI, I would be very interested to hear you speak about the concept of merit from the Zen perspective.

**EIDO ROSHI:** In Zen, we say *Mukodoku*: No merit! There is no merit whatsoever in our practice. No virtue at all. In the West—or perhaps I should say the modern world of East and West—there is so much interest in investing, so people expect something out of it. Real Zen should aim for no Buddha, no virtue whatsoever.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** So does *mukodoku* mean going beyond investing?

**EIDO ROSHI:** Yes, in the modern world, with the



industrial revolution and capitalism spread all over the world, we have such capitalistic mind. So Zen is considered as an investment of time and energy for which we should receive a product. This is a great danger. It's a disease of modern practice. In pure Zen, there are no expectations, none whatsoever. There is no virtue, none at all.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** That reminds me of Shantideva talking about acting with no sense whatsoever of reward, but simply making a spontaneous response, like the hand reaching out to assuage the pain of the foot. There is no calculation of any merit.

**EIDO ROSHI:** That's the Buddha view.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** In our tradition, accumulation of merit is very important, but I am not so sure about the "accumulation" part of its English translation. Indeed, accumulating is based on a quantitative thinking, thinking of investment, which is certainly wrong. Merit practice is basically letting-go practice. It is about letting go of negative habits, thinking, action. It is letting go of all your attachments to any objects. One of the key examples is not ritualistic practice but simple acts of generosity and discipline, the paramitas. I suggest people go to a homeless shelter or food bank to make a contribution. True giving is giving without expectation, any expectation of results in return. That kind of giving goes beyond virtue and non-virtue.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** Rinpoche, would you say that in addition to the letting go, that activities like offering and begging also acknowledge our intercon-

It is true that we have been neglecting other aspects of the path. However, Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment sitting under the bodhi tree. He was not doing anything else but self-realization, and that is the root of Buddhism.

—Eido Roshi

nectedness, the fact that we ask from each other and we give to each other all the time? It helps us to remember that all the time.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Definitely.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Excuse me, Rinpoche, may I ask something?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Yes, Roshi.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Does the letting go include yourself?

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Yes, it definitely includes yourself.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Good.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** There is no true paramita without the three purities: no subject, no object, no action.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Yes.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** I think that is *mukodoku*.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Yes.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Ritual practices in many Buddhist traditions carry with them ancient cosmologies that are very different from ours. How do we approach practices that seem to contradict our understanding of the universe?

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** The way we understand where we are in the universe is much different from the cosmology of the Buddha's time and place. We see ourselves on this small globe flying around the sun, in a vast cosmos that we know more and more about through empirical observation. We no longer inhabit the classical Indian cosmology that existed through most of Buddhist history.

I have certainly struggled with this in my own practice, and it is also an issue with many of the people I teach on retreats. They often have a very deep and heartfelt attraction to the dharma, and yet when they cross the threshold of a Buddhist center, they often find themselves encountering something alien that they really can't relate to. It turns them away from the dhamma, and that is a real shame. If one doesn't really deeply share in that cosmological vision, such practices can often be extremely difficult to do with any authenticity or honesty.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** The question of people being put off by cultural trappings surrounding the dharma is not trivial. I have fears that my own tradition will remain an exotic import, marginalized in the culture. Consequently, it would not take part in the conversation I hope we are about to have about what we do in the face of global warming and constant warfare. Buddhism must be part of that conversation. I love mythology and rich stories and beautiful archetypal figures, but if I had

## WISDOM IS NOT ENOUGH

Merit-making practices are just as important as meditating on the true nature of mind, says Tulku Thondup. Without them, he warns, one cannot attain buddhahood.

BUDDHISM TEACHES that in our true nature, we are enlightened—totally open, peaceful, joyful, compassionate, and omniscient. The Buddha proclaimed:

*Profound, peaceful, and free from concepts,  
Luminous and uncompounded—  
A nectar-like nature—that I have realized!*

This aspect of our mind is “the true nature of the mind.” When we become aware of it and perfect it, we become blossoming buddhas.

We're all attracted to these highest views. But some students of Buddhism just want to meditate on the nature of the mind, emptiness-wisdom, free from concepts, without opening their hearts to the merit-making practices that are indispensable to liberation. They regard important practices like praying and generating devotion as “theistic” and “dualistic.”

There are many ways to make merit, or positive karma. The most comprehensive are the six perfections (*paramitas*) that Mahayana Buddhism prescribes as the path to enlightenment. They are: giving (generosity), discipline (morality), patience (fearlessness), diligence (eagerness), tranquility (contemplation), and wisdom.

The first five perfections, collectively referred to as “skillful means,” are especially for accumulating merit. The sixth, wisdom, involves realizing the true nature of mind, which is wisdom-emptiness.

The undervaluation of skillful-means practices to develop merit is unfortunate. Their purpose is to refine and transform our mind. Devotion opens our hearts. Compassion dissolves ego. Prayer unites us with our enlightened qualities. Pure perception transforms our awareness. Serving others, especially those who rely on us, is the purpose of dharma.

There is no such thing as a buddha who doesn't help others. So the more we open our hearts to skillful means, the more quickly and surely we reach buddhahood. We should never abandon these practices, for the path of skillful means is perfected in the goal of enlightenment, just as bricks become the finished house.

As long as we have dualistic concepts and emotions, the world is solid to us. Our suffering is all too real. Circumstances matter. If our surroundings are chaotic, it will be hard to find tranquility. If we experience peace and joy, however, we will be inspired to generate even more peace and joy. Then whatever we say and do will be the words and deeds of joy and peace. We progressively loosen our grasping at self, and eventually we glimpse the luminous nature of our mind. If we perfect this realization, we uproot grasping at self and become fully awakened.

I am not saying that we should not meditate on the nature of the mind. My point is that we should do so in conjunction with skillful means. Buddhist masters have always said that buddhahood is the result of two accumulations: of skillful means *and* of wisdom. Merit and wisdom are each as indispensable to attaining enlightenment as two wings are to a bird's ability to fly.

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From “The Power of Positive Karma” by Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, published in *Shambhala Sun*, May 2006.

to set them aside so that we could enter more fully into this crucial conversation, I would willingly do that.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** Years ago I was asked to be an interpreter for a Western nun who wanted to see the senior tutor of the Dalai Lama, Ling Rinpoche. She wanted particular protector practices and various amulets and so forth to protect her on a dangerous journey. His response was, don't bother with any of that. The only genuine protection you need is taking refuge. The greatest antidote to egoism is the act of refuge. In every moment of your life, you must give yourself away to the values of the dharma, go beyond yourself to approximate

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—Ponlop Rinpoche



as best you can the qualities of the Buddha, and do that within the framework of a community.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Is it possible that one might have a relationship with protector principle or the wearing of an amulet that might not be based on superstition?

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** In a Tibetan context, it would be so much part of the culture that it would be the natural and good thing to do, but outside of that context, it's open to serious question. I have done protector practices, I've worn strings around my neck, and, frankly, I let go of all of that. It was too alien. I find that it's something entirely alien to the early tradition of Buddhism as well. There's no hint of that in the early canon. The Buddha certainly did not countenance any such exercises that I'm aware of. Such practices are a function of how Buddhism integrated into the society of India and later in Tibet, but whether that is a practice that can be effectively transplanted here, I'm not so sure.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** So if I make a tea offering to a protector by tossing the tea in my backyard, is that absurd in the context I live in?

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** I can't say, because I don't know where you're coming from. I wouldn't condemn any practice out of hand. I would have to see how that operates in the context of your life, in the

context of your community, but it's not something that has any meaning for me.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** What you say is helpful, but one could certainly question drawing on the authority of the Buddha as the arbiter of a given practice in Tibetan or Japanese Buddhism.

**EIDO ROSHI:** I am sort of sympathetic with what you are saying. Offering tea to the Buddha, offering tea even to Jesus Christ, is the same as offering tea to your neighbors in a tea ceremony, if it is in the right spirit of the host and guest relationship. The real question is not whether someone else feels uncomfortable or comfortable with your offering. The real question is, are you offering not only tea but also your heart? As long as you offer the heart, even water can receive your heart.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** I agree. The point is not the tea or even the protector, but it's the giving away of oneself; it's the offering up of a certain heartfelt trust in something greater than oneself or wiser than oneself. The question is how we formulate that in our times.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** There are of course pros and cons with all rituals, but I would like to say that I don't think it's accurate to say that the Buddha did not make offerings. I remember instances where the Buddha made various kinds of offerings; for example, to the nagas.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Rinpoche, excuse me.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Yes, Roshi.

**EIDO ROSHI:** Didn't Buddha offer himself? [general laughter]

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** [laughs] Yes, he offered himself to us, and what more can you do? In general, there's no need to disregard offering practices. Some practices will work in some places and not in others. The point is always to evaluate the effectiveness of any ritual and also to see how we can adapt a Western form.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** One area where Westerners seem to have some resistance is following the various rules, structures, and formats of traditional Buddhism, which is itself a type of practice. How important are these, or can we get on without them and just focus on our own meditation?

**EIDO ROSHI:** Precepts and meditation and realization cannot be spoken of one by one. It's completely one unit, inseparable. Each element supports each other element. That's been the case since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, and it's still the case, whether we are talking about East or West.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** Various kinds of disciplines and precepts have evolved in different Buddhist com-

## WHO KNOWS WHY THERE IS WAKING UP?

“Waking up” doesn’t hinge on doing this Buddhist practice or that one, says Toni Packer. Everything from the Big Bang to a leaf falling contributes to the unfolding of the present moment.

**T**ruth is not caused by a path. And waking up—who knows why there is waking up? It’s the miracle of humanity, or of the universe, that there is waking up to the truth of infinite wholeness! For me to think that you woke up because my tradition did something for you can make me feel good about myself and about my tradition.

If I remember correctly, the Buddha once said: “Since there is the Unbecome, the Unborn, the Unmade and Unformed, there can be liberation from the Become, the Born, the Made and Formed.” *Unbecome* means not subject to cause and effect. Everything we do—striving, hurting, retaliating, or forgiving each other—is the conditioned stuff of cause and effect. The clarity of insight is unconditioned—it has no cause and no effect.

Why no “effect”?

If you belittle me, and there is complete listening, complete attention to what you’re saying—what’s going on for you and what’s happening in me, to the body’s impulse to tighten up, fight back, defend itself, or withdraw in pain—if there is complete openness in

listening, attending to the whole thing vulnerably, innocently, then what you are saying need not become the cause of an effect.

I see you are nodding. You understand.

People say to me: “Didn’t you, Toni, learn to concentrate and be aware through long years of Zen practice—wasn’t that the cause of an effect?” And looking back through memory, I can say, yes, twenty, thirty years ago, there wasn’t this ability to look and attend quietly, undividedly, in a sustained way. But one also realizes that uncountable other things, besides Zen training, have fed into the unfolding of this present moment, including the Big Bang, the fact that the universe happened at all. If it becomes clear that right now we’re the result of everything that’s ever happened, why pick out one thing and say *that* was the cause of *this*? Everything is the cause of everything, and everything is also the effect of everything. And yet this moment of being here completely unfettered is timeless and without cause.

Someone asked me, “Can a leaf swirling to the ground be my teacher?” Yes! Of course! This instant of seeing is the timeless teacher; the leaves are just what they are.

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From *The Wonder of Presence*, by Toni Packer. Published by Shambhala Publications.

munities at different times in Buddhist history. It started with the vinaya, a kind of legalistic ethos. Then a much more compassion- and love-based ethos evolved in the form of the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva and the development of bodhicitta. In recent times we see the evolution of different forms of precepts, like those developed by Thich Nhat Hanh for the Order of Interbeing.

We certainly need the structures and guidelines, but at the same time I think a genuine and spontaneous ethical life has to stem from integrating love, compassion, and wisdom. It involves a constant openness to the suffering of the world and deep obligation to do something about it that entails risk and uncertainty about the outcome of whatever we do. Precepts, in whatever form, create a framework, but that framework can never be adequate to guide us to a moral life that deals with the exigencies and demands of any given situation.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** As a contemporary American woman, I have some concerns with the vinaya. I simply can’t accept a rule that requires me to take more vows than a man does simply because I’m a woman. That’s a procrustean bed I’m not willing to lie down in. So it’s my obligation to explore what takes its place. I am in sympathy with what Stephen was just saying about a willingness to meet circumstances as they arise, working not from a recipe book but from openness, caring, and a dedication to trying things.

From the koan perspective, that means understanding that whatever we do will in some way be a mistake. There’s no right way, so we choose the mistake we feel the greatest affinity with, the one we think is most beautiful or seems like it might help the most. Then we watch and see what happens and we correct and change, based on what we notice. I find it very helpful to hold that idea of everything I do being a mistake. It’s provisional and subject to change.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** The vinaya is not just do’s and don’ts. Each element of discipline teaches us how to be mindful of subtle actions. Wearing robes, for example, makes us pay attention in a way that is different from how we usually treat our clothes. We put clothes on without really thinking so much. Being in robes can give you that deep sense of responsibility and obligation to be mindful of one’s actions in the world in the way Stephen was talking about as a necessary adjunct to meditation.

The vinaya is also the Buddha’s teaching on the ideal Buddhist sangha or society. For example, there is a consensus voting system in the vinaya. The Buddha introduced a kind of democracy coupled with mindful voting. If there’s any disagreement in the vote, we have to ask a dissenter to express their view and see how we can compromise. We also ask three times for consent. There are a variety of other social norms in the vinaya. It

is much more than Buddha's list of do's and don'ts. It is a Buddhist teaching of social science.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** What was the spirit of the vinaya, then? Is there a way for us to understand that spirit deeply and find its Western equivalent? If we can find its natural expression here, then integration happens. We need to bring the spirit of the forms and expressions of the past to forms and expressions that are natural to us as Westerners.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** We can integrate the social philosophy of the vinaya by recognizing how it came into being. When the Buddha was teaching and gathering more students and followers, issues naturally began to arise, the same issues that arise as any society forms: Who will lead? What are the qualifications to be included? How will conflict be resolved? How should negative actions be dealt with? The vinaya is like a case study. Each discipline developed on the basis of incidents that occurred. We do not need to copy the vinaya, but we also needn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is much we can learn in the vinaya about how we in the West could conduct ourselves as a community. We shouldn't throw everything out because of certain elements we naturally don't agree with, like some of the distinctions between men and women.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** We could emulate that kind of organic development. They noticed what happened and they created forms based on their own experience.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** Shortly before the Buddha died, he told Ananda that they need not follow the minor rules. Ananda failed to ask him what minor rules he had in mind. As a result, they decided to keep the lot. That was a pity, because it established a large number of rules, but I suspect the Buddha wanted his legacy to be a set of principles, an interpersonal set of guidelines, that would, as Rinpoche said, govern the life of the community through consensus. He did not want an autocratic system of governance. He wanted the community to be modeled on some of the republican forms of government existing at his time. He was going against the main political models of his period, which was moving more toward autocratic monarchy. He resisted the tendency for society to rely on an absolute authority. He sought to set up a system of law, the dhamma, which would govern the life of the community through assembly. That's a crucial principle we can explore today, particularly in a society such as ours that has some curious resemblances. We are also trying to move away from autocracy toward a kind of pluralistic democracy.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** In addition to telling Ananda about not needing to follow the minor rules, the Buddha also told Kashyapa that vinaya rules should be

applied according to the country, the time, and the situation, which gives us a lot of room.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** With that in mind, we need to focus more of our attention on what's actually happening in people's lives now. We need to ask ourselves what they need. The dharma is not simply a tradition. It's a living thing that needs to relate directly to the lives of the people trying to practice here in the West.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Are there values that have developed in the West that create a difficult environment for some types of Buddhist practice? In the West, there has been a lot of rejection of authority, ritual, and religion, as well as tremendous emphasis on personal space.

**EIDO ROSHI:** It is true that there are quite a few students who reject the authorities and rituals and so on. The form is as important as spirit. If we don't follow the forms established by our teachers in ancient days, how can we testify that we have offered students the real taste of buddhadharma? If we don't stick to the ways we have inherited, and quickly Americanize, I am afraid the real taste of buddhadharma is lost. I am well aware that quite a few people reject the traditional ways, but still some people love them, and these people are the ones who have real devotion toward buddhadharma. That's all I have to say.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** Roshi, the great Japanese teacher, Muso Soseki, comes to mind. He was teaching at the time when the dharma was coming from China to Japan. He forbade his students to go study in China, saying simply, "If the buddhadharma isn't here, it isn't anywhere." I would echo his sentiment in talking about buddhadharma coming to the West.

We have to be aware that we live in a world where the shadow side of religion is on vivid daily display. Perhaps one of the things we can uniquely offer is a place for people to have deep and sustaining spiritual experiences without a lot of religion. In Zen, one of the three legs on the stool is great doubt. It encourages inquiry and taking truths as provisional. In a world where the shadow side of certainty—and particularly religious certainty—is on vivid display, that seems to me to be a central offering we can make.

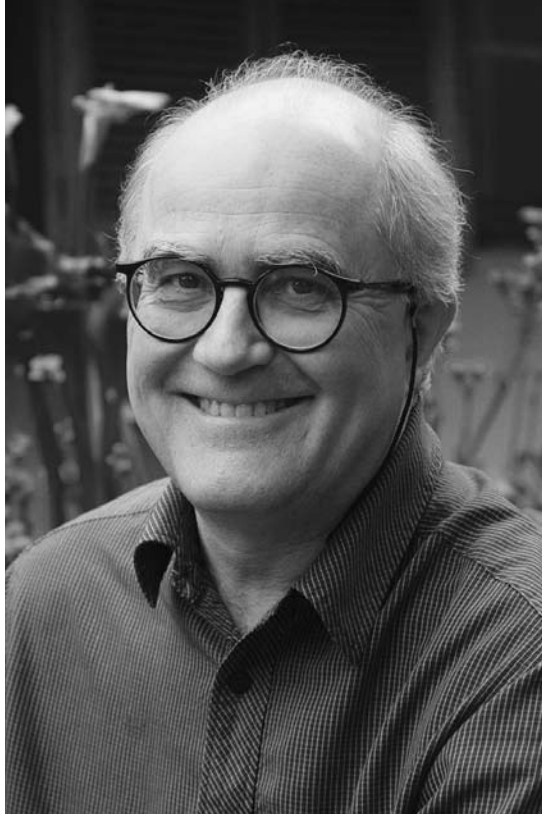
**EIDO ROSHI:** We are saying that it is fifty years since the introduction of buddhadharma to America and that it is time to evaluate. I disagree. To me, fifty years is nothing. It's too early to evaluate.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Are you also saying it's too early to leave behind or alter practices?

**EIDO ROSHI:** Yes, I guess so. We just keep doing practice, and when it has gone on for five centuries,

I have done protector practices, I've worn strings around my neck, and, frankly, I let go of all of that. It was too alien. Such practices are a function of how Buddhism was integrated into India and later Tibet, but whether they can be effectively transplanted here, I'm not so sure.

—Stephen Batchelor



then maybe history will judge us. People may look at us and say the transmission of buddhadharma from East to West took place during the twentieth century. It was great or it was terrible, whatever the case may be, but for us, it's just fifty years, which is a bit too early for me to evaluate and consider changing.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** The Indian master Chandrakirti addressed this concern with the analogy of monkeys swinging from one tree to the next. A skillful monkey won't let go of the branch it's holding on to until it gets a good grip of the next branch. If it lets go of the previous branch too soon, it will fall to the ground. That's a good way of thinking about transplanting the dharma in any country. We have to have some form of Western Buddhism or American Buddhism, but we have to take care that nothing whatsoever gets lost in the transformation.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** Eido Roshi, do you feel there is a possibility of Zen becoming marginal by being too conservative?

**EIDO ROSHI:** This is a difficult question. If we are talking about Zen involving koan study, some of the koans and the koan stories are quite subtle, perhaps exotic from a Western point of view. They are exotic enough from a Japanese point of view. But the key point is that one has to have a really lucid realization. Otherwise, koan study could simply become building up credits one after another. One must have the first real good breakthrough to the true taste of dharma.

I would also like to say that, sooner or later, Zen Buddhism will inevitably be Americanized, but here we have the possibility of returning to

the point in the thirteenth century before Soto and Rinzai arose as separate traditions. In Japan they can never be combined, but in America that could in fact be done. It's a most exciting time for us, to see the possibility of that kind of union coming about.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** I deeply respect those who commit themselves to following in the time-honored traditions of the various lineages, all of which are available to just about anyone in any city in America. For a young man or woman who wants to train in the dharma, that's what I feel they should do. They should not try to adapt anything, but go back to the source and train, putting aside Western assumptions and prejudices.

At the same time, we have the demands of our society. The world is calling out for a means to deal with the suffering of the modern world in a language that people who are not necessarily Buddhists can understand. As a practitioner, then, you are called upon to constantly reconsider your rootedness in tradition and at the same time respond, in perhaps unprecedented ways, to the global situation.

We might learn a great deal about that by looking back to the kind of dharma that was practiced in the sangha at the time of the Buddha. You don't get any sense at all that these men and women were doing ritualistic or devotional practices. There were no images of the Buddha until five hundred years after the Buddha's death. It was an open kind of community, comparable to the ancient Greek communities of Stoics or Epicureans, who did not think of themselves necessarily as religious. I'm not sure the Buddha and his followers thought of themselves in religious terms.

In the origins of our tradition, we find emphasis on qualities of mind and on practice, but very little sense of any formalism. Yet the traditions of today—the Japanese traditions, the Tibetan traditions—all of them have evolved particular forms of practice and styles of ritual. Of course, practitioners who have committed themselves to those have to practice them. But there's an important distinction between being rooted in a tradition and being stuck in a tradition. To be rooted in a tradition like Buddhism is absolutely necessary, but it's also possible to become attached to certain doctrines, to certain ways of doing things, that do not allow you to grow. They become another form of attachment. From rootedness, we need to be able to respond anew to what the world presents to us.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** I have great faith in the robustness of the dharma. It will survive our best efforts to either preserve or improve it. I spoke with my students about the questions we're addressing today, and they definitely felt that there is a danger of our practice here becoming too much of a self-improve-

## THE MORAL ROOTS OF ZEN

Zen practice is based on ethical and moral teachings, explains John Daido Looi. However, the Buddhist precepts are not rules meant to bind us but a way of life that leads to liberation.

When Zen arrived and began to take root in this country, there arose a misconception about the role of morality and ethics in the practice of the buddhadharma. Statements that Zen was beyond morality or that Zen was amoral were made by distinguished writers on Buddhism, and people assumed that this was correct. Yet nothing can be further from the truth. Enlightenment and morality are one. Enlightenment without morality is not true enlightenment. Morality without enlightenment is not complete morality. Zen is not beyond morality, but a practice that takes place within the world, based on moral and ethical teachings. Those moral and ethical teachings have been handed down with the mind-to-mind transmission from generation to generation.

The Buddhist precepts form one of the most vital areas of spiritual practice. In essence, the precepts are a definition of the life of a buddha, of how a buddha functions in the world. They are how enlightened beings live their lives, relate to other beings, make moral and ethical decisions, manifest wisdom and compassion in everyday life. The precepts provide a way to see how the moral and ethical teachings in Buddhism can come to life in the workplace, in relationships, in government, business, and ecology.

The precepts need to be understood clearly from the literal point of

view, from the perspective of compassion and reverence for life, and from the absolute, or “one-mind,” point of view. Their richness is wasted if we see them simplistically as a set of rules, a list of do’s and don’ts. They are not meant to bind but to liberate. In fact, they define a life that is unhindered, complete, free. What the precepts do is bring into consciousness that which is already there.

We live in a time period of considerable moral crisis, with an erosion of values and a fragmentation of meaning prevalent throughout the fabric of society. The crisis impacts on us personally, as a nation and as a planet. The injuries that we inflict on each other and on our environment can only be healed by sound moral and ethical commitment. That doesn’t mean being puritanical. It doesn’t mean being “moralistic.” These precepts have a vitality that is unique in the great religions. They are alive, not fixed. They function broadly and deeply, taking into account the intricacies and subtleties of conditions encountered.

There is so much to learn. The precepts are incredibly profound. Don’t take them lightly. They are direct. They are subtle. They are bottomless. Please use them. Press up against them. Push them. See where they take you. Make them your own. They are no small thing, by any measure. They nourish, they heal, and they give life to the Buddha.

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From *Invoking Reality: Moral and Ethical Teachings of Zen*, by John Daido Looi, forthcoming from Shambhala Publications.

ment project. Yet what they mainly wanted to say was that Buddhism is here and spreading, and it’s too late to put it back into the box. We have to ride the avalanche.

What happens when the dharma comes into the most self-absorbed, narcissistic culture in this quadrant of the galaxy? It’s a tough nut to crack, but what a fantastic challenge! I feel much more excitement than anxiety about the development of dharma here. Yes, we have different relationships with religion and authority, but that’s just part of the complex ground we find ourselves on. When I began teaching, I deliberately stepped from behind the archetype. I didn’t want to have that between me and the students. Are there times when I wish I could just say, “Do this because I’m the roshi and I say so”? Of course. But I have also found great virtue in consulting with people. I even changed some koan practices we were doing recently based on getting feedback from a mature group of koan practitioners. I have no desire to step back behind the archetype of the Zen teacher. I’m not saying that the traditional way was not good and that the new way is good. I’m only saying that there is a lot of life to work with in the collection of virtues and vices we find in the West.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** The traditional method is to dedicate oneself utterly to practicing one tradition. Is that being undercut in the West, where we have diverse forms of Buddhism, by a kind of shopping for enlightenment and mixing-and-matching mentality that can develop?

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** The diversity we have in the West is a real benefit. It can be confusing, but often that kind of confusion is good. It makes you question. If a teacher from one school says this is the true teaching of the Buddha, you can ask, “What about what the other guy says? What about what they’re doing over there?” You realize that Buddhism is a weaving together of threads that have grown through the course of history. That is *pratityasamutpada*, dependent arising. The benefit of Buddhism’s encounter with modernity is that Buddhists can have a much greater sense of historical consciousness, an understanding that forms necessarily shift and change.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** I encourage my students to learn meditation from Zen teachers, Theravada masters, and all the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Diversity enriches our path, but it is also essential for one to be clear about a path and stick to one method to get some results on that path.



**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** I am very grateful for the diversity we have here, to realize that I fit in a circle with lots of other people who hold different parts of the whole. People coming out of different traditions have different skills and emphases. Not everybody learns in the same way; not everybody practices in the same way. The kind of meditation I teach is not necessarily the answer to every question. At times I've suggested that someone do tonglen practice instead of meditation. They've benefited tremendously. I'm grateful for the cross-pollination and eager to see what will flower as a result. I don't think of the dharma as a thing that we pass from person to person. It's a living system all of us participate in. I love the risk of taking part in that kind of co-creation.

**BUDDHADHARMA:** So the benefits of the diversity outweigh any drawbacks?

**EIDO ROSHI:** Everyone in the modern world is saturated with this idea of benefit, merit, or virtue. It's all the same thing. I don't think in terms of what is beneficial, but I do feel we are living in a most exciting period of time. But what is important for us now is not Western Buddhism or Modern Buddhism. Shakyamuni Buddha did not have any koan except life and death, and he did not use any artificial koans. Let's return to what Shakyamuni Buddha did.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** I completely agree. We need a reformation that goes back to about 500 BCE in India when the Buddha lived, as best as we can reconstruct it. The dhamma did not spring out of thin air. It was a response to a particular time and place. It was embedded in earthbound human and social concerns. That's so often been lost sight of.

There is so much Buddhism that is taught that was never mentioned by the Buddha, such as absolute and relative truth. When I trained as a Gelugpa monk, for example, or in a Zen monastery, all of the teachings were to a large extent formulated by commentators on commentators on commentators. Fine, but the phrase "the Buddha said" was used in a way that was not terribly rigorous. In fact, it was code for saying, "This is what our tradition says."

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** Yes, we have to go back to the time of the Buddha and see how he lived, what he taught, and what his sangha did. We need to bring as much of the essential teachings from that original source as we can. I also encourage my students to go back to other periods of Indian Buddhism, to do sadhana practice as it was practiced at the time of Nagarjuna, for example, so we can bring some element of that tradition into our modern American Vajrayana Buddhism.

**JOAN SUTHERLAND:** In Buddhist history, we also have examples of people jumping out of the old ways of doing things. Great Master Ma and Shitou Xiqian, two very innovative teachers, flourished in eighth-century China, a time of unimaginable catastrophe. As a result, they trained people so they could respond in a national crisis. That kind of approach to Buddhism would seem very valuable for us as we face some pretty large crises on this planet.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR:** What will help us most is a secular Buddhism, but there's a confusion around the term secularization. It generally means taking out ecclesiastical elements and reducing everything to a kind of lay authority. I take secular in its more original sense. In Latin it means "of this age" or "of this time." I would seek a Buddhism that is of this time, a dhamma that is configured for this period. There have always been Buddhisms for particular times and places. That's what Buddhism is.

**PONLOP RINPOCHE:** I support secular dharma, particularly in the sense that Stephen is talking about: of this time. Buddhism is a philosophy about a particular way of life, but I don't feel it is necessary to reject any other element of Buddhism. For some people, it may be a religion. For other people, it's not. We always say that the Buddha taught 84,000 dharmas for 84,000 different kinds of mentalities of beings. Buddhism can manifest differently for each person.

**EIDO ROSHI:** We have a tendency to think that we are doing something good for the buddhadharma, but actually that is a most arrogant point of view, a misrepresentation. It is actually none of our business. We continue our own effort and practice; beyond that, we don't have to worry about the dharmata. It will take care of itself. **BD**

What happens when the dharma comes into the most self-absorbed, narcissistic culture in the galaxy? It's a tough nut to crack. Yes, we have different relationships with religion and authority, but that's just part of the complex ground we find ourselves on.

—Joan Sutherland