

On Being Dharma-centric

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This essay was written in response to a request from Ven. Phra Sunthorn Plamintr, a Theravāda monk originally from Thailand and now working in Illinois, to write an autobiographical account of my life as a Buddhist.

I used to have a type of nightmare that haunted me again and again. At some point during a dream, usually a perfectly ordinary one in which everything was slightly distorted but not necessarily in a frightening way, I would suddenly realize that I was in fact just dreaming, and a slow panic would begin to invade the dream. The panic would grow stronger, and I would be overcome with a feeling that I must wake up immediately. But the harder I tried to wake up, the more hopelessly I would become entangled in the dream. Trying to yell for help, or sometimes trying to bang my hand against the wall, I could not make a sound or a motion. During times of stress the dreams were more frequent and more intense, and frequently I would dream that I had finally managed to awaken, only to discover that I was in fact only in a different dream. Sometimes I had to go through as many as four or five dreams before I finally woke up in a sweat, and it would take several minutes before I could assure myself that I was really awake at last. On several occasions I woke up in a different room from where I had gone to sleep, evidently having walked in my sleep.

On one very cold winter I had this experience of going through dream after dream, trying desperately to wake up, and I found myself standing naked on the ledge of the window in my room several floors above the ground. At first it seemed simply like another nightmare on the way to becoming awake, but the cold air soon brought me fully to my senses. I gingerly crawled back into my room and listened for a long time to the pounding of my heart, all too aware that I could just as easily have fallen to my death. Sleeping began to seem like an enormously risky and terrifying undertaking, and I hated the very thought of it. But the more I forced myself to stay awake at night, the more nightmares I would have when sleep finally conquered me. It seemed as if I was spending all my time climbing through veils of dreams.

The year in which these panic-filled multiple dreams were at their worst happened to be the first semester of my final year in Beloit College, a small liberal arts college in southern Wisconsin. It was the autumn of 1966. Practically every American male I knew was preoccupied with the steadily increasing involvement of the United States in the war in Vietnam, but few young people had a clear idea of what was taking place over there, and in fact not many young people even among those who were supposedly well educated had a very clear idea of where exactly Vietnam was. It was just “over

there” somewhere. Some people talked with such alarm about the danger to American freedom posed by Communism in Vietnam that one could easily have the idea that it must be an island five miles off the coast of California. People argued constantly about the war, and several friendships came to an end as people took different sides on the issue of whether the United States had any business being involved in a war “over there,” but hardly anyone was informed about the history of the conflict or the culture of the Vietnamese people. People just argued, blindly and stupidly shouting slogans at each other and accusing each other of being either fascist warmongers or un-American Communist sympathizers.

I was definitely in the latter category, not only in the eyes of people who favoured the U.S. involvement in the war, but also in my own mind. Filled with a blind hatred of the nation of my birth, enraged by the mindless and incessant greed for power and material wealth and prestige that so many of my peer group displayed, outraged by the racism and intolerance and xenophobia of the society around me, I took consolation only in phantasies about destroying the evil American giant. Utopian visions, undoubtedly the legacy of my deep Yankee Puritanical roots, dominated my thinking and drove me to read the poetry and essays of the alienated Beat Generation, the American Transcendentalists, the Marxists and the Maoists. Reading such literature honed my contempt for the generation of which I was a part, a pampered and overfed generation whose social values and human sensibilities had been formed by the insipid vicariousness and complacent self-indulgence of a Hollywood motion picture and television culture that paradoxically celebrated both the superheroes of American mythology and the tasteless mediocrity of the suburban family next door.

Among the many things that I read about in my struggle to remain at war with my own generation was an anthology of writings by the ancient Stoics. I was deeply impressed when I read that Stoic teachers made their disciples, most of whom came from wealthy families, do humble types of work, the sorts of tasks ordinarily left to slaves. Only when disciples learned to bear the physical hardships and social embarrassment of doing a slave’s labours could they begin the arduous task of acquiring wisdom. Philosophy, which I had always regarded with a certain amount of suspicion, began to seem an enterprise of the greatest importance, for it involved using not only one’s intellect but the totality of one’s character towards the goal of learning how to live sensibly in an often senseless world. Upon reflection it became increasingly obvious that none of the causes I had so passionately taken up—civil rights, international peace in general and nuclear disarmament in particular, and the movement for conservation of natural resources and wildlife areas—could be achieved on the national or international level unless the population began to work first on their own individual characters. It was self-evident that before I could possibly be effective in any of these areas, I had to begin the task of reform with myself. As Gotama Buddha said, “One who is sunk into mud cannot by himself pull out another who is sunk into mud.”¹ There was so much to be done in just this preliminary task of getting myself out of the mud, that it seemed unlikely I would ever get around to dealing effectively with the larger social issues.

Before his retirement, my father was a field geologist with the United States Geo-

¹Sallekhasutta, *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*. Majjhima-nikāya. trans. I.B. Horner. (London: Pali Text Society, 1976) p. 54.

logical Survey, and from him I acquired a scientific frame of mind from as early as I can recall. The type of scientific spirit that he instilled in me was an attitude of skepticism towards all matters. He constantly urged me to avoid making hasty conclusions about things and to be willing at all times to modify my opinions in the face of new evidence and new experiences. Some of my earliest memories are of my father talking about vast expanses of space and time and impressing upon me how very tiny and insignificant human beings are and how very simple our minds are in comparison to the inconceivable complexity of the natural world. To think that we can really come to any sort of adequate understanding of the world and our place in it is laughable, and yet we have an undeniably strong curiosity. My father taught me to cherish this natural curiosity that is innate in living beings but to be constantly cautious of a false sense of certainty. Because of this strongly skeptical outlook, I developed from a very early age a contempt towards Christianity, partly because the only form of Christianity with which I ever came into contact was that of door to door evangelists who came regularly through the neighbourhood with their dire threats of hellfire for those who did not accept Jesus into their hearts. While still a very young pupil in grammar school I took childish delight in shocking my religiously conservative playmates by insisting that I was an atheist.

This hostility towards religion grew stronger every year, and by the time I was an undergraduate at Beloit College I was so obsessed with my war against religion that many of my friends grew quite tired of my obnoxious raving. Whenever I encountered people with religious beliefs, my feelings towards them alternated between a great anger at the stupidity of the views that had been inflicted upon them and that they would inflict upon others, and a pity for their minds that were so mired in dogmas; but at other times I felt amazed at the moral strength of these same people who angered me and evoked in me feelings of sympathetic sorrow, and I had to admire them, however begrudgingly. What impressed me in particular about many of these Christians was that they could accept my atheism much more easily than I could accept their Christianity. Their tolerance sometimes made me feel ashamed of my own intolerance.

The literature of the ancient Stoics, which led me to look also into the Cynics and the Skeptics and the other neo-Socratic traditions, provided me with the most important dimensions of religion and philosophy, namely, a deep sense of concern for the causes of justice and morality (which I had often admired in my Jewish and Christian friends) and a sense of intellectual integrity, a freedom from the chains of ideology and dogma, that good scientists usually managed to cultivate. The only thing that I found disappointing in the ancient philosophers was that they had somehow managed to become extinct, and there was nowhere to turn to find an authentic teacher in the classical traditions of Cynicism and Skepticism. Reading about them in books was inspirational but hopelessly vicarious. What one really needs is good human teachers.

It was not long after I began to find great comfort in the ancient Hellenistic thinkers that I also came into contact with Buddhism. The time was only a few weeks after the incident described above in which I had fought my way out of a dream only to find myself standing naked on a window ledge. Not long after that incident I left school, having decided not to complete the requirements for a degree, and went to live with my parents to await a call from the United States Army to appear for induction. While staying with my parents for that period of about two months, I enrolled in two seminars

being held in the local Unitarian Church. One seminar was on the trial and death of Socrates, which I found very moving, and the other was on the teachings of Buddhism. The seminar on Buddhism was led by a series of Buddhists who had come to live in the Denver area from various parts of Asia. All of them happened to be scientists, and each of them in his own way placed emphasis on how little conflict there was between the scientific mentality and the Buddhist mentality. Buddhism, they said, had no creeds or articles of faith or other forms of teaching that could be threatened by new discoveries in the natural sciences or the social or psychological sciences. Attracted by the prospect of a living tradition that had much of what I found so appealing in the ancient Greeks, I began to read an anthology of translations of Buddhist Sutras.

Reading about Buddhism proved to be both a little disappointing and a little fascinating. The simple and straightforward teachings that the Buddhist scientists had talked about were indeed to be found in Buddhist literature, but one had to sift these little gems of wisdom out of mountains of barely comprehensible jargon. I enjoyed many of the Theravāda Suttas, but the Mahayana material seemed hopelessly cluttered with inflated rhetoric and exaggerated claims, and I developed quite a distaste for it at first. The tantric material was even less appealing to my tastes than the Mahayana Sutras, and even my self-congratulatory sense of open-mindedness could not withstand more than very brief exposures to the seemingly endless labyrinth of pointless phantasies that the Mahayanists and Tantrics had devised. It was, however, quite intriguing that such a rich diversity of styles of teaching and literary tastes could coexist with no apparent animosity on the part of people who followed these widely divergent traditions. Being open to different ways of seeing things and thinking was something that I greatly admired as an abstraction, but in practice I found it virtually impossible to develop even a minimal willingness to be patient with types of thinking and acting that were not obviously rooted in the rational skepticism that I so admired.

Learning to be tolerant of people with a radically different understanding of Buddhism was a matter of great importance and much frustration in the late 1960s and early 1970s in North America. In 1967, very shortly after the seminar on Buddhism, I left the United States for Canada in the belief that I would never set foot in the country of my birth again. For the first eighteen months in Canada I lived in rural parts of the Western provinces and had little contact with other American exiles. Following the Stoic example, I cleansed myself of all my suburban sins by doing hard physical labour in the factories and on the farms of Manitoba, British Columbia and Alberta. During those months I read several books on Buddhism and made efforts to piece together whatever instructions I could find in various sources on Buddhist meditation. Meditation became part of my daily routine, but I could find few people in rural Alberta with whom to talk about Buddhism or meditation. My only contact with people who understood meditation was with a group of Quakers, whose example of love and kindness made a deep impression on me. I sat with them regularly in silent meetings, but aside from this small group of Quakers I found no one who had an interest in meditation practices of any kind. My reflections on Buddhist teachings were therefore very much formed in solitude. While there was no one available to reinforce my interpretations of Buddhism, there was also no one available to challenge them.

This situation changed dramatically in September 1968, when I decided to enroll in Carleton University in Ottawa. Ottawa is not a large city, but it is the national cap-

ital and is located in a relatively populous and cosmopolitan region of Canada, and the ambient culture and prevailing attitudes there bore little resemblance to what I had experienced several thousand kilometers to the west. Among the important differences at that time was the fact that a relatively large community of young Americans had settled in Ottawa, people who like me had left the United States in order to avoid military service. It was interesting to see how many of these people had picked up some familiarity with one or more of the forms of traditional Asian religions. Perhaps because a number of American conservative Christian ministers had been so vociferously patriotic and supportive of the American military involvement in Vietnam, it was natural for war resisters to develop a great mistrust of Christianity and to look for alternative religious traditions that more actively favoured peace as a way of life. So people read whatever they could get their hands on about Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism. But at the same time that large numbers of people were rejecting American forms of Christianity and the tasteless values of 1950s American consumerism, while also rejecting the puritanical mentality that emphasized “deferred gratification” and self-denial. People began to rediscover the joys of immediate pleasure.

Among the American war resisters in Canada, experimentation with drugs and alternative forms of sex were fairly common, and the majority of people that I knew personally who were interested in Buddhism were also interested in hallucinogenic drugs and free sex. Most of them seemed to like Buddhism because in their interpretation of the Buddha-dharma, the whole purpose of life is to become free of obsessive guilt and open to all forms of experience; from this it seemed to follow that Buddhist teachings condoned the spontaneous and unpredictable actions of the free spirit who lived by the 1960s slogan “Do your own thing” in complete disregard for future consequences. I was strongly opposed to the use of drugs, probably because I had done some experiments with peyote in 1964 and felt that drugs of that type did far more to confuse than to expand my mind, and I was particularly disturbed that people spoke of taking drugs as simply another form of Buddhist meditation. I got into many arguments over this matter. I pointed out that one of the five basic training precepts was to avoid the use of intoxicants that clouded the mind, and my friends replied that the precept only ruled out alcoholic beverages and not hallucinogenic drugs. Of course there were almost no real Buddhist teachers around, and so when differences of opinion about the interpretation of Buddhist teaching and practice arose, there was no means of settling the issues to anyone’s satisfaction. People just believed what they wanted to believe and called it what they wanted to call it. Some called it yoga, some called it Zen, some called it aboriginal shamanism and some called it witchcraft, but whatever they called it, it was in fact a spiritual stew made up of ingredients from all over the world and from every period of history, all randomly thrown together to be devoured by the indiscriminate tastes of a generation that managed to retain the minds of children in the bodies of adults.

The “Buddhism” of the North Americans of the Vietnam War generation was something with which I had very little patience. But at the same time I felt a strong bond with many of my fellow war resisters. We had the same enemies: hypocrisy, injustice, blind intolerance, ignorance and patriotic arrogance. And we had the same weaknesses, for we all had exactly the same faults of the society against which we were in rebellion; we too were hypocritical, unjust, intolerant, ignorant and arrogant, because we were, after

all, products of a society that had never really showed us how to be otherwise. Coming from similar backgrounds, having similar faults and driven by similar hate-filled dreams, we therefore had much in common.

As should be clear from the tone of everything that I have said up to here, the problem that was the greatest for me personally was that of coming to terms with the great arrogant anger and contempt I had for people who seemed to be wrongheaded. This was no trivial issue, and I struggled with it for years in many different forms. On the one hand it seemed quite obvious that human society is in general in very deep trouble. The people of the past two centuries have pursued technological growth to such an extent that humankind has obliterated thousands of other life forms from the planet, and we have done irreversible damage to the soil, to the rivers and lakes and oceans and to the atmosphere. We are like thieves who have stolen the means of livelihood from future generations in order to increase our own comfort and pleasure. This blind and selfish pursuit of comfort and pleasure increases daily, and despite the fact that the disastrous consequences are well documented, very few people are willing to take the step of simplifying their own lives and learning to be content with less. Especially in North America we now take it for granted that we can have fresh fruit and vegetables all year round, fine products made by inexpensive labour all over the world, warm dwellings in winter and cool air in summer regardless of what the natural weather may be like outdoors, personal luxuries and conveniences in unprecedented abundance, and a battery of sophisticated weapons that will destroy anyone who might try to take any of it away from us. When one contrasts the way we live with the crushing poverty and widespread starvation found in most other parts of the world, most of us North Americans live at a level of opulence that is well beyond being obscene, and we believe it is our natural right to do so.

Surely this is a matter about which one is justified in feeling outraged and ashamed. Surely it is a cause of legitimate concern that so many of the world's peoples seek to solve their problems by systematic violence against people who belong to different ethnic groups, different language families, different religions and different nations. And surely one is justified in feeling alarmed at how much valuable time is being wasted by people who live in a the phantasy world of "alternative spirituality" or New Age thought as it is sometimes called: the eclectic world of astrology, the occult, mysticism and pseudoscience that is still, unfortunately, quite fashionable among many of the people of my generation. What all these alternative spiritual paths have in common is that they are perfectly incompetent to deal with the problems of modern man. It is heartbreaking to see people wasting time on them. And on the personal level it is a great struggle for me not to become a little impatient with the blindness of our times. The greatest problem of all is to learn to be patient without at the same time becoming altogether passive and indifferent, without shrugging the problems of the planet off and saying "I no longer care."

It is in this struggle that the teachings and practices of Buddhism have been a great friend. It would be impossible to cite all the passages from Buddhist suttas and academic works that have provided guidance in this struggle alone, but one group of verses from the Sutta Nipāta has been particularly useful to me in the fight against arrogance.

A person who persists in opinions regards as a waste everything other than

that which he regards as best in the world, thinking “it is supreme!” Therefore he fails to get beyond disputes. Then grasping at just that which he sees as commendable to himself in rules of conduct and vows and in what is seen, heard or thought, he regards everything else as a loss. The experts call that thing a shackle owing to which one considers all else a waste. Therefore the monk should not pursue rules of conduct and vows and what is seen, heard or thought. Nor should he form an opinion of people either on the basis of knowledge or on the basis of rules of conduct and vows. Nor should he present himself as an equal, nor should he think of himself as lowly or excellent. Giving up assumptions and not taking them up again, he does not pursue even knowledge. Indeed he does not side with any party in controversies, nor does he believe any opinion whatsoever.²

Being attached to one’s own way of looking at the world can easily lead to looking upon oneself as superior to those who see things differently. One can very easily fall into the trap of thinking of other people as worthless or even as downright dangerous because of the views they hold or because of the actions they perform. And once one has deemed another person or another people as worthless, it is not a long step to feeling that one is justified in somehow being rid of them. Human history is one long tragic story of societies ridding themselves of unwelcome forms of nonconformity to their own preferred values. It takes the form of international wars, civil wars, revolutions, uprisings, riots, acts of terrorism, religious persecution, racism, genocide, incarceration, systematic torture, brainwashing, capital punishment and dozens of other methods by which one part of the human population imposes its collective will upon another part of the population. But the root cause is a deep attachment to a particular way of viewing the world and one’s own place within it.

By oneself alone is evil done, and it is oneself who suffers; by oneself the evil is not done, and by one’s self one becomes pure. The pure and the impure come from oneself; no man can purify another.³

O let us live in joy, in love amongst those who hate! Among men who hate, let us live in love. O let us live in joy, in health amongst those who are ill! Among men who are ill, let us live in health. O let us live in joy, in peace amongst those who struggle. Among men who struggle, let us live in peace.⁴

It is easy to see the faults of others, but difficult to see one’s own faults. One shows the faults of others like chaff winnowed in the wind, but one conceals one’s own faults as a cunning gambler conceals the dice. If a man sees the sins of others and for ever thinks of their faults, his own sins increase for ever and far off is he from the end of his own faults.⁵

The ability to live in peace among the war-makers is not a consequence of divine grace, nor is it the outcome solely of one’s genetic makeup or social upbringing, but

²Sutta Nipāta 796–800. Translation mine.

³Dhammapada 165. Trans. Juan Mascaro.

⁴Dhammapada 197–199.

⁵Dhammapada 243–254.

rather it is an acquired skill. Developing the skill begins with the determination to forget about the shortcomings of others and simply to focus on one's own. As this skill is developed, one learns to be responsive to the basic humanity of all peoples and to be unmindful of the ideological, cultural and national differences that separate people into artificial categories. In practical terms the skill can be achieved by some form of loving kindness meditation as taught in classical Buddhism. There are various methods of doing this meditation, but the method that I first learned was the one in which one begins by cultivating a sense of loving care for oneself by wishing oneself to be free of physical and emotional pain, and continues by learning to transfer that same loving care to friends, to casual acquaintances, and finally to enemies. The goal is to be able to wish as strongly for an enemy's happiness and freedom from pain and conflict as for one's own happiness and freedom from conflict. Since the characteristic in myself that caused most pain to myself and to those around me was my arrogance, impatience with stupidity and tendency to let impatience grow into destructive anger, I made a habit of setting aside a little time every day to do this loving kindness meditation. Eventually it began to have a positive effect.

One phase of my life in which it was made very clear to me how powerful the meditation on loving kindness could be was during my time as a graduate student at University of Toronto. While at Carleton University in Ottawa I had made the decision, urged on by Prof. Nalini Devdas who had guided me with great kindness through the study of Buddhism and Sanskrit, to pursue the study of classical Indian Buddhism as my academic specialty. So in 1972 I entered the M.A. programme in Sanskrit and Indian Studies, and in 1974 I went on to enter the Ph.D. programme there. During these hectic years of study, I became rather lax in meditation practice, and the regular loving kindness meditation was almost completely set aside. In 1976 a crisis arose in the department that eventually resulted in the decision by the Deans of the University of Toronto to close the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies. The details of the conflict were far too complex to discuss here. Essentially the problem was that factions had evolved in the faculty. These factions were not founded on intellectual issues but were the result almost solely of differences in personality among the professors. Several of the key professors had come to hate each other for reasons known only to themselves, and their mutual animosity grew so severe that they began putting obstacles in the paths of each other and in the paths of the students of their rival professors. The bitterness became so intense that not a single student escaped the fate of having to undergo a great deal of pain and inconvenience. There were no victors, but every single person, whether student or professor, became a victim of this uncontrolled childish hatred. Being one of the many victims of this collective stupidity, I very naturally became angry, and in my anger I got into the habit of mocking and ridiculing all the professors and speaking about their shortcomings constantly to other students. Such actions served in many ways to fan the flames of hatred. I made many people laugh as I mocked the professors, but the laughter was always at their expense. It was not my specific intention to increase hatred, but that was the outcome of my careless use of cruel and biting satire in the situation.

It did not become clear to me how destructive my own actions had been until two years later. After the crisis of 1976 I completely withdrew from the academic scene for eighteen months. So great was my disgust with the pettiness of the professors that

I had lost all desire to pursue an academic life and chose instead to earn a living doing manual labour, my Stoic remedy for all psychological ills. During this time of self-imposed exile from the academic world, one of my former teachers came to Toronto for a visit. Dr. Shoryu Katsura had taught me classical Tibetan and had been the instructor in many of the courses I had taken in Buddhist philosophy. While he was teaching me he was himself a senior Ph.D. student, and when he finished his doctorate in 1974 he returned to Japan in order to help his aging father take care of the family Jodo Shinshu Temple. On his visit to Toronto in 1977 he learned that I was no longer pursuing my studies but was earning a livelihood doing manual labour, and he made an effort to find where I was. He invited me to dinner and asked me whether I would consider going to Japan to resume my studies. He urged me to apply for a scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education for foreign students to study in Japan. My feelings were very mixed at the time, for I was happy doing labour and saw the academic world as a source of endless frustration and pain. But Dr. Katsura strongly urged me to realize that I had a responsibility to make better use of the education that society had given me, so in the end I agreed to apply for the scholarship. Within a few months I heard that the application had been accepted, and by the end of 1977 I was living in Hiroshima, feverishly trying to learn Japanese and to get back into the habit of being an intellectual again instead of an honest working man.

The sixteen months that I lived in Japan proved in many ways to be a major turning point in my life. In the first place I was overwhelmed with gratitude that someone had gone so far out of his way to help me. As I began to settle into the new routine I had many occasions to reflect on kindness and on hatred. One afternoon I went outside to play baseball with the students of the Indian Philosophy Department of Hiroshima University, and we played until dark. When we came back into the study room of the department, Professor Uno, the chairman of the department, was busy binding books for his students. I found it moving that he would care for his students in this way, because I had grown unaccustomed to professors doing such acts of kindness. Eventually I observed that he stayed late almost every evening to bind books or do other tasks that would make life easier for the students in his department. Once I mentioned Professor Uno's kindness to Professor Katsura, and he said simply "Professor Uno has known suffering." I went back to my apartment and sat down and spent several hours thinking about that simple statement. Tears came to my eyes as I thought about what a beautiful way had been found to deal with one's own personal suffering: to transform it into kindness towards others. Once again I made loving kindness meditation part of my daily routine, and I made a special effort to feel kindly towards the Toronto professors at whose hands not only I but all my fellow students had suffered.

A second incident that had a very powerful effect on me in Japan was visiting the museum that chronicles the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. There is no point in even trying to describe the impact that it has on one to see the evidence of so much concentrated suffering. What so impressed me about the atomic bomb museum, however, was the way that the exhibits universalize the pain of Hiroshima. Rather than being a testimony exclusively to the sufferings of the victims of the atomic bomb, the museum manages to draw attention to the enormity of unnecessary suffering caused by war in general. Never once during my sixteen months in Hiroshima did I feel any sense of hostility towards the Americans for using the atomic bomb; rather I

saw again and again a strong determination to get the message out to the world that war must not be allowed to happen. As someone once observed, war is the last resort of the incompetent. Never have I seen that message more forcefully and so tastefully made as in Hiroshima. The city as a whole was another example to me of the power of transforming personal tragedy into universal kindness. It was an example that I shall never forget.

A third aspect of the stay in Japan was that I encountered Buddhist temples and practising Buddhists on a daily basis and eventually came to see that, aside from students and professors in the universities, not many people had much formal knowledge of Buddhist teachings. Repeatedly I encountered people who told me they felt that Buddhist philosophy and the sutras were very deep and almost impossible for ordinary people to understand. But this did not deter people from chanting sutras or copying them in beautiful calligraphic style and paying homage in various other ways, and it also did not prevent them from trying to embody the spirit of compassion. Seeing this forced me to re-examine a number of the assumptions I had acquired through the purely scholarly approach to Buddhist ideas; in particular, practices that I had once been inclined to dismiss as peripheral to Buddhism proper began to seem like perfectly natural ways of cultivating the wisdom and compassion that lies at the heart of Buddhism. Chanting and burning incense, for example, had always struck me as completely frivolous activities that had no connection with the “real” Buddha-dharma whatsoever. I associated these actions with magic and mechanical religion. My only experience with incense was that North American hippies had used it in great abundance to mask the odours of marijuana smoke, so it did not have particularly spiritual connotations to me. But when I actually saw Japanese Buddhists chanting and burning incense and bowing before Buddha images, it was evident that when done in the right frame of mind such activities were hardly different from the various other forms of self-cultivation and meditation that I found so respectable and effective.

On one occasion while on a side trip to Korea, I visited a temple on a scorchingly hot summer day, and there I saw a very elderly woman doing prostration rituals. Despite being soaked with sweat and obviously stiff with age, this woman simply did prostration after prostration with such serenity that she seemed wholly unconcerned with either the blistering heat or the inevitable pains of an aged body. Here was a practice that I could not quite fit into the theoretical framework I had of the Buddhist path, because it had quite frankly never once occurred to me that one might develop and strengthen one’s resolve by performing prostration. But as soon as I saw this woman doing her prostration exercises with such calm and single-mindedness, I said to myself “Look here, you arrogant and condescending Sanskrit scholar, doing a few prostrations might be just what you need to help yourself down to a more humble vantage point.” Before long prostrations became part of my practice.

Returning to Canada from Japan proved difficult. I had almost no money, and was trying to finish writing my Ph.D. dissertation. I learned on getting back that my department had been closed down owing to the personal feuds among the professors, but it would still be possible for me to submit a dissertation. Many of the professors were still working at the University of Toronto but no longer in the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies. A fellow graduate student in that programme had spent eight years researching and writing a dissertation on Sanskrit dramaturgy, and after

an intense summer of very hard work she managed to submit a manuscript over 700 pages long. As the time grew near for her to defend her work, signs began to emerge that the old feuds among the professors were still alive, despite the professors having been placed in different departments to keep them from seeing one another. It was also becoming increasingly clear that my colleague was going to be caught in the middle of the fights among the professors. The deans also sensed that trouble was brewing, so they sent observers to the thesis defense to ensure that nothing went wrong. Despite their very best efforts, things went terribly wrong. A very serious argument broke out before the defense even began, and the air was charged with hostility during the entire examination. When it was all over, there were not enough votes in favour of awarding my friend the Ph.D. The deans immediately ruled that the examination had not been properly conducted, so it was not put on her record that she had failed the examination, but she was also not awarded a Ph.D. Officially it was as if nothing had happened at all. It was as if she had simply never submitted her thesis and no one had ever read it. After so many years of dedicated work on a topic she dearly loved, this was a cruel turn of events. There was nothing that we could do, nor could the University of Toronto do anything more than to offer my friend a second chance to defend her work.

It is a terrible thing to see an innocent person victimized by someone else's carelessness or malice. It leaves one feeling helpless and incapable of finding any words that bring comfort to the victim. On such occasions I usually find a great conflict arising within myself. On the one hand I am usually inclined to view personal tragedy from a "philosophical" perspective. Not getting a Ph.D. is, after all, of no great importance in the greater scheme of things. The ill fortune of my friend's not getting what she had spent the better part of her adult life trying to get was a tragedy that had to be borne by her alone, for in the eyes of the world at large the event was quite simply of no consequence. It was simply an event like any other, of no greater moment than the falling of a leaf on an autumn day. But such a cold philosophical perspective on ill fortune provides little comfort to the victim. On the other hand, I am often inclined to try to have sympathetic feelings for the victim. But when the victim's feelings are intense anger, how can one encourage another to continue dwelling on the anger until it festers into an incurable emotional wound? Telling someone "You have every right to be angry and full of thoughts of revenge, for you were treated badly by another's stupidity and cruelty" would in the long run be most harmful, but that is often precisely what the victim wishes to hear. Then again, there is no point in simply trying to divert the victim's attention from the ill fortune, because sooner or later the victim must come to terms with the tragedy. It seems that whatever one says or does, even doing or saying nothing, only makes matters worse. This state of affairs has often made me reflect on how very incompetent I am helping others when help is most needed.

Perhaps one can even make the general point that most human beings are inadequate to the task of offering one another true help and comfort. Nowhere is this inadequacy more apparent than in all the many religions that humanity has devised. Our imaginations have populated the universe with gods and demons and all manner of spirits and forces on whom we can blame our misfortunes and in whom we can have false hope for our escape from suffering. Buddhism itself has taken on the myth of karma and rebirth to drive home the point that ultimately we have no one to blame but ourselves for all our afflictions. The myth of karma is no less cruel, and no more

likely to be true, than any of the other religious myths that humankind has devised to deal with its collective anguish. While it is possible that it may provide people with some small amount of comfort to believe in karma and rebirth, it is also possible that it does very little good in the long run to encourage people to believe stories that have no real grounding but can only be acknowledged in the final analysis as arbitrary fictions. Since the mandate of Buddhism is to help people to learn to be at ease in a world of impermanence and uncertainty, and since this mandate cannot very well be fulfilled if all we can do is ask people to change dogmas rather than to give up dogma altogether, and since there is no better reason to accept the story of karma and rebirth than there is to believe any other mythology, it is one of the many outdated dogmas that may well be discarded as Buddhism moves into the modern world.

Speculating about what kind of Buddhism might emerge in the modern world is not in itself a very productive exercise, but there might be a point in expressing one's views about the kind of Buddhism that we need. In my opinion what humanity desperately needs in the modern age is to face reality very directly and very squarely. A major part of human reality is that we simply do not know what reality as a whole is all about. We do not really know how the universe works, and we do not really know even how we ourselves work. Our understanding of the physical body is very impressive compared to, say, the Buddha's knowledge of the body, and our knowledge of the mind and the emotions has also made great progress since his time. But this should never blind us to the fact that we still know very little and probably never can get more than curiosity-arousing glimpses into the overall picture. Moreover, to pretend that we do understand is often to take enormous risks with the very ability of this planet to sustain life. This is not at all to say that we should not be curious and try to learn as much as possible about everything we can. Rather it is to be constantly conscious of the fact that we can never learn more than a fraction of what we really must know. Life is, and always must be, a frightfully risky business. Religion and philosophy should enhance our awareness of the risks, not shield them from our eyes behind a veil of pretty stories and palliative rituals.

An exercise that I find very useful is to imagine the worst possible kind of universe. Imagine a universe in which events are almost perfectly random, making it virtually impossible for sentient beings to learn from their experiences. Imagine a universe in which there is absolutely no justice. Imagine that people who are cruel and vicious get away with their malicious actions, often without even feeling a twinge of guilt. Imagine that some people dedicate their lives, individually and collectively, to producing things of beauty and benefit only to have them destroyed either by natural circumstances or by the negligence or meanness of other human beings. Imagine that people who have great integrity and honesty and ability are often overlooked in favour of people who are deceitful and hungry for personal power. Imagine that many of the people who control human destiny are opinionated, ill-informed and incompetent. Above all, imagine that there is no rhyme or reason to things happening as they do. And after imagining all this, begin to recognize that there is no reason to think that the world is otherwise. There is every reason to wish that it were otherwise, but there is no reason to think that it actually is otherwise. This first part of this exercise might be a little discouraging. But the second part of it is to think of the things that have gone well in one's own personal life, however few those things may be, and to feel grateful for them. Then think of the

very small number of things that are within our understanding and control, and realize what a tremendous difference it can make on our own outlook on the otherwise bleak landscape if we choose, in those small areas where we can make a little difference, to be cheerful rather than bitter, kind rather than mean, cooperative rather than obstructive. We have absolutely no one anywhere to help us, and so we can only help ourselves, even if only in these small ways. There will be no justice at all unless we make it. There will be no comfort unless we provide it. There will be no freedom unless we bestow it. Developing the habit of thinking something like this, I believe, is the only good means we human beings have of collectively beginning to pull out of the horrible downward spirals of retributive warfare and the technological rape of the planet.

Last year sometime I happened to be listening to a radio programme on important breakthroughs in medical research. A doctor was being interviewed about the part he had played in finding the causes of a certain fatal disease. The enthusiastic interviewer said "Can we expect that within another five years there will be a cure available for this disease and that people will no longer die of it?" The physician replied "Yes. Ten years from now it may well be that no one will die from this disease. They will then, of course, only die of something else." There is, I think, much to be learned from this doctor's attitude. Rooted in the realization that death neither can nor should ever be eliminated, the physician nevertheless strives to postpone each individual death as long as possible. For every patient the overall treatment is, in the final analysis, going to be a failure, for the patient must die of something. This is no call to be bitter or full of despair or depressed, because looked at in another way, every day of life is almost a miracle. A very similar attitude must be cultivated by those who work for peace, justice, sanity, and ecological and economic reform. Ultimately, no matter how many battles we may win, we will inevitably lose the war. Ultimately, humanity will vanish from the universe, and so eventually will all forms of life and consciousness. Long after life is no longer even a memory, there being no mind left to have memories, the planet will crumble, and the sun will die. After that, who knows? Given the overwhelming odds against us, then, every day that we manage not to perish is a cause of great wonder and joy. Let us strive to have several more such days. Failing that, let us strive to live in harmony just for today, just for this very moment.

Attitudes such as these are, I hope, what Buddhism will foster in the West and in the modern world in general. Classical Buddhism is a way of approaching life that has a great capacity to be in tune with our times. There is even a sense in which it has a great capacity to fulfill many of the dreams that Europeans had when they bullied their way onto the North American continent. That there is something very Buddhist about the traditional concept of America struck me when I visited the United States a while ago. Two years ago it happened that I had some work to do in Washington, D.C., and I had a few hours of spare time in which to see some of the sights of the downtown area. The District of Columbia is a city full of monuments and memorials. The Lincoln Memorial and the obelisk dedicated to George Washington have become familiar to people around the world, if only because pictures of them appear on American currency. Less famous but to my mind the most beautiful of the memorials to heroes from the American past is the Jefferson Memorial. It is a stupa-shaped marble dome overlooking a beautifully placid body of water. Inside there is a large statue of Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), third president of the United States and one of the au-

thors of the Declaration of Independence. When I entered the memorial it happened to be nearing sunset, and few people were present. The atmosphere was deeply tranquil and serene, as inside a great temple, and I could not resist sitting on a stone bench and doing zazen for some time.

Afterwards I began to read some of the words inscribed inside the monument. My eye was caught in particular by one sentence carved in marble on the walls that encircle the statue of Jefferson: "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Tears came to my eyes as I read these words, and I found myself looking up at the face of Jefferson and saying aloud "Where now is that country you founded?"

Thoughts turned to my reason for being in Washington. I had been invited to be on a panel to adjudicate grant proposals made to the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the day had been spent looking at numerous research proposals by the nation's leading scholars. The process is a very painful one, because there are simply more excellent proposals than there is funding to finance them, and the result is that truly excellent research projects receive either no funding at all or too little funding to carry out the proposed research as well as it deserves to be carried out. The Reagan administration did not place a high priority on academic research, and funding in this area reflects the low esteem scholarship has in the eyes of those who control how money is spent. In contemplating the effect that these people are having on the civilization not only of the North American continent but of the whole world, I am reminded of these words of the philosopher Kant, written in 1784:

Although...our world rulers at present have no money left over for public education and for anything concerning what is best in the world, since all they have is already committed to future wars, they will still find it in their own interest at least not to hinder the weak and slow, independent efforts of their peoples in this work.⁶

There has been a strongly demoralizing undercurrent of fear on the part of people who work for the NEH and other agencies that fund research in science and the humanities—fear that the leadership of these agencies will be taken over more and more by Christian fundamentalists, ultra-nationalists and other elements of the American right, people who certainly do not support and who might even be willing to hinder "the weak and slow, independent efforts" of people who are striving for what is best in the world. The American right, for all its mawkish flag-waving sentimentality for the lost greatness of the American past, does not have a strong record of honouring Jefferson's "hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Rather, its hostility is reserved only for those forms of tyranny, real or imagined, that are politically allied to the Soviet Union or Cuba. Tyranny that serves American political interests is easily accommodated. The American right has delivered to the world a nation that is a grotesque parody of the beautiful ideals upon which it was founded.

But that is a topic to be discussed in another forum. What I wish to pursue now is a thought that hit me very forcibly as I looked at the face of the statue of Jefferson: this

⁶From an essay called "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" in Immanuel Kant, *On History* trans. ed. introd. Lewis Beck White (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1963), p. 23.

was a very Dharma-centric man who tried to found a Dharma-centric nation. There is perhaps something to be learned from the failure of this noble experiment. I do not yet have a clear idea of what can be learned, but it seems a worthy thing to think about for a little while.

Let me begin by explaining what I mean by the expression “Dharma-centric.” Christian theologians sometimes make a distinction between theocentric and Christocentric theology, depending on whether the principal focus is upon the universalistic concept of God that is at the center of not only Christianity but also Judaism and Islam and some forms of Hinduism or whether the focus is upon Jesus Christ as unique saviour of unworthy sinners. Adapting that terminology somewhat, I think we could speak of various types of Buddhism as being Buddha-centric, Dharma-centric or Sangha-centric, depending on which of the three jewels is held as the principal focus of one’s practice. Some forms of Buddhism could even be described as Guru-centric, owing to the strong emphasis placed on devotion and loyalty to one’s personal teacher. What it means to be Guru-centric, Buddha-centric and Sangha-centric is perhaps self-explanatory, but “Dharma” is a particularly elusive word and has acquired more than its share of mystification over the millennia. The principal meaning of “dharma” according to Indian commentators was simply virtue (*guṇa*). The dharmas of a thing are the features and characteristics by which it is known and distinguished from other things. The dharma of the Buddha, then, is that characteristic by which he was distinguished from other mortals, because of which he stood out. What makes an awakened (*buddha*) person awakened, and therefore distinct from the masses of foolish people (*bāla-pūthuj-jana*), is just his wisdom. Therefore the Buddha-dharma is the key virtue of the Buddha, and the key virtue of the Buddha is just his wisdom.

Wisdom is by its very nature difficult to codify. True wisdom is always subtle and dynamic and rooted in very particular and concrete situations. It can never be successfully captured in static words and phrases and rules and formulas and creeds, because words deal only with broad generalizations and not with concrete situations. Wisdom cannot possibly be institutionalized. It cannot be made into something formal. Human history, insofar as it is a history of human institutions, whether religious or political in nature, is a tragic testimony to the simple fact that wisdom defies formalization and formalization makes a mockery of wisdom. Wisdom is an outlook, an attitude characterized by open-mindedness and impartiality and freedom from prejudice and dogma; wisdom is not doctrines or slogans or adherence to any sort of orthodoxy. Because wisdom can never successfully be codified or formalized, and because it is by its very nature expressed in openness, it follows that wisdom can never be the exclusive property of any one religious or philosophical system. This point is worth belabouring, even at the risk of becoming a little tedious, because it is common to find Buddhists who regard the Buddha-dharma as “the teachings of the Buddha” or “the doctrines of the Buddha” rather than as the essence of wisdom that Buddhist teachings try, sometimes rather awkwardly and clumsily, to convey. And it is even possible, unfortunately, to find Buddhists who feel that the institutions of the Buddhist religion embody more wisdom than do other formalized religions and who have a rather narrow-minded contempt for all forms of wisdom other than that which is found in some Sutra or spoken by some high-ranking member of the formally ordained Sangha.

Being Dharma-centric, then, means making wisdom itself the very centre of one’s

life. It means being philosophical in the root sense of that word: in love with wisdom. It was because Jefferson came from a tradition that tried very hard to do just that—to make wisdom the centre of their lives—that I call him Dharma-centric. Jefferson was not a particularly religious man if being religious is measured by outward signs of piety. He was a Deist, a person who believed in the so-called “philosopher’s God.” The philosopher’s God is a rather abstract and remote notion of the perfect goodness towards which all intelligence strives; the Deist’s God was sometimes called an “absentee lord,” because most Deists did not believe in direct divine revelation. Jefferson compiled a book called “Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth,” in which he took passages from the Gospels that reflected a strong sense of morality and excluded all those passages that seemed in violation of human reason and common sense. The essence of religion for Jefferson was morality, and the essence of morality was not formal adherence to rules and laws but rather to the single principle of thoughtfulness and kindness towards others. A product of his time, Jefferson was deeply influenced by Bacon, Newton and Locke. From them he inherited a deep appreciation of the supremacy of direct empirical investigation over speculation, and of the concrete experience of life in this world over the vague metaphysical and often self-contradictory promises of life on other planes of existence. In the language of his times, Jefferson’s interests were exclusively secular, that is, rooted in this world that can be experienced directly through the human senses rather than in mysterious other worlds that can be known only through revelation and occult methods.

These traits in Jefferson make him, I would argue, a man very much in accord with the attitudes that set Śākyamuni Buddha apart from other men of his time. For the Buddha too was secular in the sense described above. And I would also argue that there is a way in which both Thomas Jefferson and Śākyamuni Buddha failed in their missions of establishing wisdom among their fellow human beings. In neither case is the failure really theirs; the failure really lies with those who followed the formal expressions rather than the essence of wisdom. And here, I think, lies the most agonizingly difficult problem of the human condition. Wisdom cannot be transmitted. One person cannot make another wise. A person can at best act wisely and hope that others are wise enough to follow the good example. But the vast majority of people do not follow the good example. The masses of people, the *puthuj-jana*, are fools (*bāla*), who pursue immediate pleasures and gratifications for themselves and their own immediate families and clans and nations and are willing to act for themselves in complete disregard for how their actions affect other beings. That is the way of the ordinary folks, the *loka*. The way of the sage, on the other hand, is superior (*uttara*) to that of ordinary folks (*loka*): it is *lokottara*, which is often translated, rather badly, as supramundane or even transcendental.

Because the common masses of people are self-centered rather than altruistic, because they are ego-centered rather than Dharma-centered, the religious institutions of the masses tend to be filled with rituals that are designed to achieve those very things that fools want: property, social success, prestige, influence over others, comfort, luxury and a very long life in which to enjoy all these things, topped off by plenty of offspring to pass all these things on to. Appealing to magic to achieve such things when other means of gaining them have failed is what most folk religion is all about. It is also what most of life in general is all about. It is also what technology, the modern

man's magic, is all about. The most serious implication of all this, of course, is that as soon as a movement that begins in wisdom becomes popular, it is destined to be undermined by the folk trends that people bring with them. And yet, without popular support, no human institution can long survive. In many Asian countries the price that the Buddhist Sangha has paid for surviving for so long is that the spark of wisdom has been all but completely buried in a mass of folk superstitions: a haphazard assortment of benedictions, blessings, prayers for the dead, supplications for good fortune and prosperity, exorcisms of malicious forces and awe-filled reverence for the supernatural accomplishments of saints.

One might well ask: has Buddhism in fact survived any better in Asia than Stoicism has done in Europe? Was the wisdom of Buddhism any less snuffed out in Asia than the wisdom of the Greeks was snuffed out by the folk superstitions of pagan and Christian Europe? How one answers that will, of course, depend entirely on what one thinks the essence of Buddhism is. Now that Buddhism is becoming a factor in North American life, it is an appropriate time not only for North American Buddhists but also for Buddhists everywhere to give some thought to the question of what in Buddhism is essential and what can be discarded without harm.

Buddhism is now taking root in an environment that has been formed primarily by Jewish and Christian ways of thinking and behaving, and early Christianity itself was largely the product of the rich cultural diversity of Hellenistic civilization, which included Greek, Persian and Middle Eastern elements. North American Christianity is even more diversified than the earlier forms of Christianity, for it also includes many elements from the various European tribes. The great strength of Buddhism historically has been its ability to take full advantage of the cultural richness of each environment into which it has been transplanted. There is no reason to suspect that it will be any different in North America. Buddhists stand to learn a great deal from the Judaic and Christian traditions, for both of these religious traditions have benefited considerably from their incessant struggle to reconcile time-honoured ways of thinking with the ever new demands of historical change, and to reconcile the fluid perspectives of empirical science and common sense with the relatively static doctrines based on what was believed to be revelation. As a result of this struggle, the Jewish and Christian theologians and philosophers have gradually developed a science of interpretation and criticism that incorporates within it the finest intellectual achievements of humanity. Western-trained scholars of Buddhism, as well as many Japanese scholars influenced by European scholarship, have applied the critical methods of Judeo-Christian theological scholarship to the study of Buddhist thought with results that may be very challenging and stimulating to traditional Buddhists whose approach to studying Buddhism has often been somewhat more naive. During the past five hundred years Christians have had to learn to re-examine the very foundations of their traditional religious beliefs and to discard many teachings and attitudes that once were regarded as divinely sanctioned. They have repeatedly had to purge their institutions of the accidental by-products of human political interests and struggles for power and territory and domination.

To give just one concrete example of this process of getting rid of dangerously outmoded ways of thinking, since the tragedy of the genocide of European Jews in the early part of this century, Christians have had to come to terms with the fact that much of the classical Christian religion was built on a foundation that was anti-Jewish

to the core. Realizing that this bigotry against Jews was inexcusably uncivilized, many Christian leaders have been forced to question the authority of two millennia of anti-Jewish theology and they have had to question even the authority of the Christian Bible itself, much of which has an unambiguously anti-Jewish tone. Can a body of literature that places so much emphasis on the evil of one particular race of people really reflect the mind of God? To face such fundamental issues directly has taken enormous strength and courage on the part of all thinking Christians and has done much to strengthen Western society as a whole by making many Europeans and North Americans have the courage to be far less sure of themselves and of the doctrines that their society has historically taken for granted. By learning from this example of self-criticism and self-transformation that the Christians have given us, the Buddhists of North America may be able to build a vital new tradition of Buddhism that comes close in spirit if not in form to the original way of Śākyamuni Buddha and his early followers, for that early Buddhism was also above all a movement of self-improvement through self-examination.

It has been many years since I last had a nightmare. Although I have not completely rooted out my impatience and intolerance of those who think differently, the practice of Buddhist forms of meditation has helped me make some progress towards a less childish mentality. As I meet other Buddhists in North America, I see many of them experiencing the same struggles with their intolerance and prejudices that I experienced with mine. I look forward to working with them in the task of helping our world become more mature through a Dharma-centric religion. Let us make the foundation of our religion the habit of constantly reappraising the foundation of our religion. Let us make our central practice the incessantly critical re-examination of our central practice. By so doing, we may all be able eventually to penetrate the veil of successive dreams until we are, at last, fully and unmistakably awake.