

Making the most of the human condition

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TALK #1

In the beginning was the human condition: the Buddha's new way to work with it

This workshop is billed as a *secular* Buddhist workshop. Secular Buddhism is a newly-labelled movement, mainly in the English-speaking part of the western world. But the cultural adaptations of Asian-Buddhist concepts, practices and organisational forms, that the label now covers, have been accruing – spontaneously and unlabelled – for around two decades. Secular Buddhism is not a ‘school’ of Buddhism: it holds to no orthodoxy, and is already quite a diverse *movement*. It is not interested in a new sectarian development, but rather in bringing deep, coherent dharma practice within the cultural reach of us in the west.

Secularity

To start off, we need to clarify what *secularity* implies. In popular parlance, ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ are opposed terms. There is undoubtedly a certain tension between what we understand to be secular as opposed to religious, but for the purposes of this workshop I’d ask you to place a question mark over any sense that secularity is simply the negation of religion.

We can draw more useful senses of secularity from its etymology: it comes from *saeculum*, Latin for (originally) a human lifespan and (later) an age or century – as in the French *siècle*, century. So firstly, secularity draws our attention to *particular historical-cultural contexts and situations* (very much in the spirit of New Zealand’s great historiographer JGA Pocock) as necessary background to understanding any historical figure’s utterances. And how we apply any inherited set of practices and ideas likewise depends on our sensitivity to our own specific historical-cultural circumstances.

A second implication of secularity arises from this focus: if all important utterances address specific issues in particular contexts, they can’t be treated as *timeless truths*, to be accepted and applied – anywhere, any time – just as they stand. Those who come later need to interpret and adapt them. Here we locate the main tension between secularity and many expressions of religion: religious people often treat their founder’s utterances as timeless truths to be accepted and applied at face value in all situations.

Of course, this or that religionist can quite unconsciously (and in some cases consciously) put an interpretive spin on 'original' teachings so as to shore up their own ideology and/or institutional power. We're all familiar with one form of this syndrome: fundamentalism.

By and large, secular Buddhists delve into the earliest record of the Buddha's own teaching, the Pali canon, as their starting point. There are two immediate problems:

- The Buddha didn't speak Pali, partly because it's an artificial language that hadn't been invented at the time, so we're already dealing not with the original wording but rather with a translation. And like *all* such ancient teachings, they have now passed through many hands, which have left blotches and fingerprints on the text, often quite self-interested and unconsciously prejudicial ones; and
- Subsequent schools have interpreted – commented on – the texts to give them a spin helpful to the school in question. We need to put the commentarial tradition to one side if we're to come to grips with the Buddha's own teaching.

So we'll never know for certain what the Buddha 'really said', still less what he 'really meant'. But fresh study of the texts in question can give us a plausible idea of what he most likely meant, and on that basis we can *productively* interpret the teachings and adapt them to our own needs and circumstances.

First teaching: the human condition, the tiger we learn to ride

If you've done Buddhism 101 in school or on the web, you'll think you know that the tradition rests on four so-called 'Noble Truths' that the Buddha supposedly declared in his very first teaching:

1. life is suffering;
2. craving is the cause of suffering;
3. the end of suffering is attainable; and
4. the noble eightfold path is the way to end suffering.

We're off to a poor start here. The Pali text we've actually inherited doesn't say anything of the sort. In fact, it now appears that the original Pali text didn't even contain the expression 'noble truths' (*ariya saccāni*), let alone any attempt at revelation in propositional, truth-claim form. For a discussion on this point, see Stephen Batchelor's article 'A secular Buddhism' which was published in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*.

To the best of our current knowledge, as set out in Mahavagga 1, 6.16–28, the following outlines what happened and what was said. I'll be following Stephen Batchelor's translations throughout, by the way. After his major awakening experience, the Buddha (as Siddhattha Gotama now calls himself) isn't sure if he can convey what he's learned to others. But out of compassion he decides to give it a go anyway. He chooses an audience of

five of his former associates from when he was on a path he subsequently rejected, namely asceticism (self-mortification). These five men are still following that path. So initially they resist what he says, which no doubt forces him to really work on, and experiment with, how to express his new insights into the human condition.

First he tells them he's found a path of practice – a 'middle way' – between two dead ends: *addiction to* pleasure through sensuality, and *addiction to* self-punishment. We can label them hedonism and asceticism. Both are undignified and unfulfilling, the Buddha says. Hedonism – the obviously more popular dead end – is also 'low' and 'village-like'; while asceticism is also a bad idea because it's 'painful'. Being dead ends, by definition neither leads anywhere; both are states of *stuckness*. By contrast, the middle way – consisting of authentic (or 'right' or 'whole') understanding, thought/intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and mental integration – leads to calming, clarity, awakening, and the reduction of anguish.

The Buddha comes to the centrepiece of this first teaching: four central issues a spiritual practitioner of the middle way must identify, recognise as workable, and fully plumb:

1. What he calls ***dukkha*** (a crucial dharmic term). Conventionally it attracts a number of English equivalents: unsatisfactoriness, suffering, stress, distress, anguish etc – on a scale from the catastrophic to the merely irritating. But the Buddha actually *specifies* what *dukkha* includes, and it's an interesting list: birth, ageing, sickness, death, contact with whom and what we dislike, separation from whom and what we cherish, not getting what we want, and our general psycho-physical vulnerability. (Let's note in passing: none of us can avoid anything on this list. Purely and simply, these items constitute the inevitable downside of the human condition. In western philosophy, these aspects of the human condition are often boiled down to *time*, *chance*, and *death*. We don't create them by craving; they're endemic to human life as such.) We must come to *know* *dukkha* *fully*, the Buddha says.
2. ***Arising*** (*samudaya*), in particular the arising of *craving*. The Buddha characterises craving as 'repetitive, wallowing in attachment and greed, obsessively indulging in this and that: craving for stimulation, for existence [in certain states], and for non-existence.' The implication is that we fall into craving as an evasion – instead of an embrace – of the human condition. Instead of dealing with the situation we find ourselves in, we reach for another. The unintended consequence of craving is that we add to the trouble we already attract by dint of being human. The Buddha's instruction here is: *let go of craving*.
3. ***Ceasing*** (*nirodha*): 'the traceless fading away and cessation of that craving, the letting go and abandoning of it, freedom and independence from it'. (This *experience* has a name – nirvana, or *nibbāna* in Pali.) *Experience* this ceasing, the Buddha says.

4. **The path** (*magga*) with its eight branches noted above, that is, ‘the middle way’.
Cultivate the path, the Buddha instructs.

Here is the kernel of the Buddha’s teaching, the foundations he would build on during the next 45 years of his teaching career. We need to work with these four focuses – in each case by (a) identifying it; (b) seeing the possibility of rising to its challenge; and (c) plumbing or cultivating it fully. Three aspects of four focuses (or ‘tasks’) comes to twelve aspects.

The Buddha goes on to say that, until he became ‘entirely clear about the twelve aspects of the four’, he ‘did not claim to have had a peerless awakening’. Perhaps his formulation of this teaching – in order to convince his recalcitrant audience on this occasion – was the crowning achievement of his own spiritual journey. For now, he says, his ‘mind is unshakeable. There will be no more repetitive existence.’

His words land in the hearts and minds of his five listeners. They get it, they’re converts. Their leader, Kondañña, sums up what he’s learned in three words: ‘Whatever arises ceases.’ The ‘takeaway’ from the teaching has nothing whatever to do with truth-claims. It has to do with how we choose to deal with (or fudge) being-in-the-world as human beings.

In conclusion

Those of you who have been introduced to a more conventional Buddhism might find this presentation surprising. Here is a buddha who is not offering revelations that we couldn’t figure out from our own experience – though he’s pointing us in a certain direction, helping us to mine and refine our own experience. We can get down to work without first signing up to any metaphysical truth-claims at all. He’s not telling us that we suffer because we crave; rather, we suffer because that’s endemic to being-in-the-world – along with joy, and the possibility of awakening, he’ll point out later.

This is the tiger we must learn to ride. Hankering for a ride in the tram instead will just increase our unease. And he’s not offering to relieve us of our humanity – our being-in-the-world – by whisking us off to a suffering-free heaven realm. Rather, he’s offering us a helping hand to make the most of *this* world, and *this* vulnerable, human body-mind, by sticking with the real. Whatever arises ceases, remember?

What are we today to make of this no-magic-tricks buddha, steeped as we are in our culture of scepticism, evolutionary biology, big-bang cosmology and the rest? Maybe this is a buddha we can relate to.

Updating the practice on the basis of its first principles

The four tasks and the eightfold path (the fourth of the tasks) are the kernel of the Buddha's teaching. They form a feedback loop. The tradition helpfully regroups the eight folds of the path under three heads of practice ('the three great trainings') of ethics, meditation and wisdom. How can we adapt and use them today? Let's approach the question historically.

Community and ethics at the dawn of the tradition

Around 400 BCE the Buddha died, aged 80. He'd been teaching for 45 years and had a large following made up of women and men, renunciants and householders, from all walks of life. He'd been born and raised in the small Sakyan oligarchical republic, and in steering his many small renunciant communities he followed republican principles. That is to say, all members were full participants in independent, ideally harmonious communities – 'flat organisations' we'd call them in today's managementese. They had no use for boss-cookies. They owned nothing and relied on the goodwill of small-time monarchs and ordinary folk for protection and sustenance. Apart from that, they were pretty feral, in particular following the Buddha's lead in not respecting the reigning caste and gender systems.

Over time, the Buddha had to deal with the usual hassles of communal life. Again in an *ad hoc* way, he developed rules for his renunciant communities, in order to harmonise and simplify them, rules that came together in the *Vinaya*. For his followers in general, though, he boiled his ethical stance down to five precepts which, expressed in positive form, assert the values of universal friendliness, generosity, contentment, honesty and mental clarity. Note that this was indeed an *ethic* – an assertion of fundamental values – as opposed to a *morality* (i.e. a rule book). An ethic challenges our self-responsibility, intelligence and sensitivity, that is, it calls on us to take the responsibility of being moral agents. We can't get by as moral agents simply by following the rules. What an ethic demands of us will vary according to our socioeconomic, political and cultural context. Hold that thought.

Except during the rainy season, the Buddha was constantly on the move, visiting these communities, answering their questions and addressing their internal difficulties. This pattern suited the Buddha's teaching practice: turn up on the outskirts of a town, have his renunciant followers or the townsfolk toss him questions and real-world conundrums, and spontaneously answering them. He explained the principles of meditation in some detail, but never reduced them to how-to technical instructions. He gave no planned sermons, no scheduled lectures, just off-the-cuff, highly situational *performance pieces*. In today's euphemism, these conversations were 'frank and fearless' on both sides. No one learned anything by grovelling deferentially. Such are the *suttas* we inherit, the discourses of the Buddha in the Pali canon.

Institutional imperatives moulded approaches to meditation

In the centuries following his death, however, all this changed. Buddhism became organised as a religion, and took on the trappings of a religion-like-any-other. Semi-feral renunciants morphed into monastics organised into large regimented units structured around hierarchies. The Buddha's ad hoc, off-the-cuff teachings were codified into orthodox translations and commentaries. Impatient with the one-off, contextual nature of the suttas, some brave souls decided to distil them into what they called – with stunning hubris – ‘the higher teaching’, the seamless *Abhidhamma*. It was full of metaphysical truth-claims, and among other things became the basis of technique-heavy *vipassanā* meditation developed above all in Burmese and Thai monasteries. (Along with Zen, this form of meditation achieved prominence among western adherents in the late 20th century).

In accounting for this development and its knock-on effects in the Buddhist world today, the far-reaching effects of *institutionalisation* are often missed. Inevitably, power becomes the dominant issue, both externally and internally. Especially in pre-modern times, large-scale organised religions of all stripes wielded enormous social and cultural power, and their hierarchs tended to fall into bed with other power-holders – temporal rulers and socio-economic elites – legitimating them and promoting social integration on the basis of the elites' conservative patriarchal values, including the subordination and marginalisation of women.

To sustain their external and internal power, Buddhist monastic hierarchs had to train a disciplined cadre of subordinate monks. Enforcement of the monastic rule and a particular approach to teaching meditation served this purpose. The need to exercise authority and train a cadre, rather than support individuals' spiritual quests, changed the whole way that meditation was taught. It became highly technical, *formulaic*, based on the metaphysics of the *Abhidhamma*. Celibate males living regimented, institutionalised lives were drilled in standardised meditation techniques intended to produce standardised experiences. (Non-standard experiences were deemed to be ‘not meditation’ and frowned upon.)

The standardised experiences, duly ‘reported’ to a teacher, could in turn be certified at prescribed check-points to facilitate an orderly promotion process based on ‘spiritual attainment’. Spiritual progress came down to compliance with the template.

Retrieving non-formulaic meditation

When we look at the account of the Buddha's own main teaching on meditation, the *Satipatthana sutta* (‘the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness’), unsurprisingly we find no such agenda. Consistent with the focus of the four tasks on the human condition, the leitmotiv of the Buddha's teaching is human *experience* in all its variety and complexity.

Meditation is for sharpening our senses to delve more deeply into our individual direct experience of being-in-the-world, thereby coming to understand its cause-and-effect dynamics and so by degrees coming to embrace and negotiate it more skilfully. As we've all seen, surely, the flow of human experience is complex and multilayered.

So as not to lose the plot as we try to become aware of all this complexity, the Buddha asks us to account for our direct experience in four areas – roughly: physical; feeling-tone; emotional; and cognitive. If our attention tends to narrow into one of these areas, we have an instruction to check out what is happening in the other three as well, so we enter into our experience more fully and see the whole pattern.

Naturally, meditative approaches that work to formulas, and ask us to shun large slabs of our experience as 'not meditation', are false friends. Which is why, in our meditation sessions today, I've invited you to approach it without technique, or at very least to take a wider view of your experience when you apply a technique that you habitually use.

In conclusion

Let's return to the three great trainings. What are they asking of us today, as relatively well-off, well-educated individuals, citizens of a stable, affluent democracy, thus living in a highly unusual, privileged way compared to how most humans live?

¶ Ethics • Mere compliance with any set of rules doesn't even scratch the surface of our ethical responsibilities. An ethic of universal friendliness to all sentient life, generosity, contentment, honesty, and lucidity, challenges us in the unique and immediate circumstances of our individual lives, in how we treat those around us, those we meet on the daily round, what we buy (having checked out its source) and how we vote (given the contribution our elected representatives could be making to human and non-human ill- or well-being).

In the Buddha's time, political life and institutions barely existed and had negligible impact on well-being. Now organisational decisions (government and corporate) deeply affect all our lives – in promoting global warming, environmental degradation, mass death from preventable diseases, growing relative deprivation within and between countries, mistreatment of other species, etc. The Buddhist ethic carries major implications for how we tackle or duck our civic responsibilities.

¶ Meditation • A great deal of what passes for Buddhist meditation today was originally designed to train and regiment celibate men living in total institutions. Hence its formulaic nature, and its claim to be 'authoritative', 'the one true way', and so on. But we are not celibate men, and we're living highly complex, individuated lives. On the basis of the Buddha's own teaching on meditation, we need to forge meditation practices that directly tackle the four tasks in the first teaching, tasks that embrace the whole of the human

condition and work with it. We need to master the principles of meditation and learn to manage our own practices intelligently.

¶ Wisdom • In Buddhism this, too, is a practice, but a derivative one. Carefully observing the outcomes of our ethically significant actions teaches us invaluable life skills. As does a gentle, exploratory receptiveness towards our unfettered meditation experience. Giving practical effect to what we learn in these two ways goes to the core of the practice of wisdom.

Tradition and culture

Before secular Buddhist practices and groups appeared in western countries, by and large westerners entertained two basic conceptions of what Buddhism was:

1. Buddhism was *exotica*: strange rituals and mystical beliefs like rebirth; temples and gold-plated Buddha images in Thailand and elsewhere; the occasional glimpse of shaven-headed and besheeted individuals on the street; chic but delphic snippets of Zen wisdom, with accompanying book titles such as *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*; a giggling but profound Dalai Lama sporting colourful robes and an eyeshade, and appearing momentarily on the TV screen.
2. A repository of wonderfully effective meditative techniques – unknown to the western tradition, forged by centuries of Asian monasticism – with which to salve one's miseries and solve one's personal problems.

Both conceptions were potent, packageable, and marketable, so Buddhism took off in the west. Now secular Buddhism is arriving as something of an uninvited guest at the wedding of Buddhism and western society. Uninvited guests can quite often be ill-mannered without really meaning to be. This one is a bit critical of *exotica*, having read Edward Said on 'orientalism' and Marina Warner on 'stranger magic'. And lacking marketable packages of its own, it wants to open up other folks' packages and scrutinise their contents. More positively put, it wants to honour the Buddha's living *tradition* by adapting it – rather than just adopting it into – western *culture*. In order to greatly increase its accessibility and applicability in the west. In this way, secular Buddhism accentuates the importance of *tradition and culture*.

Tradition

To its critics, secular Buddhism is the antithesis of 'traditional' Buddhism: it abandons beliefs (like rebirth) which many see as essential to Buddhism; it does away with monasteries, robes and rituals, and abandons meditative techniques associated with them. In answer to the accusation that secular Buddhism subverts 'true' Buddhism, let me introduce a distinction – drawn from Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After virtue* – between *living* and *dead* traditions.

All practices worthy of the name are held and informed by their traditions, whether living or dead. But a *living tradition* is a conversation (occasionally rising to heated argument) going on, generation after generation, as it's constantly being adapted and deepened. Those conducting the conversation know what the founder's original questions were, and how the questions and answers have been reworked ever since. This historical sense of the living tradition equips each generation with parameters within which to update it. 'To have

a future, one must first have a past,' as the old saying goes. By contrast, a *dead tradition* is one in which the practitioners have lost this vital historical knowledge, and are thereby reduced to mechanically re-enacting its rituals and certitudes, reproducing it just as it is, just as they've inherited it.

Most expressions of secular Buddhism are highly traditionalist in the living-tradition sense. To the greatest possible extent, we want to get started by going back to the dharmic heartwood as it was in the Buddha's lifetime. What questions did he ask? Why did he couch them in the way he did? What was the rationale for his teaching in the terms he did? What practices and forms of association did he encourage? Beyond that, we need to know why the tradition developed in the manifold ways it did after his death. What impact did monasticism – with its political and institutional imperatives – have on the tradition's development? And given the unviability of monasticism as a vehicle of widespread Buddhist practice in the west, how should lay practice develop? What principles of association should apply to it?

At its most basic level, secular Buddhism seeks to *acculturate* the dharma in the west, allowing it to sink deep roots in western cultural soil. This project is no more surprising than its putting down roots, long ago, in Chinese, Korean, Tibetan or Thai cultures, among others. To be practised at a deeper level in each new host society, it needs to express itself in terms of the new practitioners' culture. Western culture has a bad reputation for colonising arrogance, but in this instance, western practitioners have hitherto actually been self-effacing, meekly embracing unacculturated Tibetan, Burmese, Japanese and Thai practice traditions, to name just a few.

To my mind, *this pattern creates incoherences in our inner lives*. Most of us operate from a basic western reality construct whose main ingredients are a cosmology based on the big-bang theory, evolutionary biology, and updated scientific findings in everything from neuroscience to medicine. So most of us are sceptical about birthing virgins, the dead coming back to life, spirits, angels, and a personal god. We shun that sort of magical thinking. And yet, if we take up most Asian versions of Buddhism, karma-driven rebirth, hell-realms and so on go with the territory as working hypotheses.

Sometimes we undertake to chant in Pali, Sanskrit, Japanese or Tibetan, though we'd make for the door if someone suggested we join in a Latin mass.

It's no better at the communal level. Especially we children of the large north, south and west islands of Oceania are citizens of the world's two oldest extant democracies. Social deference is foreign to our cultures. If we choose to join or form an association around our enthusiasms – cricket, netball, philately, overthrowing capitalism, or whatever – we assume that as active members we'll have the same say and the same voting rights as any of our colleagues. Freedom understood as self-rule underpins our sense of ourselves.

But if we join a typical Buddhist outfit we're expected to show deference – in the first instance to monks (usually in the absence or near-absence of nuns) and to male hierarchs. In the worst cases we're explicitly told *never* to question a teacher. Authority in most of the Buddhist world does not derive from rank-&-file sovereignty, but rather rests on the transmission of charismatic authority from on high. How are we going to buy into all that without compromising our civic sense of ourselves, including such fundamental moral commitments as gender equality and inclusiveness?

Finally, there's the cultural issue I half-raised yesterday afternoon: the incongruity of women and men who lead complex lives – with study, jobs, lovers, spouses, kids, dogs, mortgages and so on – being asked to intensively practice meditation techniques that were designed to drill celibate males in austere total institutions. We don't have to be meditating for long to realise that *our actual meditation experience mirrors our way of life*. Hence we should look for an approach to meditation that meshes with our way of life, and does not assume that a drastically simplified, celibate way of life would constitute a much better starting point for spiritual practice. Hold that thought until this afternoon.

In conclusion

From the time we acquire language as small children, language – a cultural artefact – encodes our perceptions and the rest of our emotional and cognitive processing. All our experience is mediated by language. We can extend that insight into the centrality of language to other aspects of culture. Culture is to our biological being as the operating system is to our computer hardware. Nothing works without the operating system; and we could not begin to lead human lives without our omnipresent culture.

And cultures are specific, each typically with its own language (or at least dialect), conventions, manners, rituals, tacit understandings, *modus vivendi* and *operandi*, and so on. These are the aspects of culture we use to understand ourselves, communicate with others, build trust, and co-ordinate our intricate societies.

Most of us take up dharma practice with the ambition that it will penetrate deeply into our way of being in the world. For this to happen, the dharma must speak our language and take on acculturated forms and practices that we can make our own. Coherently.

Ask not whether it's true – ask rather whether it works

Let's start this session with one of Friedrich Nietzsche's basic insights: human actions, ideas and truth-claims merely express the individual or collective authors' needs and interests. Take an utterance like: 'There is an almighty god, and he has put me in charge of you; if you disobey my rules or disagree with what I tell you, he'll see you burn in hell for ever.' Once upon a time in the west and the middle east, this sort of statement was common, and effective.

Thanks partly to Nietzsche's influence, however, it doesn't work much any more. We don't have to bother wondering if there really is an almighty god, whether s/he really did delegate authority to the power freak speaking to us, and whether there's a hell somewhere ready to receive the non-compliant. We can see that the power freak lacks the means to coerce us to get his way, and is just trying to con us instead.

Our sense of utility in pursuing our needs and interests probably explains why we bipeds have proved so evolutionarily successful. So far, at least. The birth of the dharma followed the same logic of needs and interests. In the fifth century BCE, the agricultural revolution was in full swing on the Ganges plain, stimulating trade and urban life. Well-to-do townies like the young Gotama – and his first converts when he later began his teaching career as 'the Buddha' – lived high on the hog and enjoyed life choices (including intellectual inquiry) unknown to the vast majority still stuck in rural life. They expected that their advantages would keep them happy all the time, but instead they still experienced sickness, loss, ageing, death and all the rest of it. Why was life so inherently disappointing and unsatisfactory, even now? They obsessed over this fundamental existential issue. Enter the new Buddha with his teaching of the middle way and the four great tasks in answer to their needs.

The Buddha tackled the problem in a strictly pragmatic manner, without making up a cosmic story about his teaching. In fact, he kept saying that the resort to cosmic questions and stories represented a significant obstacle to embracing the human condition in a meaningful way. As Nietzsche would do much later, he turned his back on all metaphysical speculation and truth-claims. Like Nietzsche, he really belongs among today's *post*-metaphysical thinkers, even though he's been dead for 2,500 years. He concentrates on just how we can get *right inside* human experience. Both of them counselled against making up stories and theories about the human condition, trying to understand it 'objectively', as if we 'd see it more clearly if we distanced ourselves from our predicament, and took what's called these days 'the view from nowhere' or the 'God's-eye view'.

If you watch telly or visit airport bookshops, you'll have noticed that the view-from-nowhere brigade is still hard at work debating their opposing truth-claims. It reduces religions, spiritualities, philosophies and sciences down to their propositions – their truth-claims – and argues over whose story is 'right', that is, has the most defensible truth-claims. In doing so, they're missing the whole point: all these schools of thought are human artefacts designed to serve human needs and interests, just as the Buddha's first discourse patently did. The real issues in the debate should be: whose and what needs and interests are being served, and how effectively? So let's follow the Buddha's advice and not get side-tracked into metaphysical claims and arguments.

Going by what we now know about the history and variety of religions, spiritualities, etc. – all those *social practices* – they've served a variety of practical purposes, such as bolstering group cohesion; providing community-building moral codes and rituals; providing ceremonies for seasonal and personal transitions and life events; holding communal memory; and serving as a platform for aesthetic practices, a language for existential solace and reflection, and working hypotheses to satisfy humanity's relentless curiosity. Religions are thus no different from other human innovations, like ploughs and buildings. As Wittgenstein noted, humans are 'ceremonial animals', and this trait seems to constitute an evolutionary factor. The ability of these social practices to serve their purposes does not depend on their myths being literally 'true', or even being believed.

So what is Buddhist mindfulness-based meditation *for*, and what modus operandi does it propose to serve its purpose? Unsurprisingly, we can pull the answer out of the Buddha's first discourse, which we looked at yesterday morning. Meditation keeps us focused on the fine grain of our experience, not least our *bodily* experience, and in this way leads us to 'fully know' and embrace what it means to be a vulnerable, mortal but aware being. What it means to be-in-the-world in this guise, in this way. To come to terms with our actual condition, instead of fleeing into fantasies of another set of preconditions than the ones we actually confront. That is, to ground ourselves in our real lives without 'craving'. This is the first of the Buddha's four great tasks.

We can find the modus operandi readily enough in the *Satipatthāna sutta*, among many other places in the canon. Essentially it's about opening up the totality of our experience as it unfolds, in all its freshness and complexity to awareness (*sati*), and over time come to understand it (*sati-sampajāna*). It's *not* about being drilled into a cadre-like role in a regimented community of celibate men, and having already-figured experiences while rejecting those that don't fit the template – which is the inherited agenda of formulaic meditation techniques.

Among other things, then, secular Buddhism aims to reinstate meditation to its earliest role as a major vehicle for tackling the four great tasks. To do so it promotes *non*-formulaic, non-technical insight meditation, in which one invites the senses and the mind to disclose their *entire* contents in all their layered complexity, so we come to see the whole picture,

and gradually discern the patterns in our experience, in our individual way of being-in-the-world. We need an approach to meditation adapted to our actual way of life, not one adapted to the way of life of institutionalised renunciant men. See in particular *Unlearning meditation* by Jason Siff and *Ending the pursuit of happiness: a Zen guide* by Barry Magid.

To meditate effectively, all we need to put forward are our effort and honesty. It makes no sense in this meditative environment to congratulate ourselves on being a ‘good’ meditator who can follow the instructions, or to despair and declare ourselves ‘unable to meditate’ because we don’t experience ‘what we’re supposed to’. (So many people quickly get a sense of lostness, inadequacy and failure when introduced to formulaic meditation that’s touted as ‘the one true way’. The only real failure to note here is the failure to live like institutionalised celibate men!) And we’re certainly not ‘good meditators’ by dint of often finding ourselves in blissful states, nor bad ones for sometimes seeing into the abyss when we’re meditating. All lives contain tragic elements, and we have to receive them in our sittings as we would any other experience.

We are all responsible for our own meditation practice, and the major issue we face is whether our approach is *fit for purpose*. The only indications of meditative effectiveness are often subtle, off-the-cushion ones. Am I gradually strengthening positive qualities, such as friendliness (including to myself), empathy, generosity, clarity, self-reflectiveness, and equanimity? And am I seeing more clearly – and overcoming – my reactivity, immaturity and narcissism?

In conclusion

Already in the Buddha’s own lifetime, some of his followers fetishised his teaching, his dharma, seeing it as a supreme value in itself, as the Holy Grail (we might say in our culture), instead of just as a means to an end. He tackled this problem in a well-known teaching in which he compared the dharma to a raft that someone might throw together, out of any materials that just happened to be lying around, in order to get across a body of water. Having got safely to the other shore, what should the traveller do with the raft – leave it on the shore, or carry it overland on her/his head as something of great value. The ever-pragmatic Buddha strongly recommended in *Majjhima Nikaya* 22 leaving the raft on the shore. It has already served its purpose, and that’s its only value.

Stephen Batchelor suggests that secular Buddhists take this teaching to heart. We should throw together a raft out of what we have to hand in our own time and culture. The question then is not whether this is ‘really Buddhism’; it is: does it float?

• *These talks were given at a Secular Buddhism in Aotearoa New Zealand workshop in Wellington, New Zealand, February 2013. Winton Higgins has been a Buddhist practitioner since 1987 and a teacher of insight meditation since 1995. A member of The Tuwhiri Project editorial board, he is a senior teacher for Sydney Insight Meditators and Secular Buddhism in Aotearoa New Zealand, and has contributed to the development of a secular Buddhism internationally.*