Buddhism and Modernity: An Ancient Tradition Faces the Twenty-first Century

Douglas Powers

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As we begin a new millennium, our societies are entering into an unprecedented state of interconnectedness. Sometimes called the "globalization of the world," this concept implies a closely interrelated society with no separate cultures, separate countries or separate peoples. Everything interlinks and in a sense homogenizes.

While globalization has a good side—it instills a sense of shared humanity and helps to break down generations of prejudice and suspicion—it also has a rather frightening shadow side. The values, ideals and principles that drive this interconnected world are greed and desire. Selfishness and self-interest, the desire to acquire and have, are fast becoming universal norms.

If, on the other hand, values of virtue and compassion become the central focus and organizing principles of societies worldwide, this too will exert a powerful influence of equal magnitude. I believe that most of the major problems we face worldwide are due to unrestrained greed and desire. Buddhism, although an ancient spiritual teaching, offers systematic and viable answers to some of the most intractable problems we will address in this millennium: poverty, environmental degradation, overpopulation, economic maldistribution, civil wars, terrorism and technological power outstripping our ethical wisdom to control it.

I wish to explore how Buddhist values intersect with four critical concepts of the world—individualism, science, freedom and morality—so that I can demonstrate how the Buddhist teachings can be central to solving our world's core issues.

The value of individualism has been spreading throughout the world in the last thirty to forty years and is perhaps the single most influential concept today. In short, individualism defines every person as an autonomous entity operating atomistically, as if everyone were a self-contained monad living in a social vacuum. We are located in our own universe, a world that each of us considers to be our own. Within that inviolable space, we make our own decisions based on self-centered criteria and believe that we each have an inalienable right to pursue and fulfill our own needs and desires. Greed is good, natural, even healthy from within this solipsistic perspective, since it advances the ambitions and cravings of the ego.

The idea of the individual has so captured the imagination and become enthroned in the body civic that it is nearly impossible for anyone to argue against it. We have taken the Renaissance concept of "man as the measure of all things" *ad extremis,* to an absurdity where it seems as though the individual has become the final arbiter of reality, and the final goal of existence is to have one's own desires met. The logical outcome of a life founded on such a premise is precisely what we see before us: restless people frantically vying to accumulate wealth and distract themselves with entertainment.

More and more we find ourselves living, as one philosopher put it ". . . a particular contemporary nihilism: a dream of wanting where everything wanted is finally worthless." If you view yourself as an isolated individual, operating autonomously, doing whatever you feel like doing, then it's clear that you will feel alienated from other people. Moreover, you will feel alienated from nature, and ultimately even from yourself. Nihilism and hedonism thus come to define the contemporary landscape and delimit its possible lifestyles.

This deep-seated sense of alienation makes people feel bored, anxious and unhappy; it stirs all kinds of negative emotions: ennui, apathy, despondency, loathing, frustration always on the verge of anger and alternating mood swings between agitated highs and empty lows. A culture riven by individualism leaves only one available antidote to the self-estrangement it generates: entertainment. As soon as we feel the slightest bit of boredom or anxiety, we turn something on. We turn on the television or the computer, hop into the car, or call somebody up on the telephone. We grope for some quick way to distract ourselves, to flood our gnawing "disease" in a shower of sensory data that overwhelm our other emotions of boredom and anxiety. In a very real way, seeking these external stimuli is an attempt to turn the self on—to catalyze a sense of spirit in what has become a hollow shell.

This unreflective way of being has increased to a kind of fevered pitch. The pace of life is so quickened and driven that we always feel behind, tired and yet strangely never satisfied. Relationships stagnate and eventually are replaced by technological substitutes: interactive television, websites, video games and soon the equivalent of George Orwell's "feelies"—totally interactive fantasy media. In the next few years, most American living rooms will have a high-definition television with five hundred channels—since thirty-six channels is already inadequate to meet our ever-escalating desires.

If we stand back and view this phenomenon from a clinical perspective, the conclusion is unavoidable: we are witnessing all the symptoms of addiction. There are many different kinds of addiction: drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex and even entertainment. Albeit a legal and socially sanctioned addiction, entertainment works as all addictions do: one needs more of it to keep the "high" from slipping away, which it inexorably does. All addictions are basically deflections, avoidance, attempts to find pleasure by distracting the attention from what burdens or distresses. We want to avoid anxiety, avoid our fears, avoid responsibility. Yet, ironically, as long as the modern world keeps turning its senses outward in an attempt to deal with the basic issues of life, all prospects for relief only become more elusive. It is something of a contradiction that we hope to find ourselves by avoiding ourselves.

Buddhism deals with this issue in a way quite different from most other approaches. It "returns the light to illumine within." In other words, we use the mind to look back into its source rather than out through the senses for distractions and entertainment. Buddhism does teach a kind of individualism. But Buddhist individualism differs in important ways from the individualism of the market. It is an individualism of responsibility, not desire. Buddhist individualism is based on the principle that only you can work out your own karma—that each of us has a unique history that we alone created and that we alone are responsible for. The karmic patterns of our existence, though they touch and interact with the larger web of life, are radically our own; society as a whole isn't responsible for them. The patterns that lie before us, the conditions that most fundamentally shape us—including the suffering that we experience—all reflect the entirety of our own causes and effects and result from our own decisions.

Buddhist individualism is an individualism of responsibility, not desire.

Buddhist individualism is rooted in the Buddha's teaching that if we all look deeply enough into our own true nature, we'll find the Buddha nature. In other words, in the deepest, essential sense, all of us are Buddhas. Ultimately, we share the same substance. Because I have a certain history, I manifest differently from you. Any appearance of difference or uniqueness is simply due to the variations in karma we create.

It is intriguing that part of Buddhism's current popularity stems from its emphasis on the individual working out his or her own liberation. Yet, this focus on the individual doesn't leave a person isolated and alone in an artificial self—which, in the modern world, is where everyone stops. If you think the artificial self is all there is, then of course you're going to feel lonely, bored, alienated and empty. It is interesting to note that it was just this confused belief in the artificial self that Buddha referred to as the source of suffering (*dukkha*).

In the Mahayana sutras, like the *Avatamsaka,* the Buddha describes a universe that is karmically interconnected, like a vast net of interreflecting jewels. When we act in a compassionate way, that compassion vibrates throughout the entire universe. When we mindfully connect to Guanyin Bodhisattva (the enlightened being of great compassion), we connect to and interact with a universal vibration of compassion. Conversely, when we commit an act of killing, the killing vibrates throughout and affects the entire universe.

This description of a subtly interconnected universe leads me to a second point about the modern world: its orientation is almost exclusively scientific. Science is grounded in the notion that a rigorous study of cause and effect leads us to the truth and frees us from false and limited ideas. Similarly, Buddhism is committed to the attainment of truth and to observing cause and effect—the impartial and universal law of karma.

This is not to say, however, that science and Buddhism have identical views of cause and effect. From a Buddhist perspective, science has a very limited and imprecise understanding of this phenomenon. Whenever science cannot figure out the relationship of cause and effect in a given situation, it falls back on the concepts of "chance" or "randomness" or "probability." So, when scientists ask, "Why or how did the Universe first come into being—what was the initial cause?" their answer is invariably, "Chance, the Big Bang, an anomaly of energy somewhere." "Why was I in a car accident this afternoon? Well, it was just chance, bad luck." It would seem then, that the entire foundation of science is saved by the concept of chance.

In this regard, Buddhism would appear much more modern than science. Buddhism, in fact, would find science somewhat superstitious. As science makes rather insistent claims to the universal validity of its findings, one might say even dogmatic claims, how can it accept such a large element of chance? A Buddhist might suspect that the reason science resorts to such a vague explanation based on the concept of chance is because it has not, or cannot, rigorously investigate the true cause and effect.

The workings of cause and effect as understood in Buddhism occur simultaneously on a multitude of levels—one could probably say there are thousands of different levels of cause and effect. When we cannot understand why something is happening in our life, it is simply because we lack the wisdom to see into that level of cause and effect, not because any event or condition derives from chance or randomness. So science, though useful and to some extent accurate, offers a limited tool of understanding when addressing the most subtle and significant aspects of phenomena. Yet science holds sway over our modern world.

So does freedom, the third modern concept I wish to address. People place great value on being free and are even willing to die for it. The contemporary notion of freedom traces its roots back to some key intellectuals in the European traditions, most notably Plato, Nietzsche, Locke, Mill and Freud. Western psychology—Freud in particular—developed the concept that freedom means acting on one's desires. In other words, every action allowing for uninhibited expression of desires represents freedom. Thus, many modern people, either consciously or unconsciously, adhere to the belief that acting on their impulses, emotions and desires constitutes an act of freedom or an avenue to freedom.

From a Buddhist standpoint, this notion is totally twisted around. One of the Buddha's first and most fundamental awakenings centered on the insight that to act on desire—on impulse, on instinct—is actually a form of bondage. Desire, rather than expressing our more refined sensibilities, is instinctual or karmic in nature. It's a pattern, an almost involuntary reflex that actually holds us in bondage to a previous habit pattern. Every time we yield to and act on a habitual desire, it becomes more ingrained and consequently harder to break free of.

If, for example, I take a drink of alcohol, the first act of drinking the alcohol might seem liberating. But with the first drink, I've set in motion a process of enslavement whereby each subsequent drink renders me less and less free. With each drink I become less capable of sound judgment and self-control. But more importantly, the illusory feeling of freedom the drink provides is located outside my own mind and power, and therefore ironically increases my dependence.

Buddhism has a very important principle to offer to the modern world: the concept of true freedom. True freedom paradoxically comes not from getting what you want but from not wanting to get. In short, freedom means being free from desire, free from greed, free from habits. It is not pursued nor even won; rather, freedom comes from letting go, or more precisely, not grasping. It exists already within our nature and so is absolute, something we cannot lose. This distinction between the conventional and the

Buddhist understandings of freedom is a critical concept and needs to be better understood by everyone.

Freedom, which the modern world is striving so hard to attain, is within the grasp of any person. But the only way to attain this kind of freedom is to overcome our habits and our desires, to get past them and reach a clear, more peaceful place.

A fourth area where Buddhism intersects with modernity is in the area of ethics and morality—specifically, how to act. One of the victims of "progress" has been morality. Modernization has gone hand-in-hand with secularization. Traditional values and religions do not speak to an age where science rules, the pleasure principle triumphs, and belief systems that once underpinned morality wither away. The present culture is one of instant gratification immersed in unprecedented wealth. A feeling pervades that we are entering an era of deep spiritual angst. Moreover, in the absence of a compelling spiritual tradition, the "ethics" or "values" of unfettered market principles and the antisocial globalized economy fills the vacuum—all with dire consequences.

Morality is the basis by which we interact with each other in a meaningful way. Without it, we can't trust each other. For instance, if a person tells a lie, that person's trustworthiness is compromised, the character of that person diminished, and the basic foundation of a relationship built on honesty has been damaged. The entire globalized world is becoming increasingly spiritually bankrupt, no longer able to derive meaning from God, traditional religion, or even an ethical identity rooted in family or nation. It is in great need of some sort of morality. There are close to six billion people in the world now, so the situation is critical. What are the shared ground rules for relating with one another? Without a set of principles to engage in moral discourse, we will ineluctably slide into an anarchy not unlike that described by the poet Yeats in "The Second Coming":

> *Turning and turning in the widening gyre*
> *The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*
> *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*
> *Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*
> *The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere*
> *The ceremony of innocence is drowned;*
> *The best lack all conviction, while the worst*
> *Are full of passionate intensity. . . .*

And it is here that Buddhism potentially has the greatest contribution to make to modernity. With every additional human being, the need for morality increases, if only for the obvious reason that such close proximity and growing interconnectedness requires rules by which we can interrelate with each other in a peaceful way. Buddhism puts forth a concept of morality and virtue that is not based on dogma nor upon a set of rules that comes from outside the realm of human beings. Buddhist ethics make no claims to divine authority or revelation; they derive not from a God or anything outside human existence.

One reason that the world is currently having so much trouble getting secure moral bearings grows out of our changing relationships to the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. All the major religions, of course, have long-standing and admirable ethical codes. But much of their difficulty in providing a common moral ground stems from two factors: 1) They trace their origins and authority to a transcendent divine being—a concept that is under siege in time of widespread secularization and scientific empiricism. As people begin to believe less in a God or a supernatural being, the morality connected to that being simultaneously becomes suspect. Doubt grows into disbelief, and soon the absence of a personal God undercuts any firm sense of morality and virtue. 2) Each religion makes claims of exclusivity for its particular belief system. Even when trying to be open-minded and inclusive, each historically and as a matter of dogma believes in its objective superiority to all other religions. Thus, the good points of other religions, such as their moral teachings, are often dismissed outright or seen as incomplete expressions of the absolute truth of one's own faith, which is destined to replace them.

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Buddhism, in its humanistic moral voice, meshes with the modern more closely than an ethical system appealing to divine authority. Its morality is something that we find within the human experience and need not go beyond the human realm to be plausible. Its precepts fall within the human experience of karma. The Five Precepts, which comprise the foundation of Buddhism's moral code, exist to deal with the main issues and counteract the real problems of human existence.

The appeal of Buddhist ethics is existential—virtue is reasserted not as absolute or transcendent truth but as a pragmatic ground from which to regulate human interaction. The *vinaya* (ethical precepts) provides a criteria for human interaction, including both the good and evil inclinations of human nature. The order of the precepts are traditionally: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no false speech, and no intoxicants.

The first precept of not killing is basic to existence. Respecting the life of others is fundamental to any community. Not killing simply permits other people and animals to exist, thus enabling them to follow their own causes and conditions. Such understanding of a mutual wish to live seems almost innate. In a more developed form, this recognition matures into compassion and empathy for other lives. This respect for life underpins the implied social contract that binds us together and allows us to get along in this world. I have respect for your life; you have respect for my life. As Albert Schweitzer put it, "I am life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live." As a minimum requirement for our mutual existence, reverence for life is not based on a faith in a transcendental truth. It issues from the most immediate observation of our environment and constitutes the sine qua non of human interaction.

The second precept is not stealing. Beyond its obvious meaning of not taking what does not belong to you, the word "stealing" on a deeper level refers to the coveting and envy we feel for what other people have. If the spirit of the first precept prevails, then the respect and empathy you feel for others lets you enjoy their enjoyment of what they have. Compassion would not generate a thought to take what others have. On the other hand, the Buddhist precept of not stealing includes not hoarding or consuming more than you need. If people followed this precept, the environmental and economic implications of this concept would be profound. Thus, although the precept relies on the individual to uphold it, the chain reaction of cause and effect touches the entire social and natural web.

The whole development of Western psychology has confused freedom with the release of desire.

The third precept addresses the power and potential confusions around sexual desire. Sexual desire is a major driving force in our lives. If we do not bring this desire under control, we can have no freedom. Sexual misconduct wrecks relationships and destroys families. It can bind people in confused and often abusive relationships—physical, emotional, spiritual. Buddhism is very clear on this point: to master one's karma, one must be in control of sexual desire. This departs significantly from the modern secular view informed by Western psychology: that acting on desire bestows freedom. The freedom *of* desire that is so emblematic of modern thought, Buddhism sees as a formula for bondage.

The whole development of Western psychology from Freud to the present has confused freedom with the release of desire. This view lies at the heart of the modern free market economic way of life. The promised gratification of desire sustains and propels capitalism. Consumer products are rather coarsely presented as thinly veiled surrogates for sexual pleasure. We seek to increase our purchasing power so as to give free rein to acquisitive fantasies that we believe hold the keys to our freedom. Money derives its power from the access it gives to greater releases of this energy. This trend favors the most primitive instinctual drives of mankind, and any appeal made to nobler purposes meets with immediate cynicism and dismissal. Buddhism bucks this trend by asserting quite unequivocally that genuine freedom is freedom *from* desire, and that acting on desires simply prolongs dependency and bondage.

The fourth precept concerns honest speech. As any real communication between people is based on honesty, honesty is the foundation of any relationship. A relationship lacking in trust and honesty drifts into uncertainty; everything is indeterminate, unknown. There is no basis for communication, leaving every aspect of the relationship open to manipulation and strategy. If one is dishonest once in a relationship, the nature of that relationship changes forever. There is always a little doubt, a slight scar that never fully heals. This highlights the importance of virtue as providing a place where a person can stand on solid ground internally and be trusted by others.

Honesty, however, goes beyond grounding our interpersonal relationships. It also shapes our own narrative voice and identity. It is only through being honest with ourselves that we can make any headway on developing personal wisdom and insight.

The fifth precept cautions against taking drugs and alcohol. This warning does not stem from the puritanical fear that "somewhere, someone is having a good time." Rather, it represents a nurturing impulse to safeguard clarity of mind, which is so essential to insight and genuine knowledge. Most external chemicals change our fundamental ability to concentrate and penetrate to our essence. Instead of empowering or catalyzing inner energy, they foster dependence on something external. Both the substance and the function become habit forming. Even when the experience of drugs and alcohol brings pleasure, it causes a sense of inauthenticity, because the cause of the happiness is not really our own awareness. The state is caused by something outside that takes us over. Buddhism contends that our nature is basically clear and complete; when we grasp and attach to limited states of mind, we cloud over this natural enlightenment.

Thus, as we enter this unprecedented period of global interconnectedness and material progress, we find ourselves sorely challenged to turn this opportunity to our collective and personal advantage. Many of the very values that have brought us to this historical opening now threaten to undermine its promise. Poverty, environmental degradation, overpopulation, economic maldistribution, civil wars, terrorism and technological power daily outstrip our ethical wisdom to control them. Ironically, one of the most ancient spiritual philosophies, Buddhism, holds out the brightest prospects for addressing the pressing issues of modernity. In terms of individualism, science, freedom and morality Buddhism offers a unique analysis and creative potential for reinterpreting these key elements so as to advance the human condition rather than degrade it. Its basic ethical code can confront and counteract the more destructive tendencies of human nature, while at the same time liberate its fullest expression: enlightenment. ❧