

The Great Awakening

A Buddhist Social Theory



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Buddhist Social Theory?

BUDDHISM TODAY faces the same challenge that confronts and may yet destroy every traditional religion. Our modern world is so different from the India of Shakyamuni Buddha 2,500 years ago—and, for that matter, from most of Asia until recently—that educated Buddhists cannot avoid the cognitive dissonance between their religious beliefs, which originated in an Iron Age worldview, and the Information Age technologies most of us use daily. Although the Buddha has often and traditionally been regarded as omniscient, there is no good reason to think (and many good reasons to doubt) that Shakyamuni knew anything about the cellular structure of organisms, the genetic code of life, the microbial cause of most diseases, the periodic table of the atomic elements, the structure of the solar system, Newton's laws of motion, the physics of light and electromagnetism, or the theory of relativity, much less possible applications such as the internal combustion engine, antibiotics, the telephone, television, nuclear fission, silicon chips, computers, or the Internet.

Most of us do not know very much about them either, but they have created the world we live in. I may not understand anything about how electricity works, yet I turn on the lights when it gets dark. I do not know how computers work, yet I use e-mail and surf the Net. Although I cannot claim to comprehend $E = mc^2$, I grew up (and still live) in a world haunted by the threat of nuclear war and nuclear accidents. Unlike the teachings of Buddhism, the contemporary world has been shaped by these technologies.

The Buddha was illiterate, for the very good reason that literacy did not exist in the India of his time. His teachings were orally preserved (and no doubt altered, perhaps considerably) until the first century B.C.E. Shakyamuni

therefore could not have known about the extraordinary psychological and social effects of literacy, much less the equally significant consequences of the printing press. He was also unfamiliar with nation-states, corporate capitalism, universities and scientific institutes, high-tech warfare, the United Nations, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He knew nothing about the modern social sciences, including developmental psychology (and psychotherapy), sociology, anthropology, and comparative religion.

It is no use pretending otherwise: these developments have so transformed our world that we cannot evade the question of how relevant the Buddha's teachings can be for us today. Nor can we take the easy route of distinguishing these technologies and institutions from the people who use them. The Buddhist emphasis on the nonduality of self and world just aggravates the dissonance. If our world is so different from the Buddha's, then, to a significant extent, so are we. The Buddhist teaching of *anatta* (no-self) seems to undercut efforts to find an invariant human identity throughout history.

What is perhaps an even more fundamental difference between the Buddha's world and ours has not yet been mentioned here: secularism. The scientific and social innovations that have restructured our world are the result of a shift from supernatural explanations to an empirical rationality that casts doubt on all religious beliefs, including claims of spiritual redemption. Despite a resurgent nostalgia for such sanctuaries in the late twentieth century, the contemporary world seems to have a decreasing need for increasingly dubious forms of transcendence. Our empirical understanding of the natural world leads us to be skeptical about the supernatural, but the dualism we create between the natural and the supernatural is generally alien to premodern societies.

That educated Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews experience much the same cognitive dissonance as Buddhists can be no consolation to any of them in this corrosive modern world where the value of premodern religious perspectives is questioned when it is not dismissed out of hand.

The worst is yet to come, however. We have not touched upon the greatest challenge to premodern ways of thinking, which also undermines much modern thinking: the cluster of related insights usually described as *postmodern*. Postmodernism has had extraordinary individual and social effects that may rival the impact of the printing press—consequences we are just beginning to recognize. Over the last thirty years the miniaturization made possible by the silicon chip has transformed most technologies. An equivalent transformation

in the intellectual realm is the postmodern insight into the constructed nature of our truths and therefore our "realities." Our previous innocence about such matters cannot be regained, now that we have begun to lose it. Ways of thinking can be repressed, but as Freud realized, what is repressed does not disappear. It returns to haunt us until we acknowledge it and learn to deal with it.

No social activity is more vulnerable to this realization than religion. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has defined postmodernism as incredulity toward all meta-narratives, and no narratives are more "meta-" (the Greek word for more comprehensive) than religious ones. The postmodern revolution may signify the beginning of the end for traditional religious beliefs, practices, and institutions. This includes Buddhism, of course, insofar as the Buddhist message too has been domesticated into a reassuring worldview—a "sacred canopy"—that provides psychic and social stability. Today all such protective canopies are threatened by the fundamental insight that they are human creations.

Unfortunately, that is just about the last thing we want to be told. Throughout most of history, the canopy provided by religions has been essential for grounding us: for teaching us what this world actually is, and therefore what is really important about it, and therefore how we are to live in it. It is terrifying to learn that this canopy is a fiction we have constructed and then objectified (by "forgetting" that we have made it) in order to dwell comfortably beneath it. This is worse than an earthquake: the ground beneath our feet actually disappears. No wonder we have become so anxious; no wonder we spend so much of our psychic energy denying this dawning realization, or distracting ourselves from it. It signifies the end of humanity's collective childhood. It forces us to grow up, or engage in increasingly desperate attempts to suppress what becomes ever more difficult to ignore.

But is religion *only* a protective, reassuring canopy? Even if reassurance has been its main social function, religion has served and continues to serve another role, now becoming more obvious and more important. Religions are vehicles for self-transformation. Not only do they reassure us, they provide us with principles and precepts and practices that can change us or show us how to change ourselves. Buddhism, of course, is a good example. The original teachings of Shakyamuni are concerned almost solely with such a process: the path he discovered (or rediscovered) that led to his "awakening" (the literal meaning of *Buddha* is "the awakened one").

There is often tension between these two roles—sacred canopy and self-transformation—yet they are not entirely distinguishable. The spiritual path is usually arduous and painful, because we confront the demons that lurk in the shadows of our minds. Having *faith* in this process implies, in practice, believing in a particular worldview that encourages and guides our efforts. According to Buddhism, however, the two roles are connected in another way as well. The deconstruction and reconstruction of the sense of self is necessary to become aware of the most deceptive of meta-narratives: the one we normally do not perceive because it is our ordinary, everyday reality—the “real world” we take for granted but in fact is constructed. The postmodern realization that my self and my world are constructs (and, for Buddhism, realizing that the duality between them is a construct) does not necessarily grant insight into what they are constructed of, how they are constructed, or what the possibilities for reconstruction are. Modern empirical science offers an analytic answer: the world, including ourselves, is an extraordinarily complex machine. But is that reductionistic paradigm just another meta-narrative?

Christianity provides us with a particularly wonderful example of personal transformation: the suffering of a loving god-man, whose death was necessary for a redemptive resurrection. As a model symbolizing the ego-death and transformation that each of us needs to undergo in order to realize our true nature, there is perhaps no more inspiring myth. It is therefore all the more unfortunate, from a Buddhist perspective at least, that Christianity has so often literalized this myth into history, into the story of God’s only son, who can save us if we *believe* in him. In place of a path of self-transformation, we are taught to depend on someone else to save us.

Is it a coincidence that the same pattern so often recurs in other religions? In India the notion of a savior God is a relatively late addition to the most important spiritual traditions, including Samhkyā-Yoga, Vedānta, and even Buddhism. Mahāyāna Buddhism developed a pantheon of celestial bodhisattvas devoted to helping us, as well as the promise of a Pure Land accessible to those who appeal to Amitabha Buddha. Psychologically, the early equivalent of a sacred canopy is the security provided by our parents, so it is not surprising that we continue to yearn for the protection of a cosmic father or the maternal love of an all-embracing mother. But as a meta-narrative to rely upon and reside within, this kind of canopy is less and less tenable in a postmodern world.

In contrast, the early Buddhist teachings focus almost exclusively on the path of self-transformation, with a minimum of dogma or metaphysics—in

other words, with a rather flimsy canopy, at best, to shelter beneath. These original teachings not only deny a creator God and the salvific value of rituals such as sacrifices, they also emphasize the constructed nature of both the self and the world. For Buddhism there are no self-existing things, since everything, including you and me, interpenetrates (interpermeates) everything else, arising and passing away according to causes and conditions. This interconnectedness—not just an intellectual insight but an experience—was an essential aspect of the Buddha’s awakening, and *it is congruent with the essential postmodern realization*. Even more radical than now, the original Buddhist teachings, not surprisingly, eventually became elaborated into another sacred canopy, focused on a transcendental liberation from this world. What is more surprising is that early Buddhism should have had such deconstructive insights and that they have been preserved in recognizable form for two and a half millennia.

This perspective on the Buddha’s awakening deserves our attention because no other religious tradition foregrounds so clearly this crucial insight into our constructedness. There are some parallels with the philosophical realization in ancient Greece that society is a construct that can and should be reconstructed (e.g., Plato’s *Republic*). The history of the West since then has incorporated and developed the Greek concern for social transformation. Yet none of the important Greek philosophers proposed what Shakyamuni Buddha taught—the deconstruction and reconstruction of the fictive sense of self.

These resonances between postmodern theory and Buddhist teachings provide the basis for a comparison that is more than merely interesting. Today the postmodern realization about the constructed nature of our canopies, sacred and otherwise, contributes to global crises that we are far from resolving. Indeed, Nietzsche’s prescient prediction of a coming age of nihilism suggests that the world’s destabilization may be far from over. Some people and perhaps a few institutions are beginning to assimilate the postmodern insight, but although we are becoming more aware of its implications and dangers, we do not yet have a good grasp of the possibilities it opens up.

For the West, the postmodern perspective grows out of, and depends upon, a secular modernity that privileges empirical rationalism over religious superstition. In this regard, too, our attitude derives from the Greeks, whose philosophy originated as a critique of the Olympian deities and the rites associated with them. The Indian situation was quite different. According to one’s sympathies, one can see that Indian (including Buddhist) philosophy

never quite escaped the orbit of religious concerns or, more sympathetically, that Indian thought never felt the Western need to differentiate between them.

What does that difference mean for us? Today we are struggling with the radical implications of the postmodern realization into how we construct both the world and ourselves; and the Buddha's similar discovery, in a very different time and place, offers us another perspective on that realization. This more religious perspective implies different possibilities. To dismiss that other perspective and therefore those other possibilities, without considering them, is arrogant and may be costly. Ecologists tell us that many exotic species are disappearing that have never been catalogued, much less studied; who knows what possible medical therapies—a drug for cancer?—die with them? Might the same be true for exotic religio-philosophical teachings? Might some of them have remedies for our postmodern nihilism?

One reason we may be tempted to reject the Buddhist perspective on our conditioning is that contemporary Buddhist teachers and institutions do not always offer it. Instead Buddhism is presented as another belief system, another sacred canopy under which we can find shelter. More often than not, its destabilizing path of self-deconstruction has been objectified into a fixed worldview that paradoxically ends up serving to stabilize and reassure the sense of self. As this suggests, the tension between the two roles of religion—sacred canopy and self-transformation—is strong within the Buddhist tradition. Shakyamuni Buddha had nothing to do with funerals, yet in Japan (where I live), most people identify Buddhism with funerals and memorial services—that is the only time most Japanese care to visit a temple. The main social (and economic) function of Buddhist priests is performing these expensive ceremonies. In other words, the primary role of Buddhism in Japan is to reassure people and give them the rituals they need to cope with the death of loved ones—an important function, to be sure, but a far cry from the path to liberation taught by Shakyamuni.

In contrast, the practices in Zen monasteries, such as *zazen* meditation and focusing on koans, works against such a reappropriation by emphasizing a letting-go of mental phenomena and promoting the direct, unmediated realization of our emptiness (*shunyata*). Shakyamuni Buddha used the metaphor of a raft that we can use to ferry ourselves across the river of *samsara*; rather than carrying that raft on our backs everywhere, we need to know when to let it go. His teachings are tools, not metaphysical claims.

In short, contemporary Buddhism remains a paradoxical mixture of the premodern (e.g., rituals) and the postmodern (an understanding of constructedness), whose liberative potentials are often obscured. In order to clarify the possibilities contemporary Buddhism offers us, both individually and socially, it is necessary for us to begin the process of discriminating between the essentials of its message and the incidentals of its Iron Age origins. What, for example, do the doctrines of karma and rebirth mean today? How can we (post)moderns understand them?

By asking this, I do not mean to imply that these concepts should now be rejected outright as untenable, but they certainly need to be reevaluated. Should Buddhists accept as literal truth everything the Pali canon says about karma and rebirth, simply because it is in the Pali Canon? One does not need to accept the literal truth of everything in the Bible to be a Christian. Shakyamuni himself emphasized that our faith should not be blind; we really understand something only when we know it for ourselves, from our own experience. Karma and rebirth were common beliefs in Shakyamuni's day, just as the belief in an imminent messiah was common in Jesus' Israel. How literal should our understanding of karma and rebirth be now, given what we now know (or believe we know) about the physical world and human psychology? What science has discovered about the physical structure of the world seems to provide no support for psychic survival after death; yet even if we choose to ignore all religious claims about an afterlife, we must at least consider the growing literature of personal accounts of near-death experiences, which may (or may not) be indicative of some type of survival or continuation. Maybe we cannot yet resolve that tension, but still we should acknowledge it.

There are other important dimensions to karma, aside from those pertaining to psychical and bodily rebirth. Whether or not the law of karma is a moral law of the universe—a kind of psychic equivalent to Newton's third law of motion, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction—the Buddhist emphasis on no-self and intentional action points to a more subtle aspect of karma: that we construct ourselves by what we choose to do. My sense of self is a precipitate of my habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Just as my body is composed of the food I eat, so my character is built by my conscious decisions. According to this approach, people are "punished" or "rewarded" not for what they have done but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are.

This does not necessarily involve an afterlife. According to Spinoza, happiness is not the reward of virtue but virtue itself. In more Buddhist terms, we do not live a certain way for the recompense our meritorious actions will bring us, either in this lifetime or in a future one. Rather, to become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different kind of way. The six realms of samsara have usually been understood as distinct worlds or planes of existence through which we transmigrate according to our karma, yet they can also describe the different ways we experience this world as our attitude toward it changes. The hell realm is not necessarily a *place* I will be reborn into, due to my hatred and evil actions. It can be the *way this world is experienced* when my mind is dominated by anger and hate. The twelve interlinked factors of *pratitya samutpada* (interdependent origination) do not necessarily refer to different lifetimes; that teaching can be understood as describing the various causes and effects of “my” mental processes right now.

When karma is understood along these lines, the Buddhist emphasis on our constructedness, instead of being an example of premodern supernatural thinking, becomes quite consistent with the postmodern insight. That does not mean this is the only way to interpret karma and samsara; my reflections are merely one example of the possibilities that must be addressed for the contemporary relevance of Buddhism to become more apparent. The challenge, of course, is discriminating between the baby and the bathwater, and that will not be easy. If a contemporary Buddhism is to mature, however, this task cannot be evaded.

In addition to such doctrinal issues, there are institutional ones. Buddhist religious structures in Asia have usually been, and for the most part remain, hierarchical, patriarchal, and complicit with state power. Although Buddhist teachings have sometimes been used to challenge state power, more often than not Buddhist institutions have been implicated in justifying and therefore helping to preserve oppressive social relationships. The sacred canopy can be quite a comfortable place for those with privileged positions in religious hierarchies allied with political hierarchies. This suggests that Buddhism needs the contributions of Western modernity—such as democracy, feminism, and the separation of church and state—to challenge its institutional complacency and liberate its own teachings from such traditional social constraints.

So the encounter between Buddhism and (post)modernity may be valuable for both. The modern world can help Buddhism clarify its basic message, otherwise obscured by premodern enculturations no longer relevant today. In

this book, I will attempt to show that Buddhism can also help our postmodern world develop liberative possibilities otherwise obscured by the antireligious bias of so much contemporary social critique. The implication is that the secular suspicion of spiritual perspectives—still deeply rooted in most radical critiques of our social ills—is misplaced, because the collective transformations we need are not possible without the personal transformations that Buddhism, for example, encourages. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to clarify the nature of the possible interaction between (post)modernity and Buddhism, and the purpose of this book is to offer some examples of the contribution that Buddhism can make to a new understanding of our new situation.

Elsewhere I have offered an account of how the Buddhist path deconstructs the sense of self and used that account to outline a Buddhist perspective on the historical development of the West.¹ The present book is an exercise in what might be called Buddhist social theory. What can Buddhism contribute today to our understanding of such crucial issues as corporate globalization, terrorist violence, criminal justice, biotechnology, and ecological crises? The rest of this introduction will outline what I believe to be the distinctive character of Buddhist social theory, and the chapters that follow are essays in the original meaning of the French word *essai*: “attempts” to bring Buddhist principles to bear upon such problems.

CONSTRUCTING THE REAL WORLD

The last few centuries have been a steep downhill slide for human hubris. Copernicus discovered that our planet is not the center of the universe. Darwin realized that *Homo sapiens* can be understood as a result of the same evolutionary process that continues to produce other species, a natural selection that does not require any creator God. And, although Freud’s legacy is more controversial, his theory of repression implies that we are not even the masters of our own minds: our supposedly self-sufficient ego-consciousness is not autonomous but irremediably split, buffeted by psychic forces that it cannot control because our consciousness itself is a function of them.

And that was only the beginning. More recently, poststructuralist critiques by Jacques Derrida and others have demonstrated the constructed nature of the subject by emphasizing the differences inherent in language. Our consciousness, like our texts, can never attain a stable self-presence because the

continual circulation of signifiers denies meaning any fixed foundation. Michel Foucault has argued quite convincingly that reason itself is mortal: each new epoch finds that the basic framework of its predecessor has become unintelligible; and, furthermore, what we have understood to be knowledge cannot be understood apart from its role in systems of human control.

Some of the postmodern claims remain controversial, but many of them are consistent with developments in other disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, and comparative religion. The discovery that the world contains multiple worldviews, that each of those views has its own logic, and that there is no “master” worldview that subsumes all the others, has led to the realization that knowledge about the world—including our own knowledge about our own individual worlds—is not discovered but constructed. This shifts the focus to *the truth about truth*. Why do we construct the world in the ways that we do? As we become more aware of the factors that influence our constructions, what other constructs become possible?

The earliest ethnographers in the South Pacific—many of them Christian missionaries—encountered non-Western cultures they were unable to understand. This forced them to become more aware of the conceptual categories that they themselves had been taking for granted. The contrast had radical implications. They and their successors could not help but become more self-conscious about the constructed nature of their own cultures—and therefore about the constructed nature of their own selves. Without quite understanding what they were doing, they became engaged in a collective project “amounting to the invention of a new subjectivity, the basis of which appears to be an impulse to experience a state of radical instability of value—or even the instability of selfhood itself.”² Edmund Leach began his influential *Rethinking Anthropology* by emphasizing the necessity for the cultural anthropologist to undergo “an extremely personal traumatic kind of experience” in order to escape the prejudices of his or her own culture and be able to enter into another.³ Roy Wagner’s version of this reproduces what countless Buddhist teachers have said about realizing the Buddhist teachings: “The anthropologist cannot simply ‘learn’ the new culture, but must rather ‘take it on’ so as to experience a transformation of his own world.”⁴

What does this ability to take on another world tell us about our own? The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker focused on this issue, but his writings have not received the attention they deserve, perhaps because his insights make us too uncomfortable:

The world of human aspiration is largely fictitious, and if we do not understand this we understand nothing about man. It is a largely symbolic creation by an ego-controlled animal that permits action in a psychological world, a symbolic-behavioral world removed from the boundaries of the present moment, from the immediate stimuli which enslave all lower organisms. Man’s freedom is a fabricated freedom, and he pays a price for it. He must at all times *defend the utter fragility of his delicately constituted fiction, deny its artificiality*. That’s why we can speak of “joint theatrical staging,” “ritual formulas for social ceremonial,” and “enhancing of cultural meaning,” with utmost seriousness....

The most astonishing thing of all, about man’s fictions, is not that they have from prehistoric times hung like a flimsy canopy over his social world, but that he should have come to discover them at all. It is one of the most remarkable achievements of thought, of self-scrutiny, that the most anxiety-prone animal of all could come to *see through himself* and discover the fictional nature of his action world. Future historians will probably record it as one of the great, liberating breakthroughs of all time, and it happened in ours.⁵

In his last two books, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Denial of Death* and the posthumous *Escape from Evil*, Becker located the roots of this fiction in our inability to accept the inevitability of our death. Daniel Liechty summarizes this perspective:

We are born into cultures that provide us with immortality narratives and symbols, and we tame the terror of mortality consciousness by vicarious identification with these narratives and symbols of transcendence.... But to keep ourselves from noticing that these transcending symbols themselves are human artefacts, we begin to treat the artefact as if it really had the power to bestow immortality upon us. It is the only way to keep from consciously doubting its ability to do so.⁶

Traditionally, the most important immortality narratives and symbols have been religious. We cope with the awareness of mortality by collectively reassuring ourselves that we will survive death in a different form or realm. What happens, then, when a whole civilization begins to doubt such afterlife?

The most important element in maintaining the intactness and plausibility of any particular cultural immortality ideology is the fact that everyone around you also believes in it. In modern societies, the constant confrontation with competing and contradictory cultural immortality ideologies creates inevitable suspicion and doubt about the transcendent veracity of any one of them. Hence arises in such societies a cultural malaise or anomie on one hand, and a frantic, meaning-grabbing compulsiveness on the other hand, as the cultural immortality ideologies no longer function to keep mortality anxiety at bay.⁷

This crucial insight does not need much tweaking to resonate with the essential teachings of Buddhism, but, as Liechty reminds us, the breakthrough that Becker celebrates is a problematic one, because it hurts too much. In Buddhist terms, it involves *dukkha* (suffering) and how we try to evade it. Without a shared immortality ideology—even if only the pursuit of wealth—the meaning of our lives is called into question, people become desperate, and society begins to fall apart. It remains to be seen how liberating this insight of Becker's will be for us, or how crazy we will become in trying to deny it.

It is also possible to overemphasize its novelty. If the fruit of this insight has finally ripened in our day, it is because this tree has deep roots in European history. After the French revolution it became difficult to defend the divine right of kings and the “naturalness” of such a social order. It also became difficult to overlook the implications of history: how societies change over time, sometimes radically and abruptly. It was only a matter of time before the consequences of this for human knowledge would be noticed. Hegel integrated the different truths of discrete societies and eras by viewing the course of human history as the gradual self-realization of Mind. Today it is difficult to be so optimistic, but, without some such philosophical synthesis, it has also become difficult for the center to hold against a cultural pluralism that threatens all canopies, sacred and otherwise. First we discovered the cultural water we swim in; then we began to become aware that that water is our own creation...and to realize that such constructions can be reconstructed.

Again, and predictably, the roots of this breakthrough extend back to classical Greece. In traditional societies social norms are usually maintained by religious claims that validate social values and power arrangements transcendently: they cannot be changed because they were created by the gods.

The tensions that developed in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. were due to the Greeks' groundbreaking realization that the social order is not natural in the same way that the physical world is. When *nomos* (convention) became thus distinguished from *physis* (nature), traditional social structures could be challenged. Without belief in a transcendently grounded sacred order, the Greek city-states became free to restructure themselves, as we continue to do, or try to do, or want to do; but that freedom comes at a price, as Socrates discovered, at the cost of his own life.

Once one becomes aware of the difference between nature and culture, one can never recover the unselfconscious groundedness that, for better and worse, has been lost. Both individually and collectively, the freedom to determine one's own path is shadowed by an anxiety-producing loss of security due to the disappearance of one's transcendental foundation—a sacred canopy that, whether or not it actually protects us, answers our deepest questions about the structure and meaning of the universe, and where we fit into that. Such answers do more than validate and stabilize the social order. Internalized, they also provide personal identity, a secure grounding for the self. When I accept my culture as natural and therefore inevitable, the meaning of my life is more or less decided for me. But when I accept the freedom to construct my own meaning, I experience a vertigo resulting from the lack of an external—that is, a natural—ground.

The Greeks were great seafarers, colonizing much of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and becoming familiar with a great variety of cultures. This exposure to different customs and beliefs encouraged skepticism toward their own myths. From a Buddhist perspective, however, what is most striking about the Greek experience is how much it resembles the perennial situation of the anxious individual self, which is dimly aware that it is not self-existing or “natural” but a social and psychological construct.

According to Walter Truett Anderson, anthropology's gift to the world—the realization that human beings create different kinds of cultures, which in turn create different kinds of human beings—is a deeply subversive idea, because if you absorb it you will begin to wonder who created it and why; you reflect on what it does to you, and you think about making some changes. “And the more people there are working their way through some such inner thought process, the more culturally diverse, complex and unstable a society is likely to be.”⁸

In other words, globalization means that today we all participate in the Greek loss of ground and crisis of meaning, whether or not we understand

what is happening. Most of us know little if anything about postmodern fictions, but accelerated communication and transportation systems ensure that any religious confrontation with modernity is also an accelerated confrontation between premodernities. As the world becomes smaller, we find ourselves rubbing elbows with other people and other cultures often living literally next door. This offers a particularly serious challenge to religions, which have always interacted with each other but in the past have usually had more time and space to develop according to their own internal dynamics. And since religions cannot be distinguished from the people who believe in them and practice them, this is also a serious challenge to our multicultural societies.

The problem of immigration into Western societies, for example, is usually understood in terms of economics (cheap labor, competition for jobs), crime, and occasionally differences in "lifestyle." This overlooks another dimension that in the long run may be more important: the anxiety produced when different worldviews are living next to each other. Historically, worldviews have maintained themselves by avoiding and eliminating competition, which is why medieval heretics and Jews needed to be destroyed or confined to ghettos. The less secure one's worldview, the more threatening is any alternative, but the presence of alternatives is always threatening, because it means we are constantly exposed to models of other possibilities, and because one's own worldview is never secure enough.

Fortunately, inquisitions and pogroms are no longer acceptable, at least not officially. Yet tolerance does not allay the anxiety that results from being surrounded by alien worldviews that must be tolerated. Modern distinctions between private and public, or church and state, do not resolve this basic problem either. Now my sacred canopy becomes more like an umbrella. When everyone has his or her own umbrella, and I walk through a sea of multicolored, differently patterned ones, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that mine is the only "right" one. To make matters worse, learning how to put up an umbrella shows us how they are constructed.

One response is to cling all the harder to the old "eternal" truths and traditional ways of doing things. Since this occurs in a more crowded and fast-paced globalizing environment, in which we must interact much more with people who do not believe in our beliefs or follow our ways, such a reaction becomes more problematic. It tends to aggravate the "antithetical bonding" that constructs group identity and security by denigrating other groups. We

create an in-group by distinguishing ourselves from an out-group that becomes vulnerable to scapegoating.

Although such fundamentalist responses are unlikely to be attractive to those who have read this far, we need to remember that often communities are coping in the only way they can in order to retain their sense of who they are and how to live, in response to the unwelcome transformations being thrust upon them. For those people whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by globalization, such a conservative position is not unreasonable. Rapid social change, even when positive in many ways, is destabilizing and therefore productive of anxiety, especially for those who do not share privileged Western lifestyles or modernity's gospel of social progress.

Nevertheless, neotraditionalism is a defensive response that, however reassuring in the short term, must eventually fail. There is no escaping the corrosive effects of the (post)modern world on premodern worldviews. Today we can no more suppress collective doubts about an afterlife than we can return to a life without electricity. Premodern innocence about one's sacred canopy cannot be regained once we become conscious of its constructedness. So far, of course, such an awareness has not yet penetrated very widely, but unless a global catastrophe reverses the globalization of educational exchange and intellectual interaction, the postmodern insight can only continue to spread and infiltrate traditional cultures.

A more common religious response, in the West at least, has been to compartmentalize one's world—or, more precisely, to accept an increasingly compartmentalized world. We resolve the cognitive dissonance between a traditional religious worldview and modernity by ignoring it. For example, we may live in a premodern world on Sunday mornings and in a modern world the rest of the week. This compartmentalization is actually quite postmodern. Our complicated and specialized societies encourage such a fragmentation. In fact, it has become difficult *not* to compartmentalize. A worldview that tries to make sense of the world as a whole has become the exception, even in—or especially in—academia, where a continuous explosion of knowledge continually discourages attempts to comprehend it all. It is all the easier to accept that fragmentation because of the available technological distractions that fill up our free time. And without the opportunity to reflect on these matters, the challenge for most of us is coping, not understanding.

Nevertheless, religion compartmentalized in this way becomes trivialized and irrelevant. A religious orientation that does not inform our daily lives,

infusing day-to-day concerns, is not doing its job. The point of a spiritual worldview is to teach us what is really important about the world, and therefore how to live in it. By surrendering this function to more rationalized and secular institutions—the state, the economy, the media, the university and other scientific institutes—religion is reduced to a shell that ends up providing us with little more than an occasional refuge from an otherwise stressful world, a canopy to duck under when it all becomes too much.

In keeping the worldviews of religion and (post)modernity apart, isolated from each other, we also lose the opportunity to see how each might be able to inform the other. To one such opportunity we now turn.

WHAT IS BUDDHIST ABOUT BUDDHIST SOCIAL THEORY?

Unlike some other more aggressive religions, Buddhism has been so successful as a missionary religion because of its adaptability, a flexibility consistent with its own emphasis on impermanence and emptiness (the “selflessness” of everything). In China, for example, a natural affinity between Mahayana and Taoism led to the development of Chan/Zen. In Tibet interaction with the native Bon religion led to a distinctive form of tantric Vajrayana Buddhism. So what is Buddhism adapting to today, as it infiltrates the West?

Although Buddhist-Christian dialogue has been a fruitful site of interreligious conversation, a more important point of entry seems to be Western psychology, especially psychotherapy. There is, however, another significant way in which the West has been interacting with Buddhism, not only assimilating it but influencing it. Historically, the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—have had a strong prophetic dimension concerned to promote social justice, an issue that has not been crucial in the development of Buddhism. Asian Buddhism has focused on individual liberation by transforming the greed, ill will, and delusion in our own minds. The Abrahamic focus on social justice has influenced the history of the West by encouraging a liberation that challenges and reforms oppressive social structures. Does this shared concern for liberation suggest affinity between the two traditions? One fruit of this common focus is socially engaged Buddhism, which has become an important practice for a growing number of Buddhists, in Asia as well as in the West.

What is specifically Buddhist about socially engaged Buddhism? Insofar as Buddhism traditionally focuses on alleviating dukkha rather than speculating

on its metaphysical origins, it tends to adopt a pragmatic, hands-on approach that does not worry much about social issues. Nevertheless, the question remains important for helping to determine whether Buddhist social engagement may have something unique to contribute to the concern for compassionate action emphasized by all religions (in theory, at least).

One answer is that the Buddhist emphasis on nonduality between ourselves and the world encourages identification with “others”: hence *com*-passion, suffering *with*, because we are not separate from them. Is that what makes Buddhist social engagement Buddhist?

If so, there is a problem that can be expressed by rephrasing the original question: What, if anything, is new about socially engaged Buddhism today? According to the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, all Buddhism is (or should be) socially engaged. Shakyamuni himself never abandoned society. According to the Pali sutras he often gave laypeople advice on their social responsibilities. Kings consulted with him, and on several occasions he intervened to stop battles, albeit not always successfully. If Buddhism has always been socially engaged, perhaps the only new thing is that our more democratic forms of governance allow more direct efforts to challenge the state and reform its policies.

There is much to be said in favor of this perspective, yet it suffers from an important drawback. It does not help us to understand, and therefore respond adequately to, the more complicated causes of human-made dukkha endemic to our contemporary world: the suffering caused or threatened by nuclear bombs and power plants; corporate globalization and a widening gap between rich and poor; terrorism, whether religiously inspired or state promoted; a retributive penal system that is obviously inadequate; global warming and many other ecological catastrophes; and genetically modified organisms, including human clones.

What, if anything, can Buddhism offer to help us understand these problems, most of them unique to our times? In the end, our efforts to reduce contemporary dukkha cannot avoid bumping up against institutional and structural issues. There is much that needs to be done to alleviate homelessness and hunger in U.S. cities, for example, but we also need to address the nature of the economic and political systems that create and tolerate such deprivation in such a fabulously wealthy nation. Does Buddhism have anything special to offer that can help us understand those systems and how they might be reformed?

The pragmatic emphasis of Buddhism encourages some Buddhists to give a negative answer to such questions, but I think that sells Buddhism short. Since the modern world is, for better and worse, mostly a product of the West, there may be considerable value in bringing in the perspective of a mature non-Western tradition. If we do not try to understand the larger historical forces moving the world today, we accede to them. The alternative is either to buy our social theory ready-made, more or less off the rack—e.g., some humanized version of green socialism—or to consider alternatives inspired (or at least informed) by what Buddhism has to say about human *dukkha* and its causes.

According to the Pali sutras, Shakyamuni Buddha often summarized his teaching into four noble truths: the nature of our problem, the cause of the problem, the end of the problem, and the solution to our problem. Because of this therapeutic approach, Shakyamuni is sometimes called the great physician: he tells us that we are sick, diagnoses our illness, reassures us that it is possible to become healthy, and gives us the regimen for a cure. The same logical format can be employed to examine the nature of our present social *dukkha* and outline the distinctive contours of Buddhist social theory.

What Is Social *Dukkha*?

There is no need to devote much space or effort here summarizing the varieties and extent of human *dukkha* around the globe today. Those inclined to read this book will already be familiar with many of the sobering facts, some of which are mentioned in the following chapters. Here it will suffice to cite a few figures, mostly from recent United Nations Human Development Reports. According to the 1996 report, the world's 358 billionaires were already wealthier than the combined annual income of countries with 45 percent of the world's people. More recently, according to the Institute for Policy Studies, the world's 497 billionaires in 2001 registered a combined wealth of \$1.54 trillion, a sum greater than the combined incomes of the poorer half of humanity.

As this suggests, globalization is increasing the gap between rich and poor. According to the Human Development Report for 1999, the champagne glass that reflects the world's distribution of resources is becoming even more top-heavy. In 1992 the top fifth of the world's people consumed 82.7 percent of the world's resources, the bottom fifth only 1.4 percent; by 1999 the top fifth had 86 percent, the poorest fifth 1.3 percent. The average African household now

consumes 20 percent less than it did twenty-five years ago. Worldwide, well over a billion people are deprived of basic needs, including many in developed countries. Of the 4.4 billion people in developing countries, almost three-fifths lack basic sanitation, almost a third have no access to clean water, a quarter do not have adequate housing, a fifth have insufficient dietary energy and protein and lack access to modern health services; 2 billion people are anaemic. The revised United Nations human poverty index (HPI-2) also shows that some 7 to 17 percent of the population in industrial countries is poor, and in some countries that percentage is increasing. Sweden, though only thirteenth in average national income, has the least poverty (7 percent), while the United States has both the highest average income and the highest percentage living in poverty.

Meanwhile, the earth's ever-expanding human population continues to place ever greater strains on its ecosystems. Fears that the world would soon exhaust nonrenewable resources such as oil and minerals have proved mostly false, for new reserves have been discovered and there has been a shift toward less material-intensive products and services. Nevertheless, pollution and waste continue to exceed the earth's sink capacities to absorb and recycle them, and there is increasing deterioration of renewables such as water, topsoil, forests, fishing grounds, and species biodiversity.

Other types of social *dukkha* should not be overlooked, however.

"Suffering," the usual English translation for *dukkha*, is not very enlightening, especially today, when those of us who live in wealthy countries have many ways to entertain and distract ourselves. The point of the Buddhist term is that we nonetheless experience a basic dissatisfaction, a dis-ease, which continues to fester. That there is something inherently frustrating about our lives is not accidental or coincidental. It is the nature of an unawakened mind to be bothered about something. At the core of our being we feel a free-floating anxiety, which has no particular object but can plug into any problematic situation. We may try to evade this anxiety by dulling ourselves with alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, television, consumerism, sex, and so forth, or we may become preoccupied with various goals we pursue, but the anxiety is always there; and when we slow down enough to become sensitive to what is occurring in our minds, we become aware of it—which is one reason we do not like to slow down.

This implies that everything we normally understand as suffering is only a subset—for some of us a relatively small subset—of *dukkha*. The Pali sutras

distinguish dukkha into three different types.¹⁰ The first, *dukkha-dukkhata*, includes everything that we usually think of as suffering: all physical, emotional, and mental pain or discomfort, including being separated from people we like to be with, and being stuck with those we do not. This also includes the types of social dukkha mentioned above.

A second and different type is *viparinama-dukkhata*, the dukkha that arises from impermanence, from knowing that nothing lasts forever and most things do not last long. Even when we are thoroughly enjoying ourselves, we know the moment will not last, and there is something frustrating about that awareness. However delicious that ice cream may taste, we know the last bite is coming soon—and even if we buy another cone, it does not taste as good because we begin to feel sated.

The most problematic dukkha of this type is, of course, death: not the physical pain of dying (that is included in the first type of dukkha) but the awareness that I will die. This awareness of our inevitable end often pervades and colors everything we do—so thoroughly that it poisons life. Insofar as I am afraid to die, I also become unable to live. To live fully is not possible when we are hypersensitive to the fact that danger and maybe death lurk around every corner, because any little accident could be our last.

Most of us are familiar with the social dukkha-dukkhata described above—the effects of an increasing worldwide gap between rich and poor, a deteriorating biosphere, and so forth. Is there an equivalent viparinama-dukkhata for society as a whole? This brings us back to what Ernest Becker wrote about the collective consequences of death denial, especially in his last book, *Escape from Evil*. In addition to the more obvious types of increasing suffering summarized in the United Nations Human Development Reports, there are growing social problems often explained as a consequence of weakening family and community bonds in the developed world. But is something else, maybe less evident because more discomforting, implicated in this breakdown? Liechty's gloss on Becker's thesis, part of which was quoted earlier, continues by reflecting on the social effects of doubting our collective immortality project:

Hence arises in such societies a cultural malaise or anomie on one hand, and a frantic, meaning-grabbing compulsiveness on the other hand, as the cultural immortality ideologies no longer function to keep mortality anxiety at bay. Lacking any one plausible, widely-accepted immortality narrative, any "sacred canopy," many people desperately attach themselves

to ersatz immortality ideologies—fundamentalisms of all sorts, nostalgia politics, technologism, pyrrhic tragedies such as "heroic" school shootings, or, following the truncated, material cultural narrative to its (il)logical conclusion, people begin to pile up (or fantasize about) heretofore insane levels of capitalist accumulation and material display.¹¹

All of these are a direct result of decaying immortality ideologies, and Liechty points to something quite important and usually overlooked. The West's gradual loss of belief in an afterlife has often been presented as a sign of our this-worldly maturity; less often do we reflect on its psychic costs, which are collective as well as individual. The twentieth century, by far the most violent in history, supports Nietzsche's prediction of a nihilistic age resulting from our religious skepticism, and it remains to be seen whether the twenty-first century will be any better.

Any account of our increasing social dukkha needs to consider such psychological (or spiritual) factors as well as the more obvious economic and ecological issues. Are they related? Liechty's final comment on insane levels of capitalist accumulation reminds us how obscene it is that 497 people monopolize more of the earth's resources than are available to half of the world's 6.1 billion people. Many critics ask why we support an economic system that allows this to happen; another issue, however, is why anyone would *want* to become so wealthy. (How many meals a day can *you* eat?) If a preoccupation with making much more money than you can possibly spend is neurotic, then there is also something neurotic about a society that encourages this preoccupation by making such people into role models and cultural heroes.

According to Becker our collective fascination with wealth amounts to a new immortality project. "Money becomes the distilled value of all existence...a single immortality symbol, a ready way of relating the increase of oneself to all the important objects and events in one's world."¹² For Buddhism, however, there is a somewhat different way to understand this socially maintained delusion, because another interpretation is implied by the third type of dukkha.

That third type is *sankhara-dukkhata*, dukkha "from conditioned states," although in this case the meaning is not as clear in the early Buddhist texts. "Conditioned states" apparently refers to the *skandhas*, the five components of the self—or, more precisely, those physical and mental processes whose interaction creates our sense of self. So this dukkha has something to do with

the doctrine of anatta, the strange but essential Buddhist claim that our sense of subjectivity does not correspond to any real ontological self—or in the (post)modern terms I have been using, the claim that the sense of self is a construct.

Contemporary psychology makes such a doctrine seem somewhat less perverse by providing some homegrown handles on what remains a very counterintuitive claim. In this regard Buddhism seems to have anticipated the more recent and reluctant conclusions of psychoanalysis: guilt and anxiety are not adventitious but intrinsic to the ego. Anatta suggests that our dukkha ultimately derives from a repression even more immediate than death-fear: the suspicion that *I* am not real. For Buddhism, the ego is not a self-existing consciousness but a fragile sense of self that suspects and dreads its own no-thing-ness. This third type of dukkha motivates our conditioned consciousness to try to ground itself—that is, I want to make myself *real*. Since the sense of self is a construct, however, it can real-ize itself (or rather, *try* to realize itself) only by objectifying itself (securing itself as an object) in the world. That makes the ego-self, in effect, a never ending project to objectify itself in some way—something that, unfortunately, our conditioned, ever changing consciousness cannot do, anymore than a hand can grasp itself or an eye see itself.

The consequence of this perpetual failure is that the sense of self is shadowed by a sense of lack. What Freud called “the return of the repressed” in the distorted form of a symptom links this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves feel real *in* the world. We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that “there is something wrong with me,” yet that feeling manifests, and we respond to it, in many different ways: I’m not rich enough, not loved enough, not powerful enough, not published enough (for academics!), and so forth. Our root anxiety is eager to objectify into fear of something, because then we have particular ways to cope with particular feared things. The difficulty, however, is that no objectification can ever satisfy us if it is not really an object we want.

In this way Buddhism shifts our focus from the terror of death (our primal repression, according to Becker) to the anguish of a groundlessness experienced here and now. The problem is not so much that we will die, but that we do not feel real now. If so, what does this third type of dukkha imply socially? Is there a communal version of sankhara-dukkhata? In *Escape from Evil* Becker argues that society is a collective immortality project. Can it also be

understood as a collective *reality* project, a group effort to ground ourselves? That issue, among others, is addressed in chapter 8. An affirmative answer casts a somewhat different light on the loss of our sacred canopies. If religious worldviews provide us with transcendentally validated projects that promise to make us real (i.e., various types of supernatural salvation), the decline of faith in such collective canopies can only lead to more frantic and desperate attempts to real-ize ourselves.

It needs to be emphasized, however, that this is only *one* interpretation of Buddhist teachings about anatta and dukkha, which takes into account recent psychotherapeutic theory and Becker’s existential anthropology. If Buddhism is to thrive as a living tradition in the modern world, rather than simply use traditional categories to repeat traditional claims, then such interdisciplinary attempts are necessary—and the more the merrier! In the encounter between Buddhism and (post)modernity, a diversity of interpretations is to be welcomed. Over time, some will be seen as more viable and helpful than others. Given the variety of Buddhist schools that have flourished in Asia, there is little reason to think that this process will eventually lead to—or that there is need for—only one modern version of Buddhism.

To say it again, perhaps the main reason for Buddhism’s successful diversity in Asia has been its pragmatism. Buddhism is not primarily a philosophy, nor even (by some criteria) a religion. It is a path we follow to end our dukkha. The most important thing, therefore, is to present the teachings in a form that encourages people to follow that path and enables them to do so. Cross-culturally we find a certain consistency to human dukkha but great variation in the ways different Buddhist cultures have symbolized it and institutionalized the path for ending it. This practical approach to addressing dukkha may be traced back to Shakyamuni himself. Soon after establishing the *sangha* (community of monks), he declined to formalize his teachings into any official language (e.g., Sanskrit). Instead, he sent out his disciples in different directions, to teach the *Dharma* in whatever language was suitable.

This pragmatism applies to the Buddhist teachings themselves. Many sutras in the Pali canon attest to Shakyamuni’s lack of interest in metaphysical speculation. Some questions—Does a Buddha exist after death? Is the universe eternal or infinite?—he declined to answer, declaring that he had only one thing to teach: dukkha and how to end it. Today such an anti-metaphysical attitude toward theory has become quite postmodern. The failure of the structuralist approach in the human sciences has led to another conception

of what theory is and what it can do, an approach David Scott has summarized as follows:

By “theory” (at least what I have been able to make of it) is meant that diverse combination of textual or interpretive (or “reading”) strategies—among them, deconstruction, feminism, genealogy, psychoanalysis, post-marxism—that, from about the early 1970s or so had initiated a challenge to the protocols of a general hermeneutics....

Theory, in this sense, offered itself as de-disciplinary, as in fact anti-disciplinary, the virtual undoer of disciplinary self-identities. It offered itself as a mobile and nomadic field of critical operations without a proper name, and therefore without a distinctive domain of objects. Indeed what theory went after was precisely the assumption (common to the disciplines and their rage for “method”) of the authentic self-authoring presence of things, of histories, of cultures, of selves, the assumption of stable essences, in short, that could be made to speak themselves once and for all through the transparency of an unequivocal and analytical language. On theory’s account there could be no final description, no end to re-description, no ultimate perspective which could terminate once and for all the possibility of another word on the matter.¹³

Since such critical theory cannot pretend to mirror the objective nature of society in categories that reveal without distorting, its own truth becomes an inextricable part of the phenomena it seeks to explain. As Geuss puts it:

A full-scale social theory...will form part of its own object-domain. That is, a theory is a theory about (among other things) agents’ beliefs about their society, but it is itself such a belief. So if a theory of society is to give an exhaustive account of the beliefs agents in the society have, it will have to give an account of itself as one such belief.¹⁴

This nomadic conception of theory continues to discomfort many in the social sciences. Less known is that a very similar conception of theory as self-reflexive and self-negating has been important to Buddhism from its beginnings, and essential to Buddhist philosophy since at least the time of Nagarjuna (second century C.E.), the most important Buddhist philosopher and arguably the most important figure in the Buddhist tradition after

Shakyamuni himself. Since it emphasized the contemplative need to let go of concepts, Buddhism could not avoid self-consciousness about its own employment of theoretical constructs. We have already noticed that Shakyamuni compared his own teachings to a raft that, once we have used it to cross the river of birth and death to the far shore of nirvana, we should then abandon.

Nagarjuna went further by declining to present any view of his own. His chapter on the nature of nirvana in the *Mulamadhyamikakarika* concludes that “ultimate serenity is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things; no truth has been taught by a Buddha for anyone, anywhere.”¹⁵ This applies even to the crucial concept of shunyata (emptiness), which Nagarjuna used to deconstruct the self-existence of things. Shunyata too is relative to those supposed things; it is a heuristic term, nothing more than a way to demonstrate “the exhaustion of all theories and views,” and those who insist on making shunyata into a theory about the nature of things are said to be incurable.¹⁶

Nagarjuna’s self-negating conception of conception reverberates through subsequent Buddhism. The sixth Zen ancestor Huineng, revered as the greatest of all Zen masters, also refused to offer Buddhism as a transparent, mirror-like teaching about reality: “If I tell you that I have a system of Dharma [teaching] to transmit to others, I am cheating you. What I do to my disciples is to liberate them from their own bondage with such devices as the case may need.”¹⁷ Suitable answers are given according to the temperament of the inquirer. Insofar as truth is a matter of grasping the categories that accurately and finally reflect some objective reality, all truth is error on the Buddhist path.

The crucial issue is whether or not our search for truth—be it the personal, subjective claim about my own “nature” or some structural truth in the human sciences—is an attempt to ground ourselves by fixating on certain concepts. When there is such a compulsion to grasp the truth that grasps reality, certain ideas tend to become seductive—that is, ideologies. The difference between samsara and nirvana is that samsara is the world experienced as a sticky web of attachments that seem to offer something we lack—a grounding for our groundless sense of self. Intellectually, that seductive quality manifests as a battleground of conflicting ideologies (social theories as much as religious beliefs) competing for our allegiance, each of which purports to provide the mind with a sure grasp on the world.

In other words, ideology is another attempt to objectify ourselves, by understanding ourselves objectively. On this account, the need for theory, and

the difficulty many have with unanchored critique, is the intellectual's version of the dialectic noticed earlier between security and freedom. The Buddhist alternative, as Huineng makes clear, is not to rid oneself of all thought but to think in a different way, without needing to ground oneself thereby. Such a "non-abiding" wisdom can wander freely among an overlapping plurality of truths without needing to fixate on any of them. As in the traditional Zen dialogues, our inquiry becomes a mobile, nomadic play that works to undo both the supposed objectivity of the objects studied and the supposed self-identities of those subjects—us—who study them.

Such an approach is reflexively aware that it always "forms part of its own object-domain," as Geuss puts it, yet this does not become a problem because such teachings are designed to self-negate. Since Buddhist conceptual systems form only part of a spiritual path that emphasizes meditation and mindfulness—during which one lets go of all conceptualizing—Buddhist practice works to free us from all ideology including itself. Jacques Derrida speaks of the necessity to lodge oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it, which expresses nicely why Nagarjuna insists that the everyday world must be accepted in order to point to the higher truth that negates it.¹⁸ According to Madhyamika Buddhism, *shunyata* is like an antidote that expels poison from our bodies and then expels itself, for if the antidote stays inside to poison us, we are no better off than before.

To sum up, Buddhism's pragmatic focus on *dukkha* is consistent with the postmodern attitude toward theory, because it too is suspicious of any grand theory that purports to offer some final synthesis, a master set of categories that supersedes all others. The basic limitation of all theory is simply that even very good ones do not remove our *dukkha*. Conceptual systems are heuristic, valid insofar as they are useful to us—for Buddhism, insofar as they help us end our *dukkha*. The best ones, therefore, are also open to revision, adapting to changing circumstances including new ways of understanding oneself. This psychotherapeutic interpretation of *anatta*—as a sense of lack that perpetually haunts our constructed, ungrounded sense of self—will survive only if it helps us understand and transform ourselves. If it fails to do that, we need to find new categories employing fresh ways of understanding.

Buddhist theory forms part of its own object-domain, not only because it is a self-reflexive belief about beliefs, but because it is itself an expression of the ungraspable ground that it theorizes about. The ultimate reason why there can be no ultimate theory that represents the whole is because we can never

stand outside the world to re-present it objectively. The part can never grasp or contain the whole; nor does it need to. Our concepts are not only part of the world, they are manifestations of it. Buddhist awakening does not grasp or otherwise resolve the essential mysteriousness of our being in the world. It opens us up to that mystery, a mystery that is an essential aspect of the meaning of "sacred." In practice, this means that the broadest context for all our intellectual efforts is a wonder in the face of a world that always exceeds our ideas about it. That excess does not signify any defect in our understanding. Rather, it is the source of our understanding, allowing for a perpetual bubbling-up of insights and images—when we do not cling to the ones that we have already become comfortable with.

What Is the Cause of Social *Dukkha*?

According to Shakyamuni, the cause of our individual *dukkha* is *tanha*, usually translated as "craving" but more literally as "thirst." Nothing we drink can ever assuage our *tanha*, because that thirst is due to an emptiness at the core of our being. It is as if that core were a bottomless pit, something like the black holes that astronomers believe lie at the center of most galaxies. No matter how much we try to fill up our own black hole with this or that, everything is swallowed up and disappears into it.

It is bottomless because our sense of self is an ungroundable construct. Notice, however, that the second noble truth does not identify our problem as groundlessness. The problem is "thirst"—not the emptiness at the core of our being but our incessant efforts to fill that hole up, because we *experience* it as a sense of lack that must be filled up. The problem is not that I am unreal but that I keep trying to make myself real in ways that never work. This implies that there might be another way to experience our groundlessness.

The Buddha taught *tanha* as a general truth about the human condition, yet the specific ways we try to make ourselves feel more real are culturally conditioned. Traditionally, religion fulfills the role of telling us what our lack is and how to resolve it. For example, Christianity explains it as due to our sins, including the Original Sin that each of us inherits from Adam. The solution to sin is variously understood, but for Christians it involves accepting Christ, who reassures us that our sense of lack will be resolved when we are reunited with God. Whether or not that story persuades us, it has become less important in the modern world, in which we are inclined to seek this-worldly solutions to our sense of lack.

Some of those solutions are individualistic (fame, romance, personal power and wealth), others more collective (nationalism and other ideologies). The events of the last century have discredited Marxism in the eyes of most people, but corporate capitalism (allied with what might be called technologism) is also a this-worldly ideology that promises to resolve our sense of lack with an abundance that can fulfill all our needs. From a Buddhist perspective, what those two materialistic ideologies have in common is more significant than their differences. In response to our skepticism about any supernatural salvation, socialism and capitalism both offer us a naturalistic salvation in the future, when we (or at least some of us) will become happy because our desires are satisfied. The Buddhist emphasis on *tanha* stands in stark contrast to this. Happiness cannot be gained by satisfying desire, for our thirst means there is no end to it. Happiness can be achieved only by *transforming* desire. Mustn't that also be true for the collective happiness of society? There is a basic level of human need for food, shelter, and medical care that should be provided for everyone, but the Buddhist perspective is that we are otherwise mistaken to strive for an economic solution to human unhappiness.

For Buddhism our basic thirst manifests in different ways, usually organized into what are known as the three roots of evil or the three poisons: *lobha*, greed; *dosa*, ill will; and *moha*, delusion. The familiar Tibetan Buddhist mandala known as the Wheel of Life symbolizes these three as a cock, a snake, and a pig at the axle of a wheel representing *samsara*, the six worlds of *dukkha*. The animals are depicted as biting each other because the three roots of evil are interconnected. For example, my greed tends to generate ill will, either in others (when it incites me to take what is theirs) or in myself (when they will not give it to me); this both presupposes and reinforces the basic delusion of separation between us. One way to summarize the Buddhist path is that it involves transforming the evil roots into their positive counterparts: greed into generosity (*dana*), ill will into compassion (*karuna*), and delusion into wisdom (*prajna*).

Buddhism, like the Abrahamic traditions, sometimes personifies evil as a being: Mara the deceiver. Yet Mara's role and significance as an embodiment has been comparatively limited, because Buddhism emphasizes the *roots* of evil, not the evil itself. This accords with the Buddhist emphasis on causality: all things, including evil deeds, originate (and pass away) according to conditions. Can this traditional approach also provide insight into our problematic social institutions? The following chapters attempt to answer that question.

What Is the End of Social Dukkha?

By no coincidence the chapters in this book circle around the same insights into the ultimate source of our social problems and therefore the nature of any genuine solution. Collectively as well as individually, institutionally as well as personally, greed must be transformed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, ignorance into wisdom. The sense of duality between ourselves and the world feeds our insecurity and therefore our preoccupation with power, which we seek in order to secure ourselves. The unfortunate fact that we never feel secure enough is experienced as a lack of sufficient power. The Buddhist solution to this delusion of self is to realize our interpenetrating nonduality with the world, which is wisdom, and actualize it in the way we live, which is love. Yet how does this resolve our sense of lack?

The third ennobling truth is *nirodha*, literally the "cessation" of *dukkha*, the fact that our *dukkha* can come to an end. The early Buddhist term more often used to describe this cessation is *nirvana* (*nibbana* in Pali). But what *nirvana* actually involves is not altogether clear in the early texts. Although mentioned many times in the Pali canon, the Buddha did not say very much about what it is. When asked whether an *arhat* (one who has attained *nirvana*) survives after death, Shakyamuni declined to answer, saying that the question was not helpful. The implication is that such discussions are a waste of time or, worse, in that they involve intellectual speculation, whereas *nirvana* cannot be attained by grasping at any theories about it. Most of the descriptions found in the Pali sutras are in negative terms: *nirvana* as the end of *dukkha*, the end of *tanha*, and the like. Evidently the vagueness is intentional. Shakyamuni's attitude seems to have been that if we want to know what *nirvana* is, there can be no substitute for experiencing it ourselves.

Etymology is again helpful. Literally, *nirvana* means something like "blown out"—but what exactly is it that is blown out? The answer is sometimes expressed nihilistically: there is no more *dukkha* because the self is blown out, which means an *arhat*'s death is extinction, without the *dukkha* of any future rebirth. More often, *nirvana* has been understood as some type of transcendental salvation: an enlightened person attains or realizes some higher reality. Both of these interpretations seem incompatible with what the Buddha himself emphasized: there can be no extinction of the self because there never was a self to be extinguished, and there can be no salvation for the self because there never was a self to be saved.

Perhaps the meaning of “blown out” is better understood in terms of what has already been said about our sense of lack, the “black hole” at the core of our being. The third truth reassures us that something can happen to our black hole, that we are not fated to forever trying to fill a bottomless pit. Although we cannot get rid of the hollowness at our core, we can experience it differently.

It turns out that our hollowness is not so awful after all; it is not something that needs to be filled up. We cannot make our selves real in the ways we have been trying—the bottomless pit swallows up all our efforts—but we can realize something about the nature of the hole that frees us from trying to fill it up. We do not need to make ourselves real, because we have always been real. I do not need to ground myself, because I have always been grounded: not, however, as a separate, skin-encapsulated ego somewhere behind my eyes or between my ears and looking out at the world—for there has never been such a self. Rather, the bottomless, festering black hole can transform into a fountain and become a refreshing spring gushing up at the core of my being. The bottomlessness of this spring means something quite different than before. Now it refers to the fact that I can never understand the source of this spring, for the simple reason that *I am* this spring. It is nothing other than my true nature. And my inability to reflexively grasp that source, to ground and realize myself by filling up that hole, is no longer a problem, because there is no need to grasp it. The point is to *live* that spring, to let my fountain gush forth. My thirst (the second noble truth) is “blown out” because a letting go at the core of my being means my sense of lack evaporates as this fountain springs up.

Instead of being a constant anxiety that haunts me, the nothingness at my core turns out to be my freedom to be this, to do that. This liberation reveals my true nature to be formless. Sometimes the fountain is *just this*. Sometimes it becomes *just that*. The origin of the fountain itself always remains unfathomable, because that source is never fixated or bound by any particular form or activity that I engage in.

There is a problem, however, with this metaphor: the image of a fountain at our core is still dualistic. Our core, our formless ground, seems to become even more separate from the world “outside.” The actual experience is just the opposite, because the duality between inside and outside disappears when “I” do not need to try to ground myself by grasping at some phenomenon *in* the world. Of course there are still thoughts, feelings, and so forth, yet they are not the attributes of a self “inside.” The fountain gushes forth as the spontaneity of words and acts—not so much as “my” spontaneity as a charac-

teristic of the world of which my particular fountain is an inseparable part.

This transformation includes another aspect of the awakening experience especially emphasized in Mahayana Buddhism: the spontaneous wish for others to wake up and realize their formless true nature. On the one hand, awakening includes the realization that there is nothing that needs to be gained, for nothing has ever been lacking. My bottomless pit never needed filling, inasmuch as my groundlessness just needed to be realized as a different kind of grounding. On the other hand, however, I awaken from my own lack—from my *dukkha*, from my futile preoccupation with trying to make myself real—into a world full of beings similarly empty but suffering from their delusions of self and from their vain attempts to ground themselves and feel more real. A liberated person naturally wants to help the world, because he or she does not feel separate from it. This point is essential because it also provides the foundation for Buddhist social engagement. As Joanna Macy puts it, there is no need to ask why you take care of your own body.¹⁹

What are the social implications of such an awakening? Can there be a collective parallel? Historically, the classical and most often cited example of a Buddhist society has been the reign of the Indian king Ashoka in the third century B.C.E. Whether or not he himself was enlightened, he seems to have been genuinely motivated by deep compassion for all living beings. Appalled by the carnage during his conquest of the Kalingas, he converted to Buddhism and instituted reforms that remain exemplary. The most important were his emphases on moral self-conquest (*dharmavijaya*), nonviolence, social welfare, and religious pluralism. Ashoka’s policies, as recorded in his rock-inscribed edicts, encouraged nonviolence toward animals as well as humans. Pillar Edict V gives a long list of animal species under protection and issues hunting bans; Edict I, which records in a touching way his struggle to reduce his consumption of meat, provides some of the earliest historical evidence of vegetarianism. According to other pillars, Ashoka’s welfare policies subsidized medicine to the extent of importing doctors and herbs from abroad, building rest houses and hospices for the poor and sick, looking after convicts and their families, dispatching special ministers to investigate judicial harshness or corruption, freeing prisoners, and so forth.

Perhaps the most relevant for our multicultural societies was Ashoka’s restraint in not making Buddhism a state religion. He empowered officers to look after the welfare of all spiritual sects, providing an early example of church-state separation. From Edict XII:

King Priyadarsi [Ashoka] honors men of all faiths, members of religious orders and laymen alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem. Yet he does not value either gifts or honors as much as growth in the qualities essential to religion in men of all faiths. This growth may take many forms, but its root is in guarding one's speech to avoid extolling one's own faith and disparaging the faith of others improperly, or, when the occasion is appropriate, immoderately. The faiths of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service of faith to others.... Therefore concord alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and respect the conception of Dharma accepted by others. King Priyadarsi desires men of all faiths to know each other's doctrines and to acquire sound doctrines.... The objective of these measures is the promotion of each man's particular faith and the glorification of the Dharma.²⁰

The spirit of open-minded tolerance this edict breathes is remarkable even today. Nevertheless, the model provided by his India—a king ruling over an agrarian empire—can be of only limited inspiration to socially engaged Buddhists living in postindustrial Information Age societies. The following chapters offer suggestions for institutional change, but they do not add up to a vision of what might be called an awakened society. Without pretending to adumbrate one, let me emphasize three points that I believe are essential to the construction of any Buddhism-compatible alternative.

First, it is necessary to remember that Buddhism does not offer happiness through the fulfillment of desire. For that reason, a solution to our dukkha is not to be found in economic or scientific development, whether it be capitalist, socialist, or some other technocratic version. Since our thirst cannot be sated, it must be transformed. This means that the social solution we seek cannot be socially engineered. It also means that our collective preoccupation with economic growth and ever increasing consumption must also be transformed. But into what?

That brings us to the second point. From a Buddhist perspective, it is essential that any satisfactory social arrangement emphasize meeting the minimal physical needs of its members for food, shelter, clothing, and medical care—the traditional four requisites of the *bhikkhu* (monk) and *bhikkhuni* (nun). Beyond that, however, providing increasing sense gratification is not the most important function of a social system; on the contrary, a preoccupation with

such desire is problematic because of its negative effects on our dukkha. More important is to encourage what Stephen Batchelor has called a “culture of awakening.”²¹ As the example of Ashoka shows, this does not mean promoting Buddhism but rather valuing and encouraging ethical, psychological, and spiritual development, which includes self-realization and actualizing that realization in society.

In other words, the primary concern of a culture of awakening would be education. Today the values of a liberal education are increasingly subordinated to, if not swallowed by, the demands of the marketplace. Schooling is becoming little more than exam preparation and job training. This deference to market values reflects our preoccupation with money, which from a Buddhist perspective is upside down. In a spiritually healthy society, the most important institutions, which would receive the greatest social attention and therefore the greatest share of resources, would be schools. Instead of economic development as the ultimate goal or end-in-itself, such a society would evaluate itself according to how well educated (in the broadest sense of the term) its members were and wanted to be. This understanding of education includes culture, not in the sense of entertainment but in the root meaning of self-cultivation.

The technologies already available can and often do provide us, if we are affluent, with a cornucopia of personal possibilities that exceeds our ability to take advantage of them and enjoy them. The fact that we are personally preoccupied with acquiring even more, and collectively preoccupied with further technological and economic advances, indicates not an ever-improving condition of well-being but the lack of any other vision of individual and social development to fill the void left by our fading belief in God and an afterlife.

Third and finally, such a Buddhist vision is not utopian. There is no question of recovering a lost paradise or “Golden Age,” because we recognize that there never was one. Lacking an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving God, Buddhism has no need to postulate a Garden of Eden before we sinned, or an ideal human existence before the advent of dukkha. Shakyamuni declared that he could not trace the beginnings of dukkha. Buddhist practice reveals something about myself and the world right here and now. The goal is not to attain something but to realize what we have been ignoring (hence the problem of “ignorance”). The emphasis on transience applies to civilizations as well. Whether or not societies improve, they will not stop changing. For Buddhism the aim is not some new situation to be created in the future,

but something to be uncovered about the nature of the present moment when we experience our lives in the world without the three poisons.

What is perhaps most remarkable about this process of letting go of illusions, including the illusion of selfhood, is that when we do it, or rather when we practice in such a way that it happens to us, then extraordinary changes occur in our lives without our trying to fit into some idealized model of what we think we should be. Would the same be true collectively? Perhaps this attitude is consistent with certain anarchist and Green approaches that would remove external authority over local communities and empower them to restructure themselves more spontaneously.

In other words, Buddhist teachings do not imply any particular or detailed vision of the new political and economic relationships that will remedy our institutionalized dukkha. Certain principles are more or less obvious—for example, nonviolence, a basic level of social welfare, emphasis on education—yet these allow for many possible social structures. Even as there is little reason to think that one form of Buddhism will supplant all others in the West, so there is little reason to expect all the world's cultures to follow one model of human development—unless it is forced upon them. Awakened people, and people who value awakening, are free to accept or reconstruct a variety of political and economic arrangements that are consistent with a personal and social emphasis on spiritual awakening.

What Path Can We Follow to End Social Dukkha?

With the last ennobling truth we move from Buddhist social theory to Buddhist social praxis. The fourth truth gives us the way (*marga* in Sanskrit) to wake up, the path we follow in order to realize and liberate the fountain springing up at our core. Shakyamuni taught an eightfold path: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. Mahayana emphasizes developing the six *paramitas*, literally the six “goings-beyond,” because they involve perfecting ourselves to the highest (hence to a “transcendental”) degree: perfecting our generosity, morality, patience, effort, meditation, and wisdom. Such perfection does not imply extremism. Buddhism is known as the middle way because it avoids both hedonism (indulging the senses) and asceticism (“starving” the senses). This middle way is not halfway between the two, however. It focuses on the mind rather than the senses, because that is where our basic problem is.

How do mindfulness and meditation lead to awakening, to a “turning around” at the core? As we have seen, Buddhism does not provide us with something to fill up our hole. It shows us how to stop trying to fill it. To be mindful (focusing on one thing at a time) and to meditate (focusing on one's mental processes) both involve no longer trying to satisfy one's thirst. Instead, we slow down and become more aware of that thirst, without evasion and without judgment. When I stop experiencing my emptiness as a problem to be solved, then, mysteriously—because *I* do not do it—something begins to happen to that hole, and therefore to me. Realization happens when I let go of myself, transforming the bottomless hole at my core. The problem—my anguished sense of groundlessness—becomes the solution as something wells up spontaneously from that core.

Can this process of individual transformation be generalized for collective transformation as well?

For those who see the necessity of radical change, the first implication of Buddhist social praxis is the obvious need to work on ourselves as well as the social system. If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill will, and delusion, our efforts to address their institutionalized forms are likely to be useless, or worse. We may have some success in challenging the sociopolitical order, but that will not lead to an awakened society. Recent history provides us with many examples of revolutionary leaders, often well intentioned, who eventually reproduced the evils they fought against. In the end, one gang of thugs has been replaced by another.

From a Buddhist perspective, there is nothing surprising about that. If I do not struggle with the greed in my own heart, it is quite likely that, once in power, I too will be inclined to take advantage of the situation to serve my own interests. If I do not acknowledge the ill will in my own heart, I am more than likely to project it onto those who obstruct me. If I remain unaware that my sense of duality is a dangerous delusion, I will understand the problem of social change as the need for me to dominate the sociopolitical order. Add a conviction of my good intentions, along with a conviction of my superior understanding of the situation, and one has a recipe for disaster.

This suggests a social principle—the commitment to nonviolence—that for Buddhism is vital, for several reasons. Emphasis on transience implies another nonduality, that between means and ends. Peace is not only the goal, it must also be the way; or as Thich Nhat Hanh and Mahaghosanaanda have put it, peace is every step. We ourselves must be the peace we want to create. A model

here is Gandhi, who with some justice may be considered a twentieth-century Buddha.

There is another good reason to be nonviolent: it is more likely to be effective. The people who administer our economic and political institutions, and who also happen to benefit (in the narrow sense) the most from those arrangements, control an awesomely destructive military power and the instruments of police surveillance. Fantasies of a violent revolution that would replace them with a just social order need to be replaced with the revolutionary realization that the struggle for social change is primarily a spiritual one, a clash of worldviews and moral visions. It is important to avoid the violent backlash that violence invites and, even more imperative to preclude the "moral backlash" that occurs when the focus of a challenge shifts from an untenable worldview to the violence used to challenge it. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the violent posturing of radical groups such as the Weathermen and the Black Panthers was suicidal. We should not have any illusions that nonviolence will make this struggle easy. Our leaders—who might more accurately be called our "rulers"—also have powerful media and persuasive public relations machines to inculcate their worldview. How quickly the presidential coup d'état in the 2000 U.S. elections was forgotten in the aftermath of September 11! How quickly, again, corporate scandals such as Enron and WorldCom, which threatened to implicate the White House, were forgotten as the focus shifted to invading Saddam's Iraq!

From a Buddhist perspective, the most fundamental problem with present social arrangements is that they do not really make people happy—even those who benefit the most—because they are based on a defective premise, a wrong understanding of how dukkha may be ended. To encourage a culture of awakening, that focus must not be lost. If we become angry and want to act out that anger, Tibetan Buddhism provides an apt metaphor: to become angry at someone and want to injure someone is like trying to hurt someone else by stabbing yourself in the chest. Another Buddhist image is of acting angrily as throwing hot coals at an adversary: regardless of whether you hit your adversary, picking up the coals, you are sure to burn your own hand. A deeper understanding reduces our sense of separation from other people, including those in a position of power relative to us. Gandhi always treated the British authorities in India with respect. He never tried to dehumanize them. The more nasty a person may be, the more he or she is deluded, and it makes no difference whether he or she has any inkling of it. For Buddhism such ignorance is never bliss.

Not to kill is the first of the *five precepts* extracted from the eightfold path. The others are not to steal, not to lie, not to engage in sensuality (usually understood as improper sex), and not to use intoxicating drugs that cause heedlessness. These precepts are not commandments that we are required to follow. They are vows that we take to develop ourselves, in the belief that not to live according to these principles hurts ourselves most of all. The precepts also provide another way to make the Buddhist critique of institutionalized greed, ill will, and delusion, for today it has become more obvious that the precepts have collective implications too.

Today the precept against killing clearly implicates the militarization of contemporary societies, especially in the United States, whereby a large percentage of our resources continues to be devoted to the development, sale, and use of increasingly horrific weapons. The U.S. Defense Department now spends a billion dollars a day, roughly equivalent to the total amount spent on defense by the next fifteen largest military nations. According to a congressional study, in the year 2000 world arms sales grew by 8 percent over the previous year, to nearly \$36.9 billion; over half of that, about \$18.6 billion, was sold by the United States. Many influential people continue to benefit from the widespread belief that violence is an acceptable way to resolve disagreement. The violence of secretive terrorist groups is minor compared to the large-scale terrorism (also against innocents) that modern states use to enforce their control and extend their influence. But it is not only the death and injury inflicted on humans that violates the Buddhist precept against killing; the precept has always been understood to apply to other sentient beings as well. The imminent collapse of ecosystems and the accelerating extinction of plant and animal species require a more ecologically engaged attempt to embody this precept.

Not stealing has traditionally been defined as "not taking what is not given." Today it is arguable that our economic system is based upon stealing, not only because of the heavy debt burden borne by many of the world's poorest countries, but more fundamentally because corporate globalization is commodifying the whole earth and all its creatures into "natural resources" that it also tends to concentrate in the hands of a global elite.

Not lying seems simple enough to understand, if not to practice, yet today we have what might be considered "systemic lying," insofar as increasingly concentrated corporate media use their enormous influence not to inform and educate but to manipulate for the sake of their true purpose, the profits

they earn. The result is that we are continually distracted and diverted by entertainment and sports spectacles. Our national and international nervous systems are for sale to the highest bidder.

Not engaging in harmful sexual behavior is sometimes defined as “avoiding sex that causes pain to others.” Except in Japan (and in some of the Japanese-derived American lineages), Buddhist monks and nuns are traditionally celibate; but celibacy is not prescribed for laypeople. Courtship, marriage, divorce, and birth control are secular matters scarcely addressed in the Buddhist teachings. That all of us have the same Buddha-nature implies not only the liberation and empowerment of women but opposition to all gender-based discrimination, including gay, lesbian, and transsexual rights. The widespread use of sexual imagery in advertising today, and more obviously the burgeoning international sex trades, can be considered violations of this precept.

Not using harmful intoxicants that “cloud the mind” traditionally refers to alcohol, but it applies to many other legal and illegal drugs as well. Today, however, no intoxicant clouds our minds more than the “never-enough” consumerism manipulated by a system that needs to keep creating markets for the goods it keeps overproducing. Thich Nhat Hanh understands this precept as “no abuse of delusion-producing substances,” which can include televisions, Walkman stereos, cellular phones, the Internet, and many other technological devices that many of us are addicted to. One effect of silicon chip miniaturization has been to provide more opportunities to distract ourselves anytime and anyplace. If it is painful to stop and look at what our life has become—well, that is no longer a problem, because thanks to the wonders of modern science we can evade that predicament indefinitely.

In this fashion what might be called the five *social* precepts provide another way to evaluate the failure of our institutions. They are also useful because they thereby imply specific criteria for how those institutions need to be reformed: until they no longer violate these precepts. If *not killing* becomes a basic principle for challenging social injustice, what about the others? If it is important to address the forces of militarization nonviolently, are there parallels in the case of the other precepts? Do they also provide us with principles that need to be personally integrated in order to most directly and efficiently question institutionalized greed, ill will, and delusion?

If, for example, the social equivalent of stealing is an economic system that commodifies and monopolizes the earth’s resources, following the social precept of *not stealing* involves not only challenging this system but, first of all,

nurturing another system in our minds and lives: learning to tread lightly on the earth and its beings. Voluntary simplicity, choosing to reduce our consumption, will not by itself be enough to reform the economic order, yet simplifying our lives in this way is socially powerful because of the time and energy it liberates and, perhaps as important, because the example of this alternative lifestyle to others is important—especially if it is seen to reduce rather than aggravate our dukkha.

A similar approach can be applied to the other precepts. We follow the social precept of *not lying* by, first of all, refusing to allow our nervous systems to become addicted to the channels of communication that maintain the collective trance generally accepted as “social reality.” In other words, we accept responsibility for liberating our own attention and clarifying our own awareness.

What is perhaps most remarkable about following these social precepts is that they are quite unremarkable—because many people, most of them not Buddhist, are already trying to live according to them. Gandhi, again, is an obvious and inspirational example. This suggests that the basic issue here might not be Buddhist principles so much as a different type of consciousness and lifestyle of which Buddhism is one example. Whether or not we consider ourselves Buddhists, attempting to embody these precepts encourages the same type of transformation: the sense of alienation between myself and the world (and other people in it) diminishes, and a sense of mutual responsibility naturally matures.

For Buddhism, then—or at least the understanding of Buddhism presented in this introduction—realizing and actualizing such nonduality remains the heart of the issue, because ultimately it is the sense of duality between ourselves and others that shores up the social structures institutionalizing greed, ill will, and delusion. The greatest challenge to those working for social transformation, therefore, is to find creative ways that enable more people to realize this simple truth and to embody it in their lives.

Mahayana Buddhism developed the teaching of *no-self* into the bodhisattva archetype, whose lack of self-preoccupation allows him or her to be wholly devoted to the salvation and welfare of others. As the example of Ashoka reminds us, it is not important that such devotion be characterized as Buddhist. Bodhisattvas and Buddhas do not need to think of themselves as Bodhisattvas and Buddhas; what is important is what they do, including their willingness to risk themselves for a greater good. When the Dalai Lama is

asked what his religion is, he often replies, "My religion is compassion." From a Buddhist perspective, what we most need is not Buddhism but the wisdom that realizes our oneness with the world, and the loving-kindness that lives that wisdom.

The chapters that follow develop the above understanding of the four noble truths by considering how the three poisons have become institutionalized. Although there is considerable overlap among the poisons, chapters 2, 3, and 4 mainly address the problem of *institutionalized greed* in globalizing capitalism and the economic development of "undeveloped" societies. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine examples of *institutionalized ill will*: the new American "holy war" against terrorism, retributive justice systems, and the curious historical problem of Japanese samurai Zen. Chapters 8 and 9 reflect on two significant cases of *institutionalized delusion*: our collective fascination with biotechnology and our dualistic relationship with the earth.

In chapter 2, "Buddhism and Poverty," I ask whether Buddhism has anything special to contribute to our understanding of how to alleviate poverty. Buddhism is sometimes criticized for encouraging a nonmaterialistic way of life that goes against the grain of our main motivations, but it is actually more realistic than economic theory in the way it understands the sources of human ill-being and well-being. Its approach also reflects the ways most pre-modern communities have understood well-being, and the ways "undeveloped" societies today still do. From a Buddhist perspective, then, it is not surprising that the institutional efforts of the last fifty years have actually aggravated the social problems they were supposed to solve. Far from providing a solution, the conventional approach to development is better understood as the problem itself. Buddhism contextualizes the problem of poverty differently; it questions the assumptions that dominate our thinking about "undeveloped" societies.

Buddhism does not encourage poverty, yet it also recognizes that the single-minded pursuit of material wealth does not make human beings happy or even rich, for a world in which envy and miserliness predominate cannot be considered one in which poverty has been eliminated. When human beings gain an intense acquisitive drive for some object, that object becomes a cause of suffering. Such an object can be compared to the flame of a torch carried against the wind or to a pit of embers: it causes much anxiety but yields little

satisfaction—an obvious truth we repress by turning our attention to another craved object. There is a fundamental and inescapable poverty built into a consumer society. For that reason, projects that seek to end poverty by "developing" an economy focused on consumption are grasping a snake by the wrong end. Unless they have been seduced by the utopian dream of a technological cornucopia, most "poor" people never become fixated on fantasies about all the things they might have. Their ends are an expression of the means available to them. It is presumptuous to assume that the only way to become happy is to get on the treadmill of a lifestyle dependent on the market and increasingly preoccupied with consumption.

We are also misled by our delusive thinking. Bipolar categories divide things into pairs of opposites. If I want to live a "pure" life, I will be preoccupied with avoiding impurity. In the same way, desire for wealth is inevitably shadowed by fear of poverty. One implication of this dialectic is that there is no such thing as a "poverty problem" that can be understood separately from a "wealth problem." Rather, we are inflicted with a wealth/poverty dualism. Global poverty is *conceptually* necessary if the world is to be completely commodified and monetarized. Traditional cultures must be redefined as obstacles to be overcome, and local elites must become dissatisfied with them, in order to create a class of more self-interested people as the vanguard of consumption. The poverty of others is also the benchmark by which we measure our own achievements. In other words, among the causes of poverty today are the delusions of the wealthy. Instead of focusing only on poverty, therefore, we also need to address the personal, social, and ecological costs of our obsession with wealth and growth.

We would do better to accept that the world can be enriched by a plurality of understandings about human ill-being and well-being. The neoliberal economic understanding of what happiness is and how to achieve it is only one vision among many. There is a social price to pay for the comforts and commodities neoliberalism promises, a price that we should not impose on others who have their own worldviews and values.

Chapter 3, "Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes?" reflects further on the kind of economic system such an attitude implies. Buddhism, like Christianity, lacks an intrinsic social theory, which means that we cannot look to its traditional texts for perspectives on contemporary issues such as the globalization of capitalism. Yet its teachings do have important economic implications that can