

MONEY

SEX

WAR

KARMA

NOTES FOR A BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

DAVID R. LOY

“If you’re interested in personal or societal change, this is a book you need to read.”
—Noah Levine, author of *Against the Stream*

A Note from the Publisher

We hope you will enjoy this [Wisdom](#) book. For your convenience, this digital edition is delivered to you without “digital rights management” (DRM). This makes it easier for you to use across a variety of digital platforms, as well as preserve in your personal library for future device migration.

Our nonprofit mission is to develop and deliver to you the very highest quality books on Buddhism and mindful living. We hope this book will be of benefit to you, and we sincerely appreciate your support of the author and Wisdom with your purchase. If you'd like to consider additional support of our mission, please visit our website at wisdompubs.org.

MONEY, SEX, WAR, KARMA

Notes for a Buddhist Revolution

MONEY

SEX

WAR

KARMA

NOTES FOR A BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

DAVID R. LOY



Wisdom Publications • Boston

Acquired at wisdompubs.org

Wisdom Publications, Inc.
199 Elm Street
Somerville MA 02144 USA
www.wisdompubs.org

© 2008 David R. Loy

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system or technologies now known or later developed, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Loy, David, 1947-

Money, sex, war, karma : notes for a Buddhist revolution / David R. Loy.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-86171-558-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-86171-965-5 (ebook)

1. Religious life—Buddhism. 2. Buddhism—Social aspects. I. Title.

BQ5395.L69 2008

294.3'42—dc22

2008002693

12 11 10 09 08

5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Emily Mahon. Interior design by TL Set in Diacritical Bembo, 11.5/16.

Wisdom Publications' books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America



This book was produced with environmental mindfulness. We have elected to print this title on 50% PCW recycled paper. As a result, we have saved the following resources: 33 trees, 23 million BTUs of energy, 2,857 lbs. of greenhouse gases, 11,859 gallons of water, and 1,523 lbs. of solid waste. For more information, please visit our website, www.wisdompubs.org.

When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom.
When I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love.
Between these two my life turns.

—Nasargadatta Maharaj

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| The Suffering of Self | 15 |
| Lack of Money | 25 |
| The Great Seduction | 31 |
| Trapped in Time | 37 |
| The Second Buddha | 45 |
| How to Drive Your Karma | 53 |
| What's Wrong with Sex? | 65 |
| What Would the Buddha Do? | 79 |
| The Three Poisons, Institutionalized | 87 |
| Consciousness Commodified: The Attention-Deficit Society | 95 |
| Healing Ecology | 103 |
| The Karma of Food | 113 |
| Why We Love War | 127 |
| Notes for a Buddhist Revolution | 139 |
| | |
| Index | 153 |
| Acknowledgments | 161 |

Now that Buddhism has come to the West, how are they changing each other?

Half a century ago the British historian Arnold Toynbee predicted that their encounter would be a major event in world history. According to one account he even claimed that the arrival of Buddhism in the West “may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century.” Given everything else that’s happened in the last hundred years, one hesitates to agree with him, yet today we can appreciate better that the arrival of Buddhism does mark something special. For the first time, most of the world’s major civilizations—I’m thinking of India, China, Japan, and the West—are not only interacting militarily and economically but their world-views are in serious conversation with each other.

Nothing like this has ever happened before. Thanks to the density and speed of interaction provided by modern information and transportation technologies, the global dialogue between East and West is opening up possibilities that we cannot anticipate. This encounter also challenges Buddhism in new ways. If the Dharma is to fulfill its liberative potential, it must make the transition from being an Asian tradition (more accurately, several Asian traditions) into a teaching that speaks more directly to the spiritual needs of modern people living in a globalizing world.

What does that imply about the ways contemporary Buddhism is being taught and practiced?

2 Money, Sex, War, Karma

Buddhism is the oldest of the world's three big missionary religions, the other two being Christianity and Islam. Each was so successful because it became the religion of an empire (in the case of Buddhism, the empire of Ashoka in the third century B.C.E., which included most of South Asia). This does not mean that Buddhism spread by the sword. Its expansion to Ceylon and Southeast Asia, and later north of the Himalayas, seems to have been a peaceful affair. In accord with its own emphasis on insubstantiality and interpenetration, Buddhism spread by infiltrating other cultures, subverting their religions to its own purposes. Native mythologies were not suppressed but *reinterpreted* in Buddhist terms. In China, for example, Mahayana Buddhism resonated with Taoism and their intercourse gave birth to Chan (Zen). In Tibet, tantric Buddhism merged with Bön shamanism and the fruit was Tibetan Buddhism.

This adaptability did not always work to Buddhism's advantage. There were many factors that led to the eventual disappearance of Buddhism in its birthplace, India, but one of them, ironically, was its influence on Brahmanism and other local traditions. Buddhism became more dispensable once some of its key elements had been absorbed. As the art historian and philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy put it, "Brahmanism killed Buddhism with a fraternal embrace." For example, the Buddhist understanding of *nirvana* influenced Hindu notions of *moksha* liberation, and Buddhist innovations such as the two-truths doctrine were adopted and adapted by Vedanta.

This history is worth remembering as Buddhism faces its biggest transition yet. To influence the modern world, Buddhism must adapt to it. But is its present popularity another fraternal hug? The threat today is not Western religions but psychology and consumerism. Is the Dharma becoming another form of psychotherapy? Another commodity to be bought and sold? Will Western Buddhism end up all too compatible with our individualistic consumption patterns,

with expensive retreats and initiations catering to over-stressed converts eager to pursue their own enlightenment? Let's hope not, because Buddhism and the West need each other.

Despite its economic and technological dynamism, Western civilization and its globalization are in trouble—which means all of us are in trouble. The most obvious example is our inability to respond to accelerating climate change as seriously as it requires, if humanity is to survive and thrive over the next few centuries. There's no need to go on at length here about the other social and ecological crises that confront us now, which are increasingly difficult to ignore; many of those are considered in the following chapters. It's also becoming harder to overlook the fact that the political and economic systems we're so proud of seem unable to address these problems. One must ask: Is that because they themselves are the problem?

Part of the problem is leadership, or the lack of it, but we can't simply blame our rulers. It's not only the lack of a moral core among those who rise to the top, or the institutional deformations that massage their rise. Economic and political elites (and there's not much difference between them anymore), like the rest of us, are in need of a new vision of human possibility: what it means to be human, why we tend to get into trouble, and how we can get out of it. Those who benefit most from present social arrangements may think of themselves as hard-headed realists, but as self-conscious human beings we remain motivated by some such vision whether we're aware of it or not. As "Why We Love War" points out, even secular modernity is based on a spiritual worldview—unfortunately a deficient one, from a Buddhist perspective.

The Dharma talks and essays that follow offer examples of how Buddhist teachings can illuminate our situation. Yet influence is a two-way street. The exotic names, robes, and rituals of Asian Buddhism are attractive to many of us, but sooner or later we must begin to distinguish the imported forms that we appreciate from the essential

4 Money, Sex, War, Karma

Dharma that we need. Buddhism needs to take advantage of its encounter with modern/postmodern civilization—offering a greater challenge than Buddhism has ever faced before—to engage in a self-examination that attempts to distinguish what is vital and still living in its Asian versions from what is unnecessary and perhaps outdated.

This is dangerous, of course. There is always the possibility of throwing out the baby with the bathwater—but the alternative is to keep immersing ourselves in waters that have become tepid and muddied. We should accept that the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions we have learned so much from are particular historical, culturally contingent forms that the Dharma has taken in pre-modern Asia. Buddhism might have evolved differently, and today it needs to continue evolving, in order to find the ways of teaching and practices that work best for us.

I am not talking about changing the Dharma but adapting its forms, as they must always be adapted so the Dharma may thrive in a new place and time. Buddhist emphasis on impermanence (*anicca* in Pali) and insubstantiality (*anatta*, *shunyata*) allows and indeed obliges this adaptability. The writings of the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen are so insightful because he challenged old metaphors that had gone stale by taking advantage of the creative possibilities of the Japanese language. Does the challenge of modernity require anything less from us? Buddhism can provide what the modern world most needs: the spiritual message that may yet awaken us to who we are and why we as a species have such a penchant for making ourselves unhappy. For that message to have its full impact, however, the Dharma must find new modes of expression that speak more directly to us, including those who may not be much interested in Asian cultures. When transplanting an exotic species into a new environment, it may be helpful to bring some of the original soil entwined with the roots. Eventually, however, the plant must become able to root itself in new ground.

The interdependence of our globalizing world implies that the evolution of Western Buddhism will also reflexively interact with Asian Buddhism. In fact, this is already happening, and that is just as well. To some extent Asian Buddhism is stuck, in much the same ways that all religious traditions tend to get stuck. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama—in many ways an inspiring example of how a religious institution can begin to change in new circumstances—has mentioned that by the time of the Chinese invasion Tibetan Buddhism had begun to fossilize, and that in some ways Tibetan Buddhism has benefited from exposure to the West. The situation of Buddhism in other Asian societies is quite different, of course, but many of the problems are similar.

As religions begin to develop so too do tensions between the founder's salvific message and the institution that arises to preserve that message. Although an organization is necessary, it's not easy to avoid a shift in focus from the original message to preserving and enhancing the status of the institution. We see this in the evolution of Buddhism as well. Shakyamuni created the Sangha as a fellowship of serious practitioners, but I wonder if he anticipated what would happen to it. Although it began as a community of wandering mendicants, thanks to many donations the Sangha eventually became quite wealthy and influential, as also happened to the medieval church in Europe.

This changed the relationship between monastics and laypeople. The Pali Canon makes it quite clear that lay men and women can also attain liberation, although they have more responsibilities and distractions to cope with. The basic challenge for them is exactly the same as for monastics: practicing the Dharma to awaken, and living a life of compassion that manifests that awakening. In much of Asian Buddhism, however, a self-defeating split has opened up between the Sangha and the laity. Today the main spiritual responsibility of lay Buddhists is not to follow the path themselves but to support *bhikkhu*

monks (and, less often, *bhikkhuni* nuns). In this way lay men and women gain *punna*, “merit,” which can lead to a more favorable rebirth next time, or, even better, winning the lottery this lifetime. (See “How to Drive Your Karma.”)

Such spiritual materialism has had a negative effect on the Sangha too. In some cultures its main social role today is not to spread the teachings, or even to set a good example, but to serve as a “field of merit” that provides opportunities for laypeople to gain merit. According to popular belief, the more spiritually developed a *bhikkhu* is, the more merit a donation deposits into one’s spiritual bank account. The most important thing for *bhikkhus*, therefore, is to follow the monastic rules and regulations (the *Vinaya*) strictly, and to be *seen* doing that, so that one is a worthy recipient of lay support. The result is that some Asian Sanghas and their lay supporters are locked into a co-dependent marriage where it’s difficult for either partner to change.

A rather different situation exists in Japan, where many temple monks had common-law wives and children before 1872, when they became legally permitted to marry. The task of providing for them eventually transformed temples into family businesses, and the oldest son is still expected to become a priest to keep that temple business in the family, regardless of whether he has any religious inclinations. As a result, Japanese Buddhism today is, in very large part, a thriving (and lucrative) industry focused on funerals and memorial services—and not much else.

Ironically, Shakyamuni Buddha himself seems to have been quite relaxed about rules. During his lifetime many regulations were formulated to keep order among the rapidly growing monastic community, but just before he passed away the Buddha emphasized that only the major rules were important; the rest could be discarded. Unfortunately no one thought to ask him which were the major rules, so afterward the Sangha ignored his hint and decided to keep

them all. We are reminded that the Buddha was more flexible and open-minded than the institutions that developed to preserve his teachings. Today we find ourselves in a situation where that flexibility needs to be recovered.

To sum up, the encounter that Toynbee had such high hopes for is between a West in crisis and a Buddhism that has its own problems. This does not diminish the importance of their interaction. Quite the opposite: it means that both sides need each other. Each has much to learn from the other as well as to offer the other. On the Buddhist side, we need to do more than translate traditional categories into modern terminology. Today some Buddhist teachings are more comprehensible to us than they could have been in the Buddha's day. The Buddhist emphasis on *anatta*, "not-self," makes more sense to modern psychologists who understand the ego-self as a mental construction. (See "The Suffering of Self.") Linguists and philosophers have caught up with Nagarjuna's realization that language constructs reality, and usually deceives us in the process. (See "The Second Buddha.") Our understanding of Buddhism can benefit from these modern developments. On the other side, some things make less sense to us today. Although we can understand better the Buddha's critique of ritual and his emphasis on motivation and intentions, we need to rethink our often inconsistent views of karma and rebirth. (See "How to Drive Your Karma.")

The essays that follow try to do more than wrap the Dharma in modern clothes. What is most illuminating is when two different ways of thinking encounter and interrogate each other sympathetically, in a mutual search for new understanding. The results have significant implications for each side. We can begin to see more clearly what is essential about the Buddha's Dharma, and we also begin to see more clearly its extraordinary implications for the situation we find ourselves in. As the Buddhist path is demythologized, its relevance today becomes more apparent.

Of course it's presumptuous to talk about "liberating Buddhism," but there's something to be said for the *double-entendre*: a more liberated Buddhism is a more liberative Buddhism. Although both concerns are present in each of the chapters that follow, "liberated Buddhism" is the main focus in the first half of this book, which offers some innovative ways of expressing the Dharma. "Liberative Buddhism" is emphasized in the second half, where the Dharma offers us fresh ways to understand the fix we're in today. In every chapter, however, it is my hope that each perspective benefits from the other.

"The Suffering of Self" goes to the heart of what is most distinctive about Buddhism: the link it reveals between our inability to enjoy life and our delusive sense of self. How are they connected, and how can the delusion of self be overcome? The sense of self is shadowed by a sense of *lack* that we feel but do not understand, so we usually try to resolve it in ways that just make things worse. Since this problem is basically spiritual—in fact it's *the* spiritual problem, at the root of many, perhaps most other, problems—the solution must also be spiritual. We need to stop evading the emptiness at our core and realize its true nature.

"Lack of Money," "The Great Seduction," and "Trapped in Time" use that perspective to understand how our ways of thinking about money, fame, and time have become delusions that "bind us without a rope." Why do we never have enough of them? The desire for money is often obsessive because money functions as a kind of symbolic reality that can fill up our sense of lack. Money as a social construct is of course valueless in itself—you can't eat or drink a dollar bill—but as our medium of exchange it is the most valuable thing of all. Inevitably, then, it has come to represent abstract happiness. Remember Midas? Today there's a bit of him in most of us. There is nothing wrong with having money if you know how to use it well,

but we're in for trouble when we expect something from it that it can't provide.

Is the same true for fame? We tend to assume that fame, like money, is a universal craving, but neither of them was very important in the European middle ages. Modern fame requires modern media: television and film, newspapers and magazines, and so forth. Why has the prospect of fame become so attractive to us? To understand that we also need to consider the alternative: what Leo Braudy calls the "living death" of anonymity in a world increasingly dominated by electronic media. The collective attention of so many unknown people seems to offer us a potent way, perhaps the best way, to feel more real. Since it can't really make us more real, however, this possibility is better understood as a collective delusion.

An even more troublesome issue for many of us is time, or the lack of it. Is our lack of time also connected with our lack of self? Not only is there never enough time to do everything we want, there never *can* be enough time, because we know our time is limited and we know what is going to happen at the end of it. Buddhism doesn't promise immortality in the usual sense—living on and on, forever—but it offers a different solution to our time-stress, which involves a new understanding of time. Time isn't something I have, it's something I am, and if I *am* time then I can't be trapped *by* it. Paradoxically, to *become* time by realizing my nonduality with it—what Dogen called *uji*, "being-time"—is to live in an eternal present.

Our usual way of thinking about time, and how we get trapped "in" it, is a good example of how we make conceptual distinctions that we then get stuck in—for example, the delusive distinction between *me* and *my time*. The ancient Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, generally agreed to be the second most important figure in the history of Buddhism, wrote about such dualisms and how they deceive us. What he had to say is very important but his philosophical style

|| Money, Sex, War, Karma

is condensed and not easy to understand. “The Second Buddha” offers an overview of his teachings and how modern philosophers are finally catching up with what he realized almost two thousand years ago.

One of the most important issues for contemporary Buddhism is *karma*. How should it be understood today? As impermanence implies, karma too has a history, and that history comes with its own baggage. The most common literal interpretation implies that social justice is built into the moral fabric of the universe: someone born blind or poor is reaping the consequences of deeds in a previous lifetime. Unlike *anatta*, “not-self,” and many other Buddhist teachings, however, there is no modern support for such a view; science has discovered no such force or mechanism. That in itself does not refute such an interpretation but it does suggest that we should consider other explanations. The problem, again, is that karma is usually understood as something that the self *has*, rather than something that the sense of self *is*. “How to Drive Your Karma” presents this “new” perspective. For the Buddha the most important point about karma was that it’s the key to spiritual development, because it reveals how our lives can be changed right here and now by changing the motivations behind what we do.

Another issue that many contemporary Buddhists are confused about is sex. Is Buddhism compatible with contemporary attitudes toward sexuality and gender? Although celibacy is not necessary for laypeople, it is required of monastics. Does that have implications for those who are not monastics but who also take their practice very seriously? Is it better for our spiritual development if the rest of us are celibate too? “What’s Wrong with Sex?” tries to answer that question by considering why celibacy has been so important for Buddhist monastics. Just as important, we need to think about what we today expect from romance and sex, especially our continual hope that they can somehow fill up our sense of lack.

Our world is quite different from the Buddha's. If he were living today, what would the Buddha do? That question is not easy to answer yet it's not one that we can ignore either. The globalization of economic, military, and ecological crises gives new meaning to the Buddhist emphasis on interdependence, and calls for new types of bodhisattvas—for all of us to respond as best we can. But if everything is “empty,” what's the urgency? In order to really help the world, shouldn't we focus on our own awakening first? Or do those objections misunderstand the Buddhist path? “What Would the Buddha Do?” takes up these questions.

“The Three Poisons, Institutionalized” reflects further on what distinguishes our situation from that of the Buddha. He emphasized the importance of transforming the three unwholesome motivations: greed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, delusion into wisdom. Today we also have to address their collective versions: our economic system institutionalizes greed, militarism institutionalizes ill will, and the media institutionalize delusion. Any personal awakening we might have on our cushions remains incomplete until it is supplemented by a “social awakening” and a social response to these institutionalized causes of widespread suffering.

Buddhist awakening liberates our awareness from grasping fixations. As well as institutionalized greed, ill will, and delusion, today we are subjected to new types of *attention traps* that are discussed in “Consciousness Commodified.” Our awareness is conditioned in new ways: fragmented by new information and communication technologies, commodified by advertising and consumerism, and manipulated by sophisticated propaganda techniques. Who owns our collective attention, and who has the right to decide what happens to it?

Although you wouldn't know it from the news media, no problem today is more important than global climate change and related

ecological crises that threaten the continuation of civilization as we know it. Why are we so incapable of responding to these challenges with the seriousness they deserve? “Healing Ecology” offers a Buddhist perspective based upon the delusion of self and the lack that haunts it. If my fundamental personal problem is the delusion of separation from others, is that also true collectively? If the parallel holds, our alienation from the rest of the biosphere must be an ongoing source of collective anxiety for us, and our attempts to secure ourselves are just making things worse. Why is our GNP never big enough? Why do we never have enough technology?

“The Karma of Food” offers an example of how a Buddhist perspective might help us evaluate new technologies, specifically the benefits and dangers of genetically modified (GM) food. Although at least one Buddhist organization has condemned GM food as unnatural, there is little concern for “being natural” in traditional Buddhist teachings. A better way to address this issue is to remember Buddhist emphasis on the karmic consequences of motivation. How much are food corporations focusing on what is beneficial for consumers and the biosphere, and how much are they motivated by institutionalized greed and delusion?

“Why We Love War” reflects on the unfortunate paradox that, although everyone professes to hate war, we keep doing it. Is that because war is yet another way of trying to resolve our sense of lack? Do we have to fight against the bad guys *over there* in order to feel good about who we are *here*? Historically, the attempt to get rid of evil people has usually ended up creating more evil. Isn’t that also true of the War on Terror? If terrorism is the war of the poor, war is the terrorism of the rich. Perhaps we can’t understand the enduring attraction of war or terrorism until we understand the festering sense of lack built into secular modernity, which seems to offer us different ways to become happy but can’t explain why they don’t actually make us happy.

It's relatively easy to see the problems. How can Buddhism help us solve them? "Notes for a Buddhist Revolution" argues that socially engaged Buddhism does not imply a distinctive social movement. Along with other engaged spiritualities, however, it may have an important role to play in what has become a global movement for peace and social justice. Buddhism contributes an emphasis on personal spiritual practice, commitment to non-violence, the flexibility implied by impermanence and nonsubstantiality (*anatta* and *shunyata*), along with the realization that ending our own *dukkha* requires us to address the *dukkha* of everyone else as well.

These have many implications for how we engage, but what should socially engaged Buddhists focus on? While we certainly need to address the militarization of our society and the ecological impact of our economy, Buddhist emphasis on the liberation of awareness suggests a more distinctive critique of the ways that our collective awareness has become trapped and manipulated. Does that also imply where we should focus our efforts?

The Suffering of Self

If someone asked you to summarize the teachings of the Buddha, what would you say? For most Buddhists, probably the first thing that would come to mind is the four noble (or “ennobling”) truths: *dukkha*, its causes, its cessation (better known as *nirvana*), and the eightfold path that leads to cessation. Shakyamuni Buddha himself is believed to have emphasized those four truths in his first Dharma talk, and those of us who teach Buddhism find them quite helpful, because all his other teachings can be included somewhere within them.

Nevertheless, there is nothing exclusively or distinctively Buddhist about any of the four noble truths.

Buddhism has its own take on them, of course, but in their basic form the four noble truths are common to many Indian religious traditions. *Dukkha* is where most of those spiritual paths begin, including Jainism and Sankhya–Yoga. There is also wide agreement that the cause of *dukkha* is craving, and that liberation from craving is possible. Moreover, they all include some sort of way to realize that liberation. Yoga, for example, teaches a path with eight limbs that is quite similar to Buddhism’s eightfold path.

So what is truly distinctive about the Buddhist Dharma? How does it differ from other religious traditions that also explain the world and our role within it? No other spiritual path focuses so clearly on the intrinsic connection between *dukkha* and our delusive sense of self. They are not only related: for Buddhism the self *is* *dukkha*.

Although *dukkha* is usually translated as “suffering,” that is too narrow. The point of *dukkha* is that even those who are wealthy and healthy experience a basic dissatisfaction, a dis-ease, which continually festers. That we find life dissatisfactory, one damn problem after another, is not accidental—because it is the very nature of an unawakened sense-of-self to be bothered about something.

Early Buddhism distinguishes three basic types of *dukkha*. Everything we usually identify as physical and mental suffering—including being separated from those we want to be with, and being stuck with those we don’t want to be with (the Buddha had a sense of humor!)—is included in the first type.

The second type is the *dukkha* due to impermanence. It’s the realization that, although I might be enjoying an ice-cream cone right now, it will soon be finished. The best example of this type is awareness of mortality, which haunts our appreciation of life. Knowing that death is inevitable casts a shadow that usually hinders our ability to live fully now.

The third type of *dukkha* is more difficult to understand because it’s connected with the delusion of self. It is *dukkha* due to *sankhara*, “conditioned states,” which is sometimes taken as a reference to the ripening of past karma. More generally, however, *sankhara* refers to the constructedness of all our experience, including the experience of self. When looked at from the other side, another term for this constructedness is *anatta*, “not-self.” There is no unconditioned self within our constructed sense of self, and this is the source of the deepest *dukkha*, our worst anguish.

This sense of being a self that is separate from the world I am in is illusory—in fact, it is our most dangerous delusion. Here we can benefit from what has become a truism in contemporary psychology, which has also realized that the sense of self is a psychological-social-linguistic construct: *psychological*, because the ego-self is a product of mental conditioning; *social*, because a sense of self develops in relation

with other constructed selves; and *linguistic*, because acquiring a sense of self involves learning to use certain names and pronouns such as *I, me, mine, myself*, which create the illusion that there must be some *thing* being referred to. If the word *cup* refers to this thing I'm drinking coffee out of, then we mistakenly infer that *I* must refer to something in the same way. This is one of the ways language misleads us.

Despite these similarities to modern psychology, however, Buddhism differs from most of it in two important ways. First, Buddhism emphasizes that there is always something uncomfortable about our constructed sense of self. Much of contemporary psychotherapy is concerned with helping us become "well-adjusted." The ego-self needs to be repaired so it can fit into society and we can play our social roles better. Buddhism isn't about helping us become well-adjusted. A socially well-adjusted ego-self is still a sick ego-self, for there remains something problematical about it. It is still infected by *dukkha*.

This suggests the other way that Buddhism differs from modern psychology. Buddhism agrees that the sense of self can be reconstructed, and that it needs to be reconstructed, but it emphasizes even more that the sense of self needs to be *deconstructed*, to realize its true "empty," non-dwelling nature. Awakening to our constructedness is the only real solution to our most fundamental anxiety. Ironically, the problem and its solution both depend upon the same fact: a constructed *sense* of self is not a real self. Not being a real self is intrinsically uncomfortable. Not being a real self is also what enables the sense of self to be deconstructed and reconstructed, and this deconstruction/reconstruction is what the Buddhist spiritual path is about.

Why is a constructed sense of self so uncomfortable? "My" sense of self is composed of mostly habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and acting. That's all. Those impermanent processes interact with others and give rise to a sense of being a self that is separate

from other people and things. If you strip away those psychological and physical processes, it's like peeling off the layers of an onion. When you get to the end, what's left? Nothing. There's no hard seed or anything else at the core, once the last few layers have been peeled away. And what's wrong with that? *Nothing*. The basic problem is, we don't like being nothing. A gaping hole at one's core is quite distressing. Nothing means there's no-thing to identify with or cling to. Another way to say it is that my nothing-ness means my constructed sense of self is ungrounded, so it is haunted by a basic sense of unreality and insecurity. A sense of self can never become secure because it is nothing that could be secure.

Our English word *person* comes from the Latin *persona*, "mask." The sense of self is a mask. Who is wearing the mask? Behind the mask (form) is nothing (emptiness). That there is nothing behind the mask is not actually a problem—but unfortunately the *persona* does not usually know this.

(Don't be misled by these metaphors: peeling off onion layers to reach the *core*, or looking for what's *behind* the mask. In fact, that way of thinking is part of the problem: we usually make a deluded distinction between ourselves *inside* and the rest of the world *outside*.)

Intellectually, this situation is not easy to understand, but I suspect that most of us actually have some innate awareness of the problem. In fact, if our sense of self is truly empty in this way, we *must* have some basic awareness of this problem—yet it's a very uncomfortable awareness, because we don't understand it or know what to do about it. I think this is one of the great secrets of life: each of us individually experiences this sense of unreality as the feeling that "something is wrong with me." Growing up is learning to pretend along with everyone else that "I'm okay; you're okay." A lot of social interaction is about reassuring each other and ourselves that we're all really okay even though inside we feel somehow that we're not. When we look at other people from the outside, they seem quite solid and real to

us, yet each of us feels deep inside that something is not right—something is wrong at the core.

Here another modern psychological idea is helpful: repression. Although Freud's legacy has become quite controversial, his concept of repression, and "the return of the repressed," remains very important. Repression happens when I become aware of something uncomfortable that I don't want to deal with, so it is "pushed away" from consciousness. Freud believed that our main repression is sexual desires. Existential psychology shifts the focus to death: our inability to cope with mortality, the fact that our lives will come to an end, and we don't know when—maybe soon. For Buddhism, however, fear of death focuses on what will happen in the future, while there is a more basic problem that we experience right *now*: this uncomfortable sense of unreality at our core, which we don't know how to deal with. Naturally enough, we learn to ignore or repress it, but that doesn't resolve the problem. The difficulty with repression is that it doesn't work. What has been repressed returns to consciousness one way or another, in a disguised or distorted fashion. This "return of the repressed" is thus a *symptom* of the original awareness that we didn't want to deal with.

Our repressed sense of unreality returns to consciousness as the feeling that there is something missing or lacking in my life. What is it that's lacking? How I understand that depends upon the kind of person I am and the kind of society I live in. The sense that *something* is wrong with me is too vague, too amorphous. It needs to be given more specific form if I'm to be able to do something about it, and that form usually depends upon how I've been raised. In modern developed (or "economized") societies such as the United States, I am likely to understand my lack as not having enough money—regardless of how much money I already have. Money is important to us not only because we can buy anything with it, but also because it has become a kind of collective *reality symbol*. The more money

you get, the more real you become! That's the way we tend to think, anyway. (When a wealthy person arrives somewhere his or her presence is acknowledged much more than the arrival of a "nobody.") Because money doesn't really end *dukkha*—it can't fill up the bottomless hole at one's core—this way of thinking often becomes a trap. You're a multi-millionaire but still feel like something is wrong with your life? Obviously you don't have enough money yet.

Another example is fame. If I am known by lots and lots of people, then I must be real, right? Yet the attention of other people, who are haunted by their own sense of lack, can't fill up our sense of lack. If you think that fame is what will make you real, you can never be famous enough. The same is true of power. We crave power because it is a visible expression of one's reality. Dictators like Hitler and Stalin dominate their societies. As their biographies reveal, however, they never seem to have enough control to feel really secure. Those who want power the most end up the most paranoid.

This understanding of *anatta* gives us some insight into karma, especially the Buddha's take on it, which emphasized the role of motivations and intentions. If my sense of self is actually composed of habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and behaving, then karma isn't something I have, it's what I *am*. The important point is that I change my karma by changing who "I" am: by reconstructing my habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and behaving. The problematical motivations that cause so much trouble for myself and for others—greed, ill will, and delusion, the three unwholesome roots—need to be transformed into their more positive counterparts that work to reduce *dukkha*: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Whether or not you believe in karma as something magical, as an objective moral law of the universe, on a more psychological level karma is about how habitual ways of thinking and acting tend to create predictable types of situations. If I'm motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, then I need to be manipulative, which alienates other

people and also makes me feel more separate from them. Ironically, I'm busy trying to defend and promote the interests of something that doesn't exist: my self. (And because the sense of self is not a real self, it's always in need of defense and support.) Yet acting in that way reinforces my delusive sense of self. When I'm motivated by generosity and loving-kindness, however, I can relax and open up, be less defensive. Again, other people tend to respond in the same way, which works to reduce *dukkha* for all of us.

Transforming our karma in this way is very important, yet it is not the only goal of Buddhist practice. Fundamentally, Buddhism is about awakening, which means realizing something about the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core. If changing karma involves *reconstructing* the sense of self, *deconstructing* the sense of self involves directly experiencing its emptiness. Usually that void at our core is so uncomfortable that we try to evade it, by identifying with something else that might give us stability and security. Another way to say it is that we keep trying to fill up that hole, yet it's a bottomless pit. Nothing that we can ever grasp or achieve can end our sense of lack.

So what happens when we don't run away from that hole at our core? That's what we're doing when we meditate: we are "letting go" of all the physical and mental activity that distracts us from our emptiness. Instead, we just sit with it and as it. It's not that easy to do, because the hole gives us such a feeling of insecurity, ungroundedness, unreality. Meditation is uncomfortable, especially at the beginning, because in our daily lives we are used to taking evasive action. So we tend to take evasive action when we meditate too: we fantasize, make plans, feel sorry for ourselves...

But if I can learn to not run away, to stay with those uncomfortable feelings, to become friendly with them, then something can happen to that core—and to me, insofar as that hole is what "I" really am. The curious thing about my emptiness is that it is not really a

22 Money, Sex, War, Karma

problem. The problem is that we think it's a problem. Our ways of trying to escape it make it into a problem.

Some Buddhist sutras talk about *paravritti*, a “turning around” that transforms the festering hole at my core into a life-healing flow which springs up spontaneously from I-know-not-where. Instead of being experienced as a sense of lack, the empty core becomes a place where there is now awareness of something other than, more than, my usual sense of self. I can never grasp that “more than,” I can never understand what it is—and I do not need to, because “I” am an expression of it. My role is to become a better manifestation of it, with less interference from the delusion of ego-self. So our emptiness has two sides: the negative, problematic aspect is a sense of lack. The other aspect is being in touch with, and manifesting, something greater than my sense of self—that is, something more than I usually understand myself to be. The original Buddhist term usually translated as emptiness (Pali *shunnata*; Sanskrit *shunyata*) actually has this double-sided meaning. It derives from the root *shu*, which means “swollen” in both senses: not only the swollenness of a blown-up balloon but also the swollenness of an expectant woman, pregnant with possibility. So a more accurate translation of *shunyata* would be: emptiness/fullness, which describes quite well the experience of our own empty core, both the problem and the solution.

These two ways of experiencing our emptiness are not mutually exclusive. I think many of us go back and forth, often bothered by our sense of lack, but also occasionally experiencing our emptiness more positively as a source of spontaneity and creativity, like athletes do when they are “in the zone.” The point isn't to get rid of the self: that's not possible, for there never has been a self. Nor do we want to get rid of the *sense* of self: that would be a rather unpleasant type of mental retardation. Rather, what we work toward is a more permeable, less dualistic sense of self, which is more aware of, and more comfortable with, its empty constructedness.

The two aspects of the spiritual path, deconstructing and reconstructing one's sense of self, reinforce each other. Meditation is letting-go, getting back to the emptiness/fullness at our core, and this practice also helps to reconstruct the sense of self, most obviously by helping us become more mindful in daily life. Each process assists the other indefinitely. As the Japanese proverb says, even the Buddha is only halfway there. Buddhist practice is about dwelling in our empty core, which also reconstructs us into less *self-ish*, more compassionate beings devoted to the welfare and awakening of everyone.

Lack of Money

What is money? Can Buddhism help us understand it? These seem like silly questions. After all, we use money every day, so we must have some basic understanding of what it is...but is that really so? Perhaps our familiarity with it has the opposite effect, keeping us from appreciating just how unique and strange money actually is.

Take out a dollar bill and look at it. What do you have in your hands? A piece of paper, obviously. You can't eat it, ride in it, or sleep on it. It can't shelter you when it rains, or warm you when you're cold, or heal you when you're ill, or comfort you when you're lonely. You could burn it, but an old newspaper would be much more useful if you want to start a fire. In itself that dollar bill is less useful than a blank sheet of paper, which at least we could use to write on. In and of itself, it is literally worthless, a *nothing*.

Yet money is also the most valuable thing in the world, simply because we have collectively agreed to make it so. Money is a social construction that we tend to forget is only a construct—a kind of group fantasy. The anthropologist Weston LaBarre called it a psychosis that has become normal, “an institutionalized dream that everyone is having at once.” As long as we keep dreaming together it continues to work as the socially agreed-upon *means* that enables us to convert something (for example, a day's work) into something else (a couple bags of groceries, perhaps).

But, as we know, money always has the potential to turn into a curse. In addition to the usual social problems—in particular, the

growing gap between those who have too much and those who have too little—there is a more basic issue. The temptation with money is to sacrifice everything else (the earth becomes “resources,” our time becomes “labor,” our relationships become “contacts” to be exploited, etc.) for that “pure means.” To some degree that’s necessary, of course. Like it or not, we live in a monetized world. The danger is that psychologically we will reverse means and ends, so that the means of life becomes the goal itself. As Arthur Schopenhauer put it, money is abstract happiness, so someone who is no longer capable of concrete happiness sets his whole heart on money. Money ends up becoming “frozen desire”—not desire for anything in particular, but a symbol for desire in general. And what does the second noble (or “ennobling”) truth identify as the cause of *dukkha*?

The Greek myth of Midas and his golden touch gives us the classic metaphor for what happens when money becomes an end in itself. Midas was a Lydian king who was offered any reward he wanted for helping the god Dionysus. Although already fabulously wealthy, his greed was unsatisfied and he asked that whatever he touched might turn to gold. Midas enjoyed transforming everything into gold—until it was dinnertime. He took a bite—*ching!* It turned to gold. He took a sip of wine—*ching!* He hugged his daughter—*ching!* She turned into a golden statue. In despair, Midas asked Dionysus to deliver him from this curse, and fortunately for him the god was kind enough to oblige.

Today this simple yet profound story is even more relevant than it was in ancient Greece, because the world we live in is so much more monetized. Nowadays Midas is socially acceptable—in fact, perhaps there is a bit of Midas in all of us. Living in a world that emphasizes instant convertibility tends to de-emphasize our senses and dull our awareness of them, in favor of the magical numbers that appear and disappear in bank accounts. Instead of appreciating fully the sensuous qualities of a glass of wine, often we are more

aware of how much it cost and what that implies about us as sophisticated wine-drinkers. Because we live in a society which values those magical numbers as the most important thing of all, most of us are anxious about having enough money, and often enough that anxiety is appropriate. But what is enough, and when does financial planning become the pursuit of abstract happiness? Focusing on an abstraction that has no value in itself, we depreciate our concrete, sensuous life in the world. We end up knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. Can Buddhism help us understand why such traps are so alluring?

Today money serves at least four functions for us. For better and worse, it is indispensable as our *medium of exchange*. In effect, as I've said, this makes money more valuable than anything else, since it can transform into almost anything. What's more, because of how our society has agreed to define value, money has come to symbolize *pure value*.

Inevitably, then, money as a medium of exchange evolved into a second function. It is our *storehouse of value*. Centuries ago, before money became widely used, one's wealth was measured in cows, full granaries, servants, and children. The advantage of gold and silver—and now bank accounts—is that they are incorruptible, at least in principle, and invulnerable to rats, fire, and disease. Our fascination with gold has much to do with the fact that, unlike silver, it doesn't even tarnish. It is, in effect, immortal. This is quite attractive in a world haunted by impermanence and death.

Capitalism added another little twist, which brings us to the third function of money. It's something we take for granted today but which was suspicious, not to say immoral, to many people in the past. Capitalism is based on *capital*, which is *money used to make more money*. Invest your surplus and watch it grow! This encouraged an economic dynamism and growth that we tend to take for granted today yet is really quite extraordinary. It has led to many developments that

have been beneficial but there is also a downside, when you keep re-investing whatever you get to get even more, on the assumption that you can never have *too much*. Capital can always be used to accumulate more capital. Psychologically, of course, this tends to become the much more insidious problem that you can never have *enough*. This attitude toward money is in striking contrast with the way that some premodern societies would redistribute wealth when it reached a certain level—for example, the potlatch of native communities in British Columbia. Such societies seem to have been more sensitive to the ways wealth-accumulation tends to disrupt social relationships.

The other side of capital investment is debt. A capitalist economy is an economy that runs on debt and requires a society that is comfortable with indebtedness. The debt is at least a little larger than the original loan: those who invest expect to get more back than their original investment. When this is how the whole economy works, the social result is a generalized pressure for continuous growth and expansion, because that is the only way to repay the accumulating debt. This constant pressure for growth is indifferent to other social and ecological consequences. The result is a collective future orientation: the present is never enough but the future will be (or *must* be) better.

Why do we fall into such obsessions? The *anatta* “not-self” teaching gives Buddhism a special perspective on our *dukkha*, which also implies a special take on our hang-ups with money. The problem isn’t just that I will someday get sick, grow old, and die. My lack of self means that I feel something is wrong with me right now. I experience the hole at the core of my being as a sense of lack, and in response I become preoccupied with projects that I believe can make me feel more “real.” Christianity has an explanation for this lack and offers a religious solution, but many of us don’t believe in sin anymore. So what is wrong with us? The most popular explanation in

developed or “economized” societies is that we don’t have enough money. That’s our contemporary “original sin.”

This points to the fourth function of money for us. Beyond its usefulness as a medium of exchange and a storehouse of value and capital for investment, money has become our most important *reality symbol*. Today money is generally believed to be the best way to secure oneself/one’s self, to gain a sense of solid identity, to cope with the gnawing intuition that we do not really exist. Suspecting that the sense of self is groundless, we used to visit temples and churches to ground ourselves in a relationship with God or gods. Now we invest in “securities” and “trust funds” to ground ourselves economically. Financial institutions have become our shrines.

Needless to say, there is a karmic rebound. The more we value money, the more we find it used—and the more we use it ourselves—to evaluate *us*. Money takes on a life of its own, and we end up being manipulated by the symbol we take so seriously. In this sense, the problem is not that we are too materialistic but that we are *not materialistic enough*, because we are so preoccupied with the *symbolism* that we end up devaluing life itself. We are infatuated less with the things that money can buy than with their power and status—not so much with the comfort and power of an expensive car as with what owning a Mercedes-Benz says about *me*. “I am the kind of guy who drives a Mercedes / owns a condo on Maui / and has a stock portfolio worth a million bucks...”

All this is a classic example of “binding ourselves without a rope,” to use the Zen metaphor. We become trapped by our ways of thinking about money.

The basic difficulty, from a Buddhist perspective, is that we are trying to resolve a spiritual problem—our “emptiness”—by identifying with something outside ourselves, which can never confer the sense of reality we crave. We work hard to acquire a big bank account and all the things that society teaches us will make us happy, and then we

cannot understand why they do not make us happy, why they do not resolve our sense that something is lacking. Is the reason really that we don't have enough *yet*?

I think that Buddhism gives us the best metaphor to understand money: *shunyata*, the “emptiness” that characterizes all phenomena. The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna warns us not to grab this snake by the wrong end, because there is no such thing as *shunyata*. It is a shorthand way to describe the interdependence of things, how nothing self-exists because everything is part of everything else. If we misunderstand the concept and cling to *shunyata*, the cure becomes worse than the disease. Money—also nothing in itself, nothing more than a socially agreed-upon symbol—remains indispensable today. But woe to those who grab this snake by the tail. As the *Heart Sutra* teaches, all form is empty, yet there is no emptiness apart from form. Preoccupation with money is fixation on something that has no meaning in itself, apart from the forms it takes, forms that we become less and less able to truly appreciate.

Another way to make this point is that money is not a *thing* but a *process*. Perhaps it's best understood as an energy that is not really mine or yours. Those who understand that it is an empty, socially-constructed symbol can use it wisely and compassionately to reduce the world's suffering. Those who use it to become more real end up being used by it, their alienated sense of self clutching a blank check—a promissory note that can never be cashed.