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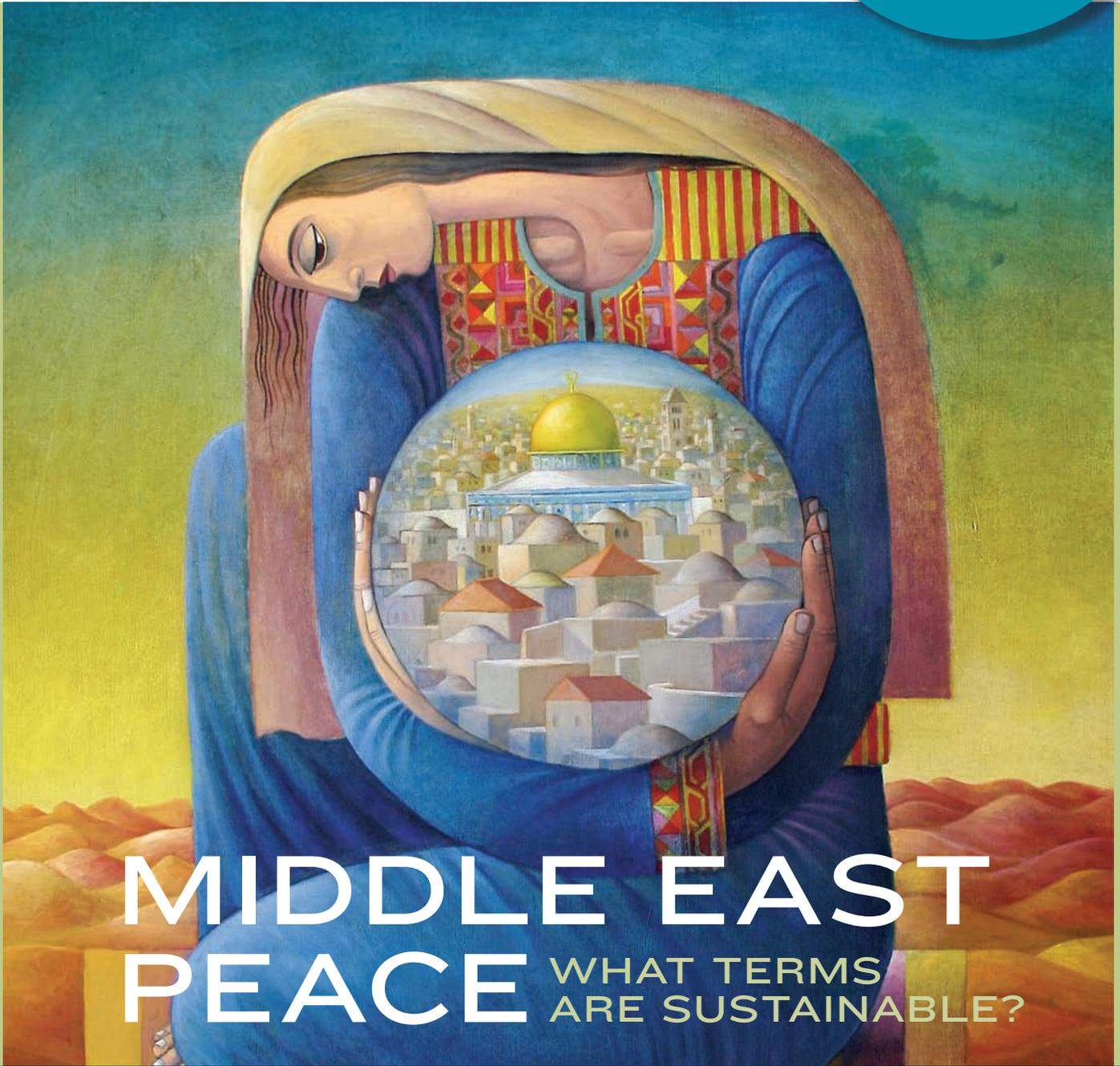
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WINTER 2014

SECULAR
BUDDHISM

Phil Wolfson

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MIDDLE EAST PEACE

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Secular Buddhism and the Quest for a Lived Ethics

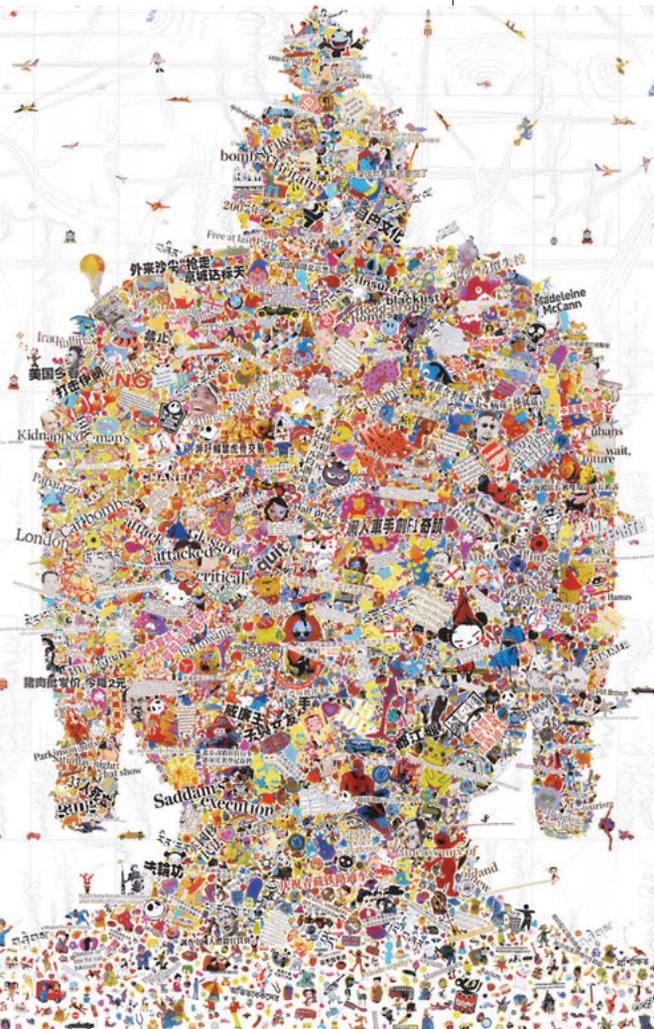
BY PHIL WOLFSON

BEING HUMAN HAS NEVER been more complex. Technology and information inundate us. Change has never been so intense or rapid. Nearly everything has been commoditized, and the dominant for-profit culture makes spiritual clarity and community belonging difficult to engender.

I'm interested in how secular Buddhism—a relatively new development in the world of Buddhist practice—can serve as a resource for people who are seeking to escape atomization and instead create loving connections with each other and nature. Offering a humanistic and pragmatic essence that eschews metaphysical absolutes, secular Buddhism suggests an approach to lived ethics without being sectarian or necessarily incompatible with religious practices from other traditions.

The primary Buddhist impulse was and is democratic: all humans have the same nature as a potentiality for personal and social understanding and loving behavior. All of us are equally deserving of happiness, awareness, and spiritual attainment. This democratic view, deeply personal and simultaneously communitarian, is the wellspring for Buddhism's relevance to our times. As a political activist, I also appreciate Buddhism's inherent tolerance, its respect for individuals' freedom to come to their own conclusions, and its profound insistence on our interdependency.

While dogmatization has occurred over the 2,500 years of Buddhist practice, there has also been an ongoing dynamic impulse to shed such dogmas and to create independent mindfulness. Seen in relation to the older Buddhist traditions from which it builds, secular Buddhism can be characterized as both restorative (in that it re-examines the original teachings of Gautama Buddha as a person living in his time) and modernizing (in that it attempts to remove all unprovable elements and metaphysical assertions from the tradition). What is left is a pragmatic praxis, or "Buddhism 2.0," as its principle exponent Stephen Batchelor has inelegantly characterized it. A closer look at secular Buddhism thus reopens for examination questions about Buddhism's boundaries and constitutive elements.



Summer Buddha
by Gonkar Gyatso.

The Flesh-and-Blood Buddha

Our contemporary encounters with the Buddha are with imagery, symbols, and statuary that are meant to convey to us a being in a relaxed and contemplative state. Most of us are not acquainted with the meanings of the various postures and gestures (*mudras*) that are designed to trigger reminders for spiritual practice among the practitioners of

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Buddhism. In truth, the intention of these images is not to remind us of an actual person or resemblance, but rather to remind us of the teachings that were offered by that being—to remind us to return to our essential practice.

In the metaphysical lore of Buddhism, it is said that we cannot become the Buddha and be released from this wheel of rebirth save through lifetimes of earning merit, although each of us is said to have his nature. Each of the many strains that comprise religious Buddhism has its own view of how many lives are needed and what is to be done.

To pierce through to the historical Buddha in his actual existence is not really possible. We can do distant approximations at best. To regard the Buddha as an actual human being like all other human beings—of his time and also vastly ahead of it—takes an effort to bring him out of the metaphysical realm of religious Buddhism, out of the idealized god realm.

By appreciating the Buddha as a human, secular Buddhism breaks a metaphysical “absolute.” If it is not provable by rational means and experience that the Buddha himself transcended death—if the Buddha was in fact impermanent—it is not possible to assert reincarnation for anyone. It is an extraordinary feeling to make him one of us—a sense of breathtaking possibility. For the Buddha must have lived as a practical person, struggling to understand his context, considering his choices within the frame of limited personal freedom, and creating a lived ethics based on non-harm and positive benefits. He had a deep and complex understanding of the nature of this impermanent existence, of the truth that once we arise, we shall cease—that all creation inevitably engenders disintegration.

The Buddha was a human being! Knowing that as fact, he becomes approachable, although we know so little of him. Even the dates of his life are controversial. There are no portraits. Each culture that has embraced the Buddha has created its own vision of the man: he looks quite different in Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, etc. There are no writings from the Buddha himself. We can only infer what he actually said and did from others who came significantly later. Personal details are scant, and imagining the Buddha stepping into his actual consciousness and emotional body is a lovely exercise in projection with no validation.

Perhaps no one has tried more intensely to envision the flesh-and-blood Buddha in recent times than the former monk and present-day teacher, writer, and practitioner Stephen Batchelor. Batchelor’s journey of exploration, translation, and interpretation has led him into a word-by-word examination of some of the earliest sutras in the “Pali Canon,” which contains the Buddha’s teachings in the no-longer-spoken Pali language. Batchelor’s quest has been to find the human Buddha and his discourse prior to his deification and incorporation in Buddhist monastic hierarchies and self-perpetuating religious organizations. In the past few decades, new scholarship has fostered the possibility of separating out later additions and modifications to the original sutras. This then has formed the basis of Batchelor’s radical claims about the Buddha’s interest in a lived praxis, as opposed to the later karmic concept of nirvana, which involves leaving the wheel of life and rebirth with its attendant suffering. In fact, religious Buddhism shares the idea of salvation from this life with its soteriological predecessors early Hinduism and Jainism.

For us to envision the Buddha as an ordinary human being seeking a new communitarian democratic experience freed of caste and the rule of the rich opens us to the recognition that he must have stumbled, fallen, and picked himself up. My personal experience tells me that all gurus have a bit of clay between their toes. When we become involved with the idea of the Buddha as one of us, we can approach our struggles to not do hurtful things to others and to search for clarity of mind knowing that the Buddha also had to struggle to find his clarity and path. Indeed, the Buddha put himself through extraordinary trainings, tasted many tastes, and was a person of consummate discipline and perseverance. He is a model for how we can be in our own precious lifetimes. In this sense, this personal relationship moves us away from the myth and into the “what to do” and “how to be.” The Bodhisattva paradigm thus becomes about making life on earth



Stephen Batchelor, a proponent of secular Buddhism, is examining some of the Buddha’s earliest teachings in an attempt to imagine the Buddha as a human rather than as a god.

A mural in Chiang Mai, Thailand, shows Siddhartha, the man who became the Buddha, witnessing death and disease for the first time.



rich and bearable, helping each other, and sharing and loving. It ceases to aim for escape from the wheel of rebirth, but instead directs our consciousness here—right to this rich, worm-filled loam of being. The Bodhisattva truly knows this is a difficult, bittersweet, uncertain existence, and he/she is here to share it with us.

The Core Teachings of Buddhism

Buddhism has experienced many schisms, yielded three major branches, and produced many different schools. Its original core affirmation was that eliminating in-the-moment craving/attachment to virtually any object we fasten upon leads to freedom of mind and freedom from affliction. In other words, eliminating craving opens us to the pleasure of originality and the emptiness following the cessation of clinging and needing, therefore leading us back to clarity of mind. Indeed, words cannot do justice to that sense of awakening, spaciousness, and renewal. When I am successful in letting go of my grasping, I feel ecstasy, spaciousness, vitality, compassion, and connectedness. That pleasure is the source of my volition to return to the state of nonattachment. That experience constitutes my notion of nirvana—a here-and-now experience that is beyond concepts.

As Buddhism evolved and the Buddha became a scripted legend within a monastic system, the dharma (teachings) evolved, leading to a conception of nirvana as an ultimate totality to be achieved by the rare practitioner. Nirvana was then seen as the exit from this particular life and the cycle of rebirth. Explanations for the suffering of this life came to focus on old age, sickness, death, and the sufferings we create from craving, desire, aversion, and reincarnation. Some teachings suggested that one could be freed from this suffering by meditative transcendence within a single life; others suggested that the process could take dozens of lives. The karma of past lives (the transgressions of the past moving somehow into this life) became an explanatory principle for our good and bad fortunes. As a result, what we do here and now came to be understood as the cause of our own future sufferings. Our states of mind and actions—the things we can do something about—lost some of their centrality. Nirvana morphed into the “absolute” of *rigpa/dzogchen* (names for the state of primordial awareness, which came to be posited as existing separately from the individual, immortal and unstainable), and this state could be accessed through secret practices known only to the monastic hierarchies. In truth, as Chögyal Namkhai Norbu has argued in *Dzogchen Teachings*, dzogchen—luminosity, clarity, and spaciousness of soul—is available to all of us and is directly experienced, often without awareness and therefore unnamed as such.

Can awareness transcend itself? Can there be a state of awareness that lacks subject and object? Is that ascertainable to humans? This remains controversial in Buddhism and Hinduism and in the realm of consciousness research. And if the answer, as I am

proposing, is negative, that in no way diminishes the extraordinary experience of expanding our ability to stay as much as possible in the clarity of nonattachment.

The Buddha takes up this issue frequently as an essential focus. To give a flavor of the original sutras, here is an excerpt from the Sutra with the Fisherman's son, in which the Buddha shows that his view of consciousness is that it itself is conditioned. He upbraids Sati:

Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to arise upon conditions, since without a condition, there is no origination of consciousness? Monks, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness etc. . . . Just as fire is reckoned by the particular condition on which it burns—when fire is reckoned by the particular condition on which it burns—when fire depends on logs, it is reckoned as log fire, etc. . . . Then monks, it occurred to me: When what exists does consciousness come to be? What conditions consciousness? Then, monks through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: When there is name-and-form, consciousness comes to be; consciousness has name-and-form as its condition.

Secular Buddhism's Take on the Four Noble Truths

As we are aware from our own difficult times, sometimes adopting ancient practices—or adapting and modernizing them—leads to a strange and rigid fundamentalism seemingly out of sync with the contemporary, unfortunately serving to reinforce regressive, male-dominated hierarchies. Other times it leads to a situation where wraiths of the original religious sources are applied piecemeal for authentication of the new views.

Is modernized but revisionist secular Buddhism—or in other words, Buddhism stripped of its “absolute” truths and its unprovable metaphysical assertions about everlasting nirvana—still Buddhism? Traditionalists from Buddhism's various branches all argue that secular Buddhism goes too far. Critics such as B. Alan Wallace, who published a vitriolic critique titled “Distorted Visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and Atheist” in *Mandala Publications*, claim “you can't pick and choose” and that secular Buddhism's re-examination is based on shaky scholarship of limited sources. In truth, there is a limit on the project to tease out what can be regarded as the Buddha's actual words and teachings. There is just too much intervening discourse between the Buddha in life and the contributions that have created and enriched this pile we call Buddhism. And, in truth, developing secular Buddhist forms of community, ritual, meditation, practice, scripture, and study is a large and looming process.

The most accepted criteria for the defining boundaries of what can be considered Buddhism per se involve what are known as the Four Seals. Secular Buddhism does fit into that framework with the proviso that the four propositions, or seals, are understood as pertaining to the here and now—this life. In the end, secular Buddhism agrees that all things that arise are impermanent, that emotions tainted with ego/craving are ultimately painful, that there is no intrinsic self, and that the experience of nirvana is based on non-attachment.

The Four Noble Truths are also constitutive of Buddhism. Batchelor—in an act of “heresy” to mainstream Buddhism—reconfigures the Four Noble Truths into the Four Noble Tasks or, to be consistent with recent re-translations and reexamination of the original sutras before religious elaboration was inserted, *the four tasks*: a pragmatic action format to be accomplished. We who struggle to understand and accept the propositions of Buddhism in accord with its tenet of purposeful examination often have ended up adopting its “inexplicables” as beliefs based on the contradictory tenet of the necessity for faith and devotion as acceptance. This leads to confusion along with rationalization. It leads us to take shelter in the comfort of our own palpable ignorance and assume that our lack of development makes us insufficient to comprehend or question the teachings. As

Batchelor states in a recent essay in which he reiterates the Four Noble Truths and goes on to demolish their “Truths”:

From the very outset of one’s engagement with the dharma, one finds oneself playing the language game “In Search of Truth.” The unstated presumption is that if you believe these propositions to be true, then you qualify to be a Buddhist, whereas if you regard them as false, you do not. One is thus tacitly encouraged to take the further step of affirming a division between “believers” and “non-believers,” between those who have gained access to the truth and those who have not. . . . Each of these propositions is a metaphysical statement, no different in kind from “God is love,” [or] “creation arose from the breath of the One”. . . . Perhaps because of Buddhism’s more psychological-sounding and non-theistic terminology (not to mention the widespread perception of Buddhism as “rational” and “scientific”), you may not notice the blatantly metaphysical nature of the claims of the four noble truths until you start trying either to prove or refute them. “Craving is the origin of suffering.” How then is craving the origin of old age? How is craving the origin of the pain of a baby born with cystic fibrosis? How is craving the origin of being accidentally run over by a truck?

The fulcrum concept is that of *dukkha*, usually translated as “suffering,” from which has arisen the common misunderstanding, especially among non-Buddhists, that Buddhism affirms that *life is suffering*. This thrusts the entire exegesis into transcending this painful life and preventing future miserable rebirth. It throws into confusion motivational views of pleasure and happiness and makes the avoidance of the inevitability of pain the primary incentive. In the traditional interpretation of the Buddha’s First Discourse, craving/clinging is said to be the origin of suffering and what causes us to commit actions that lead to being born, sickness, aging, and dying.

Batchelor presents another view. In the First Discourse, he writes, the Buddha defines *dukkha* as birth, sickness, aging, and death, and the “five bundles of clinging themselves—in other words: the totality of our existential condition in this world.” Remarkably, he demonstrates that in the original work (Buddha’s “actual” presentation), what is articulated is that it is suffering that actually causes craving, not the other way around. This fruitful reversal of structure and concept allows for a reformulation that changes praxis fundamentally. The reformulation moves us away from fatalism and toward a conscious, active, embodied, and socially engaged way of being in the world.

“Craving” describes all our habitual and instinctive reactions to the fleeting, tragic, unreliable, and impersonal conditions of life that confront us. If something is pleasant, we crave to possess it; if something is unpleasant, we crave to be rid of it. The practice of mindfulness trains us to notice how this reactive pattern arises from our felt encounter with the world in such a way that we cease to be in thrall to its imperative and are thereby liberated to think and act otherwise.

The core emancipating truth is that “craving,” like all other aspects of living, inevitably *arises and ceases*. If we foolishly carry our obsessions to the edge of our death, those cravings certainly will cease with our end. If we crave perfect health, immortality, having too much, competing to be above others, dominating, and living out of balance, all of that craving will cease at our culmination and drain into an ocean of meaninglessness. Such craving—our attachments to “I am” or “I am not,” or “it is” or “it is not” (dualistic thinking)—are the dead ends that lead to all of the problems of too much “self.” When this reorientation is understood, it is an opening into the “complete view” that is the first step of the Eightfold Path. For “view” is discernment of our condition and the transcendence of our ordinary experience of reality.

“Right view” (or following other translations of the Sanskrit term, “appropriate, wholesome, wise, skillful, or correct view”) is free from craving and opens us to being in the ever-moving, contingent process of our life and the lives of all things. Truly living mindfully in this process, in the fluidity of a self that forms and dissolves, generates a pleasure of clarity, presence, and flexible maneuvering. Craving is just not that much fun! I am

sure you have noticed. Letting craving go opens us to that instant of silent possibility for nearly anything to happen, a moment of liberation before the next installment. And in that moment we are able to reorient ourselves to the demonstrable truths of our lives and those of others, to open our senses to new experience, and to experience the glory of the absence of prejudiced judgments.

Updating Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path

Roughly 2,500 years ago, the Buddha told a story in which he described the Noble Eightfold Path: an ancient path trodden by “awakened” people of former times. It is a timeless guide to living this life. Some schools have divided the path into three sections: wisdom, ethical conduct, and concentration. The ethical conduct section contains right action, right livelihood, and right effort. Each part of the path has liberating and restrictive aspects, and much of the path's discourse is aimed at monastics and is renunciative in orientation.

There is a sense of obligation within secular Buddhism's developing movement of contemporary practitioners to integrate into Buddhism new elements that reflect our time and its concerns, opportunities, and dilemmas. To not integrate new elements would reflect enmeshment in a fear of transgression. But this effort to make Buddhism contemporary needs to be done carefully and with recognition that transformations of refined practice—dharma—can miss the point and distort what is precious in the original teachings.

For us to draw a secular pragmatic praxis out of Buddhism, even the Noble Eightfold Path needs reevaluation. In our time, lay people predominate as practitioners, and the Noble Eightfold Path needs to address without prejudice or hierarchical distinctions the lives, aspirations, and problems of those who are not choosing monasticism. I'd like to offer a few tentative offerings to the discussion about how this path may be adapted within secular Buddhism.

First, I'd like to propose that we reconceptualize the Noble Eightfold Path as an illuminated path rather than a noble one. The word “noble” comes from a time of aristocracy: kings, queens, gilded brocaded elephants, and parasols sheltering royalty from the sun. “Illuminated” is more appropriate because paths that are outlined by light are easier to discern. Stepping off them puts one in murk and darkness. Better to look for more light.

Second, I'd like to propose replacing the path's call for “right” action, livelihood, and effort with a call for “awakened” action, livelihood, and effort (as in awakened view or awakened action). “Right” conjures images of authoritarian teachers and parents admonishing a child for an action that is wrong, inappropriate, or incorrect. But it is on our own initiative that we come to desire an illuminated path. We are drawn by its clarity and appeal, by our happiness in following it, and by our inner certainty about the benefits of treading its path, not by fear and external authority.

Third, I'd like to propose that *awakened sharing* be added to the path. In these times of unprecedented possibilities, eliminating hunger and providing the core necessities of life (clothing, shelter, safety, decent health care, and the rule of civilized law) for all humans is an imperative addition to the illuminated path. This addition—awakened sharing—is the antidote to greed, war, overconsumption, and the destruction of our planet. Awakened sharing is the exertion of the commitment necessary to build a world culture that equalizes access to core human needs and shares surplus with those who do not have enough. Its values and methods include persuasion, dialogue, and negotiation of different needs. It is just and egalitarian. It recognizes that a world culture of peace and love is achievable. It requires each of us to consider sharing our surpluses—of money, time, labor, skills, creativity, and things—with others who have too little. It is implemented through community-building, social forums, service, art, and near constant self-observation to assess our personal shifting and evolving ecological balances.

The process of global sharing will require patience, fortitude, and the engagement of as

many of us as possible in an ongoing, nonviolent, participatory, and democratic cultural forum. Anxiety about its possible failure does not alter the time frame. The climate is changing in difficult ways as a result of human activity. There is a great and urgent need to rein in our impact, but there is still no clear commitment to do so from nations or the general populace. Instead, we continue to consume selfishly without regard for the future. Frustrating as it is to those of us who are alarmed and wanting to nurture future generations, our only true hope lies in generating awareness. Awakened sharing—in concert with “awakened view” and “awakened action”—offers a personal and social guide, a bit of light for our feelings and actions.

Finally, I'd like to propose that we add *awakened love* to the path. In this age of surplus, much of our life energy has come to center on romantic love. Almost nothing else in our lives consumes as much of our energy. Thus, adding awakened love seems necessary as part of this effort to come up with a modernized secular Buddhist path. The ingredients of awakened love include consideration and respect for others, avoidance of exploitation, consent, full disclosure, treating the other as Buddha, and protecting oneself from possible exploitation and disrespect.

These additions and changes result in a new version of the Noble Eightfold Path: *the illuminated tenfold path*. The lack of capital letters in this new name reflects the understanding that this path meanders and lengthens, is adjusted to reflect its present circumstance, and is malleable. The illuminated tenfold path is not meant to be a document like the Ten Commandments, a what-not-to-do handed down from a higher, external authority. Rather, it is a self-reflective guide to a practical, joyous, self-liberating, and communitarian practice.

The Buddhist tradition is so rich in the arena of self-examination, emancipating us from craving and attachment! Craving, clinging, and discontent are at the core of our suffering. If discontent ceases even for a moment, we are free—we discover a spaciousness that makes room for creativity and love. We are on earth to engage, and following a guide such as the illuminated tenfold path can help us do so as better friends, relatives, and lovers. ■