



INQUIRING MIND

A SEMI-ANNUAL JOURNAL OF THE VIPASSANA COMMUNITY

VOLUME 14, NUMBER 1

FALL 1997



Liberation & the Sacred



THE SACRED

JOANNA MACY: RESPECT FOR SENTIENT LIFE

The question of whether the practice of the Buddha-dharma is to get off the wheel or to relish life becomes a dilemma only when you are stuck in a substantialist view of reality. But when you shift from the perspective that sees the world as composed of “things” to the kind of process view that the Buddha taught, the matter becomes a non-issue.

In understanding the basis of the question, a good place to start is the social context in which the Buddha taught. In India in the sixth century B.C.E., the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey was construed as *moksha*, as liberation from the world, as getting out of here. Whether you followed the teachings of the Vedas, the Upanishads, Jainism or yogic ascetism, the idea was to transcend this changing world of matter and phenomenality, which was held to be less real than something else that doesn’t change, something abstract and purely mental. This view, in its varied forms, was identified as “eternalist” and “theist” in the early Buddhist discourses, and the Buddha consistently argued against it. He took issue with its fundamental assumption, which is that what is real is real by virtue of the fact that it does not change. The Buddha made the reverse move: he said what is real is change itself, and change has its own unfolding patterns, its own law.

That law is his central teaching, the core doctrine of *paticca samuppada*, or dependent co-arising. It is the understanding that everything—be it construed as mind or matter—is intrinsically related, that everything conditions and is conditioned by everything else. “When this

arises, that comes to be.” It represents a radical shift from a substantialist to a process view of reality. (Modern-day scholars of an eternalist or neo-Platonic bent like to cite the scriptural passage of Udana 8 from the *Khuddaka-nikaya* about there being “an unborn and an unconditioned.” Even this oft-quoted passage should be interpreted in process terms as referring to the means of awareness rather than to some independent, self-existing realm.) The Buddha’s aim was to help us free ourselves from suffering, not to free ourselves from the world. He taught liberation from ego, not liberation from phenomenal life.

The tradition of vipassana meditation that we practice today has been transmitted within the Theravada, or “school of the elders,” the most conservatively monastic of the eighteen early schools that developed following the Buddha’s parinirvana and, because of historical circumstances, the only one of them that survived. The Theravadins had a great stake in helping their monks develop aversion for temptations of the flesh and contempt for the body. They assigned great value to maintaining the purity of the monks’ practice, hence the ascetic and world-rejecting flavor of many of their texts.

Interpretations of the Buddha-dharma that emphasize rejection of the world are in large part based on the philosophic elements that crept into the Abhidharma, the “special teaching,” which is, along with the *suttas*, or discourses, and the *vinaya*, or rules of conduct, one of the three sections of the Theravada canon. The Abhi-

dharma arose later than the other sections—three or four centuries after the Buddha’s lifetime—and it represents the work of scholars who sought to systemize the earlier teachings.

The Abhidharma and its commentaries altered the earlier presentation of *paticca samuppada* by positing that there are unconditioned dharmas, or elements of existence, namely nirvana and space. Now, when that happens, when nirvana is characterized as an unconditioned dharma, as an ontological category apart from samsara, the impression is created that there is a place to go when you exit from samsara. And this, of course, bolsters any world-denying tendencies on the part of the Theravadins.

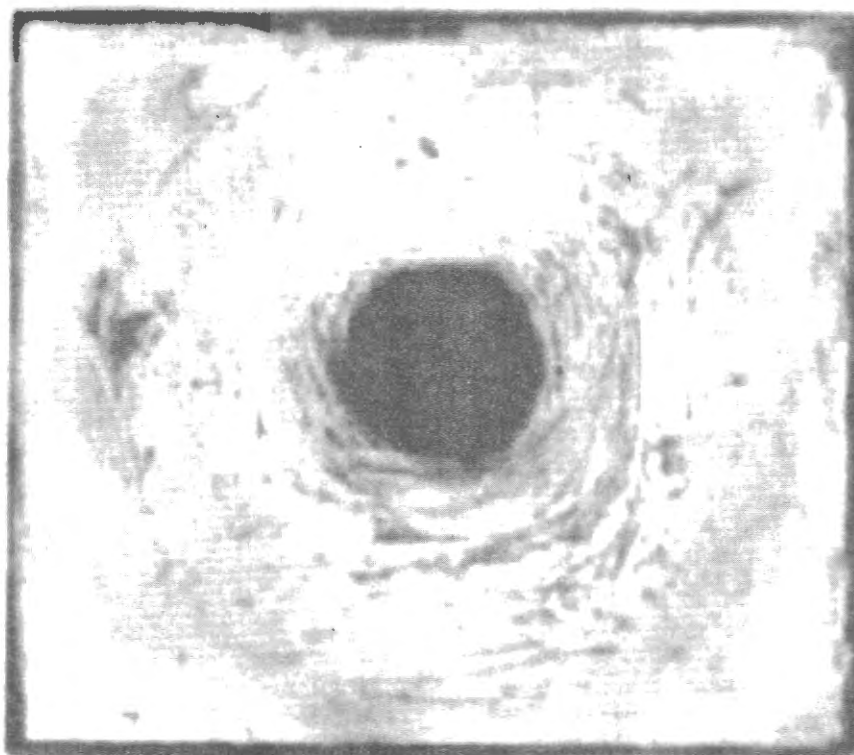
The rise of the Mahayana served as a correction to this tendency to substantialize and to create unconditioned categories of dharmas. It represented a return to the radical process view of the Buddha’s own teachings. The Perfection of Wisdom teachings, attributed mythologically to the Mother of all Buddhas, return to a thoroughgoing focus on interdependence, including explicitly the interdependence of samsara and nirvana.

There is something else to keep in mind here. A fear of physical embodiment, a distrust of nature, has stamped a lot of Western culture and thought. When we in the West learn practices that remind us of the impermanence of body and mind, we have to be careful not to project our own fear and loathing of phenomenality and nature on the people of the Buddha’s epoch and onto the teachings of the Buddha.

Many of the classical meditation teachers use impermanence as a goad to nonattachment and even revulsion. “You may be happy now, but in a little while your teeth will fall out. So don’t be attached.” As if impermanence were a reason for not loving something! Because your beloved is dying, do you love him or her less? What a spoilsport notion. How demeaning to human nature. It is like saying, “I won’t come to your birthday party because it will be over at five.”

We all know that we are now in the process of destroying the physical basis of life. Our instinct for self-preservation has been crippled; we are experiencing an erotic failure. The last thing in the world we need is to despise things because of their impermanence. Existentially, our task is to *not* disengage from the phenomenal world. That would be the most egregious betrayal of future generations.

Jung wrote of a change in the nature of our spirituality as we move astrologically from the Piscean age to the Aquarian. He described it as a shift from a journey toward perfection to a journey toward wholeness. This means that instead of climbing up a ladder to leave behind impurity, even suffering, we turn to embrace the world in all its brokenness. This movement, which I see happening in every religion—in Christianity’s creation spirituality, in the Jewish Renewal movement, in Sufism—is part of the healing of our world when we are on the brink of destroying it.



Michael Dee Cookinham. Homage Dr. Gobar.

Ruth Denison

Continued from page 8

our practice. When these factors are present, we feel a happiness and confidence which help us to more easily integrate mindfulness practice into our lives. Then our practice becomes a more skillful and happy event, one in which there is less struggling.

These open forms of developing mindful attention let us discover, quite tangibly, how to renounce all that takes us away from the ground of being. Great joy and relief arise from the realization that the "waterfall" of compulsive thinking, judging, wanting and resenting is interrupted and the interference of "I" has subsided. Being freed from the grip of "I" and "me" gives joy easily.

On one level, Dharma practice is hard work. But when we know that we work to protect our happiness and to fulfill our humanity, our roles as beings who have taken this human birth, then it isn't dreary work. It is delightful and meaningful, a beautiful offering from yourself to yourself. ☺

Ruth Denison is a vipassana meditation teacher and leads retreats world-wide. She is the founding teacher of Dhamma Dena Desert Meditation Center in Joshua Tree, California. She was born in Prussia in 1922. Her teachers include Burmese masters U Ba Khin and Mahasi Sayadaw as well as several Japanese masters. This article is based on an interview conducted by Barbara Gates, vipassana teacher Julie Wester, and Jain Hein, a student of Ruth Denison's. In editing this statement, Inquiring Mind received editorial assistance from a senior student of Ruth Denison's, Ron DeHart (whose delightful tape, Dharma Boogie, can be ordered from Dharma Seed Tape Library).

Joanna Macy

Continued from page 9

Shantideva, the great Mahayana teacher of the eighth century, wrote, "Let all sorrows ripen in me." This is the bodhisattva's stance toward suffering. The compassion of the bodhisattva overturns our righteous judgments and embraces the polarities—light and dark, pure and impure, worthy and unworthy. As we cease to fear the natural world, it reawakens our erotic connection to the living body of Earth. Life's love for itself and its desire to unfold are unblocked.

The Buddha-dharma seems uniquely suited to this. Thanks to its teachings of interdependence and the images that go with it, such as the jeweled net of Indra, it can help us come home to our deep mutual belonging.

At the same time, we need to beware of those teachings, often wrongly attributed to the Lord Buddha,

that could breed contempt: "This is impermanence, so don't be attached." We had better be attached to what is impermanent! The ancient redwood forest at Headwaters is very impermanent, and we better love it! Certainly those teachings that nurture profound respect for sentient life are what the Buddha would want us now to take to heart. ☺

*Joanna Macy is a Buddhist scholar, a teacher of systems theory, and a deep ecologist. She has shown imaginative genius in adapting and applying the teachings of the Buddha to contemporary social issues, designing workshops with titles such as *Despair and Empowerment in the Nuclear Age* and *The Council of All Beings*. Her books include *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax Press, 1991) and a translation of Rilke's *Book of Hours* (with Anita Barrows; Riverhead Books, 1996). This article is based on an interview conducted by Andrew Cooper and Barbara Gates.*

Jack Kornfield

Continued from page 10

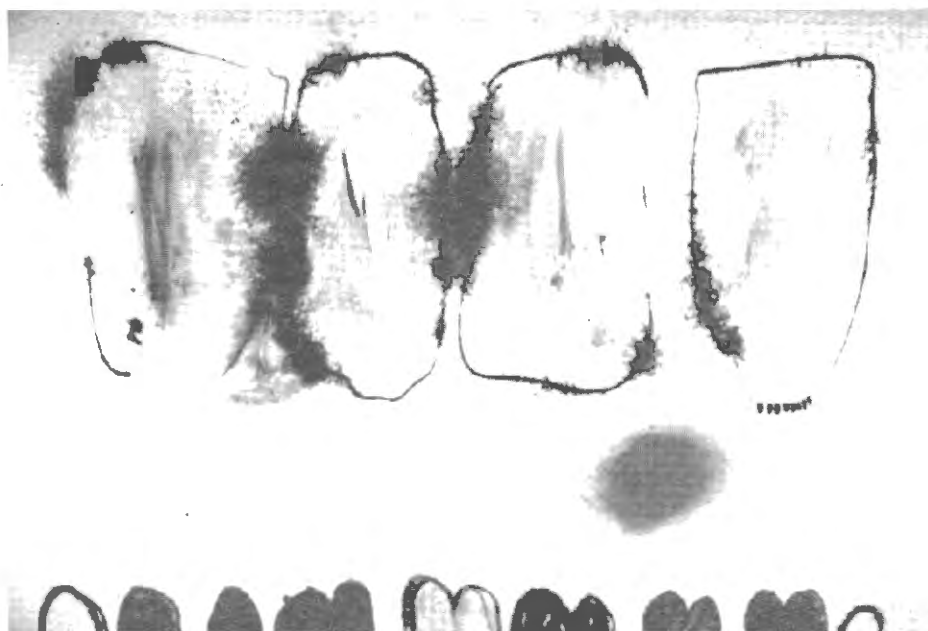
quote *The Bible* but miss the teachings of love. Dharma words are simply pointers to freedom.

Masters from Thailand, Burma, Japan and Tibet have remarked on the sincerity of Western students and have acknowledged that we will have to find our own language

and our own way. Our way will surely be more inclusive of and integrated with the everyday world as well as being open-minded, egalitarian and feminine. It will lead us to a freedom that cares for the earth, just as the Thai forest monks are also now learning to place their robes around old growth trees to save their endangered forests.

Already we can hear these new emphases growing in Western dharma. At recent teacher councils at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and Insight Meditation Society, teachers discussed whether they considered themselves to be Theravada Buddhists. Most replied, "No. We are not Theravadins. We simply follow the essential way of the Buddha." This is the middle way, embodied in the teachings of virtue, mindfulness, compassion and non-clinging. The middle way is not life-denying, for it rests neither on ideas nor philosophy but on great compassion and freedom of the heart. To practice it fully leads to the end of greed, hatred and delusion, to the end of sorrow. As the elders of our forest tradition teach, when the heart is pure "all things become holy, proclaiming the one true nature of life." ☺

*Jack Kornfield is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, and of Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. He leads vipassana meditation retreats world-wide. His books include *A Path With Heart* (Bantam Books, 1993) and *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* (coauthored with Joseph Goldstein; Shambhala Publications, 1987).*



Michael Dee Cookinham. Homage Dorothy Burtnett.

BREEMA

This ancient and graceful bodywork system is distinguished by its profound understanding of the natural laws governing health. Breema's cornerstones are the non-judgmental treatment, its emphasis on the practitioner's comfort, and its unifying effect on body, mind, and feelings. Treatments and Self-Breema exercises release tension and create vibrant health, mental clarity, and emotional balance for both practitioner and recipient.



Immerse yourself in Breema!

Winter Intensive Program: February 13 - 25, 1998

UPCOMING BREEMASM CLASSES:

- ◆ INTRODUCTORY CLASSES: NOVEMBER 3 & DECEMBER 1
- ◆ SUNDAY WORKSHOPS: OCTOBER 19, NOVEMBER 16, & DECEMBER 14
- ◆ FAMILY CLASSES: OCTOBER 18, NOVEMBER 15, & DECEMBER 13

The INSTITUTE For HEALTH IMPROVEMENT

165-HOUR CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN BREEMA BODYWORK
DEMONSTRATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS FOR INTERESTED GROUPS

CALL FOR FREE BROCHURE, CLASS SCHEDULE,
& PRACTITIONER REFERRALS.

www.breema.com (510) 428-0937 FAX: (510) 428-2705
6076 CLAREMONT AVE., OAKLAND, CA 94618