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Postmodern Buddhisms & American Dharmas

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This past week I completed the first half of a two-year Meditation Teacher training program through an organization known as Buddhist Geeks, and I finished teaching a 13-week class here at UUCF on practicing mindfulness. I would like to share with you some of what I'm coming to understand about both the practice of meditation and the evolving Buddhist tradition in this globalized, pluralistic, postmodern world in which we find ourselves.

For any of you who have ever felt bewildered by meditation, please be assured that I can relate. I can still remember my first serious introduction to meditation more than twenty years ago, during the late 1990s. As part of an assignment for a religion class in college, I visited a local Zen Center, where I was warmly welcomed, ushered over to a meditation cushion facing a blank white wall, and told that the meditation period would begin shortly. Indeed, it did.

A bell was rung, and forty-five minutes of silence ensued. Most of the time I was having thoughts along the lines of: "OK, I'm still staring at this blank white wall. I guess I'm meditating?! Presumably they'll ring the bell again at some point?" And—spoiler alert—they did. After forty-five minutes of silence, the bell was rung and I was thanked for coming to the class. **But I'm not sure I knew much more about meditation afterward than I did prior to attending.**

A few years later, in the early 2000s, I started seriously exploring the Christian contemplative tradition, reading folks like Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, and attending week-long retreats at monasteries like the Abbey of Gethsemane where Thomas Merton had been a monk. For me, that particular path culminated about a decade ago in a three-year diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Around that time, in 2009, I stumbled upon a podcast called Buddhist Geeks that has been quite influential in my life. In particular, that podcast introduced me to the contemporary meditation teacher Daniel Ingram, who had published a book a year earlier titled Mastering the Hardcore Teachings of the Buddha. Ingram is a now-retired emergency medicine physician who brings an intense and somewhat unusual Gen X sensibility to the dharma. Compared with the previous Boomer generation of dharma teachers—who are also great—Ingram represents, in *his* words, “**a generation whose radicals wore spikes and combat boots rather than beads and sandals, listened to the Sex Pistols rather than the Moody Blues, and wouldn’t know a beat poet or early sixties dharma bum from a hole in the ground**” (Gleig, 193).

To my mind, as with many things, one’s choice of teachers is not a case of either/or, but of **both/and**. We don’t have to choose between learning from one or another; we can choose both! In this fast-changing world, more accessible spiritual perspectives and experiences are available to us than at any point in history.

And even brief reflection makes it clear how much I and many other meditation practitioners have benefited from teachers of many different generations:

- From the **Silent** Generation names that immediately spring to mind include Thich Nhat Hanh (1926 -), the Dalai Lama (1935 -), Pema Chödrön (1936 -), Sylvia Boorstein (1936 -) and Alan Watts (1915 – 1973).
- Then there are the often hippie-influenced cohort of **Boomer** Buddhist teachers born following World War II (1946 - 1964), teachers such as Jack Kornfield (1945 -), Lama Surya Das (1950 -), Sharon Salzberg (1952 -), Tara Brach (1953 -), and Stephen Batchelor (1953 -).

- And for some time, we have seen **Gen Xers** (born in the early 1960s) coming onto the meditation-teacher scene, teachers such as Adyashanti (1962 -), Ethan Nichtern, and Daniel Ingram.
- My own most influential teachers have been Elder **Millennials** such as Vince Fakhoury Horn and Emily West Horn.

In future years, I'll be interested to see all the ways that Gen Zers—and the emerging Gen Alpha—will evolve Buddhist dharma further.

As we have explored previously with regard to many other world religions, there has never been one monolithic Buddhism; rather, there have always been *many* Buddhisms—**Buddhisms plural**—just as there have always been diverse, multiple, and complex Hinduisms, Judaisms, Christianities, Islams, and more.

According to traditional accounts and historical records, “18 or 20” different strands of Buddhism arose from the earliest days, and the many different interpretations, possibilities, and permutations of the dharma have only expanded exponentially over time. Just in our own country, “(o)f the estimated 1.0-1.3 percent of the U.S. population who say they are Buddhist, 67-69 percent are Asian American” (Han 8). Admittedly, the numbers of American Buddhists shift somewhat if you specify “people interested in meditation” as compared with “people who identify as Buddhist.”

May I mention parenthetically that **white Buddhist teachers have often been overrepresented in the media** insofar as who gets quoted in articles and books, and whose faces end up on the covers of magazines. Chenxing Han has explored this oversight in her important book, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*. Happily, some important rebalancing is finally happening in recent years in light of a growing recognition among Western meditation teachers that “**people of Asian heritage make up more than two-thirds of American Buddhists**” (9).

Certainly we could explore more deeply the many turnings of the wheel of the dharma over the past 2,500 years—since the time Siddhartha Gautama first resolved to sit under the bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India, until he woke up. But for our current purposes, let's skip ahead a century or more, and explore meditation practice today.

If you are looking for a single starting point, one of the best introductions I have found to the contemporary meditation landscape is ***American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity*** by Ann Gleig, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Central Florida.

I don't want to get too nerdy, so let me just say a few words about the intersections of ancient Buddhist wisdom traditions with world views of today.

At the risk of oversimplifying often-disputed philosophical terminology, “**modernity**” started around the 1600s with the Age of Enlightenment, characterized by growing hopes in inevitable and perpetual progress based in science and reason—hopes which crashed on the rocks of the First and Second World Wars.

“**Postmodernity**,” which emerged as humankind struggled to emerge from wartime's wreckage, is characterized by a much greater skepticism about all such grand, universal claims. Postmodernism thus tends toward a much greater emphasis upon diversity, difference, contingency, and irony (Gleig 8-9).

Clearly, *modernism* injected many Western influences into ancient Buddhist traditions—among them science, Romanticism, liberal Protestantism, individuality, Democracy, pluralism, and the privileging of meditation experiences as the core of the Buddhist tradition (3). In turn, *Postmodern* Buddhism has become ever more diverse, globalized, and open to the full range of Buddhist traditions, both ancient and contemporary (6).

Moving past theory, let me share a few insights about meditation from my own experience and understandings, insights which were not obvious to me when I first began diving deeply into Buddhist traditions and practices.

First, meditation practice is not an unalloyed good that leads only to greater good, compassion, and kindness in the world. **Buddhism and meditation practices can be watered down, co-opted, and misused for all sorts of questionable aims.** For instance, I don't think it was ever the Buddha's goal to give working people just enough mindfulness to be better cogs in an unrepresentative, inequitable, and unaccountable form of capitalism.

Furthermore, Buddhism, like Christianity, did not originate from some perfect, equitable version of spiritual purity that has since been corrupted. With regard to the

never-ending struggle between social classes, Buddhism has always been messy and complicated: the Buddha advised wealthy and powerful kings and Brahmans. It was King Ashoka who spread the dharma throughout India. In China and Japan, Buddhism was adopted by elites long before it was disseminated throughout the broader culture. Seminal figures like the Buddha, Nagarjuna, Shantideva, and Dogen were members of their respective aristocratic classes by birth, who often taught and advised other members of their social class. (68)

It is also important to know that Buddhism has all the same problems that every other human institution, movement, or religion has—so be forewarned of Buddhism’s history of sex scandals around teachers sleeping with their students (86-87). All that information is widely available—or you can just read the sex chapter in Ann Gleig’s book on America Dharma. My point here is: beware of any Buddhist or meditation teacher—or any other spiritual leader for that matter—who pretends to be perfect, and is not transparent about their own flaws, difficulties, and fundamental humanity (89).

It can be confusing that the same human being can be both a powerful teacher of authentic spiritual wisdom, and meanwhile be caught up in unethical practices. To quote the religion scholar, Jeffrey Kripal, **“There is no necessary or simple connection between the mystical and the ethical.”** There’s a lot to unpack in that statement, but the short of it is that *ethics and morality* tend to be both historically contingent and culturally bound, while *mystical experiences* often explode and transgress such relative distinctions.

The philosopher Ken Wilber helpfully frames this dynamic in terms of the “level/line fallacy.” Imagine a graph with multiple parallel vertical bars, a graph which represents various personal skill areas—**kinesthetic, cognitive, moral, emotional, spiritual, aesthetic**, and more—each bar’s height representing one individual’s relative level of development in each category.

Here’s the thing: many people mistakenly assume that just because someone is spiritually advanced, they must also be highly developed in other areas. For better or for worse, this just isn’t the case in the reality we find ourselves in. There are many instances of people who are authentic, powerful spiritual teachers—who also embezzle money, sleep with their students, aren’t very emotionally intelligent, have terrible taste

in music and art, etc., in the same way that someone can be a highly kinesthetically developed NFL player and a domestic abuser; or that a Nobel prize-winning academic can be clumsy—or any other permutation of such charts.

So, in this globalized, pluralistic, fast-changing world in which we find ourselves, we are more aware than ever that there have always been—and will continue to be—many Buddhisms offering many worthy and interesting permutations of the dharma.

The part of Buddhism I've spent the most time exploring is the Pragmatic Dharma movement. Pragmatism itself emphasizes “what *works*.” If certain traditional parts of the Buddhist path remain effective for our lives and meditation practices today, the basic pragmatic approach is: let's keep them. For whatever practices aren't helpful, let's give ourselves permission to let them go, or to adjust them.

There's also an emphasis in pragmatism on *transparency*. As Brené Brown says, “**Clear is kind.**” In contrast, some parts of Buddhist traditions have been described infelicitously as immersing new students in “mushroom cultures”—as in “Keep them in the dark and feed them manure.” Pragmatic Dharmas favor being open and transparent, and putting all the information out there for whoever wants to use it—instead of, like early Catholic hierarchical leaders, keeping religious texts and esoterica hidden within an exclusive elite circle.

A website called The Dharma Overground describes the principles of the Pragmatic Dharmas movement as follows:

- pragmatism over dogmatism
- practice over faith
- personal responsibility
- transparency
- collectivity
- mutual support rather than hierarchy
- inclusion (133)

Pragmatic Dharma is great if you want to take on meditation practice as a serious hobby; but let me briefly address those of you who are only a little bit meditation-curious, and who don't have plans anytime soon to schedule a ten-day meditation retreat.

I sometimes get the question: “What’s the *least* amount of time I can meditate and still have a decent likelihood of getting all those benefits that I sometimes hear about, such as decreasing stress and increasing concentration and focus?” On the one hand, there is a ton of research being done around meditation, so more information will be forthcoming in future years. The latest research suggests that we can get statistically significant results from meditating routinely “**as little as twelve minutes a day.**” For more details, see Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes a Day by Amishi Jha (16, 338)

Furthermore, from brain scans of meditators, scientists are learning that, “Even the very first twelve minutes you spend will immediately change how your brain operates—but only for those twelve minutes.... However, over time, as you establish a consistent practice of five or more days per week, week after week, these new ways of paying attention increasingly become the mental default (Jha 303). That being said, if even twelve minutes daily feels like too much to add to your life at the moment, I would like to emphasize that significant change can come from one lovely deep breath.

You don’t have to believe me. You can test this practice in your own direct experience right now. Take a deep breath in...and let it go. Notice whether you can sense a shift in your mind, heart, body, spirit. Then take another breath. Breathing tools are available to you anytime and anywhere.

Whether or not you become a regular meditator, I wish for you in the coming days a traditional Buddhist blessing:

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be peaceful and at ease.

May you live with an open heart.