Zen in the West

The Dharma Bums

Jack Kerouac

[The Dharma Bums is a 1958 novel by Beat Generation author Jack Kerouac. The semi-fictional accounts in the novel are based upon events that occurred years after On the Road. The main characters are the narrator Ray Smith, based on Kerouac, and Japhy Ryder, based on the poet, essayist and Buddhist Gary Snyder. The book largely concerns duality in Kerouac’s life and ideals, examining the relationship that the outdoors, mountaineering, hiking and hitchhiking through the West with his “city life” of jazz clubs, poetry readings, and drunken parties.

One of the most important episodes in the book is of Smith, Ryder and Henry Morley (based on real-life friend John Montgomery) climbing Matterhorn Peak in California. The real-life episode was Kerouac’s first introduction to this type of mountaineering and would serve as inspiration for him to spend the following summer as a fire lookout for the National Park Service on Desolation Peak in the North Cascade National Park in Washington state. —from Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia.]

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At about noon we started out, leaving our big packs at the camp where nobody was likely to be till next year anyway, and went up the scree valley with just some food and first-aid kits. The valley was longer than it looked. In no time at all it was two o’clock in the afternoon and the sun was getting that later than more golden look and a wind was rising and I began to think. “By gosh how we ever gonna climb that mountain, tonight?”

I put it up to Japhy who said: “You’re right, we’ll have to hurry.”

“Why don’t we just forget it and go on home?”

“Aw come on Tiger, we’ll make a run up that hiss and then we’ll go home.” The valley was long and long and long. And at the top end it got very steep and I began to be a little afraid of falling down, the rocks were small and it got slippery and my ankles were in pain from yesterday’s muscle strain anyway. But Morley kept walking and talking and I noticed his tremendous endurance. Japhy took his pants off so he could look just like an Indian, I mean stark naked, except for a jockstrap, and hiked almost a quarter-mile ahead of us, sometimes waiting a while, to give us time to catch up, then went on, moving fast, wanting to climb the mountain today. Morley came second, about fifty yards ahead of me all the way. I was in no hurry. Then as it got later afternoon I went faster and decided to pass Morley and join Japhy. Now we were at about eleven thousand feet and it was cold and there was a lot of snow and to the east we could see immense snowcapped ranges and whooee levels of valley land below them, we were already practically on top of California. At one point I had to scramble, like the others, on a narrow ledge, around a butte of rock, and it really scared me: the fall was a hundred feet, letting you bounce a minute preparatory to a nice goodbye one-thousand-foot drop. The wind was whipping now. Yet that whole afternoon, even more than the other, was filled with old premonitions or memories, as though I’d been there before, scrambling on these rocks, for other purposes more ancient, more serious, more simple. We finally got to the foot of Matterhorn where there was a most beautiful small lake unknown to the eyes of most men in this world, seen by only a handful of mountain-climbers, a small lake at eleven some odd feet with snow on the edges of it and beautiful flowers and a beautiful meadow, an alpine meadow, flat and dreamy, upon which I immediately threw myself and took my shoes off. Japhy’d been there a half-hour when I made it, and it was cold now and his clothes were on again. Morley came up behind us smiling. We sat there looking up at the imminent steep scree slope of the final crag of Matterhorn.

“That don’t look like much, we can do it!” I said glad now.

“No, Ray, that’s more than it looks. Do you realize that’s a thousand feet more?”

“That much?”

“Unless we make a run up there, double-time, we’ll never make it down again to our camp before nightfall and never make it down to the car at the lodge before tomorrow morning at, well at midnight.”

“Phew.”

“I’m tired,” said Morley. “I don’t think I’ll try it.”
“Well that’s right,” I said. “The whole purpose of mountain climbing to me isn’t just to show off you can get to the top, it’s getting out to this wild country.”

“Well I’m gonna go,” said Japhy.

“Well if you’re gonna go I’m goin with you.”

“Morley?”

“I don’t think I can make it. I’ll wait here.” And that wind was strong, too strong, I felt that as soon as we’d be a few hundred feet up the slope it might hamper our climbing.

Japhy took a small pack of peanuts and raisins and said “This’ll be our gasoline, boy. You ready Ray to make a double-time run?”

“Ready. What would I say to the boys in The Place if I came all this way only to give up at the last minute?”

“It’s late so let’s hurry.” Japhy started up walking very rapidly and then even running sometimes where the climb had to be to the right or left along ridges of scree. Scree is long landslides of rocks and sand, very difficult to scramble through, always little avalanches going on. At every few steps we took it seemed we were going higher and higher on a terrifying elevator, I gulped when I turned around to look back and see all of the state of California it would seem stretching out in three directions under huge blue skies with frightening planetary space clouds and immense vistas of distant valleys and even plateaus and for all I knew whole Nevadas out there. It was terrifying to look down and see Morley a dreaming spot by the little lake waiting for us. “Oh why didn’t I stay with old Henry?” I thought. I now began to be afraid to go any higher from sheer fear of being too high. I began to be afraid of being blown away by the wind. All the nightmares I’d ever had about falling off mountains and precipitous buildings ran through my head in perfect clarity. Also with every twenty steps we took upward we both became completely exhausted.

“That’s because of the high altitude now Ray,” said Japhy sitting beside me panting. “So have raisins and peanuts and you’ll see what kick it give you.” And each time it gave us such a tremendous kick we both jumped up without a word and climbed another twenty, thirty steps. Then sat down again, panting, sweating in the cold wind, high on top of the world our noses sniffing like the noses of little boys playing late Saturday afternoon their final little games in winter. Now the wind began to howl like the wind in movies about the Shroud of Tibet. The steepness began to be too much for me; I was afraid now to look back any more; I peeked: I couldn’t even make out Morley by the tiny lake.

“Hurry it up,” yelled Japhy from a hundred feet ahead. “It’s getting awfully late.” I looked up to the peak. It was right there, I’d be there in five minutes.

“Only a half-hour to go!” yelled Japhy. I didn’t believe it. In five minutes of scrambling angrily upward I fell down and looked up and it was still just as far away. What I didn’t like about that peak-top was that the clouds of all the world were blowing right through it like fog.

“Wouldn’t see anything up there anyway,” I muttered. “Oh why did I ever let myself into this?”

Japhy was way ahead of me now, he’d left the peanuts and raisins with me, it was with a kind of lonely solemnity now he had decided to rush to the top if it killed him. He didn’t sit down any more. Soon he was a whole football field, a hundred yards ahead of me, getting smaller. I looked back and like Lot’s wife that did it. “This is too high!” I yelled to Japhy in panic. He didn’t hear me. I raced a few more feet up and fell exhausted on my belly, slipping back just a little. “This is too high!” I yelled. I was really scared. Supposing I’d start to slip back for good, these screes might start sliding any time anyway. That damn mountain goat Japhy, I could see him jumping through the foggy air up ahead from rock to rock, up, up, just the flash of his boot bottoms. “How can I keep up with a maniac like that?” But with nutty desperation I followed him. Finally I came to a kind of ledge where I could sit at a level angle instead of having to cling not to slip, and I nudged my whole body inside the ledge just to hold me there tight, so the wind would not dislodge me, and I looked down and around and I had had it. “I’m staying here!” I yelled to Japhy.

“Come on Smith, only another five minutes. I only got a hundred feet to go!”

“I’m staying right here! It’s too high!”

He said nothing and went on. I saw him collapse and pant and get up and make his run again.

I nudged myself closer into the ledge and closed my eyes and thought “Oh what a life this is, why do we have to be born in the first place, and only so we can have our poor gentle flesh laid out to such impossible horrors as huge mountains and rock and empty space,” and with horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, “When you get to the top of a
mountain, keep climbing.” The saying made my hair stand on end; it had been such cute poetry sitting on Alvah’s straw mats. Now it was enough to make my heart pound and my heart bleed for being born at all.

“In fact when Japhy gets to the top of that crag he will keep climbing, the way the wind’s blowing. We this old philosopher is staying right here,” and I closed my eyes. “Besides,” I thought, “rest and be kind, you don’t have to prove anything.” Suddenly, I heard a beautiful broken yodel of a strange musical and mystical intensity in the wind, and looked up, and it was Japhy standing on top of Matterhorn peak letting out his triumphant mountain-conquering Buddha Mountain Smashing song of joy. It was beautiful. It was funny, too, up here on the not-so-funny top of California and in all that rushing fog. But I had to hand it to him, the guts, the endurance, the sweat, and now the crazy human singing; whipped cream on top of ice cream. I didn’t have enough strength to answer his yodel. He ran around up there and went out of sight to investigate the little flat top of some kind (he said) that ran a few feet west and then dropped sheer back down maybe as far as I care to the sawdust floors of Virginia City. It was insane. I could hear him yelling at me but I just nudged farther in my protective nook trembling. I looked down at the small lake where Morley was lying on his back with a blade of grass in his mouth and said out loud “Now there’s the karma of these three me here: Japhy Rider gets to his triumphant mountaintop and makes it, I almost make it and have to give up and huddle in a bloody cave, but the smartest of them all is that poet’s poet lyin down there with his knees crossed to the sky chewing on a flower dreaming by a gurgling plage, goddammit they ‘ll never get me up here again.”

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I really was amazed by the wisdom of Morley now: “Him with all his goddam pictures of snowcapped Swiss Alps” I thought.

Then suddenly everything was just like jazz: it happened in one insane second or so: I looked up and saw Japhy running down the mountain in huge twenty-foot leaps, running, leaping, landing with a great drive of his booted heals, bouncing five feet or so, running, then taking another long crazy yelling yodeling sail down the sides of the world and in that flash I realized it’s impossible to fall off mountains you fool and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and began running down the mountain after him doing exactly the same huge leaps, the same fantastic runs and jumps, and in the space of about five minutes I’d guess Japhy Ryder and I (in my sneakers, driving the heals of my sneakers right into sand, rock, boulders, I didn’t care any more I was so anxious to get down out of there) came leaping and yelling like mountain goats or I’d say like Chinese lunatics of a thousand years ago, enough to raise the hair on the head of the meditating Morley by the lake, who said he looked up and saw us flying down and couldn’t believe it. In fact with one of my greatest leaps and loudest screams of joy I came flying right down to the edge of the lake and dug my sneakered heals into the mud and just fell sitting there, glad. Japhy was already taking his shoes off and pouring sand and pebbles out. It was great. I took off my sneakers and poured out a couple of buckets of lava dust and said, “Ah Japhy you taught me the final lesson of them all, you can’t fall of a mountain.”

“And that’s what they mean by the saying, When you get to the top of the mountain keep climbing, Smith.”

“Dammit that yodel of yours was the most beautiful thing I ever heard in my life. I wish I’d had a tape recorder to take it down.”

“Those things aren’t made to be heard by the people below,” says Japhy dead serious.

“By God you’re right, all those sedentary bums sitting around on pillows hearing the cry of the triumphant mountain smasher, they don’t deserve it. But when I looked up and saw you running down that mountain I suddenly understood everything.”

“Ah a little satori for Smith today,” says Morley...


**Buddhism and the Possibilities of a Planetary Culture**

Gary Snyder

BUDDHISM HOLDS that the universe and all creatures in it are intrinsically in a state of complete wisdom, love, and compassion, acting in natural response and mutual interdependence. The personal realization of this from-the-beginning state cannot be had for and by one- "self,"—because it is not fully realized unless one has given the self up and away.

In the Buddhist view, that which obstructs the effortless manifestation of this is ignorance, which projects into fear and needless craving. Historically, Buddhist philosophers have failed to analyze out the degree to which ignorance and suffering are caused or encouraged by social factors, considering fear-and-desire to be given facts of the human condition. Consequently the major concern of Buddhist philosophy is epistemology and "psychology" with no attention paid to historical or sociological problems. Although Mahayana Buddhism has a grand vision of universal salvation, the actual achievement of Buddhism has been the development of practical systems of meditation toward the end of liberating a few dedicated individuals from psychological hang-ups and cultural conditionings. Institutional Buddhism has been conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under. This can be death to Buddhism, because it is death to any meaningful function of compassion. Wisdom without compassion feels no pain.

No one today can afford to be innocent, or to indulge themselves in ignorance of the nature of contemporary governments, politics, and social orders. The national politics of the modem world are "states" which maintain their existence by deliberately fostered craving and fear: monstrous protection rackets. The "free world" has become economically dependent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled, sexual desire which cannot be satiated, and hatred which has no outlet except against oneself, the persons one is supposed to love, or the revolutionary aspirations of pitiful, poverty-stricken marginal societies. The conditions of the Cold War have fumed most modern societies—both communist and capitalist—into vicious distorters of true human potential. They try to create populations of pretas—hungry ghosts with giant appetites and throats no bigger than needles. The soil, the forests, and all animal life are being consumed by these cancerous collectivities; the air and water of the planet is being fouled by them.

There is nothing in human nature or the requirements of human social organization which intrinsically requires that a society be contradictory, repressive, and productive of violent and frustrated personalities. Findings in anthropology and psychology make this more and more evident. One can prove it for oneself by taking a good look at Original Nature through meditation. Once a person has this much faith and insight, one will be led to a deep concern with the need for radical social change through a variety of nonviolent means.

The joyful and voluntary poverty of Buddhism becomes a positive force. The traditional harmlessness and avoidance of taking life in any form has nation-shaking implications. The practice of meditation, for which one needs only "the ground beneath one's feet," wipes out mountains of junk being pumped into the mind by the mass media and supermarket universites. The belief in a serene and generous fulfillment of natural loving desires destroys ideologies which blind, maim, and repress—and points the way to a kind of community which would amaze "moralists" and transform armies of men who are fighters because they cannot be lovers.

Avatamsaka (Kegon or Hua-yen) Buddhist philosophy sees the world as a vast, interrelated network in which all objects and creatures are necessary and illuminated. From one standpoint, governments, wars, or all that we consider "evil" are uncompromisingly contained in this totalistic realm. The hawk, the swoop, and the hare are one. From the "human" standpoint we cannot live in those terms unless all beings see with the same enlightened eye. The Bodhisattva lives by the sufferer's standard, and he or she must be effective in aiding those who suffer.

The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both. They are both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom (prajñā), meditation (dhyana), and morality (śīla). Wisdom is intuitive knowledge
of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one's ego-driven anxieties and aggressions. Meditation is going into the mind to see this for yourself—over and over again, until it becomes the mind you live in. Morality is bringing it back out in the way you live, through personal example and responsible action, ultimately toward the true community (sangha) of "all beings." This last aspect means, for me, supporting any cultural and economic revolution that moves clearly toward a truly free world. It means using such means as civil disobedience, outspoken criticism, protest, pacifism, voluntary poverty, and even gentle violence if it comes to a matter of restraining some impetuous crazy. It means affirming the widest possible spectrum of non-harmful individual behavior—defending the right of individuals to smoke hemp, eat peyote, be polygamous, polyandrous, or homosexual. Worlds of behavior and custom long banned by the Judaeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West. It means respecting intelligence and learning, but not as greed or means to personal power. Working on one's own responsibility, but willing to work with a group. "Forming the new society within the shell of the old"—the I.W.W. slogan of 70 years ago.

The traditional, vernacular, primitive, and village cultures may appear to be doomed. We must defend and support them as we would the diversity of ecosystems; they are all manifestations of Mind. Some of the elder societies accomplished a condition of Sangha, with not a little of Buddha and Dharma as well. We touch base with the deep mind of peoples of all times and places in our meditation practice, and this is an amazing revolutionary aspect of the Buddhadharma. By a "planetary culture" I mean the kind of societies that would follow on a new understanding of that relatively recent institution, the National State, an understanding that might enable us to leave it behind. The State is greed made legal, with a monopoly on violence; a natural society is familial and cautionary. A natural society is one which "Follows the Way," imperfectly but authentically.

Such an understanding will close the circle and link us in many ways with the most creative aspects of our past. If we are lucky, we may eventually arrive at a world of relatively mutually tolerant small societies attuned to their local region and united overall by a profound respect and love for the mind and nature of the universe.

I can imagine further virtues in a world sponsoring societies with matrilineal descent, free-form marriage, "natural credit" economics, far less population, and much more wilderness.


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Ultimate Reality and the Experience of Nirvana

Robert Aitken

Satori and Šūnyatā

As a teacher of Zen Buddhism, I confess that I feel a little uneasy with my assigned topic. I find such terms as "ultimate reality" and "nirvana" to be abstract and unreal—absolutes that fit philosophical schemes, perhaps, but not the requirements of Zen students who face the challenge of maturing as human beings in their practice.

"Satori," now an English word, thanks to its introduction by D. T. Suzuki, has come to imply omniscient wisdom. I much prefer the term kenshō (Chinese: chien-sheng), which holds the more moderate meaning of "seeing into (essential) nature." Šūnyatā, the void, expresses deepest experience, but I find that all too readily it becomes something abstract called "nothing."

I spend time with inquirers disabusing them about absolutes. When someone who has read a little in Zen Buddhism asks me if I am enlightened, I respond without hesitation that I most certainly am not. When someone asks me how many koans I have passed, I respond that I am still working on my very first koan and haven't passed it yet. This is not false modesty but is true to the very bottom. There is enlightenment
beyond enlightenment, passing beyond passing. Each milestone on the path may seem a be-all and end-all experience. Everything falls away. The everyday self disappears. Yet the path continues to open out.

Experience is the moment; the path is endless practice. They are like the frame and the narrative of a movie. The student glimpses the timeless in the frame, but the movie continues. Frame and movie are like the complementary principles of light: without the photon, there is no wave of light. Without the frame, there is no movie.

"Movie" can be a helpful metaphor, but it is limited. The complementarity realized in Zen Buddhist practice is not confined just to time with no time but includes form with emptiness, the mundane with the spiritual, the particular with the universal, and the dimension of birth and death with the dimension of no-birth and no-death.

The Buddha Shākyamuni taught this apparently complex yet actually very simple complementarity more than 2,500 years ago. With the passage of his teaching through many cultures and languages, the original manner and expression of his Way have evolved significantly in a variety of directions. Yet the archetypal message is the same: "Human beings tend to be miserable because they are preoccupied with themselves. When they are free of their self-centeredness they can find happiness."

That is to say, you and I tend to get absorbed in patterns. We tend to become fixated on the temporal, the mundane, the particular, and the world of being born and dying. When we see into the nature of things and make intimate the formless, the timeless, the spiritual, the universal, and the dimension of birth and death with the dimension of no-birth and no-death, then we are evolving on the path to full and complete lives. We can see for ourselves how our previous views were correct, yet only so far as they went. We once saw the world of forms and time but not their essential qualities of no-form and no-time. We gave meaning to the many people, animals, plants, and things in our richly varied world, but now those many beings give meaning to us. Thus we can be liberated from constrictions that bind us to an atomized existence.

This liberation brings happiness—not simply self-contained happiness but the joy of work in the world. It is not mere adjustment to the needs of others but an extinction of the acquisitive self, a peak experience that must then be processed. This new practice is not merely a kind of cognitive realignment but a dynamic engagement in consequential possibilities.

The Buddha's basic teaching is usually and rightfully summed up with reference to the Four Noble Truths, traditionally considered to be the content of his first sermon: (1) anguish is everywhere, (2) there is a source of anguish, (3) anguish can be rooted out completely, and (4) the path of this liberation is eightfold: Right Views, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort or Lifestyle, Right Recollection, and Right Meditation. The term "right" should be understood to mean "in accord with the essentially vacant, interdependent, and richly varied nature of things."

Anguish, the Buddha said, has its root in clinging to the notion of a permanent and independent self or soul. When it becomes clear that the self and indeed all things are not only evanescent but illusory and that everyone and everything come into being interdependently, then one is liberated from the misery that comes with a preoccupation with "me and mine."

The entire corpus of Buddhism can be seen as practice and realization of this simple formula of the Four Noble Truths. My purpose here is to show how Zen Buddhism is one of its many particular developments, how it is being applied today, and what applications might be appropriate in the future.

To begin with, the Pali term dukkha (Sanskrit, duhkha), rendered here as "anguish," is not well served by its usual translation: "suffering." I agree with Walpola Rahula that "suffering" is an ambiguous English word that is not an appropriate translation, for it can mean "enduring" and "allowing" as well as "experiencing pain." The word "anguish," it seems to me, sums up the Buddha's allusion to the profound sense of dissatisfaction felt by human beings about their dependence on others and about the transitory nature of their lives and of everything around them, particularly their possessions and structures.

Liberation from this profound dissatisfaction does not, of course, come by waving a wand. The Eightfold Path is a rigorous way to liberation, with a scrupulous and exacting formation of views, speech, conduct, and practice. It is the perfection of character, with "perfection" understood as a process rather than a state. The realizations along the way are profound and transformative, but the end is not yet.
Zen Buddhists have mined the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path for treasure, and the outcome is twofold: (1) a particular practice of meditation that leads to Right Views of the world and its beings as evanescent and essentially harmonious and (2) a daily-life practice that brings essential harmony into worldly reality. Compassionate modes of attitude, speech, and conduct lead to Right Meditation, and Right Meditation leads to further compassionate modes of attitude, speech, and conduct.

In the meditation hall, the Zen Buddhist student is encouraged to muster body and mind and focus on single points, one at a time. The preliminary practice, by no means an easy one, is to count the breaths. The breath is the spirit, as traditional peoples across the world understand. While Buddhists will not isolate the spirit as an entity, the metaphor is nonetheless useful. With counting the breaths, one links body, brain, spirit, and will.

The exercise is to count inhalations and exhalations both, or just the exhalations, from "one" to "ten." If we return to the metaphor of a movie, then each number in this counting is the individual frame in the epic of counting breaths. The end of all epics is expiration, once and for all. Thus, in Zen Buddhist practice, and indeed in any religious practice worthy of the name, one's attention is not particularly devoted to sequence. The object is not to reach "ten" so much as it is to become intimate with each point as it comes up—with just that point "one," just that point "two," just that point "three," in the whole world. Everything else in the mind is quiet. "Intimacy" and "realization" are synonyms in traditional Zen Buddhist texts. The point has no dimension, no magnitude. There is the timeless itself. Ther is the universal; there is the dimension of no-birth and no-death.

With some sense of the possibilities of meditation, the student can move on to other exercises. In the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, usually this will be the rigorous practice of facing the timeless void. In the Rinzai school, the student will be given cases from the literature to face in meditation—not to analyze but to confront and make intimate. In both options the way is one of understanding, of taking upon oneself. There is no abstraction here, no philosophy of religion.

Take, for example again, the seminal story of Chao-ch'ou's dog:

A monk asked Chao-ch'ou, "Has the dog Buddha Nature or not?"
Chao-ch'ou said, "Mu."

Probably Chao-ch'ou said, "Mu." It is thought that the word was pronounced in such a way in his time. In any case, it is modern Japanese pronunciation and has passed in that way into use at North American and European Zen Buddhist centers. The word means "No," or "Does not have."

Clear enough, but if "does not have" were the sole meaning of Chao-chou's response, the entire practice of Mahayana Buddhism would be thrown into confusion, for the literature plainly states that all beings have, or indeed are, Buddha Nature. The monk really is asking, "What is Buddha Nature?" So if Chao-chou is not denying Buddha Nature, then he is either temporizing or he is somehow affirming it.

It is clear from the many commentaries on this cue that Chao chou is not merely temporizing. He is saying in effect, "You are really asking what Buddha Nature is. Well, I'll tell you: Mu."

So the question is, then, "What is Mu?" This is the point to which the student musters body and mind. In his comment on Mu, Wu-men urges his students to carry the word day and night, concentrating on it with their "360 bones and joints and their 84,000 hair follicles," with all their inquiring spirit. With earnest, one-pointed practice, Wu-men promises, you will find your own ground, and even the Buddha and his great successors had better stay out of your way.

There is a risk, however, of getting stuck in Buddha Nature—that is, in the void that is simply potent with all things. The well-known story of the hundred-foot pole is a cautionary tale in this respect:

Ch'ang-sha had a monk ask Master Hui, "How was it before you met Nan-ch'uan?"
Hui just sat there silently.

Ch'ang-sha and Hui were once brother monks in Nan-ch'uan's assembly. Ch' ang-sha became the teacher at a large monastery, while Hui secluded himself in a mountain hut. Ch' ang-sha wondered how his old friend was getting along, so he sent a monk to see him, after priming the monk with a leading question. Hui responded to the question by not responding. The dialogue continued:
The monk asked, "How was it after you met Nan-ch’uan?"

Hui said, "There couldn’t be anything different."

In other words, before his experience with his teacher, Hui found himself in empty silence, and after his experience, he still found himself in empty silence. The monk returned and told Ch’ang-sha about this conversation. Ch’ang-sha came forth with a poem by way of comment:

You who sit on the top of a hundred-foot pole, although you have entered the way, it is not yet genuine.

Take a step from the top of the pole and worlds of the ten directions will be your entire body.

The top of the hundred-foot pole is the isolation of Hui in a selfless condition. He has experienced one side of the complementarity of form and emptiness, but he has not integrated the two aspects of reality for himself, as himself. Even after meeting the great Nan-ch’uan, he is still stuck in the void.

"Take a step from the top of the pole." This is the test point of the case, which students through the centuries since Ch’ang-sha have presented to their teachers. For our purposes, we can see how Ch’ang-sha is emphasizing the importance of moving on from simple awareness of the insubstantial nature of the self and all things. With that step, "worlds of the ten directions will be your entire body." That is, you will find mountains, rivers, the great Earth itself, the sun, the moon, the stars, people, animals, plants, streets, and towers to be your own great self. The monk then challenges Ch’ang-sha:

"How can I step from the top of a hundred-foot pole?"

Ch’ang-sha said, "Mountains of Lang, rivers of Li."

The monk said, "I don’t understand."

Ch’ang-sha said, "The four seas and the five lakes are all under imperial rule."

"The mountains of Lang, the rivers of Li, the four seas and five lakes" are specifics of worlds of the ten directions. Who is the emperor here? At another time, Ch’ang-sha enlarged on his principal point:

The entire universe is your eye; the entire universe is your complete body; the entire universe is your own luminance. The entire universe is within your own luminance. In the entire universe there is no one who is not your own self.

Not only is there no one who is not myself or yourself, there is nothing at all that is not each of us. No leaf, no stone, no gecko that is not I myself, you yourself. Thus the self arises—not merely interdependently with all things but as all things. It is all things—interbeing, to use Thich Nhat Hanh’s expression.

The photon and the wave theories are just preliminary and conflicting insights into the reality of light. Likewise form and emptiness, however profoundly experienced, can be seen as steps to realizing the interbeing that gives them relevance. Interbeing, the uniqueness of form, and the void are the three-part complementarity that has been and continues to be explored to the depths by Zen teachers:

A monk asked Ta-lung, "The body of form perishes, What is the eternal body?"

Perhaps the monk is thinking that the eternal body is something absolutely empty or something absolutely solid, Like Ch’ang-sha, Ta-lung responded with a verse:

The mountain flowers bloom like brocade; the river between the hills runs blue as indigo.

When it is clear that the absolute is none other than this lovely, rich world in its many forms—when the world and its animals and plants and people are found to be one’s own body—then we walk with everybody and everything on a common path. This is compassion, suffering with others. “Suffering” is here an appropriate word. We endure, we allow pain and sorrow, we welcome gray hair, weakened powers, and death itself with our friends and family members.

Compassion is thus the liberation from self-preoccupation. The joy of this release and the simultaneous experience of inclusion bring forth a vow to work with the world with one’s own
hands—not imposing from above, not missionizing to redeem nonbelievers, but like Gandhi, weaving cloth for clothing with the village women. Or like Whitman, sitting with the wounded in a Washington hospital.

Walking a common path we realize more and more intimately how closely dependent we are on all people, animals, and plants, and how closely dependent they are on us. Like Hui’s experience of emptiness, however, this cannot be simply a static disclosure—we cannot remain stuck there in a blancmange of oneness. Engagement the noun is engagement the verb—the practice. This is the Way of the Bodhisattva, who vows to postpone full and complete enlightenment for herself until all beings are enlightened. Turning the wheel of the Dharma, she feels in her bones and marrow the sounds of agony that William Blake heard and expressed so vividly in his poem “London”:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every black'ning Church appalls;  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues me Marriage hearse.

The Bodhisattva Kuan-yin, who by her very name discerns the sounds of the world, is here the poet, experiencing inner-city cries as outer-city torment, men taking the most appropriate action—to write a timeless poem about human anguish and, by clear implication, human responsibility. Such Bodhisattvas are rare, East and West.

In Asia, cultural influence shave in the past generally confined the Bodhisattva ideal and imperative to doctrine and to the sangha and the surrounding lay community. Exceptions can be readily cited, from the Buddhist King Ashoka, who set forth decrees of human civility once he had carved out his kingdom, to the monk Gyogi Bosatsu, who traveled around medieval Japan building waterworks for the peasants. While Buddhists in general, including Zen Buddhists, could from very early times rightfully be honored for their study of many constructs of morality and for their practice of morality in ritual, meditation, and interaction with lay supporters, they could also be criticized for avoiding social analysis and any application of their understanding much beyond their temples and paths of pilgrimage.

Today such criticism is still valid to a certain degree. However, many of the monastery walls are down, and where they are intact, they have become quite porous. The superstition that Buddhists do not get involved in politics is likewise disappearing, and across the Buddhist world we find broad applications of the Buddha’s teaching. Some North American Zen Buddhist centers sponsor programs of peace, justice, social and medical care, community organization, bioregional organization, and the protection of nature. Participants in these programs find inner guidance from their own experience of dynamic unity with all beings and inspiration from such outstanding thinkers and leaders as Joanna Macy and Gary Snyder. The members also look for leadership to geniuses of engaged Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, whose names may not be familiar to the average American or European.

Buddhadāsa Bhikku, for example, the late Siamese Buddhist master, has challenged monks, nuns, and lay followers to restructure society to be in keeping with natural balance and fundamental Buddhist teaching. Other key Southern Buddhist leaders who apply their religious understanding in the world include Maha Goshananda, the leader of Cambodian Buddhists, who leads peace walks in his own country along roads made dangerous with land mines, as well as beyond his country, to show the way of peace to the world; Aung San Suu Kyi, the elected president of Myanmar and a Buddhist, who has remained steadfast in her insistence on democracy in the face of arrest and imprisonment; A T. Ariyaratne, who founded and inspires the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement of village self-help in Sri Lanka; Sulak Sivaraksa, who founded and perseveres in the face of government prosecution to guide the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and a number of other progressive associations in Siam; Thich Nhat Hanh, who coined the term “engaged Buddhism” and was a prominent figure in the peace process during the war in Vietnam, and who continues to maintain effective support for sufferers in his homeland. The one Asian Mahayana figure who serves as a wonderful model of
engaged Buddhism for Zen Buddhists and Buddhists generally is the Dalai Lama, who lectures on loving-kindness without using a single Buddhist buzzword and who resolutely supports movements for human rights and the protection of nature—a prophet for everyone, regardless of their religion.

It should be noted that the engaged Buddhism that is advanced by most of these North American and Asian figures is not mere service, though certainly service is an important element of their work, from the protection of refugees to the rescue of prostitutes. The teachings and writings of Buddhāsā Bhikkhu on “Dhammic Socialism” have inspired the development of cooperative Buddhist communities in Siam, which Tavivat Puntarigvivat relates to the Base Communities of liberation theology in Latin America. Studying Dr. Puntarigvivat’s account of these Siamese Buddhist communities, I am struck by their reformative nature and at the same time their conservativism, for like the villages of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, they flourish from the root of traditional teachings.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) in North America, whose leadership is largely (though by no means completely) Zen Buddhist, has established a program called the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement, whose acronym (BASE) is clearly an echo of liberation theology and whose policy arises from the Buddhist teaching of dāna, or giving. Young volunteers live together with a schedule of sharing and religious practice while serving as apprentice workers in social welfare and medical agencies. At the same time, however, Buddhist Peace Fellowship members are beginning to examine the futility of an engaged Buddhism that is limited to hospice and other medical and social welfare work. Speakers at a recent BPF institute challenged the leadership to consider how they might be functioning as no more than Band-Aids to the acquisitive system and that they might even be perpetuating its evils by helping it to work better.

The world is in a terrible mess. Great self-perpetuating economic and governmental institutions, fueled by the Three Poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance, are contaminating vast populations of people, animals, and plants. Almost a hundred years ago, William Butler Yeats in his “Second Coming” asked the foreboding question:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

We already know the answer. The monster has been born, and we read of his foul depredations across the world in our daily papers. As a final point in this discussion of Zen Buddhist experience and its application, I suggest that Zen Buddhists, Buddhists generally, and men and women of all religions—and those of simple goodwill with perhaps no formal religion—face the task of finding a way, perhaps like the folks in self-reliant villages and ashrams of South and Southeast Asia, to live in this society but not of it and to network like Buddhist sanghas of classical times to create a new way of life that is at the same time as old as the world, a way that is grounded in gracious generosity.
