The Whole Way

Is Buddhism a transcendent path to enlightenment or a practical aid to everyday life? The Way cannot be divided like that, JOAN SUTHERLAND **tells us. Like the water system of the high desert, it flows in every direction and is found wherever we decide to tap into it.** PHOTOS BY ANTONIO M. MORA GARCIA

BEING HUMAN IS A COMPLICATED AFFAIR, and Buddhism began and continues to evolve as a response to this challenge. It describes in great detail what is unsatisfactory and why, and then it offers practices, philosophy, and art to help transform this unsatisfactoriness into awakening—or, more accurately, to help us see the awakening that was always right there, inextricably a part of the very life we considered unsatisfactory.

There are many forms of Buddhism and a variety of Buddhist practices, including meditation, ceremony, study, service, art, and devotion. Practice is key, because it bridges idea and embodiment; it helps make the Way real. In the Asian cultures in which Buddhism first arose, there has been, broadly speaking, a distinction between monastic and lay practice. There's obviously much that they share, but monastics and lay people have often had different aspirations, which has led them to different forms of practice.

To a larger extent than we sometimes realize, Westerners have inherited this split. It's easier to recognize if you think of monastic practice as including the retreats that laypeople attend, with the perennial end-of-retreat question about how to bring the experience into daily life. So I'll speak of cloistered

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practice, which is meant to include both monasticism and lay retreat experience, and daily life, which is pretty much everything else.

Many of us take for granted that we're moving from one world into another as we leave the retreat center and head for home. Some of us believe that the truer practice, the one that will lead to enlightenment, is held in the monastery or the retreat, and that anything else is second best. Some would argue that only lay practice and immersion in the world can open the Way. Do we have to choose one over the other, or reconcile ourselves to the idea that the disjunctions between them are inevitable? Is awakening really the province of one mode of practice more than the other? Or is there a perspective that unites them into something whole, an uncompartmentalized and onflowing Way?

When buddhas don't appear
And their followers are gone
The wisdom of awakening
Bursts forth by itself.

—NAGARJUNA

Last year I moved to the high desert of northern New Mexico, where the presence and absence of water are never far from our thoughts: monsoon rains in the summer, winter snows, water held for a season by rivers or a few hours in arroyos that flood and go dry again, water held for centuries in aquifers, bubbling up as natural springs. And from time immemorial we humans have joined the great cycle of wet and dry with our wells and irrigation ditches. Even with modern reservoirs and sewer lines, there's the strong sense here that life has been sustained by deep wells and a net of acequias, the ditches that run through fields and along the sides of roads, even in some neighborhoods of the state capital.

This is how I've come to think of awakening. It's everywhere—as sudden and complete as the crash of thunder on a summer afternoon, as promising as a distant smudge of cottonwoods, revealing the presence of water. There are times of drought, too, when the very idea of awakening seems to have dried up under an unrelenting sky. We might think of awakening as something that happens inside us, but, as with a landscape, we also happen inside of it.

In moments of awakening, it's clear that what our heart-minds experience—what we sense and see and feel—is entirely continuous with the world we ordinarily think of as outside ourselves. There is no longer observer and observed but a single field, and this field is what I'm calling awakening. From this perspective, awakening seems like a force as fundamental and all-pervasive as gravity or electromagnetism, and we see that it is inside us and we are inside it.

And so we try to establish a relationship with it, tap into the resource, coax awakening into causing our particular corner of the world to flourish. We practice, and it's just as though we're digging wells and ditches. At times we concentrate our energy and go deep into the underground sources of water. At others we stand on the earth and open the acequia gates, letting our awareness pour across the land like water, which makes life possible wherever it spreads. Each is essential; neither has power without the other. A well without acequias is a hole with water at the bottom; an acequia without a source of water is a dry ditch. Our practice is a collaboration with awakening to discover its expression in our particular human life. To do this we have to touch the deep pools of awakening that are hidden from our ordinary gaze, and we have to do something out in the open with what we discover.

In this spirit, some people have adapted practices developed in a Buddhist context so they can be shared with others for specific ends like pain or stress reduction. Others have taken what they've learned from practice into prisons, hospitals, hospices, environmental work, corporations, social work, political action—the list is long and growing. Family life, friendship, art, and culture have all been affected, sometimes explicitly and sometimes without saying a Buddhist word. Making accessible the ideas and methods that might be useful to people whether they're Buddhist practitioners or not is the very Way itself—generous, creative, skillful.

If the flow of ideas and methods was initially from cloistered practice into daily life, it moves in both directions now. The field of awakening grows stronger and more tangible as silence and speech converse, stillness and action learn from each other in the new exchanges made possible by crossing the boundary from meditation hall to marketplace and back again. If the question arises whether it would be better if we were all doing the same kind of practice—choosing the cloister or a householder's life—just pull the camera back. The hermit in her meditation cave, the Buddhist midwife, and everyone else whose heart has turned toward the Way—there is a field large enough to hold us all. It is our shared awakening, to which we all contribute. Its evolution might be achingly slow and full of setbacks, but it continues—because of, and in spite of, all our best efforts.

Someone is standing on a solitary mountain with no way to get down. Someone is in the middle of a crossroads, not facing any direction. Who is ahead and who is behind? It has nothing to do with householder and bodhisattva.

—LINJI

In what follows there's an artificial purity in the distinction between cloistered practice and daily life. Each, of course, contains elements of the other, and neither always lives up to either its ideal or its shadow. Neither, in other words, is wholly the pure land nor wholly problematic; both are much more complex and interesting than that. Perhaps I'm speaking to

that part of ourselves that tends to see things with unrealistic purity; perhaps I'm inviting a little boundary crossing and border-town mixing it up.

Both the well of cloistered practice and the acequias of daily life have their mysteries, their beauties, and their difficulties. To be sure, some things happen more readily in one mode or the other, but if our aspiration is for an awakening that leaves nothing outside itself, this seems like an argument for the complementary nature of cloistered practice and daily life, for the ways they need each other. Many Westerners seem to be making this assumption, as we apprentice to awakening in the world and the cloister simultaneously.

Even as we do, retreat practice and daily life can still appear to be in conflict with each other. This is probably rooted in a split between a cloistered and a worldly turn of mind that many of us bring to practice. In the midst of one, we long for the other.

When we're awake in the early hours doing our taxes, the starlit, pine-scented walk to the meditation hall can sound like heaven. It goes the other way, too: a woman's old sailing buddy calls to say that while she's in retreat he'll be out on the open sea in the yacht she used to crew on, and she wonders for a few moments about the turn her life has taken. Someone wakes up in the city every morning, pierced by a deep longing for silence and solitude; someone else is surprised by the urgency with which she wants to see her young son on the last day of retreat.

The institutions of Buddhism can, wittingly or unwittingly, reinforce this split. Most of the Buddhism that first came to the West in the twentieth century had a strong monastic cast,

even when it was being practiced by laypeople. Over time many established centers have actively encouraged the development of householder practice, while new ways of practice have emerged that don't make the monastic assumption at all. But there's still a pretty strong, often unconscious bias toward cloistered practice, with householder practice seen as an adaptation of it. When inner conflict meets institutional authority, it can create an inertia that's difficult even to see clearly, let alone question.

Let's do it anyway.

Why do many of us assume that this split is inevitable? Why, in point of fact, do many of us experience it that way? What is the nature of longing? Is it just that humans are wired to yearn for the thing that isn't there? Is it instead a deep desire for wholeness? Is it the symptom of something not yet resolved or out of balance in the ways we practice—a symptom that, if we paid attention to it, might lead to greater health? Are we unwilling to accept that true apprenticeship offers a great deal and also asks for sacrifice? How does longing relate to aspiration and to bodhichitta, the desire for enlightenment so that one can be helpful to others? What about when the longing, the feeling that something is missing, eventually drops away, because, whatever the circumstances, nothing seems to be missing anymore?

The more we don't take the split between the cloistered and the daily for granted, the more a rich field of inquiry opens up, as many have discovered. Individuals and practice communities can respond to these questions in lots of different ways and come to very different conclusions. The important thing is that we keep holding the questions, keep examining our assumptions and conclusions, because all of this is still very much a work in progress. It's alive, it's exciting, and this exploration might end up being one of the West's great contributions to the onflowing Way.

…the love that is enlightenment because it is the unity of experience. —VIMALAKIRTI

Over time, someone in apprenticeship to awakening is not so buffeted by the movement from cloistered practice to daily life. She becomes aware that there's really only one practice going on, and its location at any given time becomes less and less critical. The pure lands on either side of the boundary are receding, while the border town grows. This unified practice gets at once simpler and more pervading; it's like breathing. Inhale and exhale. Turning away and turning toward. Down and deep, out and wide. Wells and acequias.

What once seemed like two activities or focuses of attention are now aspects of one. You can't hold your breath forever, and you can't breathe out forever, either. We don't call this inhale-and-exhale; we call it breathing. In the same way, the apprentice begins to experience a one whole practice, a one whole path, under her feet wherever she is.

Awakening is the unity, the breathing that is made of inhale and exhale. It's the through line and the base note of our lives. If at the start the apprentice has a sense that the continuity in her life is provided by the self, a profound shift of allegiance eventually occurs. She sees that the self rises and falls; she climbs into the self when she needs it, and sometimes when she's deeply absorbed in meditation or art or physical exertion it disappears altogether. Underneath it all, awakening unfolds with each new experience, and it won't be complete in this lifetime until she draws her last breath.

This awakening isn't thicker or more accessible in some places than others. Awakening happens in the meditation hall, and it also happens on the freeway and in the sickbed. In any moment of any day, awakening is already there, and in any moment of any day we might come to experience it. We can leave that to chance or we can practice, which puts us in collaboration with awakening rather than making us exclusively reliant on grace. Most of us have figured out that practice isn't something we do only at specific times and in specific ways, but something we're doing in all the moments of our lives. What the apprentice to awakening comes to see is that she's not bringing something she gets from formal practice into the rest of her life; she's allowing that practice to change her, to soak in and stain her completely, so that she is now that stained person in every moment of her life. Awakening is also her willingness to be soaked and stained by other things—to feel the caress, to take the hit, to be devastated by a bit of news from the other side of the world, to let an encounter with beauty change her mind about everything. Allowing all these things to break open her heart is an essential part of the apprenticeship, because without it awakening can't be whole.

Sometimes the long arc of awakening is punctuated by great breakthroughs. In an instant, the true nature of things becomes vivid. The apprentice sees the emptiness of everything, meaning that she experiences how big and radiant everything is, and how everything is connected to everything else. People have these experiences in the meditation hall after years of practice, and they have them spontaneously as children, or in the most unlikely of circumstances. Awakening isn't snobbish about where and when it reveals itself, so we probably shouldn't be, either. A breakthrough will leak away, though, unless we ground the experience. Without a way to deepen and broaden it, to maintain a living relationship with it, it tends to fade into a fond or frustrating memory of what might have been.

Here's where the practice of daily life can be helpful. Awakening doesn't happen only like a bolt of lightning; sometimes it's a dawning awareness that the sky has been gradually getting lighter for some time. In the midst of our daily lives, we become aware of domestic, local moments of seeing the emptiness of things. A man starts to tell a familiar story whose meaning was set sometime in the last century about some relationship, and he finds that he can't get past the first sentence; suddenly the habitual narrative seems unreal, completely made up, even ridiculously funny. That's also seeing emptiness, just a particular emptiness rather than the emptiness of everything all at once. If we let the floor be pulled out from under us and for a moment fall freely, that moment of falling freely is a moment of breakthrough. With practice, we won't try to catch ourselves too soon, to reconstitute the self that has for a moment vanished. Crucially, if these moments of falling freely are recognized and appreciated, they tend to leak away less readily than the big breakthroughs; they accumulate and cause lasting change, and this can be tremendously encouraging. If the breakthroughs give us the biggest perspective of all, this falling freely shows us what that looks like in any moment of any day.

The fundamental promise of Buddhism is that any of us can awaken. As Buddhism has evolved, it has became clear that awakening is not just an individual matter. We are all in this world together, and we are all awakening together. So a matter of great importance is how we encourage practice that compromises on neither the awakening of the individual nor awakening in the field that holds us all—that sees both as essential to the uncompartmentalized Way. What an extraordinary, what a beautiful, challenge to be given. ♦