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# Radical Buddhism and Other Essays

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*Leonard Price*



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By

**Leonard Price**

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# Radical Buddhism

**B**uddhism comes West as a vast body of teaching, and we who receive it are often awed by its abundance, its complexity, and its subtlety. Where is the centre, the real thing we should fix on? Or is there a real thing at all to be apprehended? History shows that Buddhism can and will accommodate itself to new cultures, and will flourish according to the perceptiveness and energy of its new adherents. Now in the West our perceptiveness and energy are put to the test to grasp the “real thing” by which this religion lives—its radicalism.

The Buddhas only point the way, and the way they point is a difficult one through the perfection of morality, concentration, and wisdom to the freedom from suffering called Nibbāna. It is a way of action. A path is useless without the will to follow it, and good intentions alone are futile. To make the journey, the roots of mental defilement must be torn out entirely; the old illusions we live by must be shattered; the mind must seek the light. It is a radical way, because the Buddha enjoins us to give up what is before, give up what is behind, and give up what is in between. Then and only then will the wheel of birth-and-death

be knocked from its axis.

Those of us in the jaded and desperate West who hear the resonance of truth in the teachings of the Buddha must hear also that urging to act, to start an inner rebellion against our ancient sloth and stupidity. Yet the more we ponder, the more we recognize the enormity of the task, and an understandable reaction is to set about re-defining just what has to be done and just how prudent it might be to fling ourselves into action. The danger here—so typical in our comfortable and seductive society—is to forget the radical imperative of suffering and try to make over Buddhism into a tame amalgam of platitudes suitable for pleasant contemplation—praising it in order to avoid practicing it. Indeed, Buddhism is rational, patient, deep in wisdom, but should we then just bask in its reflected light?

Complacency is death. If, out of custom and timidity, Western Buddhists turn their religion into a museum piece, or worse, a hobby, they lose the essence. It is easy enough to settle for an undemanding status quo, a modicum of calm, a pleasant sense of harmonious living, and it is easy enough to postpone or forget any effort to break the shackles of old delusion, believing that one need not strain when the road will likely be long. But in accommodating too much to personal or societal

expediency we cheapen our ideals and slide further from the disturbing implications of the Noble Truth of Suffering. We may even take the Buddhist vision of kamma as an indication that “everything is as it should be.” But everything is not as it should be. Everything is in fact miserable. If we are complacent we blind ourselves, and there is no safety in blindness.

In the radical view of the Buddha, saṃsāra is no cosmic merry-go-round, but a terrible juggernaut of birth and death dragging beings through endless cycles of woe. “Free yourselves!” says the Buddha. All lives and events are variations on the theme of suffering. All are without substance, endurance, permanence—merely a web of emptiness, void upon void. The “self” that everyone spends so much time defending and nurturing is pure fiction. “Dismiss it,” says the Buddha. The world will not conform to our wishes and to presume otherwise is folly; the disciple must cease clinging to it and proceed along the path to the end of suffering. The root problem is craving, and the radical solution is the destruction of craving through wisdom.

The sober truths taught by the Buddha, squarely faced, present us with problems and choices. Are we to assume that every Buddhist ought to be off grunting in a cave, sweating his way toward enlightenment? Is this the radical conclusion?

Actually, the dilemma is not so formidable. The Buddha taught gradually, according to the capacity of his hearers to understand and practice. Every person should devote himself to the teaching as far as he is able. The goal is ultimately the same for all, though progress along the path depends on the individual. The Dhamma of the Buddha will lead us to the safety of Nibbāna, and it will also sustain us along the way. What matters is always to bear in mind where we are and where we are headed.

The radicalism of the Buddha is probably no more difficult for Westerners to comprehend than for anyone else, yet we are especially concerned with it now, because the teaching is only just now settling into our culture and its future direction is uncertain. It is a critical time for the religion. The fundamental teachings must not be neglected, lest we take to wearing our religion like warm slippers and doze into mediocrity. Understood rightly, the Noble Truths are profoundly disturbing. They compel us to act, to pursue the ideal of emancipation no matter how difficult the journey appears. Buddhism truly goes against the stream of the world and demands an uncommon vigour of the disciple. How well we respond depends on individual choice and ability, but what matters most is the recognition that a response is called for, that a path does exist, and that the goal can

be achieved.

Understanding the basic teachings, Western Buddhists should be wary of tendencies to turn Buddhism into an instrument of secular reform, or a philosophical playground, or an esoteric hobby. Before all else, there is suffering and the path to the end of suffering. There is no safety in faddishness, complacency, or the compulsive intellectualism that hungers for truth but eats the menu instead of the dinner.

To reach the truth, to reach deliverance, we are told to give up what is before, give up what is behind, and give up what is in between. The essence of Buddhism is to let go of everything, to cease clinging desperately to transient, woeful, empty phenomena. The disciple who acts on this breathtaking advice may find the bottom dropping out of this fictitious world. So be it! Thus begins the journey.

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## **The Baited Hook**

Though seldom stated in so many words, a cherished

belief of all human beings is that happiness lies in the satisfaction of our desires. All our actions are usually predicated on this seemingly self-evident fact. We are devoted to obtaining the objects of our desire; we consider it our right, our duty, and indeed our highest aspiration to get what we want, to obtain what we think will bring us enjoyment, satisfaction, or “fulfilment.” We are accustomed to asking one another, “What do you want out of life?” believing that if we can settle on some clear vision of happiness, and go after it, then all will be well.

Unfortunately, experience has a way of overturning our theories. Those manifold objects we yearn for prove troublesome to capture; when captured they yield less pleasure than expected; when held onto they decay and cause us grief. Then we are driven to turn for relief toward other enticements and thereby renew the cycle. Somehow we believe that if only this search for gratification is conducted correctly, if only the right objects are selected, if only we can have a little luck to add to our efforts, then we can certainly attain that permanent happiness that now eludes us. Badly thumped by fortune, we doggedly tell ourselves, “Yes, it’s worth all the pain,” and turn a swollen eye toward fresh delights.

But is it worth all the pain? Consider a succulent worm bobbing just below the surface of a pond,



attracting the attention of a hungry fish. In a flash the fish swallows the worm, only to discover the hidden hook, the barb that rips into its innards and causes it terror, suffering, and ultimately death. The worm is attractive, but it delivers little satisfaction to the fish. Such is the nature of sense-pleasures. Those objects of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind that we find so alluring are more likely to cause us misery than happiness, and the surprising truth is that it is not so much our choice of objects that is at fault, but the mere act of choosing in the first place, since all phenomena of this world are in reality flawed, connected to suffering, and unreliable.

According to the Buddha, true happiness is not to be found in the deceptive sense-pleasures of the world—not in wine or wealth or roses. No matter how hard we try, we can never reach security as long as we persist in wrong views of the desirability of this or that sensual object. Without a clear understanding of the nature of phenomena our search is doomed from the outset. Our first task must be to confront the facts that the universe does not exist for our amusement and that such pleasures as we customarily derive from it are false, impermanent, and unworthy of our interest. While the Buddha does not deny the existence of enjoyment in world, he points out that all worldly pleasure is bound up with suffering, inseparable from

suffering, and sure to give way to suffering. Therefore in embracing the pleasant we cannot help but embrace the unpleasant. Our craving prevents us from realizing these facts by continually projecting a false appearance on the world, convincing us that the tempting objects around us can actually be possessed and squeezed dry of some satisfying essence. Without the intervention of wisdom, craving will keep us running from one disappointment to another. Though we have many times taken the bait of sense-pleasure and suffered the inevitable pull of the hook, each new worm that comes wiggling through the water excites the heedless man.

The Buddha teaches that the solution to the terrible union of pleasure and pain is not to struggle hopelessly to split them apart, but to view the whole contaminated mass with detachment. All phenomena share the same characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and unsubstantiality, so it is futile to single out some objects for liking and others for loathing. The whole cast of mind that sees things in terms of liking-and-loathing must be abandoned in favour of the detached observation called “mindfulness.” Clearly, if the bait hides a hook we do best to curb our appetites.

Forsaking attachment to sense-pleasures is a logical application of the Four Noble Truths, yet even among

those who subscribe to the teachings of the Buddha there can be found a deep-seated reluctance to move from theory to practice. The hold which craving has over our minds is so tenacious that we tend to straddle the abyss between truth and illusion, hoping to live in both with some fast philosophical footwork. For example, may we not propose that sense-pleasures are not in themselves harmful and may therefore be enjoyed in moderation? We may propose it, but we are apt to justify thereby any craving that enters our heads. As long as one regards any experience as personal or desirable, one remains mired in ignorance. There are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings arising in the mind; they come and they go; they are to be observed, not sought after, because it is such seeking or craving that sustains the round of suffering.

Another common notion is that Buddhism may be employed to beautify life by making the individual more appreciative of the “harmony” of the universe. This is false on two counts. Firstly the Buddha did not aim to put a pleasing, comforting face on things, but to educate the individual to the ultimate worthlessness of suffering-dominated, conditioned existence. Secondly, the only “harmony” discernible here and now is the implacable and impersonal law of cause and effect—not the blissful oneness beloved of poets.

A third erroneous notion is that sense-pleasures

may be pursued full speed if they are part of worthy efforts and worthy goals. This is a self-serving rationalization. While mundane aspirations may be quite wholesome in conception, as long as they provide a surreptitious vehicle for craving they are flawed. For the proper development of insight one needs to get rid of the idea of an ego or self that enjoys, possesses, and appropriates. The noble-minded man is detached from both ego and world. He acts for the welfare of himself and others without thought of reward or gratification. He is indifferent to results; he is not swayed by the pleasant and the unpleasant.

In considering the lure and danger of sense-pleasures, it is not difficult to see that most of us will ultimately defend our indulgences, not from logic but from the blind urge, "I want." What harm, we reason, can there be in a little innocent delight? To clarify: the harm lies not in the sensation but in the deluded *mind* that fastens onto the sensation and clings to it obsessively. What behoves the diligent Buddhist is to get beyond the whole idea of liking and disliking, to set it aside, to cease entertaining it—in order to advance to the fruitful fields of direct insight.

Suppose then, that we acknowledge the danger of the baited hook and agree that the restless, craving mind is a source of suffering. What do we do about it?

Often we complain, "I can't help myself! I know it's dangerous but I can't help it." Anyone who has tried to oppose his own ravenous appetites for pleasure, amusement, or gratification knows this sense of helplessness. A mind long accustomed to grasping is not dissuaded by mere rational arguments; it goes its own way, chewing up one experience after another in a hopeless search for happiness. So what is to be done? The trouble here, as is so often the case, is one of self-deception. Although we may say we understand the danger of sensual obsession and the advantage of restraint, our weakness shows that in fact we do not. Wisdom is simply incompatible with defilement. As long as we are willing to compromise with our obsessions we have not fully understood the Buddha's teaching about the nature of reality. We may recognize intellectually that craving and clinging lead to suffering, but we have not penetrated to a direct experience of the truth. Much work remains to be done; we can't simply throw up our hands and plead weakness.

If we truly recognize the hazards of succumbing to the baited hook, we must resist its enticements. Yet the Buddha does not recommend a stubborn, stoical self-abnegation. The disciple must deal with the problem intelligently. Escape from suffering does not depend on obliterating or denying sense-pleasures but on

seeing them for what they are through the systematic practice of mindfulness. In ordinary life we are generally too caught up in gaining and losing to give sufficient attention to the elements and dynamics of the process. We are borne along on these ancient waves only because of compulsive habit. To stop our headlong career it is essential to develop and apply mindfulness, to cultivate scrupulous attention toward even the most mundane habits and desires. Steady mindfulness, intensified in meditation, reveals that the mind is a ceaseless torrent of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and mental impressions—never still for an instant, never stable enough to be considered substantial or enduring. What we loosely term the “external” world is likewise a blur of evanescent phenomena, all changing with incredible speed, arising and vanishing with no beginning or end in sight. Where then is the object that is truly desirable? Gone! Lost to view in the instant. Where is the one who desires? Gone! Thought succeeds thought, effect succeeds cause in a tumble of empty foam, with a desiring “self” nowhere to be found. Mindfulness discerns these truths directly, examining and breaking down experience until the “permanent” is understood as impermanent, until the “pleasant” is understood as unsatisfactory, until the “self” is understood as empty and unreal.

As with all of the truths taught by the Buddha, these three characteristics of existence must be realized through direct insight—not just through the ruminations of the intellect. The practice of mindfulness can lead us to such insight if we undertake the task with patience and impartiality. One who luxuriates in craving will remain twisting between misunderstood suffering and imagined pleasure, but one who recognizes danger will shun the baited hook and seek the bare facts of reality beneath the dazzling magic show of the senses.

By avoiding the baited hook of sense-pleasures we do not, as is sometimes maintained, rob life of all its joy. On the contrary, we abandon false satisfaction and approach the true happiness that is born of freedom. We take worldly enjoyment in moderation keeping it in perspective. The wise disciple does not dwell in gloom and try to see the bad side of every experience. If it is pleasant, he notes it as pleasant; if it is unpleasant, he notes it as unpleasant; if it is neutral, he notes it as neutral. Whatever its appearance, he regards it with mindfulness and does not cling to it. He enjoys life simply as he finds it. In so doing, he escapes the peril of hook and line and swims freely toward the end of suffering.

Again and again the Buddha exhorts his followers to be mindful, because the world is burning with

greed, hatred, and delusion. Freedom can be won, but not by the careless, infatuated person. The one who attains freedom will be the one who has mindfulness, energy, and the courage to see the canker in the rose.

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## **Meeting the Buddha, Alone, on the Empty Shore**

A veneer of credulity and feeble optimism covers the dark preoccupations of our lives. In an age marked everywhere with signs of spiritual decay, we somehow remain ever entranced by new toys, ever receptive to the latest balderdash from noisy charlatans, and ever ready to abandon the present moment for the lure of the next. Let it be rumoured that “self-fulfilment” has been glimpsed in somebody’s book or therapy or religion, and immediately a cloud of dust obscures the sun as we stampede into the new territory—only to find ourselves, puzzlingly, still in the same dull company.



Do we really want happiness, or only titillation? It's hard to say, because we rarely sit still long enough to examine the matter. Suspecting dimly that life is treacherous, we keep moving fast to avoid calamity.

If we are credulous, we are no less sceptical. We are quick to believe but find belief intolerable. We topple today's idols and from their fragments eagerly assemble tomorrow's. We pace up and down the shores of doubt, rousing one another with shouts of encouragement, but stepping into the river we find the water cold, and promptly conclude there's a better crossing further down.

The water is always cold. Somebody sees a vision over the horizon, and the chilled troops waste no more time at *this* spot. In our solitary reflections we may notice our inconstancy and regretfully wonder, "Has it always been thus?" If we are Buddhists we are bound to answer, "Yes." This endlessly mutable landscape of disappointment, this lurch and halt of conviction, is called saṃsāra.

We are accustomed to regarding the "cycle of birth and death" as a remote, cosmic scheme of creation and dissolution. In fact, saṃsāra whirls with cyclonic force here in the prosaic moment, here in the wavering and furtive mind. If *this* is, *that* is. Out of ignorance rises craving; out of craving rises the whole mass of anxiety

and suffering. We deceive ourselves even in our desire for happiness. Our pursuit of pleasure or “self-fulfilment” is also a flight from despair. Uneasy with the deteriorating present, we leap with unseemly greed toward the future, which, fictitious creature that it is, soon fails us and leaves us exactly where we were. The great wheel turns, and has turned, and will turn again.

Freedom from saṃsāra does not spring from finding the right teacher or the right temple or the right style of meditations. We must instead begin by discarding false expedients, brief enthusiasms, fashions, platitudes, and most of all, excuses. Self-excuse is just grease for the wheel. Ah, we sigh, if only we had met the Buddha in person! Vain foolishness, this. The Buddha was never to be found in six feet of flesh. In his time and in ours he is only seen in the destruction of the defilements, in the giving up of excuses, evasions, and wilful blindness. If we earnestly strive to distinguish between the false and the true, the shallow and the profound, the path of the Buddha takes shape before us.

But after so many years of quick credulity and quicker doubt, of lukewarm and ambivalent effort, how can we make it across that cold, lonely river of ignorance? If we divest ourselves of false and trivial comforts shall we not be left naked? Indeed we shall.

And it is in precisely that condition that we may encounter the Buddha. Buddhism is, after all, a religion of renunciation—renunciation of wrong thoughts, wrong speech, and wrong deeds. When we give up our shabby illusions and the manifold hiding places of the mind we find ourselves naked and ready for the first time to see the world without distortion. Whereas before we may have nominally accepted the reality of impermanence, suffering, and non-self, now we may begin to discern these truths directly and realize our predicament. The old cliché, “The Buddhas only point the way,” strikes us with fresh significance. Buddhism demands that we help ourselves, and here on the long, empty shore where we have so often wandered we may at last appreciate the task ahead.

The world around us may be crass and wicked, but not so crass and wicked as our own deluded minds. We feast on the bones of cynicism and are not satisfied. We give new names to iniquity and pursue it in shadows. We mistake the pleasant for the good and perennially follow the easiest course. Then in our accidental nights of fear we stare in bafflement at the four walls and ask ourselves, “Haven’t I tried?” Silence replies with silence, and there’s nothing left for us but to blunder after a new ghost of happiness, and thereby give the wheel of saṃsāra another spin.

Credulity is not faith, nor is scepticism wisdom. The

noble follower of the Buddha proceeds with a balanced mind, considering the world as he finds it, shunning the harmful and welcoming the useful. He crosses the flood of saṃsāra on the raft of Dhamma, knowing that nobody will make the effort for him. What distinguishes such a person from his fellows is not necessarily brilliance of mind, but plain and simple perseverance, the resolve to follow the true course no matter how long it may take. We can do likewise if we set ourselves firmly on the path.

Delay is the luxury of ignorance. We commonly suppose Nibbāna, the ultimate purity and freedom, to be something infinitely far away and terrifically difficult to reach. We think of the Buddha as long departed. But Nibbāna is near for those who would have it near, and the Buddha is as close as true Dhamma truly observed. What is required of us is to let go of our crumbling, mortal toys and to come down, alone, to the long shore of renunciation. In that exhilarating solitude we may meet the Buddha, whose body is wisdom, whose face is compassion, and whose hand points out the waypoints directly to the deep and hidden purity in our hearts.

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# April and November

Early spring is a fitting time to consider death, though few of us, alas, appreciate this healthy practice. When the first crocuses and skunk cabbage blunder into the sunshine, the conventional mind waxes bold and brave and salutes the regeneration of the world. We have won through once more, we've got another chance, we shall dawdle barefooted in gardens. Gone is the dark time, the emphatically dead winter of land and heart. We are, surely, about to participate in the general leafiness of things. The gurgling pigeons in the park—formerly wretched pests—excite our fine feelings of sympathy. We are magnanimous at seventy degrees. We have great expectations.

Legions of us swarm the sidewalks with uplifted chins, celebrating what we had no part in making. But there's a certain self-deception here. If the sun burns more beneficently these days is it any of our doing? If it shut down altogether would we be consulted? We may fancy ourselves philosophers improvising on the rhapsody of spring, but we display, in the main, scarcely more independence than the pigeons. We are seduced by the flowers April throws our way and esteem ourselves wise for having noted they are pretty. We find in the loveliness of the season not a

theme for true reflection but only a licence for yearning. We indulge without compunction, believing that we are in accord with the sacred law of the moment, when really we continue to *flee* the present moment and lust for the unborn fixture— some garden of promise yet to bloom.

Better we should turn our minds to dissolution and death— right now in the brilliant season. Any fellow of sound faculties can stroll through late November and remark the transience of vital forces. Ah, withered grass, leaden skies, brief span of happiness! He is moved—having, as he thinks, come to terms with mortality. The same fellow, come the daffodils, is warbling about youth and beauty. But where is the brave heart who sees deeply in spring the bud dying to the flower, the flower to the fruit? Where is he who at close of the year regards the snow-bitten rose and is not cast down? Where is he who lives serenely in fair times and foul? All things shall pass not only in black November but in pastel April as well—a lapsing without pause, a continual perishing of the dear, the unlovely, and the indifferent. Nature suffers no moratorium on decay; it unrolls itself in seasons that we with our predilections for warmth and light, habitually misunderstand, finding gloom this month and gaiety in that.

To dote on April is to despise November. We are

caught up in liking and disliking, taking a sip of truth when we can't avoid it and spitting it out at the first opportunity, living tentatively like wine-tasters. We ride the seasons on and ever on to the sweet, cruel music of hope, while the world burns because of *us*, because we've lit it with the torch of delusion. Should we not now starve the fire to coolness and let be the race of forms we call our life? Change sweeps all forms away, and no one can find peace in his time who does not attend to this universal moving-on.

So then, it is spring and the bluebirds are twittering. Shall we pick our scabs and visit graveyards? Of course not. Let us go on breathing; if the air is sweet, why then, it is sweet. If the rain blows off and the sun slants warm through the willow tree, so be it. Let us sit on the porch and be alive. No need to scourge ourselves or sleep on gravel. No need to curse winter or praise spring. They come and go independently of us: dead grass, dragonflies, thunderstorms, and snow—what scene should we prefer when all are flowing? Reality cannot be seized; it arises when the mind stops grasping. He who lets go is he who is established. He lives in all seasons but serves none.

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