

The Dark Side of Buddhism

Buddhism is often seen as the acceptable face of religion, lacking a celestial dictator and full of Eastern wisdom. But Dale DeBakcsy, who worked for nine years in a Buddhist school, says it's time to think again.

On paper, Buddhism looks pretty good. It has a philosophical subtlety married to a stated devotion to tolerance that makes it stand out amongst the world religions as uniquely not awful. Even Friedrich Nietzsche, not known for pulling punches when it came to religious analysis, only said of Buddhism that it was "nihilistic", but still "a hundred times more realistic than Christianity." And we in the 21st century have largely followed his lead in sensing something a bit depressing about Buddhism, but nothing more sinister than that. But if we start looking a bit closer, at the ramifications of Buddhist belief in practice, there is a lurking darkness there, quietly stated and eloquently crafted, but every bit as profound as the Hellfires of Christianity or the rhetoric of jihad.

For nine years, I worked as a science and maths teacher at a small private Buddhist school in the United States. And it was a wonderful job working with largely wonderful people. The administration, monks, and students knew that I was an atheist and had absolutely no problem with it as long as I didn't actively proselytise (try and find a Catholic school that would hire a moderate agnostic, let alone a fully out-of-the-closet atheist). Our students were incredibly sensitive and community-conscious individuals, and are my dear friends to this day.

However. I have no doubt that Buddhist religious belief, as it was practised at the school, did a great deal of harm. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the ramifications of the belief in karma. At first glance, karma is a lovely idea which encourages people to be good even when nobody is watching for the sake of happiness in a future life. It's a bit carrot-and-stickish, but so are a lot of the ways in which we get people to not routinely beat us up and take our stuff. Where it gets insidious is in the pall that it casts over our failures in this life. I remember one student who was having problems memorising material for tests. Distraught, she went to the monks who explained to her that she was having such trouble now because, in a past life, she was a murderous dictator who burned books, and so now, in this life, she is doomed to forever be learning challenged. Not, "Oh, let's look at changing your study habits", but rather, "Oh, well, that's because you have the soul of a book-burning murderer."

To our ears, this sounds so over the top that it is almost amusing, but to a kid who earnestly believes that these monks have hidden knowledge of the karmic cycle, it is devastating. She was convinced that her soul was polluted and irretrievably flawed, and that nothing she could do would allow her to ever learn like the people around her. And this is the dark side of karma – instead of misfortunes in life being bad things that happen to you, they are manifestations of a deep and fundamental wrongness within you. Children have a hard enough time keeping up their self-esteem as it is without every botched homework being a sign of lurking inner evil.

As crippling as the weight of one's past lives can be, however, it is nothing compared to the horrors of the here and now. Buddhism's inheritance from Hinduism is the notion of existence as a painful continuous failure to negate itself. The wheel of reincarnation rumbles ruthlessly over us all, forcing us to live again and again in this horrid world until we get it right and learn to not exist. I remember one of the higher monks at the school giving a speech in which she described coming back from a near-death experience as comparable to having to "return to a sewer where you do nothing but subsist on human excrement." Life is suffering. It is something to be Finally Escaped.

Now, there are legitimate philosophical reasons for holding to this view. Viewed from a certain perspective, the destruction of everything you've ever cared about is inevitable, and when it's being experienced, the pain of loss does not seem recompensed by the joy of attachment that preceded it. And that yawning stretch of impermanence outside, so the argument goes, is mirrored by the fundamental non-existence of the self inside. Meditation, properly done, allows you to strip away, one by one, all of your merely personal traits and achieve insight into the basic nothingness, the attributeless primal nature, of your existence. Those are all interesting philosophical and psychological insights, and good can come of them. Being hyper-sensitive to suffering and injustice is a good gateway to being helpful to your fellow man and in general making the world a better place.

However. There is something dreadfully tragic about believing yourself to have somehow failed your calling whenever joy manages to creep into your life. It is in our biology, in the fabric of us, to connect to other human beings, and anything which tries to insert shame and doubt into that instinct is bound to always twist us every so slightly. If the thought, "I am happy right now", can never occur without an accompanying, "And I am just delaying my ultimate fulfillment in being so", then what, essentially, has life become? I've seen it in action – people reaching out for connection, and then pulling back reflexively, forever caught in a life of half-gestures that can't ever quite settle down to pure contemplation or gain a moment of genuine absolute enjoyment.

The usual response that I've gotten to these concerns is, "You're sacrificing truth and wisdom for the sake of feeling good. That's just what you criticise Christianity for, isn't it?" This would be a pretty damn good argument if I were convinced that the conclusions of Buddhist belief were as ironclad as their usually serene-unto-finality presentation makes them seem. There are two central claims here: that our own fundamental essence is non-existence, and that the nature of the outer world is impermanence.

The idea of the void-essence of self is one arrived at through meditation, through exercises in reflection dictated by centuries of tradition. That's enough to give us pause right there – it's not really a process of self-discovery if you're told the method, the steps, and the only acceptable conclusion before you've even begun. Here's the fourteenth (and current) Dalai Lama on how to start a meditation:

"First, look to your posture: arrange the legs in the most comfortable position; set the backbone as straight as an arrow. Place your hands in the position of meditative equipoise, four finger widths below the navel, with the left hand on the bottom, right hand on top, and your thumbs touching to form a triangle. This placement of the hands has connection with the place inside the body where inner heat is generated."

This is already an unpromising start – if you aren't even allowed variation in the number of sub-navel finger widths for hand placement, how can we hope to be allowed to even slightly differ on the supposed object of inner contemplation? And the text bears this out. When speaking of meditating on the mind, the Dalai Lama maneuvers his audience into a position where his conclusion seems inevitable:

"Try to leave your mind vividly in a natural state... Where does it seem that your consciousness is? Is it with the eyes or where is it? Most likely you have a sense that it is associated with the eyes since we derive most of our awareness of the world through vision.... However, the existence of a separate mental consciousness can be ascertained; for example, when attention is diverted by sound, that which appears to the eye consciousness is not noticed... with persistent practice, consciousness may eventually be perceived or felt as an entity of mere luminosity or knowing, to which anything is capable of appearing... as long as the mind does not encounter the external circumstances of conceptuality, it will abide empty without anything appearing in it."

If this reminds you more than a little of Meno, where Socrates leads a slave boy into “rediscovering” the truths of geometry through a combination of leading questions and implied conclusions, you’re not alone. Notice the artful vagueness of the phrase “may eventually be perceived or felt as an entity of mere luminosity” - the subtle pressure that, if you don’t perceive consciousness that way at first, you must keep trying until something in you falls into line and you end up with the “right” answer to meditative practice. Or take into consideration the construction of the questions - how the second question immediately shuts down any actual consideration of the first, and how the answer to that second question leads to a single special case open to multiple interpretations which are again immediately declared to be explicable by only one single answer. As it turns out, you have as much freedom of inquiry as you had freedom in hand placement. In a curious twist unique to Buddhism, rigidity of method has infected the structure of belief, ossifying potential explanations of existence into dogmatic assertions mechanically arrived at.

The impermanence of the outer world seems more solidly founded. Five billion years hence, I’m pretty sure that this novelty shot glass next to me is not going to exist in any sort of recognisable novelty shot glass form. Nothing in this room will functionally persist as long as you only admit my Use Perspective as the only relevant lens of observation. The matter and energy will both still exist, but they won’t exist in the configuration which I am accustomed to. And that, apparently, is supposed to fill me with a sense of existential dread. But it doesn’t - at all - and this is the weakness of the conclusions that Buddhism draws from an impermanence theory of the external world. It supposes that I cannot hold in my mind at the same time both an appreciation and attachment to an object or a person as they stand in front of me right now AND a recognition that my use of a particular configuration of matter and energy at the moment doesn’t determine how it will exist for all time.

Buddhism’s approach to use-based impermanence attempts to force us into a false binarism where we must either be the slaves of attachment or the cold observers of transience, and that only one of these offers us a way out of suffering. Compelled by the forced logic of its myopic perspective on self-analysis that we saw above, it opts for the latter, and presents that choice as an inevitable philosophical conclusion.

So, it’s not really a choice between Feeling Good and Truth. It’s a choice between being able to unambiguously enjoy companionship and a system of thought which uses an ossified methodology bordering on catechism to support a falsely binary approach to our relations with the outside world.

At the end of the day, it’s still true that, in many respects, Buddhism maintains its moral edge over Christianity or Islam handily. That instinct for proselytising unto war which has made both of these religions such distinctly harmful forces in the story of mankind is nowhere present. But, the drive to infect individuals with an inability to appreciate life except through a filter of regret and shame is perhaps even more dangerous in Buddhism for being so very much more subtle.

Squeezed between the implications of inherited evil instincts and a monolithic conception of what counts as a right answer to the question of one’s own personal existence, a young person entering a Buddhist community today is every bit as much under the theological gun as a student at a Catholic school, but because society has such a cheery picture of Buddhist practice, she has far fewer resources for resistance than her Catholic counterpart. And that allows sad things to happen. I would urge, then, that as fulfilling as it is to point out and work to correct the gross excesses of Christianity (and, let’s face it, fun too), we can’t let the darkness of Buddhist practice go by unremarked just because it works more subtly and its victims suffer more quietly.