Take Seriously but Hold Loosely
(perspectives on Secular Buddhism)

Bhikkhu Cintita, August, 2017

Recently someone compared my writing to that of Stephen Batchelor,[1] the most prominent and perhaps most articulate proponent of the new Secular Buddhism movement. I had to think, at first, what the similarities and differences might be, because I don't identify myself as a secular Buddhist– largely because I feel the distinctions between "religious" and "secular" or "traditional" and "modern" are spuriously misapplied to Buddhism. In fact, I hope that this essay might serve as a middle way between extremes that seem to be forming within Buddhism around these distinctions. Nonetheless, I admit to sharing two fundamental premises which Batchelor has clearly articulated, and which are also, I understand, mainstays, perhaps the two most important mainstays, of Secular Buddhism. These premises are:

(1) *The Dharma is about practice, not belief*.

The title of Batchelor's well thumbed-through and dog-eared book *Buddhism without Beliefs* reflects this premise. Buddhism is something we do, not something we believe. This is by no means to say that the Buddha did not provide a doctrinal framework: he gave us the Dharma, which consists of a large system of interrelated teachings. However, the Dharma falls short of being a "belief system," and instead serves exclusively as a critical support for practice. My arguments in what follows serve to supplement Batchelor's arguments. For this reason, I will submit that the Buddha's teachings are to be taken *seriously*, because each one will have an important practical function, or *practice function*, to be realized in beneficial results for the practitioner and for the world at large. At the same time, the Buddha's teachings are to be held *loosely*, as less fixed than "belief," because a teaching needs to be *meaningful and acceptable* by the particular practitioner in support of its practice function. In fact, belief provides poor support for practice, for it is the practitioner's task

1 Among other works, Batchelor (1997, 2017).

to make the teaching his own.

(2) *The Dharma will inevitably be adapted to modern sensibilities.*

The teachings are always going to be interpreted by individuals through the filter of their own culture as well as in idiosyncratic ways. For instance, Buddhists from an animist culture will tend to see behind the teachings intelligent but invisible underlying mechanisms, where Buddhists from a modern culture will look for verifiable physical or mental processes. Such interpretations have been necessary for cultures to keep Buddhist teachings meaningful and acceptable as Buddhism has entered new lands, and this is unlikely to cease in the West. Moreover, if we hold Buddha's teachings loosely, we have *license* to interpret them in ways that are most meaningful and acceptable to us. At the same time, since we also take the teachings seriously, it is our obligation not to lose sight of their practice functions and do what work is necessary to make them our own. This is how can preserve the integrity of the Dharma without demanding interpretations that will never make sense to us. Fully functional organic Dharma practice will make a huge difference in promoting a culture of awaking in the troubled modern world.

In short, the point of bringing Buddhism into a new culture is not to introduce yet another belief system to take its place alongside alternative understandings of science, philosophy and religion, but to produce an all-too-rare kind of human character, one that lives, acts and thinks something like a buddha. Buddhism has retained its functional integrity remarkably well, in my view, even as it has been repeatedly reinterpreted in different cultural environments. If we take care, it will do so in ours.

A third similarity between my approach and Batchelor's is that both of us have currently a primary interest in early Buddhism, the teachings that were articulated before sectarian differences arose historically, what is referred to as the Early Buddhist Texts (EBT).[2] I personally have a great respect for most later traditions as they have developed in Asia, but the very earliest stratum of Buddhism gives us a well articulated form of Buddhism, the one closest to the Buddha, and also the one least adulterated by extraneous cultural and religious influences that have with time in the various traditions have developed as an

2 The EBT are itemized, for instance, in Sujato & Brahmali (2014). EBT Textual references in this essay (for instance, SN 56.31) are follow the convention found, for instance, at accesstoinsight.org.

accretion around a central Dharmic core.

I will now motivate these two mainstays of Secular Buddhism in more detail. I will develop the first premise first in terms of practice function (taking seriously), and then in terms of non-belief (holding loosely), and will show that this first premise is clearly motivated in the Buddha's teaching itself. I will then show that the second premise makes sense in terms of the first and look at some general issues of modern interpretation. I will leave it to the reader to how this might differ from current approaches to secular Buddhism.

Taking the teachings seriously

In this section we demonstrate that the range of teachings is consistently justified as supports for practice, what we actually do in our lives and the benefits that thereby accrue. We take the teachings seriously because each has a practical function, or practice function, that makes a difference in our lives. Famously, in the *Simsapa Sutta* (SN 56.31) the Buddha, holding a handful of leaves, declares that if the leaves of the forest represent what he *might* teach, the leaves in his hand represent what he *does* teach, for he teaches only suffering and the end of suffering:

> And why have I taught these things? Because they are connected with the goal, relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to nirvana. (SN 56.31)

The Buddha was not interested in teaching speculative philosophy, or what we would not call science, nor in metaphysics, but only in the practice that leads to human benefit and ultimately to awakening. He was very practical.

Four noble truths. Batchelor frequently illustrates the point that the function of Dharma is in support of practice particularly with regard to the four noble truths, that most central teaching of Buddhism. He points out that the presentation of the four noble truths in the Buddha's very first discourse, known as the *Turning of the Wheel Sutta*, and elsewhere explicitly incorporates instructions for practice. The four noble truths are:

- The truth of suffering, which is to be understood,

- The truth of the origin of suffering, which is craving, and which is to be abandoned,
- The truth of the cessation of suffering, which is the cessation of craving, and which is to be realized,
- The truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering, which is right view, right intention, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right, mindfulness and right concentration, and which is to be developed. (paraphrase from SN 56.11)

A significant point about the four noble truths, aside from their highlighting of a conditional relation between suffering and craving, is that they merge fact and value, that is, “is” and “ought.” Stated in their most concise form, they appear to be four empirical propositions subject to verification, and are in fact referred to as “truths” (*sacca*) in the early discourses. Yet, we are given an explicit practice for each of the truths: understanding, abandoning, realizing and developing, respectively. The truths are justified for their practical value, that is, for their practice function. It has been pointed out that the truths are like a doctor's evaluation, in which the truths would represent, respectively, symptom, diagnosis, prognosis and cure, and we note that a doctor's evaluation also merges “is” and “ought” and is justified for its practice function, that of curing the patient. The path of practice referred to here is the noble eightfold path, eight bullet-points of more detailed practice to be developed.

This is hardly an obscure passage, yet Batchelor is right that at least some later traditions often highlight the propositional content, as if our primary task is to believe, not to understand, abandon, realize and develop. Not all Dharmic teachings make their practice function this explicit, but my experience is that a practice function is always present at least implicitly for any teaching, even if the practice function is not at first obvious. Belief by itself gives us no reason to take a teaching seriously, its practice function gives us every reason. The Buddha was very practical.

These things lead to benefit and happiness. These points about the priority of practice over belief form the topic of the *Kālāma Sutta*, which warns us against arriving at fixed viewpoints, no matter their source, but instead to verify teachings in terms of the benefits accrued through embracing them, which is to say. in terms of their practice function:

> Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon repetition, nor upon what is in a scripture, nor as a result of thought; nor upon an axiom, nor upon careful reasoning, nor out of delight in speculation, nor upon another's seeming ability, nor upon the thought, "The monk is our venerable teacher." Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good, these things are not blamable, these things are praised by the wise, undertaken as a whole these things lead to benefit and happiness," then enter on and abide in them. (AN 3.65)

In the passage, the ultimate criterion for evaluating a teaching is practical, that is, whether what we do on the basis of the teaching is of benefit. It is because the teachings have a practice function that we take them seriously; together they make a huge difference in our lives. We eschew intellectual achievements, whether these seem like "common sense" or result from higher scholarly reasoning and speculation, in favor of what is of benefit in our lives.

Faith. So, the four noble truths are about *practice*; they give us something to do. I should point out at the outset that they are also about *faith.* Faith is often mistakenly put in opposition to reason, but, in fact, the very reasonable four noble truths give us nothing to do, absolutely nothing, if we do not have faith that they are giving us good advice. Why would we take them seriously if we don't assume that the Buddha knew what he was talking about, that his doctrine is reliable and that our modern teachers are representing it properly? Without these assumptions the four noble truths are useless in our lives. This is not to say they are not verifiable: If we understand suffering, we will see that it is the shadow side of craving. If we follow the path of practice, we will realize the end of suffering. But we can only verify the four noble truths *after* we have practiced on the basis of them, generally for many years (if not lifetimes). Until then, our practice is based in faith, faith in the efficacy of the four noble truths for our practice. As one of my Zen teachers, Shohaku Okumura Roshi, once said of Zen meditation, "Zazen takes a lot of faith. Otherwise nobody would do something [that looks] so stupid."

What we accept on faith is virtually always, in Buddhism, subject to verification. This explains why the Buddha says the *Dhamma* is "personally experienced by the *wise*" (AN 11.11), not by everyone, but only by those who have developed wisdom through practice. This is why the Buddha invites us

"to come and see" (*ibid*.) the Dharma: When he says "come," he is shouting down to us flatlanders from the mountaintop. To arrive at his vantage point we need to scramble up hills, struggle through brambles and ford creeks, with the faith that the Buddha is up there telling us to see is worth our while. When he says "see," we need to focus our eyes intently in the right direction to barely make out what the Buddha sees with great clarity of vision, and, sure enough, we can verify it for ourselves, … in the end. Until then our effort is carried by faith.

However, this is not blind faith by a long shot, and it has little to do with belief. It is actually a commonplace faith that informs literally everything we do: cooking by following a recipe in a cookbook, following the directions for assembling a new vacuum cleaner, undertaking a course in chemistry, watching a movie on the recommendation of a friend, brushing our teeth. Ultimate verifiability stands behind this kind of faith, for even though we have yet to personally verify the efficacy of the teaching we are given, we can assume that others who have preceded us have verified it over and over again. Otherwise this teaching would not have survived to be transmitted to us. With practice experience, the Dharma establishes a kind of track record, and this pushes our faith even further.

The function of developing faith in Buddhism is fulfilled by the practice of *refuge*, the development of trust in the reliability of the three sources of Buddhist wisdom: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The Buddha is our original teacher, the Dharma is the teachings themselves and the Sangha are the living teachers who are developed in understanding and in practicing the Dharma. This is not faith in a set of beliefs, such as in a catechism or in a fundamentalism not to be questioned. Refuge is itself a practice whose practice function is to bring ourselves to take the other teachings seriously. Refuge is thereby very practical. The practice of refuge is substantially to recall the track record of these sources of wisdom, but also to develop an *emotional intimacy* with these sources of wisdom in order to open up the heart and mind to their influence, that our understanding and practice might deepen. Simple physical practices like bowing were endorsed by the Buddha from the Buddha at the very beginning and have always been utilized as a support for refuge ever since, much like handshaking is a support for cordiality in Western culture.

The relationship of refuge to the four noble truths illustrates the way one

practice function feeds into another in an integrated system of teachings. The four noble truths, when practiced, fulfill the function of ending suffering. The refuges, when practiced, fulfill the function of taking the four noble truths seriously, that is, of instilling life into the four noble truths, as well as into other teachings.

The diversity of teachings. To practice is to exercise the skill of life. It is useful to recognize the similarity between Buddhism and other skills, such as tennis, hang gliding, *haute cuisine*, ceramics, making a sales pitch, chess, bird-watching or solving non-linear equations. Each begins with teachings and faith in the teachings. For the aspiring master chef, for instance, these might be focused in a favorite cookbook, one that may have been recommended by a wiser cook than oneself, or by its strong track record acquired through repeated personal use. Each instruction in each recipe will serve a practical function, contributing something to the taste, texture or appearance of the food; if we leave anything out or make a mistake in the instruction, the result will generally be disappointing. The overall functionality of the instructions is revealed in the benefit attained, the bright faces, delighted smiles, smacking of lips and positive comments of the satiated. Belief in the instructions is not the point, but rather what we do on the basis of them. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The teachings, practice and benefits in *haute cuisine* are of a different nature than those of Buddhism, or of any other kind of skill, but the analogy provides a useful perspective for understanding the function of Dharma.

The four noble truths are the core teachings of Buddhism, the teachings that lead to high spiritual attainments and eventually nirvana. Most of the Buddha's significant teachings are elaborations of the four noble truths. However, everything arises in some context, and refuge is a significant part of the context of the practice of the four noble truths, as we have seen. Refuge is, in this sense, more foundational than the four noble truths. The context of the four noble truths is even further filled out by advice on how to interpret the teachings, which is substantially our concern in this essay. The Buddha seems to leave no stone unturned.

It is important to recognize that many of the teachings support not the specific individual's practice, but instead the functions of the Buddhist community in which the individual practices. The Buddhist community itself functions to

support the individual's practice by providing role models and teachers, material support for those who want to dedicate themselves to spiritual development, and, ultimately, the means of propagating and preserving the integrity of the teachings for future generations. The teachings around the Buddhist community thereby have even an historical function. Moreover, it is within the community that the individual practices virtue and generosity and learns humility and harmony. The community ideally defines a culture of awakening that both pulls and pushes the individual toward nirvana, through inspiration of those further advanced in practice, and and through the encouragement of all, including those less advanced.

In a significant sense we might say that the teachings belong to the community as a whole more than to the individual, and are preserved by the community. Individually, most of us are familiar with only a small part of the body of teachings: we might be farmers or parents with limited time for learning and putting into practice the finer points of meditation or of Buddhist psychology, and still harbor many attachments which we don't even want to think about giving up. Simply put, we do not all practice at the same level but are subject to our own aspirations or circumstances, and very few us give much thought to satisfying the highest standards of practice, a very high bar indeed. To this extent, there are many teachings whose practices we do not personally undertake. Nonetheless, we take even these seriously to the extend that we respect those who practice according to a wider body of teachings than ourselves, and we know that they might one day help us expand the scope of our understanding and practice. We generally know to whom to go to learn these additional teachings when we need them. We certainly do nothing to denigrate or undermine those teachings just because we do not personally practice with them, because then they might become unavailable for others.

The communal basis for Dharma can be compared to most other areas of knowledge. Although I enjoy birdwatching and can identify a number of species, my understanding of ornithology is quite limited. However, I know where to find any amount additional knowledge if needed and am confident that there working ornithologists who are continually updating that knowledge accurately, even while no one ornithologist has complete knowledge of the field. In this sense, ornithology belongs to a community and is sustained by that community, a core community within a wider community, to which I

belong as a consumer of such knowledge and possibly as a material supporter of the core community. The Buddhist community has a similar relationship to the Dharma.

I should point out, at this point, a tendency in Batchelor's writings to focus narrowly on the central doctrinal framework of the four noble truths to the exclusion of the rest of the Buddha's body of teachings. In fact, a wider range of teachings is exhibited in the EBT whose authenticity is just as widely recognized in the scholarly community, and all of which – just as in the case of the four noble truths and its many subsidiary teachings – function in support of practice. Because the same basis in practice function seems to hold throughout, there is no need in the present discussion to focus on the four noble truths. In fact, I am deliberately highlighting some of the teachings that have shown themselves to be thorny in the modern context, and for which my interpretation–presented here in each case rather sketchily–may differ from Batchelor's. This is by way of illustrating the implications of this approach.

By viewing all of these teachings on the basis of practice function we can begin to see how they fit together very systematically into an coherent, organic whole and to appreciate their remarkable consistency, in spite of many minor corruptions, additions and inconsistencies that crept into the EBT during their early transmission. The Buddha provides abundant support for our practice in every context; the same logic of practice function extends well beyond the central teachings of the four noble truths in the EBT.

Monastic practice. The Buddha gave abundant attention to founding and fashioning the multi-functional monastic community, through an extensive set of teachings in the EBT called the *Vinaya*, the discipline, or the monastic code of conduct.[3] The *Vinaya* is based more directly in elaborate rules of practice or conduct with even less in the way of abstract conceptual content than the Dharma. The doctrine (Dharma) and discipline (*Vinaya*) are related roughly the way science as theory and science as discipline, that is, as science_1–a system of paradigms, theories and empirical results–is related to science_2–an institutional process regulated by rules of conduct such as not falsifying data or plagiarizing others' results, standards for certifying the qualifications of researchers, professors, etc., and supported materially by the wider society. Science_1 is

3 In Batchelor (2017), he argues unconvincingly for a later date for the monastic community, but see my forthcoming review of this book.

substantially a product of science$_2$. Advanced realization of the Dharma is substantially a product of monastic discipline.

The teaching of monastic discipline fulfills a number of individual, community and historical functions at the same time. First, the monastic life affords the practitioner an ideal context for practicing the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path, through its isolation from the corrupting influences of common pernicious worldly concerns, tending to spin off practitioners of great attainment who ennoble the entire community. Second, the monastic community provides a communal space in which the Dharma and its practice burns brightest, (a) providing inspiration for the monastics themselves, as well as for the lay community, (b) providing a basis for teaching, learning and exchange of understanding and experiences, and (c) providing the vehicle by which teachings are preserved in their functional integrity and transmitted to future generations.

It is no exaggeration to say that these functions have been essential to the survival of Buddhism.[4] Buddhism would not long endure without the monastic Sangha; it never has. An analogy with the discipline of science is once again apt in this regard. Science would not long endure without its disciplined community; it never has since its earliest beginnings. Undeniably there are amateur scientists of great attainment (a young Einstein was once one), just as there are Buddhist laypeople of great attainment, but these are never more than a couple of steps removed from the ordained or certified community in each case. In both cases, the institutional core is necessitated, in fact, by the radical sophistication of the subject matter, and its consequential vulnerability to misunderstanding and distortion. Sustaining the integrity of either science or Dharma requires, in practice, a community of dedicated full-timers.

The Buddha was very aware of the critical function of the monastic Sangha. In fact, the Buddha consistently referred to the whole body of his teachings as the *Dharma-Vinaya*, that is, doctrine and discipline, expressive of the comparable weight he accorded the functions of the doctrine and of monastic discipline. Remarkably, the monastic Sangha, carefully constituted and let loose on the world by the Buddha, has endured longer than any other public human institution on the planet, yet another reflection of the Buddha's genius. The *Vinaya*, like the Dharma, is once again about practice and fulfills many well-

4 Ling (2013, pp.145-172), Lions Roar (2010), Cintita (2014).

defined practice functions.[5]

Unessential teachings. When we look at the ancient EBT we are struck that some teachings are clearly highlighted as essential, while other notions appear here and there rather casually. These texts were, for the most part, delivered extemporaneously in everyday language, in a cultural context dissimilar to our own, so it is not surprising that much of their content is extraneous. In fact, much of the content may be without a practice function at all, and therefore needs not to be taken seriously by the modern practitioner. Let me suggest an example: the appearance of deities walking (or flying) through the world, who often visit the Buddha, sometimes to offer advice, but more often come to hear his teachings. I use the phrase "*suggest* an example" here deliberately because we have to take care that we are unaware of a practice function that is simply not apparent to us at the present time. We may often fail to recognize, over many years of study, the practice function of what reveals itself to be a very important teaching in the Buddha's very elaborate system of teachings. And I set aside for this discussion the role deities might have in "heavenly realms."

Concerning deities, we should first note that in India, now as well as in the time of the Buddha, people rather casually attribute divinity to brahmins, to famous ascetics, to cows, sometimes to trees and to the fires in people's hearths, and to aristocrats. The latter are often addressed as "deva" (deity) when spoken to by commoners in the early discourses. Therefore, it would surprising if references to them were altogether absent, or they did not appear in the many allegories, similes or background stories to add a little color. Moreover, whereas in most religions deities function in practice as objects of worship, or as personalities that are appealed to for their power over the circumstances of people's lives, nowhere does the Buddha recommend such practices with respect to deities to his disciples. On the contrary, when the deities do appear, *they* venerate the *Buddha*, and sometimes the other monastics, bowing to his feet and sitting respectfully to one side according to Indian custom. If these references to deities have a practice function to them, it would seem to be merely rhetorical and quite minimal: they serve to illustrate the practice of refuge, illustrating its relevance for even the most exalted of beings.

5 Bhikkhu Cintita (2014) explores the functional implications of the monastic Sangha in much more detail, for individual practice, for society and for Buddhist history.

In short, the examination of the practice functions of the teachings gives us a principled method of discerning what is really essential in the ancient texts and what is superfluous, what we should take seriously and what we need not. But again, we must proceed cautiously, not to dismiss an important part of the Buddha's message due to possible limitations in our current state of understanding. Doing so might otherwise just possibly end up like leaving salt out of a recipe, unless we know exactly what we are doing.

Karma and rebirth. Karma is another word for our practice. Karma is, by definition, simply intentional action, which is exactly what our practice is. The Buddha, in giving us this definition, seems to have appropriated and reinterpreted a brahmanical conceptual scheme in which karma was understood as ritual action, which, when carefully performed, assured benefit for the one on whose behalf the ritual was performed. For the Buddha, every action brings potential benefit or harm to the agent of that action, and must therefore be taken as seriously as the brahmin takes his ritual. This is why we take the teachings seriously that make our practice skillful. I should note that an analogy can be made for any skill. For instance, we take a recipe seriously in order to experience the delight of others in the products of our gastronomic efforts. The chef might well understand his practice as follows:

> Whatever I do in the kitchen, whether skillfully or unskillfully, to that I will fall heir.

Buddhist practice is fundamentally rooted in ethics or virtue and is not limited to the kitchen, and so the equivalent principle becomes:

> Whatever I do, for good or evil, to that I will fall heir. (AN 5.57)

In short, our *karmic* actions not only shape the world for others, but also shape our personal well-being. What we inherit personally is called the *result* or *fruit* of our deeds.

This simple teaching has a profound influence on our ethical behavior. The greatest difficulty in the practice of ethics for humans of all faiths and backgrounds, the reason people are not universally virtuous, is that self-interest and benefiting others are perceived to come into repeated conflict. Yet, this teaching *equates* self-interest and benefiting others. It says that good deeds always work to our own benefit as well as to the benefit of others at the same

time, even though we might not recognize this immediately. Bad deeds always work against our own benefit as well as against the benefit of others at the same time. This simple teaching, when taken seriously, has an enormously profound practice function, promoting virtue and almost every other aspect of our practice. For now we simply note the practice function of this teaching; we will consider how we come to find meaning and acceptance in this teaching in the course of the discussion below.

Although karma and its fruits generally play out in the present life, by introducing rebirth the Buddha greatly extends the scope of this teaching beyond a few decades of a single life, and therewith the scope and significance of all of Buddhist practice. The consequence of taking the teaching of rebirth seriously is that we fully take responsibility for the distant future as well as the near future. Rebirth thereby endows our practice with a meaning bigger than life (at least bigger than one life), endows it in the words of Bhikkhu Bodhi with "that panoramic perspective from which we can survey our lives in their broader context and total network of relationships," that comes from realizing that our lives and therefore our practices are woven inextricably into something far grander in scale, a rich and immense tapestry of human affairs. We see ourselves each engaged in an epic struggle with twisted karmic forces (ingrained greed, hatred and delusion) from the ancient past that will project *karmic* outcomes endlessly into the future … unless we intervene through our practice.

There is thereby in our practice vastly more at stake than happiness and comfort in this present life and so our incentives become heightened. From rebirth comes the urgency that impels us to deep practice, even giving up the comforts of conventional life on behalf of practice, and that thereby fully opens up the prospect of awakening. The practice function of the teaching of rebirth is profound in that it provides a means of framing our practice that lends it enormous gravity, effectively as a multiplier of the practice function of the teachings around karma. Once again, for now we are simply noting the practice function of this teaching; we will consider how we might come to accept and find meaning in this teaching in the course of the discussion below. Once again, the Buddha's concern was practice, not belief, so we have license to hold these teachings loosely, even while for the sake of our practice we take them seriously.

Holding the teachings loosely

In this section I show how the teachings are intended to fall short of belief, but are rather to be held loosely or provisionally. This, in fact, is often important for a teaching to become *meaningful and acceptable* by a particular practitioner, who can thereby experiment with different personal interpretations to make the teaching his own.

Working assumptions. In the *Caṅki Sutta* we learn that anything accepted through faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoning or pondering may or may not turn out to be true. At this the young *brahmin* Caṅki asks how, then, is truth to be preserved:

> If a person has *faith*, his statement, "This is my faith," preserves the truth. But he doesn't yet come to the definite conclusion, "Only this is true; anything else is worthless." To this extent, Bharadvaja, there is the preservation of the truth. To this extent one preserves the truth. I describe this as the preservation of the truth. But it is not yet a discovery of the truth. (MN 95)

The Buddha then repeats this formula with appropriate substitutions to make it about each of faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoning and pondering. Notice that this is a similar list of conditions to those for belief that the Buddha rejected in the *Kālāma Sutta*, discussed above.

What this says is that nothing is to be simply believed unconditionally, because no matter what, even if the wisest teacher swears on a stack of *Nikāyas* that it is true, it might just turn out to be false. At no point can we with certainty state, "Only this is true; anything else is worthless." This would be belief, something fixed or timeless, something we tend to put on the shelf, not to be further questioned, a definite conclusion. Most of us have at least at least some such beliefs: about science, about politics, about religion, about football players, about fashion. The Buddha cautions us that the only thing we might be certain about is that we *think* certain things are true as a matter of experience, never that they *are* true. Fixed, immutable belief has no place in the Buddha's thinking.

Until a teaching is directly realized and fully understood in one's experience, it can at best be taken as *provisionally* true, a kind of *working assumption* as a

matter of faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoning or pondering. The truth of the teaching is only later *discovered* through direct experience. At that point, the teaching itself becomes without further function, a mere propositional approximation of what one has discovered and experienced directly for oneself. Teachings, therefore, at all stages, stop short of belief. They are accepted only conditionally and are ultimately expendable. In these senses, teachings, even while taken seriously, are to be held loosely.

This perspective is also reflected in the Buddha's use of the word "view" (*diṭṭhi*), as in "right view." A recent book demonstrates in detail[6] that right views in the EBT are not a correction of wrong views, but are a detached order of seeing, not doctrine (therefore, to be taken seriously) but *knowledge* of doctrine, to be practiced, not believed (therefore, to be held loosely), and that holding any proposition as true is no more than a form of attachment and therefore to be reliquished. As the monk Ñāṇananda puts it, the aim of right view is "to purge the mind of all views inclusive of itself,"[7] in this way removing mental rigidity and attachment. Right views are right because they bring out the wholesome in the practitioner, not because "this is true and anything else is worthless."

Malleability and reinterpretation. The practical advantage of taking a teachings as working assumptions rather than as a belief is, in fact, exemplified in the truths of suffering and of the cause of suffering in the four noble truths. As we have learned, the practice functions of these truths are the understanding and ultimate relinquishment of suffering and craving as factors of of our own experience. It would be a mistake to try to crystallize these truths from the beginning into a belief, precisely because we do not yet understand what suffering and craving are at that point; they require a lot of investigation. Any belief about them would have slim propositional content, and would be unlikely even to approximate the experiential understanding that ultimately arises from the practice these truths give rise to. As we investigate something like suffering or craving, we are likely to make a series of distinct intermediate working assumptions before we come to recognize, perhaps after many years of practice, what the Buddha was asking us to see directly for ourselves. If at any point we fix on a belief, we will have sacrificed the malleability required to

6 Fuller (2005).
7 *ibid*, p. 4.

discover the truth. We give up even our final working assumptions once these truths are understood, because there is nothing like seeing directly for ourselves. We see that working assumptions are malleable and subject to reinterpretation and modification in a way beliefs are not. This is good, because their malleability allows us to make them ours, to wrap out minds around them, to make them meaningful and acceptable in our own way. Hold teachings loosely is important for the process of discovery, which is the practice task associated with the first noble truth.

Moreover, a particular teaching may similarly be critical at one point of practice, and lose its importance, or even its coherence, at a later stage. This explains why the Buddha always adjusted his teachings to his audience and why the early discourses are careful to clarify to whom they are spoken. Consider the teaching “I am the heir of my own deeds,” which has to do with karma and the fruits of karma, whose practice function we have already discussed above. Although this teaching plays a critical role in the practice function of establishing ethical conduct at the early stages of Buddhist practice, it actually makes less and less sense at later stages of practice, in which the agent of those deeds is recognized as a mere mental construct. In fact, it is taught that karma itself disappears in the fully awakened one. At the early stages of practice virtue involves a difficult process of overriding the inherent greed, hate and delusion associated with the agent of karma, in favor of what is really of ultimate benefit for self and other. At the later stages it comes primarily from the almost complete absence of greed, hate and delusion once these are cognitively disassociated from that agent.

In summary, teachings are to be held loosely, such that they make sense to us at the right level at the right time, but produce the best results if they remain malleable, subject to individual reinterpretation and modification within the limits of their practice functions. As we hold teachings loosely, we can turn them this way and that, try to generalize them, test if they maybe apply in a more specific way than first thought, conceptualize them in different ways, all the while deepening our understanding of the various texts that present these teachings:

As we approach suffering, what exactly is meant? Is any hint of anxiety or stress an instance of suffering? Are we suffering when we are not aware that we are suffering? As we approach the teaching that we are heirs of our own

deed, can we find examples in our own experience, or counterexamples? Is this principle precisely true in every instance, or is it only an approximate generalization? We may not be able to resist the urge to speculate, Does it imply mysterious underlying mechanisms, or is there a natural explanation for why this generalization would be true?

In these ways we develop insight, relate the teachings to direct experience and make of the teachings an increasingly powerful influence in our practice. Working assumptions are a lot more work than beliefs, which is perhaps why they are called “working” assumptions, but they are much more workable.

The skeptic's choice. As we reflect on the teachings in this way, sometimes we may balk nonetheless. The Buddha gives us an example in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*:

> There are some contemplatives and brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view: “There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no brahmins or contemplatives who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.” (MN 60)

These views deny what the Buddha teaches about karma and rebirth, as well as about responsibilities to parents. The existence of passages like this suggest that his teachings were not without some controversy even in the Buddha's time. Significantly, the Buddha does not argue that these contrary views are factually wrong, for instance, by citing research on memories of young children of past lives, even though he elsewhere states that he has himself directly experienced the truth of karma and rebirth. Instead, he argues entirely from the perspective of practice function, that is, from how these views are likely to condition the behavior of such contemplatives and brahmins:

> It can be expected that … they will adopt and practice these three unskillful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives and brahmins do not see, in unskillful activities, the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skillful activities the benefit of renunciation, as cleansing. (MN 60)

In other words, these views would have a *negative* practice function. Here is the kicker: people of these contrary views cannot win, whether or not their contrary view turns out to be factually true in the end:

> Assume there is no other world, regardless of the true statement of those venerable contemplatives and brahmins. This good person is still criticized in the here and now by the observant as a person of bad habits and wrong view: one who holds to a doctrine of non-existence. If there really is a next world, then this venerable person has made a bad throw twice: in that he is criticized by the observant here and now, and in that with the breakup of the body, after death he will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Thus this incontrovertable teaching, when poorly grasped and poorly adopted by him, covers one side. He gives up the skillful option. (MN 60)

This describes a purely practical basis for accepting one of two alternative theses on the basis of a kind of cost-benefit analysis, or a means of covering one's bets that by itself justifies its acceptance as a kind of loosely held working assumption. The positive thesis should therefore be taken seriously, because it has a positive practice function; it should be taken seriously regardless of one's skepticism. Our job is to put aside our skepticism, and make the positive thesis our working assumption. The Buddha makes a similar argument at the end of the *Kālāma Sutta* (AN 3.65) with regard to realizing the fruits of karma in the next life. It is clear that he recommends that the teachings of karma and rebirth be taken seriously and therefore accepted as working assumptions even by the skeptical. We have already discussed the practice function of these teachings above, and will discuss their content a bit more below.

Some writers and teachers take the advice to skeptics in the *Kalama Sutta* in the wrong way. It is important to pause and reflect here, because it seems clear that the Buddha is providing us with a subtle middle way between two extremes, belief and disbelief. Batchelor, for instance, concludes correctly from the *Kālāma Sutta* that the Buddha does not require belief in rebirth. But then, at least in his earlier writing, he infers that rebirth need not be taken seriously and that it can be safely dismissed.[8] However, if the Buddha intended

8 For instance, in a 2010 Buddhist Geeks interview Batchelor stated, "I am not

that inference, he would not have made the pragmatic case for accepting rebirth on the part of the skeptic. Batchelor's detractors, on the other hand, also miss the point of this passage when they state that one *must* believe in rebirth, sometimes even adding that one is not really a Buddhist if one does not believe in rebirth! The mistake here is that both sides conflate belief with taking seriously, where the Buddha in fact opens a gaping middle way that allows taking seriously and holding loosely at the same time. One can follow the Buddha's teachings fully without believing in rebirth, but one who wants to follow the Buddha's teachings fully will take the teachings around rebirth seriously, for the loss of rebirth's practice function is likely to hinder the benefits of practice. The salty flavor of nirvana just might be lost without the practice function of rebirth, just as the wonderful flavor of pesto would be lost by leaving out the basil.

This leads to a relevant question that the Buddha does not seem directly to answer: What if we balk? What if we simply cannot accept a teaching, even as a working assumption, as hard as we try, either because it conflicts with some tightly held fixed beliefs that we are not willing to give up, or because it seems otherwise nonsensical, irrational or contrary to observable experience? What if it does not, no matter which way we turn it, become meaningful or accessible to us? How can we be expected take such a teaching seriously? Specific examples will be taken up in more detail in the context of adapting teachings to modernity, for this is a common experience for skeptical modern people. But let it suffice for the moment to point out that people, in fact, have a remarkable capacity for accepting inconsistent or strange assumptions; even the most rational of us do so all the time.

B.F. Skinner, for instance, was a strong advocate of behaviorism in psychology in the middle of the last century, which involves the view that things like thinking, emotion, free will, perception, etc. are illusions that play no role in physical behavior. This once lead me to wonder if Skinner had children–Yes: according to Wikipedia he had two daughters–and how he handled the various

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interested in whether or not one is reborn. I find the whole issue irrelevant, an unnecessary distraction from what is central to the Dhamma: how to live a good life here and now. If there is rebirth and a law of karma, then this would surely be the best way to prepare for a future life. But if there is not, then one has lived optimally here and now. Moreover, this very point is explicitly made by the Buddha himself in the *Kalama Sutta*."

desires, fears, upsets and excitements that children have on a daily basis, once he returned from work where his interactions were no longer primarily with pigeons. Somehow I doubt that he, as a father, was indifferent to his daughters' emotional states, nor that he tried to convince them they were illusory: “It's OK, Julie. The bee sting was real, but your distress is not. So we are going to ignore that.” Each of us lives in an objective world and in a subjective world, even if we are convinced philosophically that only one or the other of these worlds is real. We have no choice.

Even physicists are adept at moving from one irreconcilable model of physical reality to another, from the Newtonian world to the world of relativity and back again, when it is convenient. And string theorists, I imagine, inhabit the same world of naive physics the rest of inhabit do when they are driving their cars, fending off an aggressive Chihuahua or eating a sandwich. There are, of course, practitioners of the hard sciences who believe in God, yet never consider the possibility that a NASA space craft might run into God's nose. We all keep multiple frames of reference neatly separate. Moreover, much of our everyday reality is entirely fabricated, yet we take what is contained therein quite seriously even when we understand it is fabricated. Money and football are striking examples, which exist and become meaningful (quite often hugely meaningful) only to the extent that we agree to pretend that they exist and are meaningful. Holding things loosely, even the craziest things, has abundant precedent and often serves very practical functions.

Vagueness in the teachings. Many teachings do not lend themselves to a single interpretation. The Buddha made use of many rhetorical devices: myth, metaphor, allegory, symbolism, sometimes even literalism. This often leads us to entertain multiple interpretations and may leave us, and must have left the ancients as well, wondering how one is *supposed* to interpret such teachings. If we hold teachings loosely, this need not concern us, for a range of interpretations commonly fulfills the same practice function. Let's take Māra as an example.

The infamous Māra appears in the early discourses as a kind of fallen deity who is always ready to tempt, discourage, seduce and disarm, to do anything to bring the Buddhist practitioner away from what is wholesome, from what leads to *nibbāna* or supports the *Sāsana*. He shows up frequently as a physical being, but generally in disguise, with remarkable persistence given that his rate of

success seems quite low in the early texts. In each case, he then typically disappears as soon as he is recognized for who he is.

Now, what is the practice function (if any) of these repeated accounts of encounters with Māra? These accounts suggest that it is important to recognize Māra when he is trying to disrupt our practice, for when we do, he goes away and we can return to our practice. I know of no practitioner who has encountered Māra in the flesh, but I know many practitioners who apply this advice metaphorically when mental hindrances arise in their practice; they acknowledge the hindrance and let it go. The metaphor is quite apt, because often it actually seems like there is an obscure unconscious part of our mind whose interests often seem to run counter to our own and who seems to be very clever in realizing his interests and hindering our own.

Are we to interpret Māra as myth or reality? In terms of practice function it does not seem to matter much, since we are unlikely to encounter him in the flesh, but he does nonetheless teach us a lesson we can put to use in our practice. Karen Armstrong points out that the question of myth or reality is a modern question, of little concern even in the West before modernity. Pre-moderns were, in this sense, in a better position to hold this teaching loosely. Moreover, some modern scholars of religion point out that mythology has traditionally provided a means of talking about psychology. In fact, the Buddha was a pioneer in the use of new-fangled psychological language for what otherwise might have been expressed mythically, with some precedent in the early *Upanishads*. Rupert Gethin points to what he calls the *principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology* in early Buddhism whereby heavenly realms, etc. actually correspond to subjective states, for instance realized in meditation.[9]

In fact, alongside many passages referring to a flesh-and-blood Māra, we find this telling passage:

> Where the eye exists, Samiddhi, where visible forms, eye consciousness and *dhammas* cognizable by the eye exist, there Māra or the manifestation of Māra exists. (SN 35.65)

Here Māra clearly becomes a psychological entity, something that arises in subjective experience, not in the objective world. Notice, however, that Māra

9 Gethin (1998, 119).

keeps his name, still giving the impression of an independent and contrary agent within the subjective domain.

The point is that individually we may interpret Māra as a real physical entity, as a myth about such an entity, as an aspect of our own minds, or – least problematically – as "Beats me." "Beats me" is best, since it simply puts aside any particular view on the matter; it is the epitome of holding loosely. The Buddha does not seem to have been too concerned about precision in this case. Some of us will prefer one interpretation or another, and this choice will often be culturally determined. Unfortunately, it is often difficult in our modern culture to accept "Beats me" in lieu of a view. But we might note that even if we interpret Māra in psychological terms, we will have a strong impulse to anthropomorphize our own interpretation, to spin a myth around about that disruptive aspect of our own minds, sometimes even giving it a name as in "Little Timmy is at it again" or "Be gone, Little Timmy!" Myth, reality, literal and metaphorical seem *cognitively* not so distant from one another, even though they may be *ontologically* quite distinct. In the end, we need not be so precise in the way we conceptualize things, as long as we preserve the proper functional response to potential disruptions of our practice. This is to hold a teaching loosely.

Misunderstanding the teachings. Individually we are likely to misunderstand many teachings at some point or another as we try to wrap our minds around them in various specific ways, and this may lead to harm as we attempt to put them into practice. We rely on our teachers and on our ongoing studies and practice to correct these misunderstandings. More worrisome is when misunderstandings become entrenched in a particular Buddhist tradition and become part of how the teachings are conveyed, even by one's own teachers, sometimes for untold generations. Alas, this is not uncommon. However, the transmission of Buddhism to the West affords a valuable opportunity for correcting many of those traditional misunderstandings, since we tend to see the Buddha's teachings with new eyes, and with a healthy degree of skepticism. Let me offer an example.

We have seen that I am the heir of my own deeds, that is, I experience harm or benefit as results of the ethical qualities of my deeds. It does *not* follow logically that *all* harm or benefit I experience results from my previous deeds, for some of these may result from non-karmic causes. Nonetheless, this

inverse assumption is a common misunderstanding in many Asian traditions. For example, if lightning strikes my house and it burns down, I must have done something harmful to someone in the past, possibly in a previous life.

In fact, this inverse proposition is explicitly denied by the Buddha, in the somewhat obscure *Sīvaka Sutta* (SN 36.21). Even if we overlook the *Sīvaka Sutta* ourselves, we nonetheless have an adequate basis for recognizing this inverse proposition as a misunderstanding, not through failing to find underlying mechanisms, nor by falsifying it in our own experience, but purely on the basis of practice function: assuming the inverse proposition would likely result in *inhibiting* the practice of compassion. In brief, if someone else suffers a misfortune – his house burns down, for instance – it is his own karmic fault, and moreover, if we provide him relief, we would only postpone his inevitable payment of his karmic debt. Furthermore, if we choose to do something harmful to him ourselves, he must have deserved it, so we are actually helping him to pay off his karmic debt by causing harm. Even if infallible cosmic retributive mechanisms are firmly entrenched in our interpretation of karma, ones that entail the inverse proposition, practice function must nonetheless trump that interpretation. Sometimes it is necessary to loosen up calcified interpretations.

The Value of an Open Mind

We are a belief-centered culture. Modern culture has been fractured as long as it has been modern, with many internal contradictions along many fault lines – inter-religious, religious-secular, superstitious-rational, religious-scientific, spiritual-material, scientific-scientific and so on – each fault sustained by the dogmatic adherence of certain people to opposing beliefs, each holding the view “this is true and anything else is worthless.” We are at the same time a modernity in crisis, a modernity remarkable for its aggressiveness and acquisitiveness, a modernity suffering from a loss of human dignity, meaninglessness and spiritual malaise, a society in which appearance trumps substance, in which greed and fear are dominant themes and in which substance abuse, mental illness, suicide and violent crime are endemic.

Modernity has greeted Buddhism for the most part with a sense of relief. Buddhism has been widely greeted as kind, rational, unbiased, consistent with science, mystical, profoundly wise, serene, aesthetic. For some of us the entry

of Buddhism into the modern space has felt like there is suddenly an adult in a room full of squabbling children. I don't want to be unfair: there have been all along many adults in the room, but their voices had long been eclipsed by the persistent squabbling all around them. Buddhism has entered as something apart, and many have been attracted to this charismatic new visitor. The voice of the Buddha tells us of an alternative way of being in the world, one rooted in kindness, harmony, simplicity, virtue and wisdom, a message that, if taken seriously, promises relief from the modern pathology. It is a radical voice, a voice that remains a challenge to most people even in traditionally Buddhist countries, and all the more challenge to those in modern societies.

Unfortunately, these old fault lines continue to infect the thinking of many of us modern people even while we have embraced Buddhism, such that Buddhism itself is in danger, with time, of fracturing along these same fault lines, after which also the voice of the Buddha might end up eclipsed by the squabbling of children. We “convert” Buddhists–on the forefront of this epic encounter between an ancient tradition that has been transmitted through unfamiliar cultures, and modernity–must make wise decisions to get this encounter off on the right foot. “Off on the right foot” would mean that Buddhist teachings are made meaningful and accessible to moderns, at the same time that little of the transformative function of Buddhist practice, which has the potential to bring sanity to the world, is lost in the process. In this section I suggest some guidelines to inform our decisions on behalf of a thriving influential future modern Buddhism that makes a real difference in people's lives and in society.

A Principle of adaptation. There is a commodious space between practice function and belief. Practice function is the role of a teaching in upholding Buddhist practice. Belief, where it arises, collapses that space into a fixed view. The space itself represents the open mind, willing to take the teaching seriously, but holding loosely many possibilities of interpretation without insisting on a fixed view. The space comprises our wiggle room as we adapt Buddhism to modernity without compromising the wisdom of the ancient teachings, as we make the teachings meaningful and accessible, as we make them our own.

Belief, the bad guy in this equation, comes from two significant sources: It may come from within a Buddhist tradition itself in which, over time, a fixed

standard interpretation for any particular teaching may have been calcified. Or it may come from within modernity itself as an unquestioned presupposition, often at one side of many of the fault lines running through modernity. Adapting Buddhist teachings to modernity may therefore require, at the same time, challenging the views of Buddhist traditions and challenging the views of modernity.

It should be underscored that, at a minimum, Buddhism *should* challenge the presuppositions of modernity; otherwise why would we undertake the monumental task of bringing it here? At the same time this encounter with modernity will challenge and is challenging, fortunately and at long last, whatever has become calcified in Buddhist traditions, perhaps not revisited for many centuries, to make Buddhism new and sparkling again.

As this is happening, it is fitting that we take each of the teachings seriously by default, at least until such time as we have a very good understanding of what its practice function might be. The alternative is to pare Buddhism down to the point of modern comfort when faced with a teaching we do not understand. This alternative challenges neither traditional Buddhism, nor modernity, and leaves us with a voice barely audible in the midst of the squabble over traditional fault lines. Unfortunately, this alternative has been chosen far too often by many of us “convert” Buddhists in recent years.

I hope this does not seem to theoretical. In the rest of this essay I will make this more concrete. I am a modern man, academic, educated in science, without a religious upbringing, intellectual, by nature highly skeptical. At the same time, I have become in mid-life a very devout Buddhist, and even a monk in an Asian tradition. Although I am still dealing with, and find myself right in the middle of, many of the challenges the encounter between Buddhism and modernity brings, through years of study, practice and teaching I have discovered the value of an open mind. This has provided a means to reconsider and gain valuable insight into what many of my Buddhist teachers have been telling me, and at the same time to better understand and question many of the Western presuppositions I brought with me at the beginning of this endeavor.

I would like, in this section, to take up a short list of teachings that have raised western eyebrows, teachings that westerners have been challenged to find meaningful or accessible. I do not hope to put closure on these issues, but

rather to illustrate in the most vivid way how we might put our commodious wiggle-room to use to make these teachings our own while upholding their intended practice function. This list includes the usual suspects of karma, rebirth, rituals and monasticism, each of which at one time raised *my* eyebrows. This functional approach to the teachings – asking first, "What is its practice function?" than asking "How do I make sense if it?" – also forms the method behind my introductory textbook on early Buddhism, *Buddhist Life/Buddhist Path*.[10]

The challenge of karma. Recall that karma is intentional action, but that we are the heirs of our own deeds, that is, our actions produce results or fruits that we experience in correspondence to the ethical quality of our deeds. The ethical quality, furthermore, is carried by the intention–for instance, kindness or hatred, greed or generosity–that we bring to the deed. We have already seen above that this fundamental teaching has a profound practice function for ethical practice in equating, contrary to common sense and impulse, our own benefit with that of others.

Nonetheless, the teachings around karma are often a challenge for modern skeptics, who ask, "Is it really true?" In fact, if we look at these teachings simply as a generalization subject to empirical refutation or confirmation, we discover that this principle stands up remarkably well in our own experience:

First, if we are mindful, we find it feels good to act when our intentions are really pure, and we find, in contrast, at least a degree of stress or anxiety when we act out of greed or aversion.

Second, for those of us who habitually act with pure intentions, that purity becomes habituated, it becomes a mark of our character. Repeated generosity, for instance, makes us a generous person. As this happens, we develop, with time, an angelic glow and and uplifted spirit. Those who habitually act with impure intentions develop a furrowed brow and dejected mood. Repeated anger, for instance, makes an angry, unhappy person.

Consider Ebeneezer Scrooge, before and after. Although this is a fictional character, the reader should be able readily to find among acquaintances similar real-world examples. Habitual impure intentions even effect one's physical health, and naturally result in being shunned socially or in retribution;

10 Cintita (2017).

no one wants the company of the the irate or of the dishonest. Scrooge (before) lived in a kind of hell realm right here on earth, trying to find solace in his wealth. On the other hand, habitual pure intentions improve one's health, make one quite popular socially and result in others doing good in return.

Nonetheless, there are skeptics who question further, “What is the mechanism that makes all this work?” They might imagine some kind of cosmic accounting system to track when we've been naughty or nice and allocate future good or bad fortune accordingly, and, in fact, this seems to be traditionally implicit int the interpretation of the principle of karmic results. But why assume a uniform mechanism? The last paragraphs already describe a familiar set of processes that seem to conspire to produce these karmic results: human psychology, learning in human behavior, patterns of interpersonal responses and the mind-body connection.

Psychologically we could say that virtue really is its own reward; it is not so much that good intentions *bring* happiness, rather that good intentions *are* happiness. This should suffice to establish abundant confidence in the principle of karmic results as a solid working assumption, and to enjoy the support that this gives our practice. We should acknowledge that cases are sometimes described in the EBT of a particular deed giving rise to an seemingly unrelated event, for instance, helping a stranger who is sick, then later winning the lottery a week later. However, these are actually extremely rare in the EBT and I see no reason to believe they are not entirely allegorical.

Going further, this principle of karmic results is often conceptualized as merit-making in EBT, earning merits for good deeds and demerits for bad deeds, which further encourages the image of an underlying accounting system, and which thereby adds to the confusion of modern people. Merit-making actually has a very familiar practice function. Suppose we take up some non-Buddhist practice, say, jogging. We normally will want to track how many miles we run each morning and how many mornings we run each week. Why? Because measuring keeps us consistent in our practice, it keeps us from backsliding. Similarly, if we take up a meditation practice, we will track how many hours we meditate each day or week and so on. This is all merit-making does. It is a crude estimation of karmic results, but it makes a big difference in our practice; we actually begin to search intently for opportunities to be of benefit to others and we are unlikely to backslide. Merit-making is a conceptual support that

benefits our practice.

The challenge of rebirth. Rebirth often raises skeptical modern eyebrows through the roof. Our task is not to dismiss rebirth out of hand, but to find a way to interpret it, however loosely, that is meaningful and accessible to us. To dismiss the notion altogether is to lose the practice functions the Buddha attributed to rebirth, and therefore to corrode at least some of the integrity of the teachings. Nonetheless, not to dismiss rebirth is often a challenge in terms of prevailing modern presuppositions.

In his most recent book,[11] Batchelor shows, quite impressively, how he has been doing the difficult work of turning the teaching of rebirth every way he can to make it more meaningful and accessible to his skeptical mind. He acknowledges, graciously, that its theoretical validity is subordinate to whatever practical benefit it might bring in cultures in which the notion is already widely accepted. He also refers to the scientific evidence of early child memories of previous lives collected in the work of Ian Stevenson and his colleagues, but correctly points out that this evidence still falls short of verifying the ubiquity of rebirth generally assumed in the EBT, and that it has yet to provide evidence that karmic results may be realized in the next life.

Most significantly, Batchelor observes that, "… all living beings are intimately connected to a complex series of causal conditions that preceded their existence as well as to a seemingly infinite unfolding of future consequences for which each was in some small way responsible. In providing a sense of humility, connectedness and responsibility, this world view encourages people to consider the significance of their existence in the selfless context of the immensity of life itself, not reduce it to the service of their egotistical greed and hatred." He also recognizes how rebirth is a metaphor for hell, the condition of repetition, where our same old patterns of reactive behavior and our very existence play themselves out over and over again, seemingly endlessly.

Right on! This exemplifies how we can all go about exploring alternative interpretations of an age-old teaching, in spite of the fixed interpretations acquired in most Buddhist traditions, in order to make them meaningful and accessible to us as modern people. This goes a long way to provide the larger

11 *After Buddhism*, pp. 295-306.

scheme of things the Buddha set for our practice through the teaching of rebirth. Although this account might still feel a bit remote to declare it our own, this shows how we hold a teaching loosely where our initial impulse might be to dismiss it altogether.

Rebirth is more obscure than most of the Buddha's teachings in that there is little opportunity for verification in our own experience. However, a very fruitful source of rather direct evidence is often overlooked that I invite readers also to investigate. Any parent knows that children manifest well-articulated little characters from the earliest age, and most of us can remember our own peculiar qualities from toddlerhood. One child is terrified of thunder storms, another of dark places. Paradoxically, infants seem in other respects to perfectly exemplify the fabled tabula rasa, having to discover, for instance, simplest laws of physics and the nature of their own bodies on their own. But this is misleading, because right behind that come remarkably firmly established dispositions, a recognizable little character. One child seems particularly stingy, another freely generous at the very youngest age.

In a given circumstance, a given child will often follow a complex script, unique to that character, so precisely that it gives the impression of having been written then revised and rehearsed over countless years, centuries, millennia, and certainly not composed anew by a child still not potty-trained and challenged to put his shoes on the right feet. Such dispositions, communicated to us *somehow* from the past, determine our responses to sensual stimulation, to irritation or insult, to fear; how we order our lives or array the things of the world, how we like to spend our time, what we value. In this life we continue to revise our dispositions, learning new ones, unlearning old ones or revising old ones to produce new; this is how our practice bears fruit.

Just as we have somehow inherited dispositions from past lives, it must be the case that we somehow serve as vehicles through which dispositions are transmitted to future lives. In this way, our lives are embedded in a rich and immense tapestry of human affairs, and “all living beings are intimately connected to a complex series of causal conditions that preceded their existence as well as to a seemingly infinite unfolding of future consequences for which each was in some small way responsible.” We can therefore observe this in our direct experience of our own evolving habit patterns.

The astute reader will notice that I have made a case not for the specifics of linear rebirth as it is generally understood in Buddhism, but what is important is that our interpretation fulfills the practice function of giving gravity and urgency to our practice, of making us accountable to the future, of making practice the overarching condition of our lives rather than of simply making it another thing we do in our lives.

The greatest danger for us in contemplating rebirth is to adhere dogmatically to a fixed belief: “There is no such thing as rebirth, period!” This closes the mind to the many possibilities it may be necessary to consider as we wrap out minds around this central teaching. Unfortunately, almost everybody in our culture seems to have fixed beliefs about many things. My fear is that Buddhism will shatter on these many crystallized modern beliefs.

On the other hand, almost as dangerous in this case might be to adhere to the opposite fixed belief whose source is in Buddhist tradition: “There *is* such thing as rebirth, period!” A prominent Western monk once said that if science ever demonstrates that there is no rebirth, he will disrobe. For him, the teaching of rebirth seems to be working to instill urgency and commitment to his practice, best realized through monastic practice. However, it seems to me, it puts his faith in the teachings on a rather fragile basis, making it contingent on external evidence, rather than on simply fulfilling its practice function. If he were to hold this teaching more loosely, but rest in its practice function, it would be much more malleable.

Understanding our presuppositions: materialism. Rebirth is described in the EBT as a linear process, in which a death gives rise to a birth that preserves many mental factors, particularly habit patterns, in the process. Generally, as we consider this, many of us balk. It defies common sense. It is unscientific. Science allows no mechanism whereby this could happen. A little more explicitly: the mind is a product of brain function. If the body dies, the brain dies and >poof< the mind is gone. How can it be preserved for the next life?

Behind common sense are inevitably a lot of presuppositions. Einstein is said to have stated that “common sense is nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind before age eighteen.” Presuppositions here are tacit assumptions, most commonly instilled at a young age before our faculty of discrimination has fully developed, or so widely accepted in our society that we

too have accepted them without ever having examined or questioned them. They are, in other words, *beliefs*; they are, in fact, as instances of unexamined belief, *blind faith*. This does not necessarily make them false, but certainly makes them, for the wise, subject to examination. In the present case, the presupposition at hand is that of *materialism*, that all of reality is physical; that what we consider mental, if it exists at all, is a byproduct of physical activity, an epiphenomenon, generally specifically attributed to brain function.

Materialism gives rise to a range of positions about the status of mind. We have seen that B.F. Skinner simply dismissed mind as illusory and not worthy of investigation. Others hold that mind has a kind of reality, albeit one that can ultimately be reduced to brain function, but is nonetheless worthy of investigation. Many of these hold that what appears in consciousness reflects accurately objective reality, aside from emotional responses, dreams, etc., but generally dismiss such things an altered consciousness and mystical states, etc. A large segment of the population seems to regard meditative states and spiritual attainments as just one step away from fairy dust, shape shifting and reading tea leaves.

How strict we are in our materialism is bound to effect how we interpret the Buddha's teachings, because Buddhism is so much concerned with mind. Buddhist practitioners sit in the middle of their subjective experience in meditation, while right view points out what we will find there. Nonetheless, if we believe in materialism, then we may balk at rebirth; if we do not acknowledge mystical states, we will have trouble making sense of awakening; if we do not acknowledge altered consciousness, we will fail to see the value of meditation. There are such people and they will find little of Buddhism meaningful or accessible, and are not likely to show up a Buddhist temples or meditation group.

Recently I watched a video on-line of an address Sam Harris delivered to a conference of atheists on meditation. Sam Harris is as assertive in his atheism as the next guy, but has taken an interesting turn; he has developed an interest in Buddhist meditation and he wanted to convey to the audience that meditation can be cleanly distinguished from the horror of “religion” and is even beneficial. His audience would have none of it, responding with moans in many tones and by rolling its many eyes. It is clear that the strict materialist presuppositions of a large segment of the modern population make meditation,

and Buddhism generally, inaccessible. I don't expect to have more success with this population than Sam Harris, but they provide an opportunity for understanding the kinds of presuppositions that modern people harbor.

What is generally misunderstood is that science makes a poor case for materialism. Materialism has never been presented as a scientific theory subject to rigorous empirical investigation. It is a *metaphysical* assumption that most scientists find appealing.[12] Materialism has its origin in the mind-matter dualism of Descarte in which a non-material mind is the seat of consciousness, self-awareness and intelligence, clearly distinguished from matter, to which scientific investigation was to be limited.[13] As it has happened, the success of science in investigating the material universe in the succeeding centuries has been astonishing, while relatively little is understood of the mind. Rather naturally, as scholars have begun to become more interested in subjective experience, the hope seems to have arisen that what has worked in the past will work in the future, that mind will yield to the paradigm of material investigation. The logic of this is reminiscent of the man who drops his keys in the dark but searches for them under a street lamp where the light is better. So far this approach has failed to account for the mind.

Although correlations have been discovered between brain activity and subjective experiences, causality is not established.[14] Moreover, there is not even a viable theory on the table of how conscious experience can possibly arise from material processes. Furthermore, the observer effect witnessed in quantum theory suggests that mind intrudes as a causal factor into the material world at a very fundamental level.[15] Some researchers are now even suggesting that matter is reducible to mind, not the other way around.[16] Giving up or at least questioning the presupposition of materialism can open up many new possibilities for interpreting Buddhist teachings.

The challenge of monasticism. The Buddha was a monk. Virtually all the

12 Nagel (2012, 13) calls it a “hope.”
13 *ibid*. (p. 49).
14 Wallace (2012, 67).
15 Quantum Physisist Max Planck famously stated in 1931, “I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness.” See Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011) for an overview of the research that inspired that quote.
16 For instance, cognitive scientist Donald Hoffman.

awakened of the EBT were either monks or nuns. Monastics have been responsible for transmitting Buddhist teachings from generation to generation, fulfilling the mission the Buddha assigned it. Entering monastic practice has been a kind of right upheld by Buddhist communities throughout Buddhist history open to those who want to dedicate themselves fully to Buddhist practice free from the corrupting influences of the world. Aside from promoting individual practice, monastic practice serves the Buddhist community in preserving and propagating the higher teachings, and providing the key determining factor in the dynamics of the Buddhist community. Moreover, the monastic sangha is the most enduring (and endearing) human institution on the planet; Buddhism has never succeeded without a monastic sangha, and where the monastic sangha is lost, as in the "New Buddhist" movements in Japan, Buddhism becomes unrecognizable.[17]

So, why do so many modern people balk at the legitimacy of a monastic institution and some would do away with it altogether? Some even want to deny that the Buddha founded a monastic sangha, an argument that is exceedingly hard to make in the context of the EBT.

For one thing, institutions themselves are suspect, as they should be, for they easily move toward corruption and abuse. But a vehemence is reserved in this case that is not enjoyed by the local chapter of the Audubon Society, the corner Stop and Shop or the Social Security Administration. Like it or not, all aspects of society are facilitated by institutions. If you go out on a dinner date, you enter an institution, a restaurant, in which many people are working collaboratively in various roles to provide delicious food and a comfortable context for your amorous intent. If a like-minded group of stamp collectors wanted to organize their efforts, to facilitate trading of stamps or to arrange for an exhibit of rare stamps, they will probably organize a club. Why should we object to an institution in one case but not in the other?

In fact, as institutions go, the monastic sangha described in the EBT is strikingly amiable. Its primary function is, in contrast to how many think, to make the monks and nuns powerless with respect to society at large, to make them as helpless as kittens, for in this way their interest withdraws from the world, providing the seclusion conducive to practice. Internally, the monastic sangha has well-articulated means to ensure harmony, such that its members

17 Cintita (2014).

are “blending like milk and water, regarding each other with kind eyes” (SN 9.36). It is an institution with little hierarchy and no coercive power. Moreover, the Buddha designed it as a completely decentralized consensual democracy, following rules of governance and monastic behavior laid out in the monastic code of the Buddha. Membership in the monastic sangha was open as privilege to all adult members of the Buddhist community regardless of caste or gender (with some minor restrictions intended to prevent abuse of this privilege). It was designed to provide the ideal social context for Buddhist practice and cultivate a space in which the practice of Dharma can burn brightest. The monastic sangha's authority lies purely in its role in maintaining, exemplifying, teaching and perpetuating the practice and understanding of Dharma for the benefit of the entire community. Ultimately the monastic community is under the full control of the lay community, for if the monastics fail inspire, the lay community can withdraw its support.

Naturally the monastic institution has suffered some corruption of its original intent in some places during its long history. Historically this has resulted, as far as I can see, primarily from the support of governments and wealthy benefactors who demand concessions, or from government interference in the proper functioning of the sangha. It has also neglected to establish, maintain or restore the nuns' sangha in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions. Nonetheless, throughout Asia – and I can speak of Myanmar from personal experience – it generally functions to this day in the various independent local monasteries, generally in small villages, in the way the Buddha intended. Moreover, these faults in the sangha will be quickly and naturally addressed as the monastic sangha grows in the West, particularly as we leave behind any traditional political arrangements, in the way that many calcified interpretations of Dharma sometimes found in Asian traditions will be reconsidered with fresh eyes in the West. .

Understanding our presuppositions: religion. It seems that problem many have with monasticism is that in appearance it has not only “religion” but “religious hierarchy” written all over it. And so many balk, just as we do for rites and rituals, vows, liturgy, spells, mythology and sacred objects. After all, many say, Buddhism is rational (I hope this essay may have demonstrated that it is even more rational than many may have thought), not religious. People can often be quite fervent in their rationality:

“Organized religion, hierarchy, bah!”

“Religious authority, priests, monks, clerical garb, vows, humbug!”

“Religious imagery, sacred objects, twaddle!”

“Rituals, bows, balderdash!”

Once again, let's try to understand our presuppositions. These kinds of reactions, in fact, have a long history in Western culture, particularly in Protestant cultures. Recall that the early “Protestants” represented a “protest” movement against the perceived corruption within the Catholic church, particularly against its hierarchical institutions which had become instruments for the consolidation of enormous temporal power, while reserving for itself a mediating role and complete dominance throughout Europe in people's spiritual lives as the means to connect to God. Much of the priesthood had become corrupted by power, and even the monastic order was not immune. The Protestant reformation swept away this institutional presence from the lives of many, such that people could enjoy a direct relationship to God. This process was dramatized by years of social turmoil and thirty years of devastating warfare in Europe as landed aristocracy exploited the situation to “secularize” the power vacuum left in many regions by the dis-empowered church. [18]

Secularization for many, beginning with John Locke, meant that religion became a private concern without an institutional presence in society, sometimes now described as being “spiritual but not religious.” For many, the role of God in the following centuries faded, particularly with the ascent of science. With the marginalization of God, particularly in European romanticism and psychotherapy, and among the hippies, some inner core within each of us became the source of spiritual energy as well as creativity, under constant threat by social convention and institutions. A product of all this has been a general suspicion of religion. All this is the source of very strong presuppositions, rarely examined by those who carry them and very difficult to see as anything other than common sense.[19]

What does this have to do with Buddhism? Absolutely nothing, and that is the point. The Buddha was born much to early and in the wrong part of the world

18 Cavenaugh (2009).
19 McMahan (2008, 220).

to know anything about this history of Western ideas. Yet we project the narrative of the last paragraph on the situation in early Buddhist Asia, preferring to see the Buddha as the philosopher of the inner self, telling us how to push institutional life and social convention aside in order to free our inner spiritual energy, and leaving us imagining we've expunged religion from Buddhism. The simple and fragile decentralized monastic sangha thereby also becomes equated with the monolithic Catholic Church.

Our presuppositions concern something called “religion,” which many find objectionable. “Religion” is not even a concept the Buddha would have been familiar with, for historically there had been no equivalent word in any Asian language before Western contact. Although it has defied definition by scholars, not only do we presume to know what religion is or how to recognize it when we see it, but we are willing to make bold claims about religion: That it is the opiate of the people, or that it is by nature violent, and so on.

The only reasonable definition I know of religion that would include Buddhism is that of Paul Tillich, that religion is the “ultimate concern.” Indeed, we might characterize both Buddhism and Christianity as the ultimate concern for their adherents, and we can acknowledge further that there are a common set of factors that typically adhere to the ultimate concern, which include mythology, ritual, institutional structure, clergy, robes, sacred objects, etc. But at what point does the ultimate concern of Buddhism become objectionable as these various factors adhere to it?

It is not that we object vehemence to organization, hierarchy or authority per se in general: we have plenty of this in government, in our schools, at work.

It is not that we object to attributing symbolic meaning to things: we do this to flags, military uniforms, corporate logos.

It is not that we object to archaic clothing: judges and college graduates wear robes.

It is not that we object to rites and rituals: the military or a children's birthday party is full of them. Even the abundant bowing that characterizes Buddhism has its counterparts in shaking hands, in waving and in military salutes.

It is not that we object to vows and commitments: these drive most of our large undertakings, from marriage to getting a college degree.

For many in the modern West the ultimate concern is shopping and, sure enough, virtually all of these features that tend to adhere in “religion” can be found in the realm of shopping.

- Liturgy. I still have advertising jingles playing in my head that I learned in childhood. Some Christian liturgy is co-opted during the peak Christmas season.
- Mythology. Consumerist myths tend to center around celebrities, sublime beings who live problematic, operatic lives, but spend a lot of money and look great and act cool living them.
- Sacred objects. These are even conveniently marked so we know how sacred.
- Institutional presence. Shopping is largely driven by for-profit, limited-liability faceless corporations, which have many levels of hierarchy, are corrupt almost by definition and wield great power.
- Clergy. Salespeople (or maybe game show hosts).
- Ritual. The whole shopping experience is ritualized and customers become upset if the salespeople don't satisfy their behavioral expectations.

The point is that we have a set of ingrained but unexamined presuppositions about “religion,” and what it should and should not be, and then seek to impose them inappropriately on Buddhism and, what's worse, on the Buddha, the adult voice in the room.

Respect for the understandings of others. In this essay I have been calling for a radically open-minded way of approaching the Buddha's teachings. Such an approach that seriously what is of value in these teachings, that is, how they support our lives of Buddhist practice. At the same time, such an approach holds loosely any particular way we might have of making these teachings meaningful and accessible to ourselves, that is, by avoiding getting caught up in fixed views or beliefs. We have seen that the Buddha himself lights this way

(I am perpetually blown away by the depth and comprehensiveness of the Buddha's thinking).

The Buddha's teachings are very much experientially based, which means that most of us who have no qualms with the veracity of the subjective mind will find them meaningful and accessible without balking. Nonetheless, at certain points we will be challenged by certain teachings as we develop in our practice and understanding. Indeed, there is much in Buddhism to challenge us in many ways. If you find that you balk around rebirth, around bowing, around renunciation, or around any number of eyebrow-raisers, this does not mean you are a failure at Buddhism, or don't get to call yourself a Buddhist. In fact, it will probably have little impact on your practice for the short-term: We are each, at any giving time, working with a subset of the Buddha's teachings while many others are likely to be unfamiliar or obscure for many years before we succeed in making them our own. So, we have abundant material to work with. If we balk in one area of practice, we can always focus our attention on another.

We each at a given time have our own private Dharma, larger or smaller than another's, overlapping in some ways and distinct in others. Our Dharma tends to become more comprehensive with time, as more and more teachings come to inform our practice. But there is also an even larger Dharma, one that belongs not to any individual, but to the Buddhist community writ large. This larger Dharma is accessible to us as the need arises through books, through teachers, through Web searches and most importantly through admirable friends who exhibit the Dharma successfully in their lives. I want to close with an admonition: *Don't try to reduce the larger Dharma down to your private Dharma.* Rather, respect and support the practice and understanding of those whose Dharma might differ from your own. If you don't "get" rebirth or bows or why someone would become a monk, respect those who do, and never try to diminish their (hopefully loose) hold on those teachings. Someday – and this will surprise you – your understanding may comprehend what at one time seemed incomprehensible. This is how we preserve the integrity of the teachings, even while we adapt them to modern sensibilities.

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