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Paperback NZD \$30.00
ePub, Kindle or PDF NZD \$15.00

Prices are in New Zealand dollars.

When you order paperbacks through Tuwhiri's online store, the cost of postage to wherever you are in the world is included.

ISBN

978-0-473-57138-2 – New Zealand edition

978-0-473-57139-9 – Global edition (except New Zealand)

978-0-473-57140-5 – epub

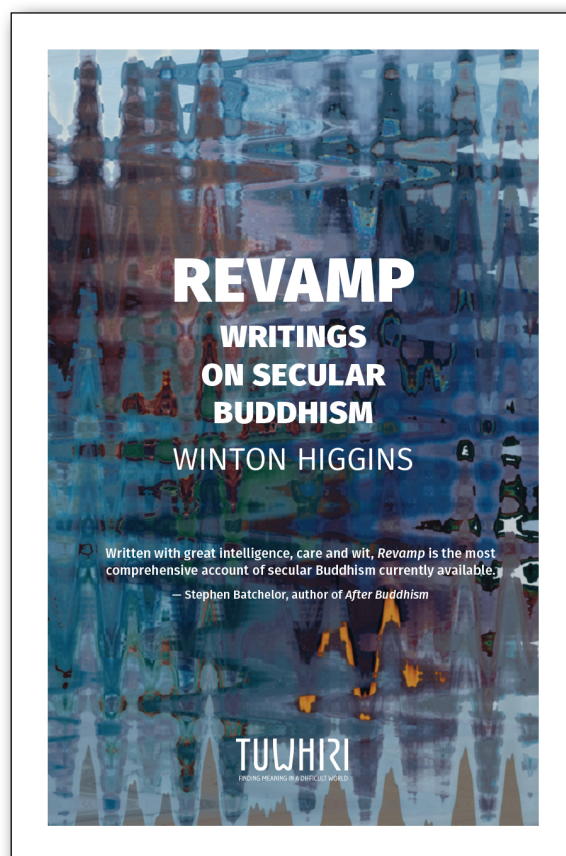
978-0-473-57141-2 – Kindle

978-0-473-57142-9 – PDF

Revamp is available through your local bookstore (tell them to order it through Ingrams) as well as in many online stores.

Published by The Tuwhiri Project Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand

<https://tuwhiri.nz/revamp>



Praise for Revamp

Written with great intelligence, care and wit, *Revamp* is the most comprehensive account of secular Buddhism currently available. Ranging from the transformative inner experience of mindfulness to the social and political challenges of dharmic citizenship, Winton Higgins weaves the many diverse threads of contemporary Buddhist practice into a compelling whole. *Revamp* is an inspiring example of critical and creative thinking about the most pressing issues facing humanity in our time.

Stephen Batchelor, author of *After Buddhism*

This book is a welcome read for both secular Buddhist practitioners and those curious about it. The author elucidates the emergence, context and meeting of cultures that secular Buddhism builds on. He presents a fresh and inspiring perspective on mindfulness meditation, offering us choices of how and what to practise. Finally, he invites us to take on 'the active responsibilities of dharmic citizenship', particularly now when we face the twin crises of global warming and globalised social injustice.

Lorna Edwards, Bodhi College participant,
Secular Buddhist Network team member, Cymru Wales

Winton Higgins has played a crucial role in helping us to understand the meaning and value of a secular dharma. The essays collected in *Revamp* reveal his unmatched ability to provide us with a lucid, nuanced account of the historical roots and key philosophical ideas of secular Buddhism. At the same time, the author insightfully explores the essential practices which promote human flourishing in this world: a non-formulaic approach to insight meditation, the creation of democratic communities of practitioners, and progressive political activism to confront the two great challenges of climate change and economic injustice.

Mike Slott, editor of the Secular Buddhist Network website, New York

It is a pleasure to go on a journey with Winton Higgins from the roots of secular Buddhism as a synthesis of western philosophical influences and Asian Buddhism, to the necessary pragmatic process of change in traditional Buddhism towards a useful, liveable, and valuable Buddhism for present-day people in modern societies. Winton encourages us to get on the path to become the person we

want to be, to tackle the ills in our society, and to strengthen values that already exist. Instead of absolute truths, it is the four tasks of daily life that guide us.

Saskia Graf, meditation teacher,
Buddha-Stiftung für säkularen Buddhismus, Heidelberg

Winton Higgins's book, *Revamp*, offers a captivating and pragmatic discussion of the emergence of secular Buddhism in the west. Winton weaves together early Buddhist texts, with contemporary influences by scholars, novelists and in particular Stephen Batchelor's work, which he builds on in thoughtful and insightful ways. As an experienced teacher and practitioner, Winton addresses critical issues of understandings and of practice, tackling for example the limiting effects of celibate monasticism and gender politics. A most engaging book for readers looking to live a secular Buddhist path with authenticity and creativity.

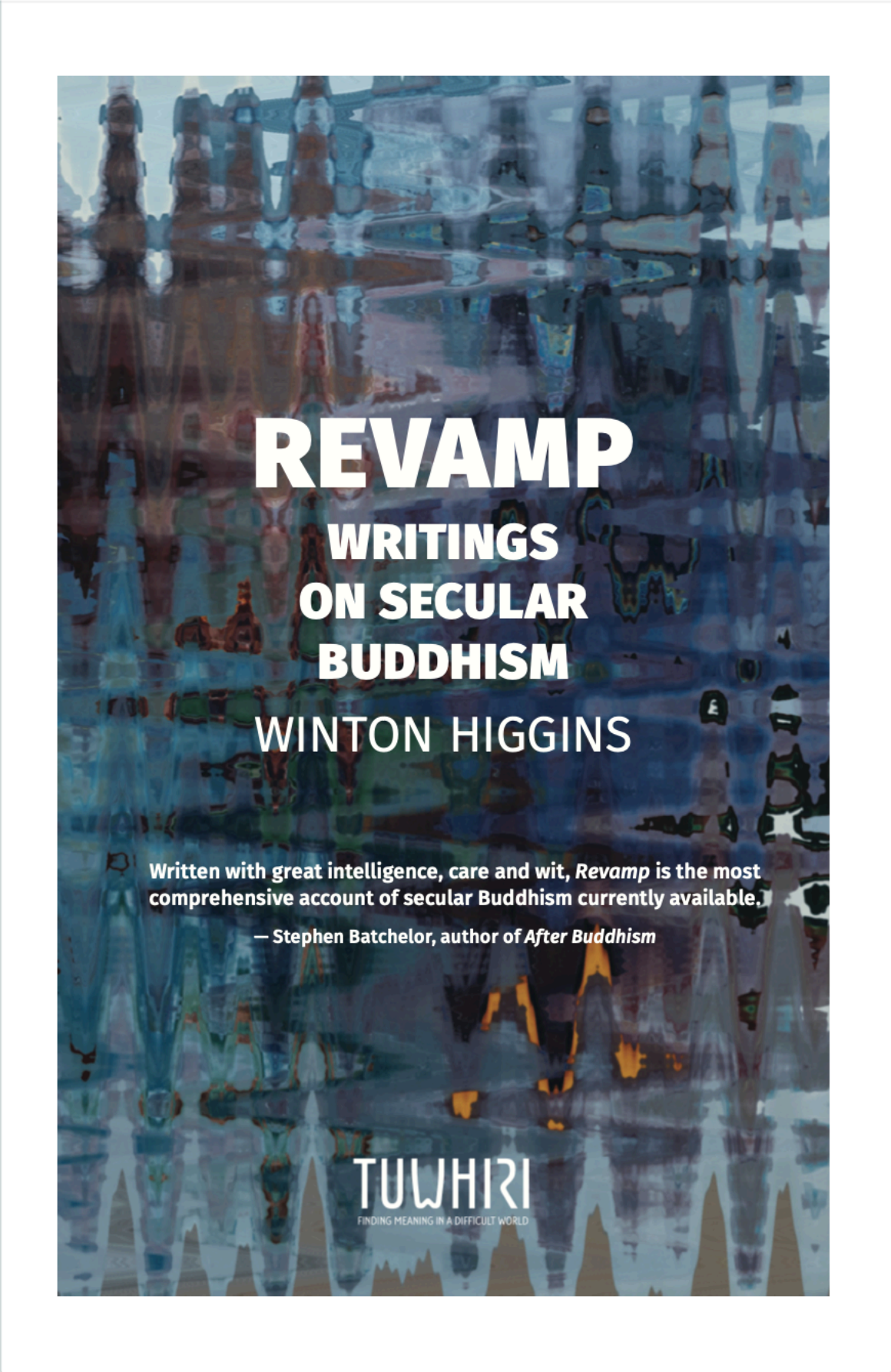
Suzanne Franzway, secular dharma practitioner
and emeritus professor of gender studies, Adelaide, South Australia

Revamp is a short book of incredible depth and insight into secular Buddhism, one that not only tracks the movement's past along wider cultural and social currents, but also provides pointers to its exciting future. Finally, *Revamp* meets the challenge introducing people to secular Buddhism in a way that is accessible, understandable, and requires no previous knowledge of 'traditional' Buddhism.

Alex Carr, One Mindful Breath, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand

Though making careful connections with western and eastern philosophy and psychology, Winton Higgins continually challenges dearly held views that have underpinned much of western Buddhism. Throughout this book Winton reframes and finds new words for the four tasks as 'the kernel of the Buddha's teaching'. Each time he languages the tasks a bit differently, I become more resonant with the path I tread. If, like myself, you are not scholarly – hang in there! Reading this book takes effort, but it's well worth it. Winton's words are nectar to my heart and mind: I will read them often.

Nelly Kauffer, lead teacher, Pine Street Sangha, Portland, Oregon



REVAMP
WRITINGS
ON SECULAR
BUDDHISM
WINTON HIGGINS

Written with great intelligence, care and wit, *Revamp* is the most comprehensive account of secular Buddhism currently available.

— Stephen Batchelor, author of *After Buddhism*

TUWHIRI
FINDING MEANING IN A DIFFICULT WORLD

A living tradition, Buddhism began as a way of working with the difficulties we all face as mortal, vulnerable, conscious beings. Its founder imbued this practice with an ethic of care, and teachings we can use today to interpret our experience and as a guide to full human flourishing.

Since the Buddha's death, the dharma has been expressed in many ways in different cultural settings, and often these border crossings enriched it. But when the dharma appeared in religious guise, it became burdened with cosmic beliefs, its practice regimented, and was used as an instrument of social control, stifling the freedom at its heart.

Secularity encourages a search for the good life in today's circumstances, not as prescribed by timeless myths. As part of the process of the dharma putting down roots in the west, secular Buddhism offers the vitality of the early dharma, free of religious distortions.

Winton Higgins tracks the emergence of secular Buddhism with a focus on today's climate emergency and intensifying social injustice that cry out for radical socioeconomic and political change. The ethic of care that underpins a creative dharma practice, he suggests, calls on us to bring our training to bear on these urgent tasks.



Winton Higgins has been a Buddhist practitioner since 1987 and a teacher of insight meditation since 1995. He has contributed to the development of a secular Buddhism internationally, and is a senior teacher for Sydney Insight Meditators.

A most engaging book for readers looking to live a secular Buddhist path with authenticity and creativity.

— *Suzanne Franzway, secular dharma practitioner and emeritus professor of gender studies, Adelaide, South Australia*

A truly comprehensive study of secular Buddhism in the early 21st century.

— *Alex Carr, One Mindful Breath, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand*



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Introduction

The term ‘secular Buddhism’ has appeared only in recent years, but it provides a rubric under which we can group certain spontaneous developments among some Buddhist practice groups and teachers in the west over the last four decades. Its doctrinal roots go back even further.

Most Buddhist practitioners in western countries belong to Asian diasporas and preserve the beliefs and practices of their countries of origin. The next most numerous group of practitioners consists of ethnic westerners who have adopted or adapted long-standing Asian forms of practice, with their associated rituals, beliefs and organisational culture (including discriminatory gender relations, monasticism, hierarchy, and concepts of authority). This group includes disillusioned Christians in search of an alternative religion. Neither of these groupings is secular. They tend to close ranks and hold themselves out as representing Buddhism-as-such while practising it as a religion like any other.

The third, emerging category of Buddhist practitioners in the west encompasses those who seek to develop forms of practice, community and thought that chime with their own culture and its progressive values – starting with egalitarianism, inclusiveness and democratic self-rule. Their project exemplifies what Seyla

Benhabib has called ‘the flexible appropriation of tradition’.¹

It’s this third group which attracts the ‘secular Buddhism’ label. Prominent in its ranks are those with no prior religious affiliation or interest, including people initially drawn to Buddhism after a positive experience of mindfulness-based psychotherapy or personal training.² Rather than looking for an alternative religion, they’re seeking a ‘practical philosophy’ in the ancient Greek sense – a set of ideas to practise and live by. Though religious Buddhists tend to see them as beyond the pale, secular Buddhists find their starting point in the ethics and matrix of concepts enunciated by Gotama (c. 480–400 BCE), the historical Buddha. Throughout the Buddhist world, this legacy is called ‘the dharma’.

In seeking to re-articulate the dharma in their own cultural terms and for their own time, secular Buddhist practitioners are doing no more nor less than their counterparts in earlier recipient societies as the dharma spread from its ancient Indian birthplace to other Asian societies. For instance, when the Chinese gradually sinified it, starting two millennia ago, they not only made its practice accessible to themselves, but also uncovered hidden depths and possibilities in the dharma’s original expression by crystallising them in terms of their own rich cultural heritage.³ They established an excellent precedent for today’s western practitioners who aspire to bring the Buddha’s tradition home.

Secularity and culture

Human life as we know it depends on culture, which complements our bare neurobiological existence in much the same way as software potentiates otherwise inert computer hardware. Culture (including language) allows us to understand ourselves, our conditions of life and their inherent possibilities, and our immediate experience. And like everything else, cultures (and software) confirm an ancient Buddhist insight by arising and then being

superseded according to shifting conditions.

At its core, secularity insists on the cultural specificities of time and place, and invites us to ground ourselves in them as we practise living consciously, that is, constantly returning to the root questions we all must face: ‘How should I live?’ and ‘What sort of person should I become?’ Secularity focuses on living well in this life – in this world at this time – rather than seeking salvation as beyond-human beings in some other life and world.

When Buddhists in the west follow the Chinese precedent in this secular spirit, the three great progenitors of modern western cultures open up for them – the classical heritage (including its foremost practical-philosophical schools of scepticism and epicureanism, with their striking affinities with the dharma); western Judeo-Christianity; and the culture of modernity itself, in which religious doctrine has loosened its grip on robust inquiry into our inner lives and the natural and social worlds we inhabit.

Religion and secularity

In religious thought, secularity invokes a subtle and profound trend in western religious development over the last seven centuries, one that has gained new momentum in our own time, as the philosopher Charles Taylor (a liberal Catholic) shows in his magisterial *A secular age*.⁴ The medieval church promoted alternately beguiling and terrifying pictures of heaven and hell, a vengeful god, a fiendish devil, pretty angels and the gruesome deaths of martyrs. Its practice was riddled with saintly cults, and relic- and image-worship. Consistent with its ethos of religious hysteria, torture and spectacular death awaited anyone who questioned the orthodoxy. But as Taylor shows, even before the Reformation (which greatly accelerated the change) all this gradually gave way to a sober abandonment of ‘superstitious uses’, some of the worst aspects of dogmatism, a gradual opening to the classical heritage

(and thereby humanism), and some toleration of diversity.

Fast-forward to our own time, and we find a growing number of progressive (and perhaps secular) Christian practitioners, including ordained priests and theologians (such as Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering), who have abandoned the supernatural beliefs that today's western culture no longer supports. They seek to retrieve what Jesus actually did, said and probably meant about how to live this life well, and interpret it in terms relevant to our own times. Sofia (formerly the Sea of Faith movement in the UK, New Zealand and Australia) and the US-based Jesus Seminar, exemplify this development. They thus awaken the ire of those who continue to trade in the older certitudes. Secular dharma practitioners encounter the same push-back from conventional Buddhists.

Unsurprisingly, then, secular dharma practitioners engage in collegial public dialogue with progressive Christians, who first announced their presence in the 1950s and 1960s. They were there before us; we have much to learn from them; and they must count as a formative influence on the development of a secular dharma in the west. A clear point of convergence is that both the Buddha and Jesus, in their several idioms, taught an ethical way of life based on reflectivity, integrity, generosity, compassion and human solidarity, and used the same metaphor for it – a path. Not a belief system, not a badge of identity or of ethnic belonging, but rather a meaningful way of life or path of practice that doesn't need to be buttressed by extravagant claims about matters beyond our accessible sensory world.

So secularity has no initial argument with religion as such. Indeed, it is the product of western religious development, as Taylor argues, and the concept of 'secular religion' has gained acceptance.⁵ But secularity finds little welcome at the table of institutionalised religions, such as the old Christian denominations and the often even older Buddhist monastic orders. Institutions as such

tend to forget their original purposes while pursuing their more pressing interest in perpetuating themselves, and consolidating and extending their own social and political power.

Religious institutional elites have typically pursued these ends in alliances with similarly entrenched temporal elites, for whom they have provided political legitimation – not least in wartime – and social integration around elite moral codes. Brian Victoria's *Zen at war* illustrates this relationship well enough.⁶ With a wink at the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, one may say that institutional religion (like war) is the continuation of politics by other means. It tends to resist substantive change, and in particular to defend timeless beliefs, which are its enduring stock-in-trade. Its hostility to a harbinger of change like secularity is thus a given.

Secular Buddhism lays great emphasis on returning to the early dharmic teachings and applying them to the way we live now. Its orthodox critics often denounce this productive activity in literalist terms, which is ironic given that they themselves often hold to a version of 'the pristine dharma' that comes from the third-century BCE Abhidhamma – possibly the most drastic re-engineering of the Buddha's teaching ever.

There is a wider point here. All the myriad expressions of Buddhism, including the Buddha's own, are mediated by culture (encompassing language, and ambient beliefs and assumptions). That is why there is no pristine dharma, no Buddhist gold standard,⁷ any more than we can identify a pristine Christianity. We have to accept that we are self-interpreting beings living in a shifting interpreted world, and learn to work with both. Thus there is no solid ground from which fideists can declare secular Buddhism anathema.

Buddhism and science

In the west in the late nineteenth century, Buddhism attracted the sobriquet of ‘scientific religion’, amid the controversy between evolutionary biology based on Charles Darwin’s work, and Christian cosmology based on the book of Genesis. The concurrent emergence of the ‘science’ of the mind – psychology – reinforced the association. Buddhism had no creation myth or cosmology of its own to be threatened by Darwin’s findings. And it had a developed interest in the mind, so it could collegially compare notes with psychologists. But that is as ‘scientific’ as Buddhism ever got: it could comfortably co-exist with western science, where traditional Abrahamic religions could not, and the ‘science’ label made for a nice selling point among the western cognoscenti.

According to a widespread perception, today’s secular Buddhism owes a great deal to science, or perhaps to *scientism* understood as a sub-culture around science and its celebrity representatives, such as ‘the new atheists’ and some neuroscientific publicists. That perception notwithstanding, it’s hard to see how secular Buddhism has gained any more substance from these sources than Buddhism as a whole has taken from natural science over the last 150 years.

Because of its post-metaphysical leanings, secular Buddhism has no interest in ‘the God question’. And today’s flood of new findings from neuroscience sheds little new light on the questions about how we should live, and how we should best practise the dharma as a reflective (self-interpreting) discipline. In Ludwig Wittgenstein’s terms, religion and science are separate language games that pretend to ultimate ‘truth’ while expressing helpful insights about the human condition. But the dharma constitutes yet another language game with a vocabulary for interpreting ourselves as we work to make the most of our ethical human potential.



Secular Buddhism is not a ‘school’ of Buddhism: it has no orthodoxy, no separate canon, and no institutional presence bar websites. For the most part its sympathisers participate in lay practice communities (sanghas) with dharma friends of other Buddhist persuasions or of none in particular. Rather, secular Buddhism stands for a developmental direction that’s typically Buddhist in its open-minded scepticism and its desire to let the dharma speak most effectively – in culturally available terms.

Buddhism and the ethic of care

The Buddha’s last days of life are recorded in some detail in the Mahāparinibbāna sutta. Here we find him eighty years old and terminally ill, but as lucid as ever. His very last words, spoken to his closest followers, were: Things fall apart; tread the path with care.⁸ Given the occasion, we can appreciate how this admonition enjoys critical importance.

We ourselves and everything in our world arise and pass away, because the conditions supporting our existence are constantly changing, pulling the rug from under us. So things obviously manifest and then fall apart the whole time. That’s basic Buddhism, and these days basic science. The term that bears most weight in these famous last words is the final one: *appamāda* in Pali, the canonical language – best translated as ‘care’. It’s a key term in the Buddha’s working vocabulary, because care is the key to the ethic he taught. ‘Just as the footprints of all living beings that walk fit into the footprint of an elephant, so care is the one thing that secures all kinds of good.’

He returned to this point and analogy again and again. ‘Whatever wholesome states there are, they are all rooted in care, converge on care, and care is considered the chief among them.’⁹

Care thus underpins the four emotional settings of the awakening mind: universal friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. We can't live ethically without caring about ourselves and others, and how we interact. Moreover – as the famous last words suggest – care must suffuse our approach to practice. We can't be mindful without caring about what is happening here and now. Care underpins the radical attention that dharma practice is all about.

As both noun and verb, the English word 'care' contains many modalities depending on context and the preposition (of, for, about) that may follow it. The same is true of its Pali equivalent, *appamāda*. But the latter is actually in negative form and goes one better in implicitly alluding to the mind states that care must overcome. It literally means non-carelessness, non-uncaringness, non-indifference.

As we move through the sources of secular Buddhism's ethics, practice and politics in this book, we need to remember that 'they are all rooted in care', as are the western affinities that we adduce along the way.

This book

This book consists mainly of lightly edited essays I have published before, and talks I have given over the last eight years. For reasons already given, none of them lay claim to being an authoritative text for secular Buddhism. Part I presents more discursive, conceptually dense pieces that account for the rise of secular Buddhism. They locate it within western culture, and identify some of the currents of thought that mould it. Earlier versions of the first two of these chapters appeared in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*. The third chapter started as a short paper I gave at the 2013 colloquium on secular Buddhism at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts.

For the most part, the rest of the book builds on dharma talks to various practice communities in Sydney and Wellington. For this reason it's an 'easier read'. Part II makes connections with certain modern western thinkers who help us to expand on dharmic themes that are especially acute in our time and culture. Part III addresses our inner world (our interiority) – how we can occupy it and transform it. From there, part IV explores the ways in which we express our interiority in concert with others, in our ethics and culture, and in the face of a calamity like the current Covid-19 pandemic. These issues lead us into Part V, about how we humans might hope to survive and thrive on a planet plagued by existential threats, above all the twin crises that predate Covid-19 and will postdate it: the wilful despoliation of the planet and its biosphere, and the mushrooming social inequities that accompany it.



Notes

- 1 Benhabib 1992: 111.
- 2 See Batchelor 2012.
- 3 See for instance Safran 2003: 14–20.
- 4 Taylor 2007.
- 5 See for instance Geering 2007.
- 6 Victoria 2006.
- 7 Faure 2009.
- 8 I'm adopting Stephen Batchelor's (2015: 101–5) translation and interpretation of *appamāda* here.
- 9 *Samyutta nikāya* 45: 140: 1551.



Chapter 6

Freud, dukkha and flourishing

Sigmund Freud sheds light on crucial and often overwhelming experiences we all have as mature individuals: loss, grief and mourning. These experiences take us to the Buddha's very own starting point – *dukkha* (suffering, dissatisfaction, anguish, frustration, stress). It's right there, centre-stage, in the Buddha's first discourse, which laid the foundations for his teachings from then on. So we need to clarify where *dukkha* fits into that teaching.

As we saw in Part I, orthodox Buddhism extrapolates its doctrine of the four noble truths from the first discourse: life is suffering (*dukkha*); craving is the cause of suffering; suffering can be overcome; and: the eightfold path leads to the end of suffering. Since the early 1960s some dharma practitioners have refuted this doctrine on four grounds: it doesn't square with what the discourse actually says, especially in its original form; the Buddha taught that life also consists of joy and the opportunity to awaken – not just suffering; it doesn't make sense to say that 'craving' is the cause of all suffering; the Buddha repeatedly rejected all metaphysical truth claims, and would not have made such claims the basis of his teaching.

A more naturalistic interpretation of the Buddha's first discourse renders the supposed four noble truths as four central *tasks* for a spiritual practitioner: embrace and fully understand suffering; on that basis let go of our habitual reactions to our dif-

ficult experiences; identify and savour the peace, spaciousness and lucidity we experience when we do let go of all our reactivity (however momentarily); and: let that experience propel us onto a path (a way of life) that builds on the wisdom that our practice of our central tasks generates.⁶

What is dukkha and how does it arise?

In that critical first discourse, the Buddha actually lists the elements of what he means by dukkha: birth, ageing, sickness, death, being separated from whom and what we love, being thrown together with whom and what we detest; not getting what we want, and our general psycho-physical vulnerability. (You might enjoy the challenge of discovering an annoyance that falls outside this list!)

This list suggests two things to us. Firstly, no human being who attains maturity can escape any one of the items on it. Secondly, the whole lot point back to our ever-present experience of (and insight into) *impermanence* – a major dharmic theme. As Shakespeare put it, ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep.’⁷

Or, as scientifically-minded souls point out: we’re all subject to the law of entropy over time. ‘Things fall apart,’ as the Buddha noted in his last recorded sentence. And as Delmore Schwartz sums up the consequence in his poem ‘Calmly we walk through this April’s day’:

Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.

So dukkha stands for *inescapable* aspects of the human condition, whether we indulge in ‘craving’ or not.

Our habitual responses (probably based on evolutionary

factors) to dukkha moments are craving, aversion, and delusion – the three ‘poisons’ identified in the dharma. Major forms of delusion are the denial, suppression, and misunderstanding of the experience of suffering (for instance, by blaming and complaining). These evasions make matters worse – often far worse. We indulge them when we fail to embrace and fully understand the primary difficulties that life inevitably throws up for us.

A lot of the time we can absorb experiences of dukkha with a modicum of honesty, maturity, insight, humour and self-compassion, and emerge from them as wiser human beings. But lurking in the Buddha’s list of dukkha elements is a real biggie: loss of someone or something very important to us. Usually this will be someone close to us – a life-partner, a parent, a child or a best friend. But it could also be something like a homeland, a culture and mother tongue, or an ideal.⁸ Such losses, like serious trauma, demand heavy work to reinstate our sense of who we are.

Mourning and melancholia

Freud called this ‘the unpleasant work’ of mourning, in his still influential 1917 essay on the subject, ‘Mourning and melancholia’.⁹ Its basic theme is that we need to undertake this work as a serious response to a personally significant loss, if we’re to emerge from it once more able to flourish. This psychoanalytic insight converges with the Buddha’s first *task* – embracing and fully knowing dukkha.

If we shirk this work, Freud suggests, we condemn ourselves to a sort of half-life, melancholia. Instead of mourning the dead, we join them. In his time, cultural awareness of the importance of mourning was imprinted in everyday culture. Rituals and social customs (such as wearing black clothing or armbands) supported a bereaved person as s/he entered into a period of profound sadness, even controlled madness – certainly exceptional fragility.¹⁰

Today we have lost that social knowledge of the importance

of mourning, and how to undertake it and support others through it. Which is why so many of us ignore, neglect and trivialise mourning. Willy nilly we find ourselves refusing to mourn. Freud has a message for us in this predicament, too.

Mourning and flourishing

Much less visited among his collected works is a three-page memoir that Freud called ‘On transience’ – a title that should entice Buddhist readers. It concerns a hike he took in the Dolomites (the Italian alps) in August 1914:

Not long ago I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet. The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that people have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom...[But] it was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it.¹¹

The ‘taciturn friend’ has the same problem as the poet – which Freud diagnoses as a *refusal to mourn*. Or, in our terms, this is the refusal to perform the Buddha’s first task: embracing and fully understanding suffering. And, of course, a vain refusal to live with impermanence (Freud’s ‘transience’).

Where does such refusal lead? For Freud this fear of mourning leads to ‘a permanent renunciation’ which the poet and taciturn friend in the story exemplify – a saying ‘no’ to life that amounts to a

self-improvement, because it's precisely change that brings us the abundance and riches of a well-lived life, including everyone and everything we love.¹²

So this permanent renunciation leaves no room for the joy and the opportunity to awaken that the Buddha also insisted were our birthright in the land of the living, and that underpin our flourishing as human beings. We cannot flourish as a human being, Freud concludes, unless we're prepared to mourn. If we do take on this 'work', we deepen as mature individuals; we're able to commit and love again, to live more fully when we've done it. But if we refuse this work, we can end up in a state of emotional death called melancholia.

Two life strategies in the face of impermanence

Western popular culture today demands that we have fun all the time. We used to have rituals and conventions for mourning, ones that respected an individual's need to do this work, which could take months or years, and to receive the community's acknowledgement and support for it. But these conventions (and the wisdom in them) have largely disappeared. Sad feelings are defined as a problem, and mourning is seen as some sort of pathology. We're now advised to take anti-depressants or see a therapist, or both, if we're feeling sad. No matter what the cause. These resources will allow us to 'get over it', 'find closure', and 'move on'.

This unhelpful attitude – a form of Freud's 'refusal to mourn' – has a good deal in common with the mistaken interpretation of the Buddha's teaching about 'detachment'. Both advise us to skip the hard bits in our human existence. But in that way they make us emotionally inadequate and stunt our development in the name of 'mental health' or spiritual 'detachment'. They try to persuade us to duck the challenge of impermanence in our lives.

The Buddha's (and Freud's) strategy goes off in the opposite

| **Revamp:** *writings on secular Buddhism*

direction: embrace our rich human life with all its deep emotional connections, and learn to ride the tiger of impermanence.



Chapter 8

Renewing the practice from first principles

The four tasks and the eightfold path (the fourth of the tasks) discussed in chapters 1 and 2 constitute the kernel of the Buddha's teaching. They form a feedback loop. The tradition helpfully re-groups the eight folds of the path under three heads of practice ('the three great trainings') of ethics, meditation and wisdom. How can we adapt and use them today? Let's approach the question historically, as secularity indicates we should.

Community and ethics at the dawn of the tradition

According to the tradition, the Buddha died aged 80 around 400 BCE. He'd been teaching for 45 years and had a large following in what is now northeastern India. This following comprised women and men, renunciants and householders, from all walks of life. He himself had been born and raised in the small Sakiyan oligarchical republic, and in guiding his scattered small renunciant communities he followed what we'd recognise today as civic-republican principles.

That is to say, all members were full participants in independent, ideally harmonious communities – 'flat organisations' we might call them in today's managementese. They had no use for leaders. They owned nothing and relied on the goodwill of small-time monarchs, other notables, and ordinary folk for protection and sustenance. Apart from that, they were quite feral, in particular

following the Buddha's lead in not respecting the reigning caste and gender systems.

Over time, the Buddha had to deal with the usual hassles of communal life. Again in an ad hoc way, he developed rules for his renunciant communities in order to harmonise and simplify them, rules that eventually comprised the *Vinaya*. For his followers in general, though, he simplified his ethical stance down to five precepts which, expressed in positive form, assert the values of universal friendliness, generosity, contentment, honesty and mental clarity.

Note that the precepts indeed constituted an *ethic* – an assertion of fundamental values – as opposed to a *morality* (i.e., a rule book). An ethic challenges our self-responsibility, intelligence and sensitivity; it calls on us to take responsibility as moral agents each time we have to make an ethically significant decision. We can't get by as moral agents simply by following the rules – we have to consider the consequences of our decisions as best we can. What an ethic demands of us will vary according to our socioeconomic, political and cultural context. Hold that thought.

Except during the rainy season, the Buddha was constantly on the move, visiting these communities, answering their questions and addressing their internal difficulties. This pattern suited the Buddha's teaching practice: turn up on the outskirts of a town, have his renunciant followers or the townsfolk toss him questions and real-world conundrums, and spontaneously answering them.

He explained the principles of meditation in some detail, but never reduced them to how-to technical instructions. He gave no planned sermons, no scheduled lectures, used no PowerPoint presentations, just off-the-cuff, highly situational *performance pieces*. In today's euphemism, these conversations were 'frank and fearless' on both sides. No one learned anything by grovelling deferentially. Such are the *suttas* we inherit, the discourses of the Buddha in the Pali canon.

Institutional imperatives and meditation

In the centuries following his death, however, all this changed. Buddhism became organised as a religion, and took on the trappings of a religion-like-any-other. Semi-feral renunciants morphed into monastics organised into large, regimented units structured around hierarchies. The Buddha's ad hoc, off-the-cuff teachings were codified into orthodox translations and commentaries.

Impatient with the one-off, contextual nature of the suttas, some brave monastics decided to distil them into what they called – not without hubris – ‘the higher teaching’, the seamless *Abhidhamma*. It's full of metaphysical truth-claims, and among other things became the basis of technique-heavy *vipassanā* meditation developed above all in Burmese and Thai monasteries. (Along with Zen, this form of meditation achieved prominence among western adherents under Buddhist-modernist auspices in the latter 20th century.)

In accounting for this development and its knock-on effects in the Buddhist world today, the far-reaching effects of *institutionalisation* are often missed. Inevitably, power relations become the dominant issue, both inside a large institution and between it and its host society.

Especially in pre-modern times, large-scale organised religions of all stripes wielded enormous social and cultural power, and their hierarchs tended to align themselves with other power-holders – temporal rulers and socio-economic elites. The religious hierarchs legitimated rulers and social elites by promoting social integration on the basis of the elites' conservative patriarchal values, including the subordination and marginalisation of women. The hierarchs deflected criticism of – and challenge to – the powers that be by propagating submissiveness among the laity as a spiritual virtue.

To sustain their external and internal power, Buddhist mo-

nastic hierarchs had to train a disciplined cadre of subordinate monks. Enforcement of the monastic rule and a particular approach to teaching meditation served this purpose. The need to exercise authority and train a cadre, rather than support individuals' spiritual quests, changed the way that meditation was taught. It became highly technical, *formulaic*, based on the metaphysics of the *Abhidhamma*. Celibate males living regimented, institutionalised lives were drilled in standardised meditation techniques to produce standardised experiences. Non-standard experiences were thus deemed to be 'not meditation' and frowned upon.

The standardised experiences, duly 'reported' to one's teacher, could in turn be certified at prescribed checkpoints to facilitate an orderly promotion process based on 'spiritual attainment'. Spiritual progress came down to compliance with the template.

Retrieving non-formulaic meditation

When we look at the account of the Buddha's own main teaching on meditation, the *Satipatṭhāna sutta* (the discourse on the four focuses of awareness), unsurprisingly we find no such agenda. Consistent with the focus of the four tasks on the human condition, the leitmotiv of the Buddha's teaching is human *experience* in all its variety and complexity.

Meditation is for sharpening our senses to delve more deeply into our individual direct experience of being-in-the-world, and thereby coming to understand its cause-and-effect dynamics, and so by degrees coming to embrace and negotiate it more skilfully. As we've all seen, surely, the flow of human experience is unpredictable, complex and multilayered.

So as not to lose the plot as we try to become aware of all this complexity, the Buddha asks us to account for our direct experience in four areas – roughly: physical; feeling-tone; emotional;

and cognitive. If our attention tends to narrow into one of these areas, we have an instruction to check out what is happening in the other three as well, so we enter into our experience more fully and see the whole pattern.

Naturally, meditative approaches that work to formulas, and ask us to shun large slabs of our experience as ‘not meditation’, are false friends. When we sit down with the intention of meditating, all experience from that point until the end of the session is meditative experience.¹ We don’t need a technique to cull and trim our meditative experience.

Conclusion

Let’s return to the three great trainings. What are they asking of us today, as relatively well-off, well-educated individuals – citizens of affluent and fairly stable democracies, thus leading highly unusual, privileged lives compared to how most humans live and have lived?

Ethics

Mere compliance with a set of rules doesn’t even scratch the surface of our ethical responsibilities. We practitioners have signed up to an ethic of universal friendliness to all sentient life, generosity, contentment, honesty, and lucidity. It challenges us in the unique and immediate circumstances of our individual lives, in how we treat those around us, those we meet on the daily round, what we buy (having checked out its source) and how we vote and participate in civic life (given the contribution our elected representatives could be making to human and non-human ill- or well-being).

As I will argue in Part V of this book, dharmic ethics requires us to confront the two crises that are overwhelming life on earth right now – the climate emergency, and the ballooning inequalities and social exclusions on every level of collective existence, from the global to the local. It isn’t ethical to turn our backs

on these crises, or to pretend that we're helping by simply honing our meditation practice.

In the Buddha's time, political life and institutions barely existed and had negligible impact on well-being. Back then the calamities that afflicted people were diseases (almost all curable now), famine, natural disasters, and violence. There were no political remedies for these calamities. But now organisational decisions (government and corporate) deeply affect all our lives – in promoting global warming, environmental degradation, mass death from preventable diseases, malnutrition, growing relative deprivation within and between countries, warfare and genocide, and the systemic maltreatment of other species.

The Buddhist ethic carries major implications for how we tackle or duck our civic responsibilities to minimise suffering and promote human flourishing.

Meditation

As we saw above, a great deal of what passes for Buddhist meditation today was originally designed to train and regiment celibate men living in total institutions. Hence its formulaic nature, and its claim to be 'authoritative' and 'the one true way'. But today hardly any of us are celibate men, and we're living highly complex, individuated lives. On the basis of the Buddha's own teaching on meditation, we need to forge meditation practices that directly tackle the four tasks in the first teaching, that is, ones that embrace the whole of the human condition and work with it. We need to master the principles of meditation and learn to manage our own practices intelligently.

Wisdom

In Buddhism this, too, is a *practice*, but a derivative one. Carefully observing the outcomes of our ethically significant actions teaches us invaluable life skills. As does a gentle, exploratory receptiveness

towards our unfettered meditation experience. Giving practical effect to what we learn in these two ways goes to the core of what it means to *practise* wisdom.

TUWHIRI

FINDING MEANING IN A DIFFICULT WORLD

The Tuwhiri Project is the initiative of secular dharma practitioners in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. A word in te reo Maori, 'tuwhiri' means to disclose, to reveal, to divulge, to make known, or a clue, a means of discovering or disclosing something lost or hidden, a hint, a tip, a pointer.

The secular approach to the dharma is a trend in contemporary western Buddhism which highlights the fundamental ethic of the teachings of Gotama, the historical Buddha – care – in all its aspects. Secularity calls on us to express this ethic of care in ways appropriate to our time and current predicaments.

Our intention is to produce educational resources for secular dharma practitioners and communities. The Tuwhiri Project is 100 percent owned by Aotearoa Buddhist Education Trust (ABET), a New Zealand registered charity. As a social enterprise with no investor shareholders and so no need to prioritise profit-making, we can focus on our purpose: to help people find meaning in a difficult world.

To find out how you can support The Tuwhiri Project, please go to:

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