

MY BUDDHISM

By ROBERT GRANAT



My Buddhism.

What is that supposed to mean?

That each one of us can follow our own personal Buddhism? Yes, and not just can. Must.

For other religions such a statement would be blasphemy—either foolish delusion or spiritual pride, an attack on the holy faith. Men and women have been racked and burned for less.

For Buddhism it is otherwise. A true Buddhist wouldn't bat an eye, might even nod. Because while other religions tell us we can only find salvation through themselves, the Buddha tells us we can only find it through ourselves. "Work out your salvation with diligence"—such, from his deathbed, were his parting words. No other Founder, Avatar, Savior, Prophet or God ever put it to us quite like that.

And this distinction is the main reason why, after countless decades of non-commitment, of smelling, tasting and nibbling my way around the great smorgasbord of religions spread out for our modern spiritual appetites, a traditionless free-floater like me has finally helped himself to the Buddha's truth. The Buddha's Truth, not Buddhism.

The two are not synonymous, no more than the Christ's Truth is Christianity. My years in this century—indeed the morning's headlines—have taught me to be weary of “isms” in general, and Buddhism is no exception. Such skepticism, I suppose, shows I am a man of my time.

And I am that, certainly, a man of my time—what other option? And my time, this particular historical instant I'm a man of, in which I am bodied, minded, and sensed, turns out to be something special, not just one more tick of the cultural clock. This time is extraordinary and unprecedented. Sociologically, anthropologically, evolutionarily, it is a genuine first. It is, of course, another of those pivotal periods when the old center does not hold and things fall apart.



Similar times have happened in the past. But this time, which happens to be our time, yours and mine, there is a crucial difference. Because now it's not merely our own center here and our own things. Everybody's centers and everywhere are not holding and their things too are falling apart. Social and cultural foundations are cracking and rending round the planet. So it's a time which invites and incites its passengers to act, to try some urgent do-it-yourselfing. Our psychic modules are popping rivets, splitting seams, flying apart.

Except for the global scale of it, human history has seen this happen before, of course. There's nothing aberrant or abnormal about things falling apart. Everything organized, whether by nature or by us, sooner or later disorganizes. Every life dies, every form deforms, every generation degenerates. This is the Law of the Universe, and nothing and nobody has ever succeeded in breaking that Law yet—though God knows we keep trying. *Never in all our millennia down here as Sapiens, the sole surviving species of the great genus Homo, have we found ourselves confronted by anything quite like this.*

A brand new drama is being written for the human stage, and you and I have the rare good fortune—or misfortune—to find ourselves spotlighted and cued to act. So far, understandably, it has been mostly ad lib and improvisation.

Not that we couldn't see this coming, those of us who looked. For the past four or five centuries, we've been sensing it, the progressive warming of our physical and psychosocial environment, as if because of some slow and subtle greenhouse effect. Naturally, the effect on us has been traumatic.

Take our homes, our personal spots on this ball of spinning rock. Inside and outside our very lives have been deliquescing and flowing like lava into one amorphous habitat that has all but coated the planet.

Our familiar neighborhoods are being ingested into one amoebic Megasprawl, our local markets into one amoebic Megamart that sells us the products of an earth whose diversity is being steadily homogenized. The Megamart stocks the Megainventory, designed to feed our every need. Not our material needs only, but our aesthetic and spiritual needs as well. I'm here to speak of this last pair of needs, of the biological hunger for spirit that nature, for reasons her own, chose to implant into the genome of her top-of-the-line primate. If I refer to my individual case it's because that's the only case I know for sure.

In all this, many of us are able to find comforts enough, soporifics enough, fun things enough, junk foods enough, to survive till we die, without ever having to examine our lives. To help us we have our Megadistracting industry tirelessly coming out with fresh products to catch fancies and circumvent questions. And they're effective, too, some of them, for a while. So why bother our heads about meaning, about spiritual practice and freedom, just because we've got human minds inside them and the inborn capacity to self-transcend? Chickens have wings. Do chicken fly?

They do but rarely. Only when they're terrified.

Although I can't recall the specific events or circumstances, somewhere not very far along the line I must have gotten terrified. Been ambushed by the ordinary facts of human existence. It was probably around the time I was learning to spell—SICKNESS...AGE...DEATH.

More than a hundred generations earlier, these same simple facts also terrified a young Indian prince, Siddhartha by name.

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Appalled him, rather, since he was not a child but an adult, a husband, a father. He personally had things easy until then, like a good many of us. He didn't have the technological salves and luxuries we do, but he had plenty of human ones, the finest available. By paternal decree he was pampered and sheltered, waited on hand a foot, his every whim indulged. Because of this extraordinary protection, he was a late starter—it took him twenty-nine years, legend tells us, to get ambushed by those four signs—the sick person, the old person, the dead person, and the monk. For most of us the attack comes earlier, and in my one case, it came traumatically. At eighteen I was a college boy who had never even attended a funeral and I was cowering in a frozen mudhole in a battlefield strewn with corpses.

After that Prince Siddhartha (and I) felt anxieties and yearnings deeper than whim. His pleasures and comforts no longer pleased him, as our own no longer appease so many of us. He looked at sentient existence and called it dukka, a wheel askew, uncentered on its axis. Full of pain and unsatisfactoriness. Something was wrong somewhere with life as we found it, something was fundamentally off.

West, East, North, South, then, now, we human beings all come to realize dukka eventually. It's the factual basis for every religion. In Western terms, Siddhartha had eaten of the fruit of knowledge and been exiled from Eden. In biological terms, he had outgrown the nest and was on his own.

Seduced by the charms of our sophisticated samsara, I was also twenty-nine and married before I really looked into the Buddha's Truth. I recall how I felt—like a captive koala bear finally offered eucalyptus buds. This man spoke to me directly, to my existential condition, to my essential being. Not just to mine personally, like a therapist. To ours, all of ours. (By twenty-nine, I had already realized that my deepest truth must lie beyond the personal.) The ancient Indian sage addressed me because he was addressing everyone. We spoke the same language. Time and space vanished and I understood him effortlessly, as if I had miraculously learned Pali.

The Buddha's contemporary, Confucius, reported that at fifteen he'd begun to study and at thirty he knew where to stand. Double those figures of us, for me at least. At twenty-nine I began to study and at fifty-six I took the Precepts. At sixty I knew where to stand. Or rather to sit. To practice. How to set out on that arduous eighteen-inch trek from the head to the heart. How to move from knowing-about to knowing, from talking to walking. To finally see, through the smog and racket of this Kaliyuga, that being it, not knowing it, is the Buddha's Truth.

Twenty-five centuries of daily practice is what has kept this gentle religion, which has rarely persecuted anybody in Buddha's name, from being wiped out by twenty-five centuries of violently religious persecutors.

So, after awakening to dukka, the second reason why I chose the Buddha's way was because it practices what it preaches—or better yet, it doesn't

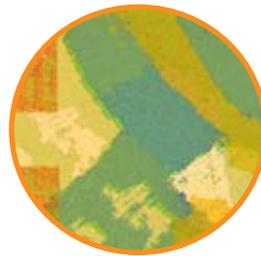
preach in the first place. The Buddha's way neither threatens nor commands but only points out and suggests.

There are other reasons, more aesthetic and conceptual, for my choice. There is the breathtaking grandeur of the Buddha's cosmological panorama, the dimensionless vastness of its time scale, not just a few thousand years, but inconceivably long kalpas, and spatially a universe unending light years across—ideas which modern science is only now catching up to. Add: Its empirical method which antedated science's by several millennia. (Don't take my word about the method. Try it yourself.) The all-encompassing embrace of its compassion, reach out not just to one smallish species on a smallish planet, but to all sentient beings everywhere, known and unknown. The indivisibility of its ultimate reality, not one God somewhere but one ALL everywhere.

The incomparable magnanimity of its eschatology. One by one by one, all beings will reach Nirvana, including sinners and demons, though that could take forever. And, for Buddhism, there is forever. The Buddha's Truth doesn't belong to the Buddha either, and in contrast to most fellow avatars, he never claimed it did. It belongs to no one but comes built into the DNA of everyone. It is human Truth Itself, unchanging, incomparable, inviolate. The light of Buddha's enlightenment is the light of Truth Itself, the same light that, five hundred years afterwards, John saw shining in the Judean darkness which had not overcome it, that

still persisted two thousand years later when, from the midst of our own contemporary darkness, it was affirmed and demonstrated by Mohandas Gandhi. And if these two were not Buddhist in fact, they were Buddhists in truth, and that is the only Buddhism that counts. Truth never denies the facts, but it always transcends them.

That is why those who walk the Buddha's way can say, without irreverence, "if you meet the Buddha, slay him." Can say "my" Buddhism without hubris or heresy. Can say, "I'm a Buddhist but I'm not a Buddhist" without absurdity or paradox.



Robert Granat has published two novels: *The Important Thing and Regenesi*, and numerous essays and other writings. His interest in Buddhism goes back many years; his concern with "the important things" even further.