

How, Then, Shall We Live?

Spiritual Ethics for Our Time

As any sensitive observer reflects on the current state of global human civilization, there is an obvious cause for serious concern, even alarm, at how we have degraded and imperiled our life-supporting natural environment. Our abuse of the natural world, particularly during the modern proliferation of global industrialization, has clearly become humanity's most serious problem, as it's the issue which presents us with the gravest threat to our continued well-being. We can see this degradation of our life-sustaining biosphere as the clearest indication that there's a fundamental flaw in the direction of our current global culture. How did we get into this precarious situation, and what can we do to get out?

When considering the full extent of the problem - from species extinction and widespread deforestation, to the proliferation of toxins throughout the environment, the dangers of nuclear waste and accidents, and the finally well-recognized crisis of climate change - most of us feel tremendous anxiety, whether conscious or suppressed; many feel simply overwhelmed. Even those who are not particularly sensitive to, or educated about, "ecological" issues, are now becoming aware that global resource depletion and climate change will inevitably lead to major human crises like massive social displacement, droughts, floods, and famines. These deprivations, in turn, will create the conditions for increased conflict and warfare. Trying to avoid despair over all this, we sometimes just look away. But in our hearts we know this won't help - so we are searching for a better response.

Sometimes we find an easy vent in blaming those corporate or government leaders who might be most directly responsible for destructive decisions. There is certainly legitimate merit in bringing these decisions to light, and pushing for accountability and change in the political arena. But if we look closely and honestly at the process by which environmental destruction occurs, we will know that most of us, at least in the wealthier countries, are deeply tied into this process through the ordinary actions and decisions we make everyday in our consumer society - the fuel we use, the plastics we buy and quickly throw away, all the materials and energy we take for granted to perpetuate the remarkable physical comfort we have become accustomed to. Some kind of deeper change is clearly necessary. How might we initiate such a deep and challenging transformation in our everyday way of life?

First, we must agree, we need to honestly face the unsustainable aspects of our daily lives, and admit we must create a fundamental change. It is remarkable to what extent we are willing to go to avoid admitting this.

Some try to avoid the need for personal change with the idea that new technology will save us - a very problematic position considering our history. Although technological tools might have a role in helping us transition, we must keep in mind that it is the unquestioning acceptance and promotion of new technology, with all its physical power, that has created the present scale of environmental destruction in the first place. Unfortunately, our technological

expertise far exceeds our ethical wisdom in choosing how to use our powerful creations - technological “solutions” routinely create new problems more extensive than those they were created to solve. This is especially true when considering our interaction with the biological intricacies of the natural world - the urge to control and manipulate nature for the short-sighted “benefit” of humans (or often for only one particular population of humans) can be seen as the fundamental origin of our present predicament.

Others might hold faith in the powers of just government to contain the pillaging that inevitably flows from corporate greed, and at the same time to lead the public to a new way of ecologically responsible living. But we must admit the naivete here as well. Hopefully governments will help in some way, some of the time, but if we are aware of how much governing institutions are influenced (and often controlled) by the interests of corporate business, there is little chance that governments will choose to act against the profit-driven motives of these well-paying clients, at least to the extent necessary to address the scope of the problems. And, even when positive steps might be taken, we must realize that government control and management can do only so much while the massive engine of global consumption continues to expand.

Clearly a fundamental shift in the way we all live needs to happen - and this implies a fundamental shift in our values and understanding of the world. How, then, shall we live?

COULD RELIGION HELP?

Most educated progressives, at least those from less traditional cultural backgrounds, most often regard “religion” with some justified suspicion. Religion in its most visible institutional form has often proved only too willing to support the status quo and suppress dissent, and might be expected to be more an impediment to fundamental cultural change than a source for it. We should naturally expect that religious institutions which are accepted and embedded into our larger culture, especially the wealthy and politically influential institutions, will reflect mainstream values that support traditional sources of authority, and serve the interests of the economic and political elite. That’s how they got to be large, wealthy and accepted institutions. These forms of religion can often be rightly accused of many unhelpful influences: reinforcing the acceptance of economic and political dominance, deflecting the outrage at society’s injustices away from the powerful perpetrators, and distracting the public from organizing towards a more just and equitable society. In short, Marx’s famous “opiate of the masses.” We can hardly expect a revolutionary new paradigm for living to come from them.

There is, however, another face of religion - what might be called the “contemplative” side. Usually the active and committed practitioners of contemplative spirituality are much smaller in number than those in “popular” religion, but its influence on world culture has still been deep and significant. Contemplative religious perspectives are usually deeply questioning of the status quo, and can be strongly challenging to conventional authority. Such contemplatives are often involved in establishing alternative communities based on values very different from the mainstream culture around them. The founders of some of the most populous world religions - such as Jesus and Gautama Buddha - seem clearly of this

religious persuasion, despite what might have happened with the later institutionalized churches that claimed to come from them. Many of the most famous saints and sages from cultures all around the world were also clearly contemplatives living lives that deeply challenged the accepted norms of their societies. These pioneering figures - and we might consider Indian yogins, Sufi saints, Taoist hermits, and Christian mystics as prime examples - all share a remarkably similar vision of how we might live a different kind of life than that expected by our mainstream societies, one that is based on values radically opposed to the usual and universal obsession with wealth, status, and order. Their vision centers around the realization that true human satisfaction lies not in material acquisition or higher social standing, but instead from recognizing the inherent and original beauty and wonder of our very existence, and the world around us that is its contents. This beauty has been hidden from us, they relate, only because we are distracted - we have numbed our sensitivities by obsessing on status, money, and security, which in turn breed the various narratives of the personal ego -the plans, projects, fears and hopes of the individuated self. The lives of these spiritual contemplatives were characterized most dramatically by a renunciation of these concerns and obsessions - instead, guided by a spirit of humility and a devotion to a simple way of life, they turned their attention to recognizing the beauty of the moment through practices of prayer and meditation. Often finding inspiration in an environment of wild nature, and embracing what others might call material poverty, they showed how little we really need to discover a truly joyful way of being. In short, they provided an invitation to a way of life that, if taken up in some form today, would be of enormous benefit in healing the problems of our beleaguered planet.

THE PROJECT AT HAND

This essay is an attempt to advocate for taking up just such a life, or some modern version of it, and, hopefully, making it into a movement. A spiritual movement focused on a simpler way of living could provide a direction and an example for the wider culture to steer away from our ecologically destructive path, and, at the same time, to discover a more satisfying and joyful way of living. We'll explore some specific guidelines from traditional sources that might help individuals and communities to exemplify such a truly sustainable way of life.

The teachings and guidelines for simple living that we'll be examining are drawn from the Buddhist tradition, but their relevance and practical application, I feel, are universal. Similar traditions, in fact, can be found in many other spiritual cultures around the world. I think it is crucial to understand that a movement rediscovering the possibility, and also the joy and beauty, of radically simple living cannot be limited to just one cultural expression if it is to be truly relevant to today's world.

This need for an open and inclusive sharing between traditions cannot be too strongly emphasized. The common human urge to closely bind one's identity to a particular group, whether ethnic, religious, or otherwise, I see as counterproductive to the universally responsible and inclusive attitude we need to develop to deal with our present global issues. This defining of oneself through allegiance to a group is the central mechanism for feelings of

separation and opposition in our societies - creating conflicts, that, under pressure, develop into bigotry, persecution, and war. Aware of this, I personally see little use in labeling myself a “Buddhist”, or any other “ist”, and thus separating myself from those who don’t use that label (similarly I find no advantage in creating a self-identity around a particular “lineage” or exclusive religio-cultural subgroup). In creating a way of life, and a community, that can deeply respond to the challenges of our times, we need to appreciate, respect, and draw from a variety of spiritual and ethical sources of wisdom, and hopefully we can come to recognize all those on the path of creating a simpler and more responsible way of life as our close spiritual family (and others not yet on that path as our family members in need of encouragement).

That said, we must also realize that taking superficial bits and pieces from the array of spiritual traditions available to us in today’s cosmopolitan world, especially through the global media, and slapping them together into a New Age amalgam of our choosing is unlikely to be very helpful. We need to revolutionize our values and transform the deep-seated habits of our daily lives - this kind of transformation requires delving deeply into the inner workings of our minds, often facilitated by the devotion to a daily practice and usually the guidance of seasoned elders. Such a thorough and consistent training is most easily accessed, for most of us, by focusing on one particular tradition’s teachings, at least for a significant number of years. Through the insight gained by deep immersion in our chosen path, we can then more easily see the beauty in many other spiritual approaches.

With this in mind, in the following pages we will focus on the Buddhist tradition as we explore the shared intentions and practices we might consider in creating a contemporary spiritual movement of simplicity - one that can help lead our culture in a more sustainable, and also joyful, direction. At the same time we can maintain an understanding that the issues raised have universal significance, and can be adapted to the expressive modes of other cultural traditions.

The Buddhist tradition might be seen as particularly relevant to our task for several reasons. For one, the Buddha’s teaching gave rise to the first well-developed and articulated renunciant religious order in the world, and thus has a long history of accumulated wisdom about how to live in a simple, mindful, and ethically responsible way. Also, the Buddhist tradition demands remarkably little in the way of adopting culturally-specific belief systems: practical guidelines for living are foremost, cosmologies and theological belief are downplayed (at least in the early traditions which we’ll be focusing on). Wisdom is to be discovered through one’s living practices and observation rather than through indoctrination. The unfolding of the Buddha’s teaching, of course, didn’t happen in a cultural vacuum - its development is reflective of the concerns of specific times and places in the Indian cultural landscape, and naturally reflects certain cultural assumptions. But its overall tenor is found by many to be of fairly universal and remarkably contemporary relevance. The Buddha seemed to be trying to re-assess how to understand and live one’s life from as fresh and unburdened a perspective as possible - something we might deeply value for our own investigations.

THE PROBLEM

Before diving into our exploration of the Buddhist model of alternative living, let's clarify the problems in our own ways of living that we're seeking to resolve. The global environmental crisis already mentioned is the most obvious and dangerous result of a way of living, and a set of values, that have spread across the world in modern times. But there is an array of other unwholesome consequences, both personal and social, that are also connected with this way of life. Alienation and feelings of isolation have become the norm in industrialized societies, where the more community-focused motivations of older cultures have given way to an intense focus on the individual's desires, and on material accumulation as the main object of those desires. In the resulting competitive race for success (or just survival), and without the nurturing support of close-knit community, mental disease of many kinds have become ever more common, as well as a general level of stress that leaves many with little resources to appreciate the simpler pleasures of daily existence. As the speed of our busy lives continues to increase, we have less time for such pleasures, and also less time to seriously question what we're doing, and consider alternatives. As we become accustomed to ever increasing stimulation in our media and fabricated environment, we lose touch with how we might manage without it, and as our sensitivity dulls, our craving for more stimulation continues to grow. At the same time, we have less experience of the healing potential of the natural world, and less awareness of its presence at all. (And, of course, there is less physical evidence of biological nature around us, particularly in urban environments). All these developments are aspects of a central mode of life - a set of values, motivations and behaviors - that can be called consumerism.

The fundamental assumption behind consumerism is simply that satisfaction in life can be achieved by the accumulation of wealth and possessions. We desire wealth for a number of reasons - to provide the physical comforts we crave, the entertainment we like to get wrapped up in, or for the more abstract enhancement of social prestige or feelings of self-worth that the idea of increased wealth brings. (I'm talking, of course, about wealth and possessions above what we need for our basic physical necessities). Sometimes we don't even remember why it's desirable, we just want it. The problem is that deep and lasting satisfaction does not seem to come with acquiring wealth or possessions even when we do manage to get them. We know this because we continue to want more. Since it is hard to find the time, or emotional resources, to really contemplate if this system is working for us, or to find where else we might turn for satisfaction, we assume that if the last purchase, or paycheck, or job enhancement didn't satisfy (at least for long), we just need the next one. And so it continues ad infinitum (and ad nauseum).

The dominant world economy of consumer capitalism actually depends on the insatiable desire of the public for ever more material accumulation (which also means ever more waste and pollution). It is the continual demand for more products and energy, irrespective of any actual need or helpful function of these products, that generates wealth for the organizers of the economy - the more consumed, thrown out, wasted, consumed again, the more money made for these elites (and since they themselves are true believers in the myth that wealth will someday bring satisfaction, accumulating it is their own insatiable, fundamental motivation). In order to make sure that the public keeps doing its part, lots of

money is spent on advertising to maintain the consensus that buying more will bring happiness (including buying more media equipment and access, which will ensure exposure to more advertising). And so it goes. The physical cost of all this hyper-consumption and waste of materials, food and fuel is, of course, the life-sustaining health of our earth's biosphere, which is now gravely threatened. It is not hard to see that the cost to our psychological well-being is similarly severe, and that the two are deeply connected.

When considering what to do about all this, we must remember that it is all of us in our daily consumerist behaviors that are the engine of this system. As I mentioned earlier, many who desire change focus on trying to pressure the elite organizers and maintainers of the system to change - again, this has its place, but we must be realistic about how likely this will yield the scale of change we need. In any case, whatever happens politically, it is essential that we all fundamentally change our way of life if we are to survive and thrive. That much is clear. We could be led there by a reformed government and business world that good-naturedly provides us with real education and the infrastructure to help us adjust, but it seems much more likely to me (and more appealing, really) that we will go there because a cultural awareness spreads through the grass-roots and we decide to initiate a new way of living ourselves, even if government and business are dragged along kicking and screaming. We need to realize that those in positions of "power" are there reliant on our cooperation with a system that puts them there - despite the powerful drug of advertising, we can wake up to an alternative vision and decide to stop cooperating.

What we need to wake up to is simple - that what we truly long for cannot be found in accumulating material objects, or abstract wealth, or status. Even the palpable satisfaction of physical comfort is very fleeting and limited. Some might claim that happiness lies instead in finding an ideal partner, but this illusion, too, leads to endless searching, hoping, and frequent disappointment, or, at best, the lesson that although working with a partner can help us grow, it is not all there is to fulfillment. And how closely entwined is the thirst for wealth and status with the hope of attracting the perfect partner!

Searching for all these things in the "outer" world of conditions in order to make us feel more complete is a project doomed to fail, because it assumes and reinforces that we are incomplete as we are, that we need to acquire something else, from somewhere else, to fill some kind of lack. It is this perception of lack, or "incompleteness" that is, after all, at the source of our dissatisfaction. In contemplative spiritual practice, however, we find the suggestion that the only thing we're really missing is simply the taste and appreciation of what it actually feels like to be alive in this moment - to discover that we are truly complete and whole just as we are. I believe we all deeply long to discover this full experience of being alive, an awareness of intimately belonging to the universe that surrounds us. That is a spiritual need, one that can never be satisfied by material or social acquisitions. In other words, we've been trying to satisfy a need for inner unity and harmony, something that comes from receptive attention and awareness, by chasing after a "purpose - driven" life, obsessing over achievements and possessions, which can never fulfil that need. We've been barking up the wrong tree. Only a spiritual revolution can help us find what we truly long for, and if we can create such a revolution in a deep and thorough way, our economy, our society, and our planet will be revolutionized as well.

THE BUDDHA'S REVOLUTION

When we look at the oldest Buddhist traditions of spiritual community, we find a way of life that exemplifies a powerful alternative to the habits and behaviors in our present world that are causing such serious problems. The original Buddhist renunciants, at least according to early records, lived lives of true simplicity, using only the food and materials that they needed for the healthy maintenance of their bodies, and taking great care to cause the least harm possible to the beings around them. Values of humility, compassion, and frugality were emphasized; self-aggrandizement and competition were avoided. But they were not, as far as we know, motivated in their restraint and renunciation by any awareness of impending environmental crisis, or the idea that more materialist pursuits were ecologically unsustainable, as we might be today. They chose their way of life because they believed it led to the ending of suffering or discontentment, and to the unfolding of a deep and lasting satisfaction. Which should be very interesting to all of us, because this suggests that a way of life that seeks to avoid material greed and is careful to abstain from causing harm to others, also helps to create a joyful life for ourselves. Or, conversely, that a life wisely guided toward inner peace and a lasting fulfillment, is also one that causes the least damage to the surrounding world. Simply put - living ethically is the basis for personal happiness. Very good news for those of us considering the transition toward a less resource-using, less globally destructive way of life.

Why it should be so that a materially simpler life also creates a more satisfying life is clearly explained in the most basic teaching of the Buddhist tradition: that the craving for something one doesn't have, or isn't present (and that, of course is all you *can* crave for) is what dissatisfaction is actually made of. Letting go of this craving, on the other hand, is returning one's attention to the present moment, and thus becoming open to appreciating its wonder - realizing it is a gift, freely and constantly given, from the universe.

Let's look at this a little closer. When we focus on craving we're focusing on our perceived lack, our sense of incompleteness, and that's just not particularly joyful. But it is habit forming. The more we chase after objects or situations, the more we feel our lack, and the harder we continue to chase. Even when we do happen to obtain a certain object or situation that we've been craving, we notice (if we're being observant) that the satisfaction we feel (if any) is usually less fulfilling than we hoped, and quickly fading. The disappointment we feel, whether consciously acknowledged or subconscious, fuels another craving for another object, which we hope will, this time, fix the problem. And on it continues. The architects of the modern consumerist system, particularly the advertising industry, understand this phenomenon well (consciously or subconsciously) and use it expertly to continue to maintain the public's insatiable appetite for shopping.

We might say that the realm of desire or craving is premised on a view of the world as fragmented - to say we feel "incomplete" is to say that we are separate from the objects (or beings) "out there" in the world that we desire, and we thus are trying to reach out, grab them, and draw them to us in order to feel whole and complete. The Buddha, however, taught that when we stop, hold still for a while, and really pay close attention to the present, we can

discover a sense of inherent unity and completion that includes all the objects of our perception - our bodies and minds are of one piece with the whole array of our experienced world. As everything is perceived as a complete whole, there is no need to reach out and grab any particular thing to make us complete - we can simply enjoy and celebrate existence just as it is.

It is easy to understand how if we don't learn to do this, if we remain in the realm of desire, there is a great potential for the disrespect and abuse of other beings. As the world of desire is perceived as a fragmented arena of many isolated, independent beings, each with their own, often competing agendas, and each chasing after the objects they feel they lack, there are inevitable clashes - we soon learn to look out for "number one," pushing aside whatever beings or aspects of our world get in the way of our plans. In the Buddhist vision, on the other hand, everything we perceive is an aspect of one inseparable reality - the welfare and happiness of other beings is not separate from the happiness of our own body-mind, and thus compassion and altruism can naturally flourish.

The essential insights of the Buddha summarized above are based on core teachings from the earliest tradition. The primary teaching that desire or craving is the cause of discontent and suffering, and that learning to let go of craving leads to the ending of suffering, was formalised into the famous "Four Noble Truths" fairly early in Buddhist history.

The first of these four truths points out the prevalence of discontent in our lives - how it arises whenever we can't get what we desire, whenever we're forced to be with what we don't want (what we desire to be rid of), or whenever we are forced to separate from what we are attached to (what we desire to hold onto). Our deepest anxiety, often buried subconsciously while we are busy chasing our goals, can be said to be our awareness that nothing we crave, or have obtained and now cling to, can actually last - we must all eventually face old age, sickness and death, and thus lose everything. In other words, despite our attempts to ignore it, we know we eventually will face an inevitable giving up of all we have pursued, a final frustration of our purpose-driven life to acquire and achieve. (This realization, particularly, is said to have inspired the Buddha's spiritual search in the first place - the facing of the fact of death is perhaps the greatest inspiration to help us see the futility of the usual pursuit of desires).

The second truth states how the "thirst" or craving for all of our desired objects or experiences is actually the source of our discontent, and the third truth follows that if we can let go of our cravings we can be free of our discontent. Finally, the fourth truth lets us know that the way to let go of craving is by leading a disciplined, ethical, and meditative way of life, as elaborated in the "Noble Eightfold Path" (arya ashtanga marga - more literally, the "noble eight-limbed path"). This path consists of "right" (or "wholesome") views, right resolution, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The essential insight that actually enables us to fully experience the relinquishment of our craving is discovered in meditative awareness. As discussed, we first observe how cravings arise from a consciousness of separation and division, of the isolated self competing and struggling against the world, pulled along by the grasping for desired objects as a way to fulfill an underlying sense of lack. Then, in meditative vision, we can come to discover that

there is really no such thing as an isolated individual with a lack, but instead a unitary world of experience that is inherently complete - therefore there is no need for further struggles and craving. This insight is described and elaborated, in various ways and to different degrees, in many sources of the Buddhist tradition. It is the understanding that arises particularly through the “effort”, “mindfulness”, and the “concentration” parts of the Eightfold Path - the parts that have to do with meditation practice.

It might seem natural to assume, then, that if one focuses solely on meditation, achieves a reasonably clear experience of the complete and unitary nature of the present moment, and discovers a taste of the dropping off of desires and cravings, then one can expect to soon become an exemplar of a simple and non-harming way of life - becoming free of the habits of consumerism and naturally having the welfare of all beings at the forefront of one’s decisions. Some schools of Buddhism, particularly in the modern West, seem to believe this general idea that meditation practice is all it takes, and they promote meditation to the virtual exclusion of other aspects of early Buddhist teaching. But this scenario does not seem to pan out. Most practitioners in contemporary meditation centers, even those who have many years of meditation practice under their belt, still seem to be caught up in the consumerist way of living, just as much as their non-meditating associates, and are just as quick to avoid addressing the serious harm brought to other living beings, and the planetary environment, that results from it. Is it that the Buddhist tradition is not up to addressing our contemporary cultural system? Or has something been left out of this version of Buddhism? If only the last three parts of the Eightfold Path are all it takes, what are the first five there for?

The Buddha’s solution to the problems of suffering involve a comprehensive revolution of how we lead our lives, covering many different aspects of daily living and involving many different practices and guidelines. These are summed up, as we’ve seen, in the Eightfold, or Eight-Limbed Path. Three of those limbs, as we’ve also seen, pertain to meditation practice (effort, mindfulness, and concentration) and this is certainly a crucial component of the path. Theoretically, perhaps, a deep and pervasive meditation practice could generate all the essential insights and wisdom for a practitioner to lead a truly wise and compassionate life, with the courage to drop one’s harmful habits and challenge the unwholesome patterns of our inherited culture. But only theoretically. Practically, we discover that we need more guidance, more context, and more varied experience to know how our meditational insights can be applied to daily living in order to develop in ways that can express deep wisdom and compassion. The Buddha, and the early Buddhist tradition, was aware of this - that’s why there are five other limbs of the Eight-Limbed Path.

One problem with simply stating this Eightfold Path, however, is that it doesn’t tell us very much. It just says “right” (or “wholesome”) this, and “right” that - but what constitutes what is right? Fortunately we have some early texts that flesh out a bit more of what the early Buddhist tradition recommended as a way of life for those who wished to follow the path toward freedom from suffering.

THE FRUITS OF RENUNCIANT LIFE

Before we look at one of these texts, we need to clear up a word, and a concept, that is central to this and other Buddhist texts, that will be important throughout the rest of our exploration, and which is often misunderstood. The term is “renunciant”. This word is a little scary for many people. It evokes images of a self-punishing ascetic who gives up all the natural, sensual pleasures of our embodied existence in a zealous determination to transcend the ordinary world, and perhaps ascend to some more pure realm of the misguided imagination. But this is not how the idea and practice of renunciation is portrayed in most Buddhist sources (nor in many other traditions), and certainly not the understanding of it that I find compelling, and even essential. In the Buddhist sense (and I think this is common to many other traditions) renunciation means to give up behaviors and practices that hold one back from realizing and experiencing the full joy and peace of awake, aware living. It is to give up behaviors that are generally unwholesome and limiting, and also to be aware of behaviors that might not always be unwholesome, but are for you, at least at certain stages of practice. It is to unburden oneself of habits that confine, so that we can walk forward in freedom. It is not to limit our sensual experience, but to refine our sensual appreciation to new levels of subtlety beyond the shackles of dreary habitual conditioning. In short, it is to give up what creates suffering in oneself and others, so that we can live lives of greater beauty for all.

The Buddha was a renunciant, and although he taught people at all levels of commitment and those following many different paths of life, he clearly advocated a life of significant material simplicity, and directed most of his teachings to those who were living, or interested in living, such a life. This way of life included voluntary homelessness, living off of alms food, using just the clothes truly needed, and having few social obligations in conventional society, so that all of one’s time could be devoted to spiritual practice. In all of this, the early Buddhist community was following a renunciant tradition that had already been developing in Indian culture for some centuries. The name generally used for this movement is “shramana” (one of a handful of words in Sanskrit that can be translated as “renunciant”; this one coming from a root meaning “to exert effort”) and it included early Jains and a number of other groups hinted at in the ancient Upanishadic texts, as well as followers of the Buddha. What typified the way of life of the Buddhist variety of renunciant in the early centuries of the tradition is fairly clearly and comprehensively laid out in a text that we’ll now take a look at.

The text is called the Shramanyaphala Sutra (Discourse on the Fruits of Renunciant Life), and is generally considered by historians to be one of the earliest written accounts that lay out the details of how one should live as a practitioner devoted to the Buddha’s path. Following the progression of the career of an idealized practitioner, it begins with a householder hearing the teachings of the Buddha, and consequently becoming inspired to devote themselves fully to the path. Considering that the way of life prescribed by conventional society is unsatisfactory, they decide to “go forth” into the voluntary homeless life of a shramana, leaving behind any wealth they’ve accumulated, and departing from their family and previous social circles.

The very first defining characteristic that’s described about this new path is the practice of not destroying life - how, putting aside hunting tools and personal weapons, the

practitioner cultivates mercy, compassion, and conscientiousness toward all living beings. This clearly includes animals, and later in the text the practice of not injuring even seeds and plants is also mentioned. Other ethical practices followed by the practitioner include not taking anything for themselves that has not been given as an offering, and avoiding lies and deceptive speech (as well as malicious gossip, harsh words, and idle chatter). The central disciplines include giving up sexual activity, eating just one meal a day, avoiding entertainments, giving up jewelry and fragrances, avoiding the use of high and luxurious beds, and not keeping or using money. The text then goes into more specifics including not owning any farmland, not owning any animals, not getting involved in any business such as running errands or conveying messages, and not getting involved in any buying or selling. Finally, the practitioner is described as content with simple robes for the body's protection and alms food for nourishment, and not needing to own anything else.

Only after setting out this solid foundation of ethical and behavioral prescriptions, does the text move on to the ideal mental attitudes that should be cultivated. The practitioner is said to maintain a state of careful awareness and mindful observation throughout all their various daily activities, watching out for, and letting go of, any craving, longing, attachment, or aversion that arises in response to any sensory impressions or process of thought.

Next, there is a description of where a practitioner should live, which is basically any secluded, peaceful place in natural surroundings. Particular suggestions include residing in the forest at the foot of a tree, on a mountain, in a ravine, or in a cave on a hillside. Also mentioned is residing in a charnel ground (where bodies are cremated) - this would have made a good camp as they were quite common to find near almost every village, and there would be little disturbance there (most people avoiding them due to their inauspicious ambiance). The practitioner's daily life is then described as consisting of a morning trip into a town or village to collect alms food, and then returning to camp to engage in meditational practices.

Finally, after these additional guidelines for practical living, there is some description of actual meditation practice. First, the practitioner is to observe if there are any hindrances in the mind, and, if so, to work on letting them go. These include longing for sensual pleasures; holding on to ill will, hatred or anger (to be countered with compassionate thoughts toward all beings); feelings of dullness or drowsiness (to be countered with clear, wakeful attention); restlessness, irritation, or remorse (countered with cultivating a sense of peaceful stability); and feelings of doubt and uncertainty (countered with a careful review of the teachings one has learned). When these hindrances are resolved, the practitioner is said to enter into the first stage of meditation, which involves reflection and contemplation (presumably on the core teachings of how suffering arises and how it is released). This stage is said to be characterized by a joy arising from the peace of seclusion. When reflection and contemplation subside, the second stage of meditation arises which is characterized by an internal quiet and an apprehension of unity; it is said to produce a joy derived from being absorbed in concentration. As grosser levels of pleasure fade away, the third stage emerges featuring a sense of equanimity, and a very subtle mindful awareness; here there is a joy pervading the body. Finally there is a fourth stage beyond any distinctions of joy or suffering where peaceful equanimity is fully matured and pervades one's consciousness. At this point

the practitioner's mind is completely clarified, and with unhindered vision the truth of suffering, how it arises with craving, and how it ceases when craving ceases, becomes clearly and deeply apparent, and thus the spiritual path is fulfilled.

What is clear from this portrait of a practitioner's life is that the final success in meditation, which provides the ultimate freedom from suffering or discontent, is fundamentally grounded in, and enabled by, a life of disciplined simplicity and profound ethical sensitivity. Meditation doesn't happen in a vacuum - the considerations that shape the more mundane activities and decisions of one's life, and that are suggested by the first five parts of the Eightfold Path, are essential to the fruitfulness of meditational insight, represented by the last three parts of the path.

The Shramanyaphala Sutra, then, covers all the parts of the Eightfold Path, and in a careful sequence. Its beginning - with the practitioner hearing and being inspired by wise teaching, then reflecting, in the light of that teaching, on the unwholesomeness of conventional society and one's own participation in it, and finally making a resolution to follow a new way of life - corresponds to the limbs of "right views" and "right resolution." The next section lays out a detailed account of what makes up wholesome ethical behavior - basically, a great care taken not to harm other beings, either physically, or even emotionally through uncaring or self-serving speech. Self-centered ambitions toward material accumulation or social power is likewise relinquished, as the true path of contentment is recognized to be nurtured by the opposite kind of life - living in voluntary poverty, immersed in calm natural surroundings, and devoting oneself to meditational practices. This section corresponds to the limbs of "right speech", "right action", and "right livelihood". "Right mindfulness" and "right effort" are applied to all one's daily activities, but perhaps take on their most specific application in the final description of meditation practice, together with "right concentration".

In revealing the final "fruit" of renunciant life, the liberation from discontent, it is important to note that there is no "content" of liberating wisdom specified, no esoteric doctrine spelled out which contains the formula for final realization. After the four stages of meditation (dhyana) are experienced, there is simply an unhindered clarity and openness - in that refined state the simple truth that we began with - that craving is suffering - is nakedly apparent, as is the awareness that there is no need, and has never been a need, to crave.

Although the authors of later Buddhist texts sometimes tried to embellish the final realization of the path with various arcane doctrines to satisfy the philosophical demands of their readership, the true experience of liberation is perhaps best left unfabricated - simply because it is not an idea to elaborate, it is a direct awareness to experience. It is, in fact, the simplest awareness - the momentary, palpable taste of being alive. Because our minds are so often consumed with habitual thoughts of likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, plans and schemes, and all the various desires and attachments that make up the narrative of our fabricated self-image, we can hardly ever find the open perceptual space to actually appreciate what it feels like to be fully alive in the present. It makes sense, then, that if we want that openness to flourish, we need to make a fundamental change in how we live our lives so as to remove the influences that tend to fill up our minds with all kinds of craving. As the Shramanyaphala Sutra makes clear, the simplification of one's way of life is of one piece

with the simplification of our consciousness - after all, our consciousness is active in, and deeply affected by, our mundane daily activities as much as in our sessions of meditation. When our way of life becomes conducive to clarity, to peace, and to compassion, our minds can begin to let go of the compulsions of a self-centered worldview. Then, refined through meditation practice, we can finally see clearly that there is no self separate from the unlimited universe of present awareness, there is no “me” that is lacking something, no reason to crave anything, and nothing to obtain anyway. Thus the root of dissatisfaction disintegrates.

In the continuum of renunciation that extends from giving up our conventional roles in society, to giving up our conventional self-idea in our meditations, it is the practical, ethical, daily life renunciations that are primary (come first) in Buddhist tradition, as we’ve seen above. They pave the way for the subtler renunciations of mind (which, in turn, make the way-of-life renunciations all the more natural and easy). In addition, it is the way-of-life renunciations that most directly affect the largest number of other beings - for example, a more profound ethical conduct rooted in a simpler way of life is what will most immediately help our entire planet avoid the approaching environmental crisis.

Unfortunately, it is the way-of-life renunciations that are least emphasized in contemporary spiritual practice communities, and, actually, the subject is often actively avoided. For this reason, there is a strong need to address this issue, and return way-of-life renunciation to its central place in our spiritual practice. Let’s now examine in more detail the various guidelines and recommendations developed in the Buddhist tradition for creating a renunciant way of life - a life that is conducive to awakened mind, to awakened society, and to a healthy and happy community of all beings.

THE TEN PRECEPTS

As the Buddhist tradition developed, many of the behavioral recommendations we encountered in the Shramanyaphala Sutra became codified as “precepts” - rules or guidelines to be followed by those on the Buddhist path. Their acceptance became so widespread and fundamental to Buddhist culture that still today “taking the precepts”, or agreeing to follow them, is the official way to “become a Buddhist” in all the various Buddhist schools around the world. There are many different sets of precepts, but the simplest, probably oldest, and most universally upheld among all the schools, and for all levels of practitioner, are these five: not taking the life of any living creature, not taking what is not given, avoiding sexual misconduct, avoiding false speech, and refraining from intoxicating substances. All practitioners on the Buddhist path, whether householder or renunciant, are expected to observe these precepts, although how they are interpreted, and how strictly they are followed, has great variation among different schools, and, of course, among different individuals.

For those who wish to devote their whole lives to the spiritual path by following the example of the Buddha’s way of life, as a renunciant, there are an additional five precepts: not taking food after midday (after the meal collected on almsround); refraining from dancing and musical entertainments; refraining from the use of perfumes and jewelry; avoiding high and luxurious beds; and refraining from accepting money. Most of these precepts, like the first five, we can recognize as having been mentioned in the Shramanyaphala Sutra. Today, all

ten of these precepts are agreed to be followed by those who undergo the “novice” or preliminary ordination as a Buddhist monk or nun, in most traditions.

For those schools that have a secondary or “full” ordination, there is, additionally, a much lengthier set of rules that must be followed - over two hundred for monks and over three hundred for nuns. This more extensive group of rules, called the “Pratimoksha” (“conducive to liberation”), are proscriptions that delineate the life of monks and nuns in often minute detail, and they generally reflect a context of settled institutional monasticism. This orientation is shown by the pronounced attention they give to regulating the interactions between the ordained clergy of monastic communities and their lay patrons and supporters - ensuring that the monks behave according to acceptable norms in order to earn and maintain the respect and support of the laity. They also express a concern with behavior that supports the orderly structure within the monastic institution itself, including patterns of authority and hierarchy. These are concerns that mostly do not seem relevant or particularly helpful to me in the project of imagining a new spiritual movement for our times. I feel we need to inspire our larger society to consider new, alternative models of living - models that challenge established institutions, not serve to support them. Also, many of these Pratimoksha rules are fairly specific to historical Asian cultural contexts, which again makes them less relevant for our purposes. So I won’t go into them much in this essay, but, because of their prominent role in the historical development of Buddhism, a few more observations about them might be useful.

Many traditional Buddhists don’t question the central authority of the Pratimoksha, as they have been considered orthodox in many schools for several centuries, and are said to have been original to the historical Buddha. There is strong reason to doubt this attribution, however - the most obvious reason is that the context of settled monasticism that they assume is a life very different from that celebrated in the earliest texts of the tradition - that of the “forest renunciant” who lived alone or in small groups, and at least somewhat secluded from the activities of village or urban life. The life story of the Buddha, himself, depicts him in a way that fits clearly with the picture of the forest renunciant, not the institutional monk.

Even in the schools that most value the Pratimoksha, there is a story preserved about the Buddha that serves to question the revered status of these codes: when the Buddha was asked if all the many rules that he had approved during his career needed to be followed in the future, he replied that only the “most important” needed to be kept. Amongst the more conservative elders there was doubt as to which ones were the most important, and so all were preserved just to make sure. Perhaps it’s time we give the advice of the Buddha around this issue a little more attention.

However we feel about the Pratimoksha, the simpler, and undoubtedly older, codes of the ten precepts can prove very useful in our exploration of the possibilities for a new spiritual movement. They contain a clear universal relevance, as their concerns of non-harm, altruism, simplicity, and humility are essential values we need to be cultivating today. It is possible, of course, to treat them only cursorily, interpreting them in a way that doesn’t challenge our already established patterns and habits of life, so that they are fairly easy and comfortable to accept. This is particularly true of the first five, which are the most widely known and adopted. But if we explore the deeper implications of these codes, and honestly consider how they

might be applied to the concerns of our contemporary world, we will discover that they have the potential to revolutionize our lives, and, in fact, challenge the fundamental assumptions of conventional global civilization. Let's look at them one by one.

The First Precept

The precept not to kill, when limited to other humans, is one that all of us would readily accept as morally essential, and one most of us would like to think that we follow. But even within this narrow scope (limited to human beings), there is the challenging issue of how we respond to our culture's socially sanctioned practice of human killing - namely warfare, and the military institution that enables it. National self-defense is often cited as an ethical rationale for warfare, but even if we believe that this idea might have some merit, we must face the reality that few, if any, of the recent global wars have much to do with defense (especially on the part of the United States), and very much to do with the violent ambition to control land, resources, and markets. I assume that relatively few practicing Buddhists are in the military in the US (perhaps more in Asia), but those that are must certainly face the obvious issue of contradicting this most basic precept, at least by the tacit support of the use of violence, if not the direct practice of it in battle. For the rest of us, there is the less direct, but still crucial, issue that we support military violence when we pay for it with our taxes. We might think we have no choice, but, of course, we do - we can refuse to pay. There is, in fact, an organized movement to refuse paying federal taxes for this reason - the War Tax Resisters League - and a few prominent Buddhist teachers have advocated for taking this stand. (One simple strategy that avoids any legal issues, and should be natural in a Buddhist context, is to keep your income low enough so that you aren't required to pay any taxes in the first place). Besides our financial support, we must also consider how we support the social acceptance of military violence when we condone "patriotism" (at least in its military aspects), or the glorification of military service.

This precept, however, is not meant to apply only to the killing of humans - it clearly prohibits the killing of all other living beings as well. Here is a much more vast issue that directly challenges all of us, and concerns our everyday decisions. In our present society millions of sentient beings - sensitive, aware, and conscious animals fully capable of feeling fear and pain - are being traumatized, brutalized, and slaughtered every single day (over 150 million worldwide, over 27 million in the US alone, each day), with the full legal and financial support of our government, and the social approval and financial support of most of our population. Most of us are certainly capable of empathy and compassion for animals, as evidenced in our care of pets, so we must assume that the social acceptance of the cruel confinement and mass slaughter of farm animals are simply a result of unquestioned habit and social conditioning, bolstered by the fact that this animal slaughter, at least in the more fully industrialized countries, is hidden from sight from most of us. For those in the meat, dairy and egg industries, of course, the motive for continuing the confinement and slaughter is monetary profit.

Scientifically, we now know that there is no nutritional need for animal products, as confirmed by the most prominent nutritional institutes, and, in fact, the medical consensus

now admits (in unfortunately limited venues) that a diet high in animal products contributes substantially to the many serious health epidemics widespread in the wealthier countries where such food is abundant (heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and cancer to name a few). Of perhaps even greater concern, there is now strong evidence that animal industries are responsible for more climate-changing carbon pollution, deforestation, and species extinction than any other single source on the planet. Changing one's diet to be free of animal products is thus likely to be the most important lifestyle change that an individual could make to reduce one's negative impact on our global ecology, to say nothing of how much it would reduce the needless suffering and death of countless living beings.

Given this reality, it is somewhat astonishing that many in the Buddhist population consider meat, or other animal product consumption, as an acceptable practice within their spiritual path. A common defense of this practice is that in the Pratimoksha regulations for mendicant monks, the Buddha is said to have allowed the consumption of meat under certain conditions. With careful consideration, however, we must admit this to be a problematic justification, for several reasons. First, one should take into account that the avoidance of meat eating was likely an already commonly understood practice for spiritual renunciants in the cultural context of the Buddha's time (as it remains in India to this day); most donors would have been aware of this and would not likely offer meat to a mendicant monk (even those few who might have had meat to spare). After all, the precept against killing, prominently emphasized throughout the Buddhist tradition and recommended for all people (not just renunciants) clearly supports the idea that it is best for us to live without killing and consuming animals. Secondly, the details of the monk's regulation concerning the acceptance of meat stipulates that meat cannot be accepted if the monk suspects that the animal was killed intentionally for the monk, or if the monk was witness to the killing (which might imply the killing was made with the monk in mind, or at least that the monk had some knowledge and consent of it). This actually conveys a strong message against the morality of meat eating; it is certainly not an encouragement. The regulation functions to ensure that the monk would not be a promoting influence on the killing of animals, allowing meat to be accepted only if a household happened to already have had meat to spare before the monk appeared (meat which might, in the Indian climate, soon go bad). It really amounts to an allowance to avoid waste, and perhaps also to help ensure that the mendicant, whose food security was tenuous at best, would receive enough nourishment (one who refused too much might not). How this allowance can be used to justify the purchase of animal products today - an action which directly supports and endorses the killing of animals - and especially in contexts far removed from the practice of mendicancy, seems to involve a substantial twisting of the intentions in the Buddhist codes, and an abandonment of the clear spirit of nonviolence enshrined in this first precept.

In addition, we should remain aware that we really don't know what the actual practice of the Buddha and his original community was concerning this issue of accepting meat. It is certainly possible that they chose to avoid it completely, as other renunciant orders did at the time, and as would be a natural expression of the injunction against killing any living being. The Pratimoksha regulations as we have them today, which contain the conditional allowance for accepting meat as an offering, are the result of a long process of editing and development

that occurred during the first few centuries of Buddhist history. During this time, a settled monastic institution was growing and becoming more integrated into the life of the surrounding society - the scholar-monks in these institutions, who wrote the rule books, would naturally express their concerns in those rules. As already mentioned, one of the main concerns of institutional monasticism was making sure the order of monks was acceptable, and never offensive, to their lay supporters. This would certainly favor softening, or avoiding altogether, any allowances for refusing offerings - care was needed to make sure the donors would not feel judged or criticized in their dietary or behavioral choices.

With the massive increase in animal suffering, abuse, and killing in the modern world, the avoidance of the issue of eating animals can hardly be seen as ethically acceptable, if it ever was, just because of the fear of possibly causing offense. With the awareness, as well, of the incredible damage wrought by the animal industry on our planet's ecosystem, the move away from animal products should become an imperative for any responsible human being, let alone those committed to spiritual maturation.

One more point might be raised about contemporary Buddhist attitudes concerning animals and our diet - the question of dairy and eggs. The schools of Buddhism that have traditionally shown the greatest concern for extending compassion to animals, and thus refusing to eat them, were the East Asian communities of the Mahayana tradition. These schools have eaten and promoted a vegan diet for centuries, but amongst their Japanese and now western offspring, this practice has been disappearing. In the modern western versions of these schools there is often a practice of avoiding meat, at least at communal events and retreats, but not much concern about, and perhaps not much awareness of, the suffering and death caused by the use of dairy and eggs. With the modern industrial dairy industry there is arguably more suffering imposed on dairy cows than what beef cattle have to endure - there is generally more confinement, the continual inducement of pregnancy, the repeated separation of the calf from the mother, the slaughter of the calves for the veal industry, health issues around an unnaturally increased milk production, and of course, the slaughter of the cow early in its life, as soon as milk production lessens. Most of these issues apply to organic as well as conventional dairy. (We might also consider how we break the next precept - against taking what is not given - when we take the milk from cows that they would naturally give to their calves). As for eggs, the living conditions for conventional laying hens are considered the most inhumane in the entire animal industry, and, of course, slaughter follows their short lives as soon as egg production slows (male chicks born to breeding chickens, of course, are quickly "discarded"). Free-range chickens have somewhat improved living conditions, but over-crowding is still intense, and the killing necessary to maintain "successful" operations still applies. The treatment of any animals in a commercial animal product "factory", whether conventional or labelled "organic" or "free range," will generally fall far below what most sensitive observers would feel comfortable with (but, of course, few of us ever see what goes on). Most of the information about how these animals are treated is fairly easy to find, however - just a few minutes on the internet - so the lack of interest in doing so (or the fear of finding out) among the members of Buddhist and other spiritual communities, indicates an important area of neglect in contemporary spiritual circles that deserves attention.

The Second Precept

In looking at the second precept - not to take what is not given - we can observe a similar phenomenon as with the first: a casual reading of the precept doesn't raise much of a challenging issue, but a deeper look reveals important and even revolutionary implications. Few of us in spiritual communities condone conventional stealing or think of ourselves as thieves. But if we are willing to consider ways our ordinary behavior might be supportive of stealing, at least indirectly, we begin to face some important and challenging issues.

Most of us buy products regularly that come from large, often transnational corporations, or at least have distant origins, and we have little idea of how the labor and resources were secured for our purchase. With even just a little research, we can discover that land and resources are very often seized through force from poorer communities around the world by large business interests - thinly veiled pretenses are used, and the acquisitions are secured with financial rewards flowing freely to agreeable local politicians or selected tribal "leaders". Oil, mining, cattle, and wood products industries are notorious for this, and their final products are ubiquitous on store shelves or at the gas pump. Paying extremely marginal wages in poorer regions is also very common, and local populations who have had their land and former livelihoods taken from them find they have little choice but to work for the industry that has replaced the local traditional economy, even if the work is unhealthy and the pay little. Outright slave labor still exists as well, as is notorious, for example, in the chocolate industry, where African children are abducted and forced to work in cocoa plantations, and these plantations then sell to the big chocolate corporations. Are we not participating in stealing when we support such corporations by buying their products, even when we might not know the details, but we willingly neglect to find out?

This is all without mentioning a much vaster issue - the stealing of resources like clean water, clean air, and intact forests, or other ecosystems, from all the animals that need it to survive, and also from future generations of humans. The incredible amount of luxury and comfort available in wealthier countries, and the enormous excess of resources that it involves, can be seen, in large part, as a direct result of a thievery committed against poorer populations, and to an even greater extent, from the natural world. Can we really consider ourselves innocent of this massive thievery while we enjoy the luxury it provides, and support it financially?

It might be argued that it is too difficult to investigate the practices of all the players in our complicated industrial-consumer networks every time we want to buy something. And that is certainly true enough - the way our purchases affect the rest of the world is mostly hidden from us, and that's one of the reasons the system is so "successful." However, with a little education, we can become fairly confident that there are almost always unwholesome practices involved in the production of our corporate purchases - in every fueling at the gas pump, in every new electronic gadget, even in every disposable plastic package. But the situation is not hopeless - there is something we can do about it. We might not have the time, or interest, to investigate corporate practices, but we can choose to lessen what we buy.

Particularly we can minimize, or eliminate, corporate products, and for those things we really feel we need to buy, we can choose more local, and less energy intensive options.

The Third Precept

The third precept - avoiding sexual misconduct - concerns a subject that seems more personal than the first two, and we might think, at first, that it is less likely to yield global implications. But, as we'll see, exploring this subject uncovers a host of fundamental issues about how we relate to our body (and, by extension, to the natural world), how we understand gender relations, how we think of the family as a building block of community and society, and how all of these relate to a renunciant life.

For householders this precept has traditionally meant to avoid sexual relations with people married to others, or those who are otherwise deemed inappropriate partners by societal standards. Of course, societal standards vary tremendously across cultures, both historically and in the contemporary world, so this leaves the specifics of the precept pretty open. And then there are those of us that might disagree with our particular society's standards, often with good reason, as these standards commonly contain patriarchal and misogynous influences. In many contemporary cultures the social significance and importance of marriage has decreased dramatically, and in some modern subcultures, at least, the question of monogamy as a universal ideal has been questioned, and contrasted with a new appraisal of the healthy possibilities of "open" (or "polyamorous") relationships. As views of what constitutes wholesome sexual relations, and thus who is an appropriate partner, transform and become enriched by the various perspectives in our more global culture, a Buddhist practitioner needs some way to evaluate moral behavior in this realm. Hopefully the intuitive ethical imperative of causing the least harm, and of nurturing the deepest spiritual maturation in oneself and others, can be the guiding light in our appraisals of what is healthy or unhealthy in sexual matters. For reflecting on this, the other four precepts can help us find a way - we can be careful to avoid violence (in all its many forms), taking what is not given, being deceptive, and being irresponsibly intoxicated.

For renunciants, the wording of this precept is different, and it is traditionally understood to mean avoiding sexual activity completely, as we saw recommended in the Shramanyaphala Sutra. (Although the central term used for celibacy in the precept - "brahmacharya" - actually means something like "following the absolute", and it is only an interpretation to read it as meaning celibacy. It is interesting to note that such an imprecise term is used for this precept, and one that is borrowed from Upanishadic literature. More on this in a bit). For obvious reasons, an injunction to lifelong celibacy is a daunting requirement for most people, even for serious spiritual aspirants, and we can assume it has been so throughout history and across cultures. Why have most orthodox schools of Buddhism made this requirement so important for its clergy throughout Buddhist history?

This question becomes particularly pronounced when we consider modern views of sexuality. In the contemporary liberal worldview that is prevalent among today's practitioners, especially in western countries, sex is considered natural and healthy, and, in fact, its suppression is seen as likely to cause stress, or even physical and mental health conditions.

It is understood, of course, that there are also problems with sex - addictions and obsessions, for example - but it can be argued that we have those issues with food as well, and we don't respond by refusing to eat, instead we learn to eat healthily, appropriately, and in balance. So what's behind the strong prohibition of sex for Buddhist renunciants?

On careful reflection we must admit that there are some important considerations about sex that differentiate it from other natural human functions like eating, and which might lend support for the practice of spiritual celibacy. For one, unlike issues with eating, imbalances with sex have immediate and often dramatic consequences on another person - so the potential for harming others is greater. In most civilizations throughout history, and still in our own time, women have most often been the victims of oppressive sexual practices, whether direct, violent abuse or the more pervasive issues of objectification. The requirement of celibacy, then, would, theoretically, prevent the community of monks from being directly involved in this kind of oppression. This would certainly enhance their ethical reputation, but, of course, celibate monks might still be just as likely as anyone to perpetuate sexist stereotypes of women, or even misogynous cultural perspectives.

Of course the most biologically important consequence of sexual activity is its potential to produce offspring, and here, perhaps, we can find the most crucial reason for the promotion of celibacy. Having children, and taking on the duty to provide for them, has traditionally defined the life of a householder - not having children, (or no longer providing for them by leaving the family), then, has usually been seen as the key defining element of one who "leaves home", a monk or other type of renunciant. Working to provide resources to support a family has historically been understood as incompatible with full-time spiritual practice, and this, perhaps, is the central reason that Buddhist orthodoxy has so strongly required celibacy of its clergy.

But is it true that taking care of a family, even in a materially simple (but adequate) fashion, means that we won't have time for full engagement with our spiritual work? We might certainly question this assumption in today's world, but even in older historical eras it was not necessarily the case, at least as a universal rule. We might also question if it was really the concern for allocating more time and energy to spiritual efforts that motivated monastic rule-makers in their demand that renunciants keep separate from families - it might also have involved a concern for keeping the practitioner's devotion and attention, as well as material and labor support, focused on the monastic institution, and not dispersed through families into the wider community. Maintaining a strict and obvious behavioral difference between monastics and "lay people" would also certainly be helpful in supporting the cultural practice of the lay community giving donations to the religious institution.

However we feel about these issues of family life and its effect on spiritual practice, we must admit one central positive aspect of not having children - population control. Although this might not have been of central concern to historical Buddhist communities, it is certainly of concern to us today. Here, at least, we have an issue involved with this precept that has definite global implications in our contemporary world.

There are several other ways of understanding the practice of spiritual celibacy, and its potential benefits, that we might consider. There is the obvious one that it might help relieve us of what we must admit is one of our strongest desires - the craving for sexual experience,

and also the related, but less physical, longing for the emotional support and sense of belonging attributed to having a partner. We can certainly observe that these longings often keep us from remaining focused on the present - and thus from appreciating the gifts that we already have, and the belonging that already surrounds us. Such longings, then, are often involved with the formation of feelings of personal inadequacy and unworthiness. Also we must admit that the pursuit of sexual encounter, as well as the pursuit of a partner, can lead us into many unwholesome entanglements, and eventually to much disillusionment and disappointment. To be free of all this would certainly be a relief. But, of course, it is an open question as to how well a practice of celibacy will actually free us of these longings, or whether deprivation will just increase frustration, or the power of fantasy. There is also the crucial question of whether a sexually active life must inevitably include these drawbacks, or whether they are just a sign that more learning and growing must be done before we can incorporate sexual expression into our lives in a healthier way - a way that allows us to remain centered in the present, in touch with equanimity, and aware of our inherent belonging to the universe.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for the practice of celibacy is the aspiration to be available to compassionately serve all people, even all beings, without the bias of an exclusive affection for one person, or the hindrance of a special obligation to such a person. We all can probably relate to the experience of feeling outside of the full attention and engagement of someone who is instead absorbed in a focus on their romantic partner - and how we might aspire to transcend such exclusive and biased patterns, patterns perhaps fed by a kind of self-centeredness, through our spiritual practice. But, again, we must ask if this spiritual maturation is best cultivated through sexual abstinence, or through other forms of understanding and working with sexuality.

In our reflection on the issue of celibacy it is important to take into consideration some of the less wholesome reasons that Buddhist orthodox institutions (as well as other orthodox religious traditions) have been so interested in demanding sexual abstinence from their clerical representatives. One unfortunate trait that often appears in many religious texts that promote celibacy is misogyny - women are often objectified as the source of spiritual pollution for male practitioners. We can find the idea of the very existence of women as being the cause of the spiritual downfall of male monastics in various Buddhist texts. Even with the origination of the first women's renunciant order in the world - certainly a positive contribution of Buddhism towards respect for women - we have the unfortunate origin story (whose historical authenticity is very questionable, to say the least) that the Buddha was resistant to its formation, and predicted that it would eventually bring the downfall of the entire Buddhist tradition.

Even more common in Buddhist literature is a denigration of the human body and its functions, sometimes even encouraging an attitude of disgust. These descriptions are given in the context of promoting a detachment to the body for the purpose of becoming free of self-obsession, but the implications of such a perspective for our attitudes toward nature and natural processes in general are not, perhaps, the most positive. Interestingly, these sentiments seem to parallel the Buddha's negative attitude to the body in the ascetic period of

his life story, as if they don't fully understand and embrace the change of approach he underwent just before awakening.

We might keep in mind that both of these negative depictions - of women and of the body - also occur in some darker aspects of our Christian cultural inheritance and literature. Many studies have been made showing an identification of women with the body, with body functions (particularly sexual), and with physical nature more generally, throughout the world's religious literature - in the more patriarchal cultures, such as those in which both Buddhism and Christianity grew, they are usually depicted in a negative light. Celibacy can be one way, then, to express the rejection of the feminine, and also of the body, and even the whole of the natural world, while pursuing an abstract, disembodied ideal of spiritual purity divorced from physicality (and thus necessarily residing in conceptual thought, with its inherent dualities and conflicts). This is certainly not the practice of the Buddha, but it can be one pitfall of a narrow perspective on sexual matters in spiritual practice.

Another issue we might consider is how enforced celibacy amongst the monastic community served the interest of the monastic institution by clearly separating the monk from the lay person, giving the monk a higher level of prestige, and thus providing a justification for lay donations to the monastery (as mentioned briefly above). Is this something that we wish to perpetuate? Why exactly are celibates more worthy of donations than non-celibates? Is it simply that most people would find it hard to be celibate, or just don't want to, and those that do have an aura of respectability because of the difficulty or relative rarity of their deprivation? Is undergoing deprivation itself worthy of respect? Or is it that a stigma of immorality surrounds sexuality for so many post-tribal civilizations, and thus those abstaining are seen as more noble? The crucial question, of course, is whether celibacy is really the most wholesome and helpful option for all or most renunciants, for their own development or for their impact on those around them. Few, I think, would say that simply abstaining from sex is the characteristic that makes a full-time spiritual contemplative worthy of respect, able to contribute positively to their culture, and worthy of support. And yet abstinence has been used as perhaps the most centrally defining characteristic for monastics for centuries, in many cultures. This, I think, must be deeply questioned.

All in all, I feel that a new appraisal and creative understanding of this precept regarding sexuality is in order for a contemporary audience. With our present society's growing feminist awareness that is moving our social values away from exclusive male perspective, and also with our more sophisticated understanding and range of options around birth control, many of the dangers that sexuality has traditionally presented to spiritual cultivation have been reduced or eliminated. Many practitioners today, particularly in the West, are beginning to take for granted that the less restricted, more flexible interpretation of the precept (the one traditionally intended for householders) - not to "abuse" or "misuse" sexuality, however we might interpret that - is the one most practitioners are going to choose from this point on (at least in the West), and there is an understanding that this is a healthy choice. This seems very reasonable to me. But along with this conclusion there seems to be a general assumption that we are thereby dispensing with the whole career of the full-time renunciant altogether - a conclusion that I feel is unnecessary and unhelpful.

As is clear in these pages, I see a revival of renunciant values and practices as a tremendous support, if not an essential element, in the transformation of society towards true sustainability and health, as well as a key factor in elevating our spiritual development to its full potential. It might not be realistic to expect substantial numbers of modern practitioners to adopt celibacy, and, indeed, it might not be desirable that they do - but we needn't therefore throw away our vision of a movement of full-time practitioners dedicated to a radically simple life. I, for one, find no contradiction in a materially renunciant way of life that includes sexual activity - and, in fact, we have extensive historical examples of just such an approach to spiritual practice. Perhaps the most obvious is the figure of the tantric "siddha" from medieval India, in both the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. There is, as well, some evidence of forest renunciant couples, often with children, in the earliest times of the shramana movement, even before the career of the Buddha. Many examples of non-celibate, but renunciant full-time practitioners, often with children, can also be found up to the present day in the various Buddhist traditions of the Tibetan-influenced Himalayan regions, and in the Tibetan diaspora.

We might even be so bold as to question how central or ubiquitous celibacy was in the early community of full-time Buddhist renunciants. If we keep in mind that the written accounts and accepted histories of Buddhist origins have all been passed through the editorial filter of the later Buddhist monastic institution, with its particular agendas, we cannot say much for certain about how the various wandering mendicants from the early days, living and meditating in their forest camps on the edge of town, might have expressed their inherent sexuality. It is intriguing, in this respect, to look at the surprisingly unspecific, open-ended word used as the core of this precept - "brahmacharya." This has usually been taken to mean celibacy in later tradition, but we might consider whether this could have been understood differently in earlier periods. It certainly can be understood differently today: the modern Indian spiritual teacher Vimala Thakar maintains, in a commentary on the sage Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (which includes an almost identical precept), that the word "brahmacharya" literally means moving or living (charya) in an awareness of ultimate creative intelligence, or divinity (brahma), and should certainly not be reduced to such a narrow rule as avoiding sexual activity - which was simply an inaccurate later interpretation of misguided commentators.

As for the question of population control, we must certainly admit that our present inflated population is an important factor in the ongoing degradation of the earth's biological ecosystems, and anyone not strongly drawn to have their "own" children would be wise to abstain. In our contemporary culture, however, the choice to have children has become largely independent of the choice to be sexually active or not, and so this issue no longer has much to do with the question of celibacy. But even if we want to just look at the spiritual and ethical question of having children or not, we must consider that an average American uses *forty times* the resources of an average African (or similar less industrialized inhabitant of our planet) - the problem really resides with how those of us in consumer cultures are living. Even with a substantially reduced world population (but with most continuing to live, or wanting to live, like an average American) we will still be using up our resources, maxing out our pollution, and facing serious trouble. On the other hand, if we all dramatically reduced our consumption habits, our present numbers could be sustainable (or even the projected

numbers in the next few decades). It is popular among denizens of wealthy countries, who don't want to question their extravagant uses of resources, to blame the problem on population growth - this really ends up putting the blame on poorer countries where the population growth is currently much greater (those same countries, of course, whose labor and resources wealthy countries have exploited to become wealthy in the first place). Instead we might develop the courage to look at ourselves and ask what we can change in our own lives to heal the problems of our communal home. Those spiritual renunciants who choose to have children could create communities of simple-living families, together raising simplicity pioneers to model a way forward.

The Fourth Precept

The fourth precept - avoiding false speech - has, like the others, a fairly simple meaning on first hearing, but reveals subtler and more challenging implications on closer examination. The primary spiritual usefulness of honesty might be described like this: if we are sincere about giving up the pursuit of personal advantage over others, of gaining more and more material goods, or of seeking higher status and enhanced reputation, then the motivation for lying (with the manipulation and disrespect for others that it implies) would actually disappear. So when we do catch ourselves telling untruths (or the more subtle version of exaggeration), we can be aware of the self-clinging habitual desires behind it, and work on letting them go by turning to more truthful speech.

This is a fairly traditional, and certainly useful, understanding of this precept. Might we also find some derivations and applications of this precept that directly reflect our modern predicament? When looking at the particular relevance of precepts for our contemporary society, it's been useful to look at how the problem the precept warns us about might have become institutionalized in our culture in a way that makes it hard to even notice. We saw this with the killing of animals in facilities hidden from our observation, which we nonetheless support with our purchases, or with the stealing of resources in far off lands that go into our products and our energy use. What about the institutionalization of dishonesty in our society? We might consider the barrage of advertising we are exposed to from the media sources we spend so much time with, as well as the fabrications of celebrity culture, and the biases of our news sources. When we give our time and attention to these influences (even our passive, or subliminal attention), are we not participating in the perpetuation of some kind of dishonesty, and even letting it shape our minds? Not to mention when we inevitably begin to spread it around as we socialize. Being very careful with what media messages we allow ourselves to be convinced by, or even exposed to, can be understood as a way to avoid participation in dishonesty.

Perhaps the most important manifestation of a culturally shared dishonesty we experience today is how most of us tend to ignore, deny, or suppress the problematic ethical implications and compromises inherent in so many of our mundane daily activities. In our habitual, and socially sanctioned, ways of living - particularly our patterns of consumerism - we are likely supporting many harmful industries and destructive practices, as we've seen. In Buddhist terms, we are contradicting several of the precepts, or at least their spirit, even

though we are socially encouraged to do so. If we refuse to reflect on this issue, to question it ourselves and raise it in discussions, are we not participating in a kind of routine dishonesty? It might be argued that dishonesty is the strongest mechanism that keeps us from realizing our dysfunction, both personal and global, and that the direct and honest facing of our problematic characteristics - our insecurities, anxieties, self-centered motivations, and resulting problematic behavior - is the greatest help in relieving us of them. By accepting and recognizing our delusions, and discovering their mistaken and unnecessary qualities, we become able to let them go. We might say that the spiritual revolution we so strongly need today is a call to total and open honesty in how we are living and what are its effects, both personally and globally, and that the solutions will naturally arise when we are willing to no longer hide.

The Fifth Precept

Exploring the fifth precept - avoiding intoxicants - can, once again, engender some uniquely modern issues to consider. The surface meaning - to refrain from using intoxicating substances such as alcohol and other drugs - reminds us of how the problems with such substances, particularly alcohol, have been around for millennia. Still, even when just considering alcohol, our contemporary culture has created new aspects that heighten the issue: the supply has become practically unlimited, and the marketing aggressive. When this is coupled with the breakdown of the cohesive community that has traditionally provided a sense of belonging and support, the fracturing of extended family, or even the nuclear family, and the lack of coherent direction in our occupational lives, we are left with a recipe for a serious and widespread alcohol abuse crisis in modern culture. Some people, of course, can use alcohol in a limited and relatively responsible way, but even these people, especially if they are spiritual practitioners interested in behavior that is compassionate towards all, might consider how one person's use of alcohol can influence those around them who might be struggling with addiction, or susceptible to it. Given the prevalence of the problem, a consistent disinterest in alcohol consumption might be the most responsible model to embody.

We must be very careful how the social acceptance of alcohol use has numbed our sensitivities to its often problematic effects on our spiritual practice, as well as our general psychological and physical health. As is well understood, alcohol intoxication temporarily covers over various fears and inhibitions that in a healthy spiritual practice will be faced and worked through - if alcohol is used regularly to bypass these tendencies, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to truly see through them. As well, we must admit that any regular urge to "escape" from our mundane consciousness by relying on an intoxicant is indicative of a lack of faith in our own abilities to fully appreciate our "ordinary" state, and experience the full wonder that is possible in the here and now. Finally, there is the obvious point that "under the influence" we tend to be less aware of others' needs, and more likely to transgress ethical conduct. For all these reasons, the precept against intoxicants should be taken seriously. Unfortunately, in many contemporary spiritual groups it is not, and some well-known teachers

themselves indulge in alcoholic behavior, inevitably influencing their students, and often not receiving the critical questioning, or the help, that the situation calls for.

Of course, the spectrum of intoxicating substances goes far beyond alcohol, and the variety has multiplied in modern times - including those that are socially sanctioned, and even pushed by our culture's "authorities" on mental health. Anti-depressants and other psychiatric pharmaceuticals can certainly provide a beneficial service to those who suffer from serious psychological ailments, especially those that are hard to treat in other ways, but the ease and frequency with which they are now prescribed should raise some serious concern. Are we as a society willing to work on psychological problems at the level of their underlying cause - including the work of restoring supportive networks of community, rethinking how we can support the more healthy raising of children, and how our deteriorating eating habits and other environmental factors are affecting our minds - or do we just want to make the problem "livable" with the quick but temporary "fix" of pharmaceuticals, which often leads to dependence, numerous side-effects, and a continuing long-term deterioration. (There is certainly a lot of money to be made that way).

Contemplative spiritual disciplines, such as that found in the Buddhist tradition, work largely by allowing all kinds of mental states, especially the difficult ones, to arise naturally, and, with patience and a clear awareness, seeing them just as they are in their quickly changing manifestations. With the power of still and focused observation, we can discover that we needn't react in habitual patterns, but can find new and healthier ways to respond to our mind's display. How might our regular use of pharmaceuticals and other "mood-enhancing" drugs interrupt or even prevent this process?

Some mind-affecting substances, on the other hand, don't have the effect of temporarily subduing problematic states, numbing our sensitivities, or "smoothing out the rough edges". Some substances actually seem to increase our focus and powers of observation, allowing both pleasurable and fearful experiences to strike us more intensely. These substances, often called psychedelics, are not generally habit-forming, and tend to encourage meditative inquiry more than pacify it. It is an open question whether to consider these substances as "intoxicants" in the traditional sense, and whether they are an impediment or a support to the spiritual path - perhaps they can be either at different times. (Certainly we must admit that many people in the modern west have come to engage in contemplative spiritual practices at least partly as a result of psychedelic experiences). But the issue of the craving for altered states mentioned earlier - the desire to escape from the mundane instead of patiently peering more deeply into it until its natural and wondrous nature becomes clear - still applies as a concern for the use of this class of mental medicine. And certainly these substances need to be approached with caution, as there are many examples of people, particularly with pre-existing psychological disturbances, who have had unhealthy mental conditions triggered by the use of psychedelics.

Finally, we need to consider a whole range of other intoxicants whose use is exploding across the planet, and which might, in the end, constitute the most serious mind-altering addictions in today's world. These intoxicants are not usually classed as "drugs", but their effect on us is no less profound. One group involves the processed "convenience" food (or "junk" food) more and more commonly eaten as a central part of the diet around the world -

many additives in these foods, including refined sugars, refined fats, and a number of artificially engineered ingredients, have been shown to have significant effects on our psychological health (not to mention on our more general health), especially among children, and are certainly addictive. How these foods can disrupt a mindful relationship to eating has been elaborated by a number of contemporary teachers, and how a poor diet can disrupt the general development of spiritual practice has been observed in the religious traditions of India and China (among other cultures) for centuries. But perhaps the most time-consuming and life-controlling addictions come not from anything we ingest at all, but rather from the electronic gadgets we are increasingly obsessed with in recent times. Television, computers, and now mobile phones (which are more used as mobile internet devices) are taking over more and more of our waking hours, and the time seems overdue for us to seriously begin questioning their effects on our mental health, particularly among children, and on our capacities for meditative engagement.

These five precepts, as we've seen, can yield profound and challenging questions about the way most of us currently live, when we interpret them in broad and creative ways. However, it is also, of course, possible to approach them on simply a surface level, accepting their most obvious meaning without much reflection, and in that way not feel much of a call to question or change one's way of life. This is likely to be at least one reason that these five precepts have been so widely and easily accepted through the ages. If we are sincere about finding ways to transform our lives so as to foster deep change in our own behavior, and in the behavior of the society around us, we might need more specific recommendations about how to live - guidelines that can apply the spirit and direction of these five foundational precepts in more concrete ways. Such guidelines would naturally focus more on the challenges of renunciation.

The next five precepts that follow the ones we've covered do just that. They complete the set of ten that are taken by novice monks and nuns, and they clearly have great antiquity in Buddhist history. Whereas the first five precepts are intended for all practitioners, and thus avoid specifying a particular way of life, these second five precepts are intended for those willing to embrace material renunciation as full-time practitioners, and they begin to lay out more concrete guidelines about what we should give up in order to more fully allow our spiritual aspirations to come to fruition, and to influence the world around us.

It might be noted here that there is another list of ten precepts common in Mahayana Buddhist tradition that share the same first five precepts, but whose second five precepts are totally different. This list arose in much later tradition, and probably in China - we can surmise that it reflected a growing focus on the practice of lay people, who wanted further precepts to guide them, but weren't prepared to make the renunciant choices asked of monks and nuns, which are specified in the older ten precepts. This alternate tradition, called the "Ten Bodhisattva Precepts" (first recorded in the Mahayana Brahmajala Sutra) uses recommendations for avoiding harmful states of mind and habits of speech that come from early Buddhist sources (from a particular list called "dasa kusala karma" - the "ten skillful actions"), and turns them into the second five precepts of their list of ten. As they avoid any specifically renunciant stipulations they became popular in Mahayana Buddhist societies

among the laity, although they were also taken by monks and nuns in addition to their more renunciant vows. (In Japan these precepts actually came to replace all other precepts, even for monks and nuns - thus initiating a process of ending the traditional Buddhist renunciant order and replacing it with a non-renunciant priestly clergy). As we are concerned here with considering the power and usefulness of the practice of renunciation in addressing the concerns of our day, we will focus on the original list of ten precepts that include the more specific and challenging renunciant guidelines.

The Sixth Precept

The sixth precept prohibits eating food after the main midday meal, which originally would have meant the meal that the renunciant had received as an offering on their morning almsround. This guideline served both as a teaching about eating an appropriate amount of food to avoid personal overindulgence, as well as a reminder to respect those who support us, and not ask for too much (for example, by going a second time into town later in the day for more food - instead one would travel on to the next town, and the next day collect alms from new people). We should keep in mind that eating one main meal a day was a guideline made in the context of the perpetually warm North Indian climate, and for renunciants who are often spending much of the day in meditation. Still, however we might adjust our food levels according to our needs (and they were, indeed, adjusted as Buddhism spread to other climates) the basic principles that we should be mindful about how much we eat, and that we benefit from eating during intentional and regular times, are still clearly valuable guidelines for all of us today.

In the wealthier countries of today's world, probably for the first time in history, there is a seemingly unlimited supply of food available for the majority at a relatively modest price (although often of very compromised quality) - this, combined with the stress and isolation often found in these same cultures, has produced an array of eating disorders. Overeating, and of particularly unhealthy foods, is the most common, and has resulted in an obesity epidemic that continues to grow, and to affect younger and younger children. Paradoxically, there is also a culturally shared valorization of very thin bodies (an ideal particularly aimed at women) and an obsession with dieting (sometimes reaching pathological levels in the conditions of anorexia and bulimia) which we might say is a societal impulse desperately searching for some kind of balance.

In most of the wealthier countries of the global north, pre-made, pre-packaged "convenience" foods have become the dominant source of calories, and the practice of relying on these products is spreading rapidly throughout the world. Easily and cheaply available, and designed to take advantage of our natural attraction for fat, sweet and salt, these foods encourage frequent and random snacking throughout the day, often unconnected to any planned or communal meal time. They can hardly help in creating a culture of attentive appreciation for the process of eating, or for the subtleties of flavor. (Convenience foods, of course, aren't designed to reward attentive awareness - they're formulated for immediate excitement and gratification, stimulating quick consumption, and leaving a desire for more, so that more is purchased). In addition, since the origins of these foods are so removed from the

personal realm of the consumer - we don't know where it comes from, how it was made, or by whom - we tend to value it less, we take it for granted, we become careless with it. In the United States, and similar "developed" countries, it's estimated that forty to fifty percent of the food produced or imported just ends up in the garbage. The cost of this waste (financially) is low to corporate producers, because it's paid by the cheap labor of poor farmers here or abroad, by the seizing of cheap land from older cultures, by the poisoning of the ecosystem and loss of fertile soil that results from industrial farming practices, and, of course, by the suffering and death of countless other creatures - both farm animals and wildlife "pests".

There is, thankfully, a growing awareness in our society of the devastation caused by industrial agribusiness, and a movement to develop and advocate for alternatives, such as smaller scale, local organic farming and a move toward a more plant-based diet. There is also an emerging field in contemporary spiritual discourse to address the more personal, psychological issue of unwholesome eating habits. What is needed, I think, is to develop the understanding that these two issues are intimately related, and that their solution will require an integrated response. A response that can be inspired by the reverential and mindful eating practices of early Buddhist renunciants.

The Seventh Precept

The seventh precept - refraining from dancing, music, and attending "entertainments" - might seem a bit austere to many of us, especially those of us who value music or dance highly, and still consider ourselves devoted spiritual practitioners. There are even those of us who actually use music and movement as some of our formal practices. In my own practice, for example, I use a form of singing as a type of meditation (a form that has been traditionally associated with meditative practice for centuries in India), and I also use a form of moving meditation that could be likened to dance (also traditionally practiced in a spiritual context). Many contemporary meditation enthusiasts are drawn to embrace both music and dance in their spiritual expression, and for centuries music and dance have played a central role in countless contemplative religious communities - the Sufi orders being, perhaps, the most notable among them. Although the Buddhist tradition isn't especially known for its music, chanting is a central part of the daily practice in almost all schools today, and sometimes it can be quite melodic. Drums and bells and gongs ring out from many temples as well, and the subtle and haunting melodies from such exquisite instruments as the Chinese Qin, or the Japanese bamboo flute, have been associated with Buddhist monks for hundreds of years. Even the Buddha is said to have used the analogy of tuning a string on a musical instrument to convey an important point about how to balance energy in our practice. So how come the stern prohibition here?

This precept, I feel, is bringing our attention not to the problematic nature of music and dance in themselves, but rather to the way they are often used. It is not the approaches to music or dance that help cultivate subtle attention, deep awareness, and contemplative appreciation that are being warned against, but those forms that are used for distraction, for immediate and habitual excitement and stimulation, and which generally are presented in order to make money. It is what we might call "commercial entertainment" that this precept is

addressing. And just like “convenience foods” these entertainments are designed to draw in quick interest, to excite, to “pass the time”, but not to deeply nourish or reward careful attention. In fact, they tend to leave the “consumer” with new habitual imprints of craving, new desire to have more of the same stimulation that had worked temporarily to distract them from more “mundane” states. It is no accident that this kind of entertainment creates recurrent desire and dependence - both convenience food and commercial entertainment are designed to draw in regular customers for the sake of profit.

Commercial music, of course, is a gigantic industry today, and those able to draw the attention of the populace, even for a short time, are rewarded with wealth and celebrity status. But music made primarily for money is rarely listened to with careful, focused attention, or at least not for very long. If it were, it would start to become obvious that there isn't much there besides catchy melodic cliches and familiar simplistic rhythms. (Just like convenience foods, which if savored with patient attention in the mouth, can soon reveal itself to be not so tasty after all, even for those habituated to it). Instead, this kind of entertainment (or food) is made to provide stimulation to the “background” of our daily lives, as we do other things. Just as we stuff junk food in our mouths while watching television, using the computer, having a conversation, or rushing about our errands, most of commercial music is most often listened to while doing other things at the same time - cleaning the house, chatting at a party, driving to work, exercising, or walking down the street. (Those last two examples explain the popularity of portable music devices and earphones). This level of exposure to background music facilitates a life of sensory multitasking, in which we take in many fields of sensory input at once, but are not able to focus deeply on any. As our capacity for quickly changing and constant sensory stimulation grows, we become more habituated, and begin to crave it, to feel uneasy without such stimulation. It can become harder to slow down, to do one thing at a time, and to learn how to reach deeper levels of attention. Much of this phenomena can apply to commercial movies and videos as well - although we might not do other activities as much while watching them, their own content induces a busy sensory experience, with their rapidly changing images accompanied by mood-creating soundtracks. And these forms of entertainment have become the dominant activity of our society's leisure hours.

It seems to me that frequent exposure to this kind of “entertainment” is not conducive to developing a meditative consciousness - the deepened and focused attention on the present moment which allows us to discover a more profound appreciation for its wonders. At the same time, the addiction to a constant stream of entertainment means the need to have the equipment to access it, and the money to buy that equipment, and a materially simple life becomes harder and harder to imagine.

In my own practice I try to listen to music only when I'm not doing anything else, and when I can really devote time and full attention to it. When we have that approach, we tend to select a quality of music that rewards such attention - offerings of heartfelt artistic creation that can hone our ability to focus, and to appreciate the subtleties of our sensory experience. (Often these creations will be works we ourselves are involved in, or our teachers and spiritual community, and, not requiring money, will more easily fit into a materially simple life). Similarly, I find it very important to be careful about what kind of movies and video I expose myself to - just as the food we ingest affects our health, the media we feed into our senses

affects our consciousness, creating imprints and habits, shaping our attractions and repulsions, and even affecting our ability to focus and clarify the mind. When considering giving a couple of hours of our life over to a video screen, we might ask if what we will watch might actually enrich our ability to fully taste the richness of this moment, or if it's just to "pass the time".

The Eighth Precept

The eighth precept - to not adorn the body with jewelry and cosmetics - reminds us that luxury items have a cost, both on ourselves and the world around us, and the craving for them is an unnecessary form of suffering that we burden ourselves with. These particular luxuries carry an additional burden: the desire for adornments usually arises from the urge to impress others - to enhance our prestige and status in an effort to gain social acceptance. To use them, then, is to feed our obsession with our self image, that illusory notion of a separated, individuated self that, in its ultimate isolation and loneliness, forms the heart of our suffering.

Like many of the habitual and unwholesome cravings that these precepts bring our attention to, this desire for adornments and cosmetic enhancement has been super-charged in our present advertising-saturated consumer world. A look at the sheer volume of ads concerning cosmetics, perfumes and jewelry in magazines, television and other media affirms their central place in our society's obsessions. Although much of this advertising is focused primarily on women, there are many products that are aimed at both sexes, especially when you consider the fairly new cosmetics called "deodorants" and "antiperspirants" that have achieved an aura in popular opinion of almost medical necessity (in just a few decades), or the bewildering volume and variety of hair-care products that are crowded on shower stall shelves in innumerable bathrooms. The case of the rise of deodorants, in particular, is illustrative of another facet of cosmetics - their ability to help us lie. As our culture has become more and more used to covering over the actual scent of the human body, and simultaneously more and more repulsed by it, we become ever more deeply invested in presenting an image of ourselves that is fundamentally fictitious - in denial of the natural reality of our embodied existence. Make-up, of course, is another obvious example. In this conflict between what we try to present to others (and even to ourselves), and what we know to be true, we encounter the suffering pointed out in the precept against lying. Not only are cosmetics involved in this dishonesty, and other adornments, but really all of the possessions that many of us collect in our conspicuous consumption culture as a desperate attempt to present to the world an image of ourselves that we know, in our hearts, to be an illusion.

All these consumer products, of course, exact a heavy toll on the environment, both in their production, and in their disposal. As for cosmetics and "body-care" products, their plastic containers contribute to serious ecological disruption which plastic "recycling" only very minimally mitigates, where it happens at all. Many of these products, as well, are tested on animals, causing severe pain and death (although slowly awareness of this issue is growing, and some companies are ending the practice). As for jewelry, one needs only to learn of the horrors in today's gold and diamond mining industry to understand the long reach of suffering

connected to our thirst for status. (Most of these mines are in poor countries and involve some of the most oppressive working conditions in the world). We are reminded again that those practices, customs and habits that we come to see have unwholesome and obstructive effects on our personal spiritual practice, also turn out to have harmful effects on the wider world of other beings. Fortunately, those practices, behaviors, and renunciations that support our own awakening, we find also nurture the welfare of all beings.

The Ninth Precept

The ninth precept - to avoid using high or luxurious beds - might seem a bit obscure, and its contemporary relevance not so clear. In fact, even the meaning of the piece of furniture here translated as "bed" is not clearly agreed upon by scholars, and some prefer "couch" or "sitting platform". Whatever the specific furniture, the general sense of this precept is usually understood to mean to avoid using items of prestige and luxury that one might desire out of pride and arrogance, or out of an urge to impress (somewhat like in the last precept), and instead to remain humble and sit or sleep on the ground like most people (at the time). This is certainly an important interpretation that we can assume was central to the original intention. But contemplating this precept further might lead to some interesting observations that can shed more light on its historical implications, and on its current possible applications.

High and luxurious beds, or couches for that matter, are some of the biggest, heaviest possessions that someone would own in traditional cultures, and they still lead the list of bulky belongings for those wealthy enough to have them today (although there's an expanding list of modern appliances that can compete; and then there's cars - more on that later). As such, they are a potent symbol of one's status, when that's gauged by the magnitude of one's possessions, as it often is. The most conspicuous possession supposedly indicating one's "success in the world" is probably their house - but large houses are really made to contain, and display, all one's voluminous possessions, especially the big ones like furniture. Large, luxurious furniture, then, can be seen as important symbols of wealth (even more so in historical eras where they were rare), and also closely connected to the big house needed to contain such things. This craving for largess - perhaps a more pronounced trend in contemporary America than anywhere - is, of course, indicative of an obsession with the image of the separate self, a self competing with the surrounding society, and striving for recognition and approval. Naturally a spiritual practitioner working to reveal and relinquish such obsessions would not want to support the esteeming of luxurious possessions, but there is a more practical reason for avoiding their use, as well. Large belongings can be a serious impediment to living lightly - impairing our ability to travel freely to wherever we might be of greatest use, and causing us to have greater need to stake a claim to a plot of land, to invest in housing, and to have a big enough house to fit our stuff. Once we have secured some housing, we are less able to share the space we have, because our stuff takes space, and perhaps we are more cautious about doing so, in order to protect our stuff. The greatest price, perhaps, of our appetite for large (or large amounts) of possessions in contemporary culture is the waste of resources and the increase in pollution that comes with their

production. But there is also the sense that we are trapped in a desperate, and often failing, race for more money to afford it all. Thus less time for spiritual practice, or other pursuits that come from our heart, and less time to question and even see the possibility of a simpler way of life.

That simpler alternative has been modeled elegantly by the traditions of many older cultures. To continue with the example of the bed, we might look at the style of bedding in traditional Japanese society: an inexpensive futon is used which can be rolled up and stashed away in the morning, opening up the “bedroom” to be used for other purposes, and for other people, and thus requiring much less housing space. (In the U.S. even the futon has been transformed by our taste for bigness - made much thicker it can hardly be rolled up or moved around). Older cultures generally filled their houses with large extended families, and tribal cultures sometimes with more than one family. Slowly the idea of sharing housing space is growing in modern societies as well (perhaps mostly fed by financial necessity, but also with a growing recognition of the value of community) and other alternatives to the large house ideal, such as the interest in the “tiny house” movement, is beginning to gain some recognition.

Since a spiritual renunciant in the India of the Buddha’s time wouldn’t be owning their own bed, or their own house to keep it in, and was usually at least somewhat nomadic, it might seem unnecessary to have a precept against using luxurious beds. The primary reason for the precept, then, might be to dissuade a renunciant from trying to curry favor with the wealthy (who might offer luxurious beds for visits). Warning us of the temptation to establish connections for self-serving motives like status, fame, and enjoying luxuries, the precept can guide the practitioner back to the heart of their practice: appreciating the simple joys always around us, and the compassionate heart that includes, and shares, with all. To turn down offers of excessive luxury, even when freely given, makes a powerful statement about what is really useful for our deepest contentment, and offers a teaching about another value system, and another way to live, that can bring us a deeper enrichment.

The Tenth Precept

The last precept - to refrain from using money - is, in many ways, the practical summation and conclusion of all the precepts, especially as they might function in today’s world.

The seeds of a kind of capitalist system, in which money is so crucial, was already functioning in the time of the Buddha, and is now, of course, vastly more developed and expanded. In such a system it is money that makes it possible to indulge in so many of the habitual cravings that the precepts encourage us to go beyond, and the pull of those cravings makes the desire for money into an obsession. Let’s look, one by one, at how money is involved in each of the precepts we’ve already studied.

The second five of the ten precepts, which we’ve just been looking at, are linked to money in the most direct way (and they probably were already, to some extent, in the cultural world of early Buddhism). We generally acquire food with money, and almost certainly if we want to eat in excess, whenever we want, and have particular favorite items that we’re

habituated (or addicted) to. Our entertainment usually costs money, especially if it's the commercial kind (and, today, our media equipment costs money as well). Jewelry and cosmetics cost money, as do large beds and other furniture, as well as the houses to keep them in (all of which we desire, often, for the sake of impressing on others that we do, indeed, have money).

The first five precepts, too, are deeply involved in the world of money, especially today. Killing other beings is not always about money, of course, but it often is, and the way most of us participate in it today - through buying animal products, or through the support of the military - certainly involves money. Stealing is most often motivated by the desire for money, and, as we've seen, the form most of us are entangled in (the stealing of resources from poorer people and other creatures that is standard in corporate manufacturing), we are involved in through the support of our money. Some of us use money for sex directly (whether with prostitution or porn), but even among those who don't, money is often involved in the process of attracting a partner. Lying doesn't necessarily involve money (although often it does), but the kind of culturally shared dishonesty that we discussed of not facing the implications and effects of the things we buy, is certainly an issue involving money. And, finally, most of us use money for our intoxicants, whether chemical or media-based (and some would claim that money itself is an intoxicant!)

Because money is what we use to acquire most of what we desire, and because acquiring desired possessions is our culture's most visible marker of success, our monetary wealth has become our most immediate indicator of social status. It is not surprising, then, that accumulating money eventually becomes, for some, an obsession transcending the practical use of money as a means for actually buying possessions that one can use. The drive for ever-increasing amounts of money has developed to such an extreme today that people who have more money than they can possibly use in enhancing their comfort or entertainment any further are still obsessed with getting more, either for status enhancement, or simply out of habit. It is these people, at the extreme margins of personal wealth, who are actually responsible for orchestrating the world-wide exploitation of poorer populations and the natural environment, in their capacities as controllers of large corporations - all for the abstract desire of endlessly higher numbers on their bank accounts. Although most of us might not approve of this level of obsession, whenever we intentionally or even unintentionally go along with the cultural assumption that more money is inherently good and desirable, we are supporting the dangerous behavior that is this assumption's logical conclusion.

When we recognize that it is through money, and often because of money, that we are led to break so many ethical precepts, and that the culture-wide worship of money has led to such dangerous extremes that the earth's biosphere has become gravely threatened, we might rightly demand that we get rid of the stuff! But how can we, when it appears to be the sole source of all the things we think we need, and all the things we want? How would we survive?

Money, of course, doesn't actually create any of the things we need to sustain our life, or even to enjoy it. It doesn't create anything at all. Money is an abstract conception - a shared agreement within a society to use a standardized symbol to regulate the exchange of goods and services. The actual "goods" that are essential for life - air, water, food, and the

raw materials for clothes and shelter - all come to us for free as gifts of nature, although some require a relatively small amount of labor to retrieve. In modern cultures the money idea is so deeply embedded that most people have lost conscious awareness of the natural origin of their essential needs - everything just comes from the store and costs money. People will walk past fruits and nuts hanging from the trees and littering the sidewalk on the way to the store to buy fruits and nuts. This is what can be expected when we have lost the knowledge of our surrounding natural abundance. But also much of the visible sources of this abundance has been removed from our dwelling places and our neighborhoods, to make way for stores, parking lots, and factories - the physical infrastructure of the money economy.

In considering how we might want to distribute the goods that come from nature, as well as the services that some can offer, and the useful products that we make, there are alternative models to the money economy that have been used by humans for millennia. For the vast majority of human history - the 95% or so of our time on the planet before the relatively recent rise of hierarchical civilizations - people exchanged goods and services in a way that reflected an awareness of, and gratitude for, the freely given gifts of the natural world: following this example of nature they simply shared with each other in what we might call a "gift economy". Raw materials collected from nature, as well as the products we make with those materials, were seen as offerings for the benefit of the community, shared amongst all according to need. This mode of wealth distribution naturally fosters a sense of mutual care and support, of inclusion and belonging, that contrasts strongly with the competition, insecurity, and personal ambition that prevails in the money economy. Where a money economy assumes a universal motive of self-interest and expectation of inequality, a gift economy can only thrive where there is a shared assumption of mutual responsibility - where one's own welfare is intimately connected, even equated, with everyone else's in the community. Often in indigenous societies this community included the non-human beings in the environment with which the people were intimately involved and dependent upon, and the welfare of these other beings was a deep consideration in daily life.

A gift economy seems to thrive most easily when there is a close balance between the needs of the human community and the available natural resources. When there is an excess of resources relative to human needs, the human capacity for greed seems to be aroused - some people tend to fall under its sway and try to secure more than they need, taking measures to defend their horde from others, and also to devise explanations to legitimize it. This can be among individuals within a tribe, or can manifest as conflict between tribes. As methods of large scale agriculture and animal domestication became established, a large surplus of food and other materials was made available, and in several regions this seems to have induced some tribes, some sub-groups within tribes, or even some individuals, to try to seize more than others - thus we have the emergence of hierarchical power divisions in some societies, which eventually included, in larger civilizations, elaborate cultural structures and beliefs that define and protect these divisions.

The early Buddhist movement (together with other contemplative religious movements around the world) responded to the rise of increasingly hierarchical societies in their midst by advocating a return to the values of a gift-based way of life. We can see this in the chosen practice of renunciation - both the reliance on mendicancy to fulfill one's needs, and the

willingness to reduce one's possessions to the minimum of what was truly needed. By relying on freely given offerings for their sustenance, renunciants developed trust that nature, and the nature of generosity in the human heart, can provide for our needs - this trust then helps us let go of the self-serving pursuit of advantage that often clouds our consciousness (and which really has its roots in the fear of being neglected). At the same time, the healthy practice of generosity is encouraged in others. Both the donor and the mendicant are immersed in a spiritual exchange that celebrates the balance of nature and the voice of the heart, instead of the rules of economic trade laid out by intellectual contrivance and the assumption of self-centeredness.

The traditions of spiritual mendicancy took the practice of gift economy to even further extents, in some ways, than the older tribal cultures that were its originators. Although pre-civilization tribes used open sharing of both materials and labor within their own communities, trusting the mutual interest of their tribal members enough that no exchanges were demanded for basic necessities - still, when interacting with other tribes, there was the use of barter or trade, which is similar to the money economy. (In both there is a "price" for particular goods or services, whether the price is other goods, or money that symbolizes such goods. So money and barter are not fundamentally different - neither promotes the open sharing based on need of the gift economy. The money system does differ from barter, though, in that it allows increased and easier exchange - since actual materials don't have to be moved around - and, crucially, it allows for greater wealth accumulation - since less actual materials have to be stored and protected). Even within cultures that are dominated by the money system, there is, of course, some limited practice of gift economy - if only within the nuclear family, or close friends. The great inspiration of the spiritual mendicancy movements was to extend the trust in mutual human caring and support to a universal field - not just within the family, or even within the tribe, but offered out to all people. The trait that made Jesus of Nazareth so notorious in his time was not that he offered healings, but that he did so for no charge, and to anyone who asked regardless of clan or caste - and that he would accept food from all kinds of people without regard to the strict ethnic and class divisions of his culture. Similarly, the Buddha sent his order of renunciants out across northern India, through different cultural regions, requiring that they spread the teachings to all without distinction, and collect alms from all kinds of houses in all kinds of villages, with no preference for caste or class.

What is offered by the renunciant in exchange for food or material support is not intellectually obvious, and ultimately cannot be measured by conceptual parameters. The yogin offers an example, a model, and a reminder of potentials for life that are easily forgotten - alternatives that preserve the deeper levels of joyful awareness that we all, to various extents, know lie dormant in our consciousness. By supporting the yogic practitioner, the donor participates in keeping alive a vision, and a dynamic living tradition, that (hopefully) has a pervasive effect on the life of the greater culture. The voluntary poverty of the renunciant, which is their central distinguishing characteristic, resonates deeply in many people's hearts, reminding them of the values that transcend the concerns with money and status, and reminding us that we can all move in the direction of becoming free from them.

In order for the renunciant to embody the trust, courage, and freedom from self-concern that this vision of sharing requires, it would be natural to practice a money-free

way of life - either not using it at all, or at least not harboring any interest in possessing it, or working to acquire it. Money is the central symbol of the drive to personal material accumulation that underlies our competitive, stressful, and isolating economic system - to find a better system it would be essential to abandon its prominence in our lives. At the same time there are immediate practical advantages to the practitioner who gives up needing money: as we've seen, without money we become free of many unwholesome practices and temptations that our present society surrounds us with - the various superficial entertainments that keep us distracted - because they generally cost money. Without money the precepts become easier to keep, without shopping our support for so much world-wide suffering and destruction can come to an end, or be greatly reduced.

As for specifics, it seems to me to make little difference whether we strictly refuse to handle money or not - our lack of interest in it, or absence of desire for it, is what must be sincere. Among the orders of Buddhist monks who keep the rule of not handling money, it is common to use a lay supporter to buy things for them, and even keep a bank account for them for various personal expenses - this seems to clearly miss the point, to follow the letter of the law, but ignore the spirit. It is only when we are willing to let go of the illusion of a personal "safety net" of accumulated wealth (and the fear of falling that lies behind it), that we can truly discover our real wealth that is always naturally present - given freely by the universe in every moment.

THE DHUTAGUNAS

We have seen how a close examination of the ten precepts can yield significant insights into today's problems, and how we might transform them. As they remain central to Buddhist practice communities around the world today, it is appropriate that they formed the main part of our study. But there is one other, lesser known, group of guidelines in the Buddhist tradition that I'd like to take at least a brief look at - it can shed additional light on our effort to understand renunciation, and on how we might give form to a helpful contemporary spiritual movement. This collection consists of practical recommendations for the daily life of the full-time yogic practitioner, and it emerged in the early centuries of the Buddhist tradition - in fact, it is likely to be even older than the formalized ten precepts. These early renunciant guidelines evolved over time, and, in their later developed forms, came to be called "dhutaguna" in Sanskrit texts, or "dhutanga" in Pali language texts. "Dhuta" is a word for renunciation, meaning "dropping off" or "letting go". "Guna" means qualities or aspects (and "anga" - literally meaning limbs, also implies "aspects"), so we might translate both terms as "the different facets of renunciation, or letting go." Let's now look at these codes, and at the picture of the renunciant that they convey.

The dhutagunas are specifically associated with a kind of full-time spiritual practitioner who clearly lives outside the bounds of conventional society, including outside the conventional monastery. There are several names for such a practitioner in various texts; a common one is "aranyaka" (of the forest) or "aranyavasin" (forest dweller); I've been using the term "forest renunciant" for both of these. The Sanskrit word "aranya" originally means "remote", and so it can apply to any landscape outside the bounds of the civilized town or

village - the terms “wild” or “untamed” come to mind; perhaps “wilderness” is the best translation. By extension this idea of “aranya” can apply to anything outside the bounds of conventional society, and of conventional understandings, assumptions and priorities, even if not physically so far removed. A “forest renunciant”, then, is a full-time spiritual practitioner who lives at least somewhat “apart” from society - usually (but not always) in wild, natural surroundings outside the realm of the settled and cultivated, focusing on meditation practices, and differing, sometimes dramatically, from the values and behavior of the usual society member.

Such a yogic practitioner would be following a way of life that the Buddha, himself, lived - it is likely that the bulk of the Buddha’s original disciples perfectly fit the “forest renunciant” description. After the Buddhist tradition developed settled monastic institutions, however, other roles for full-time Buddhist followers emerged - most notably the monk who would maintain the village-based monastic center. Such a monk would be focused on preaching and ritual interactions with the village populace, as well as textual study and compilation, and would have less time (and perhaps less interest in) meditational practices. With the rise in prominence of the monastery, the settled monastic became the normative form of Buddhist representative - the forest renunciant became an alternative minority tradition, and the two groups, understandably, maintained somewhat different views on what constituted authentic spiritual practice. It is not surprising, then, that the dhutagunas, specifically associated with forest renunciants, are only rarely mentioned in the textual products of the monastic literary tradition. But they are there, and, more importantly, the living traditions inspired by the forest way of life have continued in various cultures and regions down to the present day.

One of the earliest examples we can find of codes that begin to define a forest renunciant way of life are the well known “four requisites” (nishraya) found in many early Buddhist texts. These four foundational practices are: to sleep under trees, to subsist on food donated during almsround, to wear clothes made from discarded cloth, and to use only cow’s urine as medicine (this last might need an explanation - the use of cow’s urine as medicine is a common folk practice in traditional India even to the present time; its stipulation here is meant to dissuade the use of more rare and expensive medicinal substances). The first three of these - sleeping in forests, eating what’s offered, and wearing clothes from discarded cloth - become fundamental tenets in all future developments of forest codes. (Living in the wilds and depending on alms food we already encountered as guidelines in the Shramanyaphala Sutra, and reliance on alms food is at least implied in the sixth precept).

Another similar, but somewhat more developed, list of forest practices that we can find in several early texts is a collection of guidelines associated with a renunciant named Devadatta. His guidelines consist of: dwelling in the forest (outside of villages), sleeping under trees or in the open (not needing houses), relying on alms for food, not accepting any meat (and, in some versions, not accepting dairy products), eating just once a day, and using clothes made from discarded cloth. As we can see, his codes are basically the same as the four requisites, except for the addition of the prohibition on meat and dairy products - this is the first time we see this rule in Buddhist literature, and one of the only times. The practice of avoiding animal products for the sake of not causing them suffering is a natural derivative of

the precept to avoid killing, as we've seen, and is in line with the general Buddhist concern to develop compassion - nonetheless, it gets very little attention in the Buddhist schools of southeast Asia (the Theravada). In Mahayana schools its virtue is usually acknowledged (several Mahayana texts support the rule), but only in the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese schools do most of the monks actually avoid eating animal products.

When Devadatta's guidelines appear in texts they are accompanied by certain stories about him - these stories can tell us much about the ambivalent attitude toward forest renunciants in the monastic textual tradition. Devadatta was said to have been a contemporary disciple of the Buddha's, and to have personally proposed his rules to the master as a requirement for all the Buddha's full-time followers. The Buddha accepted that they were useful, but refused to make them mandatory for all. In later versions the story becomes more elaborated, and Devadatta is depicted in a more sinister light - he is described as a once virtuous monk who later became corrupted by arrogance and ambition, and his rules become part of a plot to take over the leadership of the Buddha's community by creating a schism among his followers (the latest accounts have him actually trying to assassinate the Buddha). Some scholars (Reginald Ray most prominent among them) suggest this vilifying process to be the result of the efforts of settled institutionalized monastics, who wrote the texts, to denigrate the image of charismatic forest renunciants (represented by Devadatta) who were perceived as a threat - perhaps as competitors for prestige and support. The historical facts are, of course, lost in the mists of time, but it is certainly possible that some renunciant named Devadatta was indeed involved in one of the many splits of the Buddhist community into different sects that took place over the first few centuries of the tradition. If so, however, it was likely long after the lifetime of the Buddha.

For the next stage in the development of the codes of the forest renunciant, we might look at an early collection of verses called the Theragatha. Although the nishrayas, and Devadatta's expansion of them, might be the earliest codes from the oral tradition (later inserted into longer texts), the Theragatha - poems written by early forest yogins describing their own personal experience of practice - is thought to be perhaps the oldest complete written text in all of Buddhist literature. (The Theragatha contains the writings of male renunciants - a remarkable record of the words of female renunciants, from around the same time, is represented in a companion collection called the Therigatha). The Theragatha contains a list of practices that typify the way of life of forest renunciation, and are somewhat more extensive than what we've seen so far. They include the basic foundations we've encountered - living in the forest, relying on almsfood, using discarded cloth for clothes - but add to this a celebration of solitary living in a secluded hermitage, an exhortation to energetic efforts in meditation practice, and a general promotion of the attributes of having few desires, and being contented with little.

One final source we should look at in charting the evolution of the forest codes is an early, and very influential, Mahayana text called the "Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra" (Eight Thousand Line Transcendent Wisdom Scripture). In addition to introducing some key Mahayana philosophical principles, this scripture includes an extensive list of forest renunciant practices which it specifically terms, "dhutaguna". They cover much the same ground as the recommendations we find in the Theragatha, but with several options

concerning where in the wilderness one should live, a few regulating alms food and clothing, and several attitudinal encouragements concerning vigilance in meditation, being easily contented with few desires, and being frugal in general.

It is interesting that we find a full treatment of the dhutagunas and the forest renunciant life, a subject associated with the earliest age of the Buddhist tradition, in a Mahayana text. In conventional modern scholarship, Mahayana scriptures, and the ideas they express, are usually assumed to be relatively late additions to the development of Buddhist thought. The usual model is that early Buddhism developed into a settled monastic tradition over several centuries after the Buddha's life, including a division into eighteen sects (nikaya), all well before the rise of the Mahayana movement (which was characterized by a focus on the "bodhisattva path" - an orientation based on the altruistic aspiration toward the liberation of all beings, as opposed to just oneself). More recent scholarship, however, has often challenged that standard model, suggesting that Mahayana perspectives might have developed alongside other views from very early on in Buddhist history - perhaps, as the movement itself claims, reflecting some of the original teachings of the Buddha. A birchbark fragment of parts of the Ashtasahasrika Sutra is actually among the oldest physical manuscripts of any Buddhist text that has so far been found (dated to the first century of the common era); although this can't tell us anything certain about the date of its original composition or its chronology compared to other texts, it does lend weight to the possibility that Mahayana ideas were circulating very early in the tradition. What we do know is that in this text, as well as in several other early Mahayana scriptures, there is a noticeable presence of the forest renunciant ideal and the dhutagunas, as opposed to the emphasis on the settled village monastic ideal found more often in the texts of the Pali canon (the scriptures of the last surviving non-Mahayana school - the Theravada). It is reasonable to surmise, I think, that if surviving bands of forest renunciant practitioners were not the central instigators of the earliest Mahayana movement, they were at least an important inspiration and influence.

A complete list of dhutaguna practices, very similar to the ones we find in the Ashtasahasrika Sutra, were eventually standardized in both the Mahayana tradition and the Pali canon, and both versions are nearly identical. Concerning a dwelling place in the forest, a few options are suggested: living at the base of a tree, living out in the open, living in a cremation ground, or just sleeping for the night wherever one happens to find oneself (or "receiving whatever place is offered"). Concerning food, there is the encouragement to rely only on what is offered on alms rounds, to treat all potential donors impartially, to eat once a day, in one sitting, and to eat an appropriate amount. Concerning clothes, there is the practice of wearing only robes made from the cloth scraps discarded by others, and limiting one's collection to three robes. (In the Mahayana list there is an allowance for additional garments of wool - this likely reflects the fact that the early Mahayana movement either originated, or greatly expanded, in the northern reaches of the Indian subcontinent, and probably at significant altitude). Finally there is an encouragement concerning energetic effort in meditation practice - the practitioner is urged to avoid the temptation of lying down, and to remain in an upright sitting posture as much as possible.

These renunciant practices might seem a little exotic, and somewhat austere. But I feel they can, perhaps with some adjustments, be used as helpful points of guidance, or at

least provide inspiration, for a contemporary renunciant movement. Of course, they're unlikely to become wildly popular among a large audience. Although practices like these might very well have been expected of the Buddha's original renunciant community, in the later tradition they were considered optional, even for monks and nuns. But they offer a crucial vision of just how materially simple we can actually make our lives, giving us new perspective, and reminding us that simplicity can help us discover our hidden potential to live in deeper appreciation and joy. Certainly there are some of us, even in our day and age, who would be drawn to engage with practices like these, at least in some contemporary adaptations, if an inviting opportunity presented itself. If some took on that challenge, many others would be inspired to take their own steps towards simplicity, from wherever they find themselves and in whatever way they're able, and a socially relevant movement could ripple out and permeate the wider culture.

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Studying the early Buddhist textual record can give us a glimpse of the long history of renunciant life in India, and the principles that developed to guide it and express it. But ultimately we have to actually live such a life in order to really find out how it works, what it feels like, and what it has to offer ourselves and our society. To learn more intimately and realistically about renunciation, we might visit and practice with the few remaining renunciant Buddhist subcultures that have survived into the modern age - the forest traditions of southeast Asia, the cave retreat practitioners of the Tibetan Himalaya, or perhaps the mountain hermits of China. Even in the more communal monasteries of East Asia, especially those focusing on meditation practice, the spirit of simplicity that draws from the heritage of forest renunciation is still palpable. But all these subcultures are fairly remote and inaccessible for modern westerners (or even most modern Asians), and, even more importantly, they use forms and cultural expressions that evolved in a different social world, and in a very different era, from our own - they might not be so appropriate for a spiritual movement relevant to the needs of our times. We need to create a new tradition of simplicity - one that draws on the richness of our spiritual ancestors, but is responsive to our unique times and culture.

How we might live as a spiritual renunciant in today's secular world is the challenge I've been experimenting with in my own life for the last fifteen years. Here's some of what I've discovered:

Free food is abundant and fairly easy to obtain (at least in a cosmopolitan urban area). In a society where almost half of the produced food ends up being thrown out, there are many ways to reduce that waste while feeding yourself and your community. Dumpster diving is perhaps the most famous, but I've found it usually to be unnecessary. Instead we can ask farmers and other food producers, as well as wholesalers and retail stores, to donate the surplus food they routinely have to get rid of. Farmers at farmer's markets are often happy to share their leftovers at the end of the day (the produce is still fresh, but it often won't make it until the next market). If you can get out to the farms, gleaning directly from the fields after

harvest is often welcomed as well. Collecting food this way won't necessarily provide for all one's dietary needs, but it certainly can cover a substantial portion.

As for the specifically religious practice of alms collecting - I'm less experienced in this practice, but the few times I've tried it in the United States, I was met with surprising success. Although the idea of spiritual mendicancy is often dismissed as not practicable in western cultures by those in western Buddhist circles, I encountered almost entirely positive reception, and received a substantial amount of food and money. How to communicate what one is doing to the people you meet is, of course, an issue - distinctive clothing is helpful, and a willingness to stop and explain might be necessary until a particular neighborhood is used to the practice. Although I chose to receive money as well as food (and then used that money solely for food), limiting oneself to only receiving food would also work, if you stationed yourself outside a food store, or actually went door to door (as is the oldest tradition).

Free clothing, I've found, is also easy to come by. In the Buddha's time, and still today in many parts of the world, only well-worn scraps of cloth might be found discarded, and it might require substantial work to sew them into usable clothes. But in today's wealthier consumer cultures perfectly intact and usable clothing is discarded constantly (to make way for the latest fashion, or simply to lighten one's load in moving). In some places you might have to sift through the garbage for such clothes, but where I live there is a common practice of putting unwanted clothes and other usable items in "free boxes" on the sidewalk, before they head to the trash. If you spend a lot of the day bicycling around town, you could easily assemble a complete wardrobe in a few days. If you wanted specific kinds of clothes - such as a distinctive garment that might indicate a religious vocation - you could take apart and reassemble regular clothes, or make them from curtains, drapes, or other large fabric pieces that are commonly found. (Sewing clothes can be a meditative work practice in a spiritual center or retreat, and certainly has a long history as such). In places where the freebox idea has not yet arrived, donations of unwanted clothes or cloth could easily be arranged with businesses or individuals, and checking out the dumpsters is always an option, and usually productive.

Although finding food and clothes for free is relatively easy, finding a peaceful place to rest your head, when not engaged with the standard economic system, is more of a challenge. In the Buddha's time, unclaimed tracts of forest land were never far from the village - just beyond the edge of the rice fields. But today the few remaining undeveloped wildlands are generally far from the population centers where food is easily available. The city I live in is closer to a public wilderness than most - you can get there in a day's bike ride - but although that works well for retreats, it would be very difficult to live there full-time. Not only would obtaining food be a big issue, but the isolation would make it hard for anyone new to practice, and the interaction with, and influence on, the wider community would be very minimal. There is parkland within cities, of course (and I've spent quite a few nights in them), but then there is the issue of having to evade the law, and there is usually no shelter from rain or snow.

It's not that there isn't excess unused space, and even unused shelter, in today's cities - it's just that it's claimed legally by private owners, and most of these folks are not used to sharing. Some people squat, and there are inspiring stories of long-term success with that in

some countries, but, of course, there are usually struggles with the “law”, and it would be hard to maintain a spiritual practice in that atmosphere. My own solution to the residence issue involves cultivating a connection to a community, and, through social networks, finding out who has space in their house or on their land, and might be interested in having a short or long-term guest. Many people live alone and actually appreciate company (especially company that provides food and likes to cook), and if they are interested in meditation practice, having someone else to practice with, and to be encouraged by, is an important benefit. But, realistically, this arrangement is usually only a short-term solution, and frequent moving, and searching for the next place, can be draining. There is, as well, the issue of whether the environment is conducive to practice, and also how the host handles the inevitable questions around one person working for money and paying rent, and another person living a different way.

Finally, this arrangement is hard to make work for more than one or two people living as renunciants at a particular place, so a community of full-time yogins would be hard to imagine using this approach.

This brings up the issue of sangha - the role and importance of community in full-time spiritual life. Although there are a few notable encouragements in the dhutagunas to practice in solitary retreat, and some praises for the hermit’s life, we need to see these recommendations in a realistic context. Many of us certainly recognize the value of solitary retreat, at least for a time, but we also need to realize that even the most traditional forest renunciants weren’t (and aren’t) really isolated from all human contact, or even uninvolved in the social world around them. They would usually collect food everyday from surrounding villagers, which might take a significant amount of time, and which meant they couldn’t live too far away. They would most likely have been initiated into their yogic calling by a teacher, and be associated with fellow renunciants - checking in with such a teacher would be almost certain, and gathering from time to time with colleagues very likely. If we look at modern day examples of yogic renunciants in traditional Asian countries - whether in the forests of Southeast Asia, or the mountains of India, Tibet or China, we find that although they might be alone for significant stretches, they are really deeply connected to a supportive spiritual community, made up of both fellow renunciants and lay people. And after their practice matures, there is an expectation that they will share the fruits of their explorations with others as teachers.

In contemporary times it is more important than ever that spiritual renunciants stay connected to their surrounding community. If full-time spiritual practitioners are to be relevant in the work of healing our wider culture, and restoring our ecological health, our example of simplicity must be observable, approachable, accessible, even inviting - we must be interested in reaching as many as possible, and in having a deep influence on our society. For the renunciants themselves, the support of both fellow yogins, and some kind of wider community, is essential: as our culture does not yet recognize or understand the calling to full-time spiritual practice, attempting to live this way in this society can be lonely and isolating, on top of the practical challenges. We are social animals after all - sangha provides an invaluable support; it is for this reason that the Buddha considered it one of the essential “treasures” of the practice path.

For these reasons, I think a community of renunciants living and practicing together daily is the way to go for our times. It is much less daunting for someone to join a functioning community, than to contemplate living a renunciant life on their own. For the wider society, seeing an example of radical simplicity functioning in a community would be much more inspiring and encouraging, and practically applicable, than simply encountering the novelty of some radical individual. Besides a daily practice schedule, a renunciant community could offer retreats, workshops and classes to the public - much like a conventional meditation center, actually, but instead of assimilating to conventional norms of consumerist behavior and culture, all the offerings of such a community would be presented in the context of a revolutionary way of life - a life truly in line with the insights of the practice of presence. (Which includes, of course, that everything would be offered for free).

All this can't be facilitated by a little extra space in someone's house. The best arrangement, I imagine, would be to discover a sympathetic land-owner who would be inspired to loan the use of some land for the creation of such a community - hopefully within a reasonable proximity (bicycling distance) to a population center. This would be a similar arrangement to the donation of parks and groves to the Buddha's original sangha, which they used for the retreat of the summer monsoon season.

So now we're actually getting to some kind of proposal - to a call for a new spiritual order of aranyakas - forest renunciants - relevant to today's world. What would such a movement look like?

First of all, it needn't be about creating yet another exclusive spiritual club, decorated with ritual initiations and symbolic tokens of prestige. Membership in an authentic renunciant movement surely should not be determined primarily by ordination ceremonies and institutional subservience, but by how one decides to actually live in the world. In the time of the Buddha, those who wanted to devote themselves full-time to practice in the renunciant order would simply leave their home and job, cut off their hair, declare their intention to live according to the Buddha's teaching, and then start doing it. I don't think we need much more today. The contemporary spiritual scene is filled with impressive ceremonies investing people with privileged membership in exclusive lineages, or granting authority and leadership in various groups, often through the ritual transferral of blessings or "empowerments", and sometimes with special robes and implements. But, in the end, rarely is much new asked of the recipient concerning how they actually lead their daily lives. It seems to me we could use much more emphasis on how we intend to actually change our lives for the benefit of all beings, and much less on the ceremonial rituals that invest people with an aura of prestige.

Certainly, though, there needs to be a clear, publically shared common intention among the members of a spiritual community if it is to be healthy and sustainable. Agreeing to follow the ten precepts could serve as the backbone of that shared intention. The first five precepts, I feel, are a vital and essential ethical guide for all sincere spiritual aspirants, whether entering a full time renunciant path, or living a more conventional existence. (And this includes the contemporary applications we've discussed - not supporting the suffering and killing of animals through buying their products, not supporting the military through war taxes, and minimizing or eliminating our other purchases that might contribute to killing,

stealing, and other forms of suffering across the planet). The second five precepts could be specifically for those practitioners who want to take the more committed step of a full-time renunciant path - either for life, or for a limited time, as during a retreat or residency with a practice community.

One modern addition, or perhaps interpretation, we might consider among these second five precepts is a prohibition on the use of cars. As car use is so ubiquitous in our culture, this suggestion might seem daunting. But if we reflect honestly, we must admit that there are few common practices among the vast majority of us that have more negative consequences on the health of our environment, including humans and all other beings, than car driving. Considering the terrible toll of oil extraction on both natural environments and human societies, and the additional damage from the refining and transporting of fuel, the purchase of gasoline already breaks at least the first two precepts, if indirectly. And the polluting emissions from driving, of course, aggravate human health and are a major factor in generating climate change. Although abandoning car use might seem like it would greatly limit our sphere of activity, my own practice of this renunciation over several years has revealed something different: that the felt "need" to travel large distances very fast is simply an acquired habit that, far from increasing our actual enjoyment of the world, is really most often reducing it. For one thing, as we're sealed off in a car, our sensitivity to our surrounding environment is obstructed. Also, as we zip along at high speeds, our minds are naturally influenced to be more speedy and busy themselves; at the same time, there is less palpable awareness of our bodies and their abilities, as we sit there inert. So body and mind become more separate and disharmonious. Perhaps most importantly, if we try giving up the temptation of car travel, we can more clearly realize that right where we are already contains the ingredients of contentment, and that the need to get to a far-off place quickly is just an idea we cling to. This intention to avoid car use, of course, would naturally extend to avoiding air travel as well, as all the problems with cars are multiplied many times in the use of planes. As plane travel is not nearly as frequent, however, this consideration is not so applicable to those trying out renunciation for a short time. But for those who aspire for life-long radical simplicity, this would be an important consideration.

If we wanted to link this practice of avoiding cars and planes to a similar-spirited traditional precept it would, perhaps, most easily fit with a few regulations from the pratimoksha codes that prohibit monks from riding on animals (the old version of cars). But I think it can be understood, as well, as an interpretation of one of the precepts we've been focusing on - namely, the ninth precept prohibiting the use of luxurious beds or furniture. Cars and planes are certainly luxurious - they even cruise down the street or fly in the sky while you're sitting in them! Like luxurious furniture, cars are big, cumbersome belongings, they cost a bunch of money (requiring us to be more bound to income-producing work to afford them), and they often serve as ostentatious signs of our attempts to establish our status in the eyes of others. The avoidance of both luxurious furniture and of cars share a similar spirit of freeing ourselves from reliance on costly, large, and burdensome possessions, and instead to discover the simpler life that opens up when we no longer crave, or are dependant on, material excess. Cars have the additional harmful qualities associated with their fuel consumption, and their impact on our psyches, as mentioned, but also with necessitating a

massive asphalt infrastructure that has an enormous financial cost and its own impact on our natural environment. In the future, as electric cars become more common, and if we find ways to power them with truly renewable and non-polluting sources of energy, we might re-think the urgency of this new precept. But several of the reasons discussed above for abandoning car use, and about how it might help enrich our practice, would still apply.

For those choosing the full-time renunciant life, in addition to the full ten precepts, the dhutagunas could provide additional guidance. As adaptations are natural in order to make them fully relevant to our contemporary situation, we should reflect on their basic spirit, and see how we might apply them today.

We can start by looking at the issue of the dwelling place in the forest, or outside the bounds of civilization - the defining element of an aranyaka, or forest practitioner. The first point we might consider here is that the inspirational beauty, and lack of distraction, that we can find in a natural environment is as valuable today as ever in supporting an awareness of, and appreciation for, the present moment. Besides the lack of distraction, an environment of natural beauty has, for many, a particular potency to draw us toward an apprehension of the mystery of our own inherent awareness. How a natural landscape has this power to help us taste the vibrancy and clarity of raw presence might be explained like this: In our usual, civilized environment we are surrounded by the objects of human fabrication - tools, furniture, buildings, streets, and often a largely artificial terrain - the physical manifestations of conceptual thought. We recognize, if only subliminally, the realm of human desire and intention imbedded in them - our urge to manipulate and control in pursuit of predictability and comfort. We can "see" the ideas behind these things, and we can conceptually understand, at least roughly, the process of their creation. When we move from this predominantly human-created environment to a more wild landscape dominated by organically arising processes, on the other hand, we find ourselves immersed in a world whose origins are beyond our conceptual understanding, and whose features are not reducible to human will and design. The inherent mystery in our natural surroundings allows us to reflect back on the mystery of our own conscious awareness that perceives it all. We can more easily notice that foundation of our being beneath the stream of personal thoughts, desires, frustrations, and hopes; that essence more fundamental than our accumulated stories. When facing the raw mystery of nature, we can suddenly see the raw nature of our original selves, beneath the constructions - and in that moment we see that this essential nature is nothing other than the world we perceive before us. When we see the morning star just as it is, we realize that what we are is exactly the experience of seeing that morning star.

We don't need to be in a completely wild landscape, far away from human habitation, in order to experience this, of course. An occasional foray into truly remote wilderness might have its special rewards, but the inspiring essence of the natural world is available wherever we can watch the trees sway in the wind, smell the plants and the earth, gaze at the clouds or the stars. To take care of food and other necessities, even forest renunciants need to live reasonably close to some kind of settled world. And to bring the benefits of our spiritual practice to the wider community, we need to maintain contact with society. Especially if cars are not being used, it would be hard to live in a very remote locale, but a mostly natural setting on the periphery of a more populous center would be ideal - as it was in the days of

the Buddha. Forays into the marketplace have always been inevitable, and are crucial for both the renunciant's material support, and for the spreading of spiritual wisdom to others. In an early Mahayana scripture that elaborates on the life of the forest renunciant (the Ugrapariproccha Sutra) there is advice given to how a renunciant should behave when going into a town or a city - there is an admonition to keep a "forest mind" even when in an urban setting. The true forest practitioner is ultimately characterized not by where one is, but by a renunciant attitude, practice and awareness - we can be wilderness yogins even while living in the city.

As for the subject of food - where the dhutagunas require complete reliance on donations received while going door-to-door each day - we should consider that in modern societies, particularly in the west, relying exclusively on this practice might be very challenging. This is partly because of the lack of cultural awareness of this practice, but also because of the big distances between a population center and the place where full-time practitioners might be living in the outskirts. If we want to have time for daily practice, retreats, workshops, and teachings, some accumulation of stored food makes sense. And in a culture whose industrial food production system causes so much harm to the environment and other beings, and creates so much waste, it makes sense for a spiritual community to model a more sustainable approach by growing some food themselves. The storing of donated food became standard in the monastic practices of most Buddhist cultures long ago, particularly in the Mahayana regions of East Asia and Tibet (allowing monks to forgo the daily alms rounds), and working toward local self-sufficiency by growing one's own food became a central feature of the Zen movement. But the practice of walking through a neighborhood to collect donations can be a powerful experience, bringing alive the feelings of gratitude, generosity, and humility in both giver and receiver, and widening the circle of intimate connection between a practice community and the society that they wish to serve. I would consider it important to include such a practice at least periodically in the schedule of a spiritual community. Especially if both food and money were accepted as donations, both on alms rounds and at other times, I have no doubt that all the nutrition needs of a community could be easily met without the need for the income-producing employment that so many contemporary spiritual centers seem to assume is necessary. In my experience, when gift culture is trusted it works.

The dhutaguna recommendations concerning eating at "one sitting" had much to do with the fact that no food was being stored, and that the already prepared food the renunciants were receiving would go bad quickly in India's hot climate. If food was being stored, and a community of yogins were not so nomadic, the rules about mealtimes could be much more flexible. As already mentioned, the optimal amount of food we eat needs to be discovered in relation to our climate, our activities, and each practitioner's background. The dhutaguna guideline about eating a "measured amount" - a portion considered with mindfulness to be appropriate - is a helpful reminder to all of us to make the eating experience healthful to our bodies, conducive to our practice of present awareness, and reflecting our gratitude to all beings for the gift of nourishment. The elegant formal eating practice developed in the Zen tradition - a kind of meditative meal-eating ceremony that I find very useful in spiritual gatherings - is called, in Japanese, "oryoki", which means a "proportionate"

(or harmoniously responsive) “amount in the bowl”. It’s apparently their translation for this dhutaguna guideline that encourages us to enjoy our meals as a reverential practice.

The guidelines around clothing - mainly to use cloth discarded by others - is, as mentioned earlier, easy to follow in our culture of material abundance. (In fact, what’s challenging in a city with free boxes is to keep your found clothing items to a modest amount. The dhutaguna’s suggestion of three robes might be a bit minimal for colder climates, but a closet-full of clothes might be excessive for a renunciant). Sewing new clothes from found cloth can be an enjoyable practice that, like growing food, can help us reconnect with the simple, grounding pleasures that have characterized traditional cultures for the great majority of human history. Creating and wearing robes that are somewhat distinctive can help communicate to the public that someone is putting effort into living a spiritual practice-based life, especially important if one is collecting offerings. Distinctive robes invite questions, too, which can facilitate the sharing of one’s practice. But nothing fancy is necessary - we should remember that the original robes of Buddhist renunciants (as with just about all mendicant contemplatives around the world) were primarily practical - there is no need for extra robes that only serve a ceremonial purpose. Putting on an article of clothing that you have made yourself, especially if it’s hand-made, can be a helpful reminder to remain aware of your life as a field of spiritual development - even the humblest garment becomes, through its genesis in devoted attention, a sacred vestment.

A final practical consideration might be shelter - the dhutagunas see no need for any structure, and just recommend dwelling at the base of a tree, but it’s pretty warm in India, and we might need a bit more in our climate. Even in India, they have the monsoon, and, probably from very early on, there developed a tradition of using simple huts to keep dry during the three-month long rainy season. We could experiment with simple structures made from found materials (there are intriguing designs of houses made from wooden pallets), and tapping into the recent resurgence of interest in traditional natural building techniques we are sure to find elegant and appropriate forms of shelter that can be built simply and with little or no money. But we should remain aware of the crucial teaching at the heart of the dhutaguna’s advice to live out in the open: with a little experimentation we can find that we need shelter much less than we have been conditioned to believe. Spending too much time indoors might be said to be one of the major imbalances of our culture, keeping us in a cocoon of physical comfort, but keeping us away from the teachings of the natural world that remind us of our own true nature. Surrounded by walls, our habitual thinking can seem trapped - circling around looking for a way out. But outside we can more easily let it go - draining into the depths of the soil, breathed in by the trees, or blowing off into the wind and clouds. One of the more distinctive traits of my own sangha is that we sit outside in all but the most challenging weather, keeping in touch with the earth, and open to the empty sky.

What would result from an experiment with a renunciant community like this? Could it be a catalyst for our larger society to begin questioning their ways of life; to begin to turn towards more simplicity and more sharing, to discover at once both a deeper fulfillment, and a way out of our global ecological crisis? Or would it just remain a novelty, mostly ignored, or ridiculed, or condemned? We won’t know until we try it. Even if it seemed to have little

impact on the wider world, at least the lives of those who participate, in one way or another, would be enriched and broadened. And in considering its wider impact, we should keep in mind that the image of the spiritual renunciant, in whatever cultural form, has been resonating in the collective psyche of almost all societies around the world for centuries - there is something undeniably compelling in the presence of this profoundly alternative vision to conventional civilization. Some of us are inescapably called to this kind of path anyway, so perhaps it's time to learn about each other, and turn some isolated, wandering spiritual misfits into a community, and maybe a movement.

Let me conclude with a story about a character from the Chinese Zen tradition whom we might want to consider the patron saint of the forest renunciant. His name was Dao Lin (Forest of the Way) but he was known as Master Bird's Nest, as he used to like practicing meditation up in the branches of a tall pine tree (how much more of a forest yogin can you get?) The famous Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi, who was also a government official and had become the governor of the province where Master Bird's Nest lived, had heard about the master, and made the journey to his forest home to see what he might learn. His main question was standard for checking out the wisdom of a teacher: "What is the essence of the Buddha's teaching?"

The master responded, "Avoid all evil actions, practice virtuous actions, and keep the heart pure." It was a quote from the Dhammapada, one of the most well known and memorized teachings of orthodox Buddhism.

Bai Juyi was unimpressed. He said, "Even a three-year-old knows that."

The master replied, "Even a three-year-old knows it, but an elder of 80 still doesn't seem to practice it."

In the end, we all know in our hearts that living simply, sharing, and avoiding harmful entanglements, whenever we become aware of them, is how we must live to create a more beautiful and sustainable world. We know that we are presently living beyond the capacity of our earth, and we know basically what we need to do to change that. But it just seems very hard to do. We're used to doing things the way we always have, and it's scary to change. Everyone around us seems to do things that way, and we don't want to be cut off and left on our own. As things are, though, we feel separate and alone much of the time anyway. And the lifestyle of endless consumption that is degrading the earth doesn't satisfy our deeper longings. We are, instead, only growing more uneasy with the awareness of what our culture is doing. It's time to realize we have nothing to lose in changing course but our guilt, and our lives of "quiet desperation." It's time to take the courageous step of actually doing what our heart knows is the most beautiful way.

There was a previous exchange between Bai Juyi and Master Bird's Nest, as well. When Bai first came up to the master's tree and gazed up at the master sitting precariously on a nest of sticks, perched on a branch, he said, "Hey, master, that looks very dangerous up there."

The master replied, "Hey, Mr. Governor, your life looks very dangerous down there."

When we have a clear view, our life in conventional society is revealed as a very unsatisfying, and ultimately very dangerous habit. It's time to gather some friends and go out on a limb to practice the way of awakening.

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