

The Dharma and Denial

by Manjuka

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I wrote this for the men's national order weekend in February. It's a look at identity and how that impacts on our approach to Dharma practise. It's a look at change and what do we mean by changing ourselves. Along the way it resolves the tension between the immanence and developmental approaches to practise. It's the talk I would like to have heard 10 years ago myself, but I reckon if I had heard it I don't think I would have listened at the time. The theme of the weekend was Sangharakshita's aphorisms, and the one I chose to talk on was:

“One cannot be what one should be merely by closing one's eyes to what one is.”

(Sangharakshita, 'Peace is a Fire')

In reflecting on this aphorism I came up with an image. The image was of a muddy pond. The muddy pond that we have as-it-were lived our lives within. Encountering the Dharma we learn to meditate and let the pond clear, the mud settling to the bottom, and we enjoy the new clarity of our vision which comes as a relief, a welcome respite from our confusions, a necessary first stage along the Path.

The pond water is now pure and we can see clearly, and yet much of the life of the pond is in the mud settled in strata along the bottom. Despite the new clarity tension can arise through not wanting to look at the strata of mud along the bottom. We love the new clarity. We think we are over the murky gloom. We even pretend it has gone away, which to all appearances it has – as long as we don't look down! And so we learn to move in a restricted fashion so as to avoid stirring up the mud, fearful of losing our new found clarity, giving it value over the murk and gloom.

This image of the pond illustrates the two separate but connected messages in Sangharakshita's aphorism. The first is “what one should be” or at least what we think we should be, illustrated by the clear water. The second is “closing ones eyes to what one is,” – the layers of mud along the bottom. The moving in a restricted fashion so as to avoid stirring up the mud points to the tension we can experience in the spiritual life. The tension between our sense of beauty and joy, of something more to life, and the realisation that an authentic life must engage the pain and suffering we find in the world.

Sangharakshita's aphorism points to the need for an understanding of the dangers and distortions we may face in aspiring to realise spiritual ideals. Spiritual experience can be seductive, it can take us away 'beyond the world' and assuage our pain, it can be beatific and full of meaning and significance, it can give us a glimpse of something more. The danger comes when we find it hard to let these unitive experiences go. It can seem like this-is-where-its-at, “what one should be”. And so we can get busy trying to recreate these experiences by closing our eyes to what we are, or more precisely what we don't like about what we are (i.e. variously a bundle of messy confusion / anxiety / insecurity / anger / jealousy / grief or whatever.) In doing so we are not only closing our eyes to what we are, we are also closing our eyes to what is, closing our eyes to reality.

It strikes me as ironic that for all the talk of suffering in Buddhism, that Buddhism can itself be used as a means to avoid rather than gain insight into suffering. Although ironic it is not so surprising. After all, why should our practise of Buddhism be somehow exempt from the deluded nature of our minds and separate from the various other means we utilise to avoid our pain? The seductiveness of the 3rd Noble Truth, the idea of the cessation of suffering, is a powerful fantasy which has oriented us all our lives – we naturally orient ourselves away from pain. When this orientation of avoidance blends with Buddhist practise it can result in the cultivation of non-suffering experiences and the denial of suffering experiences. In this way we split our experience, holding on to a certain version of “what we should be” while “closing our eyes to what we are”.

This has very little to do with any genuine approach to insight, confusing as it does the 4 Noble Truths with doctrine, rather than as a particular methodological application of conditioned co-production to suffering. The cessation of suffering is the Dharma packaged to attract those in pain, it is the banner headline that draws us in.

I can split off from my experience of suffering in all sorts of small ways, like when someone says to me in all sincerity, “Hey Manjuka, you are looking a bit down.” I usually find this threatening, I don’t want to acknowledge to myself or anyone else that I am suffering. And so I shrug my shoulders and mumble something about being fine and just a little tired. Acting in this way I am in denial, certainly to others and often to myself.

Such denial can arise to the degree that one becomes identified with the calm, spacious, contented mental states aimed at in samatha practise. By identified I mean forming an identity around calm states and forgetting that they are only a part of our experience. Well maybe we don’t forget the other angry, anxious, lonely mental states, they come along soon enough, but identification with samatha states will mean our response to these more troubling states will be variously intolerant, non-accepting and fearful. Calm, spacious samatha experiences are then given more value and seen to be more spiritual than troubled, anxious, angry experiences. Such troubling experiences are to be got-away-from at all costs, rather than understood to be as equally empty as any other mental state.

Splitting off from these unacceptable aspects of our experience, and the tension they create in us, we cling to our identification with being calm, generous, purposeful and kind. In short this is the formation of a spiritual identity, a false self that we present to ourselves and the world so as to avoid our pain. And hey-presto! we are attempting to become what we “should be” merely by closing our eyes to “what we are” - because as well as being calm, generous, purposeful and kind we are also freaked-out, selfish, lazy and bitchy.

Such a spiritual identity or false self will lead to the adoption of a set of lifestyle choices, rules, habits and ways of being. These support the maintenance of what we like about ourselves, which has now become spiritualised and the faking of, “what one should be”. Let’s say I am uncomfortable with anger (which I am), then I may adopt an identity that is harmonious, conciliatory and deferential – anything to avoid conflict. I may also tend towards being generous and helpful, inspired as I am by the ideal of selflessness. However to the degree that I am generous and conciliatory out of a need to gain the approval of others, feel worthwhile and needed then I am confusing a co-dependent version of self-negation with true selflessness. Burn out will come eventually, perhaps followed by blame. What I need to do is learn to love myself, which will then allow me to say “no” and stop being a doormat.

Or feeling shame at wanting affection and love (as I do), I may adopt an identity that is aloof, stand-off-ish, matter-of-fact. I withdraw from others because I find them threatening. Dependency and neediness are my worst fear. I am attracted by the heroic ideal, wanting to be strong, independent and invulnerable. (Secretly I want to be a Jedi!) Feelings are Chinese to me. I find it difficult understanding other people's struggles. I don't see why they just can't get on with it. I am most comfortable when given a task that I can do by myself. Such an approach can be rationalised using teachings of detachment and renunciation. What I need to do is to become more fully embodied, more engaged with myself and others. This is why friendship is so important and scary, it is what I most long for and yet also what I find the most threatening. Self-development books are a popular parody of this persona, emphasising as they do the 'self' aspect of development, playing into the fantasy that we can do it alone without having to enter into relationship with others.

Both these identities are distorted attempts at transcending suffering. In reality they are a deepening of fixed self-view, strengthening the First Fetter rather than freeing consciousness from its entanglements in form, feelings, personality and social conditioning. They are the use of spiritual practise to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs and feelings, all in the name of Enlightenment. They are also a confusion of absolute and relative truth. Attempting to live our lives from the level of absolute truth we reject the level of relative truth in our experience. The poisoned snake in the Dhammapada being grasped wrongly turns to lay in its poisoned fangs!

Obviously this 'closing our eyes to what we are' is not real Buddhism but something else. What I am describing is a spiritual materialism. When I think of spiritual materialism I think of those horrendous makeover TV shows which follow some unhappy person from ugly-before-shot, through plastic surgery to the not-so-ugly-but-a-bit-scary-after-shot. Not happy with how they looked they swapped for something better. Spiritual materialism is a similarly crude literalism and distortion of self-transformation, where one attempts to reject an unhappy state for a happy one, and instead of calling it denial, we call it the Dharma. Such spiritual materialism is based on a crude and linear understanding of growth. It thrives on ideas of growth which are developmental, evolutionary, seeing life as a natural process of constructive increase and maturation.

Dharma practise based on this conception of growth will have no place for stuck-ness, limitation, falling-apart, confusion, despair. Such states will inevitably be seen as a setback to growth and therefore be viewed negatively and rejected or denied, while other 'growthful' states will be acknowledged and encouraged. In my experience 'growth' has not been the replacing of previously troubling and painful states with other more 'developed' states. I tried to make this happen for a long time, but the painful states would always come back. Like when I go back to visit my parents, I still feel at times the same as I did when I was ten, fifteen, twenty years-old. My inner feeling response is almost predictable. Yet there has still been a change and a 'growth', and this has been a growth in awareness, an increasing ability to discriminate my experience in a way that gives me choice about how to respond to it. This is not a growing 'out of' my disturbances by no longer experiencing them, but rather a learning to recognise them and free myself from 'acting-out' behaviour.

Much of denial also comes from views around the much debated and misunderstood word: 'acceptance'. There is the view that to accept yourself will mean accepting unskillfulness. I recently heard report of an Order Member saying, "the basis of the spiritual life is realising that we are fundamentally unacceptable." This no doubt comes from Sangharakshita who suggests, "Let us *accept* what is skilful in ourselves, but let us *reject* what is unskilful." However I can easily see such an understanding of acceptance leading to a practise that actively furthers a splitting of experience, where the rejection of "what is unskilful" becomes just another version of "closing one's eyes to what one is."

Denying that I am angry will mean I am unable to dwell in the gap between anger and aggression, thereby short-circuiting any attempt to leave the wheel and journey along the spiral. Such a denial of feeling states comes from mistaking having a particular content of experience, i.e. anger, with acting out that content, i.e. aggression. It is only the latter that is an unskillfulness and until then the practise is to dwell in the gap between feeling and desire, facing our feeling with the acceptance and understanding that then allows us to choose whether to indulge the feeling or not. But there is nothing unskillful about our feelings, our vedana, they are a given, a resultant Karma. Feelings are raw data.

Denial and non-acceptance are synonymous with a lack of awareness. If we want to become aware of our feelings we need to accept them. What we then do with this awareness is the ethical issue, rather than the other way around – i.e. seeing ethics as the absence or removal of troubling experiences that may lead us to act unskillfully. Neither spiritual experience nor ethical practise is about having particular feelings and not others. They are not about feeling either good or bad. Because if they were about feeling a particular way then where all the talk of change, impermanence and insubstantiality? If they were about feeling a particular way then where all the talk of fixed self view and breaking the fetters? Because if spiritual practise were about feeling a particular way how could we not then form an identification with that particular content of experience and thereby split off from other aspects of our experience. All aspects of our experience are just as real (or empty) and close to reality as any other.

The fear of facing 'what is', is that unruly, troubling and seemingly worldly feeling states will take us over, swamp us, drag us down from our hard won spirituality. And well they might! Indeed being thus overwhelmed is a necessary stage to go through before awareness and perspective can arise. There will always be a necessary contraction in awareness when new material arises in the mind. However to avoid this contraction is to miss out on the eventual expansion of awareness it brings. This is the value of stirring up the mud from the bottom of the pond, it allows it to be brought back into awareness.

To get to the heart of the tension described in Sangharakshita's aphorism is to look at the "what one should be" and clarify just what it is that we are trying to do in practising the Dharma. What is the aim or purpose at the heart of the spiritual life, and what does it tell us about what if anything we should be? If the "what one should be" is taken to mean that we all have the potential for Buddhahood, then how do we see the state of Enlightenment? Turning to the Buddhist tradition for our answer we find a vast and seemingly contradictory tradition that has no one answer.

In the **Sutta Nippata** the 'Qualities of a Muni' are described, amongst which are,

“He has no anger, no fear and no pride. Nothing disturbs his composure and nothing gives him cause for regret...He has no longing for the future or grief for the past...He can see detachment from the entangled world of sense impression.”

Here the Buddha is detached, free from the world, neither caught up in the past or future. And yet in the **Samyutta-nikaya** we see a very different Buddha, one who laments the death of his chief disciples Sariputta and Moggallana. Speaking to Ananda the Buddha is recorded as saying,

“Now the assembly seems to me as though it were empty. The assembly is empty for me know that Sariputta and Moggallana have attained final Nibbana. There is nowhere one can look to and say, ‘Sariputta and Moggallana are living there’”

These contrasting descriptions of the Buddha each seem to me to contain a partial truth about the Buddha, each speaking to different ends of the polarity in Sangharakshita’s aphorism. To resolve the tension in Sangharakshita’s aphorism we will need to hold both partial descriptions of the Buddha in mind:

- 1) the Buddha as a transcendent being, detached from the world and free from pain
- 2) the Buddha as a strongly feeling man who felt loss at the death of his good friends.

Sangharakshita’s aphorism highlights one of the distortions of the developmental model and the path of transcendence. By attempting to transcend our experience we are in danger of getting ahead of ourselves, cutting off from our here-and-now experience and imagining we are further along the Path than we actually are. This then becomes spiritual practise as castle-building-in-the-sand. Fearful that in accepting the content of our awareness we will deepen the hold it has on us we turn away from it and seek transcendence. Such attempts at transcendence are however a non-transcendence when they lead to splitting and denial.

Of course one could then swing the other way and follow a less explicitly developmental approach, pursue an immanence model and ‘pure awareness’. However the danger or distortion does not go away, it merely changes form. The distortion would then become one of dwelling-in or remaining-in one’s experience without seeing through it or beyond it. Emphasising practise in either way leads to opposite ends of the tension described in Sangharakshita’s aphorism. However, transcendence and immanence need not be seen as holding two ends of an opposing tension.

True transcendence will only result from first of all facing our fear or discomfort and accepting the content of our experience. Denial and non-acceptance are synonymous with a lack of awareness. Therefore in accepting the content of our experience awareness follows. This awareness far from increasing the hold of the experience over us brings in perspective around it, one is less caught up in it, less likely to act-out, one is dwelling in ‘the gap’. This perspective is then a transcendence of the experience, while also a simultaneous inhabiting of the experience more fully in awareness, being immanent and transcendent together.

Here transcendence does not negate immanence or vice-versa. Transcendence can be seen to be the perspective we have on our experience, immanence can be seen to be the

inhabiting of our experience with awareness – both transcendence and immanence needing each other to function without distortion. In this way the tension in Sangharakshita's aphorism is released.

Now we can understand that there is no conflict between 'what one should be' and 'what one is' because 'what one should be' is no longer any particular content of awareness, not any particular experience but rather a perspective on all experience. I have a particular thought or feeling, say I am angry, and holding it in awareness I see that it is part of me, I can accept the anger is there, but I am not identified with it, I do not see myself as an angry person but as a person who is experiencing anger. In this way I am more than my anger and without denying its presence I have a perspective on it that allows me to choose what to do with it. This 'more than' is not any particular content of awareness, such as being content or calm, but rather awareness itself, free and unrestricted by any identifications. And yet this 'more than' is not removed from experience, it is not split off but rather holds both a transcendence of experience while also inhabiting the experience.

Returning to our two descriptions of the Buddha, we can now place them together to create a fuller picture of "what one should be". The Buddha is a transcendent being, detached from "*the entangled world of sense impression*". Yet the Buddha is also able to mourn the death of his good friends, "*The assembly is empty for me now that Sariputta and Moggallana have attained final Nibbana.*" The Buddha is described as experiencing grief, he feels fully and mourns the death of his good friends. Yet seeing the empty nature of all phenomena the Buddha does not identify with this grief, he is more than his grief. So as well as feeling grief the Buddha is also detached from the grief, although his detachment is not a splitting of or a denial. The Buddha is not threatened by his grief or any other experience and therefore has no cause to deny his experience. The Buddha's insight, the "what we should be", is then neither the presence nor absence of any particular content of awareness, but rather a perspective on all experience.

"Closing one's eyes to what one is" will not make the demons that are our unwanted experiences go away. These demon states when ignored will come back to haunt us, catch us in off moments. Indeed they will hold more sway over us through being ignored. They will leak out at the edges of our experience in seemingly invisible ways that allow us to maintain our denial and the hold we have on our spiritual identification. Denied anger will leak out quietly but destructively in passive aggression, ignoring people, being distant, 'forgetting' to fulfil a promise – all in such a way as to perpetuate the delusion of non-anger. "Closing one's eyes to what one is" our Dharma practise then becomes the denial of the trouble in our lives, our relationships, even our sangha. This is when we find ourselves saying that we, "just want to get on with Dharma practise". We compartmentalise our spiritual life away from the rest of our life.

King Trisongdeutsen wanted to establish the Dharma in Tibet. He tried to build a monastery but found that what he built by day the local demons dismantled by night. Ignoring the demons of our unwanted experiences and trying to build a temple to our spiritual vision our efforts are in vain.

The untamed demons, cast out as inimical to the spiritual life, come back by night when our wilful vigilance is off guard. They mock our airy pretensions and tear down our fragile constructs, our shaky sense of self, our limited identifications.

Realising a new approach is required and if we are able to we can put our pride to one side. In our despair and anguish we cry out for help and if we are sensitive and open enough to hear it an answer will come. Of course in the story King Trisongdeutsen was fortunate because he had Padmasambhava to call on. Padmasambhava was not afraid of these demons. He got his demon dagger out and pinned them down. But he did not kill the demons or cast them out as inimical to the Dharma Life. He merely looked at them, he merely dwelt upon them with his awareness and this was what was required. In bringing the demons into awareness, by accepting their presence and not ignoring them, they lost their destructive power and were turned to work for the Dharma. The monastery was only then able to be built and completed. Only then did the Dharma flourish in Tibet.

In translating the Dharma into our lives and into the 21st century the temptation, as was King Trisongdeutsen's, is to import it smelling of sandalwood, uprooted and dirt free. Enjoying the clarity of vision in our little pond we fail to put roots down into the mud. This is the Dharma as a crude pseudo-transcendence of hindrances, a denial of psychological hassles, a courting of bliss not affliction. This is Dharma as denial, a closing our eyes to what we are. Without roots in the mud our Lotus like nature, undernourished, is unable to reach up out of the pond to wider horizons. The challenge, as I see it, for us 21st century Buddhists is to do what Padmasambhava did in Tibet. To look at our own private and collective demons. To bring into awareness what has been denied within ourselves and within our FWBO culture. To become what we can be by looking at what we really are. Only then will our efforts to practise begin to produce lasting fruits. Only then will the Dharma begin to root in our hearts.