

## BUDDHIST SPIRITUALITY

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Folks, this blog may be too long and nitty-gritty for some of you and for this I apologize. It may not be for everyone. Here goes:

The “Dharma” or mind training (meditation methods) that the historical Buddha left us is (as we know) currently going secular big time. Today more and more people are training their minds. Does this mean that Buddhism does not have a “spiritual” component? I hesitate to use the word ‘religious’ here (and I mentioned this in the precious blog) because I don’t consider Buddhism a religion in the traditional sense. That is my opinion.

What makes Buddhism not a religion for me is the fact that it is non-theist. There is no one up there pulling strings. We pull all the strings ourselves. That fact is enough right there for me to separate Buddhism from the other major religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Yet I don’t want to debate this point, so let’s move on. A question I do want to look at is whether Buddhism also has a spiritual dimension.

It does indeed, but even then I tend to view Buddhism more as a practical psychology than overly religious, at least compared to the kind of religion I grew up in, which was Roman Catholicism. Now that was a religion in the Old Testament sense of the word, with fire & brimstone, heaven and damnation and, of course, threats of excommunication. In comparison, Buddhism (of the kind I am involved in) is mostly concerned with the mind and getting to know and use it.

Does Buddhism have a fire & brimstone side to it? By “fire & brimstone” I mean does Buddhism have moral imperatives that we are somehow damned if we don’t follow? My answer to that is a cautious “not really.” Buddhist imperatives are more like the laws of physics. We don’t break nature’s laws; they break us. A typical imperative from the Buddhist perspective might be “Consider the law of gravity; whatever goes up comes down,” and things like that.

Buddhism’s laws are the laws of science, which is perhaps why more and more scientists are getting into it. And of course we all have to consider our eventual death. Concern with death is not the sole domain of the theist religions. Science also looks at death and so do the Buddhists. What does happen after death? “Inquiring minds want to know.”

If considering questions of life and death make Buddhism a religion then so be it. Those are real questions that we each face. And I hope to discuss them with you down the line, but right here and now, let’s start with basic meditation and what comes after learning that. Today there are all kinds of quote “more advanced practices” floating out there, but most of these are not really more advanced. Let me try to explain.

I won’t detail sitting meditation again here since I have done that in many earlier blogs. Suffice it to say that practicing basic meditation is a means to form a habit of mental focus and mindfulness, a habit perhaps learned on the cushion, but one more designed for post-meditation, our life off the cushion. In a word, meditation trains us to be-here-now and continuously create not only a fresh future but also a clean past. What’s comes after we learn that?

Well, for many folks there need be nothing after that. Mind training by itself has been enough to propel Buddhism toward the secular mainstream. So then, what are these other practices all about? The so-called “advanced practices” have to do with the fact that many (if not most) of us find obstacles to our meditation training, ingrained habits and emotional fixations that require remediation or (I hate to use the word) some kind of therapy.

If simple insight into our problems is not enough to clarify them, then therapy or repeated doses of some remedy may be required. This is true for life in general, and is not restricted to Buddhism. Many of the more advanced dharma teachings are all about removing stubborn obstacles, large and small. Here I am talking about the larger obstacles, so what are they?

The Buddhists call these obstacles “Kleshas” and they are all too familiar, things like anger, jealousy, hatred, delusion, and the other crystallized thought forms that continually cloud our consciousness. As we all well know, these kleshas don’t simply go away just because we become aware of them. They come up again and again. We can’t simply dismiss them by recognizing them. They persist and require therapy and real work to remove. How do we remove these?

Well, the Tibetan Buddhists have been working on a solution for 1,000 years. For one, these more advanced dharma practices are good for getting those stubborn stains out of the fabric of our lives, the ingrained habits that we continually get stuck in like anger and jealousy. Kleshas like anger can at times take over our entire being and we are powerless to do anything about it.

As mentioned, Tibetan Buddhists have a whole regime for rooting out these ingrained bad habits that we have acquired from time immemorial, but it is not for the faint of heart. Stubborn stains require strong action to remove. The Tibetans call this regime “Ngondro” and it consists of five sets of practices designed to get us into good physical, mental, and emotional shape. These exercises amount to a spiritual boot camp.

When I first heard about ngondro I freaked out a bit because for all the world it looked like something dredged up from Medieval times. Mentally I ran screaming from the very thought of it. But before we discuss ngondro, let’s talk more about why it exists and what it is good for.

Ngondo is an exact correlate to something we all are familiar with and that is an exercise plan, a physical workout. Only in the case of ngondro it not only includes a physical regimen, but also a mental and emotional workout. I won’t go into great detail here but I do want to give you the general sense of how ngondro works.

Ngondo is a set of five major exercises, one very physical and the others emotional, mental, and spiritual. The physical exercise part of ngondro (one of the five exercises) involves doing 111,111 full prostrations on the floor, and let me assure you that this amounts to a real body-building workout.

Then there is another set of 111,111 repetitions that are designed to purify our emotional hang-ups. And the list goes on. As mentioned, there are five sets of exercises for a total of 555,555 repetitions. And while there is no pressure to finish them, nothing happens unless you practice. In fact one has to ask permission to even start ngondro. And people only ask for permission for this practice if they find in their sitting meditation practice that the mental obstacles are greater than the benefits of meditation, that is: the obstacles or kleshas (like anger, jealousy, etc.) stand in the way of any real progress. These kleshas are ingrained. As mentioned, think of ngondro as

way to get into mental and physical shape, a spiritual workout plan.

And this happened to me. My ingrained habits were often stronger than my mental (and emotional) ability to control them, and so I asked my Tibetan dharma teacher if I could start ngondro and was gently told no. Instead I was instructed to start back at the very, very beginning of meditation practice. And this after I thought I already knew how to meditate. In fact, I did not. My idea of meditation at that time was just something (I realize now) that I kind of made up, my own take (sort of a “sounds like”) on what I had read or learned about meditation.

After I was told “no” for doing ngondro, it was touch and go for me when it came to deciding whether I was willing to start at the total beginning again. After all I was an astrologer and had been counseling other people for many years. I thought I should at least place out of Meditation 101 and go directly to the more advanced stuff, like doing the ngondro. We always want the more advanced stuff, right? That is, until we get it.

And it is only because I had such great respect for the Tibetan rinpoche who was telling me to start over that I somehow found enough humility to actually put aside my pride and go to the back of the line. I am SO GLAD I did because I came very close to just chucking it all and doing it “my way” as I had always done.

But I did start back at the beginning meditation and I did find that I had all kinds of anger, jealousy, and other kleshas that made progress (in my case) slow to impossible. And so I did eventually ask again to do ngondro and this time I was given permission to do it. And then I did do it, all five sets of 111,111 practices. And although it took me a few years, those exercises actually worked to loosen me up in many ways.

Ngondro was very difficult for me and I tried to do two sessions a day. Of course I found countless reasons to not do it some days or to cut my sessions short. That is just the kind of rascal I can be. Of course that hurt nobody but myself. The physical prostrations give the old phrase “Drop and give me twenty” an entirely new meaning.

As I look back on the experience, I can see now how perfectly engineered ngondro is to work us like a potter works clay. No late-night intellectual banter here. Ngondro was hard work that hit right at the heart of the problem. It breaks down physical, emotional, and intellectual resistance and renders us vulnerable, open, and flexible once again. But it takes time and effort.

I cannot recommend it to the faint of heart and it is not for everyone. Ngondro is designed for those who understand that life is short and that if we have ingrained bad habits, they won't just come out in the wash. We have to work them out. I will end this section with a personal story that I find humorous.

Sometime after I had completed my ngondro, all 555,555 repetitions, I was having my yearly personal interview with Khenpo Rinpoche, my dharma teacher. Always looking for more contact with him, I asked if there was anything he thought I should now do in the way of practice. He looked me right in the eye and said “Do you really want to know?” I assured him I did. Then he said “It would be best if you do another ngondro.” My response was a big gulp, but I did another ngondro.