

Secular Buddhism: a Practice of Care and Awakening for our Times - Class 2

Martine Batchelor & Bernat Font

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Martine Batchelor

So very nice to be with some of you again. Today, what we want to do, like last time, is have 15 minutes each of me and Bernat talking around the subject, then a little bit of meditation, and then we will open up to a question discussion. Of course, we will have a break, and then again the same type of session: 15, 15, then small groups, and then we'll finish with discussion and a meditation if we have the time. So, warm welcome to everybody.

And so this time, in this first part of our time together, as we mentioned previously, for us, secular Dharma is really the Dharma of this secular, of this time. In the first part, we wanted to reflect a little bit on culture, on the fact that in a way, the Buddha's teaching started 2,500 years ago in India, then it went to different countries. Each time, you could say you have a kind of geographical change, a cultural change, and also part of history and what happened in each of these countries, what happened in each of these Buddhisms. Then, of course, Buddhism encountered modernity—not only in what is called the West, but also in the East, they encountered modernity. In encountering modernity, there was some change with that.

I wanted to, in terms of encountering modernity, encountering this secular, this time, look a little bit at the case of China. When Buddhism entered China in the slowly fourth, fifth, third, sixth century AD, you had a very highly cultured society. Sometimes, Buddhism entered a society and brought culture with it. Other times, Buddhism entered an already highly cultured society, and in a way, the culture had to adapt to it and Buddhism had to adapt to the culture. This is what happened in China, actually, because some of the concepts—like in China at the time when Buddhism entered—they did not have a concept of the self.

So the fact that the Buddhists were negating the self, actually, it was hard for them. They did not have a self in the first place, so they did not see the point of negating something they did not have. In a way, they had to be taught about the self before they could be taught about the not-self. One interesting thing that happened with that notion of not-self, which introduced the notion of self, was that before, there was this very Confucianist culture which really thought in terms of society, in terms of relationship, in terms of incest, and so less in terms of individual rights and more in terms of ancestor rights, family rights, the connection with the emperor, and things of that nature.

One of the things that Buddhism influenced at the beginning was actually in terms of law, in the legal profession, by introducing, kind of influencing this idea of individual rights. So in a way, you have

two books which are very interesting in terms of China and Buddhism: how Buddhism changed China and how China changed Buddhism. Both influenced each other. For example, when Buddhism entered China, they used a Taoist term to translate Buddhist terms, and then it gave a very Taoist flavor to Buddhism. Then, 250 years later, they realized the term does not exactly mean what the Taoist term means, so you had a second phase of translation, when you had enough people knowing both languages in order to really see what is really meant, what is the subtle meaning here.

Again, you had this very Taoist influence, for example, in Chan Buddhism, which now is known as Zen Buddhism from the Chinese translation. So you have China changing Buddhism, the way it developed in China, and actually like Thailand, Vietnam, and so on. What I want to say is, what is a word that actually has entered our language that was not there before? One of the words which had entered what I would call Western culture—a newspaper, you read an article, and suddenly you have this term: instant karma. This is kind of like one of the things people seem to slightly rejoice in, is that if somebody they don't like, something bad happens to them because they've done a bad thing—ah, instant karma—which is kind of very close to Schadenfreude of the German, I would say, the use that often instant karma is used.

Here, I think we have to reflect on how do we use this ancient word nowadays. In a way, we seem to use it as strictly: there is a cause, there is an immediate effect. When actually, if you look in the text, karma is one of the most mysterious things to explain, because it has so many different aspects. It's part of conditionality. The Buddha was clear that actually karma did not mean that everything we experience is the fruition of our action.

Because in one sutta, there is one sutta where somebody said to the Buddha, everything we experience in terms of *vedanā* is because of our karmic fruition, karmic fruit. The Buddha said, no, no, no, there are eight causes for what you experience, and only one of them is actually karmic fruition, karmic fruit. He said, you know, it's like if you have illnesses, if there is external accident, if there is heedlessness, and so on and so forth. So we have to be careful when we think of karma because we start to think that karma is actually like science, like there is a cause and there is going to be a definite effect.

But we have to see that for the Buddha, karma, actually thinking about karma was actually more talking about ethics, but not in, you know, if you do a bad thing, you're going to hell type of thing, but more looking at responsibility, what are we responsible for. I think in a way it's kind of looking what is going on, and at one level can we transform what is possible, to accept what is not possible to transform. Personally, I think we have to really be careful of looking at karma as in a totally scientific cause and effect.

Another thing which I found interesting looking at karma from this secular is that a few years back I read a book called *The Drunkard's Walk* by Mlodinow, a researcher in randomness. The secondary title of the book is *How Randomness Rules Our Lives*. By the end of the book, he nearly convinced

me that cause and effect did not exist. But in a way, I was going the other way. He did not say everything is random, but what he was saying is that things are more random than we think. It really made me question, how do I hold the theory of karma? How do I hold the theory of cause and effect nowadays?

To me, it's back to what the Buddha says: there is a certain part we can, there is a cause and effect we can affect in a way, and there is also cause and effect we cannot affect. But then the question is, how can we creatively engage, as he says, with what arises. So that's what I wanted to share with you today in terms of secular Dharma, change, and karma. And now to Bernat.

Bernat Font

Thanks, Martine. And again, hello, everyone. I hope that you can see me and hear me well and that you're having a good morning or afternoon, wherever you are. So on the topic of culture, Martine mentioned how Buddhism changed when it went to China, and it changed China. Obviously, Buddhism has changed a lot when it has come to the West, what we call the West, and the West is also changing.

But sometimes in secular Dharma or in general in contemporary Buddhism, we have this fiction that what we want to do is to strip away the culture and just get to the real Dharma. Just take away all these things they've put on top of it, as if somehow Buddhism was a sort of banana split with too many toppings and you just have to take away the toppings and then you'll get to the... So that quest for purity, the pure Buddhism. Well, Buddhism is always cultural. It's part of culture. It is a culture. It doesn't exist independently of culture. It's, to say it in Buddhist, it's empty. It doesn't exist independently of culture.

Certainly some things are more universal and timeless than others, but still if you try to take away all the layers you end up with nothing. If you really took that to the last consequences, maybe you end up with nothing. There's always a culture, and we also have a culture. Sometimes the problem with this fiction that we will strip away all the cultural accretions, as it's usually said in English, to Buddhism, is we think, are we not going to impose cultural accretions? We have to be a bit more self-aware and humble, and then see how our culture is interacting with the Dharma and changing it and changing us.

I want to give a couple of examples. One is our view of religious texts. For most of us, our reference for religious texts is the Bible, Christian texts. The Gospels are accounts of Jesus' life. It's very tempting to just see the Buddhist texts in the same way, the sort of Buddhist version of the Gospels. Sure, the human Buddha is a very, very inspiring thing. So there's nothing against that. I find it very inspiring. But at the same time, is it the same as the Gospels? Are Buddhist texts the same as the kind of thing we call holy texts of the Abrahamic religions?

I think Asia has seen texts differently. If you think about it, there is no Buddhist equivalent of the Bible. There isn't. There's no text that all traditions read. Tibetans don't read the Pāli suttas or the

Āgamas. They don't read the early discourses. In Japan, they probably don't read them either. Until very recently, even in Southeast Asia, they read many other texts mixed in with the suttas or even more than the suttas. They have never seen it as a problem to keep adding layers of texts. Just like in the history of Western philosophy, you have Plato and then you have Aristotle and then you had people. Just keep evolving the message.

But sometimes we try to create this kind of Bible. Okay, let's go to the earliest texts. Again, don't get me wrong, I love the early texts. But the point is, why do we do this and how aware are we of our own presuppositions and our assumptions and our biases? We go looking for what's really authentic, what did the Buddha really teach? As if, I mean, the Buddha's Buddhism is also affected by culture, his own culture. Or sometimes we get like, can we go kind of behind the page of the book and find the Buddha before the texts? As if that notion made any sense at all. We just have the texts. We don't have a time machine.

I've often thought that if I had access to a time machine, the first trip I would make would be to go see the Buddha. Who knows, maybe I'd be incredibly disappointed. Who knows? There's also a value in keeping the Buddha as an ideal. It's half human, half... It's the incarnation of an idea. So there's a few things in here. There's a couple of things. First, I find a very interesting paradox in this quest for origins that we need to project everything of our understanding of Buddhism back to the founder, back to the Buddha.

What's paradoxical about this, especially in contemporary and secular forms of Buddhism, is this is a very religious impulse. Philosophers don't try to say, well, actually Plato, this is what he really meant. They are not, Plato said this and then Descartes said that. But we have this thing, we have a sort of personal relationship to this figure. We want him to have said the things we want to hear. That's not necessarily bad. It's good to become aware of it, though. Because we can go into a certain way of thinking as if the only valuable thing were the early discourses. From that, everything started to decline.

Something interesting here is how it can play into colonial arrogance. Where we just become dismissive of what people in Sri Lanka or Thailand have been writing and practicing for centuries, like they kind of got it wrong, but here we come, and we're going to access the earliest layer of this and interpret it properly. So we're going to tell you what your tradition is really about. Obviously, usually we don't go that far, but I recognize in my own path there have been times where this notion of stripping away all the unnecessary toppings of how people in different cultures had misunderstood the Buddha and added their own cultural stuff and get to find the real one. That was a driver for me at some point.

With time I realized, hmm, some things here are not particularly wholesome maybe. Maybe there's some arrogance, maybe there's some dismissive attitudes to forms of knowledge from a different culture and from a different time. So what is a critical and respectful relationship to the Buddhist traditions, to the Buddhist texts? Aware that we don't need to agree with everything. At the same time,

we can understand and not just be blind to our own toppings that we are going to add. Already I'm showing how culture is affecting how we see Buddhism through a certain conception of what religious texts are.

Martine mentioned science, and she'll talk about this more later. But again, after the scientific revolution, we have a very distinct kind of separation between what is literal and what's metaphorical, what's symbolic and what is literally true in the sense of scientifically true. But can we project that back to times before the scientific revolution? Someone mentioned cosmology last week and that made me think: Buddhist cosmology, the mythological creatures and realms, how do we understand that? I mean, you can't say that they are entirely psychological metaphors, because probably people did believe that there were hungry ghosts and different types of deities and hellish beings.

At the same time, it's also not quite right to just think that was their view of the literal world. I mean, clearly they've always functioned as psychology, in a way. One example is the hungry ghosts. The hungry ghosts is a certain type of being that roams around because they were very greedy in their previous life. So they are destined to an existence where they literally can't quench their thirst. Now that is a psychological and moral teaching about what happens if you feed your greed. You'll end up in a state where you can never quench your thirst.

That's how a lot of these stories have worked in certain cultures and even today. They are conveying teachings that maybe today we don't quite resonate with explaining it in this way, because we cannot get out of our post-scientific revolution mind. Yet, we can also understand what they were trying to say, or try our best to understand, instead of just judging it as nonsense. One of the things that sometimes we judge as nonsense, I was talking about the texts, in that privileging of the earliest discourses, is the commentaries, the Abhidharma. This is a kind of language that I, how to say, inherited to some degree, this dismissal.

The monk Ñāṇavīra Thera is famous for saying that if you've never read the commentaries, that's better, because it leaves less to be unlearned. I've heard a lot of people repeat this kind of thing. I'm quite sure they've never actually read the commentaries, because most of them are not translated, and usually people don't know Pāli. So why do we do this? Again, you might not find those texts useful, but is that why you kind of don't use them? Or are we repeating something that's biased? Analayo had a paper showing an example from Ñāṇavīra Thera precisely of having a supposedly very innovative interpretation of dependent arising as happening in each moment of mind. But that interpretation is found in the commentaries to the Abhidharma from centuries ago already. So sometimes we just reinvent the wheel. It's an interesting example.

Anyway, back to the stories and science. I think sometimes it's more useful to think in terms of art than science. We understand the power of stories. We understand creative thinking, symbolic ways of expressing things. Then again, we might or might not resonate with certain stories, and we have today a very psychological way of speaking, and that's fine. That's how our culture is shaping the

Dharma.

Another example, also about symbolism, is ritual. Many people think of secular Buddhism as some sort of Buddhism that is devoid of ritual. Again, that has a history in the West with the Protestant kind of movement. It evolved a particular conception of spirituality as an entirely private affair that should not be part of our external behavior because obviously the state should be secular, etc. So our religiosity or spirituality or however you call it just stayed within the confines of our skin. Ritual, which is something external and shared, went out the window.

Interesting also to note that this change is because of a religious notion at some point, that of the view of Protestantism. I read a book a few years ago, very interesting, the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, a book called *The Disappearance of Rituals*. It's a very thin book and I recommend it. It speaks of the disappearance of ritual also as an effect of capitalism and our highly individualistic societies. Because ritual creates shared spaces of meaning which don't depend on verbal communication. They might sometimes, but not necessarily. They can be actually completely silent.

Whereas today, we kind of have the opposite. We have a lot of verbal communication, but we really struggle to keep and maintain community, shared spaces. Rituals create those shared spaces, and with the dismemberment of community in the individualistic world also came the disappearance and falling out of fashion of rituals, which stimulate the symbolic mind. They engage the bodies. We're not just brains. Again, it's part of our modern culture that we have been thinking of ourselves for a while as merely brains with something underneath that moves it from one place to the next. Again, now this is changing. We're much more aware of how we're embodied. We can think creatively.

So I'm going to take, just to end, Martine's idea of creative engagement. To creatively engage with the notion of ritual. Because to me, and I'm not a ritualistic person especially, but lack of ritual is not what to me defines secular Dharma. Either with or without ritual is completely valid. But how can we creatively engage with that? Rituals are performed acts; they can be creative and maybe we can create new ones because they can be non-discursive teachings, they can be reminders.

About twice a month approximately, we buy at home a bunch of bananas and offer them to the Buddha in our altar at home as it's classic in Southeast Asian countries. We buy them quite raw, like green, and so for a few days you have to be aware of when it's time to put them down, to take them out of the altar because they're ready to eat, because if you leave them for too long, then they go to waste. Doing that kind of became a natural reminder of change and impermanence. So I suggested to a few students that we were studying the theme of impermanence to create some sort of reminder or ritual around impermanence. Someone came up with the idea of, with certain regularity, buying a flower and then throughout the days you see it wither and you smile at it every day.

So that is a teaching. It's not discursive, it's not conceptual, but the case of impermanence is a very good example for me because we don't need to understand impermanence. We already know that things change. What we need is not to be forgetful about it, to really keep it in mind, so we can en-

gage something symbolic like this or a little ritual or whatever to help our practice. So this was an example of engaging creatively with something rather than just react with aversion against it out of our conditioned habits and histories. Okay, so these were my reflections.

Martine Batchelor

And so now we have about 30 minutes for discussion. So if you want to ask any questions about what myself or Bernat have said for now, or what we talked about last time and you kind of thought more about it later, or if there is a subject you thought would be interesting also to look at or inquire, then just let us know. And Victoria, you can unmute yourself.

Questioner

Thank you. I have a million questions. I was thinking already this morning, I've got to jump on a plane and go to Europe or wherever you are. So I will try to just ask one question for now and not be too greedy, too craving. I feel like there's a fundamental need in human nature for devotion and worship. And so that's what I'd love to hear more about from both of you, what that impulse is, the impulse to worship and where it originates and how it manifests.

And then to the point, this is kind of cheating and adding another question, but I was thinking about Dante while Bernat was talking and this idea of the, you know, like with the hungry ghosts and things like that, the equivalent in the Christian tradition and how interesting it is. I gave a series of lectures during the big Dante year, so I was very immersed in Dante. I was looking at all the different art forms, because I'm interdisciplinary in the arts, visual arts, music, as well as other literature besides Dante's work himself. Looking at how this need and this desire to have images, to have music, sounds, to have the stories, which basically all are conveying, just like I believe the Buddhist—I'm not a Buddhist scholar, but I believe the Buddhist stories, the different levels and strata of the, that they are meant somehow to teach us and for us to sort of take these concepts and they're more readily absorbed through the arts, I believe, in the sense of it's more, speaking of *vedanā*, it's more pleasant, as it were.

We see that also in the ancient cathedrals. We see it all through the history of Christianity that also because of illiteracy, which I assume is the same case in Asia with the Buddhist scriptures or texts, that people who can't read need somehow to learn these stories. So the imagery becomes important and then figures. Then to speak to what Bernat was talking about, about Protestantism, I differ with a few things you said. But basically, I think Protestantism was an overreaction to what was perceived as not using the images for educational purposes, but rather as idolatry. That brings me to a whole new slew of questions about idolatry. I will stop here for the courtesy of others. So that's sort of my introductory bunch of questions for you. I'd love to hear what you have to say. Thank you.

Martine Batchelor

Okay, thank you. So first, ritual. I think in a way we can understand this thing in many different ways. I think worshipping we can understand in many different ways. But to me, what's really one of the

rituals who touched me the most, actually, when I was a nun in Korea, was when they had the new Buddha statue in the main Buddha hall. Then they had the ceremony of opening the eye of the Buddha statue.

What the ceremony entailed was that everybody, the monks, the nuns, the lay people were sitting on the floor. A red thread was attached around, around, around the Buddha statue. The red thread, it was very long, was passed through everybody. Everybody was holding the red thread, everybody. So 100 people. Then the ceremony was chanting and everything and holding the thread. Because basically we were giving life to the Buddha, but in a way, there was an exchange of Buddha nature there.

So in a way, I think, again, of course, some people want to worship something higher than themselves. But in a way here, there was this kind of connection, the recognition, oh, the Buddha nature is within each of us. In a way, we're giving the Buddha nature, our Buddha nature to this statue so it can come alive for us. But it was our sincerity, the Dharma we practice, which in a way we're putting in the statue. I found that, you know, and then you cut the thread and then you keep it. I thought that was so moving to see in a way this connection, this kind of live connection.

So personally, I would say in a way, worshipping is nearly an excuse to be doing something together. Because I think there is something special about doing an act together in which often we forget ourselves. So I think in a way, what do we do the ritual for? I remember for myself when I was getting my precept, the ceremony of the precept, and one of the conditions for the ceremony was to do the 108 vows, which I had never been keen on anyway, but I had to do them. What was very fascinating for me was that up to the 33 I was, oh la la, I have to do this, I have to do this, I have to do this—very kind of selfish. Then after 35, 33, it was like something let go and there was just a doing of it.

So by doing a certain repetitive activity with other people, it actually got a different meaning and a different experience. At the end of this 108 bow, there was a kind of feeling of lightness, this feeling of connection, and not an imposition anymore. So I think in a way there are different things coming into this kind of worshipping ritual, especially using the body as a group together for a certain activity. But again, within, I think to me, all this is doing within an ethical and wisdom framework. We do this because we hold certain value of wisdom and compassion. Bernat?

Bernat Font

Yeah, actually, Byung-Chul Han mentions repetitiveness as also an important value in ritual, that the fact that a lot of the times you have to slow down, you have to be contemplative. I mean, sitting meditation is a ritual. A retreat is very ritualistic, even if there's no chanting. If someone who had never seen that suddenly appears in a meditation retreat and sees people walking in silence slowly and then in the hall all sitting, that looks very ritualistic.

I think there's a lot of meaning, lots of important moments that we want to mark are ceremonial. I remember my graduation, I remember lots of things that are like a ceremony. But to not make this too long maybe, a couple of comments on worship and then I'll go into the stories. I guess the worshipping

depends on where you do it from. One can be worshipping out of a sense of inferiority and of lack or out of a sense of respect, a sense of humility. I think we find it meaningful when we are not at the top of the world, when we are belonging to something larger than ourselves. It can be the planet, it can be history, humanity, or some other. We're part of a narrative. I think that the coziness of that idea is a part of wisdom. The wisdom of that. But selfing is stressful. Letting go and connecting is not.

Again, we always worship things. It might be Christ. It might be Steve Jobs. It might be a politician. So the question is in the details. The devil is in the details. That leads me to the other question on hell realms and Dante. Yeah, we learn through stories. Some of the most popular Buddhist texts in Southeast Asia, the *Jātakas*, the story of the Buddha's past lives—does it matter that they are a little bit later than the suttas? Why would it? Does it matter that the story of Sujātā, the girl who offered the rice pudding to the Buddha, is not found in the suttas? It's not found even in the Jātaka. It's found in the commentary to the Jātakas. The point is what meaning...

So I guess religion, spirituality, whatever you want to call this, its main function or one of its main functions is meaning making. Meaning making. The pictures we see in temples and probably the same in churches, they are teaching devices. They have been teaching devices. So it's not just like people learn the story of the Buddha and everything through looking at it, but also it's the ancient version of slides. Instead of showing a slide, you just point at the wall and then you explain that. It was one of the functions of monastics: you have the images and the—I can't remember the English name now—the thing carved on rock outside. So all the scenes depicted there were things that monastics would explain to visitors. So yeah, if we have time then you can ask more questions and we can expand, but let's give a little bit of space to—sorry to not pronounce that properly.

Questioner

Thank you both so much. I just had a couple comments that I wanted to make about ritual. Just talking about the subject makes me feel good and I really appreciated, Bernat, your banana example, your ritual that you use. It just made me think about how, like you said, we all know that impermanence is sort of a truth but we forget it sometimes, so just having these little reminders around that can impact the way that we engage with our moments is just really beautiful to me. It's like the reminder that the thinking with which we do something really matters.

I also found it interesting that you said that we're in a culture that is not short of any words, but lacking in community and rituals. I just was like, that's just so interesting. And yes, selfing is stressful. But thank you. Thank you for your points on ritual. I really find a lot of sweetness in that whole topic and I embrace it, so thank you.

Bernat Font

Thank you, Corey. It is something I've been averse to for very long and I just found myself in situations that include these things and then having to make sense of it. Then it makes you reflect. So it's a good exposure to travel, experience different cultures, different types of Buddhism and different ideas. The

thing about communication and community, that is a very good point by Byung-Chul Han. So you might enjoy his book, *The Disappearance of Rituals*. Yeah.

Questioner

Thank you.

Martine Batchelor

And also, I mean, personally, I was on earth for 10 years in Korea. What was very interesting in Korea is that because Buddhism was repressed there from the 13th century to the 19th century, actually all their rituals and all their instruments had to be portable and to be quite short. Now it's become different because they have more finances. So in a way, they have the art of ritual in a kind of very simple, very practical way.

One of the rituals which I really like there, apart from there are lots of ceremonies, different type of things, but one thing which was nice in the meditation hall is that in some meditation hall, you would not have a Buddha statue and you would just have a mirror. Every morning, every evening, you would bow three times to each other. Also, in a way, to your Buddha nature reflected in the mirror. Again, I think kind of ritual can take different shape, different form, again, according to geography, history. Then it's how we kind of communicate, again, the value of what we are doing and how also I think we are caring for each other, and also how we're supportive of each other.

Because when we sit in meditation in silence, we're actually supporting the meditation of each other, the silence of each other. When we are bowing together, again, we are supporting each other. I think it's an important part for me. Of me, I'm always happy to bow. I go to a temple, okay, I'll bow. I love bowing. Not too many times because of my knees nowadays. But I kind of, it's like I find something, kind of something I really love to do to show respect, to kind of be kind of respectful, kind of showing through the body that this is important. This is kind of something I want to take care of. I want to respect. Anything else from anybody else?

Bernat Font

Can I give an example of a very briefly of a modern ritual that is evolving in the Dharma world? It is the giving away of phones at the beginning of a retreat. Some teachers ritualize it more than others, and I've taught with a few people who really want to ritualize it, saying, well, it's just we have to go bigger and then people will actually be more inspired if it's bigger. It was interesting to see in some retreats, I thought that it's not just there's a basket in front of the teachers and people with the phone, but some teachers want people to line up and then put the phone and kind of bow and then they ring the bell every time that someone puts the phone. Also, everyone is included in rejoicing in that act of letting go every time they hear the bell, even if they choose not to renounce the phone. So this is something that's happening. I find it quite interesting. So Linda and then Helen.

Questioner

Thanks very much. I'm really interested in the whole thing about ritual and chanting actually, because

I'm someone who I've always felt a bit averse to the chanting. I did. Then I joined the Uposatha Sangha with Bodhi College and you chant there. I started really enjoying it. I think it's the connectivity and what you just said, Martine, about you do something with the body. I went on a retreat with Ajahn Sucitto a while ago. He did some chanting with us. I happened to be standing very near to him. When he started chanting, it startled me because the vibrational quality, I could feel it. It was a very visceral sense of connection. It was just so interesting for me. I like the chanting now. I know if I can have an opportunity to do the chanting, I will do it too.

I just want to say, and someone else said, I think it was Corrie, I think it was you, that it's a very, the whole idea of ritual and devotion is a very sweet kind of area for you. I think it could be for me too. Increasingly, it's just, it feels important and creating that shared space and that, you know, the co-created kind of intention. It feels very lovely, actually. Yeah. Thank you, Linda.

Martine Batchelor

Ellen?

Questioner

So thank you so much, Bernat and Martine and everybody else. I always get back to this question in my own mind. I get tangled up into this because you're beautifully talking, obviously, about our times. Martine, you brought back the notion there is a cause and effect, but that's only one aspect and there are many others that could very well not be that. Bernat, you were talking about impermanence and then the notion of rituals, which obviously is very important. How to break from the notion, well, get back to community through the notion of rituals, which makes very much sense. But we're not always able to get into that. We don't necessarily always go to a sangha or go to... And right now, we're very much trapped into repetition. We're trapped into, for example, violence and repetition. I work a lot on Africa, and that notion is very evident. Bernat, you talked about, for example, the colonial views that we've kind of gotten embedded in and we can't get out of, for example.

So how, in the individual notion of meditation, without necessarily getting into the rituals that would be more effective probably in a sangha, even though we can do some, but in the present situation that we're in, how is that not getting engaged in an individualistic debunking of something that falls back into that individual notion with oneself? I don't know if I'm clear.

Martine Batchelor

I don't totally get what you're trying to get at in the end. Up to the end, I kind of followed you, but here I'm losing you a little bit.

Questioner

The notion of the example editing is a very individual area for the better good of everybody. How is that sort of in the world situation in which we're in, when we're not belonging necessarily to a sangha, obviously we could break that, but how is that sort of aligning with the notion of community that is necessary right now in order to really get out of the notion of repetition that we're stuck in? I don't

know if that's clear.

Bernat Font

A little bit, but it's still a bit obscure to me. But I first just wanted to say that ritual is an option. So I'm not making the point that we all should, but it's like, can we reconsider just inviting people if they want to? You can make it individual and symbolic, like the example of a flower. In that sense, it would not be something that is feeding into community. You can do it with others, but you can also do it online. So nowadays you have online communities and I think that's quite meaningful. Again, it calls for a different type of ritual or ceremony. But of course, it's not like we put our trust that making certain movements together or whatever is going to magically by itself dissolve all our selfing. It's an instrument we can use, but yeah, it's not gonna solve it.

Martine Batchelor

I think in a way, I mean, we'll talk more about this in the second part of our session: how do we make community, what does it mean to make community, are we in a community in a way to be in a safe space, which would be totally fine, are we in community in order to be acting in the world in a certain way, are we in community to cultivate certain value? In a way, we can be in community in many different ways and we can be very individualistic even being in community. This is one of the things I kind of noticed in terms of a meditation group, for example, that often you have half the meditation group who want to do things communal and half who just want to sit in silence together. Often what I tell the one who wants to be more communal: don't wait for the one who wants to sit in silence to do something, but appreciate that they sit with you together. If you want to do something together, then that part of the sangha has to go and do it, but not try to have everybody in it.

I think it kind of, again, when you have community, there is also the question of inclusivity and exclusivity in terms of community and in terms of how much are you individual within the community or how are you merging? Also, how can you, I think, to me, what would be valued would be how can one individual or can few individuals coming together, how they can change kind of the mood around them. I saw that once in action. I really was impressed. We were at a retreat in silence. Then there was something happened in London. We were in the countryside, which was very shocking. We did not tell them, but they had phones, so they got to know about it. They said, why did not you tell us? Then it was like a little revolution on a meditation silent retreat many years ago. So we had a discussion and it was getting a little kind of like heated, you could say, in the meditation hall. Then suddenly somebody raised his hand and said, but the British, they're really open people. They're kind of always, you can be whatever you want on the street of London. You have a kind of well-known for that, and it's a quality I really like about, you know, England and the British, et cetera, their openness and things like that. Suddenly the mood totally changed. One person, instead of kind of like, you know, being attacking the teacher and kind of they were plotting or whatever it was, suddenly everybody kind of suddenly looked at it in a very different way with just one person. So I think also looking at the effect of the group on one person, but also the effect of one person on the group. But I'm not totally sure

if I kind of commented enough on your question. And then, okay. And Jerry, the last one before the break.

Questioner

I have to admit that I'm dealing with some at-home crisis, but I'm doing my best to follow what's going on, and I can re-listen to it. I'm a little surprised that I had a notion of what secular was, and you guys are not, thankfully, sort of reinforcing that notion. So two things. One is I want to make sure I haven't wandered too far. With secular, it needs some form of, some way of validating, which I think you were talking about, Martine, with being aware of *vedanā* changing. They need some way of validating that you're actually still in the realm of Dharma practice, that you haven't wandered off to something that then becomes, in a way, unwholesome or becomes a hindrance to the real practice instead of actually, you know, it's not wholesome. It feels good, but not for the right reason. So there is a responsibility for that, right? At the same time, it sort of invites us to be a little bit more open. We're not locked in to something that was relevant 2,000 years ago, but it is still relevant, if that makes sense.

So it sounds like I clearly had it bad in terms of chanting and bowing. I mean, it was like I thought, I'm never going to get over this. I have, actually. The chanting, I now know why I don't like chanting in a group, because I don't know if Linda and I were at the same retreat in June. Yeah, okay, because I even spoke up. So it was Sucitto. So now how is he using chanting? I'm sorry. It was life-changing in many ways for me. The chanting was now focused on the individual being aware. It wasn't even chanting. We were just making noises at first, about resonating. In a way, it's like resonating to the life force. You know, it's just that you don't have to tell me to look for that. It's just obvious. Then I learned a lot about my shame, and I learned I couldn't even get, and if anybody knows me, this is never a problem. I couldn't get the vocal cords to work at all. I was just like so contracted and afraid of something. So that was an invaluable lesson that to me is forward leading for the Dharma. He took that resonating back and forth between resonating and then harmonizing. What a beautiful image, right? Being in touch with the life force inside of you and how that gets even more expanded. I couldn't do too much of the harmonizing because I was so constricted. I couldn't really do the resonating, but it really stayed with me. It was beautiful, actually. That was his own creativity, which as soon as Linda described it, I don't remember seeing you there, Linda, but I knew we must have been in the same place. So thank you.

Martine Batchelor

Thank you, Jerry. So I think this is, in a way, another take on chanting. So personally, I have no problem with other people chanting. I have a little problem with me chanting because I am, talk about, I am in a way, let's say musically unadapted. Anyway, and so for me, that's why I love people chanting. I love to listen to it, but I can do it only if there is enough people that my chanting won't be noticed. I could never lead it. So I think there is also a little bit of, is one able to do it in such a way that it works? I think we have to kind of put this little caveat. But I think this is beautiful, that Ajahn Sucitto really presented as resonating and harmonising. I think it's very beautiful. Though personally, in terms of

musicality, I would have a big trouble harmonising, but fair enough.

Questioner

And if I can follow up just for a second, he has a memory that's sort of unbelievable, actually. So he met with us in two weeks once, and I talked about this difficulty. He remembered that I also said something about reading Śāntideva and trying to develop compassion. He said his recommendation to me was go back to compassion, and all of that tightness and not being able to fit in with others, that that may help melt that a little bit. That's a very hard sort of goal or endeavor, but it made sense to me that the not fitting in to chant with others, they're not going to judge me as harshly as I'm judging myself. So that's what I learned from that. So you learn things when you break, you engage in activities you were afraid to do before. Now I'll be quiet.

Martine Batchelor

Excellent, excellent. Bernat, final word.

Bernat Font

No, I'm not going to add anything. I mean, I think what you shared, Jared, is a beautiful story. So no need for a topping to this banana split. We'll take a 20-minute pause now.

Martine Batchelor

So hello, everyone. So welcome back. So we want to continue. And so for this second half of the session, I'd like to personally, I would really like to look at, in a way, in terms of secular Dharma, in terms of Dharma for our time, kind of looking a little at community, **saṅgha**. So in a way, you have the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha. And again, we can interpret it in different ways.

The Buddha, the historical Buddha, or the Buddha within, or the Buddha we can become. The Dharma, the teaching, the law, or the practice that we can do ourselves and experience the wisdom, the compassion. And the Saṅgha, of course, the Saṅgha from the time of the Buddha was a fourfold Saṅgha: the monastic, the non-monastic, the lay women, the lay men. And in a way, at some point, the Saṅgha seemed to have been represented mainly by the monastics. And in a way, we could say that over time, the *raison d'être*, the function of the monastics has kind of changed.

Because in a way, from long ago until recently, for example, if we take the case of Thailand and what Sulak Sivaraksa was telling us about, for many centuries, the monastery were places where people got some education, they got some medical help. Many different things were happening in the temple, and they were really a resource for the people around them. But then, when came the modernization, when came, you could say, secularization of the world, in a way, when all these functions were not done by the religious people, that they be Buddhist, Christian, or otherwise. Then, medicine got into hospital, education got into school.

And then, for example, in Thailand, the monks were left a little way, of course, to do religious rites and then to do lots of meditation or to do lots of study. So even for them in our time, that kind of function has a little change. But at the same time, the monasteries still nowadays are considered a little like the repository of the Dharma, the place where you can connect in many different ways and practice. And in a way, nowadays, especially in Asia, where you have many Buddhist countries or we have a strong Buddhist presence, and you still have the monastic, though the conditions are changing for them, too, in this modern time.

If I look at Korea, of course, Buddhism was repressed for quite many centuries, but then it came back. And then after the Korean War, then it came back up again. And now it's 30% of the population is Buddhist and 30% Christian, 30% independent. And you see, the position when I was in Korea in 1975 was very different to what it is now in 2025. Because then, when I was in Korea in 1975, especially for women, nunneries were considered a place where they could be free to be themselves, free from being forced to be a wife, a mother, a daughter.

So a very constricted, Confucianist kind of framework of the culture. And one way to get out of that was actually to become a nun. And then as a nun, they could become a religious person, an artist, somebody to chant, a gardener or whatever they wanted to do, because that's what was beautiful about this beautiful style in terms of the Korean monasticism. Although you have a similar curriculum at the beginning, after that you can become somebody who chants, somebody who meditates, somebody who teaches, somebody who gardens, somebody who builds roads or whatever it is. So there are different places for different people within that monastic framework.

And in those times, it was places for women to be more free and for poor people to have actually a better life with some education and being able to eat every day. One of my friends, a monk, still a monk, an Abbot now, he was very clear when I met him in 75. He became a monk so he could eat every day because he came from an extremely poor family. But nowadays, actually, the problem for the monastic in Korea is that for women, there are so many other ways to be free now because they can work. They don't need to necessarily marry or have children.

The society has changed to some degree. And also, there are many different ways to get out of poverty and to study and so on and so forth. So actually, their difficulty, they don't have enough monks and nuns to actually sustain the temple. So that's in a way their difficulty nowadays, to find people who have a vocation to be monastics. I would say our possible difficulty in our time in Europe or in America or in Australia or different countries, so-called Western countries, is the fact that we don't have the help of the monastery or the nunneries.

And then, of course, you can have the center. You can have the *sati* center. You can have a retreat center. You can have, in England, you have Gaia House, which is a wonderful place. But in a way, how can you have a hub without a building? Because I think, in a way, the saṅgha is a very important part of, I would say, secular Dharma or any Dharma.

Because I think it's within the saṅgha that you have the opportunity to create something together. To me, that's so important. And also to practice. I mean, all of us might have been in this kind of like if you're part of any. I was part of Gaia House in many different guides for many, many years. And many other Buddhist associations.

And then, you know, how do you have business meetings? How do you have community meetings? How do you do things together? How do you plan? How do you organize? How do you live together? I mean, this is a thing. I think, you know, there are so many different types of community. And so in which way can we nourish the community? And in which way can we be nourished by the community?

I think this is something to really reflect in terms of our action. So in a way, they can be a physical place. For me, for nearly 40 years, I was one of the really helping Gaia House to the degree I could. And for me, it was very important to in a way dedicate myself. And I'm sure here we have people who have dedicated themselves to many different centers and being volunteers and things like that. And I think this is so important nowadays, that we're in a way part of the Saṅgha by doing something for the Saṅgha.

But also I think being part of the Saṅgha is really kind of cultivating the practice as we relate to others. To me, the Saṅgha is very much about the Dharma of relationship. So you have the Saṅgha of Buddhists around us. But I think also we have, as we said before, the saṅgha of the wider concentric circle of people we relate to. And so I think this is something for secular Dharma, actually is what I would call the Dharma of relationship.

How do we relate to each other? How do we cultivate bonds with each other? How we can work together? And of course one of the big kind of example of that is a Thich Nhat Hanh Saṅgha because they're really kind of, you know, what is interesting with the kind of Plum Village and the Thich Nhat Hanh Saṅgha is that the Saṅgha is really one of the most important things. And so everything, kind of to the precept, to what they do, to how they engage with it. So in turn, in a way, they're not known for their meditation practice.

They're not known for their study practice. But I would say they're really a great example of Saṅgha practice. And so I think this is kind of like different people in different ways are trying to find ways to be Saṅgha together. So that's something I wanted to say about Saṅgha. Another thing I wanted to mention about the secular Dharma was actually the place of women.

I think this is part of the secular. This is something which really, I would say, makes a difference nowadays that a lot of the women are teachers now. It was not so possible in the ancient time. So in a way, you could say that the secular has influenced the hierarchy of how things are done. And so I think this is a really important facet of what happened. But it is not just in the West, but also in the East.

I think there is this really rebalancing of the authority and also rebalancing of how to be an authority, how to be a teacher. And I think this is another thing about the secular Dharma, is really reminding

ourselves of the **kalyāṇa-mitta**, of kind of like cultivating good knowing advisor, cultivating good friendship. And I think this is really something which is a lot in the text. Also that the Buddha really worked on in terms of working with his community, really worked on different texts like the *Sigālovāda Sutta*. And so in a way, again, back to ethics, back to relationship, and back to how are we together in the world.

And I think women becoming in some level more equal, I think also is very important at that level. Then there is another thing I wanted just to say, which I find interesting, interval of secular Dharma, is the place of science. To me, what is very interesting is how now we nearly look to science to prove meditation or to prove Buddhism. And then often I think, but what if science do not prove it? Am I going to stop? And I would say no.

You see, I was associated, I think we have to be careful of science as a religion of exactitude. I personally, I was associated with the Silver Santé study, which was teaching meditation to seniors to see if it would improve or their well-being or many different other things. It was like a super-duper scientific research at all levels. It was done so meticulously. But then what I learned from being associated with that experience is that actually science does not necessarily deal with a human being.

It deals with kind of analysis of a mean. So it does not represent one meditator. It's kind of trying to find among 100 people, let's say, is there a mean? It's all about analytics. It's all about kind of finding the mean of all these different things. And, of course, our study, although it was 18 months, did not find any biological change in the people.

So they thought, oh, maybe if they had done it longer, there might have been a biological change. I don't know. I don't know. Is it why we're doing the meditation? So we have a better kind of brain. Or is it that we do meditation because we value wisdom and compassion?

And that's what we want to be in the world, kind of cultivating the Dharma of relationship, the Dharma of wisdom, of compassion, of creative engagement. So this is something I would question in terms of our secular. How much do we pay attention to science in terms of kind of giving value to meditation or the Dharma or Buddhist idea? I would question that. Bernat.

Bernat Font

Thank you, Martine. To continue from there for a bit and ignore my script because it's very interesting, because we're reflecting about how Buddhism becomes acculturated in our time and in our societies. And a few years ago, there was this book published, *Secularizing Buddhism*, which was quite critical of secular Buddhism. And I read, I didn't read all of it, I read parts of it, it's an edited volume, different chapters written by different authors. And of secular Buddhism. The feeling was, I don't know who they're talking about, but clearly not me.

So I guess it's a flexible label. What do we call secular Buddhism? So that's why I think it's interesting what we're doing here, trying to define how we understand it. Some people might include the

mindfulness movement in secular Buddhism. I would not. And one thing for me that keeps secular Buddhism kind of being itself is still there's a connection to explicitly Buddhist things.

I don't know why. That's my share of attachment to this lineage. A certain awareness of mortality and practices dealing with that, which so far have not been part of the mainstream mindfulness movement, and then really a reflection of what this practice is for. Are we doing this to be more productive? Are we doing this to... So what is the point? And that is really important.

Like what is guiding the technique? Because it's not just the technique. It's not just I sit and watch my breath. It's what is the framework around this? And that's what makes it so... In some sense, the secular Dharma is still Dharma because it still very explicitly tries to find a way to cultivate awakening, whatever that means for us.

So last week we talked about freedom from harming. This is in the service of developing certain qualities. And the Saṅgha, interesting history. At the very beginning, they spoke about the fourfold Saṅgha: male monastics, female monastics, male lay people and female lay people. And that's inclusive for their standards. For us, it's too binary.

But with time, that became even more restricted. The Saṅgha started to mean monastics only. And even more, awakened beings, like those who are in some degree of awakening. And this has changed now. And I think it has to change and it has to adapt by necessity because of what Martine was saying. The role of monastics, their presence is different. It has decreased.

And in Asia, this shows up in certain ways. And then in the West, it shows up in other ways. Most of Dharma teachers today are lay people. And so if Saṅgha starts to mean monastics, as a refuge, it becomes shrunk and shrunk, you know. Sorry, shrunk. You know, it becomes smaller and smaller.

I think that what Saṅgha means is the answer to the question, who is helping me awaken? Who is helping me awaken. And that includes teachers, and that includes fellow practitioners, and also people who work and volunteer at retreat centers. All that is Saṅgha. So it's community. But one thing I found interesting, because I'm in touch with the community back home, it's very small.

And I used to worry too much about community. And then I thought, well, it's not black and white, like either I'm part of a community or I'm completely alone. Maybe I have a couple of friends who are meditators. So to cultivate this friendship, this spiritual friendship, these Dharma friendships, and that is community. Maybe just one person, you know, and we would just WhatsApp a couple of times a month. But just to have people in our life related to the practice, to help us awaken.

And then in an even broader sense, the Saṅgha is just any interaction I have with another human being. Because if I want to, if I make it into a practice, everyone can help me awaken. So I'm not going to settle on a definition. I think it's the question, who helps me awaken? And then we can look at different levels.

I'm still at Gaia House, as I was last week. Last week, Martine was here as well. We had just taught a

retreat. And then I stayed on and I've stayed on a personal retreat since we last saw each other. And it's been interesting to see how my role has changed in Gaia House. So for a week, I was in the role of teacher.

And then the week after that, I'm on the role of retreatant. Solidly retreatant and I would say I'm still part of the Saṅgha in a different position. I'm contributing first by teaching and then later by chopping vegetables in the morning and just meditating, keeping the practice alive. And that's one of the functions of Saṅgha as well, that sense of people who keep the practice alive. It's like a candle burning, maybe no one's watching but the candle is burning. Someone is keeping this thing alive.

That's another function that monastics traditionally have had in Asian countries. Those people are doing it. So maybe I'm not very generous or maybe I'm not very compassionate, but someone there that's kind of taking care of that and is keeping it alive. So if I want to, at any point, I can plug in and get some of that help to develop compassion. Monastics is a very interesting topic nowadays in terms of secular Dharma, usually also understood as lay Buddhism, a form of lay Buddhism, and it touches on what I call the central contradiction of contemporary Buddhism.

Which is that most of us are lay people but we're still practicing on the basis of renunciation texts. And again this relates to our first half about the obsession with the earliest layer of Buddhist texts. When you go there, one of the things that's a bit of dissonance perhaps, is that the very renunciant and ascetic texts, they were put together, shaped and passed down by people who were celibate for example, we didn't have families, people who were monastics. And so of course that doesn't mean that there isn't a lot of wisdom that's applicable to our life, of course there is, but it also means let's make a difference.

I recently read a Substack post about how interest in Buddhism is declining, just using some statistics of Buddhist publishers, how this has been declining in the last 15 years or something. And books on Stoicism are on the rise. Now, I don't know what to conclude from that. I think it's too early. But this person writing thought maybe it's because the problems that we have in our cyclone right now, a lot of them are political struggles. They call for social responses.

And Stoicism is a type of philosophy that was shaped by emperors and people who were actively involved in political life in a way that ancient renunciant monastics were not. I don't know if that's true or not, that this is the reason for the decline of interest in Buddhism and the rise in interest in Stoicism. But it's an interesting reflection. These texts are teachings for celibate renunciants, and we're not celibate renunciants, at least most of us. So, no wonder, I don't know how many of you in a retreat have heard a talk about money and finances, or sex. I mean, you have some books about this, so I'm not saying that it's not talked about, but it's talked about much less.

So it's interesting to reflect on that. Because of our needs and our seculum, the texts that we use are going to be useful to some extent, but also they have gaps. It brings me a little bit to the concept of stream entry. The first level of awakening, but putting that aside, one of the characteristics of a

stream-enterer is it has let go of the fetter of clinging to rites and rituals, that's how usually translated. And to me this is very much about conceiving of the practice as mainly a meditation technique.

Just if I do this enough times, you know, if I sit for enough hours, whatever, we put our faith in a technique that's going to save us, so we don't have to do the work. We outsource it to a technique, be that meditation or even chanting. If I do this enough times in the correct way, it will solve everything. And instead, the stream-enterer moves towards a different conception, that this is a way of life, an integral way of life. I find this quite obvious on the one hand and something that I need to remind myself of: the practice is not just a cushion, the practice is not just a cushion.

So often we go on a meditation retreat or we take some meditation class and then we practice that and we sort of hope that this will flow out to the rest of our life, it will somehow infuse our acts and our words. And this happens to an extent. Interesting to notice, though, that in the traditional text and just the traditional paradigm, for centuries has been the opposite. First you start by changing your behavior. So the five precepts, you start by cultivating generosity, etc. Then you move on to cultivating mindfulness in daily activities.

And then once you've done that, maybe you'll go to a secluded place and you'll sit down, close your eyes, and do what we call formal meditation. Don't have time to expand on this, but it's not to say that one order is wrong and the other is right. It's, of course, much more of each one nourishing the other. But it makes us think today that whatever we are going for, as we were saying last week, we have to make sure that we're facing in that direction. So, some of us might be quite fond of, let's say, retreat life or hermit life.

And then retreats serve a particular function. They teach us how to be on retreat because we are hermits. We want to live in a retreat situation. But if we're not, then what are retreats for? So, how should we do retreats? Because otherwise, they're usually a form of temporary monasticism, aren't they?

So I would say retreats can be about training skills intensively so that we can then bring them to life, but we have to do that on purpose, not just expect it because we went to retreats and we did the technique and we followed the schedule, then we will go back and our mother will call us and we'll just be naturally nicer and more compassionate and less irritated by her. Not my experience. But in that moment you can remember something you've been training and then you practice it and it does make a difference that you've spent a few days kind of just as if you're a musician learning a piece and then you just focus on one phrase and repeat it again and again so that when you're playing the whole piece you don't need to put that much of an effort.

But another way to see retreats nowadays is to see them as a break, as a relief from our stressful lives. So on the one hand, of course, we have to change our life, not just insert some meditation without changing anything else. That's going to have a limited effect. But also, we have some responsibilities as lay people, and we're living in times where we might feel called to engage politically or in any other

way that is maybe not so suitable for a lot of serenity and calm. So retreats can also be an end in themselves, an opportunity to experience something different.

So to allow even non-ordinary experiences, non-ordinary states of mind, why not? And that's not because we want to just live forever in that bubble. But the capacity to experience those states, and I'm not talking about anything too extraordinary, it's just more calm and clarity and maybe kindness, is a reminder that we can be in those states, is a nice experience to have in itself, and it can give us kind of power, kind of charge our batteries to go on. Anyway, these are a few of my thoughts. I hope they were clear enough.

And again, like last week, we have now a chance for you to go into breakout rooms to discuss any of this. And one suggestion is to think of that interaction of retreat practice and the rest of our life, or the relationship between formal practice and informal practice. If you don't want to be in the groups, please stay in the main room. You can reflect individually so that in 20 minutes you can also be part of the discussion. So we'd really like everyone to stay for the discussion, whether you want to go to the breakout room or not. And that's going to be for about 20 minutes.

Martine Batchelor

Hello everybody, nice to have you back and I hope you had a nice discussion in your small groups. So what we want to do, so it's the last 30 minutes we have together, so again any reflection you like to share, any comments and of course if you have any questions of course we can also discuss.

Bernat Font

Miranda.

Questioner

Thank you Bernat. From one of Martine's talks this morning and she was talking about the religion of science, science is meant to be a method and the religion currently being practiced with that method is reductionism and I think reductionism is a huge problem but it made me think about applying science but not in a reductive way to my practice on the cushion, off the cushion and see where that goes. It's an interesting idea to not be reductionist about it. Anyway, that was my only thought in my whole head.

Martine Batchelor

No, no, no, no. I think there is a good point. Though I was not thinking of that, actually, because I'm not very well-versed, like reductionism and this kind of thing. I was actually thinking more statistics. I was thinking more about statistics. To me personally, I thought, not being so scientifically minded, I thought that science was very rigorous, very factual and very kind of like true to what goes on.

But having been part of a kind of a long study, realizing a lot of it is about statistics, then I started also to see that no matter what you do, even science is subject to condition. Like, you know, not being able to park or not being able to take the tram. I mean, this happened, that happened. But in the end, no matter what happens, you still have the statistic and the mean. So for me, what was interesting about being part of a project was actually looking at science in a much lighter way.

Kind of still knowing that it does thing for cancer or physics and things like that, but learning not to take it as the gospel, that everything science says is true and totally factual, and seeing more that, yes, it's a method, and a method applied in different ways. And, of course, it has many kind of like some kind of connection, of course, within terms of cause and effect, you know, and kind of seeing if I do this, what happens? If I don't do this, what happens? So no, I think there are some methods which are really excellent. But it was more for me, the myth of the rigor of science, kind of like slightly getting a little kind of more malleable in my mind. Bernat.

Bernat Font

Well, an interesting reflection with this is, when we're using science to prove Buddhism in a way, what is it that science can study? And it has to be something that can be measured, so you have to select. And I think if you're... Sorry, Zoom is trying to ask me to confirm if I'm speaking Spanish. I don't think I am. It really picks up on my accent, doesn't it?

So, yeah, what are we measuring? Because we have to select the variables. And then what is the practice for, as I was saying, has an impact. If you're practicing for reduction of cortisol levels, yes, then I can maybe use science for that. It's like, is it working? Is it not working? But if it's about meaning and cultivating, it's a different study at least.

So I would recommend a book by Evan Thompson called *Why I'm Not a Buddhist*. It's a very good book. It's quite short and it's very well written. If you don't want to read the whole book, I wrote a review entitled, I think, "Why Buddhism is Not a Science of the Mind," which is more than a review. It's kind of a summary because I found the book really interesting. So you can also read that first. And it touches on some of these points, Miranda, about science.

Martine Batchelor

Thank you for your point, Miranda. Jerry?

Questioner

Right, I don't know. I'm just going to share this with Miranda, with everybody. And I don't really know what I'm talking about. But I just recently, through *Tricycle*, their film festival, I did watch a couple of the films, and two on the Dalai Lama, who always fascinates me, although I don't know anything about him. And one of them, he was meeting with the neuroscientists that, you know, he meets with them regularly.

And if you listen to his history that introduced the movie, he's been interested in science since he was like four or five or six years old, right? And what I saw is that some of the pathways, they have their

different methodologies. He finds it confirmatory for what Buddhism might teach. And what really touched me, because the content I couldn't follow, he came alive, actually. He's pretty alive anyways. But he has such a deep love for science and then how it's mostly Western science, sort of like doesn't take away from his complete commitment to Buddhism.

And I think he felt a little bit, I don't know the right word, but he was enlivened by it. Let me just say that.

Martine Batchelor

Thank you. Thank you, Jerry. Thank you. Anybody else?

Bernat Font

Linda.

Questioner

Yeah, just the thing about science and Buddhism. I think that I'm thinking about the topic of this course is for some people it's a way in. If there is, you know, a published research paper that says, oh, yes, mindfulness helps with this or helps with that. So I think it's a way in for some people and it gives a legitimacy and allows them to try stuff that they wouldn't otherwise have done. So I think it does have a positive role.

Martine Batchelor

Of course, of course. No, no, it's all very interesting stuff. Very interesting stuff. Yeah, yeah, of course, of course.

Bernat Font

Quick anecdote. My mom now messaged me with questions about compassion and things like this. Because my parents have done mindfulness courses. I don't think they would have ever gone to a Buddhist temple to meditate, but they did mindfulness courses. Mark.

Questioner

Yeah, so I still think actually by the way so I am a scientist and so I've been practicing science for 45 years so I think so last week I said I see the Buddha as a physician it's to, you know, to relieve suffering in the world. And I think that in an ideal sense, science is doing the same, you know, in an ideal sense, I'm saying, right? So there's, of course, many, many exceptions to this. There's power and other things and controlling and so on. But in an ideal sense, science, at least that's what I see in science, is again a way to relieve suffering ideally.

So for me, these two, it would be crazy not to explore the science as a way to investigate concepts that concept values and things that Buddhism has been, you know, enlightening me to as being important. And so in science, because I'm studying the science of what people are publishing in on mindfulness practices and so on, so one thing scientists look at the effectiveness of certain practices and that part of the science is very flawed, it's very primitive and questionable and so on, but there are a number of

scientists who are trying to understand how, say, meditation and other contemplative practices work, so how they work rather than whether they work, which are kind of like two quite different approaches. And so those approaches, I think, are, to me, more revealing and more interesting at the moment. So, yeah, I just wanted to mention that.

Martine Batchelor

Thank you, Mark. Thank you. Thank you. No, no, as a scientist, it's lovely, lovely that you bring your understanding. No, thank you very much.

Bernat Font

I also wanted to say it's lovely to hear from people we haven't heard from yet and also you don't need to put your camera on to ask a question or share something and also remember that you have a chat so if you want to put a question or reflection in the chat you can also do that. Victoria.

Questioner

Bernat said the people who haven't shared yet.

Bernat Font

No, no, no, that was an encouragement. You're very welcome to speak.

Questioner

I'd like to encourage everyone else to participate if they're inclined. Just cut me off if you see another hand or something in the chat, please. Well, as to science, I think again to return to what I mentioned in the earlier session this morning, the kind of what I consider almost a built-in human need for to worship something or someone or whatever, that I think that's where the, yeah, science is a method, but I think it has become an idol for many people and that's where things can get tangled up or sticky, you might say, sort of like apropos of our meditation with the *vedanā*. And I'm wondering, science as practiced, as a method, has a very wholesome purpose, but it also can, it's how it's used. I mean, the science, as we know, I mean, also the science led to scientific discoveries led to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

So there's always the possibility of good and evil, or if you want to say wholesome or unwholesome or skillful or unskillful. And so I feel like still with this, I guess coming to the end of this wonderful session, I hope there will be more in the future with both of you. My question that still remains at the end of these discussions is, to what degree can there be a kind of a wholesome way of practicing Dharma regardless of the culture in which we find ourselves? And so that's across the globe, Eastern, Western, whatever you want to call it. What I love about the secular, I personally am very religious and I practice my faith. And yet I feel like the secular, the reason I signed up for this, well, apart from U.S. Teachers and Sati Center, was just the sense that I kind of long for a reinvigoration of the secular, which I feel is more honest ultimately. Well, maybe that sounds judgmental. I'm going to be quiet now. Thank you, you can make what you can of what I've said. Thank you.

Martine Batchelor

Secular, it can cover so many different things. I think personally, I mean for me secular mean really of this time, in what way can the Dharma respond to the question of this time? In what way can the Dharma can lead us to all what we are buffeted with? In what way can it help us to really be the best human being we can? And so that personally, that's why I think I kind of look at it in terms of very kind of relatively practical, in terms of myself, what I do, what I do for others, how I relate, how I relate to the world, my impact on it.

And at the same time, something I forgot to mention in terms of secular Dharma, I think it's also a Dharma which learns for something outside of Buddhism. To me secular Dharma is also seeing that there are something that was not known at the time of the Buddha, for example about trauma, that was not kind of considered in that way at the time of the Buddha, or certain mental illness was not known in that way at the time of the Buddha. And so I think here, I think the new science, one could say of psychology, the new science of fMRI and different things like that, I think can look, I think kind of there is an aspect of all these things that we are kind of looking at, that I think it's kind of interested of the secular, what is it we are discovering, what is it we are naming, because in a way you have different names for different conditions over time.

And so also I think what is very interesting nowadays, what's happening with in terms of, let me find the right word, neurodiversity. So personally at the moment, I have a lot of kind of like creative engagement with people who are neurodiverse and kind of really kind of question some of the way maybe we teach or we look at or we describe or we use language. And so I feel, you know, this you don't find in the sutta, you know, early text or commentary. And so I think this kind of like new knowledge of nowadays ask us to how can the Dharma adapt, be flexible, change according to the different condition people come with and how can the diverse condition of people teach us something, teach the Dharma something. To me, secular Dharma is not so much I'm telling you what's what, but we also learn from the condition of this secular, to adapt the Dharma to the condition of this secular, through the learning from other people.

Bernat Font

I'd like to connect the two parts of your question or your sharing, Victoria. Buddhism can be used for good or for bad. And in history, it has been used for bad as well. Martine mentioned karma. Karma sometimes is used as a way to make people feel responsible for the misfortunes or certain conditions in their lives, saying, oh, you must have done something horrible in your previous life. Not very compassionate, I'd say.

So what is a wholesome way to practice in whatever culture, etc.? You could every now and then pose yourself the question, how am I using the practice? How am I using the Dharma? What am I practicing for? Am I doing this to feel clever? Am I whatever? So what am I practicing for? And always look at one's own mind.

I'm not talking about being self-absorbed. But there's this advice from Ajahn Chah that said, observe

your mind, not the mind of others, in the sense that if you use your practice to look at the mind of others, you'll just start finding fault with everyone who is not compassionate or mindful enough. And as you're doing that, you're not looking at whatever reactivity is happening in you, i.e. being judgmental. So that's a way maybe to incompletely respond to your question.

Martine Batchelor

Anything else? We just have a few minutes left, so if somebody wants to share something or comment something. So Robin, again, we can't hear you. Oh no, okay, sorry, you can put the comment in the chat, yeah.

Bernat Font

Robin put something in the chat already, so yeah, sorry.

Martine Batchelor

We cannot hear you, Robin. So how the practice works rather than some measure of whether it works is a perfect example of holism in science rather than reductionism. Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, no, to me this is actually very interesting for me. That's one of the things I became very interested in was how does it work? Kind of observing myself, observing others. And that's why I started with that last time, talking about my idea about how anchoring works or how kind of looking deeply works.

And I think at that level, each of us, actually, I think when we practice, we also, it seems to me, explore how does it work? When does it work? That's something that really interests me. When does it work? When does it not work? So, Robin said, I wrote down the beautiful question you have asked. "What is the tonality of being mindful in a careful and caring way? How can we nourish the community in our everyday life? How am I using the practice in a wholesome way?" Thank you, thank you.

To me, actually, the first one, what is the tonality of being mindful? I found that very interesting experience in meditation. To feel, actually, how does it feel when I am mindful? And actually, the Buddha said, you know, you experience a tonality which is without grasping. So it's kind of a tonality which is really make us feel, I mean, it's interesting, how does it feel when we don't grasp? When there is no rejection, no aversion, no grasping for something, but we're really there in a very open, spacious, responsive, creative way.

I find that often very healing. How does it feel? And actually, generally, that's why Bernat is very much into that. It feels very pleasant, but without grasping. He had a whole thesis about it. Bernat.

Bernat Font

I'm not gonna add anything, but Linda, you had your hand up and we're running out of time, but I wondered is it something that you can ask concisely and then of course the question is can we answer concisely.

Questioner

I've already spoken.

Questioner

Actually, so there may be other people who want to speak. No, please go ahead. Okay. I was just going to, I was talking to Jerry in my small group and I work for a charity, a sort of homeless charity that works with people who are unhoused and also addicted to drugs and alcohol. I just do, I make sandwiches. That's all I do. But it strikes me, I was thinking about the role of the monasteries in earlier times. It doesn't, and Jerry pointed this out to me, it's embodied compassion.

They don't talk about any particular philosophy or religion or approach, but they provide shelter, they provide food, they have a doctor come in who sees people who need to be seen by a doctor. And it's almost like it's there, but it doesn't have, and it's this embodied compassion. But it's not a Buddhist monastery. And it could be any religion, I suppose, actually.

Martine Batchelor

Exactly. Or none. Or none. Or none. I think, you know, I forgot to mention humanistic Buddhism. You find in Taiwan from the 20s, and which led them to do a lot of different charity activity in all kinds of different, very interesting ways. So, indeed, embodied compassion. And I think we're going to stop with that. And then Rob has a final announcement. And thank you very much for your attention and your practice.

Bernat Font

Thank you. Thank you. Great questions and reflections that you've shared.

Martine Batchelor

So thank you so much. And it was a great pleasure to be with you today and the other day. And please keep well and as you can, embodied compassion for yourself and others.

Bernat Font

I don't have anything else to add. Just always a pleasure to share a little of what I kind of think I understand. And hopefully you found this useful. And maybe see you another time. Keep well. Bye-bye.

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