

## 23 Theravada Buddhism

All material in all the chapters on religions is my opinion. The material is not an official description of any religion. I love Buddhism but disagree with it. If you wish, you need read only Parts 1 and 2 at first, about 50 pages. You will miss the in-depth commentary on Buddhism and its relevance to modern life but you will not miss much that you need for later chapters. The last part of the chapter, Part 7, about 50 pages, is optional as well. So this chapter is not nearly as long as it seems.

One person, Siddhartha Gautama, titled “the Buddha”, began Buddhism about 600-543 BCE in the area around Nepal. The Buddha died in 543 BCE. Buddhist calendars begin with that year.

Indian religion at that time centered on ritual. Brahmins were strong ritual priests, like some Christian bishops, heads of mega-churches, and Muslim clerics. Brahmins and rulers together formed a system that dominated society. Buddhism partly was a revolt against the Brahmin order and against irrationality, ideologies of superstition, glamour, ritual, magic, and the supernatural.

Other stances also arose distinct from Brahmins. Here are two: (1) The “Upanishads” are essays about spiritual life (“oo” as “woo”, “oo pahn i shahds”). The name means something like “writing from the forest” and refers to people who lived apart from society. The Upanishads teach: (A) all beings are similar or identical (“you are that”), so we are not different from other people or animals; (B) each sentient being is an eternal soul-self (“atman”); and (C) we should feel compassion for all. The Upanishads show the mix of inspiration and logic that is typical of India. Hindus developed many systems based on the insights of the Upanishads. Their importance is huge.

(2) Jainism (“jine” like “pine-ism”) is austere and reverences ALL LIFE. Jains are vegetarian and pacifist, like some Vegans. They strain water before they drink so as not to kill any bugs. They merge individual humans into Life. To me, unofficially, they imply that humans are Life’s way of knowing itself. We are special only because of that; in modern terms, they minimize “species-ism”. The Jain sense of Life is like the idea of Life that Jedi masters use to explain the Force but the Force is all good. Jainism remains a small distinct religion mostly inside India.

Always some people have a “Jain character” or “Upanishad character”, or both, even if neither society nor formal religion make a place for them: God is Life, The Living God, love people and nature, God is Love, hurt nothing, animals are like us, all people are our kind and our neighbors, we should be glad to sacrifice for them, God has a plan, all things have a place in God’s plan, and we all do God’s work. Both tempers can add to good versions of Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, and all religions.

Already in the time of the Buddha, ideas similar to those from the Upanishads and Jainism were used to begin a system in which eternal soul-like selves were a part, the system supported them, they supported it, it lived through them and worked through them, they did its work, and the system was holy and joyous. Only a few people can see the system as a whole. Still, you can participate fully, be fully realized and

fully justified, by doing your role-duty in this life or by being devoted to a major character in the system such as a god or the God. Indians are great at mixing vast inspiration with logic.

The Buddha presented his ideas partly in contrast to ideas from the Upanishads and Jainism and partly in parallel. He taught compassion and morality – monks strain water. He rejected (a) any eternal soul-self and (b) the relevance of a world system of which each soul-self is a part. He did not reject such a system in principle, he simply denied it was finally relevant, and he ignored it. Except for Dharma, he would have rejected depending on a Big Principle, not even Life, and would have rejected merging people into Life, Dharma, Mind, Emptiness, Love, or any Big Idea. Buddhism also is both inspired and logical.

On the Net, find Cynics, Stoics, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, and David Hume. Aristotle's "Ethics" is great. Aurelius was a Roman Emperor, like the old good emperor in the movie "Gladiator". These people were not exactly like Siddhartha but close enough to make both similarities and differences worth knowing. Keep them in mind also for the chapters on Taoism, Zen, and Confucius.

Buddhism has two-and-a-half big schools: (1) Theravada ("ter-ra va-da", "Elders' way"), (2) Mahayana ("ma-ha ya-na", "bigger vehicle"), and (2.5) Vajrayana ("vaj-rai ya-na", "lightning diamond way-vehicle"). Vajrayana came from Mahayana and is usually linked to Tibet. I don't write about it. Theravada likely is closest to the original ideas of the Buddha but other schools dispute the claim. Theravada is mostly in mainland Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Mahayana likely came after Theravada, maybe 200 years after the Buddha. The forerunners of Theravada and Mahayana split officially around 250 BCE at a meeting in India. Mahayana is all over the Far East, and it is what most people think of as Buddhism. I lived in a Theravada nation, Thailand, and am closer to Theravada in spirit, so I am biased. Mahayanists call Theravada "Hinayana", meaning "smaller vehicle", to put down Theravada in contrast to Mahayana. Please do not use "Hinayana" for Theravada. Mahayana gets its own chapter.

Much of what I say about Theravada applies also to other religions and to mysticism. I do not point out similarities, the differentiating "spin" that religions put on similarities, or how similarities remain despite spins. Keep this chapter in mind for later.

Sanskrit is the traditional high language of India, like Latin in the Roman Catholic Church and old Hebrew in Judaism. Pali came from Sanskrit and is close to it. Already at the time of Siddhartha, Sanskrit was old and Pali was spreading, like the English of Chaucer first and then of Shakespeare. I don't know if the Buddha used Pali. Until about 200 years after the Buddha, little was written. People memorized. Some old texts were in Sanskrit but most were in Pali. Nearly all texts relevant to Theravada are in Pali. Many Sanskrit and Pali terms are in daily languages of Buddhist areas just as Greek and Latin terms are in languages of Europe and the Americas. "Nirvana" is Sanskrit, "Nibbana" or "Nippana" is Pali, and "Nippan" is Thai after Pali. The word checker on my computer recognizes Sanskrit but not Pali, so I use Sanskrit even though almost all Theravada is in Pali.

My terms do not match exactly with Buddhist terms although they are not far off. In this book, it is an error to "get hung up" on formal terms. If a basic idea in a religion cannot be said in natural language then feel wary. Sometimes I mention a term because you will meet it in other reading.

Theravada canonical texts are collected in a set called the “Tripitaka” (Pali: Tipitaka). It means “three baskets” for three major fields and texts: (1) Sutras, including sermons and explanations; (2) Codes of Conduct for monks and lay people, that is, Buddhist ethics; and (3) Buddhist view of mind, body, life, perception, and being. For lay Buddhists, “sutra” can be a catch-all term for all official texts. Rather than explain the status of a text, not relevant here, I too use “sutra” for a canonical or important text. “Sutra” in Pali is “sutta”. A sutra is like a chapter in the Tanakh, New Testament, Koran, or like the Bhagavad Gita. Most sutras begin with “The Buddha said” and claim to be verbatim copies of sermons by him. There are so many texts, they are so long, and disagree enough, not all could be exact direct copies of his words. Buddhists know this. I don’t know which words likely are his and which not. Buddhists know Part Three of the Tripitaka came after the Buddha but still accord Part Three high status, like the Hadith in Islam. Mahayana accepts Theravada sutras but reinterprets them. Mahayana has sutras that Theravada does not have and does not accept as canonical even if held highly, such as the Lotus Sutra. Mahayana has sutras written in local languages such as Tibetan and Chinese. Mahayana stresses its texts that are not shared with Theravada such as the Lotus, Heart, and Diamond Sutras. As in all religions, both Mahayana and Theravada teachers select whole sutras, and passages, that help them and hurt foes. I do not cite any passages but do adapt lines. Some teachers are so influential that their work is effectively canonical (Buddhaghosa and some Zen masters).

## **PART 1: BACKGROUND IDEAS**

“Buddhists think” and “Buddhism says” refer to fairly astute people. I do not refer to folk Buddhism unless I say so. “Dogma”, “doctrine”, “orthodox”, and “official” do not mean arbitrary rules but mean standard respected teachings. Dogma and doctrine are not propaganda. No term disparages.

### **The Dharma.**

I do not define karma. The common idea of karma is not exact but it is close enough. This chapter does not need a long or precise definition of Dharma or “the Dharma”. The Dharma is the basic stuff, doing, being, life, mind, self-knowing, sociality, morality, and spirituality of the universe. Dharma is how it all works at the most basic and pervasive. Cause-and-effect is one mode of Dharma but only one. Dharma is physics, life, sociality, and morality, but more too. Dharma is the regularity and liveliness of the world if liveliness is not merely an evolved delusion but is fully true. In my view, Dharma would be like the mind-behind-it-all that I call “God”. Followers of Dharma think of it not as god but as supra-personal.

“Dharma” also means knowledge about the world and it means wisdom. The world has order, so we can grasp the order, and sometimes can say it. When people say “study the Dharma” they can mean to learn Buddhism, Hinduism, and wisdom. Buddhism and Hinduism call themselves “the Dharma”. They are the Dharma making itself known to its creation and known to itself in its creation. This use is similar to the idea that to read the Bible or Koran is to learn the mind of God and those texts are the Word of God.

### **Puzzles of the Dharma.**

The puzzles here are all aspects of one puzzle: “Why is there evil?”, and “Why is there so much evil?” All religions face the problem, all offer solutions, and no solution satisfies me. Max Weber wrote short clear books describing the major religions by how they respond to evil, how their responses make them distinct,

and the results on society of being guided by a particular view. Keep in mind the points here for some puzzles mentioned below and for chapters on Mahayana, Taoism, and Hinduism.

(1) Many people tacitly assume that Dharma and Nature are the same. The Nature that people have in mind is Romanticized Nature of TV ads and shows for children, not the real nature that scientists study. Dharma, Romanticized Nature, and real nature are not the same. Even Max Weber mistook Dharma for nature and thought religions based on Dharma have as a main goal “back to nature”. Don’t make that mistake. Think out relations of Dharma and real nature.

(2) Real nature has quite a bit of violence, and, to me, has some badness and even some evil. To make real nature and Dharma the same, you have to accept that nature, and so the Dharma, intrinsically have violence, some badness, and maybe some evil. Nature-Dharma is not all-and-only “you are that”, love, compassion, and one harmonious system. Most believers in Dharma want Dharma-Nature to be all about goodness and light regardless of how it seems.

(3) Regardless of nature, or any association between Dharma and nature, Dharma is not all goodness and light. Dharma accepts violence, badness, and even evil. Followers of Dharma have to explain this dark aspect of its character. Even if the badness is only an illusion in the long run, apparent badness is real enough for most people during their lives, and it has to be taken seriously.

(4) People want the good light-filled part of Dharma to win in the long run. So, one side of the Dharma has to be pitted against another side of the Dharma, and one side has to defeat the other side. You have to split Dharma, allow for a long conflict, and make one side win. Even if, in the end, the light side and dark side reunite, splitting and conflict are true for the long time in which we live particular lives.

(4A) One way to win is to make victory happen along with conflict, at the same time, all the time. If victory is not a distinct event, as in the Second Coming, then it must be mystic, everywhere, all the time. Some people see the whole story including conflict as the victory, as in “the journey is the destination”. Splitting is merging and merging is splitting. The never-ending moral wrangles of humans do keep us engaged and occupied.

(5) Some people dwell on the Dark Side of the Dharma and think they serve the Dharma when they seek power and do dark deeds. They are confused and wrong, and should be opposed.

(6) It is easy to turn the drama of Dharma into the interplay of good and bad, and to think good and bad need each other. This way of thinking almost does not occur in Theravada although some individuals in Theravada do think this way. I consider it wrong, for which see Part One of this book. Some Mahayana and Hinduism developed this view.

### **Widespread Then-New Ideas from about the Time of the Buddha.**

About the time of the Buddha, a set of ideas appeared from Italy through India. It is not clear where they began and if they began together. The ideas spread because they make sense of the world, of badness, and different life situations such as lord and peasant, rich and poor, healthy and sick, weak and powerful, and lucky and unlucky. The ideas fit well in mature agrarian (farming) stratified (class) states, conditions

common when the ideas spread. The ideas showed up in Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnosticism, Platonism, and Neo-Platonism. The set resembles variations (C) and (D) of the “many lives” stances described in the chapters in this book on Issues.

-Many particular lives are unfair. Good people get no reward; bad people live well.

-Much about life is hard, unpleasant, and unavoidable, such as disease, getting old, hunger, political disappointment, love, children, etc.

-Life changes. Life is unreliable. What is here today is gone tomorrow. A river changes course. A tree dies. The crops fail or we have a bumper crop. Kin and friends die. Ideas about the gods change. The government changes policy, causing changes in business. One ethnic group rises up while another falls down. One religion rises up while another declines.

-Much in life is so changeable and so unreliable as to be an illusion: security, happiness, good relations with neighbors, friendship, and even good relations with kin.

-Even concrete aspects of life such as your body, even recurring aspects, such as the coming of the seasons, have much about them that is unreliable and illusory.

-What is obvious about life cannot be fully real. There must be something underneath what we see that is more real. What is underneath might generate what we see but the two are not the same.

-Even though what we obviously see is changing, unreliable, and illusory, it is still appealing, and people still commit to it. The changing, unreliable, and illusory world can be a lot of fun.

-We need to wake up to the unreliable and illusory nature of this life. If possible, we need to wake up to what is really real beneath. We need to stop clinging to what is obvious, and instead wake up to what is more real.

-Indians called the unreliable, changing, and illusory world “samsara” or “maia”. They called waking up “release” or “moksha”. We now call it “enlightenment”.

-Although we are individual human beings, still we are much like other people and other forms of life. In the words of the Upanishads, “you are that”. The proper attitude when we realize how much we are like others is empathy and sympathy, kindness, and being helpful.

-People should seek enlightenment. They should seek it much more than any worldly success, even family success, even more than conquering the whole world.

-Understanding the world might require long hard work. There might be a process of “ascending” to a full understanding of life’s secrets and to fully waking up.

-Not everybody can awaken in his-her present lifetime.

-If we allow that people are reborn and have more than one life, we can solve many problems. If we allow that having many lives forms a system, we can solve even more problems.

-Rebirth solves problems of bad luck, unequal social situation, unequal wealth, unequal power, unfairness of all kinds, the fact that good people don't seem to get rewarded, the fact that bad people don't seem to get punished and might even prosper, and badness.

-Rebirth solves a problem that affects awakening. If a person does not awaken in this lifetime, he-she will awaken in a future lifetime. There has to be a way that spiritual progress and spiritual regress in this lifetime can carry over into future lifetimes,

-Rebirth also causes problems. Indeed, it is a major problem. To be reborn into a series of illusory, changing, unreliable, unfair lives is a bad thing, even if many of the particular lives are good. When a person wakes up, he-she ceases to be reborn; he-she ceases to participate in the whole system of many lives. To cease being reborn entirely is a good thing.

-This point is unclear and will be contradicted below: A person might awaken to the idea that particular lives are unfair, unreliable, etc. but not awaken to the idea that all lives, and the system of multiple lives, are undesirable. That person could accept rebirth as a good thing without seeing it is also a bad thing. If a person wakes up to the fact that the whole system of rebirth is undesirable, he-she would also have to realize that all particular lives are undesirable even if some are superficially enjoyable.

-While it does not always seem so, and while any particular lifetime might be poor, the world as a whole is moral. The world as a whole rewards good and punishes bad. The world as a whole supports spiritual striving and spiritual achievement. This is part of the reason why we feel that we are like other sentient beings and like all life, "you are that".

-The system of rewarding good and bad, in this lifetime, and in future lifetimes, is called "karma". Karma extends not only to explicitly moral deeds but to all deeds of all kinds. Karma responds to what kind of occupation you have, whether you act diligently or not, whether you are aware of nature, etc.

-The system as a whole is called the "Dharma" or the "Dharma". The role that any person plays in the system is also called the "dharma" of that person. The fact that a person is a teacher or a farmer is the dharma of that person.

-This point might have arisen about the time of the Buddha but more likely a few hundred years later in Hinduism. To keep the system going, each person should carry out his particular dharma (destiny, duty, role) correctly. For any person to do that, all others need to carry out their dharma correctly too, even most bad guys. We need each other, need society, and need some bad guys. This is the big lesson of the Bhagavad Gita, and one big lesson from the "Spoon River Anthology". If you are a farmer, farm; if a householder, see to your family; if a warrior, fight; if a ruler, rule, if a holy person, seek release; if a thief, steal; and if an egomaniac intent on taking over the world, sincerely try.

**The Following Points are Important in Mahayana and Hinduism.**

-This point might have arisen about the time of the Buddha; likely it was developed after him; I doubt the Buddha held exactly this view but he might have held something close: If you keep in mind the above points, carry out your Dharma-karma, and set your mind to spiritual growth, then you can enjoy this life to the extent it allows, and this life can be graceful or worthwhile, at least in passing.

-The following points likely originated after the Buddha, and certainly were developed after him.

-Although any given life might not seem worthwhile, there is a system. The system has mind-like being. The system is overall moral even if it allows some immorality. The system overall is good and worthwhile. Although it might not seem that some particular life is worthwhile, the system of lives as a whole is good, worthwhile, and even joyous. Each life is worthwhile in that context.

-We are part of a system that is bigger than us. Just because we are part of a system, we are important too. We are the system working out its way through us. This one reason we feel "you are that". If we feel our life right now is not worthwhile, we are wrong because we do not see our life in the whole system.

-All lives have some suffering and some lives have a lot of suffering. That is too bad but it is not the great tragedy it seems. The joy of future lives can more than make up for suffering now. Especially the greater joy of the system of many lives dwarfs the suffering of any one particular life.

-Suffering is something that pertains to particular lives, not to the system as a whole. What appears to be suffering is an illusion. It is only a transient part of one particular life. It only arises because lives are one aspect of the system and not the whole. The joy of the system is the true reality while suffering in any one life is only a passing part of the total joy.

-The system never appears as a whole all at once. It only shows in particular lives in particular situations. Even so, there really is a system, it really is big and important, and it makes each particular individual big and important too. It makes each of us big and important too. So, there is no real difference between particular individuals and the system. The system is the individual lives that we obviously see because that is all we can ever see of the system. If we look hard enough, we can always seem the system in all individual lives. There is no difference between daily un-awakened life and awakened life. If the system is "God", then you are God too. If you are a part of God, then the whole system is God.

-When you see the relation between yourself and the system, you do not merge into the system and you do not disappear somehow. Instead, you become part of the system in a deeper better way. You help other people, and other life forms, to realize the same ideas and feel the same feelings.

### **The Wheel of Dharma-Law-Karma-Life.**

-From "Jack and Diane" by John Mellencamp:

"Oh yeah, life goes on  
Long after the thrill of livin' is gone"

The cycle of birth-death-birth-etc. is called the “Wheel of Dharma”, “Law”, “Karma”, or “Life”. Now, we glamorize, Romanticize, and extol the Wheel. Listen to “Proud Mary” by CCR; I bought a cereal called “Dark Cocoa Karma”; and you can get a credit score from “Credit Karma”. In Mahayana and Hinduism, the Wheel became good as the Great System of Dharma-Karma, Emptiness, or Buddha Mind. That was not original. Originally, life on the Wheel was not good and it was not worthwhile. Listen to “Do It Again” by Steely Dan. To live here again and again is not worthwhile; it is suffering. The Wheel is the Cross on which we must be nailed over and over again. Life on the Wheel is like being trapped inside the Matrix, Walking Dead, Breaking Bad, Orc town, a sappy tear-jerker movie, TV show about conniving, or plot-free action movie, forever. People want off. To get off, it helps to see that life on the Wheel is not worthwhile; if you do not see that life is not worthwhile, then likely you can’t get off. To get off the Wheel means no rebirth. Recall, in India, spiritual success is called “moksha” or “release”.

This was the view of life in the milieu of the Buddha. Life is not worthwhile. The Buddha offered his ideas as a way to get off the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life. The Buddha did not offer his ideas primarily as a way to make the Wheel better and so make life worthwhile; making life better in some ways is good but not key. When the Buddha taught how to defeat suffering, I think he meant that as a step toward seeing that life is not worthwhile and so getting off the Wheel. To get off the Wheel did not mean to find a secret way that made it all better or find a secret view from which we could see it had really been great all along. All that came later after the Buddha.

I differ from official doctrine. Buddhism stresses suffering instead of not worthwhile life, and says it cures suffering. Buddhism now does not deal with whether life is worthwhile and it does not refer to the Wheel. In contrast, I think suffering is only a way to see that life is not worthwhile. Really, suffering is not the main issue. To stress suffering without asking what it means, without seeing implications of suffering, became a way to avoid dealing with the bigger issue of worthwhile life. I don’t know what Siddhartha thought. Buddhists feel I distort Buddhism. Because I differ from doctrine, I return to this issue often. I do explain official doctrine also. Please be patient.

**Repeat: The World is Intrinsicly Moral.**

In religion based on Dharma, the world is intrinsicly moral. Morality is in the nature of Dharma’s world. All relations between sentient beings and the world are guided more by morality than by chance, physics, chemistry, psychology, and biology, including relations between sentient beings and: sentient beings, animals, many plants, environment, nature, big features of nature such as the oceans, and social groups. You feel the effects of your deeds, and others feel the effects of your deeds, according to morality more than according to results for wealth, power, sex, family success, or any worldly success. The Dharma can support neutrality and chance, and can support various characters, including some bad characters, but, in the end, good is more important than neutrality or badness, and good wins. Accident or badness might win in the short run but good always wins in the long run.

The Dharma might enjoy some badness, and the Dharma tolerates a lot of badness, but the Dharma likes goodness more. You can get short term benefit from acting badly, but, in the long run, you do better by acting morally and by going along with the Dharma and its world. Bad guys might be needed to move the plot along and to make life more interesting but they are still bad and the good guys still win. Mahayana and Hinduism can get confused on the need for bad guys to move the Dharma plot and they can excuse

or even extol bad guys too much. Yet even in Mahayana and Hinduism, good is still better than bad over the long run. Badness is another level of control that lets people think they are superior but really it only keeps people deluded, on the Wheel, and confused. Rebellion is really only more servitude and deeper servitude. To succeed in a Dharma system, eventually you must be good. If you go against Dharma by acting badly, you will fail. You will fail not only in the moral terms intrinsic to the Dharma but in all other ways including mundane ways. Whether life in the system (on the Wheel) is worthwhile or not worthwhile, whether you want to stay in the system or get off, you still have to be good eventually.

### **Two Important Contradictions, a Crucial Choice, and an Implication.**

Contradiction (1): (A) On the one hand, Dharma and its world are good and satisfying, and you must go along with Dharma. “Must go along” is fine because the world is good. Going along is fun. Violence, hurt, badness, and even evil are only temporary and might be mere illusions. They make the world more interesting and help the plot along – think of TV such as “Animal Kingdom” and “ Fargo”. People want to stay on the Dharma world for a long time, many lifetimes, maybe forever. (B) On the other hand, the world also is painful, hard, tedious, annoying, beset by suffering, often bad, and often evil. Life is not worthwhile. The world is hurtful enough, and satisfactions cannot make up for badness, so people want off the Dharma system. People want off the system in this lifetime if possible or in a lifetime soon. They don’t want many lifetimes. People want to go against Dharma and its world system.

Which is correct? There is no clear answer.

People in a Dharma system try to have both at once. Most attempts don’t make much sense; at times, attempts to get both are sublime; often, attempts are sublime but false; and often they are silly nonsense. Too often the nonsense sounds sublime and people can’t tell the difference.

At first, “get off” prevailed; and likely it prevailed at the time of the Buddha and Upanishads. Afterwards, the following prevailed, especially in Mahayana and Hinduism: “The world is good and is really secretly joyful; apparent suffering is a clever disguise and it actually increases long-term joy; everything is as it should be; especially everything is as it should be if you do what you were meant to do; so do that”.

In Theravada, “get off” should prevail, but Theravada followers resist this view and they look for ways to get around “get off” and to have successful happy lives. I comment more below on this contradiction and on the desire for a good life.

Choice: Followers of the Dharma face the four issues listed above. In addition, followers of the Dharma have to choose between (A) Go along with the Dharma, stay in its world system, try to find success in its terms, and try to find secret joy, OR (B) Reject the Dharma world system and try to get out.

People who choose (A) can also (A1) choose a secret Dharma system or (A2) can find joy without such a system. Few people try to find contentment in the Dharma and this life (A2) without also finding a system to magically secretly resolve all the problems (A1). If you choose (A) in any form, you are almost doomed to find some sort of magic system (A1).

Sometimes people start out by thinking they can eventually find a version of (A) if they apparently start with (B), with apparent rejection but really with underlying acceptance (A). They get confused between (A) and (B). I think most Buddhists are confused this way, even many monks.

Regardless of love it or hate it, the Dharma and its system is all there is. Whatever you do is rooted in the Dharma, including your desire to get out of the Dharma world.

Contradiction (2): People who want off the world system have to use Dharma to overcome Dharma, like using Nature against Nature. The Dharma has to permit people who want to reject the Dharma world to get off the Dharma world. At least, Dharma has to provide them with the tools to do so. Dharma has to provide people with the tools to overcome itself and-or go against itself.

It is useful to look at these situations from the view of someone who wants to get off the world system and so to see only one big problem: being stuck in a system where life is not worthwhile and having to use the tools of the system to get out of it. This is the situation in Theravada. This should be the situation in Mahayana and Hinduism as well but they try to escape the bind.

Implication: Whether you choose to stay on the Dharma system (Wheel) or get off, you do not choose only for yourself, you judge the entire system and implicitly choose for everyone, especially when “you are that” is an integral part. If you say “the Dharma system is good for Sally but not Bob”, you really don’t say anything. If it is good for Sally, it is good for Bob and everybody. Bob might not see it is good yet, but, in a few lifetimes, he will. If it is bad for Bob, it is bad for Sally and everybody. Sally might not see it is bad yet, but she will. You can’t hedge or have it both ways. Either the whole system is worthwhile for all or not worthwhile for all. People in Dharma systems don’t like getting cornered but this choice is a clear implication of a Dharma system.

Contradictions bolster systems that eat the world, especially bolster the hole at the center, and especially through nonsense that seems sublime. Logically, a contradiction can support any nonsense. In “2001: A Space Odyssey”, the computer “Hal” went crazy because he faced contradictory tasks. People go crazy too and they take up more bad ideas that make it all worse.

### **The Buddha and Awakening.**

“Buddh” (“bood” like “food”), means roughly “active mind” or “awakened mind”. “Buddha” is not a name but a title, like “Christ” (anointed person), “The Christ” (one particular important anointed person), or “Lao Tzu” (wise old man). “Buddha” means “awakened person”. “Buddhism” is “the way for people who seek to wake up or are awake”. The founder was “The Buddha” (one particular important awakened person), named Siddhartha Gautama, of the Shakya Clan (also sometimes spelled “Gotama”).

Technically, anybody who awakens is a Buddha. However, Buddhists tend not to say that. Christians do not say “David, a Christ” although David was a key anointed person. Christians keep the term “Christ” for “Jesus the Christ”. Likewise, Buddhists keep “Buddha” not for anyone but for “Siddhartha the Buddha”, and often call him “The Lord Buddha”. Only a male human may awaken and be a Buddha, for reasons that I do not go into. If the sexism and species-ism offend you, ask a Buddhist or Hindu.

“Buddha” also can refer to a person who is central in the great Dharma system, comes along every few thousand years, comes to teach and to awaken people, has amazing powers, helped make the world, continues to make the world, embodies the system in him-her, and embodies cosmic principles such as Compassion. The system and its virtues are incarnate in him. This Buddha would be like The Christ if The Christ came every few thousand years. This Buddha does not figure much in Theravada but does in Mahayana where Siddhartha is one appearance of this Buddha. Each appearance of this Buddha is like a Hindu avatar such as Krishna. I don’t use this Buddha here. The only relevant Buddha in Theravada is Siddhartha Gautama, and he came only once.

Siddhartha was the son of the prince of a small state in the area around Nepal, likely the eldest son and heir of his father. From his clan name, Japanese and Tibetans call him “Shakyamuni” meaning “jewel of the Shakya” or “sage of the Shakya”. As a youth, Siddhartha’s parents married him to a woman of similar rank. By then, Siddhartha already doubted normal life. The couple had a son, who Siddhartha named “Rahula”, meaning “fetter”, “tie that binds us to this world”. When Siddhartha was twenty nine years old, one night he snuck out, leaving his wife, child, parents, palace, duties, and privileges. His wife and son would have a good life even without him. Siddhartha had to “figure it all out”. He lived in the forest, and trained with teachers, for six years. Training included severe asceticism such as fasting and hard yoga. Siddhartha advanced quickly at first, then bogged down, and finally he felt disappointed with the teachers, ideas, and practices. He left the teachers but stayed in the forest, and he taught himself. He had his own ideas, with his own regimen, which was moderate yet firm. His techniques allowed his body and mind to reassert their natural vigor. He found what he wanted. His mind became fully active and he “woke up”. He explained his ideas, and soon got students. Students became a movement. Soldiers, aristocrats, merchants, and crafts people joined because he denied the final authority of ritual and Brahmins, urged individual people to run their own lives, and supported autonomy. At the request of followers, Siddhartha set up an order. He lived over eighty years. Eventually peasants, workers, and other commoners joined the movement. Siddhartha became “the Buddha”. I do not tell more of the story. The ideas count. The book “Siddhartha” by Herman Hesse is a good fictional account of a man like the Buddha, with the same name, set in the same time and place. Hesse is too Hindu but that should not corrupt innocent minds too much. The movie “Young Buddha” is fun, and you can learn about Indian-Buddhist-Hindu ideas from it, but it also clings to Hinduism too much; it makes the Buddha into an avatar.

After awakening, Siddhartha liked to call himself “(the) Tathagata”, which means roughly “‘thus gone’ person”, or “‘thus arrived’ person”: a person who no longer holds to this world yet who is deeply present. Fans of jazz used to call a musician “gone” who knew the music well, lived for music, and put the world apart: Bix Beiderbecke, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker. Rockabilly fans said “real gone cat”: Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Look up the “Real Gone” music company on the Web. I guess “Tathagata” also means “person simply fully here without pretence, obvious for all to know”. In American idiom: “real up-front simply honest integrated whole person with no pretense, posing, or guile”. Siddhartha strikes me as a simple decent person who sought a way so other people could be simple and decent too. Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Francis of Assisi, and likely Moses, were much like that.

### **Nirvana and Enlightenment.**

A person who is “awake” is also “enlightened”, also called “Nirvana”. One likely root for “Nirvana” is “snuff out” or “extinguish” as with a candle. Suffering, wrong ideas, desires, and clinging all totally end for an

awakened person. He will not be reborn and so snuffs out when he dies. Another likely root for “Nirvana” is “cool down”. A person cools down by ending the same things. The fire stays warm enough to maintain life until life ends naturally. The person does not freeze into a block of inert numb ice.

Western people, and even Buddhists, wrongly say you “reach” Nirvana or “achieve” it. Nirvana is not a place, condition, situation, attitude, or thing. You do not reach any place or achieve anything when you “reach” Nirvana. You simply wake up. Westerners say Buddhists “seek enlightenment” as someone seeks a bargain. That view is misguided. Suppose you have a sweet taste in your mouth so you can’t taste properly, you think food is better than it really is, and you can’t stop eating. You are a “junk food junky” as most of us are “life junkies”. Then the sweet taste goes away, and you taste normally, so you can taste food as it is, including good flavors and bad. Food is not nearly as sweet as you had wrongly thought. Now you can judge food and can control eating. You choose adeptly what to eat, can stop when you are as full as you wish, and know eventually you will get tired of eating. Your taste buds and mind are now properly awake. If all your friends still have the wrong overly-sweet taste, you could not explain; they can’t “get it” until they too lose the wrong taste. You have not achieved anything and are not in a special state. Maybe you are where you should have been all along. The same thing happens when we see life properly and are not obsessed with life and the things, ideas, relations, and attitudes in it.

## **PART 2: MY SYNOPSIS**

Material here rests primarily on my view about worthwhile life and not on ideas of suffering although I do write about suffering. I repeat ideas and I cannot present the ideas serially.

### **The Core Insight: Life is Not Worthwhile.**

Basic Buddhism is simple. What is taught as Buddhism usually is not basic Buddhism. Almost all of that came later. What came later is not always wrong or worse, it is just not the original idea. Much of what came later, especially in Mahayana, was reasserting of ideas which likely the Buddha had purged. What happened later was similar to what happened to Jesus when he became the One Divine Cosmic Christ and Christians made elaborate theology to make sense of that role for a real historical person. The drift went further in Mahayana than Theravada, and in folk Buddhism than thoughtful Buddhism. You have to decide what Buddhism is true Buddhism and what is best regardless of whether it is true Buddhism.

The core insight: Each single life, and life overall, is not worthwhile. This life now is not worthwhile. Your life is not worthwhile no matter how much you think it is and how good it seems. When you know life is not worthwhile, you can let go, and wait to die. You will not be reborn. You must act morally always. People who see all this wait calmly. This is the whole message. All else is added.

Even if there is a system of many lives, the whole system is not worthwhile. Even if you have good lives in the future, those lives are not worthwhile and the system of many lives is not worthwhile. Even if you fully get all the points from above, this life now is not worthwhile and any system of lives is not worthwhile. Even if good wins in the end, your life, all lives, and the system, are not worthwhile. Maybe especially if good wins in the end, because there is no real risk, life is not worthwhile.

Below, I mention the roles of desire, clinging, stickiness, struggle, suffering and wrong ideas in how we come to think life is worthwhile when it is not. Ideas about these factors can help us see that life is not worthwhile but ideas about them are not needed if we simply see directly that life is not worthwhile. You do not have to get rid of all wrong ideas (mental defilements) and think perfectly to see directly that life is not worthwhile; you simply see it directly.

We mistakenly persist in thinking life is worthwhile even in the face of good evidence it is not. Buddhism explained why people mistakenly think life is worthwhile. Some Buddhist explanations anticipated ideas from the modern theory of biological evolution but I cannot go into that topic much here.

People dislike the term “not worthwhile”. It is not as harsh as it sounds, there is no better way to say the idea in any language that I know about, and the term does make us consider basic issues. It does not mean “life is miserable” or “life is disgusting”. Don’t get annoyed until you have read more.

Until Buddhism settles whether life is worthwhile, both before and after awakening, I doubt Buddhism can: (a) bridge the gap between thoughtful deep Buddhism versus folk Buddhism, (b) bridge the gap between Buddhism based on awakening versus Buddhism based on karma and charisma, (c) take out enough of the irrationality, magic, superstition, metaphysics, and glamour that it has accumulated, (d) be rational enough in the ways required of modern life, and (e) re-see itself to serve as the basis for good modern life in modern states. Neither Theravada nor Mahayana now measure up. (No religion can take out all irrationality etc. and be perfectly rational, nor should it; all religions could do better.)

You can think of “not worthwhile” like this although I ask that eventually you get over thinking of it like this: Life is a giant “con”. The Dharma cons itself and cons us. The Dharma does this to amuse itself. Our life amuses the Dharma and keeps it from going crazy. All our running around, and even striving for wisdom, adds to the Dharma game. It is time you grew up, woke up, quit enabling your own confusion, and opted out of the con game. You lose nothing by giving up rebirth and life, and you avoid a lot of running around and suffering, for yourself and others.

Regardless of what the Buddha thought about whether life is not worthwhile or suffering besets life, I take the central issue of this chapter to be whether life is worthwhile. The Wheel is a way to focus attention on the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life. I take Buddhism to be really about not worthwhile life even if Buddhism says it is about suffering. Even if Buddhism really is about suffering only, does not engage the issue of worthwhile life, and I am wrong, I still use Buddhism to think about whether life is worthwhile, and to think how to make life more worthwhile. The issue of worthwhile life is deeper, prior, and more important than the issue of suffering. Even if, by Buddhist standards, I am wrong to focus on worthwhile, my ideas bear on the Buddhist use of suffering, so the material in this chapter is still worthwhile.

### **Suffering and the Orthodox View.**

At its base, Buddhism offers Four Truths about suffering. Almost certainly the Truths come directly from Siddhartha. The Truths are the bedrock of all official Buddhism of any school. All Buddhist schools must begin with their view of the Four Truths. The simple question whether-life-is-worthwhile-or-not-worthwhile gets confused because Buddhism now does not simply say life is worthwhile or not. Buddhism now starts with the Four Truths to build attitudes about life that suit practitioners. Often what is supposedly built on

the basis of the Four Truths essentially ignores the Four Truths or contradicts them, usually in an effort to make life worthwhile.

(1) Suffering besets life. Suffering is the first problem of life. Suffering puts its stamp on all of life and on all that we do, think, and feel. We need to cure suffering. We need to cure suffering before we can do anything else effectively. Even if curing suffering does not by itself solve all other issues, we cannot see what is really important or not important, and cannot make any progress on what is really important, until we deal with suffering. If we do deal with suffering, then likely we will make progress toward dealing with what is really important.

(2) Suffering has causes. The closest cause of suffering is clinging; desire causes clinging; and wrong ideas enable desire. Although not the only wrong idea, the root wrong idea is that some things in the world are permanent and so can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction, especially the wrong idea that our self is eternal and can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction.

(3) The causes of suffering can be ended (defeated), and so suffering can end. Buddhism can end the wrong idea of permanence, end other wrong ideas, end desire, end clinging, and so end suffering.

(4) The Eightfold Path of Buddhism is the way to end suffering. The Eightfold Path is being right in all of these: (a) Views (accept the Buddha's teaching); (b) Thought; (c) Speech; (d) Conduct; (e) Livelihood; (f) Effort (hard work, diligence, and little lapsing); (g) Mindfulness (intent, focus); and (h) Concentration (meditation and other ascetic-like practices, like yoga with meditation, done in Buddhist style).

The term for suffering is "dukkha" or "dhukkha" ("doo kha", like "Count Dookoo"). Some Buddhists insist no translation of "dukkha" is adequate, all translations are misleading, and writers should use "dukkha" until readers get a sense for it not limited by their own language. I get the point but to do that would lead to dozens of foreign technical terms, so I don't. Religion needs to be said in natural language. If religion requires special terms, something is amiss.

In orthodox Buddhism: (A) To end suffering is the central problem and key to all other issues. Once we end suffering, other issues should fall into place or not matter. If we don't end suffering, we can't really get our lives on track. (B) But, to end suffering, we need to end wrong ideas and desire-and-clinging. So, really, to end wrong ideas, desire-and-clinging becomes the key, often displacing suffering. See Part 3 here. (C) But, then, to end wrong ideas, and desire-and-clinging, Buddhism uses methods and ideas, what I call "Aids". Aids displace the need to end desire-and-clinging, and become more important even than the goal of dealing with suffering. So, now, using Aids becomes the real key and the real focus of Buddhism. See below and see Part 7 here.

Even monks and adept lay Buddhists often fall into obsession with suffering, wrong ideas, desire-and-clinging, and methods. This stance raises some contradictions. Notice that the question of worthwhile life is gone, the Wheel is now gone. Yet the Four Truths strongly imply "life is not worthwhile" both before and after defeating suffering, before and after awakening.

Not all Buddhism really does center on the Four Truths even if all Buddhism must begin with them, no more than all Christianity centers on the moral teachings of Jesus. Schools in Buddhism use suffering as

entry to other issues that they think more important. After paying lip service to suffering, schools jump it and forget it. Theravada sticks more to the issue but even it uses suffering as entry to other ideas and to practices. Mahayana puts suffering in the context of a great Dharma system, suffused by joy, in which the issue of suffering is only the first step toward seeing the big system, and in which system the issues of suffering and not worthwhile life disappear.

Introductory books on Buddhism often give background that includes the Wheel and its lesson that life is not worthwhile. Books include supporting ideas such as about Samsara and Maya (we don't see life as it is but instead see it in ways that keep us overly engaged and wrongly engaged). The books quickly move to the Four Truths and books drop the Wheel and "not worthwhile" although they bear on suffering. The books then also effectively drop the problem of suffering to focus on related issues of desire-and-clinging and Aids. The issue of not worthwhile life and its relation to suffering and awakening gets lost. When you read about Buddhism, be aware of these transitions and overcome them.

"Suffering" might once have been a way to face the issue of not worthwhile life but now is not. In theory, suffering is the key problem by itself. In practice, one or more Aids become the main focus.

It would be good to know fully what Siddhartha thought about the Wheel and about not worthwhile life, especially what suffering and the Four Truths implied for worthwhile or not worthwhile life. It would be good to know fully what Siddhartha thought was the fruit of not suffering, and what we should do after we end suffering, especially whether life becomes worthwhile after suffering. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought the end of suffering allowed people to make up their minds whether life is worthwhile or not. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought people who were free from suffering would know what to do with life after suffering, including acting to make life more worthwhile. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought that to end suffering and to awaken were the same. I don't know any of that. Modern Buddhism does not say officially although individual Buddhists and Buddhist schools have their own opinions.

I don't know if the Buddha assumed that people accepted "life is not worthwhile" as background, and he offered the Four Truths as what to do next. I don't know if the Buddha decided the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life was not important due to the need to end suffering; if we should deal with suffering first and then the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life would take care of itself. I don't know how focus got away entirely from not worthwhile life and got entirely onto suffering, desire, clinging, and Aids. Think about all this yourself.

I think Buddhism strongly implies life is not worthwhile both before and after ending suffering. To end suffering, a person must, at least for a long time, leave ALL normal life. After a man has fully defeated suffering and fully awakened, then he waits to die and he is not reborn. To stop all suffering, and to awaken, you have to be willing to let go of all desire, including the desire for life. To let go of the desire for life, you cannot think life is deeply worthwhile. Schools differ, but mostly a man who has fully defeated suffering and is fully awake cannot lead a normal life. The Buddha did not lead a normal life after ending suffering and awakening. All this goes along with the idea that the Wheel is bad and we should seek release. To end suffering in the Buddhist way does not defeat suffering in the sense that life becomes happy and worthwhile despite the usual problems, as a Christian or Muslim says defeat of evil makes life

worthwhile. Instead, the end of suffering in Buddhism reveals life was not worthwhile before and is not worthwhile even after.

Standing outside Buddhism, ranking its priorities, I think seeing life is not worthwhile is more important than seeing how suffering permeates life – contrary to official doctrine. The issue of suffering is only a way to see that life is not worthwhile. It is an Aid.

Buddhists sense this problem of not-worthwhile-life behind the official problem of suffering and the official Four Truths, and this lurking problem about not worthwhile life makes Buddhists uneasy. People like a religion that says “we can remove suffering” but don’t like a religion that says life is not worthwhile even without suffering. People want the end of suffering to make life abundantly worthwhile. That is a reason why Buddhism after Theravada got away from suffering even if it paid lip service to the issue of suffering. Theravada seems to avoid any implications of the problem of suffering for not worthwhile life. The focus of Theravada only on suffering is, ironically, a way to avoid implications of suffering for not worthwhile life. It is like steadfastly focusing on the pain of a broken leg instead of on the broken leg.

Beginners in Buddhism also sense this problem, sense there is no response to it in official Buddhism, and so get uneasy. When they first hear about the end of suffering, they think that is great and expect the end of suffering to give a much improved life. Most Buddhism is sold in the West through much improved life. Then new Buddhists sense that suffering never really gets solved, and, even if it did get solved, life would not be better. But no Buddhists will tell them for sure. They feel cheated. So they get more anxious, that is, add to their suffering.

Is suffering the most important issue? Does the end of suffering do everything that we need done? Does the end of suffering remove other questions? Does the end of suffering make life that was not worthwhile into worthwhile life? Did the Buddha intend to make the problem of suffering a way to see the problem of not worthwhile life or did he avoid the issue of worthwhile life? Did the Buddha think that ending suffering would turn a not worthwhile life into a worthwhile life, even if the Buddha expected awakened people not to live normal lives and to die away completely? Did the Buddha think ending suffering allows people to see clearly and so make up their own minds about worthwhile or not worthwhile life, what to do in life in general, and the Wheel? Did followers of the Buddha shift attention away from implications of suffering for not worthwhile life, and instead focus on suffering, because they wanted to avoid the bad feelings that are raised by “life is not worthwhile”? Did Buddhism get stuck on suffering and lose its original focus on how to get off the Wheel? Did misguided focus on suffering then lead to the metaphysical speculations of Mahayana and Hinduism? These questions have no sure answer.

I believe the Buddha used “end suffering” as a way, an Aid, to help people think better; and, when people think better, he expected they would see life is not worthwhile, not go back to normal life, and so get off the Wheel. The Buddha did not think to end suffering makes life worthwhile. Thinking better does help us solve other problems and does, ironically, make life more worthwhile even if not fully worthwhile. The Buddha’s followers then focused entirely on suffering and overlooked the issue of not worthwhile life, and Buddhism got stuck on suffering while overlooking the original deeper prior issue of not worthwhile life. I cannot prove my guesses. Buddhists disagree with me.

The basic idea behind suffering and its defeat is not hard to get but is hard to do. The difficulty led to the basic idea being raised to the key, being covered in metaphysical awe, and surrounded by sticky opaque confusing Aids.

The ideas that (a) we suffer because we expect too much and (b) we can get past most suffering, are not only in Buddhism: A person lives long enough, gets knocked around, loses a few, wins fewer, so he-she finally sees with fair clarity, sees what is important and not, chooses important, lets go of not-important, with no regrets, and gets on with simpler better life. The world does not come to an end. Most of life falls into place, and past concerns don't seem important. A person does not have to see with perfect clarity and consistency, only well enough. A person does not end all suffering but does overcome it enough to keep a fairly clear head and to stay mostly in control. Commonly, the newly-wise person gets on with a more moderate life and more effective life.

In what I think was the original Buddhist version, the newly-wise person sees life is not worthwhile and lets go of it all. In one official Theravada view, the newly-wise person sees that all life, even family life, is beset by suffering, and lets go of it all. In another quasi-official Theravada version, the newly-wise person now controls suffering and so goes back to limited but real participation in the world with family life and business. In a Buddhist version common to Theravada and Mahayana, a person is now in total control of suffering and the world, and goes on with anything in life including family, business, career, and politics.

Buddhism asks for a reckoning with life deeper than most of us think possible. Try to imagine that deep reckoning. Buddhism would be valuable if it only led us to this reckoning and had no other benefits. The orthodox view of the reckoning is "mastery of some Aids, total mental clarity and consistency, total control of desire, total end of clinging, and total end of suffering". I think the original answer was "now I see that life is not worthwhile". I think both answers are wrong.

As naturally evolved creatures, we lie to ourselves a horrendous amount, mostly so as to succeed in this life. Our lying brings suffering to ourselves, other people, animals, and nature. The deep reckoning that Buddhism offers can help stop most of the lies, and can help you act better to you, everybody, and all. It cannot make you or the world perfect.

You need to decide what suffering is, what it means to manage suffering, what it means to end suffering in the Buddhist way, if humans can end suffering the Buddhist way, and if that is the same as awakening.

### **The Irrelevance of a Big System, Big Idea, Gods, Merging, or Anything Similar.**

As far as I know, Siddhartha never said there is a Supreme God, Big Principle, or a few gods, and never said there is not. He said they are not relevant. Siddhartha knew that both Brahmanism and the then-incipient-Hinduism had many gods, the gods were important to people, yet belief in gods often misled people, belief in gods was not relevant to awakening, and relying on gods kept people from awakening; but Siddhartha didn't argue against the gods. He ignored them. I don't know if he would say Dharma is not relevant in the same way, and I let Buddhists decide.

If you can manage suffering, decide whether life is worthwhile, and act well, then why do you need a big System, a big Dharma system, Big Principle such as Life, need God, or the gods; and why do you need to

merge with them, serve them, have them guide you through life, or follow them? Do they need that from you? If you can't manage suffering, decide about life, and act well, then what good comes of God, Big Idea, etc, and what good comes from to believe, merge, serve, or follow?

If believing etc. helps you to manage suffering, decide about life, and act well, then fine; but the important part is to manage, decide, and act well. If believing etc. does not lead you to manage, decide, and act well, then you have gained little and given little. Once you are comfortable with managing suffering, have decided about life, and act well, then hopefully you will see that is what counts and you don't need the others. The others can work well as temporary steps but they are not the enduring platform on which to live properly. You can learn to live well without them.

If believe, merge, serve, or follow get in the way of manage, decide, and act well, then stop. If belief in God or a Big Idea leads you to think poorly, such as by seeing the Devil everywhere, you should revise your belief or stop entirely. You should not condone other people who let belief etc. get in the way, such as terrorists. If you can point out the error of their ways without getting you and all-your-neighborhood killed, then you should do so.

This stance that we don't need the gods or a Big Idea leads us immediately to see we don't need magic, superstition, metaphysics, glamour, fortune telling, grand ideologies, and most "isms" including atheism, modern academic fads, and the ism that we don't need isms; this stance shows us that they get in the way and they actively hurt; and this stance leads us to shun them. We help the world when we debunk them. We help individual people when we lead them away from such misleading bad practices – as long as they don't get angry, get more confused, and lash out.

This stance is much like the stance that I offered in Part One of this book where I stressed that we should do the right things for the right reasons (even though we will be assessed in the end).

This attitude toward the gods, Dharma, Big Ideas, merging, etc. is similar to an attitude that developed in Classical Greek philosophy and among Cynics and Stoics. They also promoted managing, deciding, and acting well, and denied the relevance of gods, big ideas, merging, etc. Unfortunately, especially in Neo-Platonism, people reverted to believing in, serving, and merging with the Good and God, but that did not erase the previous insights.

How does my stance differ from atheists who also promote acting well, deny the gods etc, and point out that thinking about the gods etc. often hurts acting well? See the chapter on atheism in this book. Briefly, atheists believe so strongly in Justice and morality that they raise them to the level of the supernatural but they also deny they have allowed the supernatural and they will not see the implications for allowing even a little supernatural. If you believe in acting well, you must accept that your belief in acting well invites the supernatural and it opens the door to belief in God. Belief does not necessarily lead to abuse. Belief in one good God does not require that you believe in angels, demons, ghosts, magic, etc. and it does not require you to do bad things. It should require rationality and good behavior. Atheists believe we cannot think well until we erase the idea of God from our minds and so they waste a lot of time and effort fighting an idea that has a tenacious evolved basis. I believe we can think well if we accept God and even if our ideas have an evolved basis and are not fully accurate.

How does Buddhism differ from atheism if Buddhism also stresses the importance of acting well and it fears that focus on gods or big ideas leads to confusion and bad acts? Like all Dharma-based systems, Buddhism accepts intrinsic morality. Dharma is supernatural even if it is known only through its natural effects. Unlike atheism, Buddhism does not deny the gods, or their ties to morality, it only says the gods are ultimately irrelevant to the quest to manage suffering etc. and are ultimately irrelevant when you have managed suffering etc, and have learned to think well. You need not waste time and need not confuse yourself by arguing against gods. To focus on that leads to confusion, error, waste, and bad acts. When you have managed suffering, then you can speculate, if you want. I think Siddhartha thought most people wouldn't care much about the gods and Big Ideas after learning to manage suffering. Buddhism allows in only as much supernatural as it needs for intrinsic morality and cause-and-effect, and then it disdains and so effectively banishes all the rest.

Why do I accept the supernatural? Again, see the chapter on atheism. I accept that morality allows the supernatural and accept that even this small amount of the supernatural through morality leads naturally to thinking about God. God ties it all together well without leading to bad ideas or bad behavior. I accept God even though the basis for the idea of God evolved. A general drift toward morality and acting well is not enough. We need some specific ideas, and those specific ideas have to serve as the basis for good institutions. We got them from Jesus. Jesus believed in God and his ideas are rooted in his belief. Now that we have them already, we can derive Jesus' ideas without God but that trick seems artificial and false. We might as well respect his belief in God when we respect his ideas even if we don't adopt formal Christianity and we don't believe Jesus is God. I believe in his ideas and his God. Stressing morality while denying the supernatural, and accepting the supernatural without seeing the implications, especially for a mind behind it all (God), is contradictory enough to lead to confusion, errors, waste, and bad acts. I think I, and other people, think better and act better because we accept the supernatural and believe in God – but not because belief in God scares us – that would be worse.

I think Buddhists would say much the same about the Dharma. You think and act worse if you deny it and think and act better if you accept it and try to go along with it.

Also close to Siddhartha's stance about not needing gods etc. is the stance that we don't have to believe Jesus is God to follow him. We don't have to decide whether he is God or whether he rose from the dead. His divinity is ultimately irrelevant to his moral message. If his moral message does not stand on its own then his divinity will not make it do so; and, if his moral message does stand on his own, we should follow it whether he is God or only human. It helps to give the matter hard thought and it helps to decide; but you don't have to decide; and, if stress from deciding makes you confused and act badly, then don't. Part of my love for Buddhism comes from this overlap in stance.

Does my stance conflict with Buddhism? Yes. I do not seek perfect harmony between my ideas and Buddhist theory. I am more interested in how well Buddhists act, and, in that, they do well. Accepting the idea of God can help us think clearly as Buddhists wish to think clearly and to act well as Buddhists wish to act well. Accepting God can help avoid "mental defilements" such as confusing success in an Aid with awakening, overlooking the issue of worthwhile life, and stressing total victory over suffering rather than merely managing it.

Is there a link between accepting the supernatural (in my case, through goodness) and seeing that life is worthwhile? I think so. Is there a link between avoiding the supernatural and avoiding the question of whether life is worthwhile? I think so too. Any link is not cut-and-dried; for example, agnostics avoid making up their minds about the supernatural yet likely most think life is worthwhile (agnostics seem not aware that stressing goodness implies the supernatural). Here it is not worth going deeper.

Buddhists need to consider what it means to live in a Dharma system in which the Dharma is intrinsically moral. What kind of supernatural is the Dharma? What do the goodness and the supernatural status of the Dharma imply for worthwhile life and suffering? What does Buddhist stress on goodness imply for any supernatural? Does even that little bit of supernatural open the door to God as long as the idea of God is not abused? Do we need to be honest about morality and the supernatural, if being honest about morality and the supernatural leads to better thinking, and not being honest leads to worse thinking?

Put Theravada, Aristotle, Cynics, Stoics, some Taoism, Zen, and Confucius all in one group as holding the stance described above about the irrelevance of gods, big ideas, etc. to acting well and thinking well. Put Mahayana, Hinduism, some Taoism, most Confucianism, atheism, and nearly all theism in another group that requires gods, big ideas, devotion, some merging, etc. If I could not have my stance, and I had to choose between groups, I would quickly choose Theravada, etc. I feel no wavering. I love the stance of original Buddhism that we don't need the gods, magic, superstition, or a big idea. It makes Buddhism hugely charming.

### **Buddhist Aids, with some Assessment.**

Buddhist Aids include practices such as meditation and chanting, and include ideas such as Dharma, karma, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, nothing is permanent (what begins also ends), confusion (mental "defilements"), a mind free from defilements (clear consistent thinking), empty mind, compassion, cooling, non-self, morality, bodhisattva, suffering, stickiness, clinging, desire, letting go, the Middle Path, the self is not an enduring transcendent integrated soul, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, and Joy. I consider all the Four Truths to be Aids. Aids have a place in Buddhism similar to Christian ideas and practices such as prayer, liturgy, sacraments, Grace, God's Will, Works, Justification, Heaven, Salvation, Incarnation, and Crucifixion. Buddhist Aids tend to be more rational. Most schools of Buddhism have similar Aids but differ in which Aids they stress. See Part 7 of this chapter.

Most thought and effort by Buddhists is in Aids rather than directly on suffering or awakening, as most thought and effort by Christians is in church, prayer meetings, liturgy, Heaven, works, cultivating faith, etc. rather than directly on doing what Jesus asked, on doing the right things for the right reasons.

You do not need any Aid to awaken if you can simply see life is not worthwhile or is beset by suffering, and you can defeat desire-and-clinging. Aids can help us to see how the world works, and that helps us to see life is not worthwhile or is beset by suffering. Still, you do not need any Aid if you can simply see that life is worthwhile. I am not sure if that stance is orthodox Buddhist doctrine. If, in contrast, you see directly that life is worthwhile, you can still use Aids to help you see better how the world works and how to make the world more worthwhile for yourself, other people, and nature.

Buddhist Aids can help much but they also are a great danger. People get lost in an Aid as if it were the real religion, thus miss the real idea, hurt self, and hurt others. They mistake means for end. Sublime appealing nonsense from contradictions in Dharma mixes with Aids to make both even more dangerous. Buddhist Aids now cause more harm than help much as do ideas and practices in Christianity. (This is how Protestants see Roman Catholic practices such as the Rosary, devotion to Mary, and sacraments. This is how Roman Catholics see Protestant ideas such as a personal relation with Jesus, knowing the exact moment of personal Salvation, seeking Grace, and obsession with Baptism.)

I think the idea of suffering and of overcoming suffering was originally an Aid but got raised to the status of the main point, and this confusion causes damage.

Despite any danger, here are a few good Aids that everyone should know:

(1) Aristotle in Greece lived about 150 years after the Buddha. Both extolled the value of the Middle Way or Middle Path. As Americans have learned since the 1970s, usually extremes are wrong no matter how right they seem; the best way is the middle; we must compromise in real life; and, without the middle, we stall, bite throats, and die. Seeking the middle does not mean you compromise goodness away. Uptight moralists are as bad as self-indulgent immoralists that use relativism as a tool. Terrorists are committed to extremes and are dead wrong. The real Middle Way requires experience, thought, and heroic effort more than any extreme. The Buddha's idea of the limited self is an example of the Middle Way.

(2, 3, 4) Cause and Effect, Dependent Origination, Impermanence: Almost everything that is, is because of causes (the only exceptions are Dharma, maybe awakening, and maybe some free will (free choice)). Almost everything also has effects. Almost everything is both effect and cause. Almost nothing makes itself, causes itself to be. Everything depends on other things to come into being and to stay in being. As long as its supporting causes keep it going, it is; when they stop, it stops. "Whatever has a beginning has an end". Everything has a beginning except Dharma, so everything ends except Dharma, including souls and the world. Almost everything comes from several causes and effects, from a nexus; and everything goes away when its nexus goes away. Think of rain-and-wind storms, fog, gardens, forests, prosperity, conflict, tantrums, love, family, your country, your religion, or scientific research. Cause and effect also hold sway over our self, mind, ideas, and attitudes. We feel pain, and we suffer, because of causes. We can manage pain and suffering partly by managing the causes of conditions and partly by managing the causes of attitudes. We make spiritual progress if we put ourselves in situations conducive to it, including those that affect ideas and attitudes. We should avoid situations that hurt progress or lead us backwards. We can adjust causes so we have fewer bad things to cling to and we are less likely to cling in bad ways.

(Light affects our eyes to help cause the effect of seeing red. So the mix of light, eyes, brain, and mind, causes the effect of seeing red. The origination of seeing red depends on the prior origination of light, eyes, brain, and mind. When causes of seeing red are gone, then seeing red is over too. All the same is true of you-as-a-being-person, of your mind and its contents including feelings, and of your suffering.)

We cannot change the world simply by changing our attitude; we cannot take away all suffering simply by ignoring it or "rising above" it. We do not unilaterally control the world. The idea that we control the world through our attitude ignores the totality of cause and effect, dependent origination, and impermanence. It

is a common mistake in Buddhism. I think some texts are clear that it is a mistake and caution against it but I do not cite examples.

We do have enough free choice so we can work toward goals and succeed. We work with the world toward goals. Buddhism does not solve the problems of evil or free will anymore than any other system but it does well enough and does better than most.

These ideas are well-known in Buddhism and can help us avoid trouble:

(A) The Buddha insisted we think for ourselves and make up our own minds. We should accept nothing on authority alone, not even his authority. If we do not think out an issue for ourselves then we will not believe conclusions and will not live them. The Buddha would understand people who think it is better to be honest atheists than to believe in God from fear of Hell, hope of Heaven, or social pressure; or to be honest rascals than to force sweet goodness. You can never be bad. The Buddha liked logic, reasons, insight, and argument. Not all people are smart enough, think fast enough, or have the aptitude, to think out all of life and religion from scratch. We have to rely on some authorities. That is alright. Do the best you can. Back up if something feels wrong. Learn from people who do think well. That I should make up my own mind and I can disagree with the Buddha gave me in comfort in writing.

(B) “That topic does not lead to edification”. The Buddha disliked questions about heaven, hell, salvation, spiritual power, angels, demons, luck, etc. because they did not help people see how the world works and did not help people make progress. They are beside the point, distractions, wastes of energy, and traps. Keep to the point, which is to end suffering and get off the Wheel. Don’t confuse yourself and others by secretly lusting after some vain supposedly smart triumph.

Buddhism looks at the world with what we now call a “scientific attitude” or “rational attitude”. It explains spirit and spirituality rationally. It explains the mind scientifically. Buddhism accepts that we choose and change, so it is not reductionist like simplistic materialism. It is not pop psych. Buddhism avoids magic, metaphysics, empty ritual, glamour, mysticism, spiritualism, and “airy fairy”. Those are not useful and can be bad traps. I doubt the Buddha would enjoy most “New Age”. Good Taoism and good Zen are similar to Buddhism but are not scientific in attitude.

In Greece, about the time the Buddha explained his stance, science, logic, math, and philosophy arose. Ideas of the Buddha did not come from Greece or vice versa. Good ideas can develop independently. This parallel is a reason why Buddhism gets along well with modern science.

### **Mixing “Think for Yourself”, “You are Responsible”, and “No Gods, Big Systems, or Big Ideas”.**

When you think for yourself, you are responsible for yourself. You don’t need big ideas etc., and they get in the way of self-responsibility. Even if you don’t think for yourself, you are responsible for yourself, your ideas, your acts, and what flows out of your acts – but that is another topic.

When you add “no gods, big systems, or big ideas” to the fact that people are responsible for themselves, then you see that people, we, are responsible for nearly all the badness and evil of the world. The Devil, Mara, Chance, Nature, Science, etc. are not responsible. We are. No excuses. “The government” is not

responsible because, in the democratic world, we are the government. We can put some blame on the economy because it runs partly on its own apart from us; but, even so, if we wished, we could figure out the situation and do something. We can put part of the blame on crazy groups such as terrorists, bigots, and political idiots; but, again, even there, we could figure it out and do something about it.

Buddhism certainly makes clear that people are responsible for their own attitudes and “hang-ups” but it does not always stress that humans are responsible for big outside problems. Buddhism does stress that we should not use gods, systems, etc. as excuses. I stress this logical implication of Buddhism because it goes along with what I said in Part One of this book and I like backup. We do the damage and we are the only ones that can fix the problems. We cannot blame god, the devil, our religion, another religion, religion in general, secularism, or atheism.

Of course, humans can also take credit for much good, and I am happy with that as well. On the small scale of interpersonal relations, business, and doing our job, usually we do more good than harm.

### **What a Buddhist Awakens to, with Some Assessment.**

Oddly, what happens after the defeat of suffering is not clear, and what a person awakens to is not clear. The lack of clarity in each area reinforces the other, and the confusion makes a difference. I deliberately omit considering whether awakening is conditioned, that is, caused, and whether it is chosen.

(1) As far as I can tell, officially: To end suffering is to awaken; and to awaken is to end suffering. That is it. Nothing else is needed. All Buddhists have to deal with this identity between not suffering and waking up in some way, even if they think awakening requires more than simply the end of suffering.

I think orthodox Theravada Buddhism says that to-awaken and to-fully-defeat-all-suffering are closely tied or identical. If you awaken, you defeat suffering, and vice versa. To awaken this way, you do not have to deal with the question of the Wheel or the question of not worthwhile life.

I am not sure if to defeat all suffering automatically results in your mind becoming active in a way that it could not be active before. I can imagine defeating all suffering and still not being awake but that seems odd. So it seems reasonable to say that to defeat all suffering awakens the mind.

I can easily imagine having an active awakened mind and yet not defeating all suffering. I do not mean merely pain, I mean suffering. So, even if defeating all suffering would awaken the mind, we do not have to defeat all suffering to awaken the mind. I am not sure Buddhists would count this awakening as true Buddhist awakening but I count it as awakening enough.

I do not believe we can defeat all suffering, for various reasons, but mostly because we evolved and our evolutionary history set some limits for us. If we cannot defeat all suffering, then we cannot awaken in the stereotypical Buddhist way. Yet some people do seem to awaken enough. Buddhists need to think about this result. Luckily for me, I think we can awaken enough without totally defeating all suffering.

(2) Some Buddhists say: When you end suffering, you awaken; then you can decide about life and figure out what to do; you can decide to be a regular person again if you wish, even if the Buddha didn't.

Whether life is worthwhile or not does not play a role in scenario (1) or (2). The second version is not far from the official orthodox version but I can't say if the two are the same. It depends on what you may do after you awaken. You may not do just anything.

(3) Some Buddhists, especially Mahayanists, say: When you awaken, you see you did have to master suffering but suffering is not really that important; the great Dharma system matters. Really, you awaken to the great Dharma system. Some Mahayanists continue: After you can handle suffering, then you can do whatever you wish; likely you will wish for a successful human life; in pursuing that, you also will help the great Dharma system much like a deer, tiger, or buffalo.

(4) Some Buddhists say that mastery of desire-and-clinging is waking up and vice versa.

(5) Some Buddhists continue: To stop suffering and defeat desire, we need to stop clinging to the world. People have many useless or harmful desires, and people cling, because they do not see clearly, they are confused; their minds are "defiled". To stop desire and clinging, we need to see consistently and clearly. If we see clearly and consistently, we will stop clinging, stop useless and harmful desires, and stop suffering. Here the focus is on getting rid of mental defilements and so seeing consistently and clearly. So, to see clearly and consistently, not cling, not have useless desires, and not suffer are waking up; and waking up is to see clearly and consistently, not cling, not have useless desires, and so not suffer. The exact relations between not clinging, not having useless desires, seeing clearly, getting rid of mental defilements, and waking up are not clear. It is not clear if you can have one without others, or which causes which.

(6) In practice, most Buddhism says that mastery of an Aid, such as meditation or the theory of cause-and-effect, is waking up, and vice versa. (a) We should use Buddhist Aids to understand suffering and to awaken, (b) and-or we cannot awaken unless we are adept in some Aids, (c) and-or we will become adept in some Aids when we do awaken, (d) and-or to awaken and to become adept in some Aids is the same thing. For example, if you fully know the idea of impermanence or are fully adept at meditation, then you are awake, and vice versa. I am not sure about official dogma for relations between Aids and awakening. Buddhists might aim to awaken by use of Aids, or might not think that far ahead and simply practice Aids because the Aids are meritorious in themselves. The large majority of Buddhist practice is not done not through thinking about suffering or about worthwhile life but through Aids.

(7) In some Theravada, but mostly in Mahayana, especially Zen, Buddhists say to appreciate Emptiness, Buddha Mind, or Empty Mind (Free Mind, "mind of a baby") is to wake up, and vice versa. You came from Emptiness or Mind, you are connected to that even if you don't know it, you will return to that, and likely you will issue forth again. I consider all these ideas mere Aids, and dangerous. You will meet them again often if you read more about Buddhism.

(8) I am not clear on this point. Buddhists sometimes talk about awakening, and the end of suffering, as if it (they) means to be suffused with Dharma, like mystics feel suffused with God, Holy Spirit, or something similar. I am not sure how this view differs from (7). I do have mystic feelings but still I am not sure how Buddhists feel suffusion. Buddhists can talk as if they feel suffused by Dharma even when they are not fully awake or suffering is not fully ended, much as some Christians are "taken up in the Spirit" even when

they are still sinners. Intellectual Buddhists often disdain such feelings but there is precedent for them in the sutras, and even intellectual Buddhists, and monks, feel a bit happy with themselves when they have the experiences.

(+) Sometimes Buddhists say that awakening is to see the importance of good behavior, of compassion, promoting goodness and avoiding badness, and doing your duty. Most people are so numb to their own selfishness that to see we should act better is life-changing, an awakening. Likely, a person does need to awaken this way before he-she can awaken in the ways listed above. There is precedent in the sutras for waking up as moral waking up. Moral waking up might lead quickly to one of the other ways of waking up listed above. I put simple decency, honor, the Golden Rule, and being a useful person, in the foundation of what I wish people to wake up to; see Part One of this book. But, in Buddhism, moral awakening is not the key central important waking up that the Buddha had in mind and that most Buddhist adepts have in mind. Something more is needed. What? Why?

I dislike all the numbered options, and disagree that: suffering is the pivot of life, the defeat of suffering is the first goal of life, we need to end suffering to think clearly enough, and awakening is the same as to end suffering. Some schools substitute other ideas, such as Empty Mind or Buddha Mind, for “end suffering”. Those other ideas are supposed to be the same as awakening. I deny those versions as well. I am not interested in setting what awakening is for Buddhism; I am interested in making up my own mind about awakening, managing suffering, and worthwhile life.

I think: Originally, Buddhists learned life has suffering and that desire-and-clinging make suffering and-or add to suffering. The suffering from desire-and-clinging likely is more than innate suffering and it is what matters. Suffering-apart-from-desire-and-clinging, desire-and-clinging, and suffering-due-to-desire-and-clinging all cloud our minds. After a Buddhist has reduced suffering to a manageable level, he-she can think more clearly. When he-she can think more clearly, he-she can decide if life is worthwhile. Then he-she awakens to: (a) Life is not worthwhile before and after waking up. (b) We can stop the bad effects of not-worthy life simply by thinking more clearly, seeing that life is not worthwhile, and not desiring-and-clinging. (c) We cannot make life worthwhile by not desiring-and-clinging or by waking up. (d) We should always act morally. Full waking up comes in seeing life is not worthwhile. I explain later how not desire-and-clinging goes with seeing that life is not worthwhile. When a Buddhist sees all this, he-she waits calmly to die and is not reborn on the Wheel. Seeing the roles of desire-and-clinging and suffering was a step on the path to waking up; it is not waking up itself. The idea of suffering originally was an Aid.

(If you think life is not worthwhile, likely you suffer; so sometimes people think that to end suffering also means automatically to solve the problem of worthwhile life and make life worthwhile. It is a clever trick but does not hold up. To see life is not worthwhile is not necessarily to end suffering. To end suffering does not mean also to solve the problem of worthwhile life and to make life worthwhile. We do not end suffering so as to make life worthwhile. Even after suffering, the issue of worthwhile life remains. The question of worthwhile should be decided before dealing with suffering.)

You should decide what Buddhists wake up to and what happens then. Buddhists should give people a clear idea of what they wake up to and what happens. Buddhists should do this even if words cannot get across the fullness of awakening and even if words mislead. Getting some clarity is worth the risk. You

should be ready to ask Buddhists what they awaken to and what happens. Ask about relations between awakening, suffering, and Aids.

Not being clear about what we awaken to is a case of the “hole in the center” that I described in sections on “systems that eat the world” in chapters on issues. Other sources contribute to the hole in the center. Below I describe other sources and the results of having a hole in the center.

### **Hopefully Typical Buddhist Behavior.**

Ideally, when a person feels fully that he-she follows Jesus, he-she should love neighbors and treat them better even than him-herself. That rarely happens. Instead, what Christians do depends on their local culture (English Christians act differently than Spanish Christians); particular Christianity (Calvinists act differently than followers of Saint Francis); historical, economic, and social situation (English Christians in 1000 AD acted differently than English Christians in 1950 AD); and on Christianity in general (Christians really do try to follow the Golden Rule, follow “applies equally”, and build good institutions). It is almost impossible to separate out distinct contributions. The same is true of Buddhism, so I don’t try. I give a few ideas of how pretty-good-but-not-ideal Buddhists might act. Enough real Buddhists act well enough to add to Buddhist charm.

After you take seriously that life is not worthwhile or suffering besets life, and before you awaken, what do you do or don’t do? You don’t indulge. You don’t seek mere pleasures. The antidote to suffering and to “not worthwhile life” is not kicks. You don’t hurt any person, any animal, or nature. You also don’t deny yourself reasonable human joys as long as you don’t get them in a bad way. You don’t add to suffering, yours, of anyone else, of any animal, any community, or nature. You don’t break the law. You don’t break morality. You don’t act above anyone or above nature. You don’t act “above it all”. You don’t act haughty, a spiritual lord. You don’t act with feigned indifference as if immune to human feelings, as if you were in total control. You don’t treat other people as animals because they have not achieved your lofty sensibilities. You do not seek to make or to store “merit points” or to give them to others. You do not support divination, mysticism, superstition, magic, glamour, irrationality, or pointless metaphysics. You don’t go against other religions or other believers without strong cause.

You do have a sense of other people and other beings, as in the Upanishads and Jainism. You act with compassion, as in the Upanishads and Jainism. You act like the Buddha acted in his relations with other people, government, and nature. You try to ease all suffering. You explain and educate without holding yourself above. You contribute to community and good government when it does more good than harm. You help religious institutions such as temples and monks. You help educational and medical institutions. You reduce your belief in magic, mysticism, superstition, and metaphysics. You try to be gracious, calm, patient, and accepting, again without holding yourself above. You think how to be a good citizen and then you actually do it. You learn from others. You learn how to think, reason, and assess. You may engage in ardent discussion about religious ideas with Buddhists and non-Buddhists as long as you don’t cling to such discussion. You don’t live a normal successful life because your greater sense of morality and of others prevents you from full normal competition and full success.

What do you do after you awaken fully? That is not clear. Mostly you do and don’t do as above although you limit the scope of your public action. You can try to emulate awakened people but Buddhism has not

had many clear-cut cases of real awakened people, other than the Buddha, to use for examples, and few people expect to be just like the Buddha. You do prepare to die and to go away completely. You cannot live a normal life, and mostly you shouldn't want to.

If all this sounds like good Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism, it should. This is what people stress when they see similarities between religions. It is definitely worth appreciating this similarity as deeply as you can for as long as you can. It also implies that you don't need to wake up in the Buddhist way or appreciate suffering in the Buddhist way to act well. Taoism is a bit distinct but the difference is not very important here.

Two differences between Christianity versus the religions that came out of India (Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism): (1) Indian religions stress abstract Compassion while Christianity stresses specific rules such as the Golden Rule and "applies equally", and (2) Christianity developed specific institutions to carry out its ideas. I defer more on this issue to the chapter on Hinduism.

### **Brief Assessment, Mostly on Worthwhile.**

It is important to make up your mind whether life is worthwhile or not regardless of what you think about suffering and regardless of your interest in any Buddhist Aid.

I decided life is worthwhile. I disagree that life is not worthwhile. Nearly each life is worthwhile and life in general is worthwhile. Some lives are so painful or bad they are not worthwhile but that does not thwart my general assessment. I can manage suffering well enough and I can think clearly enough. I am not perfect at either task. I don't have to be. I get better sometimes. I appreciate help.

Life is worthwhile just because it is. God or the Dharma might have made life worthwhile but that doesn't matter. What matters is that life is worthwhile regardless of how it got that way.

We evolved to think life is worthwhile whether it is or not - but life is worthwhile anyway. We cannot use evolution to discount or credit the idea that life is worthwhile or to discount or credit alternatives. We have to judge the idea on its own merits, and, on that basis, I judge that life is worthwhile.

Life is worthwhile not because of any system. Life is worthwhile not because we will be reborn, and, on average, life in the system is good. This life is worthwhile not because it gives us the chance to awaken and get off the Wheel.

Look at this life right now for what it is. Decide about that.

You do not have to judge the universe, or anything in it, to decide if life is worthwhile. You do not have to avoid judging the universe, or anything in it, to decide. You do not have to avoid moral, social, political, gender, religious, or ethnic judgment to see whether life is worthwhile.

The universe can be dismal or great, or you might not be able to judge whether the universe is dismal or great, and life can still be worthwhile. You can be celibate, shy, gregarious, sad, in pain, have children or not, succeed or fail, and life is still worthwhile. Life as a whole is worthwhile even if no particular activity,

relation, cause, person, institution, or thing in life is worthwhile on its own. Despite being able to manage suffering, still sometimes you will fail, and yet still think life is worthwhile - and life is worthwhile is despite your failure and despite what others will take as your rationalization.

My view is not the same as "Say 'yes' to LIFE". It is not New England Transcendentalism, westernized Jainism, westernized Hinduism, New Age, or American booster-ism.

Rather than think with perfect clarity and consistency, we should strive to think well enough. Rather than fully overcome desire, clinging, and suffering, we strive to manage them. This approach is more in line with real naturally evolved people than is ideal Buddhism. This approach goes with the morality of both Jesus and Siddhartha. It allows us to use ideals without letting ideals thwart real acts and their benefits. It is on the Middle Path. See Part One of this book.

You do not need a Big Idea, Big System, or Big God to decide whether life is worthwhile and in particular you do not need a Big Idea, System, or God to decide that life is worthwhile. They do not automatically make life worthwhile and the lack of them does not automatically make life not worthwhile. If you decide they do not exist and-or are not important, the lack does not automatically make life not worthwhile. Your life can be worthwhile with no system of Dharma, karma, Wisdom, or God. Those things can embellish a worthwhile life and can give it direction but they are not necessary.

Decency and doing the right things for the right reasons are part of what makes life worthwhile but they alone do not make life worthwhile and the lack of them alone does not have to make life not worthwhile. Fighting for them can make life more worthwhile but not to fight for them does not have to make life not worthwhile. Some people don't have it in them to fight, the meek, but that does not mean their lives are not worthwhile. I think: To love decency and do the right things for the right reasons helps greatly to keep our hearts-and-minds focused on worthwhile life; and God helps us to love decency and to do the right things for the right reasons, helps us to see life is worthwhile, and helps us to make it so. Simple decency, simple rightness, God, and worthwhile life all go together for me.

Some people, without God, a Big Idea or Big system, get lost and despair. If they cannot give up those things, as I cannot give up God, that is fine, but the people have to recognize that life can be worthwhile just because it is. Ironically, the insight makes God, Idea, and System even better.

You can have a worthwhile life if you are an eternal soul-self (atman). You can have a worthwhile life if you are not an eternal soul-self but are merely a temporary self (an-atman). You can have a worthwhile life whatever God decides to do with you after you die. You can have a worthwhile life if God assess you after you die. You can have a worthwhile life if God does not assess you after you die. You do not need to be an eternal soul-self, a temporary self, be judged by God, not be judged by God, be reborn at God's grace, or vanish entirely after God assesses you, to have a worthwhile life or to make up your mind if life is worthwhile.

All these situations are irrelevant to a choice about worthwhile life. So, make up your own mind, adopt ideas accordingly, and act accordingly.

You should think about what conditions might make life not worthwhile. Then think what your ideas show about how you see worthwhile life.

(One logical option is to think life is not worthwhile but to do the right things for the right reasons, and-or act as you should, and-or do your duty, and-or do what God wishes, and-or do God's (Dharma's) work, anyway. Here is not where to go into that option. It is odd to think a person could do the right things for the right reasons etc. and not think life is worthwhile, even if the world stinks. Some Christians seem to screw themselves up into something like this stance but often it is a dour cover, as in "The Scarlet Letter" and other critiques. Some Buddhists say this is the right stance but they don't really believe it and they are not as dour as Christians.)

Siddhartha the Buddha wished people to give up depending on gods, systems, and big ideas. I do not know if he avoided the issue of worthwhile life and focused on suffering so as to get people to give up depending wrongly on gods, systems, and ideas. I strongly suspect so. If so, Siddhartha got confused and he threw out the baby with the bath water. To grasp worthwhile life, people do tend strongly to err by misusing gods, systems, and big ideas. But it is possible to handle the question of worthwhile life and not to fall into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, especially if we are warned in advance and we monitor our minds along the way. That is a better path than focusing on suffering so as to avoid the issue of worthwhile life so as to avoid the traps of gods, systems, and big ideas. If Siddhartha the Buddha had stayed focused also on worthwhile life, and did not look primarily in terms of suffering, he could have seen how to find worthwhile life without also falling into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. Buddhists do not like me to imply that Siddhartha was imperfect. (In fact, avoiding the issue of worthwhile life to concentrate on suffering opened the door wide for Mahayana and Hinduism which brought with them, in many-fold, the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. If Siddhartha had foreseen this turn, I am not sure he would have avoided the issue of worthwhile life to focus entirely on suffering.)

Although I disagree (a) with the basic stance of the Buddha that life is not worthwhile; (b) with the basic stance of Buddhism that life is about defeating suffering; and (c) with the idea that we must end suffering to find a worthwhile life; still (d) I learned hugely from the Buddha, from his issues, methods, and from Buddhism. If Siddhartha intended his ideas to help us to more freedom so we could decide for ourselves, then, in my case, he succeeded. Other thinkers helped too.

Buddhists need to ask if their approach as-a-whole implies that life is not worthwhile. What are the roles of suffering and overcoming suffering in not worthwhile life or worthwhile life? Buddhists need to consider if they wish to stay with the view that life is worthwhile or they should change it. Mahayana and Hinduism changed this view quite a bit. Modern Theravada in practice also changes it quite a bit.

I doubt Buddhists can take care of suffering until they have at least a strong working conviction that life is worthwhile or not. How they see suffering and handle suffering depends on that choice.

In fact, nearly all Buddhists, including the large majority of monks and adept lay people, think their own lives, and life in general, is worthwhile. They find meaning and satisfaction in life just as other people do. They do not seem to see or to accept that the Buddhist emphasis on suffering and Buddhist view of what happens after awakening strongly imply life is not worthwhile. They accept the Wheel and its implications as part of Buddhist history and as background but then ignore it. They avoid the question. Some monks

and lay people assume that, by following Buddhist practice, they are justified, or will be justified, and so they do not have to face the issue of worthwhile life. This approach is a bit hypocritical but not more so than contradictions in other religions such as Free Will versus Grace in Christianity. Not dealing with the issue of worthwhile life, acting as if life worthwhile, but following doctrine that strongly implies life is not worthwhile, does put a contradiction deep in Buddhism. For myself and my curiosity, I wish adept monks and lay people would face the issue of worthwhile life, and face the implication of the Four Truths for worthwhile life, and would come up with Buddhist ideas. This resolution might not be possible as long as Buddhists hold to standard interpretation of the Four Truths.

If Buddhists decide life is worthwhile, they can use many parts of Buddhism to make life better and more worthwhile for self, all people, and nature. Buddhists do who stress the common morality that Buddhism shares with major religions, ideals such as not being selfish and the Middle Path, already do that. It is what Buddhists do when they seek Buddhist reasons for ideals such as gender equality, democracy, fair economies, justice, diversity, education, and science.

In my view, what happens after we see that life is worthwhile? What then? What do we awaken to and what do we do? See Part One of this book. If we decide that life is worthwhile, regardless of Buddhist teaching, because of Buddhist teaching, before awakening, or after awakening, then we have to decide what to do. I think we are led strongly to something like the ideas that I gave in Part One. Buddhism is congenial with the ideas of Part One, especially if we ignore God. But I think we are not led inevitably to the ideas of Part One, so here is not the place to discuss how strongly we are led to those ideas and to discuss relations of Buddhism, awakening, and worthwhile life to those ideas.

Buddhists tend to say that, after awakening, then “We are free and we can do whatever we want as long as it is moral, including going back to the farm, market, town, family life, sex life, and political life where we can use ourselves as examples of the Dharma”. That is not what the Buddha did and not what other awakened Buddhists did. So the saying amounts to a superficial defense of normal competitive life with striving for success, and it avoids deep real issues. Buddhists are not clear how awakened people should act, and this lack of clarity has caused some problems.

Buddhism has ethics like the ethics in other major religions including Christianity. Buddhists know right from wrong. They respect moral people. Buddhism knows the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, rule of law, citizenship in democracy, pro-active helping, and community responsibility. It did not stress them in the past and did not develop them until recently. The Buddhist stress on suffering does not promote the good ideas and, I think, retards the development and appreciation of them. Still, Buddhists now do know the value of the ideas and try to make good modern states based on them. Buddhists are moral.

Despite the fun, insights, and benefit from Buddhist Aids, all that we could ever gain from Buddhist Aids, including the idea of suffering as an Aid, is little compared to what we gain from deciding whether life is worthwhile. You are better off to give up Aids entirely if they get in the way of deciding the issue. Careful use of Aids can help you to decide but there is so much danger in Aids that you must be ready to give them up if you begin to lose your way.

Awakening makes sense as a strong version of “coming to my senses” but not as the big boom that most Buddhists, even monks, think of. That idea of awakening causes as much harm as the idea of salvation

does in Christianity, Islam, and some Mahayana, and Hinduism. You are better off not thinking of that kind of awakening at all but instead simply working to be a better person.

Other religions have problems with worthwhile life and try to avoid the problems. In Christianity, we get abundant life once we are saved by Jesus; so what did we have before? Do people who are not saved really have a worthwhile life? Christians don't treat them as if they did. In Islam, life is worthwhile after you submit to Allah and to the local Muslim clerics. Was life worthwhile before? Do non-Muslim infidels have a worthwhile life? Do people who will not go to Muslim heaven have a worthwhile life? Do women have a worthwhile life? In both Islam and Christianity, is life a gift from God and so worthwhile before you are saved? In Hinduism and Mahayana, in theory, people have worthwhile lives because they are part of a system and only for that reason; in theory, because everybody is part of the system, everybody has a worthwhile life; but the people high in the system, the ones who should know better, certainly don't treat the low people as if low lives are worthwhile. Do Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Sunnis, Shiites, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, and Confucians all live equally worthwhile lives?

Taoism, and some Zen, insists life is worthwhile, especially if we find the Tao and learn how to live along with it. Taoists do not dream of overcoming suffering; they do manage suffering well without awakening in the Buddhist way; in some Taoist stories, Taoists live well despite suffering and they do not have to end suffering to live well; you do not have to defeat suffering to live in accord with the Tao and to have a worthwhile life; and no Taoist ever enjoys suffering. Taoists do not imagine forcing thought to conform to clarity, consistency, and purity; yet they think well enough. Except for a few odd individuals, Taoists do not think any single normal person can wake up to know the full Tao but are happy with insights that allow them to go with the Tao and enjoy life. My view is similar to Taoism and Zen but is not exactly like either. I like the blend of Taoism and Buddhism that Zen tried to make.

### **Brief Assessment Continued: Human Nature and Modern Life.**

Evolved humans are by nature imperfect. We see the world with bias, and we lie even to ourselves. We desire and cling. We cannot think with perfect clarity and consistency. We cannot be simply whole and fully integrated. We cannot be perfectly moral. We can get better and likely can get good enough.

All religions go against evolved human nature somewhat. At the least, they ask us to be more moral than we are comfortable with, and more than we can usually do. Sometimes they ask a lot, far more than any evolved being could give. Few of us can love enemies or even love our neighbors a little bit, let alone as much as we love ourselves.

To end suffering, Buddhism asks for a lot from evolved people. Buddhism wants to use nature to negate nature or, at least, overcome it. To end all desire and clinging is beyond us. People cannot stop suffering as Buddhism wishes them to stop. Buddhists had to reinterpret original ideas from Siddhartha quite a bit to make a version to serve as the basis for the daily life of peasants, merchants, soldiers, and politicians. Buddhists have to think if the original ideas of Siddhartha are reasonable. Buddhists have to think if pure Buddhism, the ideas of Siddhartha, alone can serve as the basis for normal life for evolved humans in any era but mostly in modern times. I doubt it.

All major religions handle the problem of rising above evolved human nature by saying obvious evolved flawed human nature is not our real nature. By following a religion, we go from obvious evolved flawed human nature back to our real much better nature. In Christianity, the work of Jesus returns us to the original grace of Adam and Eve. In Islam, faith in God does that. Mahayana, Taoism, and Zen say we are really in Emptiness, Buddha Mind, or Tao, and that to awaken is to see that. I think Siddhartha did not want this “out” and he accepted that real human nature is flawed. He insisted we could rise above it anyhow. In rising above our obvious (evolved) nature, he insisted we do not return to any big system. He insisted the normal human self is not eternal and perfect. I agree that we are flawed but disagree that we can rise above it totally anyway. Questions about original human and returning to purity remind me of the movie “Dr. Strangelove”, which shows what happens when we believe too much in purity, keeping it, and getting back to it. On the other hand, don’t Romantically wallow in impurity as a new kind of purity.

Theravada waffles. It cannot accept an eternal-soul-self-with-a-big-Dharma-system, as in Mahayana or Hinduism; but it also does insist real human nature is much better than corrupt obvious evolved human nature, we can get back to the ideal, to return is to awaken, and to awaken is to return. I am not clear about what Theravada Buddhists think our true nature is but it is something like being suffused with the Dharma. When we are suffused with Dharma, we awaken, and, when we awaken, we are suffused with Dharma. Theravada wants to have the cake of purity-of-nature and eat it too. In doing so, it opens the door to little-eternal-self-in-big-eternal-system. There is no point reviewing various schemes.

#### **Brief Assessment Continued: Why Bother?**

If I disagree with the core idea of Buddhism, expressed either as “not worthwhile” or “beset by suffering”, then why did I write and why should you read? I disagree with many of the ideas described in this book but I still wrote about them and it is still worth knowing them both for content and to get along honestly with believers. (1) As I said at the start of the book, I do care about doctrine but I care more about what people do. As long as people act well, I care more about that than details of belief. Buddhists generally act well. At the least, they seem less prone to war and terrorism than followers of the major God-fearing religions and Hinduism. (2) Buddhism fosters a great attitude toward truth and life. Buddhism is sane, even-minded, open-minded, quiet, dignified, and graceful. Sincere Buddhists are among the most sane and helpful of people. Particular people in other religions approach Buddhist grace but not always as result of their religion. (3) It is a joy to study its ideas and ways even when I disagree. (4) Buddhism is among the most forgiving and tolerant of religions, more so than most Christianity. (5) Buddhism has beneficial practices. We can gain from the practices even if we don’t know the ideas behind the practices or even if we disagree with some ideas. It does help to know Buddhist ideas behind practices, and why you agree and disagree. (6) Buddhism has ideas that go well with science. (7) We gain when we face ideas that we don’t agree with. (8) We gain when we decide issues, decide through sound thinking, and we commit. Buddhism helped me to see the importance of worthwhile life and suffering. (9) As Jesus said: “By their fruits you will know them”.

#### **Brief Assessment Continued: Suffering and Worthwhile Life.**

At the risk of boredom, it is important to get clear about suffering because I disagree with Theravada and because differences between Theravada versus Mahayana-and-Hinduism pivot on issues of suffering, worthwhile life, and the value of a system. While paying lip service to suffering, in fact, Mahayana and

Hinduism get around it so as to make life worthwhile in the context of a system. Officially, Theravada insists suffering is the main issue; if we deal with that, we deal with all; but, in practice, Theravada does not focus on suffering either. We cannot see how Mahayana and Hinduism grew unless we appreciate Theravada insistence on suffering. I disagree with Mahayana and Hinduism too.

Also, a good look at suffering can help undo any bias I have due to my view based on worthwhile life. We need confidence in what Siddhartha had in mind by his stress on suffering so we can feel confident about how we see suffering and worthwhile-or-not-worthy. Buddhists should think about what Siddhartha had in mind because they often approach suffering with formulas rather than think about what suffering meant to Siddhartha, means to them individually, and what role it plays generally.

I don't overlook suffering or make light of it. Suffering does permeate life, erode quality of life, and attack relations with people, nature, and God. It blinds us to simple truth. I know all the kinds of suffering that Buddhists refer to. I have not left out anything. I know suffering that comes from the self, desire, other people, society, limited resources, the state, and the bad breaks of the world. I know suffering that can be helped by managing personal desires and suffering that can be helped only by working on problems of the world. The Buddhist idea of suffering is important and is largely accurate, more so than ideas of most other religions and philosophies. Suffering deserves to be an important Aid. Suffering is a start in getting at worthwhile life. But the Buddhist idea also is dangerous. It is too easy to fall into the idea and too hard to jump out of the hole once in it.

Again: The idea of suffering reflects original ideas about how bad is the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life but suffering was not the basic idea. The original point was that life is not worthwhile. Originally, the idea of suffering helped people see that life is not worthwhile and so get off the Wheel. A shift from "not worthwhile" to "suffering" causes confusion (mental defilement), causes clinging, gives rise to objects of clinging (suffering and the war on suffering), and causes damage.

Again: In Buddhism, the focus is on suffering plain-and-simple without much thought for what suffering implies. Life is beset by suffering and Buddhism defeats suffering. That's it. Likewise, the focus is on methods to overcome suffering, on Aids, without much thought for what that implies about worthwhile life. To defeat suffering is to wake up and vice versa. To become adept at an Aid is to wake up. It is all about suffering and Aids. If suffering once did reflect the Wheel and the lesson of not worthwhile life, the idea of suffering used in Buddhism now does not show up like that. Now it is dogma that suffering sours life, we should overcome suffering, Buddhism has the tools, to overcome suffering is to wake up, and that's it. We might, or not, remain on the Wheel after we do overcome suffering.

Again: I am not sure, in doctrine, of the exact relation between waking up and overcoming suffering but I think anyone who has overcome suffering is awakened and vice versa.

Again: I think the following ideas imply that life is not worthwhile. Even separately they imply that life is not worthwhile but together the implication is strong. "Suffering besets life. A huge goal is to overcome suffering. To end suffering, at least for a long time at first, we must withdraw strongly from ALL normal life. After we end suffering, we are not reborn again on the Wheel. After we end suffering, we do not go on with normal life as a normal person." To end suffering, we have to be able to let go of all, including life. To let go of life means not to hold on to the idea that it is worthwhile. For Buddhism to hold the ideas

but not deal with their apparent implication about not worthwhile life is odd and does not make my mind any clearer and does not lead me to end my suffering. To focus on suffering without also considering worthwhile life leads to confusion over what desires and clinging to end, overcome, let go, or hold.

(1) Key Point: All lives have some suffering, and some lives have much suffering, but most lives are still worthwhile, and most lives were worthwhile in the time of the Buddha. Suffering in itself does not make a particular life not-worthy unless the suffering is great. A life can be worthwhile with much suffering or, if badly misused, not-worthy with little suffering. The big majority of modern lives have more hope and contentment than suffering except in horrible places. Even there, most people still have some hope and joy to pierce the suffering.

(2) Key Point: The issue of worthwhile life is deeper and more important than suffering. We can see suffering in terms of worthwhile-or-not-worthy-life but cannot see worthwhile-or-not-worthy-life in terms of suffering except for a few bad cases that do not change the basic judgment.

(3) Key Point: If we think life is worthwhile, we can handle much suffering and can learn to think clearly enough; if we think life is not worthwhile, suffering is not really that important. You can lead a worthwhile life if you do not totally defeat suffering but you only think well enough and only manage suffering. You can lead a worthwhile life if you do not awaken in the Buddhist manner but you only have some good insights, think well, and act well.

(4) Key Point: Once we see that the issue of worthwhile life is more important than the issue of suffering, we can still accept that we need to manage suffering, bad thinking, desire, and clinging. We can see that we need to manage rather than end them. We can accept the use of some Aids. But we take a different attitude toward suffering, desire, clinging, thinking, Aids, defeating, ending, and managing.

Again: I doubt a person can manage suffering without first choosing whether life is worthwhile. Making that choice clears your head and allows you to work on suffering. Not making that choice keeps your head muddy and interferes with managing. If, while learning to manage suffering, you change your mind, that is fine, and you do have the ability to do it, but you should first take a stand. Even if you choose wrongly at first, the clarity of mind is worth the risk. To be honest, I doubt you can really manage suffering unless you see that life is worthwhile. But Buddhism likely disagrees with me.

Again: Siddhartha the Buddha wished people not to depend on gods, systems, or big ideas. To keep people away from the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, Siddhartha might have focused on the end of suffering and so overlooked the issue of worthwhile life. The issue of worthwhile life tends strongly to the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, and it was worth avoiding the issue, important as it is, so as to avoid the errors. I understand his tactic but disagree. To focus on suffering does help to avoid the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas but it also overlooks the issue of worthwhile life. To do that is to give up too much, to throw out the baby with the bath water. If the issue of suffering distracts entirely from the issue of worthwhile life then more is lost than is gained by defending that way against the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. Unless the questions of worthwhile life and suffering are posed together, and answered together, then too much is lost. I believe we can pose them together without falling into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. If we do not, we practically demand compensation through the mistakes of Mahayana, Hinduism, cosmic Christianity, Islam, and other such big religions.

Again: Naturally evolved people do suffer but we are not “born to suffer and to endure suffering”. Nor can we reasonably expect to escape suffering entirely. To live is to desire, strive, and cling, and those lead inevitably to some suffering. Still, life is not a “weepy” movie in which we revel in misery. Suffering is not the central fact of life or the key to life. We do not control life if we defeat suffering, if we make it optional, or manage it. Like pain, suffering is one part of life among other parts; we have to accept that; and we have to manage suffering as well as we can with the tools that nature gave us. Some Christians and some Buddhists revel in suffering. The opposite error, in Buddhism, is that we can we make evolved humans fully consistent, clear in thinking, and so free from all suffering, fully able to make suffering optional or to end it. Buddhists use nature to negate nature. I say, as evolved beings, we can get more adept at thinking but we cannot get fully consistent and clear at thinking, and we can get more adept at managing suffering but we cannot totally overcome suffering through better thinking or any other common natural way. We can get morally better as people but we cannot be perfectly moral and so totally overcome suffering. We can manage suffering most of the time. We can get better at thinking, more moral, and more adept at managing suffering. That’s all. It is enough. If ever we do totally end suffering, we lose so much of what is human and good that the end result is dubious. We have to work with what we evolved, and we can. Buddhism acts much of naturally evolved beings. Usually Buddhism can adjust to go with naturally evolved real humans.

In Buddhism, to end suffering, we remove the causes of suffering. We end suffering partly by removing false ideas of the self and so by not desiring and clinging as a result of false ideas of the self. We help to end suffering by removing the false bolstered idea that all selves, and my particular self, are eternal simple unified soul-things. Yet to see you are not an eternal soul-self (atman) does not necessarily end suffering. You can see with clarity and fullness that you will end completely someday and yet still suffer. Atheists might be absolutely sure that they will end someday, and might even strongly reduce desire and clinging, yet still suffer. Some scientists see clearly that the evolved self, at least on this world, is not the simple ideal soul-self of most religions yet the scientists still suffer. Especially since about 1850, I think some painters and sculptors – Impressionists, Pointillists, Fauves, Cubists, Abstractionists - have seen clearly both that the self is not the ideal soul-self yet still some self persists, but the artists suffer. The idea of the limited-but- still-present-self and his-her relation to the world runs through the work of James Joyce and maybe of some writers after him. The Buddhist idea of non-self (an-atman) or limited self is not the necessary and sufficient key to end all suffering (or even to make us all not selfish and helpful).

To know deeply that we are caught in cause-and-effect does not necessarily remove suffering or give us the tools needed to remove suffering. A scientist can deeply know the cause-and-effect of a tsunami but still truly suffer when his-her entire family and-or village is wiped out by one.

Much suffering does come from ourselves; we do enable our own suffering. But not all suffering comes from a mistakenly bolstered idea of self, from mistaken ideas about the world, or from mistaken ideas. Some suffering comes from the world and it is not under our control. We cannot end all suffering simply by changing our attitude or by using dismissive phrases such as “it’s not a big deal”, “nothing is that important in the long run” and “it’s nothing because it will pass”. A cancer patient truly suffers even if he-she manages suffering, and it is nasty to say he-she suffers only from a bad attitude. A twelve-year old forced soldier, or ten year-old victim of gang rape, truly suffers, and it is nasty to say otherwise. If they could have removed the causes of suffering, they would have; but some causes we cannot control. If

they could entirely forget and let go, they would, but some things we cannot erase. That is part of what evil is. Maybe God can turn every evil into a greater good but we can't. We can manage even such suffering sometimes but it is mistaken to say we can turn it into not-suffering with an "attitude adjustment". We can reduce suffering by seeing that we desire security, safety, continuity, and freedom; but even if we control those desires, we still suffer because of what happens in the world. Not to see this is deliberate blindness, deliberate bolstering of self into more than it is; and it purposely overlooks Dharma, cause, effect, and dependent origination. Someone who suffers because he-she did not get a well-deserved promotion, or did not get well-deserved recognition, should work more on him-herself than on the world but it is not true of all cases. That some real suffering is of the world, and we can't change this fact with a mere attitude adjustment, is a big theme of the novel "Catch 22" by Joseph Heller. We're not all totally crazy. Sometimes it really is them.

We cannot end suffering by not making value judgments, by not judging the world. Moral relativism does not end suffering. We can see that bacteria do not mean to kill us when they invade our blood but we still suffer and so do our friends and kin. We can see that good sometimes leads to bad ("Scarlet Letter") and bad sometimes leads to good (Batman movies and revenge movies) but that fact does not mean we can end suffering. Right and wrong can add to suffering – when robbed, we feel not only loss of goods but also feel wronged - yet they do not alone make suffering. Being too moralistic does add to suffering and we are better off by not being very moralistic. But neither fact means no moral judging would remove all suffering. Most animals do not judge the world and I doubt they have the idea that they are eternal souls yet they still suffer and no attitude adjustment could change that. A world without any judging at all would still have too much suffering.

I do not misunderstand suffering and so err about sources of suffering and removing suffering. I do not confuse suffering and pain. People who think we can remove suffering with a better idea of the self, by knowing cause and effect, changing self, changing attitudes, or not using moral judgment, misunderstand the world and fool themselves about suffering. Buddhists misunderstand suffering and fool themselves. Even the Buddha himself, if he thought like this, misunderstood suffering and fooled himself. Sometimes the fooling is deliberate in service to an ideology.

Don't go overboard the other way by blaming the world, or "them", for all your suffering, as in the modern style. Don't demand all your rights without any responsibilities, including your right not to suffer. You still cause most of your suffering, you still make others suffer, and you should work mostly on yourself. The proper response to the suffering from the world is to work hard to make the world better. To do so, you need to know what really causes suffering and what really works to cure it.

(Since the 1960s, a Thai Theravada monk, Pali: Buddhadasa [Thai: Phuthahaat], and some other Thai Buddhists, have accepted that an individual alone does not control all suffering. The world does add suffering apart from the desires of an individual. The world adds suffering through harm to nature, and through economy, politics, society, and culture. You-as-an-individual might defeat your own personal suffering, even that portion caused by the world apart from you, by controlling desires and clinging; but you also have to see that suffering has various causes and some lie outside you. I think this approach is more consistent with basic Buddhist ideas of Dharma, cause-and-effect, and dependent origination. This approach potentially is a big development. Still, I am sure that Buddhadasa and most Buddhists would disagree with me about worthwhile life, suffering, and awakening. As Buddhists are finding out, seeing

that the world causes suffering is hard enough but figuring out what really to do is even harder. It leads easily to problems of desire and clinging for individuals who otherwise mean well. I wish them luck. We need the help. See below, especially Parts 3 and 4.)

We can learn much from a battle with suffering but we lose more than we gain if we let suffering become the whole war. We need to put suffering in the context of “(not) worthwhile life” and we need to think what suffering implies.

As Buddhism now presents suffering and ways to battle it, Buddhism implies life is not worthwhile, at least before a person defeats suffering. Nearly all of us live in a cloud of suffering. So Buddhism implies that normal human life is not worthwhile. Buddhism is not clear what happens after a person defeats suffering but, to me, Buddhism implies life is not worthwhile even then. Few people defeat suffering. By the time a person has defeated suffering, often he is too old or too far from normal life to return to normal life. When people defeat suffering, they do not go back to normal life but stay retired, as did the Buddha. After they defeat suffering, they do not go on to more rebirths that are happy but they die out and are not reborn. All this implies getting off the Wheel and implies life is not worthwhile.

Buddhism says people cannot achieve secure real happiness in life because life is beset by suffering. The reasons that cause suffering also insure we cannot hold happiness; lack of happiness and suffering are two aspects of the same problem. Happiness serves as a good case for seeing the pervasive effects of suffering. Here would be an apt place to go into the issue but it takes too long. See (A) of Part 3 of this chapter.

The idea that we must totally overcome clinging and suffering is a negative absolute, like iconoclasm (no pictures, statues, or relics; not much literature, movies, or TV) or like abstinence from sex and alcohol. It is not a positive absolute like “love your neighbor”. It can put on heroic dress but it is still an absolute and still negative. I am wary of absolutes, especially negative. It is better to manage clinging and suffering as we manage pictures, words, drugs, and sex. If you feel you must totally defeat clinging and suffering, go ahead; but don’t think other people must follow; then, when you think you are done, you must overcome the suffering that you feel from clinging to the need to totally overcome clinging and suffering.

People dislike the idea that “life is not worthwhile” and don’t want it as the main message of their religion. Getting around the problem of “not worthwhile life” was a big way that Mahayana and Hinduism overtook original Buddhism. In them, “overcome suffering” sounds happier, focused not on the defeat of suffering but on how to make a better happy world for ourselves. Mahayana and Hinduism used that view of “end suffering” to veer away from Theravada into making a joyful Dharma system of which all of us are small permanent parts (atman) and into which we merge.

I don’t know if the Buddha originally said we have to control suffering to be free to handle life properly, to decide if life is worthwhile, and see what to do. If the Buddha originally stressed suffering as Aid rather than the main focus, I don’t know if he or his successors moved it from Aid to main focus. If the Buddha did not originally face the issue of worthwhile life, and did believe that a focus on suffering is all we need, then I disagree with the Buddha. I can still assess these issues and still assess Buddhism if I disagree. It is still worth deciding if life is worthwhile, and still worth using Buddhism to do so.

It is almost impossible to think well, perform well artistically or athletically, compete, or fight, if you are too tense. Yes, energy helps, but tension hurts. Likewise, we have to relax to make lasting changes in our lives and to advance spiritually. We need energy, drive, and nerves but tension is a killer. We need to let go of some suffering so as to think more clearly and let go of more suffering. Letting go of some suffering and thinking clearly can make a reinforcing process. I am sure the Buddha had this effect in mind when he wished us to end suffering. But, I think, and I am almost certain Buddhism teaches, the Buddha had more in mind when he offered the Four Truths and he wanted us to end suffering. He had in mind the kind of deep reckoning with life that I described above.

We have to let go of some suffering to relax to let go of more suffering. To decide if life is worthwhile, it helps to manage at least some suffering first. We face an old chicken-and-egg problem. Just as judges, lawyers, actors, mechanics, programmers, gymnasts, martial artists, and musicians face and solve this problem, so can spiritual seekers. People solve chicken-and-egg problems all the time. Sometimes, as in Zen, you need a hard knock to get you going, but you can do it.

When we decide that life is worthwhile or not worthwhile, we have already more than taken the first step. Already we have gone a long way toward managing suffering.

We all think our ideas are the correct ideas and are the ideas that everybody should care about. Maybe I make the Buddha an advocate of my ideas because I hold him in high regard and I want him to be on the right track. Maybe I think he really did hold ideas similar to mine and I care about truth. Maybe I try to use his prestige to support me regardless of what official religion says, even if the official religion is tried-and-true and almost 2600 years old.

Regardless of the past, right now we have to face that (a) how Buddhism sees suffering and deals with it implies that life is not worthwhile, and (b) the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life is deeper, prior, and more important than the issue of suffering. There is no getting around this issue by saying we have to deal with suffering first. We need to decide about worthwhile life. We have to deal with worthwhile life first before we can adequately deal with suffering.

**Brief Assessment Continued: “I Teach only Suffering and Release from Suffering”.**

The Buddha said something like “I teach only suffering and release from suffering”. He meant that he did not speculate in metaphysics, theology, pointless ethical dilemmas, politics, and economics. He wanted people to focus on one big task and to get that done. Unless suffering is greatly reduced, people cannot think well enough to do anything else properly.

As far as I know, the Buddha deliberately did not say what happens after the end of suffering. He thought we would be better people but did not specify better in what ways except morally.

(1) By not specifying what happens at the end of suffering and beyond, the Buddha allowed people to imagine whatever they wished, imagine whatever they thought fulfilled Buddhism regardless of Buddhist teachings or whatever fulfilled their desires regardless of Buddhism. People gladly did so and still do, usually with the magic, glamour, metaphysics, and mysticism that the Buddha disdained. People have determined imaginations.

It is easy to make the Buddha mean “life is worthwhile, especially after a person ends suffering”. I think most Buddhists make that jump. I ask Buddhists not to jump. I think the Buddha would want you not to jump, at least not until after you had ended suffering and thought more. Hopefully the end of suffering frees you enough so you can make up your own mind about worthwhile life. I repeat: the general drift of early Buddhism, and the milieu in which it came, imply life is not worthwhile even after the defeat of suffering. The Theravada and Zen way of saying not to make this jump is to say that Buddhism offers nothing, that you gain nothing from it (with no metaphysical implications of the term “nothingness”).

(a) Some Buddhists take the saying to mean that, once we get rid of suffering, and we awaken, we can take on our full human nature, our full Dharma nature, and we can handle anything that comes our way, including vexing metaphysical, moral, and practical issues. (b) Some Buddhists think that, when we end suffering, we are suffused with Dharma (Emptiness, Buddha Mind). Dharma works through us, and we do the work of the Dharma in its world. (c) We succeed in all ways.

I doubt the Buddha meant those. I don't think he meant the end of suffering to be the gateway to all kinds of other success and fulfillment. I doubt he expected awakened people to be suffused with Dharma like mystic candles. Buddhists need to seriously consider why they want so much from the end of suffering. What did the Buddha want people to do after they had ended or strongly reduced suffering? Zen is a little more limited in what it expects.

I do think the Buddha wished to reduce suffering to allow us to think more clearly, if not perfectly, and so to be better all-around people, to live gracefully what is left of our lives, and be prepared to die gracefully when it time. I think he also meant the end of suffering to open our eyes that life is not worthwhile. To really end suffering, we have to be ready to let go of life too, all life, and we see so when we get near the end of suffering. We do not let go of something that is intrinsically worthwhile when we let go of life. To see that life is not worthwhile enough to hang on to is all, and it is a lot.

It is worth wondering why the Buddha thought that ending suffering was sufficient. Sufficient for what? What does the end of suffering do for a person? What did Siddhartha want us to do after we had ended our own suffering?

(2) We can take the Buddha to mean “the end of suffering” is a self-validating experience sufficient in itself that requires no other explanation, clarification, justification, or comparison. When it happens, you get it; it is valuable-in-itself; and that is that. So stop the chatter and get to work, especially by meditating. I think Siddhartha did mean it this way, just as other religious teachers intend to lead us to their versions of self-validating experiences.

Also as with other religious teachers, Siddhartha meant his version of a self-validating experience, “the end of suffering”, to be the most important self-validating experience, the one-and-only gateway to other such experiences, the best gateway to good experiences that are not self-validating, and he meant it is intrinsically good and leads only to goodness. (You might have other self-validating experiences later but Siddhartha kept that possibility out of this discussion, likely largely to avoid magic etc.)

A certain amount of awe comes with self-validating experiences. The companion awe leads believers to add mysticism, etc. to the lore of the self-validating experience. Siddhartha did not do that, and warned against it. Yet followers did so anyway and continue to do so. The false awe-and-lore takes the place of the real self-validating experience. It sustains and channels people to the bad use of Aids.

The awe warns us to be careful with all self-validating experiences. Self-validating experiences tend to create their own self-validating worlds, to live at the heart of systems that eat the world.

There are many self-validating experiences, and not all are good. Some preclude others while some can go along together (“God loves us all” and “So you’ve made your first kill now”). To evaluate “the end of suffering” as a self-validating experience I would have to put it against other self-validating experiences and other similar strong experiences. That is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I simply state some opinions.

-It is hard to shed all magic etc. once it attaches to the lore of the self-validating experience. I doubt that all but a few quite adept Buddhists can do shedding this now. Shedding accumulated magic etc. likely is the hardest task on the road to the end of suffering. Other religions suffer from the same problem.

-Buddhists believe, or wish to believe, that “the end of suffering” goes along with experiences such as had by the followers of Jesus, Chuang Tzu, and Mohammad. They would like to see all core self-validating experiences in all good major religions as pretty much the same.

-I doubt they are all the same. You have to think about what each religion says about big self-validating experiences, compare experiences and religions, and choose which experiences to work for. Because they are self-validating, it is harder to compare than you might think. To know them, you have to get into their world, then it is hard to get out, and comparison is next to impossible. It can be done. You have to learn how to get in deep enough and then get out – as in the movie “Donnie Brasco”.

-On the whole, when done the traditional Buddhist way, the process that leads to “the end of suffering” is good and so likely “the end of suffering” is good too. Even if you do not totally end all suffering, still the process is good. The idea of “the end of suffering” can be abused, but you have to work at abusing it, so I don’t take that up here.

-I doubt people can have an experience of “the end of suffering” as glamorized in Buddhism. People can have the experience of being able to manage suffering, as I describe elsewhere. They are not the same. I don’t know which the Buddha had in mind. If he had in mind a huge self-validating experience that ends all other concerns, as in magic Buddhism, I disagree with him. If he had in mind a huge self-validating experience qualitatively unlike simply managing suffering, or if he thought people in other religions could not have his experience, I disagree with him.

-As with other self-validating experiences, you have to look past the Buddhist self-validating experience. Then what? What do you do next? Siddhartha does not say. What happens next is important in itself. Also it “works backward” to affect the validation of the self-validating experience. If what happens next is bad, useless, or nothing, then we likely self-validating experience was not really so self-validating after all. It was phony, or, even if real, not so important.

-If what happens next is as important as the self-validating experience, or more so, then why worry over the self-validating experience? Why not just do what happens next? Why not work on that? You are as likely to have a good self-validating experience by working to do the right things for the right reasons as by going directly after the glamorized self-validating experience.

-Even if the Buddha meant "end suffering" to be an entirely self-contained self-validating experience, the context of his life and thought, the fact that the experience is about suffering, the attitude that Buddhism takes toward normal life, that fact that people who have ended suffering withdraw, and other factors that I have mentioned, all indicate life is not worthwhile. So we have to take "end suffering" in the same context and assume it also implies life is not worthwhile. This result conflicts with self-validating experiences from other religions and with my insight. So even if "end suffering" is self-validating, it is not self-contained, we have to put it in context, and we have to think about what comes after "end suffering".

### **Brief Assessment Continued: Possible Overlap, with Fun Excursions.**

The topic in this section is a hypothetical way to reconcile (A) life is not worthwhile on the Wheel and so we should strive to get off the Wheel with (B) this life is worthwhile. Do not seize on this idea in the wrong way. I do not know this idea from any particular work that I recall but my memory is poor and I am not the first to think of it. The point here continues from the section immediately above.

(1) Suppose life is not worthwhile as long as we suffer enough. Most people do suffer enough to affect their lives, and their thinking is so confused, so their lives often seem not worthwhile. To reduce, or end, suffering in one particular life can make that one life worthwhile even if it does not make all lives worthwhile. To reduce or end suffering can help one person think better, and so make his-her one life worthwhile. When I reduce suffering in my own one particular life, I do not have to aim to make all my future lives worthwhile and the lives of all other people worthwhile. We do not aim to be reborn many times with our newfound worthwhile life, so all our future lives will be worthwhile. We do not find our way into a great system just because now we see that one life is worthwhile. We simply accept that one life now is worthwhile while it lasts, do what we can while we live, and die when the time comes. If there is anything more, we don't worry about it or expect more. While alive, we treat this life as worthwhile, and treat all life as potentially worthwhile, which means we try to be useful, caring, and thoughtful. It does not mean we are successful in normal life or as a mystic.

(2) We can combine (a) making one particular life worthwhile through reducing or ending suffering with (b) not-worthwhile-life while still on the Wheel.

(2A) My one particular life is not worthwhile until I end my suffering; when I do end my suffering, my one life is worthwhile. To end suffering gets me, and only me, off the Wheel of rebirth. To end suffering for one life does not change the Wheel so life on it is now worthwhile generally for all life. To end suffering in one life now does not mean he-she who ends suffering must have good lives for all the future without any suffering. To end suffering does insure that the person who ends suffering is not reborn. Not to be reborn, not to be reborn on the Wheel, was a big goal of Buddhism. To end suffering, and not be reborn, come together and cannot come separately. To end suffering, to make this life worthwhile, and not be reborn, all come together and cannot come separately. This is one reason why the Buddha insisted the

self is not eternal. In contrast, to be reborn must mean more suffering, and must mean that lives still on the Wheel cannot be fully worthwhile. Rebirth, suffering, and not worthwhile life also come together.

(2B) To make life worthwhile, you have to end suffering. If you end suffering, you also die completely with the end of this life; you are not reborn. So, to make this one life worthwhile is also to insure your life does not go on past this lifetime. There is no way to make any life worthwhile, to get off the Wheel, and insure that any life goes on forever. To make any life worthwhile is also to make sure it ends. We have to accept a final end to this life so as to make sure this life is worthwhile. Yet even if this life must end as a result of being worthwhile, and I don't make any other life worthwhile, it is still worth ending my suffering and making my own life worthwhile.

Because to end suffering and make life worthwhile leads to the final end of a person, it is easy to think a person is punished for ending suffering and making life worthwhile. In contrast, people who fail to deal with suffering and so make life worthwhile get rewarded with more life. It seems the people who succeed at ending suffering and making life worthwhile are the ones who should get more life while those who fail should die completely. But that is not how the Wheel works. This result only makes sense if unexamined normal life on the Wheel is not worthwhile. This is another reason people want off.

It is also natural to think: If one person can make it, why can't everybody? Rather than force the one good person who "makes it" to vanish into total oblivion, why not keep him-her around to help others? If possible, keep him-her for many lives. That is part of compassion too. He-she would like staying around to help, and everybody would like it. This idea was one of the founding ideas in Mahayana, was the basis for the bodhisattva. Yet the Buddha did not teach this option, even if the Buddha did stay around and teach after he awakened and before he died.

Mahayana and Hinduism strove to arrange things so that to end suffering does makes life worthwhile and more abundant for the person who ends suffering but also to end suffering does not end the Wheel even for the person-who-ends-suffering-and-so-makes-his-her-life-worthwhile. Mahayana and Hinduism strove to incorporate the feeling above about staying on due to compassion. The way to do all this is to make the Wheel not a place of suffering but a place that is worthwhile and joyous. To end suffering in this one life and to make this life worthwhile leads to better life on the Wheel for the person who ends suffering and it leads that person to see all life is good on the Wheel even for people who appear to suffer and who do not see that their lives are worthwhile. It leads an adept person to see that even people who think they suffer do not really suffer. It makes the Wheel a big joyous system. The adept person sees all people do lead worthwhile lives but not for the silly reasons that they fool themselves with such as family, fame, success, etc. but because their lives add to the one big joyous system. As with Jesus in Christianity and Mohammad in Islam, heroes who changed the world, saved the people, and made life worthwhile and abundant, the arrival of one person, Cosmic Buddha, who ended his own suffering and made his own life worthwhile, also changed the lives of all people so they could make their lives worthwhile on the Wheel. Another reason Siddhartha, the merely real Buddha, insisted the self is not eternal was to forestall this kind of error and confusion.

(3) (more like 2A than 2B) To see your life as worthwhile even if other lives might be confused, even if you end completely, even without heaven, is like how David Hume, a famous atheist-or-agnostic, saw his life. Hume did not totally end suffering. He died in pain from illness although that does not necessarily

mean he suffered uncontrollably. He did manage suffering well. He died feeling his life was worthwhile even though it ended in pain and ended completely. This stance is close enough to what I have in mind with “life is worthwhile” so I don’t split hairs. This stance shows a good attitude. I hope the Buddha had something like this in mind. Many people in all religions and in atheism come to see this stance. This stance is not a big cosmic bang as most Buddhists see awakening but it does change lives.

I, Mike Polioudakis, do try to manage my suffering but that is not what makes my life worthwhile. I do accept a final end but I do not think my acceptance also conquers my suffering while I am alive or also makes my life worthwhile. My life now is worthwhile because it is, whether it ends at death or goes on. If my life were not worthwhile, if I could not end suffering, that situation would not make me continue in future lives, on the Wheel. If I do succeed in managing my suffering, my success does not necessarily lead to my having many future lives in which I help other people. Nearly all lives are worthwhile although people are ignorant, foolish, confused, and suffer. Lives are not worthwhile because they are in a great system. Few people will be reborn, on the Wheel or off. We are not not-reborn because our lives are worthwhile or because we end suffering. We just end; we just are not reborn. Still, I respect people who see a link between accepting a final end to their own life, working to end suffering, making their own life here-and-now worthwhile, working to be useful, and working to make the world better.

People suffer largely because they are ignorant, wrong, desire, and cling, but not entirely. Much suffering is real and comes because the world is just like that. Much suffering is self-enabled but not all. Much is caused by the world including human-made situations.

The Buddha might have had something in mind like the view in the numbered paragraphs above. If he did, then largely I agree. We have to reduce suffering before we can come to our senses and can see. I disagree that we have to totally defeat suffering to make this life now worthwhile while it lasts. I hope the Buddha had this view in mind and I wish he had been clear that he had this view in mind.

This stance does not have much support in sutras. Sutras say “end suffering” without saying what that implies for worthwhile or not worthwhile life and without being clear on what next except no rebirth. I can find passages to support the stance as I can find passages that say something else. I don’t know where the preponderance lies, and, because I am not a Buddhist theologian, I don’t have to declare definitely. The main drift seems to be: In the time of the Buddha, people feared life was not worthwhile but strove to make it so in wrong ways. They often acted out of fear, ignorance, blindly, foolishly, and selfishly. The Buddha offered a cure for suffering as a way to get people to handle life gracefully while here, not have future lives, accept that life is not worthwhile, and to die gracefully when the time comes. I write this chapter mostly on the basis of that premise.

Even if the Buddha had in mind that the end of suffering can make a particular life worthwhile, what I write in this chapter is still valid because it confronts issues that Buddhists and all people need to confront.

If you think ending-suffering-does-make-at least-this-one-particular-life-worthwhile is what the Buddha really had in mind, you should work out the implications for Buddhism. The implications do not support what most Buddhists see as Buddhism but they do support other good ways of life. They do not support Mahayana or Hinduism. This chapter, and Part One of this book, can help you work out the implications.

**Brief Assessment Continued: Rationality, Wisdom, Unstated Premises, and Confusion.**

Any faults described in this section belong not only to Buddhism but to all religions and ideologies, and usually affect them more than Buddhism.

(1) Buddhism is rational in a simple easy-to-follow satisfying appealing way. Buddhism offers a limited set of simple obvious premises such as the Four Truths, and it reasons clearly from them to conclusions that make sense even if, like me, you don't agree fully. The average Buddhist seems amenable to reasoning; and I love that effect of Buddhism on people. Basic Buddhism is not complex as are ideologies that try hard to be rational. It is not like Thomas, Spinoza, Luther, Calvin, Kant, Hegel, systems theory, or Post Modernism. The simple rationality of Buddhism is a great and deserved part of its charm.

Buddhism does have complicated sutras and individual writers such as Buddhaghosa; but you don't have to read those, and, if you do, conclusions are clearly stated and you may decide for yourself.

(2) Still, Buddhism is not strictly rational and only rational. Buddhism puts rationality in service to Wisdom ("panya"). Logical argument leads you up to conclusions, but you cannot always step into conclusions using mere logic alone, sometimes you need an intuitive leap. Always conclusions should serve Wisdom. Sometimes you have to look beyond mere logic to Wisdom. You should not go against logic if you can help it, but, if you have to leap logic to serve Wisdom, do so. In Zen, logical points are not intended to be satisfying, and sometimes they are annoying, but they should let you leap. The Four Truths get us to see we need to cure suffering, and open us to the right methods. Putting rationality in service to higher truth should not offend you. It is the rock of faith-based religion. Staunch atheists put rationality in service to their values. Almost all Western philosophers use rationality to serve Wisdom and some are clear about doing so. Plato is logical and he is clear that he uses logic to serve Good, where "Good" plays the role of Wisdom. A country song is not about the story but about Wisdom. Without the Wisdom behind the song, few people care about the tremendous rational craftsmanship.

What is the Wisdom that rationality serves? Part of Wisdom is to end suffering but there is more Wisdom than simply the end of suffering. With Wisdom, you should be able to see directly the truth of the Four Truths, the power of desire, and the value of various Aids. Hopefully this chapter will give some insight. You should read more Buddhism to get more insight. I would guess that Wisdom is what you see after you end suffering. I think we also gain much Wisdom along the way to the end of suffering. Compassion, the non-self, and "don't be selfish" are part of Wisdom.

Where does Wisdom come from if not through rationality? Wisdom does come through rationality in that rationality leads us up to Wisdom, and, in most cases but not all, reason is the best way there. Rationality is not sufficient but helps. Wisdom comes through proper meditation. Wisdom comes through example by monks and other adept people. In the case of Zen, it comes through a knock on the head or escaping traps. I would guess that much Wisdom comes after a person defeats suffering. I hope most people don't have to wait for the total end of suffering to get some Wisdom. I hope much Wisdom comes when we learn merely to manage suffering, desire, and clinging.

How can we be sure Buddhist Wisdom is the correct and best Wisdom, especially since rationality is not enough by which to assess Wisdom? Briefly, we can't be sure of Buddhist Wisdom any more than we

can be sure of Wisdom in any other religion or ideology. Because rationality is not the sure-and-only road to Wisdom, because Wisdom is beyond rationality, we cannot be sure any proposed Wisdom is truly wise. Still, again, "By their fruits you will know them". The best way is to get a fair sample from each of several religions and ideologies, without getting lost in any, then think, consult, and take the best. When people do this, they tend to credit their own native religion or ideology with having had the best Wisdom all along even if it did not, but that is part of human nature, and one lesson of Wisdom as yet unlearned at the time. I do not consider claims of divine revelation to be a sufficient guarantee of Wisdom, especially when one claim contradicts another claim, some claims are used to discredit others, and claims are used to enable "us versus them". God might have given us some bits of Wisdom but we still have to assess those much as we do Wisdom from Buddhist sources.

Does Wisdom necessarily imply a great system of which the individual is a small but still important part? To Mahayana, Hinduism, much Zen, and most Christianity and Islam, it does imply this, but Siddhartha disagreed. As far as I can tell, he avoided this issue as not useful and as potentially a severe distraction. It is better to concentrate on the end of suffering, on Wisdom that we gain while we work to end suffering, and on Wisdom we gain when we end suffering. Then, if we still care, we can decide if Wisdom needs such a great system. I think effectively Siddhartha denied a great system.

(3) Buddhism has some premises that it does not state clearly. Usually Buddhism does not intend to hide any assumptions but it simply overlooks making all assumptions explicit. Usually the premises come out so clearly, without being stated explicitly, that there is no problem. For example: (a) the world is sticky, (b) wrong behavior occurs always-and-only due to wrong ideas or "mental defilements", (c) right ideas can completely push out wrong ideas, (d) correct action automatically follows when right ideas push out wrong ideas, and (e) a natural (evolved) human is able to think with full clarity and total consistency. Sometimes premises are not clear such as that life is not worthwhile or is worthwhile. To go through the assumptions even of Theravada would require a book so I don't try. I do try to be as explicit as I can but I am sure that a few ideas got by me. When you read Buddhism, think what ideas have been taken for granted without being stated, and then assess those ideas.

Western science tries to bring all assumptions to the fore, and it does amazingly well, but it is not perfect, and it always has background assumptions such as about cause-and-effect, the rationality of the world, the ability of the mind to know the world through rationality, and no magic. Science still does the job that it claims to do in approaching truth, and does the job better than any alternative, so we should consult science first. For us in our age, the road to Wisdom goes through science even if the road does not stop there. I think Buddhism would agree.

If you must reveal the assumptions of a living person, leader, or school do so politely. While in grad school, I worked through the assumptions of ideas in anthropology, such as systems theory, evolution, social structure, structuralism, and post modernism. Once, during his class, I badgered a teacher about his assumptions. The teacher gave me a distressingly low grade.

When the real goal is Wisdom rather than mere rationality, tacit assumptions often play a big supporting role yet stay hidden. People who use the grandeur of the universe or of mathematics to speculate about order and God use tacit assumptions but we can see the assumptions and we forgive them because we share in their wonder. What are the tacit assumptions of super hero stories, what is the main goal, and

how do tacit assumptions serve the main goal? You can ask the same of any work of literature. If you love to read, you can see how Plato's assumptions about Being and Good shaped all his dialogs but only gradually came out as his work went along. Atheists assume Justice is so important that effectively it is really supernatural although they never say so and hate to have it pointed out.

(4) The mix of seeking Wisdom, using rationality to serve Wisdom, and unstated assumptions, invites magic, metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. In this mix, even rationality can serve magic, glamour, etc. Examples from the West include metaphysical-mystical Neo-Platonism, how Greek philosophy was used to serve mysticism and Christianity, Romanticism, and Post Modernism. In Buddhism, the best examples come from Mahayana but folk Theravada is full of solid cases such as the dominance of karma, karma is simple bookkeeping, and the great charisma-grace of religious and political leaders. Donald Trump would be called a bodhisattva or a "chakravartan" (world conqueror).

The mix also bolsters the hole in the center of systems that eat the world and it bolsters the systems. It gives the systems pseudo-logic, pseudo-gravity, and provides them with methods to handle evidence so evidence only supports them and never denies them. How all this happens is beyond the scope of this chapter but it is worth saying that it does happen. Buddhists hope this bad result does not happen in Buddhism but it does happen as when Buddhists says life is dominated by suffering although, to me, it is clear that suffering is one big component in life but not the dominant component.

#### **Brief Assessment Continued: Personal Responsibility.**

"With great power comes great responsibility". "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Thai Buddhists told me the Buddha offered the best system for individuals while Jesus offered the best system for societies (Chinese would say Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu for individuals and Confucius for society). Buddhists did not tell me how to blend the two.

Theravada Buddhism seems selfish. You take care of yourself, and that's it. The Buddha told people to look after themselves, warned that nobody else could save them, and they could not save anybody else. Buddhism urges Compassion, Buddhism follows the Dharma in morality, the Buddha did condemn selfishness, and Buddhist monks generally are among the kindest people you will ever meet; but still Buddhism comes across as selfish. Individuals end their own suffering without worrying about others, worrying about world issues, how they added to problems in the past, what they add now, how to help, and how to help without hurting their quest to help themselves. Many individual Buddhists do not follow this pattern but the attitude pervades Buddhism and it leads to a real difference between Buddhists versus people of other religions. With the rise of modern concerned Buddhism, Buddhists are finding a better balance but the tension remains.

Selfishness and self-centeredness are mental errors, they are "defilements", and they lead to desire and clinging. Compassion is important. Morality is an intrinsic part of a Dharma world, and morality inherently includes consideration of other people and nature. How do these ideas square with "saving yourself is most important" and "save only yourself"?

Much of folk Buddhism relies on the natural need for people to help others, to save them if possible, even at the expense of self. Thus people think in terms of merit points and people transfer points to parents, children, and kin. Beginners in Buddhism sense tension between saving only self versus compassion and the power to act for others, and they get confused.

The problem of selfishness is compounded because humans have much power and humans bear much responsibility. Only if we have power over the causes of our suffering can we alter those causes and so save ourselves. Only someone who feels responsibility for past deeds and toward others has the moral sensibility to succeed in Buddhism, at ending suffering. If we have power over self, we have at least some power over the suffering of others. Through misusing their power, humans cause most of their own suffering. Humans cause most world problems. So we bear much responsibility to our selves, other people, and the world.

Power leads to abuse, even power over self and power to help others. We do not have complete power, not even over self. Seeking more power than proper leads quickly to abuse of what power we do have. We should not seek complete power over ourselves or others even if we intend to use power well. We should seek wise use of power, which includes limiting it.

Yet, in Buddhism, the ability to end my own suffering is an absolute power. As such, it directs attention away from relations between self and world entirely to myself. Responsible modest use of power is hard if you obsess over your salvation.

The ability (power) to end our own suffering is not exactly the same as the power (ability) to help other people and help with world problems. To say we can do one fully but cannot do the others, or we have no duty to do the others, is legitimate in theory. But it is also a little “flaky”, self-indulgent, and suspect. It might be right but it still has a bad feel. Can the two abilities be entirely different? Although one power might be full and the other limited, we can still abuse either or both.

From what I have seen, Buddhists are not more selfish than people in any other religion, and seem a bit less selfish and more inclined to sympathy and helpfulness. The calm and the understanding of human weakness that come with Buddhism make up for the selfishness of “save yourself and don’t worry about anybody else”. But the ultimate tension remains.

You cannot save someone despite themselves but you can help, especially if they want to get better; this is true in all religions; and Buddhists help when they can. You can compare Buddhists to other religions on this basis, and Buddhists come off well, but still there is a difference in feel.

If individual Buddhists should look to themselves first, cannot save the world, and have no responsibility to the world, then gods and demons rule the world. So, in that case, people should worry more about their relation to gods and demons than about ending their suffering. Folk Buddhism and superstition are more correct than the teachings of Siddhartha. In any religion, to focus entirely on the self is to open the world to gods and demons, and is to deny personal human responsibility generally. Selfishness and even well-intended self-ness spawn demons; and demons spawn selfishness and bad self-ness. Gods and demons are part of the corruption that comes with seeking absolute power even over merely the self. On the other hand, if you do not want gods and demons to rule, do not want to make a peace with demons,

think people cause most problems, or think that God gave us stewardship, then you personally must take responsibility. I think a large necessary part of taking responsibility is helping others and nature, and that includes more than saving only yourself.

I doubt Buddhists really can totally control even their own suffering. The fact that Buddhists cannot totally control even their own suffering is not an excuse to concentrate even more on the self to the exclusion of others but should lead Buddhist to think about their relation to the world and how to help. If you cannot fully control even your own suffering and you cannot control the suffering of others, then we are all in the same boat, and what helps them helps us and vice versa. We are not exactly the same as them but we are close enough. Then we see that humans do have responsibility for the world, and the demons don't matter. Accepting both limits on the ability to save the self and as much responsibility as possible can be a way to vaporize demons.

Two lessons of dystopias such as "1984" and "Brave New World" are that we cannot totally control the self or society, and too much society is bad. Movies about computers taking over the world carry on the themes. One lesson of modern "dystopias" such as movies and TV about zombies, apocalypses, and vampires, and TV shows such as "Breaking Bad", "The Sopranos", and "Game of Thrones", are that too much self is bad, and we cannot fully control and-or assert the self. Too much self becomes a demon; too much society makes us all demons. All the genres teach that we have to take responsibility for our self without asserting too much self, and we have to take responsibility for society and to help society without letting society eat us. We have to accept the limitations of self and society, we have to learn how to assert the self properly, and we have to find the right balance of self and society. No modern political ideology and no religion, traditional or new, tell us how to do that. Political ideologies and religions err in their own ways. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism tells us what we need to know, and each errs in its own way.

I think Siddhartha understood these issues well enough for his times, and he offered his idea of the finite temporary self as a way to head off some problems. But, as developed in Buddhism, and as understood now, Siddhartha's idea of the finite temporary self does not head off problems well enough. I don't know if the idea can be grown to do so. I don't know if such a development would be a "return to the Buddha".

The fact that not all suffering is caused by us as individuals, or even by humans, makes the issues harder but does not take away the central problem.

Buddhists may not rely on a shallow forced external calm demeanor as a way to confront their personal responsibility and world issues. Buddhists may not use that false smug façade as a screen behind which really to be selfish.

One reason that Mahayana displaced Theravada is because it (seemed to) offer ways to blend dealing with individual salvation and dealing with world problems. The biggest way was through the person of the bodhisattva, like the Christ. You cannot truly defeat your own suffering until you defeat world problems. You have to work on them together. The Mahayana way does not work but it is hard to fault Mahayanists for trying and it is easy to see why Mahayana would appeal to people who felt compassion and wished to help the world as well as save their own limited temporary self. Mahayana appeals to people who

understand the power and responsibility that go with the idea that we can end suffering, wish to use the power correctly, and wish not to abuse ability.

My solution to these issues is in Part One of this book and my solution is represented in this chapter by the idea of “managing”.

It might be that, ultimately, individual Buddhists do have to reject helping the world in favor of ending their own suffering. Maybe Buddhists do have to be selfish of a kind. If so, Buddhists must clarify this stance and all the implications.

Other religions have versions of these issues even if other religions accept limits on the human ability to control self. A fun adept look at this problem is the movie “The End” starring Jay Baruchel with a big all-star cast. Do we act selflessly to seem good and so really serve-ourselves-and-go-to-Heaven or do we really help others, even at our expense, because that is the right thing to do? Supposed Christians deny global climate change, deny they can do anything, and deny personal responsibility; yet they expect God to take them (and family) to Heaven because they go to church. Because Taoism does not accept any need to help the world, its dilemma is like Buddhism. But the versions in other religions are not at issue here and do not lessen the problems for Buddhism.

#### **Brief Assessment Continued: Hole in the Center and its Effects.**

Holes in the center are one way that a system eats the world, and they cause problems. In Buddhism, some sources for a hole in the center are:

- (1) Theravada Buddhism is not clear about what people awaken to.
- (2) Theravada Buddhism is not clear about what it means to end suffering.
- (3) Buddhists are not clear if life is worthwhile or not; are not sure of relations between worthwhile life and suffering; and not sure of relations between awakening, suffering, and worthwhile life.
- (4) Modern Buddhists overlook the original lessons about the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life and its implication that life is not worthwhile.
- (5) In practice, Buddhists believe that life is worthwhile despite that “life is beset by suffering” implies life is not worthwhile and despite that the Wheel (and so the Buddha) taught life is not worthwhile. Buddhists do not accept that to overcome suffering also reveals that life is not worthwhile.
- (6) In practice, Buddhists really work to make their own life worthwhile on their own terms despite doctrine about suffering or worthwhile life. They avoid questions of worthwhile life and suffering, that is, they avoid issues at the heart of their religion. They work against ideas at the core by seeking a worthwhile life and by seeking it in terms other than sanctioned by their religion. This stance is a normal human reaction but it is also a contradiction.

(7) Buddhism is not clear about what it means to end desire and end clinging. Buddhism overlooks that we cannot end all desire and clinging, such as to the Dharma. Buddhism is not clear about all relations between desire, clinging, and suffering.

(8) Buddhists focus on sub-goals, Buddhist Aids, rather than focus on awakening by seeing that life is not worthwhile and-or by overcoming suffering. The focus on Aids lets them work on their own lives and lets them avoid issues of suffering, worthwhile life, and awakening. The focus on sub-goals can be an evasion of the original issues of the Wheel in Buddhism, that is, of worthwhile life.

(9) Buddhists should work to awaken in this life but few try, not even monks. Instead, Buddhists put off awakening until "next life". Buddhists can put off the core religious goal in a way that Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even Taoists and Confucians, cannot. The core goal of the religion is gone from its center. In its place, Buddhists put many sub-goals from base selfishness up to high sub-goals such as meditating. Even when Buddhists use high sub-goals, the center is still empty. I am as sick of hearing "God willing" (Allah, Eloi, Yahweh, Heaven) as of hearing "next life".

(10) "End suffering" is presented as a self-validating self-sufficient experience, and it is given as if nothing else is needed and nothing else reasonably follows. This presentation seems intended to thwart magic, metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour yet, paradoxically, it clearly invites magic etc. to fill in the void of what it means and what happens next.

(11) Buddhists explain awakening negatively by what it is not rather than give a positive sense of what it is. They do this with other ideas too such as suffering and Aids. Other religions use the negative way. Saint Thomas Aquinas liked it. I use it. The negative way can be a good tool and sometimes it is the only way. But used carelessly, it allows people to fill in whatever they want for what is supposed to be left over after taking away, including prattle, metaphysics, mysticism, magic, glamour, and hokum. Try defining a bird or dog by what it is not, then use your imagination to fill in what it might be after you have removed what it is not.

(12) Seeking after wisdom, assuming wisdom is beyond rationality, still using rationality to seek wisdom, and opaque assumptions. Magic etc. come of this practice.

(13) Adept good people are punished with the end of their good lives while inept and-or bad people are rewarded with more life.

(14) Buddhism teaches Compassion, yet the good adept people do not stay around through many lives to teach the inept and-or bad people to be better and get better. Buddhism wants everyone to succeed but it does not keep around the best tool, adept good people, to make that happen.

(15) The tensions over self first, helping self, responsibility to others, over power, responsibility, and limits of power.

The effects of these causes are as below. I do not dwell on common problems of Dharma-karma-based systems such as accepting, rather than fighting, socio-economic class, poverty, sexism, ignorance, bad government, magic, metaphysics, mysticism, glamour, and superstition.

Most Buddhists either don't know the role of "life is not worthwhile" in Buddhism or refuse to consider its importance; a contradiction. This attitude would be like Christians insisting that Jesus is fully divine but has nothing to do with God or the Holy Spirit. Sometimes in literature, TV, and movies, the role of "not worthwhile" rises to the surface when someone who has suffered bitter defeat runs away to be a monk or nun – but that "out" is only a literary device, and still even literate smart people will not face the idea.

Theravada Buddhism invites other Buddhism such as Mahayana, invites Hinduism, and invites poor ideas and practices to co-exist with it such as magic, metaphysics, divination, and spiritualism. Such ideas and practices cannot be removed from Buddhism and these ideas and practices almost necessarily have to play a large role in folk Buddhism. As long as Buddhism has a hole in its center from the above causes, I don't see how Mahayana, Hinduism, and bad folk Buddhism can be avoided.

Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, suffers from hypocrisy, sometimes bad hypocrisy, and suffers from a malaise that feeds on hypocrisy. Buddhism-in-spirit is no more hypocritical than other religions, usually less. But common Buddhism, even with smart people, is as hypocritical as other religions, and Buddhists feel hypocrisy more because Buddhism prides itself on logic, consistency, coolness, and objectivity. I found even smart and successful people in Buddhism suffer from unease, an affliction that puzzled me until I understood better the contradictions in Buddhism.

I never stopped feeling annoyed at the magic, superstition, and divination in folk Buddhism although I did learn to get along with it. I feel the same about magic, superstition, and TV evangelists in Christianity. I feel much the same way about worship of saints, Mary, relics, and religious leaders.

Focusing on Buddhist Aids can make Buddhists daffy. Focusing on Aids makes them like Hare Krishna chanters at airports and not like Christmas carolers. It is like Christians morbidly worried over Works, Grace, Faith, Justification, and Salvation rather than just doing the right things for the right reasons, doing what Jesus wants. It is like being stuck saying the Rosary forever or stuck praying with your hands in the air forever. It is like trying to "beat the system" in Las Vegas; you might learn about some math but you will have a poorer life and you will get a bit wacky. The fact that prestigious Buddhist Aids are part of the hole in the center allows Buddhists to gloss over the hole and daffiness, and that makes everything worse in a feedback loop.

Recall comments above on Aids about reintroducing metaphysics, mysticism, spiritual ascent, and hidden knowledge. These trends reinforce daffiness and feelings of spiritual power. These ideas and feelings push out better ideas and feelings. They enable people to use the Aids to seek power instead of seeking to awaken or seeking simply to do good. They encourage the worst of folk Buddhism. The effects were stronger in Mahayana but are strong enough in Theravada.

A hole in the center allows not only bad non-orthodox thoughts but good thoughts of all kinds, orthodox and not. Buddhists use the freedom allowed by the hole in the center to cultivate motifs that most people find good such as tolerance and help. Buddhists try to make life more graceful. The hole in the center can help in cultivating good ideas such as Mindfulness, the limited self, honesty, and helping. This I enjoy among Buddhists all over. This is how most people think of Buddhists.

What Buddhists do in practice to make their lives worthwhile depends in part on teachings that go along with Buddhism, such as compassion, but mostly on values and ideas of their particular culture apart from Buddhism such as social ranking, proximity to power, and making sure you come out alright. Some ideas that go with Buddhism are almost unique to it such as the stress on cause-and-effect and the idea of not-self. Most of the teachings that go with Buddhism are not unique to it such as the stress on mental clarity. Not-unique ideas are not less good – kindness, clarity, and the Middle Path are good. Not-unique ideas enrich Buddhism and Buddhists. The mixing of ideas from Buddhism with ideas from local culture does make it harder to assess Buddhism. It is not clear how much uniquely Buddhist ideas affect the search for worthwhile life in Buddhist countries, and I cannot go into that query here.

The hole in the center erodes the basis for a good political state and dealing with nature. It undermines the basis for rule of law and good institutions.

### **Brief Assessment Continued: Religion, Culture, Good Ideas, and Good Institutions.**

All religions wish to be the basis for a society, and, when big enough, the basis for a state. Theravada Buddhism did serve as the basis for societies and states but not by using only Siddhartha's ideas of suffering and awakening. It relied heavily on ideas of karma, merit, and what Westerners might call Grace or Charisma. That kind of Buddhism has little to do with the original ideas of Siddhartha, is a grandiose version of folk Buddhism, and is more like Hinduism than like original basic Buddhism. Here I don't worry about Buddhism and the state. I say a little more in Part 4 of this chapter. Mahayana did not have to develop Buddhism to serve as the major basis for society or a state because, almost everywhere Mahayana grew, Confucianism already did that fairly well.

Buddhists now wish to make Buddhism the basis for a modern state, democracy, development, social justice, and good relations with nature. I wish Buddhists well. But the original ideas of Siddhartha cannot alone serve as the basis. I don't think he meant them to. I hope modern Buddhists can merge the ideas of Siddhartha with ideas of a good state from elsewhere without falling back into karma, merit, Charisma, grandiose folk Buddhism, and a Buddhist version of Hinduism.

Christianity and Buddhism are systems that eat the world, with holes in the center, but Christians made great institutions such as rule of law, science, democracy, and education while Buddhists did not. It is easy to praise or blame religion but religion alone is not the key. Rather, cultures-and-societies are more important. (The people in) Cultures-and-societies use religion to rationalize what they wish to do for their own reasons. Religion added to differing drifts of East and West but it did not cause them. Religion now would not stop any cultures from making good institutions if the people set their minds to do so. People can adopt good ideas and institutions if they wish. Buddhism can help. (I lump South Asia in the East although most of the obvious dominant motifs in South Asia came from Indo-European culture.)

Then how can Buddhism help make good institutions and a good modern state? Buddhists have to accept that the ideas for good institutions and a good modern state do not come intrinsically, directly, inevitably, and only out of the original ideas of Siddhartha. The basis for good institutions and a good modern state have to be added to his ideas. Christians had to add ideas of the Greeks and Romans to Jesus to make Western civilization, good institutions, and good states. Jesus' ideas alone are not enough. Buddhism helps because, like Christianity, it can recognize and accept a good idea when it sees

one, and nothing in Buddhism is against the ideas and institutions needed for a good modern state. Much in Buddhism, such as rationalism and the idea of being helpful, can support a good modern state.

Buddhists should not worry about borrowing ideas. They have to borrow. Everyone has to borrow, and societies do it all the time. The Greeks borrowed geometry from the Egyptians and the alphabet from the Phoenicians. Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos all added to Buddhism to make distinct ways of life although each boasts that it got its distinct life directly and only from first principles from the Buddha. Buddhists should not worry about total originality and about getting everything directly from first principles from the Buddha. They should worry that they borrow only good ideas and use them well. They should pick the best from the Buddha and make sure that what they do borrow does not go against that. When they do this, they can bring Buddhist identity into the modern world and still preserve their own basic cultures and national identities.

Originally, Buddhism denied the system of rulers and Brahmin priests. Buddhism insisted people could and should take care of their own spiritual business and general conduct. But modern Buddhists love to explain how Buddhist ideas are closely tied to governing, Buddhism validates the state, the state supports Buddhism, they need each other, ritual is a big part, and it all needs monks. If a modern Buddhist dislikes the current state, he-she explains how it goes against his-version of idealized Buddhism, how his-her idea of a good state goes along with his-her version of idealized Buddhism, and how his-her type of Buddhism supports his-her idea of a good state. In effect, Buddhism and the state are one again as Brahmins and the state once were one. "Déjà vu all over again". Buddhist argument about close relations between Buddhism and the state is not useful anymore than arguments for a close relation between Methodist Christianity and the state. Buddhists need to see what they do, and, in this case, need to go back to the idea of Siddhartha that identity between state and religion is not the highest goal.

#### **Brief Assessment Continued: Enough Good-Enough Adept-Enough People.**

If Buddhism waits until enough people have awakened and have defeated suffering before it can build a good government and tackle world issues, it will fail. If Buddhism waits for enough people to awaken-enough-and-act-well-enough-through-working-on-the-defeat-of-suffering, it will fail. If Buddhism waits for enough Buddhists to master an Aid well enough, such as Empty Mind, before it can build a good state and tackle world issues, it will fail. Likewise, if Christianity waits for enough Christians to be surely saved so they can build good government and tackle world issues, it will fail, and it has failed. If Christianity waits for enough people to act well enough because they "see the light", "fear the Lord", "love the Lord", deeply want Heaven, and want to do good in His Name, then it will fail, and has failed. The same is true of all religions. In a state with many religions, all of them combined will not do the job.

We need enough good-enough adept-enough people, soon, to build good institutions and tackle world issues. We don't have that. We won't get it by going through religious and moral revival first. We can use religious ideas and institutions, and should, but that won't be enough and we can't wait for religion to do the job. We must rely on general education in morals, character, and reasoning, and on the natural, biological, and social realms. We must be honest about the historical role of religion in giving ideas and goals but we have to go regardless. Religions need to think not only how they can save people from sin and suffering but also how they can assist in this task even if they do not dominate the task.

Few places in the world have brought good quality realistic education to the majority of their citizens and the United States is not one. It is worth inquiring why we failed but here is not the place for the inquiry. Mostly the citizens have themselves to blame. Bad leaders helped.

**Brief Assessment Continued: What is Unique about Buddhism?**

No major religion was unique in its time except maybe Hebraic ethical monotheism when it first arose, and none is really unique now. Then why do people insist their religion is unique and why do they resist other religions so much even when the moralities are so nearly the same? How do differences between ideal religion and practiced religion affect attitudes? To answer, and to assess Buddhism on the basis of the answers, is a topic outside this book. The most commonly cited unique feature for Buddhism likely is the non-absolute self. I invite readers to list key features of their religion without thinking if the features are unique and to list key features of a rival religion. Focus on behaviors such as the Golden Rule and Compassion more than on dogma such as “there is only one god”. Make a list for your ideal religion and one for your practiced religion. Make both lists for the rival religion. Compare the lists. Make sure to compare your ideal to their ideal and your practiced religion to their practiced religion. When you know enough about Buddhism, add it to the exercise.

**Brief Assessment Continued: Success in Buddhism.**

Very few people can succeed by Buddhist standards, can totally end suffering and fully awaken. It might seem odd to have as the one-and-only goal(s) of a religion a task at which exceedingly few people can succeed. It is not so strange. People can succeed partially in lesser ways than through full awakening and totally defeating suffering, and those are good goals in themselves, such as acting morally. I explain a bit more in Parts 3 and 4. People in Mahayana and Hinduism have the same problem because they too are based on a Dharma system in which the total end of suffering and full awakening is the supreme goal(s). They too have in-transit goals similar to Theravada; Mahayana and Hinduism use savior figures; and Hinduism allows other ways to succeed well such as devotion, asceticism, intellect, and wisdom. Christianity and Islam do not allow a human ever to succeed on self merits, people can succeed only by the Grace of God, and God need not give His Grace; so it might seem those religions are gloomier than Buddhism. But, in those religions, people also can succeed on lesser levels, and, in the end, God does seem to give Grace much more than people feared. Judaism, Taoism, and Confucianism stand apart somewhat, and there is no point in reviewing them here.

I don't know how to address whether Buddhism is more or less gloomy for the average not-so-adept Joe and Jane than, say, Christianity. Some people who get the ideas of suffering and of awakening might be discouraged just as Protestants get discouraged when they get the ideas of Fallen Humans and Original Sin. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin could be “real downers”.

Still, there is a difference between the ultimate goal of Buddhism versus the ultimate goals of a religion like Christianity (following Jesus' teachings). The provisional goals of Buddhism, such as good conduct and success in meditation, certainly are good but they are not the final goal and are not lesser versions of it. In following Jesus, only one person could completely love God and neighbors but provisional goals are similar to the ultimate goal and are lesser versions of it, such as forgiving people and following the Golden Rule as much as possible. The final goal of loving God and neighbor is an unreachable ideal but it is an

ideal that gives real guidance. In Buddhism, the final goal remains unreachable and does not really guide intermediate goals. Intermediate goals are not lesser versions of the final goal. The relations between ultimate goal, ideal, intermediate goals, and real, differ in the different kinds of religions. One reason that Mahayana and Hinduism overcame Theravada is their variety of intermediate goals that make sense on their own without much reference to the final goal. It would take too much space here to go more into how differences play out. Given that most people don't worry much about this issue, intermediate goals are similar for all religions, and are worthwhile on their own, this chapter is not the place to dwell on the topic. I come back to this topic in other writing.

### **Suffering versus “Not Worthwhile”, Buddhist Aids, and the Self; See Parts 3 and Part 7.**

Here I should comment more on suffering and “not worthwhile”, and defend my use of “not worthwhile”. That takes too long. I put more material on this topic at the end of the chapter. It is easy to convert what I say below about “not worthwhile” to “suffering”, so, if you wish to use “suffering”, do so. You can benefit from the material in this chapter whether you see in terms of “suffering” or “not worthwhile”.

### **PART 3: DESIRE, CLINGING, STICKY LIFE, NOT WORTHWHILE, AND AWAKENING**

This part of the chapter looks at Buddhist ideas that are relevant to everyone. Buddhism excels at these issues and gives its greatest benefit by making us look deeply at life through these issues.

We need to see that we do desire and cling and we should let go of many things. We also need to see what we wish to hold, to what extent, how, and why. We need to feel the depth, diversity, and tenacity of clinging before we can manage it. We need to think what makes life worthwhile, what hurts worthwhile life, what might make life not worthwhile, and what makes needless suffering. How could smart Buddhists say life is beset by suffering and imply life is not worthwhile? Seeing their view is better than retorting “Damn, life is worthwhile” or shouting “God said creation is good, so it is, including all life, including mine”. What do we all wake up to?

For the topics of awakening and “not worthwhile”, I present material mostly negatively. I give ideas about awakening and “not worthwhile” and then show how Buddhist ideas have to go beyond those. I challenge Buddhists: “You, an adept Buddhist, thought that was how Buddhism saw awakening and-or suffering. But you are wrong. So what does pure real full Buddhism say? What is Buddhism really all about?” Non-Buddhists have to think why the idea that I critique is not enough, think what idea might be correct, or see if there is no correct response in your frame. Siddhartha wanted us to think for ourselves and here is a good place to start.

I apologize that the detail can get annoying. The detail is not as important as what it points at, which is “What kind of life does Buddhism aim for?” I can't get directly at life for Buddhists without going through all the detail first. A Buddhist can't decide what kind of life is possible without deciding first what desires to keep or defeat, and how to handle which desires.

Even after the detail, this book can't get at the best life for a Buddhist. That is another big topic, it would need a work itself, and likely it should be done by a Buddhist. If I did it, I would not do it from a Buddhist

view but from the stance given in Part One of this book. My view would give Buddhists material to fight with me but it would do little good.

Instead, please ask yourself often what kind of life Buddhists could live given what the detail here implies about what they aim for, what they have to give up, what they can keep, and how to give it up or keep it. What kind of life would a dedicated Buddhist live? No more than most Christians, most Buddhists don't live dedicated to religious ideals but instead seek success in this world, and seek a rationale for success. The rationale should act to keep them within bounds of decency and within some (but not all) bounds set by their religion. What kind of rationale can Buddhism give for a normal successful life in this real world, within fairly decent limits, a rationale that takes into account evolved human nature, and accepts needs for family, religious activities such as ritual, religious power, competition, capitalism, the state, modern plural states, many states in one world, differences in wealth and power, and the needs for material well being, progress, justice, social justice, to keep the environment, the influence of distinct cultures, and the need to keep some distinct cultures? Other religions have to do the same.

**(A) (1) Wrong Ideas, Impermanence, Desire, and Clinging.**

From my version of the Four Truths from above, pretty much in accord with official doctrine:

Truth (2) Suffering has causes. The closest cause of suffering is clinging; desire causes clinging; and wrong ideas enable desire. Although not the only wrong idea, the root wrong idea is that some things in the world are permanent and so can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction, especially the wrong idea that our self is eternal and can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction.

Truth (3) The causes of suffering can be ended (defeated), and so suffering can end. Buddhism can end the wrong idea of permanence, end other wrong ideas, end desire, end clinging, and so end suffering.

It looks as if we should begin with wrong ideas about permanence-and-impermanence, then move on to other wrong ideas, before we tackle desire, clinging, and suffering. We should see better the roles of knowing, permanence, and impermanence. Some teachers do take this path. In the West, Socrates and Plato took this path (via Knowing, Being, and Becoming). It is not the best first path. It is better to go into desire and clinging first. I hope to go more into this topic in other writing. Here I give enough to let you feel better about going to desire and clinging.

-The problem of impermanence usually is tackled with the "picking apart" that I described in an earlier chapter. Those methods, and the results, are easily abused. They have to be handled with care, and that careful handling takes a lot of space.

-Different things are (a) impermanent or (b) durable in (1) different ways and (2) different degrees; and the differences matter. If you leave an orange outdoors, it degrades faster than a car and in different ways. If you leave an orange or a child in a car on a hot day, similar things happen but the difference matters. If an orange gets a moldy spot, you throw it out; if your body gets a moldy spot, you go see a doctor; if your mind gets a moldy spot, what do you do? The impermanence of a chance for sex is not the same as the impermanence as an almost-car-accident, and which is more important depends on age.

-If a monk gets sick, he-she sees a doctor. The visit can cost the temple support group a lot. The money might be better spent on a young healthy replacement monk. Why does any monk go see a doctor? Why not just let nature take its course and, in case you die, be reborn again?

-Buddhists disdain everything impermanent, which means almost everything except maybe the Dharma: Everything impermanent is misleading more than truthful, and so bad more than good. This attitude is part of the general stance that life is not worthwhile. I disagree. Impermanence is not always the enemy. Some impermanent things are useful and even help spiritual advance. Your mind is not forever but, when the Buddha says to think for yourself, he seems to agree with the Jefferson Airplane: "Your mind's guaranteed, it's all you'll ever need". A good teacher is not forever but he-she can mean the world to a student. A copy of the Tripitaka is not forever but every temple should have one. The sutras from the era of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama are not forever, will be lost, and will be replaced by sutras of another Buddha, which in turn will be lost, etc. Your body must wear out but we all have one and should care for it. Without it, we could not awaken. Helping a child cross a swollen stream brings up many impermanent things but the task is still worth doing. Jesus might not appear on every planet with sentient beings. It is wrong to rely on these things absolutely but not wrong to rely somewhat, to gain what they can give, as long as we keep perspective.

The key is not to deny all impermanence or deny all that is less-than-absolute but to learn what is useful, how useful, how not useful, and to use properly what is given to us. This stance is harder than simply denying all impermanence or non-absolute.

The glib Buddhist attitude that all impermanent things are bad effectively blocks this better attitude about usefulness. I doubt Siddhartha had this glib attitude against all impermanence. Buddhists should ask how Buddhism got this glib attitude and why they keep it. Much the same happened in Greek philosophy and in some Christian and Muslim theologies in the battle between being and becoming and in ideas of the Fall and Fallen Bad World. This glib attitude invited some good Mahayana and Hinduism, those that accept and correctly use some impermanent things, but also a lot of bad Mahayana and Hinduism.

-Some durable recurrent things are bad and are not the platform on which we wish base progress: pride, greed, anger, lust for power, lust for sex, selfishness, etc. Welcome to the Dark Side.

-People know quite well that what-they-use-as-the-basis-for-satisfaction is not permanent but they do it anyway, such as with house, car, job, fame, and family. They are not fully ignorant in the Buddhist sense but they still do it anyway.

-People know some things are permanent but do not use them as the basis for living and satisfaction, such as logic and rationality, the findings of science, the Dharma, God, Grace, Love, Compassion, and Justice. They are not fully ignorant in the Buddhist sense but they still not do it anyway.

-As Socrates, Plato, Paul, Augustine, Aristotle, and Hume saw, and every parent sees, knowledge alone is not enough, not even clear knowledge of permanence and impermanence. It takes more. I do not guess here what more it takes and how to get that across.

-People over-commit in a way beyond the irrationality inherent in the thing itself, such as by being a fan of sports, fashion, art, politics, glamour, romantic love, or religion.

-People under-commit given the temptation inherent in the irrationality of the thing but still cannot let go fully in the way that Buddhism needs, such as with politics, family, job, romantic love, and religion.

-"Do it anyway" and degree of commitment are not a matter merely of knowledge, of good ideas and bad ideas, of mental clarity and mental defilements.

-People sometimes do act appropriately on the basis of the permanence or impermanence of an idea-or-thing yet they are not awake in the Buddhist sense. People can kick a bad kid out of the house but that does not make them awake. People can work for a corporation without loving the corporation because, in the modern world, they cannot make a living by begging or out in the forest, but that does not make them awake. People can love art to the extent that it adds to their life and to the extent that it is a great legacy of humanity, and only to those extents, but that does not make them awake. People know some political causes are ridiculous and can't last but support them anyway to the right extent. People can act aloof and act as if not enticed by desire and clinging but that does not mean they are awake.

-No naturally evolved sentient being can think with full clarity and consistency and no such being can be entirely integral and consistent. We cannot entirely get rid of all wrong ideas and we cannot entirely get rid of all wrong ideas with roots in mistakes about permanence and impermanence. We cannot get rid of all wrong ideas enough so that we can get rid of all desire and clinging. In contrast, we can think well enough to manage as I describe below but still we cannot think with perfect clarity and consistency. If Buddhism requires perfect consistency and clarity, and that seems to be its claim, then people can never succeed in getting rid of all wrong ideas and can never wake up in the Buddhist sense. If Buddhism requires perfect clarity and consistency, then it is wrong. I think some people, but not all, can think well enough and can wake up enough.

-The large majority of Buddhist texts do mention impermanence before getting on to desire, clinging, and suffering; but they make only a perfunctory ritual nod to be orthodox, and what they say is not helpful and can be confusing. They too see the real first problem as desire, clinging, and suffering but they do not actually say so.

If Buddhism could mix its ideas of human nature with scientific ideas of evolved human nature it could strengthen arguments about impermanence, all other wrong ideas, desire, clinging, and suffering. It still might not succeed perfectly as it wishes or as I wish.

It is still worth thinking about permanence, impermanence, right ideas, wrong ideas, desire, and clinging even if permanence and impermanence are not alone the key to right and wrong ideas and right and wrong ideas are not alone the key to desire, clinging, and suffering.

### **(A) (2) End Clinging and Overcome Desire.**

To awaken, we must end suffering. To end suffering, we must end-or-overcome clinging. And, to end-or-overcome clinging, we must overcome-or-end desire.

Buddhism is not entirely clear what desires and clinging we should defeat and what we may hold on to. This issue is not a mere game because, for example, while we might let go of watching TV, we cannot let go of the Dharma, Buddhism, Wisdom, all compassion, logic, science, or the idea of temporary person (an-atman). Other religions tell us to let go of desires, material things such as wealth, attitudes such as hate, and ideas such as “we are better than them” or success; but they never tell us to let go of wisdom, morality, compassion, the Golden Rule, prayer, devotion, God (Allah), nature, integrity, or spontaneity. Confusion over what to end, what to hold, how much to hold, and how to hold, is bolstered in Buddhism because it focuses on suffering and does not come to grips with the issue of worthwhile life yet Buddhism strongly implies life is not worthwhile. If Buddhism were clearer about issues of not worthwhile life and the relation of not worthwhile to suffering, Buddhism would be clearer about ending, overcoming, letting go, and holding on to desires and clinging.

We desire, and cling to, not only material things but also to ideas, feelings, and attitudes, especially ideas and attitudes such as power, love, success, help God, help Dharma, find the Tao, serve Heaven, the Four Truths, art, do not cling, end desire, end suffering, awaken, and “I am a smart astute skeptical guy”.

“End” and “overcome” are not the only approaches to desire and clinging, and they are not hard-and-fast techniques. They represent attitudes-and-methods to take toward desire and clinging. The material here should suggest variations that you can use.

(A) (2) (A) I do not define desire here. To “cling” to something is to keep it in the back of your mind, think of it often, think about it from time to time, wish for it, feel life would be better with it than without, want it whether life would be better with it or without it, depend on it, or depend on the wish for it. You don’t have to be a fiend. Most people cling to hundreds of things without knowing it. A grudge is clinging but so are: kissing mommy goodnight, love, loving art, loving order, science, and giving to United Way.

Desire and clinging are similar but not the same. To cling is not to desire-a-desire or we get a strange loop, and, besides, they feel different. Because they differ, we have to use different techniques to handle them. Because they are similar, the techniques overlap and we can easily get confused, so we have to be as clear as we can. For instance, it is hard to draw a sharp line between love versus the usual clinging that comes naturally from love; but it is easy see that some love runs over into bad clinging and even into obsession. It is harder to see that ALL love causes clinging, so it is almost impossible to separate love from clinging and good-love-without-clinging from bad-love-with-too-much-clinging.

Nature gave us many desires and nature usually made sure we cling to them, as for example for wealth, family, a good reputation, community, power, to uphold morality, to have relations with spirits, and to seek deep ideas such as awakening.

(A) (2) (B1) End. Think of desire and clinging as idea-attitude. To end an idea-attitude is to stop it, not feel it if possible, and never to act on it. To end might entail not thinking about it at all, effectively to erase it from our minds. We can do this with some ideas-attitudes such as desire for goose liver spread but it is much harder with others such as for basic food, shelter, friends, affection, and security.

(A) (2) (B2) Overcome. To overcome is not always to end. “Overcome” does not mean that we never feel an idea-attitude or that we erase it from our sensibilities and minds. We can overcome the desire for, and clinging to, fashionable clothing but that does not mean we erase the idea of clothing from our minds and that we never buy new pieces when old ones wear out. We can overcome desire for friends and we can even end clinging to friendship but it is hard to entirely erase the idea-attitude of friendship and never to act on it. “End” is stronger than “overcome”. “Overcome” is stronger than “control”.

(A) (2) (B3) I would guess that both to overcome and to end is to think-feel-act so that an idea-attitude-thing does not lead to suffering. If an idea-attitude-thing does lead to suffering, we have not ended it or we have not sufficiently overcome it. This definition is fine in theory but it doesn’t give us what we need. We need to know how to deal with clinging and desire so they don’t lead to suffering. That is hard. It takes work and experience.

(A) (2) (B4) To stop an idea-attitude-thing from leading to suffering, sometimes we have to end it but we don’t always have to kill it and delete it. We have to take a different approach to specific different desires and specific different instances of clinging. Hopefully looking at a few cases can give us an idea.

(A) (2) (B5) Different schools of Buddhism stress different ways to end and to overcome desires and clinging. We have to learn about the approaches and what schools say. I don’t go into details but you have to know some background.

(A) (2) (B6) Buddhism as-a-whole is not clear if we should end desire-in-general and clinging-in-general or overcome desire-in-general and clinging-in-general; and Buddhism is not clear which desires to end or overcome and what clinging to end or overcome. Buddhism is not clear what end and overcome mean; different schools have different ideas. Especially when Buddhism advises merely to overcome rather than end, it is not clear what “overcome” and “end” mean and is not clear how to end or overcome.

(A) (2) (B7) Often in writing you see “let go”. “Let go” seems to lie between “end” and “overcome”, seems more effective than both, like a magic middle. “Let go” has much value and I do get around to comments on it. But “let go” is not a magic answer. To appreciate the value of “let go”, we have to go through “end” and “overcome” first. When you get comfortable with “end” and “overcome” then “let go” makes more sense. “Let go” is more like “overcome” than “end”. If it helps, think of “let go” as a variant of “overcome” and vice versa. If you want a mental workout, wherever I assess end or overcome for a case of clinging or desire, try applying “let go” to see how it works or doesn’t work.

(A) (2) (C1) Clinging. Simplistically, in theory, Buddhism might advise that we end all clinging, end many desires but not all, and overcome the desires that we cannot end. In practice, it is hard to end all clinging, so we have to merely overcome some clinging; and it is hard to overcome many desires without also ending them, so we have to end many desires. It is hard to tell which is which.

Some Buddhism becomes “end all desire and end all clinging” – likely not possible. Some Buddhism becomes “overcome both desire and clinging” – likely not effective enough. Much Buddhism becomes an unclear mixture. Zen, likely due to Taoist influence, says “Trust your own judgment about what to end and overcome, and how to end or overcome, but do end most clinging and do overcome most desires”. I like that.

(A) (2) (C2) In theory, end all clinging. Clinging is bad. Not only in theory but as a matter of obvious fact in real life, clinging leads to suffering. In practice, the line is not easy to draw and some clinging is not so bad. Buddhism insists we feel morality and act morally. It is hard to do that without clinging. Buddhism insists on compassion, and it is hard to do that without clinging. The Buddha taught for about fifty years, and all Buddhists would say he did it without clinging, yet I am not sure. Monks teach lay people, and I doubt all monks do so without clinging. There is nothing wrong with a monk doing a bit of science but most scientists cling to their work. Monks extol monks who are experts in the scriptures and in Buddhist theory but I know from direct observation that people cannot become experts without clinging. We want doctors, teachers, journalists, and priests to be dedicated. Of course, most clinging is bad, and it is still worth trying to end as much clinging as possible. But to try end all clinging is to cling to the idea of end-all-clinging, and we don't want that either.

(A) (2) (C3) As it is hard to end some clinging – compassion - also it is hard to overcome some clinging without ending it. It is hard to be involved in love or politics without clinging. You cannot have a child without clinging. Clinging to political positions causes much damage in the world. It is almost impossible to really believe in a religion without clinging, even Buddhism. It is hard to muster just the right amount of belief in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, to be a good believer, without also clinging to the religion and its comforts, and so opening the door to disdaining others and causing harm. Yet should we end all religion, whether God exists or not, the Dharma exists or not, because religion must cause more harm than good? Do we foster political anarchy (a position to which people cling) because politics and political positions cause much of the damage in the world?

(A) (2) (D1) Desire. What would happen if we ended nearly all desires? People would not be Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, or Hindus. People would not support democracy. Nobody would learn Buddhist texts. People would forget about the Buddha and Dharma. Nobody would meditate. People would not bother with families. People would be neither very friendly nor at all abusive. Nobody would do science. We would revert to a haphazard gathering of wild food for a living. Even in the all-natural world, nobody would bother to look at a beautiful sunset and likely nobody would be sure if it was beautiful or only rosy colored. Some people might think this would be a good world, but they would have to give up that opinion and that desire too. Many desires are useful, not only for life, but for supporting the kind of world that Buddhists, even the Buddha, want. Even some good desires with attendant clinging are useful, as when people ardently meditate and study the scriptures.

(A) (2) (D2) In theory, we can desire something but not cling. On a hot day, we can desire an ice cream cone; but, if we don't get the ice cream right away, and we are able to not fret about the lack, not take firm steps to get ice cream, and forget about the desire fairly soon, then we can have the desire but do not cling to the desire. It is not clear if this action-attitude ends clinging, lets go of clinging, or overcomes it.

(A) (2) (D3) So, it seems we should overcome desires so we use them but we do not cling through them. In some cases we might be able to overcome desire but not end it and not cling through it. We can put off the desire to drink water, urinate, or serve the Dharma, but we might not be able to end it. If we can put off desire enough, we might be able to overcome-or-end any clinging that comes of the desire, such as the need to drink only cool well water or build a monastery with a stupa (pagoda). It is not clear if this attitude-action is to overcome the desire but I think so.

(A) (2) (D4) INTERLUDE: The desire to end all desires is a desire. In fact, it is obsessive and compulsive in a way that most normally human normally problematic desires don't come close to. It is near insanity. Of course, it is self-contradictory. Its self-contradiction is related to the logical issues that I discuss below under "let go of letting go".

More than a logical puzzle, it is a real problem that Buddhism has to deal with and that all seekers have to deal with. If we end the desire to end desires, does that mean we have to fall back into the whole sticky icky world with all the mistakes and pain that we tried to leave? Are we doomed to fail? Some schools of Mahayana and Hinduism seem to say so, and then make this apparent failure into a greater success (as God makes evil into greater good) by making this particular falling back into the world part of the great joyous Dharma system.

Or, can we end the worst desires but keep the best desires, such as compassion, in the right amounts? I think we can cope. Is coping what Siddhartha tried to teach? Likely, but I can't argue this view against 2500 years of Buddhism. All religions teach some coping, which is why I suggested Classical Stoics and Cynics. Coping is part of managing. To overcome bad desires, and control even most good desires, is part of managing. Managing is a lot harder than it sounds. It is as hard as trying to end all desires but, to me, it is a lot saner.

Trying to end all desires, or even strongly overcome all desires, supports the implication that life is not worthwhile. Shifting to cope, firmly overcome, and manage, does not have to make life worthwhile but it does help. Managing makes it easier to accept that life is worthwhile and to work on making life more worthwhile for us and others.

Jesus knew the allure and value of ending desires when he pointed out that lust begins in the mind, and, to be pure, we would have to clean our minds. He also knew to scrub the mind was impossible for mere humans, and he advised ways to deal with bad thoughts and to prevent bad acts. I suspect Siddhartha the Buddha had pretty much the same ideas but they got out of control.

(A) (2) (E1) To overcome desires without ending them is good in theory but hard in practice. It is hard to merely overcome a desire without eventually having to end the desire. It is hard to end being moralistic, feeling superior and telling people what to do, without also ending morality and simple moral judgment – especially for beings in which morality evolved. The cases in which we can merely overcome desire and do not need to end desire likely should NOT set the pattern for general strategy about desire. In the case of ice cream, even if we avoid clinging now, desire might give rise to more clinging later that we cannot end, let go, or overcome. That is one reason why ice cream trucks make regular rounds. "It is easy to say but hard to do".

Some desires we might be able to end such as the desire to murder someone who wronged us. Even with these desires, more likely we overcome rather than end entirely – dreams of revenge linger on for decades. Desire is like that.

(A) (2) (E2) If we cannot end a desire, we don't have to act on all desires. We really don't have to murder a bad person who wronged us. We don't have to embezzle even if we would not get caught. We don't

have to seduce anyone. We don't have to eat junk food. Inaction on desires might be to end, let go, or overcome clinging and desire.

(A) (2) (E3) Trying to end clinging without also ending or nearly-ending desire is like telling an alcoholic to have only one drink or a smoker to have one cigarette. Clinging and desire don't work that way. When a problem is out of hand, it is better to forbid than to say "only a bit". When we forbid, and the forbidding works, it is not clear whether to call that result "end" or merely "overcome". Mohammad forbade alcohol and human images, and some Christians ban alcohol, icons, movies, and singing. Buddhist monks may not drink alcohol, have sex, marry, or have children. In the normal human condition, it is easier (a) to get rid of the desire and its objects entirely, to successfully forbid desire, than (b1) first to overcome clinging and then (b2) indulge the desire only to the proper non-clinging extent. Eventually, Buddhists get around to "end or nearly-end desire" even if they also teach to end clinging or overcome clinging.

(A) (2) (E4) We can't end all desires, and we can't overcome some desires without ending them. What to do?

Buddhism is not clear on these situations yet the points cannot be overlooked. The training needed to deal differs with situations, the chance of success differs, and the kind of possible success differs.

Buddhism tends to say we should end nearly all clinging; and I agree. But the need to end clinging is not definite, and to end clinging is hard, so we might end most clinging but need only to overcome some other clinging. Buddhism varies on what to do with desire. I think, mostly, Buddhism says to overcome desire; but some Buddhism also says to end all desire. In theory, Buddhism is clear that we need to end suffering. But, to end suffering, first we must deal with clinging and desire, and uncertainty about doing those tasks makes Buddhism also uncertain about suffering. That strikes at the heart of Buddhism.

Some Buddhism says "End all clinging, end all desire, and so end suffering". Some Buddhism says "You may desire anything as long as you do no harm and don't think about it too much, as long as you do not cling hard. Merely overcome even clinging. Not to harm, and not to think too much, is to overcome, and to overcome is all that is needed to end suffering". Most Buddhism is a mix in between.

(A) (2) (E5) Think about what it means to end desire or even to merely overcome desire. We are not logical machines destined to think with perfect clarity and consistency. We are not slaves to emotions either. Nature gave us many of our desires. To end a naturally-based desire means to go against nature in a harsh definitive way. Once you cross that line, you can't go back. It changes us in a deep way forever. Even to overcome a naturally-desire does much the same. We do have to control most of our desires most of the time, even naturally-based desires. We cannot give in to hatred, revenge, and the urge to pee anytime anywhere. But if we take out all the desires that nature gave us, or all the desires that are based on the desires that nature gave us, we have little left. Likely, we won't know what to do with what little we do have left.

Most people want to keep a fair amount of evolved human nature (natural nature). That does not mean you keep it all. It does not mean you don't end some parts and overcome other parts. We do have to end some clinging and desire, and overcome some clinging and desire. We have to let go of some parts of natural nature.

Likewise, keeping a lot of natural nature does not mean you have to see yourself and natural nature as part of a giant beautiful Dharma system in which the bad secretly supports the good and it all works out well in the end. Natural nature is not necessarily secretly all joy. Don't make a "rebound" mistake when you reject the rejection of natural nature.

What does Theravada, Mahayana, or Hinduism really want you to be like? Think about what to end or overcome and why. Think about what to keep and why.

(A) (2) (F) All this uncertainty causes confusion and some damage. Likely you are confused and bruised. I try to lessen confusion but I cannot take it all away because confusion is in the subject.

I get tired of writing only "end" and "overcome". Because they overlap, I can use similar words that imply both, such as "defeat" and "conquer", and sometimes I can use them as synonyms, without making more confusion and damage. When I need to be more precise, I am.

(A) (2) (G) Advice: Before you try to end clinging, think through problems of suffering and worthwhile, and think through your desires in light suffering and worthwhile - what you might hold on to and let go of. When you have better ideas about those, then you can work on clinging and you have a better chance of success against clinging. When you think about suffering and worthwhile, also think about desire, even if desire is not the main inquiry.

(A) (2) (H) The usual term for clinging is "attachment" but, in my English, "attachment" is neutral, clinical, polite, dry, high, and far. "Clinging" is closer and wetter. "Attachment" has technical meanings from psychology and biology that could cause confusion. In the Thai version of Pali, the usual term for both the relation of clinging and object of clinging is "kilet" ("gee" as in "go", "ee" as in "bee", and "late", so "gee late"). "Kilet" can mean anything from consistent interest to full-blown obsession. It can also mean a strong desire. There is no point going through the many Pali terms and I am not an expert anyway.

(A) (2) (I) I do not say whether to end desire and clinging, or overcome, is to suppress them. Buddhism is not clear. Buddhism is clear that, when fully successful (awake), we should never feel suffering even if we feel the conditions that lead to suffering such as missing a friend after he-she dies. To see Buddhist ideas primarily in mental ways, in terms only of psychology, leads easily to errors. Sheldon from TVs "Big Bang" correctly complained of this view when Amy held it. Also, "suppressing" raises issues about mental health, especially in the modern age when we are supposed not to suppress anything, and those issues are not useful here, so I avoid them.

(A) (2) (J) When you read enough Buddhism, you might see that Theravada tends to say on "end desires, and clinging automatically is not an issue" while Mahayana tends to say "end clinging and automatically you can overcome desires". The distinction is not sharp. Both schools try to handle both desires and clinging, and both schools pretty much teach the defeat of desires and clinging. Both schools teach both end and overcome although I have not detected typical patterns (I have not looked hard).

(A) (2) (K) Humans evolved desires and clinging. Desires and clinging are natural. The Dharma gave us desires and clinging. As noted in Part 1 of this chapter, to end-or-overcome desires and clinging is to use

nature against nature, Dharma against Dharma. Smart people in Dharma systems say it is not to use Nature-Dharma against Nature-Dharma but to use Dharma to fulfill Nature-Dharma, to realize its highest potential. I don't think that is what original Buddhism had in mind. Also, using Nature-Dharma against Nature-Dharma is related to a logical problem about "let go of letting go" that I note below. These issues get worse when we recall that our desires evolved and are part of our deepest nature. I don't belabor any of this because it takes too long and is not needed here. I do point the issues out because they are fun to think about and because they show up in various guises in further reading.

(A) (2) (L) My response to all this is "manage", which is like a mix of overcome, end, and "let go" but does not require the full success of any. I work with desire, clinging, end, overcome, let go, and defeat as best I can. My stance is like Taoism and Zen but not exactly like either. I say more about manage below. I do not say much because this chapter is not really on that subject. The first Part of this book gives my idea of manage. Use and channel your evolved nature. Do the right things for the right reasons. Jesus told you what those are. Work hard to make the world better. Be decent. Make good institutions. Trust God.

### **(A) (3) More on Desire, Clinging, Balance and Imbalance, and Manage.**

Buddhism becomes: to awaken, to end suffering, we have to defeat all desires. So, one of the highest-level goals of Buddhism becomes to defeat desires. Although not explicitly in the Four Truths, tradition adds: To defeat desires, end clinging. So, to end clinging and awaken, we use Aids such as meditation, and must become adept in using some Aids. That is how many laypeople and monks present Buddhism, as seeking to defeat all desires, as having the means to defeat all desires, and as dwelling in the means. But, Buddhism is not clear if defeat means to overcome or end; not clear what overcome or end mean; and it is vague about how to defeat, overcome, or end desires, despite definite techniques. The lack of clarity causes confusion.

I disagree with Buddhism that ending desire is effectively the highest goal by leading to all other goals. Instead, I think we need to manage desires, and we manage desires to make worthwhile life more so and to better work hard for the world. "Overcome", "end", "defeat", and "manage" have much in common but they are not entirely the same.

We cannot end all desires or even all clinging, yet Buddhism says that we do have to end all desires and clinging to end suffering and to awaken. I think (a) confusion over suffering and awakening, and (b) not coming to grips with the issue of worthwhile life, (1) lead to confusion over the teaching that we have to end all desires and clinging, and (2) blind Buddhism to the desires and clinging that it does keep. This, in turn, opens the way for Mahayana and Hinduism and for confusion in Mahayana and Hinduism.

Reminder: "Desire" includes not only obsessing over a job or a car but also the need for water on a hot day, the wish to see a particular person, the wish to see a particular show on TV, love for art, ideas such as triumph of democracy and awakening, attitudes such as irritability and compassion, emotions such as love for family and hate of "them", the search to end clinging, seeking to end desire, seeking to awaken, seeking to follow the Dharma, hopes, and dreams. Often desires have objects such as the family that we love and to wake up. Even irritability has a kind-of object in that we wish to be left alone or wish to bite somebody's head off. It is useful sometimes to think of desires in terms of their objects.

(1) People have desires given to us by evolution, as for air, water, food, shelter, clothing, sex, mates, family life, some wealth, some power, friends, community, and links to spirits. (2) We can abuse natural desires by (a) doing them too often or too seldom or (b) doing them too much or too little, (c) so they are out of normal healthy balance with other desires and activities. (3) We can learn desires such as for success in a profession, a big asset portfolio, success as a monk, awakening, or salvation. (3a) Some learned desires have a firm natural base such as interest in pretty people. (3b) Some desires might have a basis in evolved nature but seem fairly independent such as desires for a tattoo or to make a scientific contribution. (4) As with natural desires, we can abuse them by (4a) doing them too often or too seldom or (4b) doing them too much or too little. We can go crazy over pop music, money, fashion (“The Devil Wears Prada”), or cornering the market on oranges (“Trading Places”). Some learned desires are fairly reasonable, we do not go crazy over them, and we fit them into our lives, such as the need to care for a lawn or to see a stage play. (5) Some desires are good or bad, regardless of their closeness to nature, how much they are learned, or their role in balance or imbalance. How much and how often we do them might make some difference but not enough to consider here. We must stress the good and reduce the bad. (6) Some desires are so bad and so aberrant that all religions and penal codes descry them, such as serial child molesting. I don’t consider them here.

Badness such as clinging comes through desires but some good things come through desires as well, often indirectly, but just as surely. We learn lesson through what we get that we weren’t looking for, and what we learn indirectly often is more valuable than the object of the desire. Put aside the movies and TV, and think how much young people learn when they buy their first car, especially, in the old days, when it needed work. People learn when they buy a house, especially if it needs work. People learn when they take care of a child even as a babysitter. People learn when they get a job with real responsibilities for property, life, and other people, even small responsibilities. People learn from disappointments from the objects of desire, as when a beloved old car finally dies. We learn to let go of desires but we also learn how to better manage some of the desires that we hold on to.

In the modern world, few of us have a good balance in our desires, so we don’t lead satisfying worthwhile lives as a result of a good balance. We are too far from nature and human nature. We compulsively do things to make up for emptiness such as binge TV or treat ourselves. Few of us are fiends obsessed and warped by desire, and so do harm, like a serial killer or rapist. Most of us live in a cloud of befuddlement, out of balance, compulsively seeking treats, compulsively pursuing a few juicy things such as success or romance, not treating other people and nature as we should, not being good citizens, with gnarled minds, doing more harm than we can admit. We all need to do better.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, teach us to accept most desires that have a fairly firm link to evolved human nature, are moral, and not far out of balance. They teach us to be moderate so we keep a healthy balance and our minds are clear enough to connect with God and to make us good neighbors. They also teach us not to be entirely natural but to depart from nature and rise above nature: “Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s wife or other stuff” (the sexism is deliberate). They teach us to suppress bad desires even if those are natural such as to steal, gossip, and kill. No religion is purely natural.

In theory, Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism teach us to get away from nature entirely and to escape the Wheel by overcoming or ending all desires including all natural desires. In practice, they leave that goal for an indefinite “later time” and instead they teach people to defeat their desires. Still, they never

entirely abandon “end or overcome all desire” as the highest goal. They treat all desires, natural or learned, in balance or out, as if those desires were among the desires that drive us out of balance, drive us half-crazy, or make us fiends.

Don't brush off Buddhism and Hinduism as silly and don't embrace deistic religions as if they are all for nature and all for balance. Buddhism certainly knows a good healthy natural balance from an unhealthy unnatural obsessed imbalance. Achieving a good healthy natural balance is a huge intermediate step on the way to final release, like the Buddha giving up harsh asceticism and letting his own natural vigor re-assert. It is on the Middle Way. In practice, Buddhism seems more likely to lead to good healthy natural balance than most deism. That is why, despite the dogma of “no desires at all”, Buddhism is charming and it appeals widely. Deistic religions can get crazy and lead people far away from nature and healthy balance. To me, John Calvin and Calvinist schools seem unnatural, bent on suppressing normal healthy desires, obsessed, out of balance, and near crazy.

While, in practice, the Dharma-based religions allow for keeping many desires and for finding a balance among desires, even so, they are not clear about ending desires and about balance. Lack of clarity makes confusion and contributes to the hole in the center of a system that eats the world.

No religion has a magic formula, or even a magic hallowed code, that says unerringly which desires, in which amounts, how often, we should pursue, and which we should overcome or suppress. Especially no religion has a formula for the modern world. All religions give good advice; and some codes, such as the Ten Commandments and the sayings of Jesus, still have great value. Simply mouthing “The Middle Path” does not do the trick but it can be a good place to start. All religions give bad advice and bad codes. When modern people find a pattern that suits them, often they can't tell if the pattern fits with the spirit of their religion or any religion. This gap leaves us open to anxiety and to control. It is worth thinking about you own desires and pattern of acting in light of your religious convictions, if only to reduce anxiety and make you less vulnerable to stupid ideas and bad people. Don't think the end of the world is nigh if your pattern does not mesh perfectly with some religion.

Likely the strongest example in recent art of bad desire, bad balance, clinging, struggle, and suffering is Gollum from “Lord of the Rings”. We find it hard to accept that Gollum is not a total aberration but is an extension of natural tendencies. Gollum is what happens to people trapped in a sticky world; caught in desire and clinging; mind defiled; twisted horribly; and suffering. Each of us is like Gollum in our ways. Recall “you are that” from the Upanishads. Even good Frodo falls victim. We are like Gollum not only in obvious addict-like clinging to power, wealth, sex, serving God, Dharma, the Tao, and magic rings, but in many smaller ways such as in loving sport, wanting a nice backyard, wanting to look good, loving family, and wanting our party to win always. Seeing Gollum as a logical yet perverted extension of nature and seeing our own self as like him is not a hammer seeing every issue as a nail. It is not an overstatement. It is not seeing the world as a sour melodrama of clinging and suffering. It is partial waking up, seeing what is really going on with ALL of us more than we had imagined. We are all Gollum-in-the-making. After we see, then we have to figure out what to do, and then actually do it. Buddhism sees the Gollum in all of us and wants to lead us away from that.

The orthodox Buddhist view is based on suffering and strongly implies that life is not worthwhile. In that view, a person must defeat all stickiness, desire, and clinging so as to defeat suffering and succeed, to

awaken. A person needs to end all mental defilements and needs to think with perfect consistency and clarity to end suffering and to awaken. To make sure you never are Gollum, you have to end not merely excess or imbalance but use a purified intellect to defeat all desires. The Buddhist ideal is “anti-Gollum”. The Buddhist ideal does not follow the Middle Path; it goes to one extreme to defeat all desire.

In my view based on “life is worthwhile”, in what I call “managing”, a person need not overcome all desire totally but needs only to manage stickiness, desire, clinging, etc. well enough. A person need not think with perfect clarity and consistency but only well enough. It is not easy, it is hard. My ideal is less anti-Gollum and more like Tom Bombadil, although I do not aim for the perfection of Tom Bombadil, his ability not to desire or cling to even absolute power. (Tom Bombadil is not the anti-Gollum any more than he is the anti-Gandalf, anti-Frodo, super-Frodo, anti-Sauron, or super-Sam.)

You can gain from this chapter whether you think in terms of overcoming-ending or merely managing, you think of an ideal mind free of all defilement or an evolved mind well skilled, and think in terms of suffering, not worthwhile, or worthwhile.

Regardless of overcome or end, in Buddhism, you may not have any desires for anything immoral or harmful to people and nature. If you want to awaken soon, then Buddhism also disallows sex. Buddhism disallows family because family needs a high level of commitment and participation. Buddhism disallows other interests that quickly lead to obsession and over-indulgence, such as politics, even if through them you might do some good. Buddhism is wary of art for the same reason even though art also does a lot of good. Although Buddhism seems to allow some desires, in fact, still the ideal seems to end-or-overcome any-and-all desire.

Buddhism allows different attitudes toward desire for people of different “grades” of spiritual achievement and striving. Monks hold higher standards than lay people. Even so, it is not clear to what standards monks are held, to what standards what grades of lay people are held, and why. Desire can be an all-bad word, a half-bad word, or a merely natural word.

A common Buddhist reply to “which desires and clinging, how much, and what to do” is simply meditate. Stop all this jabbering. Stop seeking formulas – “that topic tends not to edification” - and do something proven. This advice actually does work well, about half as well as Buddhists wish. If you meditate at least fifteen minutes per day, you do reduce many desires, get rid of others, develop some good desires, and find a more healthy moral beneficial balance. All the people who do yoga-with-some-meditation or who take “mindfulness” courses can testify that it works. But meditation is not the whole answer. Even if you simply sit quietly for 15 minutes daily, you would gain much the same benefit. If you sit for 15 minutes a day and do nothing but think about your desires, you would gain much the same benefit. If you chant 15 minutes daily, likely you would improve. Despite claims that special techniques of Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism differ much, in fact they are much the same. Yet the outcomes, what people see, feel, and wake up to, differ. What people get out of meditation depends a lot on what they expect and on what teachers and fellow students tell them. I think the result depends more on that than on the actual techniques. So I doubt meditation alone is the answer even when it comes with correct teaching. In any case, it is not the answer in this book, and, here, we have to use our minds to see what is right. We have to find the correct teaching. This is one lesson from the Buddha leaving his meditation classes and teaching himself.

The desire to defeat desires, and confusion over what it means to defeat desires, leads to bad attitudes among Buddhists. Buddhists, including Mahayanists, think that to defeat desires leads to a person who is cold, haughty, indifferent to the world, above the world, and above other people. In this mistaken view, a spiritually advanced person becomes repressed, fairly nasty, and a master of passive aggression. Of course, the perpetrator denies that he-she is like that. While Buddhists understand this perversion, and condemn it, still, when they want to act Buddhist, this is how too many act. Without doubt, Buddhism and the Buddha would deny this use of Buddhist ideas and would advise these people to “knock it off”, grow up, and get better.

Deistic religions have the same attitudes toward human nature, human quirks, and sin. They offer many ways to control troublesome quirks and sin. Most ways don't work well and many lead to bad attitudes typical of deistic religions.

This confusion in Buddhism over which desires needs what treatment leads to many special terms for desire, attitudes, and objects of desire. Buddhists like special terms because the terms give Buddhists a feeling of precision and the terms makes it easier for Buddhists of one school to argue with Buddhists of another or with non-Buddhists. I do not deal much with terms here. I do discuss a few below.

For convenience, here I give one attitude as the standard view but allow for variations. I adhere to what I think was the original view of Buddhism shortly after the Buddha – I don't know if this was the view of the Buddha. The ultimate goal is to defeat ALL clinging and desires. If necessary, you should be able to starve. End all clinging, not merely overcome. Ultimately, you need at least to overcome all desires. In practice, you have to end most desires too. You may feel a few desires such as for air, water, and the Dharma. You may act on simple natural desires such as for food, water, and basic shelter as long as you do not cling. Seeking any particular food is wrong. Until you can do better, you may have some bad thoughts such as about triumph over a foe but may not act on them; and, in the end, you have to end such thoughts too. You must to let go of (end) many natural desires such as for family. Eventually you must end links to family too. You may have friends as long as you do not think of them much or often, and you can do without them in case they go away or die. You do not seek balance (balance is a desire) except perhaps a simple balance made of only a few basic desires. Only this way can you end all mental defilements, think with full consistency and clarity, overcome suffering, and awaken.

I disagree with this stance. I advise readers to seriously think through their opinions on desire, acting on desire, and managing or controlling desires.

When you read a text in Buddhism or any religion, ask what the text thinks about: desire, natural desire, learned desire, good desire, bad desire, acting on desire, ignoring desire, letting desire go through you, not feeling desire at all, clinging, the balance of desires, and letting go of desires. Ask what the religion wants as the final goal with desires and what it allows for most normal people in the meantime. One text can have multiple views. Then decide for yourself.

**(A) (4) Life, Stickiness, Desire, Clinging, Not Worthwhile, and Suffering.**

Recall Gollum from above and that he is an extension of normal natural life with normal natural desires. How do we live without becoming Gollum? Can we live normally without becoming Gollum?

To live normally is to desire. In the orthodox view, as long as you live, until you have conquered suffering and awakened, you must still desire, and nearly all desire goes inevitably to clinging, mental distortion, more desire and more clinging. Even desire for normal natural things such as family and friends usually is bad because it leads us to cling and leads to a muddled mind. As long as you do not see that life is not worthwhile, desire cannot end. In my view also, you cannot live, and you cannot think life is worthwhile, without desiring. Much of what you desire is harmful but not all of it. You need to sort out what you can reasonably desire without causing too much confusion and harm, and you need to let go of the rest. In both views, even if you are not aware you desire, as long as you think life is worthwhile, you must desire. In the orthodox view, that is bad. In my view, that can be good as long as we learn to want less and want reasonably.

The Buddhist term that I render “desire” is usually translated “hunger” or “crave”. It can also mean “have a strong appetite for”, “wish for”, or “want”. The term can be used for sex drive, drive for power, etc. The phrase for “obtain the object of hunger” is to “eat” the object, so that a woman who seduces a man can be said to “eat” the man; she does not roast him and devour him in forkfuls.

The Buddhist terms remind us that already we are using metaphors. Buddhist terms are biased toward seeing normal natural un-awakened relations with the world as aberrant and harmful; we “crave” water, love, and wisdom rather than simply “thirst” for them. More usefully, the Buddhist terms reminds us that hunger can be put off for a while but always returns. No matter how we stuff our bellies on Thanksgiving, we will be hungry again on Monday. No matter who we have sex with on Saturday, we fantasize again on Sunday. No matter who pledges love to me on Monday, and how ardently she pledges her love, I wonder again by Tuesday. We are never satisfied. The terms also remind us of close links between body and mind. We think of hunger as from the body but also it is guided by the mind, and is of the mind too. We thirst for water, wisdom, and security. People that crave chocolate have bodily and mental addiction. In Buddhist mythology, people who crave strongly in this life, after they die and before they are reborn, go for a while to a hell where they crave always but can never be full, like Tantalus; they are called “hungry ghosts” or “praet”. The term “praet” also applies to living people who crave power, sex, wealth, fame, success, justification, salvation, heaven, be a hero, to save all the unborn, save nature, save “my people”, be a bodhisattva, awaken, etc.

The average life is not a rancid cloud of perverted craving but it is lost in stickiness, desires, and clinging anyway. Buddhism seeks not only to save (awaken) abject sinners but more to save (awaken) average people who do not even see how lost in desire and clinging they are. To see desire and clinging among common persons, we can use strong-but-still-mostly-sane cases such as of shopping addiction or sports addiction. We should not rely on obvious crazy clinging, such as by Kim Jong Un (North Korean dictator in 2017). You personally need to feel how much you desire, strive, and cling, how much it shapes your mind, how much it channels your life, and how much of it is not necessary and harmful. Then you need to manage or to stop altogether.

I use “desire” because “desire” gets across the ideas and it reminds that I am not using official Buddhist terms. “Hunger” and “crave” suggest all naturally-based desire is wrong, perverted, and bizarre addictive

disease. Both terms imply we cannot have reasonable natural desires, all natural desires are necessarily harmful. A person can be retrained not to desire harmful things but a person cannot be retrained not to crave air, food, and water unless he-she is willing to die. We learn most desires but we do not learn most hungers. We do learn most cravings but not all learned desires are cravings, for example, desire to vote. People see that many desires are not addictive hunger-driven mad cravings. They wrongly think: "I am not caught up in stickiness, desire, and clinging; I am not confused; I am stronger than what Buddhists say; all is right with me; and Buddhism is silly." We need a term to see that most people are lost in vainly chasing swollen natural desires and silly desires without implying all of us are fiends. It is better to use a modest term than to use a strong scary term that overstates and so gives people a false out.

I assume the orthodox Buddhist view based on suffering implies that life is not worthwhile, and I take "life is not worthwhile" to be the Buddhist view. I assume "life is not worthwhile" is implied by the meaning of "desire" that I gave above, and vice versa. They go together. I use the idea of "not worthwhile" more often than the idea of "suffering" but I still intend "not worthwhile" to refer to Buddhism. When I want to stress my view, I say so.

All desire, even reasonable desire but especially too-strong desire, leads to thinking life is worthwhile, and thinking life is worthwhile leads to desire. To desire and to think life is worthwhile is to cling and is to fall into the stickiness of life. They all come together. This insight is basic. This idea is true in the Buddhist view and my view. Buddhists think it must be bad while I think some of it is alright.

When we think life is worthwhile and we mix up our desires with worthwhileness, then our desires become too big and entrenched. We need to reduce desires and clinging by reducing the link between them and the feeling that life is worthwhile. In my view, we need to see that life is worthwhile without using that as an excuse to desire too many things too hard. We need to use that as a basis to manage rather than as a basis for error.

We can have strong desires and strong clinging, and then convince ourselves that life is worthwhile as a way to justify our obsession. In art, people who are obsessed with power feel their lives are worthwhile, regardless of others, as a way to justify their greed, such as Voldemort. It might help to think of ordinary lives as weaker versions. In my view, we need to make the sufferer see life is worthwhile apart from his-her desires, and he-she can find the true worthwhileness of life only by giving up wrong desire. That is what literary heroes do, as when Luke Skywalker saved his father but not the Emperor.

We could get people to stop desiring and clinging if we convinced them life is not worthwhile. Buddhists may do this if they really think life is not worthwhile, if "beset by suffering" makes life not worthwhile. If you do not believe that life is not worthwhile, then telling people life is not worthwhile as a way to get them to stop clinging is dishonest and dangerous. If we do believe life is worthwhile, it is better to accept what we believe, and then find a way to desire properly and to hold properly without going too far and without clinging harmfully. All the same is true of suffering.

People overlook that life is "sticky" and we cling to it. "Stickiness" is to get involved, often more and more involved. An old term for having a romantic attachment was being "stuck" on a person, as in "George is 'stuck' on Sally". Another old term for a romantic attachment is "involved". We call romantic relations "an attachment". A funny TV show in 2016 was "My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend". We say that life "sucks us in". You

can recall for yourself the line from “The Godfather”. In a TV ad from in 2015, a young man out with his buddies at a party sees many attractive young women and says he will never commit to only one, but he does and they marry; the couple sees other couples with kids and says “we’ll never have any kids”, but they do; they say “we’ll always live in the city, never in the suburbs”, but they move; they say “we’ll never buy a minivan”, but they do; after the angst of the first child, they say “we’ll never have more children”, but they do. People start out watching one football game in college and stay lifelong fans even if they don’t really get the game and they don’t really enjoy the game more than alternatives such as watching movies. People take a path in college, such as anthropology, and stay on it all their lives even though they don’t get nearly as much satisfaction as they hoped and they never really try alternatives. People buy a house in one school district and that is their lives, and the lives of their children, for thirty years. We roll a dice or deal some cards, and it is five hours later. We pick up the first beer and it is a six pack later. We open a bag of chips and suddenly it is empty. All life is like this. In the novel “Light in August”, William Faulkner described how life easily traps us: a man has to care for a pregnant woman although he is not the father but just because she is Life and Life needs tending. Once you’ve made the first kill or the first save, it’s all over.

To desire is to cling. To desire and to cling are to fall into the stickiness of life like a fly on flypaper. To desire food, water, and shelter is to cling to them. Even when what we desire is normal and good, to desire is to cling and to fall into the stickiness of life. To desire an apple is to cling to the apple even after we have eaten the apple and are no longer hungry; we remember the apple so we can think of it again when we get hungry, think about what temporarily allayed our hunger, and go find another apple; and that is to cling to the apple. To love a person is to desire the welfare of him-her, and that is to cling and stick. To desire social justice is to cling and to stick.

Life inevitably is a struggle. Clinging is a struggle, even when successful. To struggle is to cling even if we are not aware that we cling. If we desire food, we have to struggle for food. In our past, the idea that life was desire, and desire was struggle, was more obvious when we had to go out every day to look for food, and when we had to fight other beasts. Even now, if we think a little, it should be clear that we have to struggle through “the daily grind”, and we have to compete to get and hold a job, because we desire. Even if we make a good salary, going to the grocery store is a struggle, a truth about which many funny TV sketches have been done. We desire and we struggle because we live and because we think life is worthwhile. With every breath we take, every swallow of water, every bite even of veggies, every time we walk on the lawn, we kill thousands of small life forms – or else they would kill us. We have to struggle to live and killing is part of struggle.

Because life, desire, and struggle come together, other ways to say “life is not worthwhile” are: “life is not worth the struggle, bother, fuss, or aggravation” and “life isn’t worth the candle”. This view does not mean life is a torment and we should kill ourselves. It only means there is no sure pot of gold at the sure end of a sure rainbow. Nor is looking for the pot of gold better than finding the pot of gold; the journey is not the destination. Even if we find a rainbow, an end to the rainbow, and a pot of shiny metal, often the metal is only glitter. Even if the gold is real, soon gold runs out and we want more. There is no end to struggle, clinging, and stickiness. For elusiveness of pots and gold, see the old Disney movie “Darby O’Gill and the Little People” starring young Sean Connery. It is good family fun.

Desire, clinging, and struggle lead to fear and suffering. Even if this life seems happy, even if right now we have a lot, life is still fraught with fear and suffering. At the least, like dragons and Sith, we fear to lose what we have. We fear other people. We suffer when we do lose even small things. We need not suffer great loss, such as death, for us to be haunted by fear and suffering. When we fear, we cling harder and we desire more. Then we fall into a vicious circle, the Wheel, out of which it is hard to climb.

Even when we think we “see through life”, even when we see life is unfair, illusory, changeable, painful, a struggle, and often not very real, we wrongly cling to life. We think life is worthwhile. We struggle against the results of our own mind. We allow one part of our mind, irrational hope, to dominate our whole mind. We cling to aspects of life, such as family, friends, wealth, power, goodness, fun, career, etc. because we think those are worthwhile. When we think parts of life are worthwhile, we think all of life is worthwhile. When we think all life is worthwhile, we think parts of life are worthwhile, even when, as in business, love, and family, often they are not. Buddhism offered insightful accounts of why we cling, and how, many of which insights anticipate modern ideas from evolutionary theory.

Life, desire, the mistaken idea that life is worthwhile, clinging, stickiness, struggle, fear, and suffering all come together.

In Buddhism, the best antidote to this complex of mistakes is to see that life is not worthwhile. We can undo this complex of mistakes by focusing on any component but the most direct and total way is to see directly that life is not worthwhile. As long as we think life is worthwhile, we can rationalize other aspects in this complex of mistakes. If we think life is worthwhile, we can rationalize stickiness, clinging, desire, struggle, fear, and suffering. Once we see life is not worthwhile, all aspects in this complex fall. If we do not see that life is not worthwhile, we err. The idea “life is not worthwhile” best conveys the totality of Buddhist thinking. Orthodox Buddhism picks apart the complex of errors by starting with suffering and desire but it stops short of explicitly saying life is not worthwhile.

It does help to see that suffering is anti-desirable; it hurts. The only way to end suffering is to see that life is not worthwhile. To see life is not worthwhile, it helps to see the roles that desire, stickiness, clinging, and struggle play in leading us to think life is worthwhile.

Rather than cure this complex of mistakes only by seeing that life is not worthwhile, orthodox Buddhism also says we can (1) think with total clarity and consistency, so see that life is beset by suffering, and so totally conquer all suffering. We conquer suffering by conquering clinging and desire. I suggest we can (2) think well enough and thereby managing desire, clinging, and suffering. Option (1) is harder and less accurate than simply seeing life is not worthwhile, and likely it would lead us to see life is not worthwhile in the end. You might as well see life is not worthwhile from the “get go”. So option (1) often amounts to seeing directly that life is not worthwhile. Option (2) is hard, takes much practice, is not guaranteed, and takes constant work, but it can succeed. We can learn to let go of a lot of stuff, think well enough, and manage our lives, if we put our minds to it and we have help. Option (2) is not as metaphysical and glamorous as option (1) or as Mahayana is but I prefer it. Again, I don't know what the Buddha did or what he would advise.

**(A) (5) More on Not Clinging and on Letting Go.**

Rather than say all the time “end clinging and overcome desire” it is easier to use one phrase, so usually I choose “let go”. Besides convenience, “let go” fits with how people see Buddhism now, and I like the idea of “let go”. “Let go” is like “just walk away” but it happens not only on the obvious level such as walking away from a relationship or a damaged car but also in your mind and your self.

In using the phrase “let go”, we are tempted to forget the variety of things that we have to let go of, forget we cannot approach each sticky desire the same, and that the world is sticky in itself. So “let go” is not a simple single “attitude adjustment” by us. Please don’t forget.

Ideally the largest time-and-effort spent on Buddhist Aids is on learning to see how we are caught in a sticky world, see how we cling, and learning to end clinging, defeat clinging, or to let go (in practice, the largest time-and-effort likely is for mental-spiritual power). I think the original intent of the Buddhist Aid “suffering” was this, learning to see how we are caught and learning to defeat clinging. Aids of cause-and-effect, dependent origination, “whatever has a beginning has an end”, learning to see satisfaction is limited, and the limited self, are all aimed at seeing stickiness, clinging, and how to let go. Learning to let go is a big deep art. It is valuable in itself, and in learning how to manage, regardless of awakening. Learning Buddhist Aids so as to learn how to let go is well worthwhile.

Not to cling, to “let go”, is not like giving up something for Lent and it is not like Muslim Ramadan. It is not giving up on the world in the usual sense of having been defeated by the world. It is not giving up one thing to get another, even better, thing, like an athlete giving up parties. It is more like these: (a) You are a good golfer but now you are 40 years old, and you realize you are never going to win the Masters’ Golf Tournament. You are fine with that. (b) You go to China for a vacation where you eat real Chinese food. You know that, where you live, you will never get food like this again. You savor what you had and then give it up. You are fine with that. (c) You work for a big company or for the state. You know you could start a business, succeed, make a name for yourself, and maybe a small fortune. But you also see the toll it has taken on others. So you give it up. You are fine with that. (d) Your children are smart enough easily to go to a good state college but the children of your neighbor are smart enough to get scholarships to Ivy League schools. You are fine with that. (e) Your “ne’er-do-well” sad-sack brother wins the Lotto for 276 million dollars. You and your kids will see only a dribble. You are fine with that. (f) Your daughter gets knocked up by a loser. You learn to live with it and to make the best of it. (g) You are out for a long walk in the country and the rain pours. In your head, you hear the Beatles’ song “Rain” and you finally really get it. (h) You finally accept that mass populist democracy is failing. (i) You see that your religion does not have all the final truth, even if it might be better than other religions. (j) You see that whoever you held as the highest and most holy, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Moses, or Krishna, is not really a supreme being with unlimited powers.

In most cases above, people can be “fine with that” because they got what they could out of it, and, on the whole, they gained more than they lost. In Buddhism, letting go is not like that. It is not giving up something because you got what you could out of it, or because, by giving it up, you gain more than you lose. You just give it up. You just let go. You don’t worry anymore about where the balance falls, about gains and losses, costs and benefits. In Western terms, by letting go, you gain freedom, and in Taoism, you gain by living in accord with the Tao, but in Buddhism, you don’t even think in those terms. You just give it up. The time for it has come and gone, and now it goes. Yes, you can. Some Buddhists might say you lose the world but gain the Dharma, like Taoists gain the Tao, but, I think, “pure” Buddhism would

not even seek this bargain. You can say what you give up held you back so you must gain more than you lose when you let it go, but that view really distorts what happens. You can say you gain final release, but, since you would be dead and totally gone at the end of such a lifetime, it is odd to say that you gain something. You can gain some peace during what remains of this lifetime but, if that is primarily why, then you still cling to peace, you won't get peace, and you need to let that go of striving for that kind of peace too. Just let go.

Again: "Just let go" is much easier if you also see life is not worthwhile, and much harder if you can't see life is not worthwhile or you insist life is worthwhile. The same applies to learning to manage what we can properly hold on to from what we should let. "Just let go" and "not worthwhile" go well together and they do not go well separately.

In Buddhism, one of the hardest things that people have to let go of is the idea that they are an eternal soul-self. They have to let go of that idea of the self so they can see that their own self comes into being, holds together, and goes apart, like many other things of the world, like an elephant or an ecosystem. You need to practice on letting go of other things before letting go of the mistaken idea of the self as an eternal soul-self. See Part 7 below for more on the self in Buddhism.

Using "let go" opens the door to bad thinking and to abuse. It can become a source of confusion or "mental defilement". "I have let go", "I will let go", or "I can let go of whatever I wish whenever I wish" becomes a bad excuse. By simply saying "let go", we forget that not all clinging and desire are the same, that we have to approach different cases of clinging and desire differently, and sometimes "end" is better while sometimes "overcome" is better. We get sloppy and make needless hurtful mistakes. We think we end-or-overcome clinging and end-or-overcome desire when all we really do is gloss over them. They are still there. We still desire and cling but not we cover it over with another layer of desiring and clinging. We think we have let go because we have a phrase but really we hold on harder than ever. "Let go" has become a magic phrase, and that use is an abuse. It is always a good idea to check "let go" by thinking through the case in terms of end, overcome, desire, and clinging. Only after you have become adept at end and overcome in many cases can you relax when you use "let go".

Even if, like me, you think life is worthwhile and do not accept Buddhist ideas about not worthwhile life and suffering, it is still worthwhile to see the reality of stickiness, desire, clinging, and the suffering that they bring. It is still worthwhile to manage. Buddhists Aids help. Buddhism can make a worthwhile life even more worthwhile through managing stickiness, clinging, desires, and suffering.

#### **(A) (6) More on What to Cling to and What to Let Go of.**

This section does solve the title problem but it might help some. For what I think we should hold on to and what let go of, see Part One of this book.

Evolved nature guides humans to hold on to some things and let go of others depending on the situation; yet that is precisely what Buddhism wants people to rise above. Virtually all religions and philosophies say hold to some things hard (God, Justice) and let go of others sometimes (Pride). Even hedonism says hold to pleasure and let go of pain. Virtually all schools differ from simple nature or they would not be needed – even Taoism is not only natural. How does Buddhism differ? What makes Buddhism distinct?

This question is hard to answer and I don't give a firm answer here. Again, you have to read and decide. Ask some Buddhists.

Buddhism does not advise that we stop breathing, stop drinking water, or stop eating until we die. It does say a monk should be willing to starve to death if nobody gives him (now her) food. Nobody can let go of morality. Breathing, drinking, eating, and morality can be enjoyable. Buddhism differs on whether it says we should try to breathe, drink, eat, and act well without the joy – some schools sprinkle ashes over the food of monks to cover any possible good taste to which monks might cling. Buddhism does not advise that we never talk to other humans or we could not teach. Buddhism used to advise men monks almost never to talk to women.

Once we open the door to as little as the good taste of water or the incidental joy that comes of doing the right thing, it seems as if all else might come rushing in but usually that is not the case. Instead, simple things such as breathing, eating, drinking, talking, and acting well give seekers practice for what might be too sticky and so should be let go right away and what might be used to benefit in modest doses. Practice on simple things shows that anything might be a problem. It does not show that we can deal with everything if only we are adept enough – some things remain too dangerous regardless of skill level such as family and power. I don't go into specifics or methods.

This step forward still does not show how Buddhism differs from other disciplines except it shows that, in ideal Buddhism, unlike Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, we should be willing to let go of anything if need be. Everything is a candidate for “too sticky” and for letting go. As monks practice Buddhism, in fact most monks do eventually try to let go of everything except bodily functions and needed social functions. Lay people are not expected to let go of that much but they are expected to understand deeply the idea of letting go and to see how theoretically it could apply to anything.

Practicing on simple things also teaches another important lesson: If we are careful, we can enjoy some things while they last, if we don't expect them to last longer than their natural length, don't expect them to be more enjoyable than they usually naturally are, and don't take steps to make them last longer or make more joy than their natural span and strength. If you have to breathe, sometimes you might as well enjoy it – meditation uses that tendency to advantage. As long as you know you do have to let go and you do actually let go, then go along with what comes your way.

In theory, as I understand theory, monks and lay people differ this way: Monks should plan nothing that leads to enjoyment for the enjoyment while lay people may, can, do and should plan. In practice, even monks do some planning as when they plan to learn Pali so they can read Buddhist texts in the original languages. Monks plan for fewer things than do lay people. Except for religious devotion, the level of planning by monks to sustain something desirable is much less than among lay people for most things in their lives such as house, car, and entertainment, and the level of planning by monks should dwindle as the monk's career goes along. While lay people may plan, they should learn not to plan too much and not to expect too much. For that, they can get the help of experienced and good-minded monks.

Now we have a range of possibilities:

(1) Let go of everything.

- (2) Be willing to let go of everything or be on the verge of letting go of everything.
- (3) Enjoy things as they come, as long as you take no current steps to extend or enhance.
- (4) Let go of conventional useless morality but keep real useful morality.
- (5) Enjoy things as they come, as long as you don't plan to extend or enhance.
- (6) Plan to extend or enhance as long as nothing is immoral, most of the joy is in normal human things such as family, and you are sure you won't fall into anything like lust for power.
- (7) Plan to extend or enhance but have confidence on your ability to step away even from things such as wealth, sex, and power.
- (8) You may plan for normal modest human activities such as career and family but you must stay away from ways that suck you into pride, power, and lust such as politics, business, academia, media, art, and administration.
- (9) Participate in responsible professions even if they are tempting and sticky because the world needs responsible smart people to guide it.
- (10) Let go of morality of as much real morality as you wish.
- (11) Go ahead and enjoy all aspects of the world as much as you want without regard to morality, or enjoy morality too if that's what "gets you off".
- (12) Force the world to give you what you desire for as long as you desire.

Most people, including most Buddhists, are not sure where Buddhism lies for whom. Different schools of Buddhism give different answers. Mahayana accuses Theravada of pushing everybody toward (1) and it claims to lie somewhere about (3) to (5). Theravada says that Mahayana actually falls somewhere along (6) through (11) because the temptation is too great and the world too sticky. Some Mahayana monks are allowed to carouse, have sex, and have families. Westerners think Buddhism falls somewhere along (3) or (4), and many Westerners would like to do that too, but few people ever achieve it. All abbots of big monasteries dabble in (6) and (9) whether they know so or not.

I often stress that we should manage life, clinging, and suffering rather than forcibly let go. Managing lies in the range of (3 to (9) most of the time, but can go to (2) or (1) if conditions get bad.

In Part 2, I mentioned that happiness is a good test case to understand how suffering afflicts life, and the "ins and outs" of clinging and letting go. Here would be the right place to take up that question again but I delay the topic until after dealing with a few more issues.

### **(A) (7) Really Letting Go in Buddhist Style.**

Religions say we are too caught up in selfishness and worldly affairs but they offer little by way of what to do other than platitudes, good wishes, and ritual. Christianity offers a great general frame in the Golden Rule but few specifics about how to quit selfishness. In contrast, Buddhism offers specific effective ways. I do not describe them here. The release we get from Buddhist methods not only can help us to awaken but makes us better persons and helps make the world better. The methods are among Buddhist Aids and so have risk but, used adeptly, they are worth the risk.

Everybody knows we are caught up in worldly affairs such as materialism, party politics, ethnic strife, and religious competition. We all know we are greedy. We like power, wealth, sex, booze, drugs, and media too much. We have the disease of gadgets such as cars and cell phones. We compete with neighbors. We are fashion slaves or we despise those who are fashion slaves – too often both.

Yet we do not see how we are also caught up in deeper self-ness. We think we really do deserve a break today and every day ten times a day, and we will take it regardless. Fine things exist, and other people have them, so I deserve fine things and I will get mine, if not for me, for my kids. I am the one-and-only exception to every rule. We excuse every grab because others are ahead of us and they are getting theirs so we should get ours. They made me do it, over and over again. Too often we are bad Sheldon. We think there is a level of wealth and power above which you “make it” and don’t have to worry, and we will do almost anything to get there. If I can’t get there myself, I make sure my kids get there and other kids remain below mine in comparison. I don’t make any of the above mistakes, I am a good person, I help others less able than me, and I am proud of it.

Even if we really aren’t selfish, we hold mistaken ideas such as: truth is always beautiful, if it is ugly it isn’t the truth, if it is too beautiful then it isn’t the truth, people show character in their faces, the world will turn out well in the end, it isn’t the end if it hasn’t turned out well, good guys will prevail, goodness will win just because it is good, bad systems are innately self-destructive, and bad guys all get theirs in the end either here on Earth or later in Hell.

Buddhist methods can lead us to these gritty levels and can make us confront ourselves. That is hard but is worthwhile. People who extol “mindfulness” are pushing in the right direction. Few religions other than Buddhism have Aids that work as well at this task.

Maybe the ideal is to blend Buddhist self-examination techniques with Christian-style morality. Taoism, Zen, and martial arts offer similar techniques but that is another topic.

### **(A) (8) What Happens, or Doesn’t Happen, When We “Just Let Go”.**

In most religions, good things happen when we “just let go” in the right ways and right amounts. We see things that make life better. The world really was worthwhile all along but we did not see how worthwhile because our fear and ignorance blinded us. We become better. I do not list the good things that happen. “Islam” means “surrender (to God)”. Christianity teaches “just let go” in “trust God”, “love God”, “love your neighbor”, “cast your bread upon the waters and it will return to you many fold”, and “seek and you will find, knock and the door will open”. Learning to let go and to manage suffering lets us see more clearly,

think more adeptly, notice more good things in life, and make life more worthwhile. I don't think it makes life all wonderful.

In Theravada Buddhism, when we let go, the world does not get a lot better, get worthwhile. Usually we do become better individual people, we help others and the world, and we enjoy more honestly what is truly joyful – but we do not make the world worthwhile. We do not see that the world has been worthwhile all along but our fear and ignorance had blinded us. We see more clearly the same old beset-by-suffering pain-filled not-worthwhile world. Most Buddhists dislike that letting go does not reveal the world as better in the same way other religions say so. Buddhists have developed similar ideas of how letting go does make the world better, even make it worthwhile, or how letting go allows us to see it had been worthwhile all along. A key idea of Mahayana is that the world was deeply worthwhile all along; in fact, the world is full of magic that we can see and use only when we let go. The difference between Buddhism and other religions over letting go, matters. Think about implications of the difference between original Buddhism, what most Buddhists want, and what other religions say.

#### **(A) (9) Trust the Dharma.**

The real Buddhist version of letting go might not be “stop clinging” but “trust Dharma”. Buddhists believe the Dharma will help them if they act morally, study sincerely, listen to authorities, and practice diligently. They will make progress and they will be useful. They are as correct as are believers in other religions who think God, Tao, or Heaven will help them if they are sincere etc. I cannot argue against this belief because I share it: the world likely was set up so this belief is mostly true. We do get better when we try. In this sense, Buddhists do get a lot when they “just let go”. I like that.

Theravada Buddhists still don't get a world full of joy, Dharma, love, shiny magic, and realized embodied metaphysics (Jesus, often Mohammad, Great Buddha, bodhisattva, or avatar). Theravada Buddhists still don't solve suffering this way although they can seem to dispense with it. Mahayanists think they do get joy etc. and do miraculously overcome suffering but they are mostly wrong.

Trusting the Dharma can make us think more clearly and reduce suffering, so we can then think yet more clearly and reduce suffering even more, and so on; and this process seems to dissolve the problem of not worthwhile life. If we trust Dharma, life becomes worthwhile enough and we need not worry more. “Trust Dharma” can help with clear thinking, ease some suffering, and make life more worthwhile but it does not solve the problems of suffering or whether life is worthwhile. I don't go into detail why.

“Trust the Dharma”, if taken too far, stops being traditional Buddhism. Rather than using the ideas and methods of the Buddha to overcome suffering. “Trust Dharma”, becomes more like trusting God, Tao, Heaven, Dharma in Mahayana and Hinduism, Emptiness, or Buddha Mind, or like devotion in Hinduism. Buddhists who have a strong attitude of “trust the Dharma” can seem more like deists, etc. even when they use Buddhist Aids and Buddhist rhetoric. They do not see that they have veered from traditional Buddhism. A strong attitude of trust easily merges with magic, bad metaphysics, superstition, astrology, and bad elements of folk Buddhism. It can be hard to tell if a person trusts Dharma or trusts magic, spirits, astrology, his-her own pride, etc. Other religions have the same problem with simplistic trust and devotion. “Trust the Dharma, a lot” might be alright and it might even be better than traditional Buddhism

but it is not traditional Buddhism. A little of “trust the Dharma” is quite good but more is too much - a case of the Middle Path even with core ideas.

### **(A) (10) Let Go of Letting Go.**

The material in this section runs up against a logical problem that you should not get “hung up” on. The logical problem is not simply a fun game but also introduces a real issue. It came up above in the issue of the joy in knowing there is not satisfaction in life, and it comes up again later.

To think clearly, you have to stop clinging. You even have to let go of cherished ideas such as trusting to the Buddhist “church”, the monkhood, and you have to let go somewhat of doctrines such as Dharma and karma. If you still cling to them, they become mere rule-based dogma and obstacles in the path.

Eventually, you have to see that “letting go” is a mere rule-based dogma, and you have to let go of letting go. If you stick to letting go then you cling to letting go and you can’t let go. “Let go” becomes a mere rule-based dogma, an object of clinging itself, and an obstacle. Stop clinging to not clinging. End the desire to end desire. Seeking to not suffer makes you suffer.

Clever people often see that, after you let go of letting go, then you have to (3) let go of (2) letting go of (1) letting go, and so on. Don’t worry about this infinite fall too much. After the first two levels (let go of letting go), then more levels don’t matter.

When you let go of letting go, you learn what you can let go of, what you can hold on to for a while, and what is dangerous to hold on to. You find your way among the scenarios mentioned above. In my terms, you learn to manage.

Here comes the logical fun: If you let go of letting go then you are likely to hold on to some things. So, if you let go of letting go, you don’t let go. And, if you don’t let go of letting go, you cling to letting go and you don’t let go.

You have to jump out of this level of mere logic and make up your mind what you need to do and not do. In this way, the logical problem is a useful “kick in the pants”.

You have to decide how much to let go and how much to let-go-of-letting-go and so-hold-to-something. I think we really do have to let go of “let go” as mere rule-based dogma and we have to get accept holding on to some things, at least for a while from time to time.

Letting go of letting go is not an excuse to cling on to everything we crave. It is not an excuse to get back to normal sticky confused often-stupid wasted life. It does not mean the sleeping life and awakened life are the same. It means we have to use our abilities to manage. We have to think what we really can let go of, what we might have to cling, what we wish to cling to, what dangers we put us in, and why. The same is true whenever we run into this kind of conundrum.

As mentioned, when people get the idea of letting go, and learn to let go of something, they feel really good about their new-found outlook, new-found skill, and themselves. I think these false joys add to the

idea from Mahayana and Hindu that the Dharma system is really joyous despite apparent hardship. Don't cling to this first step or to the joy. Don't be dour either. Take many breaths, and continue on down the road for a while. Letting go of both the over-joy and the reactionary stern dourness that comes with this first step can help in learning properly to let go of letting go.

Letting go of letting go does not mean you must convert to Mahayana, some kind of Hinduism, Zen, or any discipline that sees awakening to be the same as the ordinary world of stickiness, clinging, desire, confusion, and suffering. It does not mean the world of clinging must be deeply satisfying. It does not mean waking up is a mistake, and there is no point to struggle and to try to wake up. It does not mean life is worthwhile or not worthwhile. It means only that you are working toward a better healthier balance. When you are closer to that, then you can decide what to do next.

**(A) (11) Mistake: The Joy of Renunciation.**

Keep the idea of this section in mind for comments on the Dalai Lama, below, and for Mahayana in the chapter on it. Sometimes in Buddhism you hear a phrase similar to "what great joy to know there is no happiness in life". (A) When people first learn to let go, they feel contentment, peace, and joy, often much greater than the sticky icky jolt they got from whatever it was that they clung to and let go of. You get this feeling of joy not only from letting go as the result of studying Buddhism but from letting go due to following any religion or similar discipline; Buddhists know this and are fine it; they care more that you let go than that you let go as a result of Buddhism. Buddhists warn against this feeling as another form of stickiness and another object of clinging. They advise to let go of this feeling too when you can. (B) In addition to the first rush of joy, there is also contentment that comes when you have let go of many things and you feel fairly sure you can let go of anything that you have to, including this feeling of contentment. Ask Buddhists what to do. (C) The point here is not to pursue the joy of letting go in place of joys from clinging. Don't substitute one gigantic object of clinging for many smaller objects of clinging. Don't try to let go so as to get that big joy. Learn to let go because it is the proper thing to do. You can get incidental joy from Buddhism but Buddhism does not offer joy as its primary goal or as a large goal. Using joy as an enticement, no matter how well-intended, is a mistake.

This mistake is an instance of logical puzzles and in particular an instance of the artificial splitting that I describe below in connection with the Dalai Lama.

**(A) (12) Mistake: How Much Happiness is Too Much?**

A mentioned in Part 2, Buddhism says we cannot have enduring real happiness. The issue of happiness makes a good arena to look at suffering and letting go. The term for suffering is "dhukkha" while the term for happiness is "sukkha". For most purposes in Buddhism, the two are opposites. Problems with terms can confuse this issue yet I am not precise with terms. I follow my version of English, so "happiness" and "satisfaction" are similar enough.

(A) People look for satisfaction and-or happiness in life as a whole. (B) They also look for it from things such as a collection of cars, activities such as prowess in golf, status such as head of a business firm, relations such as love or family, and in power, wealth, etc. According to Buddhism, we can never get real satisfaction from life in general or from particular things. Impermanence, clinging, and suffering stop real

satisfaction. So we must stop clinging to these things and to life. Often Buddhism is correct. People look far too much for satisfaction automatically from life and from particular things. We are better off not to put much hope in satisfaction, especially from particular things.

Buddhism is not always correct. Most people do get satisfaction from life as a whole even if not from any one thing or set of things. Recall that I decided life is worthwhile. Worthwhile does not guarantee any satisfaction, and it does not say that life is worthwhile because of satisfaction, but it makes chasing some satisfaction a fairly reasonable activity. Rather than seize on any one limited thing in life as the source of satisfaction, and hope that we can expand that one thing to make all life satisfying, usually we are better off to make what we can out of what we get as we go along.

Some people do get satisfaction from life as a whole regardless of satisfaction from particulars. Some people do get satisfaction from particular activities, things relations, etc. I think most academics don't get satisfaction from their careers but some do, their satisfaction is real, and I am happy for them. Many teachers, police officers, fire fighters, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, farmers, and grocers get satisfaction from careers, service they perform for the general public, and service they give to individuals. People get satisfaction from a family even if not all the family members turn out well, and sometimes if none turn out well. Impermanence by itself does not necessarily destroy happiness. It only destroys happiness if we expect conditions to be permanent. Families, countries, and churches are not permanent yet people get satisfaction from them. I hope Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein got satisfaction from their lives despite disappointments and personal issues. You can get satisfaction out of service to God, Dharma, Heaven, Nature, or church. You can get satisfaction from following the Tao. Some of these might be permanent, and, even if they are not, we can still get real satisfaction from serving them.

Although it seems as if people do get satisfaction, Buddhism still insists we do not, we are deluded about happiness. Buddhism does a good job showing how the conditions that lead to happiness cannot endure and how people usually fool themselves. I don't go into details here; use your imagination.

I get the point from Buddhism, and Buddhism is right in many cases, but not always. Just as you can use your imagination to tear down satisfaction, so you can use it to build reasonable cases of limited but still real happiness. Then decide for yourself. Then think what your choice implies about worthwhile life and vice versa.

Don't disdain happiness while it is here. Be content to enjoy while it is here and let it go when it is gone. Don't try to prolong happiness beyond its natural size or natural time. You may plan to make conditions that lead to happiness as long as you know there is no guarantee and you do not think your planning can lead to more happiness and longer happiness than the natural duration. A lot of people already have this attitude. Even after reading a fair amount of Buddhism, I don't know if doctrine is in line with this attitude or if it disdains all happiness. Taoism is in line with this attitude and, as far as I can tell, so is Zen when it is not too fierce or too mystical. Mahayana and Hinduism try to expand happiness too much to make sure life is worthwhile. Sometimes Zen suffers from that Mahayana legacy.

**(A) (13) Mistake: Suffering, Worthwhile, and Happiness.**

Before we awaken, impermanence, clinging, and suffering erode happiness so we cannot have enduring happiness. Yet even after awakening, and we have seen past impermanence, and we have overcome clinging and suffering, we still do not have happiness and cannot get real happiness.

The reasons that cause suffering also insure we cannot hold happiness; lack of happiness and suffering are two aspects of the same problem. Most of what we think is happiness is a delusion caused by desire and clinging. We want particular conditions (happy family, wealth) to last forever so we can be happy forever through them. Buddhism reminds us that all things end but the Dharma, so, when we base hope for happiness on normal human expectations in the real world, we are doomed to disappointment and no real happiness. Most supposed happiness really is suffering already or is suffering about to happen.

We have to give up our human-but-wrong expectations, and so have to give up hope for human-style happiness. Life cannot be happy both (1) because of suffering and (2) after suffering is overcome.

To me, this situation suggests that Buddhism says life is not worthwhile. Buddhism says this situation only shows that life is beset by suffering and impermanence. To me, his situation also implies that the question of worthwhile is deeper than issues of happiness, unhappiness, satisfaction, and suffering. I see a logical problem that leads me to the question of worthwhile life. To be clearer about Buddhism and suffering, and for our own sake regardless of Buddhism, we need to decide about worthwhile life before we decide about happiness.

(1) As with suffering, worthwhile life and happiness are somewhat independent. Where they don't overlap, we can see directly that worthwhile is more important. Even where they do overlap, still we can figure out that worthwhile is basic. (2) When life is worthwhile, happiness is not as important as the fact that life is worthwhile, and the lack of big lasting happiness is not as important as that life is worthwhile. Life can be worthwhile even if we are not very happy as long as we don't suffer deeply. Worthwhile life does not need big constant happiness. Most people don't expect big constant happiness so as to think life is worthwhile. Most people don't expect big constant happiness. (3) If life is not worthwhile, then some happiness or some unhappiness is not as important as the fact that life is not worthwhile. Even a not-worthy-life can have some happiness. Life can be not worthwhile despite some happiness. (4) Some unhappiness does not by itself make life not worthwhile. Some happiness does not by itself make life worthwhile. Even a fair dose of happiness does not by itself make life worthwhile. Worthwhile life is worthwhile in itself, not primarily because of happiness. Not worthwhile life is not worthwhile in itself, not only due to lack of happiness or only through unhappiness. (5) Worthwhile life does not guarantee happiness. Not worthwhile life does not guarantee that we suffer or that we lack happiness. (6) We need to decide worthwhile life first. Then decide the roles of hope, happiness, unhappiness, satisfaction, and suffering in life.

We can be happy for a while if we don't expect situations to last, we don't expect happiness to last, and we don't expect huge happiness but only modest happiness suited to real life; that is, if we manage living. I don't know what Buddhism says about this alternative of limited happiness. People dream of forever big happiness but most people don't really expect to get it and so most people base real acts on temporary small happiness. That behavior too goes along with ideas about managing. I don't know what the real expectations and behavior of people implies for Buddhist ideas.

**(A) (14) Some Managing Advice.**

Even if you decide life is worthwhile, decide you can chase some satisfaction, and use “let go of letting go” as a magic formula, you still need to work on not clinging and on letting go, and you still need to not demand too much. The average person, even a really smart person, clings far too much.

Don't think the task is impossible. The fact that most things in life, and your own whole life, are transient does not necessarily mean there is no real satisfaction.

Most people get satisfaction from serving something that is good and that is bigger than themselves such as God or the Dharma. Even so, don't force yourself to serve an imaginary “bigger than me” just because I said so.

Usually people get more happiness when they do not aim hard at happiness but instead aim for other goals such as enjoying work, doing something useful, and a healthy family. Happiness comes as a bonus along the way, and it comes in the right amounts for the right duration. This is a case where we are more likely to miss if we aim right at the target and more likely to hit the target if we aim at something nearby. Do what works and is good.

**(A) (15) Some More Words.**

(1) The following is easy to say but hard to do: “Take it as it comes” and “let go”. Don't try to hold on to anything beyond its natural span and don't try to make happiness more than it is. Don't try to arrange the world so you have greater longer happiness than comes naturally. When something good comes along, welcome it. When the good thing is over, let it go. This idea is one key in what I call “managing”. I love this idea but I know I can't live by this idea alone.

“Take it as it comes” and “let go” is hard to do for three good reasons. (1A) People are not lower animals that take what food and sex come along and then walk on. People see ahead and plan ahead. Even some animals see ahead and might plan ahead. People plan for bigger longer happiness. That is part of our evolved nature. To go against that part of our nature is as much to go against the Dharma as to steal, lie, murder, and clench. “Only dead fish ‘go with the flow’”. Do you really want to base marriage on “take it as it comes and let it go when you feel like it”? The “plan ahead” part of our nature has to be worked into “take it as it comes” and “let go”. For all their wisdom, religious teachers such as the Buddha, Jesus, and Chuang Tzu never told us how.

(1B) Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow but he also told us to work hard for the Kingdom of God, not only for today, but to plan for tomorrow. He sent people out to work for the Kingdom of God. He set up an organization to help bring in the Kingdom of God. If you enter the monkhood, you anticipate working hard to make a better world. Part of our action for today and our planning for tomorrow is to work hard to make a better world. That is hard to do on the basis of “take it as it comes” and “let go”. This kind of planning for this kind of world also is a part of our natural evolved nature. There is no obvious solution to this dilemma. It helps to keep in mind that the ultimate fate of the world is not in your hands but in the hands of God or the Dharma. You still have to try hard.

(1C) Like it or not, big societies, the state, capitalism and big business, and self-government, are part of life now. There is no place to escape. For better or worse, we have to live in them. We might as well live for better. We can't do that with "take it as it comes". We cannot run democracy on the basis of "take it as it comes". When you have a problem, do you want officials to brush you off with "Let go, sad little aggrieved misguided ignorant being, and learn Dharma wisdom"? This issue was an argument between Taoists and Confucians in China 2500 years ago.

(2) Many Westerners believe Buddhism champions the idea of "take it as it comes, let go when it is done". People take this idea as the heart of Buddhism. I love the idea. I use it below. The idea does show up in Buddhist texts written clearly after the Buddha, especially in Mahayana texts. I wish I could declare that this idea is an obvious integral part of all Buddhism. But it does not show up in early texts, at least as far as I know. In early texts, you are more apt to read how sticky life is, how much suffering besets life, how hard it is to escape suffering, how transient happiness is, and how we should forget about any happiness and should work instead on escaping suffering. Again, this is one reason why I was led to contemplate "not worthwhile" and the relation between "not worthwhile" and "suffering".

We should not take this situation too far down any direction. We should not take it to mean that the idea was entirely absent in early Buddhism, that it appears only later, that it appears only in Mahayana, and that it was not a key part of the thought of the Buddha. We also should not take it as the hidden heart of real Buddhism that was so obvious and strong that early Buddhists did not need to write it down.

I learned this idea not only from texts but from real flesh and blood Theravada monks who had little to do ever with Westerners. Some were quite literate in Buddhist texts, and certainly did know of Mahayana texts, but I think they did not pick up the idea that way. Rather, it seemed to be a part of Buddhist oral culture that they had learned from other monks and that they were happy to pass along. Versions of the idea are part of Buddhist popular culture. These facts do not mean the idea was a part of early Buddhism from the time of the Buddha and has been passed along by word of mouth. These facts do not mean the idea was such an obvious integral part of Buddhism that the idea did not have to be written down. These facts do not mean the idea is far more important than "defeat suffering". They also do not mean the idea is mere fluff spun off as a shallow truism to make life more superficial and easier. There is real meat on those bones, and it takes chewing too. I think it is reasonable to associate this idea with Theravada and with Buddhism in general. Other religions are free to take credit too; I think Jesus and Chuang Tzu knew the idea and were quite comfortable with it.

As with all ideas, we have to assess "take it as it comes" and "let it go" on its own merits in the context of other ideas including "you may plan ahead" and "work hard for a better world". You have to do that. That is part of what the Buddha and Jesus wanted you to do.

### **(A) (16) Is Life Too Sticky?**

Maybe the most classic and entertaining case of sticky life is Mowgli and the village girl in Kipling's great "Jungle Books". When all is said and done, is all this talking about trying to find a balance of what to keep and how much just silliness? Is life so sticky that we really can't play this game? Do we have to let it all go, including, maybe, Buddha, Dharma, the Sangha (Community of Buddhists), meditation, Compassion, the Four Truths, the Eightfold Way, Love, Beauty, and Hope? If we try to find a few things to hold, are we

doomed to recreate the whole sticky spider's web and get eaten by the giant spider of our own desires? There is a good reason why people forbid talk of religion and politics at gatherings.

Mahayana and Hinduism say "Yes, we are doomed to recreate the whole thing over and over in various guises but that is a really good thing. We are agents of the Dharma, doing its Will, and finding its Joy, through us".

Theravada says we must let it all go except for the Dharma, Buddha, Sangha, Four Truths, and Eightfold Path. You have to ask particular schools and people in Theravada what to hold on to and what to let go, and I suggest you do ask them.

Most people don't lead well-balanced well-ordered effective self-aware lives. Most people are caught up in silly desires with short satisfactions. Most people go through life from cling to cling. Most people are useful only because they are part of a social-governmental-economic system in which they help others by seeking their own benefit, as in capitalism, bureaucracy, and academia. Yet most people are not harmful either except when caught up in unusual selfishness or in "us against them" such as "end all programs except those that serve only us" or "our lives matter". Most people don't get so caught in stickiness that they recreate an evil-empire-of-the-spirit or an empty-desert-of-desire-mirages. Most people could do a whole lot better but they won't. The majority simply end at death. I think their lives and your life are worthwhile anyway.

Now, you decide. And cling, or don't cling, to whatever you decide. Or, don't decide, refuse to decide, and cling, or don't cling, to that. And see these choices as part of the stickiness of the world.

I think we can deal with sticky life even if we fail often and even if some of us fail completely. If we decide that life is worthwhile, as most of us do, then we also decide we can deal with sticky life. Then we need to decide what to do. I think we are led strongly to the ideas in Part One. If any religion, or any believer, decides he-she can deal with sticky life, and life is worthwhile, and he-she has to decide what to do next, then he-she has to think about the ideas in Part One too.

### **(B) Dharma as Law, Dream, Game, and More.**

-From "I Fought the Law" by Sonny Curtis, sung by the Bobby Fuller Four, Lou Reed, and The Clash:

"Breakin' rocks in the hot sun  
I fought the law and the law won  
Y'know my race is run  
I fought the law and the law won"

-Quoted by William Butler Yeats from an old play; also from the poet Delmore Schwartz:

"In dreams begin responsibilities"

-Recall from above from "Jack and Diane" by John Mellencamp:

“Oh, yeah, life goes on  
Long after the thrill of livin’ is gone”

### **(B) (1) Dharma as Law.**

Buddhism and Hinduism often call Dharma “the Law”. The Dharma does not control us absolutely but it does guide strongly. It is like “God’s Wish-Will” or a hard version of “the Tao” (see chapter on Taoism). The Dharma is like the rules of a play when you are in the play. It is the game we all play just by being. It is like “the system” that Americans rebel against or “the game” in “game of love”, “got to love the game”, or “hate the game, not the player”. We must work within the rules of Dharma. In Buddhism, cause-and-effect and Dharma are aspects of each other. For Law versus Love, see the movie “A Matter of Life and Death” starring David Niven.

Anyone who defies the Law comes to grief. Anyone who goes along with the Law likely succeeds. Even for people who see that life is not worthwhile and wish to escape stickiness, clinging, struggle, etc, it is better to go along with the Dharma and use it than to fight the Dharma by pretending that you can bend all to your will. People who try to bend the Law to their will end up serving time in bad lives, in Dharma prison, Dharma hell. “I fought the Law, and the Law won”. When people or even gods fight the Dharma, it defeats them and punishes them to get them to reform: “Breakin’ rocks in the hot sun”. This is part of the intrinsic moral nature of the world. Seeing that you cannot bend the Dharma to your will goes with seeing the limited coherence of selves; see below on self. Buddhism is not about being so free that you can do as you wish. Buddhism is not about knowing the universe so well, and being such a key part of it, that you can bend reality and can do as you wish, as in some versions of Mahayana. When you learn to use the Dharma to get out of a bad game, then you simply do not reappear: “Y’know my race is run”.

### **(B) (2) Dharma as Dream.**

Everyone dreams of having his-her dreams come true. We think having our dreams come true means everything goes our way, troubles end, and bliss begins. In fact, that is not true. “Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it”. All dreams entail stickiness, clinging, striving, hardship, etc. A dream is not freedom but instead is responsibility, especially if it comes true, and more so when it includes other people. If we dream of a family, and get one, we soon learn “in dreams begin responsibilities”. If we dream of business or academic success, and get it, we soon learn the same. In teaching, we have to give grades, meet students, write proposals, kiss up to authorities, etc. Even merely having the dream leads to the responsibility to fight for the dream; see the movie “Breakfast Club”. All dreams, for lowest worm to highest god, entail binding responsibilities. If we want to get rid of binding responsibilities, we have to stop clinging to dreams. To stop clinging to dreams, we have to see that even realized dreams are not worthwhile. We use the Law to avoid clinging to dreams and to dreams-come-true.

One way to see the world is as Dharma’s dream. Dharma dreams the world into being and-or becoming. Even in Dharma’s own dream, in dreams begin responsibilities. You should think out what responsibilities the dreaming Dharma might have in a moral universe with much drama, moral dilemmas, and many kinds of needy characters. That thought can be a big step on the road to Hinduism. The Dharma itself has problems when it dreams the world. Buddhism is a way out of the dream problems of the Dharma. As

individuals within the Dharma dream, to get out of the dream problems of the Dharma, we have to go along with the Dharma. We wake up out of the Dharma dream by playing out the Dharma dream.

Buddhism is like old-fashioned blues without any upbeat hopeful ending, without the lingering sadness, and especially without lingering self-pity. It is not like raunchy or funny songs with a blues scale, rhythm, structure, or idiom, like Bessie Smith or Jerry Lee Lewis. It is not “blues inflected” “guitar rock” or “jam rock” from the 1970s or 1990s. It is not “New Age”. It is about facing sadness, not overcoming sadness so as to be happy. Like classic blues, Buddhism does not overcome tragedy and sadness but accepts them and endures until the game plays out, like “St. James Infirmary”, “Motherless Child”, or the versions of “Black and Blue” and “Shine” by Louis Armstrong. Buddhism is longing for Shenandoah and knowing you will never find it in this world but also knowing you can get by for a while on this side of the wide Missouri. It is like “Crazy” and “Walking after Midnight” sung by Patsy Cline or like half the songs of Hank Williams but without the self-pity. It is like Joni Mitchell if you overlook the lilt and listen to the words and where the music goes. Buddhism is about facing all inevitable sad bad things, accepting them, and then letting go. It is not about letting go so you can move on to better or so you can show the enigmatic smile from the novel “Siddhartha” or the movie “Being There”. You might enjoy the lilt from Joni Mitchell after you let go but you don’t let go just so you can feel the lilt.

### **(B) (3) Dharma as Game.**

The Dharma made the game, started the game, and runs the game. Buddhists are in a Dharma game but they can’t escape without using Dharma. In Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God built the game and what God did was good until humans and Satan ruined it. It seems reasonable that what the Dharma did was good. The Dharma world does not have to be good in a conventional sense, conventional moral sense, economic, or simplistic sense, but still is good. The Dharma made the world sticky. The Dharma made you with desires, urge to cling, and so suffer, and it made you with your urge to stop clinging and stop suffering. So, it stands to reason that the game is good despite stickiness, clinging, and suffering or even because of stickiness, clinging, and suffering. The game does not have to be good for everybody all the time, just good overall. It seems contradictory, presumptuous, rebellious, ungrateful, spiteful, and selfish to reject the game, like rejecting God. Why not see that you are wrong instead of blaming the Dharma? You set yourself up to break a lot of hard rocks. Anyone who rejects the game puts him-herself above Dharma and so is caught up in the egotism and selfish clinging that the Buddha sought to cure. You try to use the Dharma as a tool to overcome the Dharma and merely that. You put yourself above Dharma when you reject the bounty of the Dharma. You seek to turn Dharma against itself so that, like a child, you can say “No” to all that your parents generously give you. This problem with Dharma is related to the logical problem mentioned above.

Buddhists know of these implications, and their responses help define schools of Buddhism. I cannot go into the possibilities here. Briefly, most Buddhism ignores the implications, and it repeats teachings about the importance of overcoming stickiness, desire, clinging, self, and suffering. It says: meditate and all will sort out. Buddhism says it goes along with the Dharma and does not use the Dharma for selfishness. I do not pronounce on this position. It is worthwhile to know Buddhist critiques of the game and the self, and to learn a little of meditation and “Buddhist Aids”.

On a more practical level, most Buddhists, including most monks, use the Dharma to bring out the best aspects of the Dharma and to suppress any possible bad aspects of the Dharma. They use meditation, study, and practice to make themselves kinder, mindful, aware of the ebb and flow of life, less selfish, and more moral while making themselves less hasty, less hot, less selfish, and less angry. They do not make an elaborate theory of why the Dharma has good and bad aspects, why they should favor good over bad, or why Dharma provides good tools for favoring one aspect of itself over the other aspect of itself. This stance by Buddhists might offer a hint why Jedi in Star Wars perpetuated a myth about ultimately merging the light side and the dark side.

Mahayana and Hinduism used this dilemma for their ends when they reaffirmed the system as a whole over the suffering of any particular individual in any particular situation in any particular lifetime. They urge people to embrace the system as a whole even if particular individuals have trouble in this life now. If the Dharma made you, it wants more of you than to reject the system that the Dharma also made. In Hinduism, the “more” that the Dharma wants is for you to do your social and cosmic duties, to keep the Dharma going, and so to make the world better in the way that the Dharma thinks is better. The avatar (Hinduism) or the bodhisattva (Mahayana) sometimes serves as the “chosen one, the savior” who unites the dark side and light side of the Dharma. I disagree with the uses by Mahayana and Hinduism even if I think life as a whole is worthwhile and we should all work to make the world better.

If you want to beat the system, the game, you don’t rebel against it. The game counts on rebellion and uses that to keep you playing. It is another level of control like “the One” in the “Matrix” movies, rebels and artists in Romanticism, or bad guys in Hinduism.

To beat the game, you play by the rules until you play out the hand, and then you simply stop playing. It is like the movie “War Games” with Allie Sheedy and Matthew Broderick. The only way to win the big game of “Global Thermonuclear War” is to play the little game of “tick tack toe” until you see it can never lead to victory within the game. Likewise, the big game can never lead to victory within the big game, and the only way to win is not to play.

Herman Hesse in “Siddhartha”, Rudyard Kipling in “Kim” and the “Jungle Books”, and the Mahabharata, all suggest the game is sticky. We cannot play only a little bit. Once we begin at all, we get sucked into it totally. Mahayana and Hinduism suggest, if we do accept the game wholeheartedly, that can be a very good thing. If we can’t see through to the goodness of the game, then the only thing we can do is opt out, refuse to play. On the other hand, I have suggested that throwing yourself into the game is dangerous and usually bad, and that we can play only a little if we manage well. We can’t commit to total victory, or we will be sucked down in a bad way. We do the best we can with what nature gave us. Hesse would say I am wrong and foolish, I am doomed to be sucked into the game totally, and, sooner or later, I have to stop playing and opt out. This is what Michael Corleone felt at the end of his life. You have to decide, hopefully before you get sucked in too far and before you opt out without knowing why.

Be careful. Often thinking you are opting out really is only another play within the game, and really you are falling farther than you can imagine. You do not let go of letting go (see above). I found the best way to let go of letting go is to play a little bit while always mindful that you can get sucked down the rabbit hole. You are less likely to get sucked in too far if you think it is all about worthwhile life and managing

than if you think it is all about the defeat of stickiness, clinging, and striving, and you act both as if life is not worthwhile and life is worthwhile.

**(B) (4) Dharma Game is Not Worthwhile.**

It might make more sense to say “the (Dharma) game is not worthwhile” than “life is not worthwhile”. After you decide if the game is worthwhile then you can decide about life. You can decide (a) the game is not worthwhile but life is worthwhile or (b) the game is not worthwhile and life is not worthwhile too. If you say the game is worthwhile, you almost have to say life is worthwhile. Smart people often wish to say the game is not worthwhile but life is worthwhile. The choice is not so simple. Settling up with the game is a tempting idea but it turns out to be an in-between step that it is best not to take.

Instead, start by deciding whether life is worthwhile or not. If you decide life is worthwhile, then you don’t have to worry much about the game. If you decide life is not worthwhile, you have also decided the game is not worthwhile and also don’t have to worry much about the game.

People wish to say life is worthwhile but the game is not. People cling to the game so they can conquer the game so they feel clever and strong. In contrast, they really get only extra unneeded steps and get caught in the trap of feeling clever and strong when they are not. The game wins. Trying to reject the game but embrace life is that higher level of control. To think about the game so as to reject the game is to cling to it, and the game wins again. The best way to reject the game is not to think about it much, not to play it. Go on with your life without referring to it.

(a) The kind of life that you lead when you decide life is worthwhile when you manage suffering and clinging, and (b) the kind of the life that you lead when you say the game is not worthwhile but life is modestly worthwhile, are (c) so close that it is not worth splitting that hair here. Splitting tempts too strongly to wrong ideas. Choose option (a) and you get (b).

Some people say they can’t decide if life is worthwhile without first deciding about the game. If you feel you must decide about the game first, then do so, but ultimately the important question is whether life is worthwhile, not the game. Regardless what you decide about the game, you also have to decide about life, and you might as well think about life while you decide about the game. You can take what I say in this chapter about worthwhile life and not worthwhile life as a way to see through the game so as to make up your mind if life-without-the-game is worthwhile or not, and then decide what to do. If you try that path, you had better go slowly and be careful.

The stance that life is worthwhile despite the game is similar to how good Classical Cynics saw the world and how David Hume saw it. They illustrate adept good people who avoid most traps.

**(B) (5) Buddhism as Crazy Clinging; Let Go of All Striving.**

Here is another instance of the logical problem mentioned above. Anything that sticks in our heads and we pursue, we cling to and are stuck on that thing. Sticking and clinging are obvious with obsessions such as wealth, power, sex, beauty, love, and smart phones but they are as true of everyday life such as success at work, a house, steady good job, food, etc. Yet Buddhists pursue advancement in Buddhist

prowess with zeal that would shame mad business people, buyers of cosmetics, politicians, academics, sports fans, and celebrity fans. Monks can let go even of basics such as steady food. They spend hours reading arcane sutras in foreign languages and meditating. They deny simple pleasures even in balance with reading and meditating. Monks dress funny. Buddhists obsess. They are stuck on, and cling to, ideas of awakening that are odd, against evolved human nature, unrealistic, and that they only dimly understand. They are lost in a way. Isn't Buddhist awakening a false idol of the sort that the Buddha warned against? To awaken, shouldn't Buddhists let go of awakening? If they don't let go of awakening, they can never wake up.

The simple answer might be part of the Middle Path. Buddhists can-may-and-should pursue awakening but not like crazy self-starving mortifying yogis or like crazy celebrity fans. That is one mistake made by the first teachers of the Buddha, before he was enlightened. True Buddhist seeking is not the same. It is more like how a champion pro golfer pursues golf knowing that there is an end to his-her career or like a mathematician pursues puzzles knowing that, once a puzzle is solved, it is solved forever.

Whether you find this answer satisfying depends on you. Because I am not a Buddhist, I don't have to say. Mahayana used this puzzle to say that normal everyday asleep life and awakened life are the same, and to put life into a big Dharma system. Hinduism did the same although with its own spin. Zen says you do have to pursue awakening with zeal at first but can-may-and-should let go later on when the time is ripe. Taoists disdain or ignore the issue.

I could easily use these dilemmas as a snide way to discredit Buddhism but that path is low. All ways of thought, life, and religion have dilemmas. They also have valid insights and they deal with problems that are not merely of their own making but are of the real world. They all have their own value. It is better to take on religions and other stances at their best terms fairly. You should think about these dilemmas to see how you would handle them.

My advice about not making awakening into a sticky object of clinging is the same advice that I give to Christians about Salvation, Justification, Grace, Works, and Heaven. Don't worry about Salvation and Heaven. God will assess you. If you worry about those, you will freeze up and screw up. Genuinely let go. Don't pretend to let go as a roundabout way to Heaven. Trust God and really let go. Be the best you can along the lines Jesus taught. If you can't let go and trust God, don't worry about that either but still be the best person you can along the lines Jesus taught. Buddhists should learn about awakening and value the idea but don't be trapped by it. Learn what you should do to be a better person and better Buddhist. Do that. If you do that, then you can let awakening take care of itself. Don't follow magic, empty rituals, or silly pursuit of external merit. Enjoy rituals if you can. Trust Dharma. My answer is like the Taoist and Zen answer. Many Buddhists do this already, more so than Christians.

### **(B) (6) Using Logical Traps to Our Advantage: "Manage".**

This section recalls the logical trap from above. This trap is similar to other traps including a famous trap in formal logic called the "Liar's Paradox" ("I always lie"). It is similar to "damned if you do, damned if you don't" and to "Mexican Standoff". It is related to the idea that, if you push any idea to its limits, it becomes nonsense, and can become its opposite ("only a Sith deals in absolutes"). The material here is a taste of what Tao and Zen teachers do to get people to jump out of traps and to think for themselves. This might

seem like a silly game but it is more. These logical conundrums are signs to start thinking. You need to be ready for these games because Mahayana and Hinduism use them to make us think and use them to attack other religions, especially Theravada.

We want to not cling. If we cling to not-clinging, then do we not cling or do we cling? If we not cling to not-clinging, do we still cling or do we not cling?

To “reach Nirvana” we have to let go of a lot, maybe all. Do we also let go of reaching Nirvana? If we do let go, we never reach Nirvana. If we don’t let go, we never reach Nirvana. Choose. Then go through the same exercise with “awaken” and “get saved”.

The Dharma tells us that we have to let go. Do we also have to let go of the Dharma? If we let go of the Dharma, do we then have to stop letting go? If we stop letting go, can we go back to the Dharma? If we do not let go of the Dharma, we cannot fulfill the Dharma, and so we kill the Dharma. Most Buddhists abhor the idea of letting go of the Dharma and are quite uneasy with the idea that “let go” implies letting go of the Dharma.

“Fear nothing but fear”. If you don’t fear fear, then you will fear. If you do fear fear, then you will fear. Keep this problem in mind for material below.

“Hate nothing but hatred”. If you do hate hatred, you will hate. If you don’t hate hatred, you will hate. “Do everything in moderation”. If you do moderation in moderation then sometimes you will do too little and sometimes too much. If you don’t do moderation in moderation, you miss out on a valuable idea in life.

Pure rule of the majority soon leads to tyranny, which is the complete negation of democracy. Besides pure rule of the majority, we also need basic rules and the people have to follow the rules. Democracy can only exist when it is not pure democracy.

In human affairs, almost every big idea should apply to itself to some extent. This principle is similar to “applies equally” and “what if everybody did it?” or “what if nobody did it?” from morality. If an idea can’t apply to itself, you need to work on the idea until you can understand it better, see what is going on, and see some paths through the problem.

When we are near these logical traps, it does not necessarily mean something has gone so wrong that we are stuck in agony. It can be an opportunity. It means we have to use judgment. Usually it means we have to take from both sides according to what is best – the Middle Path. Step back. Think “outside the box”. See what you lose by clinging to one side. Think what you gain by taking from both sides. See if you can take good from one side without necessarily killing the other. As evolved sentient beings, luckily evolution gave us the ability to do all this enough. It might be one way we are superior to machines, at least for the next few decades. I call this skill “managing”. Some people call it “coping”.

If we let go of letting go, that means we do have to hold on to some things. So what? We manage. We cope. We choose what to let go of and what to hold. I prefer this option to being stuck trying to let go of letting go or trying to rationalize why we have to let go of everything but can’t.

Democracy has to be a mix of majority force and principles. So what? We can manage this situation if we try and we don't think we will get it perfect for every case for all time.

Even the Middle Path is not always the Middle Path, and sometimes the off-center is the Middle Path. When bullies find out that we compromise, they are quick to take advantage. Then we have to stand our ground, get tough, stick to our guns, find out what we believe in fight for that, and even have to get crazy. The rules in democracy are the residue of people sticking to their guns in the past. Then the good Middle Path includes residue from not the Middle Path, residue from the extremes. Of course, if we stick to our guns all the time then we get crazy and we are as vulnerable to bullies and crazy people of other kinds; and we are back to the obvious Middle Path. Yes, we can manage all this but it takes some experience.

Managing is a skill as hard and deep as letting go and it requires much more than clinging mindlessly to a mere dogma, to God, Dharma, Tao, or Heaven. It does not contravene faith.

**(B) (7) Instead: Manage Clinging and Suffering, and Think Well Enough.**

Dalai Lama (1): "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional".

Dalai Lama (2): "The ultimate source of happiness is our mental attitude".

French proverb: "He (she) who fears to suffer, suffers from fear".

These lines are not quite the same as "let go of letting go" but are in the same family and they require us to think and to manage. They teach lessons. One undoes the others. The Dalai Lama is a Mahayanist (Tibetan) but that doesn't matter in this episode.

I revere the Dalai Lama, the idea in the first quote from him is valuable, and likely the Buddha had some idea like this in mind. I think the Dalai Lama had in mind something like that we can be angry, or even hate, but we don't have to act on anger or hate. This is a good idea, and it is about the best we can do with anger and hatred. Even then, the best is to manage, and we can expect to slip up sometimes. But desire, clinging, pain, and suffering don't work exactly like anger and acting on anger, and the difference makes a difference. If we err on how we treat desire, clinging, pain, and suffering, we will not be able to handle anger and hate, and we will act on anger and hate.

As a result, the quip is more clever than wise. It divides things that have much in common, so as to make a distinction sharper than it really is. It uses a small difference to make a metaphysical chasm. It asserts a qualitative difference between us and the world. Pain is in the world but suffering is only in us, not from the world. We control the world by changing our attitude; we can make it all better by changing our attitude. That is all we need to do. We are all-powerful. Quip (1) leads directly to quip (2). Both are false and dangerous. They imply that we have magical control of an illusory world, as in the story of Vimalakirti from Mahayana (see chapter). They support Mahayana, Hinduism, and Romanticism. The quips and the attitude overlook that the world is as real as we are and that we are in many relations with the world, ideas that are basic in Buddhism. The quips imply that people who "get it" are sharp and so the quips invite the smug end of thinking rather than the curious start of thinking. We have to accept that we are in

relations with the world, and we cannot make the relations entirely one-sided. We cannot merely win by totally overcoming suffering or by changing our attitude.

Although quote (1) uses the mild word “optional”, really it says we can and should defeat all suffering. It promotes a mere dogma, and so promotes bad clinging. This particular clinging has distorted Buddhism. What happens to suffering when it is fully optional? If so, then who opts to suffer, when, how much, or why? How do we decide which suffering to accept and which to deny? Only a crazy person would opt to suffer at all if he-she could avoid it. If taxes were fully optional, who would pay? In love, if heartache were optional, would anyone choose it? Does pain still have its sting if suffering is optional? What about life? Is life rotten before we find an attitude to make pain optional but “hunky dory” and is abundant fun after we find a way? Can you make suffering optional by popping pills and so changing your attitude that way? I disagree that we can defeat all suffering or that we should.

Sometimes pain is suffering. Often suffering hurts like “real” pain. Sometimes pain and even suffering are good. Some kinds of pain and suffering change us. We can learn to let go of some pain and some suffering but not all of either. We have to learn the difference. It takes more wisdom to do that than is implied in this quote. Think about caring for a spouse with dementia after you two have lived a long time together and have succeeded and failed together at many things, things that he-she might not remember but that helped people and helped nature. I challenge you to draw clear lines.

Compare: “I love him but I don’t love-love him”. “I love my country but I don’t love-love it”. “Buzzed is not drunk. I can drive buzzed”. “Everybody is multi-sexual so specific gender is optional”. “Reign is inevitable but democracy is optional (or tyranny, monarchy, Communism, fascism)”.

I think of managing suffering, managing clinging, and managing problems rather than overcoming them; and I think of thinking “well enough” rather than of thinking with perfect clarity and consistency. People who merely manage still feel some suffering; they cannot opt out of all suffering. Sometimes events and suffering defeat even a person who is adept at managing. People who think adeptly still err. People who merely manage have to accept some risk. My use of “managing” and “well enough” is on the Middle Path. Making suffering totally optional is not on the Middle Path.

Sometimes you have to let go of letting-go-of-suffering. People who dedicate themselves to eradicate suffering cling to suffering and cling to their clinging. They make suffering an object of clinging and they make letting go of suffering an object of clinging. People who fear suffering and so cling to suffering also cling to their fear and so cause themselves suffering. Instead, when we (1) manage clinging, we have to manage (2a) clinging-to-suffering and (2b) clinging-to-fear-of-suffering. To manage (2a) clinging-to-suffering and to manage (2b) clinging-to-fear, we don’t obsess over that extra clinging too; we don’t add another pain-suffering-fear-and-guilt on top of this pain-fear-and-suffering. Instead we find a way to live with it all. We follow the French proverb. We find a way to live with fear-of-suffering and suffering. We don’t banish all suffering and all fear. We manage most (nearly all) suffering and fear.

If by making suffering optional, the Dalia Lama meant that sometimes we have to let go of trying to control all suffering, that we can only manage suffering, then I agree. If by making suffering optional, he really meant get rid of all suffering, then I disagree. I think the Buddha and the Dalai Lama meant eradicate all suffering, so I disagree.

People who merely manage suffering accept that sometimes suffering overcomes us; and they are willing to take that chance as part of a worthwhile life. "Sometimes you get the bear and sometimes the bear gets you". People who are not content to merely manage suffering, people who wish to make suffering optional and to defeat it, are afraid that suffering will overcome them sometimes. They are not willing to take the chance. They fear suffering. They are willing to say life is not worthwhile in order to avoid the chance that suffering might sometimes overcome them. People who wish to defeat suffering (make it optional) cling to fear of suffering and do whatever is needed to service their clinging to a fear. People content to merely manage suffering also manage their fear and largely let go of that one fear. People who fear life also fear suffering and wish to end suffering so that they can control their lives. Apparently the Buddha feared suffering and he did what he had to do to avoid suffering including saying (implying) that life is not worthwhile.

In the Hindu epic poem the Mahabharata, and in "Siddhartha" by Herman Hesse, people who live normal lives also gamble in-and-with life while people who wish to end suffering refuse to gamble. A major hero of the Mahabharata, Yudisthira, had a gambling problem, and it started the story. In "Siddhartha", just before walking up, Siddhartha spent years lost in gambling. He only wakes up when he sees how sticky gambling and life are. People who do not fear life must gamble. People who do fear life will not gamble and they seek to end suffering so as also to end all risk. They fear suffering and gambling. The view in the Mahabharata and Hesse is ultimately wrong but it is useful here. If you fear suffering then you say that life is not worthwhile. If you say that life is worthwhile then you must risk some suffering and failure. Even if you manage, you still must risk some suffering and failure. You do not have to like gambling, in fact you can detest it, and I think most people who think life is worthwhile don't like gambling, but you have to be willing to take a chance. You have to choose.

As long as we are beset by suffering, we cannot think clearly enough and we cannot decide whether life is worthwhile. We do need to manage suffering before we can decide about worthwhile. To do that, we need to think more adeptly than most people think. We don't need to think with perfect consistency and clarity but only well enough. We don't need to completely overcome suffering but only to manage it. To manage suffering is not to make suffering fully optional. The Buddha gave us ideas and methods to think well enough (not perfectly), and to manage suffering enough (not overcome it totally), so we could decide if suffering is the main issue or worthwhile life is the main issue, and to decide if life is worthwhile. Even if suffering is the main issue, you still have to decide if life is worthwhile. Some people, even without much training, are close to being able to think well enough, and to manage suffering well enough, to decide. Even many non-Buddhists are not so far away.

You cannot conquer suffering until you can manage suffering well enough. When you manage suffering well enough, you will see that likely you can't conquer suffering completely and likely you won't want to. Clinging-to-conquering-suffering thwarts learning to manage suffering, and so likely thwarts conquering suffering. You cannot think with total consistency and clarity until you can think well enough. When you can think well enough, you won't need to think with total clarity and consistency, and likely won't seek it. Clinging-to-thinking-with-perfect-consistency-and-clarity thwarts learning to think well enough, and likely thwarts thinking-with-perfect-consistency-and-clarity. Conquering-suffering and thinking-with-perfect-clarity-and-consistency sound more like the wrong overly-strict teachers of Siddhartha than like his Middle

Path. Sooner or later, you have to trust your ability to manage suffering and to think well enough. If you can trust, you manage better and think better. See the chapters on Taoism and Zen.

If you think life is worthwhile, it is easier to manage pain and suffering. If you think life is worthwhile, you cannot automatically conquer pain and suffering. Those relations are fairly easy to see. I cannot figure out all the relations between worthwhile, not worthwhile, conquering suffering, making suffering optional, and before and after.

You cannot pretend to (seek to) manage suffering and to (seek to) think well enough and then leave the issues of worthwhile life and suffering hang. At some point, you have to say “enough” and then decide about suffering and about worthwhile or not worthwhile. Don’t evade. You can work on “suffering” and “worthwhile” both at the same time until you can see clearly enough, and then you must decide. Use Aids but don’t abuse them. Not to decide is more a betrayal of the Buddha than to disagree with him.

You guess what the Buddha decided when his mind cleared (enough).

### **(B) (8) Buddhism as Getting Free.**

(A) While we suffer, we can’t think well; while we can’t think well, we suffer. The Buddha offered ideas and ways to free us from this impasse so we can think well and manage suffering. (B) Now that we can think straight and manage suffering, we can decide if life is worthwhile or not, we can decide about the game, and what to do with life. The Buddha freed us to decide. Buddhism is about getting free. I do not specify what kind of free. Buddhism is the only way to get free.

Some idea of Buddhism as getting free might have been important when people adopted Buddhism at its start. Buddhism gave freedom from the Brahmin-and-rulers system, and people then mixed up political-religious freedom with the kind of freedom described above. I don’t know.

This view of Buddhism as freedom is a step to Mahayana and Hinduism. Some Western Buddhists act as if this were their view of Buddhism, although they don’t say it clearly. “Buddhism as how to get free” appeals to Westerners and to modern people as economic and political freedom become more important. As far as I can tell, Western people did not lead Buddhists to see Buddhism in this way until recently, and the Western view was not important to Buddhists until recently.

Buddhism helps with freedom but I don’t like seeing it primarily that way. If life is not worthwhile, whether we are free does not matter a lot. We only need to be free enough to opt out. If life is worthwhile, then we should see that life can be worthwhile even if we are not fully free in all ways. We can be not-fully-free in some ways or even not-at-all-free in some ways. We can be working toward freedom. If we were not-at-all-free in any way, we couldn’t glimpse the ideas and ways of Buddhism. Here is not the place to wrangle over how free, and in what ways, we need to be to keep life worthwhile, or how we got enough freedom in the first place to begin Buddhism.

So, before we can assess this view of Buddhism, we have to deal with issues of worthwhile life, suffering, and the roles of worthwhile life and suffering in Buddhism. We have to think if Buddhism intended to say whether life is worthwhile, and we have to think how Buddhism focuses on suffering. We have to decide

if suffering is the main issue in life, and is correct to make it the main issue. Even if we think the Buddha really intended his ideas to make us free, Buddhism now does not see itself first that way. We have to deal with the terms in which the problem was originally given (Wheel) and the terms in which Buddhists see their religion (suffering and thinking clearly). If the Buddha intended to make us free, he intended to make us free so we could decide about suffering, the Wheel, and whether life is worthwhile. Freedom was a means at least as much as an end. We have to focus on the ends toward which freedom aims and not treat freedom and the one-and-only great-everything-in-itself self-justifying end that we tend to do in the modern over-politicized-over-populist world. This chapter is about the questions of worthwhile life and suffering rather than the question of whether Buddhism is all about freedom.

We are lucky to be at least partially free and thus able to decide well enough. Working on questions of worthwhile life and suffering first is necessary preparation for later thinking about Buddhism as freedom, and for getting free. Working on those questions first is more effective than directly going after the issue of Buddhism as freedom and better than directly going for freedom. We have to decide those issues to get free even if deciding them does not alone make us free.

### **(B) (9) A Common Practice.**

You can pursue a version, even your own version, of letting go, not clinging, letting go of letting go, not suffering, making suffering optional, or managing, and call it whatever you want. Letting go of some things while valuing other things is common to all religions and philosophies. The distinction between what to let go and what to hold does not always coincide with the distinction between profane and sacred. Much of what all good major religions and philosophies advise us to let go, or hold, is common among them. People call it by different names. That coming together can be quite good.

### **(C and D) Avoiding Mistakes, and Thereby Sensing What the Idea is About.**

People don't like the idea that life is not worthwhile. They want something more glamorous from the mind of the Buddha. They don't want to think the Buddha taught that life is not worthwhile. They want to think life only seems not worthwhile but they personally can awaken to a great truth that does make life secretly deeply worthwhile, even abundant and fun. That is what the Buddha secretly really taught. They want to think their own life is worthwhile even if the mistake-ridden miserable lives of most others are not. To hell with the stupid people who are still ignorant and still live in misery. All this thinking is natural but wrong. It leads people astray. It led people astray in Mahayana and Hinduism. I have to ease people into seeing the simple idea that life might not be worthwhile. The labeled and numbered sections do that task. I don't try to persuade you life is worthwhile or not worthwhile.

If it helps, think that life is unsatisfactory; "I can't get no satisfaction". Or, think that you have to be crazy to live in this world, wish to live here, or need to live here. Instead of crazy serial killers, we are all crazy serial lifers. It is better to be not-here-and-sane than to live like this even if life seems fun. Waking up is getting sane, ending the need to live crazy. C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, noted Christians who should value life, at times wrote as if life were a disease to get over or a bad dream to wake up from. If the other ways of seeing life as not worthwhile help, use them for now but later rethink in terms of worthwhile and not worthwhile.

It is easy to say life is a dream from which we need to awaken. Not all dreams are bad. We could live forever in a good dream. The dream need not be ours; maybe it is Dharma dream. We could be meant to live like this. This view is like Mahayana and Hinduism. The movie "Inception" plays with this theme, not always adroitly. Only if the dream is not worthwhile should we wake up. Eventually we need to see that life itself, the basis for any dreaming, the dream, is not worthwhile.

### **(C) What We Don't Awaken To.**

Think about what Buddhism wants us to awaken to or what any religion wants us to awaken to. What is unique about what a religion wants us to wake up to? Much of what religions extol is common between them. People are often confused about what Buddhism wants us to wake up to, thinking it is something common such as deep compassion. By taking away what is common and by taking away errors, we get a better view of what the world is, what humans are, what Buddhism wants us to wake up to, and whether we really agree.

Waking up in Buddhism is not about seeing that life is crappy. For most people, life is not crappy, not even for women, men, gays, the working class, the beset middle class, true liberals, true conservatives, Christians, and Muslims. For many people now, with modern medicine, lots of food, entertainment, and the illusions of populist democracy, life is fairly good. A crappy life is not worthwhile but not because it is crappy. A good life does not become worthwhile because it is good. A good life still is not worthwhile. All life is inherently not worthwhile simply as life. A crappy life, and crappy things in life, can show that life is not worthwhile but they are not what make life "not worthwhile". Dwelling only on crappy things in your life, in the lives of some other people, or in most lives generally, can lead you astray and obscure that all life is not worthwhile. You mistakenly think: if you could get rid of crappy things, if I could live only with the good, then life would be worthwhile. That idea is false. You have to stop thinking in terms of crappy or good and have to start thinking about worthwhile or not worthwhile. This mistake about crappy life is similar to the mistake that life would be good if we could only overcome suffering.

Waking up is not about seeing that life is good or bad. Life can be good if you are not sick or old without a home and insurance. Even if life seems good, still life is not worthwhile. We notice life is not worthwhile when life is bad; but even when we do not notice, and even when we enjoy it, still life is not worthwhile. Pleasure can far exceed pain, we can do our duty, be a good person, make the world better, make great art, make scientific advances, find deep love, raise successful happy children, see cause-and-effect and dependent origination, or stop most clinging, yet life is still not worthwhile. Nothing inside life can make life worthwhile. Nothing outside life can. You can say it however you wish but get used to it.

Awakening requires not only seeing that life is not worthwhile but requires a little bit more. Some people glimpse that life is not worthwhile and they respond with anger, bitterness, and lashing out. Some people use "not worthwhile" as an excuse to do and take what they want. Such people do not see fully what "not worthwhile" means and so do not really let go of desire to make life satisfying on their terms. Residual clinging leads to bitterness etc. If they also let go of the desire to make life worthwhile, and fully accepted that life is not worthwhile, they would not be angry, bitter, hurtful, and selfish.

Even so, simply seeing that life is not worthwhile might not do the trick. We also need to see the value of morality, compassion, and acting well. We need to see the value in other persons. These things do not

go away when we see that life is not worthwhile; and we cannot properly see that life is not worthwhile if they do go away because we would lack full standards by which to see that life is not worthwhile. When we let go, we need to let go as a person, a self, and, if we lost morality, compassion, and acting well, we would not be full enough selves to let go properly. We can see that life is not worthwhile and still remain good persons who act well; we can only see that life is not worthwhile if we are ready to be good persons who act well. Still, we do need to see that valuing selves, morality, compassion, and acting well are not by themselves the same as awakening; we do need to see that life is not worthwhile, and that is the hard part; see more on the role of morality below and see more on the self below.

In Japan, a Zen Buddhist monk (I think the Sixth Patriarch) said something like: "Before I was awake, I was miserable. I was cranky, hated people, disdained everybody, deplored the ideas of others, and was never satisfied. Now that I am awake, I am still miserable etc". Seeing that life is not worthwhile is not the same as finding another source of joy and contentment even if seeing it does bring you some joy and contentment. Seeing that life is not worthwhile is not the same as transforming life into something that is worthwhile. It is not the same as putting you in a state of grace so now your life is worthwhile. You have to take good and bad, and have to let go of good and bad. Only now you can manage it.

Waking up in Buddhism is not about seeing that most of everyday life for most people is a quagmire of silliness, stupidity, selfishness, false goals, aimlessness, and mild immorality, and then rising above the foolishness of the apish masses. Waking up is not about seeing that most of life consists of small traps that steal intellects, hearts, and souls, such as cars, beauty, entertainment, success, and tiny victories. Many people in many religions, and many people apart from any religion, have those insights. They are true but not enough. We have to see that much but we also have to see more. It is unlikely that a person could awaken in Buddhism and not already have seen through the silliness of ordinary life to something more rational, ordered, decent, deeper, and dignified; but still that insight alone is not enough. You need to build on that insight.

Waking up in Buddhism is not primarily about seeing through all the silliness and traps and then settling in to a measured rational life in which you rise above most things to live as a wise person in the middle of a vexing world. It is not about being "the fool on the hill", the wise monk or wise nun who can find just the right word to say, the good teacher, music lover sitting down to booze and hip-hop, the one-in-a-million person who can read theology, a patient gardener, or Chauncey Gardner from the movie "Being There". Those paths usually are distractions. Once you have walked those paths for a time, you need to think what else Buddhist awakening might be.

Waking up is not about becoming a mirror for the universe, reflecting all its glorious diversity and unity, and sometimes reflecting it back in a better way.

Waking up is not about seeing morality and becoming a more moral person. It is not about becoming a good person. Morality is an intrinsic part of Indian thought, and so morality does play a role in Buddhism. Buddhism takes moral awareness for granted and asks what you should do. The universe is intrinsically moral. The Dharma is intrinsically moral and promotes morality. If you struggle against the morality of the world, you will go backwards. If you go along with the morality of the world, you are more likely to go forwards. If you do not see the value of morality and do not almost always act morally then you cannot awaken. But morality alone is not enough even if you never act badly, are a good person, and are pro-

active in morality. In Buddhism, it is not enough to work hard to make a better world. It is impossible that you could awaken if you were a bad person; but awakening is not primarily about being a good person.

People are so confused by morality, moral vigor, and apparent moral laxity in Buddhism that I return often to morality in Buddhism and repeat often that Buddhism insists on morality.

Awakening is not about seeing through conventional morality to deeper morality. It is easy to see through the hypocrisy, conventional morality, moral deception, and moral conniving that most people in the world live daily. It is easy to see through all that to deeper moral principles such as the Golden Rule and “don’t be a lazy leech living off state support (for individuals or business firms).” It is not hard to imagine a better world based on deep real moral principles. Again, it is unlikely that you could awaken if you did not have these insights but these insights alone are not awakening.

Awakening is not about seeing that good and evil are mirror twins that depend on each other. Not only is this insight wrong but it would not be enough even if it were true.

Awakening is not about getting beyond all morality, getting beyond good and evil, to something deeper and better (better in some non-moral sense). It is not hard to glimpse this possibility of getting past all morality; still it is wrong to think it is part of Buddhism and that awakening depends on this insight. Likely, it is necessary to see this possibility and see it is false, to awaken in Buddhism, but seeing this possibility is not the same as accepting the need to overcome all morality, and getting past this mistaken insight is not awakening. Even if some people do somehow get past all morality, and some smart people think you have to get past morality to be one of them, still, getting past morality cannot be the same as awakening in Buddhism.

Awakening is not having the ability, without error, to know what we can cling to and what we cannot. Awakening is not unerringly using “natural” or “moral” to decide what we can cling to and what not. To live is to face stickiness, desire, and clinging; we must cling to some things; so we have to choose; and choose wisely. Awakened and not-awakened people both have to choose. We have to: (1) distinguish between sticky things; (2) distinguish between what we can safely do, that is, almost-cling to, versus what we cannot do because it is too sticky; (3) be able to choose correctly; (4) be able to act on our choices. (5) We may use ideas of natural and moral to help. These tasks are part of one skill. This skill helps us to awaken before we awaken, and comes out of awakening after we have awakened, but in itself it is not awakening. For example, all desire, even for food, water, air, and to avoid extreme temperature can be clinging and harm the quest to awaken. Yet we all must eat, drink, breathe, etc. to pursue awakening; they are natural to a human; breathing is needed for meditation; breathing in meditation is not simply natural; but food, water, air, etc. need not be sticky clinging and need not lead to losing the way. We have to handle them wisely without clinging. Yet this ability is not the same as awakening. We have to forego other desires such as to be adored by lay Buddhists yet that ability too is not the same as awakening.

I make a point of the ability to live in a sticky world with managed clinging because: First, some people, including monks, think the ability to handle stickiness and clinging is the same as awakening, and I do not agree. Adept people in Hinduism and several schools of mysticism appear to manage clinging as well as Buddhists yet Buddhists would not call them awakened. Second, some people think awakening is the

same as not clinging at all, and I doubt that is strictly true. If we did not cling to breathing, we would die. Awakening goes along with correct management for the right reasons rather than not clinging at all. Even then, correct management for the right reasons is not exactly the same as waking up. The ability to manage clinging, to choose and act wisely, comes with awakening even if it is not same as awakening. Awakened people have a huge ability not to cling to anything – food and water – more than most of us can imagine, but few even of them can simply stop breathing or wish to. Even monks like to talk to anthropologists; and that is a form of clinging; but monks managed it for the best rather than gave it up entirely. Third, the ability to live in a sticky world without clinging does not mean we can do whatever we want. People in all religions make that mistake, as when some early Christians felt above Tanakh (OT) Law and civil law, and Paul set them straight. That stance is clearly wrong in Buddhism too.

For examples of the need to choose, manage clinging, and the role of natural and good, remember that nature can be abused, and natural and good do not always coincide, and sometimes we have to pick. Awakened people might, or might not, always choose correctly – they are more adept than “sleeping” people – but skill in making this choice is not awakening. Recall that breathing in meditation is not simply natural but also learned; we cling to it in learning meditation; yet it is useful; we need not cling to it so much that we lose the way; but, unless we are careful and lucky, we can cling to breathing so much that we do lose the way. Awakened people know eating one apple is alright while eating eight apples gives you a pain in the gut but that is not the same as awakening. We can be hungry and eat a single apple or eat an entire bag of junk food. Knowing the difference is not awakening. Awakened people know eating an apple fallen from an abandoned tree is alright but picking an apple from an owned tree without permission is not. Awakened people know that, for married people, having sex with a spouse is alright but having sex with a willing able 14-year old person is not. Such discriminations are not awakening. Awakened people know that squirrels naturally store up nuts for winter and people learn to store up milk in the refrigerator yet hoarding gold and clothes are wrong; but that discrimination is not awakening.

Friendship is natural; it can be morally good; it can be morally bad; it can be overdone or underdone; it can help with awakening or it can hinder awakening; awakened people can have friends if they do not fall into stickiness, desire, and clinging; the naturalness, morality, and stickiness of friendship all should be managed and can be managed.

Advanced people know both that (1) ANY desire and clinging can be misplaced and (2) some of what seems like desire and clinging can be rightly placed. Craving to eat an apple can be a source of clinging if we are in Antarctica. The desire to restrain a man can be NOT clinging when the man is beating a child – or the desire can be clinging if we also “get off” on violent domination. It is false that any desire can be passed through by an advanced Buddhist without clinging. With training, most desires can be passed through, so an adept person sometimes can do things that seem inherently sticky. Still, this skill and the freedom that goes with it are not awakening. Pride is natural and often good; to suppress natural pride is bad; but it is hard to feel pride and not cling. A great skill is to know the difference between modest honest helpful pride versus pride that leads to a fall. When you know, you do not put yourself in the way of temptation by engaging in activities that lead to pride.

But even knowing all this and being able to manage all this is not the same as awakening.

Gangsters, politicians, business people, lawyers, killers, criminals, and accountants can manage desire and clinging. They focus attention. They see cause-and-effect and dependent origination. Somebody called adept politicians “monsters of patience”. Adepts of other religions select and focus attention, see and manage cause-and-effect and dependent origination. The ability to manage does not mean anyone manages in a way that leads to Buddhist awakening. A Buddhist can find small differences in focus and technique to account for the shift but I ask you to look past finagling to get the point that managing desire and clinging is not the same as awakening.

Recall that a monk should be ready to starve if nobody gives food. Starving to death is not natural, and, mostly, even for a monk, not good. I think the Buddha gave this guideline because he wanted monks not to mistake skill in choices about natural, moral, desire, sticky, and clinging for awakening. He wanted all people to see such skill as leading up to, and coming out of, awakening rather than as awakening itself.

Awakening is not the same as feeling great compassion as in Jainism, and in some Islam, Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism. It is good to feel great compassion. I suspect it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if a person has not sometimes felt great compassion. But feeling great compassion in itself is not awakening.

Awakening is not the same as being an un-selfish person, fully successful at unselfishness, and without mistakes at unselfishness. An awakened person likely often knows when to be selfish, self-interested, helpful without hurting self-interest, mildly altruistic, and strongly altruistic; but this ability is not awakening. Many people in many religions cultivate this ability and some people become quite adept at it but they are not awakened in a Buddhist sense. Moral atheists cultivate this ability but they are not awakened in a Buddhist sense. For more on un-selfish persons, see Part 7 below.

Awakening is not the same as the feeling of being a small person in a big world, and is not the same as feeling you matter anyway even if you are a small person in a big world. It is not the same as the Grand Canyon feeling. It is not the same as feeling the connections between everything in the world, how you are a little bit them and they are a little bit you, as in the Upanishads. It is not the same as discovering ecology, the environment, nature, and the cosmos. It is not the same as feeling that the universe will take care of you. It is not the feeling that you will take care of the universe and help the universe take care of other people and nature. Again, likely it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if you have not felt these feelings but they alone are not yet awakening.

Awakening is not the same as seeing that your body-mind work the same way as the universe works, and seeing that the universe and your body-mind reflect each other. It is not the same as seeing the links between the micro-cosmos (your body-mind) and the macro-cosmos (the universe). It is not the same as seeing the universe working through you, using you to do its work. It is not even the same as seeing the universe working through all people, using all of us to do its work.

Awakening is not “mindfulness”. It is not social, humane, or cosmic awareness. Many books have been written on mindfulness since 1980, so see those. Mindfulness is similar to having a feeling for others, like compassion, seeing that others are real too, have feelings, and are sentient. It is empathy and sympathy. It extends to nature. It is seeing that your mind works the same way as the minds of other people, other

beings, and nature. It is using these insights for good. Likely it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if you are not somewhat mindful but mindfulness alone is not awakening.

Awakening is not the same as success in meditation. Success in meditation can help with awakening but is not the same. Meditation is a tool, like aerobic exercise. It can be a goal in itself if you are satisfied with it as a goal in itself. But primarily, in the past, meditation was a tool to a greater goal, awakening. Unlike as with other insights mentioned here, it is possible to awaken without meditating. But meditating by itself without use for awakening is rarely harmful and it is usually helpful as long as we do not mistake the successes of meditation with the real goal of awakening.

Awakening is not the same as seeing that the world is caught up in cause-and-effect. These days, some scientists think they see the world as entirely a mechanism running on cause-and-effect (I doubt they do really see the world this way, but that is not relevant here). Seeing the world this way does not often lead these scientists to see the world as moral, see connections between things, see the stickiness of the world, see how people cling to the world, feel mindfulness, and feel compassion toward anything. Seeing the world in terms of cause-and-effect might lead to such insights but it might not. It might also lead to amorality and a deep numbness. It might lead to despair. As with meditation, seeing the world in terms of cause-and-effect can help to awaken but it is not necessary and it can be misleading.

If you want to use the idea of cause-and-effect to help awaken, keep in mind how the Buddha likely saw cause-and-effect. Here morality matters again. The Buddha saw cause-and-effect in the physical arena but that was not very important. The most important arenas for cause-and-effect were what we now call psychological and moral. If you do a bad act, you have to pay the price, and likely you will become more of a bad person. If you fear, you are likely to lash out. Fear turns easily into hate, hate turns easily into bad acts, and bad acts easily trap us in hate and bad acts; this is what the Emperor knew and he used it to manipulate Anikin Skywalker, not to liberate Anikin. In the movies "The Matrix", standard ideas about cause-and-effect are given by the character "The Merovingian" or "the Frenchman", who is also Hades or "the elder Satan". He does not use cause-and-effect for good. Simply seeing cause-and-effect alone is no guarantee the insight leads to goodness and awakening. We need more besides cause-and-effect or we need to introduce specific causes into cause-and-effect. Love is likely to break the cycle of hate and break the prison around us. This both the Buddha and Jesus knew, and many other religious teachers too. Cause-and-effect has to be used to good ends. Using it for good ends helps free us. Ultimately, knowledge of cause-and-effect is a great tool to help free us as long as we include in our view of cause-and-effect the right ideas-causes. The Buddha saw cause-and-effect in these terms. Usually cause-and-effect works to keep us in the silliness of everyday life; but, once we understand it, and if we are astute enough, we can use it to help awaken us.

Seeing that we are bound by cause-and-effect can help us see the ties between life, desire, clinging, striving, suffering, and disappointment, and so help free us. Seeing cause-and-effect also can lead us to see links between desire, striving, and joy, as when parents set up a college fund and eventually a child graduates. In Buddhism, that "good" outcome really is deceptively bad, so seeing cause-and-effect also can trap us. We can use ideas of cause-and-effect to advance toward awakening, but also we need to see beyond cause-and-effect, to see that life is not worthwhile despite some links between good things. Seeing cause-and-effect alone is not awakening but seeing cause-and-effect can be a tool on the way to awakening. I return to cause-and-effect below.

Awakening in Buddhism is not about becoming a decent person or simple good person. I think anyone who did awaken in Buddhism would be a decent simple good person, that awakening comes with simple good decency, but awakening is not the same as simple good decency. Even simple people, and decent people, “mistakenly” think life is worthwhile. Hopefully, I am in that group.

As a Buddhist meditates (including all austerities and withdrawals from the world), he-she increasingly sees that things are not as important as they seemed, that things come and go. He-she lets go, stops feeling attracted to the world, the world seems less sticky, and he-she stops clinging. Still, he-she does not let go of morality. He-she still has to see morality in interactions among sentient beings (relations among people) and still has to make moral decisions and do moral acts. He-she does not cling to the outcome of moral acts as before when moral sight was biased by worldly stickiness but he-she does not discard morality to become amoral or immoral. He-she develops better moral judgment and better moral action because he-she is not as biased and is not as manipulated by the world.

This moral acuity is not awakening. The better-moral-judgment-and-better-moral-acts of an advanced Buddhist are not the same as awakening. Likely moral acuity is necessary for awakening but it cannot be exactly the same. People who have not gone through Buddhist meditation, or any meditation, can have moral acuity as high as an advanced Buddhist. People who have gone through other forms of meditation can have moral acuity as an advanced Buddhist. I do not think there is any moral insight that a Buddhist can have that other people also can have, not even a fully awakened Buddhist. Even if there were some moral insight that a fully awakened Buddhist could have that other people cannot have, I think that moral difference still would not be the same as awakening.

Moreover, when a Buddhist does let go of the world, is not hurt by stickiness, and no longer clings, but still feels morality and acts morally, the Buddhist needs a set of moral principles by which to see, assess, and act. As far as I know, other than avoiding suffering, Buddhism does not have moral principles that are peculiar to Buddhism and that distinguish it from other religions such as Hinduism and Christianity. What are the principles by which an adept and-or fully awakened Buddhist acts, and what have they to do with awakening? I do not address these issues here because they are not addressed well in Buddhism. I urge Buddhists to adopt the moral principles in the teachings of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. In practice, that is what many modern Buddhists do. Adopting these principles does not betray Buddhism. Adopting these principles is not the same as awakening. But it is worth thinking about the relation of these principles to the insight and acts of an awakened person.

This paragraph won't make full sense until you know Taoism and Zen but it belongs here and I hope you keep it in mind for chapters on Taoism and Zen. Awakening in Buddhism is not simply acting naturally without pretense. It is not “doing without ado”. It is not finding that your inner nature conforms to the true nature of the universe, and then being able to go along with the true nature of the world simply by acting on your own true nature. It is not transcending conventional morality by linking your nature to the true nature of the universe. All this is a wonderful goal for its own kind of awakening, and it would be delightful if it could merge with Buddhism; maybe it did in Zen; but it is not original Buddhism.

Awakening is not the same as being a simple whole integrated person who has no contradictions and no guile, and who “speaks from the heart”. As I said in the chapter on evolved human nature, I doubt that

any evolved sentient being can achieve full simplicity, integration, and guileless truthfulness. Like many simply decent people and like many simply religious people, an advanced Buddhist is more simple and integrated than other people but that still is not the same as awakening. I don't know if a fully awakened person such as the Buddha is fully ideally integrated and I don't know if full simple integration is needed to fully awaken. Even if full integration and full awakening go together, I doubt they are the same. I also doubt it is worth considering deeply how they differ. If you pursue one, you will advance in the other even if you never fully achieve either.

Awakening is not the same as being a "real" person as opposed to a phony, pretender, or poser. You cannot awaken if you are a phony pretender poser, and you should be as real as you can, but awakening still is not the same. As with full integration, I doubt that an evolved being can be fully real and genuine. Awakening is not the same as being a real person in the sense that Americans wanted of their artists (writers, rock artists, hip-hop artists, actors, movie makers), politicians, friends, spouses, and selves after about 1960. It is not the same as a genuine person without false consciousness in Existentialism. If you pursue awakening, you will become more genuine just as you will become more simply integrated with less guile but they still are not the same. An American or European who met an advanced Buddhist likely would see the Buddhist as genuine, real, and not phony, but awakening and being fully genuine, still are not the same. You can pursue awakening and know nothing of the real-phony distinction even as you become more real through pursuing awakening.

The following issue is related to the idea that Buddhism uses the Dharma to overcome the Dharma. The formal exercises that lead to awakening, and awakening itself, are not entirely natural. They are based on the view that nature and the natural life are full of suffering (not worthwhile) and must be overcome. The goal is to leave the natural world. These days, not being all-natural seems like Devil worship; but it is not as bad as it sounds. Recall that nature is not all good and sometimes we have to choose not to pose, lie, steal, rape, or murder. ALL religions claim to overcome nature somewhat. The morals of Jesus come from evolved human nature but they are not simply natural and Jesus' followers to suffer a disadvantage compared to all-natural self-interested people. Often religions claim to fulfill nature or fulfill God's plan for nature. When religions seem to go against nature, they claim to really make us more-natural-than-nature, as, for example, with Christian ideas about birth control, abortion, and family, and with Christian policies that both condemn homosexuality and say it is really all right. Buddhism claims that awakening fulfills human nature by using Dharma to highest capacity. Mahayana and Hinduism enlarge this claim. They say an awakened person identifies with nature (Dharma) to carry on the Dharma program. I think original Buddhism cannot claim to fulfill nature and to identify with nature; I let Mahayanists and Hindus fight their own case. Original Buddhism is far enough from nature so Buddhists have to worry about the gap. You have to assess how important Buddhism's particular anti-naturalness is. You have to say if contradicting nature makes Buddhist awakening too amiss.

Buddhist morals and meditation techniques can enhance evolved human nature, becoming more alert and mindful is good if you don't wallow in it and don't force it on others, but the goal of escaping nature is misguided. Buddhist insights about the self, mind, and body are inspiring. Being able to see clearly nature and your own silliness due to your evolved nature is a great tool. Wishing to end suffering or make life worthwhile automatically by ending suffering are mistakes. Meditation does not necessarily awaken. Awakening is not seeing how the world makes suffering and, through that insight, automatically to escape suffering. We cannot end desire, clinging, and suffering entirely and still remain human. We can lessen

the worst, and we can help with some pain. We can choose and we can learn. Some of us can learn to help other people and nature. We are better off pursuing those goals. Buddhist methods and sensibilities can help. That's what most Buddhists who are good people do. Mahayanists and Hindus are wrong to claim that awakened people merge with nature (Dharma), or see that they already are at one with nature (Dharma), and thereby enhance its plan.

Many people, on reading the above mistakes about awakening, think: "Hold on. They are a good deal, better than straight Buddhism as Mike (Polioudakis) describes it. I would be well off, and likely satisfied, if I could awaken to modest morality, seeing cause-and-effect, compassion, mindfulness, spontaneity, simple goodness, simple decency, and managing desire and clinging. Surely this success would make life worthwhile after all. Maybe that is what the Buddha meant. Maybe getting rid of suffering through ending clinging is really only the biggest step in making life really worthwhile. To end clinging to bad things, so to remove suffering, is the big step toward being a good person and living a worthwhile life. Maybe Mike is wrong, so awakening in Buddhism really is about becoming a simple mindful good mildly aloof person and about seeing that my life and all life is worthwhile in that light." Most Buddhists think this way though they would not say so. Even most monks likely think this way. Buddhists might be correct that this is what the Buddha really intended; but I doubt it. Some mix of other ideas of awakening might be superior to original Buddhism. A mix of other ideas might be better than what now is taught as Buddhism. Still, awakening in the other ways is not original Buddhism. You have to decide. If you think these other ideas are superior to what the Buddha originally said, then you have to decide if the religion suggested by the other ideas is superior to the original religion of the Buddha or is superior to versions of common Buddhism.

I too admire these ideas. I hope anybody who awakens in Buddhism also would be a simple good decent mindful spontaneous useful caring helpful person. I don't like aloofness. I would add that you act as true to yourself as you can without hurting anyone, you not try to force yourself to be a goody-goody, but you do try to be good. Cultivating good qualities can help with awakening. I suspect anyone who claimed to be awake but did not show good qualities. Still, not any one of the qualities, nor any mix, is awakening in original Buddhism. Buddhist awakening is something else. Whether it is something more and better, or less and worse, you have to decide.

I especially like mixing morality with the Taoist-Zen sense of acting naturally. Zen followers tried to find the right mix of morality, spontaneity, and naturalness. They felt they could find it, and felt this mix was both true Buddhism and true Taoism. I think Jesus had this sensibility too. Jesus also had a tremendous sense of us as persons made by God relating to other persons made by God and relating to a beautiful world made by God.

Working through the possibilities, and seeing the contrast of these ideas with the intent of the Buddha, led me to see more in general; appreciate Buddhism and all religions more; and see the value of the ideas of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values.

#### **(D) (1) Life is Not Worthwhile: Avoiding Mistakes about "Not Worthwhile".**

Everything that has a beginning has an end. You have a beginning and so you will end. Not just die from this life, but end. You are not an immortal soul-self. If you will end, why defer the inevitable, especially if

so much of life so has no purpose, and so much of life is empty, boring, often painful, beset by suffering, and not worthwhile? Why not seek a way to get out of this circle, to end the situation naturally in this lifetime? This conclusion does not mean life is devoid of all enjoyment and satisfaction but it does mean it all has to end. You can live with grace in this lifetime as long as you don't let yourself get lost again. Simply accept reality and deal with it by going along with the natural flow of things and doing what you need to do to end completely. (That we all began and all will end does not necessarily mean we all will awaken. That is another issue that I can't go into here.)

"Not worthwhile" seems like despondency, despair, defeat, and resignation. It is not. The blues has roots in despondency and despair but it also grows above those roots into a larger tree with large flowers and fruits, even if it does not become happy sing-along music. Despondency and despair are wrong ways to see the world, they are sticky, and they lead to clinging and suffering. "Not worthwhile" is what happens when you feel in your guts that you have watched too much TV and you turn the damn thing off for a long time; you decide to stop being a sports fan and you actually start living a real, more meaningful, and more satisfying life that includes people and movement; you finally give up on a bad love affair; you accept that politics stinks, even your party and its leaders can't get the job done, and you start looking for other ways to help. It is what happens when you, or a dear one, gets cancer, and you have to get past that badness to make something of what remains. With "not worthwhile", the arena is large, the whole world, but the feeling is the same. If you think of "not worthwhile" through these images, or similar ones, you will be more on the right track than if you think of it in terms of defeat and resignation.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because the world has fallen into sin and depravity as in Christian and Islamic stories of the Fall and Original Sin. Unfairness in nature such as cancer, and evil acts by humans such as terrorism and economic inequality, do make the world less appealing and can make life not worthwhile for some people. But, even if we cured all disease, made the economic system work fairly, and made all people act nicely, still life would not be worthwhile. Bad things make us more aware life is not worthwhile and make life less worthwhile but they alone do not make life "not worthwhile". Our situation in life and our intrinsic attitude toward life, its stickiness and our desire and clinging, make life not worthwhile. How this works out is best seen indirectly through re-reading mistakes about awakening from above and by reading more about "not worthwhile" in this section.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because we are bound by cause-and-effect. We cannot escape cause-and-effect but that in itself makes life neither worthwhile nor not worthwhile. Life might be worthwhile even in a web of cause-and-effect; life might be worthwhile for a spider if the spider could think. Life would not necessarily be worthwhile even if we could escape cause-and-effect as in fantasies of magic. Life might be even less worthwhile if somehow we could escape cause-and-effect. Seeing the extent of cause-and-effect helps you to see whether life is worthwhile or not. You have to accept cause-and-effect just as you accept breathing or the color red, and then decide.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because it is an illusion. Life might, or might not, be an illusion overall. Life could be full of illusion. Life could be free of illusion. In fact, evolutionary theory says we do not see the world simply as it is, and we distort so as to do better. So life does have some intrinsic illusion-ness. But, mostly, we do see the world clearly enough, and we can overcome many illusions.

None of this matters. We could see life clearly but still life is not worthwhile. If illusion is a problem, and we get rid of illusion, what we then see clearly is that life is not worthwhile; we do not see a better life, a good system of lives, or a way to make life worthwhile. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is an illusion as in the movie series “The Matrix”. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a series of nested illusions. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a fun good illusion or a hurtful bad illusion. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a series of fun good illusions or bad hurtful illusions, or a series that is a mix. We could see through all that, even see through a series to the bottom, even find that the bottom is fun and interesting, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could defeat Agent Smith, make peace with machines, eliminate the Matrix, free all people, secure the future of Zion, and live within ultimate reality, and still life would be not worthwhile. We could see that life is a never-ending series of illusions with no bottom, some illusions fun, some illusions scary, and still life would not be worthwhile. We can be totally clear about life but still life will not be worthwhile. We can free ourselves of all illusions and delusions except the delusion that life is worthwhile, and still life will not be worthwhile.

Delusions can make it all worse, and usually do, but not because they make life hard, ugly, unpleasant, or a failure. In fact, illusions and delusions can make life happier and can help us achieve worldly success. Delusions make it all worse because they impede seeing that life is not overall worthwhile; so we have to get over them, usually one-by-one, until we see clearly. It is hard work to get over the illusions that go along with self, family, work, community, success, fame, etc. Even when delusions make life enjoyable, especially when they make life enjoyable, they are still delusions, cause us to cling, and so block seeing that life is not worthwhile. Especially when they work, it is hard to get rid of our delusions and illusions. Sometimes a few hard knocks help to open our eyes.

Some people say, “Yes life is a struggle, life is painful, and sometimes there is more pain than pleasure, but life is still overall worthwhile.” Below I agree with this idea; I say life is worthwhile overall despite the fact that much in life is bad. Buddhism says: This idea that life overall is worthwhile despite aggravations is typical of clinging to life. “Life is still worthwhile despite its aggravations” is something people say when they are still lost in the complex that includes the mistake that life is worthwhile. The only way to get over this mistake is simply to see that life overall is not worthwhile.

Some people say, “Yes, life is a struggle, the struggle is painful when we lose, and the struggle is painful even when we win, but the struggle itself is worthwhile. The struggle is worthwhile regardless of whether we win or lose. The struggle adds to life. Overcoming obstacles is part of life and adds to life. Even pain and suffering can add to life. The struggle can make us better. The struggle can be worthwhile because it is painful, not despite its pain. Thus life overall is worthwhile. Life overall is worthwhile partly because of struggle, and not despite struggle. What matters is not the game but how you play.” This attitude is heroic, and partly true, but it is still overall wrong. It is something people say from within the confusion of life, not from an objective assessment of life. This attitude is true in that we can gain from pain, and we should gain from pain when we can; but this outlook still does not make life worthwhile. This attitude is wrong if it says we can gain enough, through struggle, pain, and living, to make life worthwhile overall. In the end, what we should gain is the insight that life is not worthwhile.

Life is not “not worthwhile” because we are reborn or not reborn. The main insight of Buddhism does not depend on karma or rebirth. The ideas of karma and rebirth can make sense of inequality, and they can be used to support the Buddha’s message – I don’t do that here – but that is not necessary. The ideas of

karma and reincarnation also can be interpreted to make the fact that life is not worthwhile harsher and clearer: it would be horrible to be reborn over and over, blind to reality, sometimes enduring the suffering of this world, and forced to make up for previous bad acts. Recall that, contrary to Western confusion, this is how early Indians and Buddhists thought of the system of karma and rebirth; not as an adventure but as a wheel of torture; and they wanted escape it. The Buddha offered a way out. But the Buddha also offered a way out even if we live only one life. Listen to “Do It Again” by Steely Dan.

We could see that the point is the journey rather than any destination, or see that life has no destination and that not having a destination is alright, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that the point is to participate in the series of illusions rather than to uncover some mysterious truth at the bottom, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that life is a game that is fun in the play rather than is fun in the winning, and still life would not be worthwhile.

We could be the savior of this world (messiah), and still life would not be worthwhile. We could be the hero of a joyful system of many lives (bodhisattva or avatar) and we could save all people, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that we ourselves made life with its games and illusions, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could be the one God who made this world and all worlds, and life still would not be worthwhile. We could be the God who suffers and dies for everybody, and life still would not be worthwhile. We could be the God (bodhisattva) who leads all beings to grace and salvation, and life still would not be worthwhile.

Sometimes when people start to see that some aspects of life are mistakes, delusions, or not worthwhile, they begin to feel good. It feels good to see through the mistakes of life such as wanting a giant house, believing a political party, or allegiance to race. It feels good to see that large aspects of life are absurd and to see other people running around like idiots. When people see this, they feel they have figured it all out, and their particular life is worthwhile after all. If you can figure out what in life is not worthwhile – a lot – and figure out what in life is worthwhile – not much but quite valuable – and you feel good, then maybe your particular life is worthwhile after all. This idea is a mistake. Even when you see all the particular things that are not worthwhile, the absurdities and silly people, and you feel good, still life as a whole is not worthwhile. Half-smart people think they have gotten to a privileged place where they see through absurdities and silly people, and have found what is worthwhile about life, but, really, usually they are mired in some fairly silly ideology-fantasy of their own. You have to go farther, and, when you do, you will find that all of life is not worthwhile.

#### **(D) (2) Life is Not Worthwhile: Not Caring.**

Here is an old quip about Buddhism: “Don’t just do something, stand there”. Super villains cannot defeat super heroes one-on-one in combat. Instead, villains go after people that the hero cares about: romantic interest, parents, friends, co-workers, random children, or simply people in general. Caring makes us vulnerable. Villains say it makes us weak. It sucks us into the world. It makes us depend on the world even if we are super. Even when caring gives us great rewards, it also makes us sad; it causes suffering. Maybe we can see Buddhism a living out of the slogan “just don’t care”. On the other hand, Westerners believe caring makes us great, makes us human, and makes us who we are even if in some ways it also makes us vulnerable. Caring makes us strong. James Bond wins because a woman cares. John Wick wins because he has friends and he loves his wife and dog. Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter make a

point of telling Tom Riddle that they have friends who all care about each other, and they believe in good things, while he has nothing. The greatest speech in the “Lord of the Rings” movies is by simple Sam Gamgee about how some things are worth caring about and fighting for.

Looking at Buddhism through caring and not caring has pitfalls, especially for Westerners who now make so much of caring. When she was fifteen-years-old, my modern Thai niece replied to everything: “I don’t know and I don’t care” (mai ruu mai son). She turned out a useful adult. In our world now, “don’t care” sounds like a spiteful immature child. It sounds like a typical “me” person who cares only about career, “making it”, and markers of success such as trophy children and the latest phone. “I don’t care” sounds like a person who has been beaten by the world and is bitter but would care if he-she could get another real try. It does not sound like someone who has lived a bit, won a bit, lost a bit, and decided the game as a whole was not worthwhile despite some wins. “Don’t care” sounds mean, bitter, and spiteful rather than intelligent, thoughtful, the end of a line of serious thought, following the Dharma, and part of the Buddhist Middle Path.

In fact, Buddhists can care, do care, and should care. Buddhists just should not get lost in caring, and so get stuck in the world, and become overly vulnerable. Instead of saying “I don’t care” say “I don’t cling”. Not to care at all turns yourself into old rusty metal. But, in fact, you are not crumbly old rust or you would not know about Dharma and Awakening and you would not care about them and seek them. If you see a kitten up a tree, rescue it. Share your bowl with a bum who hasn’t eaten. Teach about the Dharma. Help a child with homework. Study math for fun. Explain to villagers why a dam across a stream might or might not work, and so save them effort and suffering in building it or not building it. Explain to all people why terrorism is horrible. An intrinsic part of the Dharma and the universe is morality, and morality implies some caring. As a good Buddhist, you have to act morally, and it is hard to act morally without caring a bit. When you do care a bit, you act morally as Dharma intended. They come together. The Buddha cared for all sentient beings and so taught the Dharma, that life is not worthwhile, and how to escape from suffering. Be ready to let go and walk away when things turn into a vortex and you feel sucked in and twisted. It is hard to care some yet not get sucked in but it can be done.

If you want to think about the issue in terms of caring, think this: “Life is not worthwhile enough so that I should risk caring enough to get permanently sucked in and forget myself but I may care up to that point”. Every time in this chapter you see “life is not worthwhile” you can think about the longer version.

To deliberately not care is a mistake about as big as caring too much. Deliberately not caring is a desire, clinging, and a way of getting stuck on an abstract dogmatic stance. It is caring in reverse. It comes too close to disdain, pride, and hate. Deliberately not caring takes a lot of energy that would be better spent finding the correct limits of caring and not caring.

“If you love someone, set him-her free”. The following view is somewhat misleading but can be useful. If you really care about somebody, you want him-her not to suffer, and you want the best for him-her. The best for him-her is to see how the world works and to attach (cling) or not attach (not cling) appropriately. “Perfect” would be awakening but we can’t do that for others. We can manage our clinging to the person so we don’t bind that person and instead we set that person free to pursue Dharma as fits him-her. In contrast, when we care a lot for a person and show it, we almost demand of the other person that he-she care for us as much. When we say “I love you”, we expect him-her to say it back, and feel it, or we get

angry. “Two and a Half Men” and “Big Bang Theory”, among other TV shows, had good episodes about what happens when a person does not say it back. Don’t put other people there. Don’t care for them so much (cling) that they have to cling to you or they feel guilty and confused. Care for them as much as you can to help them along the Dharma path. Any more is wrong for both of you. That much is best for both of you. If he-she really cared for you, wouldn’t he-she do the same for you? This is one version of a Buddhist Golden Rule. You don’t have to limit caring only to what sends him-her along the path, you can be nice to him-her and can share good times and common interests, even those that have nothing to do with the path, you can play golf or watch sappy movies together, you can talk about which candidate best, but not so much as to endanger the path for either of you. You should not force, or use guilt to force, a person to “be better” and “to reach his-her full potential” along the Dharma path or in other ways either. That is not really caring.

The idea of “caring” can highlight the contrast of Western with Buddhist. Westerners say the people and ideas that we care about are exactly what make life worthwhile even when they bring pain and even though too often they don’t work out. We think what we care about, who we care about, and how much we care, is what makes us distinct as a person and makes us valuable, and we think the same is true of all peoples. Caring matters, makes us people, and makes us distinct. Buddhists say even people and ideas are not worthwhile in that way, and caring for them does not make our life worthwhile or their lives worthwhile. Caring brings suffering and the suffering is not worth it.

Don’t dismiss the Buddhist view because the contrast is clear and because modern people have been trained to accept the Western view. Westerners repeat their point so often that it seems they are trying to talk themselves into something they secretly doubt. A flip of the TV remote reveals how often shows and movies promote caring. Even the violent movie “Predators” is about how caring is better than strategic selfishness and better even than strategic mere self-interest. In real life, how often does love win the day or does family really win? Wouldn’t it be better to care in the context of reality where the caring is much more likely to do good? Is caring really what it is all about, does caring really make us fully human, and does caring really make each of us distinct, unique, and valuable? Are we really that individually distinct and that valuable? Do we really make the world by what we care for and how much? That kind of caring seems, paradoxically, selfish.

Too much caring leads to religious fervor, nationalism, racism, sexism, terrorism, and us and them. Even too much caring for a person leads to political corruption and family corruption.

Despite the sense of the Buddhist stance, I still hold the Western position although softer than common. Caring is important, helps make us persons, and makes us distinct. Life is worthwhile and caring helps make life worthwhile. Western culture is going through a Romantic whirlpool of sticky clinging stupid silliness about emotions and caring. By putting too much stock in caring, we care wrongly and we hurt the ideas and people that try to we care for. The Buddhist view could help. You can still be a worthwhile useful person if you don’t have all the deep squishy family, friends, and causes that media glamorizes. Too often caring really is about me and not about them. The Buddhist idea of the limited self can help here if we think both of them and me in that way, and we live up to the potential of that kind of self rather than the super self of Western myths about caring. The Buddhist Middle Path is worth considering even for caring commitment.

**(D) (3) Life is Not Worthwhile: Big and Small, Great Compassion, and Not Caring.**

The feeling of “big and small” is two feelings: (1) We are all only small parts of a very much bigger whole. (2) Although we are only small parts, God (Dharma, Tao, and the Whole) cares about us and all the small parts, and God wants us to do well by his standards.

Recall that a feeling of “big and small” and great compassion often, paradoxically, comes with a feeling that somehow life and the world are not worth it. Someone who feels all of this still intends to care for people and nature but knows caring might not do the job. Someone who feels this way accepts and goes on anyway. My wife calls this mixed feeling the idea that God cared about us once but now God has left us to the squalor that we make here – maybe God finally shrugged his shoulders and left - we do deserve our fate even if it is sad. While this feeling might be related to the Jewish-Christian-Muslim idea of a fallen world, it is not the same as their idea of a fallen world. It is less dramatic yet sadder. I don't know why these feelings come together, but, if you know what I am talking about, you gain an insight into Buddhism.

Most people who have all these feelings together try to suppress the feeling that it might not all work out and try to foster the feelings of “big and small” and great compassion. Buddhists accept all the feelings, and instead see the message that it is not worthwhile even if it does work out. This Buddhist stance does not mean you stop caring within the right limits and does not mean you stop feeling. It does not mean you do not appreciate the whole and the Dharma. It means you see reality as it is, stop fooling yourself, and start thinking and acting accordingly. Unless you have had all the feelings in this way, it is hard to describe any more.

Most people do have all these feelings at some time in their lives. They nurture the feelings that their culture-or-religion tells them to hold onto and they suppress the feelings that their culture-or-religion tells them not to have. The next time this happens to you, if you are able, dwell on all the feelings for a while but not permanently. Don't suppress the sadness that comes with “big and small” and with compassion. Accept the feeling that the world went awry and won't work out. Think about what that outcome might imply. If all this frightens you, then stop right away.

**(D) (4) Life is Not Worthwhile: Illustrations and More Explanation.**

In the movie trilogy “The Matrix”, in movie two, the Architect (Dharma or God) gives Neo a choice. Neo can either (1) give up the woman he loves, Trinity, partly save the city of Zion, and so continue the game of the Matrix for one more round; or (2) Neo can save Trinity and win freedom, but very likely lose Zion totally, let the machines win, bring the demise of nearly all humans, impoverish existence for all survivors, and end a long-running somewhat mutually beneficial game between machines and people. Five saviors have come before Neo and faced a similar choice. Neo and his predecessors were groomed to choose to keep the game going by instilling in them deep love for humans. All Neo's predecessors chose to save Zion and continue the game. All five thought the game better than nothing, thought life worthwhile. All five clung to the game, seeing that as the correct moral choice between self versus others. All five struggled to a moral choice. Krishna urged Arjuna to choose likewise, and he did. All five predecessors acted like Mahayana bodhisattvas or like Hindu avatars. Unlike his predecessors, Neo chose to save Trinity and to assert freedom. The result of his choice, at first, seemed like disaster; but it ended well by saving Trinity, saving Zion, ending a bad game, and bringing humans and machines to accord. Through

struggle and choice, in the end we can have it all. This outcome is a common human fantasy. Now, in the West, this common human fantasy is tied with ideas about political freedom, wealth, patriotism, love for people, romantic love, and love for family. "Star Wars" teaches much the same.

As my wife, Nitaya, pointed out, unlike his predecessors, Neo did not choose to continue the game. He did not act like a bodhisattva or avatar. Neo acted somewhat like a Theravada Buddhist in not making humanity, life, and the continued game, an ultimate priority. Yet if Neo were a true Buddhist, he would not be in this situation to begin with. Neo did not care about the game as given to him but he still cared about Trinity and other particular people, and about people in general. If Neo were a true Buddhist and he was in this situation, Neo would not choose at all. Any positive choice implies life is worthwhile, and renews clinging etc. Neo would not save Trinity, Zion, the game, humanity, or the machines. He would not fight Agent Smith. He would not mistakenly think that choice-in-itself is moral glory or is glamorous moral victory. He would not glamorize struggle, morality, choice, or success. Neo would not heroically choose or refuse to choose. He would simply do nothing unusual, and so let the game play out and end. He would not see doing nothing as a glamorous moral choice either. If Neo did choose Trinity, and the result worked out well all around, Neo would not fool himself that anything had been gained. The Brave New World is not more worthwhile than the old. Neo would not let himself believe the Western fantasy that romantic love eventually wins everything. Neo would believe the common human fantasy that family and family love eventually wins everything. Neo would know that, even if the fantasies are true, their success leads to nothing worthwhile. If Neo chose to let Trinity die and so let Zion and the game turn through another cycle, Neo would not fool himself that anything had been gained. Few Buddhists could let go as in the choices above, after any choice, or with no choice at all. All Mahayana bodhisattvas and Hindu avatars would choose as did the heroes who came before Neo, as with Arjuna. I don't know what normal flesh-and-blood merely human Buddhists would do. Many Westerners think they would choose as Neo did, choose love, and so have it all at last, including freedom and prosperity.

By choosing "Trinity", the movies imply that by choosing God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Western values, we get it all, including a glamorous identity as a moral romantic hero. This sounds like what I am saying. It sounds like my rejection of Buddhism and Hinduism. It is not. The Trinity of the movie myth is not the God that I believe in, and my idea of making the world better is not "getting it all". I insist we can't have it all, and we should not glamorize. I do not confuse romantic love with working hard to make the world better or with anything else. I do reject the idea that we are in a game, and that we should keep the game going. I do reject the idea that sacrificing ourselves or others to keep the game going is heroic, moral or, glamorous. I do reject glamorizing morality or indecency.

It is hard to see that life is not worthwhile, life is often painful, goals are often delusory, we cling to life with our delusions, clinging leads to suffering, and they all reinforce each other. This idea goes against what I have said all through this book about doing good and about working to make the world better. If you wish to go along with Buddhism, you have to see what it says and to overcome what I said.

Millions of years of evolution have channeled us to see life as worthwhile even when life stinks. Evolution made it hard to see life as not worthwhile, almost no matter how bad it is. Evolution made sure we almost always cling to hope. The fact that evolution leads us to think life is worthwhile does not, by itself, mean life is worthwhile or not worthwhile. Even so, we still have to evaluate the worthwhile-ness of life on its own terms. We have to override how evolution has channeled us to assess life as it is. The fact that

evolution led us to see life as worthwhile means we have to be careful to give full weight to the evidence that life is not worthwhile and maybe we have to discount some of the evidence that life is worthwhile. Buddhism accepts the natural tendency to see that life is worthwhile regardless of facts – another way in which Buddhism and modern biological theory coincide. Buddhism assessed the issue on its own terms apart from the natural tendency to see in rosy terms, and without reacting against the natural tendency, and Buddhism concluded that life is not worthwhile.

In the chapter on evolved human nature, I said that we do not see the world exactly as it is, some of our delusions are useful, we are contradictory, some of our contradictions are useful, and we can never get rid of all contradictions so we are one simple whole integrated being. We can get rid of enough confusion so we can see clearly enough to follow the Golden rule, “applies equally”, and rule of law. Buddhism seems to require us to get rid of all our delusions so we can see that life is not worthwhile. It takes a lot of clear minded integrity to see that life is not worthwhile especially if evolution is pushing hard to make us think life is worthwhile. Arguing this issue back and forth here is not useful. So I say you don’t have to be perfect in Buddhism any more than you have to be perfect in my version of following Jesus. Despite the push of evolution, we can be integrated enough to be clear enough to see that life is not worthwhile. This stance does not mean that intellect wins over emotion or vice versa. It only means we can see enough of what we need to see when we are ready to see it. I assume we evolved the ability to do this too, along with our delusions and contradictions. I do not make a big deal out of this evolved ability to overcome delusion and confusion such as by claiming that the Dharma (God) set up evolution so we would evolve this ability. Please keep these comments about integration in mind for remarks below about the self in Buddhism and in the modern theory of evolution.

The idea that life is not worthwhile is like the feeling we get when we have to wash the same dishes over and over again or wash the same clothes over and over again. It is like getting up every morning to go to work so we can buy food and pay rent so we can get up every morning and go to work again. There is no end to it. It does not get us anywhere. It doesn’t even move us forward; it just keeps us from falling back. Nothing is ever complete, finished, done, and accomplished. Even if we wash the dishes after a good meal with family and friends, and should feel satisfied, we still face the same old pile of dishes over and over again.

People think life would be worthwhile if they could be a hero, face constant adventures, face a few small defeats, but win overall, over and over, like James Bond, Matt Dillon, Jason Bourne, or Michael Westen. Evolution might predispose us to be fooled in this way but ultimately it is not true. Even that kind of life gets boring after a while, and usually sooner than we hope. The movie “Robin and Marion” makes this point, and I have heard that some brave soldiers say the same.

In the time of the Buddha, people did not have the chance to continually cure different diseases or hope to cure a big complex disease such as cancer once-and-for-all. We think that might make life worthwhile but don’t be so sure. If you are the one who does it, yes, you will feel good for a while. But, if you didn’t do it, somebody else would. Does the fact that you did it make your life worthwhile but make the lives of other people not worthwhile, even if somebody else would find the cures eventually? If somebody else does it but not you, does that make his-her life worthwhile but not yours? Don’t confuse getting a Nobel prize, fame, glory, or wealth with making life worthwhile.

You are bored watching TV all evening every evening. You decide to do something a little naughty, such as play risqué music, invite the person down the hall in for a drink, a smoke, or a pill, and maybe have sex. That is fun. You do it again. You go out to look for people who do the same thing. You do a little crime such as a drug deal or stealing. Life is fun again. But that lasts only for a while. Pretty soon you get tired of sex, drugs, rock and roll, hip-hop, music about righteous anger, and petty crime. Even if you escalate to bigger, you get tired of that. Many nights, now all you want to do is watch Nature, Discovery, or History on the TV. Eventually, you know in your heart that nothing will keep you engaged all the time every time, not even conquering the world.

Everybody once in a while gets the feeling of deep bone weariness with life. You would know life is not worthwhile if you took seriously that feeling. You do not have to be disappointed or hurt to have this feeling. Sometimes you just feel it from the center outwards. You might even feel it in the middle of a happy event such as a wedding. Evolution guards us from dwelling on those feelings and taking them so seriously that we use them as a turning point. In contrast, Buddhism insists those feelings are right, and Buddhism tries to get us to overcome our evolved programming to go on anyway despite what we can see is the truth.

Recall the chapters in this book on “Worlds”, especially the second chapter. There I described scenes of increasing boredom and of increasing helplessness with boredom. I reviewed techniques for fending off boredom, including the ideas of rebirth, life is a game, and losing yourself. The techniques might work for a while but ultimately they cannot stave off boredom. Not even The Game in the novels “Kim” (Rudyard Kipling) and “The Glass Bead Game” (Herman Hesse) can fend off boredom forever. Think of boredom as a proxy for “not worthwhile”. The moves that fend off boredom might make life seem worthwhile for a while but not forever. Eventually we see through all moves to the fact that life is not worthwhile. A merry-go-round can be interesting for a long time but it cannot make life worthwhile. The idea of not worthwhile is like a very deep qualitatively distinct unfixable kind of boredom.

Besides, even if life is not boring, even if life is fascinating, that still does not make life worthwhile. To a stoned person, reruns on TV are amazing but that does not make them worthwhile.

If you read enough fiction, eventually you realize there are no new stories, and more fiction is not going to get you anywhere. Even good stories get empty after a while. How many gangster or vampire movies can you watch? Fiction is not worthwhile. If then you go back to real life, after not long you realize most life is more boring than fiction. To make life more interesting, usually people turn to life that is dangerous or thrilling, or turn to the “underbelly”. Even then, after a shorter time than they feared, they realize thrill and danger too are empty. “The thrill is gone”. After that, there is little to turn to.

“Not worthwhile” means all the lessons from all the scenarios. It does not mean “boring and unlikely to pay off our investment”. It means pointless despite the fantasy, endless variation, and engagement. For a wonderful novel about this realization, read “Kim”.

Rebirth might solve some problems but it also creates worse problems. Rebirth helps keep people lost in the system. Understanding that life is not worthwhile gets us out of a system of rebirth. It does not make the system of rebirth more fun or make it worthwhile as a system.

The idea that we can keep dying and getting reborn, so stave off boredom, and so make life worthwhile, is probably a reaction to the idea that life is a delusion. This solution – rebirth to fend off boredom – is central in Hinduism and Mahayana. This solution is similar to the idea that God can lose himself in play and-or dreams, so enjoy himself, and so ultimately find himself in an even better way. I think the Buddha would have rejected this alternative and this view of God and the self. I don't know if this alternative was available in the time of the Buddha and that he did, in fact, reject it. If this alternative appeals to you, then you might disagree with the Buddha. If you prefer Mahayana or Hinduism to Theravada, then you should consider the role of this idea in your thinking.

The idea that God judges us after death does not make life worthwhile even if we expect that God will be kind to us and even if we hope that God allows us to try again in other lifetimes. No matter how well we do with God, no matter how many times we try, life is not worthwhile. God cannot make life worthwhile. God is fooling himself if he thinks he can make life worthwhile. We fool ourselves if we think God has made life worthwhile or can make life worthwhile. The ideas that God saves us, Jesus saves us, or we are justified by our faith in God and by following his Will, do not make Life worthwhile. The idea that we go to heaven does not make life worthwhile; even heaven gets boring; "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens". Life is not a great-and-wonderful gift from God.

**(D) (5) Life is Not Worthwhile: Life has no Meaning.**

Life is not "not worthwhile" because life is meaningless although the lack of meaning in life can open our eyes to the fact that life is not worthwhile. For readers who recall high school "lit" courses, the idea that life is not worthwhile is like the idea from Existentialism that life is absurd. Recall Albert Camus' novels "The Stranger" and "The Plague". (In the movie "Life of Pi", while in "high school", the hero reads "The Stranger" in original French.) In "The Plague", a doctor fights the plague although he knows he does not make the life of anybody better, good people die who should live, stupid and bad people live who should die, and the plague will mutate to return over and over, so there is no end to it and nothing is ever finally done – in contrast to what Jesus said on the Cross. People who have the plague and people who do not have the plague make up ideas about why it has come and what life is all about, but the ideas seem silly. The challenge is to make meaning in the face of all this. Existentialists claim we can make meaning although life has no intrinsic meaning and life is absurd, and that this meaning makes life worthwhile. I am not sure Camus believed this. I do believe this. Buddhism does not. We can make up meanings, even real meanings, but that does not make life worthwhile.

At a first level, Buddhism is like the doctor when he feels life is absurd and all meaning is merely made up self-defense fantasy. We "see through" all meaning. We see that life is absurd. When we see through all meaning, and see that life is absurd, then we also see that life is not worthwhile.

In the movie series "The Matrix", ideas about the absurdity of life are introduced by the character "Agent Smith", especially when he opens his heart to Morpheus. The idea that life is absurd makes everything absolutely the same, and vice versa: "everything means less than zero". When Neo first defeated Agent Smith, Neo took meaning (purpose) from Smith's life. When Neo merged with Agent Smith, Smith got the power to make everything the same, to make it all him. Agent Smith must defeat Neo to reassure himself that he has found a new purpose in making it all the same. Without at least this purpose, Agent Smith cannot go on. Because Agent Smith cannot fathom the purpose-in-non-purpose of life, eventually he

must cease entirely. If the Merovingian is the old Satan then Agent Smith is the new Satan in which life has no meaning regardless of cause and effect or anything else.

Buddhism does not deny we can have real meanings or even that we can make up real meanings but it denies that meanings make life worthwhile; even real meanings do not fully make up for the plague. For Buddhism, life can have real meaning but life is still not worthwhile. To “see through” meanings can help us to see that life is not worthwhile but ultimately it is not necessary to see through all meaning. Some people assert their meaning cannot be “seen through”, debunked. For them, life is not absurd. People say this about family, love, God, religion, science, and country. Buddhism does not have to argue with them. It simply sees that life is not worthwhile even for people who make real meaning; these people only think life is worthwhile. Even when life has meaning that we can’t easily see through, and life is not absurd, life is still not worthwhile. Even a meaningful life is not worthwhile. “Meaningful” is not always the same as “worthwhile”. “Not worthwhile” is not exactly the same as “absurd” or “not meaningful” any more than “meaningful” is exactly the same as “worthwhile”. “Meaning” is a game that is played within the limits of the mistake that life is worthwhile, and, within those limits, meaning is fully meaningful. Once outside those boundaries, meaning is not wrong, it is irrelevant.

Stories like the writings of Camus help us understand these issues. For more stories, read excerpts from the “Lotus Sutra”. It is a Mahayana sutra (book) rather than a Theravada sutra, but still useful, and won’t cause much damage.

#### **(D) (6) Life is Not Worthwhile: Not “Bleak House”.**

When people begin to feel that life is not worthwhile, they can get despondent. It seems a bleak vision. But it is not nearly as bleak as the ideas below. The idea that life is not worthwhile is not the same as any ideas below. Unlike as with the ideas below, after we see that life is not worthwhile, we still have a lot of life to live and a lot of scope to live in. We can still be useful in life, enjoy life, watch, teach, have friends, do science, and make art, without thinking those activities make life worthwhile; and we don’t have to fall into clinging. This scope for modest living is part of what gives Buddhism its charm.

The idea that life might not be worthwhile does have benefits. It leads us to really think through whether life is worthwhile and what might make life worthwhile. It makes us think through the meanings that we others and that we make up. Thinking about whether life is worthwhile helps us make ourselves, much as confronting moral issues helps us make ourselves. Although life might not be worthwhile, life does not end right away as soon as we know that it is not worthwhile, and we should carry on well.

- Life is intrinsically meaningless
- Life is absurd
- We cannot give meaning to life
- All meanings are false and we should see through all meanings
- All life is bad delusion
- Because we are caught in cause and effect, we can have no choice
- Because we are caught in cause and effect, life is necessarily meaningless and absurd
- Because we evolved, life is necessarily meaningless and absurd
- We cannot see otherwise than as evolution programmed us, so life is meaningless and absurd

- Morality is a delusion and-or a tool for control
- There is no objective truth, everything is relative
- Life is disappointing
- Life is pain and suffering
- Even deep emotions such as love are delusions and meaningless
- Life is necessarily deeply boring (“ennui”)

**(E) More Comments.**

**(E) (1) Letting Go, Again.**

We can overcome the complex of mistakes. Because life is not overall worthwhile, we should not commit to it. We should see that life is sticky, that the stickiness cannot be avoided within a normal life, and so we need to avoid normal life with its stickiness. We should not cling to life or to any thing in it: material, mental, artistic, emotional, social, or spiritual. We should let life go on around us without clinging to it, we should wait to die, we should not fear, and be content when we do die. Not to cling is a way to see that life is not worthwhile. Seeing that life is not worthwhile is a way not to cling. Just as desire, clinging, and life push each other, so not clinging and seeing that life is not worthwhile help each other. Given how the mind works, usually we have to let go of some clinging first before we can see that life is not worthwhile. In practice, the two ideas often come together in small reinforcing partial steps.

At the same time, we should not commit against life because that is an indirect way of clinging too; killing yourself is an indirect way of clinging to life, especially in a system of many lives with rebirth. We should not kill ourselves. In a system of many lives, if we kill ourselves, we will be reborn, and then will have to go through it all again. Even if there is only one life, we should not get angry at life, or at least we should not stay angry.

It is fairly easy to stop clinging to obvious obsessions such as the White Whale in the novel “Moby Dick”. It is harder to stop clinging to more natural objects such as family. Letting go in Buddhism is not like letting go of the White Whale. It is more than simply working fewer hours at the job and so caring more about your family. It is subtler and harder. One lesson of “Moby Dick” is to look at many aspects of life as if they might be the Whale and to let go of them as we would the Whale. Letting go in Buddhism is more like letting go of the Holy Grail in the movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”. Even things that seem good can be bad if we think of them too much and don’t think about other more important issues. “He chose wisely”. Yet, in Buddhism, everything in life is like that. We can only think properly if we let go of all particular things in life, learn to take issues as they come, and learn to put them down when we have disposed of them properly.

We should learn to accept thoughts, feelings, and actions, as they come, and then to let them go. If we learn to let go that way, we are ready to die at any time, and ready to wait until we die naturally.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile, and to give up commitment to life, if you have a parent, siblings, spouse (partner), children, other family members, and friends, and you care about them. It is impossible not to struggle and cling if you have to tend other people. If you truly wish to wake up, then you must give up family life. If you have not married, don’t marry. If you do not already have children,

don't have children, and give up your spouse. If you already have a spouse and children, give them up. When the Buddha set out to find truth, he gave up his wife and child. It is true that his wife and child lived well at his father's palace, but he still gave them up.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile, and to give up commitment to life, if you still want fortune, fame, power, glory, success, intellectual achievement, spiritual achievement, or a place in history. To seek those is to mistakenly believe they are worthwhile, and so to struggle and cling.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile if you wish to serve people, do good, and make the world better. To vigorously seek goodness is to cling and struggle. At the same time, you may not act badly. You do not have a license to do what you want. You do not have a license to act badly. That is a worse form of clinging than moral action. Act with simple moral decency. Dogmatic morality and anti-morality are both forms of clinging and of thinking life is worthwhile. Moral action is better than immoral acting, but to cling to morality is still clinging and so is still bad. To cling to morality hides that life is not worthwhile. This clinging makes life sticky. You must be willing to give all that up. You might do good along the way but that goodness is only incidental.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile if you care about anything, if, in Western terms, you care. You do not despise anything, and you might see the value of many things, but you cannot really care about anything, anybody, any god, or any cause. You can be a good person but not a caring person.

It is alright to have feelings and ideas. It is alright to enjoy your mind as it goes along. "Being dead to the world" is not the same as seeing that life is not worthwhile. You should not make your mind (self) "a pile of dead ashes". It is alright to act on some feelings and ideas, such as "I want to go pick an apple off that tree", or "I should tell my neighbor that his dog has ticks". The point is not to cling, not to commit, not to obsess, not to care, and so to see life truly. Once you have had a feeling or idea, and have acted rightly, then let it go. If you can't get the apple off the tree, don't worry about it. Some feelings or ideas you can have but should not act on, such as "I want to kill my neighbor because he throws cigarette butts on the apartment lawn". From an old story: A senior monk and his student came to a stream. The stream was swollen, and thus hard to cross. At the ford, a young woman waited, wishing to cross but unable. The elder monk picked her up, carried her across, and put her down. The monks walked on. Monks should not touch women ever. The younger monk was distraught. After an hour, he said, "Master, you carried that woman. You know touching women is forbidden. Why did you do that? What am I supposed to do now? Who am I to believe now? What am I to believe now?" The elder monk replied, "Are you still carrying that woman? I put her down long ago."

You may enjoy nature as long as you do not cling to it. You may enjoy beauty as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy art as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy science as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy theology as long as you do not cling. You should work for goodness as long as you do not cling. All this is hard to do. Many Buddhist monks have gotten lost in clinging to natural beauty and-or theology.

Not clinging is not the primary end. Not clinging is not an end in itself. Do not cling to "not clinging". Not clinging is a way to overcome desire and stickiness, see clearly, and see that life is not worthwhile. After you see that life is not worthwhile, then you stop clinging automatically. Life is no longer sticky. You no

longer desire. It sounds like a trick to say “stop clinging to not clinging” but, once you see the ideas and practice them, it does not seem like a trick, and it does not seem like a contradiction.

Once you begin to let go of things in life, you might feel much better. This is not your goal, although you should not reject it. You should not mistakenly think, because you feel better due to Buddhist ideas or techniques, that, in fact, life is worthwhile. You should not mistakenly think you can conquer stickiness, suffering, and clinging. To do so is another form of stickiness, clinging, and suffering. Sometimes people feel tremendous joy at realizing life is not worthwhile. That is not the goal either, and to seek that joy is another form of stickiness and clinging. Either to pursue or to reject the feeling that comes with letting go is itself another clinging. Accept what satisfaction or dissatisfaction comes your way as a result of your quest. Many people feel joy but not as they expected, not as in religious ecstasy, and not as in therapy.

Recall the monk in medieval Japan who said: “Before I was enlightened, I was miserable. I was cranky, hated people, etc. Now that I am enlightened, I am still miserable etc”. You have to take the good and the bad, and let go of the good and bad.

You may not commit any crimes or immorality. You are not above the rules. Freedom from mistaken ideas is not the same as not being bound by rules. Breaking the rules will not set you free. You cannot steal and then say “Oh, I put that down long ago”. You need not worry about rigid moral rules or arbitrary moral conventions but you do still have to be moral and you still have to respect the sensitivity of others. Moral rules still apply to you. Buddhism is quite strong morally without clinging to conventional morality or false uprightness.

As with all Indians of his time, the Buddha took the moral nature of the universe for granted regardless of whether life was worthwhile. The universe is intrinsically moral. Through karma, the universe rewards good deeds and good intentions, and it punishes bad deeds and bad intentions. That is part of the law of cause and effect; see below. You should act well regardless of any reward or punishment, but, whatever you think about purity of motive, the universe still responds to your deeds and intentions.

You cannot make spiritual progress if you commit bad acts. Bad acts cloud your mind and so keep you from the clarity needed for spiritual progress.

You do not have to become a monk. Being a monk is an aid in your search, and helps the rest of society by clearly showing people that you are searching and are no longer in normal society. A person who is searching but is not a monk often looks like a bum, and he-she scares other people. Somebody dressed as a monk is more likely to bring a smile. As a monk, you can help other monks, that is, other searchers. It is not misleading to help as long as you do not cling to being helpful. It is not wrong to be a monk, and it can be useful; but it is not necessary.

Exercises such as meditation, yoga, and Tai Chi can help but are not essential. Ideas such as karma, Dharma, reincarnation, spiritual force, merit, demerit, sin, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, the non-self, and Enlightenment can help but are not essential. They can help us get rid of some delusions and clinging. They help calm and focus our minds so we can think well and can overcome the mistakes of normal thinking. But they can also be a source of delusion and clinging in themselves. We should do them to the extent that they help but only to that extent. We should not do them so that they get in the

way. The young Buddha left his teachers because they reveled in ascetic practices to the point where practices got in the way of further spiritual progress. Only after he had given up rigorous asceticism for moderation did the Buddha fully see. Overly-rigorous asceticism taught the young Siddhartha a valuable lesson about clinging, the inevitability of clinging in life, and the not-worthwhile-ness of life.

**(E) (2) What Happens After You Awaken 1: An Awakened Person Does Not Lead a Normal Life.**

An awakened person sees that life is not worthwhile. He-she sees that life is sticky, we cling to life-as-a-whole and to particular things in life, and so we suffer. An awakened person reduces-or-ends clinging and suffering. An awakened person lets life flow through him-her without clinging to life. The Buddha offered methods to help us do all this.

After awakening, when an awakened person dies, he-she is not reborn. His-her karma is “spent”. In a common image from Theravada, he-she “goes out like a snuffed candle”. The person is over and done. In Theravada, this is a desirable event. It is called “pari-nirvana”.

Most people who are not awakened can understand not suffering, but they dislike that they simply cease totally at death. They want to go on living but without suffering and with worldly success. In Theravada, this goal is not allowed although I think most Theravada Buddhists secretly hold this desire. In Mahayana Buddhism, this goal replaces the goal of enlightenment-and-then-simply-going-out. In Mahayana and Hinduism, people (as Buddha Mind or as Dharma) lived forever before they were born in this lifetime, and will live forever after. They are unborn and undying. I think Siddhartha Gautama denied this possibility but it still runs through various forms of Buddhism anyway.

A person who seeks awakening cannot live a normal life. An awakened person cannot live a normal life. Even after awakening, a normal life too readily leads to clinging and suffering. If you disagree, then try following a particular sports team, a particular sport, a style of music, a style of movie, TV, or novels, politics, the economy, the ecology, fashion, beauty, or celebrities. You cannot follow anything interesting in this world without getting sucked in, getting stuck, clinging, and getting confused. You cannot run a business if you seriously seek awakening or have awakened.

An awakened person need not reject some normal things such as curiosity, education, exercise, friends, etc. An awakened person does have to avoid things that are strongly sticky and that lead to clinging such as family, career, politics, business, formal religion, being a famous scholar, etc. To awaken, usually we have to live apart from society; the Buddha left his family and made monks live celibate. After awakening, a person can come back to society a bit, but still cannot live a normal life; the Buddha did not return to his family, did not start a new family, and did not carry out an occupation such as merchant. The Buddha did advise awakened people to teach other people, and advised that awakened people could live in the normal world somewhat without falling back into clinging and suffering. He advised them to “go to the market” to explain his ideas. Still, that advice does not mean seekers and awakened people can lead a normal life. The Buddha would not allow people to be cutthroat merchants, conniving politicians, or careerist academics. Jesus and Mohammad said people who feel the call of God cannot lead entirely normal lives but the two leaders differed on how their lives departed from normal.

I doubt that a person could be a public school teacher or an academic and be a dedicated seeker or fully awakened person. Teachers and academics can be really good people, and many helped me, but they cannot be a dedicated seeker or an awakened person.

At the least, true seekers and already-awakened people will suffer a disadvantage due to their greater feeling for morality. This is the same disadvantage that followers of Jesus face. To compete with other business people, and to deal with authorities and politicians, you have to do “questionable” things such as pay off bad police officers and buy elections. You have to lie on your EPA reports and taxes. Yes, if all business people, all officials, and all politicians were honest, and the playing field were entirely level, you could be fully moral and not suffer a disadvantage – but the world is not like that. Yes, a moral business person, official, or politician does gain some advantage when customers see that he-she is moral; and this advantage can partially make up for the advantage that others gain from “cutting corners” – but not enough for all honest people and not enough over the long run. You might go to the market to teach but you could never do more than run a small shop. Some Christians settle for this much and I am fairly sure some good Buddhists do as well. Yet imagine if all monks opened shops in any predominantly Buddhist country; Thailand has tens of thousands of monks; then you get the point.

Don’t fool yourself about this point. People want very much to have spiritual success and a normal life at the same time, and so people fool themselves into thinking they can awaken from clinging and suffering and can still lead a normal life. You cannot.

Most Buddhists do not work for full awakening in this life but only work toward eventual awakening. They lead somewhat normal lives but try to be spiritual along Buddhist lines at the same time. I don’t speculate on: how much, and in what ways, you have to be spiritual along Buddhist lines to be a good successful Buddhist and still lead a somewhat normal life; how much you have to give up so as to follow a somewhat normal life as a striving Buddhist; how much you can keep and still be a real Buddhist; when you stop being a real Buddhist if you keep too much; what added particular ideas, acts, or morality you need to live a somewhat normal life and still be a real Buddhist.

This point about not leading a normal life is important because Mahayana does say both a seeker and an awakened person can lead completely normal lives such as “married with children”, soldier, farmer, police officer, merchant, or politician. In Mahayana, with the right attitude, you can live in the world without worrying about clinging and suffering. In Mahayana, seekers and awakened people need not name their children “fetter” (Rahula) as did Siddhartha. In Theravada, it is not true that you can live in the world but not be subject to the cause-and-effect, desire, stickiness, and clinging. This idea is a point of contention between Theravada and Mahayana.

If Buddhism says that life is not worthwhile, seekers cannot live a normal life, and successful Buddhists do not live a normal life, then why did ordinary people follow Buddhism? See sections below.

Suppose you do awaken, then what? If you are a monk, then mostly you continue as a monk. You teach other beings, human and non-human. If you are not a monk, you adjust life so you do not do anything bad or anything that might erode awakening. You allow your native personality to play itself out, as long as your native personality is not criminal. If you are a fussy gardener, garden fussily. If you like to paint, paint. If you like to sing, sing. If you like to write logical treatises, do so, as long as you do not perpetuate

misleading ideas or get lost in the maze. Don't fall back into attachment. Wait for your life to run out, and for you to go away. While you are waiting, you can watch the world play out. In particular, you can watch the world act out Buddhism: cause and effect, clinging, suffering, moments of suffering, moments of joy, moments when people see Dharma, hardening of egos, softening of egos, morality, immorality, amorality, and the rise and fall of states. You cannot do anything bad. You can do as much good as you like, and likely will, but you should not get attached to good acts. Teaching is a good compromise. Being a patient watcher, mild liver, and mild doer of good deeds, who sees the world in terms of Buddhist Dharma law, all contribute to the charm of Buddhists, as I describe below.

For more on this topic, some of it not completely orthodox, see the section "What Happens after You Awaken 2: Just Wake Up" below.

### **(E) (3) Non-Metaphysical, Non-Mystical, and non-Glamorous.**

The original teaching of the Buddha was not metaphysical, mystical, magical, or glamorous. That is part of the charm of Buddhism. The Buddha did not take a stand on metaphysical or mystical issues; he just ignored them as irrelevant. It does not matter if there is a bigger-than-me, I feel the bigger-than-me, I reflect the bigger than me, the bigger-than-me sees through my eyes, I do the work of the bigger-than-me, the bigger-than-me loves me, I am the bigger-than-me, the bigger-than-me is unborn and undying, individuals are real but the general (species) is not, the general is more real than particular individuals, we are all one, or we are all particular and one at the same time. It does not matter if there is God, heaven, hell, judgment after death, making the world better, objective truth, etc. It only matters that life is not worthwhile, we see this, and we take steps to correct the problem. Even though God exists, the life he made for here-and-now is not worthwhile.

In Buddhism, the ideas that life is sticky, we cling, life is not worthwhile, cause-and-effect, karma, and dharma are not metaphysical or mystical because we can see them directly in experience.

Metaphysics and glamour go together. When we want to exalt something as metaphysical we also make that thing glamorous. When we hold a person, such as Jesus or the Buddha, to be a savior, we also make him glamorous. Jesus did not really have a halo around his head and likely did not look like a movie star. The Jewish Law is not only given by God, it is also exalted, powerful, deep, and glamorous. We cannot make the union of good and bad metaphysical without also glamorizing badness a bit and making their union glamorous too, as Blake did in the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell". As far as I can guess, the Buddha wished his ideas to be non-metaphysical and non-glamorous too. There is nothing exaltedly heroic about seeing that life is not worthwhile and then letting the game play out to the end. You just do it.

To explain the Buddha, people after the Buddha used many aids. Aids always reintroduce metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. Reintroducing metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour is almost always hurtful and an impediment. Theravada Buddhists glamorize the Buddha, his teachings, and their religion. For example, they glamorize the "Middle Path" not as an observation about how the world works, and a piece of good advice, but as the "Yellow Brick Road" of Buddhism and the magic solvent that allows them to cure every problem. Mahayana depends on glamorizing both this world and the overcoming of this world.

Even Zen masters who likely knew the Buddha well often made this serious mistake by glamorizing the Void, Buddha Mind, and the idea that everything is as it should be.

As part of how our minds work, as part of seeing a lively world, we naturally tend to some metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. They are natural ways to think. It is natural and easy to reintroduce them in explaining a hard idea such as that life is not worthwhile. Yet to reintroduce them is still a mistake. To think without metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour is a bit unnatural, difficult, and takes practice. It can be done. You do not have to deny metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour to do it. Ironically, to deny them is to take a mystical and metaphysical stand, to glamorize your renunciation, and so to reintroduce them. You simply learn to play with them and ignore them, and learn to focus on other concerns. Some great Buddhists, and great Zen masters, understood this, could do it themselves, and advised other people to do it. Yet so strong is the natural tendency to mysticism, metaphysics, and glamour that great masters often lapsed back to them in their explanations.

Science contains a fair amount of metaphysics and usually contains more than a dollop of mysticism. That does not invalidate science, and it is not a concern here. It is not usually a concern to practicing scientists but only to philosophers of science.

#### **(E) (4) Honoring Normal Everyday Life.**

By ignoring mysticism and metaphysics, the Buddha gave more status to normal everyday life than was common among religious seekers of his time, and he supported the idea that the world is as it is and not otherwise. The Buddha used examples from normal life to support his ideas, and so also valued normal life and common sense. I do not know whether the Buddha intended to support normal life and common sense or if he supported them inadvertently, but they did become part of Buddhism.

By supporting everyday life and common sense naturalism, the Buddha did not undermine his basic idea that life is not worthwhile. We might enjoy common life and common sense, and value them above mystic life and vision, but that still does not make life overall worthwhile. In supporting everyday life and common sense, the Buddha did not make mystic, make metaphysical, or glamorize everyday life. Life is what it is. Just because we should live in everyday life does not mean we should exalt it.

In supporting everyday life and common sense, and devaluing mysticism and metaphysics, the Buddha put up a block to people with a natural mystic temper. The Buddha did not deny natural mysticism; he simply ignored it as not immediately relevant.

As compensation, people who are natural mystics tend both to over-extol and under-value normal life and the common sense world at the same time; I do not say how. Natural mystics bend the religions around them to mystic visions, often by interpreting visions and religion in metaphysical terms. Mystics seem to like Buddhism, and they want to put metaphysics back into it. There is much scope for doing so through Buddhist aids, but, eventually, mystics come up against the fact that the Buddha avoided mysticism and glamour. When they reach this impasse, rather than bow to the Buddha, they often greatly over-stress the Buddhist aids and greatly stress their own metaphysical interpretations. They “double down”. They try to stress both, on the one hand, normal life and common sense, with, on the other hand, mysticism,

metaphysics, and glamour. They both make humble and exalt everyday life at the same time. They want to have their cake and eat it too. I think the Buddha did not do this.

Several hundred years after the Buddha, Mahayana Buddhism tried to fuse the ideas that normal life is valuable and normal life is somehow mystical. I think Mahayana failed. But the Mahayana attempt was rooted in attitudes that can be traced back to the Buddha. In the next chapter, I use Mahayana as my chief example for the mystical, metaphysical, and glamorous reshaping of Buddhism.

I agree with the Buddha that a common sense naturalistic approach to life is where we should start, and that we should stick to it as much as possible. I believe in the taste of peaches until somebody can give me a conclusive argument otherwise. I agree that we should respect normal lives and that normal lives have as much value as lives devoted to mysticism or metaphysics. Yet I have had mystical feelings and I also understand the desire to inject them back into our normal life and common sense. I understand the desire to reshape religion along the lines of our own mystic visions and I know how to use metaphysics and glamour to do it. Because I see this, I have tried to use my mystical feelings without falling into error. I sympathize with the desire of natural mystics to inject Buddhism with metaphysics and glamour but I think this is a mistake and it goes against the original intent of the Buddha.

#### **(E) (5) Middle Path Again.**

Usually we err when we go to any extreme. Usually we make progress when we are about in the middle. Not to cling usually brings us to the middle. Usually finding the middle helps us not to cling. The story of how the Buddha took the last steps to awakening usually serves as an important lesson about the middle. Palace life was an unending party where nobody was sick, nobody got old, and nobody died where young Siddhartha could see it. When Siddhartha left the palace, he went over to the opposite end. His studies under spiritual teachers were quite harsh, abused his body, brought him near death, and left him no mental strength with which to figure things out. Not abundant life nor stark death, extreme pleasure nor extreme suffering, was the key. When Siddhartha left his teachers, he ate properly and he moderated his exercises. His mind cleared up, and he thought through the issues of life, death, suffering, and clinging. He realized that anti-life was just as much an impediment as clinging to life, and that pain was just as much an impediment as pleasure. The Buddha urged seekers to find and follow the "Middle Path", and sometimes called his way the "Middle Path".

Again, the Middle Path is not the end in itself; it is merely a proven means to the end. If you cling to the Middle Path, then you are not on the Middle Path, and you have erred. The Middle Path should allow your mind to work properly so you can see what is what. When you can see that, then you can follow the obvious middle path or you can veer off temporarily as appropriate. For people who have been through a college course in politics or philosophy, the Buddha's idea of the Middle Path was much like Aristotle's idea. Both men had similar ideas at about the same time.

Often Buddhists say they follow the Middle Path as a synonym to say they follow Buddhism and they lead a good life. If they are middle class and middle most things, they think they are automatically also good Buddhists. They use the term "Middle Path" like a mantra or PC slogan. They do not know, or avoid, the idea that life is not worthwhile, and instead follow a path between moral craziness and amorality, between being a fussy helicopter parent versus one who lets kids do whatever they want, a political true believer

crusader versus ignorant slacker, etc. Here the “Middle Path” is a religion in itself that borrows its validity from the historical validity of Buddhism. The Middle Path will magically take you to wherever Buddhism is supposed to have taken you. Usually there is nothing wrong with this approach, even when followers do not understand that, in Buddhism, the Middle Path is not an end in itself but is only a means to an end. It is better for these followers of the Middle Path to live morally and well in slight temporary confusion than for them to seek bizarre spiritual, cultural, and political extremes.

The Golden Rule is the middle way between diffuse unproductive empty good wishes Compassion versus specific-rules-and-moral-fervor, and between selfish indifference versus moral fervor. “Applies equally” and “rule of law” are the middle way between rigid highly specific law versus ad hoc make-it-up-as-we-along judgments, strong tyrant versus no central authority, and mass populist pseudo-democracy versus rational legalism. Old-fashioned representative democracy is the middle path between fascism (including Communism) versus mass populism pseudo-democracy, between rigid political party war versus chaos of many small ineffectual narrow minded parties.

#### **PART 4: MORE COMMENTS**

##### **Clinging, Commitment, and the Not Worthwhile World; “Just Let Go”, Again.**

“Clinging” has bad connotations, like a clinging boyfriend or girlfriend that you wish would go away. The word “commitment” has good connotations, like commitment to a cause or to lifelong marriage. That view is wrong. Commitment is clinging; we just wrongly think some clinging is good clinging. Commitment to any religious life is clinging to a dogma just as much as commitment to the idea that a losing team will finally break through this year is clinging to a vain hope.

Clinging causes suffering. If we end clinging, if we let go, we stop suffering. Clinging makes us think life is worthwhile when it is not. If we fully let go, we don’t have to worry whether life is worthwhile. So why wonder if whether life is worthwhile and why think about suffering directly? Why not just focus on not clinging, and let all the rest take care of itself? In this way, we avoid the trap of clinging to a religious life.

To stop clinging is good advice. It is a good idea not to get too lost in things, not even good things. It is a wonderful skill to participate without obsessing, without zeal, and without losing yourself in a bad way. “Don’t obsess”. I don’t go through all the situations, objects, and people for which it is fine to participate but bad to get obsessed.

Worrying whether life is worthwhile can be a form of clinging. Not worrying if life is worthwhile seems to eliminate one type of clinging. Why add another layer to the puzzle? If life turns out not worthwhile, then so be it; by not clinging, you have taken a big step toward letting go of life that is not worthwhile. If this particular life turns out worthwhile, then so be that; you have enjoyed this life even more by not clinging and by not worrying if this life was worthwhile. If life in general turns out worthwhile, including all future lives, then so be that too; you have enjoyed this particular life more by not clinging and by not worrying if any life is worthwhile. If life in general is not worthwhile, then at least you took a big step in this life by learning not to cling, not even to dogma. The situation is like Pascal’s Wager in which we believe in God because it is the gainful thing to do.

All this advice about not clinging is good advice. This is the attitude that many people take in Buddhism without actually saying so. Officially, Buddhists always have to refer back to “end suffering”. “Just stop clinging, just let go” is an attitude that shows up also in Zen and Taoism. As long as you can stick to this simple plan, I see little wrong with it. See Part 4, Section (A) (1) and following.

There are two problems. First, we shouldn't let go of everything, and, of what we do let go, we don't want to let go of everything the same way. We may not let go of deep true morality. We can let go of moral convention, but that is not an issue. We may not, and cannot, let go of the Dharma. We may let go of Buddhist teaching and Buddhist texts, but likely we don't want to do that right away or fully. After we have let go of most everything else, maybe we want to keep a few Buddhist texts for reminders and because they are no longer dangerous. We don't want to kill all desires. We have to breathe, drink water, eat, and sleep. We have to let go of particular friends when they die but we don't want to let go of friendship. We wish to let go of desire for beauty or for particular works of art, but that does not mean we cannot enjoy a beautiful sunset, beautiful animal, or piece of music when it comes up. To reject the world is another form of clinging. We have to learn not to cling to that either. We have to learn to see the wonderful variety of the world without clinging to it. If we think only of “don't cling”, then we forget that the world is sticky and that to let go is not a simple “attitude adjustment” by us but needs mutual change with the world. When we think “let go” is one simple thing that we impose on the world, really we show pride and power, and we are more caught than ever.

As we think what to let go and what to hold, and how best to let go or hold particular desires, inevitably we will seek guidance from a religious vision. As for which particular vision I think is best in deciding what to hold, what to let go, and how, that is what this book is for, especially Part One. There is nothing wrong with taking advice from several visions as long as they are not too contradictory. (Most religions become heavily relevant, get heavily involved, at the point where people have to decide what to let go of, what to hold, and how to do it all. Coming in hard at this point gives religion a lot of power. Other ideologies do the same with the same power, such as Leftism and Conservatism. That does not necessarily make any ideology evil. But the ideology better be correct.)

Second, people don't stick to this simple plan to just let go. When they begin to let go of clinging, they begin to feel good, and begin to think life is worthwhile after all. They find excuses for indulging all the traps of the world, thinking they are above it all, all the time clinging while thinking they are not clinging. They think they are the one person in the world who can get away with it when everybody else gets stuck. They are like the cigarette junky who says “I can quit anytime I want, so I'll have one more”. They think their love for their particular high-quality spouse, family, church, or country is the exception; they are not stuck in their own desires but all other people are stuck in theirs. They forget about change, suffering, illusion, unfairness, stickiness, etc. They are the lucky recipients of cosmic joy. They think “Not all particular lives are worthwhile but the entire game of many lives is worthwhile; those lives are worthwhile that are aware; and my own particular life is worthwhile because I am aware”. They are saved because they are smart. Their cleverness gets in their way. Sooner or later, you must face the issues of suffering, stickiness, and worthwhile. From the context in which the Buddha learned, and from what he said, he did not think life was worthwhile in any way that people usually think. If the Buddha saw life this way, it is a good idea to take his vision seriously before fooling ourselves again. Likely you are not smarter or better than the Buddha. I am vain enough to disagree with the Buddha but even I am not vain enough to think I am the one person who can master letting go, so I can cling to or let go of whatever I want without worry.

### **Puzzles Over Not Clinging.**

The following puzzles do not derail Buddhism. They enhance it for people who like puzzles. It is worth spending time thinking about them. Just don't get stuck. Because I am not a Buddhist, I don't have to know the answers. See "Just Wake Up" below.

Can we awaken without not-clinging? Can we not-cling and not awaken? If we not-cling do we have to automatically wake up? If we cling, then we cannot awaken, and, if we are not awakened, then we must still be clinging, so: If we don't have one, do we automatically not have the other? Are waking up and not-clinging the same?

Are not-clinging and not-worthwhile the same? Can we not-cling yet not see that life is not worthwhile? Can we see that life is not worthwhile yet continue to cling?

I am not sure, but I think it is possible to defeat clinging yet not awaken in a Buddhist way. On the good side, other religions also advise that we not cling or that we cling as little as possible, such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Christian and Muslim asceticism and mysticism. Think of Christian monks who take a vow of poverty. On the bad side, some people seem unattached to the world and almost unfeeling such as some psychopaths. We don't want to call psychopaths awakened. Buddhists can argue that these other ways of not clinging are not "really real" and so only Buddhism has true deep insight on true not clinging - I don't take sides in that argument. Rather, assume some people can nearly stop clinging yet do not necessarily wake up in an obvious Buddhist sense. Something else is needed besides not clinging. What is needed? I say: originally Buddhism said we also need to evaluate life and see that life is not worthwhile. Buddhism now says: we also need to see that we must defeat suffering. Some people say even those insights are not enough; to stop clinging you need positive content too. See Part One of this book for my ideas on what further positive content is needed. In practice, Buddhism also requires more positive content such as Compassion and skill in Aids such as cause-and-effect and Emptiness.

When you have defeated clinging, do you also give up not clinging? Do you also give up clinging to the doctrines of Buddhism including the doctrines about awakening and not clinging? Do you let go of the Dharma? Do you give up relying on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (society of Buddhists, especially of monks)? Do you give up on morality? All orthodox Buddhists would emphatically deny that you give up on any of these. Is their emphatic denial more clinging? What can you believe in but not cling to? What are the implications?

In practice, Buddhists do not really think not-suffering or overcoming-suffering comes with not-clinging. In practice, Buddhists pick elements of personality and social relations that they extol for reasons other than Buddhist doctrine and they use those as markers of success at not clinging. They cultivate those traits as a way to show how far they have advanced just as some Christians show off wealth as a sign of God's favor. Many Buddhists use aloofness and the supposed ability to see through all kinds of human motives to the desire, clinging, and suffering that beset all of us normal low-life people but not them. Buddhists think not-clinging gives magical insight and so they act as if they have magical insight. You should think about how a person who has reduced clinging might act.

## **What Happens After You Awaken 2: Just Wake Up.**

If this section appears to contradict anything in the chapter above, it does not. The ideas here are useful in my assessment of Buddhism, and for Taoism and Zen later. These ideas are not necessarily orthodox.

Beforehand, we need to get over two points. First, waking up can't be only seeing that most people live in a dream – the Matrix - with few purposes other than biological urges and what TV ads put in their heads. Every half-smart kid sees beyond that. Waking up can't be only living a life that is smarter, more mindful, aesthetic, and better than “the herd”. Those are not bad goals but are not awakening. Self-styled “better” people are not awake. Waking up has to be more. Sometimes less is more. Second, “just wake up” is related to “just let go”. They share many good and bad points. I don't go through all that. Please apply the assessment of “just let go” to the topic here. After this section, apply ideas here backwards to “just let go”.

The three main themes here are:

- (1) “Just wake up”, the most important theme
- (2) Acting naturally and-or spontaneously
- (3) Seeing the world as it is and appreciating daily life

Set aside issues of worthwhile life and of suffering, but agree that we need to wake up. Instead of waking up to the idea that life is not worthwhile, why not just wake up without saying beforehand what we wake up to? We can, and should, use ideas of suffering and life-is-not-worthy to help lead us to wake up, but, when we awaken, we can let go of those ideas too. We don't have to decide if life is not worthwhile and-or full of suffering, before waking up, during, or after.

It is hard to wake up without waking up to something. Usually we need to wake up to some vision that tells us how the world was before we woke up, why everybody is not awakened, and how the world is now that we have awakened. Usually other people give us their visions, which guide us in our quest and fill up our visions. The Buddha offered a vision of life as not worthwhile. Most religions offer visions of a bright and glorious bigger-than-me (God, Dharma, Tao) into which we merge. Mahayana and Hinduism offer visions of a bright glorious joyful bigger-than-me that is a system of many lives.

How do we make sure we wake up to something good? How do we make sure we avoid waking up to something bad? How do we avoid mistakes? How do we avoid becoming merely a powerful demon? Here the ideas of suffering and that life is not worthwhile can help, as can Buddhist aids. We can know in advance to avoid some mistakes, such as thinking we are above the law or we are above the intrinsic moral nature of the universe. After we start to awaken, we should not lapse into the idea that we are special, don't suffer much, and our particular life is superior, just because we are so clever. Hinduism is quite clear about the mistakes and about avoiding them. We can avoid this trap of wrong ideas if we are forewarned. If we avoid the wrong ideas, then, when we wake up, we stand a good chance of being on the right track.

If we know to avoid mistakes, and use the ideas of other people to guide us without seeking to remake their visions, then maybe we can wake up without having a vision to wake up to. We just wake up. We let our awakened self fill in whatever we think is correct as we wake up.

The Buddha might have had this “context free” idea of waking up in mind. He might have used the ideas of suffering and life is not worthwhile to get people to wake up, and to wake up the right way. The ideas of suffering and “life is not worthwhile” were Buddhist aids. We should be careful with this interpretation of what the Buddha had in mind because it is not orthodox. People see ideas in prophets as a way to justify their own ideas. We have to be careful not to do this with the Buddha or any prophet. Hopefully I avoid this pitfall. See below.

It is worth stressing this point in passing: It can seem like a relief not to have to worry about suffering and whether life is worthwhile. It sounds easier just to wake up. That is not so. It is easier to rely on a mental aid such as the idea of suffering. It is easier to have a context. It is hard to advance without some guide such as the idea of suffering. It is hard to wake up without some clear idea what to wake up to. Not even Zen masters can do this, not even if, on awakening, they (think they) get rid of context, like forgetting about the stairs once we have climbed them to high ground. The need for some context might be why the Buddha offered the idea of a “not worthwhile” present and-or of suffering. The ideas get us away from normal life for a while so we can just wake up. Then we can make up our own minds. If you think “just wake up” is not enough or gets in the way, then forget about it, and go back to orthodoxy. Orthodoxy has worked for about 2500 years.

The idea of “just wake up” goes along with seeing the world as it is and valuing ordinary life. I think the two ideas go together well. We can think about them together without necessarily making “daily life” the context that we must wake up to.

This idea of “just wake up” goes along not only with Buddhism but with any religion that is critical of the usual unexamined selfish normal life – which is all major religions. We can use this interpretation of “just wake up” for all religions that are critical even if they also insist the world is as it is and they value ordinary life, including Judaism, the teachings of Jesus, and commonsense Christianity and Islam. I do not go into this point in this book for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

What do you do after you “just wake up”? The answer is not clear. You cannot act immorally. You are not above the law. Contrary to misconception, you can’t “return to the marketplace”. You can’t become a politician who is “above it all” even while he-she strives to make it all better. You can’t go back to ordinary life. Not even Tao and Zen masters of the past led ordinary lives in the bustling city market or took up positions as Prime Minister.

You might try acting spontaneously and-or naturally. Don’t worry about worthwhile or not worthwhile, suffering or not suffering, waking or sleeping, karma, dharma, etc. Don’t even worry about good or bad much, although you still can’t do anything immoral. Most people are basically decent. Few people get intrinsic satisfaction from being bad, hurting people, or hurting nature. If you are the kind of person who has sought earnestly to “just wake up”, then likely you are more good than bad. Trust your nature. Trust what led you to seek to “just wake up”. Trust God. Then act naturally and spontaneously according to

your nature. You can act naturally without necessarily making “act naturally” the context to which you must wake up.

If “just wake up” is much the same as trusting your inner nature, your natural nature, your self, then “just waking up” is the same as acting naturally, and acting naturally is the same as waking up. If you can see to act naturally, and do it without anguish, then you have “just woken up”. There is no difference, and it is not worthwhile trying to figure out some subtle theological metaphysical difference. As we will see in later chapters, Taoism and Zen saw “just wake up” and “act naturally” as much the same without insisting that “act naturally” is the key vision to impose on waking up.

“Just wake up and act naturally” is a good way to go. In acting naturally, usually we act out daily life and we appreciate daily life. Waking up, acting naturally, and living daily life go together naturally. This is an even better way to go.

The idea that “just wake up”, acting naturally, and living daily life, all go together, became a central idea in Zen Buddhism. Although, in theory, the idea that all three themes go together appears in Mahayana, most Mahayana does not stress it. Instead, most Mahayana sees ordinary life as fabulous because it is part of a grand system. We do not wake up to ordinary life as it is but to life transfigured. Unfortunately, seeing daily life in terms of a grand system undermines “just wake up” and “act naturally”. I don’t explain. Zen got rid of that misleading exultation. In doing so, it returned to a Taoist vision.

Now we can better ask again, is “just wake up” what Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha originally had in mind? Is all the business about life not worthwhile, life full of suffering, and letting go just a way to get us out of the traps of ordinary life and to just wake up? Zen said so. Theravada knows of the idea but the idea is not a big theme there, and official Theravada continues to stress suffering. Some Mahayana thinkers seem to say this idea is what the Buddha originally had in mind though most Mahayana thinkers saw the idea of “just wake up without reference to suffering” to mean that life is worthwhile as part of a grand system. I don’t know if the Buddha originally had in mind “just wake up”. I doubt it. I am sure the Buddha would understand and I think he would approve. I think this idea is an improvement on what the Buddha likely originally had in mind.

Is “just wake up and act naturally” what Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha originally had in mind? If the Buddha did not have “just wake up” originally in mind, then likely he did not have “just wake up and act naturally” originally in mind. Still, again, Zen said “yes he did have both in mind”, Theravada knows of the idea but does not stress it, and Mahayana knows of the idea but prefers that we wake up to a fabulous system. Again, I think the idea is an improvement, and Siddhartha would approve, but this is not what he had in mind originally.

Does the fact that the Buddha did not originally have in mind “just wake up” and “act naturally” mean that the ideas are necessarily wrong or inadequate? No, they could still be true even if they alter a deep view in Buddhism.

Does the fact that the Buddha appreciated daily life necessarily mean that life is worthwhile, life is not full of suffering, “just wake up” is necessarily true, “just wake up” is necessarily false, “act naturally” must be true, or “act naturally” must be false? These questions are too subtle for me.

Can a person “just wake up” and then think life is worthwhile? This is the mistake that Mahayana made. I doubt you can “just wake up” and then think life is worthwhile if you think of “worthwhile” in terms of wealth, power, family life, success, or belonging to a grand system.

Feeling sure we can “just wake up”, act naturally, and life is worthwhile, is the mistake I am tempted to make when I want to merge Buddhism and Taoism with what I believe, that is, merge them with how I see the message of Jesus. It is not hard to imagine scenarios in which we just wake up, think life is modestly worthwhile, act mostly naturally, and work hard to make the world better – all without clinging and without thinking that wealth, power, success, Justification, and heaven are what it is all about. Even so, this is a tricky path. It is worthwhile thinking about this issue. Thinking about it helps get you clear on waking up, “just wake up”, natural action, not natural action, not worthwhile life, worthwhile life, my admonitions about how we should act, and Jesus. Don’t begin with the conviction that the ideas must merge simply because they all are so wonderful. Just let yourself think and wander and think.

When I thought about it, I found I had to give up “just act naturally” in favor of “mostly just act naturally but also rely on principles such as the Golden Rule”. We will see why in the chapter on Taoism.

### **What Happens after You Awaken 3: Common Bad Mistake, or I Might be Wrong.**

I did not look through English translations of major Buddhist texts for citations for what I say here. I am sorry for the lack of citations. Even Buddhist writers that I otherwise respect seem to make the mistake here. The issue is big enough to bring up despite no citations.

Some Buddhist writers imply: A person who wakes up is able to see that things, ideas, feelings, power, wealth, etc. do not last. He-she sees arising and disappearing, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, emptiness, and maybe Buddha Mind. He-she sees that none of this makes life worthwhile. Still, because he-she sees how the world really works, he-she can get along in worldly life well, even can succeed. He-she can manipulate the world as well as it can be, as well as any business person or politician. He-she is immune to clinging and so is able to avoid suffering and avoid using others. So he-she could live in this world successfully. Power, wealth, family, and fame are back in play. This view is akin to the idea that an awakened person should take his-her view back to the marketplace and to the fields and palaces, and teach by example.

I understand the wish for this alternative. It is important in Mahayana. But I doubt that it is so. I think the Buddha doubted this alternative. The world is too sticky. The world is too adept at “sucking us in”. We think we can see how it all works and so avoid getting taken in but we can’t. If we try, we get lost. This is a major theme of the novel “Siddhartha” by Herman Hesse.

Whether true or false, the idea that an awakened person can work on the sticky world with impunity, skill, and worldly success is dangerous. It easily misleads. It gives lay people wrong ideas of awakened persons. It makes lay people think a successful business person or politician must be awakened, almost awakened, or have many merit points. Most of outwardly successful people are hardly awakened, and many are far from it. This idea makes Buddhists seek for signs just as Jews, Christians, and Muslims seek for signs of God’s favor and of Salvation. It makes people believe in magic and in monks who claim

to have powers. It makes lay people overlook Buddhists who are truly advanced, really good people, and have a lot to give, but might not be charismatic.

We should never suppress a true idea only because it is dangerous. If the idea that an awakened person can use the world easily and without danger is true, we have to accept it. Then we must deal with results. We should not suppress even untrue ideas just because they are dangerous but we need to assess those ideas openly, in public, deeply, and truthfully. Keep the warnings in mind. Keep mistakes in mind, don't make them, and point them out. These are Buddhist duties.

I don't believe the idea is true. In the end, you have to decide if an awakened person could-and-or-should thrive in the sticky world.

### **Buddhist Aids.**

Here is the logical place for a discussion of Buddhist Aids but that takes too long. The basic idea is that people get stuck on issues about meditation, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, and the non-self instead of thinking directly about worthwhile and not worthwhile. Any idea, no matter how good it seems, even ideas like desire, sticky, clinging, and suffering, can distract us from direct insight about worthwhile and not worthwhile. So I moved discussion of Buddhist Aids to the end of the chapter. See discussion of the not-self below before going on to material about Buddhist Aids.

### **Buddhist Code as Buddhist Aid.**

Buddhism does offer a code of conduct that nearly everybody can follow. The code differs for monks and lay people, and differs in strictness for grades of lay people. When people follow the code, they feel they are improving and are moving to success. Following the code does not necessarily wake you up. I like the Buddhist code. It is like codes in large formal Western Christian churches such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed. It is like a version of Jewish Law that has been made more rational and consistent. It is like French Rationalist law.

Still, the code is like external worship in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is not enough to think you are making external progress now, so you can defer real (internal) progress and success (awakening) to an indefinite future. It is not enough to do things because of a code; you have to do things because they are right and to help other people. Following an external code gives people the sense that they are getting somewhere because of what happens outside. People need to use the code to see beyond the code but they rarely do. Buddhism knows about this flaw in its own code, and nearly all codes, but can do nothing about it except warn people.

Religion should offer a reasonable chance of reasonable success in this life to every normal person. You should not have to be really smart or a "born saint" to succeed in the terms of a religion. The Buddhist code gives people that. If you try to live by the standards of the code then you have succeeded to a fair extent in ways that everybody can understand. I have nothing against religion offering fun ideas for smart people to chew on but success should not depend on those. Zen moves toward simple ideas that people can master in this life now. Most of Mahayana does not but instead elaborates the Buddhist aids.

## PART 5: PRACTICE

I do not write about popular Buddhism and I don't write much about how Buddhism, society, culture, economics, politics, gender, etc. work together. Popular Buddhism uses the idea of Karma much more than ideas of Dharma and waking up. It has only a dim notion of the idea that life is not worthwhile, and it uses the idea of suffering largely to explain away bad results. With Karma, popular Buddhism explains the order of society, including high and low, bad and good, good luck and bad luck, and it gives ways for people to wiggle within the social order to improve their positions. It explains big rises and big falls. How the idea of Karma does this is too much to go into here. The popular Buddhist view of Karma is enough to support various somewhat different orders of society, it supports modest change, and it worked well with agrarian societies until recently, so it survived robustly. It is not clear what will happen in the modern world of global quasi-capitalism and modest democracy in a populist appearance. As of 2017, it seemed to be doing fairly well. Many people, academic and not, have written about Buddhism in society and vice versa. I give a few samples in the Bibliography but not many. You can find many on the Internet.

### **Briefly.**

People often call Buddhism a religion of "renunciation" but that view is not accurate. To say the world is "not worthwhile" is not to reject it the way that we spit out bad food. If we know the food is bad and have not yet taken a bite, we simply don't take a bite. Or we take a bite because we need food to get by, hope our stomach can handle it, and don't expect food to cure all ills. If we take a bite and taste that the food is bad, but can't spit it out, we go ahead, chew, try not to get attached to the taste, swallow, and let it go through our system. Then we can refuse another bite. Monks do not dress strangely because they reject the world in the sense of spoiled food but to remind themselves and everybody else that they are not the same as everybody else.

It might seem a religion of "not worthwhile" or of "renouncing" would not get along in society and would not support society, that it should fail and disappear, but this is not true. With allowances, Buddhism, monks, non-monks, and society all support each other fairly well.

In the beginning, Buddhism appealed to the upper middle class and upper class because they did not want to live under the yoke of the Brahmin priests and the political machine that priests supported. The Buddha told everybody to rely on his-her own self, and declared that everybody had the ability to rely on his-her own self. Buddhism appealed to people generally because they liked being their own master, determining their own spirituality and destiny. As Buddhism grew, these achievements were not enough. People wanted a positive relation between their religion and success in their ordinary lives. Desire for a positive relation between religion and success in this life play a large role in Mahayana, as we will see. It led people to reinvent Buddhism as a joyous system of many lives rather than as based on the idea that life is not worthwhile.

In Theravada countries, people applied the idea of being their own spiritual masters to all of life. A person could control his-her own destiny in family, economy, and power as well as in spiritual life. Of course, this degree of self-determination is never fully true, but is true enough if you believe it. It makes a good place to start. The same thing happened in the West with our ideas of the free person and that God makes us responsible for ourselves.

People in Theravada countries saw they were not likely to be enlightened in this lifetime but they could work on the quality of life in this lifetime, especially as they were their own masters. Working on quality of this life runs the risk of stickiness and mistakenly thinking life is worthwhile but not much more risk than any other attitude and it is a good attitude. Working on a graceful quality of life is a good base from which later to better appreciate stickiness and “not worthwhile”, and it builds up good karma rather than bad karma. Non-monks could seek the middle path, be good neighbors, get an education, be good leaders, act morally, feel self-reliant, be self-reliant, and contribute to well-run society. Non-monks could do as they wished as long as they didn't hurt other people. All this was preparation for more advanced lives in the future and for enlightenment but it also built a solid foundation for a good life now for particular selves and for neighbors.

Non-monks could be good people, good neighbors, and good citizens. Monks could help non-monks in all the tasks. At least, monks could educate many children and serve as the moral foundation of their local society. In return, villagers and aristocrats could support monks modestly. A close relation grew between monks and non-monks which benefitted both, and avoided the vexing question of working hard for enlightenment right now by replacing enlightenment with a good moderate life for everybody. This resolution is part of the charm of Buddhist countries, Theravada or Mahayana. The rest of the chapter explains in more detail.

### **Monks and Society.**

Modern people find the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk charming without realizing what the robes came from. The robes are death shrouds. In India during the time of the Buddha, before a body was cremated or buried, it was wrapped in old cloth that sometimes was deliberately dyed yellowish (“saffron”). Monks took those shrouds from graveyards to use as clothing. If the cloth was not already died yellow, monks died it. Monks made robes from shrouds to reinforce the idea that monks were no longer normal people with normal lives. They were “dead to society and the world”. They were “thus gone”. Monks literally left all family, as Jesus said a person's family had to be dead to him-her to follow Jesus. A monk may not return a greeting because a monk is not really here, not even from parents or the King. King Bhumipol (“Phumipon”) of Thailand was a devout intelligent Buddhist and did not expect monks to return a greeting. In the movies “Kill Bill”, the wonderful haughty Kung Fu master Pai Mei (“pie may”) destroys the Shaolin monastery because the abbot did not return his greeting with sufficient vigor. For Americans, the idea is a good plot device, but, in Buddhist China, Pai Mei would know that a monk may not return a greeting. (Some monks nod so as not to upset a person who mistakenly greets them, as the Buddha ate meat that was offered to him so as not to upset people who wrongly did so. I think the abbot in “Kill Bill” did nod.)

The Pali term for a male monk is “bhikku”, which means “beggar of alms”; for a female, “bhikkuni”. The word is also spelled “bhikkhu” and “bikku”. In Buddhism now, for a monk to offer a “begging” bowl is not like begging but instead the bowl is an opportunity for a lay person to appreciate the monk's quest and for the lay person to gain “merit points” by supporting the monk. I am not sure how the Buddha saw it.

Westerners think monks all live in quaint pretty monasteries but monks should live in monasteries only part time. In theory, monks should wander “begging” most of the time, that part of the year outside the rainy season. In the modern urban crowded world, they can't do that.

Monks seek enlightenment on their own, for themselves, and only for themselves, just as the Buddha had to give up his family and his teachers to awaken on his own. No person can awaken another person; you can awaken only yourself; only you can awaken you. In Christianity, no person except Jesus can save you directly; you can only save yourself, by correctly inviting God's Grace, usually with the help of Jesus. In Buddhism, you can help another person toward awakening as Muslims and Christians help another person invite the Grace of God and so be saved. In Buddhism, "learning the Dharma" is like inviting the Grace of God. So, nearly all Buddhist monks are happy to help other people learn the Dharma. Helping others, mostly by teaching the Dharma, can largely overcome any selfishness latent in the idea of seeking awakening only by yourself just as, in Christianity and Islam, bringing others to God helps overcome the apparent selfishness of one person being able to save only him-herself. The Buddha saved only himself but he also taught the Dharma to everybody and so brought millions of others up to awakening. In a later chapter, we will see that Mahayana carries the idea of helping others to salvation too far, in the character of the bodhisattva.

If life in general is not worthwhile, then certainly social life in particular is not worthwhile. So it seems monks and society would have little to do with each other but Buddhist monks took an important part in society. In practice, Buddhist lay people overlook the idea that life is not worthwhile to focus on morality, karma, meditation, advancement through lives, and spiritual power. As a result, monks and society can have close ties, and monks and lay people can carry on useful lives in the context of mutual relations. Monks help the people with morality, proper behavior, getting along, spiritual problems, learning, social order, spirits, luck, and success while the people support the monks. Monks are very important as moral teachers and often important as arbiters of peace. This stance is not necessarily hypocritical any more than similar stances in other religions. In all major religions, serious practitioners hold themselves a bit apart from mainstream society in which people primarily seek success yet religious practitioners still help society and play a role. For a hundred years after Jesus, Christians could not be politicians, military, police, or too rich, but now Christians pride themselves on all those. Christians could not have imagined their ideas being the basis for whole societies and empires, but they have been. Exactly how Buddhism goes along with society depends on particular Buddhist societies - Buddhism in Thailand, Japan, and China has different relations with society there just as Christianity in Russia and the United States has different relations with the state - and I can't go into details here.

Before the Buddha, Brahmins dominated religion, somewhat like ancient Egyptian priests, Christian bishops, or mega-church leaders but not as well arranged in a single system, somewhat like Americans think of Celtic Druids. Priests were the highest rank of a ranked society. Even aristocrats and warriors were below priests. Before any venture, a ruler had to consult priests. The rulers had to maintain priests. The rulers had to give priests a share of spoils. Suddenly, Buddhism said priests were irrelevant. Only the Dharma is relevant. As long as an aristocrat or military person follows the Dharma, he-she is alright, and may dispense with priests. Aristocrats and military people can do what they want. Buddhism spread first, and quickly, among the upper classes and merchants. Although the rulers did not become monks, they could embrace the new ideas, and the new freedom; they could always tell themselves they would become monks in a future life. The rich merchant class embraced Buddhism for the same reasons. The first patrons of the Buddha were rulers and rich people. From the rulers and rich, Buddhism spread to the common people because they emulated superiors. About 1200 years later (after CE 800), Islam spread through island Southeast Asia in the same way.

Monasteries and monks became the centers of lore, learning, education, and even research. The same Buddhist ideology that denied hard distinctions between rulers and priests also served common people through the benefit brought by monks. Monks did not limit their teaching only to rulers and rich people, they taught everybody, including common village people. They taught people according to ability to learn, not only according to ability to pay or power. Monks allowed common people to know their own society and even to advance in society.

When Buddhism is well-established, nearly every large village, or village cluster, has a monastery. The villagers support the monks. In return, the monks teach the village children. The monks prepare children for good lives as rural cultivators rather than just lives as slaves of the land. The monks prepare some village children for a better life beyond the village. Boys have greater access to the monks but even girls are taught to read and write. In Thailand, where Theravada was well-established, literacy was over 90%.

Monks ratified social projects such as digging a canal, building a palace, or building a large house. In this capacity, they did act like the old Brahmin priests. Monks also took the place of the old Brahmin priests as fortune tellers, and monks sometimes took the place of the Brahmin priests as fighters against black magic. The difference is that the monks did not seem to “squeeze” the aristocrats and the villagers as had the priests.

A few monks do live apart from society. In Thailand, they are called “forest monks”. They are interesting people and among the best people in Buddhism. They are not relevant here, so I omit them. I urge you to search the phrase “forest monk” on the Internet.

Some people, especially Westerners who first learn about Buddhism, think close links between monks and society is hypocritical, and a monk cannot really work on enlightenment in the typical monastery. The relation can subvert the spiritual quest and subvert Buddhism just as it does in other religions but usually the spiritual quest goes on pretty well anyway. According to the original precepts given by the Buddha, monasteries are supposed to be located at least so far from villages that monks cannot hear the sound of women talking; since shortly after the Buddha that was rarely possible because of dense population, and now over most of the world that distancing is almost impossible. So monks must have a relation with society and must strive to make it as little tempting and hypocritical as they can. Most monks succeed. For some monks, close relations to society, prestige, and popular acclaim for his-her magical power, is a temptation off the path.

Any serious monk who wants to work on awakening can find the time, energy, and seclusion even in a modern monastery. It is more a matter of will and of learning from other such dedicated monks than of place. Social duties are not usually a burden unless the monk allows them to be, and even the Buddha interacted with society. Some monasteries are more serious, both in practice and theory, and a monk who wants to work hard can move to that kind of monastery.

I was lucky to live in a village for two-and-a-half years in which the monk was well educated, interested almost entirely in awakening, disdained all magic, and enjoyed talking to me. Later, my wife and I were lucky to live near a good monastery, Wat Suan Mokh (“Temple of the Garden of [force for] Liberation” and “Temple of the Foggy Garden”, thanks to a play on words), begun by a great monk, “Phutathaat” (in Thai,

or “Buddhadasa” in Pali). We gained much from teaching there. Monks who really need to be alone can become forest monks even in the modern world of many people and few trees.

### **Monks and Magic.**

Regardless of official religion, common mass religion always has much magic; I don't go into details here. Christian priests perform many acts of magic as part of their official role as priests, such as transforming bread into the body of Christ; and perform acts of magic as magical beings living in society in addition to their official role as priests, such as blessing businesses, persons, children, ships, and planes. Christians might not see that priests are magical figures in addition to being priests, but they are. So are politicians; we look to them magically to control weather, forest fires, earthquakes, and the world economy. In the same way, monks in Buddhist societies fill roles as magical figures in addition to monks. Buddhist society demands it, as Christian society does for priests. Magical roles are set by society and culture rather than by official Buddhist doctrine. Monks can be fortune tellers, seers, healers, give blessings, remove spells, provide amulets, and transfer magical potency simply by hanging around. Individual monks differ in how much they act as magicians. Some monks relish their role as magical beings, and make considerable (unauthorized) return from it in money, prestige, and popularity. I find use of magic by monks sad. My wife and I were lucky to find monks who had little interest in magic and had much interest in awakening. I was lucky that the monk in the village where I first lived had a strong grasp of doctrine and had no interest in magic.

### **Buddhism and the State.**

People interpret and change their religion to get validation for success in life and for ways life. People in a state society interpret and change their religion for the same reasons, often to validate the state and the institutions of the state, including institutions that take care of power and leaders that use power. King and religious savior often merge into one sacred soup. Subgroups in the state do the same with their religion, or their version of the main religion, for their particular situations, both for and against the state. Farmers have one version of a religion while bankers have another version of the same religion. Rebels and bankers have their own versions. To workers, Jesus was a carpenter while to modern middle class capitalists Jesus was a supporter of free trade and the right to work. The same is true of all religions.

There is no formula for how much interpreting and change occurs within the original scope of the religion and how much is really out of the original scope of the religion but accepted by people anyway. Some ideas that start out of the original scope eventually become accepted as part of a new baseline scope. Circumcision might have started outside the scope of Abraham's religion. Christianity started outside the scope of Judaism. Likely ideas about the body and blood of Jesus started outside the scope of original Christianity. Terrorism is outside the scope of Mohammad. Whites, Blacks, Liberals, and Conservative Christians see Christianity differently. It is not clear how much Christianity can stretch to accommodate differing views and still remain Christianity. “Back to the roots” movements often are less about back to the roots than about making up ideas about what the roots were to get extra support for your group now. Protestants since 1700 have had many different ideas of what it means to go back to original Christianity and they have uses their own ideas to support versions of a good society. The exact situation varies by country and by historical periods in countries.

All this is true for Buddhism and Buddhist countries. You have to decide what true Buddhism is, what is presented as true Buddhism due to a long history of accommodation to the state and society, and what is claimed as true Buddhism by present groups that wish to have religious validation. I cannot go into any details here.

### **What Most Buddhists Do.**

Other than monks, what most Buddhists do is what most Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus do: they go to “church” in a monastery once a week, where they hear sermons and chanting, and participate in a liturgy-like service. They help build monasteries. They repair monasteries. They provide air conditioning to high-ranking monks. They do good deeds to acquire merit. They use their merit to succeed in this life or to have a better next life. They give some merit to kin so kin can have a good life now or a better next life. Sometimes they support charities and public policy such as a national health service or defending the environment. Some Buddhists follow charismatic leaders, usually priests, as Christians and Muslims follow particular “preachers”. In Mahayana, Buddhists devotedly follow a non-living spiritual leader, the bodhisattva, like Jesus or Mary. In Mahayana, some Buddhists seek to be reborn in a paradise later as a result of worship now, like Christians and Muslims expect to go to heaven. It is not hard for a churchy Jew, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu to adapt to Buddhist worship practices, and vice versa as long as they focus on the good that is done, “mitzvah”, rather than on absence of God.

### **Self Sufficiency.**

The Buddha taught that the self is not a strong eternal thing like the soul-self of Christianity, Islam, and the Upanishads but the self is a semi-coherent bundle as in modern evolutionary theory. At the same time, he insisted every person could work out his-her own “salvation” alone, did not need Brahmin priests, did not need any priests, did not need monks, and did not even need the Buddha. As part of human nature, even if our nature is not absolute and eternal, we can think, and can think well enough to figure out the world. The Buddha’s insistence on the ability of the self was a big part of the appeal of Buddhism.

Sometimes people see a contradiction in the idea that the self is not a pure metaphysical eternal thing with the idea that each person can work things out on his-her own. I don’t feel this contradiction although I can see how other people might feel it. We don’t need to be an absolute self to be enough of a self, and to have enough abilities, to work things out on our own. A squirrel is not an absolute self but it can still figure out how to avoid hawks, get nuts, and hide hundreds for the future. It is not much harder to save yourself along Buddhist lines if you don’t screw yourself up first and cling to the screwed-up self. It helps when working things out to let go of the absolute self and to get used to the lesser self.

Both ideas are important in Mahayana Buddhism and Zen: the not-absolute self and the fact that even the not-absolute self is able to work things out and awaken.

Besides saying we are sufficient, the Buddha also said we can rely on the Buddha (himself), the Dharma, and the association of Buddhists, in particular monks or the “Sangha”. These two ideas also seem contradictory although most Buddhists deny they are. One resolution of the conflict is that people rely on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha when they begin practice but rely more on themselves as they go

along and ultimately rely on themselves alone. I do not decide if these ideas are contradictory. I point them out because they are relevant to the following issue.

Dr. Chamrat (“Moh Jamrat”), a wise Christian physician in Nakorn Sri Thammarat (“City of Dharma Rule”) in Thailand, told me that Christianity and Buddhism differ precisely on self reliance. The Buddha said “work it out on your own” while Jesus said “where two or three of you are gathered together, I am among you”. American Christians say “you’ve got a friend in Jesus”. Buddhists are alone while Christians have God as a friend, Jesus as a friend, and have a community. God loves us. I doubt God intervenes directly much to help us but he might intervene sometimes. Buddhists would think this Christian belief was all silly self-indulgent wishful thinking. Yet Buddhists also insist that we can “lean on” the “Three Gems”, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (the Buddhist “Church” or society of monks and lay people). So, despite what the Buddha said, Buddhists are not alone except in a dogmatic sense or in the way that all seekers have to go through times of aloneness.

At the same time I think God loves us, and Jesus cares about us, I also think we are mostly on our own, God through evolution gave us the abilities to deal with most issues if not all, and the world provides us with many opportunities. So my views are a bit contradictory too, and I can’t reconcile them gracefully. In practice, I work out issues on my own. Sometimes God’s creation gives me hints. This result does not mean the Buddha was right, Dr. Chamrat wrong, I am wrong, and Christians are delusional. Buddhists contradict as well. This result means I don’t understand everything, and neither do Buddhists. This result means there are issues on which Buddhists and followers of Jesus really do differ.

(Technically, the passage in which Jesus says “two or three” refers to the requirements for a valid court proceeding, and might not, or might, have the meaning intended by Christians that Jesus is literally with them although he died. Whether it has that meaning, and whether Jesus does attend Christians, matters less than what Christians believe and the contrast with Buddhists. Buddhists have a similar attitude of “always with me” when they rely on the “Three Gems”. These are other issues.)

## **PART 6: MORE ASSESSMENT**

### **No Simplistic Bliss.**

You cannot simply “follow your bliss” in Buddhism. You need not and should not be miserable. You may enjoy what you enjoy and what the world gives you as long as you do not cling. You may plan to enjoy as long as you do not cling. But you cannot follow your bliss as in the common understanding of that slogan. In other religions, and life in general, you also have to be careful about following your bliss – life is not as it appears in the simplistic slogan “follow your bliss”. If your bliss is to be a dictator and oppress people, you may not. In Hinduism, you may follow your bliss only if it coincides with your Dharma-social-duty. If your bliss is MMA fighting, you can follow your bliss if you are adept enough and less than about 40 years old, otherwise you will get hurt for no gain. I am not sure what to say if your bliss is to give sexual service. “Follow your bliss” implies you should not be a slave to convention or harsh expectations but instead you should do what you are good at, enjoy, and does no harm. In that way, in Buddhism, you may follow your bliss, again, as long as you do not cling. The Buddha enjoyed teaching so teaching might have been part of his bliss. I don’t know if he clung to teaching or to anything in his bliss. I warn that to follow your bliss and not cling is hard.

### **Letting Go, Worthwhile Life, and Not Buddhism.**

All the skills below contribute to a worthwhile life and can even make a sad life worthwhile.

- Learning to sort what you can cling to from what you have to let go. We all have to breathe, we do not all have to kill animals for sport.
- Learning to sort what you can cling to somewhat energetically from what you can cling to only softly or not at all. We all have to eat, we do not all have to be “foodies”.
- Learning to let go completely of many things.
- Learning to manage suffering without necessarily overcoming suffering fully.
- Learning to blend these skills with spontaneous natural “from the heart” acts and thoughts.
- Learning to “just let go” (not cling) when it feels right without worrying about all letting go and about using letting go for some other goal such as to make life worthwhile or to overcome suffering.

The problem with these skills and Buddhism is that learning to let go in this way and-or making your life more worthwhile in these ways is not to overcome suffering and it is not to awaken. These skills with their goals are not the official main goal of Buddhism and they might interfere with Buddhism’s main goal. All these skills are good, and some Buddhists do, in fact, take these skills as the goal of Buddhism just as many Buddhists make success an important goal of Buddhism. Taoism and Zen pretty much take these skills as the main goal. If you think these skills are better than the official goal to awaken and overcome suffering, then you have to decide how much of a Buddhist you really are. What was the Buddha really like? What did he really want from you and everyone?

You can’t get out of this problem by saying: “Oh, well, I will work along the above lines in this lifetime, and let future lives take care of themselves. If, in a future life, I get “beyond” these skills and I work to overcome suffering directly, great. If I actually do overcome suffering and awaken, better. Until then, I won’t worry about it.” You might as well figure out your true religion now. That will serve you better in future lifetimes than confusion and prevarication now.

### **Buddhism, Modern Science, and Darwinism.**

Buddhism and Western science go together well.

The Buddhist versions of Dharma, dependent origination, and cause and effect, are like the Western idea of natural law. Everything that happens does so according to cause(s). Everything has results. Cause and effect are in proportion to each other. If we want to understand a thing, we should look to its causes and its effects. If we want to change a thing, we need to change its causes. Nothing exists on its own apart from the total net of causes and effects. For a given purpose, we can understand a thing according to its immediate causes and effects. For greater purposes, we can know a thing only in the context of a wide range of causes and effects. The rules of cause and effect apply not only to physical things such as trees but also to processes such as star formation and society, and to mental things such as anger, joy, seeking, clinging, and suffering, and to morality.

The idea of dependent origination is similar to Western ideas of a thing in terms of its context: Nothing arises by itself. Nothing is sufficient in itself except Dharma. Everything arises out of causes. Everything depends on its causes. Causes tend to come in clusters. One cluster depends on prior clusters, and so on back indefinitely to the Dharma. To know anything, we have to know its cluster of causes. "Thing" here includes you, your self, all selves, psychology, relations, moral acts, immoral acts, karma, desire, clinging, and spiritual progress or stagnation. To understand a cluster of causes, in Western terms, we use: multivariate analysis, systems theory, graphs, structuralism, post structuralism, post modernism, and deconstruction. The Buddhist versions seem less pretentious than Western ideas of the 1900s and the 2000s such as post-modernism. The ideas of cause-and-effect and dependent origination go along with the Western biological idea of an organism. On a bigger scale, they go along with Western ecology and the mutual making of the parts of an ecosystem. The idea of dependent origination goes along with Western ideas of a self-determining system as in idealized capitalism. The idea of dependent origination does not have to be abused as in the Western New Age "it's all connected".

The Buddhist self is a bundle held together by the delusion of self and the force of clinging. See below. Specific mental abilities, the overall operation of our minds, the coherence of our minds, and our overall mental lives are subject to laws of cause and effect, to dependent origination. Each of us is not the metaphysical eternal soul-self that we think we are. The mistaken idea of a soul-self arose as part of desire and clinging. Our mistaken idea of our self serves to perpetuate desire and clinging; it is part of how clinging sustains. When we examine the idea of a soul-self, we find particular currents of desire and clinging without anything under them to hold it all together. This idea goes along not only with Darwinian ideas of a self but with the idea of the philosopher David Hume of the self in the middle to late 1770s. In Darwinian terms, we evolved to think we are more of a self than we really are because that is a useful misconception for personal action and for social success. We evolved to see other people as more selves than they really are for the same reasons. When we examine a self, we find primarily a bundle of proximate mechanisms or mental modules rather than an integrated whole.

Buddhists and Darwinians run into a similar problem with the self and with reductionism. Buddhists do not think the self can stand up to being picked apart but they insist Dharma can. Dharma persists on its own regardless of whether people exist to understand it and believe in it. In the same way, scientific laws and scientific method persist on their own regardless of whether there are any Darwinians around to know the laws and use the method. One thing, the self, can be reduced; but the other, Dharma and science, cannot be reduced. I do not go into this issue more here.

In current Western evolutionary theory, long ago on Earth, chemicals arose that replicated themselves in the right context. The replicating chemicals became the basis for life later. As far as I know, the earliest replicating chemicals likely were similar to short strands of Ribonucleic Acid (RNA) or were such strands. It does not make sense to say the early chemicals, and the early life to which they gave rise, desired the means to their reproduction and clung to the situations that allowed them to reproduce; but the fact that they did well in those circumstances, and they developed means to get into those circumstances, form the basis for later seeking and clinging in life. When life had evolved, those bits of life that did seek some situations more than others, and clung to some situations, did better. Thus was born seeking and clinging in all life, and eventually in all sentient beings on Earth. Even amoebas have something like smell, they seek some smells and avoid others, and they attach themselves to some smells. Seeking and clinging arose automatically as part of the automatic process of natural selection of replicating chemicals and life

forms. Seeking and clinging are intrinsic to all life. Now as evolved sentient beings, we cannot master seeking and clinging until we see this fact. When Buddhism simply insists on this insight, it is consistent with modern science. What we do with this knowledge depends on our religion.

Recall that life does not see the world exactly as it is but develops biases that help success more than if life did see the world exactly as it is, such as when daylight creatures fear the dark or when we jump at the glimpse of a stick as if it were a poisonous snake. The development of bias also is intrinsic to life, and is consistent with the Buddhist view that perception and thought are more often biased than neutral, so as to allow us to strive and cling. In Buddhism, people have to deliberately cultivate neutral perception and thought. Scientists do that through scientific method and the scientific community.

Some particular evolved biases deserve mention. Buddhists think the self does not see the world as it really is but instead sees the world in distortions that allow desire and clinging to persist, and lead us to mistake life as worthwhile and full of happiness even when life is not worthwhile and is full of suffering. A Buddhist would understand that people see their mates as more beautiful than the mates really are so as to perpetuate the mating relationship. Buddhists agree that people love their children so as to better reproduce. We evolved to give life meaning even when it is an automatic process without meaning. We evolved to think we are successful even when we are only average or are below average. We evolved to think great success is just around the corner even when it is not. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast". We evolved to cling to life, and most things in life, regardless of the intrinsic worth of life and of everything in it. We evolved to have a stake in our spouses, children, nieces, nephews, friends, children, grandchildren, cousins, neighbors, and even enemies. We evolved to get involved in politics, religions, morality, and making a living. We evolved to meddle. We evolved to make ourselves beautiful. We evolved to seek fame, fortune, reputation, and power. We evolved to cling to life. We help life be sticky. We evolved to overlook pain and suffering so we could go on even in the face of sure defeat. We evolved to make life seem worthwhile even when it is not. The Buddhist analysis of stickiness and clinging is an amazing anticipation of modern evolutionary analysis.

The Buddha did not have the modern idea of evolution although likely he had an idea of transformations of life; and he did not think any of the present forms of life were necessarily absolute. "Whatever has a beginning must have an end; and every conditioned thing (most of the real world including planets and species) had a beginning." The evolved self is both not absolute and amazingly capable. The evolved self can handle most problems that come up in life, if not all. The evolved self has enough ability to figure out most spiritual issues and enough ability to awaken. The Buddha might have argued that evolution gave us both the not-absolute self and enough of a self so that we can work things out. However, I do not want to put words in the mouth of the Buddha. I put it this way: the evolved self is not absolute but it did evolve enough ability to know right from wrong and to see that we face God after we die. It did evolve the ability to wake up enough.

Life has no intrinsic necessary purpose. Life makes life, which makes more life, which makes more life, and so on. Life is a mechanism. People evolved a desire to make meaning where there is no meaning because meaning makes it easier to carry on and reproduce. Even the pursuit of science has no intrinsic value but is only something people do as continuation of abilities that evolved in our past for other uses. If people saw no meaning, they would be far too likely simply to stop trying. People who saw meaning in the past reproduced better than people who did not. For Buddhists, meaning is an illusion too. The idea

that life has meaning allows people to think mistakenly that life is worthwhile, allows people to cling to particular meaningful things such as freedom and wealth, cling to meaningful people such as our parents and children, pretend suffering is not important, and seek satisfaction. Only if we get rid of the evolved delusion by seeing it in terms of dependent origination can we see that there is no intrinsic meaning and that life is not worthwhile.

Not all evolved perceptions are pernicious. Because Buddhism sees cause-and-effect and dependent origination operating in all spheres, it sees all aspects of nature as connected and dependent. It quite specifically includes humans as part of nature, especially if we think of nature as Dharma and as subject to karma. What we do to the planet, the planet will do to us, one way or another, sooner or later. What we do to other species, nature will do to us, one way or another, sooner or later. Only recently have Western people come to re-discover and appreciate this truth.

Buddhism and modern science coincide in most of their views about morality. Even to Buddhists, most practiced morality is not intrinsic to a situation but is a distorted judgment that people make in order to advance our own interests and continue to cling. Morality develops in people as part of the development of craving and clinging. Darwinians say the capacity for morality evolved, and show that people are highly adept at using morality to serve their own ends.

Buddhism differs from modern science in some ways. To a Buddhist, the universe is intrinsically moral and Dharma and karma are intrinsically moral. Morality is part of scientific law. People might abuse it horribly, but morality still exists apart from people, and would continue as a part of Dharma and karma even if all human beings vanished. To Darwinism, the universe is not intrinsically moral. If anything, it is amoral. In current orthodox Darwinism, morality "exists" only to the extent that it appears in evolved beings. Morality is not one same thing for all evolved beings. Morality differs according to the species that evolves it. The particular uses that people make of morality are all there is to morality. Dharma and karma are moral only because people think they are. Dharma and karma do not exist apart from people and so could not be intrinsically moral apart from people.

I largely agree with the Buddhist view because I think there is only one morality, and that a version of the same basic morality arises whenever morality evolves, not only on this Earth. Certainly the details of morality differ between particular species that evolve morality, and those details will be very important if ever evolved sentient-moral beings meet. But all sentient-moral beings will recognize "applies equally" and the Golden Rule.

A successful Buddhist gives up family, friends, society, success, and almost everything that we think of as typically human. In the evolutionary past, an adept Buddhist would have left few genes to serve as the basis for kin to follow his-her path. (I assume kin selection and inclusive fitness would not have made up for what an adept Buddhist lost by not using direct reproduction). The personality of an adept Buddhist could only have arisen as the unnatural extension of abilities that arose for other reasons, such as analytic skills and a good imagination. An adept Buddhist is not a human in the usual sense that we think of a human. This does not mean an adept Buddhist is a monster or that we should be appalled. It only means that we should not easily think of an adept Buddhist as a natural growth of human potential and as the peak of what it means to be human. An adept Buddhist is more like a starving non-reproductive artist than like a successful athlete or politician. With a perfect Buddhist like the Buddha, it might be more

accurate and useful to think of them as having transcended human nature entirely. Needless to say, a Darwinian would not accept such an assessment of any being in this universe.

In the chapter on evolved human nature, I mentioned that evolution might be able to surpass itself in the sense that it could lay the basis for true glimpses that could not be fully developed through evolution, could not be sustained through evolution, and could not be very prevalent. This is the same sense that a dog might understand human society. I do not know if Buddhism is such a case. I invite you, and skillful Buddhists, to comment on this question.

Other religions share some of the same coincidences and differences with modern science as Buddhism, such as Mahayana, Hinduism, Taoism, Zen, and Islam. I think the overlap is purest with Buddhism but I do not argue the point here. I do not repeat these observations when discussing other particular religions so please look out for whatever you can see.

If Buddhism wants to use similarities between itself and science, especially to validate Buddhism, then it has to accept that people evolved naturally and so have an evolved nature. It has to take into account the strengths, limitations, and needs of people. It has to wonder if a naturally evolved person can actually overcome suffering, see that life is not worthwhile, or cease to cling, as Buddhism says we should try to do. Buddhism has to think what success it should offer to people in this lifetime to satisfy their evolved needs without their screwing up too much. Buddhism has to expect that people want superstition and magic, and has to present Buddhism so as to minimize the bad effects of the desires – it has not done well on that score so far. Even really smart people have their own versions of superstition, magic, and worldly success. While the Buddhist idea of the self and the scientific idea of the self from evolutionary theory are pretty close, they are not the same, and Buddhism has to think of differences and what the differences mean.

### **See Below for More on the Self.**

Here is the logical place to insert more on the self but that takes too long. See the end of the chapter.

### **Buddhism and Modern Ethical Issues.**

Because of its stress on dependent origination and cause-and-effect, people sometimes think Buddhism is amoral like simplistic materialism, but that is not true. Buddhism takes for granted the strong code of empathy and help that prevailed at the time of the Buddha, and is expressed in the slogan “you are that” from the Upanishads. The world is intrinsically moral and we must go along with its intrinsic morality. The issue in Buddhism and Hinduism was how to express this world-morality. Modern Buddhists have not yet thought out specific issues such as abortion, nationalism, environment, role of women, gay rights, class struggle, capitalism, and other problems that beset Americans. Buddhist nations are as plagued by these issues now as America is, and so eventually Buddhist thinkers have to ask “What would a close follower of the Buddha do?”

Buddhism aims to remove suffering. Few people can achieve awakening in this life, so it is not realistic to argue that Buddhism aims to remove all suffering all at once. Instead, modern Buddhist thinkers argue that Buddhism also aims to reduce suffering, including the overall extent of suffering among a group of

people. Buddhists can safely support policies that genuinely reduce the overall extent of suffering. For example, if economists can show that a national health care system is worth the cost, and thus reduces overall suffering, then a modern Buddhist could safely support such an idea without worrying too much that he-she is clinging to a dogma. If capitalism brings the greatest prosperity and freedom from worry, a Buddhist could also support capitalism. This approach to ethics is a good idea, but it leaves a lot of work to be done. I hope Buddhists work on it. In this form, Buddhist ethics is like the Western ideas of "utility", the general good, and maximizing the general good. This result does not mean one group has copied the other. This result is a good thing, and it means two great schools of thought are converging in different directions on the same conclusion.

The fact that Buddhists take for granted the moral nature of the universe puts them in line with moral atheists but might put them at odds with more strict atheists for whom morality is also a delusion. I leave this issue between those camps to settle.

Because everybody has a unique history, and because people are somewhat the product both of their history and present circumstances (dependent origination of the self), Buddhism does not expect people to conform rigidly to roles. Buddhism supports social rules that promote general morality but it does not necessarily support conformity. My impression is that Buddhists are much more comfortable around behavior that Jewish-Christian-Muslim traditionalists find difficult such as transvestites, gay men, lesbians, and independent women. As long as people do not compel you to immorality, do not hurt people, do not disrupt society, and do not disrespect long-standing cultural customs, there is no intrinsic reason to force them to act as you wish. Contrary to misconception about Thailand and other Buddhist nations, the vast majority of Buddhists are conventional moralists who would fit in with middle class people everywhere. They promote orderly and decent society, and they work hard. Buddhists who are not conventional by traditional Jewish-Christian-Muslim standards still respect people and individuality more than do many Americans. For example, they rarely force their sexuality on to anybody and they get confused when other people force foreign standards on to them. Even robbers rarely do bodily injury as long as they get the material goods they desire.

Buddhism has no inherent mistrust of the future, change, and changing roles. Because of dependent origination, Buddhism expects change. As a result, Buddhists seem more relaxed about new social roles such as for women, gay people, and old people. Buddhism is not inherently liberal but it is not offended by liberality. Buddhism is conservative in expecting serious Buddhists to treat all beings morally and with respect.

### **Why Follow Buddhism?**

If Buddhism says life is not worthwhile, seekers cannot lead normal life, and successful Buddhists cannot lead normal life, then why do ordinary people follow Buddhism? There is both a historical answer and a general answer.

Historically, for the first time in India, Buddhism said both that people are responsible for themselves and people are able enough by themselves. The world is as it is, it is not some magical otherwise that takes a wizard to deal with. Every normal person is up to the task. Who you are and what you do is up to you. People could be free of Brahmin priests and the political system that was based on Brahmin priests, and

still succeed. While not reaching full Enlightenment, still people could make spiritual progress and seek modest worldly success. Ordinary people could mix worldly success and spiritual progress. They could do spiritual good deeds by supporting monks and education. They could use their minds, reason, and experience, and could trust the conclusions that they came to on this basis for both spiritual insight and worldly action. They could use commonsense morality based on ideas of sympathy and persons. This outlook appealed to aristocrats, soldiers, successful farmers, craftspeople, and merchants; those were the people that first adopted Buddhism. In these ways, early Buddhism was like early Christianity, like some Protestantism and some enlightened urban Reformation Roman Catholicism after 1600, and like Enlightenment Christianity such as held by Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. This outlook is extolled now in idealized small-business private enterprise capitalism.

Generally, people don't have to give up a lot to gain the benefits of Buddhism. People do not have to decide the issue of "life is not worthwhile". They can put that idea aside while they concentrate on more modest spiritual goals and on success here. You can be kind and "mindful" if that suits you, or you can be an aggressive business person as long as you don't break obvious commonsense morality. People can follow Buddhism as lay believers while leaving to monks the rigors of strong seeking and the hard questions such as whether life is worthwhile and the dogma of non-self. This is what most Christians do with issues of theology such as the Trinity, general Resurrection when Jesus returns, and exactly how Jesus saves. Buddhist laypeople and monks maintain a relation, described above, in which monks teach people and protect them spiritually against (mostly imagined) threats while people support monks. Monks and people use Buddhist ideas such as morality, cause-and-effect, and personal sufficiency. People can follow both Buddhist ideas such as cause-and-effect (science) and modest animistic spiritualism without worrying too much about logical consistency.

Theravada Buddhism appeals most when it contrasts with Brahmanism and with austere religions such as Jainism. When other competing religions can offer the benefits of Buddhism; offer priests who are helpful rather than tyrannical; offer spiritualism; offer magic; offer a system; teach that this life, and all lives, are worthwhile, as part of a system; teach that worldly success is spiritual success as when Arjuna goes to war; and teach that you can reach ultimate spiritual success and still have a normal life; then they can supplant Buddhism. When religions offer people ways to have their cake and eat it too, then they can overcome Buddhism. Exactly this happened twice in India, first when Mahayana supplanted Theravada and then again when Hinduism supplanted Mahayana. It happened in America to modest Enlightenment Christianity when various Christian religious revivals, Transcendentalism, fundamentalism, relativism, "New Age", and the occult supplanted Enlightenment belief in Jesus as moral teacher and prophet.

### **More on Buddhism and My Views.**

I do not explain all the points on which I agree with Buddhism. Despite liking Theravada, I disagree with the Buddha, and Buddhism, on several points. I stated my skepticism about Buddhist aids, and stated the need for naturally evolved people to be able to achieve reasonable success in this lifetime. See also the chapters on Mahayana, Taoism, Zen, and Hinduism.

I think life is worthwhile. Everybody suffers, and for some people life is not worthwhile due to suffering. Even so, overall, for most people, life can be worthwhile.

Likely, evolution programmed me to feel life is worthwhile regardless of whether life is worthwhile. Still, I do not think life is worthwhile only because evolution programmed me to feel that way but because I do feel that way based on as much evidence as I have been able to process.

Life is rarely worthwhile because of particular activities or successes. Life is rarely worthwhile because we get a PhD or win the Nobel Prize. Having a good satisfying successful family can go a long way to making life worthwhile but even families can detract from life rather than add to it, and even having a good family in itself does not necessarily make life worthwhile. Just as no particular activity necessarily can make all of life worthwhile, so, also, the fact that no particular activity is obvious worthwhile does not mean life as a whole is not worthwhile. Rather than any particular activity, life overall is a good thing and is worthwhile. We can be disappointed in our careers, grow bored with our spouses, grow disinterested in our children, see our hobbies as mere shiny pebbles, get bored with art, and find science predictable, and think politics a cruel joke, yet still find life overall worthwhile. We will necessarily be disappointed in some ways in any particular thing we do yet still find life as a whole worthwhile. Life is worthwhile regardless of the satisfaction of any particular activity and regardless of the sum total of many activities.

All of us age, get sick, feel disappointment, and face unfairness. Some of us get screwed really badly. Many of us go through bad jobs, bad bosses, bad colleagues, bad marriages, ungrateful children, drugs, alcohol, stupid ideologies, and the frustration of not knowing how to contribute to the world. Still, life is not simply suffering. It is not possible to say if the total of joy (pleasure) exceeds the total of suffering, but, for most people, that is likely the case as long as they let themselves enjoy some of life. If Buddhism claims that life is not worthwhile because the total of suffering exceeds the total of joy, then it is false.

If Buddhism claims that life is not worthwhile because of deep suffering, because life is just not worthwhile despite superficial joy, then all I can do is repeat that life is worthwhile for most people. The Buddha was wrong. Even with deep suffering regardless of superficial success, still usually life is worthwhile.

Buddhist advice about clinging and stickiness is correct. Life is sticky. We cling to everything. Clinging does lead to suffering. We cling to crazy girlfriends or boyfriends, crazy children, bad jobs, bad ideas, bad politics, the hope that our job will turn out, the self-delusion that we are victims of society, the hope that we can justify our lives through our professions, and so many other things that I cannot even suggest them. Even the good things that we cling to cannot guarantee satisfaction in life, such as family, friends, love, children, a useful job, an active enlightened church, and correct politics. We are all better off if we learn to let go appropriately. Buddhism supports that. Evolution programmed us to cling and to commit sometimes. So sometimes we have to get over that part of our evolutionary programming. One program, our judgment, has to overcome another set of programs, our clinging. This is hard but it is possible to a large extent. We can do manage stickiness and clinging without falling into the other mistake of thinking all life is not worthwhile because of stickiness and clinging.

Getting over clinging is not entirely possible, at least not for the vast majority of people. We all cling to some things. Only a miniscule number of very special people can get over all desire for all family, fame, wealth, and success. Probably the hardest things to get over are family, the desire to be right, dogmas, and the desire to leave a strong positive legacy of reputation and-or ideas. It is hard to face the fact that you might die with nobody to remember how much spiritual struggle you went through and how much progress you made.

Even though people cannot get over all clinging, that apparent deficit does not mean life is not worthwhile and nearly all of us are mired in clinging and suffering. Even with some clinging, life can be worthwhile, and most of our lives need not consist of clinging and suffering. Some clinging can even lessen suffering and make life more worthwhile. Most people cling to their families but that does not necessarily create suffering and it does not necessarily make life not worthwhile; usually it creates joy and makes life more worthwhile for the kind of beings that we are.

Working hard to make the world better, trying to do good, keeping morality in mind, using our talents to their best, avoiding zealotry, and thinking of morality in terms of “applies equally” are all forms of clinging. We can carry them to excess, and they can be hurtful. But usually we err in the other direction. We do not strive hard enough; we do not act like a Buddhist monk seeking to awaken. Clinging to principles can be a good clinging, just like clinging to the goal of awakening.

Buddhism forces us to deal with paradoxes such as “what is satisfaction?”, “clinging”, and the “self”. It keeps us mentally alive, especially when we disagree with it. It gives rise to some silly intellectualism, but most people can avoid the silly games to focus on the real issues.

Buddhism is intrinsically moral, and it teaches empathy. It has its own versions of the Golden Rule and of “applies equally to everybody”. Unlike as with Jesus, it does not stress those moral points or make them central to its mission and way of life. Buddhist nations have not created the institutions that support a good life as I have described. Buddhists are amenable to those institutions, do understand them, and do take them up to the extent that their culture, society, and government allow. As the world becomes more capitalist and democratic, I hope Buddhist nations can take up strong institutions of pro-active service naturally. I hope Buddhists do so without resentment toward Jesus, his message, or Christians. I hope Buddhists can do this while acknowledging Jesus and his ideas, just as I hope Westerners learn from the Buddha. Yet if Buddhists do adopt pro-active service but insist on seeing it entirely in Buddhist terms, overlooking Jesus, that stance is fine with me.

Rather than to Theravada Buddhism, the following criticism applies more to systems of “many lives” such as Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism; but Theravada nominally is a system of many lives, so I offer this point here. It is easy to get lost in the tools of Buddhism, including karma and rebirth. Some Buddhists glimpse the grandeur of many lives and of time without end, and get caught up in that. Whether there are many lives does not matter. What matters is what you do right now right here. Even if there are many lives, you can do no better over the course of many lives than if you do well right now right here. If you do not do well right now right here, then having many lives makes no difference. You will not progress, you will not enjoy your many lives, and your many lives will do you no good. If you squander this instant, you squander not only this instant but all instants and all lives to come. If you save this instant, you save everything. To see this point is part of what it means to understand morality and good life. This is why I think we have only one life and our one life if important. This point does not mean you should live self-indulgently frivolously in the moment. I discuss more of what it means in the next chapters, especially in the chapters on Taoism in Zen where living here and now is part of mental freedom.

Theravada and I agree in a way that might make neither Buddhists nor readers of this book comfortable. I expect to meet God when I die. God might decide not to send me back to live again or to send me to

heaven, but instead simply to end me. Naturally I prefer a better next life or a vacation in heaven but I have to be ready for the chance that I might simply end altogether forever. Even if God does give me a few chances and a few vacations, eventually I think he will end even the great me. Theravada Buddhists have to be ready for that outcome as well. In fact, they should work toward that end even if they do not yearn for that end to the point of clinging. Other versions of Buddhism, and mainstream Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism deliberately avoid this possibility. (Hinduism allows this possibility as a good thing but does not stress it, and diverts attention to other possibilities.) “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”. Mostly other religions get around this end by putting us into a joyous system of many lives; another reason why I do not accept a system. I don’t think my view, or the similar view of a Theravada Buddhist, makes us unduly gloomy or heroic. It is just something you have to deal with. Dealing with it does make you a better person but not in any way to brag about.

### **The Worthwhile-ness Continuum.**

Imagine a sequence of stances toward satisfaction with life.

First is the true skeptic who makes no value judgments. I leave him-her to another book.

Second is the person who sees nastiness, evil, and the devil everywhere. Everything should be totally good but turned out totally bad. Nothing is as it should be. It is all our fault. We are all and only bad. As Martin Luther said, we are a pile of dung covered with a thin coating of snow. I don’t like these people and I ignore them in this book.

Third is the person who is overcome by the troubles of the world. Life might be good but it just isn’t. It is a tribulation, rather like Satan wished to make Job see the world. I also ignore these people.

Fourth is the Buddhist who sees the fleeting joy in aspects of life but thinks life overall is not worthwhile. While you are in the game, play it out moderately to the end, and then let it go.

Fifth is my position, the position of Mike Polioudakis. “We are in it. We might as well play (work) hard to make it better. Things too often go badly, but often enough they go well, and they might go well in general with some luck. Some parts of life are really wonderful. Life is worthwhile as a whole even if much of it is annoying. We will not all be saved in the end. Life is real. Some of will succeed spiritually and some of us will fail. God will judge. We can trust God.”

Sixth is the business-and-political style American optimist. Life is hard work but it will turn out well in the end. I don’t care if other people fail as long as I succeed, and I know I will. My career and family make life worthwhile. Everyone could have this if they tried and knew what to do. People who don’t have this have only themselves to blame, and we can forget them.

Seventh is the exuberant style American optimist. Life is always a lot of fun. Look in the sunny side. If you are not making people happy, you are making them sad, so make them happy. We can all do well enough if we only try and if we help each other. Think of life in terms other than material success. Think in terms that will lead you to your success. “Follow your bliss”. “Be kind and mindful”.

Eighth is the idea that not all lives right now are worthwhile but life in general is worthwhile as part of a system of many lives, many lives are worthwhile right now as they are lives, and each being eventually gets at least some lives that are worthwhile while they are lived. If you are lucky enough to have one of the good lives, enjoy it, and don't worry too much about other people. This idea is typical of Mahayana and Hinduism.

Ninth is the mystic. We are all one. We are all God. We will all be saved in the end. The Great Risk of Life is an illusion. We all are part of the single great Void or Mind. We are all drops in the one ocean, and we all will sometimes be part of a shallow pool, inside a fish, part of a crashing wave, deep in the dark cold, or filling the lungs of a drowning person. Good and bad are both all one and different at the same time. Mountains and valleys are both all one and different. Everything is just as it should be even though it is not all good all the time. We should appreciate that. "Follow your bliss" and it will lead you to see how everything is right with you and the world. Be joyous.

In this frame, Buddhism is near the middle path. My differences with Buddhism are not as much as with other stances. The second and ninth stances are almost mirror images, and likely they are related both psychologically and in terms of how we might frame theology. I disagree with the stances that are either pessimistic or exuberant, for example the second, eighth, and ninth stances. I think both extremes are seriously misleading. I make this assessment not because I am on the outside looking in but because I have felt both directions myself.

### **Alternative Understandings of "Waking Up" and of Buddhist Success.**

It is hard to accept that life is not worthwhile. The idea goes against a long evolutionary history that leads us to try to succeed and to think only in terms that help us to succeed. We deny what leads us away from succeeding. Very few Buddhists, and even few monks, really accept life is not worthwhile. They do not think "waking up" means seeing life is not worthwhile. Buddhists, even intellectuals, resented me when I pointed out that "life is not worthwhile" was the core teaching of Buddhism. They could see the idea, but they disliked it. To Buddhists, including intellectuals and monks, Buddhism is about the richness of its ideas and the quality of its practice. That is not a bad way out.

Instead of thinking that the core idea of Buddhism is waking up to the fact that life is not worthwhile, most Buddhist lay people, and most monks, substitute other ideas that we wake up to. They substitute other ideas of what it means to succeed in Buddhism. Here I am not concerned with the ideas common in all mass popular religion of religious success in terms of family success and other success in mundane life. I am interested in intellectual alternatives to seeing that life is not worthwhile and I am interested in cultural values that take the place of seeing the world as not worthwhile.

Some people think of waking up as seeing that the world is not as it appears to be, that there is a lot more going on, that much of what is going on is hard to see on the surface, and that much of what is going on undermines our normal values. That is not quite Gnosticism but it is like Gnosticism. It can lead a person to be more moral and to be intellectually curious, but not necessarily.

Some people think of waking up as seeing that the normal values of the world are silly, and that there are deeper better moral values. Usually they become more concerned and more moral. I think this is an

important kind of waking up, and so I agree with them to a large extent. I wish more people would wake up in this way.

Some people think of waking up as seeing the world is foolish and annoying. The world often is foolish and annoying but that is not what necessarily makes the world “not worthwhile”. We do not wake up just because we get deeply annoyed at the world. We do not awaken because we are cranky.

Some people seem to think that waking up means taking seriously that there are sacred powerful things in the world and that we have to respect them. This sounds like waking up to crude animism but usually it is more than that. Often it means waking up to the truth of other religions and cultures.

Some intellectuals think that waking up consists of deeply understanding the ideas of Buddhism, that they are close to awakening because they know so much so deeply, and so they are better than the common people in the same way the Buddha was better than the common people. In fact, knowing more about a good religion can make people better. It depends on what they do with their knowledge and what attitude they take. Too often, knowing more makes people stuck up. In that case, the ideas that they know are not a help but are a hindrance. This attitude is a disease of half-well-read and half-smart people in all religions, not just Buddhism, and so needs no further comment.

Some people think waking up and succeeding is not having any commitments, in being able to let go of all attachments, especially to material goods, sex, power, wealth, TV, pop culture, going to the beach, eating an ice cream cone, etc. I have met only a handful of people who come close to really being able to do this. I have met fewer people who can enjoy the world without clinging to the world. Most people who think they can do this seem far too committed to their own spiritual superiority and achievements. In any case, letting go is not the same as waking up. Letting go is one means to waking up. It can be one result of waking up.

At least among some Asians that I have met, people take the idea of waking up, and letting go, to mean a pose of superior diffidence about the world and about people. They are “above” politics, art, intellectual controversies, pop culture, and the masses. They are above the petty squabbles of their neighbors and business associates. They don’t want to get caught up in conflicts or to make commitments. Democracy is a passing fad. They don’t have to participate. They look at most people as chattering squirrels. They think of themselves as somewhat ethereal, not determined by the vagaries of this world, and not confined to the doings of this world. In strong versions, they learn to literally look past or look through people when they want to avoid people. It is odd to be overlooked in this way. In my experience, these people are not so much above the world as extremely selective in what they wish to deal with and how they wish to deal with it. They ignore what it makes their life easier when they ignore it, and can become quite agitated by issues that concern them personally or that affect family success. Haughty diffidence is not the same as waking up. It is not the same as non-commitment.

### **Waking Up and My Views.**

We all face God whether we wake up or not. If we wake up to the idea that life is not worthwhile, then we have awakened to an error. In the same way a person can be decent without knowing he-she is decent, so a person can be successful as a spiritual being without having the idea of awakening. Just as the idea

of decency can impede decent people, the idea of Buddhist awakening can impede people who want to properly assess life. So, strictly speaking, I should describe Buddhist waking up as a pernicious delusion. But I don't feel that way about it or about striving for it. It is good to wake up to the difficulties in life not only for yourself but for other people. It is good to wake up to many of the Buddhist ideas such as cause and effect and the self is not necessarily eternal self-sufficient soul-stuff. The techniques of Buddhist meditation are worthwhile even if they do not lead to Buddhist awakening and even if they do not lead to my ideas. People who really study Buddhism tend to be more decent than average. We can think of Buddhist waking up as like a mystic vision, and so partly true but not wholly true. So I cannot condemn the ideas or the methods. I only ask that Buddhists look with the same critical eye on Buddhism that they turn on other dogmas such as the eternal soul-self. Don't be afraid to come to conclusions other than that life is not worthwhile and life is inevitably suffering. Don't look down on other religions as merely inferior versions of Buddhism or as stopgaps in this life on the way to deeper awakening in future lives.

### **Buddhist Charm.**

This section does not take all Buddhists to be saints. I know most Buddhists in Thailand do not follow what I call Buddhism but are "animists" obsessed with magic, power, spirits, amulets, luck, fortune telling, and getting an advantage through connections to the spirit world. I ignore that here.

This section seems to contradict the idea that a religion should give normal people clear guidelines for reasonable success in this lifetime as preparation for meeting God. My guidelines for success come from Jesus, mixed with realism, and with Western ideas of government. I care more about acts than dogma. Acting well along Buddhist moral lines and intellectual lines goes with what I want people to do and with what leads to a good interview with God. It might be better for me personally if Buddhists all agreed with my dogma but likely not better for Buddhists. God will make up his own mind.

Buddhists often seem charming to Westerners. Thai people are charming apart from being Buddhists, so Thais can be doubly charming. Most Buddhists that Westerners meet are monks, or are serious about religion, are fairly well off, are students, intellectuals, artists, or academics, have travelled, or are in an international "do good" mission such as saving forests or farmers. When people of other religions meet Christians with these traits, the Christians can seem charming too. Americans used to give off this kind of charm until the 1980s.

Aside from the usual dose of magic that is found in all societies, Buddhism has a simple wooden-headed straightforward wonderful attitude. Most Buddhist goals are simple and clear, the techniques are clear, and people can be clear about what their particular goals are and what they will do to achieve their goals. You do not have to aim for awakening right away. You can simply aim to improve. You should strive to act morally. You should use logic and reason. You can make as much or as little progress as you wish on your own or in a group. You do not need to depend on other people but you can get help from other people if you wish and you can give help to other people if they wish. You do not have to depend on anybody else to save you. Nobody can send you to hell or heaven. Nobody expects you to awaken next week. Salvation is a goal but it is not a crisis issue. For most people, continual progress is more a focus than awakening. Generally, magic plays little role. At least traditionally, and even in the modern urban world, Buddhism tends to produce decent people. Despite the individualism of Buddhism, Buddhists have as much fellowship as among people in any religion. Buddhism encourages science, intellect, and

an open mind. It is no wonder that Lisa Simpson prefers Buddhism although she also follows the moral teachings of Jesus.

Buddhists aim for “lesser” goals such as clarity, mindfulness, calmness, kindness, sympathy, empathy, doing good, promoting kindness, rationality, science, and promoting the order in society that minimizes suffering and maximizes clarity. The “lesser” goals are quite valuable in themselves regardless of any attitude about worthwhile life, and would be admirable in any religion.

Buddhist aids, such as karma, rebirth, dharma, emptiness, Buddha mind, etc. are fascinating, can never be fully resolved, and make good topics of conversation. They can help sharpen the mind. Sometimes they give us insight into other topics such as how the mind evolved, causality, and the fact that most of our categories for knowing the world are made up. Sometimes they even help quiet the mind so we can think better. Studying them allows smart people to feel satisfied with themselves without necessarily leading to posing or to looking down on others people. They are like good art.

A few smart Buddhists do have a sense of the Buddhist idea that life is not worthwhile. Their response is like Existentialism: they make meaning for now, and are content to live in the present meaning that they make, even if their intellectual superiors, like the Buddha, know better. They achieve what Existentialism achieves but without pretense and self-congratulation. They are content to allow other people to find their own meaning, and they tend to respect the meanings of other people. This attitude does not lead to self-indulgent anarchy where each person lives in “his own private Idaho”. Buddhists live in society, and they adjust meaning to get along with others. To find meaning without too much pretense is quite charming in itself even without the other sources of Buddhist charm.

Most Buddhists take morality seriously without being zealots. Buddhists have empathy and compassion without losing themselves as clinging enablers. They understand that other people are like themselves and other people face the same problems they do. They know other people can get caught in clinging and other people suffer. They help other people while remembering that they need to take care of their families and themselves, and they need not to undermine society. Buddhists try to be polite and to talk nicely to other people.

Buddhists engage in causes, such as saving the forests and species, on the same terms. Buddhists can agree to disagree on social and moral issues. A Buddhist might have strong views on either side of the abortion issue but would not kill doctors who perform abortions. A Buddhist tries to follow the law while keeping in mind that few formal systems can encompass all the variety of life. Although women’s rights did not originate in Buddhist countries, Buddhists have accepted the idea because it makes sense in light of cause-and-effect and rebirth. Many people who are men in this life were women in past lives, and a person born a man in this life might easily be reborn a woman later, so there is no point in oppressing a class of person’s (women) you might have been or that you might join again soon enough. Buddhists would easily understand the philosophers Immanuel Kant and John Rawls.

Buddhists accept cause and effect. They like rationalism and science. They rapidly see the scientific point of view, and have no trouble with evolution and Relativity. They see the business point of view in which aspects of the economy influence each other. Buddhists might not have invented modern medicine

but they pick it up very quickly. Buddhists can be both stoic about the hazards of living in a body, and the inevitable decline of old age, yet see the value of medicine in relieving suffering and sustaining vigor.

Buddhists accept art as part of the charm of the world. They succumb to art because they don't expect to resist all clinging and all joys of this world. Art can bring some joy without too much pain. Buddhists are happy to learn lessons about religion and life from art without expecting art to reach the depths of the Buddha's mind and without expecting art to tell them all about life.

To many Buddhists, the Middle Path does not consist of the correct balance between asceticism and a normal healthy body. The Middle Path means trying to understand a variety of views, and then coming down somewhere in the middle, usually within the limits of common sense and general moral principles. Drink in moderation. Wear skirts neither too long nor too short. Defend a point of view but don't get into fist fights. Save some money while using some money to have a good time. Meditate but don't give up your job and your family unless you become a monk. Be brave but not foolish. Work through politics for the improvement of society until it wears you down or until politics becomes hopelessly corrupt.

This Middle Path is much like what Aristotle advised, at about the same time as the Buddha. A Buddhist who accepts that the world is worthwhile, at least for now, is much like an Aristotelian.

All this makes any person charming. It would be nice to combine many Buddhist traits with the concern and dedication of Christians and other followers of Jesus. As the world goes along, something like that might happen.

### **Sweet Western Buddhists.**

When Western Buddhists adopt Buddhism, they learn that life is "not worthwhile", but, as far as I can tell, they don't take that idea seriously, maybe because most Western Buddhists learn Mahayana. Western Buddhists learn about suffering but tend to think of it in terms of bad situations and bad attitudes such as a long slow burn about being overlooked at work or lingering anger at a bad romance. They do not think much about the deep suffering that goes on even when life seems successful (see Part 7). They have a caring circle of friends, do good deeds, meditate, and are mindful. Instead of dwelling on life as "not worthwhile", Westerners are drawn to meditation; many lives; a joyous system of many lives; Buddhist Aids; Buddhist empathy and sympathy; mindfulness; not returning bad for bad; returning good for bad; seeing the root causes of sadness and bad behavior in general in selfishness; the beauty and goodness of nature; and many other points that make Buddhists charming. They write self-help books about not getting into bad situations and about getting out of bad situations. They write about how to be useful and help others. They write about using emotions so you are a nice person instead of a hurtful person. Sometimes they try to be diffident, un-emotional, and mildly "above it all" but not too often. Sometimes they think they are secretly better than non-Buddhists because they are so good or they are so close to true ideas, but they indulge this attitude no more than do people of all religions. All this is fine with me. It can get a little over-sweet but over-sweet is better than glamorizing villainy and better than self-righteousness and crusading. Their overall stance is not really different than the stance of love, help, and kindness as in some Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, etc. That is fine with me too.

The only problem I have with sweet Western Buddhists is the same issue I have with all dogmas: when they want to convert me to be like them and they want me to share exactly their concerns, experiences, feelings, and attitudes – the “Agent Smith” problem. I am a mild person but I am not like them. All I ask of them is good behavior, and I wish all they would ask of me is good behavior and that I make sense. It would be better if the good behavior on both sides was based on the same principles and it would be nice if we could talk with each other better. But we can’t always get what we want, and I don’t want to force them to think like me and be like me.

### **Buddhism Back to Almost Hinduism.**

In the list of widespread ideas that began this chapter, the last points amount to accepting that the system-of-many-lives is good even if a particular life is painful, we should do our duty (dharma) as part of our role in the total system of many lives, we should enjoy this present life, and so life really is worthwhile. Buddhists reject this conclusion. The whole system is not good even if it sustains rebirths that lead to awakening. Such a system is self-contradictory, and self-contradictory systems are rarely mostly good. We can do our duty as part of our present life but we need not worry about doing our duty to uphold the whole system. We can enjoy this life in moderation but we should not get smug about this life. Hindus eventually worked their way to the non-Buddhist view; see the chapters on Mahayana and on India. They see the Buddha as one of the gods-forces who sustain the total good system of many lives. All this is a big difference between Hindus and Buddhists.

Buddhists who take the view described in the previous section seem to enjoy the present life, feel happy about the system as a whole, do their duty as part of sustaining the system as a whole, and do their duty as part of sustaining their society. Buddhists who take the view described in the previous section seem to act like practicing Hindus even if they do not follow Hindu doctrine. Most Buddhists are not happy about being described as Hindus by default. I leave it up to Hindus and Buddhists to figure out how they differ and then to tell non-Buddhists and non-Hindus.

Buddhists who want to separate themselves from Hindus should consider the points above, and should consider what the Buddha said about life being not worthwhile. If they conclude the Buddha did say that life is not worthwhile, they should consider what that means. If they conclude they can take part in this life, they should try to explain the terms both to themselves and to non-Buddhists. If they conclude that life is worthwhile, then what makes Theravada different from Mahayana, and what makes Buddhism different from Hinduism?

For most practicing Buddhists and Hindus, what matters is not intellectual doctrines about whether life is worthwhile, this particular life is worthwhile, or the total system of many lives is worthwhile. What matters is their own particular culture, and how their culture gets them to see their religion and to act their religion. Hindus are Hindus because they have roots in Indian culture. Hinduism is as much about Indian culture as about a set of ideas. Buddhists are Buddhists because they have roots in Southeast Asian, East Asian, European, or American culture. Thai Buddhists are Thai while Indian Hindus are Indians. Culture is more important than dogma. I leave Buddhists and Hindus to explain how their cultures and religious doctrines interact. I leave Buddhists to explain why non-strict Buddhists are not Hindus.

In the future, people of all cultures will face religions that were not originally of their culture, and religions will move into cultures from which they did not originate and from which they have not taken their basic character. This is already happening in America and Europe, and, to a lesser extent, India and China. It will be interesting to watch the interplay of culture and doctrine then. It will be interesting to see how far a doctrine can stretch to accommodate a culture. It will be interesting to see if a doctrine can actually shape a culture.

(Uninteresting personal note: While I was in graduate school, socio-cultural anthropologists pretty much said: society, culture, family, economics, morality, and religion are the same thing; religion takes the lead; religion and morality are closest, and form a complex; and religion-morality determines family, economics, society, and culture. Society, culture, economics, and family are a particular religion-morality in practice. Their anthropological doctrine was like a Buddhist aid. In their view, they had found the key to social life in a formula that centered on religion and morality. I disagreed. While religion and morality are important, religion, morality, culture, society, economics, and family are not identical, and which one leads depends. Using religion or morality as the key causes us to overlook culture, society, family, and economics, just as using “cause-and-effect” or “mindfulness” causes us to overlook Buddhism. Using only “not worthwhile” or “suffering” as the key might have the same result. My later experience confirmed my ideas about anthropological theory. I had to figure out my own ideas, much as the Buddha had urged. I could not have thought through the issues in this chapter or book if I had converted to the wrong views that were taught in graduate school. Buddhist students take note.)

## **PART 7: (A) SUFFERING VS. “NOT WORTHWHILE”, (B) BUDDHIST AIDS, AND (C) SELF.**

This end part of the chapter is optional but firmly recommended. It delivers on the promise for “more later”. It goes into detail on the topics listed in the header, and includes more assessment.

### **(A) WORTHWHILE, NOT WORTHWHILE, AND SUFFERING.**

#### **Short Whimsical Prolog.**

The idea of suffering in Buddhism and Hinduism gives me the same uneasy creepy feeling that the idea of heaven and hell gives me in Christianity. Christians sometimes corner you and demand, “Do you want to go to Heaven or Not? Do you want Heaven or Hell?” If you reject the dichotomy and you answer “No”, then you will go to Hell. If you answer, “Of course, forced to make the choice, everybody would rather go to Heaven”, you are trapped inside their view. You have to accept what they say about going to Heaven and Hell. The Christian inquisitor does not allow rejecting the frame. Suppose a Buddhist asks, “Do you want to end your Suffering or do you want to spend forever in Ignorance and ugly Suffering?” This is the same frame and dilemma. The Buddhist inquisitor does not allow you to reject the dichotomy anymore than the Christian does – the Buddhist does not allow the Middle Path. I don’t like this. The difference is the Christian openly scorns you if you don’t accept while the Buddhist merely damns you with pity and smug superiority. “Stupid not-Buddhist doesn’t even know when he is suffering”.

Like many people, my reaction is “a pox on both your houses”. I don’t live in these frames and I don’t like being forced to live in these frames. This dilemma is one tool of systems that eat the world. This is why the Buddhist view of suffering is one of the most dangerous of Buddhist Aids. A difference between me

and a few other victims is that, after a long life and a lot of thinking, I can give a few good reasons why I can reject the frames and I can give some alternative better views. Traps like this are one reason I came to enjoy Taoism and Zen.

If you desperately seek enlightenment, then you cling to enlightenment and you suffer.

If you desperately seek to stop clinging, then you cling to not clinging, and you suffer.

If you desperately seek to stop suffering, then you cling to suffering and not suffering, and you suffer.

Recall my comments earlier that the command to stop clinging and stop suffering is a negative absolute like iconoclasm, Prohibition, and sexual abstinence.

It is better to manage than to try to totally wipe out. Buddhist Aids used adeptly help manage.

### **“Not Worthwhile” versus “Suffering”, in More Detail.**

This section can get technical. I repeat myself.

Westerners think of suffering as what happens to cancer patients or to people taken by the police in bad states. Buddhists see suffering as a common part of all life and see it in sickness, pains, aches, old age, love, accidents, disappointment, bad acts, taxes, the decay of society, and sorrow. Suffering appears in the hazards of life such as car accidents and plant closings, normal changes of life such as first crush and growing old, inevitable annoyances such as taxes, lingering unfairness such as the success of people who kiss ass, and the doubt that ever gnaws our hearts and minds. I see all this too. I don't overlook any suffering that Buddhists might consider.

Buddhists do not necessarily aim to end suffering or end all bad feeling; they aim to overcome suffering so it does not distort thought and keep us wrongly attached to life. When suffering is overcome, then it comes and it goes with no lingering bad effects or distortions. To “end” or “defeat” suffering is the same as to “overcome”. To “manage” suffering is to respond to it so as to minimize how it distorts thoughts and acts but not necessarily to end suffering or to not feel it. People manage suffering who accept that life has hard knocks and do the best they can anyway with as little bitterness as possible. They do not try to end all suffering. I advocate that we manage rather than overcome. I do not dwell on the difference between manage and overcome.

It is not clear if a person who overcomes suffering also does not feel suffering at all or does not feel much of anything at all. I doubt it. Some Buddhists act as if not feeling is the aim but they are wrong. A person who has overcome suffering still feels but he-she does not hold on to (attach to) feelings.

The issue of suffering is about something in life, about some of the content of life. In contrast, the issue of worthwhile life is about all of life, life itself. The issue of a worthwhile life contains the issue of suffering. The issue of suffering is one way to get at the issue of worthwhile life but that way is dangerous because a person can get stuck on the idea of suffering and so forget that the real issue is worthwhile life. I think that is what happened in Buddhism. I don't know if that happened to the Buddha but I doubt it. I think he

saw the real issue as worthwhile life. He used suffering to get at worthwhile life, and his followers got stuck. I cannot prove my view of what happened.

We all can be overcome by suffering. Suffering makes all of us think “crooked”. Crooked thinking leads us to more suffering and traps us in suffering. Our crooked thinking makes us make others suffer and it traps them too; then they do it to us; and so on. It could be the Buddha focused on suffering so as to alert us to these problems and to show us what is important. He gave us a way to handle suffering so it would not overcome life. He gave us a way to think clearly so as to undo crooked thought caused by suffering and crooked thought caused by anything. In the face of suffering, he offered a way to make life better, to think adeptly, and “get on top of” life, even if not to make life all good. For example, the Buddha found a way to overcome suffering so we also could end selfishness. Many Buddhists think like this although they do not usually say so. I think the Buddha used the issue of suffering to wake us up to what matters, and he promoted overcoming suffering to make life better. I don’t know for sure what the Buddha wished us to wake up to after we overcome suffering. I think the Buddha did not think that to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile. I cannot prove my view of what the Buddha thought.

Even if the Buddha offered a way to manage suffering to make life better, I disagree with the approach. The Buddha needed to say for sure if we awaken when we defeat suffering, what we awaken to, if life was worthwhile or not worthwhile before we defeated suffering, and if life is worthwhile or not worthwhile after we defeat suffering (and awaken). It seems odd to base a way of life (religion) on the idea that we must overcome suffering without also saying what makes life better and without focusing more on what makes life better. The Buddha’s approach amounts to falling back on the problem of suffering only, and it forces us to identify awakening with the end of suffering. That stance forces us to conclude that life is not worthwhile; certainly life is not worthwhile before we manage suffering; and likely is not worthwhile after. We conclude “not worthwhile overall” tacitly even if not overtly.

So, that is what happened. Orthodox Buddhism fell back on the problem of suffering, it avoided the issue of worthwhile life, but fell back on a stance that only tacitly sees life as not worthwhile, regardless of what the Buddha had intended. Orthodox Buddhism asserts the Buddha said suffering besets life (ruins it), we have to do what we can to end all suffering, and that is that. Orthodox Buddhism says ending suffering does make life better as a benefit along the way but Buddhism denies that the Buddha offers overcoming suffering primarily so as to make life all better, as a kind of therapy. Overcoming suffering is not a means to any other end except awakening. Buddhism focuses on overcoming suffering without tying the defeat of suffering to any other gain except awakening. The issue is suffering, plain and simple. This view is not so odd. A similar idea is the Christian and Muslim view that the world is fallen, beset with sin, sin ruins life, and the task is to overcome sin and all the evil that follows, plain and simple. This is how Christians and Muslims get stuck on fighting Satan and how they forget there is much more to life than fighting the Devil and fighting evil.

As far as I know, Buddhism takes no explicit stance on whether life is worthwhile before overcoming suffering, after overcoming suffering, or in general, except to say being born a human male is an amazing rare opportunity to defeat suffering, awaken, and to end dependency on the suffering of karma-Dharma-rebirth. This life is worthwhile because it allows us to end suffering and end normal life, and that is the only reason this life is worthwhile. To overcome suffering does not, in itself, make life worthwhile. The Buddhist stance strongly implies that life is not worthwhile before, after, and in general. Buddhists wish to

avoid that implication but I don't see how. I think the Buddha thought life is not worthwhile. (Women cannot end suffering and cannot awaken. Adept women must be reborn as men to awaken. I don't make the rules of Buddhism.)

I disagree that suffering ruins all life and I disagree with a focus on suffering. Suffering does not usually make life "not worthwhile". I disagree that to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile and it is the only thing to make life worthwhile. Managing suffering makes life better but does not make life worthwhile. Life is worthwhile despite most suffering. Life is worthwhile, plain and simple. I disagree with the Buddha and with orthodox Buddhism. My stance disqualifies me entirely for many Buddhists.

(0) The logic in more detail: To repeat: The issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering and it contains the issue of suffering. "Suffering" is about some of the content of life while "worthwhile" is about life, all of life. We can see suffering in terms of worthwhile life but we cannot see worthwhile life in terms of suffering except for a few bad situations that do not change the basic relation. We have to make up our minds about worthwhile life before we can assess how suffering affects life.

(0 continued) As developed in Buddhism, the ideas of suffering and of overcoming suffering, and all Aids, are bolstered ("reified"). They are overly strong so as to force themselves on minds. They do not follow the Middle Path. The ideas of suffering and overcoming suffering could be more useful if they were not so strident. I don't know if bolstering was done by the Buddha or by his followers but I think more likely by his followers. I don't know if "manage" is more along the Middle Path but I think so.

(1) Assume life is not worthwhile overall regardless of suffering. Then: (1A) The issue of suffering is minor in comparison. (1B) To defeat suffering does not make life worthwhile – what counts is that life is not worthwhile. So what if we end suffering but life is not worthwhile? (1C) Why work hard to overcome suffering? Especially if you feel fairly good already, working hard to end suffering gets you little more at a high cost. (1D) To overcome suffering still would not settle a serious issue in life. We would still feel malaise. It is not clear if this malaise is "suffering" by Buddhist standards but it is by mine. (1E) So, to defeat suffering does not defeat suffering unless to defeat suffering also makes life worthwhile; for this set of points (1), we assumed life is not worthwhile; orthodox Buddhism implies both that life is not worthwhile and to defeat suffering does not make life worthwhile; so, again, to defeat suffering does not defeat suffering. (1E) As long as life-in-general is not worthwhile, and not-worthwhile is a kind of suffering, we can't really manage suffering. Usually we can manage suffering if we feel life is worthwhile.

(2) The apparent Buddhist stance is based on the ideas that (a) life is not worthwhile, (b) life is beset by real suffering, and (c) to overcome suffering does not make life worthwhile. The Buddhist stance offers some good advice but is not a solution. (2A) Suppose in Buddhism, we defeat suffering so as to make life worthwhile. I say: then the real goal is to make life worthwhile, and to end suffering is only a means. It is odd to focus on the means (ending suffering) and so to obscure the goal (worthwhile life), especially when we need clear thinking to defeat suffering. If the real goal is to make life worthwhile, or to see that life is worthwhile, then say so, and go after that goal directly. (2B) Regardless of worthwhile, it is worth overcoming suffering because suffering hurts, we need to overcome suffering to think well, and then we can see clearly that life is not worthwhile. We do gain by overcoming suffering, and the gain is more than worth the cost. I agree that we need to manage suffering and to think clearer. When we do, we do not have to see that life is not worthwhile. We might see that life is worthwhile but standard Buddhism does

not allow this conclusion. (2C) Even though life is not worthwhile, to overcome suffering lets us live more gracefully until we die, and grace matters. I agree that grace matters. (2D) If people think life is worthwhile even with suffering, then people will not pursue Buddhism, and Buddhism will die. So, to keep Buddhism, we need to stress suffering and overlook the issue of worthwhile life or imply that life is not worthwhile. I disagree. See below. (2E) To overcome suffering in the Buddhist way avoids the issue of worthwhile life: worrying about worthwhile life is one kind of suffering, and it is overcome too when all suffering is overcome; the issue of worthwhile life disappears after suffering has been overcome; people do not long for a worthwhile life after suffering ends; so Buddhism does not have to deal with the issue; and-or Buddhism deals with the issue of worthwhile life when it deals with suffering; to overcome suffering is to fully awaken and to reach perfection. I disagree. See below. (2F) Even if people do not know they suffer, they still suffer, even when they feel good; and it is worth working hard to see hidden suffering, defeat hidden suffering, and defeat all suffering. I agree that people do suffer even when they don't know so. People need more insight about their real situations and how they really feel. People need to quit fooling themselves. That still does not mean suffering besets and ruins life in the Buddhist way; people should see suffering the Buddhist way; and should remove suffering in the Buddhist way. People can see suffering in other ways and can use other methods to manage it. See Part Four in this chapter.

(3) I think the Buddha thought: Life is not worthwhile before and after overcoming suffering, and so life is not worthwhile before and after awakening. The Buddha uses suffering to get at worthwhile life. Still we should overcome suffering because suffering hurts, we see much more clearly when we end suffering, and living gracefully matters. I think the Buddha thought that overcoming suffering would also take care of the issue of worthwhile life by letting us see that life is not worthwhile. I doubt that way of dealing with worthwhile life dispenses with the issue of a worthwhile life without directly confronting the issue. I think the Buddha did not care if Buddhism dies out as long as people find clear thinking, truth, and grace, learn how to deal with suffering, and see that life is not worthwhile.

(4) My stance is based on (a) the issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering, and (b) life is worthwhile. See (2) above and Part Four below. If life is worthwhile, then: (4A) Most of us can deal with suffering, with help. (4B) That (a) all lives have some suffering, and (b) some particular lives have much suffering, do not make all life not worthwhile. (4C) Even a life beset by suffering can be worthwhile, and many are. (4D) Even if most lives are beset by suffering, life can still be worthwhile, and is. (4E) If life is worthwhile and we manage suffering, we can better decide what to do next. We do not have to totally defeat suffering to manage suffering. If we defeat suffering and life is still not worthwhile, then we don't know what to do. (4F) Managing suffering can help us see more clearly but we do not need to fully overcome suffering to see clearly enough, some suffering helps us to see better, and ending suffering does not necessarily lead us to see perfectly. (4G) Again: If the goal of overcoming suffering is to make life worthwhile then the real deep goal is to make life worthwhile, we should say so, and we should work on that directly. (4H) Wondering-about-worthwhile-life is not the suffering that Buddhism seems to see and its methods aim to overcome. Even if Buddhist methods reduce suffering, still we have to deal with the issue of worthwhile life. Buddhism does not sidestep the issue of worthwhile life. (4I) Wondering about a worthwhile life is not wondering about the meaning of life. We can not-know the meaning of life but still decide life is worthwhile; people do this all the time. The two issues are related but I don't need to go into it here. (4J) Buddhists make the same mistake in their focus on awakening as Christians do with Salvation. Overcoming Suffering plays a similar bad role as do Grace and Justification. Christians worry about those instead of worrying about doing what Jesus wants and doing the right things for the right

reasons. Christians should stop worrying about S, G, and J while Buddhists should stop worrying about Enlightenment and Overcoming Suffering. Get better and be more useful. (4K) If you want insight into suffering and worthwhile life, ask someone who is depressed. You can “have it all” but, if you feel life is not worthwhile, you have nothing.

(5) (A) Maybe a life that does not defeat suffering is not worthwhile but a life that does defeat suffering is worthwhile. We defeat suffering to make life worthwhile. Maybe to defeat suffering is to think clearly and adeptly, to think clearly and adeptly defeats suffering, to think clearly and adeptly and to defeat suffering make life worthwhile, and is the only way to make life worthwhile. They go together. Maybe the Buddha meant all this. (B) Whatever he meant, I think: the ideas in (A) are wrong; life is worthwhile regardless of most suffering; we do not need to end suffering to make life worthwhile; and, in general, to end suffering does not make life that was not-worthwhile-before into life that is worthwhile after. Learning to manage suffering helps almost everyone. For a few sad people, learning to manage suffering might let them go from not-worthwhile life to the worthwhile life that most of us have. Buddhist methods help. None of this means that managing suffering turns life-that-is-generally-not-worthwhile into generally worthwhile life. Thinking adeptly is another issue. The Buddha and Buddhism are not clear if to-overcome-suffering-makes-life-worthwhile but Buddhism, with a focus on suffering, strongly implies that life is not worthwhile before and after. I think neither the Buddha nor Buddhism intended us to overcome suffering so as to make life worthwhile. If anything, the Buddha intended us to overcome suffering so we could see that life is not worthwhile and so to endure gracefully.

(6) We have to decide if life is worthwhile before we can really deal with the issue of suffering, even if, by using the methods of the Buddha, we seem to overcome suffering. We have to decide if life is worthwhile despite suffering, and we have to say so. If we think life in general is worthwhile, say so. If we think life in general is not worthwhile, say so. If we think life is not worthwhile before overcoming all suffering, say so. We have to decide if to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile. If to end suffering makes life go from not worthwhile to worthwhile, say so. If to overcome suffering does not make life worthwhile, say so. If to manage suffering and to think more adeptly make already-worthwhile life even better, say so. I hope I do say that.

(7) Not to decide about worthwhile life inevitably promotes alternatives, such as Mahayana and most of Hinduism, that push out Theravada. They succeed because they change the view of view suffering so it does not erode worthwhile life and worldly success. They redefine suffering, worthwhile, and success. In effect, they define away suffering so they can offer their version of a worthwhile life and success. I think their methods of salvaging suffering, worthwhile life, and success are wrong, and I think most Theravada Buddhists would agree. The best response is not to drown the question of worthwhile life in the issue of suffering but to get at worthwhile life directly, simply, and correctly.

(7 continued) Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, and other good religions assert that life is worthwhile. Despite all its great features, orthodox Buddhism cannot really face other religions unless it makes clear how it thinks life is worthwhile or not worthwhile, and how its view differs from other religions. If Buddhism feels other religions overlook the issues of suffering and worthwhile life, Buddhism has to be clear about how it stands and how (it thinks) they stand.

(8) This point won't make sense now to anybody new to Buddhism but please return to it later when it does make sense. Life and the things in life are inevitably sticky; and we cling to life, perceptions, ideas, hopes, stances, dreams, pleasures, feelings, etc; Both stickiness and clinging play a role in how suffering works and why it negates life. The analysis of stickiness and clinging were great advances in Buddhism and the analysis largely holds regardless of conclusions about worthwhile life and suffering. The analysis helps us see how suffering works and helps us to overcome suffering. But the analysis of stickiness and clinging itself can become sticky and become an object of clinging. We have to manage the stickiness-and-clinging of stickiness-and-clinging while not killing the ideas of stickiness-and-clinging. We have to manage the overcoming of stickiness-and-clinging. This task is hard as long as suffering is the core issue. This task is not too hard with worthwhile life at the core. With suffering, it is hard to overcome clinging to the ideas of stickiness-and-clinging because those are integral to how suffering works. In contrast, those ideas are not integral to the issue of worthwhile life. Those ideas help us appreciate worthwhile life and help to make life better but they are not vital. We can use the ideas of stickiness and clinging as needed or can let them go as needed.

(8 continued) Some parallels not from Buddhism might help. We have to learn how to be wary of all dogma without rejecting all dogma, including the dogmas that (a) we should be suspicious of all dogmas, (b) we should not reject all dogmas, and (c) we should be suspicious of all dogma but not reject it all. We have to learn how to not worship idols without also hating images. We have to learn to not worship Mary-Mother-of-Jesus without rejecting all reference to her and curiosity about her. We have to reject the Devil without denying that evil matters. We have to work at a job not so much that we neglect life and family but we do have to work some to have life and family. We have to reject superstition, magic, and bad religion without scorning all belief and all curiosity about supernatural and without enjoying art that uses magic. We have to suspect politics and politicians without hating them all and without turning favorites into demigod saviors.

It is worth repeating my guesses of what the Buddha thought and the implications. He used suffering to get at "not worthwhile". The Buddha felt life is not worthwhile before we defeat suffering and after. "Beset by suffering" is another way to say "life is not worthwhile". Most people won't accept "not worthwhile", so it is easier and more effective to use suffering. Used adroitly, suffering as a way to get at "not worthwhile" turns a question about some of the content of life into a question about all of life. The Buddha thought some people could defeat suffering well enough; then they would quickly see that life is not worthwhile; and then live graciously. You have to think yourself why the Buddha felt life is not worthwhile. I think it was part of the complex of ideas that were current in his time, what people meant by being trapped on the Wheel of Dharma-karma. The Buddha used ideas adroitly but that does not mean all his listeners did and then all their listeners did too. Used not-adroitly, focus on suffering loses people in an issue about some of life when we should think about all of life. Still, it is worth managing suffering even if life is not worthwhile, worthwhile, or we are not sure. Maybe some people who manage suffering will "break on through" to see that life is not worthwhile or is worthwhile. People who are trying to deal with suffering see not only their own suffering but the suffering of others, and they act better toward all living beings; they act morally and graciously. This goal is worthwhile even if people who seek to awaken through overcoming suffering do not fully awaken. Yet, of course, as long as life is not worthwhile, to overcome suffering cannot make life worthwhile. Even if we overcome suffering and make our lives better in some ways, still life is not worthwhile, and that remains a serious problem.

Remember the Buddha lived when people believed in many lives. If the Buddha had thought life was worthwhile after overcoming suffering and waking up, he could have arranged to live a long time in that blessed state or to live many lives in that blessed state. Instead, he chose to die at the normal age of about 85 years old and not be reborn again. He chose to get off the Wheel of Dharma-Karma. I have to conclude it was not worthwhile to live longer or to be reborn again, even in the blessedness of awakening. Again: "Oh yeah, life goes on long after the thrill of livin' is gone".

The Buddha was like a few other people who believe that this life is all there is and we should be ready to give up everything when we die, such as like David Hume. Live gracefully, then let go. To live gracefully, it helps to overcome suffering.

The Buddha wanted us to make up our own minds even if we disagree with him. In that spirit, I say the Buddha was wrong and Buddhism still is wrong. I cannot prove the Buddha thought life is not worthwhile and he used suffering to get at the problem of worthwhile. I cannot prove orthodox Buddhism is stuck on suffering and so overlooks the deeper question of worthwhile. I can see issues with all Buddhism, such as endemic spiritualism and magic, but I cannot prove they result from this problem. I can see the unease of many smart Buddhists but I cannot prove it results from this problem.

It is possible the Buddha never meant us to overcome suffering in the sense that the idea was developed after him. It is possible the Buddha wanted us to manage suffering enough so we could see grace and kindness, put ourselves in proper humble perspective, see life is not worthwhile, see the value of others despite that life is not worthwhile, and then wait to die. He gave his followers good tools. Then followers who bolstered suffering took over. It is not possible to settle speculation like this. We have to deal with issues as we have them now, including that we have to make up our minds about suffering, worthwhile, overcoming, managing, awakening, and the correct use of Buddhist Aids.

Because I think life is worthwhile and the issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering, I need not worry about the exact role of suffering. In this book, I may focus on "worthwhile life" and see what that implies for waking up and for conduct.

Some Christian churches, and maybe some Hindu churches, think suffering adds to life in ways that I find a little creepy; I do not rest any argument on that view; and I dislike it. We can learn from suffering but we should never glamorize it. Some Christian churches glamorize suffering. I do not glamorize suffering or worthwhile life. The Buddha did not glamorize suffering, not even to make it into a bigger dragon to slay. If any Buddhists do dramatize or glamorize suffering, they err.

Although I disagree with the Buddha about worthwhile life, he remains one of the people that I admire most. Although I disagree with the monkhood ("Sangha") about both worthwhile life and suffering, I have rarely met such good, delightful, modest, and useful people. "By their fruits you will know them". The Buddha made a good case. He honed strong tools for thinking and doing. He had excellent insights about the self, mind, and world. In showing us how to manage suffering, he also showed us how to be better people, and his insights into better are useful regardless of the issues of worthwhile and suffering. It is worth studying him to learn, be clear about where we agree or disagree, how we see suffering, and about worthwhile. Despite reliance on the idea of suffering, it is monks who carry the message of the Buddha just as Christian priests carry the message of Jesus.

Although Buddhism officially says the goal is to end suffering - and that's it - most practicing Buddhists, including most monks, don't act this way. Rather, most feel that managing suffering makes life better and worthwhile in various ways, such as by making us more mindful, making us not-selfish, "turning us on" to Emptiness or Buddha Mind, or allowing us to succeed in life and business. Most Buddhists are uneasy with the idea that life is not worthwhile and uneasy that Buddhism says life is not worthwhile. I do not say much on why Buddhists think so. In chapters on Mahayana and Hinduism, I explain how the yearning for a worthwhile successful life shaped alternatives to Theravada.

### **Suffering in More Depth.**

I did not explain the Buddha's insight in terms of suffering partly because of the confusion just noted but mostly because people misunderstand when they think of suffering. They think: "If I can stop obvious suffering, then I have won". They use four tactics. All are wrong, and all actually reinforce stickiness and clinging. (1) If, on balance, pleasure (broadly reckoned) exceeds pain, then I have won. If I succeed in my job and family, have friends, am good, and am not disappointed, then I do not suffer overall. I have won, and I do not need the Buddha. (2) I am different from other people; I can overcome the stickiness of life even while I enjoy life; I can join fully in life and enjoy life without clinging to it. (3) I will succeed in life while I am young and so not yet taken by suffering. After I have established a family and set my children on their feet, and I begin to feel suffering, then I will withdraw from life and follow the Buddha. (4) I am in a system of many lives. The system is about joy-and-love. Stickiness in life leads me into the system; so stickiness and clinging are overall good rather than bad. Suffering is an illusion in the big arena, although real in its own way in the small arena of particular lives, so I need not worry about suffering. I can defeat apparent suffering by giving in to stickiness and clinging, losing my apparent self, finding my true self in the system of many lives and great joy-and-love, and doing what I was meant to do in the great system.

People misunderstand suffering. You still suffer at a deep level even if you are not keenly aware that you suffer. Nature gave us ways to cover up suffering when it interferes with biological success. The Buddha saw both obvious suffering and deep suffering. Deep suffering is the malaise, fear, nervousness, and ennui (deep boredom) that goes with all life, even good life. There is no cure for that in any success, not even in a joyous Dharma system. Even when you live with external happiness, you still fear to lose what you have and you compare yourself with other people and gods. You fear other people will take what you rely on. You fear to lose your reputation and standing. Even if you can get over fearing loss and get over comparisons, the fact of being caught up in having, society, and nature makes you anxious. Even if you do not fear for yourself, you still fear for other people, animals, country, church, and planet. You fear your life's work in business, science, or helping others will come to nothing. You fear God has forsaken you or the planet. You want to please God in ways impossible for humans. The Buddha explained in terms of obvious suffering but he had in mind deep suffering too.

I think the Buddha explained in terms of obvious suffering because that idea was easiest for his listeners to understand. In the Buddha's time, hunger, accident, deformity, disease, war, bad politics, old age, and death, were more obvious than now. Then, it was obvious that people have babies, who have more, who go on to have more babies, and so on, without end, and without any real purpose but to keep going on. People did get sick of life. People wanted release. The wheel of rebirth was not a joyous system but a wheel of torture in which cause-and-effect (Law, Dharma, Karma) were fetters to bind us to the wheel of

rebirth and suffering, and are tools of particular tortures. Rather than say “life is not worthwhile”, or try to explain deep suffering to the majority of people who could not see deep suffering even if they felt it, it is easier to point to obvious suffering. Obvious suffering was enough. Some people could understand the deep suffering of life as well but you did not have to understand the deep suffering of life to understand simple obvious suffering, and to want it all to stop. Anybody who had the ability to bring deep suffering to consciousness would get the idea from examples of obvious suffering. A simple, clear, moral plan such as the Buddha’s had considerable appeal.

Even now in the modern world, often it is easier to see clinging if we begin with suffering and heartache. All of us have felt them. All of us have been sick, lost a loved one, and been hurt by love or by the lack of love. All of us meet and fear old age. All of us have felt the sting of a good cause thwarted by mere self-interest and selfishness. All of us have held on much longer than reasonable to some pie-in-the-sky cause or dream of success. When we can see this in specific excessive episodes, then we can see it in other episodes that are not so excessive, and then we can see it generally.

You have to struggle to see clearly the causal chain around clinging and suffering. The struggle is a kind of clinging but you have to go through it to get to the other side.

Spoiler Alert: You can get a sense of the struggle, what you have to give up, what letting go is, Dharma logic, and the chain of cause-and-effect, through the book-movie “The Maltese Falcon”. First, the movie is an extended study of suffering when we cling to material things, love, glamorized wealth and power, rivalries, sex, and stories. The most obvious object-of-clinging-and-cause-of-suffering is the Black Bird – “the stuff that dreams are made of”. But that material thing only embodies one of many confused mental fantasies that cause suffering.

Second, the hero, Sam Spade, is a private detective, with a partner. Spade falls in love with one of the villains, Bridget Wonderlee or Bridget O’Shaunessy, both aliases. It is never clear if she falls in love with him or is merely playing him, and that is part of the dilemma. She murders Spade’s partner. The partner was a womanizing careless skunk, Spade did not like him, and Spade was having sex with his wife. Still, he was Spade’s partner, and Spade has to follow the moral Dharma of his profession, the moral Law of his profession, including loyalty to clients, his partner, and to some truth. Spade can help Bridget cover up her crime. Yet, in the end, Spade turns her in to the police. The decision is an agony. Had he not turned her in, Spade would have suffered more even though he would have had a woman well suited to him and a woman that he loved. Spade would have suffered because he feared what she could do to him and, more importantly, he would have violated his moral Dharma. He would have suffered both externally and deeply. By giving up what he loved most, Spade was able to go along with the Dharma, the moral Law, (almost but not quite fully) stop clinging to a bad personal relation, and gain some release. Spade runs through the reasons behind the decision out loud for all to hear. Spade knows full well the causal chain behind both not turning her in and turning her in, and Spade follows the logic of the chain that leads to the least suffering and the best outcome. The release is far from complete but it is a big step down the path toward full following of the Dharma and full release. Many viewers think Spade chose wrongly should have “gone for love” as Neo did in the Matrix movies, but I agree with Spade’s choice. In Neo’s case, I agree with his choice.

If you overlook “seeing-the-causal-chain-letting-go-partial-release-and-less-suffering”, and instead focus on Spade doing his Dharma duty to institutions greater than personal self, to profession, society, human law, and the greater Dharma of the whole system, then the story reinforces Hinduism. If you overlook those options and think Spade should have acted on love, and see the love that Spade has for Bridget as representing the joy that the Dharma offers us, then you are close to Mahayana. The three religions are that close and that distant. I could give the story interpretations rooted in Christianity or in any big way of looking at the world – the story does not exclusively support the Dharma and the Buddha only - but that diversion would not be useful here.

The writers of the Upanishads had heard the same ideas about the sadness of life that the Buddha had heard, at about the same time, and they remade the ideas to suit themselves. I think the Buddha remade the ideas to suit his own insights. That does not mean he was right or wrong – his correctness depends on what he made of the ideas rather than his source.

In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, people are saved from sin and the depravity that comes of sin. People who grew up in those traditions often cannot accept that not everybody feels sinful and depraved. You can feel the mistakes you have made, sins you have committed, harm you have done, and missed chances to have helped, without necessarily feeling totally sinful and depraved. One good idea of the crazy 1960s was seeing the difference between knowing our faults versus feeling smothered by an all-encompassing blanket of sin and depravity – a gain now likely lost. I have heard fervent Christians and sincere missionaries try hard to talk people into feeling sinful and depraved so the Christians could then save the others on Christian terms. I don't like this way of doing things “ass backwards” and of creating harm, often largely just to gain control.

As with Heaven and Hell above, Buddhist stress on clinging and suffering reminds me of Christian ideas of sin and depravity. Fervent Buddhists have tried to talk me into seeing my own suffering, mental defilement, despair, and depravity so they could show me how Buddhism had a way out. If I don't see right away how lost, clingy, in pain, suffering, and defiled I really am, the Buddhist pities me as lost in my own fog of self-delusionary depravity. Most Buddhists, like most Christians, are happy to leave you alone as long as you do no harm. I know my faults but I don't feel lost in clinging, defilement, and suffering anymore than I feel lost in sin and sinful depravity. I know when I suffer. That does not mean either that I want out of all my suffering or that I am a slave to clinging and suffering. Although loving and caring have caused me pain, maybe more pain than pleasure, still I prefer to endure the pain than to lose my inner ties to people that I have loved or do love. I also know when the pain is too much and I know how to let go of a particular relation rather than all relations. Buddhists should accept that some people do not feel suffering as Buddhism seems to require. Buddhists should think what people do feel, the implications, and what to do next. That is a sufficiently fertile ground for the ideas of the Buddha.

### **Buddha's Time and Our Time.**

Imagine you live in a ruler-priest-peasant-merchant-worker world where everything stayed the same for 5000 years. The rulers might come and go, but taxes remain. The occupants of the land change but the land remains, and so does the hardship of making a living on the land. The seller of cloth changes but the selling of cloth remains. You come, you go, and you die. Your children come, go, and die. In a few years, nobody even remembers you or your children. At best, you are a pile of bones in a mausoleum for

a few hundred years. If anybody does remember, the memory is so distorted, and so serves the purpose of other people, that it is not you. If anything, memory serves delusion. People in the peasant villages and markets know they depend on each other, and sometimes depend on the lord, but that does not stop famine or old age, and it can make life worse. Yes, there are happy times, but so what? Nothing you can do makes the world any better. Every year we people eat more of nature but nature seems always there, and nature comes back whenever a village or market dies out from famine, fire, flood, taxes, or invader fury.

In this situation, a person really seems to gain by overcoming suffering. The question of a worthwhile life is not very important. You might as well take care of your own suffering. You can't control the suffering of anyone else. You don't owe them that. All you owe them is basic morality.

Now look at our lives. Through struggle, Americans, and some other peoples in the world, can make their lives better, and can improve the lives of their children. We are part of the government. We are part of the world, stewards of the world. If we don't take care of nature, we face horror, and we undo all the good that we do for our children. Life matters. Life can be made worthwhile and can be made not worthwhile. Life is worthwhile in general if we work on it. Suffering becomes a lesser issue than how life matters and how to make it better not only in our now but in general.

So, does the validity of a religion depend on its times? Do ultimate questions vary according to what era somebody asks? Do the Golden Rule and "applies equally" apply in some times but not in others? Are the Buddha and Jesus heroes in some times but not in others?

If questions vary according to the times, still it seems we can ask the same questions about suffering and worthwhile life in all times. People might be prone to one answer or the other in different times but the questions are still valid regardless of the times.

While the description above of old times might make suffering a more relevant question than worthwhile life, that view is not how people responded, not even in the time of the Buddha. What people took from the Buddha was his idea that each person is his-her own boss and each person determines the quality and validity of his-her own life. You need not depend on Brahmins, Lords, or Spirits. You can work it out for yourself. What you make can be worthwhile even in Theravada but certainly in Mahayana. People looked to the teachings of the Buddha not so much for ways to end suffering and get out of life but for ways to gain control of life and to find success. They acted as if life was worthwhile and they could do something about it. Let "ending suffering" wait for another life. A devout Buddhist might say that people misunderstand, and people chronically misunderstand, but that is not the issue I raise in this paragraph. I point out that the question of a worthwhile life pertained even in the time of the Buddha and it still pertains now. We face suffering. We are better off learning how to deal with it. When we have reduced our suffering to the point where we can think well enough, or even to the point where we can think about as good as any evolved sentient being can think, then we can consider worthwhile life.

To keep the historical record straight: In fact, in the few hundred years before the time of the Buddha, and in the Buddha's time, the area of what is now northern India and Nepal had changed a fair amount in its economy and politics, but not nearly as much as life has changed all over the world since about 1900. The changes were mostly in who had the power rather than in the nature of the power. The changes

then, as now, led to increased suffering for some people and increased success for others. It is possible to say the Buddha's stress on suffering was in part a response to the hardship that he saw in the changes around him. Many Buddhist writers offer that view. I have no idea if it is true. Even if partly true, it does not change the context for the general view of life as given in the points at the beginning of this chapter and in this section, and it does not change the view here that valuing life only little and wanting out of life is a reasonable response in the right conditions. It is easy enough to say that the changes around the time of the Buddha led people to see life as better and qualitatively worthwhile as social scientists have argued about changes in Europe in the late Middle Ages, during the Renaissance, and during the rise of capitalism. People then picked out of the teachings of the Buddha not that life is full or suffering and not worthwhile but "I am my own boss now". It is easy enough to blend stories to reinforce the points of this section – or other views - but I don't go through that exercise.

### **What the Buddha Really Said and Really Intended.**

As mentioned, a "sutra" is an important religious book, like a chapter of the Koran, a book of the Tanakh, or a Gospel in the New Testament. The large majority of sutras claim to be transcriptions of a lecture given by the Buddha himself, as with the Hadith (Sayings) of Mohammad, the words of Jesus in the New Testament, and the claim that Moses wrote the whole Pentateuch. This claim cannot be true of all the sutras and all the words of the Buddha because there are too many sutras and words, and they don't all agree. Likely, when the sutras were written, people did not expect the words in a sutra to be actually the words of Siddhartha Gautama. Rather, a monk wanted to say what Buddhism was all about, wanted to explicate a point of dogma, or wanted to make points against what he considered wrong dogma, and so wrote a sutra. This practice was not dishonest. We have to assess sutras according to their content and not according to the claim that they are the exact words of the Buddha.

Theravada claims that it uses the earliest sutras, and only those sutras; those sutras are likely closest to the real words of the Buddha; most likely to represent what he said and only what he said; and so the ones that Buddhism should be based on. Theravada has all the orthodox sutras and only the orthodox sutras. Nobody else has this. Mahayana disagrees but I leave their argument to a later chapter.

The sutras that are clearly orthodox agree that the Buddha intended to relieve suffering and he expected awakened people to die out and not return. Overall, the view is consistent between sutras and the view does support the standard orthodox position about suffering, overcoming suffering, and then quietly dying out. Differences seem less important than consistency. The consistency and the sticking-on-topic are evidence that the original message about ending suffering was important to the Buddha even if not all the words of the sutras are his words. The Buddha did intend people to deal with suffering and to deal with it in his way.

Even so, I doubt that the sutras recorded everything the Buddha said on every important topic. The fact that the early orthodox sutras focus on suffering likely means that they did not record all that the Buddha said even on other topics that are important. The focus on suffering might show a bias of monks rather than a full sample of all the Buddha said. Mahayana says this about Theravada sutras, and Mahayana claims it has sutras about other topics and other ways to look at awakening. It claims that its sutras are more authentic to the spirit of the Buddha and his whole teaching. Both Theravada and Mahayana seem

to imply about their favorite sutras something like Christians say about the writing of the New Testament, that it was guided by the Holy Spirit. I do not assess claim versus claim.

The facts that the sutras are not all the Buddha said on everything important does not mean suffering is not the central issue or the most important issue in Buddhism. Other important topics might not be most important or most central. We would not be able to say unless we did have all the words of the Buddha, and only the Buddha, on all the topics that interested him; and we do not have that. Without that, most of what we say about topics other than suffering is just guesses. I am fine with just guessing as long as we know we are guessing and guesses are more likely to reflect what we care about than what the Buddha cared about. After guessing, we have to use our minds to assess.

I do say this: The Buddha might have intended all this talk about suffering to be only the springboard to a better fuller life. We have to get past suffering to get there. We can only get there through dealing with the problem of suffering; no other road goes there. No other groundwork clears the way and lays a firm foundation as does finally dealing with suffering. Once we are past the problem of suffering, then we can live a better worthwhile life through a mix of meditation, mindfulness, morality, and insight into cause-and-effect and dependent origination. Trust the Dharma, study, work hard, be a good person, listen to monks, give up superstition and magic, and become an unselfish person. All this is to awaken and end suffering. All the good stuff follows. I think most Theravada Buddhists really believe this version rather than strict orthodox Buddhism as I describe strict orthodox Buddhism – even monks. I think the large majority of Western Buddhists believe this version. This view of what the Buddha really meant is on the borderline between Theravada and Mahayana. It is humanized Theravada. It is Mahayana without the great joyous Dharma-Emptiness-Mind system. It is similar to my version of following Jesus. I cannot say if this is what the Buddha really intended. You have to read and decide for yourself.

Suppose you say this is what the Buddha intended because it is what YOU really want rather than what you think the Buddha really intended, and you follow this new program, and you make the world better. Then I would not fight you over doctrinal purity.

I cannot decide the intent of a man from 2500 years ago, especially when his words have been swallowed by hundreds of sutras each claiming authority. I don't care about accurately determining the intent of the Buddha. Rather than argue about what the Buddha really said and really intended, it is better to figure out what is correct and good, and what you have to do, regardless of your heroes. Your heroes can help with this task.

By focusing on individual suffering, Theravada set the stage for, and practically demanded, the invention of Mahayana and then Hinduism. I let Buddhists and Hindus work out this issue.

### **Suffering and “Not Worthwhile”; Some Summarizing.**

Between suffering, deep suffering, and “not worthwhile” there is not much practical difference, and there is little hope of searching the sutras to build a case that the Buddha meant one more than the others. A Buddhist still has to follow the same meditation techniques and will see the same linkages of cause-and-effect. Still, I say a few more words about why I use “not worthwhile”. I repeat my view is not standard orthodox Buddhism even if it is close.

I think the sutras are mostly not the words of the Buddha, they are not a complete record of what he said, they are the words of monks, monks focused overly much on the problem of suffering, and monks left out what the Buddha said about other important topics. The focus on suffering is largely due to the mindset of monks and to the fact that they had to hammer fat nails into the thick hard reluctant heads of listeners. I disagree with Mahayana that Mahayana has better sutras and disagree with how Mahayana resolved the problem of suffering and a worthwhile life.

The ideas that were widespread during the time of the Buddha show a clear and strong disappointment with ordinary life, and imply the disappointment is inevitable in this diminished world of mere becoming. They promote a pessimistic attitude similar to Christian and Muslim belief in a fallen bad world. That Buddhist view is stronger than to say mere suffering is the problem. Suffering is a symptom rather than a root cause. Deep disappointment is the issue that the Buddha internalized and with which he had to deal. He dealt with it through the more obvious issue of suffering.

When people focus on suffering and will not face the issue of whether life is worthwhile, they get confused and make mistakes. I hope I have corrected some of the mistakes here but my intent was to explain in terms of "not worthwhile" rather than to correct the mistakes made by focusing on suffering.

The facts that the Buddha did not go back to a normal life after awakening, monks are not supposed to go back to a normal life after awakening, and that an awakened person disappears from the world entirely for all eternity after he-she dies (pari-nirvana), all reinforce the idea that life is not worthwhile. If the problem was mere suffering, and awakening cured suffering, there is no reason not to go back to normality in this life, and no reason not to have an infinite number of lives in the future. That too is what some Mahayana writers think.

If life really was worthwhile, we could work on curing suffering, and could eventually find a worthwhile life for ourselves, loved ones, the planet, and even people who are not determined dolts. We could seek a biological and political solution to the problem of suffering. If we had good leaders, there would be no suffering. We could give everyone drugs. We could live in the Matrix forever and not worry about outside the Matrix. Because life is not worthwhile, we can only cure suffering by ending all clinging and by seeing that life is not worthwhile. A problem as serious as the Buddha saw could not be suffering alone but had to be something on the order of "life is not worthwhile".

From Italy to India, some-people-who-accepted-that-life-seems-not-worthwhile-yet-also-wanted-to-make-life-worthwhile resolved the problem in similar ways. The West had Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, some Cynics, Gnosticism, and all their influence on Christianity. The East had Mahayana first and then Hinduism. All do away with the problem by placing it within a big system in which people think they are miserable but really everyone would be happy if he-she saw his-her place in the big system. Some holy people are happy because they do see their part. You might disappear as one distinct individual but you become part of the mystic stuff that manifests itself all over in other ways.

Look at this result the other way around. Because they are so similar, these solutions imply a common problem, a problem that they did not solve but avoided as best they could. The problem is not suffering but deeper. The common solution implies a common problem, that life is not worthwhile. My "take" does

not have to mean the Buddha faced the same problem, but I think so. My dislike of these solutions does not mean they are wrong but I think that as well. They are wrong partly because they were not as honest as the Buddha's solution. He faced a version of the problem head-on and he did not try to sugar-coat the problem or the solution.

The fact that these wrong ideologies were driven by the same problem to the same bad solutions does not mean the problem is real, that life is not worthwhile after all. I think life is worthwhile but for different reasons.

Suppose life is worthwhile but beset by suffering. Then the insights of the Buddha and his methods still have great use. Suppose life is worthwhile but not beset by suffering. Life still has a lot of suffering, even for people who seem to have it all. As long as some honest people suffer, as long as we hurt the planet, then everyone suffers whether he-she knows it or not. Again, the insights of the Buddha and his methods still have great use. You might not use his insights and methods to awaken in the Buddhist sense in this lifetime but most Buddhists don't expect that. If you use his insights and methods to be a better person and make a better world, that result is just alright with me.

(B) BUDDHIST AIDS.

Zen saying: If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him. Here "the Buddha" refers to Aids.

### **Buddhist Aids.**

This section lists Buddhism Aids. It helps to read the chapter in this book on the Self with its explanations of "picking apart" and "bolstering". Most ideas here were current at the time of the Buddha, but he came up with some on his own, and he so much shaped previous ideas that the ideas became his own. Some ideas were developed in the few hundred years after the Buddha. I starred ideas that likely came directly from the Buddha. Nearly all these aids are more important in Mahayana than Theravada but it is best to list them here. I provide a little annotation. Do not memorize.

-Big Awakening. Buddhists expect awakening to be mind-shattering, world shattering, life changing, and a total change from everything even as it preserves the appearance of normal life or even as it preserves normal life. Because awakening is such a Big Thing, Buddhists both greatly anticipate and fear it. Buddhist Awakening is somewhat like Christian Salvation. In standard Christianity, you can't have a little salvation, you can't rely on God to take care of you as much as you deserve and as much as you are able, you are either fully saved to amazing glory for all of eternity or you are damned. In both Christian and Buddhist cases, having such a huge goal is more stultifying than encouraging. With Big Awakening or Big Salvation hanging over our heads, we cannot live normal useful lives and rationally assess better and worse. Some Buddhists schools, mostly Zen, allow for: awakening in small ways, backslidings, and that partial awakenings can accumulate to bigger awakenings. But this view has not really caught on, and I don't do anything with it here.

-Morality. See above.

-Dharma. See the chapter in this book on common ideas. “Dharma” means how the universe works. Dharma is like the Western idea of natural law but includes morality as well. The Dharma was also called the “Law”. Effects such as striving, wanting, suffering, cause and effect, clinging, and dependent origination are in the idea of Dharma or Law. The fact that we can find release by letting go of striving and clinging is part of Dharma. Anybody who opposes the Law faces greater suffering and ultimate defeat. The best course is to go along with the Law, take your lumps, get through it, enjoy what you can, and let go. This is why I began the chapter with the quote from Bobby Fuller.

-Karma. Merit and demerit. Keeping a strict ledger of merit and demerit.

-Many lives.

\*Suffering.

\*Stickiness.

\*Clinging.

\*Letting Go.

\*Dependent Origination. This idea is an immediate result of cause and effect; see below. Nothing comes into being on its own and persists entirely on its own. What a thing is, it is largely because of its relations to other things. We have to pay attention to what a thing is and to its relations. The Mom in your family has her own personality but she has also been shaped by the other people in the family, and she, in turn, shapes the other people in the family. We tend to overall value our own self, our importance, and the quality of our suffering and happiness. We overestimate how independent we are and how long we last. The idea of dependent origination helps put us in context. The strongest driver of dependent origination as it pertains to human life is human desire and clinging (attachment).

\*Cause and Effect. Everything has causes. Everything influences a lot of other things. If you change the causes, you change the thing. Things only originate, persist, change, and go away, through causes and effects. Everything that originates dependently, that is, almost everything, has causes. People originate dependently and have causes; if you had a different father, you would not be who you are now. Suffering originates dependently and has causes. If you want to end suffering, change its causes; the Buddha tells you how. Whether awakening is subject to the laws of cause and effect, or is beyond cause and effect, was a controversy in Buddhism, into which I don't go. Whether awakening is the result of removing other causes, and so is not directly caused itself, I don't go. The importance of cause and effects inevitably causes issues with free will, intuition, and determinism, into which I don't go. These questions raged in Buddhism as they have in the West and in Hinduism. .

\*Rationality and Logic. They are excellent tools, usually good. Use them.

\*Not Self. The term for the doctrine of “not-self” is “anatman” or “an-atman” or “not (‘an’)” “self (‘atman’)”. The self is not one whole simple thing, not the logic machine that Mr. Spock seeks to emulate, not the enduring soul of Christians, Muslims, some Hindus, and some Mahayanists, and not the self of grand

emotions and appetites of Romanticism. The self is a composite of somewhat independent tendencies such as for sex, power, love, food, beauty, etc. The abilities for logic and rationality are one part of the self. Buddhists are proud of their idea of not self; Buddhists have been credited with thinking up the idea; Buddhists and non-Buddhists often consider it the one distinct contribution of Buddhism to world religious ideas, and they might be correct. Buddhists assert we cannot properly disvalue or value life if we do not clearly see that the self is really a not-self; we cannot stop desiring, stop clinging, and overcome suffering if we do not clearly see the self is really a not-self. Thus awakening and seeing the not-self amount to the same. This claim about the power of seeing the not-self might be a slight exaggeration. See the chapter on the self and see below in the parts on my assessment.

-The Unselfish Self.

\*The Mind. The mind is a part of the self, and it is composite too. Buddha Mind as The Mind.

-Wisdom.

\*Emptiness or "The Void". Think of all the dog-like creatures: wolves, red wolves, coyotes, twenty kinds of foxes, dholes, jackals, and hundreds of breeds of dogs. What makes them all dog-like? There is nothing exact and concrete at the heart of the idea of "dogginess". There is no one single ideal dog after which all the other dog-like things are patterned; and we cannot think of all particular dog-like things as clear-cut variations on one single pattern. The idea of "dogginess" is empty at the center. Yet the fact that the idea of "dog-like" is empty at the center is what allows us to hold together various related-but-not-exactly-the-same things. Emptiness is what allows the self and the mind to cohere and to work. All specific forms (things) come out of emptiness; all forms are empty at their heart. But that is what allows them to work.

-Cleaning the mind of "defilements", confusion, and errors. The mind becomes a simple mechanism to assess what the senses bring to it.

-In some versions, the mind becomes "like a baby"; it simply reflects; it responds naturally and rapidly. These versions became important in martial arts.

-All reality is somewhat illusory. All reality is a mixture of being and becoming. All reality is a mixture of form and emptiness. All forms (things) are both real and not real; emptiness is both real and not real.

-Everything is connected to everything else. Whether connected things form a system is contended.

\*Meditation techniques that focus on the above Buddhist aids.

\*Emphasize practice rather than dogma. Emphasize practice rather than Buddhist aids.

\*Expedient Means. Use ideas and examples that suit the student and the situation. Do not try to force ideas on people who are not yet ready for them or who cannot understand them at all. A useful half-truth is better than a hurtful three-quarters truth.

\*All dogmas are misleading. All dogmas are, at best, only means to ends.

-The Dharma body of the Buddha.

-Buddha nature.

-No nature (no essence).

-Buddhist psychologies.

-Mind only.

-Non-differentiation, in particular non-duality. See chapter on Taoism. To understand and to appreciate, we divide the world into mutually-exclusive contrasts such as “American” versus “non-American”, “boy” or “girl”, and “animal” or “plant”. Usually it is easiest to divide into two although we can divide into three or more; I do not explain the more complicated kinds of dividing up. After we divide, then we cling to one item in the contrast. We like “Westerns” rather than “chick flicks”. To divide up the world so as to get along for a while is not necessarily bad; but it easily leads to clinging, and clinging is so bad, that we need to beware of dividing. Minimize it or stop it if we can. So we can appreciate beauty, we need to contrast beauty with ugliness. To appreciate goodness, we need to contrast it with badness. We make things artificially ugly or bad so we can accentuate the beauty and goodness in other things, and, in so doing, distort the world. “Nature people” hate the city so they can love nature all the more; and vice versa. When pushed, things tend to become other than they originally were, and can become their opposites. Too much love smothers. Much good can reside in ugliness. Beauty can hide evil. Effusive care hides bitter anger. Anger at others arises out of our own fear. Pursuit of heaven is a kind of hell. Fear of hell leads to zealotry and to hell. It is better not to stress one item, and, to avoid stressing one item, it is better not to differentiate very much to begin with. Non-differentiation came to be one of the deepest Buddhist aids, a touchstone for true and false doctrine.

Ironically, stressing non-differentiation is a form of differentiation.

-The unity of particular and general without subsuming either the particular or general. You cannot use particular to explain away (pick apart) general, and vice versa. You cannot use general to reify (bolster) itself, or use particular to reify itself.

You should think hard about compatibility of the idea of non-differentiation with the command for morality. This apparent conflict played a big role in later Mahayana Buddhism and Zen.

-The “storehouse consciousness” from which originated everything and to which everything returns. It is both empty and completely full at once.

-Vast compassion. Compassion is good, and is not clinging, when it leads to specific acts within the ability of particular people, and to specific good institutions. Compassion is an error when it does not lead to specific acts and to institutions but only to intentions that are not acted upon and to confusion about the depth on a person’s real compassion.

-Nirvana or Enlightenment. It might seem odd to list Nirvana as a mere Buddhist aid when it seems to be the entire goal, but it is not odd. The idea of Nirvana can become a stepping stone, and so a crutch and hindrance. You do not use the idea of Nirvana to get to Nirvana. You just wake up.

-Mindfulness.

-Full simple being versus continual becoming. This aid is similar to “reality versus illusion”. It is similar to the distinction in Classical Greek thinking between being and becoming. The world of normal experience changes and is not reliable. It is hard to find something permanent and permanently fully good. Still, at the heart of all is simple full being that does not change and is fully satisfying. The changing incomplete imperfect world is only a misleading imitation of simple full being. We don’t usually experience simple full being unless we are a mystic or until we are enlightened. The difference between being and becoming is like the difference between our ideal of justice and the justice that we have to settle for in real courts; see any episode of the TV show “Law and Order”.

Until we see simple full being, becoming seems not worthwhile. After we see simple full being, whether becoming then is worthwhile varies according to personal experience and schools of Buddhism.

Some Buddhists conflate “becoming” with ordinary sleeping (un-enlightened) life and conflate full simple being with enlightenment. To see that life is not worthwhile is to see that life is becoming and becoming is not usually worthwhile; and to see that becoming is not usually worthwhile is to see that becoming is sleeping life and sleeping life is not worthwhile. To see these together naturally leads us to think there must be simple full being and to seek it. To see that life is not worthwhile leads us toward simple full being. Some Buddhists think un-enlightenment, staying asleep, is to live in becoming without seeing a clear glimpse of full simple being, and vice versa. Some Buddhists think enlightenment is seeing clearly full simple being, and vice versa. Being can be the same as “Buddha Mind” or “Mind Alone”. Somewhat ironically, simple full being can be the same as Nothingness (Void).

Buddhists who think in terms of being and becoming have to decide if full simple being is worthwhile, and have to decide if knowing full simple being makes becoming (ordinary un-awakened life) worthwhile.

In one version of this view, full simple being is worthwhile. Only becoming is not worthwhile, or more precisely, only mistakes about being and becoming make becoming (seem) not worthwhile.

For the Buddhists who think being (existence) is worthwhile, the idea that being is worthwhile mixes easily with the idea that a system is worthwhile even if some lives in it are not. This mix of “simple full being is worthwhile”, “enlightenment is seeing simple full being”, and “great dharma system” became important in Mahayana and Hinduism.

For some Buddhists who think being is worthwhile and being is in (is the same as) a worthwhile system, ordinary sleeping life is worthwhile even if we can’t usually see so. Ordinary sleeping life only seems not worthwhile until we see full simple being and the system.

In some versions of “being is worthwhile and is the same as a system”, there is no difference between being and becoming, enlightened and non-enlightened, the world after enlightenment and the world before enlightenment; it all depends on attitude and point of view; to see one is to see the other; and we can only see the one through the other. This idea combines readily with the value that Buddhism puts on daily life; see below. The idea that being and becoming are similar was the source for some wonderful ideas about reality and illusions, for which see Mahayana.

As with some philosophers and mystics in the West, Buddhists who take seriously being and becoming, in any version, spend their lives seeking simple full being in itself or as it presents itself in becoming. If they can see simple full being, they are enlightened; they can be enlightened only if they see simple full being. In effect, the search for simple full being (Mind) takes the place of the search for awakening.

The idea that being and becoming are closely related was the basis for some great literature and art. The Japanese call the world of becoming “the liquid world” because it continually changes, moves, and adapts like flowing water. The phrase “liquid world” also was a euphemism for areas in cities of brothels, drugs, drinking, gambling, and fighting. The Japanese attitude shows the ideas that crop up naturally in systems like Romanticism, Mahayana, and Hinduism. The famous Japanese woodcuts of the late 1700s and early 1800s often showed the liquid world, as with Utamaro, Hiroshige, and Hokusai. Looking at the pictures, it is easy to believe that the world of deep being and the world of becoming are indeed the same.

Even with its charm, the Buddhist aid of being and becoming is one of the most misleading and harmful. It can be useful but must be used with care. Once we begin thinking in terms of being and becoming, we find being and becoming in Buddhism whether they were there originally or not, see waking and sleeping in terms of them, and see worthwhile and not worthwhile in terms of them.

### **Mistakes Latent in Buddhist Aids.**

(1) People use Buddhist aids to avoid the Buddhist plain truth that life is not worthwhile. People don't like this idea. They seek any way they can to get around it and to make life secretly worthwhile. What better way than to use important ideas from within the religion itself to undermine the religion? In case you think this is a fault of Buddhism alone, Christians use ideas like heaven, hell, salvation, justification, and grace to get around Jesus' simple teachings and to undermine Jesus.

(2) Buddhist aids are dogma. They have the same problem as any dogma: they mislead too often. They can be helpful and can be hurtful. All in all, for most people, I think they are hurtful. People get caught up in the supposed aid and they never get back to simple waking up. The supposed aid takes the place of simple waking up. People cling to the aid, and thus suffer. If you have to focus on anything then focus on suffering and on whether life is worthwhile; don't focus on an aid. Many Buddhist texts, written by brilliant people, are marred because they go on about “emptiness” and “no self”; even Zen masters do this. The Buddha explicitly did not do this.

(3) In particular: People think: (A) “If only I could understand ‘emptiness’ fully, then I would wake up”. (B) “I cannot possibly wake up until I have mastered ‘emptiness’”. (A and B) “If I could only be morally perfect for a whole lifetime, I could wake up. I can only wake up if I am morally perfect for a whole lifetime”. (C) “If only I could master meditation, I would wake up”. These ways are wrong. The idea that you have to

master an aid to wake up is like the Christian idea that you have to be justified to go to heaven. The idea that you will wake up if you totally know a Buddhist aid is like the idea that God must take you into heaven – you can compel God – if you worship strongly enough. To abuse an aid puts the aid in place of waking up and clings to the aid. The Buddha did not awaken by mastering the idea of emptiness first; after the Buddha awakened, he did not worry much about the ideas of awakening, no-self, emptiness, Mind, etc. If you master non-differentiation, you do not automatically wake up; if you do not master it, you are not held back from waking up; if you wake up, you do not necessarily also master non-differentiation.

You don't have to be perfect to face God. Likewise, you don't have to be perfect to wake up. Just as I offer no ideas about how good you have to be to face God comfortably, so I offer no ideas on what you have to "achieve" to wake up for sure. Both ways of thinking are wrong. As with following Jesus, in Buddhism, do what you would do anyway and then see how far that takes you. You can wake up without being perfect and without even knowing about "emptiness", "cause-and-effect" or "no self". This "general access to waking up" is a part of the Middle Path. This approach of "perfection not needed" reappears in good Zen too.

(4) Buddhist aids are hard to understand. They are harder to understand than the ideas of this chapter, and they are harder to understand than the simple idea that life is not worthwhile. Only a few religious near-geniuses can understand even some of these ideas and only a true genius can get them all. This situation is not what the Buddha wanted. The Buddha did not wake up by first mastering hard overly-intellectualized ideas. Buddhism should use a clear simple set of ideas and practices that most people can follow with reasonable chance of reasonable success. The Buddhist aids usually make it worse for most people and make people feel they cannot succeed.

(5) Buddhist aides inevitably reintroduce metaphysics and mysticism beyond what the Buddha needed. It is one thing to say "life is sticky" and another to say "life is sticky because Dharma planned it that way and wants us to get involved and committed" or to say "life is sticky because that helps us do our Dharma duty in the great joyous system". It is one thing to say "life is not worthwhile" and another to say "life's a delusory bitch". In Mahayana, thinkers often assumed people were part of a system, and the system was unborn and undying. We are saved (awakened) when we realize we are part of this great unborn undying system. The Buddha never said this, and never needed to say it.

(6) People need a certain amount of magic and magicians, such as the Mahayana bodhisattva, Hindu avatar, or Christian view of Jesus as embodied cosmic principles. Buddhist aids are the Buddhist version of magic. You can try to master the aids as an adept Hindu masters spiritual force or an adept Christian masters sacraments and masters having a personal relation with Jesus. In Buddhism, magic puts you to sleep. Magic is the enemy of waking up. So, focusing on aids prevents you from waking up by letting you make a world of magic. I don't know of a formula that lets us satisfy our need for magic without also turning magic into our enemy and without turning Buddhist aids into magic. You have to learn to do this by feel, and likely success in this endeavor is a good illustration of the Middle Path.

(7) Buddhist aids often are clinging. As much as some people cling to Heaven, some Buddhists cling to meditation or ideas of Mind, cause and effect, and dependent origination. Just as you have to be willing to let go of the idea of Heaven, so also you have to let go of meditating, Mind, etc. This does not mean you can't meditate at all; it means you have to learn how to meditate without clinging to it. You have to

think about Mind without clinging to the idea of Mind. If you can't do that, then you are just as caught as if you clung to Power as a way to make life worthwhile. You are better off not meditating and not using your mind to think about Mind.

(8) People use Buddhist aids to make their own religion that is not Buddhism, such as religions of Great Emptiness, Great Mind, Mindfulness, Unselfish Persons, or Mahayana, as a way to avoid the idea that life is not worthwhile and as a way indirectly to make life worthwhile. Some variations are good such as the modern religion of mindfulness or the contributions of some Buddhism to martial arts. Some are not good such self-indulgence as a way to break past clinging. Most variations are intellectual elaborations to keep smart people engaged. Alternative religions are such a big part of the story that they should be studied in themselves, and often writers on Buddhism make them the major subject rather the plain Buddhism that I present here. That is what you get when you read about Buddhism. But writing about them and critiquing them is outside the scope of this chapter.

(9) These points are a variation on (1) and (8). Most writing about Buddhism is not simple description of its main ideas but elaborate explication of Buddhist Aids. I find that writing hard to read and not helpful unless I am in the mood for hair-splitting metaphysics. Most writers use explication of Buddhist Aids as a way to make points about their view, and to fight against other writers who previously did the same thing. They do this even when they do not say they do this. Too often, they struggle to put enough spin on an Aid so they can make life seem worthwhile although the Buddha clearly said life is beset by suffering. They make suffering mean what they want it to mean so they can overcome suffering and still get along in this world. I think they do this so they can appeal to people who want to succeed in this world but happen to be reading their version of Buddhism. Hopefully, when I did this, at least I was honest that I was doing this. Buddhist Aids get in the way of clear explanation.

(9 continued) If you want to know what the Buddha really said but instead find yourself reading whether dependent origination applies to all things and perceptions or only to those begun in attachment, then you should switch your reading for a while. Don't feel guilty about not reading that stuff anymore. You can always go back to it after you personally think you sense what the Buddha really meant. Don't feel you have to agree with the view of a writer because you happen to be reading his-her explication of cause-and-effect. I wish I could suggest readings that explain what the Buddha really meant without mumbo jumbo but I can't. So you do have to wade through some material on Buddhist Aids so that you can make up your own mind.

The Buddha did not expect most people to awaken in this lifetime, so it is harsh criticism of Buddhist Aids to say most people can't use them to awaken right away. Even so, Buddhist Aids are too hard and too misleading. Besides, in my view, a religion should offer ideas that most people can use in this lifetime to achieve fair success; so, Buddhist Aids are not useful overall. They are like Christian theology and much of Christian dogma.

### **Value of Buddhist Aids.**

The aids can be fun, and even can be useful for some people. Really smart people need ideas that they can chew on. Most people need ideas to keep the mind busy so the mind eventually gets quiet enough to think well. The ideas don't have to be false and don't have to be merely "doggy treats" with no nutrition.

The ideas can be real ideas with real substance. I like the idea of the Middle Path; almost all Buddhists like it; and it shows up in other good thinking as, for example, in Aristotle. Aids often help people practice the Middle Path. Both simple being and simple non-being are mistakes, and, if you can find the middle path between them, you have advanced. Both simple differentiation and simple non-differentiation are false, and, if you can find the middle path between them, you have advanced. It can help you sort things out to think about the relation of empty to partially full to fully full. Think of: an electric dishwasher; books on the shelves of a library; and the numbers not used in street addresses. How does Buddha Mind differ from the mind that I think is behind it all, that is, God? Difficult ideas can be true aids to advancement even if they cannot guarantee success. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim theologies can help. (Jews do have some excellent theology but they don't seem to get hung up on it enough to include here.) But the ideas are not needed to awaken, and Buddhist aids should not serve as baited hooks. Even for smart people, they become that too often.

(C) SELF AND NON-SELF (AN-ATMAN).

### **More on the Self and the Non-Self.**

I doubt Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha stressed ideas of the non-self as much as they are stressed in modern Buddhism but here is not the place to sort out the issue, so I write as if modern Buddhist ideas of the non-self are intrinsic to Buddhism.

(A) Ideal strong self: A common idea of the self is a single whole integrated soul that endures forever either in heaven or hell, or as part of a great Dharma system. Christians, Muslims, some Jews, and a lot of people of no particular religion hold to the first version while most Mahayanists and Hindus hold to the second version.

(B) Nil self or "really weak" self: The opposite idea is that the self is merely a bunch of stuff with some similarity but no real coherence like a pile of old leaves in autumn. When the wind blows, when hardship arises or we die, the self goes away like old leaves.

(C) A variation on (B) is that the self is merely good and bad feelings, especially good feelings. As long as the good feelings endure, the self endures. When the good feelings stop, then the self stops. When the good feelings stop and the self stops, it does not matter because there is no self around to feel the loss. So, while they yet live, selves might as well cultivate what joys they can and they need not worry about much else. This view of the self can be seen as intermediate between the strong self and nil self but here really should be seen as a variation of the nil self.

(D) In the Brahmin religion at the time of the Buddha, people were interested in a version of salvation just as Christians and Muslims now are interested in salvation. They held to a version of the strong self just as most people always do. To get saved, people had to depend on the Brahmins. People didn't like that. The Buddha said people didn't need Brahmins or ritual. People can know issues, make progress, even awaken, or get saved, by themselves. Ultimately, you are the only way to make spiritual progress for yourself. You are the only rock upon which your progress is built. To talk like this is to strengthen the idea of the self. It is an idea of the self like the Western idea of the person. People liked the integrity of self, independence, self-reliance, and responsibility that the Buddha taught. That was one big reason

Buddhism succeeded. Self-reliance and responsibility are big factors in Buddhist charm when Buddhists really live them.

(E) It seems that, for people to have desires and for at least some of the desires to be legitimate, we also have to be firm selves. If we want to love a spouse, love children, love our neighbors, and love God, it seems to make sense if we have a strong soul-self. It makes more sense if the self is eternal. I don't go into why it makes more sense. We want to tie good desires to a strong self, and vice versa? What about bad desires such as to molest children or commit terrorism? We want to attach good desires to a good eternal soul-self and to separate bad desires from any kind of eternal soul-self, or, at least, to make sure the bad soul-selves are not lumped in with the good soul-selves.

(F) The Buddha wanted people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition so they could also overcome suffering. This desire of the Buddha implies a self that is not an eternal soul, is less than an eternal soul.

(G) To wish to awaken (cool down) and to work to awaken, something needs to wish and strive. Some self has to be the source of wishing and working. To let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competing, and to overcome suffering, it seems some self has to be doing this. Something has to let go of all that. Something has to awaken or there is no awakening, and Buddhism is an illusion.

(H) To see that life is not worthwhile requires a self to see and to assess worthwhile and not worthwhile. After (when) the self sees that life is not worthwhile, still the self needs to value other selves, morality, and acting well. Morality does not go away with awakening. To retain morality, the self has to remain at least somewhat a self.

(I) An eternal soul-self with intrinsic necessary desires cannot simply vanish at death after that kind of self has awakened. That kind of self might awaken but not in a Buddhist way. That self might transform after death but cannot simply go away completely. To go away completely after awakening and death, the self cannot be a soul-self of the Upanishad-Hindu-Dharma kind.

Philosophy, religion, and the human imagination provide a host of variations on these themes but there is no point listing them here.

The Buddha wanted a self that was strong enough to seek to awaken and to work on awakening but not so strong that desire, clinging, striving, and competing were intrinsic, necessary, and eternal. The Buddha wanted a self that could lose desire, clinging, striving, competing and a lot of individuating traits such as a love for music. The Buddha wanted a self that could separate good inclinations from bad inclinations but not get hung up on holding to either. The Buddha wanted a self that could last through thousands of reincarnations as long as it still clung but would go away completely after it had awakened. The Buddha needed something more than a pile of leaves and less than an eternal soul-self of the kind used by Christians, Muslims, Mahayanists, and Hindus.

The Buddha thought that he could get people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition if he could get people to see there was no eternal soul-self, thus no basis for desire etc., and no long-term benefit from desire etc. It is like getting people to let go of the need to gamble if you can get them to see

that all they are playing for is plastic chips and that the kind of self they are can't eat plastic chips, trade them for anything useful, or get any benefit from them. The kind of self that you are does not support the sport of gambling so you might as well not gamble.

The Buddha developed that idea of the self in his doctrine of "anatman" (an-atman). The Buddha found a compromise self that is coherent enough but not too much. The doctrine that developed is pretty good. It is fairly logically consistent and it meets the needs of Buddhism without going too far either way. Whether it is entirely true or not true cannot be argued here. It is worth reading more to see what you can make of it. I suggest further readings on this topic at the back of this book.

It is more accurate to say that later Buddhists developed the idea, based on original inspiration from the Buddha. It is more accurate to say Buddhists did not so much find a specific kind of self as they made a space to imagine the right self. They did this by negating their opponents on both the side of the firm self and the side of the soft self. What is left unspecified in the center is the useful Buddhist "anatman". Many theologians and philosophers use the technique of creating an appealing unspecified space by negating opponents. This technique is related to a "hole in the center" that I described with "systems that eat the world" in the chapters on issues. Letting people imagine what they want, within limits, is a way to appeal to people but it also, again, opens the door to bad ideas and abuses.

The term "anatman", "an-atman", "no-self", or "not-self" is not accurate. It implies a weak self like the pile of leaves, and that is not what the Buddha and Buddhists were after. Buddhists used that term in contrast to the then-current Upanishad and later Hindu "atman", an eternal soul-like self that is part of the great Dharma system. The Buddha did not want that Upanishad-Hindu kind of self so Buddhists used a term that contrasts clearly with "atman". I think the choice of term is unfortunate.

To argue various versions of the self, Theravada Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, people who followed the Upanishads, Jains, and later Hindus all used picking apart and bolstering, both to support the selves that they promoted and to attack ideas of others. Without always seeing what they are doing, Christians and Muslims also use picking apart and bolstering to argue their ideas of an eternal soul-self. I cannot here show how various techniques were used in particular cases. That topic is difficult and often boring but fun to people who like logic and it can shed light on human psychology.

When the idea of the non-self spread in Buddhism, the idea turned into a Buddhist Aid as noted above. It became a strong idea in itself, like another strong self again. It became one of the most dangerous and abused of Aids, especially when combined with Emptiness. That Buddhists use the technique of negation on both ends, leaving an unspecified hole in the center, supports this confusion and abuse. This fault of bolstering the non-self is serious, and it deserves much more criticism than I can give. I think the Buddha would be dismayed by this development, and Buddhists should be wary of this path.

In any simple straightforward terms, you cannot have it both ways. One the one hand, Buddhists say that your self is adequate to all tasks and it is the only thing that is adequate to all tasks. It endures through karma and rebirth. It creates karma and endures the results of karma. It is you who realize that life is not worthwhile and see the other truths. It is you who practices meditation. It is you who sees all things and any thing. It is you who resists temptations of the world and of other religions. It is you who acts morally. It is you who feels pain and pleasure, gets old, and gets sick.

On the other hand, Buddhists say your self is not deeply real, to trust in the self is a delusion, and you need to get over yourself to make progress. When you see that the world is not worthwhile you have not seen anything amazing. Seeing that does not make your self cosmic and glorious. When you do see the truths of Buddhism, nothing special happens except you die out completely after this life. Good karma cannot build up to a determined threshold and so force you to awaken, it can only predispose. So there is no real thing that karma hangs on. Yes, you do good deeds, but so do cats and dogs, and they are not real in the way that you hope your self is real. Getting born again is not a blessing, it is a curse. You don't feel pain and pleasure; pain and pleasure, getting old, and getting sick, happen to the bundle that you think is yourself. So don't get big-headed about yourself.

Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism developed amazing rationales to have it both ways, which I don't go into here. I don't think they succeeded anymore than Christians worked out the Trinity, Salvation by Crucifixion, Justification, Grace, Faith, Works, or Free Will either. This confusion about the self added to the bad effects of the self as a Buddhist aid. If you are interested in this sort of thing, reading arguments about the self and non-self can provide insight into people, especially if you read with evolution in mind.

Trying to keep together ideas of a not-eternal soul-self, strong enough self, too weak self, and non-self confuses relations between self and society. The Buddhist idea of the non-self allows ideas like Hindu religion to coalesce and it allows society to dominate the self. Their idea of the self allows Buddhists to be selfish sometimes, and to flout society. How the balance works out depends on particular culture and society. Buddhists are opportunistic about which idea they stress.

I invite evolutionists to think about the idea of the self while keeping in mind this tension between ideas of the self and the relation between self and society. Evolutionists already do this in theories of the self and group, and theories of self and economy. Economics has a long tradition of this argument. Think of the evolutionary idea of the self as a kind of bundle when you read about Buddhist ideas of the self.

It might help to think of the Buddhist idea of the self in light of some literature. A Buddhist has to break down the incorrect strong view of the self. The self has to be broken down. Then the self can be rebuilt in a better way. This new self is not as strong in the same way as the wrong idealized unreal self but it is strong enough for what it needs, and, in some ways, because it is not a wrong strong self, it is stronger correct self than before. We all need our forty days in the wilderness. This is what happens in tragedies, stories about coming of age, stories about personal growth, and in some modern melodrama. In "King Lear", Lear falls to pieces before he finds a better self and better world. In "Moby Dick", while Captain Ahab dies before he can find a better self, his breakdown is a lesson to the crew, the crew break down too in their own ways, and so they find better selves. Odysseus in "The Odyssey" had to break down before he could give the gods their proper but limited due, come to see himself in true perspective, and come to accurately value his limited contributions rather than overvalue his cleverness. In the TV show "Burn Notice", Mike Westen breaks down partly several times, and in the end breaks down totally, before he can see what is really important and who is really important. In several Batman films, Bruce Wayne and-or the Batman has to break down before he can remake himself. The remade Batman is stronger in character than the original Batman even if weaker physically or even if he has his weaknesses exposed. The remade Batman can never be as strong as the idealized Superman but he can be strong enough.

To the extent that I understand the Buddhist literature, originally the Buddhist self was not enough on which to base Western ideas of law, responsibility, citizen, and state. Thinkers in Buddhist states have to give some thought on how to make the self strong enough to be a good citizen of a good democracy but not so strong as to violate the needs of Buddhism.

It is easy to argue that Asian states in which Buddhism or Hinduism prevail did not develop democracy, rule of law, education, science, and important Western-style institutions because the Buddhist-Hindu idea of the self could not serve as the basis for those institutions and, in fact, undermined those institutions. If a scholar wishes to argue this way then maybe I will read what he-she says. In the meantime, I suggest not thinking too hard along these lines. While religion can be important in guiding what people possibly can think or cannot think, in this case religion is not the deciding factor. Rather, culture is the deciding factor. Asian cultures did not have the needed personalities, ideas, attitudes, and institutions to develop Western-like institutions needed for successful democracy. Asian cultures promoted the picked-apart self of Buddhism and Hinduism after it had been picked apart because a vague idea of that picked-apart self sort-of went along with ideas that Asians already had from culture. The picked-apart self of Buddhism did not make the self of Asian cultures. It is more accurate to say that Asian cultures adopted the picked-apart self of Buddhism because it work for them. While some Asians understood the picked-apart self of Buddhism, the vast majority neither understood nor wanted to. That arcane topic was something priests thought about. The self for most Asians was more like the self of other cultures and more like the self of Hinduism in which the self participates in the Dharma system for a long time. Evidence for my view is that Asian cultures have changed, and now are developing the needed ideas of self, state, and education to support democracy even though their official religion(s) and official religious view of the self has not changed.

The selves of Mahayana and Hinduism are not as solid as the eternal soul-self of Christianity and Islam but stronger than the self of Buddhism. They are stronger because they tie the self to the great Dharma system. Life is worthwhile, and each particular life is worthwhile, in the context of the Dharma system, and only in that system. Each self is a “spark” of the system and participates in the system. Especially selves participate when they do their social-karmic duty in Hinduism. The system is worthwhile so each participant is worthwhile. If you do not participate in the system, then you cannot be worthwhile or feel worthwhile. This non-participation might be part of the problem with old-style Theravada Buddhism, and why Mahayana calls it “Lesser Vehicle”. Mahayana and Hinduism try to use the right kinds, and right amounts, of picking apart and bolstering to support this kind of self and this kind of system. I do not find their arguments at all convincing, not the picking apart, bolstering, nor context of the Dharma system.

### **My Idea of the Self and the Buddhist Idea of the Self.**

My idea of the self has these bases: (1) God assesses us when we die. We need not be eternal. God made us and God can do with us as he wishes including ending us forever. Most people end after this life. I think, over the long run, everybody ends permanently. It might be bad for a human to live forever. (2) The self of evolutionary theory is a mix of distinct mechanisms and several levels of integration. The self of evolutionary theory is together enough to think of it as a self but not as together as the soul-self of Christian, Muslim, Mahayana, and Hindu lore. (3) We need a self that is strong enough to serve as the basis for legal, social, moral, and personal responsibility, and to be a foundation of democracy. I am quite sure the self of idea (1) and idea (2) meets these needs.

In my idea of the self, we can learn to let go of a lot of desire, striving, clinging, and competition but not all of it. We can learn to let go of the idea that life is worthwhile but only after much effort; and, besides, we need not learn to let go of the idea if, in fact, life is worthwhile. We can learn to be better but we cannot learn to be perfect either morally or in our ability to think. We can learn to think more adeptly but we cannot learn to think perfectly without any mental “defilements”. We can do well enough.

This brief description should get across both similarities and differences. Going into more detail here is not possible because I would have to refer to particular passages in particular texts.

### **The Unselfish Intermediate Self.**

I first met the idea of the Buddhist unselfish self in the commentary by Santikaro Bhikku (Monk Santikaro) on the writing of his teacher Buddhadasa Bhikku (Thai: Phutathaat), who was a wonderful Buddhist and teacher. Selfishness is the source of confusion about the world, how it works, seeking, clinging, badness, and suffering. I mention the unselfish self because it might figure in future “theology” relating Buddhism to modern science, other religions, democracy, and conservation. The idea is worth watching. I do not know if Santikaro further developed the idea beyond what I have read of him so far, and if others picked up the thread properly. This idea of the unselfish self as the proper self has roots in other ideas of the proper self but I did not research the topic and do not comment further here.

The bolstered self is the selfish self. The selfish self bolsters the idea of its own selfness so that it can be selfish. Only a self that thought too much of him-herself can be selfish for long. If we can learn not to be selfish, then we can learn we are not as grandiose a self as we had thought. Then we can learn how the world works, stop seeking and clinging as much, be mindful of others, and stop hurting others. If we learnt that our selves are not the solid unified strong bolstered selves that we thought, then we are likely to be much less selfish. Santikaro figuratively likens the selfish self to Satan. The original sin of Satan was selfish pride, so the similarity is not far off.

My comments: An unselfish self is still a self but not as much as Mahayana, Hindu, Christian, or Muslim selves. The unselfish self is neither too picked apart nor too bolstered. As such, it is an intermediate self. An intermediate self is a companion to the Middle Way. It is the self version of the Middle Way.

I don't know what kind of behavior would be expected of an unselfish self other than that it would not be greedy, sexually perverted, lust for power, etc. I presume an unselfish self would be honest and would be interested in genuinely helping people. I don't know if an unselfish self would follow the Golden Rule and “applies equally” but it is not hard to make that alignment. I don't know if an unselfish self would work hard to make the world better.

I don't know how the unselfish self lines up with the evolved self. Non-biologists have the wrong idea that the evolved self must be selfish, perhaps bolstered by the title of the book “The Selfish Gene” by Richard Dawkins (a book that does not assert there are genes for selfishness and does not assert that the selfish person is the naturally evolved person or the modal person - read it). Even in natural selection and the competition that is part of natural selection, people can be too selfish and so can thwart their own long term self-interest. An adept competitor in the arena of natural selection takes account of other people

and gets along with them as much as possible. Ask gangsters and police in major cities. So the evolved self is somewhat unselfish and he-she is in the middle between selfish and altruistic. Still, the evolved self is self-interested in a way firmer than what I think Santikaro had in mind. Any reproducing self that was not firmly self-interested would leave fewer genes. Likely there is a gap between a naturally evolved self and the unselfish intermediate self of Santikaro. Still, the comparison is fun.

It is also not clear how the unselfish self could serve as the basis for a real society. This is a problem not only with Santikaro's idea but for any religion, moral secularists, and moral atheists. An unselfish self could serve as the basis for society only if nearly all people were unselfish, and that will not happen. (If it could happen, this discussion would not be needed.) I do not mean we need people to turn into nearly perfect selves or angels but merely unselfish selves. Anybody wishing to promote the middle unselfish self as the basis of society has to relate the unselfish self to the naturally evolved self and has to tell us how to get to the unselfish self from the naturally evolved self. I leave that topic alone here.

### **Logical Twist on Using the Weakened Self to Let Go.**

The Buddha argued a weaker version of the self so as to get people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition, and thus end suffering. I understand this logic. This logic might work with the idealized beings of religious imagination but likely it would not work with real evolved beings and it might not work with idealized beings either. The movie "Amadeus" is factually flawed but it does make the point that one ideal (real artistic beauty) need not go with another (high-minded or graceful) even when we think they should go together. There is no reason why, once a self does not feel like an ideal eternal soul-self, that he-she should stop desire, clinging, and striving, or feel less suffering.

In a naturally evolved self, there is no reason why a shift from feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self to not-feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self should end desire, clinging, striving, and suffering; and there are good reasons why natural selection would make sure it did not.

Even in ideal selves of religious discourse, if a person stops feeling like an ideal eternal soul-self, there is no necessary reason that he-she should also stop feeling desire or should stop clinging to desire. Not-feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self does not necessarily end any original feeling, end clinging to the feeling, or end clinging to the object of the feeling.

Confusion over this topic is like the confusion that people had over the idea of cause-and-effect before David Hume pointed out that one does not magically follow from the other.

Just because I am not an ideal eternal soul-self does not mean that my desires etc, and the satisfaction that I get from them, are any less real and satisfying, and does not mean I should give them up. One does not follow from the other. My desires etc. go on, and might have value, even if they are not part of an ideal eternal soul-self and even if they are part of a weaker soul-self. I personally do not feel like a necessarily eternal soul-self (I let God decide) yet I have not given up desire, clinging, and striving, and I have not reduced my suffering greatly as a result (it helps but does not change the world). I assume animals are less ideally integrated than people and do not feel like ideal eternal soul-selves but it makes no sense to talk a panda out of eating bamboo or a lion out of killing a gazelle. When I taste strawberries, I taste strawberries, whether I am an eternal soul-self of Christians, transient modest self of Buddhists, or

a talking ape. Tasting strawberries might be a good thing or it might be a bad thing. Whether it is good or bad does not depend on how integrated I am. I might not need the Buddhist idea of the self to make it a good thing as, for example, by learning to let go of clinging to the taste of strawberries and simply enjoy the taste of strawberries now. I might let go of clinging to the taste of strawberries as a result of seeing myself in Buddhist terms or as a result of seeing myself in other terms.

When people first hear the Buddhist argument, they can temporarily feel reduced desire, clinging, striving, and suffering. I think that is a natural reaction but here I don't go into why. Still, as evolved natural beings, for most of us, the reduction does not endure because nature made sure it would not. Buddhists need to work out how their argument applies not to idealized selves but to real evolved selves (the idea that not feeling like an ideal eternal soul-self reduces desire, striving, clinging, and suffering). Likely the Buddhist argument it does not apply to real evolved selves enough to serve as the basis for overcoming suffering in the Buddhist manner.

The Buddhist vision of the self is better than the Christian-Muslim or Mahayana-Hindu visions. Studying the Buddhist vision is worthwhile. But that does not mean you have to believe all of it, and does not mean you have to believe it so as to learn to think better and to better manage your suffering. You can use the Buddhist idea of the self to learn to think better and manage suffering better without adopting it entirely. You can learn to think better and to manage suffering better even without the Buddhist idea of the self. You can adopt the Buddhist idea of the self and still have trouble with desire, clinging, etc. You can use whatever parts of the Buddhist idea that you need for your own idea of a self.

To weaken bad desires, or abuse of good desires, Christians do not weaken the eternal soul-self (though they do blather on about dependence on God). Instead, they use moral arguments and arguments about heaven and hell. In the long run, I doubt moral arguments work better than Buddhist weakening of the self unless moral arguments are well supported by reference to ecology, society, etc.

(A case can be made for the Buddhist idea that "seeing we are not ideal eternal soul-self" automatically does reduce our desire and clinging, but only with a companion Buddhist idea of cause and effect. Like Thomist-based Christian theology, Buddhist theology does all fit together into one whole. This debate is much too technical for here, and I don't accept the conclusion anyway.)