

Touching the Earth

By Glenn Wallis

Gotama was no fool. He knew what would happen. Practitioners in the future, he said, will ignore my deep but dull teachings on emptiness. They will become entranced by pretty poetic ones. It's just like the head of a kettle drum: over time, as piece by cracked piece is replaced, nothing of the original remains. That's how it will be with practitioners in the future; they won't study and master my discourses. They won't care. That's how it will be with my deep, deep teachings (*Samyuttanikaya* 2.20.7). Thus spoke wise Gotama. He knew that things would change.

Change is ever-fresh; change is eager. Lovingly, change embraces all things. We all know that. So, as Gotama's teachings spread throughout India, then Asia, and then Europe and North America, mingling always with local cultures and customs and worldviews, change tagged along like the royal astrologer.

The result? Readers of Buddhist blogs, books, and magazines know that better than most: an exotic band of Buddhisms jamming exuberantly in cultural, doctrinal, and historical accents as varied and spectacular as a Mardi Gras parade. *Buddhism*. The word evokes with equal ease images of flamboyant ritualism, luxuriant creativity, byzantine philosophizing, and tranquil contemplation. Just browse the shelves at your local bookstore: There is chanting Buddhism, meditating Buddhism, painting Buddhism, therapy Buddhism, martial arts Buddhism, Hollywood Buddhism, motorcycle maintenance Buddhism; there is Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, Zen, Vipassana, Tantric, Dzogchen, Pure Land Buddhism; there is Japanese,

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Tibetan, American, Thai, and [insert country name here] Buddhism. Now, for \$19.99, for a limited time only (let's hope), you can have Buddhism-in-a-box Buddhism!

Who can deny that the myriad forms of doctrine, literature, art, and practice attending these Buddhisms have deeply enriched the lives of people everywhere? As someone who has spent the last thirty-five years exploring the Buddhist globe, from the tropical Achans to the mountainous Zens, I certainly wouldn't. But neither can I help wondering, after all of these years: Is Buddhism an anything-goes affair? Does it know no bounds? Does it matter what the Buddha actually taught? We can dress the question in more somber tones: to whom, to what, do we, as Buddhists, owe allegiance?

Buddhas and bodhisattvas arrayed in magnificent robes, sitting majestically in their heavenly abodes — their buddha fields— exuding auras of healing light.

Magical flesh and bone, fresh as the breath of the Blessed One, efficacious as amritya, nectar of the gods.

Magnetic mantras — nembutsu, daimoku, dharani — sound tsunamis surging throughout the universe.

Ritual paraphernalia — statues, bells, a twirling wheel clutched like a crucifix in the dark.

And let us not forget those living exemplars, as charismatic and clairvoyant as the Buddha walking unscathed on an open road: Roaring roshis, shamanic lamas, wizardly tulkus, and wonder-working arahants.

I love it all! Don't you? But can we ask: at what cost, our love? Can we ask that question? Have you ever loved without consequence?

The more time I spend regarding *Buddhism*, the clearer it becomes: the basic teachings of *the Buddha* are in dire need of rehabilitation. *Rehabilitation*: to return to health, to restore to a former healthy condition, to return to normal. *Re-habilitate* from *habilitas*, ability; so, re-enable. Gotama's teaching, like the human face of the teacher himself, is vanishing. It is disappearing behind the Oz-like curtain — as shimmering and alluring as a Tibetan prayer flag fluttering in the sun — of religious Buddhism. The deep but dull teachings of the Buddha are losing their ability to do their work.

Now I have some explaining to do. I will begin by saying that I am not interested in the old philologists' project of separating out the original (good) teachings of Gotama from later (bad) accretions. Given what we now know of the textual history of the Buddhist canons (e.g., that they are heavily edited translations of older oral compositions), that project is no longer viable. So, that's not what this is about. This is about the first instance, the first step, the setting in motion, the *basis*. We say *Buddhist*, but on what grounds, what basis?

The basic teachings of the Buddha are those that follow from certain premises about both the teacher and the teachings. My approach here will not be to construct an intricate argument. Rather, I'd simply like to make explicit these premises. These premises are, I think, obvious, fair, and accurate. They constitute our starting point as Buddhist practitioners. I hope that my comments will make some Buddhists in America more self-conscious about their relationship to Gotama's teachings.

My overarching premise is this: Gotama was an unsurpassed scientist of the real. He expounded with lucidity and precision (1) our human situation and (2) an effective means for awakening to that situation with clarity and equanimity. Gotama, as Emerson

said of Plato “knew the cardinal facts” [check ref.]. He is the arrival on the human scene of an uncanny precision and intelligence; he accurately divided and defined the categories of human existence. And like all good scientists, he kept it simple.

(1) *Our human situation.* (i) Pain, in any of its many registers — irritation, aggravation, tension, anxiety, sadness, agony — flows through life like water. You know all about that. Since you do, Gotama says, just see it as it is. When you do, you’ll quit your rationalizations and evasions. You’ll say to yourself, *enough with my childish bitching and moaning. It’s time to grow up.* (ii) The catalyst of pain is this: you ask too much of the world. Can’t you see that everything is impermanent, insubstantial, and unreliable? So, why do you demand so much of these bubbles? A person with eyes to see reflects thus, and determines *let me cut the crap once and for all.* (iii) And when you decide on this cutting, says Gotama, you will know peace as sweet and soothing as a crisp spring breeze. (iv) The great scientist of the real analyzed the cutting, charted it, laid it out, called it the eight component course and said now, get going. That going will be your *basis* (from Greek *basis*, a stepping < *bainein*, to step, to go).

(2) *An effective means to awakening to our situation.* Knowing fully, clearly, completely, carefully, thoroughly, directly, wisely, diligently, vigilantly, interminably, coolly, un sentimentally, unobtrusively, phenomenologically, counter-intuitively (i) *how it is with my body, feelings, thoughts, and perceptual sensorium* and (ii) the production and function of my neurotic, delusive, illusive, polluted, shell-gaming-collusive, toxicity: infatuation, hostility, delusion. This knowing is an awakening. *How do we know?* Meditation. Meditation is cultivation (*bhavana*) of beneficial qualities (*bodhipakkiya-dhamma*); it is reintegration (*yoga*) of dispersed and estranged aspects of myself; it is

becoming collected, gathered, whole (*samadhi*) again; it is being absorbed in an immoveable stillness and silence (*jhana*); it is delight (*piti*) and it is ease (*sukha*); finally, it is unbinding (*nirvana/nibbana*) from neurotic pressure (*samsara*). *What* do we know. The categories of being. These categories are given in Gotama's meditation blueprint, the *Anapanasati Sutta*. The premise of that text is that being arises not in the abstract (as *life* or *existence*), but as particular phenomena in particular locations: the body, feelings, thoughts, and sensorium. This, then, is the Buddhist periodical table. Anything and everything that arises in your life, says Gotama, arises as a thing-event in/on/with/through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. So, awakening is, in the first instance, awakening to precisely the nature of these elements — their function, weight, gravitational force, trajectory, flavor, content, duration, conditioning mechanisms, interrelations. The lab for investigating these thing-events (*dharmas/dhammas*) is the meditation room. The posture is upright, solid, still, and silent. The lab is empty. Because none are required, there are no paraphernalia. Because none is required, there is nothing superfluous to the investigatory process.

Surely, all of the above is acceptable. How could it not be? It is so basic to Buddhism that it hardly requires comment. But being acceptable, it is also consequential: it establishes the basic pivot point of *dharmic* equilibrium. Now, as it was in the beginning, and as it will forever be, the value of the *dharmic* catalogue must be determined by its proximate revolution around *this* point — the point of careful analysis of the categories of lived experience. Can we ask: *paritta*, *mandala*, the Dalai Lamas, *sadhana*, chanting, chiming, bowing, gonging, *koan*-ing, prostrating, meritmaking — the infinitely intersecting ellipsoidal orbs that have given shape to the Buddhist doctrinal-

ritual-iconographical cosmos — how proximate are they and all that they involve to the zero point of wise investigation?

“*Skillful means, skillful means,*” interjects my interlocutor. But this old saw was originally just a cleaver ploy of later Buddhists to say and do, in the name of the Lord, whatever they wanted. (In the oldest literature, the term that we routinely translate as “skillful means,” *upayakusala*, more commonly denoted “clever ploy,” as in *Jataka* 98.) Grab hold of skillful means, and sooner or later you will find yourself slipping slipping into the slope of anything goes — even prayer to God. God? Because we would not go to Him, He kindly came to us: as *dharmakaya buddha*, *gohonzon*, *mandala*, *bodhisattvas*, the precious *guru*, the loving lama, the lineage, the statue, the magic beads, and yes, even the bejeweled Buddha. None of our philosophers’ intricate philosophizing can undo the the advent.

“*The second turning (Mahayana), and the third (Vajrayana).*” A clever ploy times two. Can we say it? *There was only one turning.* It’s called Gotama’s teaching. And it took every stitch of his strength, every whit of his will, to effect it. The second and third “turnings” are indeed just that: spin. They are rhetorical shorthand for a manufactured version of Buddhist history, involving, as spin always does, politics, power, and the struggle for patronage. That the rhetoric of the turnings has become an accepted commonplace among contemporary practitioners in America for justifying innovations in Buddhist history points to a deep forgetting and a sad ignorance of that history. *Can we study our history?*

If we accept assumptions like these — then what? If we conclude for ourselves that Siddhattha Gotama, the man we call the Buddha, was an extraordinarily gifted

scientist of the real — that he investigated with precision and care and understood what all of this (reality) is about; that he identified the proper categories for investigation (body, feelings, thoughts, the sensorium); that he prescribed a no-nonsense, no-frills, clutter-free methodology that would allow us to ascertain reality for ourselves; that he warned against the insidious and ensnaring seductiveness of ritual, devotion, and religious artifice — then aren't we compelled to look with discernment, at the very least, a measure of skepticism, reasonably, or outright bafflement, in all honesty, at many elements of the Buddhist inventory? Might such consideration be the very precondition for making capable, careful, clear-eyed judgments about the way innovative traditions and local cultures alter or impact the basic thrust of Gotama's teachings?

Try a thought experiment. Pretend you accept the preceding and following premises; then consider for yourself this question: how far removed from this starting point can I legitimately allow things to go. ("Legitimately" means preserving the integrity of the premise; "things" means doctrines and rituals — what we think and do as Buddhist practitioners.) Certainly, there is room for movement, adjustment to circumstance, intelligent application. Certainly; but to what extent? Is there a limit? Where is it? Where do the extreme points lie? Where is the responsible middle?

So, here are the premises.

Premise # 1. Gotama was a man.

Yet, to many of his followers, he is the Blessed One, an omniscient Lord of people and gods who works miracles, knows unknowable things, and continues to exert his power from beyond. It is a reassuring picture; it consoles. We accept this portrait at great cost. Many Buddhists hold an image of the Buddha (and his surrogates — cosmic

bodhisattvas, lineage founders and holders, earthly *gurus*, *roshis*, *lamas*, even meditation teachers) as a spiritual being who possesses special qualities — enlightenment, omniscience, healing compassion, supernatural power, otherworldly peace. The premise asks that we hold a more mature view of Gotama: other than in your thoughts, dreams, fantasies, visualizations, or perhaps on Halloween, have you ever encountered such wondrous creatures? Can we see that Gotama and his surrogates are either (a) fantasies or (b) beings much like ourselves? As Emerson said, even a great person “must be related to us,” and “our life must receive from him some promise of explanation.” The caricatures that have been presented to us as the Buddha do not establish this relationship or deliver on this promise. A clear-eyed view of the man as man can.

Premise # 2. Gotama was an unsurpassed scientist of the real.

(Re-cap from p. XX) He expounded with lucidity and precision (1) our human situation and (2) an effective means for awakening to that situation with clarity and equanimity. His basic teachings concerning *these matters* are irreplaceable and non-negotiable.

Premise #3. Gotama prescribed meditation, not religion. Meditation, like sleep, is essential to a healthy life. Religion, like theater, is extra — it’s an aesthetic pleasure. Meditation is a specific strategy of investigation into life processes. Gotama gives direction in the *Anapanasati Sutta* and the *Satipatthana Sutta*. Religion is another kind of strategy. It involves various forms of consolation, hope, promise, evocation, supplication, devotion, entertainment. At its heart lies some version, however subtle and disguised, of supernaturalism. Religion cultivates beliefs about how things are or will be. Meditation cultivates qualities and dispositions. Religion tells stories and shows pictures; it is

narratological. Meditation stays close to the bone; it is phenomenological. Religion is sky and cosmos; it is fragrant. Meditation is ground and earth; it is musty.

Premise # 4. Gotama is not the Buddha.

Gotama is Socrates, an opaque enigma; he is Thoreau. The Buddha is *Us*, as transparent as a Hollywood star; he is *People*. Gotama is a man whose life we have barely begun to imagine or investigate. The Buddha is a literary figure imagined and fashioned by anonymous compilers of the canonical literature over two millennia ago, and embraced by countless faithful ever since.

Premise # 5. Gotama was an ironist; his compilers, strategists.

It is crucial that we begin to sort out Gotama from the Buddha. To show just how crucial it is, let's look at a hard problem, namely, the presence in the Buddhist canon of both supernaturalism and radically phenomenological teachings. Is it the Buddha or Gotama who makes gestures toward supernaturalism and the incredible: the gods, Mara, seeing his past lives, knowing the fate of others, performance of miracles? Let's be clear about this matter: the Buddhist canons are rich in supernatural hypotheses. The *Samyuttanikaya*, for instance, opens with an extended mixed prose verse section containing dialogues that the Buddha (Gotama?) and his followers engaged in with gods (*devas*) of various classes, as well as individual *devas* (Sakka, Brahmas — plural— Mara). In translation, this section alone is over 250 pages in length. Virtually every other division of the Pali canon contains numerous references to *devas*. Furthermore, Gotama is commonly referred to as “a teacher of gods and men.” A common gloss for “the world” in the canon is “this place with its gods, Mara, and Brahma.” Finally, Gotama (the Buddha?) did not overtly contest the cosmology of his day, in which there were held to

be numerous *deva* realms, actual places where one might be reborn. Of course, he would often graft his system of meditative absorption (*jhana*) over this cosmological scheme, suggesting an appropriation more symbolic than literal; but he would generally retain the *deva*-designations (e.g., “realm of the *devas* of streaming radiance,” “realm of the *devas* of measureless aura”). Supernaturalism, it cannot be denied, permeates Buddhist literature like a rag in oil.

Coming from the mouth of a literary figure, all of this makes good sense. As a literary conceit, the gods and all the rest always make intriguing — and to their Indian audience, recognizable — interlocutors; and intriguing, recognizable interlocutors make for provocative literature, oral or otherwise (just look at our own fairy tales); and provocative tales are attended to, responded to, remembered, and handed down.

The supernaturalism in the Buddhist canon, furthermore, can be shown to be due to at least two other powerful literary forces: (i) genre restraint and requirement, and (ii) advertisement and propagation. That is, in order to win converts and coin, Gotama’s followers would have had to dress up his teachings and conversations to look like the “sacred” literature of the day, replete with its gods and miracles and wizardly teacher. By this reasoning, it would have been absurd for the canonical editors to alter the teachings of Gotama — for preservation of these teachings was the very purpose for their efforts.

Coming from the mouth of Gotama, on the other hand, such supernaturalism doesn’t make sense — at least not *as supernaturalism*. Let’s imagine that Gotama did, in fact, speak in such terms. Then, how might we understand it? The most generous view is that Gotama really did see “with his divine eye . . . thousands of *devas*” (*Dighanikaya* 16.1.27), converse with them, debate with them, and so on. Why not hold out the

possibility, as many believers do, that there really are such entities in the world? Well, one reason might be that no one has ever seen such entities *outside of the literature itself*, or outside of his or her *beliefs* about what is possible. Another rebuttal to the view of literalism is that such a reading of the supernatural material is wholly incompatible with the phenomenological, counter-speculative, counter-metaphysical reading of Gotama's teachings that the other premises commit us to.

A more non-literal reading of Gotama's usage of supernatural language might be that he was simply employing cultural coin. Buddhist teachers in contemporary North America reflexively adopt certain axiomatic American cultural constructs (the notion of equality, the inevitability of materialism, the necessity of therapeutic healing, the need for scientific validation and philosophical sophistication, and so on). Similarly, the Buddha adopted some basic cultural axioms of his own time and place. Some, of course, he would reject; but some he would not. Why not? For the sake of communication perhaps; or perhaps he did so just as reflexively and unconsciously as modern-day teachers do. Certainly, we can't take everything Gotama said at face value because he could be deviously playful with language. There is example after example in the texts of Gotama's using irony to make a point. So, maybe that's the explanation here, too. Who knows? We still have a long way to go to figure it out.

One final possibility: maybe he was just dead wrong about some things. After all, Gotama was not the Buddha.

Premise # 6. A practitioner should be a critic, not a custodian, of tradition.

Remember that "critic" comes from the Greek term for someone who discerns and judges with care. So, a Buddhist practitioner should carefully dissect, probe, and question

tradition, and not simply parrot the views of believers and teachers past and present. Being a critic takes effort. It requires you to *know the facts* about our shared tradition— i.e., the principles of Gotama’s basic teachings — and to distinguish these from the countless changes — additions, subtractions, compressions, expansions, innovations, manipulations, mutations, distortions, reversals — that history has wrought (in the guise of Zen, Vipassana, Dzogchen, etc.). Only then are you fit to judge.

David Snellgrove, one of the most respected Buddhist studies scholars of the second half of the twentieth century, makes this astute observation: “There is no reference in the earliest known traditions to staid philosophically-minded disciples simply honoring the tomb [of the recently deceased Gotama].” There are many such references to devotionally-minded disciples doing so. Snellgrove offers the startling suggestion that if it were not for these devotionally-minded disciples, we would not even know of Gotama today!

That we do, in fact, know of Gotama, is obvious. Less noticeable is that we know only, or mainly, the *devotees’* Gotama — the Buddha. The figure of Gotama that emerges from many pages of the canon is of a miracle-working omniscient sage that only a religious enthusiast could appreciate. But what if we start from the premises given above? I think that, doing so, a figure will emerge that resonates more with a more meditationally-minded and psychologically-oriented reader. The figure of *that* Buddha is not only more plausibly and realistically human; it is also infinitely more valuable to us.

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“That which should be done out of compassion by a caring teacher who desires the welfare of his students, I have done for you. Meditate! Do not be negligent! Don’t have regrets later! *This* is my instruction to you.” (*Samyuttanikaya* 4.43.44).

Thus spoke wise Gotama. But he knew that things would change.