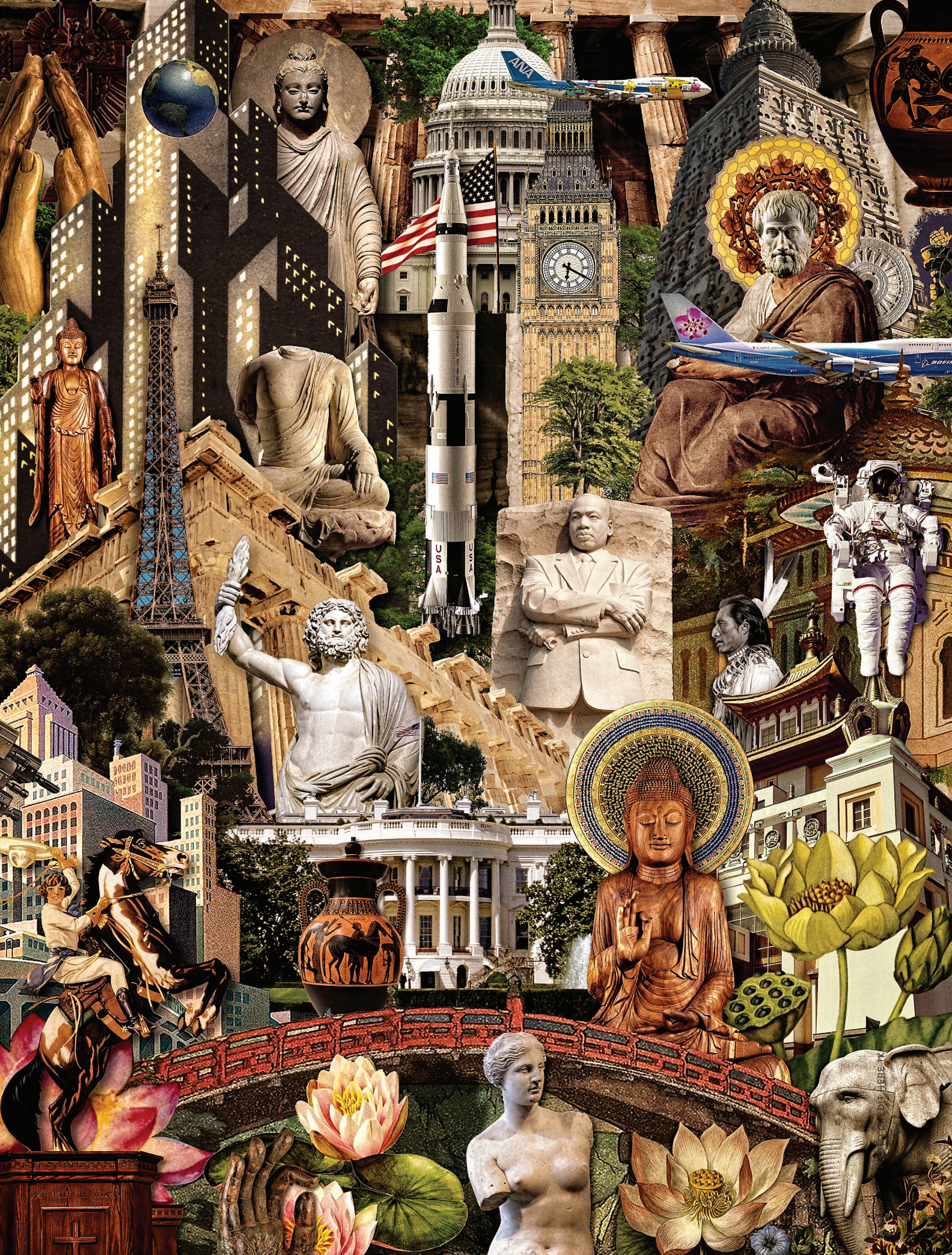
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the best possible life

AS THE DHARMA GROWS IN THE WEST, IT WILL BE SHAPED BY OUR DEEPLY ROOTED IDEAS ABOUT HUMAN FLOURISHING.

BY SETH SEGALL ■ ILLUSTRATIONS BY EDDIE GUY

ATTEND ANY ENGLISH-language dharma talk in almost any Western convert Buddhist community, and you are likely to hear an interpretation of the dharma that differs in significant ways from how it is classically presented in the suttas and sutras. Most talks emphasize being wholeheartedly present; attending to one's embodied experiencing; working skillfully with thoughts, desires, and emotions; cultivating lovingkindness, compassion, and equanimity; not mistaking one's "ego" for one's true nature; radically accepting reality; and—in Mahayana sanghas—emptiness and nonduality. On the other hand, you will probably not hear much talk about rebirth and its various realms and inhabitants, except when presented as metaphors for psychological matters. Neither will you hear much about the three *kaya*s of the Buddha, the ten *bhumis* of the bodhisattva path, or vari-

ous magical powers (*siddhis*). You will also not hear much about leaving one's family, becoming celibate, or guarding the sense doors against all pleasure. These dharma talks reflect the modal form of convert Buddhist practice in the West today, and I want to explore why it has come to be that way.

TWO MAJOR FACTORS determine which Buddhist themes get emphasized and which get de-emphasized in these dharma talks: *congruence* and *relevance*. If certain traditional Buddhist beliefs are too incongruent with deeply held Western cultural assumptions about the nature of reality, it may be too difficult for most Westerners to take them literally. This is why most of us do not believe in the literal existence of the Greek, Roman, and Norse gods, although they can remain meaningful to us as myth and metaphor. Rebirth is too discordant with what most Westerners believe for them to seriously commit to the concept. Also, while most Westerners can entertain rebirth as an interesting hypothesis, putting an end to the cycle of rebirth isn't existentially urgent for them. It does not serve as a prime motivation for practice.

The second factor that determines what gets emphasized in Western dharma talks is *relevance*. The aspects of a religion that tend to be featured are those that are most relevant to what motivates people in a particular time and place to begin practice. A belief in rebirth, for example, is irrelevant to the kinds of problems that bring Westerners to Buddhism and the kind of answers they hope to find there.

What kinds of issues bring Westerners to Buddhism? Some are our personal litanies of woes, frustrations, anxieties, disappointments, failures, and losses. People want to suffer less and hope to gain instead some sense of ease and equanimity. Other issues reflect ongoing fault lines in our common social heritage. Western culture faces a set of interrelated crises that are the consequences of modernity. The signs of these crises are evident in a number of ways: (1) science's clockwork view of the universe can't account for consciousness, meaning, purpose, and value; (2) the decline of mainstream religions has left a spiritual void; (3) science and technology evolve faster than ethics; (4) hyper-capitalism drives all values—except money—from the workplace, the marketplace, and the public sphere; (5) modernity alienates us from Nature; (6) the relentless pace of technological change destabilizes social structures; (7) hyper-individualism undermines our deep connection to kin and community; and (8) the confluence of these trends puts our survival as a species at risk.

There is something inevitable about the way sets of ideas are adapted to a new time and place. We all inescapably dwell in and are confined to a specific culture and era, just as fish dwell in the sea.

The resolution of these crises requires a change in consciousness that will restore our fundamental sense of connection to ourselves, Nature, and all beings; help us creatively cope with change and impermanence; and reaffirm meaning and value. Buddhist themes that are relevant to such a change in consciousness are the themes that tend to be emphasized.

THERE IS SOMETHING inevitable about the way sets of ideas from one time and place are adapted to a new time and place. We all inescapably dwell in and are confined to a specific culture and era, just as fish dwell in and are confined to the sea. Most of our cultural beliefs function at the level of tacit assumption and common sense. They don't require conscious thought but are like the way we know in our bones that when we take our next step on solid ground we will neither sink to the center of the Earth nor fly off into the sky. The ways we unreflectively understand selfhood, identity, gender, family, community, ethics, progress, truth, beauty, time, and space: these all function together to form our *zeitgeist*, our common ecosystem of meanings.

When we are dissatisfied with aspects of our own time and culture and seek out alternatives in the practices and beliefs of another, we find that some fit easily into our native ecosystem of meaning, others are reinterpreted through the prism of our culture's available memes, and some clash irreconcilably. The beliefs of one context cannot be completely assimilated "as is" into another. Some of them must be adapted or reinterpreted if they are to be completely embraced. When we make borrowed practices and beliefs our own, something is gained and something lost: what emerges is both a continuation of the culture borrowed from and a betrayal of it.

RELIGIONS THRIVE, wither, or die according to their ability to address the existential concerns of particular times and places and harmoniously coexist with the wider culture's deeply held beliefs. As religious traditions evolve, traditionalists strive to maintain fundamental ideas and practices that may no longer be relevant or meaningful, while innovators try to adapt them to meet the needs of the moment. Religions that survive over millennia manage to thread the needle between these extremes.

What's true for religions in general is also true for Buddhism. The metaphors for awakening that were well suited to the India of 300 BCE seemed less suited to the India of 200–800 CE, as Buddhism developed alongside other evolving *darshanas* and forms of yogic practice, and Madhyamaka, Yogacara, and tantric metaphors for awakening appeared. When Buddhism was transmitted to China, awakening was reinterpreted through the lens of Chinese culture, which was already steeped in Daoism and Confucianism. The same is true for Tibetans and Japanese, who interpreted awakening through the lens of their pre-Buddhist religious outlooks. Sometimes it's hard to know if just the metaphors changed or whether awakening itself changed as well. Is the *nibbana* (Skt., *nirvana)* of the Pali canon exactly the same kind of awakening as 13th-century Soto Zen master Dogen's "dropping off of body and mind?" How could one possibly tell?

The history of Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen reveals an unending course of revisions, reinventions, and reinterpretations, including the Song dynasty's mythologization of the earlier Tang dynasty Chan masters; Dogen's masterful reinterpretation of Chan in Japan; the reinvention of Dogen-style Zen during the Tokugawa shogunate; and the radical modernization of Japanese Zen during the Meiji era. The Zen practiced now in the West is not the timeless practice of Zen ancestors but something continuously modified over the centuries.

We should also note that the Buddhism that came to Western non-birthright Buddhists in the 20th century was a Buddhism already transformed by contact with the West. Nineteenth-century Asian Buddhists developed newer interpretations of Buddhism that were more congruent with Protestant understandings of religion and Western secular and scientific beliefs. We see this process clearly at work in Meiji-era Zen, the Southeast Asian Vipassana movement, and the Sinhalese Buddhist revival. These innovations were partly defensive responses to Western colonialism, but they were also a genuine coming to terms with modernity and Western Enlightenment ideas, values, and practices that reverberated throughout Asia.

These reenvisioned forms of Buddhism were subsequently transmitted to the West, where Westerners continued the process of adaptation and reinterpretation. It's best to think of Buddhism not as a single unchanging entity but as a conversation over the course of two and a half millennia about what it means to live the best kind of existence.

THE GREAT CHALLENGE for us as Western practitioners is how to make Buddhist practice authentically our own—how to make it something we can fully endorse without inner division or pretense and without ignoring what we sense deeply in our bones. The modern Western zeitgeist includes a number of beliefs that form significant barriers to the unmodified assimilation of traditional Buddhist teachings. These barriers notably include scientific naturalism and physicalism, and also Abrahamic beliefs concerning the afterlife.

I want to focus, however, on a barrier that gets comparatively less attention: the prevalent Western notions of human flourishing that have their origin in the Greek tradition but have become intrinsic to Westerners' understanding of what it means to live the best possible kind of life. We don't need to know anything about the Greek tradition to have absorbed these beliefs through a kind of cultural osmosis.

If *bodhi,* or awakening, is the Buddha's answer to the question of what the best possible life is, *eudaimonia* is Aristotle's answer. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (circa 340 BCE) Aristotle outlined his concept of eudaimonia, or human flourishing, as a well-being and happiness derived from exercising a set of moral and intellectual virtues acquired through practice, contemplating philosophical wisdom, and engaging in one's community to foster social well-being.

Aristotle reasoned that well-being was humanity's highest goal: the one thing people sought for its own sake. People might seek power or wealth because they believed it might give them well-being, but no reasonable person would forgo well-being in order to obtain them. Aristotle thought the best way to achieve well-being was by cultivating a set of moral virtues that included courage, temperance, even-temperedness, truthfulness, friendliness, and a sense of

justice. Each of these virtues represents the midpoint between an excess and a deficiency. Courage, for example, represents the midpoint between rashness and cowardice.

In addition to the moral virtues, Aristotle stressed a set of intellectual virtues that included practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and philosophical wisdom (*sophia*). Practical wisdom enables people to properly judge which behavior is most appropriate to each occasion: to do the right thing, in the right manner, at the right time. Philosophical wisdom is the direct apprehension of deep metaphysical principles—what Aristotle calls knowing "extraordinary, amazing, difficult, and divine things."

Aristotle's view of human flourishing influenced not only the Greco-Roman world but also the Abrahamic religious traditions through—to give just a few examples—the work of Avicenna and Averroës in Islam, Maimonides in Judaism, and St. Thomas Aquinas in Christianity. It continues to influence modern Western philosophy through the work of such virtue ethicists as Elizabeth Anscombe, Phillipa Foot, and Alasdair MacIntyre, and modern Western psychology through the work of humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and positive psychologists such as Martin Seligman.

But we don't even need to turn to philosophy, religion, or psychology to discover eudaimonia's pervasive influence on Western culture. We find traces of it in the US Army recruitment motto, "Be All that You Can Be," or when a mother gives primacy to the wish that her children will be happy, wise, and good.

ARISTOTLE TIED VIRTUE, wisdom, and happiness together in ways that parallel Buddhism's emphasis on *sila* (moral conduct) and *prajna* (wisdom) in fostering well-being. Aristotle's view of character development through practice also resembles Buddhism's emphasis on how repeated thoughts and actions determine one's character and fate. But there are also marked differences between eudaimonia and Buddhist awakening that contribute to the difficulties Westerners face in adopting certain Buddhist teachings.

The first major difference is that eudaimonia is a more modest concept than awakening. While awakening is usually considered a gradual process that unfolds in stages over long periods of time—perhaps many lifetimes—most Buddhist schools believe it has a final destination. That final destination, whether conceived of as arahantship and *nibbana* or as buddhahood and *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi,* is deemed to be permanent, perfect, and complete. Once you've attained it, there's no backsliding: you are no longer subject to suffering and have vanquished greed, hatred, and ignorance; your behavior is impeccable; you are liberated from attachment to false views about the self and see things "as they really are"; there is nothing more to be accomplished.

If *bodhi*, or awakening, is the Buddha's answer to what the best possible life is, Aristotle's answer is *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, a well-being derived from the exercise of moral and intellectual virtues.

Eudaimonia, on the other hand, has no perfect end point. There are no absolute states of happiness, virtue, or wisdom to be had. However happy we are, we can always be happier. However good we may be, we can always be better. Eudaimonic people are not immune from *all* suffering. Their happiness, while protected to a degree by their virtue and wisdom, can still be overturned by a series of misfortunes. They are more virtuous than the average person, but their virtue does not issue effortlessly from their character; they still need to deliberate about their actions, using practical wisdom to determine what's skillful in any situation.

This more modest conception accords with Westerners' deepest beliefs about what is genuinely possible for us as human beings. While we all know people we look up to, admire, and hope to emulate, none of us know any perfect people. Those we admire may be better than we are, but not better in some radically different, incalculable way. We've never met anyone who displays the kinds of perfection described in the *suttas* and *sutras*. We probably suspect that kind of perfection is impossible, or, even if it is possible, we suspect it will never be so for us. We also suspect that becoming less self-centered is always going to be a work in progress. There is never going to be a time when we can say we are done.

To be fair, other strands of the Buddhist tradition do present the end point of awakening in more modest terms. Dogen, for example, didn't believe in an awakening completely freed from delusion, or a final end to awakening. In *Genjokoan*, he wrote: "When one side is illumined, the other is dark," and "When a bird flies, no matter how far it flies, it cannot reach the end of the sky." But the fact that different strands of Buddhism believe different things only underscores the importance of interpreting these traditions for ourselves. We need to decide, at least from our current vantage point, which views have the greatest potential to carry us toward where we aspire to be, and which views seem to take us nowhere at all.

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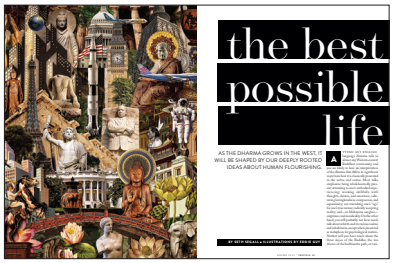

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SOME MAY ARGUE THAT it doesn't matter if hardly anyone, or maybe even no one, actually attains an ideal as long as it serves as a kind of north star to orient us in the right direction. But what if the direction the north star points to isn't exactly where we want to go?

Buddhist awakening and eudaimonia also differ in their approach to desire and attachment. Some interpretations of Buddhism suggest that we ought to eliminate desire and abandon our attachments. *Dukkha*, or suffering, is the result of wanting things to be different from how they are. The suttas do make a distinction between craving (*tanha*) and desire (*chanda*), with most texts recommending the elimination of *craving*. On the other hand, the Vinaya, the monastic code, states that the Buddha was free from desire for any and all sense pleasures.

For modern Westerners, the idea that desire is bad in and of itself requires nuanced interpretation and perhaps some amendment. Surely there are desires that must be wholesome—the desires to hear the Buddha's teachings, meditate, act compassionately, and awaken. There must, then, be criteria to separate good from bad desires: Good desires have some likelihood of being fulfilled, are consonant with our higher-order goals and values, and are likely to lead to enhanced well-being for ourselves and others. Bad desires are the opposite. Similarly, the distinction between craving and desire suggests that there are right and wrong ways to desire things. Cravings possess a rigid, sticky, addictive quality. They are intense and compelling. Desires, on the other hand, have a more flexible, optional quality to them—they are gentler pushes.

As we pursue this line of inquiry, we seem to be moving away from an interpretation of the relationship between desire and dukkha that simply says "eschew desire" and toward one that suggests pursuing *right desire*—pursuing the *right* sorts of desires in the *right* sort of way. Knowing which is which requires not only mindfulness but also a discernment that is indistinguishable from Aristotelian practical wisdom.

Westerners would also probably dissent from the Buddhist argument that because sense pleasures are fleeting and often tinged with an aura of suffering, they're not worth pursuing at all. Even when mixed with sorrow, sense pleasure seems to be an essential part of a good life. As Alfred, Lord Tennyson noted, "'tis better to have loved and lost / than never to have loved at all." There's nothing unwholesome about enjoying the colors of the sunset, the sounds of a symphony, the scent of the sea, or the loving caress of another human being. There are even intense, passionate desires—the stirrings of romantic love, the throes of artistic inspiration, the drive to excel in athletics—that add a zest we would sorely miss if our lives were always rational and well modulated. As long as these desires are consonant with our higher-order goals and values and our abilities to pursue them, they add something important to well-being, and reasonable people allow places for them in their lives. A life where only ethics mattered and aesthetics counted not one whit would be an impoverished life.

However, some aspects of Buddhist traditions are hostile to any and all sense pleasures, and Westerners have a harder time accepting these—for example, the monastic rules forbidding monks and nuns from jumping or swimming for fun, climbing trees, singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments.

THE BUDDHIST IDEA that we ought to surrender all of our attachments creates similar problems. Buddhist monks and nuns are celibate "home-leavers," withdrawing from their families of origin, eschewing romantic attachments, and bearing no children. The Buddha named his son Rahula, or "fetter," and abandoned his family to seek awakening. According to the *Vessantara Jataka*, during the Buddha's penultimate lifetime as a bodhisattva he gave his children away to a greedy beggar but became angry when the beggar beat the children. With a mighty effort, however, he overcame his anger and let his children be taken away. One strand of the Buddhist tradition says that all attachments are fetters to awakening and that a bodhisattva learns to let go of all of them.

This stands in marked contrast to Westerners' deeply held belief that rich interpersonal relationships are important constituents of well-being. Once again, our intuitions tell us that there ought to be a concept of *right attachment*—the right kinds of attachments pursued in the right kind of way. It seems to us that our meaningful, loving relationships might actually be the crucible for our awakening rather than being an obstacle to it.

One traditional argument against romantic and kinship ties is that we are partial to them. We love our spouses and children more than we love insurance salesmen and strangers. Buddhist lovingkindness and compassion, on the other hand, are supposed to be impartial; we ought to love everyone the same. This is part of what Buddhism means by equanimity. To the Aristotelian, however, such behavior reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature. It's not only natural that we love friends and family more than others, but it is also good. We can extend a generalized feeling of benevolence toward all, yet still enjoy special ties to family. There's something that feels profoundly wrong to us about trying to transcend that.

THE AWAKENING THAT modern Western Buddhists *really* believe in is neither the cessation of rebirth nor the complete and total end to suffering,

desire, and attachment, but an amelioration of suffering and the development of discerning wisdom regarding right desire and right attachment.

In my book *Buddhism and Human Flourishing,* I have proposed a eudaimonic interpretation of awakening that involves mostly gradual (but sometimes abrupt) growth along several semi-separate dimensions, including the following:

1. discerning wisdom regarding desire and aversion,
2. nonattachment to thoughts,
3. inner stability and equanimity,
4. attention to the immediacy of embodied experiencing,
5. radical acceptance that things are as they are,
6. recognition of how our "selves" inadequately reflect our fullness of being,
7. recognition of interdependence and nonduality,
8. making lovingkindness and compassion our default modes, and
9. promoting collective flourishing through civic engagement.

This understanding is primarily Buddhist in content, but it is eudaimonic in that it aims toward a superior level of well-being within a single lifetime, a well-being that is neither perfect nor permanent but realistically reflects what we're capable of, given sufficient time, effort, and practice. Most Westerners aren't interested in becoming perfect; they just want to end up someplace better than where they currently are.

I want to emphasize that my argument on behalf of a eudaimonic Buddhism is not based primarily on rational analysis. It's based on the quiet listening any one of us can do whenever we inquire inwardly, "What do I really want from my practice?" I encourage you to sit with this question as if it were a koan, a Zen riddle. If the answers that spontaneously arise are similar to mine—if they reflect not only our common human nature but our common cultural understandings—a eudaimonic interpretation of practice may work better for you than a more traditional interpretation.

By "work better," I mean inform your practice so that your life unfolds in ways that are happier and better, whatever *happier* and *better* mean for you. There is no final, perfect stopping place in this unfolding. As we progress along the path, our understanding of *happier* and *better* evolves along with it. This ongoing clarification of our aspiration is an essential aspect of the path to awakening.

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