

DHARMA

FOR MODERN LIFE

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By Renate Ogilvie

Applying the Dharma to modern life is easy when we are in a special and elevated state of mind. Somehow the concerns of everyday life just fall away. But it's hard to practice it when the car breaks down, the computer crashes, our overdrawn credit card is refused at the top of the supermarket queue, and we are told our child is the school bully. Suddenly all the spiritual gain seems lost. Buddhism, that fabulous and deeply moving spiritual experience, will have to wait for another, better day. Yet when all our worldly support structures have collapsed under us it is then that we most need the Dharma.

The truth is that samsaric suffering pervades absolutely everything. When we think life is fairly normal and humdrum, we are suffering subtly but no less intensely. The very fabric of our lives is constant disappointment and loss.

Housework is a constant fight against chaos, dirt and decay. Parenting means wrestling with guilt, anger and emotional turmoil. Relationships are a highly unstable synergy of two berserk minds. Making money is a stressful compromise between necessity and greed. Growing old entails loss of health, looks and loved ones.

That is why, when I teach the Dharma or I practice psychotherapy with my clients, I make sure I address the concerns of daily life. Often these concerns bring up questions that we are too embarrassed to raise with the lamas, or even the Western sangha. Too often we leave the practice in a precious box, waiting to be in the right mood, finding the perfect flower for the altar.

We need to learn how to practice all the time, how to be contemplative, compassionate and wise, especially when we really don't feel like it.

The Buddhist teachings are actually terrific for this. While being infinitely subtle and profound, they are at the same time practical and worldly, with the sublime wisdom methods effective even, and especially, for the often plainly ridiculous concerns of Western life.

But having acknowledged this, we are immediately confronted with a huge cultural gap. We find ourselves in gompas with the strange and exotic pictures and statues of an alien world, and few of us can relate effortlessly to this baroque



iconography, much less seamlessly accept the radical concepts we are confronted with.

Most Westerners have come from a Christian culture and our entire way of thinking has been moulded by a Christian understanding for many centuries, by the idea of a personalised God, the dialogue with a transcendental being. We are used to the idea of being able to ask for help with our problems, to personally apply for solutions, to pray to an entity when life is simply too hard to bear.

Giving up the 'I and Thou' is a very radical step. In Buddhism we do not just give up the idea of a creator, we give up any idea of redemption and salvation, any idea of a created singular world and a beginning. And most confronting of all, we have to give up the idea of an Immortal Soul, or in psychotherapy's secular language: an individual Self.

It is a challenge to facilitate this new way of thinking, and inevitably it entails a process of cultural demystification, at the same time as mining the nuggets and stressing the essentials. There is always a crucial and delicate balance

between making the Dharma accessible and what I call 'Buddhism Lite' where we simply pick a few interesting and agreeable concepts and leave out the hard bits.

I see being a Buddhist as essentially unglamorous. There is an unceasing task of chipping away at our mind delusions and turning our mind into a sort of laboratory where we fearlessly explore what we find.

Here are a few examples of what comes up when I teach and how I try to deal with it in workshops.

relationships

These are always very popular workshops. Because many of our teachers are ordained, there is actually very little that directly addresses the nitty gritty of relationships. It is, however, as we all know, the arena of very intense problems.

In the early stages of infatuation we idealise the other to an altogether unrealistic degree, hoping he or she will make us happy, then sobering up and feeling cheated; or advancing to a stage of intimacy which is exclusive and which furthers the idea of being special as a couple.

Underlying both experiences is the very solid, and wrong idea of definitely existing interacting 'Selves', while in truth we are flickering and rippling with impermanence, streams of consciousness bearing an infinite number of karmic imprints waiting to pop. Our relationships with others are therefore wholly dynamic processes, mostly misunderstood by us as we attempt to freeze and label what cannot be stopped and preserved. All our problems stem from this misconception.

We need to loosen up, relinquish the heaviness of our perception, and develop an awareness of the inherent 'emptiness' of ourselves and our relationships. Living with another or others is, in fact, one of the most intense ways of learning and practising.

Just like the peacock eats poison and is unaffected, bodhisattvas engage in relationships and transform the problems into bodhicitta. Contemplating this even for just a nanosecond in difficult situations gives us a glimpse of wisdom.

depression

Pondering the miracle of having a precious human rebirth, rejoicing at waking up alive in the morning, savouring the bliss of being in touch with the Dharma, all these are good antidotes to a depressed mind.

But what can we do when we are simply too depressed to have the energy to even sit and meditate? When we are entirely encased in the leaden prison of hopelessness and despair?

In the darkest periods we may only be able to sit down with a cup of tea, and gaze at a picture of our guru or our favourite deity, visualising their boundless compassion as soft rain on the parched land of our depressed mind. At night we think of ourselves going to sleep in their lap, safely enveloped by their unconditional love.

We may then remember that all phenomena are impermanent, and that our depression will eventually pass, too.

sex

Even the sleepest workshop will sit up and take notice when we discuss sex. If it is true that a single sexual encounter creates the equivalent of a lifetime's worth of attachment, then we are dealing with a truly awesome energy. It is the hardest vow to keep, and Buddhist or not, most of us have wrestled with sexual issues in this lifetime, and of course in numberless previous encounters.

There are a number of definitions of Sexual Misconduct, some of which are obvious, but some of which are rather difficult to relate to our contemporary reality. Moreover, if instructions are very specific it is often hard to apply them, since we find that every situation is relative.

The only principle that I have found universally useful in this fraught and difficult area is that of Not Harming.

Not harming others and oneself, physically and emotionally, does away with culture-specific notions and prejudice. It furthers trust and loving kindness, and insight and responsibility. I think it is utterly unrealistic to expect that we can generate this degree of wisdom in all circumstances. But even slightly reducing the harm we can inflict when our minds are out of control will limit the inevitable karmic fall-out.

anxiety and stress

Our karma has thrown us into a time of extreme materialism dominated by the worldly Dharmas, and the related stress and anxiety have become epidemic. A lot of people come to the centers, initially not so much to study the Dharma but to get some relief from the white noise of daily stress.

Meditation is seen as a classic stress relief but often makes beginners even more tense and anxious since the constant pressure to achieve is transferred subtly into spiritual practice.

While I teach a variety of meditations it is my experience that simply acknowledging that our natural state is suffering already brings some relief. But what puts everything into perspective is the teaching that we must die.

Death is in many ways the new taboo, especially in a materialistic society where it means the end of opportunity, power and possession. Talking about it is very confronting to most people. But death radically poses the question of what is truly important in our lives when we have to give it all up at the end of it. And what if we died soon – next week, tomorrow? Paradoxically, talking about death ultimately relieves stress. It may lead us to change the way we live and relate to each other. Facing death is getting real. It overcomes neurosis. We need to remember it every day. ☸

Renate Ogilvie is a psychotherapist in Sydney, Australia who teaches the Dharma on Lama Zopa Rinpoche's instruction. She finds the principles of the Dharma are often of immediate benefit to her clients, just as her professional practice informs her about the types of suffering that clients undergo.

