
BRIDGING THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS DIVIDE WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THE BUDDHA

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Seventh ClassCrit Conference contemplated emerging coalitions that could effectively combat unjust structural inequalities. To determine the appropriate size, nature, and durability of any humane electoral/cultural coalition, one must first estimate the severity of our species' current problems. The next step is to build a conceptual framework that might create and maintain an adequate alliance. Tragically, most prior political ideologies have been primarily animated by our instinct to optimize power, not just over each other but also the rest of Nature. As a result, our legal and philosophical systems laid the intellectual foundation for humanity's deepest structural inequality, one that is exponentially accelerating: mankind's temporary dominance of the biosphere, a relationship that may not outlast this millennium. To employ the enduringly useful political terminology of the ancient Greeks, humans are the "few" and all other beings and landscapes constitute the "many."¹ The most troubling prophecy is that nine billion people will soon seek some form of satisfaction on this diminutive planet. Strain is evident everywhere: filthy sewage ruining the sacred waters of India, drought in California and Australia, melting and collapsing ice caps at both poles and Greenland, annihilation of rain forests, acidic oceans, dwindling fish populations, earthquakes caused by fracking, and so forth. We recklessly abuse the four elements: voraciously burning limited fossil fuels and producing innumerable chemicals that toxify the earth, air, sky, and water.

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1. For example, Aristotle discussed how governments of the "one," "the few," and "the many" are "pervert[ed]" when they fail to pursue "the common good of all."² ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, Book III, in THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ARISTOTLE 2023, 2030 (Jonathan Barnes ed., B. Jowett trans., Princeton University Press 1984) (c. 384 B.C.E).

It is uncertain if humans have sufficient time to learn how to coexist with each other, different beings, and shared landscapes. Many environmental scientists believe we have less than forty years to prevent devastating disruptions (assuming we don't earlier blunder into a massive nuclear war).² Despite all the malarkey written about "natural law" and "unnatural human behaviors," Nature has two laws—one physical and the other biological—that frame this dilemma: Time changes everything, creating the possibility for life to develop by the often-harsh process of survival of the fittest (frequently the luckiest). Neither the Universe nor the Life Force seems to care if our species continues to exist, much less "sustain" its preeminent role on the planet. While most people believe our dazzling intelligence will prevail, the only survivors may be those beings that evolve quickly (bacteria) or reside in highly protected quarters (beetles under a rock). During environmental catastrophes, high intelligence is not a useful trait.³ Our extraordinary brainpower is a self-destructive threat, because we have the power to satisfy our most desperate desires. Most humans live fearful lives drenched with anger, greed, and delusion. These reinforcing, debilitating individual mind states have become institutionalized and intensified via cults of militarism, consumerism, addictiveness, and fanaticism.

If those two prior gloomy paragraphs contain much truth, our species must quickly and radically change to survive, much less to create humane societies. Thus, any successful social movement must be broader and more committed than the fluctuating electoral majorities which reflect the elite's successful efforts to maintain the status quo by carving the electorate in half. This will not be easy. As Madison explained to Jefferson many years ago, "Divide et impera, the reprobated axiom of tyranny, is under certain qualifications, the only policy, by which a republic can be administered on just principles."⁴ Personal and social moralities must profoundly change: Future generations may criticize members of this Conference for hypocritically or obliviously using so much fossil fuel to convene. Law has limited capacity to address these problems. Persuasion is always preferable to force; public opinion is often oppressive but far less invasive than the

2. See generally JORGEN RANDERS, 2052: A GLOBAL FORECAST FOR THE NEXT FORTY YEARS (2012).

3. Noam Chomsky provided these examples in a conversation to demonstrate why more intelligent creatures tend to be less adaptable in crisis. Interview with Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor & Professor of Linguistics (Emeritus), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge, Mass. (June 2015).

4. JAMES MADISON, *To Thomas Jefferson, October 24, 1787*, in MADISON: WRITINGS 142, 151 (1999).

police. Instead of glorifying the rich and vulgar, we should celebrate those who share their wealth and talents.

This political-cultural coalition not only has to be extensive but also must exist for decades, even centuries, to ameliorate existing ecological damage. This political movement can never completely disappear. Just as nuclear war made total war a futile exercise in self-annihilation, the current political economy (which includes explosive population growth as one of its defining characteristics) must also become a temporary historical phenomenon. To make that transition without violence or disaster will be extraordinarily hard: Almost every one of those future nine billion people wish to live comfortably and have a family. Fortunately, we have a chance to survive and thrive (assuming fatal environmental damage is not already irreversibly imbedded into the biosphere) if we adapt the best norms, traditions, and institutions created over the past 2500 years.

So where can such an enduring coalition be found, capable of resisting the ruling class's inevitable counterattacks? In the United States, the American secular Left is not going to succeed alone, because America remains a very religious nation. A recent Pew poll determined that seventy percent of Americans identify with Christianity even though the number of "unaffiliated" Christians and Non-Christians increased dramatically in the seven years since their last poll.⁵ Not all these people are hopelessly deluded: Whatever its originating motivations, the religious disposition manifests itself in every culture. Everybody shares a queasy anxiety about death. The politics of kindness need the humane, spiritual energy that often animates religious belief and action. There appear to be opportunities for new alliances. Many young, white Christian Evangelicals may not embrace Ralph Reed's crony capitalist Christianity; they can't find passages in the Bible where Jesus praises violence, the rich, or destruction of the biosphere. Pope Francis is more concerned about threats created by income inequality and environmental squalor than winning ossifying Culture Wars.⁶

To form an adequately broad social-political movement, many on the Left need to overcome a deeply held prejudice against some (or even all) "people of faith." This anti-religious bias, affecting many scientists,

5. See *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEWRESEARCHCENTER (May 12, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>.

6. David R. Sands, *Pope Francis' Message May Divide U.S. Catholics*, WASHINGTON TIMES (Sept. 21, 2015), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/sep/21/pope-francis-views-on-climate-change-immigration-i>. Pope Francis is causing consternation in certain conservative quarters. Stephanie Kirchgassner, *Conservative Thinktank Seeks to Change Pope Francis's Mind on Climate Change*, THEGUARDIAN (Apr. 24, 2015, 15:43 EDT), <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/24/heartland-institute-koch-pope-francis-lobbying-climate-change-global-warming>.

intelligentsia, and traditional Leftists, can be traced back to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.⁷ The political comedian Bill Maher's condescending contempt for religious enthusiasm typifies this version of invidious discrimination. Furthermore, many members of the elite (which, of course, consists of Republicans *and* Democrats) will be increasingly inclined to use religion as a wedge issue, because racism, sexism, and homophobia hopefully appear to be slowly waning. Of course, religious polarization is not just an American problem. Religiously motivated conflict is spreading throughout the world: Israel and Palestine's endless conflicts, the slaughter of Christians in parts of the Middle East, the rise of ISIS, clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar,⁸ and numerous American invasions in the Middle East.

There are grounds for hope. James Madison's constitutional plan to prevent religious conflict by tolerating many different sects created a tradition of religious diversity and peaceful coexistence that is a vital aspect of America's cultural foundation and republican virtue. In addition, both political sides presently have numerous religious believers. Many Democrats base their politics upon religious assumptions, building upon traditions created by Abolitionists and Martin Luther King. All decent people appropriately shudder when Muslim fanatics destroy rival religious iconography or religious leaders espouse racism and homophobia. As part of his attempt to be nominated by the Democratic Party as its Presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders spoke at Liberty University, created by Jerry Falwell. At least one evangelical responded positively: "I wouldn't be much of a Christian if I didn't stand on the side of gospel for the poor, because, the last time I checked, that's where my master Jesus stood, and I'll stand with Him. And, for now, that means I stand with Bernie Sanders."⁹

It will be extremely challenging to build such a movement, because many people are inclined to be self-righteous about core beliefs. I cringe at the slightest hint of proselytizing, a psychological reaction that is imbedded in current First Amendment doctrine prohibiting unwanted proselytizing in

7. See JOSEPH DE MAISTRE, *CONSIDERATIONS ON FRANCE* 41-48 (Richard A. Lebrun ed. & trans., Cambridge University Press 1994) (1797).

8. Buddhist oppression of Muslims in Myanmar is a dismaying development. Sarah Kaplan, *The Serene-Looking Buddhist Monk Accused of Inciting Burma's Sectarian Silence*, THE WASHINGTON POST (May 27, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/05/27/the-burmese-bin-laden-fueling-the-rohingya-migrant-crisis-in-southeast-asia>.

9. Vinkelhake, *An Evangelical Responds to Sanders' Speech at Liberty U*, DAILY KOS (Sept. 16, 2015, 4:03 AM PDT), <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/9/16/1421659/-An-Evangelical-responds-to-Sanders-speech-at-Liberty-U>.

public school events¹⁰ Whenever a friend aggressively attempts conversion, our friendship painfully shrivels. Many atheists and agnostics endure a guilt-ridden “breach of faith” with their family’s religions. Not only must they reject many of their ancestors’ cherished opinions, but they also risk divine retribution after death. It can be difficult to gracefully weather such domestic and theological conflicts. I still laugh at George Carlin’s sardonic sacreligiosity, a mash-up of insights, caricatures, and heartbreak.¹¹ Rural billboards extolling Jesus and ranting talk-radio ministers trigger unease.

Christian Progressives already share many core religious dogmas with religious conservatives, but the coalition needs to be broader, extending far beyond the United States to other nations and other religions. A large majority of people throughout the world must quickly find common ground to protect the common good, which includes the good of the commons. In the United States, that outcome cannot be achieved without significant, enthusiastic support from white Evangelicals and white working class citizens. People across the political spectrum must set aside numerous prejudices and legitimate fears, finding methods and experiences that generate more sympathy and respect for others. The Left and the Right should discard their lengthy litmus tests, based upon innumerable divisive cultural issues, which have created a No Man’s Land few of us explore for fear of being attacked from every direction. If one believes a fetus is a living being warranting concern *and* women have a paramount right to control their bodies and lives, one risks being ostracized from both camps. Of course, many people in both blocs will never combine forces; they prefer the divisive status quo to opening their hearts and minds to necessary compromises and changes. One of history’s grim lessons is that leaders gain power by manipulating such tribal hatreds. John Paul Sartre wrote a short story about a group of boys. A fat, awkward boy tagged along as they walked down a Paris street. Seemingly on a whim, that boy suddenly made anti-Semitic remarks as they passed a Jewish home. When the boys continued strolling after the vile rant, he was at the front of a group reconstituted by venom.¹²

10. A.M. *ex rel.* McKay v. Taconic Hills Cent. Sch. Dist. 510 F. App’x 3 (2d Cir. 2013) (upholding school decision preventing student from including religious language in her “Moving-Up” Ceremony for middle school students).

11. For instance, Carlin explained, “Religion is like a pair of shoes. . . . Find one that fits for you, but don’t make me wear your shoes.” George Carlin, GOODREADS, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/98029-religion-is-like-a-pair-of-shoes-find-one-that-fits> (last visited July 30, 2016).

12. JOHN PAUL SARTRE, *The Childhood of a Leader, in THE WALL: (INTIMACY) AND OTHER STORIES* 84 (Lloyd Alexander trans., New Directions 1975) (1948).

The rest of this essay provides several reasons why a skeptical, relativist, agnostic perspective,¹³ infused with Buddhist insights and practices, can be one of many ways to bridge the persistent divide between the secular Left and the religious Right. Combining selected Buddhist beliefs and practices with the assumption that we tiny, temporary humans will probably never solve many of the Universe's mysteries can produce direct personal experiences that develop more sympathy and admiration for traditional religious believers.

The nontheistic meditator creates a "spiritual" domain of kindness and awareness that is not necessarily "religious." Conscientiously attempting to develop more ethical habits stimulates and reinforces humane insights that surface during regular meditative practice. The practices and effects of meditation and prayer can be very similar; practitioners quietly spend time with themselves. Secular meditators often encounter joyful mind states closely resembling those of religious mystics. The time and disciplined effort put into regular prayer and meditation can create mutual respect. If you tell someone you understand why they (but not you) find comfort by believing in God, an afterlife, transcendental states, and supernatural purposes, they may react angrily if they think you are looking down on them. On the other hand, should you explain you don't believe you ever had a religious experience but deeply appreciate being a small part of a humble, compassionate community created by shared moral commitments (even if not by a "Faith") and reinforced by meditation's calm, even blissful states of awareness, you emphasize similarities instead of differences. Whenever people have comparable "spiritual" episodes, whether considered "religious" or not, they can find common ground based upon "reason and experience," not just reason's cooler, discursive arguments favored by the intelligentsia. Consequently, this essay describes a few meditative practices and personal incidents in some detail to provide readers with some examples, even though those conditions primarily arise outside of language's realm. But it also appeals to "reason" by briefly exploring relevant Buddhist doctrines.

II. PERSUASION IS INSUFFICIENT

Secular people tend to value "rationality" and facts, while religious believers are inclined to be more enthusiastic. After all, the core component of Christianity and most other religions—some conception of immortality—

13. There is a complex relationship between global skepticism and relativism. JULIA ANNAS & JONATHAN BARNES, *THE MODES OF SCEPTICISM: ANCIENT TEXTS AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS* 98, 129-45 (1985).

dramatically transcends and rejects the scientific method.¹⁴ Existing evidence overwhelmingly supports the inference that our lives' arc moves from "dust to dust."¹⁵ The crushed turtle in the dirt road appears to merge with the earth.

The tension between empiricism and religious beliefs permeates such political controversies as the environment or the structure of the economy. When Progressives analyze white working class conservatism, they often conclude those workers "don't know their own interests."¹⁶ In other words, those conservatives irrationally fail to understand reality. There is some truth in this accusation, an echo of Engels' "false consciousness."¹⁷ But it is hard for any of us to think clearly in this hyperactive, cacophonous world. A massive propaganda machine polarizes and over-stimulates the populace through disinformation, encouragement of addictive cravings, and relentless waves of distracting entertainments. Many Americans' view of politics is formed by television attack ads, which borrow the paranoid style of militaristic sloganeering to convince the populace that only shameless, greedy hacks would endure such a degrading gauntlet to obtain power. Furthermore, there would be little reason to write essays like this unless the writer sought to change other people's minds about something. Sadly, the critique of delusion applies to almost everyone. Few Americans from any background fully appreciate how they are creating numerous environmental threats to their society's long-term interests. Far fewer (myself included) make the necessary changes. After all, one "rational" response to looming environmental breakdowns is to "eat, drink, and be merry."

It is also patronizing to claim fellow citizens do not "know their interests." Very few people consistently know their best interests, much less act upon them. America's doubling of its obesity rate is an example.¹⁸ As is

14. See 1 SØREN KIERKEGAARD, CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT TO PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENTS 217 (Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, eds. & trans., 1992) ("The thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox.").

15. THE PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS, AND OTHER RITES AND CEREMONIES 285 (1789).

16. See THOMAS FRANK, WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS? 1 (2004) ("People getting their fundamental interests wrong is what American political life is all about. This species of derangement is the bedrock of our civic order . . ."). Frank subsequently argued that neither major political party addresses wealth and income inequality. THOMAS FRANK, LISTEN, LIBERAL 1-7 (2016).

17. *Engels to Franz Mehring*, MARX-ENGELS CORRESPONDENCE 1893, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm (last visited Aug. 28, 2016).

18. See *Obesity Rates & Trends Overview*, THE STATE OF OBESITY, <http://stateofobesity.org/adult-obesity> (last updated Sept. 21, 2015).

usually the case, a segment of the intellectual class claims expertise to shepherd the masses, reenacting Plato's utopian vision of a highly trained, rationalist aristocracy directing society.¹⁹ There is no vast jump from Plato's "philosopher kings," Aquinas' "a few good men," Marx's "vanguard of the proletariat," and Nietzsche's "supermen," to Ayn Rand's glorification of capitalist leaders. Indeed, the smug accusation of ignorance contains an implicit counter-argument: The social critic neither understands nor respects many white working class interests. Usually, the Progressive critic focuses on economic wants, ironically mimicking the barren materialism of neoclassical economics. The analyst then presents religious enthusiasm and patriotic zeal as additional examples of self-delusion.²⁰ However, neither attitude is exclusively self-interested. Not all goals are or should be about maximizing personal wealth and power. Many Christians help others in their congregation and assist the poor. They are attracted to the religion because it provides a caring group based upon doctrines that provide greater purpose than self-aggrandizement. Many young people join the military to protect others. While the scoundrel often claims to adore the flag and the Bible, less ambitious people frequently find a strong sense of community in God and Country that alleviates the lonely, stale dread enhanced by relentlessly feeding one's cravings.

The accusation of ignorance about class interests is also exaggerated, because white working class voters have been caught in a political barrage ever since President Johnson fractured the New Deal coalition by escalating his predecessors' war in Vietnam and supporting African-Americans.²¹ White workers can vote for a Republican elite that extracts wealth from them while cynically honoring their norms of God, Country, and Guns. Or they can vote for a Democratic elite that extracts a bit less wealth while despising them for bigotry, gun-loving militarism, consumerism, and alleged ignorance about their own interests. Now that Democratic Party rulers usually implement the predominately libertarian values of the Democratic

19. See generally PLATO, REPUBLIC (Robin Waterfield trans., 1993).

20. During his first presidential campaign, President Obama said, "[The workers] get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." Ed Pilkington, Obama Angers Midwest Voters with Guns and Religion Remark, THEGUARDIAN (Apr. 14, 2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/14/barackobama.uselections2008>.

21. President Johnson predicted this political barrage upon signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Remarks by the President at LBJ Presidential Library Civil Rights Summit, the WHITE HOUSE Apr. 10, 2014, 12:16 PM), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/10/remarks-president-lbj-presidential-library-civil-rights-summit>. Kevin Phillips explored how the Republican Party could gain more power through a "Southern strategy" aimed at whites. See KEVIN PHILLIPS, THE EMERGING REPUBLICAN MAJORITY 229 (Princeton University Press 2015) (1969).

Leadership Council, the economic differences between the two parties have diminished. Leaders from both political parties throw occasional bones to the masses, bones which also feed their wealthy patrons: The Bush administration passed the prescription drug bill and the Democrats implemented the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Democratic policies of increased taxes and regulations may cause average people to lose almost as much disposable income (at least over the short term) as Republicans. Nor are environmentalists immune from seeking to impose significant economic costs: Many people crave noisy gas-guzzlers that should no longer be made. Furthermore, Supreme Court liberals have not been sympathetic to white working class interests; the liberal bloc has defended affirmative action,²² gun control laws,²³ a rigid separation of church and state,²⁴ and permitted the easy spread of pornography into every computerized home.²⁵

There is no easy way to reduce Culture Wars' hostilities. Each side demands unconditional compliance, turning a cluster of controversial problems into a creed. Members on both sides are monitored for deviance. Obsessed with rationality, Leftists have been prone to fractionalization for centuries. Anyone who disagrees with a particular party platform (which changes over time) must be either foolish or fiendish because "rationality" allegedly provides only one "right answer." If you have reservations about affirmative action, you are a racist. The Right can be equally intolerant. If you support gay marriage, you are a RINO (Republican in Name Only).²⁶ My guess is that many leaders from both parties are deeply amoral, aggressively seeking power and wealth while doubting divine retribution. Their ability to easily polarize the multitude reaffirms their ruling class contempt, self-justifying their lust for dominion. The clever take care of the stupid (at a price, of course).

People within the two major blocs must rekindle the common humanity that transcends existing polarities; a journey requiring shared experiences, not just clever arguments. The most inspiring moment during World War I, the Great War conclusively demonstrating that technology, markets, and civilization do not immunize modern societies from collective madness, occurred when French, British, and German soldiers sang carols together and

22. See *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

23. See *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008).

24. See *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 536 U.S. 639 (2009).

25. See *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 521 U.S. 844 (1997).

26. *Republican in Name Only*, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republican_In_Name_Only (last visited Sept. 17, 2016).

exchanged presents during the Christmas season of 1914.²⁷ Needless to say, generals on both sides quickly terminated such madness.²⁸

III. BUDDHIST-INSPIRED SKEPTICISM/AGNOSTICISM

There are different theories of skepticism, ranging from “global” uncertainty about everything to “local” skepticism about particular issues.²⁹ I begin with the global assumption (not with the contradictory claim of knowledge) that I will never fully understand anything during my brief life. We perceive our Universe by forming opinions, not by using pure reason based upon ultimate knowledge. Even if we somehow discovered a single instance of Kant’s “thing in itself,” we could never be confident about that breakthrough because subsequent events might refute our finding. Our unreliable minds interpret every sensation. Interpretation is never replication; Wittgenstein observed a wide range of linguistic interpretations coexist with any perception: “[E]very interpretation hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.”³⁰ There seems no way to escape different species’ modes of perception. A bat’s perception of a tree is different: both species perceive species-specific sensations, not the actual object.³¹

Global skepticism and agnosticism, by themselves, seemingly provide little or no guidance about how to live. As the murderer in Camus’s *The Stranger* so painfully demonstrated, we can next choose to be saint or sociopath. Thus, many commentators consider this stance to be philosophical instead of practical, leading to the conclusion that global skepticism is “idle.”³² The original skeptics disagreed, asserting that skepticism tended to make one more tranquil, thereby providing a path to personal happiness.

27. Thomas Vinciguerra, “The Truce of Christmas, 1914,” *New York Times*, December 25, 2005, LEARNTOQUESTION (Jan. 19, 2012), <http://www.learntoquestion.com/resources/database/archives/003484.html>.

28. *Christmas Truce*, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce (last modified July 2, 2016).

29. JULIA ANNAS & JONATHAN BARNES, *Introduction to SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, OUTLINES OF SKEPTICISM* xxvi (Julia Annas & Jonathan Barnes eds., Cambridge University Press 2000) (c. 2nd Century A.D.).

30. LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS* 164 (G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker & Joachim Schulte trans., 4th ed. 2009).

31. See THOMAS NAGLE, *MORTAL QUESTIONS* 169-70 (1979).

32. See ANNAS & BARNES, *supra* note 13, at 8 (“‘Philosophical’ doubt is thus essentially idle.”). Annas and Barnes were not completely skeptical about skepticism; they were describing the claim that global skepticism is functionally irrelevant.

Pyrrho, the founder of radical Greek skepticism,³³ travelled to India with Alexander the Great and allegedly talked to Indian practitioners.³⁴ Perhaps he experienced the paradoxical journey from philosophical impermanence and indeterminacy to personal happiness. This is not the place to describe in detail how meditation might illuminate that journey,³⁵ but notice how Buddhist-inspired meditation provides a middle way between total skepticism and dogmatism. Gentleness and tolerance can flourish when we create a spacious mind that is not controlled by instinctive and habitual reactivity.³⁶ A skeptic may be calmer than most people, because he or she is not as agitated and distracted by the biggest and most troubling questions about life and death, mysteries that frequently generate dogmatic, violent divisiveness.³⁷

During the modern era, David Hume was the most eloquent proponent of skepticism. He first extended the domain of global skepticism by undercutting our assumptions about causation but then discussed how Nature (particularly the urge of self-preservation) pragmatically overwhelmed those doubts.³⁸ We cannot fully understand how circumstances arise; we rely on a “few simple principles” to organize and makes sense of our lives, but “we can never arrive at the ultimate principles.”³⁹ We formulate those simple inferences based upon the small sample of perceptions and experiences gathered during our brief lives.⁴⁰ Our inferred “facts” remain vulnerable to refutation: “One wou’d appear ridiculous, who wou’d say, that ‘tis only probable the sun will rise to-morrow’ or that all men must dye; tho’ ‘tis plain we have no farther assurance of these facts, than what experience affords us.”⁴¹ Hume next observed that this dizzying, fundamental indeterminacy had little practical value: We shouldn’t attempt to philosophically refute our

33. *See id.* at 10.

34. *Id.* at 12.

35. The Buddha believed meditation was crucial to avoid philosophical error. “[F]or the destruction of such views about the past and the future, and for transcending them, I have taught and laid down the four foundations of mindfulness.” THE BUDDHA, *Pasadika Sutta: The Delightful Discourse*, in THE LONG DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA 427, 438 (Maurice Walshe trans., 2012).

36. *See* STEPHEN BATCHELOR, *AFTER BUDDHISM* 56 (2015).

37. SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *supra* note 39, at 10-11 (“For those who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled . . . the aim of Sceptics is tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us.”).

38. DAVID HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE 123 (David Fate Norton & Mary J. Norton eds., Oxford University Press 2000) (1740).

39. DAVID HUME, *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published; Entitled, Treatise of Human Nature, &c.*, in A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE 407 (David Fate Norton & Mary J. Norton eds., Oxford University Press 2000) (1740).

40. *Id.* at 410.

41. HUME, *supra* note 38, at 86.

daily, pragmatic theory of causation by walking in front of a train. Hume, who had a conservative, cheerful disposition, did not believe human beings were completely depraved or would become deranged without supernatural constraints. Human nature is complicated. Most of us love our children and care for others. He believed our main problem, which are we are collectively demonstrating on a planetary scale, is a chronic inability to adequately consider long-term consequences.

Although it would be contradictory to claim certainty about the ultimate source of human morality, we apparently can create a moral code without seeking divine assistance. Thus, we might choose to retain global skepticism as humbling background while constructing a pragmatic system to get us through the day. To adopt a popular environmental slogan, such skeptics think globally but act locally. Consequently, we don't need to embrace the conclusions imbedded in Existentialism's bitter sense of absurdity⁴² or atheism's rejection of God's existence. There may be ultimate meaning to life as well as an active god or quarrelling gods. Either way, the Universe remains a place of wonder, beauty, and horror. After all, the processes that brought each of us here border on the miraculous: (1) The possibility of anything; (2) The existence of a universe which has the physical laws and materials to generate and support life; (3) The emergence of life out of this Universe; (4) The human capacity to develop such amazing skills as language, art, and mathematics; (5) The birth of any particular person, an event that would almost certainly never have happened if there had been all but the tiniest of changes in that person's parents' past, our species' history, and everything else that previously happened; and (6) The possibility of having children. Those can be enough "miracles" for one lifetime. Even Hume acknowledged that something unexplainably extraordinary happened when our Universe first emerged. But he was very skeptical that there were any more interventions by that "supreme cause" after it triggered the basic laws of physics, "the common course of nature."⁴³

At best, skepticism, relativism, and agnosticism stimulate a tolerant, flexible attitude towards all religious-oriented believers, including those who aggressively reject all religions. Because the skeptic relies upon opinions instead of knowledge, he or she can't know which of the competing theistic or atheistic beliefs are wrong. One need not try to answer the most important

42. Hume anticipated the Existential writers who dominated intellectual thought in the middle of the Twentieth Century. Camus and Sartre believed that human existence was so meaningless that it was absurd, but each of us must make some sort of a "leap of faith" to live. Both were very active politically, adopting moral codes requiring action.

43. DAVID HUME, *Of the Immortality of the Soul*, in *DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION* 92 (Richard H. Popkin ed., 2d ed. 1998).

questions biggest questions: the likelihood of life after death, the possibility of magic and miracles, the nature and existence of God or gods, the origin of the Universe before the Big Bang, the nature and existence of a “soul,” the true meaning and purpose of life, why there is suffering, and so forth, etc. The original Greek skeptics had a lovely phrase to describe their reaction to such religious questions: they “suspen[d] judgment.”⁴⁴ If you prefer a more contemporary version, a graceful refrain in the introductory song to the second season of “The Leftovers,” a television series that studies society after two percent of the population mysteriously disappears, declares: “I’ll just let the mystery be.”⁴⁵

Selected Buddhist doctrines and practices can provide habitual doubters with one of many paths towards a life of decency and less personal suffering. The meditator leads a broadly “spiritual” life that is not necessarily “religious.” Placing Buddhism within an skepticism’s intellectual framework raises some problems, because the original Buddhist texts presented at least three different Buddhas.⁴⁶ One was a superhero who could read people’s thoughts, transport himself to different locations, and recall innumerable prior lives.⁴⁷ While that more religious Buddha asserted that permanent enlightenment provided an escape from the dreary repetition of reincarnation, many people understandably find hope in reincarnation. Any form of immortality seems preferable to eternal nothingness. Stephen Batchelor, previously a Buddhist monk who collaborated with the Dalai Lama, concluded these religious overlays reflected existing Hindu superstitions that later Buddhists incorporated to make their ideology more attractive.⁴⁸

The second Buddha, whom we have already encountered, believed he could achieve a transcendental state of permanent enlightenment that enabled him to “fully understand.”⁴⁹ Many moderns, seeking certainty and permanent happiness, are attracted to this transcendental Buddha even if they don’t

44. SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *supra* note 29, at 11.

45. 10,000 MANIACS, *Let the Mystery Be*, on FEW AND FAR BETWEEN (Warner/Chappell Music Inc. 1993).

46. See STEPHEN BATCHELOR, CONFESSIONS OF A BUDDHIST ATHEIST 101 (2010) (“[The Pali Canon] contains different voices and narrative styles, internal contradictions, psychological insights followed by tirades on hellfire and damnation, a hopelessly scrambled chronology of events, and mind-numbing repetitions of stock passages.”).

47. See, e.g., THE BUDDHA, *Ambattha Sutta: About Ambattha*, in THE LONG DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 35, at 116 (describing the Buddha invoking a higher power, Yajirapāni the yakha, threatened someone who had not been able to answer one of the Buddha’s questions).

48. See BATCHELOR, *supra* note 46.

49. See THE BUDDHA, *Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*, in THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA 179, 183 (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi transs., 4th ed. 2015).

believe in devas, cosmic karma, or reincarnation.⁵⁰ However, I am very skeptical that anyone could no longer encounter any negative emotions (an internal psychological claim that is hard to refute).

The third, far more secular Buddha refused to speculate about the major religious questions surrounding our existence, advocating methods and perspectives that enable people to live more happily in this uncertain, ever-changing world. This Buddha thought it was not worthwhile to be distracted by such issues, an equivocation resembling the Greeks' gentle method of skepticism that suspends judgment. His list of distracting issues that we probably won't solve includes scientific mysteries as well as religious concerns: the possibility that time is infinite; the relationship between the soul and the body; and the likelihood of life after death.⁵¹ These questions appear unanswerable, so there is no need to adopt, much less require, any particular solution to live happily. This vast perceptual space need not generate Existential despair. The pragmatic Buddha rejected nihilist⁵² and eternalist beliefs about the self and the world.⁵³

The Buddha also rejected global skepticism as the "verbal wriggling" of a "dull and confused" teacher who can only say, "I don't say it is like this. And I don't say it is like that. And I don't say it is otherwise. And I don't say it is not so. And I don't say it is not not so."⁵⁴ The enlightened Buddha, allegedly living in perpetual enlightenment, "directly know[s] earth as earth," because [he] "has fully understood it to the end."⁵⁵ Thus, the Buddha was never a global skeptic even though he assumed pervasive impermanence, but he frequently was a local skeptic who "suspended judgment" on many impenetrable questions. Alas, I am unable to shake my skepticism about transcendence, the capacity of any person to "directly know" anything or to be permanently enlightened. Thus, I turn to the third, most pragmatic Buddha, seeking to be increasingly joyful, kinder, and compassionate to others and myself. However, I am not truly "Buddhist," because I seriously

50. JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI, CHOICELESS AWARENESS: A SELECTION OF PASSAGES FROM THE TEACHING OF J. KRISHNAMURTI (2007).

51. THE BUDDHA, *Cūlamaāhunkya Sutta*, in THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 49, at 533, 536.

52. THE BUDDHA, *Apannaka Sutta*, in THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 49, at 506, 507-10.

53. THE BUDDHA, *Brahmajāla Sutta: The Supreme Net*, in THE LONG DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 35, at 67, 73-75.

54. THE BUDDHA, *Sandaka Sutta*, in THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 42, at 618, 625.

55. THE BUDDHA, *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, in THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 49, at 83, 89.

doubt that anyone can achieve permanent happiness in this impermanent world.

The distinctions between religious, transcendental, metaphysical, and secular “spiritual” beliefs are imprecise. Some doctrines attempting to describe the human condition in nonverifiable ways don’t easily fit within conventional usages of “religious.” They just seem implausible and/or obscure. The Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, which partially reside in this grey area, are the doctrinal starting points for the secular, transcendent, and religious versions of Buddhist-inspired practice.

This essay rearranges the sequence of the Noble Truths to reflect a transition from more verifiable scientific claims to inherently controversial questions of morality. The Second Noble Truth is a scientific proposition about impermanence. The First Noble Truth is a psychological proposition about the suffering caused by that uncertainty. The Third Truth offers a solution but contains transcendental aspects. The Final Truth is ethical and pragmatic, providing tools for alleviating, perhaps even eliminating suffering.

We begin with the Second Noble Truth, which relies upon a law of physics: We can reduce, perhaps eliminate our suffering if we relinquish our futile desires to control our contingent, perpetually changing existence.⁵⁶ Based upon my limited reason and experience, the proposition of pervasive impermanence seems accurate and helpful, a Natural Law that is hard to refute. Time, space, and matter seem deeply intertwined. Matter probably cannot exist with time and space, and time constantly alters matter. The proposition approaches irrefutability, resembling more religious claims, but can be factually refuted if we ever discover something that does not change. Even if such a discovery took place, this common sense proposition provides a good working hypothesis for daily life.

In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha explained how the Second Truth’s physical law of impermanence causes human suffering. Humans miserably live in delusion by clinging to ever-transient desires and dreading the unwanted: “[not getting] what one wants is suffering.”⁵⁷ His sweeping psychological principle, like all others, has an aspect of circularity. Circularity, however, is not the same as religiosity. All moral and scientific systems —such as “All Men Are Created Equal” or evolution—are based upon assumptions and theories although they are not Faiths. The psychological implications of the Buddha’s Natural Law of Impermanence

56. See THE BUDDHA, *Saccasamyutta*, in THE CONNECTED DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA 1838, 1878-84 (Bikkhu Bodhi trans., 2000).

57. *Id.* at 1844.

sound right: We fearfully agonize by seeking too much control. The secular Buddha was not suggesting that his path eliminated pain;⁵⁸ it prevented the mental suffering that often follows and aggravates initial injuries. Notice how this assumption of impermanence undermines some environmentalists' goal of "sustainability." There is no way to sustain this political economy, even if we wanted. We must change to survive and flourish.

The Third Noble Truth claims we can eliminate suffering.⁵⁹ I am not just skeptical but also wary of such transcendental propositions. If everything in life transforms, how can anyone achieve permanent enlightenment? Furthermore, the existence of such a mind state cannot be refuted. While we observe people altering habits and perspectives, we cannot determine if somebody permanently transcended normal reality. From a more political perspective, priests and other believers often invoke transcendental capacities to elevate themselves above the laity, thereby ossifying and excessively legitimating any hierarchy needed to spread doctrines through teaching and example. For a global/local skeptic like myself, it is best to dilute the proposition; the Buddha's path can significantly reduce mental distress but never eliminate it.

The Fourth Noble Truth provides a brief description of means one should use to gain enlightenment: The Eightfold Path.⁶⁰ Morality and meditation play major roles. We can adopt any or all of these tools if we find them worthwhile. Personal anecdotes and scientific surveys support the inference that meditation, community, moderation, and kindness tend to alleviate suffering (what is often called "stress") for many people.⁶¹ I quickly noticed improved short-term memory when resuming practice after a long hiatus.

Aside from permanent enlightenment, other important, traditional Buddhist doctrines reside on the cusp between the secular and religious. The Buddha believed it was possible and desirable to eliminate the "Self." Tibetan Buddhists later described this sought-after mind state as

58. Elsewhere, the Buddha claimed his practices lead to "the disappearance of pain." THE BUDDHA, *Satipatthāna Sutta*, in THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 49, at 145. For excellent analysis, see ANĀLAYO, *SATIPATTHĀNA: THE DIRECT PATH TO REALIZATION* 168-71 (2003) and JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN, *MINDFULNESS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AWAKENING* 280, 291 (2013). The disappearance of pain seems so implausible as to be transcendental.

59. THE BUDDHA, *Saccasamyutta*, in THE CONNECTED DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA 1838, *supra* note 56, at 1838, 1844.

60. *Id.*

61. One study demonstrated that meditation improved older people's sleep. Anahad O'Connor, *Meditation for a Good Night's Sleep*, N.Y. TIMES: WELL (Feb. 23, 2015, 3:06 PM) <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/23/meditation-for-a-good-nights-sleep>.

“emptiness.”⁶² While *fixed* views of self, doctrine, and reality cause suffering and conflict, I don’t desire, much less understand how to eliminate every aspect of “myself.” Every perception and action is processed through a temporary, unique mind-body system: Something got out of bed this morning and has been writing or editing this unique sentence. While there is deep, pervasive impermanence that constantly alters personal identity along with everything else, there also appears to be temporary continuity in the pragmatic world. To use the Buddha’s cryptic phrase, my identity simultaneously “Everything is” and “Everything is not.”⁶³ The sense of personal identity is our deepest mantra, inescapable as long as we remain aware of surroundings.⁶⁴ The Universe blossoms with every birth. Color and sound could not exist without life; those conditions need other causes and interactions to arise. When the tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, there is no noise because there must be contact between the sound wave and an ear. More practically, why seek to eliminate all attachments and all sense of “self?” How can one get out of bed if there is no self? Our goal is not to transcend life and suffering, but to embrace it.

The best-known Buddhist conception of karmic causation has completely nonverifiable, religious overtones: Some mysterious force allegedly distributes pain and pleasure to people depending upon the merit or wrongfulness of prior actions.⁶⁵ Whenever something terrible happens to someone, that event resulted from improper action in this or prior lives.⁶⁶ There is retribution during life as well as in the afterlife when a flawed person is forced to reincarnate (as a lowly animal if one acted particularly badly).⁶⁷

62. For example, see THE BUDDHA, *Opammassamyutta*, in THE CONNECTED DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA 1838, *supra* note 56, at 706, 709. The Buddha called this state “supramundane,” whatever that might mean. *Id.*

63. THE BUDDHA, *Selected Discourses from the Pali Canon*, in BATCHELOR, *supra* note 36, at 337.

64. This point was made at a recent meditation retreat. Michele McDonald, Rebecca Bradshaw, Greg Scharf, Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey, Insight Meditation Society, Liberation of Heart and Mind (May 22 – June 4, 2015). Unfortunately, I cannot be certain which teachers said what, so I can only attribute any insights to them all. The centrality and inevitability of some dimension of identity (even if one decides not to call it the “Self”) is consistent with Hume’s claim that we live by a few ultimate principles: space, time, cause and effect, resemblance, contiguity, external existence, and *personal identity*. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE, *supra* note 38, at 1, 50-178. Like the Buddha, Hume did not believe in a fixed self. We cannot find any identity separate from our perceptions: “The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.” *Id.* at 165. Thus, identity is “some fiction or imaginary principle of union” that we rely upon to survive and make sense of our world. *Id.* at 171.

65. BATCHELOR, *supra* note 46, at 294-304.

66. *Id.*

67. *Id.*

Once again, we see the recurring, innate human need to find a meta-theory of causation that rectifies all wrongs, eliminating Nature's structural injustices that often reward the cruel and punish the meek. However, there is another, more secular version of karma. Steven Batchelor noted that the Buddha rejected that religious conception of karma in one of his earliest suttas.⁶⁸ The Buddha observed that many causes affect us: "Some feelings . . . arise . . . from phlegm disorders," "wind disorders," "imbalance," "change of climate," "careless behavior," and "assault."⁶⁹ The murder of a loved one is not karmic payback; it is terrible fortune. In other words, the secular Buddha believed our intentions and actions create karma that influences but does not exclusively determine our future.⁷⁰ If we drink too much or use heroin, it is foreseeable we will become miserable. If we act unethically, we cannot meditate effectively, creating a version of mindfulness that can be worse than reptilian. On the other hand, when we consistently attempt to meditate with humble curiosity, we calm down.

The Buddha said his doctrine should be investigated and tested.⁷¹ The meditator should rely upon personal experience for verification. He thereby applied an early version of the scientific method to his own doctrines.⁷² Nothing—laws of physics, psychological theories, psychological outcomes, or practical methods—should be taken on blind faith. With his usual thoroughness, the Buddha dismissed all sources of authority aside from personal experience:

[D]o not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cognition, by the acceptance of a view by pondering it, by the

68. See BATCHELOR, *supra* note 46, at 142.

69. THE BUDDHA, *Vedanāsamayutta*, in THE CONNECTED DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 56, at 1260, 1279 (emphasis added).

70. STEPHEN BATCHELOR, BUDDHISM WITHOUT BELIEFS 121 (1997). "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma." THE BUDDHA, *The Book of Sixes*, in THE NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA 851, 963 (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., 2012). All actions arise from greed, hatred, and delusion or non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. *See id.* at 902-03. In another sutta, the Buddha became more obscure, claiming wholesome mind states create karma that "leads to the cessation of kamma." THE BUDDHA, *The Book of Threes*, in THE NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, at 195-344. I cannot grasp how present intentions eliminate all future intentions.

71. See THE BUDDHA, *The Book of Threes*, in THE NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 63, at 195, 278.

72. See JEREMY W. HAYWARD, *Scientific Method and Validation*, in GENTLE BRIDGES: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DALAI LAMA ON THE SCIENCES OF MIND 6 (Jeremy W. Hayward & Francisco J. Varela eds., 2001).

seeming competence [of a speaker], or because you think: “The ascetic is our guru.”⁷³

It is insufficient to adopt his beliefs wholesale or to study them academically. The consistent practice of meditation enhances our innate post-discursive mind state. The meditator patiently and quietly observes whatever happens inside and outside the mind instead of primarily listening to and reacting to the discursive mind’s incessant babble. Fluctuating between the meditative space and normal consciousness (during which one can study Buddhist works to refine understanding and technique), each meditator assesses every doctrine. Meditators can “know for yourself[f]”⁷⁴ how to live more happily.

Everyone should take what he or she needs from this genius’s vision. One may decide to gently leave the more religious and transcendental doctrines behind veils of skepticism, agnosticism, simple doubt, confusion, or disinterest. Or, depending upon one’s inclinations, one might include some or all those beliefs. Nor is there any need to become any kind of a “Buddhist,”⁷⁵ much less conclude his methods are the exclusive means to a better life. My mother-in-law is one of the kindest, happiest people I have ever met, but she never studied Buddhism or formally meditated (she does regularly pray for other people’s happiness). Thus, we should consider the following paragraphs, which describe some Buddhist-inspired practices and experiences in more detail, as suggestive instead of directive, one path for some secularly inclined individuals to feel less alienated from the Universe, other beings, and themselves. That sense of inclusion can extend to those who hold more dogmatic, religious views. The secular, the spiritual, the religious, and mystical, and the obscure are not so far apart, because everyone needs emotional beliefs to function in the world. Can’t we find solace and community because everyone wrestles with the same basic questions, problems, desires, and fears?

IV A BRIEF LOOK AT BUDDHIST-INSPIRED PRACTICES

People start meditating for many reasons: stress reduction, pain management, alleviation of depression, increased calmness, permanent happiness, termination of the cycle of reincarnation, and/or enhanced ability to act more compassionately. While never attracted to the more religious

73. THE BUDDHA, *The Book of Threes*, in THE NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 63, at 195, 280 (second alteration in original).

74. *Id.*

dimensions within Buddhist traditions, I have periodically shifted objectives. Sometimes the primary pursuit has been to become a kinder person. During other periods, the quest has focused on discipline, concentration, clarity, or joy.

Whenever life presents severe challenges, the practice requires dogged endurance. If the physical or mental agony is great enough, that problem can be the starting point of the formal sitting meditation. The Tibetan nun Pema Chödrön recommends that the meditator drop the unique “story line” immediately causing the misery and observe how triggered emotions rip through the physical body.⁷⁵ One might feel sadness flowing down one’s face like a thin waterfall or rage tightening the chest. The pain constantly shifts intensity, location, and sensation (providing yet another confirmation of the law of impermanence). Freed from resistance and denial, discomfort usually intensifies. After all, every new tragedy we encounter dredges up similar past defeats and worries from the subconscious mind. This is not the first time we have been fearful, depressed, angry, or overwhelmed. During such difficult times, the formal practice can be the worst part of an already agonizing day. The meditator no longer runs from or denies the dreadfulness stalking their life: They study with tender, patient curiosity the ghastly dance between recurring painful emotions and bodily effects. Sometimes that encounter only lasts for a few moments before the meditator needs to contemplate less painful mental formations. Other times, it continues throughout the entire session, leaving the meditator drained. As one friend said, “You have not really meditated until you have cried.”

Just as there are different meditative ends, there are also numerous meditative means. Various Buddhist traditions have generated a wealth of meditative practices, each providing different benefits. There are many “objects of meditation” that a meditator can revisit after becoming lost in a train of thought; different “objects” emphasize different objectives. The Vipassana “insight” tradition follows the method the Buddha described in great detail in the canonical text, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.⁷⁶ Perhaps the Buddha’s greatest contribution was precisely explaining how to meditate effectively. After quietly settling down, the meditator watches the breath ebb and flow. There is no willfulness: Some breaths are long and others are short. One might notice two pauses between the in-breath and the out-breath or the rising and falling of shoulders or back. Whenever the mind engages in its inherent wandering tendency, the meditator eventually becomes aware of that

75. See PEMA CHÖDRÖN, *START WHERE YOU ARE: A GUIDE TO COMPASSIONATE LIVING* 45 (1994).

76. See THE BUDDHA, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, in *THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA*, *supra* note 49, at 145-55.

meandering and gently returns attention to the breath. Indeed, some say recognition of the drifting, discursive mind is a small glimpse of enlightenment.

It is amazing how much follows from this seemingly simple advice. Every breath reconnects us to the rest of existence. The meditator might perceive complete dependence on other plants and animals, first for producing oxygen and later for providing food. One repetitively experiences every breath's transience, tiny examples verifying the Buddha's First Noble Truth of Impermanence.

The Buddha and his followers invented many other techniques, other "objects of meditation" to revisit after noticing the wandering, chattering mind. Loving-kindness meditations increase one's capacity for friendliness. These practices strongly resemble prayer: The meditator might wish that various beings (including themselves) may be safe, well, happy, and live with ease.⁷⁷ Notice that there are no requests from a deity; there is the hope that others *may* be happier. Many Tibetans practice Lo Jong, contemplating an aphorism randomly picked from a list of heartening slogans. One of my favorites is "Abandon any hope of fruition."⁷⁸ The Zen tradition combines koans, an absurd sense of humor, and precise posture to develop powerful self-discipline.⁷⁹ I trust my intuition to choose which tools seem most beneficial to achieve ends currently being pursued.

One can make minor refinements. While writing this essay, I was exploring relationships between breath meditation, listening meditation, and "choiceless awareness" (a challenging practice where you try to be aware of whatever your mind perceives next).⁸⁰ I had noticed that the experience of returning to the four stages of the breath (in-breath, pause, out-breath, pause) is often reassuringly sensual and intimate but often somewhat abstract. Countlessly revisiting the breath's ebb and flow creates a pleasant refuge that may be somewhat deadened by routine: One slides back into breath, relaxes too much, and loses contact with the present moment. To freshen that experience, I sometimes expressly tell myself to notice how each breath, whether heard or not, uniquely coexists with any and all arising sounds, a perpetually varying symphony. Simultaneously attending to breath and sound is like listening to a concerto: The breath resembles the soloist while

77. I learned that simple, friendly version from a taped dharma talk by Sharon Salzberg, cofounder, Insight Meditation Society. For a more protracted discussion of "metta practice" that uses similar terminology, see SHARON SALZBERG, *LOVING-KINDNESS: THE REVOLUTIONARY ART OF HAPPINESS* 29-30 (1995).

78. CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA, *TRAINING THE MIND* 94 (Judith L. Lief ed., 2003).

79. See, e.g., SHUNRYU SUZUKI, *ZEN MIND, BEGINNER'S MIND* (1970).

80. KRISHNAMURTI, *supra* note 50, at 19.

the changing background noise seems like an orchestra. At every moment, I try to remind myself that I have never perceived “this” combination before. While it is possible that the mind can only notice one thing during any microsecond, the two techniques merge. As awareness settles, the verbal reminders fade away. The mind floats, lightly giving more attention to breathing and noises than anything else that might arise.

In recent years, “mindfulness” has become something of a cultural phenomenon (perhaps even a “fad”) in the United States.⁸¹ Jon Kabat-Zinn created a useful stress reduction program that begins with breath meditation, body scanning, and yoga.⁸² Kabat-Zinn would not consider such techniques sufficient: he agreed with the Dalai Lama that “My religion is kindness.”⁸³ However, the Wikipedia definition of mindfulness narrowly emphasizes technique: “Mindfulness is the ‘intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one’s attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment, which can be trained by meditational practices derived from Buddhist *anapanasati*.”⁸⁴ The goal is to create individuals who can more efficiently achieve chosen goals because they feel less stress. It is not surprising that private corporations and the military employ some Buddhist techniques to increase productivity or reduce post-traumatic stress syndrome.⁸⁵ While an amoral conception of mindfulness provides many personal benefits (at least for some people), it is woefully insufficient to resolve our severe personal, interpersonal, or global difficulties. A mindful assassin may be a more contented and effective murderer and a mindful corporate predator may sleep better, but they still suffer from distracting self-degradation caused by harming others. These meditators are not engaged in “right mindfulness” or “right action.” A meditator needs to become more ethical to advance on the path, because memories of unethical behavior disrupt meditation. More importantly, alert wrongdoers continue to harm others. Indeed, their superficial sense of serenity and ease might provide

81. Matt Tenney, *Why the Mindfulness Fad Won't Go Away*, HUFFINGTON POST: THIRD METRIC (Mar. 1, 2016 4:11 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matt-tenney/why-the-mindfulness-fad-wont-go-away_b_9352404.html.

82. See JON KABAT-ZINN, *MINDFULNESS FOR BEGINNERS: RECLAIMING THE PRESENT MOMENT—AND YOUR LIFE* (2012).

83. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Foreword to* SHARON SALZBERG, *LOVING-KINDNESS: THE REVOLUTIONARY ART OF HAPPINESS*, *supra* note 77.

84. *Mindfulness*, WIKIPEDIA, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140718210334/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness>.

85. Vujanovic, Niles, Pietrefesa, Potter, & Schmertz, *Potential of Mindfulness in Treating Trauma Reactions*, U.S. DEP'T OF VETERANS AFFS., *Jeanne Meister, Future of Work: Mindfulness as a Leadership Practice*, FORBES (Apr. 27, 2015), <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/overview/mindful-PTSD.asp> (last updated Feb. 23, 2016); <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2015/04/27/future-of-work-mindfulness-as-a-leadership-practice/#39c9e9ada41b>.

them with internal license to become more vicious; they imagine they have transcended conventional conceptions of good and evil.

According to the Buddha, mindfulness is not the ultimate end: It is one of seven reinforcing factors that work together to reduce suffering (and perhaps achieve enlightenment): mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, relaxation, concentration, and equanimity.⁸⁶ In this passage, mindfulness appears as the first meditative step, not the ultimate method or goal. “Right mindfulness” appears within his demanding moral and philosophical approach called the “Noble Eightfold Path:” right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, *right mindfulness*, and right concentration.⁸⁷

Thus, Buddhist-inspired mindfulness has a vast moral dimension, even if one often aspires to being nonjudgmental towards oneself during formal meditation. However, one should not simply be nonjudgmental. Sometimes, one should follow Pema Chödrön’s advice and become “unconditionally friendly” towards whatever arises.⁸⁸ Otherwise, one mimics the cooler analytics of science rather than the warmth of kindness. We compassionately observe our own suffering to learn how to act compassionately towards others after formal meditation ends.

The Buddha required a strong moral code based upon generosity and not harming others (including animals). Generosity is the first step, eroding our personality’s greediness by elevating interests of others above personal desires.⁸⁹ For householders (non-monastics), the Buddha created five precepts premised upon reducing harm to self and others: One should abstain from killing, taking things without permission, engaging in sexual misconduct, indulging in false speech, and consuming intoxicants.⁹⁰ Nor should one engage in the following five trades: “trading in weapons, trading in living beings, trading in meat, trading in intoxicants, trading in poisons.”⁹¹ Thus, one cannot be a fully mindful soldier or manufacturer of carcinogenic products.

86. See THE BUDDHA, *Bojjhngasamyutta*, in THE CONNECTED DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 56, at 1567, 1573.

87. THE BUDDHA, *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta*, in THE LONG DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 35, at 335, 348-49.

88. PEMA CHÖDRÖN, WHEN THINGS FALL APART: HEART ADVICE FOR DIFFICULT TIMES 23 (1997).

89. *The Buddha’s Advice to Laypeople*, GENEROSITY, <https://buddhasadvice.wordpress.com/generosity> (last visited Aug. 28, 2016).

90. THE BUDDHA, *Dighajanu*, in THE NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, *supra* note 69, at 1196.

91. THE BUDDHA, *The Happiness Visible in this Present Life*, in IN THE BUDDHA’S WORDS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF DISCOURSES FROM THE PALI CANON, at 105, 126 (Bhikkhu Bodhi ed., 2005).

The Tibetan Buddhists believe compassion was not just a means to enlightenment but also the ultimate goal. The Bodhisattva foregoes permanent enlightenment, returning to normal reality to alleviate other beings' suffering.⁹² A weird tension exists within the Buddhist tradition: Its monastic quietism tends to accept the status quo, but its psychology, epistemology, and morality are revolutionary.

V. THE VARIETY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

During a recent silent meditation retreat, I often walked with a steaming cup of tea to the front of the main building. One could look past the simple but thoughtful flower garden, over a tall hedge, to a line of hills faintly tracing the Western horizon. Two or three times—for less than a total of ten minutes—an extraordinary degree of tranquility spread through mind and body. It felt like residing within a serenely beautiful three-dimensional painting that gradually and elegantly changed every moment. Nothing seemed displaced, including myself. Normally, there is a slight tinge of anxiousness and tightness in the chest, a bodily symptom of existential dread. I now am more aware of that extremely low-grade anxiety's physical manifestations, because they significantly diminished during those episodes. Soon, this blissful consciousness complied with the Law of Impermanence and dissolved. Indeed, I spent several minutes watching that increased clarity gradually fade into regular consciousness. Thanks to experience and core teachings about impermanence, the subsequent upsurge in anxiety generated little distress. For whatever it is worth, this was not my first experience of an exceptionally gratifying mind state. Most meditators would not continue meditating if they did not sometimes experience tranquility and joy.

Fortunately, those few minutes resembled stones dropped into a pond: I still periodically feel gentle ripples. Who knows? Perhaps I felt for five or ten minutes one percent of what the Dalai Lama senses two hours a day. No wonder he is so delighted to be alive! Of course, those episodes could have just been a delusion, a minor step, or even a misstep should I become obsessed with replicating those moments. The Buddha described seven advanced meditative states.⁹³ Some meditators spend a great deal of time in those joyful places. They can become as addictive and distracting as any other impediment. I think we should accept and embrace our uneasy

92. See, e.g., CHÖGYAM TRUNGA, *THE BODHISATTVA PATH OF WISDOM AND COMPASSION* (2013).

93. Four of these mind states are called "jhānas" and three are called "True Knowledges." THE BUDDHA, *Mahā-Assapura Sutta*, in *THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA*, *supra* note 49, at 367-70.

relationships with life and death, including the slight tremor of existential dread churning the heart. It is not always easy to be unconditionally friendly to whatever manifests within.

It may be a truism, but it is humbling to remember that every person has a unique blend of strengths and weaknesses. I appear to have something of a religious temperament but a secular intellect that prefers suspending judgment about the most fundamental, seemingly unknowable questions. Thus, those blissful events seemed somewhat transformative, but not at all transcendental. If one reads mystical literature from any culture, one encounters similar descriptions of peaceful, deep integration. A religious person might say I had been “blessed.” While there definitely arose a sense of gratitude resembling grace, such terminology seems a bit too hierarchical, intimating a divine force concerned about my life. My guess is that meditation triggers chemicals and thoughts deeply imbedded in our minds that enable us to continue living while knowing we will die.

Overall, these practices have generated experiences, thoughts, and feelings that create a common ground for intimate, honest conversations with those who have had more theistically inspired experiences of well-being. I have an increased respect for religious enthusiasm, so long as the enthusiast has similar respect.

VI. THE SANGHA

The Buddha described “three jewels” that assist people towards enlightenment: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.⁹⁴ Creating a peaceful refuge by emulating the Buddha’s character and behavior should not become a cult of personality; that outcome would undermine his teachings about self-absorption and taming the ego. He offered himself as a role model, as have such essential thinkers as Confucius, Jesus, Socrates, and the early skeptic Pyrrho. While the word “dharma” has several meanings, most people believe the Buddha referred to his ideas in this passage. The Sangha consists of a group of motivated meditators who befriend, support, and educate each other.

This communal aspect of Buddhism is underappreciated in the dangerously atomized West, where so many people are obsessed with self-improvement. The Sangha is another “holy place[] where the races meet,”⁹⁵ providing an opportunity to develop through friendship and discussion. Interacting with numerous people, some of whom will trigger aggravation, is

94. See SANGHARAKSHITA, *THE THREE JEWELS; THE CENTRAL IDEALS OF BUDDHISM* (2006).

95. LEONARD COHEN, *Democracy, on THE FUTURE* (Columbia 1992).

another meditative practice. New meditators often find the first year or two of meditation quite rewarding, even exciting: They calm down, perhaps have intense experiences, and perceive the world and themselves differently. But over subsequent years, various impediments arise, undermining the commitment to sit every day with whatever arises in the mind. One member of my Sangha cryptically joked, “Meditation is not all that cracked up as it claims to be.” One need only look in the mirror to be reminded about the difficulties of maintaining any discipline; billions of us cannot overcome such destructive addictions as cigarettes, laziness, excessive consumption, obesity, or debilitating depression.

The Sangha resembles a religious congregation. One witnesses the personal and interpersonal benefits of associating with a wide range of people interested in each other’s well being. For those who don’t enjoy social chitchat, it is a relief to be around others willing to discuss life’s deeper joys and challenges. From a political perspective, these groups exemplify the intermediary institutions that De Tocqueville maintained were an essential to American democracy. Such groups help satisfy the need for tribal solidarity that throbs within our genetic code. Instead of watching screens alone, we regularly venture into our community for guidance and companionship.⁹⁶ Before seeking commonality with religious or political organizations that may have doctrines we might find implausible or even repellant, it helps to become part of a supportive, friendly community with a group of individuals who have more compatible opinions. By befriending ourselves and a few people who had been strangers, we develop a greater capacity to trust and work with many others.

VII. ABIDING WITH HATE, GREED, AND DELUSION

While it would be gratifying if this essay piqued a few readers’ curiosity to explore Buddhist-informed, ethically infused meditation instead of the amoral version of “mindfulness” that is one of America’s latest fads, this essay is not designed to persuade anyone to adopt any particular spiritual practice. It attempts to expand our capacity for mutual kindness and respect, based upon a shared religious instinct, without degrading that impulse with divisive dogma. Many people find solace by communicating with a deity, placing their prayers within a reassuring, supernatural framework that

96. ROBERT D. PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* 224 (2000). Putnam later described how Americans frequently turn to religious intermediary institutions. See ROBERT D. PUTNAM & DAVID E. CAMPBELL, *AMERICAN GRACE: HOW RELIGION DIVIDES AND UNITES US* 29-32 (2012).

proposes answers to fundamental questions about life and death.⁹⁷ If they wish, they can incorporate some of these Buddhist meditative techniques into their prayers, quieting their mind before attempting communication with a higher power. Indeed, many people join Sanghas without abandoning prior religions.

There are many more likenesses between religion and this blend of skepticism, relativism, Buddhism, and agnosticism, similarities that beget community instead of discord. For example, most traditional religions teach humility and gentleness. Virtues are preferred to vices. Is there really a great difference between the bird-loving Saint Francis of Assisi and the Buddha? Both monastic traditions require self-discipline and a sincere attempt to conform to an external set of ethical guidelines.⁹⁸ Rules and hierarchies can be beneficial. For example, meditators are rarely permitted to speak during silent retreats.⁹⁹

While the secular Buddha sidestepped recurrent religious quandaries, he consistently confronted daily life's challenges. After all, the Buddha's First Noble Truth observes that our lives are permeated with dissatisfaction. His core meditative practice of "returning to the breath" is simple to describe and intended to reduce self-loathing, but most practitioners are quickly humbled by the practice. They immediately discover they cannot control their mind for protracted periods of time; the mind naturally shifts its attention—reacting to current events, reenacting prior memories, or imagining future possibilities. Because meditation creates a mind state located somewhere between normal consciousness and dreaming, weird and disturbing thoughts and feelings easily emerge from the subconscious. Often, the meditator is caught in swirling chatter and imagery, the infamous, discursive "monkey mind."¹⁰⁰

Not only are there many impediments to maintaining concentration during formal practice, but there also is the far greater challenge of maintaining the practice. A practitioner skips a day, cuts a few meditations short, skips a few more days, and suddenly is no longer meditating. Or one uncovers so many painful thoughts and feelings that one retreats to the delusional world of addictive denial. Few, if any of us, can completely abide

97. See *Find Comfort in Religion*, THE ARDA, http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_51.asp (last visited Aug. 30. 2016).

98. See *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MONASTICISM* 168 (William Johnston ed., 2000)

99. See Judith Soal, *Ten Days Without Talking*, THE GUARDIAN (Mar. 9, 2011 15:00 EST), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/mar/09/ten-days-without-talking>.

100. Madeline Diamond, *Here's How You Can Meditate Anytime, Anywhere*, HUFFINGTON POST: SLEEP+WELLNESS (July 12, 2016 4:45 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-tibetan-buddhist-masters-simple-guide-to-meditation_us_57850a79e4b07c356cfe8158.

with all the Buddha's moral requirements: We are not generous enough with our time and resources; we continue to imbibe intoxicants; we remain fixated about our career, family, and things, and/or we speak harshly about others. Most of us continue to deliberately kill other beings: I put out poison for carpenter ants that devoured part of my house. The practice can become another guilt-inducing stressor. After all, we encounter our most unwanted character traits during meditation, because we are finally relaxed enough to provide the time and space for our mind to reveal its immense range of thoughts and feelings, including those we normally suppress.

Such challenges need not be debilitating; they can become the path to partial liberation from relentless, debilitating self-absorption. When we become more aware of our limitations, we may become less judgmental of others and ourselves. I don't think people should drive huge cars, but I live in a large, air-conditioned house. There are many other ways I fall short of my ideals, but this essay is not a confessional. Increased awareness of the causes of suffering and the bodily pain it inflicts can lead us to have more sympathy for other people's difficulties. Suppose you are suffering from knee pain. You might focus on how that pain is mutating within your body, next sympathize with all other creatures that are enduring similar knee pain, and then wish their pain would alleviate. In an instant, your suffering was transmuted into sympathy. After formal meditation ends, you may be more likely to compassionately assist others with chronic pain.

The meditative path provides many techniques to gradually erode, if not eliminate, the pain and suffering caused by excessive egoism's stranglehold. As we become less inclined to immediately act upon our impulses, we gain liberating self-control. Soon after returning to meditation a few years ago, I became much more aware of how my body manifested emotions. Anger arose from deep within the body; it gradually began fizzing within the solar plexus, creating an uneasy tightness that increased in irritability. This early warning system provided an opportunity to not act upon or even reveal the growing resentment. I simply observed anger's emergence and waited for the physical-emotional-mental sensations to dissolve. Over time, anger did not arise as frequently or fiercely. While some want to eliminate anger, I aspire to diminish hatred, the wish that others suffer. Outrage remains a powerful analytical tool to study injustice, while hatred and cruelty are self-degrading and contagious.

To prevent our species from ruining this planet for ourselves and many other beings, we must reduce greed, hatred, and delusion. If techniques like meditation make us less arrogant and judgmental, it is easier to reach people of faith, doubt, or no faith at all. We next can develop a broad moral framework that can be part of the movement to make this planet more

habitable for diverse beings. From a Buddhist perspective, excessive personal greed, hatred, and ignorance are the fundamental “unjust structural inequalities” residing deep within each person that cause so much injury to self and others. It may be discouraging that these impulses permeate every person’s psychological structure, but it is also encouraging that there are numerous ways to reduce their influence.

Finally, the practice can be beneficial irrespective of any capacity to create a coalition sufficiently large to address the myriad, systemic threats to humanity’s collective happiness. If our species somehow overcomes the internal and external obstacles to creating viable, humane societies, every person will still encounter illness, the challenges of old age, and death. Utopia can never be Heaven. Should our collective future make a dramatic turn for the worse, the meditator has a few tools to face those problems with more joy, equanimity, and decency.

Anger, greed, and ignorance remain within genetic heritage; we cannot survive without some aggression to obtain and defend enough goods to satisfy basic needs. Most of us continue to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Even the Buddha had goals: One should seek joyful enlightenment. Whether the mind state of permanent nirvana exists or not, a disciplined meditative practice yields many benefits. Some of these benefits are almost paradoxical; one lives more peacefully within a seemingly indifferent Universe by acknowledging and embracing the shimmering transience of life.

VIII. KINDNESS: THE SPIRITUAL COMMONS

It is not enough to be aware of similarities in the modes of thought that structure science, religion, and politics, the comparable psychological problems that everyone faces, and the widespread social/political/economic/psychological resistance to make necessary changes to prevent a disastrous escalation of environmental tribulations. We must determine what to do next. At the personal level, the Buddha would probably recommend we first develop a meditative practice, aspire to inflict less harm, join a group to facilitate that journey, and learn more about the human condition. We thereby develop the patience and kindly perspective needed to work more effectively with others.

In other words, we must cultivate kindness, the moral framework for interpersonal action. It is not enough to reside in blissful jhanas or be more aware and focused; one must more frequently act with open gentleness.

Kindness is the common ground, the holy, spiritual domain where all decent people can meet, irrespective of differing reactions to religion questions. Such basic virtues as patience, tolerance, friendliness, love, and

compassion pervade major religions and ground many, such as myself, who have no fixed religious beliefs. Whether one starts with a fundamental assumption in a God, no God, or uncertainty, one need not turn those assumptions into universal requirements. While the first step is to reduce harm to others, kindness is the best moral litmus test, residing within and without the legal domain. The Buddha manifested his genius in many ways. He (or the monks who transcribed the oral tradition two hundred years after his death) was very analytical. His writings contain detailed descriptions of perception, the meditative method, the path to enlightenment, and the ethical code. Indeed, one massive collection is called *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*.¹⁰¹ Elsewhere the Buddha subdivided kindness into four intertwined concepts: loving kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity.¹⁰²

Western novices are often startled when first taught a “loving kindness” meditative practice. Usually, the practitioner initially directs friendly thoughts towards themselves.. Even the first stage presents surprising problems. I have observed that many people find it extremely difficult to hope they would be safe, well, happy, and live with ease. They believe such goodwill towards oneself is selfish, or they are unworthy of self-respect. They suppose they should be immediately helping someone else instead of increasing their sense of “self” by also pursuing personal happiness. When the Dali Lama first came to the United States, he was puzzled by our notion of “self hatred,” the prime suspect behind depression.¹⁰³ Pema Chödrön believes unconditional friendliness towards oneself sets the meditative tone for the pursuit of happiness through kindness. Echoing the famous Buddhist metaphor of a beautiful lotus flower emerging from the muck, she explains how to transmute dreadful experiences and emotions into positive ones. One extends that good will towards oneself to teachers, loved ones (including pets), friends, neutral people, and difficult people, eventually wishing that all beings be well. This final aspiration is so impossible (because beings must kill one another to survive) that it approaches religiosity. A gentle disposition gradually spreads to other people and beings. Mindfulness becomes more than concentrated awareness; it grows into a “warm readiness”¹⁰⁴ for whatever happens next. Such warmth can only originate in a gentle heart.

101. THE NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., 2012).

102. See THE BUDDHA, Tevijja Sutta: *The Threefold Knowledge*, in THE LONG DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA *supra* note 35, at 187, 194. The following paragraphs were profoundly influenced by dharma talks at a recent retreat. McDonald et al., *supra* note 64.

103. Diana Winston, *Wide Awake: A Buddhist Guide for Teens*, in THE BUDDHA IS STILL TEACHING 90 (Jack Kornfield ed., 2010).

104. This is another insight I learned from that retreat. McDonald et al., *supra* note 64.

Sympathetic joy celebrates others' successes. Instead of writhing in jealousy and resentment, you rejoice in other people's happiness, hoping they continue to thrive. At the crudest level, one will become happier if other people's accomplishments make one cheerful instead of envious. Obviously, this reaction undermines the competitive instinct, which increases self-absorption, always seeking advantage and/or a higher rung on various hierarchical ladders. As with loving kindness, sympathetic joy can be cultivated during formal meditation by first delighting in one's own successes before rejoicing in the accomplishments of loved ones, the triumphs of friends, the victories of people one doesn't know very well, even the achievements of "difficult people" who cause you stress and injury, and the achievements of all beings. Notice the similarities between these kindness practices and religious prayer. In both situations, one repetitively uses certain phrases. The big difference is the absence of any deity. The practice is nontheistic, unwilling to take positions on theism or atheism. Thus there are no requests, complaints, or special relationships.

Some readers may think parts of this practice are ridiculous: Who could or should wish their enemies (the most "difficult people") happiness and success? I sometimes cannot direct benign thoughts towards people whom I dislike, much less wish those thoughts to come true. The Buddha's ethical path to happiness resolves this quandary. Like so many others, he rejects the neoclassical economic assumptions that happiness is a purely individualized construct. The Buddha did not think a murderer or greedy person could be happy so long as they continued upon the same path. The greedy, fearful, and deluded might obtain momentary pleasure, but their life is fundamentally wretched and degraded. So when one wishes that others be "happy" or have "success" in life, one does not necessarily hope they obtain whatever they currently want (which might be heroin or world domination). One yearns they find a way to live more gently, enabling them to befriend themselves and assist others.

Compassion is the dynamic aspect of kindness: The compassionate person acts to reduce other beings' suffering. Arthur Schopenhauer believed compassionate action was "the true and ultimate goal of all morals and moralizing."¹⁰⁵ Deeply influenced by the *Upanishads*, he offered the following maxim: "Injure no one; on the contrary, help everyone as much as you can."¹⁰⁶ Although loving kindness and sympathetic joy have their

105. ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, ON THE BASIS OF MORALITY 97 (E.F.J. Payne trans., Hackett Publishing 1995) (1837).

106. *Id.* at 92 n.5.

energetic aspects, they are a bit more passive, encouraging us to perceive others more tenderly and less competitively.

We must define compassion precisely, because compassion has often been commingled with sympathy and empathy. We can start with Schopenhauer's clarifying definitions. One acts compassionately by helping another being without expecting anything (internal or external) in return: "[T]he relation between justice as practiced by men and genuine honesty of the heart is analogous to that between expressions of politeness and the genuine love for one's neighbor. "Unlike politeness, such love overcomes egoism not ostensibly, but actually."¹⁰⁷ Schopenhauer believed that the compassionate principle was the only way to combat the bourgeois creed of selfishness, which measures the worth of everything by its exchange value¹⁰⁸ and abides by the maxim, "Help no one; on the contrary, injure all if it brings you any advantage."¹⁰⁹ Even worse is the sadistic impulse: "But rather injure all as much as you can."¹¹⁰ Thus, compassion, not justice is the strongest challenger to "might is right."¹¹¹ Notice how Schopenhauer's definitions are a declaration of war on prevailing Western political and economic assumptions. Humans should not be motivated exclusively by self-interest. A compassionate act is an absurd act, an existential act defying prevailing social conventions, personal needs, and even the probable meaninglessness of life. Most neoclassical economists would call it "irrational," which actually is a compliment.

So how does compassion differ from empathy and sympathy? Empathy, a skill that varies from person to person, enables someone to sense another's emotions. Bill Clinton famously said, "I feel your pain."¹¹² If you spent any time with the man, you probably felt you were the center of his kindly attention. While empathy is often humane, it also can be a sociopath's tool. The trick of any confidence game is for the "con man" to gain the victim's confidence by pretending to care for them and understand their situation. Many sociopaths are friendly, charming, and sensitive to others' feelings and needs (which they then manipulate for their own interests).

A sympathetic person feels badly when observing other suffering beings. The sociopath has little sympathy but may have a great deal of empathy. The

107. *Id.* at 122.

108. *See id.* at 101.

109. *Id.* at 92 n.6.

110. *Id.*

111. *Id.*

112. Bill Clinton, Excerpts from an Exchange with Heckler (Mar. 26, 1992), in *The 1992 Campaign: Verbatim; Heckler Stirs Clinton Anger: Excerpts From the Exchange*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 28, 1992), <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/28/us/1992-campaign-verbatim-heckler-stirs-clinton-anger-excerpts-exchange.html>.

compassionate person turns empathy and sympathy into helpful actions. Particularly in this hyper-capitalist culture, compassion is the ultimate act of cultural disobedience.

Equanimity is the most elusive of the four components of kindness. One might wonder why some version of detachment is an aspect of kindness. How can one be serene in the face of systemic injustice or personal loss? Equanimity is often erroneously equated with elevated bliss or sublime indifference: “Whatever.” Some meditators rise so far above normal consciousness that they dismiss all pain and suffering as temporary phenomena caused by deluded individuals who do not understand that life resembles a dream and that humans are merely temporary energy clouds reacting to transitory phenomena. Fortunately, there is a gentler conception of equanimity that enhances kindness by reducing burnout, arrogance, an excessive sense of responsibility, and/or ego self-aggrandizement. Most of us who have spent much time trying to help others know how easy it is to slip into condescending pity or withdraw into resigned, even bitter callousness. When litigating grisly child abuse and neglect cases, I frequently returned to my law office to quietly quiver in horror.

A line from an equanimity mantra nicely encapsulates its balancing function: “I care for you, but I cannot control your happiness or unhappiness.”¹¹³ My mother-in-law had similar advice for parents: “Love your children with loose fingers.” In other words, caring equanimity is warm, not coolly indifferent. It acknowledges the other person’s sovereignty and the limits of one’s power and responsibility. This curbing version of equanimity is humble, emphasizing our small capacity to protect others. I once walked down a rural road during wildflower season. Along the way, attention turned to a small cluster of lanky weeds emerging out of dirt, pebbles, and scattered grasses. Perhaps there was a single, straggly flower. The following thoughts arose: “I am not all that different than you. I fear all of us are threatened by the rapidly changing climate. But there is almost nothing I can do about it.” Compassion keeps me in the world, while equanimity prevents me from taking myself too seriously.

IX. CONCLUSION

Whether comparing some basic principles of Western and Buddhist philosophy or briefly describing personal individual experiences, this essay attempts to remind us of some commonalities of the human condition—East or West, secular or religious, male or female, and on and on and on. We are

113. I learned this gentle mantra at a mediation retreat.

all frightened, vulnerable creatures living in an increasingly unstable world. Pervasive guilt, conflict, and distrust will increase as our environment rapidly deteriorates. The corporate-state machine continually stimulates our more problematic basic instincts—existential dread, sexual desire, economic uncertainty, tribalism, and distractibility—to create passive fodder for their continual conquests. Those who make a living by sharing—nurses, teachers, and government workers—are insulted and short-changed while the self-absorbed strut about the public arena owned by private power. The rise of Donald Trump is a harbinger of catastrophe.

During any era, each individual must work very hard to liberate himself or herself from the worst tendencies emerging from the inherent human dilemma: extraordinary intelligence coexisting with a fragile, transient body. The mind often becomes furious with the body, a constant reminder of frailty and mortality. No wonder so many twisted belief systems despise the body. These perpetual sources of suffering will probably reach a critical mass when nine billion people, stimulated by sophisticated propaganda campaigns, compete for diminishing resources to meet basic needs or luxurious desires. Secular Buddhism is a path for some. Others prefer a more religious vision, perhaps retaining their families' beliefs. Atheists take a harsher and more confident

route, risking intolerance after leaving skepticism and agnosticism behind.¹¹⁴ The Buddha's four components of kindness are probably the only common way forward, the "spiritual" province of the decent, the refuge against tribal, state, religious, and capitalist hegemonies.

The path towards collective kindness will be far harder to traverse than the individual quest of temporary or permanent enlightenment, which is extraordinarily difficult. While despair or hedonism remain as alternatives, each of us can help purify the planet. I enjoy playing with words and concepts, exploring the past for present guidance. Once all the arguments are put aside, this essay is simply a token of good will. Many years ago, Ronald Dworkin based his constitutional jurisprudence on "equal concern and respect" for other humans.¹¹⁵ This essay suggests that equal concern and respect must extend far beyond legal doctrines formed by Dworkin's Herculean judges, who claim great power based upon alleged wisdom and expertise.¹¹⁶ Concern and respect for other humans is just one step. A large majority of us, not just a few judges, must toil together to create a worldwide

114. This hostility to religion has been called "New Atheism." See, e.g., RICHARD DAWKINS, *THE GOD DELUSION* (2008).

115. RONALD DWORKIN, *TAKING RIGHTS SERIOUSLY* 326 (Bloomsbury Academic 2013) (1977).

116. See Ronald Dworkin, *Hard Cases*, 88 HARV. L. REV. 1057, 1084-86 (1975).

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culture that is predominantly kind, tolerant, and creative. There must be widespread respect and kindness, if not equal “concern and respect,” for other beings and landscapes we have been desecrating.

This shared journey on the path of kindness will not eliminate disagreement about major issues: Some warm-hearted people will always oppose abortion because of their concern for the fetus. Other decent individuals are far more worried about the pregnant woman’s fate. Perhaps we can agree to disagree about issues like abortion, affirmative action, and gay marriage instead of demonizing the opposition. We could celebrate our common strengths and weaknesses, creating a coalition of decency that overcomes the institutionalization of war, greed, and delusion. If the oceans turn so acidic that most of the oxidizing plankton die, no humans will exist to remember our particular positions about the cultural issues that the elite have left for us to squabble about while they pontificate and luxuriate in Davos and Bohemia Grove.

