

## **THE ARTIST'S BUDDHA**

Buddhist Philosophy and Meditation as Tools for Coping with the Challenges of the Theatre  
Artist's Life and Craft

by Tanya Shaffer

Two and a half years ago, in the throes of a cranky blue melancholy, I wandered into Shambhala Books in Berkeley and spotted a book called Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness. Picking it up, I flipped to a random page, and read: "The basis of the Buddha's... teaching is that our efforts to control what is inherently uncontrollable cannot yield the security, safety, and happiness we seek."

Boy, is that ever true, I thought grimly. Within the past two weeks I'd learned that a dream role I'd braved three arduous callbacks for was not mine, that my relationship was ending due to my boyfriend's impending departure for the Yale School of Drama, and that I would probably die without having accomplished everything I'd hoped. Okay, I knew the last one already.

"True happiness may not be far away," the book continued, "but it requires a radical change of view as to where to find it."

Where's the map? I thought. My psyche was screaming to be radicalized, primed for revolution. In an act of reckless abandon, I purchased the book (hardback!) and haven't looked back since.

In a wildly uncertain profession and a more uncertain world, where can we find refuge? Nowhere, a Buddhist teacher might say, but right here, within ourselves. As long as we base our happiness on unreliable circumstance, we will be battered and tossed like a sock in a dryer, flung from despair to elation and back again. Only by contacting the part of ourselves that is whole and inviolable can we find balance and serenity in the midst of it all.

The theatre artists I interviewed for this piece came to meditation practice for different reasons. Some sought a spiritual path, some a relaxation technique, some a coping mechanism for personal grief. Some identify as Buddhists and some don't. What we all agree is that meditation practice has had a profound impact on both our personal and professional lives.

Director and teacher Richard Seyd, who meditates privately but is not part of any organized community, feels that the most important lesson Buddhism has to offer theatre artists concerns the question of attachment. The Buddha taught that attachment, also called desire or grasping, is the primary cause of suffering. Seyd points to the actor's audition process as an example of this.

"The more you want something, the higher the stress," says Seyd. "You are very attached to the desire, so you become very attached to the rejection. You develop protective tools to avoid the pain of rejection, such as cynicism, envy, lowering the stakes... All of those things mean you can't be present, and being present is what it's about."

In a best case scenario, Seyd says, the audition process itself can be a profound opportunity for meditative practice. "As actors, you have to be able to give 100% of yourself, to come to an audition with an unprotected, open heart, knowing how much you care, and still not become attached to the outcome."

The mistake people make, he explains, is thinking that not attaching means not caring. In fact it's the opposite: If you can open yourself completely to how deeply you care, fully experience the pain of rejection when it comes, and then allow yourself to pass through it, you are touching the essence of a practice and philosophy that can pervade all aspects of life.

"The only power the actor has is the only power that is real: the power to do everything you're capable of doing with the most freedom and creativity possible," Seyd continues. "If you learn to accept that power and lack of power, you are living closer to the core truth of human existence, which is that none of us have any control over what happens to us. We just think we do."

So how do we lessen our attachment? Through close attention to the present moment, says Buddhist philosophy. If we ground ourselves firmly in the actual experience of this moment, we quickly come to see how all thoughts, emotions, and sensations, even the most difficult ones, are ephemeral and transitory. Only when our mind clings to them, grasping at the pleasant and pushing away the painful, do our struggles seem unbearable.

Meditation, then, is a tool to establish clear seeing. It's called practice because you literally practice paying attention. Through sitting in a cross-legged posture and focusing closely on every aspect of your experience, from the sensation of breath to the activities of the mind, you train yourself to notice what is actually there.

"As actors, all we have is the moment," says actor and freelance casting director Lisa Cooke. "Meditation helps me to enjoy the process. So often you spend hours preparing for an audition, and then it's over in an instant and you walk out to your car going, 'What just happened?' Meditation stops me, so I can be there in that room with all my senses awake, then walk outside and let it go."

Henry Woronicz, actor, director, and former Oregon Shakespeare Festival Artistic Director, says he isn't sure which came first: his interest in Zen meditation or his pursuit of moment-by-moment truth on the stage. Onstage or off, he seeks to make each moment "full and felt and aware."

"It's the same work," says Woronicz. "Whether you're talking to a friend, driving a car, or acting on the stage.... 'Chop wood, carry water.'" He laughs.

Another benefit of close attention is learning to experience emotions fully, without getting lost in them. Berkeley Repertory Theatre Artistic Director Tony Taccone, who describes himself as "wildly emotional," says meditation practice has helped him to see that no matter how all-consuming his emotions appear, they will pass. Knowing this allows him to open to them and move through them, rather than pushing them away.

Understanding more fully the nature of your own thoughts and emotions can also lead to greater freedom onstage, says Seyd.

"The more illusions about yourself you can let go of, the more possibilities you can see that aren't filtered through your own defensive or protective way of looking at the world," he explains.

Several people talked about using the meditative process as a tool for tackling creative uncertainty. Cooke says that often, when she's struggling, if she quiets her mind through meditation, a solution will blossom in front of her. She finds this quietness an extremely fertile state for creativity-- a space out of which anything can grow.

Woronicz mentions experiencing moments of "kensho," or "momentary enlightenment," both onstage and off. He describes kensho as "the iris of the camera opening onto a moment of peace... times when we're able to let go of all those things the mind constructs to make us feel good about ourselves and achieve a kind of moment-to-moment clarity... everything disappears and it becomes this wonderful depiction of how mind and body can work together."

Although such illuminating moments may occasionally occur, meditation, by nature, is all about process. You don't do it to get high, or to have a spiritual experience, says actor Squire Fridell, a meditator since 1973, you do it for the long-term benefits to your life.

Woronicz says this process-oriented approach has helped him learn, as a director, to stand back and let things happen, to allow them to unfold rather than trying to push or control them.

The principle of allowing things to unfold can also be useful with respect to ambition. There are areas we can control: our own efforts, and areas we can't: other people's responses. Even with our own efforts we can't control the product, only the intention. All we can do is apply our entire attention to the task at hand, whether it's sitting on a cushion, performing a monologue, or putting a manuscript into the mail. The rest is out of our hands. As Natalie Goldberg writes, in her wonderful book "Writing Down the Bones": "Ours [success] will come in this lifetime or the next. No matter. Continue to practice."

Does that mean there's no place for ambition at all? Actually, it doesn't. Buddhist teachers distinguish between two types of ambition: aspiration, which is positive and energetic,

and grasping, which causes suffering. I often ask myself whether my urge to accomplish is growing out of a wholesome aspiration to create something meaningful, or out of a need to bolster my ego and fill some gaping emptiness. This second type of desire is sometimes described as "the hungry ghost," a phantom with an enormous stomach and a tiny pinhole mouth, who eats and eats but can never be filled. When I spot the hungry ghost in myself, I try to focus my attention on discovering the hunger's real source. No amount of professional success will satisfy me if what I'm really lacking is a deep-seated sense of self-worth.

And where, again, do I look for that? Oh yeah. Right here.

"I suppose meditation fights cynicism," says Taccone, "and for me that's a huge deal... The only way I could get excited about this job was to get excited about being a citizen again and take responsibility for trying to create something positive in the culture. That takes personal resources that are connected to fighting cynicism, to being happy... On my worst days, meditation is at least a conscious attempt to open myself. Whether or not I open, it's a conscious attempt."

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### **A SHORT SUGGESTED READING LIST:**

- Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness, Sharon Salzberg
- A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life, Jack Kornfield
- Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, Shunryu Suzuki
- Being Peace, Thich Nhat Hanh
- Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life, Jon Kabat-Zinn
- Breath Sweeps Mind: A First Guide to Meditation Practice, ed: Jean Smith
- Long, Quiet Highway, Natalie Goldberg
- Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind: The Zen Journal and Letters of Maura "Soshin" O'Halloran, Maura O'Halloran

### **RESOURCES**

(These are just four of the numerous meditation centers located all around the Bay Area and Northern California. Visit the websites below for more comprehensive lists.)

Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 5000 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Woodacre, (415) 488-0164, <http://www.spiritrock.org>. Vipassana meditation practice and instruction with Jack Kornfield

and other teachers. The Spirit Rock Newsletter a list of ongoing drop-in sitting groups around the Bay Area.

San Francisco Zen Center

- City Center: 300 Page St., San Francisco, (415) 863-3136.
  - Green Gulch Farm: 1601 Shoreline Highway, Sausalito, 383-3134.
- Zen meditation practice and instruction.

Community of Mindful Living, 850 Talbot Avenue, Albany, CA 94706, (510)527-3751, [www.parallax.org](http://www.parallax.org), [parapress@aol.com](mailto:parapress@aol.com). Followers of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Tse Chen Ling Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies, 4 Joost Ave., San Francisco, (415) 333-3261. Tibetan Buddhist training in the tradition of the Dalai Lama.

### **ONLINE RESOURCES:**

**Dharmanet.org** is a comprehensive website with links to Buddhist meditation centers around the United States and the world, as well as online Buddhist bookstores, discussion groups, newsletters, etc.

**Spiritrock.org**, the website of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, has links to a variety of resources for vipassana meditation around the Bay Area and the United States.

**Zendo.com** lists Zen meditation centers around the greater Bay Area.

**Parallax.org**, the website of the Community of Mindful Living, has links to resources around the country for followers of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh.

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