Practice and Paradox

A Dharma Talk given by Darlene Cohen, March 12, 2000

This morning I'd like to talk about my favorite thing about Zen practice, or my favorite thing right now—you know, it switches all the time. My favorite thing right now is how practice, not just Zen practice, embraces paradox. That's the moment-to-moment intermingling of things that supposedly don't go together. Seeing contradictory notions as just two parts of the very same thing.

Why do I like paradox so much? It's because when you encounter paradox, things that are logical and rational are subverted. Paradox slips underneath all the things that are in their place that are neat and orderly, all the ideological socks that are arranged according to color and style, and put in the drawer in different compartments.

Paradox subverts all this neatness and presents you with life as it usually is—very messy and gushy, ideas flowing in and out of each other without any warning. Just knowing that this unruly realm exists, when I'm walking my linear plank, ready to trip at any moment and be engulfed by this unruliness, makes me relax a little and just let things be how they are.

From this perspective, I think it's funny that we see consistency as a good thing. We try to be consistent. We try to get our ideas in order so they don't contradict each other. I question the value of this exercise.

I spent many years of my life trying to be consistent, to be the same way in this situation as I was in that situation. I tried to develop a consistent self, because people seemed so alarmed when you're not consistent. I remember my college roommate complaining to me that sometimes I was super neat, and sometimes I was very messy, and therefore she didn't know how to conduct herself. She said I was inconsistent. This bothered her a lot, because she didn't know how to play off it. She used herself as a paragon of virtue in this matter, saying she was always messy. (Laughter.) I just conceded the point.

Then when I was in a radical political group in my twenties, I was expected to have clear, solid, immutable opinions. But in some circumstances I was against the death penalty; and sometimes, I wasn't. Sometimes I thought we should kill the pigs, and other times I thought just thinking that way was counterproductive.

Try as I would, I couldn't squeeze all of my selves into one single self that when confronted with different moments in time, was always consistent, always the same. Life just seemed too complex to me. But since other people always pointed this out as a huge character flaw, I thought for a long time that it was, too.
A few years later, when I experimented with various psychedelic drugs, and got to know the non-linear drugs, I had new respect for the constantly shifting nature of things, and what makes things shift. I finally gave up on consistency altogether. Some time later I ran across Carl Jung's remark that "Consistency is the mark of mediocrity," and that made perfect sense to me.

Because, of course, if you try to squish all of your selves into a single case, like a sausage, then of course you have to chop off all the ornamental edges, all the designs, all the curlicues, if you will, to make it fit in that casing. Then you don't have the benefit of all that complexity, some of which is merely entertaining, or merely ornamental, but a lot of it is the stuff in you that is resonant with any particular situation that you encounter.

I think it probably helps me to ventilate the airless cubicles that are my personal opinions by realizing that things that appear to be different from each other are actually usually, and always can be, aspects of the same phenomena. You have to, if you're going to look at things this way, ask yourself the question, what makes things different from each other in the first place? What makes all of you different from the wall that I'm perceiving? What makes the black cushion different? What makes you different from you? What does make things different from each other?

Well, we—perceiving beings—assign differences in values to things. We pick out the stuff we're going to pay particular attention to at any particular time according to our desires and our fears in that particular situation. According to our attractions, or our aversions, in any particular situation, then we differentiate things and assign values. This picking out particular things to want or to run away from is what creates all of our problems.

It's not necessary to pick out anything in particular. Suffering is delight, delight is suffering. There's suffering in delight, there's delight in suffering. It's all mixed up together. We call things by different names, so that we can talk about them, but our actual experience is not so easily reduced.

For instance, you're making love to someone, and you are delighted by them, but you think, you know, that they're going to leave you soon. You can just feel it. Or you're going to leave them soon. You know that; you've made that decision. That's suffering present in delight. They're interminable.

I give workshops for people in pain, and one of the things we do is pair off, and people tell someone else about their suffering. Usually, when people do this, while they're telling about all the terrible afflictions of their life, they suddenly feel very light and joyous, because this person has been assigned to listen to them. They actually can tell someone about their suffering for a certain amount of time, and it's embarrassing how joyful you feel, talking about your suffering in this way. That's when joy penetrates suffering.

These things are not clean. If you stick to your experience, then you can't actually use categories that way. We operate by maintaining categories of things, but when we understand how profoundly those categories are based on our own desires at the time, we can shake up our categories at will. We can make them bleed into each other, whatever the situation calls for. This is a very important aspect of living your life, if you wish to live it fully.

If you have an idea of the kind of life you'd like to be living, and you see it as very different from the life that you're actually living, in order to live fully you have to diminish your clinging to your ideal life, and turn toward the life that you actually have.

For instance, it's very difficult for us to have a strong functional body replaced by a helpless weak one, whether
through calamity or through aging, whatever. It shakes us to our very identities to have that happen. But eventually, if you're going to have happiness in your life at all, you have to say, "This is the life I have," and let go of your ideas about your life, and turn your creative attention to this life that you actually have.

For many of us, when we first come to practice, we have an idea of what practice is, and how we should live up to that ideal, whatever it is. We aren't so interested when we're new to practice, in what we will be interested in later, which is: what is our specific suffering, what are the specifics of it, and what are our inherent tendencies that make our life so difficult? We just want to be a good practitioner at the beginning, just a successful spiritual seeker.

We hear often in Buddhism—Zen or Vipassana—the ideal of the empty mind, and so we want to accomplish that ideal. We try to empty our minds of their concepts and our bodies of their emotions. We impose our ideal on top of what is already here. We don't really notice much what's already here. We're too busy trying to moosh down something over here, prop up something over there, in order to make ourselves look to ourselves like our ideal practitioner.

Then some teacher comes along and says, "Start where you are, with your ancient twisted karma, your obnoxious habits, your busy anxious mind," and we're surprised. We were busy suppressing our nasty selves and puff up our admirable selves. It's a real turning point in practice when we realize that Zazen points us beyond any ideas of what practice should look like, and we begin to notice what's already here—what's already in front of us.

When we do notice what's already here, that our practice is right here, in the selves that we are, we understand then that one conceptualization or another is totally inadequate to capture the vastness of our human lives.

We don't believe in the solidity of anything that we see or think about, but we also don't take a stand in the emptiness of anything that we see or think about. Those ideas have to disappear, and it's just this.

Following Nagarjuna's example, we neither impute absolute meaning in the things we see and think about, nor do we impute no meaning at all in the things we see and think about. This is how I understand what we call in Buddhism the Middle Way. It's not so interesting to interpret the Middle Way as midway between two extreme points. Traditionally the two extremes are referred to as hedonism and asceticism, or emotional indulgence on the one hand and emotional repression on the other.

But the Middle Way is not the average way. In fact, the Middle Way is often referred to in texts as "nowhere standing." You don't hang out in the bland, colorless middle, and you don't hang out in the extremes. You don't hang out anywhere, really. Sometimes you choose this behavior, this action, this point of view that you have, and in other situations it's that action, or that point of view that's already a part of you. You choose, you have all these options. If you can see yourself clearly, you have a lot of options, and you choose them in different situations.

For example, in the age-old extreme between hedonism and asceticism, you can have both; you can have it all. If you sign up for a seven-day Sesshin, a long sitting, you will be an ascetic monk. You will not eat anything but what's served to you—the simple food that's served to you a couple of times a day. You will not do anything except follow the schedule of Zazen and lecture and more Zazen and walking meditation, or whatever meditation the retreat offers, and the chanting. And all your standing and walking and sitting and lying down will be prescribed by the schedule rather than your preference. This is a very ascetic way to live. You can do that for however long a time you choose to do it.

Dear Dharma Daddy:

How do the Buddhist Sutras compare to the Christian Scriptures in terms of authenticity, provenance, and numerous translations?
—Faithful Reader

Dear Faithful:

This is an important question, which is not nearly as easy to answer as it seems. The Buddhist writings that we might consider sacred are considerably more extensive than Christian scriptures. In some ways they resemble Christian scriptures and in other ways they are very different. Also, the whole notion of scripture and canon, so familiar in Christianity, is problematic in Buddhism.

When we speak of scripture and canon we are probably thinking of these terms as they are used in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions, despite their differences, are similar enough that they can be regarded as belonging to a (severely dysfunctional, but real) family. Because all three accord a position of honor to Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic) they are have been called the Abrahamic Traditions. All three attest to the existence of an all-powerful Creator (God) whose will has been revealed through writings which are preserved in a standard collection. This is the scriptural canon. Scripture means writings and canon means an instrument of measurement like a yardstick. The canon is said to be closed, because the content of the canon has been fixed by the appropriate legally constituted authority (the rabbis, the bishops, or the 'ulema) to form, respectively, the Jewish Bible (also known as the Tanakh), the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an. These canons are then regarded, in similar although distinct ways, as the direct word of God.

At first glance, the Buddhist writings would seem to form a scriptural
There’s no difference during that time between you and an ascetic somewhere in the caves.

Then, some other time you can go to your sister’s wedding, and get as drunk and eat as much and dance as much, as anybody else there. In fact, if you choose to be ascetic at your sister’s wedding, everybody will say, “What’s with him? Is he trying to show us something, or what?” It’s much more appropriate then for you to eat a lot and drink a lot and make a lot of noise to celebrate your sister’s wedding. It’s not a matter of hanging out in one place. You have to actually be alive, be conscious, and react from some calm place that doesn’t identify with any ideology, but is ready and willing to see what’s under your nose.

Suzuki Roshi said, “This is why Zen practice emphasizes everyday life, rather than some particular state of mind. We should find the reality in every moment. We should not attach to love alone. We should accept hate.”

A student of mine at Zen Center, a woman in the latter part of life, has two grown children, a boy and a girl. Last Christmas, she made plane arrangements to go see her daughter who is on the East coast. She decided not to see her son, who is there in a different state, because he was undergoing a very acrimonious divorce, there’s a child involved, and a lot of emotional difficulty. She thought she would be a burden to the family. They hadn’t actually moved into different houses yet, there was a lot of tension, and she didn’t want to add to this.

But her son called her up after he heard about her plans to visit her daughter, and he started screaming at her. “You’ve always favored her! You won’t come to me in time of need! This is terrible! I’m being treated like a second-class son!” Just shouting at her.

She understood that he was just venting. He didn’t even believe this stuff—at least she thought that he probably didn’t. But she heard the anger, and in a funny way she didn’t take it personally. She understood that she was just the only person he could vent on in that moment. She heard what was behind the anger: the need, the disappointment, the fury.

So she decided to go to his place. You know, at Christmas time, it’s very hard to change your plane reservations, and she went through that, she paid the extra money, she didn’t do what was necessary to see him as well. When she told him that she was coming, he just started crying with gratitude. He said, “Oh, thank you, thank you!” The next day he called her up and said, “You know, this is not a good time for you to come!” (Laughter)

But he felt so good about the fact that she would come, that he changed the reservations back for her, and all that. He was so grateful to her that she accommodated him. So, we can’t just accept love. We have to accept hate when it comes our way, and to accommodate it, and be responsible to the person who feels that way.

A student gave me a book called “Head Off Stress,” by D.E. Harding. He describes with great admiration how effective Mother Teresa was in her heartbreaking work. He says, “Mother Teresa was not delicately picking her way along some middle path between the extremes of being emotionally affected by human catastrophe and settling in her inner peace. Not some sensible compromise between those, no. She made for both extremes at once, with energy and dedication, and in practice, solved the problem of being really effective in doing what has to be done. She took on joyously the most appalling human tragedies, because her central peace remained undisturbed. She solved the problem of being surrounded by unbearable suffering by immersion in it, by being it absolutely, and not being it absolutely. It’s not a case of balancing one thing against the other, of compromise or moderation, but of extremism.”
Now, Harding uses the word extremism here to make a point, but actually we're talking about paradox when we talk about this. The recognition of two seemingly disparate points that are actually the same thing—in this case, Mother Teresa's ability to be immersed in her work.

If you practice Zen for a while—and it may be in forms like Vipassana, too—you may think that balance is the thing. It does look that way for a while, maybe ten years or so. (Laughter) But it's not so.

It really goes against our grain to apprehend how necessary it is to believe in nothing. To be ready to see whatever presents itself to you, without an a priori agenda.

So where do you abide, if there are no hard and fast rules? No midway points between extreme and extreme you can think of to cling to? No ideal that you can embrace that doesn't immediately turn to sand, or worse, into a rigid stance that prevents you from shifting gears in a difficult situation?

Zen master Muman said, "No place can be found in which to put one's original face." There's no place. So where exactly is your original face, and how do you do "nowhere standing?"

Suzuki Roshi: "The important thing in our understanding is to have a smooth, free-thinking way of observation. We have to think and observe things without stagnation. We should accept things as they are, without difficulty. Our mind should be soft and open to understand things as they are. At first it's very difficult to accept things as they are."—no kidding—"When you can do everything, whether it's good or bad, without disturbance or annoyance, then form is form and emptiness is emptiness. There's no duality. "Trying to be free from the suffering of duality is helpful, but not perfect practice." That's when you're trying to empty your mind. See, you're caught here. How do you get soft without emptying your mind? "Knowing that your life is short, enjoy it every day. When Buddha comes, you welcome him. When the devil comes, you welcome him."

I have another student who is a married woman. She married her husband when she was young—she's in her forties now—and she said to me that this is the husband that she wants; she doesn't want to divorce him or anything, but she's spent most of their married life trying to change him. He didn't quite fit in a lot of ways what she wanted in a husband. One of these ways is that a woman wants a man to be romantic. She wants him to court her, give her gifts, and appreciate her. This is very widespread.

At the time I met her, she was at the point where she already said that she was not going to change him. She was stuck in a very uncomfortable place, which was that she was very critical of him all the time. And she didn't keep this to herself, and maybe she shouldn't have kept it to her self. In fact, not keeping it to herself is how she got convinced that she wasn't going to change him. She said to me, the first time I ever saw her privately, "You know, I think my husband is a wonderful person, but I just can't help criticizing him. It's like some compulsive habit that I have."

I said, "Well, if you really believe it's a compulsive habit, that you don't need or want, you can change it. Just like you quit biting your nails or something." And she said, "All right, I will try." Then we discussed strategies. And at various times over the years she came saying, "It seems like this strategy doesn't work so well, it seems like I could do the center that." 

Over the years she did change her habit of constantly criticizing her husband. Of course, when you do things like that, it's much bigger than it looks like it's going to be. Just changing this behavior allowed all sorts of other things to arise. The upshot of this story being that she came to me a couple of weeks ago and she showed Bodhisattvas. There is something Pythonesque about the question. How does the guy know he's in a sutra? Well, never mind, he's a high Bodhisattva, he just does. Shakyamuni makes a very interesting reply. All enlightenment (bodhi) is the same, he says, and anyone who speaks out of that enlightenment is saying what a Buddha would say. Therefore, the teachings of the highly realized disciples of the Buddha are the same as the teachings of the Buddha.

What I think this means is, the real speaker of the Dharma is not the Buddha as such, but the Buddha Mind, or bodhi mind, which is in the listener as much as it is in the speaker. Zen Master Dogen said, "Do not respect my words because I am the Zen Master Dogen. Respect my words because they come out of Emptiness," that is, because they come from the bodhi mind. This even works for Theravada Buddhism. Theravadin Buddhists do not usually teach the existence of Buddha Mind (although some Thai teachers who seem to be influenced by Tantra come quite close to this doctrine) but they do maintain the existence of clear, or shining, mind (chittaprabhāsa). A Buddha, say the Theravadins, is one who has fully realized clear mind, and ordinary practitioners like us are nourishing and maturing clear mind by our practice.

With this principle out of the way, it is easier for me to answer the question of the authenticity, provenance, and translations of the Buddhist texts.

The Buddha spoke to different audiences on different occasions, as need arose and as he had been asked. Soon after his final disappearance (parinirvāṇa) the tradition says that a council was held to record and classify his teachings. (The historical reality of the First Council, and what happened at it if it actually occurred, is disputed.) The principle was established that nothing would be accepted as
authentic unless it had been heard by a prominent disciple who was actually present at the time of the teaching. All sutras (with a very few exceptions) therefore begin with the phrase “Thus have I heard at one time. The Blessed One was staying at ...” (According to some scholars the phrase should be punctuated as “Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was staying at ...”) The teachings were divided into two broad groups, Dharma and Vinaya. Dharma referred to teachings on general topics to lay audiences, while Vinaya referred to teachings on the monastic regulations. Ananda, the devoted servant of the Buddha and his favorite disciple, is said to have recited the Dharma texts at the First Council, and Upali is said to have recited the Vinaya texts. Some time later, the Dharma texts were subdivided into Sutra texts (general teachings) and Abhidharma texts (advanced teachings) to form, with the Vinaya, the Triple Basket Collection (Tripitaka), a term which became standard and which is sometimes translated as “The Buddhist Canon.” These texts were passed down orally by reciters who had memorized specific texts. (This explains the prevalence of numbered lists and repetitions, hallmarks of oral texts.) We should note that oral transmission is not, in the Indian Subcontinent, inferior to written transmission, in fact it is the preferred mode for important and sacred material. Oral transmission, on the Subcontinent, is not intrinsically untrustworthy. Subcontinent people were accustomed to training their memories, and they realized that what we memorize we can access immediately and flawlessly, whereas what we have written down may get lost, mislaid, or destroyed. Some hundreds of years later the Tripitaka was inscribed on stone tablets, but the intent was not to preserve the texts so much as to gain merit, which thing quite new and different, moment after moment. Our way is not always to go in one direction.”

Now, I have a friend, who grew up in New York, and we were talking about our old political days. I said, “Things have changed a little bit in how I look at things, I’m wider.”

She said, “Let me tell you a story. I was wide even then. I was out demonstrating against the Viet Nam War in New York City, and the police came to put us into vans and take us to the station house to be arrested. We all had the training, we all went limp, and they had to drag us to the vans. The policeman who was dragging me said to his companion, ‘This is killing my back!’

She said to him, “You have a bad back? She got up and walked to the van. (Laughter) The policeman was blown away. He spent the next ten minutes sitting in the van with her telling her how much he hated to do this work. (Laughter)

I think maybe the basis for our actions, if we don’t cling to a particular stance, is something like love. Not love, as opposed to hate, but something like openness, a willingness to let a little fresh air in, fumigate our opinions, our prejudices.

The important thing is that we suspend the judgments we have, allowing ourselves to be in direct contact with the stuff of experience. We can suspend our judgments without suppressing them or expressing them. We can have them there and know they’re there, but choose to embrace life.

This is appreciating the emptiness of our conceptions. This is true emptiness, not “Oh, I can’t think that!” This is true emptiness, suspending judgments while embracing life. We have this ability to suspend our judgments when love calls.

I’ll tell you another story. Another friend said when I was ordained a year or two ago, “This is disgusting! Here you practice all these years without any
Local Dharma Centers
A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and as a handout at our Sunday sittings. We encourage members to explore what these Dharma centers can offer to their practice.

Meditation Group in Sonoma County
A Buddhist meditation group meets near the town of Sonoma every other Wednesday evening starting at 7pm, and GBFers are always welcome. The group now has gay and nongay practitioners. For more information, contact Bob Hass, 707.938.8868.

Ongoing Meditation Group on Monday Nights
Led by Jon Bernie, a meditation teacher in San Francisco with thirty years’ meditation experience (including eleven years of Zen Buddhist training and seven years of Vipassana training). The group is free and open to all; donations gratefully accepted. Quaker Meeting House, 65 9th Street (between Mission & Market), 7–9pm. For more information, call Jon at 415.621.7314.

Local Dharma
May 2000 San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Tuesdays, Thursdays, & Fridays, 10:30am: HIV Sitting Group. Hartford Street Zen Center, 57 Hartford St, SF. Information 415.863.2507.

Sundays, 3–5pm: “Buddhism for Gay Men.” Gay Men’s Buddhist Sangha. A 20-minute meditation followed by a presentation of the core teachings of the Buddha, designed specifically for the Gay community. New Leaf Center, 1874 Market St, SF. Information 415.207.8113


Buddhism at the Millennium’s Edge
series sponsored by SF Zen Center. Information (on any of the events below) 415.863.3133.

Friday, May 19, 7:30pm: “Veterans Sangha Project Readings,” lecture by Maxine Hong Kingston. Fee: $15. Unitarian Center, 1187 Franklin (at Geary), SF.

Saturday, May 20, all day: “Writing Peace,” workshop led by Maxine Hong Kingston. Fee: $75. Green Gulch Farm, Highway 1, Marin County.


If you would like to recommend a Dharma event for this column please e-mail information to: <halburt@aol.com>.
GBF Calendar
May 2000 San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Sunday Morning Sittings,
Sunday Morning Sittings, 10:30am:
San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37
Bartlett St, between 21st & 22nd,
one block west of Mission St.

May 7 Jim Wilson
Monthly Speaker

May 14 Dennis Horan
Guest Speaker

May 21 Tony Richardson
Guest Speaker

May 28 Discussion by Sangha members

'Dennis Horan has been a student of Advaita Vedanta for over 15 years with several Bay Area teachers. In 1997 he met his True Teacher. He will talk and answer questions about Gangaji. Gangaji is an American-born spiritual teacher dedicated to sharing Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri H. W. L. Poonjaji’s message of freedom and peace in the West. Gangaji holds Satsang around the world. She is author of You are That! Volumes 1 and 2.'

'Tony Richardson is a Heart student of the Ven. Gyaltsay Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist Master. He works as a psychiatrist and body oriented psychotherapist in the Bay Area. His current interest is translating the practices of his teacher into useful Western forms to support and encourage the path to enlightenment.'

Sunday, May 28, 12pm: Newsletter Mailing Party; after GBF Sunday sitting, 37 Bartlett Street, SF.

There is no GBF Potluck Dinner in May, due to the Memorial Day Weekend.

GBF Newsletter is in need of a new editor, beginning in June. If you are interested in serving the Sangha community in this way, please contact Hal Hershey, 510.527.7474, halburt@aol.com; or any member of the Steering Committee.

We also need volunteers to listen to recordings of Dharma Talks and transcribe them for publication in the newsletter. This is a great way to really listen to a talk! Contact Hal Hershey.

"Queer Dharma" is sponsored by several Sanghas of the Bay Area Gay and Lesbian community, including GBF. We need one of our members to be a liaison and GBF representative to the committee that plans events. Contact any member of the Steering Committee.

GBF Homeless Project
If you are available to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the second Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Seiter at 415.386.3088. GBF volunteers prepare a dinner, funded by GBF, for homeless families.

Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money for GBF

GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha and the community. Last year we received over $800 through members’ generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information 415.861.4910.

GBF Website
www.gaybuddhist.org
robes or extra stuff, and then at the last minute you completely desert and go into this corrupt priesthood, this patriarchy, this disgusting hierarchy!"

She and I were going to Tassajara last summer to give a workshop together. I said, "You know, you'll have to put my robes on for me for Zazen, because I have arthritis, and these robes are very heavy. At Zen Center, in the morning, someone comes to my house and helps me put on the robes and then we go together. Since we're going to be in the same cabin, you will have to put my robes on."

She said, "I will not do this, it's disgusting! You can go in your nightgown!" We went to Tassajara, and the time came, the gong started for Zazen, and I said, "Would you please put on my robes now?" She said, "That is disgusting! I hate that you did this!" All the while, putting on my robes. (Laughter) With such gentleness and love, and since she was married to a priest for many years, and has worn the sitting robe herself many years, she knew just how to make the three colors of white, gray, and black show. She knew just the kind of knot to make in the robe.

Going on and on while she's dressing me, and when we started out the door she said, "You make me do terrible things!" (Laughter.)

could be used to end a disastrous famine which had struck Sri Lanka.

There is no single sacred language for the Buddhist texts, as there is in Judaism and Islam and, to a lesser extent, in Christianity. The Buddha is said to have told his disciples to teach the Dharma in the language of the region, and it was written down in a variety of languages, many of which are long dead. In time, formal collections developed in Pali (a language similar to Sanskrit), Tibetan, and Chinese. The Pali collection, which is read by Theravada Buddhists, is the smallest and, since the Buddha may have spoken a local language similar to Pali, there is some merit to the claim that the Pali collection is the earliest and so, from a historical point of view, the most authentic.

However, different versions of the Pali texts are found in the Chinese collection, and they may be translated from versions which pre-date the formalization of the Pali collection. The Tibetan and Chinese collections (there is more than one collection of each), which are read by their respective branches of the Mahayana, and which contain the Vajrayana (Tantric) texts, may have originally been largely in Sanskrit, although only a few Sanskrit texts have survived and there is no extant formal collection. They are considerably larger than the Pali collection and include biographies of eminent monastics, commentaries by authorized teachers, and texts on history, medicine, astrology and other matters, none of which even pretend to be the word of the Buddha, and even some catalogues of Buddhist texts—an intriguingly mind-blowing loop for those who maintain that the collections constitute a canon. Despite these additions, the collections are still often called the Tripitaka. The Mahayana holds that the Buddha has a giant, transhuman form known as the Sambhogakaya, and they sometimes say that it is in that form that the Buddha spoke the Mahayana texts. Vajrayana lineages may similarly teach that the Buddha spoke the Tantric texts in a special embodiment that was inaccessible to ordinary disciples. Thus, both the Mahayana and the Vajrayana can claim that their texts are authentic even when there is no way that they could possibly have been spoken by the historical Shakyamuni. In some sense, perhaps we can say, they are spoken by the Buddha Nature.

No authoritative body comparable to the Rabbinate or the Episcopate has arisen in Buddhism to close the "canon", but it is not exactly open. One cannot just sit down and write a sutra on one's own and expect to have it accepted as the word of the Buddha, but if one is an authorized teacher, one's commentaries will be honored and may in time find their way into one of the standard collections. On the other hand, at various times certain texts have, for various reasons, been rejected as spurious and edited out of one or other of the standard collections.

So, with all this richness and confusion, how do we distinguish what is authentic from what is not, and if we want to study the sutras, where do we begin?

From very early times, it seems, a text was presented by an authorized teacher who then gave an oral commentary on it. This is still the best way for a practitioner to approach Buddhist "scripture." (Historical critical studies of the literature are available for those of academic bent, although the studies are surprisingly few and none are complete.) In the absence of a living teacher it is probably best to begin with books on the Dharma in general and work one's way back to the sutras, many of which are incomprehensible when read on their own. There seems to be some interest in having a group at GBF which would study selected sutras. Stay tuned.
According to Buddhism, there are two kinds of truth, relative or worldly truth (samvriti satya) and absolute truth (paramartha satya). We enter the door of practice through relative truth. We recognize the presence of happiness and the presence of suffering, and we try to go in the direction of increased happiness. Every day we go a little further in that direction, and one day we realize that suffering and happiness are “not two.”


How to Reach Us

**GBF Sangha**
Send correspondence and address changes to: GBF, 2215-R Market Street, PMB 456, San Francisco, California 94114. Send e-mail to <gbfsf@hotmail.com>. For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message, 415.974.9878.

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