RESPONSE TO GLENN WALLIS’S “BUDDHIST MANIFESTO”

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Some of you might remember that I have written about an old friend of mine (well he’s not “old, old” just a friend from way back) named Glenn Wallis. Glenn recently asked for my reaction to an article that he wrote regarding whether Buddhism is an anything goes affair. [NOTE: the original title of “Buddhist Manifesto” was “Is Buddhism an Anything Goes Affair?”]

It is quite a challenging article, and it is something that I have thought long and hard about from time to time. Glenn invited me to post my comment about this on his blog as well. But I’d also like to share my comments here as well. So here they are:

The question you ask in the article is “We say Buddhist, but on what grounds, what basis?”

I think this is a very fair question. My own question has been: “When is an alleged skillful methods neither skillful nor an effective method of helping people understand suffering, cut off its causes, realize freedom, and cultivate the path?”

I don’t think skillful methods can be dispensed with. I think that Buddhism does have just one taste, the taste of liberation, but to get to that requires many different methods and the liberation itself is a “you have to be there” kind of experience that cannot be pinned down. I do think its fruits or traces can be described. One can, in a sense, triangulate authentic awakening by looking for things like selflessness, equanimity, compassion, nonattachment, and so on. I find Buddhism to be a living breathing culture whose aim is supposedly that awakening or liberation. That culture is certainly wheezing and gasping and in some of its forms is either dead or perhaps undead (by which I mean a rotting thing that moves though it should have been buried long ago and that sucks the life out of others rather than bestowing life). This can be said of any religious tradition though – they are cultures based on some awakening or liberation (on some level – or at least the appearance of some kind of salvation) that changes, evolves, mutates, dies, passes on old insights or values (sometimes way past the expiration dates), as well as old biases and prejudices, breaks up other biases and prejudices, and occasionally picks up new insights and values or picks up new biases and prejudices.
You start your investigation with an overarching premise: that Gotama was an unsurpassed scientist of the real. I don't know enough about scientific method, and I have never even read Thomas Kuhn's book (though probably I should), but it seems to me, judging from the Pali Canon that is all I have to go by, that Siddhartha Gautama was at least a deep empiricist. By this I mean that he did not arrive at awakening through some mystical revelation or scripture, nor through logic or speculative reasoning, but through his own direct experience based on meditative praxis (samatha and vipassana). This is empiricism but not in the sense of the materialistic or positivistic sense of people today – but more in a yogic sense. If meditation is an experiment and the meditation room is a laboratory, then yes I guess we could say Gautama was a scientist. I looked up “scientific method” on wikipedia though, and it states that it is a method of observation and experimentation based on testable hypothesis and able to be objectively verified. But was what Gautama awakened to objectively verifiable? Or was his awakening the fruit of a spiritual maturity that is inherently a subjective matter?

I like your way of expressing the four noble truths – that in itself is a skillful means. I see the four noble truths themselves as a skillful means of setting up a method whereby we can discern how things are really and be liberated by that insight.

I also agree that the four foundations of mindfulness are an effective means of awakening to our situation. I think all Buddhist practice should boil down to samatha (necessary to overcome negativity and cultivate enough focus and clearheadedness to observe impartially how things are) and vipassana (and this is when meditation becomes truly Buddhist when it leads to actual insight). I think when you get past the hype, spin, and packaging it can be seen that Zen, Mahamudra, Dzogchen and the rest all boil down to samatha vipassana. But what about the six recollections (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, dana, sila, devas) or the recitation of the Metta Sutta or the Brahmaviharas (the divine abodes of boundless friendless, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity)? These are also found in the Pali Canon though they are not given the importance of the four foundations or the other 37 requisites of enlightenment. For that matter, was it the Buddha or later redactors that put the emphasis on the 37 factors over and above the Brahmaviharas or the six recollections? For my part I agree that vipassana or insight into the conditioned nature of dhammas that leads to detachment and liberation trumps the Brahmaviharas or the more devotional six recollections. Without that insight each of the Brahmaviharas can lead to its near or far enemies, and the six recollections can lead to increased attachment (and their corollary aversions) rather than less. And yet, I have to wonder about three things:

1. In terms of the outcome of the practice of the 37 qualities: Is the detachment of seeing that all dhammas are unsatisfactory, impermanent, and selfless all that we are looking for? Is equanimity really a supreme value that supercedes
compassion? Or is compassion somehow integral? And if so, how does it fit into this detached empirical investigation leading to disenchantment and detachment?

2. In terms of helping people actually practice the 37 requisites: What about all those for whom the five hindrances of sensual desire, hostility, heavy lethargy, agitated worry, and debilitating doubt are so overpowering that they are not able to give this bare bones practice a try? Shouldn’t other wholesome practices be introduced to help get people to the point where they are able to appreciate and take up the practice of being fully awakened to the real? Isn’t this the point of the Buddha’s “graduated discourse” wherein he taught people about the value of generosity, self-discipline, and aspiration to the heavenly realms, and then the value of renunciation? He taught all this and only then taught the four noble truths. So the Buddha himself apparently knew that some groundwork needed to be laid before getting into his core teaching and practice – at least according to the Pali Canon. If skillful methods are the downfall of Buddhism, then the Buddha himself is as much to blame as anyone else. And who is to say that the 37 requisites are themselves not just another skillful method, though a deeper and more comprehensive presentation? In the case of Bahiya, the Buddha simply taught, “In the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard…” That seems to be the most direct teaching of all. If one is looking for “no-nonsense, no-frills, clutter-free methodology” the teaching to Bahiya makes the 37 qualities seem like a lot of busy work and self-conscious all too deliberate analysis and parsing.

In terms of bringing the entirety of ourselves to the practice: The practice of the 37 qualities assumes that we bracket or put aside our imaginative and emotional life (except perhaps as bugs to put under the lens of mindfulness until they evaporate away with the flow of causes and conditions). It certainly does not indulge the imagination or the emotions, and that is its strength. And yet, I think there is great wisdom, found as far back as the Abhidharma at least, of looking at particular types of people and helping them direct these parts of themselves to Buddhist practice. Why not utilize our imagination and emotions to, on the one hand, facilitate samatha and, on the other hand, to bring to the fore qualities that should be examined in greater depth? This is tricky, of course, because this can lead to catering to delusions and rationalizations of all kinds of conduct and base motivations. At the same time, if done skillfully, why shouldn’t the hostile person cultivate friendliness? Why shouldn’t a warmhearted person but simple person of faith use the six recollections to put their mind on wholesome inspirational models that will lead them to actual practice of vipassana? Why not have practices that can counteract specific character traits or hindrances, and other practices that can utilize a person’s inclination and abilities and channel them in such a way that they lead to the development (perhaps even unwittingly) of the 37 qualities that lead to awakening? These methods are not even Mahayana innovations, nor are they only found in the Abhidharma. They too are found in the Pali Canon and I don’t see why they
shouldn’t be given credence. Evidently those who created the current recension of the Buddha’s teachings that became the Pali Canon with its emphasis on the 37 requisites also saw fit to include things like the six recollections and the Brahmaviharas as well.

It is very fair to ask of all the Buddhist paraphernalia and procedures that have since arisen “how proximate are they and all that they involve to the zero point of wise investigation?” But I have to wonder, is a clinical detached investigation of how empty everything is really the zero point? Chih-i didn’t think so. Chih-i thought the analytical analysis (and direct observation) of how all dhammas are empty is just the beginning. I think Chih-i was right.

You go on to say that “skillful means” are just a “clever ploy of later Buddhists to say and do, in the name of the Lord, whatever they wanted.” Perhaps philologically upayakusala does mean “clever ploy” but I think that is an unnecessarily cynical way of looking at it. As I mentioned, Gautama himself would be to blame for using them in the form of his “graduated discourses.” Can skillful means go too far? Can they be used to rationalize and justify things that controvert the Dharma? I certainly agree they can. But primarily I think they are the pedagogical methods of a skillful teacher. That they have been and occasionally are used unskillfully does not mean that one should not try to use skillful means.

You mention the so-called “three turnings of the Wheel of the Dharma”, I can understand that they help provide a certain perspective – but I agree that they are the passing off of an opinion as the Buddha’s word. All the Mahayana sutras are that. I prefer the T’ien-t’ai schema of the five periods and eight teachings which are another opinion. I am not afraid to admit that these are opinions that arose as Buddhism developed and later teachers had to try to come to terms with what is and is not important, what is preliminary and what is vital. Your article is itself another attempt at this – cutting away the dross, pointing to what is vital and essential and what is merely of subordinate value or perhaps none at all. For my part, just as I am not afraid to admit that these are matters of opinion, I am also not afraid to embrace the ones that seem to be helpful to me insofar as clarifying practice and wholesome motivation and avoiding pitfalls and oversights. But certainly I reserve the right to second-guess, double-check, and keep a certain healthy skepticism. That is why I see myself as a modern Buddhist and not just a traditionalist taking everything at face value.

“Certainly, there is room for movement, adjustment to circumstance, intelligent application. Certainly; but to what extent? Is there a limit? Where is it? Where do the extreme points lie? Where is the responsible middle?”

This is the key question. When is a skillful method neither skillful nor effective as a method, and perhaps even detrimental? That is how I think of the question. You then lay out some premises so let me comment on those:
Premise #1: Gotama was a man. – I think this is unfair to the Gotama Buddha of the Pali Canon, the only one that we can really know. He was not a superhuman or a god or anything like that. But he also stated quite plainly that he was not simply a human to the brahmin Dona. Yes, I know, his actual response was something more like, “I will not become a human.” The point is that he defined himself as one who is awake. This is the crucial difference. He attained a level of spiritual maturity beyond our usual experience of what it is to be human. A human capacity, yes. And no, I don’t believe it was supernatural. But he no longer viewed himself in terms of the aggregates the way we do. There was a qualitative and revolutionary difference between Gotama the awakened one, and the way we usually think, act, and relate to ourselves, others, and the world. There are, I suppose, very down to earth and clinical, I suppose psychological or developmental, ways of describing this. But would they do that qualitative difference between a person still caught up in becoming and an awakened one justice?

Yes, the mythological portraits with their superpowers and freakish 32 and 80 signs are not really anything I can relate to literally. I view those who take them literally as a bit out of touch with reality. But I can appreciate that the folklore of ancient Indian culture was utilized to try to convey a very real revolution from becoming to being awake – the difference between Siddhartha the enlightening being and Gautama the Awakened One. I think we need to honor the old folklore for what it is, myth and poetry, but at the same time find a modern way to describe that qualitative revolution in a way that will continue to inspire people to take up the Way and awaken themselves without the drawback of having to cling to old myths in a fundamentalist way.

Premise #2 Gotama was an unsurpassed scientist of the real. – I already responded to this above. I agree with what you say here: “His basic teachings concerning these matters are irreplaceable and non-negotiable.” I have the same conviction – even though unlike yourself perhaps – I do think it possible to candy coat them to make the medicine go down smoother. In addition, by basic teachings I would include the six recollections and Brahmaviharas and even the “graduated discourse” which I often refer to as generic spirituality 101.

Premise #3: Gotama prescribed meditation, not religion. – I kind of agree with this, but I believe Gautama was wise enough to appreciate and utilize the aesthetic impulse just as he allowed for the ascetic one. The Buddha did not permit ascetic practices like starvation or acting like a dog or cow, but he permitted the dhutas as a more constructive middle way of utilizing the ascetic impulse. Likewise, the Buddha never set up a priesthood or asked to be worshipped, but apparently taught the six recollections and the graduated discourse which both have what some might call a religious element or at least the seeds of such. I do find it problematic when the religious impulse overrides and even does away with the meditative.

You say, “Religion tells stories and show pictures; it is narratological.” That is
fine with me, I think that is good and necessary. In the Buddha’s day they had the Buddha’s living example to guide and inspire, to attract and lead the way. Now we use stories and images to inspire and arouse bodhicitta. The problem is when the next step is not taken – the meditative step. Religion is also a way of celebrating and sharing how wonderful it is to have taken that next step and to see what there is to see. I don’t know about you, but one of the nice things about being out walking around on the ground is to have fresh air and clear sky above. Do we want a sky with no earth to land on, or an earth with no sky overheard?

Premise #4 Gotama is not the Buddha. — The way I read this, you seem to see the Buddha as a strictly mythological construction. I don’t see it that way. I see “Buddha” as the “Awakened One.” The mythical Buddha is a personification of selfless compassion, but wasn’t that what the humble Gautama was all about? Selfless compassion. If he was not, then there was nothing so special about Gautama at all that we should bother with him or his methods or insights or values. “Buddha” is a way of highlighting what it was that made Gautama worth listening to, and why his teachings and experiences resonate so deeply with us even now – because the Buddha is also our own selfless compassion when we do the work and awaken.

Premise #5: Gotama was an ironist; his compilers, strategists. — You say, “Coming from the mouth of Gotama, on the other hand, such supernaturalism doesn’t make sense – at least not supernaturalism.” I don’t think it sounds strange at all. Gautama was a man of his times. Later you say, “One final possibility: maybe he was just dead wrong about some things. After all, Gautama was not the Buddha.” Frankly, I do think he was just mistaken about some things. I think he mistook the unconscious narrative making function of the mind and in accord with his cultural assumptions believed them to be actual past lives of himself and the actual past and future lives of others. But I do think he was an Awakened One to that which is essential. He utilized this raw narrative material to reflect on life’s essential nature and thereby awakened to the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of all dharmas, and then went even further to the more positive awakening to the unborn, the deathless. I can forgive him his quaint patriarch pre-industrial worldview, because what he awakened to, what made him Buddha, was this insight into the conditioned and the unconditioned.

I have to bring this to a close now, but I look forward to any response you may have to this response.

In many ways I agree with you. In other ways, my approach is very different as you know. I just hope that I can make the approach I take (and the experiences I have had which led me to it) intelligible.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo,
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ORIGINALLY APPEARED

This piece was originally posted on the blog Fraught with Peril:
http://fraughtwithperil.com/ryuei/2008/05/02/is-buddhism-an-anything-goes-affair-asks-glenn-wallis-my-response-2