Western Buddhism and social work

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Introduction

Buddhism was transported from the Asian continent to Europe, North America and Australia from the nineteenth century onwards when representatives of colonial powers analysed Buddhist scriptures, art and architecture. At the same time, Asian émigrés were forming Buddhist enclaves in the West (Chappell 2004a). In the twentieth century, Western converts who had been immersed in a Buddhist culture or ordained by a Buddhist preceptor instituted Buddhist orders and meditation centres for Westerners (Chappell 2004b). For example, Roshi Glassman founded the Zen Peacemaker Order in North America (now the Zen Peacemakers) and Sangharakshita established the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in Britain (now Triratna or The Three Jewels). This coincided with the persecution of Buddhism in swathes of Asia, and Buddhist leaders-in-exile such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh started to convey Buddhism to a worldwide audience. By the turn of the millennium, information and communication technologies enabled spiritual seekers in the West to access Buddhist writings and participate in online Buddhist conferences (Chappell 2004b). Such an exponential growth of a religion transplanted outside of its cultural milieux entrains the twin dangers of a superficial familiarity alongside profound misunderstandings (Sangharakshita 1996; Wilber 2006). When aspects of this ancient Eastern religion are conjoined with modern Western social work, further confusion could be on the horizon.

The aim of this chapter is to dispel the confusion by distinguishing three levels from which Westerners may approach Buddhist principles and practices. First, the secular level is available to people of any faith or no faith as it invites us to inspect these principles and practices for ourselves, relying upon our human faculties for sensory experiencing, cognitive processing, moral evaluation and scientific investigation. Second, the spiritual level revolves around a transpersonal experiencing of these principles and practices ‘from the inside’, so it can surface within atheists or Christians who venture into Buddhist territories, although it does not propel them towards abjuring their (non-) religious standpoint. Third, the religious level is chosen by converts who place their faith in the Buddha and who interpret their everyday and esoteric experiences within a Buddhist framework. By deploying this multi-levelled approach to the Buddha’s Enlightenment, his teachings on suffering and Buddhist practices to transform our mind and
our world, we will be able to pinpoint where Buddhism and Western social work make easy bedfellows, and where they may part company.

The Buddha’s Enlightenment

The man who was to become the Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha Gautama in Northern India (now Nepal) in the fifth century BCE. His excursions beyond the palace unveiled the reality of human suffering (he witnessed old age, sickness and death) and the possibility of a release from suffering (he saw a holy man, a wandering mendicant, at peace with himself). So Siddhartha escaped incognito from the palace in order to pursue a spiritual quest to make sense of and surmount the suffering of the world. He perfected the art of sitting in silence and stillness under a tree, an introspective practice that became known as meditation, and that yielded Enlightenment (Trainor 2004). It enabled him to comprehend and control the workings of his own mind, as representative of all human minds. It also revealed a trans-human reality, comprising the evolutionary recycling of species that unfolded in accordance with their conditioning in the realm known as Samsara, and the distinctively human potential for liberation in an unconditioned realm dubbed Nirvana. When Siddhartha arose from his meditation, he was no longer recognisable. He was asked whether he was a god, a ghost or a man? His reply was that he had destroyed all the conditionings that give rise to such forms and so he was a Buddha – this transliterates as ‘one who is awake’ in the sense of having awakened to transcendental reality (Sangharakshita 1996: 30–1). He devoted the rest of his long life to expounding his realisations to disciples, lay publics and political rulers in teachings on psychology, morality, meditation and wisdom (the Dharma) and developing communities for monks and nuns (Sanghas).

The Buddha imparted the Dharma in different ways to different audiences in order that the maximum number of people would be able to absorb its messages at a level congruent with their conditioning, their stage of spiritual development and their aspirations (Blum 2004a). Therefore, it is fitting to adopt a multi-levelled approach to the story of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. Secular Westerners tend to treat him as an ordinary human being whose insights into humanity and reality can be verified by anyone who deploys his method of meditative introspection and who reflects upon his teachings in relation to world history. As such, they will be adhering to the Buddha’s exhortation that everyone should test out his teachings for themselves and follow their own inner light (Ellsberg 2001), but are likely to discard many of the subsequent scriptures as myths. Spiritual seekers and secularists who sustain a meditation practice are likely to experience some transpersonal aspects of the Dharma for themselves, at which point they may hail the Buddha as an extra-ordinary human being, more akin to the mystics of all religions. Given the close association between spirituality and the perennial philosophy, those who reach the Buddha on a spiritual level are likely to believe that once we abstract from the specifics of a given cultural-historical era, the kernel of the Dharma can be found in all moral and religious traditions (cf. Ellsberg 2001; Kabat-Zinn 2005). Western converts partake in a Going for Refuge ceremony, taking refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. They believe that Siddhartha-the-man died under the Bodhi tree and that the Buddha was born as an Enlightened Mind inhabiting Nirvana, and they seek to follow in his footsteps. Enlightenment is bound to be an enigma for non-enlightened minds, so conversion to Buddhism entails a quantum leap of faith (Sangharakshita 1996).

After the demise of the historical Buddha, this new religion evolved into diverse traditions, and the Mahayana tradition predominates in Western Buddhism. Mahayana signifies ‘the great vehicle’ as it allows for laypeople as well as monks and nuns to attain Enlightenment, but it harbours contradictory strands. On the one hand, there are schools of meditation (Chan in
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Chinese, Zen in Japanese), which cultivate the simplicity of mindfulness in everyday life (Blum 2004b). This can appeal to any secularist or spiritual seeker, and Western Buddhists in the caring professions tend to be trained in Zen meditation (e.g. Brazier 2001; Brenner and Homonoff 2004). On the other hand, Mahayana scholars solved the death of the historical Buddha by elaborating cosmologies with an array of archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (Blum 2004a). Given that this Buddhist pantheon does not feature in the cultural heritage of most Westerners, it requires a vivid spiritual imagination to entertain it, and relevant transpersonal encounters or religious faith to endorse it. The Mahayana ideal is the Bodhisattva – a being who seeks Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings and who vows to return to Earth again-and-again until all are free from suffering. The Dalai Lama is regarded as the reincarnation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and this Bodhisattva is also the ideal for Buddhist social workers (Canda and Furman 1999). A reconciliation between these Mahayana strands is possible insofar as the Buddha recalled previous lifetimes as a Bodhisattva (see Conze 1959). But Westerners may prefer to interpret Buddhist symbolism through the lens of depth psychology, conceiving of a Bodhisattva as an aspect of our higher self, whether as a conscious ideal or as a hidden potential (cf. Sangharakshita 1996). Such a reading is compatible with the Mahayana belief that an embryonic ‘Buddha nature’ undergirds all beings since it is co-terminous with cosmic reality itself (Brazier 2001).

The non-duality between Samsara and Nirvana is a core tenet of Mahayana Buddhism. The Buddha referred to himself as the Tathagata, which is translated as ‘going the way of suchness or thusness’ and applied to one who sees and responds to reality ‘as it is’ in every moment (Brazier 2001: 37–38). More mysteriously, all Buddhas are Tathagatas insofar as they are ‘thus come’ and ‘thus gone’ i.e. they are no-one, ‘coming from nowhere and going nowhere’, as they inhabit Nirvana, which transcends time, place and personhood (Conze 1959: 166–7). Although all of us are embryonic Buddhas (Tathagata-garbhbas), it is only those who have extinguished the sources of delusion who are awake in Samsara, and Nirvana refers to this extirpation of Samsaric conditioning, or the radical purification of consciousness, rather than the exiting of Samsara itself (Ellsberg 2001). A living Bodhisattva embodies Enlightenment on Earth, and Nirvana is only sustainable within Samsara if they represent two different ways of being-on-the-earth, perceiving-the-world and engaging-with-reality, rather than two literal realms. This is why the non-dual has become the philosopher’s stone of Western Buddhism (Wilber 2006).

However, the Buddha extemporised his insights into reality with reference to two orders of reality, as they only become one for the Enlightened Mind, and the non-dual can only remain silent when confronted with the artificial divisions of human language (Sangharakshita 1996). This engenders the great chasm in Mahayana scriptures between ‘conditioned’ and ‘unconditioned’ reality – so there are psychological and historical truths about the empirical and conditioned reality of life-on-Earth now ratified by Western sciences, and cosmic and metaphysical truths about an ultimate, underlying and unconditioned reality disclosed by and to the Buddha (Blum 2004a; Ellsberg 2001; Sangharakshita 1996). To bypass this distinction courts the risk of misunderstanding some doctrines in Western Buddhism and misapplying them to Western social work. This will be exemplified later with reference to the doctrine of emptiness and the associated notions of no-self and non-attachment.

Suffering and its overcoming

The Buddha taught that the conditioned reality of life-on-Earth is characterised by the impermanence of all things and the inevitability of suffering for sentient beings as their bodies undergo birthing, ageing, decaying and dying. In the case of the human species, the mind amplifies
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suffering in myriad ways. We develop attachments to our bodies, identities, homes, careers, families, nations and religions. In tandem with this, we are burdened with aversions to disability and mortality, the loss of cherished people and places, and criticisms of our worldviews. The mind also ruminates on wounds from the past and hopes for the future, further compounding our suffering in the present. But the core neurosis is our attachment to the ‘self’ – in the absence of a belief that ‘I’ and ‘you’ exist as separate entities, there can be no other attachments or aversions, as there is no-one to cling to anything, and no-one to love, mourn or despise (Brazier 2001).

The toxic ingredients of attachments and aversions are stirred together in the cauldron of delusion, which refers to our ignorance of the law of conditionality and of our true (Buddha) nature, which lies hidden beneath the debris of conditioning. The law of conditionality is technically rendered as the law of conditioned co-production or the law of dependent origination. In its most general form, it states that whatever arises, arises in dependence upon the preceding conditions, and that whatever changes or ceases, changes or ceases by virtue of a transformation or cessation of the preceding conditions (Conze 1959). In the human world, it also manifests as the law of karma since intentional actions generate consequences; whenever we set out to heal or hurt someone, we are sowing positive or poisonous karmic seeds that will bear fruit in the future; and karma operates within and between lifetimes (Sangharakshita 1996). The Great Physician is another appellation of the Buddha, since he revealed how the mind sows the seeds of suffering, and how we can dig up poisonous roots and plant nutritious seeds in their stead (Brazier 2001).

Abiding by ethical precepts and principles is the first step on the journey towards Nirvana. There are five prohibitions to prevent us from causing suffering to ourselves and others, which are correlated with five injunctions designed to cultivate peaceful and present-focused states of mind, as illustrated in Table 9.1 and adapted from Sangharakshita (1996).

If we practise the virtues we cannot succumb to the prohibitions, but if the virtues are not perfected we will lapse into the vicious cycle of conditioned reactivity – for example, by seeking vengeance upon those who injure us rather than showing them loving-kindness.

It is only when we are steadfast in our morality and the positive psychology associated with it that we are ready to embark upon the next stage of the journey towards Nirvana, i.e. insight-based meditation and the transcendental wisdom it eventually yields (Conze 1959). Transcendental wisdom is the gateway to the unconditioned reality of Nirvana, but this can only be traversed when we have undone the entirety of our conditioning, including our division of the world into self and other, and our assumption that these cultural signifiers point to actual substances. The Buddha saw the universe as a web of interconnections stretching across the infinity of space-time, wherein all elements and entities are in a perpetual process of becoming, transforming from within, transacting with each other and transmuting into each other. At

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**Table 9.1 Buddhist morality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative prohibitions (Shilas or ethical precepts)</th>
<th>Positive injunctions (Dharmas or ethical principles)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Harming sentient beings</td>
<td>Loving-kindness to all sentient beings</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Taking the not-given</td>
<td>Generosity of giving</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Sexual misconduct</td>
<td>Contentment of mind and body</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Untruthful and unkind communications</td>
<td>Truthful and helpful communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Imbibing intoxicating substances</td>
<td>Awareness or mindfulness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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this metaphysical level there is only interbeing – a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh (Ellsberg 2001), but perhaps more accurately rendered as interbecoming. The Buddhist doctrines of ‘emptiness’ (shunyata) and ‘no-self’ (anatman) flow from this, since everything and everyone is devoid of an inherent or immutable essence. By extension, this metaphysics overturns conventional morality since nothing and no-one can be intrinsically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Blum 2004a).

Most secularists raise no objections to the Buddha’s teachings on suffering and morality. Beyond a minimal level of maturity, we are cognisant of transitoriness and unsatisfactoriness from our own life-experience, and those who enter the caring professions witness the causes and consequences of suffering in the lives of others. The conduct prohibited by the Buddha is reflected in civil and criminal law, and the positive injunctions are aligned with virtue ethics in the caring professions (Øvrelid 2008). If we peel back the metaphysical layers of the law of conditionality, it is the most ancient rendering of the scientific law of cause-and-effect and systemic theory. A spiritual appropriation of these teachings is accessible to most of us too. The Dalai Lama has pointed out that spiritual seekers and scientists alike are waking up to the reality of interconnectedness (2006), and he acclaims the universal validity of Buddhist virtues at a secular-spiritual level beyond religious disputes (2011). But only a minority of Westerners subscribe to metaphysical beliefs in karmic re-becoming. Their quest is for a radical de-conditioning that destroys all karmic traces, both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, in order to become a Bodhisattva or a Buddha in this or a subsequent lifetime (Sangharakshita 1996).

The Buddhist view of suffering and its overcoming may be more contentious among Western social workers. Classic Buddhist scriptures trace all suffering to the root poisons in the human mind, resulting in an introspective and individualistic approach to its overcoming (Mascaró 1973). Although engaged Buddhists acknowledge the societal structures and cultures underpinning inequality and violence, these are also ultimately traceable to destructive mind-states such as greed and hatred. This is reversed in the social work ethos of anti-oppressive practice, where prejudices and predispositions at a personal level are grounded in cultures and structures, so that the diminution of suffering presupposes the dismantling of social systems (Thompson 2012). While destructive mind-states and destructive social systems are two sides of the same coin, which one we prioritise has major implications for practice. Øvrelid (2008) contends that social workers aggravate their suffering by wanting to change the world, and that if they could see societal reality as it is, as a network of causes and conditions beyond their control as individuals, it would release more energies for casework. This resolves the dilemma only if we assume that social work and casework are synonymous, an assumption that can also be challenged from a Buddhist standpoint, as we shall see later.

Social workers may be more perplexed by the idea that nothing is inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Let us recall the great chasm of Mahayana Buddhism. The moral truth that slavery is ‘bad’ can be juxtaposed to the metaphysical truth of interbecoming, which implies that there is no such thing as ‘slavery’. The law of conditionality at a cosmic level means that all phenomena are equally indispensable to the evolution of the universe, so without people-becoming-slaves there would be no people-freeing-slaves either. Definitive moral judgements at an ultimate level are then only possible from the standpoint of infinity and eternity. This yields a supra-mundane morality rather than non-morality, as the Great Compassion arises precisely when we no longer discriminate between self and other, friend and foe, good and bad (Ellsberg 2001). To eschew this transcendental wisdom is to misunderstand Buddhism and to turn away from the Great Compassion; but to interpret it as a licence for doing nothing in the face of societal injustices such as slavery is to misapply transcendental truths to concrete facticities in the socio-historical world. Buddhists are exhorted to live and labour at the interface of two realities, which demands a dialectical movement between engaging with the world as it is in order to alleviate suffering,
and retreating from the world in order to touch the transcendental reality that is the ultimate source of healing and understanding. Only Buddhas resolve the tensions of this dialectic by fully realising Nirvana within Samsara (Sangharakshita 1996).

**Meditation practices**

Westerners who take up meditation in an educational or health care setting are exposed to a secular version of this practice. Pacification meditations are designed to calm the body and clarify the mind so they function as stress management strategies for agitated and anxious people. In strict Buddhist terms, they are methods of purifying our psychology and morality, thus preparing us for the insight-based meditations which engender transcendental wisdom.

While the simplicity of the Zen method of just sitting (zazen) is attractive, it is also arduous, and alternatives such as walking or lying meditations can be more accessible for beginners (Kabat-Zinn 2005). Sitting meditations are facilitated by concentrating on a mantra (phrase) or mandala (image), since when we concentrate on something it allows the debris in our minds to disperse, providing a respite from our internal chattering. The mindfulness of breathing is the most popular concentrative practice, but the modern term ‘mindfulness’ can be misunderstood (Kabat-Zinn 2005). It is wise to recall the older translations of ‘watchfulness’ or ‘wakefulness’ (Mascaró 1973) since the meditator is aware of but not attached to the machinations of the mind, or emptying rather than filling the mind. When we tune into the breath the mind is returned to its rightful place in the body here-and-now; lapses of concentration are also vital to the process, since they tell us about the toxins we carry, and furnish us with opportunities to return to the breath; this in turn demonstrates that we can transcend our mind and its toxins. There is evidence of the benefits of meditation for clinical and non-clinical populations, and an understanding of its operations that is faithful to both Buddhist and Western psychology (cf. Groves 2014; Kabat-Zinn 2005), so it is not surprising that it has been included as an optional module in some social work programmes (Birnbaum 2008).

Meditation acts as a stimulant to spiritual development for many erstwhile secularists, including social work students who have only been exposed to an eight-week course (Birnbaum 2008). In Buddhist terms, when pacification meditations generate an experience of bliss, we have arrived at the first dhyana, a transpersonal state of consciousness that propels us beyond discursive, discriminatory and dualistic thought, unveiling the first glimpses of our Buddha nature (Sangharakshita 1996). The hallmark of transpersonal experiences is a dissolution of boundaries between self and others, and there are loving kindness meditations to enhance our receptivity to this. Here, loving kindness is initially directed towards one’s self, then re-directed to loved ones, strangers and enemy figures, and eventually radiated out to all sentient beings (Kabat-Zinn 2005).

Buddhists who meditate on a religious level undergo a journey of spiritual death and rebirth. Sangharakshita (1996) sketches out two insight-based meditations reserved for people ordained into his Western Buddhist Order. The six-element practice confronts us with our mortality as we meditate upon the demise of the body and mind, relinquishing each of the elements constitutive of our being (earth, water, fire, air, space and consciousness) to the universe from which they emerged, and realising that none of them ever belonged to us, that we are not identical with elements, body or mind, that ‘I’ am no-thing and no-one at all. This is an experiential realisation of the doctrines of emptiness and no-self (cf. Kabat-Zinn 2005). It is also the void from which we can be reborn within this lifetime, or the great opportunity for breaking the chains of our conditioning. Ordination involves being given a new name and a seed mantra related to a Buddha or Bodhisattva, and ordained members undertake a daily visualisation meditation to nurture this seed. So a committed Buddhist becomes a midwife charged with the
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birth and growth of a transcendental self, which recognises that the division between self and others is illusory.

Meditation at the secular-spiritual interface would be beneficial to most social workers, particularly if cultivated in a consistent manner so that it becomes a preventative rather than remedial approach to stress management. Birnbaum (2008) makes a convincing argument that the admixture of awareness-with-acceptance in mindfulness meditations is an antidote to the endless rounds of theoretical analysis and critical reflection in social work education, promoting a more healthy balance between the senses and the mind, emotions and cognition, striving for achievements and letting-be or letting-go. The most scholarly students, as well as their academic educators, can encounter more pitfalls in meditation. Intellectuals are more likely to be weighted down by a discursive mode of consciousness; if they manage to jettison this, they are more likely to soar into space, detaching their mind from their body and the world; and this is tantamount to an alienated rather than integrated awareness (Sangharakshita 1996). The message is that all of our experiencing has to be cooked in the pot of mindfulness. The paradox is that the cooking takes place all by itself, and our only contribution is to sit down in the non-doing of a non-discursive and non-discriminatory attentiveness (Kabat-Zinn 2005).

The erasure of self, others and attachments at the spiritual-religious interface is troubling for social workers. Once again we need to distinguish between metaphysical and psychological layers of truth and reality. It is impossible to relinquish one’s self or to countenance spiritual death-and-rebirth if one has not yet attained authentic selfhood on a psychological level, so a Buddhist monk or nun retains their individuality and integrity in everyday life (Wilber 2006). Similarly, non-attachment is more pertinent for adults facing significant losses around divorce, disability and death (Masel et al. 2012), and may be harmful if applied to young children who need secure attachments as the incubator for psychological maturity. In concrete terms, this means that a social worker who encouraged a vulnerable adult to free themselves of ego or a child to weaken their attachments to care-givers in the name of Buddhist principles, would be guilty of misunderstanding and misapplying them.

Worldly engagements

The phrase ‘engaged Buddhism’ was coined by Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1960s. He developed a School of Youth for Social Services in Vietnam as an offshoot of his Order of Interbeing, and trained social work students in mindfulness before sending them out into rural areas, initially to educate children, and later to rebuild villages after their bombardment (Ellsberg 2001). In the Western world, it is best exemplified by Roshi Glassman’s Zen Peacemaker Order. He initiated street retreats where his students lived on the streets of New York among homeless people, an experiential exercise in seeing ‘reality as it is’ from the perspective of disprivileged others. Informed by this grassroots perspective, the students set up affordable housing managed by the residents, a bakery providing apprenticeships for those deemed unemployable and a health care centre for people with HIV/AIDS (King 2009).

Viewed from the outside, such endeavours are scarcely distinguishable from the work of community-oriented social workers who often subscribe to a secular ideology. But we do not have to delve far into the inside to bear witness to the spiritual underpinnings of socially engaged Buddhism. It is predicated upon interbeing, so when Western Buddhists mobilise for environmental protection, they invent rituals to cultivate empathy for the suffering of all sentient beings and planet Earth (Macy 2007). By contrast, its specifically religious core is often concealed from the Western gaze. The Dalai Lama’s peaceful negotiations with the Chinese government that desecrated his country are rooted in a belief in karma. Karmic logic intimates that the Tibetans
may have perpetrated injustices against their Chinese neighbours in the distant past, in which case they must bear the consequences. Furthermore, the Tibetans can be grateful towards the Chinese for an opportunity to perfect the virtues that will expunge their karma, so the oppressors who have not yet harvested the fruits of their violence are in greater need of compassion than their victims (King 2009).

Western social workers are likely to repudiate the doctrine of karma. A retrospective reading of karma is oppressive if it showers praise or blame upon people for what in secular terms is an accident of birth, while legitimating status hierarchies around caste, disability and gender. A prospective reading of karma is more empowering as it imparts the message that our fate is in our own hands, given that our future is already being incubated in our present, which is always malleable to some extent (King 2009). Social work would be more enriched by locating itself within the community of interbeing. This presupposes a reformulation of our conception of the person-in-their-environment so that it encompasses our earthly habitat, along with the abandonment of socialist economics that also exploits scarce natural resources to cater to spiraling human greed (Coates 2007). Contra Øvrelid (2008), this is an entreaty to social work as a profession to reorient itself towards communities and take on the suffering of the world.

In the meantime, Western social workers will continue to undertake casework. A small-scale study of Zen-trained social workers in North America showed that the main contribution of Zen was to enable them to empty themselves of ego on the one hand, and professional theories and techniques on the other, in order to be fully present with clients in the here-and-now (Brenner and Homonoff 2004). But this is only one side of the equation, and the danger is that the client’s self-absorption can increase in tandem with the professional’s self-emptying, with ruminations on the past and the future being reinforced by our discursive methods (Brazier 2001). The other conundrum is that Zen masters are renowned iconoclasts, prepared to jettison venerable teachings and to improvise as they see fit at any given time. So in Brandon’s (1976) candid account of his Zen-inspired social work in Britain, we find departures from standard practices and even professional ethics. In a youth offending context, he threw the ignition keys of a teenager’s motorcycle down a drain; and when dealing with domestic violence, he threatened to assault the husband if the latter assaulted his wife again, and then carried out this threat.

From a Buddhist perspective, the question is whether such spontaneous acts reflect a conditioned human nature or the Buddha nature? From a social work perspective, the problem is that however we answer this question, our codes and curricula seem irrelevant. My advice is that social workers should treat their theories, techniques and codes in the way that Buddhists treat the Dharma. The Buddha’s analogy was that the Dharma is a raft ferrying us across the ocean of Samsara, a raft which can be abandoned when we reach the shore of Nirvana insofar as it may become an obstacle to the rest of our journey (Ellsberg 2001). The corollary is that a premature dismantling of the raft could drown us.

**Conclusion**

Globalisation facilitates and necessitates a multi-levelled approach to Buddhism, which has been depicted here as a continuum between the secular, the spiritual and the religious, a continuum that allows for both intersections and quantum leaps between levels. Most social workers and clients in Western countries will be operating at the interface of the secular and the spiritual when applying Buddhist principles and practices, and they have latitude in whether to adopt a more secular or spiritual orientation. It is only when social workers are committed Buddhists or when they are dealing with clients from Buddhist communities that the religious level comes to the foreground (Wisner 2011). While a religious orientation to Buddhism has spawned
sublime ideals, ranging from the Bodhisattva of Compassion to the community of interbeing, it is inseparable from a metaphysics that can be misappropriated by Westerners, particularly if it is not recognised as such.

References


