Can a Buddhist Revise a Sexy Novel? [1]

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Theme Essay by Judith Walcutt

The Challenge of Cutting Through Words

At the exact moment in time when the Dharma door opened for me, I was 45 and in free fall. An AWOL Catholic, I was trying to maintain my own business, working a part-time job as a publicist, and feverishly on the run as a wife and mother.

How was I writing during this time? I don't know; like childbirth, I've forgotten the pain involved. Somehow, I managed to kick out a 98,000-word novel and dribble dozens of poems down the sidelines. Maybe being at my wits' end was good for my creative life—in the same way that obstacles are good for a spiritual life.

[5]The *bodhisattvas* say you don't really know you're a Buddhist until you've faced a crisis and have refrained from causing harm to self or others. As disasters are unfolding, though, it's hard to bear this in mind.

The Dharma found me on the island in the Puget Sound where I live. In 1996, an elementary school teacher whom everyone loved was dying of breast cancer. She was part of a Buddhist group that had been practicing together for many years. One member told me that a renowned Tibetan lama was coming to help prepare our mutual friend for death. This lama would give a public teaching for the community of friends—did I want to go with her? I did.

The room was crowded. I sat near the door so I could leave in time to pick up the kids from school. When Wangdor Rinpoche entered, those in the know bowed as a traditional gesture of respect. The monk sat on a cushioned chair on a low dais before us and spoke in (translated) Tibetan.

It was the simplest of teachings—a meditative practice using as its focal point the mantra of universal compassion, *om mani padme hum.* But Lama Wangdor also spoke of the coming death of our friend. He spoke to the impermanence of all things—of good things, of bad things, of all living and nonliving things.

Even in translation, his words slaked a thirst I didn't know I had. The room filled with a luminescence I could not account for other than that it came from the lama himself. The visceral experience of it surprised me—and captured me for good.

There's no doubt this spiritual epiphany has infiltrated the content, language, and ethic with which I write and live. These days, I strive for simplicity and the clearest expression of truth I can manage.

The movement of thoughts crowding the mind become "as clouds that vanish into the sky." This is a Buddhist metaphor for how we "see" reality in all its impermanence. Shantideva, the eighth-century Indian Buddhist scholar and yogi, described enlightenment itself as "a flash of lightning in the dark of night." The language is simple, but the choice of images, as in poetry, heightens awareness of the ineffable.

Each word I choose now brings me back to *now*—to this place, this moment on the page where I am writing. I watch my thoughts unfold, review them for truths and lies and greatness and smallness.

To be sure, the Buddhist understanding that words truly are actions affecting all who hear them—and speak them—has complicated my writing life. Take that novel I wrote seventeen years ago. I began it before I was a Buddhist and finished it after I became one, and now I can't decide if the story is worth rewriting, rethinking, or tossing into the burn barrel.

It's about a young woman who lives a robust, 1970s picaresque life, busy with high jinks of mostly the sexual kind. When I first wrote it, I was interested in producing something that would sell—sell BIG—and help put my kids through college.

It didn't do any of that. The manuscript went around New York in 1996 and 1997, loved and hated by some of the best and worst publishers of the time. But in the end, it was dropped off on my doorstep by my agent (now ex-) with a note that read, basically, "This book has too much sex in it."

Wow, I thought. *A mass-market book can have too much sex?*

In 2013, it's a whole new scene. *Fifty Shades of Grey* has made more money than any book in the history of publishing. So, why don't I get that oversexed manuscript back out to the carnal knowledge-hungering world again?

Because I'm a Buddhist. When I re-read this novel, it feels like someone else wrote it. The books that I'm writing now are very far from this one.

Do I abandon it? All 98,000 words? If I rewrite it, will it lose the naïve voice that my younger writing self captured? If I take this character for a metaphorical stroll in the Garden of Redemption, will she stick her tongue out at me and run away?

The practice of Buddhism is a daily, moment-to-moment activity, one in which I'm constantly revising the way I observe the world. But revision of words on a page is a particular circle of hell for me.

[6]

That's likely true for most creative people, regardless of faith, but Buddhism challenges me to rethink my process as a writer. An artist in my Buddhist group suggested that I look at revision as akin to the Tibetan practice of *chöd*, which means "to sever" or "cut through." When doing *chöd*, Buddhist practitioners visualize the head separated from the body, transformed into a bowl into which all the remaining parts of the body are poured and then offered up to benefit all.

In Tibetan culture, *chödpas* travel to charnel grounds and other remote areas that provoke fear. As they sing their *sadhana*, flick their *damaru* drums, and shake the *dorje* bells rhythmically in sync with each other, they're cutting through their emotions, fears, and obstacles, and dedicating their practice to the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering.

When I look at *chöd* in this way, as a writing Buddhist and a Buddhist writer, I see it as a perfect metaphor for the writing life—the life of taking on many lives, many loves, many fears, many comedies, many tragedies—and of cutting through the whole gamut of emotions for the enlightenment of others.

Writers have the capacity to sort through heaps of worldly experience and pull out a few threads with which to weave a tale. Writers are frightened for us and with us; they also work hard to redeem us. Writers are our *chödpas*—wandering in the wildness of their perceptions, returning with meaning assimilated for all.

Here, I begin to see where the Buddhist and the writer are one and the same. Like a *chödpa*, the writer cuts away at her words, choosing what to leave in and what to take out, revealing the essential truth.

I am still contemplating the fate of my old novel. But I know that the writing process itself, which shifts every second, is

the key to how I'll cut through the blank paper, perceive its inherent emptiness, and write my way through to the next piece.

Art Information

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Walcutt's blog for *Whidbey Life Magazine* [7], "Minding the Sky," contemplates ordinary life in a spiritual light. Her independent production company, Otherworld Media [8], has been producing family programming for over thirty years. She's also a grateful alumna of Hedgebrook [9], a women writers' retreat on Whidbey Island.

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