

# Liberation

*Religion for the Third Millennium*

Book manuscript **draft** by Dino Karabeg



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# Introduction

The idea for this book came while I was visiting the international part of the Suan Mokkh (The Cove of Liberation) forest monastery in Thailand, just before the January 2017 meditation retreat would begin.

"Ajahn Buddhadasa reached an insight which, as he saw it, was exactly what our civilization needed in order to liberate itself from its self-destructive tendencies and begin to evolve in a completely new way", I told Ajahn Medhi, the abbot of the Suan Mokkh International Dhamma Hermitage ("ajahn" is the Thai respectful title for an advanced monk and teacher). "He created this international part of the monastery and the international retreat center to communicate and spread this insight to people from around the world. But his message does not come across! I did a bit of research and found out that even the people who are committed to spiritual pursuit leave Suan Mokkh without a slightest idea about its message."

"Why don't you explain the message?" replied the ajahn. "I'll give you fifteen minutes of my teaching time each day of the retreat."

Later that day I got a typewritten message from Ajahn Mehdi: In the meeting that took place that afternoon it turned out that the retreat center staff members were not in favor of his proposal. I was, however, invited to join the retreat once again as a "volunteer" - a non-paying member of the team, this time as the ward of the men's dorm.

While Ajahn Medhi was in the meeting, I had already begun preparing those ten fifteen-minute talks. And I really liked the way they were coming together. And so I realized that I had in fact started working on a new book project.

During the silent meditation retreat, the next ten days, in the austere environment of the retreat center with its concrete beds and wooden pillows and the bell waking us up at 4am for meditation, I was enjoying the spacious upstairs premises with two terraces and a wide-open view of the surrounding coconut grove and tropical forest, sharing the second floor only with a green snake that made itself a home in the tubes of the terrace railing. Secluded in this way, I was able to practice Sheng Zhen Gong (a brand of qigong, Chinese moving meditation) and yoga during the breaks, which complemented perfectly the long hours of sitting in *anapanasati* (a brand of *vipassana* or "insight meditation", which Ajahn Buddhadasa reconstructed as the original meditation technique that was practiced and taught by the Buddha). As my energy level and focus heightened, the book project was present in

the back of my mind and the ideas were fermenting. This creative process continued when I rejoined Ajahn Mehdi deeper in the forest, in the international part of the Suan Mokkh forest monastery after the retreat.

So when upon return to Oslo I sat down to write, the contours of the book were already there, and it only remained to polish up the details.

What you are reading is the result.



The title, "Liberation", I adopted from the name of the Suan Mokkh forest monastery, "The Cove of Liberation". Obviously, Ajahn Buddhadasa himself chose the word "liberation" as the one that best expressed the main potential or intended effect of his insight. The insight itself he however attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, better known as the Buddha. In the spirit of his monk name, Buddhadasa - which means "the slave of the Buddha" - he saw his role as no more than communicating and reviving the insight and the practice that the Buddha discovered twenty-five centuries earlier, which he himself only rediscovered. Since Ajahn Buddhadasa framed it as an insight into a natural law, which connects certain causes to certain effects, I will feel justified in calling it *the Buddha's Law*.

Ajahn Buddhadasa considered *the Buddha's Law* - the nature and the value of which I will attempt to portray on these pages - to be the essence of all religion. One of his stated purposes for creating the Suan Mokkh International Dhamma Hermitage was to help people from around the world understand "the essence of religion, that is something identical and contained in all religions". By becoming mindful of this essence, Buddhadasa believed, the religious people would easily resolve their differences, and join forces to help us all create a world that is inspired by this essence, and revitalized by it.

I will be using the word "religion" in a somewhat different way than what is usual. (When I want to signal that, I will write the word in italics; and I will do the same with other words to which I am attributing a self-defined meaning.) By *religion* I will be referring to the role that religion has played in traditional

societies. So *religion* will here not be the kind of institution that we see around us, but a placeholder and an open question - setting us off on a quest for a suitable way to fulfill that role, in contemporary conditions.

The role of *religion* which I have in mind corresponds closely to this word's etymological root (re + ligare), which means to re-connect. In traditional societies the religion indeed served as a binding element, connecting people into a community by giving them a shared identity and worldview; and connecting each individual to a certain ethical principle, often identified as "the will of God".

In our post-traditional global society, however, whatever we have kept from our religious traditions appears to separate us rather than connect us. And when they succeed in binding us to age-old lifestyles and beliefs, religions tend to stand in the way of the evolutionary changes that we now *must* go through.

Can we liberate *religion* from its present implementation - where it is cemented by and identified with a traditional worldview? Can *religion* liberate us from outdated forms of consciousness, and then connect us to new purposes, and to each other in completely new ways? Can it liberate us from old allegiances and reconnect us into completely new institutions, and institutions into a whole new society? Can religion *help us* evolve?

As we shall see, *the Buddha's Law*, as rediscovered and interpreted by Ajahn Buddhadasa, offers affirmative answers to all those questions.

At the end of the January 2016 retreat, in my three-minute talk during the closing evening where we were invited to share our experiences, I used the opportunity to point to this attractive possibility.

"In the midst of our shared walk toward the ultimate cooling of emotions, the Nibbana, I am experiencing a sense of drama.

We are living in a world laden with problems that are so new and so complex, that even our best minds hardly have a clue what we might do about them. And here we are offered an insight, or we may also call it a *meme*, which - if we could bring it back home with us and put it to use in our daily lives and workplaces - would transform our world quite thoroughly, so that those problems would *naturally* disappear!

Right here where we are sitting, here in Hall Five, is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. This hall was *created* to share this message with the people from around the world. And those people - that's us!

Shall we be able to receive this message? Shall we be able to take it back home and integrate it into our lives and our environments?

I really really hope so!"



Another reason for choosing this title was that it suited so well also my other purpose - to introduce *polyscopy*, which has been the focus of my academic work during the past couple of decades. As we shall see, the vision that motivated *polyscopy* was a different yet related kind of liberation - of *science*, and of us through *science*.

By *science* I am again referring to the role that science has acquired in our society - the production of reliable, state-of-the-art, rigorously founded... truth and meaning.

That *science* may need to be liberated - or better said, that we may need to be liberated from the limitations its present implementation has imposed on us - is an insight that has been voiced by researchers of highest authority. Already a century ago Max Weber (a founder of academic sociology) pointed to the "iron cage" of rational concepts and narrowly conceived pragmatic pursuits to which modernity has confined us. And a half-century ago, in "Physics and Philosophy", Werner Heisenberg (a founder of quantum mechanics) pointed out that science had discovered a way out.

Heisenberg's monograph is so central to our two our themes, the liberation of *religion* and of *science*, that I will now reproduce its page-and-a-half conclusion verbatim. This conclusion follows after a brief historical summary where it is shown how the successes of science led us to accept a certain (mechanistic, causal) worldview as *the reality*; and how then modern physics *disproved* this worldview, by demonstrating that small particles of matter behaved in ways that were incompatible with it. The boldface emphasis is mine.

In this way, finally, the nineteenth century developed an extremely rigid frame for natural science which formed not only science but also the general outlook of great masses of people. This frame was supported by the fundamental concepts

of classical physics, space, time, matter and causality; the concept of reality applied to the things or events that we could perceive by our senses or that could be observed by means of the refined tools that technical science had provided. Matter was the primary reality. The progress of science was pictured as a crusade of conquest into the material world. Utility was the watchword of the time.

On the other hand, **this frame was so narrow and rigid that it was difficult to find a place in it for many concepts of our language that had always belonged to its very substance, for instance, the concepts of mind, of the human soul or of life.** Mind could be introduced into the general picture only as a kind of mirror of the material world; and when one studied the properties of this mirror in the science of psychology, the scientists were always tempted – if I may carry the comparison further – to pay more attention to its mechanical than to its optical properties. Even there one tried to apply the concepts of classical physics, primarily that of causality. In the same way life was to be explained as a physical and chemical process, governed by natural laws, completely determined by causality. Darwin's concept of evolution provided ample evidence for this interpretation. **It was especially difficult to find in this framework room for those parts of reality that had been the object of the traditional religion** and seemed now more or less only imaginary. Therefore, in those European countries in which one was wont to follow the ideas up to their extreme consequences, an open hostility of science toward religion developed, and even in the other countries there was an increasing tendency toward indifference toward such questions; only the ethical values of the Christian religion were excepted from this trend, at least for the time being. Confidence in the scientific method and in rational thinking replaced all other safeguards of the human mind.

Coming back now to the contributions of modern physics, one may say that **the most important change brought about by its results consists in the dissolution of this rigid frame of concepts** of the nineteenth century. Of course many attempts had been made before to get away from this rigid frame which seemed obviously too narrow for an understanding of the essential parts of reality. But it had not been possible to see what could be wrong with the fundamental concepts like matter, space, time and causality that had been so extremely successful in the history of science. Only experimental research itself, carried out with all the refined equipment that technical science could offer, and its mathematical interpretation, provided the basis for a critical analysis – or, one may say, enforced the critical analysis – of these concepts, and finally resulted in the dissolution of the rigid frame.

Let us pose for a moment and reflect about what we just saw: A giant of modern physics was telling us that his field found the key to that very "iron cage" within which another giant, of sociology, saw us confined! Heisenberg even went as far as saying that this might have been *the most important* practical contribution of his field!

And yet - you will have no difficulty verifying this with the help of the quoted text - *we are still confined to the "iron cage"!* Somehow, and perhaps incredibly, we haven't yet summoned the good sense or the courage to unlock the door and come out!

*Polyscopy* does not undertake to liberate us from the "narrow and rigid frame of concepts" and from the worldview that has been characterized as "the iron cage" by offering a new worldview and new concepts, as it has been the case in the past. The *polyscopy* proposal is more ambitious and more radical - it is to liberate *science* (our creation of truth and meaning) from *any* fixed conceptual schemes and worldviews, and even from its age-old dependence on worldview creation!

Liberated from subservience to a worldview, and from all those values, policies and routines that have been put in place to secure that we don't deviate from it, information and the way we create it and handle it can be reconfigured to better serve *any* purpose!

As one might expect, this single act of liberation will open up a vast new creative frontier.



Take a moment and consider this question: If we are now allowed to consciously choose a purpose for information, and then *design* what information should be like and how we might need to handle it to better serve that purpose - then *for what purpose* would you use *this newly acquired freedom*?

It is to that question that *polyscopy* is offered as a *prototype* answer. Instead of coercing us into "the reality", *polyscopy* undertakes to orient us in the complex reality we have created -

by combining already available resources and insights, and by creating new ones as needed.

The next question that arises is - *what should information be like to fulfill this pivotal purpose? And in what way or ways might it be created?* Over a period of two decades, a portfolio of *prototypes* have been developed to answer those questions quite thoroughly. *Polyscopy* includes epistemological principles, value criteria and methods. There are completely new information formats, structuring primitives, and new *kinds* of information. *Polyscopy* is showcased by redesigning the book, the article and other media formats, showing how information might be different, and how it may make a difference. There is even a prototype institution called Knowledge Federation (created, of course, through collaboration with my international colleagues), which is tailored to the challenge of developing this line of work and making it widely used (you will easily notice that our conventional academic and other institutions are *not* suitable for this task). Systemic or institutional prototypes have been created by Knowledge Federation showing how scientific results may be liberated from the jargon and interests of their disciplines and communicated broadly; and how journalism, education and other core knowledge-work institutions may be thoroughly reconfigured to better serve us in our new condition - and by taking advantage of the capabilities of new information technology.

In this first book about *polyscopy* I will, however, *not* speak about any of those technical matters (for an impatient or interested reader an intuitive summary of *polyscopy's* fundamental ideas is provided in Appendix I). *Polyscopy* will here only be *showcased*, by applying it to a single communication challenge - *the Buddha's Law*, or "the essence of religion". I will not introduce more of the technical material than absolutely necessary: I will use only a single and most simple technique - *vignettes*.

*Vignettes* are short, sparkly and sticky people-and-situation stories, the kind of thing one might tell over a glass of wine at a social gathering. They will allow us to zoom in on experience while liberating it from the language and preoccupations of the field of knowledge from which it has emanated. The *vignettes* will give us a way to "stand on the shoulders" of the past and present visionaries, to see what they saw, to truly share their experience. We shall then see how the most basic insights or experiences from a variety of fields of interest can be combined together to liberate us from a limited and dysfunctional worldview, by creating whole new ways of understanding some the core issues of our lives, and of our time.

By weaving the *vignettes* together a dramatic effect will be created, through which the new insight, which the *vignettes* compose together, will be highlighted.





The dedication is to my friend and academic colleague Victor Vianu.

While I believe that everyone might find interest and value in the liberating insights I am about to share, the primary audience I had in mind while writing was Victor - and of course other people like him.

Victor lives in Paris and survives in Del Mar, California (he is an academic researcher with two positions and homes). One could say that there are worth places to live in than Del Mar! But Victor thrives in Paris because of its unique ambiance of galleries, theatres, restaurants... When he's neither at work nor with his family, Victor might be painting in a small, round tower-like studio he's been renting near the Pompidou arts center.

What brought us close was that Victor and I share (forgive me, Victor, for using this word) an almost *religious* appreciation for "good things" - good science, good art, good theatre, good food...

But Victor, just as I too used to, associates "religion" with a *betrayal* of good things. He experiences religion as a way to drown the quest for true art and true knowledge in the stale waters of communal reassurance. Having grown up in former Eastern Europe, both Victor and I received an entirely secular upbringing. Each of us later moved to the United States to complete our education.

So when my *religious* transformation began, nearly three decades ago, my first concern was to avoid breaking my bond of friendship with Victor. I wanted to bring Victor along on my inner journey. I also wanted to connect my own past with my future. I felt that my transformation was completely consistent with the values that Victor and I shared. And that I could explain this to him. And so I began to write.

*Polyscopy* resulted from this writing.

With this book I want to complete what I then began. I want to demonstrate to Victor that just as there is good science and good

art - there is also good *religion*. I want to make it plain that there are *memes* related to *religion* that are just as essential to culture as poetry, painting and mathematics. And that having been misunderstood and misplaced, those *memes* now carry an *enormous* transformative potential.

I want to offer to Victor, and to other people like him, *religion* as a cultural frontier, on which we may now expand our quest for meaning - personal *and* academic!



I will do this in part by weaving in fragments of my personal story.

I have, namely, had the unusual fortune to study under four exceptional masters of Oriental arts (the fourth by reading books, and by immersing myself in the environment and the practice that he'd created):

🍇 Grandmaster Sang Kyu Shim, who after raising to the very top (he was a 9th Dan Black Belt Grandmaster, co-founder and president of the World Martial Arts Association, main editor of the Tae Kwon Do Times journal and author of three books) understood that there was a deep and subtle inner principle that was as a rule missed in martial practice; and who then gathered his most advanced students, some of which had been studying with him most faithfully for twenty or more years, and proclaimed: "From now on, must forget everything I have taught you. It was all wrong. We begin from the beginning."

🍇 Sufi Master Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, who with a Ph.D. in psychiatry from the University of Sorbonne rose to the peak of his profession in his native Iran; and who - having become the headmaster of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order at the tender age of 27 - later moved to the West and spread this order worldwide, wrote and published prodigiously, resulting in a series of books that make the tradition and the essence of Sufism accessible to the international audiences, and two volumes of his own poetry.

🍇 Qigong or more precisely Sheng Zhen Gong founding headmaster Li Jun Feng, who having attained honor and fame in his native China (as the head coach of the national wushu team, and later also as a star film actor) experienced

through his own Sheng Zhen practice a profound personal transformation which he termed "the unconditioned state" and "unconditional love"; becoming in that way aware of the difference this could make to the people of the world, he left position and fame and dedicated his life to spreading the Sheng Zhen practice internationally.

🌸 Buddhist Ajahn Buddhadasa, who having seen as a young monk the limitations of the usual practice, learned Pali to be able to read the original texts, and withdrew into the forest to live and practice the way the Buddha did; and who as a result "saw the world as it truly is", and that the meaning of the Buddha's teaching was quite something else than what was usually taught.

It was my already mentioned devotion to what is genuine and good in culture that made me an eager and ardent disciple to each of my masters. I spared no effort and strove to understand their teachings as thoroughly and as deeply as I was able. Having experienced the value and the transformative potential of the practices and insights they had to offer, I also became an instructor or facilitator to each of them. As a result I was accepted as an insider in their communities.

I made simple phenomenological models to explain to myself how the techniques I was studying and practicing might work. They later served as the seeds from which the technical side of *polyscopy* grew. I tested my models by experimenting on myself, by reading, and by exploring other techniques and methods extensively.

For years I lived on a vegan macrobiotic diet, immersed in the etiquette of selfless service, and the divine poetry of Hafez and Rumi (I learned enough Farsi to be able to enjoy the originals). Only on occasions I would visit "this world". Can you imagine how it felt just walking by a newsstand: Is *this* really the informational "daily bread" with which my fellow citizens nourish their minds and souls?

A result of this experiment was that I became "a cultural mutant".

So imagine an extraterrestrial coming to our planet and looking at our condition from a completely different experience and background. Or better still - imagine those children from Andersen's fable who saw and said that the emperor was completely naked. What I'm about to say might at first strike you as preposterous; but then you'll have no difficulty seeing that it's what you yourself have been looking at all along.



Let us not hesitate to begin this most timely and interesting exercise!

Already a casual glance at the lifestyle that is practiced at Suan Mokkh, where a monk

- lives on alms (eats only what is given)
- shuns sensory stimulation of any kind
- gives his time and hands to the service to community

will reveal that their lifestyle is not only different, but indeed entirely *opposite* from what the modernity has given us. We might try to explain away this difference by attributing it to self-induced suffering resulting from some rigidly held beliefs. We would, however, be reminded that the very purpose of "The Cave of Liberation", and of the teachings of the Buddha, has been the *liberation* from suffering, and from rigidly held beliefs!

We shall therefore not miss this opportunity to turn the tables and inquire whether *our own* lifestyle and life experience might be a result of misdirected "pursuit of happiness", whether it might be an instance of self-induced suffering that resulted from ill-advised beliefs. Well, "self-induced" might not be a fitting qualification here, we only need to lift up our eyes to see how much of our sensory overstimulation is due to scientifically orchestrated psychological manipulation in the service of commercial interests - which is coercing us to consume more than we need to, and than our planet can endure. Just looking around us will suffice to recognize that we have unwittingly, and incredibly, abandoned the creation of our lifestyle, and of our beliefs and values and ultimately of our culture, to that manipulation and those interests.

So what could be a more useful and a more honorable task for *science* than to lead us to a better way? But to equip itself for that task, *science* will of course need to change its own self-image and values, as well as the way it is practiced.

We shall use the insights that Suan Mokkh has presented us, combine them with *polyscopy*, and draft an alternative. It will be of course only a *prototype* (as everything in *polyscopy* is), but it

will get us started. We may call the corresponding region of the emerging creative frontier "evidence-based pursuit of happiness"; although perhaps "pursuit of *wholeness*" might be more fitting.

In the first four chapters of this book we shall put together disparate pieces of evidence, emanating from a colorful variety of sources, to draft a set of guidelines or a "map" for an informed pursuit of happiness. We shall see that a whole new realm of human experience, a life incomparably more worth living, has remained ignored but within reach. And we shall already have a glimpse of an entire new realm, a frontier, with its own "laws" and "corollaries" and pursuits and practices, which is open to us to explore and to "colonize".

In Chapters Five and Six we shall place *the Buddha's Law* onto this map and see that it not only fits in most snugly, but that it also completes it in a most interesting and practically most relevant way - to provide a link between our personal and larger societal pursuit of happiness, so that they become seamlessly united. Thus we show that wholeness is indeed possible, and natural. A general insight will be that *religion* can be liberated from its historical dependence on rigidly held beliefs, and made similarly agile and useful or "recycled" as a key part of our heritage, and our new, emerging, *informed* culture.

In the last four chapters we shall see how this act of *liberation* can be most fruitfully extended to restructuring the structures and the forces that hold us together as society. We shall show that similarly spectacular possibilities for improvement await us also there, and that our "pursuit of *wholeness*" will extend itself most naturally also in that direction.



Let me now be completely transparent to you: This book is part of a strategy.

Until those recent developments at Suan Mokkh monastery that I've just mentioned, I believed the "Thrivability Strategy" would be the book by which we would begin introducing *polyscopy* to the public. Indeed, what could be a more relevant and more interesting question on which to test the value of a new approach to

knowledge, than how we might "change course" from unsustainable to thriving?

As I was writing *Thrivability Strategy*, though, I realized again and again that the visionary thinkers who discovered what needed to be done and undertook to engage their contemporaries in a remedial action ended up being ignored. And I saw the same trend continued until this day. And so it became clear that *before* we can really talk about resolving the urgent contemporary issues, before most of us can even become *interested* in doing that, a step of *liberation* must be taken.

This book, and the action we are planning around it, have been conceived as a practical way to do that.

The idea is to raise the kind of issues that contemporary people *won't* be able to ignore - because they have been socialized to accept them without questioning; because they are part of their identity; because they are the kind of things they feel passionate about: religious or anti-religious beliefs; that science gives us an accurate and objective picture of reality; that we are free and in control because we live in a democracy. With the aid of *polyscopy*, those beliefs will be challenged in a way that is blameless, compassionate, loving even - and yet resolute.

Our goal will be to begin a public *dialog* about those themes.

And when I say *dialog*, I am using this word in the sense that has been given to it by Werner Heisenberg's reputed colleague David Bohm - to denote a form of communication whose goal is *not* to wrestle others into our own worldview, but on the contrary, to liberate ourselves from clinging to it (a short description is given in Appendix II).

With the help of some of my old friends who are seasoned experts in this form of communication, and new friends who will, I anticipate, join us, we shall be able to hold the flexible structure of this dialog compassionately but firmly!

In that way we shall not only *talk* about a new and liberating way to communicate - we shall indeed already be practicing it, and *rebuilding* our communication accordingly.

As you may have understood, it is this *rebuilding* that *polyscopy* is really all about!