

Being the Buddhist on the BBC's *Thought for the Day*

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ABSTRACT

Vishvapani Blomfield has been the Buddhist contributor to Thought for the Day (TTFD) since 2006. TTFD is a comment on the news from a faith perspective that cannot be politically partisan or critical of other faiths, and it needs to contain a clear idea that listeners can grasp and reflect on. As the only Buddhist, there is a responsibility to represent Buddhism as a whole. The risk in passing from a specific news story to a timeless teaching is that the comment is platitudinous – a common charge against the TTFD slot. The benefit is the need to go back to first principles and consider what Buddhism truly has to offer modern society in its own terms. This paper reflects on Blomfield's experience and how it has affected their understanding not just of how to communicate Buddhist teachings, but how Buddhism is relevant to modern society.

KEYWORDS

Buddhism, Public Engagement, BBC *Thought for the Day*

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Introduction

Thought for the Day runs for two minutes forty-five seconds in every edition of Today, the morning breakfast news programme on BBC Radio 4, at around 7:47 am. It is a daily faith-based reflection on the news on the BBC's main radio news programme, and for seventeen years I have been a Buddhist contributor. As a central element of religious broadcasting on the BBC, *Thought for the Day* plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of religion, and this is a personal reflection on what I try to achieve through these broadcasts and what I have learned.

In 2022, Today's average weekly reach was over six million listeners – around 16 percent of the total UK radio audience – and the number rises when a crisis, a major event or an election heightens interest in the news. The listening statistics include all seventeen hours that Today broadcasts each week, and there are no figures for listeners to *Thought for the Day* itself; but, as there are many repeat listeners and the slot is at peak listening time, it is reasonable to think that the number of people who hear any one talk is in the millions. At any one time, a few dozen contributors, in a carefully weighted roster, take turns to speak about the news from the perspective of their faith community, each of them usually delivering around ten talks a year. Population statistics dictate that there is only room for one professed Buddhist on the roster, and the BBC prefers to work with regular, longstanding contributors – presumably because of the challenges involved in writing a *Thought for the Day* script. Consequently, since 2006 I have been that Buddhist – though in recent years Elizabeth Harris (my fellow contributor to this edition of JBASR) has spoken as both a Christian and a Buddhist Studies scholar.

In a 2022 volume of selected talks covering the whole history of *Thought for the Day*, the editor, Christine Morgan, who oversaw the slot for many years as Head of Religion and Ethics at BBC Radio, explains the BBC's rationale in selecting speakers. '*Thought* finds people who have things to say from within their communities, who can offer an authentic view of how they live and what they believe – and who would seldom get a chance to be heard on a mainstream news programme.' (Morgan, 2022: xx–xxi) I feel a responsibility to speak in ways that all Buddhists can recognise, but there are many Buddhist schools and *sanghas*, and some Buddhists object to the absence of other voices. Some also object to my presence as a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order, both because of the controversies Triratna has attracted and because it is not the continuation of a single Asian Buddhist school. My own view is that Triratna's approach of drawing on the whole Buddhist tradition in light of its foundational teachings is a good starting point in speaking on behalf of the whole community. I tend to focus on shared, core teachings and the words we attribute to the historical Buddha, the tradition's founder – which is also the main focus of my scholarship and the subject of my life of the Buddha (Blomfield, 2011) – while also drawing, less systematically, on the teachings of individual schools.

'Unlearning' misconceptions about Buddhism is important, but at quarter-to-eight in the morning listeners are likely to be eating breakfast or rushing to work and the scope for educating them in Buddhist teachings or directly challenging their misconceptions is limited. The focus must be on engaging listeners' interest by showing that Buddhism's message offers a new way to see an issue with which news coverage has engaged them. That said, the mere fact of contributing to *Thought for the Day* means that certain perceptions of Buddhism intrude. The presence of a Buddhist speaker in a religious slot implies a position in the perennial debate over whether Buddhism belongs within the category 'religion'. From one perspective, it is enough to say that Buddhism's combination of a transcendental orientation and a social expression locates it among similar traditions; but it is more accurate to say that it has a distinctive relation to religious/secular divide. I tried to articulate this in a recent script about the coronation of King Charles III, which was of course both a civil and a religious event:

I think I'll watch the coronation this weekend, but I know it will raise some problems. How can I say 'God Save the King' when I don't believe in God? Yes, I'm a Buddhist, and Buddhism is a 'faith', but it's a non-theistic faith. We don't do God. At the same time, I don't call myself an atheist because atheism

suggests to me a secular outlook that excludes the spiritual dimension that's so important for Buddhists. (3 May, 2023)¹

My hope is that, over time, articulating this 'spiritual dimension' in a distinctively Buddhist way will help listeners locate Buddhism in relation to both religion and secularism.

If Buddhism differs from other religions, its outlook is also, in some ways, profoundly non-secular. Max Weber called it 'world denying', and the foundational teachings, as recorded in the Buddhist Discourses, emphasise 'going forth' from mundane activities, living monastically and devoting oneself to the path to Nirvana. Connecting Buddhism with the news agenda on *Thought for the Day* challenges that view of Buddhism, and, against Weber, we could set Trevor Ling who characterized Buddhism as 'a great social and cultural tradition'. In his book *The Buddha* Ling writes: 'Especially in Ceylon and South East Asia, it has continued to the present day to impart its own characteristic values and attitudes, and has had a profound influence on the life of the home as well as of the nation.' (Ling, 1973: 17) Ling's scholarship focused on Theravadin Buddhist countries, but his argument is, if anything, stronger among followers of Mahayana Buddhism whose ideal is the compassionate bodhisattva who works in the world for the benefit of all beings rather than pursuing Nirvana for their own sake.

This description only suggests Buddhism's general stance while *Thought for the Day* is focused on a specific news item. Listeners should be left with a thought – a reflection stemming from the contributor's faith tradition that carries ethical or spiritual weight and offers a new way of seeing the news item. An important caveat is that this thought or reflection should not be a political opinion. Christine Morgan explains: 'As *Thought* contributors aren't challenged on air, maintaining a balance across contributors, and within scripts on particular subjects, such as food banks and refugees, was important to avoid sounding partisan.' (Morgan, 2022, xxii) A script will usually move from a headline to a timeless teaching, and, in leaping from the particular to the general, it must also somehow avoid becoming trite or platitudinous. This raises further questions with which every contributor must struggle: What does it mean to comment meaningfully on society without adopting a political stance? And what distinctive, nonpolitical contribution can a faith tradition such as Buddhism make to public discussion of the world's problems and conflicts?

The personal element of this challenge is that each contributor will doubtless have a 'political' response to what is happening in society, which they are asked to subordinate to the perspective of their faith. Frustrating as this is, I have learned to see *Thought for the Day* as a valuable discipline, alerting me to the unconscious assumption that, as I am a Buddhist and I have certain views, they are *ipso facto* Buddhist views. I observe that many ethnically European convert Buddhists assume that being a Buddhist implies being politically liberal. However, members of migrant Buddhist communities in western countries, by contrast, are often politically conservative and the British politician Suella Braverman is a rare example of a right-wing convert Buddhist, albeit one of ethnically-Indian origin (Blomfield, 2023).

Questioning my opinions in this way echoes the Buddha's advice to his disciples in the Discourses, to avoid becoming caught in the tangle or morass of 'speculative views' (*ditthis*). The most prominent text expressing this teaching is The Brahmajala Sutta of the Digha Nikaya collection in which the Buddha surveys sixty-two metaphysical and religious beliefs

¹ The scripts are unpublished, except those selected in Morgan, 2022 where page references are given.

and declares that, without exception, they express ‘the feeling of those who do not know and do not see; that is only the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving.’ (Brahmajala Sutta, Digha Nikaya 1, I: 40; Walshe, 1992: 85) Extending this to political philosophies implies that we are being asked to regard them, at root, as rationalisations of mental states that grow from unconscious emotional needs. As political policies are also responses to pragmatic needs, that is probably too simple; but it should alert Buddhists to the elements of political thinking that can become the snares or traps the Buddha indicated. His teaching encourages me to reflect on the emotions that underlie the seemingly objective language of the public sphere and the process through which a belief rigidifies into ‘ideology’. It also encourages me to ask *why* I believe what I believe, and to notice the subjective factors that condition my interpretations of Buddhist teachings, which are usually expressed in universal terms, when I translate them into a political opinion.

But if Buddhism *per se* cannot be located on the political spectrum, I also believe that there remains a pragmatic, non-ideological approach in Buddhist teachings that situates it between world-denial and conventional political engagement. *Thought for the Day* requires me to find this middle ground and over the years certain themes have emerged in the wider culture about which I think Buddhist teachings have something clear and important to say. I don’t consider these themes the basis for a Buddhist political platform or social philosophy, but I do think they indicate areas in which Buddhist values have a particular modern resonance.

The Centrality of the Mind

Buddhism’s focus on the mind and inner experience is far from unique – many *Thought for the Day* contributors speak in these terms and, in a large perspective, we all inherit Kant’s dictum, ‘That which you seek is within you; do not search for it elsewhere’.² We could place beside this the first verse of *The Dhammapada*: ‘Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind.’ The remainder of the verse suggests what is distinctive about a Buddhist contribution: ‘If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox drawing the cart.’ (Sangharakshita, 2001: 13) In Buddhist teachings, recognising our inner experience is a starting point for the conscious ethical mental and spiritual development that we refer to as ‘practice’, and it means that Buddhism has a great deal to say about what, in a modern context, we could call ‘psychology’.

In the time I have been contributing to *Thought for the Day* mental health and psychological wellbeing have risen on the public agenda. Mental health problems have lost some of their stigma, in part because they have become more common, and mindfulness, which is rooted in Buddhist *satipatthana* practice, has gone from a fringe activity, akin to many alternative therapies, to something more mainstream. The number of research articles featuring the word ‘mindfulness’ has increased exponentially, (Baminiwatta, A. and Solangaarachchi, I, 2021) and interventions such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) have become available through the NHS and privately. More diffusely, hundreds of millions of people have downloaded a meditation app and iPhone users can log their mindful moments alongside the time they spend exercising.

² A translation of Kant’s motto, ‘*Quod petis in te est. Ne te quaesiveris extra*’, which he wrote in the notebooks of his students.

I know about these developments firsthand, having taught mindfulness courses since 2007 and involved myself in advocating mindfulness through The Mindfulness Initiative and Mindfulness Wales. The understanding of mindfulness in these settings differs somewhat from the Buddhist understanding of *sati*, (Anlayo, 2008) but the overlap is sufficient for me to regard 'mindfulness' as a Buddhist-based practice that has, almost uniquely, made the leap from religion to secular society. When BBC News reported in 2014 that mindfulness courses had started in the UK Parliament, I was pleased to write with a new sense of conviction: 'The wisdom of ancient traditions, for which the mind had long been a central concern, is turning out to be more relevant than ever.' (Morgan, 2022, 2005).

As mindfulness has been popularized, it has also been commercialized and trivialized. In a Buddhist setting, mindfulness is a part of a complete path that touches every area of life, starting with ethics (*sila/shila*) and leading to the development of wisdom (*panna/prajna*). This goes much further than stress relief, let alone whatever it is that mindful colouring books are hoping to achieve, and I feel a responsibility to present mindfulness in this wider setting. When David Cameron's government introduced a 'Wellbeing Index' in 2011 I wrote: 'The Wellbeing Agenda is encouraging because it suggests that we can take the initiative in creating our happiness. But that inevitably raises fundamental questions about what happiness really is and how it comes into being. That's where Buddhist insights into experience, and Buddhist practices for changing the mind, can help.' (01. 2012)

Contentment

Another way to put this is that mindfulness is associated with attitudes that address the causes, and not just the symptoms, of mental distress, on one hand, and wellbeing, on the other. Starting with its most familiar teaching, the Four Noble Truths, Buddhism identifies craving as the source of suffering. That's a generalized, universal teaching, and *Thought for the Day* requires me to address how craving is expressed in modern society and how Buddhism suggests we can counteract it.

I have sometimes suggested that the Buddhist teaching of 'guarding the gates of the senses' – i.e. reducing sensory input – is important advice in an attention economy that bombards us with stimulation and advertising. In common with other *Thought for the Day* contributors, I also look for ways to remind people of sources of satisfaction that don't involve consumption or acquisition. The distinctively Buddhist element, I suspect, is the understanding that these can be systematically developed as 'practices' within a broader process of mental cultivation.

Conditionality

One source of the popular impression that Buddhist teachings exist on a more rarefied level than that of daily life, I believe, is the seeming abstraction of some of its teachings. The Buddhist teaching of conditionality – its account of *how things* happen – is a good example of this, but my experience of writing *Thought for the Day* has convinced me that this is, in fact, one of its most valuable contributions to social and political debate.

Today typically focuses on British politics and government policy, and discussion of these subjects, in both news media and political discourse, is often couched in terms of targets, statistics and a demand for immediate solutions. If we apply the Buddhist hermeneutic of seeing the implicit belief behind a particular thought, I think we can identify a belief in a

mechanistic relationship between causes and effects. The Buddhist teaching on conditionality, by contrast, suggests that desirable outcomes cannot be produced mechanistically. Instead, we must create the conditions for their arising, which may take time and require us to think broadly about the conditions involved.

This non-mechanistic, or non-instrumental, outlook is especially relevant to the climate crisis, which requires systemic and long-term thinking. Like many environmentalists, Buddhists regards human beings as neither the masters nor the 'stewards' of natural systems, but as belonging to them. An ethical perspective on how we should act towards nature follows from this, and in one of the many talks I have given on environmental issues I suggested that 'The mistake is to regard something like the food system as a machine we can control' and proposed that we regard it 'more like a living organism.' (12. 07. 2022).

Compassionate Care

The emotional attitude associated with this outlook is connected to loving kindness (metta/maitri) or compassion (karuna), which are core values for all Buddhist traditions. I sense an affinity between my Buddhist values and the position of people across society who are involved in compassionate care – and I was happy to have the opportunity to say as much when I gave a talk after spending a week sitting beside my mother in an IC unit when she was seriously ill.

Compassion is also relevant to issues of war and peace, especially considering the direction of first Buddhist precept to abstain from taking life. However, Buddhism is not strictly pacifist, at least historically, and the uncertain boundary between Buddhism's ideals and its pragmatism becomes strikingly relevant in times of war. It is tempting to keep repeating The Dhammapada's injunction 'hatred is not overcome by hatred but only by love', but when the Ukraine War broke out, I hesitated to proclaim that principle while Ukrainians were fighting for their lives. My understanding of Buddhist ethics is that it asks us to engage sincerely with ethical principles such as nonviolence, but not to shy away from genuine uncertainties and dilemmas. A columnist writing in *The Observer* was exasperated by what she considered to be banality of most *Thought for the Day* responses to the Ukraine War: 'Along with various Ukraine-refreshed bromides, the audience has been invited to consider deep suffering as a learning opportunity and to enjoy music that teaches everybody, not excluding dispossessed refugees, to look on the bright side.' I escaped her disapproval by describing a meeting with fellow Buddhists in which we had honestly expressed our perplexity and wrestled with what it meant to apply the principles we shared. 'Oddly enough,' she wrote, 'the occasional confession of utter defeat can come across better. "Buddhism has no magical answer to events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine"' (Bennett, 2022).

I have come to recognise the hypocrisy as well as the condescension in speaking from the viewpoint of timeless wisdom while evading real complexities. Buddhists are part of the world, along with everyone else, and we are sometimes part of its problems. When the Burmese army launched a campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' against the Moslem Rohingya minority in the name of Buddhism and with the support of Buddhist monks, it seemed important to avoid the 'no true Scotsman' argument: 'It won't do to set a pure, essential Buddhism against the distorted version endorsed by Burmese generals. No doubt, distortion occurs, but our ideals should be judged by their effects.' (Morgan, 2022: 75) I questioned the very idea of a Buddhist state, prompting appreciation from Christians who wished their churches were as forthright, and criticism from some Buddhists.

Skillful Communication

Being outspoken requires that you have a simple, clear point to make, and often I struggle to find it. This no doubt says something about my limitations, and more journalistically-minded contributors like Giles Fraser, an outspoken Church of England clergyman, seem more able to formulate forthright opinions. However, there is value in offering a different kind of voice during a fast-moving news programme that is crowded with vehement opinions, and this seemed especially important amid the divisions over Brexit. I spoke several times about the need to keep listening to opponents, be scrupulously accurate in our speech and value harmony as well as victory. The Buddhist precepts around communication state that we should speak in ways that are truthful, kind, helpful and conducive to harmony, and this has seemed increasingly relevant as the 'culture wars' have developed.

The principle of 'harmonious speech' returns me to the underlying stance I think Buddhists and other people of faith can most helpfully adopt if they wish to influence a non-religious culture. Our outlook may be 'radical' in the sense of proceeding from values that are at odds with mainstream forces like consumerism or nationalism, but an oppositional stance is likely to sound like a claim to religious authority. Communicating the difference a faith can make is a subtler matter than simply proclaiming it.

Many people felt that *Thought for the Day* came into its own during the covid lockdowns when everyone in society was isolated in their own 'social bubble' but also connected through a shared experience. Covid showed the vulnerability to contingencies that lies beneath 'normal' life, including the presence of what Buddhism calls 'the three divine messengers': old age, disease and death. These are not just personal afflictions, I wrote, but 'whispered reminders that call us to greater humility and challenge us to live our short lives authentically with full awareness of their fragility, their transience and their potential splendour.' (07. 05. 2020) Reflections such as these take us a long way from the familiar concerns of the news agenda, but perhaps closer to what Buddhists and other people of faith can offer.

For many years, when I mentioned that I was a contributor to *Thought for the Day*, the commonest response was along the lines of, 'Oh, really. I do like Rabbi Lionel Blue,' sometimes followed by: 'Why can't you do talks like his?' One answer is that Lionel Blue, whose talks over several decades made him a household name, told Jewish jokes and stories but usually didn't comment on the news, as other contributors must; another is that his ability to connect with the audience stemmed from his character and wasn't just a technique that someone else could copy. All the same, I have gradually understood that there is more to broadcasting than giving talks on the radio. If the medium is the message, and the medium is the speaker him or herself, then it follows that an important part of the message is the speaker's character, as it has been shaped by their faith. That's exposing, but it is also an opportunity to offer something more valuable than an opinion or even a teaching. As Walt Whitman says:

Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give I give myself.
(*'Song of Myself', Part 40: 8-9*)

I know that my talks work best when I care about the subject I am discussing. The Buddhist exposition needs to be grounded in my experience of what it means to practice Buddhism, (and this has changed as my own Dharma practice has developed). I increasingly speak about the arts and culture because these subjects are close to my heart; and I allow space in the talks for quirky or personal elements. I pay more attention to my intonation, pacing and tone because I want my voice to express my engagement with the material.

This is more than a matter of broadcasting technique. The view that Buddhism is alien or Asian, or involves keeping your eyes closed and your mouth shut even when the world is in turmoil, is not countered by communicating Buddhist concepts. The challenge in speaking on *Thought for the Day* is to convey what it means to be a Buddhist in the 21st Century who cares about what is happening in the world and is genuinely seeking to contribute to shared concerns by drawing on their faith. Remaining rooted in my faith perspective means knowing it more deeply; being open to social needs means looking beyond the confines of my own community; finding a distinctively Buddhist contribution means recognising how many of my views are received opinions; and communicating the importance of compassion and awareness means learning to be more fully present in the words I speak.

Perhaps the best response to misconceptions about Buddhism is to communicate that, before it is a faith community, a set of beliefs or a religion, it is a path of practice. I suspect that the most important thing I can communicate, even if I am trying to make a point about the news, is the quality of my own practice, and – as I have gradually come to understand – part of that practice is scripting and presenting *Thought for the Day*.

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