



NOTES FOR A BUDDHIST TRANSFORMATION

Here **Dr. David Loy**, one of the world's foremost writers on socially engaged Buddhism, examines what the *Buddhadharma* has to offer in response to the social and political challenges of our times.

Buddhism is a personal path of spiritual transformation, not a program for political or economic revolution. Yet is it always clear where the one ends and the other begins? Or is this another duality of the sort that Buddhism likes to critique? Together, our ways of thinking and acting create society, but the opposite is also true: social institutions condition what we think and how we act. This means that, sooner or later, the *bodhisattva's* devotion to the awakening of everyone will bump up against the constraints of present economic and political systems, which in order to thrive need our complicity as consumers and defenders of that way of life.

According to a few scholars (most notably Trevor Ling in *The Buddha*), Shakyamuni saw the *sangha* as modeling a new kind of society. Such a claim is difficult to evaluate, because almost everything we know about the Buddha was filtered through the memory of many generations of monastics before being written down. The dharma that they eventually recorded emphasizes the difference between everyday life and religious renunciation. Nevertheless, the Buddha's teachings still have many implications that extend beyond the individual spiritual path. He had much to say about the role of a good householder and the responsibilities of a wise ruler.

As Buddhism also emphasizes, however, times change. We live in a world radically different from anything that even Shakyamuni could have anticipated, which requires creative ways of adapting his profound insights to new challenges. The greatest of those challenges, of course, is survival: not only the effects of rapid climate change on human civilization, but also

the continuation of countless other species threatened by our technologies and population growth. The first precept—not to harm any living being—calls upon us to consider the consequences of our actions for the biosphere as a whole.

Of course, that does not mean we can ignore the social problems that confront us. As we know, and as Buddhism also implies, ecological, political and economic crises are interconnected. We won't be able to meet the challenge of global warming unless we also figure out how to rein in an economic system that depends on continuous expansion if it is to avoid collapse.

The real issue isn't our reliance on fossil fuels but our reliance on a mindset that takes the globalization of corporate capitalism (and its dominant role in supposedly democratic processes) as natural, necessary, and inevitable. We need an alternative to "there is no alternative." What can Buddhism contribute here?

Is a reformed capitalism consistent with a dharmic society, or do we need altogether different kinds of economic institutions? How can our world de-militarize? Should representative democracy be revitalized by stricter controls on campaigns and lobbying, or do we need a more participatory and decentralized political system? Should newspapers and television networks be better regulated, or non-profit? What should be done about advertising, which continues to colonize our collective consciousness? Can the United Nations be transformed into the kind of international organization the world needs, or does an emerging global community call for something different? I do not think that



Buddhism has the answers to these questions. We should hesitate before deriving any particular economic or political system from Buddhism's various teachings. Different aspects of the dharma can be used to support capitalism, socialism, anarchism, and (a favorite of mine) *Georgism*. The basic limitation of all such arguments is that Buddhism is really about awakening and liberating our awareness, rather than prescribing new institutional structures for that awareness.

understand the problem of social change as the need for me to dominate the socio-political order. Add a conviction of my good intentions, along with my superior understanding of the situation, and one has a recipe for social as well as personal disaster.

This emphasis on one's own transformation is especially important for more individual and life-style issues such as racism,

BUDDHISM IS REALLY ABOUT AWAKENING AND LIBERATING OUR AWARENESS, RATHER THAN PRESCRIBING NEW INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES FOR THAT AWARENESS.

We cannot determine what awakened awareness will decide when applied to the problem of social *dukkha*. There is no magic formula to be invoked. That no one else has such a formula either, so far as I can see, means that solutions to our collective *dukkha* cannot be derived from any ideology. They are to be worked out together.

This suggests the role of socially engaged Buddhism: not to form a new movement but, along with other forms of engaged spirituality, to add a valuable dimension to existing movements already working for peace, social justice, and ecological responsibility. What does Buddhism have to offer those movements?

The importance of a personal spiritual practice.

Buddhism begins and ends with individual transformation. The basis of Buddhist social engagement is the necessity to work on oneself as well as on the social system. Why have so many revolutions and reform movements ended up merely replacing one gang of thugs with another? If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill-will and delusion, our efforts to address their institutionalized forms are likely to be useless, or worse. Even if our revolution is successful, we will merely replace one group of egos with our own. If I do not struggle with the greed inside myself, it is quite likely that, when I gain power, I too will be inclined to take advantage of the situation to serve my own interests. If I do not acknowledge the ill-will in my own heart as my own problem, I am likely to project my anger onto those who obstruct my purposes. If unaware that my own sense of duality is a dangerous delusion, I will

patriarchy, homophobia, "moneytheism" and consumerism, and family size (number of children). While new laws addressing these concerns may sometimes be needed, the main battle for social acceptance is fought in local communities and the most valuable tool is personal example. Any solution to consumerism, for instance, must include public demonstration of an improved quality-of-life based on relationships rather than consumption. Some recent economic studies have discovered that, once a minimum standard of living has been achieved (about \$10,000 per person), an increase in income has little if any effect on one's happiness. The Buddha would not be surprised.

Commitment to non-violence.

A non-violent approach is implied by our nonduality with "others," including those we may be struggling against. Means and ends cannot be separated. Peace is not only the goal; it must also be the way. We ourselves must be the peace we want to create. A spiritual awakening reduces our sense of separation from those who have power over us. Gandhi, for example, always treated the British authorities in India with respect. He never tried to dehumanize them, which is one reason why he was successful. However, this is not an argument for absolute pacifism, which seems to me a dogmatic attitude inconsistent with Buddhist pragmatism. One might decide to resist not evil, in any form, yet I do not see that being a Buddhist is always incompatible with legitimate self-defense. If my wife and son are

about to be physically attacked, I have a responsibility to defend them, by force if necessary. The point of nonviolence is that even in such dangerous situations it is usually the more appropriate and effective way to respond.

Of course, once the principle of collective self-defense is accepted then every act of aggression becomes rationalized as self-defense, the 2003 invasion of Iraq being an especially visible example. The solution, I suggest, is not to assert unconditional pacifism in every possible situation but to be prepared to challenge the propaganda and manipulations of those who are

The world is not a battleground where people who are good must destroy those who are evil, but the place where we do stupid things to ourselves and to each other because we are ignorant of our true nature. The fundamental social problem is that our individual and collective awareness gets manipulated in ways that aggravate rather than relieve *dukkha*. We are all victims of such manipulations which have become institutionalized and taken on a life of their own. Our leaders or rulers have been so preoccupied with gaining and wielding the ring of power that they don't realize what their lust for that ring has done to them. Sympathy for

perfections (*paramitas*) that *bodhisattvas* develop include *kshanti* (patience) and *virya* (persistence). These are essential for self-less social action. We don't expect to be rewarded for what we do or gratified by what we have achieved. We should not expect to see the fruits of our labors, but neither are we free to give up the work. Although this can be frustrating, it accords with Buddhist emphasis on nonattachment and "just this!" This moment is not to be sacrificed for a future one – for example, some social utopia that may or may not be just around the corner. What is happening right here and now is whole and complete in itself, even

...IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT BUDDHISM TRACES OUR COLLECTIVE SUFFERING BACK TO DELUSION, NOT TO EVIL.

willing to use violence in pursuit of what they see as economic and political gain. This is a difficult issue, however, and we can expect a diversity of opinion among engaged Buddhists because the best approach cannot be determined simply by invoking some dharmic principle that trumps all other considerations.

Although nonviolence may not make a social struggle easier or more successful, it incorporates an essential issue: not merely wresting power from others who are misusing it but challenging their delusions in ways that might prompt them to rethink what they think they know. The righteous anger that often incites resistance movements is understandable, to say the least, yet from a Buddhist perspective hatred is never a skillful response. According to one Tibetan metaphor, wanting to hurt someone is like picking up a burning coal in one's bare hand in order to throw it at someone else.

In deciding how to respond to such situations, it is important to remember that Buddhism traces our collective *dukkha* back to delusion, not to evil.

their plight must not deflect us from working to achieve justice for their victims, but Buddhism is not concerned with one side to the exclusion of the other. *Bodhisattvas* vow to do whatever is necessary to help awaken everyone.

Awakening together.

Contrary to the way that the *bodhisattva* path is often understood, Buddhist social engagement is not about deferring our own happiness to help others who are less fortunate. That just reinforces a self-defeating (and self-exhausting) dualism between them and us. Rather, we join together to improve the situation for all of us. As one aboriginal woman put it: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together." The point of the *bodhisattva* path is that none of us can be fully awakened until everyone "else" is also awakened. If we are not really separate from each other, our destinies cannot really be separated from each other. The difficult world situation today means that sometimes *bodhisattvas* need to manifest their compassion in more politically engaged ways. The six

as we devote ourselves to addressing its *dukkha*. That is the daily practice of a *bodhisattva*. Such an attitude, along with emphasis on one's personal spiritual practice, is the key to avoiding the exhaustion and burn-out that plagues social activists.

Impermanence and insubstantiality.

These two Buddhist principles have special implications for social transformation. Everything is related to everything else and changes as they change. Impermanence means that no problem is intractable since it is part of larger processes that are constantly evolving, whether or not we notice. My generation grew up during a cold war that would never end, until suddenly it did. Apartheid in South Africa seemed inflexible and implacable, but below the surface tectonic plates were gradually shifting and one day that social system collapsed. These characteristics are not always encouraging: things can slowly worsen too, and solutions as well as problems are impermanent. It depends on us to understand how things are changing and how to respond to those changes.

That highlights two other principles: non-dogmatism and *upaya* “skillful means.” Shakyamuni Buddha’s own flexibility and Buddhism’s lack of dependence upon any fixed ideology implies the pragmatism of *praxis*. We build whatever raft will work to ferry us to the other shore, and we don’t carry it around on our backs. Non-attachment allows for the openness and receptivity which awakes *upaya*: imaginative solutions that leap outside the ruts our minds usually circle in.



To sum up, what is distinctively Buddhist about socially engaged Buddhism? Emphasis on personal spiritual practice, commitment to non-violence, the flexibility implied by impermanence and non-substantiality, along with the realization that ending our own *dukkha* requires us to address the *dukkha* of everyone else as well. While we need to address the militarization of our society and the ecological impact of our economy, Buddhism has something more distinctive to offer with its critique of

the ways that our collective awareness has become trapped and manipulated. One place to start is by challenging

the pervasive role of advertising, but in order to do that effectively I think that we will eventually find ourselves addressing the institutionalized social *dukkha* perpetrated and perpetuated by our globalizing, corporation-dominated economic system.

We may well feel overwhelmed by such a prospect, so it is important to

remember that any role socially engaged Buddhists might play will be minor, as part of a much larger movement for peace and social justice that has already begun to develop in the same direction. This movement has many faces and involves many different perspectives. Buddhist emphasis on the liberation of our collective attention suggests that a socially-awakened Buddhism might have a distinctive role to play in clarifying the basic problem and assisting in the transformations that are needed if we are to survive and thrive throughout this century.



David R. Loy is Besl Family Professor of Religion and Ethics at Xavier University in Cincinnati. He is the internationally renowned author of numerous books and scholarly articles on engaged Buddhism, many of which have been translated into French and German. Of particular interest to those of our readers who enjoyed this article might be *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* and *Buddhist History of the West, Studies in Lack*.