

# Buddhism and Social Action

JEAN BOULTON

Does Buddhism have something to offer to today's contemporary society – as a guide to political and social engagement – or is it primarily a personal meditation practice? Is Buddhism a pre-modern set of arcane rituals or does it chime with post-modern ideas and might it help us to challenge rigid and fixed ways of thinking and find new ways to create change?

There is a growing interest in the ways Buddhism is indeed relevant to social, political and ecological life. For example, Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, with these questions in mind, coined the term 'Engaged Buddhism' (see [www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk](http://www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk)). He said (1991):

*"When I was in Vietnam, so many of the villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries or would we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection we decided to do both, to go out and help the people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it Engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting... we must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help."*

And eco-philosopher Joanna Macy has this to say on her website ([www.joannamacy.net](http://www.joannamacy.net) 2009):

*"I have been deeply inspired by the Buddha's teaching of dependent co-arising. It fills me with a sense of connection and mutual responsibility with all beings. Helping me understand the non-hierarchical and self-organizing nature of life, it is the philosophic grounding of all my work."*

*Now we see that everything we do impinges on all beings. The way you are with your child is a political act, and the products you buy and your efforts to recycle are part of it too. So is meditation – just trying to stay aware is a task of tremendous importance. We are trying to be present to ourselves and each other in a way that can save our planet. Saving life on this planet includes developing a strong, caring connection with future generations; for, in the Dharma of co-arising, we are here to sustain one another over great distances of space and time...we don't have to invent or construct our connections. They already exist. We already and indissolubly belong to each other, for this is the nature of life."*

What these writers have in common, together with Buddhist David Loy, is that they seek to identify the essence

of Buddhist thinking and explore the connection with contemporary and collective life; they are less interested in issues of ritual and details of practice. It is as if they were asking, *"Were the Buddha alive today, how would he engage with our social, ecological and political problems?"*

So how can we encapsulate the essence of Buddhism? What is the worldview that it represents and how does that differ from other worldviews, from other religions and philosophies and from traditional science? And why is this an important question? Because the essence of our deeply-held and sometimes-unconscious assumptions drives our behaviour, so what we believe – about the nature of 'reality', about purpose, about people not like us, about the Earth – is critical to explore and uncover.

Buddhist philosophy emphasises:

- that all is connected.
- that what emerges arises from what has happened before and from what has been chosen (dependent co-arising)
- that what we are, both individually and collectively is 'empty' – that is to say ephemeral, context-dependent and evolving.
- that our inner world drives the outer world as much as the outer drives the inner.

What do these ideas suggest as to how we should engage socially and politically? And could this Buddhist perspective provide a more generative and hopeful under-pinning to our social and political life?

Facing the loss of our sacred canopy and combating 'growth fetishism' Loy makes the point that religion has, traditionally, offered us a sense of meaning, a protective sacred canopy, as he calls it. He says (2003:2-3):

*"Scientific and social innovations that have restructured our world are the result of a shift from supernatural explanations to an empirical rationality that casts doubt on all religious beliefs, including claims of spiritual redemption.... Today all such protective canopies are threatened by the fundamental insight that they are human creations.... It signifies the end of humanity's collective childhood."*

His point is that religion has traditionally provided us with security, meaning, redemption and support. So, in facing up to the fact that religions are (in his view) essentially man-made, we are going to experience a sense of loss and an anxiety which (as he goes on to say) we attempt to conquer

through addictions of various sorts, or through a return to fundamentalism. Loy says (2003:13):

*“One can never recover the unselfconscious groundedness that, for better or worse, has been lost. Both individually and collectively, the freedom to determine one’s own path is shadowed by an anxiety-producing loss of security due to the disappearance of one’s transcendental foundation – a sacred canopy...that answers our deepest questions about the structure and meaning of the universe, and where we fit into that.... Globalisation means that today we all participate in the... loss of ground and crisis of meaning, whether or not we understand what is happening.”*

Loy’s contention, along with many others including psychologist Anne Wilson Schaef (1992) and philosopher Clive Hamilton (2010), is that we have made consumerism our new religion. Loy (2003:22) quotes Becker’s book *Escape from Evil*:

*“Hence arises... a cultural malaise or anomie on one hand, and a frantic, meaning-grabbing compulsiveness on the other, as the cultural immortality ideologies no longer function to keep mortality anxiety at bay .... People begin to pile up (or fantasise about) heretofore insane levels of capitalist accumulation and material display.”*

Clive Hamilton, in *Requiem for a Species*, calls this ‘growth fetishism’. He sees its roots in the idea (2010:38) that *“the earth’s resources are infinite and that humans have a right to exploit them for their own benefit”*.

So how does Buddhism combat this so-called growth fetishism? Buddhism is essentially ‘pragmatic’; it does not seek to rescue us from the here and now and from responsibility for our own experience. Buddhism emphasises what is; it pushes us to face the fact of our mortality; the fact that resources are not infinite; the truth that how we behave influences what happens next. It does not suggest that we are to be saved by a transcendental God, or that the earth is for our use or that we will be forgiven; or that those who do not think like us are not ‘chosen’ and so have less rights or are more likely to be ‘evil’. As Loy says (2003:32):

*“Since our thirst cannot be sated, it must be transformed... It also means that our collective preoccupation with economic growth and ever-increasing consumption must also be transformed.”*

Buddhism advises us that suffering is caused not by what we do not have, but by how we resist the truth of our own situation. We must face loss and from that comes acceptance and less attachment to ‘having’ – be it having ‘things’ or having immortality or having forgiveness. The implication is that to accept and face this loss will lead us

away from addiction. This idea is very much in tune with many psychological theories, which work on the basis that freedom from addictions of many kinds lies in facing the feelings of loss they mask.

Hamilton connects this to climate change denial. He asserts that climate change denial is fuelled by this unwillingness to give up on our long-standing beliefs. If the deniers were to accept that climate change is created by human behaviour then they have to accept their way of life is flawed, their democratic process is inadequate and, even worse, their God has forsaken them.



### Facing Uncertainty and yet Seeing that the Past Influences the Future

Many many people have written about the way that the physics of Isaac Newton was absorbed by the French Enlightenment as a universal theory which posits that the future can be designed, predicted and controlled and that causes can be linked to their effects (for example Toulmin, 2001). Buddhism, together with the science of complexity (Boulton, 2010), emphasises emptiness, impermanence and hence shows that the future evolves rather than is designed or unfolds according to a pre-ordained plan. What does this mean for our social and political ventures? Buddhism, like complexity science requires us to set out on such ventures with more humility; we cannot know with any certainty what will be the result of our actions or policies or theories or plans. We have to act, see what happens and refine our actions, both individually and collectively.

Buddhism, like complexity theory, also tells us that what emerges is a complex and contextual result of interconnected factors and choices, built on the past. This is the meaning of the phrase ‘dependent co-arising’. So we must pay attention to what ingredients we put into the mix, what values we hold, what intentions we weave, what actions we take. We cannot just make the future what we want as if the past has never happened.

John Gray (2009) is Emeritus Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics. He believes this utopian view - that we can create the future we want - means we tend to ignore history, and to imagine a ‘breathless continuation of the present’.

As he says, this utopian view creates a number of difficulties; it makes it difficult to learn from the past; it makes it difficult to consider that new approaches and new politics are either possible or necessary. If we are doing the best, making ‘progress’, it is easy to ignore or deny any evidence to the contrary, to imagine that ‘all will be well’. Diamond’s (2005) treatise on ‘Collapse’ shows how often societies that collapsed failed to take seriously the signs of their demise. It was Mark Twain who said ‘history does not repeat itself, but it does often rhyme’: a reminder that we ignore the lessons of history, and the way the past shapes the future, at our peril.

### Balancing Inner and Outer

Marie-Louise von Franz, a psychologist who worked alongside Carl Jung, shared Jung’s interest in alchemy. She was keen to explain (von Franz, 1979) that the central tenet of the alchemists is that the collective inner world, which Jung called the collective unconscious is one with the external world of matter. Both inter-penetrate and share a reflexive relationship. This relationship between inner and outer is also held within Buddhism. There is a need to work inwardly, through meditation and contemplation as well as to act outwardly. As Loy says (2003:35):

*“for those of us who see the necessity of radical change, the first implication of Buddhist social praxis is the obvious need to work on ourselves as well as the social system. If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill will and delusion, our efforts to address their institutionalised forms are likely to be useless or worse.... Recent history provides us with many examples of leaders, often well-intentioned, who eventually reproduced the evils they fought against. In the end, one gang of thugs has been replaced by another.”*

### Conclusion

The beliefs implicit with Buddhism, in embracing interconnectivity, the impermanence of who we are as individuals and the impermanence of the structures of the world in which we are a part, speak to the way in which we should engage politically in the world.

Embracing a Buddhist worldview would imply that we should:

- Spend time working on ourselves as individuals through meditation and stillness as well as through study and practice; learn about life through experience rather than accept any particular cosmology or science and, most

importantly, face the loss of a transcendental ‘sacred canopy’.

- Accept that the past shapes the future and yet the future can be affected through what we collectively choose to value, how we collectively choose to act.

- Accept that we cannot, however, know for certain what will be the outcome of any particular path or policy so that we must approach policy and political action with more humility; be more prepared to modify the course in the light of outcomes, be more prepared to act with humility and learn through action.

- Accept the reality of the interconnected of all things; seek to develop joined-up policies which bring together the differing and often contradictory goals of ecological, economic and social perspectives.

It is exciting that this Buddhist perspective dating from pre-modern times, is so in tune with the ‘new’ science of complexity, with ideas from post-modernism and action research and pragmatism. Perhaps it provides a philosophy that will encourage a different sort of political behaviour, which is less certain, less confident of outcomes, more engaging and holistic?

### Notes

1. Pragmatism claims that an ideology or proposition is true if and only if it works satisfactorily; that the truth of an idea needs to be tested to prove its validity. Pragmatism began in the late nineteenth century with Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. This focus on empiricism, on paying attention to what really happens, is a central tenet of action research and has been developed in the twentieth century by Richard Rorty amongst others.

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**Jean Boulton writes and teaches on the topic of complexity theory. She is very interested in the links between complexity, Buddhist philosophy and social action.**