

## Ethics and the Wider World

For most of its history, Buddhism was a spiritual path in a number of Eastern countries including China, Japan, India, Cambodia, Sri Lanka. Now that Buddhism has come to the West, how is Buddhism changing the West, how is the West changing Buddhism?

Despite its technological and economic advances, western civilisations are in trouble. Which means all of us are in trouble. The most obvious example is our inability to respond to accelerating climate change. The political and economic systems seem unable to address these problems.

Buddhism isn't a programme for political or economic revolution. it's a path of spiritual transformation. So is Buddhism relevant at all to the social and ecological predicament we find ourselves in in twenty first century Britain? Should Buddhist practitioners be turning their attention to these issues and if they do, what can they offer? What might their role be?

If there is one central teaching in Buddhism it is that things are the way they are because of other things that affect them. In Sanskrit (the ancient Indian language in which many early teachings were written) this is called *pratītyasamutpāda* which is translated often as conditioned arising. Though initially it may sound very simple and obvious, this is a profound teaching when the full implications of it are realised. One way of looking at it is to say that we can't be isolated from our context. Together, our ways of thinking and acting create society but the opposite is also true, social conditions and trends affect what we think and what we do. We are bound up together with our social situation. We are shaped by it and we shape it. So the process of change in ourselves can't be chopped off from the world we live in therefore in Buddhist practice, we don't have the option to separate ourselves from these wider issues.

What Buddhism can offer is an understanding of why things happen as they do and how change happens. It can support the clarity that is needed to find a way forward. It offers a worldview, a vision. And can point to how to bring that about.

Another way of applying this Buddhist principle of conditioned arising is to see that ecological, political and economic crises are interconnected. We can't do something about fossil fuel usage unless we also figure out how to rein in an economic system that depends on continuous growth to keep it going.

Within all of this its important to remember that Buddhism traces suffering back to delusion not to evil. 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 own true nature.

So what is the basic problem? Buddhism says that we are unaware of our true nature. But what does that mean? What **is** our true nature?

Buddhism teaches that the root of our dissatisfaction is lack of wisdom or in other words, ignorance. The Buddha was someone who has “woken up” from this delusion about the nature of the self. And “awake” is what the name Buddha literally means. What we really are, according to Buddhism, is an evolving flow in a constant state of change, but deludedly we think there is something fundamentally unchanging about ourselves - an experiencer behind the experiences we are having. We are actually a process, a “becoming” rather than a fixed being.

Its not surprising we feel uneasy.

In the words of David Loy:

*“The sense of self is a construction and therefore ungrounded. This ungroundedness can feel like a hole at the core of our being...a sense of lack. The natural tendency is to identify with something in the world in the belief that it can make ourselves feel whole and complete”*

So we roam about discontentedly looking for the right house, the right job, the right partner, the right holiday, the right amount of recognition for our work, etc etc. Which is never ultimately satisfying.

In order to fix this sense of lack, we grab at that (greed) and get angry if someone gets in our way (hatred) we push that away (more hatred) and the whole thing is driven by a deep unease and confusion. These three, greed, hatred and delusion are sometimes called the three poisons or afflictions.

David Loy again:

*“A group identity forms in the same way as personal identity, by discriminating an “inside” (my own group) from an “outside” (another group). Therefore our group identity ends up with the same problem as personal identity: it never feels real enough, it can never feel secure enough. The temptation is to project this discomfort - but even if we kill all the enemy, we’ll need to find another external group to define ourselves against”*

So do the three poisons also operate collectively? If there are collective selves, does that mean there is also collective greed, collective ill will, collective delusion? The problem is not only that they operate collectively but that they have become institutionalised, part of the social fabric. For example, a case could be made to say that our present economic system is institutionalised greed - classism, racism is a type of institutionalised ill will - and our corporate media institutionalise delusion.

The basis of Buddhist engagement is the necessity to work on oneself as well as on the social system. Why have so many revolutions and reform movements which ended up more or less 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 institutionalised 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, its 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 on to those who obstruct my purposes.

The alternative is to build a society based on the Buddhist ethical precepts - loving kindness, generosity and truthfulness. But how to do that? We need to bring Buddhism into dialogue with the best thinking in economics, ecology and many other disciplines and skill sets. What is exciting about a large urban Buddhist Centre like Birmingham is the potential for a very fertile dialogue to happen between the people who come to the centre - with all their experience of life, their training and experience of different kinds. Together, based on our shared understanding of Buddhist teachings, we can take part in the exploration of other alternative ways of living. And then something really interesting might happen!

Suggested follow up reading:

Money, War Sex and Karma David Loy (there are two copies in the Buddhist Centre library for loan!) Also see [www.davidloy.org](http://www.davidloy.org) and at <http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/what-would-the-buddha-do/>

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