

Review: *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*

Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution by David Loy, Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008, 160 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0861715589, UK £9.99.

Reviewed by Dharmacāri Nāgapriya

Reviews Editor, Western Buddhist Review

www.nagapriya.com

David Loy has established a formidable reputation as a serious Buddhist thinker able to tackle the big issues. He is especially concerned with the encounter between Buddhist ideas and practices and the contemporary world, an encounter that he believes has the potential to be mutually beneficial. In his words, 'Buddhism and the West need each other.' (p.3) He adopts a broadly existential approach to interpreting Buddhism through an analysis of what he calls 'lack' – an idea that derives from the traditional Buddhist teachings of *anātman* and Emptiness. In previous publications, Loy has emphasised that 'lack' underlies the existential condition and is the driving force behind human suffering.

Loy's latest work, the sensationally titled *Money, Sex, War, Karma*, comprises a series of fourteen essays that continue to address major cultural, political, economic, and spiritual issues from a Buddhist perspective. The book is written in a direct, urgent tone and adopts a conversational style.

Although he is a committed Buddhist, Loy is no apologist. His appraisal of traditional Buddhism is sober and critical. He is concerned to 'distinguish what is vital and still living in its Asian versions from what is unnecessary and perhaps outdated.' (p.4) Loy argues that rather than simply adopt some ready-made Asian version of Buddhism, we must renew it in the light of the needs and challenges of contemporary, westernized life. A key theme here is that any personal awakening that we may realise needs to be supplemented by what Loy calls 'social awakening'. This means that while Buddhist practice aims to transform the individual it must also transform society because the two are interdependent.

In 'Lack of Money', Loy shows how the commoditization of experience can lead us to be more concerned with how much, say, a bottle of wine costs than what it tastes like. The fact that everything has a price tag means that we tend to evaluate quality in terms of *expense*, rather than experience. Moreover, he argues, the principle of capital investment and return implies that we can never have too much money. The downside, though, is that this can lead to the anxiety that we will never have

enough (p.28). One consequence of this is a perpetual future-orientation towards the day when things will be better.

Loy suggests that the problem with money is not that it makes us materialistic, but rather the opposite; we begin to cherish the symbolic value of money above what we can actually buy with it. So, for instance, a wealthy professional may be more concerned with how his luxury car advances his social prestige, rather than with simply enjoying its practical comforts (p.29). Ironically – and I think convincingly – he argues, ‘the problem is not that we are too materialistic, but that we are *not materialistic enough*’ (p.29). This underlines that there is nothing intrinsically anti-spiritual about enjoying material contact. Far from it, the ability to appreciate sensory experience fully seems to be an indicator of enhanced spiritual awareness.

In ‘How to Drive your Karma’, Loy faces up to the apparent contradictions between traditional models of Karma and the contemporary scientific world view, which for many modern Buddhists results in an experience of ‘cognitive dissonance’ (p.53). In traditional societies, belief in Karma has led to passivity on the part of laypeople, who defer the challenge of self-transformation to a future life, and a slavish rule-following on the part of the monastic Sangha, as monks are reduced to merit-machines offering opportunities for lay people to gain merit through giving them donations. For Loy, ‘many Asian Sanghas and their lay supporters are locked in a co-dependent marriage where it’s difficult for either partner to change.’ (p.54) More sinister is that Karma can be used to rationalise all kinds of injustice and suffering because they can be interpreted as the natural consequences of previous evil conduct.

Loy argues that Karma, like all Buddhist teachings, must be seen as a product of social and cultural conditions, rather than as some freestanding, absolute revelation. In doing so, he draws on an apposite passage from Erich Fromm: ‘The creative thinker must think in the terms of the logic, the thought patterns, the expressible concepts of his culture...The consequence is that the new thought as he formulates it is a blend of what is truly new and the conventional thought which it transcends.’ (p.57)

Loy emphasises Karma as a forward rather than backward thinking principle. In other words, rather than necessarily seeing one’s current situation in terms of one’s past karma, he emphasises ‘how our life situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of our actions right now.’ (p.61) For him, karma is not something the self *has* but what it *is*. ‘People are “punished” or “rewarded” not for what they have done but for what they have become’ (p.62). I would add that we are also punished or rewarded *by* what we have done.

In ‘What’s Wrong with Sex?’ Loy subjects the Buddhist perspective on one of our deepest urges to some much needed scrutiny. Why, he asks, has Buddhism generally taken such a negative view of sexual activity? Intriguingly, he speculates that some of this negativity may arise from a general

disparagement of the body in India (p.71). More pragmatic issues, such as the lack of contraception and the expectations of lay supporters, may also have been significant factors in producing a culture where renunciates were expected to abstain from sex completely (p.72-3). Loy argues that our present cultural situation poses somewhat different challenges in relation to sexual desire. In particular, he believes 'there is something delusive about the myths of romantic love and sexual fulfilment.' (p.75) Genuine happiness, he argues, has little to do with sex. To paraphrase Loy, we use sex and romantic attachments to try to fill up our lack, but this strategy never fully succeeds because nothing can fill this gap. Our over-expectations of sex and intimate relationships result in suffering, as they ultimately fail to deliver what we hope for.

In 'What Would the Buddha do?' Loy tackles the environmental crisis. In a hard-hitting essay, he challenges all Buddhists to face up to the global catastrophe that may result from human activity on Earth. In doing so, he rejects quietist models of practice that aim to overcome one's own failings before addressing wider social questions, arguing that Buddhist practice consists in doing what we can in relation to such issues *right now*. As he puts it: 'We don't wait until we overcome our self-centredness before engaging with the world; addressing the suffering of the wider world is *how* we overcome our self-centredness.' (p.82) Loy argues that Interdependence is not just an abstract insight that we must cultivate on our cushions but something we must recognize in our daily lives.

In 'The Three Poisons, Institutionalized', Loy takes a novel approach to the basic Buddhist teaching of the three poisons and explores how they can be applied to organizations. He concludes that 'Our present economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism institutionalizes ill will, and our corporate media institutionalize delusion.' (p.89) As a consequence, the three poisons have taken on a life of their own independent of individual wills. Importantly for Loy, gaining insight into the operation of the three poisons at the collective, institutional level is just as important as recognizing these forces at work in ourselves, which once again emphasizes the linkage between personal and social liberation.

In 'Consciousness Commodified' Loy argues that in the present age it is not attachment that is the problem but rather *distraction*. Our attention has become a precious commodity, which all kinds of agencies compete for. This leads to a 'fragmentation of attention' (p.96), which results in having less time to give to what is most crucial in our lives. As soon as we begin to focus on something important, we are distracted by an advert, our mobile phone, or an internet message. The degradation of our ability to attend struck me as an especially serious issue; the overwhelming range of choice that we have to negotiate every day entails that living simply can be extremely difficult to achieve.

'Healing Ecology' applies an understanding of *anātman* to our relationship with the planet. Loy argues that in the same way that we, as a self, feel estranged from others, we, as a species, are alienated from nature. Rather than feeling part of the planet, we regard it as a resource to be controlled

and exploited. In doing so, we try to build a sense of collective security through consumption, but this strategy never fully succeeds because the self can never be made secure. For Loy, recognising that we are part of nature, not separate from it, is central to resolving the ecological crisis.

In 'Why We Love War' Loy draws on the thought of the war correspondent Chris Hedges who argues that war 'can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living.' (p.132) In Loy's terms, it becomes another way of dealing with our sense of lack. Religious fundamentalism in particular is a response to this sense of lack and its sometimes violent manifestations express the need to create a sense of meaning and purpose in a world where secular narratives dominate. For Loy, 'War offers a simple way to bind together our individual lacks and project them outside, onto the enemy.' (p.138)

The final essay, 'Notes for a Buddhist Revolution', offers a reflective overview of the themes explored in previous essays. In particular, Loy explores what Buddhism has to offer existing groups and currents that promote peace, social justice, and ecological responsibility. He identifies its commitment to individual transformation, nonviolence, and mutual awakening as key principles. In addition, he believes Buddhism's insights into impermanence and Emptiness are crucial in resolving global problems. Loy rightly recognises that for the socially motivated Buddhist there are so many problems to tackle that it is hard to know where to start.

Loy does not pretend to have a blueprint to solve all the world's ills, but believes that Buddhism can help to open our awareness to some of the deepest problems and enable us to begin to imagine how things could be different. His work succeeds in drawing attention to a wide range of issues facing the contemporary world and the contemporary spiritual practitioner. Two points seem most compelling; first, Buddhist ideas and practices must be renewed in order to deal with the unique challenges of modern life; and second, individual and social transformation are inextricably linked.

David Loy's is an urgent and vital voice in the Buddhist world, and his latest work is a passionate and bold survey of some of the big issues that face us individually and collectively. This thoughtful, probing work warrants the attention of anyone interested in creative change on either an individual or social level. I strongly recommend it.

How to cite this article: <http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol5/money-sex-war-karma.html>