



WISDOM ACADEMY

The Dharma of Social and Ecological Engagement

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Lesson 1:
Personal and Social Transformation

Reading:
A New Buddhist Path
“Challenge,” pages 105-133



A New Buddhist Path

enlightenment
evolution
and ethics
in the
modern world

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CHALLENGE

The mercy of the West has been social revolution.
The mercy of the East has been individual insight
into the basic self/void. We need both.

—GARY SNYDER, *Earth House Hold*

TO UNPACK Gary Snyder's insight: the highest ideal of the Western tradition has been the concern to restructure our societies so that they become more socially just. The most important goal for Buddhism is to awaken and (to use the Zen phrase) realize one's true nature, which puts an end to dukkha—especially that associated with the delusion of a separate self. Today it has become more obvious that we need both of these aspirations, not just because these ideals complement each other, but because each project needs the other.

The Western conception of justice largely originates with the Abrahamic traditions, particularly the Hebrew prophets, who fulminated against oppressive rulers for afflicting the poor and powerless. Describing Old Testament prophecy, Walter Kaufmann writes that “no other sacred scripture contains books that speak out against social injustice as eloquently, unequivocally, and sensitively as the books of Moses and some of the prophets.” Is there a Buddhist equivalent? Although the doctrine of karma understands something like justice as an impersonal moral law built into the fabric of the cosmos, historically karma has

functioned differently from the Abrahamic version. Combined with the doctrine of rebirth (a corollary, since evil people sometimes prosper in this life) and the belief that each of us is now experiencing the consequences of actions in previous lifetimes, the implication seems to be that we do not need to be concerned about pursuing justice, because sooner or later everyone gets what they deserve. In practice, this has often encouraged passivity and acceptance of one's situation, rather than a commitment to promote social justice.

Does the Buddhist emphasis on dukkha provide a better parallel with the Western conception of justice? Dukkha is unquestionably Buddhism's most important concept: according to the Pali Canon, Gautama Buddha said that what he had to teach was dukkha and how to end it. The best-known summary of the Buddha's teachings, the four Noble Truths, is all about dukkha, its cause, its extinction, and how to extinguish it. Historically, Asian Buddhism has focused on individual dukkha and personal karma, a limitation that may have been necessary in autocratic polities that could and sometimes did repress Buddhist institutions. Today, however, the globalization of democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech opens the door to new ways of responding to social causes of dukkha, and a more socially engaged Buddhism has been developing.

On the other side, the Abrahamic emphasis on justice, in combination with the classical Greek realization that society is a collective construct that can be restructured, has resulted in our modern concern to reform political and economic institutions. This has involved, most obviously, a variety of human rights movements. As valuable as these social reforms have been, as much as they have achieved, the limitations of such an institutional approach, by itself, are becoming evident. Even the best possible economic and political system cannot be expected to function well if the people within that system remain motivated by greed, aggression, and delusion—the “three fires” or “three poisons” that Buddhism encourages us to transform into their more positive counterparts: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Today, in our globalizing world, the modern Western focus on social transformation encounters the traditional Buddhist focus on individual awakening. Their encounter helps us understand why each has had limited success, and challenges us with new possibilities. We need to see why they need each other in order to actualize their own ideals. Some of the implications of that interdependence will be explored by looking at our present economic and ecological situation from a Buddhist as well as a Western perspective.

Good vs. Evil

The Abrahamic religions emphasize, most of all, morality. God's main way of relating to us, his creatures, is instructing us how to live by giving us ethical commandments. To be a good Jew, Christian, or Muslim is to follow those rules. The fundamental axis is *good vs. evil*: doing what God wants us to do (in which case we will be rewarded) and not doing what he does not want us to do (to avoid punishment). According to one common version, this world is a battleground where God and Satan contend with each other, and where the most important issue is whose side you are on.

Even the supposed origin of human history—the Genesis story of Adam and Eve—is understood as an act of disobedience against God the Father. Earlier I mentioned that the story can also be taken as a myth about the development of self-consciousness (and its shadow, a sense of lack), but the focus is explicitly on the moral dimension. According to some Christian accounts, we still suffer due to the original sin of our primal parents.

Later, because of the wickedness and corruption of the human race—in other words, people were not living the way God wanted them to—God sends a great flood that drowns all humans and animals except those in Noah's ark. Eventually God formalizes his moral instructions to humanity with a covenant that includes giving the Ten Commandments to Moses. Jesus has a more intimate relationship with God the

Father and emphasizes that we should love one another, yet this does not abrogate the importance of living according to God's commands: of our will submitting to his will.

Although many people in the modern world no longer believe in an Abrahamic God, morality—the struggle between good and evil—arguably remains our favorite story. It is the main theme in most popular novels, films, and television shows (think of James Bond, Star Wars, Harry Potter, not to mention every detective novel and TV crime series). From a Buddhist perspective, however, this preoccupation with good vs. evil is...well, both good and evil: there's something wonderful about it, but also something very problematic. Let's start with the problem.

“There is no good and evil, there is only power,
and those too weak to seek it.”

—LORD VOLDEMORT

The duality between good and evil is a prime example of the difficulty that often occurs with dualistic concepts, when we think in terms of bipolar opposites such as high and low, big and small, light and dark, etc. Although those particular examples are usually innocuous, other instances are more problematical because we want one pole and not the other. Yet, because the meaning of each is the opposite of the other (we do not really know what “high” means unless we know what “low” means), we cannot have one without the other. Although this point may seem quite abstract, it's true not only logically but also psychologically. If, for example, it is really important for you to live a *pure* life (however you understand purity), you will inevitably be preoccupied with (avoiding) *impurity*.

Genuine purity of mind is a state beyond purity and impurity.

—CHAN MASTER HUI HAI

The relationship between good and evil may be the most problematical example of dualistic thinking, because their interdependence

means that we do not know what good is until we determine what evil is (good requires avoiding evil) and that we feel good about ourselves when we are struggling against that evil—an evil *outside* ourselves, of course. Hence inquisitions, witchcraft and heresy trials, and, most recently, the War on Terror. What was the difference between Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush? They were not only polar opposites but mirror images of each other: both fighting the same holy war of Good against Evil, each leading the forces of goodness in a struggle against the forces of evil, because that is what the forces of good are supposed to do. Once something has been identified as evil, there is no need to understand it or accommodate it; our task is to destroy it.

You're either with us or against us.

—GEORGE W. BUSH

The War on Terror illustrates the tragic paradox: historically, one of the main causes of evil has been our attempts to destroy evil, or what we have understood as evil. What was Hitler trying to do? Eliminate the evil elements that pollute the world: Jews, homosexuals, Roma gypsies, and so forth. Stalin attempted to do the same with landowning peasants, as did Mao Zedong with Chinese landlords. Lest one conclude that this is a fascist and communist problem, we should also remember the 1965–66 massacre of up to a million “leftists” by the Suharto regime in Indonesia—with the covert assistance of the U.S. government.

It's not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand
how the two of you bring each other to deep completion.

—DON DELILLO, *Underworld*

There is, however, also a very positive side to the duality between good and evil, which brings us back to the Hebrew prophets. One of the earliest, Amos, castigates those who “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” and “crush the needy”; prayers and sacrifices cannot make up for such evil deeds. Isaiah complains about those “who

write oppressive laws, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey.” Both speak on behalf of God, and both address themselves primarily to rulers who abuse their power. Of course many more examples could be cited from the Bible: speaking truth to power, the prophets called for social justice for the oppressed, who suffer from what might be called *social dukkha*.

THE OTHER SOURCE of modern Western civilization is classical Greece, which discovered the momentous distinction between *physis* (the natural world) and *nomos* (social convention). In effect, this was the realization that *whatever is socially constructed can be reconstructed*: we can reorganize our own societies and in that way (attempt to) determine our own collective destiny. This was another important aspect of the Axial revolution that occurred in the middle of the first millennium BCE. The Axial Age took form as new religions in India, China, and the Middle East, but in Greece it inspired the beginnings of philosophy, science, and this new perspective on how we live together.

As mentioned earlier, pre-Axial Age cultures such as the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Aztecs generally assumed that their hierarchical social structures were as “natural” as their local ecosystems. We consider the Greeks *humanists* because their discovery about social convention challenged the archaic religious worldview that embedded the traditional political order within the larger natural order of things. Now humans could consciously determine for themselves how to live together.

An unusual set of cultural conditions encouraged this development. Consistent with Homer’s detached, ironical attitude toward the gods, most of the Greek city-states had no sacred scripture or powerful priesthood. Their merchant fleets sparked a great colonizing movement that exposed the Greeks to very different cultures, which encouraged relativism and skepticism toward their own myths. And unlike Moses and Mohammed, Solon did not get his tablets from a deity when he gave Athens new laws.

With the help of some remarkable leaders, Athens was able to reorganize itself more or less peacefully. Cleisthenes replaced the four traditional, family-based tribes of Athens with ten districts, supplanting kinship identity with one's area of residence. Pericles extended the access of humble citizens to public office. The result was a provocative experiment in direct democracy, although a very limited one by today's standards—women and slaves did not qualify.

Not everyone liked democracy. Plato never forgot what happened to Socrates, and offered more elitist plans to restructure the Greek city-state in two of his dialogues, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Such alternative visions nevertheless presupposed the same distinction between *physis* and *nomos*. The various revolutions that for better and worse have reconstructed our modern world—English, American, French, Russian, Chinese, etc.—all took for granted such an understanding: if a political regime is unjust and oppressive, it should be challenged, because social structures are collective human creations that can be recreated.

Bringing together the Hebrew concern for social justice with the Greek realization that society can be restructured has resulted in the highest ideal of the modern West, actualized in reform and revolutionary movements, democratic government, human rights, etc.—in short, social progress. We are all too aware of the shortcomings of this progress, but our concern with those shortcomings itself testifies to our social justice principles, which we understand to be universal but are nonetheless historically conditioned and not to be taken for granted.

Of course, even with the best ideals (what might be called our “collective intentions”), our societies have not become as socially just as most of us would like, and in some ways they are becoming more unjust. An obvious economic example is the gap between rich and poor in the United States, and in much of the rest of the world as well, a disparity that is not only obscenely large but increasing. How shall we understand this discrepancy between ideal and reality? One obvious reply is that our economic system, as it presently operates, is still unjust because wealthy people and powerful corporations manipulate

our political systems, for their own self-centered and short-sighted benefit. So we need to keep working for a more equitable economic system, and for a democratic process free of such distortions.

I would not challenge that explanation, but by itself is it sufficient? Is the basic difficulty that our economic and political institutions are not structured well enough to avoid such manipulations, or might it be the case that they *cannot* be structured well enough—in other words, that we cannot rely only on an institutional solution to structural injustice? Is it possible to create a social order so perfect that it will function well regardless of the personal motivations of the people so ordered, or do we also need to find ways to address those motivations?

The Greek experiment with democracy failed for the same reasons that our modern experiment with democracy is in danger of failing: unless social reconstruction is accompanied by personal reconstruction, democracy merely empowers the ego-self. Insofar as I am still motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, my freedom is likely to make things worse. So long as the illusion of a discrete self, separate from others, prevails, democracy simply provides different types of opportunities for individuals to take advantage of other individuals.

Athenians became aware of this problem quite early. According to Herbert Muller's *Freedom in the Ancient World*, Greek individualism “was rooted in the Homeric tradition of personal fame and glory and was nourished by habitual competition, as much in art and athletics as in business, but everywhere off the battlefield with little team play.” This individualism “was tempered by little sense of strictly moral responsibility, or in particular of altruism.” It soon became obvious that private appetites were corrupting the democratic process. Demosthenes lamented that politics had become the path to riches, for individuals no longer placed the state before themselves but viewed it as another way to promote their own personal advantage. Plato's *Republic* argues that the democratic personality fails because it lacks a coherent organizing principle and yields to the strongest pressures of the moment—a recipe for interpersonal as well as intrapersonal strife.

Sound familiar? Perhaps this also helps us to understand why so

many political revolutions have ended so badly, with one gang of thugs replaced by a different gang of thugs. Suppose, for example, that I am a revolutionary leader who successfully overthrows an oppressive regime. If I have not also worked on transforming my own motivations—my greed, aggression, and delusion—I will be sorely tempted to take personal advantage of my new situation, inclined to see those who disagree with me as enemies to be purged, and (the number-one ego problem?) disposed to see the solution to social problems in my superior judgment and the imposition of my decisions. Unsurprisingly, such motivations are unlikely to result in a society that is truly just. And the history of Athens reminds us—as if we need to be reminded—that these distortions are not confined only to authoritarian rulers.

If we can never have a social structure so good that it obviates the need for people to be good (in Buddhist terms, to make efforts not to be motivated by greed, aggression, and delusion), then our modern emphasis on social transformation—restructuring institutions to make them more just—is necessary but not adequate by itself. That brings us to the Buddhist focus on personal transformation.

Ignorance vs. Awakening

As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world—that is the myth of the atomic age—as in being able to remake ourselves.

—MAHATMA GANDHI

Of course, ethical behavior is also important in Buddhism. Laypeople are expected to follow the five precepts (to avoid harming living beings, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, improper speech, and intoxicants), and hundreds of additional rules and regulations are prescribed for monastics. But if we view them in an Abrahamic fashion we are liable to miss the main point. Since there is no Buddhist God telling us that we must live this way, the precepts are important because living

in accordance with them means that the circumstances and quality of our own lives will naturally improve. They can be understood as exercises in mindfulness—vows to train ourselves in certain ways.

The precepts can be compared to the training wheels on the bicycle of a young child, which can be removed as the child learns how to ride. In the Brahmajala Sutta—one of the most important Pali suttas, in fact the first sutta in the Digha Nikaya—the Buddha distinguishes between what he calls “elementary, inferior matters of moral practice” and “other matters, profound, hard to see, hard to understand... experienced by the wise” that he has realized.

He makes that distinction because for Buddhism the fundamental axis is not between good and evil but between ignorance/delusion and awakening/wisdom. The primary challenge is cognitive in the broad sense: becoming more aware of the way things really are. In principle, at least, someone who has awakened to the true nature of the world (including the true nature of oneself) no longer needs to follow an external moral code because he or she *naturally* wants to behave in a way that does not violate the spirit of the precepts. (The fact that, in practice, there have been so many cases of improper behavior by so-called enlightened teachers raises issues that are too complex to be pursued here.)

The Buddha emphasized that what he had to teach was dukkha and how to end it. Did he have in mind only individual dukkha, or did he have a wider social vision that encompassed structural dukkha: the suffering inflicted on many people by oppressive rulers and other unjust social arrangements? In *The Buddha: Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon*, the British scholar Trevor Ling argued that religions as we know them today are “reduced civilizations”—the remnants of movements originally much more ambitious:

To say that Gotama the Buddha founded a religion is to prejudice our understanding of his far-reaching influence. For in modern usage the word religion denotes merely one department of human activity, now regarded of less and less public

importance, and belonging almost entirely to the realm of men's private affairs. But whatever else Buddhism is or is not, in Asia it is a great social and cultural tradition.

Ling believes that the Buddha intended to start a movement that would transform society, rather than merely establish a monastic order with alternative values to the mainstream. Certainly his attitudes toward women and caste were extraordinarily progressive for his day—more progressive than many of his followers, even today.

Earlier I discussed a controversial account in the Pali Canon of how the Buddha reluctantly agreed to establish a *bhikkhuni* sangha for nuns. It is evident that the version we read has been altered, to cast some doubt on the Buddha's decision ("It's Ananda's fault!") and to assert male control over women monastics. Despite many stories in the Pali Canon of bhikkhunis attaining various levels of enlightenment, including the highest, the bhikkhuni sangha apparently did not receive the same level of support as the male bhikkhu sangha, and it eventually disappeared. My guess is that some bhikkhus did not appreciate the competition.

Another incident in the Pali Canon gives insight into the Buddha's attitude toward the caste system, which during his time was not as rigid as it became afterward, yet even then was a considerable source of social dukkha. According to the Vinaya account, six young high-caste men, whose barber was Upali, decided to join the Buddhist sangha. They gave their elegant robes and ornaments to him with instructions to bring them back home, but Upali was worried that he might be accused of stealing them. So he decided to join the sangha as well. One version of the story is that the high-caste applicants then asked the Buddha to ordain Upali first. According to another version the Buddha decided to test the high-caste men before ordaining them, by sending them on a meditation retreat; while they were so engaged he ordained Upali. Since seniority in the sangha is determined by when one joins, that meant he would always be senior to the other six.

In either case, the point is important: within the sangha there is no

discrimination on the basis of caste. Trevor Ling has called the sangha the first democratic institution in history. It suggests that the Buddha did not support the caste system, although any broader social implications of that are more difficult to infer.

Ling reminds us of something else that is easy to overlook. Among academics in the field of religious studies, the very concept of “religion” is contested; no definition has ever become generally accepted. Our usual experience of religion today—going to church on Sunday morning is the classic example—is very different from the more central role of religion in the premodern West and from its greater role in many nonmodern cultures even today. As mentioned previously, everyday life in medieval Europe was saturated with religious activities: daily prayers, mass and other sacraments, processions, public penances and pilgrimages, the yearly calendar of holy days, and so forth. This suggests that we should not anachronistically project our enervated contemporary understanding of religion back onto the life and times of the Buddha. It also complicates the familiar question about whether or not Buddhism is a religion: what we think of as “religion” must be quite different from what it meant to the Buddha and his contemporaries. Given the paucity of historical documents, however, we may never know what the Buddha hoped for the larger social influence of the sangha.

Regardless of what Gautama Buddha may or may not have intended, what apparently happened after his *parinibbana* is that within a few generations much of the sangha settled down in places that became monasteries. Some bhikkhus continued to practice in the forest but not much is known about them. Early Buddhism as an institution came to an accommodation with the state, relying not only on the tolerance of kings and emperors but also their material support to some extent. And if you want to be supported by the powers-that-be, you’d better support the powers-that-be. Because no Asian Buddhist society was democratic, that placed limits on what types of dukkha Buddhist teachers could emphasize.

Is that how Buddhism became “reduced” to a religion? The tradition as it developed could not address structural dukkha—for example,

the exploitative policies of many rulers—that ultimately could only be resolved by some institutional transformation. On the contrary, the karma-and-rebirth teaching could easily be used—and was—to legitimate the power of kings and princes, who must be reaping the fruits of their benevolent actions in past lifetimes, and to rationalize the disempowerment of those born poor or disabled, who must also be experiencing the consequences of (unskillful) actions in previous lifetimes.

We in the West take for granted the principle of separation between church and state, but that distinction is another modern concept. Asian Buddhist rulers were not only patrons and defenders of the sangha; they also served as cultural idealizations and living symbols of the social order, necessary to maintain harmony between the state and the cosmos. In other words, their role was religious as well as political. Today we see this as an example of collective mystification, yet it has been the norm in Buddhist cultures and was common in the West's not-too-distant past (for instance, “the divine right of kings” of medieval Europe). Chinese emperors claimed to be bodhisattvas and even buddhas, and understandably few dared to contradict them. Perhaps we still see vestiges today in the attitude of many Thai people toward their king, and in the reverence of many Tibetans for their Dalai Lama, until very recently a “god-king.”

The coming of Buddhism to the West—more precisely, the globalization of Buddhism—challenges such mystifications, even as modern Europe long ago overthrew its absolute monarchs. Secularism and democracy are liberating Buddhism from any need to cozy up to autocratic rulers. In most locales Buddhists and Buddhist institutions are no longer subject to oppressive politics, and we also have a much better understanding of the structural causes of dukkha. This opens the door to expanded possibilities for the tradition, which can now develop more freely the social implications of its basic perspective. As Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and insubstantiality suggests, history need not be destiny.

Another way to express the relationship between the Western ideal of social transformation (that is, social justice that addresses social

dukkha) and the Buddhist goal of personal transformation (an awakening that addresses individual dukkha) is in terms of different types of freedom. The emphasis of the modern West has been on individual freedom from oppressive institutions, a prime example being the Bill of Rights appended to the U.S. Constitution. The emphasis of Buddhism (and some other Asian traditions) has been on what might be called *psycho-spiritual* freedom. Freedom for the self, or freedom from the self? Today we can see more clearly the limitations of each freedom by itself. What have I gained if I am free from external control but still at the mercy of my own greed, aggression, and delusions? And awakening from the delusion of a separate self will not by itself free me, or all those with whom I remain interdependent, from the dukkha perpetuated by an exploitative economic system and an oppressive government. Again, we need to actualize both ideals to be truly free.

One might conclude from this that contemporary Buddhism simply needs to incorporate a Western concern for social justice. Yet that would overlook the distinctive implications of the Buddhist understanding of dukkha, craving, and delusion. To draw out some of those implications, the next sections offer a Buddhist perspective on our economic and ecological situations today. They summarize arguments I have made elsewhere, but it is important to see their relevance in this context.

The Economic Challenge

Until the modern era, economic theory was understood to be part of social philosophy, and in principle at least subordinate to religious authority (e.g., Church prohibitions of “usury”). Today the academic profession of economics is concerned to model itself on the authority of the hard sciences and become a “social science” by discovering the fundamental laws of economic exchange and development, which it hopes might be as objectively true as Newton’s laws of motion.

In practice, such a focus tends to rationalize the kind of economy we have today, including the increasing gap between rich and poor. Despite many optimistic reports about economic recovery—for banks

and investors, at least—in the U.S. that disparity continues to widen. At the time of writing, wealth is now the most concentrated it has been since 1916. We have become familiar with news reports that, for instance, the richest 400 families in America now have the same total wealth as the poorest half of Americans—over 150 million people. If, however, this is happening in accordance with the basic laws of economic science—well, we may not like this development and may try to constrain it in some way, but fundamentally we need to adapt to big disproportions. In this way such a disparity is “normalized,” with the insinuation that it should be accepted.

“But it’s not *fair!*” In opposition to such efforts to justify the present economic order, popular movements call for social justice—in this case, for distributive justice. Why should a wealthy few have so much and the rest of us so little? It is not difficult to imagine what the Hebrew prophets might say about this situation. For an economic system to be just, its benefits should be distributed much more equitably. And I would not disagree with that. But does the Buddhist emphasis on delusion-vs.-awakening provide an alternative perspective to supplement this concern for distributive justice?

Two implications of Buddhist teachings stand out here. One of them focuses on our individual predicament—one’s personal role in our economic system—and the other implication considers the structural or institutional aspect of that system.

The first part of this book emphasized what I believe to be the single most important teaching of the Buddha: the relationship between *dukkha* “suffering” and *anatta* “nonself.” In contemporary terms, one’s sense of self is a psychological and social construction that does not have any *svabhava* “self-existence” of its own. Being composed of mostly habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, intending, remembering, and so forth—processes that are impermanent and insubstantial—such a construct is inevitably haunted by *dukkha*: inherently insecure, because not only ungrounded but ungroundable.

As explained earlier, we commonly experience this as the feeling that something is wrong with me, that something is missing or not

quite right about my life. In other words, an unawakened sense of self is haunted by a sense of *lack*. Usually, however, we misunderstand the source of our discomfort and believe that what we are lacking is something outside ourselves. And this brings us back to our individual economic predicament, because in the “overdeveloped” world we often grow up conditioned to understand ourselves as consumers, and to understand the basic problem of our lives as getting more money in order to acquire more things, because they are what will eventually make us happy.

There is an almost perfect fit between this fundamental sense of *lack* that unenlightened beings have, according to Buddhism, and our present economic system, which uses advertising and other devices to persuade us that the next thing we buy will make us happy—which it never does, at least not for long. In other words, a consumerist economy exploits our sense of lack, instead of helping us understand and address the root problem. The system generates profits by perpetuating our discontent in a way that aggravates it and leaves us wanting more.

The American dream has become the world’s nightmare.

—THICH NHAT HANH

Such a critique of consumerism is consistent with some recent studies by psychologists, sociologists, and even economists, who have discovered that once one attains a certain minimum income—a basic level of food and shelter—happiness does not increase in step with increasing wealth or consumerism. Rather, the most important determinant of how happy people are turns out to be the quality of one’s relationships with other people. I suspect that the Buddha would not be surprised.

Notice that this Buddhist perspective does not mention distributive justice or any other type of social justice, nor does it offer an ethical evaluation. The basic problem is delusion rather than injustice or immorality. Yet this approach does not deny the inequities of our economic system, nor is it inconsistent with an Abrahamic ethical cri-

tique. Although an alternative viewpoint has been added, the ideal of social justice remains very important.

What does this imply about our economic institutions, the structural aspect? The Buddha had little to say about evil *per se*, but he had a lot to say about the three “roots of evil”: greed, aggression, and delusion. When what I do is motivated by any of these three (and they tend to overlap), I create problems for myself (and often for others too, of course). Yet we not only have individual senses of self, we also have collective selves: I am a man not a woman, an American not a Chinese, and so forth. Do the problems with the three poisons apply to collective selves as well? To further complicate the issue, we also have much more powerful institutions than in the Buddha’s time. These constitute another type of collective self that often assumes a life of its own, in the sense that such institutions have their own motivations built into them. Elsewhere I have argued that our present economic system can be understood as institutionalized greed; that our militarism institutionalizes aggression; and that the mainstream media institutionalize delusion, because their primary focus is profiting from advertising and consumerism, rather than educating or informing us about what is really happening.

If greed, aggression and delusion are the main sources of evil, and if today they have been institutionalized... well, you can draw your own conclusions. Here let’s consider only the first poison: how our economic system promotes structural dukkha by institutionalizing greed.

One definition of greed is “never enough,” something that does not function only personally: corporations are never large enough or profitable enough, the value of their shares is never high enough, our national GDP is never big enough.... In fact, we cannot imagine what “big enough” might be. It is built into these systems that they must keep growing, or else they tend to collapse.

Consider, in particular, the stock market, high temple of the economic process. On the one side are many millions of investors, most anonymous and mostly unconcerned about the activities of the corporations they invest in, except for their profitability and its effects on

share prices. In many cases investors do not even know where their money is invested, thanks to mutual funds. Such an attitude is not disreputable, of course: on the contrary, investment is a highly respectable endeavor, and the most successful investors are idolized (Warren Buffet, “the sage of Omaha”).

On the other side of the stock market, however, the desires and expectations of those millions of investors become transformed into an impersonal and unremitting pressure for growth and increased profitability that every CEO must respond to, and preferably in the short run. Contemplate, as an unlikely example, the CEO of a large transnational corporation, who one morning wakes up to the imminent dangers of climate change and wants to do everything he (it is usually a he) can to address this challenge. If what he tries to do threatens corporate profits, however, he is likely to lose his job. And if that is true for the CEO, how much more true it is for everyone else further down the corporate hierarchy. Corporations are legally chartered so that their first responsibility is not to their employees or customers, nor to other members of the societies they are part of, nor to the ecosystems of the earth, but to those who own them, who with very few exceptions are concerned primarily about return on investment—a preoccupation, again, that is not only socially acceptable but often lauded.

Who is responsible for this collective fixation on growth? The important point is that the system has attained not only a life of its own but its own motivations, quite apart from the motivations of the individuals who work for it and who will be replaced if they do not serve those institutional motivations. And all of us participate in this process in one way or another, as workers, consumers, investors, pensioners, and so forth, usually with little if any sense of personal responsibility for the collective result. Any awareness of what is actually happening tends to be diffused in the impersonal anonymity of this economic process. Everyone is just doing their job, playing their role.

In short, any genuine solution to the economic crisis will require more than some redistribution of wealth, necessary as that is, and it is not enough to append a concern for social justice to Buddhist

teachings. Applying a Buddhist perspective to structural dukkha implies an alternative evaluation of our economic situation, which focuses on the consequences of individual and institutionalized delusion: the dukkha of a sense of a self that feels separate from others, whose sense of *lack* consumerism exploits and institutionalizes into economic structures that assume a life of their own. Although distributive justice remains important, in terms of equal opportunity and more equitable distribution, we must also find ways to address the personal dukkha built into consumerism and the structural dukkha built into institutions that have their own motivations. It has become obvious that what is beneficial for those institutions (in the short run) is very different from what is beneficial for the rest of us and for the earth's ecosystems.

There's good news, and there's bad news.

The bad news: civilization, as we know it, is about to end.

Now, the good news: civilization, as we know it, is about to end.

—SWAMI BEYONDANANDA

The Ecological Challenge

Does the basic Buddhist insight about the dukkha inherent to a (sense of) separate self also apply to our biggest collective sense of self: the duality between us as a species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and the rest of the biosphere?

The Buddha, like his contemporaries, knew nothing about climate change, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, and so forth, yet he knew a lot about the delusion of self and the difficulties that gets us into. In fact, there seem to be precise and profound parallels between our usual individual predicament, as discussed earlier, and the present situation of human civilization. The basic problem in both cases is an uncomfortable sense of separation, our misunderstanding of the predicament, and our inappropriate reactions, which often aggravate the difficulty.

For this particular correspondence between individual and collective selves to hold, our collective sense of estrangement from the natural world must also be a source of collective frustration. And our collective response to that alienation—attempting to secure or “self-ground” ourselves technologically and economically—must be making things worse.

I mentioned earlier the important distinction that classical Greece made between *nomos* and *physis*, between the conventions of human society (governance, culture, technology, etc.) and the ecosystems of the natural world. Although today we take that insight for granted, it’s not something that pre-Axial societies understood; they usually accepted their own social structures as inevitable because those structures were understood to be just as “natural” as their ecosystems.

This justified social hierarchies unacceptable today, yet there was nevertheless a psychological benefit in thinking that way: such societies shared a collective sense of meaning that the modern world has lost. For them, the meaning of their lives was built into the cosmos and revealed by their religion, which they took for granted. We, however, lack that kind of “social security,” which is the basic psychological comfort that comes from knowing one’s place and role in the world. The price of our freedom has been an increasing anxiety about who we are and what it means to be human.

There is a tension between such freedom (we decide what to value and do) and security (being grounded in something greater, which is taking care of us). Thanks to ever-more powerful technologies, it seems like we can accomplish almost anything we want to do, yet we don’t know what we *should* want to do. What sort of world do we want to live in? What kind of society should we have? In this fashion too, our collective as well as individual lack of grounding in anything greater than ourselves has become a constant source of *dukkha*—an existential anxiety rooted in our sense of alienation from the natural world.

What has been our collective response to this predicament? Let’s first remember how we usually react to our individual predicament: misunderstanding its source in the delusion of self, we look outside

ourselves and become preoccupied with acquiring external things such as money, fame, and power. There is a collective parallel in our taken-for-granted obsession with never-ending economic growth and technological development. When will our GNP be large enough? When will we have all the technology we need? Perhaps the word “progress” is misleading, because of course one can never have enough progress if it really is progress. Yet why is *more* always *better* if it can never be *enough*?

The important point is that economic growth and technological advances may be good *means* to accomplish something but they become problematical as *ends* in themselves. Insofar as we are not sure what we collectively want to do, however, they have become a collective substitute: we have become obsessed with ever-increasing power and control.

Notice the parallel with our individual predicament, according to Buddhism. Lacking the security that comes from knowing our place and role in the cosmos, we have been trying to create our own security by controlling the conditions of our existence, until everything becomes subject to our will, a “resource” that we can use. Ironically, if predictably, this has not been providing the sense of meaning and security that we seek. We have become more anxious, not less.

That project makes an ecological crisis inevitable, sooner or later. And if our reliance on technology as the solution to life’s problems is itself a symptom of this larger problem, then the ecological crisis requires something more than a technological response (although technological developments such as more efficient solar panels are certainly necessary). Increasing dependence on ever-more sophisticated technologies can aggravate our sense of separation from the natural world, whereas any successful solution (if the parallel still holds) must include recognizing that we are an integral part of the natural world. That also means embracing our responsibility for the health of the whole biosphere, because its well-being ultimately cannot be distinguished from our own well-being.

If these parallels are helpful, they clarify what many have been intuiting: the ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis. Just as the Buddhist

perspective on our economic situation cannot be subsumed into the familiar social justice paradigm, so a Buddhist perspective on the ecological crisis requires something more than the usual preoccupation with trying to make industrial-growth society more “sustainable.”

TO SUM UP, we cannot expect either the economic or the ecological transformations we need to succeed without personal transformation as well, and the history of Buddhism shows that the opposite is also true: teachings that promote individual awakening cannot avoid being affected by social structures that promote collective delusion and craving. As the sociological paradox puts it, people create society, yet society also creates people.

Modern attempts at collective social reconstruction have had limited success because they tend to be compromised by ego-driven individual motivations. Buddhism and other nondualist traditions have also had limited success at eliminating dukkha and delusion, because they have been unable to challenge the dukkha and delusion built into oppressive social hierarchies that mystify themselves as necessary and beneficial. The convergence of those two projects in our times opens up fresh possibilities. They need each other. Or more precisely, we need both.

May each find in the other the supplementary perspective it needs to actualize its own deepest aspirations.

The New Bodhisattva

Bodhisattva (Sanskrit, from *bodhi* “awakened” + *sattva* “being”): any person who, motivated by compassion, wishes to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all living beings.

The Western (now worldwide) ideal of a social transformation that institutionalizes social justice and ecological sustainability has achieved much, but not as much as we want or need. In fact, the more we learn about our situation, the more overwhelmed and discouraged many of us become. Climate breakdown... a mass extinction of species...

a dysfunctional economic system... corporate domination of government... overpopulation... This is a critical time in human history, and the collective decisions to be made during the next few years may set the course of events for many generations to come. The problems are so enormous and intimidating—where to start? We often end up feeling powerless, even paralyzed.

For those inspired by Buddhist teachings, an important issue is how much Buddhism can help us respond to these crises. This book has explored the relevance of Buddhist teachings to our present situation, but it's not enough to elaborate on those teachings: they require practice. We also seek examples of engagement that actually address the formidable challenges that face us.

Of course, we cannot expect to find precise answers to contemporary difficulties in ancient Buddhist texts. The Buddha lived in Iron Age India, and his society faced a different set of problems: for instance, aggressive monarchies competing to swallow up smaller states. Traditional Buddhism cannot help us decide whether to rein in growth-obsessed capitalism or to replace it with a more socially responsible economic system. We cannot depend on the Buddha to advise us whether a revitalized representative democracy can work well enough or whether we should push for more local, decentralized governance.

Nor does Buddhism imply a new political party or social movement, in my opinion. As Paul Hawken points out in *Blessed Unrest*, there are already a vast number of large and small organizations working for peace, social justice, and sustainability—well over two million, he now estimates. This encouraging number indicates a change of consciousness that is certainly not limited to Buddhist practitioners. The issue is whether a Buddhist perspective has something distinctive and pragmatic to offer, which can contribute something otherwise lacking in this movement. What might that be?

Historically, churches and churchgoers have played an important part in many Western reform movements—for example, in antislavery and civil rights campaigns. Nevertheless, much of the impetus in the West for deep structural change originates from socialism and other

leftist movements, which traditionally have been suspicious of religion. Marx viewed religion as “the opiate of the people” because religious institutions have often been complicit with political oppression, using their doctrines to rationalize the authority of exploitative rulers and diverting believers’ attention from their present condition to “the life to come.” As we have noticed, this historical critique applies to some Buddhist institutions as well, yet a main concern of this book has been to demonstrate that at its best Buddhism offers an alternative approach: the path is really about personal transformation, about deconstructing and reconstructing the sense of self, not to qualify for a blissful afterlife but to live in a different way here and now.

Is there something specific within the Buddhist tradition that brings together personal and social transformation, in a new model of activism connecting inner and outer practice?

Yes: the bodhisattva.

In the Pali Canon, the bodhisattva refers to the earlier lives of Gautama Buddha before he became the Buddha. As Buddhism developed, however, the concept became a sectarian and divisive issue. According to one account, there was a conspicuous difference between the Buddha’s accomplishment and that of the arahants who awakened by following his teaching. By definition, an arahant has attained the same awakening as the Buddha himself, yet the Buddha was nonetheless observed to be special because he so wholeheartedly devoted himself to helping everyone awaken. This perception led to the development of a more altruistic model of practice, which supposedly demonstrates the superiority of the Mahayana “Greater Vehicle” tradition over the Theravada, the so-called Hinayana or “Lesser Vehicle.”

It has been difficult for scholars to determine how much historical truth there is in this story, but in any case it’s essential to distinguish the bodhisattva ideal from such doctrinal claims. Today we need to understand the bodhisattva path as a nonsectarian archetype that offers a new vision of the relationship between spiritual practice and social engagement—an alternative to rampant self-centered individualism, which can include preoccupation with one’s own personal awakening.

According to the usual mythology, bodhisattvas are self-sacrificing because they could choose to transcend this world of samsara by entering into nirvana and ending rebirth, but instead they take a vow to hang around here in order to help the rest of us. That kind of altruism still distinguishes the best interests of the bodhisattva from the best interests of everyone else. There is a better way to understand what motivates the bodhisattva—if we understand awakening as the realization that I am not separate from (the rest of) the world. Then the bodhisattva’s preoccupation with helping “others” is not a personal sacrifice but a further stage of personal development. Because awakening to my nonduality with the world does not automatically eliminate habitual self-centered ways of thinking and acting, following a bodhisattva path becomes important for reorienting my relationship with the world. Instead of asking, “What can I get out of this situation?” one asks, “What can I contribute to this situation, to make it better?”

Thus the bodhisattva path is a way of emphasizing the important distinction between two basic ways of understanding the Buddhist path: do I follow the path only to end my own suffering, or to address the suffering of everyone?

That speaks directly to an important tension today between “self-help” Buddhism and socially engaged Buddhism. Many if not most North American Buddhists have demanding jobs, and practices such as *metta* and mindfulness meditation provide much-needed relief from the pressures of daily life. Such practitioners seek quiet time to de-stress and pursue their own enlightenment, or at least their own peace of mind.

Without denigrating in any way the importance of such practice, we also need to remember Slavoj Žižek’s criticism that Buddhism can be practiced in ways that reinforce the current social order. Is Western Buddhism being commodified and co-opted into a self-help stress-reduction program that adapts to institutionalized dukkha, leaving practitioners atomized and powerless? Or is modern Buddhism opening up new perspectives and possibilities that challenge us to transform

ourselves and our societies, so that they become more socially just and ecologically sustainable?

Among those who recognize the importance of social engagement, there is another distinction to be made. My sense is that most Buddhists understand social engagement as serving the underserved, as directly responding to those who need help, such as homeless people, those who are terminally ill, or those incarcerated in prisons. This seems consistent with Buddhist emphasis on letting go of abstractions in favor of immediate experience: attending to the needs of that suffering person on the sidewalk, right here and now, rather than becoming involved in a more abstract and sometimes confrontational movement for social change.

Again, without disparaging in any way the importance of helping those who urgently need it, we must also ask: if we share the basic concern of the Buddha to end suffering, don't we also need to understand and address its social causes? As we pull drowning people out of the river, shouldn't we consider why there are an increasing number of people floundering in the water? Who or what is pushing them in upstream? Today it's not enough to help that homeless person in front of us. We also need to consider why, in the wealthiest and most powerful nation in human history, the number of poor people is growing so quickly. In particular, why (to cite some recent statistics) are over a million schoolchildren homeless in the U.S.? Why are a quarter of our children growing up in poverty—the second-highest percentage among developed nations (after Romania), according to a 2014 UNICEF report?

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint.
When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.

—DOM HELDER CAMARA

So bodhisattva activism is also concerned to address institutional causes of dukkha, and it has some distinctive characteristics.

Interdependence—the idea that “we’re all in this together”—is one; a focus on delusion rather than evil is another. Together, these imply nonviolence (violence is usually self-defeating anyway) and a politics based on love rather than anger (which dualizes between “us” and “them”). Although it’s not always easy to remember, the basic issue is not wealthy and powerful “bad” people but social structures that promote collective greed, aggression, and delusion. The Buddha’s pragmatism and nondogmatism—for example, viewing his own teachings as a raft not to be carried on our backs once we’ve crossed the river—can help to cut through the ideological quarrels that have weakened so many progressive groups. And Buddhist emphasis on skillful means foregrounds the creative imagination, a necessary attribute if we are to co-construct a healthier way of living together on this earth.

The difficult we do immediately.
The impossible will take a little longer.
—THE U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

Yet those attributes, essential as they are, do not touch on the most important aspect of the bodhisattva path in these difficult times, when we often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenge. The bodhisattva’s response? In the Zen centers where I have practiced, the “four bodhisattva vows” are recited every day, the first of which is “living beings are numberless; I vow to save them all.” This accords with the classical formulation: bodhisattvas pledge to help liberate all sentient (literally “breathing”) beings. Given the size of the universe, this is no small commitment—and that is my point. Someone who has signed up for such an unachievable task is not going to be intimidated by present crises, no matter how difficult or even hopeless they may appear. That is because the bodhisattva practices on both levels, inner and outer, which enables him or her to engage wholeheartedly in goal-directed behavior without attachment to results.

Ours is in the trying.
 The rest is not our business.
 —T. S. ELIOT

The task of the bodhisattva is to do the best one can, without knowing what the consequences will be. Have we already passed ecological tipping-points and civilization as we know it is doomed? Frankly, we don't know—yet rather than being overawed by the unknown, the bodhisattva embraces “don't know mind,” because Buddhist practice opens us up to the awesome mystery of an impermanent world where everything is changing whether or not we notice. I grew up in a world defined by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, a standoff haunted by the always-imminent possibility of nuclear war. Most of us took this situation for granted—until communism suddenly collapsed overnight. The same thing occurred with South African apartheid. If we do not really know what's happening, do we really know what's possible, until we try?

The equanimity of the bodhisattva-activist is due to nonattachment to the fruits of one's action, which is not the same as detachment from the state of the world or the fate of the earth. Nonattachment does not mean that one is unconcerned about the results of one's activism, yet it is essential in the face of the inevitable setbacks and frustrations that activism involves, which otherwise lead to simmering anger, despair, and burnout. Given the urgency of the challenges, we work as hard as we can. When our efforts do not bear fruit in the ways that we hoped, we naturally feel some disappointment—but we do not remain stuck there, because we have an inner practice that helps us not to hold on to such feelings.

What is the source of the bodhisattva-activist's nonattachment? That points to the fruits of his or her inner work: the bodhisattva realizes shunyata “emptiness,” the dimension where there is nothing to gain or lose, no getting better or worse. The Diamond Sutra says, in effect, that we save all living beings by realizing that there are no living beings to

save. That is a very important realization, although it is not by itself the full awakening that we need.

Shunryu Suzuki used to tell his students “you’re all perfect just as you are... and you can use a little improvement.” Both are completely true. Part II mentioned the danger, for practitioners, of becoming attached to that insight (“clinging to emptiness”). To say it again, emptiness is not a place to dwell that is free from form; it is experienced in or as the impermanent forms it takes, which include our world and our own lives. In terms of the “new story,” realizing shunyata opens us up to the source of the creative process, liberating a creativity that is much needed today.

For the Buddhist activist these are the two complementary dimensions of practice, which turn out to be different sides of the same coin. As Nisargadatta might put it, “Between these two the bodhisattva’s life turns.” Our world needs both.