

02 David Loy and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Western Buddhists and Political Activists

David Loy and Bhikkhu Bodhi are both American and are among the most famous western Buddhists.

In their pasts both lived for long periods in the East, David Loy in Singapore and Japan, Bhikkhu Bodhi in Sri Lanka. Both now live and practice as Buddhists in their homeland, the USA.

They belong to different Buddhist traditions. A lay person, married with a son, David Loy has been a Zen practitioner since 1971 and is a qualified Zen teacher. Bhikkhu Bodhi was ordained as a Theravada Bhikkhu, or monk, in 1972.

Both have published extensively, David Loy as a writer on a wide range of Buddhist topics, Bhikkhu Bodhi as the world's foremost translator of, and commentator on, the Pali Canon.

And as we shall see, they are both politically active, separately and collaboratively.

In 2009 David Loy and Bhikkhu Bodhi, working with scientist Dr. John Stanley, together published "The Time To Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration On Climate Change".

[\(https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/buddhist-declaration-on-climate-change/\)](https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/buddhist-declaration-on-climate-change/)

My interest in this talk is not so much in the ways in which they are active politically, but in the way they utilize, even revise, traditional Buddhist analysis and practice in laying the foundations for what they perceive as urgent present-day needs for action.

Let's take David Loy first.

My first contact with David Loy was reading "A Buddhist History of the West", a book that examines how greed, hatred and delusion have conditioned our history. I was excited by the scale and perspective of this project. Central to the book is his notion of 'lack'.

Buddhism teaches that there is no fixed, separate self; our sense of self is a construct, an ever-changing process. The self does not exist in its own

right. Because of the absence of a separate reality of its own, the absence of any fixed or permanent or stable ground, then the self is haunted by a 'sense of lack' or 'lack' for short. Because of our inability to recognise and accept that the self is empty of a separate, fixed existence, we close up and experience a deep-rooted level of unease or unsatisfactoriness or suffering, which we can never quite resolve.

One of the ways that we use to try to cover up this reality manifests in a consumerism that promises, but can never deliver, fulfilment. We try to build a sense of identity by consuming. If, instead, we were to explore this lack of a separate, fixed existence, and even to embrace it, we would discover a tremendous source of creativity and positivity.

Later I read more of David Loy's books. Loy is also a social activist, participating in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, writing blogs and newspaper articles, , raising issues and urging responses, especially in the field of ecodharma.

His book "Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution" (published by Budakoda in Estonian as "Raha, seks, sõda, karma: märkmeid budistlikuks revolutsiooniks") brings together some of his most important thinking on socio-economic topics.

One of the distinctive contributions in this book is his focus on what he describes as the *institutionalization* of the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion in our modern economic society, in particular his analysis of greed and the role of the corporation.

In Buddhism greed, hatred and delusion are seen as root poisons, inherent in the individual human being; poisons that can be overcome by a path of practice laid down by the Buddha leading to Enlightenment. In this way greed is transformed into its opposite of generosity, hatred into its opposite of loving kindness, and delusion into wisdom.

In Loy's view the three poisons also operate collectively, such that our present economic system institutionalizes greed, militarism institutionalizes hatred, and our corporate media institutionalize delusion.

The institutionalization of greed works in two ways; corporations are never profitable enough, and people never consume enough. The drive

for profits means that people must be conditioned to find meaning in life through more and more buying and consuming.

Considering the stock market, Loy points out that investors demand increased earnings through dividends and higher share prices. Executives of companies therefore respond by a constant search for higher profits, growth, and higher share prices, with an emphasis on the short run. With the globalization of corporate capitalism, the drive for immediate profitability, higher share prices and growth is increasingly the engine of the world economy. Everything else, including the environment and quality of life, is subordinate to this anonymous demand for profits and growth. This demand is anonymous because the system has attained a life of its own. We all participate in this process as workers, employers, consumers, investors, and pensioners, with a very diffuse sense of moral responsibility. In this way greed is thoroughly institutionalized.

When reflecting on Occupy Wall Street, Loy remarks that Wall Street is the most concentrated and visible part of a much larger nightmare; the collective delusion that there is no alternative to our present economic system.

This delusion is reinforced by the ever-increasing closeness of the economic and political spheres in the United States.

From a Buddhist perspective this integrated system is incompatible with Buddhist teaching because it encourages greed and delusion, the root causes of our dukkha (suffering). At the heart of this system is the corporation. To counter the power of corporations Loy supports groups like the Network of Spiritual Progressives who call for an Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment (ESRA) to the U.S. constitution, to compulsorily require corporate charters to be rewritten to include social and ecological responsibility.

But by itself, Loy argues, this won't be enough. In Buddhist terms the problem isn't only greed, it's also delusion. He argues that "realising the nature of these three institutionalised poisons is just as important as any personal realisation we might have as a result of spiritual practice".

Loy also points out that Buddhists have much to learn from Occupy Wall Street. It's not enough for Buddhists to focus just on waking from their own individual dream. Buddhists need to join with others and awaken from a collective nightmare. He rhetorically asks, "Is it time to bring our spiritual practice out into the streets?"

Bhikkhu Bodhi

For many years I have been in awe of Bhikkhu Bodhi for his tireless dedication to the rigorous translation and elucidation of the meaning of the Pali Canon.

But I have become aware that he has another side. As a student in the 1960s Bhikkhu Bodhi was a political activist. But after becoming more interested in working on himself, he became a Buddhist and a monk, believing that in the long run he could better help the world in this way.

Apart from a five year spell back in the United States, Bhikkhu Bodhi spent the thirty years between 1972 and 2002 living in Sri Lanka as a monk. During this time he became one of the top translators of the Pali Canon and a respected Dharma teacher. In 1984 he became the editor of the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) and in 1988 he became its president.

After a long separation from the outside world, with the encouragement of his teacher in Sri Lanka he was gradually drawn back into thinking and writing about world events. As he puts it, "the social progressive that had gone into deep hibernation decades earlier... was starting to re-awaken."

But it was his return to the USA in 2002 that led him to fully re-engage with global events from a progressive perspective.

At the same time he was able to closely observe how Buddhism was being assimilated in the USA. He was troubled by what he saw as complacent and self-absorbed attitudes among many American Buddhists; attitudes that were disconnected from the deepening economic, social and ecological crises in the world.

It seemed to him that that many middle-class American Buddhists understood suffering mostly in terms of their own individual problems—

“the ennui of material prosperity, the stress of unfulfilling relationships, discontent with their personal foibles”.

Outside the group of Engaged Buddhists, many Buddhists seemed barely aware of the misery that overwhelmed some ninety percent of the world’s population because of poverty, tyrannical regimes, social oppression, militarism, and economic globalization.

He was critical of the way that Buddhist practice was narrowly understood in terms of one’s personal meditation, which appeared to serve a largely therapeutic function.

Buddhism, he thought, was being taken up as a path to personal fulfilment rather than as a means of tackling the deepest roots of suffering both for oneself and for others.

These concerns led Bhikkhu Bodhi, with the help of some of his students and Buddhist friends, to found Buddhist Global Relief, whose primary mission is to combat chronic hunger and malnutrition, with over fifty hunger-relief projects in countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, India, Kenya, Niger, South Africa, Haiti, and the United States.

His experience has also led Bhikkhu Bodhi to question some aspects of his understanding of Buddhism.

In his view, Buddhism, like many traditional forms of contemplative spirituality, is based on the perception of a disparity between involvement in the world and an exalted sphere of reality transcendent to the world.

The spiritual quest aims to ascend from a life normally dominated by contingency, impermanence, illusion, distress and anxiety, sin or defilement, to a spiritual realm in which all these imperfections have been finally overcome.

This is a state of Enlightenment which can be described as ‘unconditioned, stable, pure, blissful and serene, a state from which we can never fall back into the swamp of unenlightened living.’

Bhikkhu Bodhi now believes that this perspective on the human condition and its spiritual potential is necessary but incomplete.

It is necessary because it sharply illuminates the divide between the deluded condition of our everyday lives and the state of ultimate perfection (Enlightenment) that is ever available to us.

It is incomplete because it drives a wedge between the spiritual and mundane spheres. As a result, we may feel compelled either to choose one above the other or 'to settle for an uneasy tension between the ideal and actual.'

Bhikkhu Bodhi now distinguishes three major domains in which human life participates.

One he calls the transcendent domain, 'which is the sphere of aspiration for classical contemplative spirituality'.

The second he calls the social domain, which 'includes our interpersonal relations as well as our political, social, and economic institutions.'

And the third he calls the natural domain, which includes our physical bodies, other sentient beings, and the natural environment.

Bhikkhu Bodhi concludes that a spirituality that privileges the transcendent and devalues the social and natural domains, or sees them at best as steppingstones to realization, is not enough in our current situation, and may even help to put our future at risk.

The pursuits of contemplative spirituality are undertaken by the "spiritual virtuosos," the contemplatives, mystics, and yogis, who aspire to transcend the world, and express their compassion simply by guiding others to the heights they themselves have reached.

At the same time humanity's future is left solely in the hands of politicians, CEOs of corporations, and technical experts, who are often driven by greed and narrow belief in the value of technology. This division, he believes, also opens the doors of our communal institutions to religious dogmatists and fundamentalists.

Instead of this division of domains, Bhikkhu Bodhi imagines a future that requires the creation of an integral type of spirituality that can bridge the three domains of human life.

Until now, he says, the spiritual quest has primarily moved along an ascending track 'from the conditioned to the unconditioned', and 'from mortality to the deathless'.

What is required today is 'to complement the ascending spiritual movement with a descending movement, a gesture of love and grace flowing down from the heights of realization into the valleys of our ordinary lives.'

Whilst both the ascending and descending movements are necessary, Bhikkhu Bodhi's view is that the scale of problems facing humanity at the present moment force us to give special attention to the descending movement.

Under the influence of love, this requires that in the social domain we must strive for government that embodies justice, equity, and compassion. (Interestingly Sangharakshita writes about a similar use of what he describes as the 'power mode' subordinated to the 'love mode' in order for government to redistribute income.)

Social and economic policies must be grounded in the conviction that all human beings are entitled to live in peace, with sufficient access to food, water, medical care, and housing, and opportunities to fulfill their potentials.

In the natural domain Bhikkhu Bodhi urges us to look at the universe with wonder, awe, and reverence, to treat all other living beings with care and kindness, and to ensure that nature's capacity for self-regeneration is preserved.

Bhikkhu Bodhi believes that there is much in the teachings of the Buddha, on ethics, communal harmony, and on the duties of governments and kings, that can assist in this project. As Bhikkhu Bodhi says, the Buddha taught the dharma on the basis of a far-reaching vision that pierced the depths of suffering in both its personal *and* collective dimensions.

Although Bhikkhu Bodhi warns that we can expect stiff resistance from those who profit by preserving and extending the status quo, he does believe that Buddhists can make a difference. To do this he urges the creation of Buddhist communities, both locally and globally, that express wisdom, care, and compassion.

In conclusion, both David Loy and Bhikkhu Bodhi argue for a balanced approach to the problems facing humanity today, working to deepen insight and understanding, without underestimating the urgency of dealing with those problems.

David Loy pinpoints the human sense of lack, and consequent urge to cover that sense of lack with consuming material things, as the core Buddhist diagnosis of the human predicament.

He adds to this diagnosis an emphasis on the collective institutionalization of greed, hatred and delusion; our economic system institutionalizes greed, militarism institutionalizes hatred, and our corporate media institutionalize delusion.

Bhikkhu Bodhi calls for an integrative type of spirituality that bridges the three major domains of human life; the transcendent domain, the social domain, and the natural domain.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, analyzing what he sees as the urgency of the current situation, calls for special attention to be given to the social and natural domains.

Here, from my own personal experience, I would add a note of caution.

Dealing with the sense of lack and the prevalence of greed, hatred and delusion; and creating an integrative spirituality; requires a deep individual and collective practice to underpin political engagement.

Without that basis of deep and collective practice it is possible to get lost in political activity, without uprooting the core spiritual causes of the human predicament.

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/6v3osucz057ezq4kn3160/02-English-Only-David-Loy-and-Bhikkhu-Bodhi.MP3?rlkey=hzsiwyn4muww18ieov1vvcwoq&dl=0>