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PRACTICING PEACE: SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN WESTERN BUDDHISM

KENNETH KRAFT

Lehigh University
Department of Religion Studies
Maginnes Hall 9
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 18015
E-mail: klk2@lehigh.edu

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines some current concerns of socially engaged Buddhists in the West. How does one practice nonviolence in one's own life and in the world? How can the demands of "inner" and "outer" work be reconciled? What framework should be used in assessing the effects of Buddhist-inspired activism? Today's engaged Buddhists do not refer extensively to Buddhism's ethical tradition, and some of their activities may not appear to be distinctively Buddhist. Nonetheless, their efforts reflect a longstanding Mahaayaana ideal -- that transcendental wisdom is actualized most meaningfully in compassionate action.

TEXT

Buddhism in the late twentieth century is affected by many of the same forces influencing other religious traditions today. Increasingly, Buddhists in Asia and the West are responding to contemporary issues in ways that may seem unprecedented but are nonetheless grounded in Buddhism's past. Although Buddhism is typically depicted as otherworldly, its present-day vitality can best be seen in various forms of engagement -- social, political, and environmental.

For those interested in religious ethics, the emergence of a "Western" Buddhism offers potential new sources of knowledge and insight. [1] This is so for Buddhist scholars as well: until recently studies of Buddhist ethics were limited to Asian Buddhist texts and communities. A premise of this essay is that we can no longer overlook the experience of Westerners who are attempting to

unify Buddhism, ethical concerns, and social action in their daily lives.

Because socially engaged Buddhism is a recent movement (in its present incarnation at least), its contours keep shifting: new causes are embraced or dropped; new organizations are created or abandoned; new bridges to mainstream culture are tried or rejected. A recent development of note is the inauguration of the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), under the auspices of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. During the spring and summer of 1995, a pilot program in the San Francisco Bay area combined social service or social action with Buddhist practice. Women and men aged twenty-five to fifty worked as volunteers in various settings: a hospice, a health clinic for the homeless, a shelter for Asian women, a campaign for nuclear nonproliferation, and an urban gardening project for at-risk youth. During evenings and weekends the participants met for meditation, study, and other forms of training. Supporters of the program endorsed it in historic terms: "Until now there has been no full-time service organization with a Buddhist orientation in the West." [2]

Although the forms of socially engaged Buddhism in the West vary, and the Buddhist schools that contribute to the movement are diverse, one aspiration is almost universally shared by those involved -- the ideal of nonviolence or peace. Accordingly, the theme of peace will be used here as a kind of shorthand for the ever-expanding range of engaged Buddhist concerns.

An American Buddhist scholar, commenting on a recent collection of writings by socially engaged Buddhists, lamented that the contributors "argue about timely ethical issues with deep sincerity and commitment, but with rarely a canonical reference, almost never a footnote to Buddhist commentarial literature." [3] It is true, as we will see below, that few Western Buddhists attempt to ground their arguments in Buddhism's rich doctrinal traditions. (For that matter, disciplines such as moral philosophy or comparative ethics are similarly slighted.) However, even if historical awareness or philosophical sophistication seem lacking, it may be possible to identify characteristic Buddhist viewpoints, fields of inquiry, and bones of contention. How do contemporary Buddhists assess their own actions or lack of action? How does their experience of practicing in the world shape their thinking about practice in the world? What leads them to regard their activism as "Buddhist"? We will find that time-honored Buddhist teachings about peace, ethics, and related issues are being translated into new forms of discourse -- more vernacular, more psychological, and more political.

As traditional Buddhist understandings of nonviolence are filtered through new cultural settings and historical circumstances, fresh interpretations emerge. First, there is a renewed affirmation of the fundamental interconnectedness between individual peace and social or political peace. From this standpoint there can be no such thing as an "inner peace" that is separate from the world. Real inner peace is the fruit of deep awareness, and deep awareness includes a profound sensitivity to the suffering (lack of peace) of other beings.

Any "inner peace" that does not generate some kind of response to the

pain of the world is therefore considered a false inner peace. Some Western Buddhists would even go one step further, contending that unless one is working "outwardly" for peace, one will not be able to experience real inner peace.

Once interconnectedness is affirmed, it also follows that inner/outer peace is not separate from a cluster of related issues: justice, economic fairness, human rights, racial and gender equality, protection of the environment, and so on. Accordingly, most Western Buddhists are convinced that one can meaningfully work for peace by campaigning against the death penalty, serving in an AIDS hospice, promoting animal rights, conserving water in an intentional community, publicizing the effects of nuclear waste, or practicing a few minutes of silence before a family meal. Patrick McMahon, an engaged Buddhist who has taught in an inner-city school, writes:

> Unless I thought there was a point to Buddhist peacemakers working in the schools, reforming society from within, I wouldn't be there. . .How do you teach peace in the war zone of present-day education?. . .How do you practice mindfulness, much less //teach// mindfulness, in the rat cage of an overcrowded classroom? How do you translate Buddhist teachings into the various languages of class, color, and culture of an inner-city school? Or, if yours is an economically favored situation, how do you address the ways in which the privileged are estranged from diversity and deprived of the knowledge of how things are on the street? [4]

Although most of the examples that follow illustrate publicly visible forms of peace work, we must also acknowledge the other realms in which Buddhist peace work continues to take place. One such realm is individual practice, even when narrowly conceived. In any branch of Buddhism the deepening of insight and the cultivation of equanimity can readily be described in terms of peace. A second domain in which Buddhists strive to actualize peace is found in the personal relations and ordinary actions of daily life. Like countless Asian Buddhists before them, Western Buddhists are seeking ways to live nonviolently in their homes and places of work. This daily-life arena can be distinguished from the primarily intrapsychic realm of self-realization and the primarily public realm of deliberate social action, although the boundaries between the three remain porous.

Even among Buddhist activists, there are many who affirm that awakening and its actualization in daily life are authentic and often sufficient expressions of the Buddhist path and therefore of Buddhist peace work. They recognize that participation in the third arena -- wider social engagement -- has rarely been regarded as obligatory in major streams of the Buddhist tradition. Nonetheless, contemporary Buddhists often feel a need to explore the possibilities of socially engaged Buddhism, not as a distant ideal but as a vital part of their own lives.

Those practicing peace "on the ground" today have diverse

backgrounds and interests, as the following introductions suggest. Joe Gorin is a psychologist who spent several years working with the poor and homeless in western Massachusetts. A practitioner of //vipassanaa// (insight) meditation, he is a former board member of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. From 1987 to 1990, Gorin worked in Nicaragua and Guatemala for Peace Brigades International and Witness

for Peace, documenting human rights abuses, accompanying people threatened by political violence, and confronting high-ranking military officials. Maylie Scott is an ordained member of the Berkeley Zen Center; since 1987 she has been demonstrating against international arms traffic at the Concord Naval Weapons Station near Oakland, California. Vanya Palmers, an Austrian living in Switzerland, trained at an American Zen Center for ten years and founded a group called Buddhists Concerned for Animals. Melody Ermachild, who works with death row inmates in California prisons, is an active board member of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Helen Tworkov is founding editor of _Tricycle: The Buddhist Review_, a New York-based magazine with a national readership. Alan Senauke, a resident priest at the Berkeley Zen Center, works full-time as national coordinator of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

Because the thoughts and actions of these and other Western Buddhists will serve as our source material, the discussion that follows inevitably has an anecdotal quality. Someday there may be sufficient demographic and behavioral information about Westerners who call themselves Buddhists for us to make observations more systematically; in the meantime we must rely on selective (and perhaps idiosyncratic) evidence. Nor is it possible here to describe the various forms of Buddhism embraced by Western Buddhists -- the single label "Buddhist" tends to disguise the variety of affiliations and orientations found even within our own small sample.

THE DAILY PRACTICE OF PEACE

During the past two decades the possible interpretations of "Buddhist practice" have expanded for Americans and Europeans. Initially, practice was narrowly conceived: it generally meant meditating devotedly on one's mat, followed (or preceded) by a few bows and perhaps some chanting. Increasingly, practitioners are calling attention to the many ways that practice can be extended to other facets of one's life. For politically concerned Buddhists, this process also exposes points of convergence between "practice" and "work for peace and justice." As the war in the former Yugoslavia escalated, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship circulated a discussion paper presenting a variety of possible responses. The handout included a reminder that peace must also be practiced close to home:

> In our discussions at Buddhist Peace Fellowship, we agree that a most important lesson to be learned from ethnic cleansing is our responsibility to oppose hatred here, where we live. Bosnia-Herzegovina is by no means the only place in this world where people are killing each other over national, religious, and ethnic differences. If war in Bosnia were resolved tomorrow, the killing would still go on in Burma, Sri

> Lanka, Kurdistan, and elsewhere. Only a century ago the United States was "ethnically cleansed" of many of its Native American peoples, with untold effects even today. [5]

Since Western Buddhists see inner peace, world peace, justice, and economic equality as interdependent, they are concerned about the implications of the smallest acts, choices, and details. Robert Aitken Roshi, a leading Zen teacher, notes that even if he attempts to practice nonviolence by not buying shoes made from leather, the rubber soles on his canvas shoes may come from a plantation that exploits its workers. So the recurring question is:

"How can I live nonviolently in this world?"

For those attempting to practice peace in their daily lives, not taking certain actions may be as crucial as taking certain actions. Examples, too numerous to cite, range from carpooling (not driving wastefully) to vegetarianism (not eating flesh foods). From one perspective, such concerns and activities do not seem distinctively Buddhist -- there are undoubtedly many more Christian carpoolers and secular humanist vegetarians than Buddhist ones. Still, it is worth noting how some contemporary Westerners are framing socially responsible behavior in Buddhist terms. Thus Stephanie Kaza, who writes about environmental issues from a Buddhist perspective, reinterprets the Buddhist virtue of restraint in a modern context:

> To go deep with this practice requires constant attention to the act of consuming. . .I keep returning to the simplest of all Buddhist practices -- restraint. Restraint against the pervasive values of consumption as the driving economic force; restraint against mixing up needs and desires; restraint as a practice of self-awareness and consideration for what I consume -- plants, water, fuel, money. [6]

Any discussion of Buddhism in the West will necessarily include references to Asian teachers and leaders like the Dalai Lama or the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Both men have exemplified and concretized the principle of nonviolence in ways that can be readily understood by many Westerners, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. Nhat Hanh teaches specific methods of breathing, smiling, walking, eating, driving, using a phone, and gardening, all offered as ways of "touching peace" in the present moment. He also emphasizes "mindfulness," an undistracted awareness of present reality.

In certain contexts, mindfulness also means paying attention to distant or future repercussions. A classic exemplar is the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Doogen, who is said to have conserved water when washing his face by using half a scoop rather than a full scoop. Today, the scope of mindfulness extends from the immediate to the global.

An awareness of these principles may affect the way one drinks a cup of coffee. For Buddhist activists such as Joe Gorin, it is not enough to drink coffee in an undistracted, Zen-like way: "I see that

when we drink a cup of Salvadoran coffee in the morning, we are affecting the coffee pickers and the economy of El Salvador." [7] Within such awareness, it is believed, are the seeds of potential change. If, for example, a coffee drinker later learns of a way to buy coffee from non-exploitive growers, he may change his purchasing pattern. Or, unable to find such an alternative, he may eventually decide to stop drinking coffee altogether.

Buddhist activists accordingly attempt to change their lives in various ways. Maylie Scott spends as much time as she can beside the tracks of the Concord Naval Weapons Station, bearing witness to the continuous arms traffic there. Her aspiration is not to withdraw from the world but to engage it religiously: "My dream is to, little by little, leave my private lifestyle and belong full-time to a spiritual activist community." [8] Occasionally, Western Buddhists are confronted with clearcut choices. When these occur in the context

of a career, they become an opportunity to practice the classic Buddhist principle of "right livelihood." Actor Peter Coyote, a Buddhist, was making television commercials for General Motors when he learned that GM was treating animals cruelly in crash tests. In protest, he wrote a letter to the GM chairman and resigned.

FINDING A BALANCE

Lay Buddhists in the West commonly struggle to balance worldly demands of family and work with a yearning to maintain a strong spiritual practice. They recognize that (ultimately speaking) practice is not a domain separate from family or work, but this understanding does not necessarily solve the dilemmas that occur on a practical level. Actual choices are quite concrete. For example, the morning routine in a household with working parents and school-age children may not easily accommodate a half hour of quiet meditation. When some wider form of social engagement is added to this mix, challenges multiply. Alan Senauke, national coordinator for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (and the father of two young children), writes candidly about the pressures he faces:

> Meanwhile, the daily work of Buddhist Peace Fellowship expands with each new friend and connection. . .There are funds to raise, pleas to answer, urgent concerns to address. . .My wife Laurie is incredibly busy. . .[W]e try to balance our formal zazen [meditation] practice with the rigors of work and family life. Then there are the necessary pleasures of making music, seeing friends, or just going away for a few days. It seems like too much. [9]

Senauke's situation may not seem to differ much from the lives of other busy Americans, including observant followers of other religious traditions. But his predicament is nonetheless worth noting in a Buddhist context. In a tradition that began with an emphasis on monasticism, few canonical sources dwell upon the varied demands of lay life. A monk in a monastery must learn to handle many roles, easy and difficult. Yet the roles are circumscribed for fixed periods (the cook does not receive guests), and a monastic community is a

relatively defined, stable context. In contrast, a typical layperson in the West fulfills diverse roles: family member, worker, practitioner, local citizen, global citizen. Although Buddhism has ample precedents for practice in the world, the Asian contexts of those models seem distant in time and place to most Westerners.

The sensation of juggling constant and excessive demands elicits various responses. Some practitioners choose, often reluctantly, to address certain needs in the present and put off other desired goals until conditions change. There are as many trade-off strategies as there are Buddhists, but some general approaches are evident. The four areas that Western Buddhists most often feel the need to prioritize are family life, formal practice (usually meditation), work in the world, and social/political engagement. Several types of Buddhists can be identified by the area (or areas) in which they are //least// involved. No judgment is implied here: the factors underlying a lack of involvement in a particular domain may include personal preferences, a deferral of effort, conscious sacrifices, and/or circumstances beyond individual control.

Some Western Buddhists seem to be fully extended by their

family, work, and practice commitments. They have steady jobs, stable families, and a strong personal practice. But they are not drawn to social activism, and they do not seek to introduce an identifiably "Buddhist" element into the workplace, the community, or a wider political arena. Engagement is therefore the area in which they are least involved. Long-term practitioners who live close to an established Dharma center often fit this pattern.

Other Western Buddhists place great emphasis on practice, personal relations, and social engagement, but they have not developed careers that meet the usual worldly standards of success. Rather, they have chosen a somewhat countercultural stance in relation to mainstream society, living frugally and changing jobs frequently. In order to carry on political work or participate regularly in meditation retreats, they sometimes turn to friends or sponsors for financial assistance. In this category one finds activists and volunteers committed to a wide range of causes.

A third group demonstrates a relative lack of emphasis on formal practice. Typically, they have had some exposure to Buddhist teachers, workshops, or books. But they do not see themselves as belonging to one of the sects transmitted from Asia, nor do they place spiritual practice close to the core of their identity. However sympathetic and respectful their attitude to formal Buddhist practice, they rarely meditate themselves. In the other three areas (family, work, engagement), they may be quite active and committed. In this category one might find a social worker drawn to Buddhism by the example of the Dalai Lama, or a Buddhist scholar concerned about the plight of Buddhism in Cambodia.

Finally, we can also identify Western Buddhists who are strongly committed to work, practice, and engagement but relatively less involved in family life. For example, in order to train in a

monastic community or volunteer for an international Buddhist organization, an individual may forsake a long-term relationship with another person. Or a married couple deeply committed to practice and engagement may indefinitely defer having children. Regardless of one's definition of family, one can find numerous examples of people who have given up something in this domain.

The above typology is only a heuristic device. No individual would perfectly fit a category, and distinctions between the various commitments are rarely clear-cut. Moreover, from the standpoint of a traditional Buddhist culture this typology would have little or no meaning: in the relatively seamless life of a pre-industrial community it would be unimaginable to treat family, work, practice, and social engagement as separate domains. For scholarly purposes we see the need for more information, even some kind of database that could be interpreted sociologically. Some normative issues (i.e., who qualifies as a "Buddhist"?) are lurking offstage, but this is not the place to examine them.

The lives of Westerners are so full, there seems to be little space for a spiritual practice that regularly requires "time off" from daily duties and year-round responsibilities. In these circumstances Western Buddhists are especially eager to explore possible ways of combining practice and work in the world. Buddhist Peace Fellowship coordinator Senauke has openly solicited advice on this subject from fellow practitioners:

> I try to remember to breathe, to find my feet, to stay physically and mentally flexible -- these are core practices. Yet there must also be a Bodhisattvic way to regulate our lives and our workplaces to complement our awareness. What is a Buddhist work style? One person says to practice mindfulness in all activities; another reminds me of the Zen admonition to practice as if one's head were on fire, to do each activity completely. . .Each day I'd like to cultivate a grove to shade the many beings, and cultivation usually involves plain hard work. Any suggestions? [10]

A "Buddhist work style" has been pondered and implemented many times before in the history of Buddhism, but for Senauke and others the past is not always a sufficient source of guidance.

The experiences of women are also being reinterpreted and revalued in spiritual and specifically Buddhist terms. If it seems impossible to care for young children and at the same time maintain a strong meditation practice, then perhaps there is a way to treat childrearing as an authentic spiritual path of practice in its own right. Scholar-activist Charlene Spretnak has declared that boundary-dissolving experiences such as the postorgasmic state, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and menstruation can be used by women as "body parables" to reveal vital dimensions of interdependence. [11] Rather than reject Buddhism because of its patriarchal patterns, Spretnak and others seek to reform the tradition from within. As in the search for a bodhisattvic way of working, the

intention of Buddhist feminists is to break down the dualistic separation of "spiritual" and "worldly" life.

Those who are not familiar with Buddhists or Buddhist thought sometimes reductively misinterpret the thrust of practice in daily life. They may surmise, for example, that these Buddhists have decided just to skip the whole struggle for enlightenment and work instead toward their chosen secular goals, hoping that their civic objectives might in some way encompass their religious ones. To accept such a view one must reject the truth claims of the practitioners.

Some engaged Buddhists renew themselves periodically through contact with a master and attendance at retreats. Sulak Sivaraksa, the seemingly tireless Thai activist, outlines a model regarded by many as a desirable ideal:

> Even those of us who are in society must return to these masters from time to time and look within. We must practice our meditation, our prayer, at least every morning or evening. . .At least once a year we need to go to a retreat center to regain our spiritual strength, so we can return to confront society. [12]

For others, it is sometimes possible to experience a sense of balance and peace right in the midst of political action. For Maylie Scott, vigils at the Concord Weapons Station meet this need:

> I get to feeling stifled in my life, in the middle-classishness of it. I go out there and just take a deep breath. It's partly the place, and partly the people who are so dedicated to freeing themselves and our society from our various addictions. [13]

DEALING WITH COMPLEXITY

Aside from the difficulty of balancing worldly roles and spiritual practice, Western Buddhist peace activists are sensitive to (and sometimes dismayed by) the complexities that accompany social engagement. As soon as one enters the realm of human affairs, one confronts most of the same questions that perplex other concerned citizens, whether their outlook is religious or secular. Buddhist social thinker Ken Jones concedes: "In a particular situation we may not be focusing even upon the real problem, let alone the real question, let alone the real answer." [14] A Buddhist Peace Fellowship discussion paper lamented, "Like most people, we in Buddhist Peace Fellowship are in a state of painful confusion about the war in Bosnia." [15]

Whether the issue is disposal of nuclear waste, oppression in Burma, or human rights abuses in Central America, Westerners recognize that a Buddhistic approach (whatever form that may take) does not magically sweep away obstacles and resolve ambiguities. For example, the Buddhist-inspired Nuclear Guardianship Project, founded in California in 1990, has proposed several imaginative schemes to keep radioactive materials out of the biosphere. A guiding premise is that

nuclear waste must be stored in a monitored, retrievable manner, because current technology cannot guarantee the long-term safety of underground burial. However, Guardianship Project leaders recognize that their preferred policy raises other difficult questions: Could a storage site be protected in the midst of a war? Can human societies be expected to safeguard materials that will remain toxic for tens of thousands of years?

The concept of peace has its own complexities. One soon realizes, for example, that the first Buddhist precept, "Do not kill," cannot be interpreted absolutely (i.e., not killing any living thing for one's food would be to kill oneself). During Joe Gorin's years in Nicaragua and Guatemala, he found himself reexamining the principle of nonviolence and his relation to it. On some occasions his personal convictions were painfully tested: "I felt in my gut that if I had seen them torturing Rolando, and if I had had a rocket launcher, I might not have hesitated." At other times he had doubts about the rightness of nonviolence in response to violent, systematic oppression: "The afternoon session was a basic nonviolence training, during which I avoided using the word nonviolence even once." Gorin experienced a difficulty that often arises when First World peace activists encounter Third World freedom fighters -- a reluctance to "preach" nonviolence from a position of privilege. He writes:

> I want to explain this alternative [nonviolence] to Guatemalans, but whenever I feel the desire to do so, I see myself as just another proselytizing gringo who is trying to tell Central Americans how they should do things. . .Until they are //my// children who are dying from malnutrition, I don't feel that I have the right to tell those whose children are dying how they should wage their struggle for a better world. [16]

In early Buddhism, ethical precepts (//"siila//) were primarily addressed to monks, as individuals and as members of the Sangha (monastic community). In their personal behavior monks were

supposed to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication, but the possible //social// applications of these injunctions were not emphasized. Today, in contrast, Buddhists interpret the precepts globally as well as personally, and that compels them to confront the complexities of large political and economic systems. Not to kill, for example, may also mean working for the extension of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty. When contemporary Buddhists ask, "How can I live nonviolently in this world?" they are conscious of their participation in systems that may, by their very nature, perpetuate violence.

Among the many factors that make it difficult to honor the precepts on a planetary scale is the seeming intransigence of governments, multinational corporations, and other large systems. For example, Americans involved in international peace work eventually direct their attention to Washington D.C., and their initial encounters with the Washington establishment can be sobering. A few meetings with harried Congressional aides can dispel any lingering

tendencies to romanticize peace work. Recent efforts by American Buddhists in Washington have yielded some sharp disappointments: the well-intentioned International Burma Campaign disbanded in less than a year. But other groups remain active and have scored some modest successes. Notable among them are the International Campaign for Tibet and the Institute for Asian Democracy, which have demonstrated an ability to affect Congressional legislation.

All of these considerations -- the paradoxical aspects of nonviolence, the unyielding nature of large systems, the knotty practical-level decisions -- contribute to the moral complexity that attends peace work in the modern world. As Ken Jones has observed:

> Moral perplexity is more commonly experienced nowadays not, I suggest, so much because moral precepts are less observed, but because it is more difficult to see where they point in the ambiguous, obscure, and interconnected situations in which we increasingly find ourselves. [17]

An example that has not yet been mentioned is the issue of abortion. A Buddhist vows not to kill, yet sometimes there are compelling arguments -- also based on Buddhist principles -- for early termination of a pregnancy. In a thoughtful essay entitled "Anti-abortion/Pro-choice: Taking Both Sides," _Tricycle_ editor Helen Tworkov writes:

> When it comes to abortion, however, dharma teachings can be used to validate either pro-choice or anti-abortion politics. For this very reason, abortion places American Buddhists at the crossroads of Western and Eastern perceptions of the individual, society, and what liberation is all about. [18]

When Westerners turn to Buddhism in such situations, they expect that its teachings about nonviolence and peace will illuminate matters in some meaningful way, but answers do not always come easily.

In the early stages of spiritual seeking (at least in the meditative traditions favored by Westerners), most of a practitioner's attention and energy are devoted to the path that leads inward. Although each person must find his or her own way, helpful signposts

have been left by countless previous travelers. Eventually, when a degree of spiritual insight has been achieved, the practitioner is able to embark on a new "outward" journey back into the world. Actually, at this stage the outward and inward journeys can proceed simultaneously, nourishing each other. Yet the challenges of a more mature and diffuse practice can equal the trials of the initial search. Even though most people tend to think of the external realm as familiar, signposts to guide spiritual action in the world are often hard to identify.

The Zen tradition has the well-known ten oxherding pictures, which trace the stages of deepening insight into True-nature; of the ten, only the last points back out to the world. Maybe today's

socially engaged Buddhists will develop another set of ten oxherding pictures as a sequel or companion to the first, illuminating the progressive stages of practice in the world. At what point in the traditional sequence would a second set of metaphorical images come most fruitfully into play -- at the outset, midway (as nondual insight is deepening), or only after the rarely attained tenth stage has been actualized?

Though spiritual discipline is no cure-all, contemporary Buddhists report that practice does help them deal with the complexities of social engagement. Those who have been exposed to genuine training and have tasted some of its fruits find that they (usually) can bring added clarity, patience, and centeredness to their work. Someone who can periodically reconnect with a unitive realm beyond complexity tends to be more adept when operating amid complexity. From the standpoint of awakening, Buddhists further assert that practice is indeed a powerful antidote to the dilemmas of the world: through //praj~naa// wisdom one sees that the most intractable problems fully manifest Buddha-nature just as they are.

INTENTIONS AND MOTIVES

In classic Buddhist formulations of the rationale for compassionate action, the stated justification is usually compassion itself. Because compassion is considered self-evident as a foundational value, further explanations are rare. When a Mahaayaana Buddhist recites the first bodhisattvic vow -- "I resolve to save all sentient beings, infinite in number" -- he or she is not expected to defend that aspiration on other grounds. Saichoo, founder of the Japanese Tendai sect, wrote:

> Buddhists with Way-seeking minds (//bodhi-citta//) are called bodhisattvas in the West and gentlemen in the East. They take the bad upon themselves in order to benefit others. This is the height of compassion. [19]

In this view, ethical behavior is not a means to enlightenment or a means to karmic benefits; it is an end in itself. [20]

Although Buddhist tradition suggests that loving-kindness requires no ulterior motive, contemporary Buddhists nonetheless wonder about the wellsprings of their own altruistic behavior. [21] Sometimes the question "Why am I doing this?" will erupt acutely right in the midst of some form of engagement, as one steps up to a microphone at a public hearing or sits down in protest on a railroad track.

For many Buddhist activists, the starting-point is a deep-felt experience of the suffering of another being. The intensity and duration of empathetic identification may vary, but the direction of the response does not -- there is a natural impulse to try to alleviate pain. The impetus for socially engaged Buddhism may be as close to home as a dying parent or as far-flung as refugees on the Thai-Burmese border. Joe Gorin describes a daylong walk with some

Salvadoran peasants under a blazing sun; because his companions were unable to afford a bus ride or even a cold drink, Gorin also went without:

> In that moment, when my strong visceral needs went unsatisfied, I had a taste of what life was like for these new friends -- often wanting or needing some basic item. . .and knowing it was not within their means. [22]

Vanya Palmers is moved to action by the pain of animals:

> Factory farms are hell realms for billions of suffering beings. . .Can we honestly claim to be concerned with the suffering in this world while not only overlooking but -- with our food choices -- directly supporting this large-scale, institutionalized abuse? [23]

Countless sensitive people have comparable perceptions and feelings; here we note that Buddhism gives these activists a meaningful context in which to cultivate empathy with others' suffering. Within this context, compassionate action is not simply a matter of relieving the pain of others seen as outside oneself. Buddhists believe that the misery of the world and one's own personal troubles are intimately related; the two contribute to each other, and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between them.

Peace work, inner or outer, invites continuous introspection, and the process of self-examination yields doubts as well as certainties. For example, the coexistence of "pure" and "impure" motives is often acknowledged. Gorin admits, "I was disillusioned to discover the extent to which my behavior is motivated by the need for recognition and not just pure humanitarian ideals." [24] Further reflection on one's own motivations may disclose less-than-enlightened psychological mechanisms. Lewis Lancaster cites psychological studies that suggest why "helping others" can be a complex matter:

> The psychologists tell us that if in giving help one shames the recipient, that may be far more destructive to the individual than the original need. . .Many who become caretakers are doing so out of personal need. That may include a need to create situations in which another person is seen as inferior, so that shame can be transferred to them. [25]

Tricycle editor Helen Tworkov goes one step further -- she believes that some engaged Buddhists already manifest unhealthy "do-gooder" tendencies:

> This movement [socially engaged Buddhism] also harbors Cub Scout and Brownie Buddhism -- where the self-cherishing identification as one who does good deeds takes precedence over the slow, often painful, process of cultivating an open

heart. [26]

Few Western Buddhists are willing to comprehend their own

intentions exclusively in psychological terms. Whatever psychological compulsions remain operative, there are also transcendent impulses that deserve recognition. Buddhist scholar-activist Joanna Macy, for example, argues that "the pain we feel for the world" is "not reducible to individual needs and wants. It cannot be reduced to the personal ego." For Macy, an empathetic response to others' suffering signals "that we belong to our world, that we are deeply interconnected, like cells in a larger body." In an interview, Macy rejects psychological reductionism:

> The pop psychology of our time tries to reduce these concerns for our world to a private pathology, to a personal craziness. So you have to face that one down, you have to unmask that, you have to free yourself from that kind of reductionism. . .The pain for our world is not the only way that we discover our wider dimensions, the wider reaches of our true nature, of ourselves, but it's the one that we tend to believe. [27]

From one perspective, Buddhism attaches overriding significance to intention/motivation. A traditional view holds that "it is the motivation which precedes an act that determines its rightness." [28] From a different perspective, Buddhism also offers a radical critique of //all// intentions. Nearly everyone believes that he or she is doing good -- even Hitler was convinced that eliminating the Jews would greatly benefit humanity. Stated in extreme terms, all self-conscious intentionality contributes to suffering; in the course of human history more suffering may have been caused by well-intentioned people than by people who did not mean well. Experienced Buddhist activists are among the first to concede that their convictions are no less conditioned than the convictions of bombmakers and polluters. Is is possible to be passionate about a cause, recognize attachments as they develop, and yet work in a way that keeps relinquishing those attachments? The antidote, according to certain streams of Buddhism, is an insight into emptiness (//"suunyataa//), a realization of nonduality amid and beyond duality. In many East Asian disciplines, a person who truly masters a field is also expected to perceive its empty aspect. This does not mean that an activist stops marching for peace; rather, she recognizes -- even while marching -- that she is not taking a single step.

Ultimately, fundamental motives may be beyond the reach of any explanation. Even as Buddhists strive on one level to purify their intentions, many of them also recognize that there is something unknown about their deepest motivations. The answer to the question "Why am I doing this?" may remain a mystery, but in the spirit of Buddhist practice such mysteries are welcomed rather than shunned.

ASSESSING RESULTS

While other belief systems may begin by positing the ultimate perfectability of human nature and/or society, Buddhist social thought acknowledges suffering as an inescapable component of conditioned existence. Any results, actual or desired, will be assessed in that light. Here we are primarily concerned about results in the

sociopolitical realm rather than spiritual outcomes, though engaged Buddhists point out that such a distinction is provisional. When a sociopolitical goal is successfully achieved, feelings of personal satisfaction and accomplishment are usually augmented by gratitude for assistance received from "all the ten directions." More interesting, perhaps, are patterns of response to an apparent lack of results, an inability to achieve a goal. Reactions include philosophical resignation, persistent hope, and spiritual affirmation.

There are times when one's best efforts come to naught. Buddhist Peace Fellowship board member Melody Ermachild, who works with inmates on death row, befriended prisoner Robert Alton Harris over a period of years. As the date for Harris's execution approached, Ermachild's anguish intensified: "You knew it would happen, you knew you couldn't stop it, but you tried anyway. It began to make you sick." [29] Ermachild was not immobilized by despair, however. She went with her family to the gates of the prison to bear witness to the execution; she submitted op-ed articles to local newspapers; and she continued to practice "mindful breathing and looking deeply." Several months after Harris's execution she reflected:

> For me, the principle for moving forward out of that kind of despair is //not// to use meditation to avoid or look away from the painful reality, but to use meditation to calm oneself enough to be able to look right at the reality. If we look and continue to look, perhaps we can find something redemptive in it, or at least reach something like acceptance. [30]

Somewhere between (or beyond?) despair and hope is a determination to do the best one can. Emotions aside, if one strategy does not work then another will be tried. Zen practitioner and animal rights activist Vanya Palmer seems to exemplify this approach. He recently reported from Europe:

> In spite of three years of activism, the conditions for pigs on factory farms in Austria and Switzerland haven't changed much, and it doesn't look as if they will in the near future. So our new focus is to urge people to eat less meat and dairy products, and we do this by educating them as to the destructive effects of eating meat on their health and the health of the whole planet. [31]

If one looks at such statements in isolation there is nothing especially Buddhist about them, but to expect to find distinctive Buddhist elements at the level of tactics may be to expect too much.

Even if results are not immediately visible, cautious optimism sometimes arises from the faith that seeds have been planted. Maylie Scott never hesitates to speak with the commander of the Concord Weapons Station because she believes that each encounter may have unseen consequences:

> I doubt that he's being stirred in his own opinions, but in

> these nonviolent actions you don't know; you really don't know. Seeds get lodged, but you can't really measure the result. There's a kind of cognitive dissonance that gets planted. [32]

In a similar spirit, many believe that any step toward alleviating suffering in the world has a real effect, and the cumulative outcome of such actions will eventually prove to be of utmost significance. "I know this sounds grandiose," writes Gorin, "but I do really see the work here as a drop of water in the wave of history that is rolling inexorably towards liberation." Shifting metaphors in a later passage, he adds, "Our work may take lifetimes, but with each grain of sand, we are building a new world." [33] As Buddhist social thought develops, such sentiments may be examined more systematically: from a specifically Buddhist standpoint, is there a way to assess the relative significance of "small" versus "large" acts?

Interconnectedness -- as doctrine and as experience -- is a source of comfort and inspiration for most Buddhist activists. If all things are related to each other, then work on behalf of one worthy cause often supports work on behalf of other worthy causes. Joe Gorin kept asking himself where he could contribute most effectively; eventually he concluded that "each struggle for justice is a part of every other one, so it makes little difference where I go after my time in Guatemala is over." [34] In practical terms, saving rainforests may not help to save whales, but saving rainforests may indeed help to protect indigenous peoples. The task for globally oriented activists is to identify the meaningful connections.

For veteran practitioner-activists there is a steady current of "results" in one's inner life, however external outcomes are reckoned. When all else fails, the sense of forward movement on the path can provide sufficient justification for continuing one's work in the world. Alan Senauke articulates this assuredness:

> Often I feel discouraged by the overwhelming tide of violence, nationalism, racism, and all painful divisions we create between and among us. But the work of kind words, nonviolence, mindful breaths, and quiet sitting has its own core of steel. [35]

Maylie Scott describes one of the ways that her presence at the Concord Weapons Station has contributed to her spiritual understanding:

> From the first time I went out -- Christmas of 1987 -- it was very clear to me that the community there was not really based on results, although it was dedicated to stopping the weapons from being exported. The site is the basis of a community witness. . .Seeing the trucks pass and knowing what's happened -- both on the site and as a result of the weapons themselves -- you fall into a meditative response; you recognize something. [36]

Since the boundary between "inner" and "outer" is porous, any achievements in the inner realm yield benefits in the outer realm. Whenever Scott or others "recognize something," they are somehow changed; and they further believe that in changing themselves they also transform the world.

The sense of efficacy in the spiritual realm is not experienced merely as a compensatory source of solace for political frustration or failure. Spiritual power is believed to achieve its own results in its own ways. Thus a group of Buddhist demonstrators bearing witness at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site recited a ritual dedication as part of a ceremony they created. It concluded:

> All merit and virtue that may have arisen through our efforts here, we now respectfully turn over and dedicate to the healing of this beautiful sacred land and to all beings who have been injured or harmed by the weapons testing on this place, so that the children of this world may live in peace free from these profane weapons, and thus may have their chance to realize the Buddha's Way. [37]

CONCLUSION

The material presented here raises a number of questions that cannot yet be answered. (This is not surprising -- Western Buddhism is a comparatively recent development, and socially engaged Buddhism in the West is even newer.) It may be too soon to sort out, for example, the relative weight of Western and Buddhist influences in the lives of practitioner-activists. Are self-described Buddhists just adding a veneer of Buddhist forms and concepts to predominantly Western modes of belief and action? Or are we witnessing the early stages of a fresh synthesis of Asian spirituality and Western political thought? Some observers may conclude, from this small sample or from other evidence, that distinctively Buddhist elements are scant, and therefore it would make little difference if these same activities were instead labeled "Judeo-Christian" or "secular humanist." My own sense is that -- in some cases at least -- Buddhist elements are being incorporated in a genuine way. But more evidence and more time may be required before the authentically Buddhist aspects of this fledgling movement can be demonstrated conclusively.

In a recent essay, Helen Tworkov pointedly raises a related concern -- that a Westernized Buddhist ethics will lose its connection with the essential experience of awakening. She fears that Western Buddhists' interest in lay practice, ethical issues, and social action has been accompanied by a tendency to downplay enlightenment. Tworkov adds:

> If the essential emptiness of one's own Buddha-nature is not plumbed as the source for ethical action and compassion, and if ethics is separated from realization, then what is called "Buddhist ethics" offers nothing new to a predominantly Christian society. [38]

At this stage it may indeed be difficult to identify the signs of realization in the actions or the ethics of engaged Western Buddhists. Yet one should not conclude too hastily that such a dimension is entirely missing. It remains to be seen whether Buddhism's indigenization in the West will yield an ersatz (essentially Western) Buddhist ethics, an attenuated Buddhist ethics (lacking enlightened awareness), or a robust Buddhist ethics that brings the essentials of the tradition to bear upon contemporary conditions.

The fifteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist master Tsongkhapa

(following Kamala"siila, who was following "Saantideva) stated:

> Even if a bodhisattva investigates highest wisdom (//praj~naa//), one is not a proper bodhisattva unless one applies skillful means (//upaaya//) to benefit other sentient beings. [39]

If we were to rephrase this passage without technical terms, we might say, "The most highly developed Buddhist practitioners are not only enlightened, they also strive in every way possible to relieve the suffering of other beings." The context of Tsongkhapa's assertion is a longstanding issue in Buddhism: What is the relation between personal salvation (enlightenment) and moral behavior (compassionate action)?

Whether or not Western Buddhists are aware of it, they too have become part of this debate. In Damien Keown's recent study of Buddhist ethics, he cites two widely held assumptions associated with Theravaada Buddhism: "first, that true moral conduct is only possible after enlightenment; and second, that Buddhist ethics is motivated basically by the self-interested pursuit of karmic merit." [40] The Buddhist activists surveyed here, in their words and their actions, reject both of these assumptions. (Keown, through doctrinal analysis, also rejects them.)

Articulated or not, the understanding of most socially engaged Buddhists is that transcendental insight and moral maturity inform and reinforce each other. One is not a precondition for the other. So the search for ethical, compassionate responses to present-day dilemmas can be a way to move ahead on the path to enlightenment. And the deepening of one's spiritual awareness can lead naturally to increased sensitivity to the problems of the world. This is the Mahaayaana Buddhist approach, consistent with the statement by Tsongkhapa cited above. As Keown rightly observes, "The Mahaayaana was critical of the failure of the Small Vehicle [Theravaada] to recognize the importance of ethics in soteriology." [41]

As we attempt to clarify the ethics of Western Buddhists, we will continue to examine those ethics comparatively within the Buddhist tradition. If this process is fruitful, the most recent manifestations of Buddhist ethics may also prompt a reconsideration of Buddhist ethics in other cultural and historical contexts. For scholars and practitioners alike, this is a subject that invites further exploration.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Sixth International Seminar on Buddhism and Leadership for Peace, November, 1993, in Honolulu, Hawaii.

[1]. "Western Buddhism" now seems as apt as "Buddhism in the West": over a hundred years have passed since a Zen master addressed the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago; major American Zen Centers are approaching their thirtieth anniversaries; an estimated million Americans identify themselves as Buddhists; Buddhist publications are flourishing; and so on. The geographical contours of Western Buddhism are necessarily unfixed; in this essay the term refers primarily to Buddhism in North America and Europe. As in the past, the interchange with Asian Buddhism remains a vital part of

Western Buddhism.

[2]. Letter to members, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, December 1994.

[3]. Charles S. Prebish, "Buddhist Ethics Come of Age: Damien Keown and _The Nature of Buddhist Ethics_," _Buddhist Studies Review_ 10:1, 1993, p. 106.

[4]. Patrick McMahon, "The Practice of Education," _Turning Wheel_, Fall 1991, p. 14.

[5]. Buddhist Peace Fellowship, "How might we as Buddhists respond to war in the former Yugoslavia (and elsewhere)?" June 1993, p. 1.

[6]. Stephanie Kaza, "Waterwheel Keeps on Turning," _Turning Wheel_, Summer 1991, p. 13.

[7]. Joe Gorin, _Choose Love: A Jewish Buddhist Human Rights Activist in Central America_ (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), p. xvii.

[8]. Denise Caignon, "Owning the Disowned: A Conversation with Maylie Scott," _Turning Wheel_, Spring 1992, p. 27.

[9]. Alan Senauke, "Coordinator's Report," _Turning Wheel_, Fall 1992, p. 43.

[10]. Ibid., p. 43.

[11]. Charlene Spretnak, _States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age_ (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 138.

[12]. Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism in a World of Change," in Fred Eppsteiner, ed. _The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism_ (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), pp. 11-12.

[13]. Caignon, "Owning the Disowned: A Conversation with Maylie Scott," p. 27.

[14]. Ken Jones, _The Social Face of Buddhism_ (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1989), p. 175.

[15]. Buddhist Peace Fellowship, "How might we as Buddhists respond to war in the former Yugoslavia (and elsewhere)?" p. 1.

[16]. Gorin, _Choose Love_, pp. 7, 196.

[17]. Jones, _The Social Face of Buddhism_, p. 173.

[18]. Helen Tworkov, "Anti-abortion/Pro-choice: Taking Both Sides," _Tricycle: The Buddhist Review_ 1:3, Spring 1992, p. 67.

[19]. Paul Groner, _Saichoo: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School_ (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies, 1984), p. 17 (modified slightly).

[20]. See Damien Keown, _The Nature of Buddhist Ethics_ (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 74-75 and passim.

[21]. Although certain branches of law and philosophy distinguish

between motive and intent, here the terms are not being used technically.

[22]. Gorin, _Choose Love_, p. 53.

[23]. Vanya Palmers, letter to the editor, _Tricycle: The Buddhist Review_ 3:1, Fall 1993, p. 9.

[24]. Gorin, _Choose Love_, p. 11.

[25]. Lewis Lancaster, "Buddhism in the Contemporary World: The Problem of Social Action in an Urban Environment," in Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko, eds., _Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society: An International Symposium_ (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 350.

[26]. Helen Tworkov, "Editor's View," _Tricycle: The Buddhist Review_ 2:3, Spring 1993, p. 4.

[27]. "Spirit in Action, with Joanna Macy," taped interview (San Francisco: New Dimensions Radio, 1992).

[28]. Keown, _The Nature of Buddhist Ethics_, p. 178.

[29]. Melody Ermachild and Susan Moon, "Non-refundable Tickets," _Turning Wheel_, Summer 1992, p. 15.

[30]. Personal correspondence, October 1993.

[31]. Vanya Palmers, "What Can I Do?" _Turning Wheel_, Winter 1993, p. 16.

[32]. Caignon, "Owning the Disowned: A Conversation with Maylie

Scott," p. 26.

[33]. Gorin, _Choose Love_, pp. 110, 198.

[34]. Ibid., p. 54.

[35]. Alan Senauke, "Coordinator's Report," _Turning Wheel_, Spring 1993, p. 44.

[36]. Caignon, "Owning the Disowned: A Conversation with Maylie Scott," p. 25.

[37]. Tenshin Reb Anderson, "Dedication for Buddha's Birthday at the Gate of the Nevada Nuclear Test Site," April 10, 1994.

[38]. Helen Tworkov, _Zen in America_, rev. ed. (New York: Kodansha America, 1994), pp. 258, 263.

[39]. Masao Shoshin Ichishima, "Realizing Skillful Means in Future Buddhist Institutions," in Fu and Wawrytko, eds., _Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society_, p. 335.

[40]. Keown, _The Nature of Buddhist Ethics_, p. 74.

[41]. Ibid., p. 163.