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Why Buddhism and the West Need Each Other: On the Interdependence of Personal and Social Transformation

David Loy¹

Abstract

The highest ideal of the Western tradition has been the concern to restructure our societies so that they are 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: not just because these ideals complement each other, but also because each project needs the other. The Western (now worldwide) ideal of a social transformation that institutionalizes social justice has achieved much, yet, I argue, is limited because a truly good society cannot be realized without the correlative realization that personal transformation is also necessary. On the other side, the traditional Buddhist emphasis on ending individual *dukkha* is insufficient in the

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face of what we now understand about the structural causes of *dukkha*. This does not mean simply adding a concern for social justice to Buddhist teachings. For example, applying a Buddhist perspective to structural *dukkha* implies an alternative evaluation of our economic situation. Instead of appealing for distributive justice, this approach 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 (and motivations) of their own.

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

Another way to put it: the highest ideal of the Western tradition has been the concern to restructure our societies so that they are 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: not just because these ideals complement each other, but also because each project needs the other.

As far as I have been able to determine, 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, “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” (186). Is there a Buddhist equivalent? The doctrine of *karma* understands something like justice as an impersonal moral law built into the fabric of the cosmos, but historically *karma* has functioned differently. Combined with the doctrine of rebirth (a necessary corollary, since evil people sometimes prosper 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* (suffering in the broad sense) provide a better parallel with the Western conception of justice? *Dukkha* is arguably Buddhism’s most important concept: according to the Pāli Canon, Sākyamuni Buddha said that what he had to teach was *dukkha* and how to end 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 and institutional causes of *dukkha*.

On the other side, the Abrahamic emphasis on justice, in combination with the Greek realization that society can be restructured, has resulted in our modern concern to pursue social justice by reforming political and economic institutions. This has involved, most obviously, various human rights movements (the abolition of slavery, the civil rights

movement, feminism, LGBT liberation, etc.), which have not been an important concern of traditional Asian Buddhism. As valuable as these reforms have been, 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 are motivated by greed, aggression, and delusion—the “three fires” or “three poisons” that Buddhism identifies as unwholesome motivations that need to be transformed into their more positive counterparts: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Today, in our globalizing world, the traditional Western focus on social transformation encounters the traditional Buddhist focus on individual awakening. This essay addresses why they need each other in order to actualize their own ideals, and uses the example of our present economic situation to explore some of the implications of this interdependence.

Good vs. Evil

The difference in focus can be traced back to different paradigms. One way to draw the contrast between the Abrahamic and Buddhist traditions is to consider their dissimilar attitudes towards morality. The Abrahamic religions are (the primary) examples of “ethical monotheism” because they emphasize most of all ethical behavior. God’s main way of relating to us, His creatures, is instructing us how to live by giving us moral commandments. To be a good Jew, Christian, or Muslim is to follow His 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). For many, perhaps most, of its adherents, this world is a battleground between God and Satan, and the most important issue is whose side we are on.

Even the origins of human history in the *Genesis* story of Adam and Eve—which seems to me a myth about the development of self-consciousness—is understood as an *act of disobedience* against God: we suffer now because of an original sin by our ancestors. Later, God sends a great flood that destroys everyone except those in Noah’s ark, because people are not living in the way that He wants them to. Later, God formalizes His instructions by giving the Decalogue to Moses. Then Jesus (with some help from Paul) adds an emphasis on loving one another; still, this does not abrogate the emphasis on living according to God’s commands, on the importance of our will according with His will.

Although many people no longer believe in an Abrahamic God, the duality between good and evil arguably remains our favorite story, 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, our preoccupation with that theme is . . . well, both good and evil.

The duality between good and evil is a good example of the problem that often occurs with dualistic thinking—that is, conceptualizing with bipolar opposites such as high and low, big and small, light and dark, etc. Those particular examples are usually innocuous, but some other instances are more problematical because we want one pole and not the other. Yet we cannot have one without the other, because the meaning of each is the opposite of the other. (You do not really know what “high” means unless you know what “low” means.) This is important not only logically but also psychologically. If it is really important for you to live a *pure* life (however you understand purity), you will inevitably be preoccupied with (avoiding) *impurity*. That is why Chan master Hui Hai describes true purity of mind as “a state beyond purity and impurity” (in Blofeld 81).

The relationship between good and evil is perhaps 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 we feel that we are good when we are struggling against that evil, preferably an evil *outside* us. This can be exemplified by 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 were mirror images of each other; both were 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, only to destroy it.

The War on Terror illustrates a tragic paradox: historically, one of the main causes of evil has been our attempt to destroy (what we understand as) evil. What was Hitler trying to do? He was trying to eliminate the evil elements that pollute the world: Jews, homosexuals, Roma gypsies, etc. Stalin attempted to do the same with the *kulaks*, and Mao Zedong with Chinese landlords. Although the struggles of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were apparently “secular” in the sense that they were not motivated by what we normally consider to be religious belief, they were nonetheless identifying with the same basic duality, resulting in incalculable *dukkha* for many millions of people. (We shall return to the fact that traditional Buddhism explains such *dukkha* as the consequence of individual karma.)

That is the problematic aspect of the duality between good and evil, but there is also a beneficial side, which brings us back to the Hebrew prophets. Amos castigates those who “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” and “crush the needy” (2:7, 4:1). 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” (10:2). 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 call for social justice for the oppressed, who suffer from what might be called *social dukkha*.

I am not aware of anything comparable in the history of Buddhism. There may have been a few counterexamples, but if so they did not influence the tradition in the way that the example of the prophets has influenced the West. According to the Pāli Canon, the Buddha was consulted by kings and gave them advice, yet apparently he did not castigate or challenge them. Nor did the *sangha* do so after he died.

The other source of Western civilization is classical Greece, which discovered the momentous distinction between *physis* (the natural world) and *nomos* (social convention). Pre-Axial Age cultures such as the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Aztecs generally assumed that their social structures were as “natural” (and therefore to be accepted) as the ecosystems they were embedded within. Realizing that human institutions are not pre-determined in the way that nature is—which means that we can restructure our society to make it better—the Greeks created a democracy that, although woefully inadequate by modern criteria, opened the door to new possibilities that modernity has developed.

Bringing together the Hebrew concern for social justice with the Greek realization that society can be restructured has resulted in what seems to me the highest ideal of the West, actualized in revolutions, reform movements, the development and spread of democracy, human rights, etc.—in short, social progress. We are all too aware of the shortcomings of this progress (see next paragraph) 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.

So, with such lofty ideals, everything is fine now, right? Well, not exactly, and I assume that I do not need to waste much time trying to persuade you of that. 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, which today is not only obscenely large but is increasing. How shall we understand this disparity 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 shortsighted 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 want to challenge that explanation, but is it sufficient? Is the basic difficulty that our economic and political institutions are not structured well enough to avoid such manipulations, or is it also the case that they *cannot* be structured well enough—in other words, that we cannot rely only on an institutional solution to structural injustice? Can we create a social order so perfect that it will function well regardless of the personal motivations of the people within it, or do we also need to find ways to address those motivations? In short, can the social transformations that our ideals seek be successful without also considering the challenge of personal transformation?

Perhaps we can now understand why so many political revolutions have ended up replacing one gang of thugs with another gang. Suppose, for example, that I am a revolutionary leader who successfully overthrows an oppressive regime. If I have not also worked on my own motivations—my own greed, aggression, and delusion—I will be sorely

tempted to take personal advantage of my new situation, I will be inclined to see those who disagree with me as enemies to be eliminated, and (the number one ego problem?) I will be disposed to see the solution to social issues in my superior judgment and the imposition of my will. Unsurprisingly, the results of such motivations are unlikely to bring about a society that is truly just. And of course these distortions are not restricted only to authoritarian rulers. Beginning with the earliest Greek experience, and certainly supported by the contemporary U.S. experience, there is plenty of evidence that democracy does not work very well if it simply becomes a different system for certain individuals and groups to manipulate and exploit—again, usually motivated by the three poisons.

If we can never have a social structure so good that it obviates the need for people to be good (in Buddhist terms, to strive to not 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 sufficient. That brings us to the Buddhist focus on personal transformation.

Ignorance vs. Awakening

Of course, moral behavior is also important in Buddhism, most obviously exemplified by the five precepts for laypeople and the hundreds of additional rules prescribed for monastics. But if we view them in an Abrahamic fashion we are liable to miss the main point: since there is no God telling us that we must live this way, they 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, as ways to train ourselves.

The precepts can also be compared to the training wheels on the bicycle of a young child, which eventually can be removed because they are necessary only until the child knows how to ride a bike. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*—one of the most important Pāli suttas, in fact the first sutta in the *Dīgha Nikāya*—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 (1.27-28). He speaks thus because for Buddhism the fundamental axis is not between good and evil, but between ignorance/delusion and awakening/wisdom. The primary challenge is not ethical but cognitive in the broad sense: becoming more aware. In principle, 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. (If only it worked so well in practice!)

The Buddha emphasized that he taught *dukkha* (suffering) and how to end it. Did he have in mind only individual *dukkha*—that resulting from our own thoughts and actions—or did he possibly have a wider social vision that encompassed structural *dukkha*—the suffering caused by oppressive rulers and unjust institutions? A few scholars such as Trevor Ling (1985) and Nalin Swaris (2011) have argued for the latter, that the Buddha may have intended to start a movement that would transform society, rather than merely establish a monastic order with alternative values to the mainstream. This possibility reminds us not to anachronistically project our enervated contemporary understanding of religion back onto his life and times. Certainly his attitudes toward women and caste were extraordinarily progressive for his day.

Regardless of what Sākyamuni Buddha may or may not have intended, what apparently happened after his *parinibbāna* is that within a

few generations much of the sangha settled down in monasteries and became relatively comfortable. Early Buddhism as an institution came to an accommodation with the state, relying to some extent on the support of kings and emperors, a development that may have been necessary for it to survive. And if you want to be supported by the powers-that-be, you'd better support the powers-that-be. That no Asian Buddhist society was democratic placed limits on what types of *dukkha* Buddhist teachers could emphasize. 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 used, 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.

The result was that Buddhism survived and thrived, spreading throughout most of Asia and developing its extraordinary collection of contemplative practices that can help us transform ourselves. The emphasis, obviously, has been on the spiritual development of the individual. Whether or not that was completely faithful to the ideals of its founder, today globalizing Buddhism finds itself in a new situation. In most locales Buddhists are no longer subject to oppressive polities. 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.

Admittedly, the implications of such a broader understanding of *dukkha*, and of a broader responsibility for addressing structural *dukkha*, are quite radical. They imply re-thinking some cherished Buddhist

teachings, beginning with *karma* itself. The conventional Buddhist understanding of one's own karmic stream as individual and discrete is normally taken to mean that I myself am ultimately responsible for what happens to me: it is the result (*vipaka*) of my earlier (volitional) actions. What terrible personal karma must each of those European Jews have had to have been born into Nazi Germany! What terrible personal karma must the *Dalit* untouchables have who are oppressed in India today! If we are now dubious about this way of blaming the victim, we may find ourselves on a slippery slope that leads to questioning some other basic principles:

The influence of Axial traditions will continue to decline as it becomes ever more apparent that their resources are incommensurate with the moral challenges of the global problematique. In particular, to the extent that these traditions have stressed *cosmological dualism* and *individual salvation* we may say they have encouraged an attitude of indifference toward the integrity of natural and social systems. (Rue 37; emphasis added)

Buddhism is an Axial Age tradition, and both cosmological dualism and individual salvation have been important aspects of its Asian message. Yet in order for Buddhism to remain a living tradition relevant to the challenges we face now, it is necessary to interrogate how those teachings are to be understood today. Does *nirvāṇa* refer to another reality, or to the *śūnya* (empty) nature of this world, where nothing has *svabhāva* (self-existence)? If the latter, does awakening involve escaping *saṃsāra*—this world of suffering, craving, and ignorance—or experiencing one's nonduality with it? According to the *Heart Sūtra*, liberation is not only realizing that form is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), but that emptiness is form. Insofar as *śūnyatā* is not some thing that exists apart from form, all of us are interdependent, part of each other, and therefore responsible to

each other. Needless to say, such reflections take us beyond the bounds of this essay; yet such issues are becoming crucial for the fate of contemporary Buddhism in a world very different from the pre-modern cultures of Asia.

Another way to express the interrelationship between the Western ideal of social transformation (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 many other Indian traditions) has been on what might be called psycho-spiritual freedom. Freedom *for* the self or freedom *from* the (ego)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 I am still at the mercy of my own greed, aggression, and delusions? On the other hand, awakening from the delusion of a separate self will not by itself free me, or all those with whom I remain interdependent in so many ways, from the *dukkha* perpetuated by an exploitative economic system and an oppressive government. We need to actualize both ideals to be truly free.

The Suffering of Economic Injustice

From the above, one might conclude that contemporary Buddhism simply needs to incorporate a Western concern for social justice. Yet that would overlook the distinctive social consequences of the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha*. To draw out some of those implications, let us consider our economic situation today.

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 are objectively true in the way that Newton’s laws of motion are.

What this has meant, in practice, is that such a focus tends to rationalize the kind of system we have today, including the increasing gap between rich and poor. Despite many optimistic new reports about economic recovery—for banks and investors, at least—in the U.S. that disparity is now the greatest it has been since the great depression of the 1930s. We have become familiar with claims that, for example, the wealthiest four hundred families in America now have the same total wealth as the poorest half of Americans—over 150 million people.² If, however, this is happening in accordance with the basic laws of economic science (which curiously echo pre-Axial understandings of social relations as “natural”), although we may not like this development and may try to limit it in some way, we would still fundamentally need to adapt to big disproportions. In this way such a disparity is “normalized,” with the implication that it should be accepted.

“But it’s not *fair!*” In opposition to such efforts to justify the present economic order, there are movements that call for social justice—in this case, for distributive justice. Why should the wealthy have so much and the poor 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 can the Buddhist emphasis on delusion-vs.-

² See, for example: http://currydemocrats.org/in_perspective/american_pie.html

awakening provide an alternative perspective to supplement such a concern for social justice?

I conclude by offering what I believe to be two implications of Buddhist teachings. 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.

What I have to say about our personal economic predicament follows from what is perhaps the most important teaching of the Buddha: the relationship between *dukkha* and *anattā* (“not-self” or “nonself”). *Anattā* challenges our usual but delusive sense of being a separate self; it is the strange, counterintuitive claim that there is no such self. One way to understand this teaching is that there is a basic problem with the sense of a “me” *inside* that is separate from other people, and from the rest of the world, *outside*. In contemporary terms, this sense of self is a psychological and social construction. Although the development of a sense of self seems necessary in order to function in the world, Buddhism emphasizes the *dukkha* associated with it. Why?

Because the self is a construct, it does not have any *svabhāva* (“self-existence”), any reality of its own. The sense of self is composed of mostly habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, intending, remembering, and so forth; the ways these processes interact is what creates and sustains it. The important point is that such a construct is inevitably shadowed by *dukkha*. Because all those processes are impermanent and insubstantial, the self is not only ungrounded but is *ungroundable* and is thus inherently insecure.

One way to express this is to say that the sense of self is usually haunted by a sense of *lack*: the feeling that something is wrong with me, that something is missing or not quite right about my life. Normally, 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 “developed” world we often grow up conditioned to understand ourselves as consumers, and to understand the basic problematic of our lives as getting more money in order to acquire more things, *because this is what will eventually fill up our sense of lack.*

Thus, 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 condition us into believing 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, and often aggravates it, rather than helping us resolve the root problem. The system generates profits by perpetuating our discontent in a way that leaves us always wanting more.

Such a critique of consumerism is consistent with some recent studies by psychologists, sociologists, and even economists, who have established that once one attains a certain minimum income—enough food and shelter at a pretty basic level—happiness does not increase in step with increasing wealth or consumerism. Rather, the most important determinate of how happy people are seems to be *the quality of one’s relationships with other people.*³

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 critique. Alt-

³ See, for example, Gilbert 2007, Lyubomirsky 2008, and Ricard 2007.

though an alternative viewpoint has been added, the ideal of social justice remains very important, necessary but not sufficient.

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,” also known as the (previously mentioned) three poisons: greed, aggression, and delusion. When what we do is motivated by any of these three (and they tend to overlap), we create problems for ourselves (and often for others too, of course). Given the Buddha’s emphasis on *cetanā* (“volition”) as the most important factor in generating *karma*, this may be the key to understanding *karma*: if you want to transform the quality of your life—how you experience other people, and how they relate to you—*transform your motivations*.

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 time of the Buddha, in which collective selves often *assume a life of their 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 our (corporate) media institutionalize delusion, because their primary focus is profiting from advertising and consumerism, rather than educating or informing us about what is really happening (Loy 2003, 2008).

If greed, aggression and delusion are the main sources of evil, and if today they have been institutionalized in this fashion, you can draw your own conclusions. I finish with a few words on how our economic system promotes structural *dukkha* by institutionalizing greed.

What is greed? One definition is “never enough.” On the individual level, it is the next thing one buys that will fill up one’s sense of *lack*. But greed works just as well to describe what happens on an institutional level: 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. But why is *more* always better if it can never be *enough*?

Consider the stock market, the high temple of the economic process. On the one side are many millions of investors, most of whom are anonymous and unconcerned about the details of the corporations they invest in except for their profitability and its effects on share prices—that is, the return on their investments. In many cases, investors do not know where their money is invested, thanks to mutual funds. Such people are not evil, of course: on the contrary, investment is a highly respectable endeavor, something to do if you have some extra money, and successful investors are highly respected, even idolized (such as Warren Buffet, “the sage of Omaha”).

On the other side of the 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. If a CEO does not maximize profitability, he or she is likely to get into trouble. Consider, for example, the CEO of a large transnational corporation, who one morning suddenly 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. But if what he tries to do threatens corporate profits, 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 the members of the societies they operate within, nor to the ecosystems of the earth, but to the individuals who own them, who with few exceptions are concerned only about return on investment—a preoccupation, again, that is not only socially acceptable but socially encouraged.

Who is responsible for this situation in which we have a collective fixation on growth? The important point is that the system has attained not only a life of its own but its own *cetanā* volitions, quite apart from the motivations of the individuals who work for it and who will be replaced if they do not serve that institutional motivation. And all of us participate in this process in one way or another, as workers, consumers, investors, pensioners, and so forth, although with very 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 not simply involve better redistribution of wealth, necessary as that is. We must also find ways to address the personal *dukkha* built into the delusions of consumerism, and the structural *dukkha* built into institutions that have attained a life of their own. 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 biosphere.

Concluding Remarks

The Western (now, worldwide) ideal of a social transformation that institutionalizes social justice has achieved much. Yet, I have argued, it is limited because a truly good society cannot be realized without the cor-

relative realization that personal transformation is also necessary. In the present generation—thanks to globalization, widespread transportation and digital communications—these two worldviews, with different but not conflicting ideals, are in conversation with each other. If I am correct, they need each other. Or more precisely, we need both.

This does not mean merely adding a concern for social justice to Buddhist teachings. Applying a Buddhist perspective to structural *dukkha* implies an alternative evaluation of our economic situation. Instead of appealing for distributive justice, this approach 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 (and motivations) of their own. Although fairness remains important, in terms of equal opportunity and more equitable distribution, the Buddhist emphasis on greed as a motivation—“never enough”—implies that, when institutionalized, greed ends up subverting the purpose of any economic system, which is to promote widespread and sustainable human flourishing.

Here, the traditional Western concern for social justice is complemented by the Buddhist focus on ending *dukkha*. The role of greed must be addressed not only individually, in our personal lives, but also its structural forms.

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