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# Positive and Problematic Aspects of Modernistic Engaged Buddhism in Light of the History of Buddhist Adaptation to Cultures

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# Positive and Problematic Aspects of Modernistic Engaged Buddhism in Light of the History of Buddhist Adaptation to Cultures

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## Abstract

This article briefly reviews the history of Buddhist adaptation to cultures, focusing on two key goals that Buddhist traditions have maintained over that history: the primary goal of supramundane *nirvāṇa* and enlightenment and the secondary goal of applying Buddhist powers of knowledge and practice to meet mundane needs of people and societies. It discusses two kinds of constructive reflection Buddhists have employed in support of those two goals in pre-modern and modern times. In light of that history, it then offers its own critical-constructive reflections, first on positive contributions of modernistic engaged Buddhism, then

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on a problematic tendency in it to succumb to modern assumptions (about ultimate human values and primary causes and kinds of suffering) in ways that reduce its ability to offer important alternatives to them. Regarding the latter, it notes that the priority of the primary and secondary Buddhist goals have become unconsciously reversed in some quarters of modern engaged Buddhism, how this reversal rests on modern assumptions that contradict core Buddhist teachings, behavioral signs of this reversal, and deleterious effects that follow from it.

### Two Buddhist Goals

Over history, as Buddhism spread from India across East Asia, Tibet, and the Himalayas, Buddhist communities of scholars and practitioners have sought to meet two key goals associated with the path of the bodhisattva: (1) to help people attain liberation from the roots of suffering, by imparting practices that lead to Buddhist *nirvāṇa* and enlightenment,<sup>2</sup> and (2) to meet many individual and social needs by drawing on beneficial powers associated with Buddhist learning and practice.

The first Buddhist goal, enlightenment, in Mahāyāna Buddhist terms, involves attaining liberation from *conditioned* causes of samsaric suffering, by realizing the *unconditioned*, ultimate nature of phenomena—*dharmatā*, suchness, emptiness—by means of non-dual wisdom. Such wisdom, inseparable from that *unconditioned* empty nature, takes expression as *unconditional* compassion and enlightened activity for all who are

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<sup>2</sup> Here, *nirvāṇa* connotes unconditioned freedom from the conditioned causes of suffering in *saṃsāra*. “Enlightenment” (*bodhi*) connotes the liberating wisdom that undercuts those causes of suffering and is associated with positive qualities of Buddhist awakening, such as the ability deeply to know and teach others.

caught in *conditioned* suffering. The second Buddhist goal is to work within the dualistic, conditioned world of *saṃsāra* as a concrete support and compassionate expression of that wisdom; to apply powers of Buddhist understanding and practice to meet many needs of people and societies. Such mundane applications of Buddhism have also garnered social support for Buddhist institutions.

### **Two Kinds of Buddhist Constructive Reflection**

As Buddhism spread from India through Asia and now to the West, Buddhist scholar-practitioners have worked to meet those two Buddhist goals in diverse cultures by repeatedly rethinking aspects of Buddhist thought and practice, to make the Dharma freshly meaningful and practicable in those cultures. This process of rethinking Buddhism in new contexts is what I am calling “Buddhist constructive reflection” (BCR). For this purpose, Buddhist scholar-practitioners have drawn on indigenous cultural understandings to reframe the Dharma in accessible ways, while also drawing on Buddhist forms of knowledge to bring new perspectives to each culture and to address its needs. These two aspects of Buddhist constructive reflection, (1) drawing on indigenous cultural concepts to make Buddhist ideas and practices newly accessible in the culture, and (2) drawing on Buddhist ideas and practices to address cultural problems in new ways, have been carried out together as Buddhists worked to meet the two Buddhist goals—the ultimate goal to make practices of enlightenment accessible in new contexts and the mundane goal to respond to practical needs. This process of Buddhist acculturation generated new forms of expression in philosophy, ritual and contemplative theory, literature, aesthetics, cosmology, art, architecture, social ethics and more, while also developing new ways to address social needs. Similarly, in the modern period, Buddhism has come into deepening dialogue with many areas of

modern thought, while helping to address current social needs and concerns.

*The first kind of Buddhist constructive reflection in Asian history: examples in China and Tibet.*

There are innumerable examples of ways that scholar-practitioners of diverse cultures reframed Buddhist concepts and practices by drawing on indigenous understandings of those cultures. Here I will give just a few examples of the first kind of Buddhist constructive reflection (BCR), focusing on ways that scholar-practitioners in China and Tibet re-formulated the Dharma within their cultural contexts, by drawing on indigenous philosophical, cosmological, ritual, and ethical concepts to generate new Buddhist systems.

For example, Tsung mi's eighth century construction of Hua yen Buddhism in China integrated Chinese Confucian moral principles and Daoist cosmogonies with a system of Buddhist teachings derived from Indian and Central Asian Mahāyāna scriptures (Gregory *Tsung-mi* 255-294). Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism first emerged in the seventh century as a Chinese synthesis of Mahāyāna Prajñāpāramitā, Yogācāra and buddha nature teachings, integrated with ontological and ethical tendencies of Daoism and Mencian Confucianism, a cultural integration effected by figures like Hongren, Shenxiu, Shenhui, Mazu and Ta-hui (Kasulis 16-38). In twelfth century Tibet, the great scholar-practitioner Gampopa sought to meet diverse orientations and capacities of Tibetans in his historical context by integrating the Tibetan teachings of the Kadampa tradition with transmissions and teachings from his yogi teacher Milarepa and Milarepa's lineage teachers. From this, he created a new synthesis of Paramitāyāna, Mahāmudrā and Mantrayāna theory as a basis for alternative paths to enlightenment for monastic and lay Tibetan practitioners, giving rise to the

Tibetan Kagyu tradition (Sherpa 129-185). During the same period, the pioneering female scholar-practitioner Machik Labdron created a fresh synthesis of Prajñāpāramitā and Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions, framed within the demonological and apotropaic worldviews of Tibetans. She developed this synthesis into the Tibetan tradition of *gCod*—a system for applying Buddhist ritual power to the pacification of ferocious indigenous spirits while cutting through the “demon” within, that is, self-defended tendencies of mind that obstruct enlightenment (Harding 21-56, Edou 6-94). The great fourteenth century Nyingma scholar-practitioner Longchenpa wove together a vast array of sutra and tantra teachings from the earlier and later disseminations of Buddhism in Tibet, together with Tibetan rDzogs chen materials from the Sems sde literature of the 8th-10th centuries and *sNying thig* revelatory literature of the 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, to generate a fresh rDzogs chen synthesis—a vast new architectonic system of Tantric and non-Tantric doctrine, contemplative theory and practice (Germano “Architecture” 203-335, Germano “kLong chen” 5191-5195).

The emergence of these and many other newly acculturated Buddhist systems in China and Tibet gave rise to debate with other scholar-practitioners, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, in the following centuries regarding the authenticity and efficacy of those systems. The need for ongoing critical constructive reflection has thus been assumed in the wake of each new Buddhist cultural innovation through history.<sup>3</sup>

*Examples of the second kind of Buddhist constructive reflection in Asian history*

These kinds of Chinese and Tibetan adaptations of Buddhism exemplify the first kind of Buddhist constructive reflection, by drawing on

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of various strategies employed within diverse Buddhist traditions for establishing efficacy and authenticity, see Davidson 291-323 and Lopez *Buddhist Hermeneutics*.

indigenous cultural understandings and contexts in ways that reframe Buddhism, especially around its primary goal of enlightenment, to make it newly accessible in that culture. The second kind of Buddhist constructive reflection moves in the opposite direction—it draws on Buddhist forms of knowledge and practice to meet the second goal of addressing the needs and concerns of societies.

Asian Buddhist teachers and communities have drawn on a wide variety of Buddhist disciplines—ritual, contemplative, philosophical, ethical, psychological, literary, and artistic—in order to apply powers of Buddhist knowledge, ritual, and contemplation to meet culturally situated needs. These have included the need for physical and mental healing; for help in dying and rebirth; for promoting harmonious relationships with ancestors, indigenous spirits, and rival clans; for averting famine, natural disasters and epidemics; for creating prosperity; for creating new ethical and cosmological frameworks for societies; for caring for those in need; for generating new kinds of learning in literature, philosophy, medicine, the arts, and more. Many people in Asian societies who first took interest in Buddhism did so significantly because of its perceived power to meet such cultural needs and desires. The history of Asian Buddhism is thus, in part, the history of the second kind of BCR—applying Buddhist forms of knowledge, ritual and contemplative practice to meet many cultural requirements.<sup>4</sup>

To address such mundane needs and concerns (the secondary goal of Buddhism) in East Asian and Tibetan Buddhist cultures has not been seen as contradicting the supramundane aim to realize *nirvāṇa* and

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<sup>4</sup> On practical applications of Asian Buddhist ethical frameworks and ritual and meditative powers to meet diverse culturally situated human needs, see e.g. Wright 1-33, Beyer 227-360, Samuel 176-198, 258-269, 309-335. Excellent further resources for this are: Lopez *Buddhism in Practice*, Religions of Tibet in Practice, Religions of India in Practice, Religions of China in Practice, Tanabe, Buswell, and White.



enlightenment (the primary goal of Buddhism). The ideological primacy of enlightenment over worldly concerns has always been maintained, but mundane applications of Buddhist power have also been viewed as important. Using Buddhist powers of knowledge and practice to meet worldly needs has been understood to function as skillful means for enacting Buddhist realizations of compassion and wisdom in concretely beneficial ways, while also generating collections of karmic merit and wisdom that are necessary to support the path of enlightenment. Such beneficial applications of Buddhist power have also garnered the social and economic support from many sectors of society that are necessary for Buddhist institutions to preserve the full range of learning, both for attaining enlightenment (the primary goal) and for addressing mundane needs (the secondary goal).<sup>5</sup>

### **The Synthesis of Buddhism with Modernity**

This recurrent historical synthesis of Buddhism with indigenous cultures continues today. In modern Asian and Western forms of Buddhism, this cultural synthesis often includes elements of modernity East and West. Both kinds of BCR unfold together in this process of acculturation, in which Buddhist scholar-practitioners (1) draw on modern concepts to

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<sup>5</sup> On skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*) as a doctrine that helps bridge the pragmatic mundane goals and the supramundane enlightenment goals of Buddhist cultures, see Samuel 269. For historical overviews of ways that Buddhist teachings and practices adapted to meet the worldviews, needs and concerns of Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan cultures, see, e.g.: Samuel 436-573, Wright, Gregory *Traditions*; Ch'en, Zurcher, Matsunaga and Matsunaga, and Kitagawa.

inform and reshape Buddhism; and (2) draw on Buddhist concepts and practices to inform current cultures and help address those cultures' needs.<sup>6</sup>

For example, in Asian cultures, Buddhist concepts are now often integrated with modern social, economic and political theories as resources for Buddhist thinkers. Figures like the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, Thich Nhat Hanh, A. T. Ariyaratne, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Chaturman Kabilsingh have used contemporary forms of social and economic analysis to reframe the Buddhist four noble truths, moral precepts, brahma-vihāras, and concepts of liberation as both spiritual and socio-political principles for diagnosing and addressing not only obstructions to enlightenment but also obstructions to the flourishing of societies and ecologies. Their ways of combining modern social analysis with traditional Buddhist principles to integrate personal and social liberative practices has reframed Buddhism for their followers in normative ways, while also bringing them into dialogue with current social theorists and thinkers of other religious traditions and philosophical systems.<sup>7</sup>

Many Westerners today who have taken a strong interest in Buddhism, or converted to it, grew up with a modern worldview that is largely

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<sup>6</sup> In the remainder of this article, the focus is on hybrid forms of modern Buddhism in which modern understandings and disciplines are integrated with Buddhist understandings, including modernistic forms of socially engaged Buddhism that are oriented to social-political liberation. As Donna Brown has discussed in her 2025 PhD dissertation, there are other more traditionalist forms of modern Buddhism that seek to address the needs of the world based not on modern social analyses but on traditional Buddhist understandings of *saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, ultimate and relative truth, karma and rebirth. In traditionalist forms of modern Buddhism, the latter understandings inform ritual-contemplative practices to bring about mundane and supramundane benefits for the world, and activities of service and material support for humans and animals. See also note 11 below and Brown.

<sup>7</sup> For examples of this integration of Buddhism with modern disciplines, see King 13-66, 96-136, Sivaraksa, Bodhi *Future* 1-54. Loy 1-52.

based in Western philosophical and religious assumptions, including scientific rationalism, romantic and transcendentalist notions of spirituality, the prominence of psychotherapy, individualism, egalitarianism, democracy, and modern Judeo-Christian concepts of social justice and service. Conditioned by that modernistic worldview, many convert Western Buddhists have brought into their interpretations of Buddhism their own prior commitments to progressive social, political and ecological ideals, personal spirituality, and therapeutic self-improvement.<sup>8</sup> It remains to be seen to what degree convert Western Buddhists who take up progressive work for social change, conditioned by such modernistic assumptions and values, will want or be able to uphold both Buddhist goals, the supramundane and the mundane. I will return to that question later.

### **Buddhist Constructive Reflection within the Synthesis of Buddhism with Modernity**

This synthesis of Buddhism with modernity East and West has conditioned many of the forms that Buddhist constructive reflection has taken in applying Buddhism to modern needs and concerns. Buddhist ideas and practices are drawn on to inform areas of philosophy, psychology, social theory, economics, education, ecology, and now also developments in artificial intelligence. Buddhist meditation methods, adapted into secularized forms, are applied to treat physical and mental illnesses, addiction, trauma, and to inform new directions of research in clinical psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and medicine. Buddhist contemplative practices are also adapted to help healthcare professionals, social workers, and educators avoid empathy fatigue and become more resilient and

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<sup>8</sup> On these aspects of modern Western interpretation of Buddhism, see McMahan 3-25, 241-254, Garfield *Modernity* 299-303, *Bodhi Manifesting* 164-169, Lele 268-278, Geiman 2-5, 74, 90-92, 183-195, 204-208.

responsive to those they serve. Various Buddhist movements in Asia and the West have integrated Buddhist principles with social, economic, and political analyses to critique global consumerism, to offer new perspectives on human rights, environmental ethics, economics, criminal justice, and to address poverty and homelessness—both by meeting needs and by working for systemic changes. These applications of Buddhism to modern problems bridge Buddhist and secular institutions, and also bridge academic and non-academic worlds of analysis, service and activism.<sup>9</sup>

### **Buddhist Accommodation to Modern Frameworks: Positive Contributions and Problematics**

Thus, as Buddhist Studies scholar David McMahan has noted, Buddhism is frequently now formulated by Buddhists and others in the languages of Western modernity, the languages of Western psychology, social science, ecological ethics, and so forth. With McMahan, I want to raise two implications of this reformulation of Buddhism into modern terms. *First*, as in past Asian Buddhist cultural adaptations, Buddhism's current adaptations to modern cultures enable it to offer people fresh perspectives and insights in their own languages and within their own worldviews. *Secondly*, as Buddhism makes important new contributions in these ways, it also risks conforming so much to dominant modern assumptions and values that it loses part of its ability to critique them or to offer important alternatives to them (McMahan 260).

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<sup>9</sup> For these kinds of applications of Buddhism to modern needs, see Garfield *Philosophy*; Darlington 487-503; Kaza; Stanley, Loy, and Dorje; Ng 353-384; Doctor, Witkowski, Solomonova, et alia; Singer and Ricard; Brox and Oerberg 504-517; *Bodhi Future* 1-54; King; Yetunde and Giles; Nicholson; Varela; Varela, Thompson and Rosch; Purser, Forbes, Burke, et alia; Gilbert; Germer and Siegel; Williams and Kabat-Zinn 1-18; Waldron; Mind and Life Institute.

Let's look briefly at those two points, with modernistic socially engaged Buddhism (SEB) as an example. (1) How is socially engaged Buddhism making valuable positive contributions to modern societies by reformulating Buddhism partly in modernistic terms? (2) How does it also risk accommodating itself so much to modern assumptions and values that it may lose some of its power to offer significant alternatives to them?

*Modernistic socially engaged Buddhism: positive contributions*

One valuable contribution of modernistic socially engaged Buddhism (SEB) to societies, I suggest, is the distinctive link it makes between individual and social conditioning in diagnosing and addressing social problems. Classical Buddhism identifies *kleśas*—delusive personal tendencies of ignorance (*avidyā*), clinging attachment (*rāga*), and ill-will (*dveṣa*)—as primary causes of individual suffering, because they drive our minds to seek stable well-being in insubstantial phenomena and ephemeral senses of self, which generate dysfunctional reactions to others, further strengthening those delusive tendencies in our minds. Drawing from the social sciences together with Buddhist teachings of interdependence, socially engaged Buddhist leaders link that classical focus on inner, personal causes of suffering with outer, social causes of suffering, by noting that the internal delusive tendencies of ignorance, clinging attachment and ill-will manifest externally in destructive forms of social and economic organization, which further strengthen the delusive tendencies in the minds of all the individuals involved. Because individual and social conditioning thus feed on each other, engaged Buddhist thinkers argue, we cannot effectively address either individual suffering or the social and ecological

crises of our time without addressing both types of conditioning—individual and social.<sup>10</sup>

If, as in much modern social activism, we work only to change social and economic systems, the individual conditioning of delusion, greed and ill-will in everyone involved keeps reasserting itself in ways that distort and potentially corrupt any new social system. But if we focus, as in classical Buddhism, just on practices to transform individuals, the conditioning influence of social structures continues to instill and reinforce the delusive tendencies in individuals. So, to undercut these delusive tendencies, socially engaged Buddhism offers culturally adaptive practices from diverse Buddhist traditions that are to be applied both individually and socially.

In their individual practice, engaged Buddhists cultivate insight into interdependence while training in unconditional compassion oriented to action. This becomes a force of individual awakening that can apply its beneficial power socially to confront problems of poverty, inequality and ecological destruction. And in their social analysis and practice, engaged Buddhists draw both on Buddhist principles and the social sciences, to critique neoliberal economic systems that promote a continual expansion of desire for commodities, and to propose ways to reorganize economies around a broader range of actual needs: material, ethical, ecological, cultural, and spiritual.<sup>11</sup> SEB thus offers not only a theoretical analysis of the causal interdependence of personal and social dimensions of suffering and liberation, but also concrete instruction on how to engage

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<sup>10</sup> For examples of this kind of analysis, see *Bodhi Future*, 5–42; Swearer 216–223; Bond 124–131; Loy 22–23, 35–36, 87, 187–197; Jones *Social Face* 193–200.

<sup>11</sup> For examples of Buddhist economic analysis and development, see King, 99–113 and the description of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index on the website of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, <https://ophi.org.uk/publication/RP-5a>.

that interdependence to transform both dimensions together. I do think that this makes a significant new contribution to the modern world.

*Modernistic socially engaged Buddhism: problematics*<sup>12</sup>

But, as Buddhist movements like SEB offer such positive contributions to modern societies, they also risk accommodating themselves so much to modern assumptions and values that they can lose their ability to challenge some of those assumptions and offer important alternatives to them. In what follows, I will speak to this point from my location as an engaged Buddhist constructive thinker who practices in the Tibetan Nyingma tradition, a Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition. My remarks are also based on twenty-five years of experience as a meditation teacher for Westerners, many of whom are engaged Buddhists involved in social activism and service as part of their practice. I would invite

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<sup>12</sup> In relation to the categories of contemporary engaged Buddhism that Donna Brown raises for Buddhist Studies, the critical remarks in the rest of this article target *modernist* engaged Buddhists whose liberative social-political activities are conditioned by the three modern assumptions that I discuss later, assumptions common to modern emancipatory movements and that contradict established Buddhist understandings: (1) temporal well-being as highest human value, (2) obvious suffering as exclusive concern, and (3) material and social causes of suffering as the primary or only real such causes. This critique would not apply to what Brown has identified as *traditionalist* engaged Buddhists, like those in the FPMT (the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition), whose social service, humanitarian activities and animal protection work are based not on those modernistic assumptions but on traditional Buddhist understandings of saṃsāra, suffering and its mental causes, nirvāṇa, enlightenment, karma, and rebirth. Traditionalist engaged Buddhists such as those in the FPMT maintain the traditional priority of nirvāṇa and enlightenment (unconditioned well-being) over conditioned well-being, while also working for the latter as an expression of and support for the former. This is similar to what Buddhist traditions over history have done, as described earlier in this article.

Buddhists of other traditions and backgrounds to see what these remarks raise for you, or how you might reformulate them in your own terms.

While the most prominent Asian Buddhist leaders of socially engaged Buddhism (such as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Venerable Chengyen, Sulak Sivaraksa, A. T. Ariyaratne, and Mahāghosananda) are renowned for embodying awakened qualities in their social practices, from long formation in established Buddhist cultures and institutions of Asia, this is not the case for many Western engaged Buddhists, whose social development and formation occurred within a cultural world of progressive modern assumptions, shared by various secular emancipatory movements, that contradict key Buddhist teachings. These include: (1) the common modern assumption that temporal well-being is the ultimate human value, rather than the transcendental liberation of *nirvāṇa* and enlightenment; (2) the modern assumption that material and social conditions of human suffering are the primary causes of suffering that need to be addressed (rather than internal delusive tendencies and dualistic fixations, which are the primary causes of suffering in Buddhist understanding); and (3) the common modern assumption that obvious forms of suffering are the only kind that exist, or the only kind worth addressing—ignoring subliminal levels of suffering that are centrally identified in Buddhist traditions, like the suffering of change (*vipariṇāma duḥkhatā*) and suffering of conditioning (*saṃskāra dukhatā*) that unconsciously drive many of our human behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

In what follows, I will argue that modern Buddhists can better preserve the deepest liberative capacity of Buddhist practice, and work for

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<sup>13</sup> Such modernistic, pre-conscious assumptions are shared by many Westerners involved in modern emancipatory movements, including Christian liberation theology and modernistic engaged Buddhism. Several such assumptions were critiqued in Makransky “Epistemologies” 241-258. On such modernistic assumptions, also see Bodhi “Manifesting” 164-178.



beneficial social change more effectively, if they explicitly reject those three modern assumptions and rely instead on core Buddhist teachings of suffering and liberation that underpin trainings in the wisdom, compassion and activity of the bodhisattva path.

The three modern assumptions noted above are part of the pre-understanding of many Westerners involved in progressive emancipatory movements, including modernistic socially engaged Buddhism. Many of us grew up with these assumptions baked into our worldview before we took up Buddhist practice. These assumptions support the tendency in modern secular emancipatory movements to focus exclusively on establishing the conditions for people's temporal well-being and social-political freedom (as in assumption 1 above). But for engaged Buddhists, such an exclusive focus on working to change the world's material and social conditions can eclipse further levels of Buddhist practice that focus on the empty, unconditioned nature of the world, where the unconditioned well-being and liberation of enlightenment is to be found. This unconditioned freedom and well-being is associated with an all-inclusive power of compassion and liberating activity that is directed not just to beings undergoing obvious kinds of suffering at the present time (as in assumption 3 above), but is directed to all beings who are undergoing the sufferings of conditioned life, death and rebirth. These include the suffering of change, the fruitless attempt to find lasting well-being in changeable phenomena, and the suffering of conditioning, the experience of being continually caught up in conditioned reactions of self-grasping and dualistic fixation.

To access such a beneficial power of enlightenment requires becoming newly conscious of, and undercutting, mental causes of suffering in oneself and others that hide the empty, unconditioned nature of phenomena, by realizing that emptiness in non-dual awareness. Working to change material and social conditions of suffering can be engaged as a compassionate expression of that liberated awareness, or as support for

practice of the six perfections that integrate that awareness. But working to change material and social conditions alone, divorced from such awareness (as in assumption 2 above), would not address the mental causes of suffering that contribute to all human-made forms of suffering. These include mental tendencies of ignorance, attachment and aversion that reify and react to our own conceptual labels of beings while mistaking those labels for the beings.

Even when Western engaged Buddhists (like me) echo their Asian teachers in asserting the combined practice of supramundane liberation from ignorance, attachment and aversion with the mundane liberation from oppressive social conditions, we are not necessarily operating at that level of practice. We can wind up unconsciously reversing the primary and secondary goals of Buddhism that were mentioned earlier: taking the secondary goal for people's *conditioned*, temporal freedom and well-being as primary, while downplaying (or largely ignoring) the primary Buddhist goal of realizing *unconditioned* freedom and well-being, enlightenment, as a foundational support for all else.<sup>14</sup> I am not suggesting that Western engaged Buddhists who work for social change explicitly argue for reversing the priority of Buddhism's two goals. Rather, we often enact that reversal *unconsciously* in our behaviors, as indicated by behavioral signs such as those noted below.

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<sup>14</sup> My discussion here and below of the tendency among Western modernistic engaged Buddhists unconsciously to reverse the primary and secondary goals of Buddhism draws from my experience of 25 years teaching in meditation retreats at which most participants are Western convert Buddhists engaged in forms of social activism or social service as a significant focus of their Buddhist practice. Bhikkhu Bodhi has also noticed this modern Buddhist tendency to lose the transcendental aspect of Buddhism for a focus on worldly well-being or flourishing. See Bodhi "Manifesting" 177-178 and "Trajectory" 18-21. See also Smith in Queen and King 17; Geiman 2-16, 49-50, 113-116; and Jones "Liberation" 190-195.

One such sign of that reversal of priorities is the pervasive habit among modern social activists, including many of us engaged Buddhists, of cultivating a strong affective preference for the so-called “oppressed” over the “oppressors,” to value the former group as worthy of great care while devaluing (and often implicitly despising) the latter group.<sup>15</sup> To view and feel one group as much more fully human than the other in this way, and to react to both groups from that perception and feeling, is to replicate the epistemology of oppression in the name of opposing it, by maintaining the perspective that some persons matter a great deal and others do not. The problem is not just that we lose the fuller personhood of the so-called “oppressors” when we mistake our own reductive labels of them for the persons, nor that each of us is also an oppressor in ways of which we are not fully conscious. The larger problem is that when we adhere to one group as worthy of great care and another group as not, we reinforce our deluded tendency to unconsciously mistake *everyone* for our own reified, reductive labels of them and to react to them from there. In Buddhist terms, this constitutes a cultivation of ignorance, attachment and aversion, which take expression in oppressive behaviors that lead to further forms of individual and social suffering.

This epistemological error and deluded habit of reaction (*kleśa*, *akuśala karma*) in the name of the good, which is common in modern emancipatory movements, contradicts the unconditional and all-inclusive kind of compassion cultivated in Buddhist traditions like my own. The latter is a power of compassion that recognizes a great dignity, worth and positive power in all beings in the deep nature of their minds, including their own profound capacity for awakening. This compassionate recognition is empowered by the wisdom of emptiness, which recognizes the empty nature of all the reductive reified constructs of self and other that

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<sup>15</sup> I have observed this tendency often, both in myself and in others, when in conversation with Western Buddhists and others regarding pressing social-political problems.

would hide that deep worth and capacity. And it is a compassion that focuses not just on obvious sufferings, but also on less conscious levels of suffering in all of us, sufferings of change and conditioning, which help drive the harmful personal and social behaviors in which we have all been unconsciously participating (Makransky “Epistemologies” 241-258 and Makransky and Condon 202-204).

Another sign that the primary and secondary goals of Buddhism have been reversed is the tendency among modern social activists, including many of us engaged Buddhists, to get recurrently overwhelmed by our frustrations at the difficulties and forms of resistance we inevitably encounter in working for what we see as beneficial change, thereby losing our perseverance. When the primary Buddhist goal of supramundane well-being and the secondary Buddhist goal of mundane well-being are unconsciously reversed, we become exclusively focused on the *shifting* material and social conditions over which we have limited control, while losing touch with the empty, unconditioned nature of all such conditions, *which is not shifting*. In Buddhist understanding, to realize this empty, unconditioned, *unshifting* nature of experience is necessary in order to generate unconditional, *unshifting* powers of compassion, equanimity, and wisdom that cannot be overcome by shifting circumstances and difficulties. In sum, to realize the empty unconditioned essence of supramundane liberation, the primary goal of Buddhism, is what provides *unconditional* powers of compassion and wisdom necessary to carry out the secondary goal of Buddhism much more effectively, including the mundane social kinds of liberation that are the focus of modern emancipatory movements (Makransky and Condon 185-187, 204-208).

I am not arguing for reducing the focus of modern Buddhist activity to ultimate, supramundane Buddhist goals alone. As noted above, the history of Buddhism has always included a secondary focus on responding to temporal needs. I am arguing against losing the primary Buddhist goal

of *unconditioned* liberation and well-being in our attachment to secondary goals of *conditioned* liberation and well-being—social and personal. I have observed in myself and in many other Buddhists involved in service and activism, a strong unconscious tendency, socially conditioned by our modern upbringings and by the modernistic assumptions of those around us, to absolutize the relative truth of the conditioned world in a way that loses awareness of the ultimate truth of it, the empty unconditioned nature of that world.

In Buddhist understanding, it is the awareness of ultimate truth, emptiness, that liberates the mind from habitual identification with its reified perceptions, fixations and reactions, and thereby frees the mind for greater discernment, equanimity, patience, perseverance, creative responsiveness, and all-inclusive compassion for action. These powers of awakening are what help the mind avoid replicating its delusive tendencies, the inner causes of suffering, while working to address social suffering.<sup>16</sup> That is why cultivating the wisdom of emptiness conjoined with those powers of awakening is central to the bodhisattva path. If the primary Buddhist goal of unconditioned inmost liberation does not remain primary in socially engaged Buddhism, delusive inner causes of suffering will be subliminally reinforced in the heat of service and activism. In that case, not only will the primary Buddhist goal be obstructed, but the secondary Buddhist goal of promoting temporal well-being will not be actualized nearly as effectively. Thus, the distinctive contribution of Buddhist traditions to the modern world will be severely limited, or even largely lost.

To help avoid that, I suggest the need for renewed emphasis by engaged Buddhists on participation in, and support for, Buddhist

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<sup>16</sup> Nhat Hanh 65-72. Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term “interbeing” to express the empty, interdependent nature of all phenomena. See also Santikaro Bhikkhu 173 and Makransky and Condon 145-214.

institutions and communities of intensive study and practice, including monastic institutions, retreat facilities, and long term study-practice centers in Asia and the West, which are foundational for modern Buddhists to learn to progress into deepening levels of practice such as those described above, which touch on the empty, unconditioned nature of things while serving and working for beneficial change in the conditioned world.

To see into that empty nature cuts through all three of the modern assumptions noted above, by giving rise to a depth of discernment (*prajñā*) that recognizes the empty, constructed nature of all our conditioned reactions, which reveals previously unconscious inner causes and layers of suffering, giving rise to an unconditional power of compassion that encompasses all beings caught in those inner causes and layers (undercutting assumptions 2 and 3 above). Those inner causes and layers of suffering take shape in societies and institutions as the material and social conditions of suffering. To give rise to an unconditional power of wisdom and compassion as a force for action in the world, on behalf of all beings involved in that world, can then be recognized as a supreme human value (against assumption 1).<sup>17</sup>

To be clear in what I have said, I am not arguing that followers of the Buddha must attain enlightenment fully before we can work for change in society. I am talking about accessing the central principles of the bodhisattva path experientially enough (in the ways summarized above) so that developing wisdom, compassion and action can actually empower each other in our lived process of spiritual practice and action in the world.

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<sup>17</sup> On the points in this paragraph, see Makransky and Condon 145-150, 202-204 with their references.

## Conclusion

In sum, two key goals of Buddhist communities throughout history, the primary goal of *nirvāṇa* and enlightenment and the secondary goal of applying Buddhist powers to meet social needs, have been supported by two kinds of Buddhist constructive reflection, which scholar-practitioners have carried out repeatedly in Buddhist cultures over history. In this way, Buddhist thought and practice has informed and reshaped each new culture as it is informed and reshaped by it. But, as Buddhism makes new contributions in this way to any culture past or present, it also risks succumbing to dominant assumptions of the culture that reduce what it could otherwise offer. In the modern context, these include three modernistic assumptions that often underpin the forms that social service and social activism take: (1) the assumption that temporal well-being is the highest human value, (2) obvious suffering as exclusive concern, and (3) the assumption that material and social causes of suffering are the primary or only real such causes. Based on these assumptions, the priority of the primary and secondary Buddhist goals become unconsciously reversed in some quarters of modern engaged Buddhism, preventing us from more fully engaging the power of the Buddha Dharma both for liberation from *saṃsāra* and for effective service to others within *saṃsāra*. This exemplifies the ever-present need for renewed Buddhist constructive reflection, to keep newly learning from and contributing to current cultures, while also cultivating a healthy Buddhist awareness of, and critical response to, some of the dominant assumptions of those cultures.

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