

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Three

Module 6: An Interconnected World – Buddhist Ethics and Contemporary Issues

Week 1: Introduction

“To transform yourself, you transform the world and when you transform the world, you transform yourself. They are not two.”

Lokamitra

This introductory section of the *Interconnected World* module will explore how the practice of Buddhist ethics relates to our societies, cultures and ecosystems. It will look at how Sangharakshita has expressed this and what we have to learn from the Buddha’s example. We will look at the challenges in studying material of this kind and suggest how to work with these challenges particularly in relation to our tendency to over-identify with views and polarise around opinion. The overall aims of the whole module are summarised at the end of the introductory section.

Ethics in an interconnected world

The teaching of *Paṭicca Samuṭpāda* - dependent origination – shows us that we live in an interconnected world. We practise in relationship with each other, our Sanghas, families, communities, cultures and societies. How do we express our precepts within the world we live in? What are we to make of the bigger picture from a Buddhist perspective?

Take a moment to answer the following question – it can be interesting to do this with another person, taking time to listen to each other for a few minutes each.

What concerns me in this world right now?

Ethics is about skilful living, living with kindness, generosity, care in sexual relationships, truthfulness and mindfulness. Does Buddhism speak to the concerns you have just explored? If so, in what way?

Ethics can be practised at a *personal* level and at a *collective* level. For example, the second precept – ‘refraining from taking the not given’ – could be practised on a *personal* level; for instance, not taking a second helping of cake when there are others in the room that haven't had a slice yet. But what about when we calculate our resource use and find, as is typical for an average Western lifestyle, that it would take two and a half planets to sustain everyone at the same level of consumption? This is what is meant by the *collective* level; in this case, our relationship with the global human community and our planet home. These levels

are interconnected of course. On a personal level, you might decide to challenge a racist remark in the Post Office queue. By challenging it, or by deciding not to, you are influencing the social landscape within which all our daily lives take place – our collective space.

How to work with this module

This is what this part of the Dharma Training Course is about – relating Buddhist teachings to some common issues of our times. What does the Bodhisattva focus on in the 21st century? We have chosen a selection of common themes. We will look at:

- Sangha and community in a divided world.
- Buddhism and peace.
- Buddhism and social equality.
- Economics and the Dharma.
- Buddhism, technology and ethics.
- Buddhism as environmentalism.

These are topics of broad relevance and affect many aspects of our lives. They are regularly the subject of debate. They *may* relate closely to the issues you most care about, or they may not. That is not particularly important at this stage.

We are more interested in *how* we can relate the Dharma to collective issues using these particular topics as worked examples. Our intention is that you can use some of the ideas to apply to the issues you are concerned about. We are not saying that these are the issues you should care about or be active in. And we are not saying that this is what you should think about them.

We *are* asking whether greed, hatred and delusion are *socially* as well as personally expressed. And if so, what teachings do we have to offer the world as Buddhists? We can express ethical principles in our membership of campaigning groups or local community activity, our professions and our voluntary work, in our writing and our teaching within the Buddhist groups we have contact with. When each Order member is ordained, they repeat four lines of acceptance, one of which is “For the benefit of all beings, I accept this ordination.” How can we express that intention in relation to our citizenship – locally or globally?

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, has been particularly influential in this area of reflection and action. It was epitomised by his work in Vietnam during the war:

“When I was in Vietnam, so many of the villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practise in our monasteries or would we leave the

meditation halls in order to help the people suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection we decided to do both, to go out and help the people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it *Engaged Buddhism*. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting... we must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help.”¹

Sangharakshita finds the term ‘Engaged Buddhism’ unsatisfactory because it implies that there can be a ‘disengaged Buddhism’. He suggests that all authentically practised Buddhism will be engaged. The notion that there are two kinds of Buddhism is unhelpful to the message ‘engaged Buddhists’ wish to communicate. While this is an area for debate, the term is in use and helps us to locate others in the field of interest. Sangharakshita and other key thinkers in the field such as Ken Jones prefer the term ‘socially engaged Buddhism’.

Sangharakshita’s perspective

Sangharakshita’s contribution to the topic of the collective aspect of Buddhism can be demonstrated through four illustrations:

1. Right Livelihood

First in his emphasis on the practice of Right Livelihood:

“With Right Livelihood we are concerned with the transformation of the collective life, not just the individual life but the collective life, the life of the community, the life of society, if you like even the life of the state. Now this is not an aspect of Buddhism which is usually very much emphasised, in fact sometimes it’s rather played down. But it is very definitely a part of the total teaching - this idea that we should try to transform also not just our individual lives but the community, society at large, the world, the state... One has to make or try to make some effort to transform the society in the midst of which one lives. It’s all very well to talk about the lotus blooming in the midst of the mire but it’s very difficult to be a lotus when the mire is particularly nasty or particularly all-pervasive.”²

2. India: the liberation of the Dalits

Second, in his concern for the well being of the Dalit communities in India who have suffered poverty, discrimination and humiliating treatment over thousands of years. Sangharakshita commented on this in his talk *Remembering Ambedkar* in October 2006:

“I sometimes contrast the position and the attitude of New Buddhists living in the West, especially in Great Britain, with the background and the attitude of the New Buddhists in India. Here (in the West) we are much more concerned it seems with our subjective psychological state, with our feelings... The people who became Buddhists in India, the Dalits, for them

the point of departure was social, they saw Buddhism... which was critical of the caste system, as the key to their social, economic and even their political uplift as well as a spiritual path.

You may say that here we go from the psychological to the spiritual... but there they go from the social to the spiritual. Because you need to have both... you need to balance the two... I certainly think that perhaps Order Members, mitras and others in the West could pay a bit more attention to the objective and social issues rather than to their own subjective feelings... I hope we can learn a bit of a lesson from our friends in India who are very much concerned with social, economic and other such issues. We must have a balanced spiritual life.”³

3. *The New Society*

Thirdly, Sangharakshita has spoken extensively on the topic of the New Society. The Triratna Buddhist Community’s main approach during the first few decades of its development was to build the ‘New Society’ which centred on the institutions of the Sangha, also known as the ‘Three C’s’: *communities* (collective living situations), *co-operatives* (team based work and income generation projects such as health food shops, gift shops and gardening businesses) and *centres* (the base of teaching classes, meeting spaces, libraries, retreats etc). This New Society formed a nucleus, a kind of modelling or exemplar of how a community could live and work on the basis of the Three Jewels. The ‘Three Cs’ were, and still are, extremely rich wellsprings of practice though there has been a decline in the number of people working in ‘team based right livelihoods’ (as the co-operatives were later to be called) and living in communities over the past few years. However, centres are still being newly opened and most continue to thrive with a range of well-attended classes and retreats and other activities associated with the wellbeing of the community more widely.

Parami, a Dharmacharini with long standing experience of teaching about ethics at a collective level, has pointed out that we need to re-vision our understanding of the Three C’s. We need to look beneath the forms to find new ways of expressing the principles of them. For example, if the principle of community is companionship and the stimulating and often challenging nature of close relationships, can we find other ways to express these principles? How can we find new ways to share the economic and practical aspects of living together? How can we create communities of the heart? Similarly, if the central principle of the co-operatives is co-operation, how can we work together in a wider number of ways?

4. *Peace, environment and citizenship*

Fourthly, Sangharakshita has also commented on broader social issues, most notably ecological issues and the threat of nuclear war. He has been concerned that Order Members play a part in public life.

On ecological awareness, he had this to say on WBO Day in 1988:

“I think as a movement, especially as an Order, we need to take a much stronger stand on issues of this sort – perhaps play a more active part, at least in our individual capacities, in the environmental movement. After all, this is completely in accordance with the principles of Buddhism... In the course of the next twenty years, I would like to see our movement, I would like to see the Order, developing what I describe as a sort of ecological dimension. I would like to see some Order members taking up this particular interest, and working in this particular field, from the basis of their Buddhist commitment.”⁴

The same year he was answering questions at a retreat for men in Spain:

“It is not that you just sit on your meditation mat radiating mettā towards the world but keeping well out of the way of the world. It is that mettā enters into your action and expresses itself in terms of non-violent action for the benefit of others.”⁵

The Buddha's example

Though the Buddha lived in a simpler society than we do today, he nevertheless communicated, through his teachings and probably more importantly by his actions, his stance on the social and political values of his times. He made strong assertions about the evils of the caste system and renounced the privileges of his own high caste birth by abandoning his comforts and leading the life of a wandering ascetic. This could be seen as the ultimate demonstration of his alliance with the poor and casteless.

However, the expression of Buddhism in the 21st century needs to apply Dharmic principles afresh to our current predicament taking our current conditioning into account.

Challenges

Consideration of ethics at the social and ecological scale brings certain challenges. The most obvious challenge is that some people are inclined to identify strongly with certain philosophical and political perspectives. The issues are complex, the information (and scope for conflicting viewpoints) vast. Without specialist knowledge of them, what sense can we make of the sometimes bewildering range of issues that assail us? And if we rely on the advice of others with more information, how do we assess their level of objectivity or even competence?

Holding lightly to views

It is important to explore the material in this module in the spirit of exploration. We are not looking for a definitive blueprint of ‘what Buddhists should think about the wider world’. After all, the application of the Dharma to the modern, rapidly changing Western world is new to all of us and nobody has the ultimate answers. In this module, the course leader will need to take a position of fellow explorer possibly rather more than usual.

‘Holding lightly to views’ is in itself a rich spiritual practice – the cultivation of the state of not knowing. The topic of views in relation to wisdom can be studied in Sangharakshita’s writings⁶ and we will not address this huge subject in depth at this point.

The Buddha suggests that we should unhitch our perception of reality from our interpretations and opinions. He suggests that we simplify our perception, attending to the bare awareness itself and see: “In the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard.” This is to allow space for a deeper knowing, a creativity.

View and opinion form a central part of all political movements. Rigidity and dogmatism can, in extreme cases, lead to bloodshed. The fixed view itself becomes the cause of the suffering. Views are often beneath the level of awareness as we are often strongly conditioned to hold these views. Mindfulness of views can loosen our attachment. This allows us a greater degree of equanimity and creativity which could contribute considerably to a discussion which has become stuck and polarised.

A wise relationship with our delusional views is echoed in the mindfulness trainings taught by Thich Nhat Hanh. For example, the second precept ‘Non-attachment to views’ expands as follows:

“Aware of suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, I am determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. I will learn and practise non-attachment from views in order to be open to others’ insights and experiences. I am aware that the knowledge I presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life and I will observe life within and around me in every moment, ready to learn throughout my life.”

And yet, even knowing that our information and perceptions are limited by our own and others’ conditioning – we act, inevitably, by doing something or doing nothing or doing something else. We come to conclusions, we commit ourselves at the same time aware that we cannot be sure of our ground. Humility and a willingness to listen to others are maybe the positive aspect of this. Indecision and denial are the shadows.

One idea is to have a mindfulness bell, which can be rung at random intervals through the study session. When the bell rings, there is silence and the members of the group reflect on the emotional energy of the discussion and whether they feel an over identification with their own opinion or position. When the bell rings a second time, the discussion resumes. It is interesting to notice the difference in the discussion before and after the bell. More challenging is the practice that any member of the group can ring the bell when they think the discussion needs to halt to allow this process of reflection. Strength of feeling does not necessarily mean attachment to view but it can be a clue that some attachment is going on sometimes.

The aims of the module as a whole

This module hopes to offer you:

- A better understanding of what the Buddhist tradition, especially as taught within the Triratna Buddhist Community, teaches with regard to social, political, economic and ecological questions.
- An understanding of the importance of social and collective transformation in Buddhist teaching.
- A broad appreciation of how contemporary Buddhists have brought their practice to bear on these issues.
- An opportunity to reflect for yourself how your practice might affect your own engagement with these issues and how these issues might influence your practice.

Suggested questions for discussion

1. *“To transform yourself, you transform the world and when you transform the world, you transform yourself. They are not two.”*

What are your reflections on this statement?

2. Do you think there is collective greed, collective hatred and collective delusion? If so, can you think of examples of it? How does it affect you in terms of your own spiritual work with these traditional obstacles to spiritual growth?
3. What is your response to the idea of the New Society? What is the potential for this vision in the Triratna Buddhist Community today?
4. Choose a current topical issue and reflect on what a Buddhist perspective would offer to a debate about the issue.
5. What views do you think you most firmly attach to? How can you remind yourself to work with these attachments? How can others help you?
6. How do we hold awareness of our limited knowledge and understanding together with a wish and a need to act?

Further reading

Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind* (Windhorse Publications, 1998). This has an excellent section on views, especially *dṛṣṭi* or opinionatedness pp.181-203.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=452>

Rothberg, Donald *The Engaged Spiritual Life* (Beacon Press, 2006).

A wonderfully down to earth and readable overview of the contribution Buddhist principles can make to social and ecological issues. The chapter called “not knowing but keeping going” is relevant on holding lightly to views.

<http://tinyurl.com/lgf28w>

Jones, Ken, *A New Social Face of Buddhism* (Wisdom Publications 2003).

An in depth examination of Buddhist social theory from one of the world’s most considered thinkers on the subject.

<http://tinyurl.com/mkewpd>

McLeod, Melvin, *Mindful Politics* (Wisdom Publications 2006). A range of essays on the application of Buddhist thinking to political and economic issues.

Websites

Network of Engaged Buddhists. A wealth of online resources on engaged Buddhism, principles and practice, biographies of key teachers, book reviews, project summaries and lots of up to date links.

www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk

Buddhist Peace Fellowship. This has a wide range of articles and archives relevant to the issues explored in this module.

www.bpf.org

Notes

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step* (Rider and Co 1995)

<http://tinyurl.com/nsxt59>

² Sangharakshita lecture series *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path: The Ideal Society – Right Livelihood* given in 1968.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X07>

³ Sangharakshita, *Buddhism, World Peace and Nuclear War in The Priceless Jewel*, (Windhorse Publications, 1993)

<http://www.sangharakshita.org/books/The%20Priceless%20Jewel.pdf>

⁴ Sangharakshita lecture *The Next Twenty Years* given in 1988.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=170>

⁵ Sangharakshita, *Questions and Answers*, Guhyaloka, 1988.

<http://tinyurl.com/n58phg>

⁶ E.g. Sangharakshita, *The Ten Pillars of Buddhism* (Windhorse Publications, 1985) – the section on the tenth precept:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=326>

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=161>

Know Your Mind (Windhorse Publications 1998) – the section on opinionatedness. (see above).

Week 2: Sangha and Community in a Divided World

For many people, the question of how to change the world is a very pressing one. While Buddhism teaches that the world, as conditioned existence, is never perfectible, that does not mean that there is no place in Buddhist practice for trying to make the world a better place. The Dharma does encourage us, though, to look at the true nature of change. What is it that makes us truly effective in bringing about positive change? What is the relationship between our states of mind and the wider world?

In this section, we will be looking at an abridged extract from *What is the Sangha?* Here, Sangharakshita strongly emphasises the role of spiritual community in bringing about change in the world. We will then be asking what relationship such communities might have with the wider reform movements we see in the world. Should we just identify with our Sangha, or should we see ourselves as part of wider networks for change?

In the extract, Sangharakshita distinguishes a ‘group’ from a ‘spiritual community’ – terms which are explored in the Year Two module *What is the Sangha?* The ‘group’ is composed of people who will conform to its norms in order to benefit from it or be protected by it. At its worst, a kind of herd mentality might lead people to act unethically to stay in with the group. Sangharakshita is not saying it’s wrong to be part of groups. In some senses, any group of unenlightened people are going to behave like a group in some way. But he is emphasising that a true spiritual community will only consist of ‘true individuals’. By this, he means a person who is:

“Not only self-aware but also emotionally positive, full of good will towards all living beings, who is also spontaneous, creative, that is to say not determined in their thinking, feeling, acting, by previously existing mental and emotional psychological patterns, whether their own or those of other people.”

He begins with the predicament that most of us find ourselves in – as people who are concerned with the state of the world but feel powerless when acting in isolation.

A Buddhist Approach to Current World Problems

“An attitude of withdrawal from public concerns into purely personal ones is one that is not worthy of a human being – not worthy, at least of someone who is trying to be a human being in the full sense of the term. It represents an abdication of responsibility. So, given that one is helpless to effect any kind of solution to these large issues, and given too that one can’t turn aside and ignore them either, what is one to do?”

World problems, by their very nature, are essentially group problems (1), as they always have been. What is new today is the size of the groups involved and the destructive power available to them. But whatever their size, the problems arising

from these groups cannot be solved on the group level. All that can be achieved on the level of the group is a precarious balance of power between conflicting interests. And that balance, as we know only too well, can be disturbed at any moment.

The only hope for humanity is therefore necessarily a long-term solution, involving more people becoming clearer about how they need to develop as individuals and co-operating in the context of spiritual communities in order to make, in their various ways, a significant impact on the world, or on 'the group'. The alternatives before us are, in my opinion, evolution - that is, the higher evolution of the individual - or extinction. That would be my overall diagnosis of the situation facing us. As for practical ways to effect a remedy, I would prescribe four courses of action for the individual to undertake.

1. Self development

This means essentially the development of the mind, the raising of consciousness to ever higher levels of awareness. Human development essentially consists in this, and for most people the route to achieving it is through meditation.

The more demanding aspect of self-development consists in what one does with the rest of one's life in order to support one's meditation practice. One will look after one's health. One will simplify one's life as far as possible, dropping all those activities, interests and social contacts which one knows to be a waste of time. One will try to base one's life, and in particular one's livelihood, on ethical principles. One will make time - perhaps by working part-time - for study; for study of the Dharma, of course, but also for the study of other subjects of general interest: philosophy, history, science, comparative religion. Finally, one will find opportunities to refine and develop one's emotions, especially through the fine arts.

Self-development always comes first. However active you might be in all sorts of external areas - political, social, educational, or whatever - if you are not trying to develop yourself, you are not going to be able to make any truly positive contribution to anything or anyone.

2. Join a spiritual community

This does not necessarily mean joining some kind of organised body or living under the same roof as other aspiring individuals. It simply means being in personal, regular, and substantial contact with others who are trying to develop as individuals. It means being able to enjoy, and seeking out, not just the psychological warmth of the herd, but the challenge of real communication, genuine spiritual exchange.

3. Withdraw support from all groups or agencies that actually discourage, directly or indirectly, the development of the individual

Groups derive their strength from their members, so it is a basic first step to weaken the power of the group by removing yourself from among its contributing members. Otherwise you are pulling in two directions at once: on the one hand trying to be an individual, and on the other lending your support to the very forces that hinder this process. If you wanted to take this principle to its ultimate conclusion you would withdraw support from the state, as the ultimate group of groups, though this would be clearly extremely difficult, however desirable.

4. Encourage the development of individuality within all groups to which one unavoidably belongs

It may be that one cannot help having a circle of friends or acquaintances, whether at home or at work, who are not interested in any kind of self-development. One may have to remain very nominally a member of a group. Still, one can stand up for what one believes in, and speak up whenever it is appropriate to do so. It is always possible to act in accordance with one's ideals even when others cannot - or do not appear to - understand what one is doing. The way to disrupt a group is simply to encourage people within it to think for themselves, develop minds of their own. So in the context of the group one can still work to undermine it. Even in the enemy camp, so to speak, one need not surrender one's individuality.

These, then, are the four strategies to get under way in order to begin to make a meaningful impact on world problems. A network of spiritual communities of all kinds, many of whose members would be in contact with one another, could exert a significant degree of influence, such as might, just possibly, shift the centre of gravity in world affairs. Spiritual communities have had a crucial impact in the past, and they may, with sufficient vitality, do so again.

It doesn't matter how humble a level we are operating at, or how undramatic our work may be. The true individual is not so much the king of the jungle as the indefatigable earthworm. If enough earthworms burrow away under the foundations of even the most substantial building, the soil begins to loosen, it starts to crumble away, the foundations subside, and the whole building is liable to crack and collapse. Likewise, however powerful the existing order may seem, it is not invulnerable to the undermining influence of enough individuals working - whether directly or indirectly - in co-operation.

A spiritual community is necessarily small, so the best we can hope for is a multiplicity of spiritual communities, forming a sort of network through personal contact between their members. A silent, unseen influence is exerted in this way, which we must hope will be able, at some point, to shift the centre of gravity in world affairs from the conflict of groups to the co-operation of communities. If this were achieved, if the influence of the spiritual community were to outweigh that of the group, then humanity as a whole would have passed into a new, higher stage of development, a kind of higher evolution as I like to call it.

Such a shift in the governing values of the world is probably all that can save us from extinction as a species in the not very distant future. There are certainly signs of hope, but there is also perhaps little time left. In this situation it becomes the duty of every thinking human being to take stock of his or her position, and the responsibilities that it throws up. We have to appreciate that it is, without exception, the most important issue we shall ever face, either individually or collectively. It is certainly more important than any merely religious question, anything that concerns Buddhism in the sense of a formal or established religion. It concerns both the purpose and the very survival of human life.”

[End of extract]

A ‘health check’

Community, this extract suggests, has a twofold significance, one inward-looking and one outward-looking. These will be part of any healthy, ethical community, from the very small up to the level of nation states. They will:

- Look inward, in that they will naturally look after the needs of their individual members, whether material, emotional or spiritual.
- Look outward and act as part of the wider world. This might be expressed in purposeful activity for the wider world. Or it might take the form of a commitment to nonviolent, non-exploitative outside relationships.

Sangharakshita suggests that we apply the four steps to all communities that we might be part of. This includes communities based on shared economic or material interest (for example, in our work) as well as those based on social, cultural or spiritual activities. They might even be applied to ephemeral relationships and transactions, such as what we buy and how we communicate with people we meet. The same questions apply and can be used as a way of reviewing all of our connections with others, a kind of ‘health check’ of our relationships:

- Does this community, relationship or transaction support my own development – including my meditation practice and my ethical awareness?
- If not, how do I change – either by withdrawing from it or influencing it from within?

The power of community

Sangharakshita refers to something that many of us experience – a sense of helplessness in the face of the large-scale problems that we see in the world. We respond to that helplessness in different ways. Some might respond with resignation or denial. Others might respond with a single-minded effort to bring about change, but in a way that ignores their own spiritual and ethical development and might therefore do more harm than good.

In either case – stasis and despair or thinking we can save the world alone – what can help us is to think and act more as part of a community. Helplessness comes largely from thinking in simple terms of ‘me’ and ‘world’. This perspective blinds us to the very source of power that could meet the challenges the world faces. When people act together for a common purpose, thinking not in terms of ‘me’ but more in terms of ‘we’, they give rise to resources of emotion, energy and wisdom not available to the isolated individual.

‘The Great Turning’

This is what has led many people to the conclusion that the most effective force for change is a network of autonomous communities acting in accord. Sangharakshita uses the term ‘spiritual communities’, which we might interpret as meaning communities that have an overt spiritual purpose. Can we then say, by extension, that any community will be a positive force for change to the extent that it has ethical aims and supports individuality?

The Buddhist writer and activist Joanna Macy and others have referred to a network of this kind as the ‘Great Turning’. The term includes all those communities that have arisen independently in response to the current ecological crisis, and which operate in harmony with others and with the natural environment. With sufficient vitality, this could bring about an epochal shift from a society based on industrial and economic growth to one based on sustaining life:

“From high school students restoring streams for salmon spawning, to inner city neighbours creating community gardens on vacant lots, from forest activists sitting in trees to delay logging until environmental impact studies are done, to windmill engineers bringing their technology to energy-hungry regions – countless groups are organising, learning, taking action. This multifaceted activity on behalf of life may not make today’s headlines or newscasts, but to our progeny it will matter more than anything else we do.”

(from *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, 1998).

The ‘Great Turning’ involves three related areas of activity:

1. Actions that try to limit the damage to the natural world and living systems, such as preventing pollution or mitigating its effects.
2. Analysing the causes of the ecological crisis and creating alternatives, such as community gardens, co-operative housing and environmentally sustainable technologies.
3. Bringing about a cognitive and spiritual shift in perceptions based on an understanding of the interconnectedness of living systems and the natural world.

Conclusion

One of the advantages of thinking and acting in community to address global problems is that it relieves us of the burden of having to do it all ourselves. Being part of the change that is needed, whether we call it the Higher Evolution or the Great Turning, does not require that we understand all aspects of economics, ecology and technology; nor do we need to join every campaign or read every theory of environmental ethics. What we do need to do is to commit ourselves to a path of personal change and then allow our relationships to be transformed. In community with others, our own particular contribution can then emerge and our potential be fully realised.

Suggested questions

1. Is there any group you are currently part of where you feel some ethical tension or an inability to act from your own conscience? What do you feel is the most appropriate way to respond?
2. What do you think helps someone to maintain their individuality in the face of pressure to conform to the group?
3. ‘...self development cannot but entail... the realisation of our potential to be agents for change. It can only lead to an increase in ones global ethical awareness and sensibility.’ Is this true in your experience?
4. Can you think of examples of groups or organisations that might be compatible or incompatible with self-development?
5. What should be our attitude to the state? Can you think of aspects of the state as a positive community that benefits its members and acts ethically in the world?
6. Do you agree that a network of spiritual communities could exert a significant influence over world affairs? Do you believe that being part of such a community is a sufficient response?
7. What relationship, if any, do you think Buddhist Sangha might have to wider movements for change, such as those that comprise the ‘Great Turning’? Do you think Buddhist groups should be actively involved in such movements?

References

What is the Sangha? by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications, 2000).

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=494>

Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World by Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown: <http://tinyurl.com/mbaj4s>

Week 3: Buddhism and Peace

“Peace is a Fire.”

Sangharakshita

In this article, Parami shares her reflections on the relevance of Buddhist practice to world peace. Parami is a member of the Preceptors’ College of the Western Buddhist Order and travels extensively, teaching and leading retreats and workshops.

Parami on Buddhism and Peace

“He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.” Those who harbour such thoughts do not still their hatred.

“He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.” Those who do not harbour such thoughts still their hatred.

Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal. ⁷

These words are from the opening section of the *Dhammapada*, one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures. Here the Buddha is making a radical statement that can be starkly contrasted by a statement made in the late 1940’s by a member of the USA State Department:

“We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity... We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction... We should cease to talk about vague and..., unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.” ⁸

Unfortunately the latter quote probably more accurately reflects the philosophy by which many of our nations, our communities and even individuals live in the world today.

In December 1994, UNESCO organized a meeting in Catalunya between members of different faiths. The title of the meeting was *The Contribution of Religions to the Culture of Peace*. As well as representatives from all the major faith groups, a number of Buddhists attended the conference, amongst them the Dalai Lama and Maha Ghosananda, the Cambodian monastic leader and activist. From that meeting came *The Declaration on the Role of Religion in the Promotion of a Culture of Peace*.

After defining the problems we face in the world today and acknowledging the seriousness of the current world situation (poverty, violence and conflict, social injustice and structures of oppression) and recognizing the importance of religion in human life, the *Declaration* defines peace in the following terms (numbering pertains to the document itself):

Peace

7. Peace implies that love, compassion, human dignity, and justice are fully preserved.

8. Peace entails that we understand that we are all interdependent and related to one another.

We are all individually and collectively responsible for the common good, including the well-being of future generations.

9. Peace demands that we respect Earth and all forms of life, especially human life. Our ethical awareness requires setting limits to technology. We should direct our efforts towards eliminating consumerism and improving the quality of life.

10. Peace is a journey – a never-ending process.

A commitment is then made in the *Declaration* that:

Commitment

11. We must be at peace with ourselves; we strive to achieve inner peace through personal reflection and spiritual growth, and to cultivate a spirituality which manifests itself in action.

Responsibility is acknowledged:

Religious responsibility

19. Our communities of faith have a responsibility to encourage conduct imbued with wisdom, compassion, sharing, charity, solidarity, and love; inspiring one and all to choose the path of freedom and responsibility. Religions must be a source of helpful energy.

The *Declaration* ends with an appeal:

Appeal

23. Grounded in our faith, we will build a culture of peace based on non-violence, tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding, and justice. We call upon the institutions of our civil society, the United Nations System,

governments, governmental and non-governmental organizations, corporations, and the mass media, to strengthen their commitments to peace and to listen to the cries of the victims and the dispossessed. We call upon the different religious and cultural traditions to join hands together in this effort, and to cooperate with us in spreading the message of peace. ⁹

I find this an interesting and even inspiring document. I think it reinforces easily recognised Buddhist values and principles such as universal love, compassion and ethical awareness. However, I think it does also challenge us to think about issues that perhaps are not so obviously central to our Buddhist practice such as justice, human rights, forgiveness and reconciliation. Of course, it does not need much investigation or thought to recognise that these values and principles can also be part of our Buddhist practice. Looking at the problems of the world through the eyes of the Bodhisattva, we will wish to see the effect of our actions on others and we will wish to participate in actions that maximise happiness in the true sense and minimise suffering.

As the Buddha stated in the Four Noble (and ennobling) Truths, suffering is caused by craving and the Path to happiness (in the sense of the end of suffering) lies in our breaking the craving and attachments that keep us enslaved to saṃsāra. So many of the world's problems come from our inability to break that slavery and from accumulating and defending of those things, entities and even people who shore up our ego-identity; and the attacking of and rejection of those things, entities and people who might seem to pose a threat to us. This is true on the level of the individual, the group, the nation state and the corporation. The defence of our ego (or in terms of the collective, the '*wego*' as David Loy has called it) leads to conflicts and violence, at worst armed and posing danger to our future as a species.

This recognition that violence comes from polarising and from the sense of separateness that characterises our clinging to saṃsāra is beautifully highlighted in Śāntideva's poetic and philosophical work the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. In the opening chapter he tells us that:

“...virtue is perpetually ever so feeble, while the power of vice is great and extremely dreadful. If there were no spirit of perfect awakening, what other virtue would overcome it?” ¹⁰

This spirit of perfect awakening is the Bodhicitta, the heart of the Bodhisattva Ideal. It is the overcoming of the separation of self and other, the identifying with 'me' and 'mine' at the expense of 'them' and 'theirs'. Peace can never be engendered while that identification occurs.

Śāntideva makes this humorously explicit later in the text when he says:

“They feel envy toward a superior, competitiveness with a peer, arrogance toward one who is inferior, conceit due to praise, and anger due to reproach. When could there be any benefit from a fool?” ¹¹

And, he exhorts us:

“One should first earnestly meditate on the equality of oneself and others in this way: ‘All equally experience suffering and happiness, and I must protect them as I do myself.’

Although it has many divisions, such as arms and so on, the body is protected as a whole. Likewise, different beings, with their joys and sorrows, are all equal, like myself, in their yearning for happiness.

Even though my agony does not hurt anyone else’s body, that suffering of mine is unbearable because I cling to it as mine.

Likewise, although others’ suffering does not descend upon me, that suffering of theirs is difficult to bear because they cling to it as ‘theirs.’

I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. I should take care of others, just as I am a sentient being.

When happiness is equally dear to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I strive after happiness for myself alone?

When fear and suffering are equally abhorrent to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I protect myself but not others.”¹²

David Edwards makes an interesting point in this vein in his 1998 book *The Compassionate Revolution* when he suggests that many of the world’s problems are caused not by hatred but by love. He further defines this love as conditional love rather than unconditional love:

“Conditional love... lies behind every act of revenge and many of the worse horrors of human life... We may love our chosen beau, belle, family, class or nation with unbounded passion but a threat to any or all of these may elicit hatred of equal intensity.”¹³

As Buddhist practitioners how do we sit with this statement? How do we keep our hearts open in love to those around us, to our near and dear without that love and identification turning, as it so easily does, to attachment and polarization?

This question is perhaps one of the core questions for us as practitioners. Another key question is how do we maintain our inner peace while dealing with the issues of the world. Many of us have rejected directly working within the more political domain because of the inherent polarization involved in the myriad ‘us and them’ analyses of the world’s problems. And yet, we see the suffering around us and wish to respond. We wish to find a way of working that goes beyond the extremes of militancy or mysticism, where we do not fall into responses of numbness or overwhelming rage and sorrow. How do we stay open to the cries of the world while holding to our clarity and mettā? How do we awaken our hearts?

One practice that I believe can help with this is sitting meditation practice, for example the practice known as ‘breathing through’. One version of this is described by Buddhist practitioner and activist Joanna Macy:

“Closing your eyes, focus attention on your breathing. Don't try to breathe any special way, slow or long. Just watch the breathing as it happens in and out. Note the accompanying sensations at the nostrils or upper lip, in the chest or abdomen. Stay passive and alert, like a cat by a mouse hole...

As you watch the breath, you note that it happens by itself; without your will, without your deciding each time to inhale or exhale... It's as though you're being breathed – being breathed by life... Just as everyone in this room, in this city, in this planet now, is being breathed, sustained in a vast, breathing web of life...

Now visualize your breath as a stream or ribbon of air passing through you. See it flow up through your nose, down through your windpipe and into your lungs. Now from your lungs take it through your heart. Picture it flowing through your heart and out through an opening there to reconnect with the larger web of life. Let the breath-stream, as it passes through you, appear as one loop within that vast web, connecting you with it...

Now open your awareness to the suffering that is present in the world. Drop for now all defences and open to your knowledge of that suffering. Let it come as concretely as you can... concrete images of your fellow beings in pain and need, in fear and isolation, in prisons, hospitals, tenements, hunger camps... no need to strain for these images, they are present to you by virtue of our inter-existence. Relax and just let them surface... the vast and countless hardships of our fellow humans, and of our animal brothers and sisters as well, as they swim the seas and fly the air of this ailing planet...

Now breathe in the pain like dark granules on the stream of air; up through your nose, down through your trachea, lungs and heart, and out again into the world net... You are asked to do nothing for now, but let it pass through your heart... Be sure that stream flows through and out again; don't hang on to the pain...surrender it for now to the healing resources of life's vast web... With Śāntideva, the Buddhist saint, we can say, ‘Let all sorrows ripen in me.’ We help them ripen by passing them through our hearts... making good rich compost out of all that grief...so we can learn from it, enhancing our larger, collective knowing...

If no images or feelings arise and there is only blankness, grey and numb, breathe that through. The numbness itself is a very real part of our world... And if what surfaces for you is not the pain of other beings so much as your own personal suffering, breathe that through, too. Your own anguish is an integral part of the grief of our world, and arises with it... Should you feel an ache in the chest, a pressure in the rib cage, as if the heart would break, that is all right. Your heart is not an object that can break... But if it

were, they say the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. Your heart is that large. Trust it. Keep breathing...”¹⁴

Perhaps this practice, alongside practices of mettā and karuṇā bhāvanā and the different mindfulness based practices can help us to stay centred, to maintain our inner peace. Without inner peace there can be no peace in our communities. Without peace in our communities there can be no peace in our nation states nor in the world. And it is worth remembering that peace is not only the absence of war or conflict: it is a positive state that can be cultivated personally and collectively. It is more than the silence defined by lack of guns and screaming, it is the deep serene silence of a mind and heart in harmony. On the deepest level it is a positive, felt sense of non-duality and non-polarisation, leading to the rejection of all identification with the ego or *wego*.

It would benefit all of us as Buddhists to explore together our responses to conflict and to strengthen our commitment to create peace at all levels through empathy, non-violence and creativity. Many years ago Sangharakshita emphasised this in a talk entitled *Buddhism, World Peace and Nuclear War*. In this he called upon us to work collaboratively to promote the great Buddhist ideal of non-violence through recognising our interconnectedness with all beings:

“Peace has become a seamless garment, and the world has either to wear the whole garment or go naked to destruction. There can no longer be any question of a scrap of peace covering one part of the world’s nakedness and not another.

This makes it impossible for us to think in merely geo-political terms. We have also to think in geo-ethical, geo-humanitarian, or geo-philanthropic terms. Since peace is indivisible, so that the stark choice before us is either world peace or no peace, one world or no world, we shall be able to achieve peace only if we realize that humanity too is indivisible, and if we consistently act on that realization. In other words, we shall be able to achieve peace only by regarding ourselves as citizens of the world...

Peace in the full sense of the term will be achieved only when disputes between sovereign nation-states, as well as between smaller groups and between individuals, are settled entirely by non-violent means.

In order to achieve peace – world peace – in this fuller sense we shall have to deepen our realization of the indivisibility of humanity, and act on that realization with even greater consistency. We shall have to regard ourselves as citizens of the world in a more concrete sense than before, and rid ourselves of even the faintest vestige of nationalism. We shall have to identify ourselves more closely with all living things, and love them with a more ardent and selfless love. We shall have to be a louder and clearer voice of sanity and compassion in the world...

Above all, we shall have to intensify our commitment to the great ethical and spiritual principle of non-violence, both in respect to relations between individuals and in respect to relations between groups...

We must therefore not only abolish nuclear weapons, achieve peace in the full sense of the term, and learn to live in accordance with the principle of non-violence, as well as deepen our realization of the indivisibility of humanity and restore communication by the reinstatement of the notion of the objectivity of truth, but we must also eradicate craving, transcend both birth and death, and attain nirvana, or the Unconditioned.”

Near the conclusion of the talk Sangharakshita warns us that

“The situation in which we find ourselves today is dangerous in the extreme, perhaps more dangerous for humanity than at any other period in history, and time is running out. Whether we shall be able to achieve world peace and avert nuclear war we do not know. We can but do our best in a situation which, to a great extent, is not of our own personal making.”¹⁵

Suggested questions

1. How do you keep your heart open in love to those around you - to your near and dear ones - without that love and identification turning, as it so easily does, to attachment and polarization?
2. Are there people or things in your life that you feel you would act violently to defend?
3. How do you maintain your inner peace while dealing with the issues of the world?
4. Do you agree that, in terms of peace or its lack, we find ourselves in difficult times? If so, do you think that as Buddhists there is anything we can do about that?
5. How do you deal with feelings of anger or violence that do arise within you?
6. Do you have means of dealing with conflicts whether within yourself or with others?

Notes

⁷ *Dhammapada*, vv. 3 – 5.

⁸ Quoted in Chomsky, *American Foreign Policy* a talk given at Harvard University March 19th, 1985:

<http://www.chomsky.info/talks/19850319.htm>

⁹ <http://www.unesco.org/cpp/uk/declarations/religion.pdf>

¹⁰ Bodhicaryāvatāra. Chapter 1 V.6: <http://www.shantideva.net/index.html>

¹¹ Bodhicaryāvatāra. Chapter 8 V.12: <http://www.shantideva.net/index.html>

¹² Bodhicaryāvatāra. Chapter 8 Vv 90-96: <http://www.shantideva.net/index.html>

¹³ David Edwards, *The Compassionate Revolution* (Green Books, 1998).

¹⁴ See <http://www.joannamacy.net/html/engaged.html>

¹⁵ Sangharakshita, *Buddhism, World Peace and Nuclear War in The Priceless Jewel* (Windhorse Publications, 1993):

<http://www.sangharakshita.org/books/The%20Priceless%20Jewel.pdf>

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=162>

Week 4: Buddhism and Social Equality

Throughout history, a great deal of unnecessary suffering has been linked to inequality. In this section, Maitrisara looks at some aspects of the debate from a Buddhist standpoint.

Maitrisara has worked within community organisations for twenty five years addressing a wide range of equality issues – poverty and cultural diversity in particular. She is secretary of the *Network of Engaged Buddhists*, an ecumenical Buddhist group which aims to apply the Dharma to contemporary social and ecological questions.

‘The special challenge facing Buddhism in our age is to stand up as an advocate for justice in the world, a voice of conscience for those victims of social, economic and political injustice who cannot stand up and speak for themselves.’

Bhikkhu Bodhi

‘We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.’

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Equality as spiritual practice

We are conditioned by our social context. An understanding of our society’s structures and patterns can help to free ourselves of its conditioning. If we have contact with people from very different backgrounds (within our own communities, or by travelling and living in other countries), we can learn a lot about who ‘we’ are – or who we think we are. We are fortunate that the Triratna Buddhist Community, as an international community, can offer us many opportunities to do this.

Traditional Buddhist teachings

Social equality is a contemporary term, though there are Buddhist teachings which strongly correspond with it. One of the meanings of the Pāli word ‘*sama*’ is equal, level, impartial, even. We are familiar with this as an aspect of *mettā* – the extending of loving kindness to all beings, universally.

The phrases of the *Karaniya Mettā* sutta reflect this attitude:

*‘But as a mother watches o’er her child
Her only child, so long as she doth breathe,
So let him practise unto all that live
An all-embracing mind.’ (v.7)*

Another source is from Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the celebrated *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Path*. In chapter 8, the instructions say that:

'...at first one should meditate on the equality of oneself and others as follows: All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself.' (v.90)

This implies that we should dissolve the barriers between self and other. This is the heartwood of the Buddhist path.

The idea of equality can sometimes be confused with a sense that we are 'all the same' which is clearly not what equality, either secular or in the Buddhist sense is meaning. For example, there are many teachings which use the metaphor of the path or levels of attainment. This suggests that some people are more spiritually advanced than others and should be accorded the respect that this implies.

Equality as an aspect of Wisdom

We have probably all carried out actions or had thoughts that bolster a sense of superiority. We have probably all been the target of them too. Whether it's to do with accent, age or left-handedness, the implication is that you don't fit in, your way is deviant or not as good. These attitudes are based on culturally conditioned 'learned' assumptions about superiority and inferiority that do not relate to reality. This can be expressed in subtle but nevertheless damaging ways – what is visible, what is marginalized, what is ignored. True equality is, at its highest, an aspect of wisdom. We can see through these assumptions to appreciate the real nature and potential of other beings. This expresses itself as mettā, which does not pick or choose who is more 'worthy' of loving kindness. Ratnasambhava represents this wisdom aspect of equality.

Three examples of inequality

We will now look at three examples of inequality. These are:

1. New Buddhists in India.
2. Women and Buddhism.
3. People of colour and Buddhism.

There are many other important patterns of social relationships we don't have the opportunity to cover – attitudes to disability and the issues of class for example. These three themes are offered only as examples of how issues of inequality can be viewed through Buddhist eyes. Some of the principles apply to other areas of inequality. You might want to explore these in your own thinking and discussion.

1. New Buddhists in India

One recent episode in Buddhism's history shows how Buddhism has inspired social change and equality in relation to caste. Dalits, sometimes referred to as 'untouchables', are a group of people who have experienced extreme inequality for thousands of years. Their position within the caste system has been justified by religious teaching within Hinduism. Caste status is designated by birth and it defines many things including your occupation. Higher castes can be 'polluted' by contact with people of lower castes, who have denied to them education, health care and clean water. Lower castes are expected to be subservient and obedient to higher castes. Sangharakshita calls it, "A state of virtual slavery."¹⁶ Though casteism is officially illegal in India, it is still widely practised.

The legacy of Dr.Ambedkar

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was born into an 'untouchable' Hindu family (a term he used himself) in Maharashtra, a large state in India. As he grew up he often experienced the deep indignity of caste prejudice. He studied in New York and London and gained two doctorates, a level of educational attainment virtually unheard of in his community. On his return to India he decided to challenge the caste system. He led several thousand people to a water tank in a high caste area and took a sip of the water, thus, in Hindu terms 'polluting' it. There was a backlash that resulted in violence, death threats and a long legal battle. Later, he publicly burnt the Manusmṛti, the anthology of 'divinely inspired' pronouncements on Hindu social life that sanction the horrors associated with 'untouchability'. Another storm of abuse and threats was unleashed.

Ambedkar was appointed to senior roles and posts within government. He served as Law Minister and drafted the constitution that brought democracy to the newly independent India. Due to a dispute over the Hindu Code Bill, which dealt with marriage and property rights, he resigned from the Cabinet. At the following general election he lost his place in the House.

This was the point at which he started to publicly discuss the idea of converting to another faith to escape the designation of caste. He saw that the caste system was 'mind made' and the solution to it would lie in the mind also.

On the 14th October 1956, Ambedkar took the Dhamma Diksha (initiation into the Dhamma) at a huge rally in Nagpur. In the presence of over 300,000 people he took the Refugees and Precepts from U Chandramani. He then faced his followers, and they took the Refugees and Precepts from him, embracing the Buddhist faith. For Ambedkar, the Buddhist faith gave people access to the dignity, pride and self-respect that had been denied them within the Hindu caste system.

Ambedkar died just six weeks after his conversion. His followers were left distraught and with little guidance on how to live a Buddhist life.

Indian Buddhism since Ambedkar's death

Nevertheless, the conversions to Buddhism have continued. There are probably 20-30 million now in India. There is some evidence to show that social benefits have resulted. A higher proportion of Dalits who have converted (73% compared with 52%) have a basic education, and the community is increasingly confident and self-reliant.

A quarter of the Triratna Buddhist Order is based in India where it is called *Triratna Bauddha Mahasangha*. It is largely composed of the followers of Dr Ambedkar. A UK based charity, the Karuna Trust, raises money for social projects such as schools and clinics.

Caste discrimination is still an issue in modern India. Though officially illegal, it is still widespread especially in the rural areas. Figures from *Untouchability in Rural India 2006* tell us that:

- Public health workers refused to visit Dalit homes in 33% of villages.
- Dalits were prevented from entering police stations in 28% of villages. ¹⁷

The position of Dalit women is particularly difficult. A book called *Broken Voices – 'Untouchable' Women Speak Out* was sponsored by the Arya Tara Mahila Trust which is one of the first trusts in Triratna to be run by women for women in India – see www.indiansisters.org. They have publicised the fact that a crime against women is committed every three minutes in India. 70% of women are, at some time in their lives, victims of these violent acts.

2. Women and Buddhism

Another strong aspect of social conditioning is gender. In this section, we are going to look at ideas about women in relation to Buddhism. Gender is a complex subject. There have been divergent views about it within many Sanghas, including the Triratna Buddhist Community. We will focus on issues to do with women and in particular feminism here.

Traditional teaching on women

Some traditional Buddhist texts contain some extremely strong messages about women which are pejorative and extremely discouraging. ¹⁸ But there are also many encouraging and empowering statements about women and very respected female Dharma teachers from the Buddha's time and throughout Buddhist history. One of the most famous was Yeshe Tsogyal, a primary disciple of Padmasambhava and arguably the first Enlightened Tibetan. This is what Padmasambhava said about her when she talked about the limitations of her female form (which was undoubtedly a cultural obstacle in 9th century Tibet):

*“Wonderful yogini, practitioner of the secret teachings
The basis for realising enlightenment is a human body.
Male or female – there is no great difference
But if she delves the mind bent on Enlightenment
The woman’s body is better.”*¹⁹

Extensive research into the history of women by scholars such as Rita Gross²⁰ have pointed out that in any major period or form of Buddhism, we can find opinions and texts demonstrating disrespectful attitudes towards women in and their spiritual capacities. But side by side with these texts, there are those that say that women have the same spiritual capacities. Many suggest that whether you are a man or a woman is totally irrelevant to the spiritual quest. An example would be the story of the goddess in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* where Śāriputra asks her to change her sex and she says “I have been here twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven’t been able to find them. How can I change them?”

Feminism and Buddhism

In contemporary terms, what is the relationship between Feminism and Buddhism? The Western Buddhist Order has equal ordination for men and women and women are ordained by women – a rarity, if not unique in the Buddhist world. Here two women order members express their views on the relationship between feminism and Buddhism.

Gunabhadri writes that feminism:

“...could be described as a movement that demands — or insists — that women should have access to all the facilities they require for their development as human beings; it asserts that they should not be confined or limited to any particular range of facilities or activities; and it encourages them to take more initiative, be more independent, and to function as individuals in their own right, rather than being mere extensions or supports to the men in their lives. Feminism of this sort is quite compatible with Buddhism and the spiritual life.”

Maitreyi suggests that:

“From a Buddhist perspective, feminism is clearly not enough. It is only a possible starting point in our efforts to develop true individuality. For while feminism asks us to look at our gender conditioning, Buddhism asks us to look at our conditioning as human beings, at how the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion underpin everything we do and limit us to habitual reactive patterns. While feminism investigates the dichotomy between men and women, male and female, Buddhism urges us to strive to overcome the dichotomy of self and other, the view of ourselves as the centre of the universe, a fixed self separate from other beings. In overcoming this dichotomy we eventually transcend identification with being either male or female.”

While both women have found the perspective of feminism useful in their own paths to liberation, they both express reservations about some elements of feminist thought that are antagonistic towards men. Ultimately they see feminism as potentially being a step on the path to liberation but that the Buddhist understanding of true liberation is a much bigger project.

3. People of colour and Buddhism

Finally, we could also apply the Dharma to ethnicity and the experiences of people of colour. Buddhism teaches that we are conditioned beings and affected by the norms that prevail in our culture. Society's patterns can easily reproduce themselves in our own spiritual communities – and we can often be quite unaware of that process when we belong to the bigger group ourselves.

In our delusion, we see a split between self and other. This can become a split between 'us and them'. Ethnicity and 'race' can become a convenient hook to hang this particular delusion on. So we need to be mindful of how this tendency might play out in our own minds.

Vijayatara, a black British Dharmacharini, has completed her doctoral research on the experience of people of colour in Buddhist Sanghas. She has focused on those Sanghas composed of people who have converted to Buddhism in the West – calling them 'convert Sanghas'. The FWBO/Triratna Buddhist Community is one of her case studies. She notes that there are disproportionately low numbers of people of colour in almost all convert Sanghas.

Buddhism teaches us not to hold too tightly on to any identity, and this includes our race or ethnicity. However, Vijayatara points out that, "In suggesting that we need to move away from any form of identification there is a risk that white people might think that they already take this stance because they can tend to see themselves as 'raceless' unlike people of colour. I consider this to be significantly different from a genuine move away from an identity position." This she calls a kind of 'pseudo-transcendence' which brings with it the risk that white people are unaware of the culture of whiteness, which they can't see because they fit in to it. Her research suggests that black people will be more likely to find a place in the Sangha if:

- We develop our awareness of how much we are conditioned by our own cultural background.
- We increase our understanding of the cosmopolitan and diverse nature of Western culture.
- We acknowledge, welcome and explore our diverse identities.
- We embrace the opportunity to free ourselves from deluded notions of self and other, us and them.

- We offer opportunities for people of colour to practise together for peer support.
- We reach out and make more contact with black communities.

Conclusion

Bringing mindfulness to our notions of difference and diversity is a rich seam of exploration. In a diverse Sangha committed to skilful communication, we can help each other to recognise those aspects of our conditioning which are hidden to us. We can get to know ourselves and each other more fully. This helps all of us to free ourselves from narrow definitions of ourselves that we might hardly be aware of.

Buddhism points to a way of being free from the narrow confines of identity and yet, without a rounded understanding of our conditioning, it can be unhelpful to think we can just ditch those identities and ignore difference. Ignoring difference by the group in the majority is likely to exacerbate difficulties for the minority groups.

Suggested questions

1. *'There have been divergent views... within many Sanghas, including Triratna.'* You are likely to read and hear a wide range of opinions within the Sangha about many equality issues – women and Buddhism for example. What would be a skilful approach if you don't agree with your teachers?
2. How is a Buddhist approach to issues of equality different from contemporary secular attitudes to equality, if at all?
3. Do you think the principles brought out in these examples apply to other areas of inequality like class, disability and sexual orientation – in what ways?
4. We are often unaware of the assumptions we bring to interactions with people who look and seem different to ourselves. Do you agree? And if so, what have been your experiences of working with this lack of awareness? Have there been times when you have suddenly noticed a view based on prejudice?

Further reading

Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (Windhorse Publications, 1986).

A detailed reflection on a fascinating period of history that Sangharakshita personally witnessed.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=360>

Valerie Mason-John, *Broken Voices – ‘Untouchable’ Women Speak Out* (Windhorse Publications, 2008). Interviews with Indian women who tell us their personal, painfully honest accounts of their struggles and triumphs.

<http://tinyurl.com/nywzmu>

Kalyanavaca, *The Moon and Flowers: A Woman’s Path to Enlightenment* (Windhorse Publications, 1997).

An anthology of Triratna women writing on their practice and experiences.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=371>

Alana Lentin, *Racism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 2008).

Recommended reading on this important theme.

<http://tinyurl.com/ljtz25>

Rita Gross, *Anger and Meditation in Being: Bodies, Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Embodiment*, Ed. By L. Friedman, and S. Moon, (Shambala 1997).

An excellent short account of a personal journey working with anger and transforming it through meditation to a more skilful AND more effective approach.

<http://www.wisdom-books.com/ProductDetail.asp?PID=7060>

Websites

<http://www.karuna.org>

The website of the *Karuna Trust* funding work in India with Dalit communities.

www.indiansisters.org

The website of the *Arya Tara Mahila Trust* which is one of the first trusts in the Triratna Buddhist Community to be run by women for women in India.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5299962989053819802>.

Video of Vijayatara talking about her doctoral research.

http://www.bpf.org/html/current_projects/diversity/diversity.html.

American network, *Buddhist Peace Fellowship* has a set of pages on diversity.

<http://www.shambhala.org/diversity/resources.php>

American sangha, Shambhala's pages on diversity.

Notes

¹⁶ Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (Windhorse Publications 1986).

¹⁷ Valerie Mason-John, *Broken Voices – 'Untouchable' Women Speak Out* (Windhorse Publications 2008)

¹⁸ E.g. 'Womenfolk are uncontrollable... envious... greedy... weak in wisdom', *Aṅguttara Nikāya* iv 8, 10.

¹⁹ *Mother of Knowledge*, p.102 (Dharma Publishing, 1982).

²⁰ Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, (State University of New York, 1993).

²¹ Gunbhadrī, *Feminism and Buddhism* from *Golden Drum*, Issue 7. Available at <http://fwbo-buddhist-articles.org/index.php>.

Week 5: Money, Economics and the Dharma

In this section, we will be looking at three points of view on the subject of Buddhism, money and economics. In the first, Siddhisambhava looks at the subject from the point of view of personal attitudes and practice. In the second, Vishvapani suggests that Buddhist teachings might prompt us to rethink our most basic views about money and economic systems; and Guhyapati suggests that the root of a new – Buddhist – economics might be found in a radical application of the principle of *dāna*, or generosity.

Siddhisambhava worked as a fundraiser for Triratna Buddhist Community's European Chairs Assembly in the Triratna Buddhist Community development team; Vishvapani is a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* and is the author of a forthcoming biography of the Buddha; and Guhyapati is a member of the Ecodharma Collective, based in the Catalan Pyrenees.

Siddhisambhava: Understanding Money, Understanding Ourselves, and Bringing Money into Our Practice ²⁴

One of my reasons for writing this is to simply encourage us to talk about money more, as I've noticed that most of us still find that difficult to do – it's another elephant under the carpet, perhaps? It's hard not to go straight into 'how much' conversations. How much do I have or want, how much does s/he have, how much do they have? With this focus, it's difficult for the feeling tone of a communication to avoid heading towards guilt, especially if you've got money, or resentment, especially if you haven't got money or – more to the point – feel you don't have enough.

The Buddha had two approaches to money: one that addressed his monastic followers - the minority - and one that addressed everyone else – those who were working, earning and spending. You could say his teaching was all about inner wealth, with our heart-mind being our greatest asset. He never condemned outer wealth, in fact he praised it. The issues were about how you got your money and what you did with it. In short, he stressed that our relationship with money be guided by wisdom and understanding of its true value and limitations. It's important not to be burdened by money. We should be masters of our own wealth and use it to bring happiness and benefit to others.

Times have changed since the Buddha's day, 2,500 years ago. The Buddha taught in a feudal world of peasants, clans and kings. It was a much simpler world. Few people could read. In his book, Kulananda ²⁵ suggests three crucial differences in interpreting Buddhist teachings on money. Firstly, Western culture is highly developed, powerful and confident. It has a well developed language for discussing money, alongside which traditional Buddhist discourse can seem naïve. This means we must listen attentively and imaginatively in the West if we are to hear the Buddhist teachings about money. The second crucial difference is the extraordinary breadth of choice we face – of family structure and lifestyles, ways to earn and spend – which can feel like liberation or unparalleled confusion. The third difference is that the way we earn and spend money in the West has the

potential to do more harm – or good – than ever before. Increasingly, money matters far more than in the Buddha’s time.

I would add a fourth area – our psychology in relation to money. Even if we take the above points into account and develop a more sophisticated discourse, it’s not enough for the discourse to be about greed, consumerism or materialism, or how we, as Buddhists, ‘should be’ with money. This approach can encourage dogmatism, as well as forget the pleasures and benefits of wealth. It also underestimates the power of the unconscious to perpetuate unsatisfactory financial behaviour patterns. We need insight into the psychological forces that affect our motivation, our attitudes to and behaviour around money.

Economists usually define money by its strictly economic function. I prefer William Bloom’s approach:

“In the tribal communities where money first emerged, the gifting and exchanging that created money was mainly to do with building relationships, signifying social solidarity, making gestures to nature and the gods, signifying a recognition of something important. The simple truth is, therefore, that money emerged in order to facilitate human relationships – not to facilitate trade and business... We can ask more meaningfully of any money situation: how well is this facilitating relationship?”

The \$64 million question is – how do we change and become more money mature and truly wealthy in the most meaningful sense of the word? As I’m sure we all know, the momentum of habit and the psychological safety that comes from familiarity are often stronger than our instinct to change. Resistance, laziness, rationalization and excuses kick in. Awakening and healing are not painless processes. To change our financial behaviour requires more than awareness and insight. We need to be willing and intend to change. If we’re clear about what our motivation is, that can give us the energy and determination to persevere. Given that the one drive which runs through all our lives is the drive to manifest and experience who we truly are, part of our motivation will undoubtedly be ethical and altruistic. There’ll also be a personal carrot, a motivation to change because we will feel better when we’re financially wise, assertive and generous, rather than financially stupid, victimized and selfish.

Brent Kessel ²⁷ has suggested a tool to help us change. He describes eight ‘financial archetypes’, each of which has its extreme and unhealthy behaviours, but also healthy gifts. The trick to change, he says, is to keep working to identify and retain the healthiest parts of our ‘story’, while at the same time letting go of the unhealthy attitudes it has engendered in us. Here is a list of the archetypes, with their pitfalls and gifts. Many of us will relate to more than one archetype, and our ‘stories’ will change. To give you a merest hint of the model, here is a list of the archetypes with their pitfalls and gifts: ²⁸

Financial Archetype	Pitfalls	Gifts
The Guardian	Worry, anxiety	Alertness, prudence
The Pleasure Seeker	Hedonism, impulsiveness	Enjoyment, pleasure
The Idealist	Distrust, aversion	Vision, compassion
The Saver	Hoarding, penny pinching	Self-sufficiency, abundance
The Star	Pretentiousness, leadership	Style, self-worth
The Innocent	Avoidance, helplessness	Hope, adaptability
The Caretaker	Self-abandoning	Empathy, generosity
The Empire Builder	Greed, domination	Innovation, decisiveness

There are dangers in using these kinds of models, or rather misusing them to fix and label other people. They are intended to help us understand ourselves and others, and to help us communicate with people who are different to us by empathizing with where they are coming from. It's aimed at individuals, but I've wondered if it might also be used to describe our institutions too. Could a centre that's been losing money and didn't know it for a considerable period of time be an institutional Innocent? Or could the centre that was considering fundraising while still having money in the bank from a previous fundraising campaign be an institutional Saver, or Guardian?

What I find helpful in Kessel's model is how well he marries dharma with psychology in a notoriously tricky area. He affirms how different we are in what's shaped us and therefore how we each need to do different things in order to grow and become more 'money mature'. One person, for example, may spend all their income and more, and be constantly in crisis and debt and need to learn and encourage prudence, a sense of the future (vision) and self-sufficiency. Whilst another person, unnecessarily anxious and cautious, would grow from spending more of their money, on themselves and on others, and need to learn to enjoy that and understand its benefits as well as its pleasures.

There is no one way to be about money. Money itself, ideas about money, including how we 'should be' (a term people rarely respond to well) with money, cannot be static and fixed. We can help to attain financial stability for ourselves and our institutions – that's the positive side of what we might call an 'earth element' approach. Yet beware the negative possibilities of such an approach, rigidity, which can lead to bad feelings, if not rigor mortis, in our relations with each other.

Money seems instead to invite water element imagery. The whole point of it is to be in circulation. Archetypal psychologist James Hillman describes it as, 'deep and broad as the ocean, the primordially unconscious, and makes us so. It always takes us into great depths, where sharks and suckers, hard-shell crabs, tight clams and tidal emotions abound.'²⁹ The writer Thomas Moore says, 'Don't try to avoid the emotions of money in fantasies of purity and control. Enter the fray but keep your sensibilities intact. Don't let money serve only your ego, propping you up and giving you control... Keep talking about the place of money in your life. Be creative with it. Don't moralise against it, but let it offer you the dramas that in the end define who you are.'³⁰

Vishvapani: Speculative Views ³¹

When the Buddha left home on a quest for the truth he joined the sramana movement of religious wanderers and found himself in a whirlpool of ‘speculative views’. His culture was haunted by fear of death, which was profoundly threatening whether it meant obliteration or rebirth. The sramanas sought the true Self, or atman, because that alone would survive death, and their philosophies obsessively circled the nature of identity. One of the Buddha’s greatest contributions was the realisation the sramanas’ ideas about identity were based on emotional needs, especially the need to avoid uncomfortable truths. In mistaking their rationalisations for reality, he said, people wove a net and became entangled.

Perhaps money is the modern atman – the key way our culture structures reality. A company can be worth \$15 billion at the start of the week and nothing at the end. The value of banks themselves is bound up with the worth of the debt they hold, which no one can calculate. Where has the money gone? The only possible answer is that it was never ‘really’ there in the first place. Banks can lend much more than the value of their deposits, and in the recent boom secondary markets priced the debts they were owed at many times the value of the entire world economy. Demand for them dictated the price, not intrinsic worth.

The very notion of financial value is a human creation. Money lets you buy real things from real people, but people decide the price. As James Buchan wrote in *The New Statesman*, “The world is held together only by instances of agreement between two or more people.” The willingness of the one party to sell and the other to buy depends, partly, on a ‘speculation’ about future values. This should hardly need stating, but habit and greed obscure the insubstantiality of the process and we all get caught in the illusion. The climbing value of our houses makes us feel better; our status is bound up with our wealth; when people pay us well we feel ‘valued’; and our emotional security is interwoven with our financial security. Karl Marx long ago showed how money ‘abstracts’ the relationship between buyers and sellers or employers and employees by connecting it to a larger system of relationships. Buchan quotes Hegel’s description of the mechanism through which we come to believe in the truth of the abstraction: “Through repetition, that which at the beginning appeared as merely accidental or possible, is confirmed as a reality.”

Amid such perplexity, we need an alternative ‘Buddhist economics’ less than we need guidance in breaching the thickly formed texture of what we think is reality. There is no better advice than the Buddha’s words to the Kalamas, in their own philosophical perplexity:

“Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, ‘The monk is our teacher.’”

He suggested they consider what their own experience and that of people they thought wise told them conducted to human flourishing. This is good counsel amid the euphoria of a boom or the dejection of a bust; it also cautions us against the persuasive claims of ideologies be they capitalist, social democrat or, indeed, Marxist.

Guhyapati: Buddhism and Economics ³²

Isn't an economic system which takes profit and growth as its primary values wholly contrary to the Buddhist vision of the value of human life - namely spiritual development? I think so. For Buddhists, the meaning of civilisation is not the multiplication and servicing of wants and craving. It is the purification of human character. And economic activity needs to be evaluated in relation to that basic value. From the Buddhist perspective classic economic theory stands the truth on its head. As E.F.Schumacher put it, it "...considers goods as more important than people and consumption as more important than creative activity."³³

This means that the current economic system has a very limited capacity to capture real human value. Using systems of measurement which reduce everything to money, orthodox economists suffer from a profound blindness. Money might measure profits, but it is useless when it comes to measuring forests, or human worth, or species, or community, or happiness and well-being.

Not only does modern economics fail to take account of human values, it also reduces all members of a living planet into mere objects, resources and commodities. This process of commoditisation applies to trees, animals and even human labour. "It is a short-sighted system: it values some aspects of the world, such as oil or banks, but is almost completely blind to others such as children or coral reefs. Using this value system, life-giving forests are important only when they are chopped down."³⁴

So, presumably a Buddhist economics would aim to prioritise quality of life over quantitative accumulation. And presumably it would seek to maximise the well being of all with the minimum of consumption.

The internal logic of the capitalist market economy is 'grow or die'. This is a core problem. It takes consumption as an end in itself and, "...tries to maximise consumption by the optimal pattern of productive effort." In its incessant drive to maximise profit and its obsession with growth it does not take into account the obvious fact that we live on a planet with non-negotiable environmental limits.

Current growth patterns are accelerating past many thresholds of sustainability. And the old economics has been unable – even unwilling – to include environmental factors on the balance sheet. It does not account for the use of natural resources as expenditure. Such use of non-renewable resources is clearly a false economy, using up natural capital and not income.

New economics: what's wealth without wellbeing?

Great efforts are being made to evolve a new economics – “..an economics as if people and the planet mattered.” This approach sits well with Buddhism, and was inspired by E.F.Schumacher (who explicitly linked it to Buddhism in his book *Small is Beautiful*). Organisations like the New Economics Foundation (NEF) ³⁵ are at its cutting edge, offering valuable critiques and models for future economic practice.

The NEF have developed a ‘Happy Planet Index’ (HPI). This index of human well-being and environmental impact, moves beyond crude ratings of nations according to national income, measured by ‘Gross Domestic Product’ (GDP), to produce a more accurate picture of the progress of nations based on the amount of the Earth's resources they use, and the length and happiness of people's lives. It strips the view of the economy back to its absolute basics: what we put in (resources), and what comes out (human lives of different length and happiness). A similar idea has been developed in the Buddhist country of Bhutan which uses a ‘National Happiness Index’.

In the ‘New Economics’ wealth really means well-being. And the measure of well-being includes an understanding of the inter-relatedness between humans in society, and society within the wider ecosystem.

Whereas traditional economics values money for money's sake, the New Economics understands that, “...human happiness and well-being are not measured very well in terms of money wealth; and that just as money is subservient to morality, spirituality and humanity, so economics is [subservient to] a wider ecosystem that explains, limits, and makes it real.”

Dāna: the root of a Buddhist economics?

Dana, the practice of giving, expresses the most elementary of Buddhist insights: namely, that we are not separate entities, but exist only as an intimate flow of relationships with others and the world. The extent to which we can practice dāna, the extent to which we can let go of ego-centredness and give, is equivalent to our ability to open up to reality. It's a concrete expression of self-transcendence, demanding that we radically revise our identities – both ecologically and socially.

Applied to economics, dāna suggests a reorganisation of socio-economic relations markedly different from those we are accustomed to. While modern political economics are rooted in the institution of the individual and their property rights, Buddhism's rejection of the existence of the separate self poses a clear challenge to the idea of private property.

Dana leads to the ideal of common ownership, a practice which has existed within the ordained Sangha since the Buddha's time. However, the traditional two-tiered system of lay practitioners and monks has created a dualistic ethic, insulating the lay economy from the more radical implications of Buddhist practice. But today,

in the light of current socio-economic injustice, perhaps we need to free the more demanding practice of Buddhist ethics from the ghetto of traditional monasticism, and apply them across a wider range of social relationships.

This would suggest future forms of social organisation where sharing once more takes ethical precedence over individualistic acquisition; and where the natural and sustenance economies once more predominate over the market economy.

Might dāna imply a renewal of customs and values found in pre-capitalist and non-hierarchical societies, which influenced economic activity along very different lines from today? These included:

- The principle of the irreducible minimum, in which all members of the community are entitled to the means of life, irrespective of their productivity.
- The principle of usufruct, whereby the means of life that were not being used by one group could be used, as needed, by another – including land, orchards, and even tools (a practice which establishes a practical distinction between personal and private property – personal property being that which we need).
- And, of course, the practice of mutual aid, in which things and labour are shared, expressing a recognition of the interdependence of each and every person within the community.

Yet, just as dāna implies a profound revitalisation of the idea of the commons, a more just and equitable world depends upon a vast re-extension of the commonwealth. It makes no sense to speak of the commons without a shared influence over what is done with them. So, dāna points to a return of natural resources, once considered a ‘common treasury’, into truly democratic control. Dana implies the creation of a culture of Earth Democracy – in which the actual needs of people, other species and the ecosystem have a stronger voice than capital and corporations.

Suggested questions

1. Which ‘financial archetype’ most closely reflects your own attitude towards money? Can you think of specific ways in which you could avoid the pitfalls and cultivate the strengths of that type?
2. “We can ask more meaningfully of any money situation: how well is this facilitating relationship?” Reflect on this in relation to your own use of money.
3. Are you aware how your local Sangha is run financially? Does it run on a dāna basis or in some other way? Are there things you could do to help apply Dharma principles to the finances of your local Sangha?

4. Do you agree that Buddhist teachings might prompt us to look not only at our individual lifestyles, but also at collective ideas and systems, such as capitalism?

“Money is the modern atman.” What do you think Vishvapani means by this, and do you agree?

5. How do you think the Buddha’s advice to the Kalamas might apply to our own attitude to money and to economic systems?
6. Do you agree that economic growth has become the main purpose of economic organizations? Do you think that it is possible to run an economy for the sake of ‘human happiness’? How might these questions affect the activities of organizations that are known to you?
7. How might our personal values and attitudes contribute to supporting the prevailing economic system in our society? In what ways could they help to bring about change?
8. “Dāna implies the creation of a culture of Earth Democracy – in which the actual needs of people, other species and the ecosystem have a stronger voice than capital and corporations.” Do you agree that we need a fundamentally different economic system? If so, how can we bring it about?
9. Do you find any contradictions between these three pieces?

Notes

²⁴ A full version of Siddhisambhava’s article can be found on *Triratna News*:

<http://tinyurl.com/l6c72h>

A shortened version is also available as an audio talk:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC97>

²⁵ Kulananda and Dominic Houlter, *Mindfulness and Money: The Buddhist Path of Abundance* (Broadway Books, 2002).

<http://tinyurl.com/m3p726>

²⁶ William Bloom, *Money, Heart and Mind: Financial Well-being for People and Planet*, (Arkana, 1995).

<http://tinyurl.com/nc5zu9>

²⁷ Brent Kessel, *It’s Not About The Money*, (HarperOne, 2008).

www.BrentKessel.com.

²⁸ You can also do an audio-guided self-inquiry into your financial archetype at www.BrentKessel.com.

²⁹ From *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings of James Hillman* ed. Thomas Moore, (Harper, 1989).

<http://tinyurl.com/nl4ml6>

³⁰ Thomas Moore, *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way Through Life's Ordeals* (Piatkus, 2004).

<http://tinyurl.com/kpet8y>

³¹ A full version of Vishvapani's article can be found at www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk.

³² This article is condensed from *Consume Less, Share More: Giving Radically*, an article by Guhyapati that can be found at www.ecodharma.com/articles.

³³ E.F.Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 1973.

<http://tinyurl.com/mfhdy>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ For the New Economics Foundation, see www.neweconomics.org, and in particular it's report, *Are You Happy?*

http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_PublicationDetail.aspx?PID=236

Week 6: Buddhism, Technology and Ethics

In this article, Khemasuri explores the conditions that affect our practice as 21st century Buddhists and the difficulties and opportunities they present. In particular, she writes here about technological change and some of its ethical challenges. Khemasuri has had a 'lay' interest in science since her childhood. She has been a meditator for over 22 years and involved in the Triratna Buddhist Community for 17 years. She has spent much of this time in rural Wales, raising children and working as a social worker, also finding time to help run the Llangollen Triratna Buddhist Community Class and retreats at Taraloka. She now lives in Sheffield and is involved in the Sheffield Buddhist Centre and Buddhafield.

Khemasuri on Buddhism, Technology and Ethics

The ethical issues surrounding the use of technology are hotly debated both within, and outside, the scientific community. For Buddhists the issues and debate may be different, but we still need to know some of the detail behind the technological changes. To reflect on ethical issues we will need to have an awareness of both the processes involved and a clear understanding of our own Buddhist principles and values.

This paper is not about giving expert or definitive advice, but more about having a basis of knowledge on which to begin a debate.

The Buddha's advice to the Kalamas

“Do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary law or with what has come down in scriptures or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with liking for a view after pondering over it or with someone else's ability or with the thought ‘The monk is our teacher.’ When you know yourselves: ‘These things are wholesome, blameless, commended by the wise, and being adopted and put into effect they lead to welfare and happiness’ then you should practise and abide in them...”

Kalama Sutta, A.N. III.65.

The world we live in today is a fast changing one where the influence of science and technology is increasingly pervasive. The Buddha lived in simpler times and the pressures and direction of these changes are not directly addressed in his teachings. The absence of clear precedent makes it difficult to formulate an authoritative response to modern ethical issues. Although it is not a simple matter, we live in a world where we have choices and have to act. The question of how to act and what principles guide our actions are of everyday importance.

For a practising Buddhist, it is vitally important to understand the actions that will enhance the path to Enlightenment and those that will hold us back. It can help to look at an issue in the light of scriptural tradition. The cross-cultural expression of ethics in the major schools of Buddhism can provide a consistency over time, pointing to an expression of Buddhist principles.

In this discussion document we will be looking at the ethical issues presented in three areas of modern technology:

- Communications and information technology.
- The Human Genome project.
- Modern biotechnology in the areas of embryology and human genetics.

Communications and information technology

Here we will be looking at information and communication technology and changes in our perspectives on time. We will then be considering the opportunities and challenges for Dharma practice in these developments.

Time and place

The Buddha taught in a time and place very different from our own, where in Vedic understanding, the universe resonated to the breath of Brahma who breathed in and out every four thousand million years. History was not written, planning for the future was not undertaken, and the world was unchanging. Spiritual practice was undertaken in the perspective of many lifetimes and within ‘all the time in the world’. This is very different from the fast pace of our life today.

The rate of technological change in the late 20th and early 21st century has been prodigious. This has in turn driven an acceleration of the market economy, leaving politics and culture struggling to keep up. We can, and are, encouraged to do everything faster, more efficiently and perhaps as a consequence more superficially. What does this mean for Buddhist practice, which needs time and nurturing? Stewart Brant writes:

“Religious time is time out. Time out from personal striving or suffering, time out from the chaos of history. In the sacred place set apart, in the sacred ritual changeless and timeless, in the sacred communion with a higher order, we step out of ordinary time and therefore make life meaningful, or at least bearable.”³⁵

Is this how we experience our practice as Buddhists or do we experience ‘time poverty’ and find that the pace of life pushes our practice into a corner?

Information

The opportunities of information technology are easy to see. The Pāli Canon on the internet, the Dharma accessible to millions of people at the touch of a button, meditation teaching online.

The Internet gives minorities a voice and individuals a say. It is so powerful that Amnesty International reports ‘bloggers’ arrested and imprisoned for telling their

truth. The Internet creates networks across the world for beneficial activity; it can be used to actively promote change.

It is also a fragile technology, the systems are brittle and they can and do crash. Although computers can hold a huge amount of information (in 1998 the total available digital capacity surpassed the total information in the world at that time) information can also be easily lost as a new system of information storage replaces a previous system. The Dharma is a legacy handed down to us through the efforts of all the previous Sanghas. If we rely increasingly on digital storage will we undermine the integrity of the Dharma, will the possibility of what is known as 'the digital dark age' lose us this legacy?

There is more information available through the Internet than ever before. We can find information on anything our mind latches onto, is this a help or distraction in our spiritual life, does it lead to a deadening of our senses, a distancing of ourselves from the experiential world? How do we guard our senses?

What happens when we buy things on the Internet, what does the ease of purchase do for our levels of contentment? Do we trawl e-bay looking for things to buy? The banks make it easier for us to borrow money by applying on-line. It is so much easier to consume, does it make it more difficult to live simply?

Communications

It often appears that communication systems are all for the good. We can reach someone on their mobile anywhere they are and find out what our friends are doing daily on 'Facebook'.

Does it mean we have less time for each other, are the demands of our electronic communication systems taking over from face to face contact? Are the benefits greater from sitting in each other's company for study or coffee than from meeting in a 'chat room'? Does immediate and fast interaction mean superficial interaction? Is it possible to have virtual Sangha? Do we want one?

Letters took a day to arrive, longer to write and there was time for aesthetics and reflection. E-mails can be written on the spur of the moment, sent in the next moment, and the consequences also can be instant. Is it more difficult to be mindful, kind in our expression, or generous in our attitude? Are we so involved in a culture of instant response that we are generally more impatient?

Mobile phones mean that we can be contacted by anyone anytime if we so wish. It can mean that there is an assumption and subsequent pressure to be constantly contactable.

What is it like to be 'unavailable'? Is it a problem for us or our friends' or family members? If we want to be alone, or quiet, or even solitary, how difficult is this now we are used to instant communication? Does this make the idea of a retreat more or less inviting? Where can we find the solitude to reflect and practice?

The human genome project

To catalogue the three million letters of code that make up the human DNA was a huge and complex task. This sequence of DNA was seen as an instruction manual for a human being and in theory it would allow the genes that cause disease or disability to be identified, so that they could then be altered or eliminated.

In 1990, the publicly funded and international Human Genome Project was launched. Six years into the project a private company, Celera, mounted a private sector effort to sequence the human genetic code. This turned scientific enquiry into an idealistic battleground with the public project's emphasis on the public property of the sequence and Celera attempting to patent the genes it discovered for the benefit of its shareholders.

The public consortium made efforts to prevent the genome sequence from becoming privatised by downloading their entire daily findings on its website, arguing that what was in the public domain could not be the intellectual property of any individual or organisation.

In the end, both parties announced at the White House in June 2000 that they had each completed the mapping of the genome. The information contained in the human genome sequence was public property and could be used by anyone. But this was not the end of the ideological dispute.

Although entire genomes cannot be patented, the private sector continues to patent and restrict access to individual genes and associated techniques. These include both human and plant gene codes. At present these include the genes that can cause breast cancer. Patents have also delayed research into malaria. In July 2008 John Sutton, who received a Nobel Prize for his work for the HGP, wrote to *The Times* expressing his disquiet and arguing for open access to scientific information. He wrote:

“The present system of innovation for medicines is very inefficient and really somewhat corrupt. It benefits shareholders over patients. It produces for the rich markets but not for the poor, and it does not produce for minority markets.”

The story of the human genome highlights the ethical divide between scientific and technological developments for humanitarian benefit and those for profit. What do Buddhist ethics have to say about this? What would generosity look like at this level?

Biotechnology: embryology

This is a familiar area of discussion, debate and dissent for anyone who reads the newspapers. I.V.F, stem cell research and cloning are all at the heart of biotechnology. All these techniques require the creation of human embryos outside the womb. The traditional Buddhist understanding is that for new life to begin, there needs to be a woman in her fertile period, intercourse to take place, and a

consciousness ready to be re-born. For some schools of Buddhism, fertilisation is the point when individual life commences. Others take the view that the development of consciousness is the defining characteristic of life. On the face of it I.V.F looks like just another way of providing these conditions, but we need to look at some of the issues involved.

At present, all embryos have as their source in vitro fertilisation (I.V.F.) techniques. This is a well-established technique producing so-called test tube babies. This can include the use of donor sperm and eggs and the freezing of embryos. I.V.F helps women who have little possibility of a natural conception to have a child. There are a range of issues here, but an important one for practising Buddhists could be the possibility of being unable to accept childlessness. Is the child wanted for its own sake or for another, less obvious reason? It could be to 'patch up' a marriage, to be the provider of care in the future, unconditional love, or status. Is this 'taking the not given'? On the other hand it is also important to recognise that many happy, healthy families are created in this way.

Another problem arises when it is understood that I.V.F increases the rate of multiple pregnancy from 1%-2% to 25%. This means there are additional risks to the mother and possible risks of life long health problems for the child. To increase the chance of I.V.F being successful, more than one embryo is sometimes implanted. In the situations where there are too many embryos a technique called selective reduction is used. This means that one or more foetuses are aborted to give the remaining ones a better chance. Is this obviously contrary to the first precept as it is taking life? Is it also giving the remaining foetuses the chance of life, and is this just false moral logic?

I.V.F. also creates 'spare' embryos, which are not implanted in the uterus and these may be frozen for further use, donated for research or allowed to die. One of the areas of research using the embryos is stem cell research.

Embryonic stem cells (ESC's) seem to have the potential to grow new organs without the problems of rejection and could reverse the damage of Parkinson's disease or diabetes. Adult blood stem cells have been transplanted in the form of bone marrow transplants for many years. They can be cultured in a lab as an unlimited source of repair tissue. ESC from embryos that have been aborted due to genetic disorders is being used to understand genetic defects such as cystic fibrosis. Here the ethical issues are to do with the use of human embryos through I.V.F. treatment and their destruction. Some work is being done on adult stem cells, but these are more difficult to identify, and are less flexible. This is important as the research side steps the ethical problems of destroying embryos.

Both forms of stem cells have all the problems surrounding the rejection of tissue found in organ transplants. One way of overcoming this would be to develop therapeutic cloning, which would make custom-made ESC's using the patient's own DNA and donor egg. As the stem cells from the resulting embryo would have the same DNA as the recipient it would not be treated as foreign by the immune system. The problem is that in theory the cloned embryo could be implanted into a womb where it could develop into a cloned baby.

This would then be reproductive cloning as in Dolly the sheep, who was the first animal to be created by scientists in a laboratory and born in 1997. Although this was seen as a wonderful breakthrough it was again at a cost. There were 276 failed attempts, which resulted in the abortion or death of the foetus. Dolly herself only lived for 5 years as she was put down due to arthritis and lung disease. Many cloned foetuses suffer from 'giantism' in which they grow so large that the womb cannot contain them.

Theological objections to cloning as 'playing God' disappear when viewed from a Buddhist perspective. As there is no creator god or a personal soul or anyone to be made in God's image there is no theological reason that cloning could not be seen as just another way of creating life. However there are likely to be strong reservations to creating human life only to destroy it as it can be seen as directly contrary to the principle of non-harm.

For Buddhists, the motivation of those involved in cloning and the likely consequences for individuals and society have to be taken into account. There are concerns about the erosion of human dignity and what it means to be human e.g. would cloned humans be seen as 'second best'? or be used as donors for transplants? There is also a fear of the return of eugenics, the movement to 'improve' the human race which fuelled many of the horrors of Nazi Germany. There seem to be few clear benefits at present, though cloning gives hope to many people.

Human genetics

The study of genetics is helping us to understand how physical and behavioural traits are inherited. The human genome project has now 'mapped' the sequences that help us to understand the biochemical processes encoded in the DNA of a cell. The map of the human genome provides information that will allow us to diagnose and eventually treat many diseases. This map will also enable us to determine the genetic basis of numerous physical and psychological traits, which raises the possibility of altering those traits through genetic intervention.

The ethical issues raised by the application of the findings of the human genome project can be grouped into two general categories: genetic engineering and genetic information. The ethical issues of genetic engineering or manipulation have covered two kinds of cells - somatic cells and germline cells. Somatic cells make up the whole body, can be manipulated, and the changes will only apply to the individual involved. Cystic fibrosis is a genetically inherited disease that is being treated experimentally by this method. At present genetic manipulation of germline cells is banned because the risks extend across generations, magnifying the impact of unforeseen consequences. The ethics of this may not be so clear-cut - if a treatment existed that could remove a disease from all future generations, would it be an ethical action to ban it? Both of these are therapeutic forms of engineering.

Enhancement engineering is regarded as both scientifically and ethically problematic. Enhancing an individual's height beyond his or her natural level may

inadvertently cause stress to other parts of the organism, such as the heart. Future generations are not likely to mind if we deprive them of genes associated with horrible diseases, but they may well feel limited by choices we have made regarding their physical, cognitive, or emotional traits. In short, there is a danger that social-historical trends and biases could place genetic limitations on future generations. Where do we stand as Buddhists on these matters? Are we ‘taking the not given’ when we manipulate our environment in such a way? Or are these ‘acts of kindness’?

The information acquired from genetic screening holds different kinds of ethical dilemmas. Screening enables faulty genes to be detected in an embryo at a very early stage without harming the embryo. The parents would then have the decision as to whether the embryo is allowed to develop or not. The sex of a baby can also be determined at this time. This technology is at the root of the present controversy over so called ‘sibling saviours’. This is where a baby with particular genetic attributes is conceived through IVF to enable another child in the family to live through donation of their stem cells or bone marrow. As Buddhists, is there a difference between choosing not to have a baby with a genetic illness and to have one of a desired sex or particular characteristic? Is life devalued?

Genetic screening of adults also poses problems. The insurance industry already screens out people with poor health, high blood pressure, familial history of heart disease etc. Genetic testing could increase discrimination from insurance companies and people may be refused certain jobs. To what extent does this pose ethical problems for Buddhists, and our commitment to kindness?

The last word

Reginald Ray writes:

“Buddhism in its most subtle and sophisticated expression, is not a tradition that seeks to provide answers to life’s questions or to dispense ‘wisdom’ to allay our fundamental angst.”³⁶

Ethics being a matter of intelligence, we need to engage with the issues that are thrown up by technology, and pursue them in line with the Dharma. We need to decide what actions are most likely to have spiritual benefit for ourselves and for others.

The Buddha, in discussion with his aunt, Mahā-Pajāpatī, defined his teaching in positive terms as:

‘...whatever is conducive to dispassion, not to passion, detachment, not to attachment, leads to a decrease in worldly gains, frugality, contentment, energy, delight in the good, and solitude. This is the norm; this is the discipline; this is the Master’s message.’³⁷

How can we do this in the technological world we live in today?

Suggested questions

1. What other kinds of technology impact on your life and on your Buddhist practice?
2. What do you think might be a Buddhist perspective on the purpose of technological research and development?
3. “Theological objections to cloning as ‘playing God’ disappear when viewed from a Buddhist perspective.” What are the Buddhist teachings that might then be brought to bear on this and similar issues?
4. What impact does technology have on your experience of contentment, on your quality of communication, and on the time you give to Buddhist practice?

Sources

The Buddha’s Eightfold Path by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications)

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=722>

Buddhist Ethics by Damien Keown (Oxford)

<http://tinyurl.com/y95basx>

The Journal of Buddhist Ethics at www.buddhistethics.org

Know your Mind by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications)

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=452>

The New Scientist at www.newscientist.com

The Clock of the Long Now by Stewart Brand (Phoenix)

Online version: http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/brand/brand_p2.html

Book: <http://tinyurl.com/y9rpnud>

Notes

³⁵ From *The Clock of the Long Now* by Stewart Brand (Phoenix, 2000)

³⁶ Reginald Ray, *Touching Enlightenment* p.14

<http://tinyurl.com/ycwelyf>

³⁷ *Vinaya* II.10. *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 8.53

Week 7: Buddhism as Environmentalism

Is there such a thing as a Buddhist environmentalism? Does Buddhism offer a distinct approach to ecological problems, and to the evidently imminent threat to the ability of the Earth's physical and biological systems to support life? In this article, Akuppa addresses these questions by drawing on the example of the Buddha's life and on the five ethical precepts.

Akuppa has had a longstanding involvement with environmental issues and is the author of '*Saving the Earth*' (Windhorse Publications, 2009).

Environmentalism

An environmentalist is someone who protects natural resources from pollution or destruction either by their deeds or their words. Environmentalism, then, is nothing new. In today's complex world, it takes on many forms. Some highlight a simple cause for ecological crisis, putting the blame on one group or another by virtue of their class, gender or nationality. Others regard human technology as the root of the problem. New technologies set up whole new patterns of resource use and pollution, and trigger social and political changes that are practically impossible to reverse.

Certainly, the environmental crisis is to do with how we use technology, how and why we develop technology, and who benefits. But we can't just blame technology as if it had a mind of its own. A Buddhist view would emphasise rather our individual and collective greed, hatred and ignorance. The reason our own states of mind are emphasised is that they are the one thing we can be sure of being able to change. However environmental problems are resolved, it will be because people learn to behave differently. Whatever our analysis of their causes, this challenge cannot be ignored. In the end, the question is, how do we motivate people to change? How do we motivate ourselves to change?

Environmentalism is a response to particular kinds of suffering. The central purpose of the Buddha's teachings was also to end suffering. So perhaps it would be more fruitful to think not of a Buddhist environmentalism, but of Buddhism as environmentalism. It will not be another ideological position, nor a political platform. It will be what it has always been - a path, or journey, of transformation that involves every part of us – body, heart and mind.

Leaving the palace

Buddhism is a quest to end suffering. This includes all kinds of suffering. In the Buddha's life, he encountered it in the form of the sickness, old age and death he saw outside the palace walls. It surfaced too in his feeling of being hemmed in inside his palace. And it was present throughout his period of teaching in the world he lived in, riven by war and caste. Suffering spurred the Buddha first to leave the palace, to break the bounds of status and material security. In time, the suffering of others was to shape his whole life, a life of simple wandering, and of

heart to heart communication that moved the poorest and richest alike. And yet this was no life of miserable self-sacrifice, but a liberated life of beauty and bliss. In our western lifestyles, many of us dwell in a kind of palace, relatively insulated from the kind of poverty and insecurity that affects much of the world. For the Buddha, to have stayed in the palace would have been a life of limitation, a life not fully lived. So how do we feel about life in our own palace? The honest answer might be that we like the enjoyment, security and privilege it brings. The trouble is, since these are based on impermanent and illusory foundations, they are bound to have their flipside. This takes the form, I suggest, of a nagging, perhaps subconscious experience of the opposites of enjoyment, security and privilege – namely, boredom, anxiety and guilt.

Boredom, anxiety and guilt

To the extent that we identify happiness with material possessions, we will experience boredom. It is natural for us to seek a deep and lasting happiness, but, as the Buddha pointed out, to try to find it in transient things such as wealth, novelty or status is simply mistaken. It is not that these things are bad in themselves; it's just that they cannot give us the deep happiness and fulfilment that we might want from them. In a materialistic lifestyle, true happiness is an ever-receding mirage.

Anxiety is bound up with this too. We have to spend time, money and mental energy keeping up the payments on our possessions, protecting them, insuring them and so on. In the background lies the knowledge that the whole economic system that supports such lifestyles is backed up by huge military forces and precarious trading relations. We know that no palace is completely secure, so if all our hopes of happiness are bound up in palace life, we cannot help but have a nagging anxiety.

And even if we try to ignore it, we know there is some connection between our affluence on the one hand and poverty and environmental degradation on the other. To live in a palace is to live a life of privileged disconnection. But the disconnection is illusory. Our true nature as human beings is that we are connected with other people and with the natural world. If only via our televisions, we cannot help but be aware of the suffering outside the walls - half a billion people without clean water; animals under stress as their habitats disappear; the threats of pollution and climate change. On some level we know that ordinary everyday actions affect other peoples' lives and natural systems. If this is not acknowledged, it can very easily turn into a dull sense of guilt.

This is not to say that boredom, anxiety and guilt are the experience of everyone in westernised societies. I am simply arguing that they seem to accompany lifestyles that are founded on harmful relationships with other people and the natural world. From a Buddhist point of view, there is a good reason for this. To attempt to seek lasting fulfilment from transient things, or to base your life on a privileged disconnection from others, is to mistake the nature of reality, the way things are.

Going Forth

So just like the Buddha, we have a choice. We can retreat into our palace, or we can set out on a journey of change. The spirit of 'going forth' will be at the heart of Buddhism as environmentalism. The experience of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha can never just be a change of heart but is bound to make a practical difference, as Sangharakshita makes clear:

“Going forth into homelessness draws attention to the extent of the reorganization which, regardless of whether or not one becomes a monk in the formal sense, the experience inevitably brings about in the pattern of one’s daily life.”³⁸

What, then, is the spirit of Going Forth? What would Buddhism as environmentalism feel like? Perhaps we can compare it to what the Buddha-to-be might have felt when leaving the palace. We can imagine he would have needed some determination and courage to leave behind everything that was familiar to him, everything that gave him security. He must have been wholehearted in his quest and clear in his mind about the unsatisfactoriness of palace life, for himself and those he loved. But he must also have heard a call to adventure, a sense of opening to the possibilities of life. Stealing through the night on his horse, he had let go of all the conventional expectations placed on him, all the narrow ways he was being defined. No doubt there will have been fear, but there must also have been a real sense of surrendering to life, a great upwelling of freedom and energy. If we look around, we will see all sorts of responses to the ecological crisis. There is outright denial by some people that anything is wrong; others are locked in a kind of paralysed despair, or just hope that someone else will come up with a solution. Some make changes to their lifestyles, but perhaps out of a dry, and even self-righteous, sense of duty. Others might throw themselves into a kind of activism that spreads more anxiety, gloominess or anger and really just makes things worse.

A truly Buddhist response will be very different in spirit. It will be infused with a sense of liberation, the taste of freedom. At each step, it will connect us more deeply and richly with others, and with the natural world. It will mean having the courage to let go of old patterns, habits, ways of identifying ourselves, and sources of security. But that will not be in the spirit of miserable self-denial, but rather as a journey of adventure, opening out to the forces of life.

The Five Liberations

At the time he left the palace, the Buddha-to-be was looking for a way to end suffering. His journey led ultimately to the foot of the Bodhi tree and the experience we call Enlightenment, a complete waking up to the nature of suffering, its causes and the way out of suffering. His life turned from a quest for truth to the communication of a systematic path that others could follow.

The path is founded on the practice of meditation. When meditating, we encounter our own habits of mind - craving, hatred, a reluctance to look at things, a lack of

energy or sense of purpose. These negative habits are the very things that bind us in to a harmful relationship with the environment. What estranges us from meditation estranges us from life. They are what prevent us from a healthy response to the world.

In meditation, we learn that we have a choice. In the place of habits that disconnect us from life, we can strengthen habits that connect - habits of kindness and clarity. The Buddha's guidance on how to cultivate habits that can transform our everyday life is set out in the five precepts. From these five guidelines we can draw a more detailed picture of a Buddhist response to the ecological crisis, of Buddhism as environmentalism. It will be environmentalism not with the taste of duty, blame or desperation, but an environmentalism whose taste is freedom.

1. The Liberation that comes from not harming life

Buddhist teachings emphasise that actions have consequences. We can see that this is true if we look at the intricate ecological systems of the natural world. Living systems are so interlinked that our actions can have unintended and unseen consequences half a world away. This is significant enough on an ordinary level - it means that it simply will not work to treat the world as a machine for supplying our material wants, or as a giant dustbin for all of our rubbish.

But it's not just that we are connected through our material transactions. There is a deeper level on which life is intrinsically connected. We can begin to see this in our experience through our relationships with others. If we are harming other life in any way, then we harm our own happiness. Our own happiness is a mirror of how we treat others. This is because the life in ourselves is not ultimately separate from the life in others.

In today's world of mass technology and international trade, we are often far removed from the consequences of our actions for other people or living things. But that does not mean that those actions will not affect us here and now. Ignorance of, or not looking at, the effects of what pollution we emit, or what goods we buy, alienates us from life. It deprives us of a healthy sense of living in harmony with others and with the world. But if we begin to become aware of those effects, and change our habits, then we can begin to enjoy a healthy, joyful sense of connection.

What we can do, over a period of time, is to train ourselves to push back the boundaries of our sensitivity to other living things. Non-harm is not a rule or an external observance, but a state of heart and mind. In each situation, we bring to bear whatever wisdom and compassion we have and try to avoid causing harm. And in each situation, we are becoming more aware of life, and less bound in our own self-centred concerns. This progressive liberation from causing harm will be at the heart of a Buddhist ecological awareness.

2. The Liberation that comes from giving and sharing

Giving and sharing are powerful acts because they undermine the notion, taken for granted by some economists, that we all act out of economic self-interest and that economic growth is the greatest good. They can be seen as a kind of liberation movement. Liberation movements arise when people refuse to assent any longer to a regime or ideology that is oppressing them. The idea of freedom becomes contagious and pressure for change becomes irresistible. If the oppressions of westernised societies are materialism, and our atomisation into individual consuming units, then giving and sharing, as their direct opposites, are subversive acts.

Individual acts of giving and sharing build communities - they are what community is made of. Communities might be local or global, and they might be based on the giving and sharing of such things as time, energy and knowledge as well as material things, but in any case they free us from our isolated sense of self. Sometimes it might feel more comfortable to stay behind our own front door, but it is an impoverished life that is not engaged with community at some level. So a Buddhist environmentalism will never be a solo effort - it will be rooted in community. That might take the form of Sangha – community with other Buddhists – or it might mean other forms of community that are based on positive ethical values.

Acting as part of a community frees us from the commonly held frame of mind that reduces our predicament to, on the one hand, ‘me’ and my limited resources of time and energy, and on the other, the whole complex of apparently insuperable global problems. This results either in grandiose ambition or, more commonly, paralysed inaction or just not knowing where to start. In sharing our time, energy and qualities with others, we become more than the sum of our parts. It is only in doing so that we can begin to affect the scale of change that is needed, and at the same time free ourselves of the burden of carrying the world on our shoulders.

3. The Liberation that comes from leading a simple life

We live in a time when food is scarce for the many because so much land is used to supply meat and biofuels to the few. And much of what we consume has hidden costs, such as the carbon emissions caused by transporting it. The most effective response is just to consume less, and consume more simply. In today’s world, simple living frees up resources to meet other people’s needs. However, it can also free ourselves.

The Buddha taught simplicity as a guideline for living because he knew how easily distracted we are, how easily we can get caught up in inconsequential detail. Being caught up with possessions alienates us from other people, or brings us into conflict or competition with them. We can become more concerned about what car we drive than the purpose of the journey; or more concerned about which phone we use than we are about the quality of what we communicate through it.

The point of simplicity is not to deny ourselves things for the sake of it, but rather to strip away some of the inessentials of life so that what is essential can shine through. The prospect might not appeal. If we try, at least for a while, to do without some of our usual distractions, we might find ourselves bored. But creating the space can also allow a richer experience of life to emerge, and a contentment that is less dependent on stimulation or possessions.

So the liberation that comes from leading a simple life is a liberation of time, energy and resources, a streamlining of our lives around their central purpose. It can lead to what Sangharakshita has called an ‘aesthetic simplicity’. ‘The truly simple life,’ he writes, ‘glows with significance, for its simplicity is not the dead simplicity of a skeleton but the living simplicity of a flower or a great work of art.’

4. The Liberation that comes from speaking out the truth

The Buddha’s fourth guideline for living life is truthful communication. We often think of this as just not telling lies. But this is only half the story – the precept is telling us that to be happy, fully human and free, we need to learn how to speak out the truth. When we see something that needs to be communicated, we need to do so. Not only that, but we need to learn how to speak out skilfully in a way that can really be heard.

Our voices are part of the ecosystem. If we see some harm being done - to people, animals or the natural world in general – then to speak out is an expression of our connection with life. To put it in the language of systems, our voices are an important channel of feedback within the systems that are causing harm. If further harm is to be avoided, the global ecosystem needs advocates within human society. And by speaking out effectively, we are not only expressing, but also affirming and strengthening our connection with life. It might take many forms – conversations with friends, writing to those in power, supporting a campaign.

To develop the skill and habit of speaking out the truth, we will need to identify and overcome our own obstacles. Perhaps we are lazy or unconfident about doing so. Or perhaps we do speak up, but we are so gloomy, angry or authoritarian that people switch off when they hear us! We need to learn how to give voice to our heartfelt connection with living beings - both those we are speaking up for, and those we are speaking to. The Buddha himself exemplified this – speaking up on behalf of those of low caste, by winning over the hearts and minds of many of those whose actions were contributing to their oppression.

5. The Liberation that comes from awareness and understanding

What is our greatest fear about the ecological crisis? Very many people shy away from thinking about this question, or prefer not to talk about it with others. This reluctance to face pain is understandable and at times, perhaps, even necessary. But in the long run the ‘not looking’ can become a prison for us, turning into a dull sense of dread, inhibiting a full enjoyment of our lives.

Buddhism does not offer any easy answers to this. But it does encourage us to face our fears and look at reality. Perhaps some of the fear of ecological crisis is fear of personal hardship, or fear of our own death or of those we love. And the scenarios that some people predict might cause us to ponder the prospect of death on a greater scale, and the fear that if we can't leave a healthy world behind us, that this renders our lives now futile and meaningless.

The Buddha's teaching of impermanence reminds us that change is part of reality. Even without imminent ecological crisis, nothing, not even the Earth, is fixed, substantial and permanent. The more we understand this, the more we understand that the meaning and significance of our lives does not lie in what material conditions we live in or leave behind. It lies in our connectedness with life.

But how can we be confident that this is so? As with everything in Buddhism, it is not a question of being intellectually convinced, but of trying and seeing for oneself. If we live a life of non-harm, sharing with others, simplified around a sense of purpose, and speaking out for life, then we experience connectedness more and more deeply. It shows itself as a natural mettā towards others, and a sense of beauty in the natural world. If we really look at these experiences, we will see that their very nature is to connect us with a significance that goes beyond our narrow sense of who we are, beyond words, beyond anything material or fixed.

This is how we free ourselves from the prison of fear. It is not a freedom that detaches us from the world, as if the world doesn't really matter. On the contrary, it is the freedom from a stultifying attachment to particular outcomes that helps us fulfil our potential to bring about change. In the words of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, "When you recognise the empty nature, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns, uncontrived and effortless."

Suggested questions

1. Do you see awareness of environmental issues as part of your Buddhist practice? If so, in what way? And if not, why not?
2. Do you, or have you, experienced, anything akin to the boredom, anxiety and guilt described here as being endemic in our society?
3. In what ways related to the natural world might you make a practice of non-harm?
4. What practical steps could you take towards 'aesthetic simplicity'?
5. Does being an advocate for the environment appeal to you? If so, what ways do you have of speaking out?
6. What are your feelings about the ecological crisis? And what gives you hope?

Notes

³⁸ *A History of My Going For Refuge*, p. 104

http://www.sangharakshita.org/_books/history-refuge.pdf

Week 8: An Interconnected World – Conclusion

In this section we review the areas covered in the module and introduce some responses from a Buddhist perspective. Inner and outer spiritual work are indivisible and we need to find new ways to express Buddhism in the 21st century, an intention which the Triratna Buddhist Community embraces to its core. We explore the themes of equanimity and anger which are so pertinent to the Interconnected World theme.

The section is written by Maitrisara, who has a longstanding interest in the application of the Dharma to current global issues and most of the retreats she teaches reflect this interest. She has a background in education and works within the voluntary sector.

Responsibility and community

In this course, we have used Buddhist ethics as a framework to look at the social, political, ecological and technological issues of the 21st century. Buddhism offers a fresh vision of *community* in a divided world:

- Relating to each other as true individuals (*Unit 2*) and deciding which groups we can be part of that nourish our spiritual growth and give us the opportunity for compassionate practice.
- Encountering what Buddhism has to offer the cultivation of peace (*Unit 3*), looking at how easily we can polarise with others in a collective delusive manifestation of the ‘wego’.
- Interpreting equality (*Unit 4*) within Buddhism as an equality of positive regard and of love, the universal quality of *mettā* which is so central to Buddhist practice.

Ethics is primarily an expression of *responsibility* – and the course has looked at our responsibilities within our collective economic affairs; for the choices we make in our use of technology; and for the way we live alongside our brother and sister species on the Earth.

- Through the central principle of generosity or *dāna*, Buddhist thinking may help us evolve a new economics (*Unit 5*) – “...an economics as if people and the planet mattered.”
- Technology (*Unit 6*) poses some complicated moral issues for society as a whole. Buddhist ethical considerations are those of compassion towards the individuals involved. The effect of the computer and the ever quickening rushing pace of Western culture can pose quite a challenge to mindfulness practice in the 21st century.
- Our alienation from our planet home (*Unit 7*) causes great suffering for ourselves. The endemic conditions of boredom, anxiety and guilt are three poisons directly resulting from our lives in materialist societies. Practising

the precepts with an ecological consciousness can liberate us from this condition of disconnection.

Self or world first?

Some Buddhist discussions about engagement have become mired in the argument of whether one's meditation practice should be prioritised to enable someone to take an active part in the world at a later date. The point is there is no division between 'my practice' and 'being active in the world'; this is a false dualism. An understanding of interdependence (and ecology) suggests that we are in a mutually influencing relationship with our environment. All phenomena are interconnected and we are not separate from other phenomena – how could we not act in solidarity with other beings? These are two indivisible aspects of practice. As Gary Snyder said, "We are going to have to learn to meditate with our hands." Sangharakshita puts it like this:

"Broadly speaking, we may say, there are two views. The first view says we must change the system... And the other view is that one must change the individual... if we want to change the world, we must change ourselves.

The first view, that we must change the system, is generally regarded as the secular view, not to say the materialistic view, and the second, that we must change ourselves, is generally regarded as the spiritual view.

Personally, I cannot agree with either view completely. In fact they are not really mutually exclusive. Spiritual movements ...are generally expected to adopt the second view; that is to say the spiritual view, the view that we must change ourselves, improve ourselves, and then everything will be all right; the world, almost automatically, will be a better and a happier place.

But the Triratna Buddhist Community does not share this view, this so-called spiritual view. In the Triratna Buddhist Community we certainly are concerned with the development of the individual; we regard this as absolutely crucial, absolutely fundamental, even where the question of transforming the world into a spiritual community is concerned.

But at the same time, we do recognise that external conditions can and do help or hinder. If we live under the right system, it is easier to develop, and if we live under the wrong system, it is more difficult." ³⁹

And Joanna Macy points to the potential of social and ecological action as a practice:

"It's my experience that the world itself had a role to play in our liberation. Its very pressures, pains and risks can wake us up – release us from the bonds of ego and guide us home to our vast true nature."

Applying the Buddha's teaching

There are certainly many examples of positive action for peace, social equality and ecological awareness within Buddhist scriptures. For example, the monastic Sangha which plays a large part in Buddhist history emphasised simplicity and frugality.

Despite this, modern Buddhism practised in the West has extended beyond these basic principles, attempting to apply them to the historical context we find ourselves in. It is a living tradition and needs to be relevant for our times. The Triratna Buddhist Community is founded on this principle. This adaptive process has been a notable feature of the arising of Buddhism in the many different cultures it has travelled through. Indeed, it is what keeps it creative and vibrant.

And the world is continuously changing. So it is important to have access to information sources which can offer fresh thinking and examples of action which address the latest manifestations of greed, hatred and delusion in our world from a Dharmic perspective. Websites such as the Triratna Buddhist Community News site, the Network of Engaged Buddhists in the UK or the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in the US are good starting points with links to many other initiatives and reflections.

Vishvapani also broadcasts for the BBC on Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* and transcripts of past broadcasts can be accessed from the BBC website. New talks come out on the Free Buddhist Audio site referring to topical issues and on websites such as Buddhafield - a Triratna project specialising in the relationship between the Dharma and ecology (see further resources below for links).

If in doubt, we can refer to the Buddha's own guidance on how to judge whether we are applying the principles of the Dharma with integrity. In the famous advice to the Kalamas, he suggests we assess against the result of our efforts based on our own experience:

“Do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary law or with what has come down in scriptures or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with liking for a view after pondering over it or with someone else's ability or with the thought 'The monk is our teacher.' When you know yourselves: 'These things are wholesome, blameless, commended by the wise, and being adopted and put into effect they lead to welfare and happiness' then you should practice and abide in them...”

Equanimity: a Buddhist contribution

The key question that has been explored in this course is, “What do Buddhists have to offer a suffering world?”

One answer might be that Buddhists can try to offer equanimity (*upekkhā*). Donald Rothberg defines equanimity as having to do with balance, with even-mindedness,

and with unshakeability/imperturbability – meaning not being unduly influenced by the eight worldly winds (of pleasure and pain; gain and loss; fame and disrepute; praise and blame) as well as having to do with a deep wisdom that understands the causes and conditions of suffering and happiness in a long-term perspective of perhaps thousands of years.

Rothberg then goes on to explore the 'near enemies' of equanimity, which mimic it but are based on a sense of separation and superiority:

“The near enemy of equanimity mentioned in the classical texts is indifference. Indifference is marked by a lack of connection to another's happiness or suffering, which suggests both a self-centredness and a distance from the experience of the other. Such indifference may be based in a retreat to a kind of fabricated mental world (or, in our times, the virtual world) where I am not touched by anything, and yet I may appear authentically calm and equanimous, perhaps even with a spiritual ambience. I may believe: 'I'm equanimous. The sorrows of the world don't really affect me because I'm not attached to how things are.' When we look carefully, however, we may find little care and little connection, but rather an indifference based in fear or aversion, that justifies itself by using spiritual language...

In exploring the nature of equanimity in the midst of action in the world, we need to account for and work through not only indifference but what appear to be a number of related 'near enemies' that may masquerade as equanimity. They include the following: ...denial, complacency, resignation, acquiescence, numbness, intellectual aloofness, rationalization, cynicism, dogmatism and fear of strong emotions, particularly anger.

These near enemies of equanimity rest, in Buddhist terms, on aversion to, and distancing from, suffering, on the one hand, and grasping after the pleasant qualities of equanimity, on the other. Both in turn depend on an underlying ignorance.”⁴⁰

Anger – is it ever useful?

Akuppa writes about anger and hatred in his book *Touching the Earth*, this extract summarises some useful pointers and suggestions:

“Is there really a problem with hatred and anger if they give us the energy to confront the causes of the problem? Is this not better than dozing in our armchairs or privately becoming hot under the collar? Firstly, we can make a useful distinction between hatred on the one hand and anger on the other. An expression of anger can be simply a sudden release of frustrated energy. But even if it is not meant to harm anyone, it can be unpleasant to be on the receiving end and we need to learn to control it. This might involve the following:

- Learn to speak your mind clearly, in an appropriate way at an appropriate time. By doing so, you are preventing the energy from becoming frustrated in the first place. It might help to rehearse beforehand what you're going to say.
- Understand what holds you back from speaking your mind on social and ecological issues – lack of confidence, laziness, or feelings of powerlessness?
- Don't deny your anger, but look for what's positive underneath it, such as a desire that people have more respect for each other and the environment.
- Think through the consequences of expressing anger – is it actually going to make things better or just alienate people?
- Pause before speaking, and take a deep breath.
- Appreciate that there are limits to how much one can improve the world – it is never going to be perfect.

Realistically, this may take some time. In the meantime, a reasonably careful expression of anger might be preferable to seething with rage or the repression of one's emotions to the point of dull quiescence.

Hatred on the other hand, is a vindictive desire for someone else's suffering. It may arise from unacknowledged sense of personal inadequacy, or the fear of what other people think of us, or from a failure to take responsibility for our own plight. In Buddhism, it is regarded as the worst state of mind we can get ourselves into because it isolates us from others and is unpleasant or even hellish to experience. Nothing diminishes us so much as hatred.

The most direct way of defusing hatred is to use the imagination to understand and appreciate the other person as a human being. You can put yourself in the shoes of the politician, or the head of the multinational corporation, or whoever is the object of your hatred, and imagine their background, their history, and all the things that have made them what they are. The more that we can do this, the more our energy can be directed not against the person, but against the values and assumptions they represent. This exercise is one of the things we do in meditation.

It might also help to recall a time in your own past when you have acted out of a similar ignorance or selfishness. What was it that changed you – was it that people expressed hatred towards you, or was it that someone communicated with you as one human being to another? This can remind us that people can change, and that, in the Buddha's own words, hatred is not stilled by hatred.

Anger and hatred can be distinguished in theory but in practice it can be difficult enough even as an individual to prevent one giving rise to the other. It

is more difficult still with a crowd of many thousands of people. If we get into such situations, we need to keep a clear head and make our own decisions. If our motivation for [social and ecological action] is an attitude of non-violence, then this can only be undermined by physical or verbal violence. Perhaps most significantly, violence simply won't work as a political strategy. The success of [social change movements] will depend on the creation of a broad consensus within peaceful societies. ... Hatred is ugly and it repels the very people that [activists] need to convince.”

Akappa captures the spirit of the Bodhisattva path in the ‘*Shambala Mind Trainings*’ (published in *Saving the Earth*):

Firmly establish your intention to live your life for the healing of the world. Be conscious of it, honour it, nurture it every day.

Do not meet power on its own terms. See through to its real nature--mind and heart made. Lead your response from that.

Simplify. Clear away the dead wood in your life. Look for the heartwood and give it first call on your time, the best of your energy.

Put down the leaden burden of saving the world alone...

As a bird flies on two wings, balance outer activity with inner sustenance.

With great patience to yourself, learn to make beautiful each action, word, and thought.

Sit with hatred until you feel the fear beneath it. Sit with fear until you feel the compassion beneath that.

Do not set your heart on particular results. Enjoy positive action for its own sake and rest confident that it will bear fruit.

Staying open, staying grounded, remember that you are the inheritor of the strengths of thousands of generations of life.

Staying open, staying grounded, recall that the thankful prayers of future generations are silently with you.

Staying open, staying grounded, know that the deep forces of Nature will emerge in the aid of those who defend the Earth.

When you see weapons of hate, disarm them with love.

When you see armies of greed, meet them in the spirit of sharing.

When you see fortresses of narrow-mindedness, breach them with truth.

When forces of power seek to isolate us from each other, reach out with joy.

In it all and through it all, holding to your intention, let go into the music of life. Dance!

Suggested questions

1. Can anger be a force for good?
2. What does the word ‘equanimity’ mean to you? Can you think of any times when you have had a glimpse of it?
3. Which of the Shambala Mind trainings most speak to you and how would you express them in your life?
4. Ask yourself ‘What change would I like to bring about in the world; what would I like to be doing; what steps can I take in that direction?’

Projects

As with all the modules of the *Dharma Training Course*, this module concludes with the opportunity to present a project to your group on a topic arising from the material you have been studying. You may wish to take one of the suggested questions and explore it in more detail than you have been able to in the weekly meetings or you may want to take up a theme or question of your own. Whatever you choose, the purpose of the projects is to give you the opportunity to practise the second level of wisdom more fully i.e. the level of reflection or *Cintā-mayī-prajñā*. It is also a good way to share something of your experience with the group.

Taking it further

If you want to explore the material in this module further or you are looking for references for your project, the following list may be helpful.

Books

Akappa, *Saving the Earth* (Windhorse Publications 2009) – a very readable book particularly addressing environmental issues:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=735>

Donald Rothberg, *The Engaged Spiritual Life* (Beacon Press, 2006). A very experienced thinker and communicator about political, social and ecological concerns in relation to the Dharma. Lots of good activities and a readable style.

<http://tinyurl.com/lgf28w>

Susan Moon (ed.), *Not Turning Away* (Shambala, 2004). An anthology of writings about different social issues from the American magazine *Turning Wheel*:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8gafex>

Subhuti, *Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition* (Windhorse Publications, 1994). Chapter 9 is one of the best sources for Sangharakshita's thinking on the 'New Society':

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=377>

Websites

<http://www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk>: a good UK website signposting to many other sources of ideas and action. Updated regularly.

<http://www.bpf.org>: the website of arguably the world's biggest organisation addressing the Dharma and our interconnected world.

<http://fwbo-news.org>: the Triratna News site – good sources of projects and events within the Triratna Sangha.

<http://www.joannamacy.net>: well-known teacher and writer on compassionate action for the world as practice.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/thought/> (search for Vishvapani): topical short pieces from this famous British spiritual broadcasting tradition.

<http://www.buddhafield.com>: some good talks from the talks section often address current issues.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com>: excellent archive of talks, some of them transcribed, from all around the Triratna. Some recommended, relevant talks available include:

Parami: *Out of Compassion for the World*, May 2008:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC56>

Sangharakshita: *Buddhism, World Peace, and Nuclear War*, 1984

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=162>

Sangharakshita: *A Blueprint for a New World*, 1976

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=134>

Padmavajra: *Training in the Six Paramitas* (series of six talks), 2004

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X40>

Sangharakshita: *Remembering Ambedkar*, 2006

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=BH09>

Notes

³⁹ Sangharakshita, *Blueprint for a New World* 1976 (lecture)

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=134>

⁴⁰ Donald Rothberg, chapter 9: *Acting With Equanimity* in *The Engaged Spiritual Life*, (Beacon Press, 2006):

<http://tinyurl.com/y9ohela>

41 Akuppa, *Touching the Earth, A Buddhist Guide to Saving the Planet* (Windhorse Publications, 2002)

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=677>