

The Three Poisons, Institutionalized

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Shakyamuni the historical Buddha lived at least 2400 years ago. Buddhism began as an Iron Age religion, and all its teachings are pre-modern. So can Buddhism really help us understand and respond to contemporary social problems such as economic globalization and biotechnology, war and terrorism (and the war on terrorism), climate change and other ecological crises?

What the Buddha did understand is human *dukkha*: how it works, what causes it, and how to end it. *Dukkha* is usually translated as “suffering,” but the point of *dukkha* is that even those who are wealthy and healthy experience a basic dissatisfaction, a disease, which continually festers. That we find life dissatisfactory, one damn problem after another, is not accidental, because it is the nature of our unawakened minds to be bothered about something.

According to early Buddhism there are three types of *dukkha*. Everything we usually identify as physical and mental suffering – including being separated from those we want to be with, and stuck with those we don’t want to be with (the Buddha had a sense of humor!) – is included in the first type of *dukkha*.

The second type is the *dukkha* due to impermanence: the realization that, although I might be enjoying an ice-cream cone right now, it will soon be finished. The best example is our awareness of death, which haunts our appreciation of life. Knowing that death is inevitable casts a shadow that usually hinders our ability to live fully now.

The third type of *dukkha* is more difficult to understand. It is *dukkha* due to “conditioned states,” which is a reference to *anatta* “not-self.” My deepest frustration is caused by my sense of being a self that is separate from the world I am in. This

sense of separation is illusory – in fact, it is our most dangerous delusion. A modern way to express this truth is that the ego-self has no reality of its own because it is a psycho-social-linguistic construct. This allows for the possibility of a deconstruction and a reconstruction, which is what the spiritual path is about. We are prompted to undertake such a spiritual quest because our lack of reality is normally experienced as an uncomfortable hole or emptiness at our very core. Being a construct, the sense of self is ungrounded and therefore inherently insecure. We *feel* this problem as a sense of inadequacy, of *lack*, which is a source of continual frustration because it is never resolved.

In compensation, we usually spend our lives trying to accomplish things that (we think) will make us more real. But no matter how hard I try, my anxious sense-of-self can never become a *real* self. The tendency is to identify with and become attached to something *in* the world, in the belief that it can make me feel whole and complete. “If I can get enough money ... if I become famous or powerful ... if I find the right lover ...” and so forth. None of these attempts succeed, however, because the basic problem is spiritual and thus requires a spiritual solution: realizing the true nature of the emptiness at my core, which transforms that core and enables me to stop clinging.

But what about *collective* selves? Don't we also have a group sense of separation between ourselves “inside” and the rest of the world “outside”? We Americans (Japanese, Chinese, etc.) *here* are different from other people *over there*. Our country (culture, religion, etc.) is better than their country...

This realization has an uncomfortable implication. If my individual sense of self is the basic source of my *dukkha*, because I can never feel secure enough, what about collective senses of self? Is there such a thing as collective *dukkha*? Collective karma?

In fact, many of our social problems can be traced back to such a group ego, when we identify with our own gender, race, ethnic group, nation, religion, etc., and discriminate between our group and another group. It is ironic that institutionalized religion often reinforces this discrimination, because religion at its best encourages us to subvert such problematic dualisms between self and other. For example, Buddhist

non-discrimination does not involve privileging *us* over *them*, because selflessness provides the foundation for Buddhist social action too. In some ways, however, our present situation has become quite different from that of Shakyamuni Buddha. Today we have not only much more powerful scientific technologies but also much more powerful social institutions.

The Three Roots of Evil, Institutionalized

From a Buddhist perspective, the problem with modern institutions is that they *tend to take on a life of their own as new types of collective ego*. Consider, for example, how a big corporation works. Even if the CEO of a transnational company wants to be socially responsible, he or she is limited by the expectations of stockholders. If profits are threatened by his sensitivity to environmental concerns, he is likely to lose his job. Large corporations are new forms of *impersonal* collective self, which are very good at preserving themselves and increasing their power, quite apart from the personal motivations of the individuals who serve them. John Ralston Saul describes this as the “amorality” of modern organizations:

AMORALITY: A quality admired and rewarded in modern organizations, where it is referred to through metaphors such as professionalism and efficiency . . . Immorality is doing wrong of our own volition. Amorality is doing it because a structure or an organization expects us to do it. Amorality is thus worse than immorality because it involves denying our responsibility and therefore our existence as anything more than an animal. (*The Doubter's Companion*)

There is another Buddhist principle that can help us understand this connection between collective selves and collective *dukkha*: the three unwholesome motivations, also known as the three poisons -- greed, ill will, and delusion. The Buddhist understanding of karma emphasizes the role of intentions, because one's sense of self is composed largely of habitual intentions and the habitual actions that follow from them. Instead of emphasizing the duality between good and evil, Buddhism distinguishes between wholesome and unwholesome (*kusala/akusalamula*) tendencies. Negative motivations reinforce the sense of separation between myself

and others. That is why they need to be transformed into their more wholesome and nondual counterparts: greed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, and delusion into wisdom.

That brings us to perhaps the most important question for socially engaged Buddhism: do the three poisons also operate collectively? If there are collective selves, does that mean there are also collective greed, collective ill will, collective delusion? To ask the question in this way is to realize the answer. Our present economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism institutionalizes ill will, and our corporate media institutionalize delusion. To repeat, the problem is not only that the three poisons operate collectively but that they have taken on a life of their own. Today it is crucial for us to wake up and face the implications of these three institutional poisons.

Institutionalized greed. Despite all its benefits, our economic system institutionalizes greed in at least two ways: corporations are never profitable enough, and people never consume enough. To increase profits, we must be conditioned into finding the meaning of our lives in buying and consuming.

Consider how the stock market works. It tends to function as an ethical “black hole” that dilutes the responsibility for the actual consequences of the collective greed that now fuels economic growth. On the one side of that hole, investors want increasing returns in the form of dividends and higher share prices. That’s all that most of them care about, or need to care about – not because investors are bad people, but because the system doesn’t encourage any other kind of responsibility. On the other side of that black hole, however, this generalized expectation translates into an impersonal but constant pressure for profitability and growth, preferably in the short run. The globalization of corporate capitalism means that this emphasis on profitability and growth are becoming increasingly important as the engine of the world’s economic activity. Everything else, including the environment and the quality of life, tends to become subordinated to this anonymous demand for ever-more profit and growth, a goal that can never be satisfied. The biosphere is converted into “resources,” and people into “human resources.”

The basic idea of capitalism is capital: using money to make more money. The other

side of capital investment is debt. A capitalist economy is an economy that runs on debt and requires a society that is comfortable with large amounts of indebtedness. But the debt is always bigger than the original loan. Those who invest expect to get more back than their original investment. This is another way to understand the general pressure for continuous growth and expansion: because that is the only way to repay the accumulating debt. The result is a collective future-orientation: the present is never good enough, the future will (or *must*) be better.

Who is responsible for the pressure for growth? The system has attained a life of its own. We all participate in this process, as workers, employers, consumers, investors, and pensioners, with little if any personal sense of moral responsibility for what happens. Such awareness has been diffused so completely that it is lost in the impersonal anonymity of the corporate economic system. In other words, greed has been thoroughly institutionalized.

Institutionalized ill will. Many examples spring to mind. Racism. Undocumented immigrants. Our punitive judicial system. But the “best” example, by far, is the plague of militarism. The United States has been a militarized society since World War II, and increasingly so. In the twentieth century at least 105 million people, and perhaps as many as 170 million, were killed in war -- most of them non-combatants. Global military expenditures, including the arms trade, amounted to the world’s largest expenditure in 2005: over a trillion dollars, about half of that spent by the U.S. alone. To put this in perspective, the United Nations spends about \$10 billion a year.

From a Buddhist perspective, the “war on terror” looks like an Abrahamic civil war. Despite being on opposite sides, George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden share a similar understanding about the struggle between good and evil, and the need for good to destroy evil by any means necessary. Ironically, however, one of the main causes of evil has been the attempt to get rid of evil. Hitler, Stalin and Mao were all attempting to purify humanity by eliminating its negative elements (Jews, kulaks, landlords). Are we following in their footsteps?

Most recently, the second Iraq War, based on lies and propaganda, has obviously been a disaster, even as the war on terror has been making all of us less secure, because

every “terrorist” we kill or torture leaves many grieving relatives and outraged friends. Terrorism cannot be destroyed militarily because it is a tactic, not an enemy. If war is the terrorism of the rich, terrorism is the war of the poor and disempowered. We must find other ways to address its root causes.

The basic problem with war is that, whether we are “the good guys” or “the bad guys,” it promotes and rationalizes the very worst part of ourselves: we are encouraged to kill and brutalize other human beings. In doing these things to others, though, we also do them to ourselves. This karma is very simple. To brutalize another is to brutalize myself – that is, to become the kind of person who brutalizes. This is the sort of behavior we would never do by ourselves, except for a very small number who receive our heaviest social retribution. In war, however, such behavior is sanctioned. Why? Because it is always justified as collective self-defense. We all accept the right and necessity to defend ourselves, don’t we? If someone invades my home and attacks me, it’s okay to hurt them in self-defense, even kill them, if necessary. War is national self-defense, and, as we know all too well today, national defense can be used to rationalize anything, including torture and what is euphemistically called “preventive war.”

It’s curious, though, that our national self-defense requires us to have at least 737 (the official number in 2005) overseas military installations, in 135 countries. It turns out that, in order to defend ourselves, we have to dominate the rest of the world. While we insist that other nations do not develop nuclear weapons, we spend almost \$18 billion a year to maintain and develop our own stockpile today equivalent to about 150,000 Hiroshima-size bombs. (Since 1997 the U.S. has conducted 23 “subcritical” nuclear tests to help design new nuclear weapons.) Using even two or three percent of those bombs would end civilization as we know it! No matter how hard as we try, no matter how many weapons we have, it seems like we can never feel secure enough.

In sum, our huge military-industrial complexes institutionalize ill will. Our collective negativity has taken on a life of its own, with a self-reinforcing logic likely to destroy us all if we don’t find a way to subvert it..

Institutionalized delusion. “The Buddha is literally “the awakened one,” which

implies that the rest of us are unawakened. We live in a dream-like world. How so? Each of us lives inside an individual bubble of delusions, which distorts our perceptions and expectations. Buddhist practitioners are familiar with this problem, yet we also dwell together within a much bigger bubble that largely determines how we collectively understand the world and ourselves. The institution most responsible for moulding our collective sense of self is the media, which have become our “group nervous system.” Genuine democracy requires an independent and activist press, to expose abuse and discuss political issues. In the process of becoming mega-corporations, however, the major media have abandoned all but the pretence of objectivity.

Since they are profit-making institutions whose bottom-line is advertising revenue, their main concern is to do whatever maximizes those profits. It is never in their own interest to question the grip of consumerism. We will never see a major network TV series about a happy family that decides to downsize, to live more simply so they can have more time together... Thanks to clever advertisements, my son can learn to crave Nike shoes and Gap shirts without ever wondering about how they are made. I can satisfy my coffee and chocolate cravings without knowing about the social conditions of the farmers who grow those commodities for me, and without any awareness of what is happening to the biosphere: global warming, disappearing rainforests, species extinction, and so forth.

An important part of genuine education is realizing that many of the things we think are natural and inevitable (and therefore should accept) are in fact conditioned (and therefore can be changed). The world doesn't need to be the way it is; there are other possibilities. The present role of the media is to foreclose most of those possibilities by confining public awareness and discussion within narrow limits. With few exceptions, the world's developed (or “economized”) societies are now dominated by a power elite composed of the government and large corporations including the major media. People move seamlessly from each of these institutions to the other, because there is little difference in their worldview or their goals -- primarily economic expansion. Politics remains “the shadow cast by big business over society,” as John Dewey once put it. The role of the media in this unholy alliance is to “normalize” this situation, so that we accept it and continue to perform our required roles, especially

the frenzied production and consumption necessary to keep the economy growing.

It's important to realize that we are not simply being manipulated by a clever group of people who benefit from that manipulation. Rather, we are being manipulated in a self-deluded way by a group of people who think they benefit from it – because they buy into the root delusion that their ego-selves are separate from other people. They too are victims of their own propaganda, caught up in the larger webs of collective illusion that include virtually all of us. (Karl Kraus: “How do wars begin? Politicians tell lies to journalists, then believe what they read in the newspapers.”) According to Buddhism *samsara* is not only a world of suffering, it is just as much a world of delusion, because delusions are at the root of our suffering. That includes collective fantasies such as the necessity of consumerism and perpetual economic growth, and collective repressions such as denial of global climate change.

Realizing the nature of these three institutional poisons is just as important as any personal realization we might have as a result of spiritual practice. In fact, any individual awakening we may have on our meditation cushions remains incomplete until it is supplemented by such a “social awakening.” Usually we think of expanded consciousness in individual terms, but today we must dispel the bubble of group delusion to attain greater understanding of dualistic social, economic, and ecological realities.

If this parallel between individual *dukkha* and collective *dukkha* holds, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the great social, economic and ecological crises of our day are also *spiritual* challenges, which therefore call for a response that must also have a spiritual component.

A Buddhist Solution?

So much for the problems, from a Buddhist perspective. What can Buddhism say about the solution to them? We can envision the solution to social *dukkha* as a society that does not institutionalize greed, ill will or delusion. In their place, what might be called a dharmic society would have institutions encouraging generosity and compassion, grounded in a wisdom that recognizes our interconnectedness.

So far, so good, but that approach does not take us very far. Is a reformed capitalism consistent with a dharmic society, or do we need altogether different kinds of economic institutions? How can our world de-militarize? Can representative democracy be revitalized by stricter controls on campaigns and lobbying, or do we need a more participatory and decentralized political system? Should newspapers and television stations be non-profit, or more carefully regulated? Can the United Nations be transformed into the kind of international organization the world needs, or does an emerging global community call for something different?

I do not think that Buddhism has the answers to these questions. Nor, I suspect, does anyone else. There is no magic formula to be invoked. The solutions are not to be found, they are to be worked out together. This is a challenging task but not an insuperable one, if men and women of good will can find ways to work together, without the deformations of pressure groups defending special privileges. Needless to say, that is not an easy condition to achieve, and it reminds us of the transformative role of personal spirituality, which works to develop men and women of good will. Yet Buddhist principles can contribute to the development of solutions. For example:

The importance of a personal spiritual practice. The basis of Buddhist social engagement is the need to work on oneself as well as on the social system. Why have so many revolutions and reform movements ended up merely replacing one gang of thugs with another? If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill-will and delusion, our efforts to address their institutionalized forms are likely to be useless, or worse. If I do not struggle with the greed inside myself, it is quite likely that, when I gain power, I too will be inclined to take advantage of the situation to serve my own interests. If I do not acknowledge the ill will in my own heart as my own problem, I am likely to project my anger onto those who obstruct my purposes. If unaware that my own sense of duality is a dangerous delusion, I will understand the problem of social change as the need for me to dominate the socio-political order. Add a conviction of my good intentions, along with my superior understanding of the situation, and one has a recipe for social as well as personal disaster. History is littered with examples.

Commitment to non-violence. A non-violent approach is implied by our nonduality with “others,” including those we may be struggling against. Means and ends cannot be separated. Peace is not only the goal, it must also be the way. We ourselves must be the peace we want to create. A spiritual awakening reduces our sense of duality from those who have power over us. Gandhi, for example, always treated the British authorities in India with respect. He never tried to dehumanize them, which is one reason why he was successful. Buddhist emphasis on delusion provides an important guideline here: the nastier another person is, the more he or she is acting out of ignorance and *dukkha*. The basic problem is delusion, not evil. If so, the basic solution must involve wisdom and insight, not good attempting to destroy evil only to discover that it is looking in a mirror.

Awakening together. Social engagement is not about sacrificing our own happiness to help unfortunate others who are suffering. That just reinforces a self-defeating (and self-exhausting) dualism between us and them. Rather, we join together to improve the situation for all of us. As an aboriginal woman put it: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together.” The point of the bodhisattva path is that none of us can be fully awakened until everyone “else” is too. The critical world situation today means that sometimes bodhisattvas need to manifest their compassion in more politically engaged ways.

To sum up, what is distinctively Buddhist about socially engaged Buddhism? Emphasis on the social *dukkha* promoted by group-selves as well as by ego-selves. The three collective poisons of institutionalized greed, institutionalized ill will and institutionalized delusion. The importance of personal spiritual practice, commitment to non-violence, and the realization that ending our own *dukkha* requires us to address the *dukkha* of everyone else as well, because we are not separate from each other.

Present power elites and institutions have shown themselves incapable of addressing the various crises that now threaten humanity and the future of the biosphere. It has become obvious that those elites are themselves a large part of the problem, and that the solutions will need to come from somewhere else. Perhaps a socially-awakened Buddhism can play a role in that transformation. If, however, Buddhists cannot or will

not participate in this transformation, then perhaps Buddhism is not the spiritual path that the world needs today.

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