

OFF THE CUSHION AND INTO THE MARKETPLACE

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ABSTRACT:

All major religions share a common concern for service to humanity by their ethical approach and moral guidance to their adherents to cultivate goodness and righteousness. Each in their own distinct way teaches those fundamentals, which help, support, enhance and shape a morally edifying, socially acceptable and wholesome conduct. All the religious encourage the human pursuit of happiness and the fulfillment of the core ideals of love, mercy, compassion, wisdom, respect, altruism and forgiveness. There are societies in which people experience a decline of religious practice and the adherents of all faiths increasingly face the challenge to engage in the public sphere, if they wish to be relevant. Buddhism and Buddhists still avow that awakening to daily life is authentic to being Buddhist but with the rising levels of ecological concerns and social-cultural issues they are moving off the cushion to engage in compassionate action in the marketplace. This paper attempts to consider Buddhist social engagement through an interfaith lens with a specific reference to its historical and contemporary teachings that would ascertain the attitudinal change necessary for social change.

INTRODUCTION

"Be like the flower that gives its fragrance to even the hand that crushes it."
- Ali ibn Abi Talib

Part of the great diversity of humankind is the equally diverse religions and belief systems which evolved over several millennia. But what then is the role of religion in our time? Is it still relevant for human beings today in a situation of unprecedented complex global issues? A revered Buddhist prelate Dalai Lama observes that "religion is an instrument to bring mental

peace and satisfaction, mental comfort with certain faith.”¹ Although the numerous philosophical traditions, doctrines and practice forms may differ, their core intention has been to facilitate and promote order and values of love, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, humility and self-discipline.

Revisiting the fundamentals of a tradition without being fundamentalist would be of immense value in resuscitating them. Recovering the primordial message would be of significance not just for the adherent of that particular tradition but would provide all with a fresh reading of it. The increasing animosity and violence especially in the name of religion have brought unpredictable challenges to the core teachings of religion as a catalyst struggling to maintain social order. The differences within religion are irrevocable but the abiding spiritual suggest that there is a possibility of a ‘core’, ‘outside the tent’.

Each of the founders of the religious traditions preached and taught in response to deep human suffering, disorder, turmoil, confusion and social unrest and yet that there was a possibility for beauty and meaning in life. In an increasingly diverse yet profoundly interdependent world, there is a compelling challenge for those interested in religion, its philosophical traditions, doctrine and practices, which could help people to transcend their differences, failing which religions could easily be made redundant and become engulfed in conflict and dissension.

BUDDHIST CONTRIBUTION TO PEACEMAKING

Some associate Buddhism as a tradition with an inward look, while others have described as ‘naval gazing’² or ‘flight out of the world’ (*fugamundi*)³ or

¹. Dalai Lama (online talk, 2011). Also see. *Collected Wheel Publications* Vol XIX, No. 281-295, Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) 1976, and also see *Teachings from a Monk's Life*, Parallax Press. 2016, p. 17.

². Particularly Max Weber's (1864-1871) Orientalist reduction and a fantasy reconstruction of Buddhism to be an individual pursuit of bliss and emancipation.

³. Muller (1823-1900), was a great scholar, an Indologist of the highest calibre. However, his suggestion of Buddhism being ‘asocial’ tradition had been the centre of criticism. Many scholars are of the view that it was because of the great passion they had for the Orient. Scholars Edward Said, would say that such was needed for the self-definition of the Occident (the West). Hence,

that it is a religion with 'a negative soteriology' (salvation).⁴ However, Buddhist teachings emphasize seeing clearly into the nature of reality. This reality of 'unsatisfactoriness' (suffering)⁵ (*dukkha*, Pali) is what the Buddha realized during his long 45 years of preaching and showing wisdom and compassion by practicing the middle path (*Majjhima Patipada* Pali). This is a credible attitude towards ethical and wholesome living, which provides sufficient tools for active involvement in the world's struggles. While there are meditative practices which emphasize the elimination of desire (*tanha*) in the interest of attaining tranquility and spiritual perfection, there are also voices among contemporary practitioner-academics such as Hershock (1996) who observes, 'to place too strong an emphasis on this is to miss an important social element which has long been stressed by Zen Buddhist masters sharply critical of these quietistic elements, and who urge instead, a total immersion in the flux of daily life, leaving no 'bolt-hole' for transcendental retreat from it.'⁶

The Buddha himself, was born into a climate of huge religious, social and political upheaval. There was a growing discontent among people concerning entrenched authority in society due to Vedic social stratification that burdened the masses, the acute power of *brahmins* with their excessive emphasis on rituals and *bhaktism*.⁷ The Buddha was openly critical of sacrificial practices and he spoke out against the caste division which sentenced the lowest castes to a life of poverty and social ostracism.

both of them (Weber & Muller) were part of a scholarship that catered to the preferred scholarship of the era.

4. This view was expressed by John Paul II in an interview which later became a book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. It was published originally in Italian, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore and in English by Alfred A. Knopf, Random House, Inc. (1994). John Paul and the book came under severe criticism especially by the Buddhist scholars who counter argued his negative proposition as one of 'crossing the threshold of another tradition' without right advice, shallow scholarship and insensitivity.

5. The original Pali word *dukkha* traditionally translated into English by Pali Text Society (PTS) does not convey what it means in classical Buddhist literature. The best nuance to the original Pali word is arguably conveyed.

6. Hershock, Peter, D. *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch'an Buddhism*, State University of New York Press, Albany NY 86, 1996, p.86

7. *Bhakti* is devotion (*bhakta* is a devotee), but it grew as movement within the Hindu context. The ritual oriented homage (*puja*) which was considered to be divinely ordained. Buddha, among others, was an arch critic of such institutional domination over the life of the people.

His early teachings (*dhamma*)⁸ attracted the who suffered great discontent and injustice. His understanding of the fundamental idea of impermanence (*annica*), that everything is in a process of change or in a state of flux; (even though known in the Greek world)⁹ was refreshingly new to his hearers because of the specific moral implication of his concept of impermanence (*anicca*).

Dhamma within the Mahayana (greater vehicle, circa 300 BCE) approach offered a new way. Perhaps by then human consciousness was able to understand a more expansive “view of all things - whether mundane or metaphysical - as neither permanent nor impermanent, pure nor impure, neither having a self nor not having a self - as inconceivable and inexpressible.” The bodhisattva ideal also emerged at that time, as a path of compassionate service based on the ultimate realization of transcendental wisdom (*prajna-paramita*) and culminating in the “perfection of wisdom”.¹⁰ This teaching is a core pillar of the Mahayana path and the resultant Chan-Zen tradition which found its roots in China around 600 CE, transmitted by an Indian monk-sage known simply as Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma, the founder and the first patriarch of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, taught in a directly experiential way that envisions a transformed cognitive state liberated from the ordinary, discriminating and judgmental patterns of everyday reasoning. Huineng, sixth patriarch of the lineage, followed closely in Bodhidharma’s footsteps, seeking a transformation but not transcendence, of ‘ordinary mind’. What marks Huineng’s enlightenment is its transformed engagement with, not a rejection of the passions. It seems that this specific approach and thinking in fact did lead a movement that distanced itself and became known as the ‘Southern Buddhism’

8. This is Pali word (*Dharma* Snkt.) has multiple meaning, righteousness (*Sadiq* Arb., *Sedeq* Heb.), moral teaching, path. Also used in several contexts among various religious traditions, hardly and definitively defined.

9. The idea of ‘flux’ (change) was being debated before the Buddha (*anicca*/impermanence), particularly among the Milesian philosophers, Thales, Ionian (642-548), Anaximander (610-546) and Anaximenes (circa. 545). (N.B. However, the *Mahayana* and the *Theravada* interpretation of these concepts vary each depending on the schools of thought that emerged in history within both major wings identified in this paper).

¹⁰ *Pragnaparanita, Hridayasutra, Heart Sutra*, (trans, 2005), a poetically an interesting prose

(Theravada). “Good friends, it is precisely the passions that are awoken. If you hold onto or are caught by a past moment or thinking of it and are then seduced into error – that is being a commoner. Awakening in the very next thought or moment is being a buddha.”¹¹

Hershock (1996) suggests that what distinguishes Zen from other Buddhist traditions of the time is its shift of emphasis from traditional sutra-study to an experiential engagement with conditioned nature, which can release people from the stranglehold of their deep conditioning and give them the possibility to express, in any circumstances whatsoever, their true and original buddha-nature.¹²

RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

Buddhist teaching on emptiness (*sunyata*) offers the insight that all things, both objects and *dharmas*, are empty of anything self-existent. Yet, if the categories of race and religion are illusions or social constructs, then what is the tension, the fear, and the ultimate hatred related to them that arises within the human psyche? Silence concerning race and other such social differences may create the illusion that all is well in our spiritual communities but the tension is palpable and the failure to approach it honestly gives rise to grief, humiliation, guilt, numbness, fear and rage. This tension is also most precious because it challenges the un-reflexive view that being human is the common ground of humanity. This perspective, negates the unique differences that people may encounter. ‘Being human’ does not provide enough common ground to navigate the challenges. People must also learn to trust - but what is it that they could trust? The Japanese Zen Master Koyabashi alludes to such a ‘trust’ in its nascence: A world of dew, And within every dewdrop A world of struggle. And yet ...¹³

¹¹. Hershock, Peter, D., Chan Buddhism, Vol 2, *Dimensions of Asian spirituality*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2005, p. 68-9.

¹². Op. cit. Hershock, 86.

¹³. Koyabashi, I., “*Tsuyu no yowatsuyu no yonagara sari nagara*” See. *The Dumpling Field: Haiku of Isse* Athens. Ohio: Swallow Press, 1991, p.17.

Buddhism teaches that humans are all ‘of one body’. But what can this possibly mean in the face of the stark differences? In the interconnectedness and in all embodiment, people may recognize an intimacy within and between humans and the rest of the animate world. ‘Humans are all one’ but the conditioned experience of interconnected intimacy can be uncomfortable and difficult. Yet, spiritual liberation cannot be attained if they turn away from the realities that insult, demean or render others invisible. One cannot close one’s eyes to these phenomena if one really wants to live an authentic life. Zenju Manuel (2015) speaks of a “way of tenderness, that cannot be trained or taught, nor can it be practiced”. She says that “complete tenderness simply rises up as an experience, void of hatred, for oneself and others”. It comes when life has ‘sat you in your deepest down’, when all the screaming and protesting is silent – when there’s nothing left to do but sit until mental distress or confusion passes. It may well present itself when rage is “at its height’ in us”¹⁴

I recall watching a recent release film: *The Insult*.¹⁵ It is set in Beirut and is a story about two men: one is an ideological zealot of the Lebanon Christian party, and the other is a Palestinian ‘refugee’ who has lived in Beirut for decades. One is a ‘big-mouth reactive’, the other seethes in silence. Both value their dignity more than common sense and seem to regard humiliation as a kind of existential death. They have an argument about a pipe that drips water from an apartment terrace onto the street below. After an angry exchange, one demands a formal apology and then a punch is thrown. Having now escalated the matter, neither can figure out how to back down without a loss of ‘face’. The matter finds its way into the Courts where memories of past atrocities are dredged up by the many not-so-silent observers in the gallery. We are reminded that the political is always personal, and that resentment and hatred do not necessarily recede when the fighting stops. People have long memories, and so do groups whose identities rest in part on seeing one another as enemies. In the final scenes

¹⁴ Manuel, Zenju Earthlyn., *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality and Gender*, Wisdom Publications, Boston 2015, p.27-28

¹⁵ *The Insult* (Film) 2018, Directed by Ziad Doueiri, Received the Academy Award for best International Feature Film.

there is a surprising shift, which I leave for your imagination you could look for the CD copy of the movie.

The story highlights the fact that personal matters are neither separate from political concerns, nor identical with them. At several moments, I was perched on the edge of my seat, expecting a hug or handshake, signaling bygones will be bygones. But the truth is, everyone who holds a grudge does so for a reason, and thus fears that letting go of it would mean the loss of something core to them, something precious. So, people hold on to their rage, grief, and stockpile it for fear that their suffering will go unrecognized, holding on to it as proof of being human and even misinterpret it as failed justice.

The way of tenderness which Manuel (2015) describes, is to gradually “let go, to allow rage and anger to flow in and out again and again, instead of holding on to it, stockpiling it ... only a liberating tenderness as a way of lessening and finally removing the potency of the long, tragic pasts as sentient beings ... will annihilate the unacceptable differences.” This way of tenderness is described as a body-mind “heartfelt acknowledgment of all embodied differences ... It’s an unfolding experience of life that is ever-present in all living beings, and yet it does not deny the uniqueness or similarities of our embodiment. It simply arises along the path of life - if we allow it.”¹⁶

KARMA AND EMPTINESS

Interestingly the concept of karma traverses through three major Indic traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Buddha evokes a moral and an ethical ramification on his understanding of karma. He enhances the concept of karma in a new direction but still solidly rooted in the foundational teachings on impermanence (*anicca*), where everything and everyone is temporary, no self (*anatta*) where one sees that everything and everyone is without any abiding substance, and the concept of *dukkha*

¹⁶ Op cit., Manuel, Z. (2015) Pp. 29-29.

(suffering/'unsatisfactoriesss') where one finds that one's grasping after that which is passing and without substance is a festering sore in the heart.

Buddhism teaches that individual 'karmic behaviour' patterns are created by the struggles of the individual human predicament. They condition the behaviour of the individual and the subsequent rounds of birth and rebirth. But this 'karmic inheritance' is also expressed as 'social karma'. Specific to time and place, different social cultures arise, whether of a group, a community, a social class or a civilization. The young are socialised to their inherited culture. Consciously and unconsciously they assimilate the norms of the approved behaviour, the 'good' and the 'bad' (even ugly) of that culture. However, it is 'individual karmic action' that links the individual to these institutions and belief systems. Each individual is a light-reflecting jewel in Indra's net, at the points where time and space intersect. Each reflects the light of all and all of each.¹⁷

Each age receives the collective 'karmic inheritance' of the last, is conditioned by it, and yet also struggles to refashion it. And within each human society, institution, social class, and subculture, as well as individual, all struggle to establish their identity and perpetuate their existence. Men and women make their own history, but they make it under specific 'karmic conditions', inherited from previous generations, collectively, as well as individually. The struggle is against what was nurtured as well as nature, manifested in the one consciousness. "The present generation living in this world under great pressure, under a very complicated system, amidst confusion. Everybody talks about peace, justice, equality but in practice it is a difficult objective to achieve. This is not because the individual person is bad but because the overall

¹⁷. See. The Avataṃsaka Sūtra (the *Mahāvaiṣṭya Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra*, Sakt.) is one of the most influential Mahayana sutras of East Asian Buddhism. The English translation is called Flower Garland Sutra, Flower Adornment Sutra, or Flower Ornament Scripture by the translator himself (trans) 1993 Cleary, T., Shambala, 1993.

environment, the pressures, the circumstances are so strong, so influential."¹⁸

BUDDHIST SOCIAL ACTION

Buddhism suggests a pragmatic approach to life which starts from certain fundamental propositions about how people experience the world and how they act in it. Individuals arise within this world through causes and conditions. Their choices and actions create circumstances for themselves and others. Everyone of them is caught within an indivisible web of destiny. And while this is true, the emptiness (*sunyata*) of all things is also true, as fully true as the play of cause and effect; and it too, joins them in a single family of things. There is a great turning that is possible here and now, a turning of the heart towards the suffering of this world. It includes the suffering of the religiously oppressed, the racially vilified, women, refugees and the politically persecuted. There are injustices right now, and people are not in a position to wait until the solution is found by others. All things come to fruition in their own time but finding the harmonies and acting within the realities is critical. It is so important that people are not caught up in old narratives that keep them trapped in their stories of shame and revenge.

Buddhist social action is responsive to social and 'individual karma'. Immediately, it is simply concerned with relieving suffering; ultimately, it is profoundly concerned with creating social conditions, which will favour the ending of suffering through the individual achievement of transcendent wisdom. Thich Naht Hanh, the Vietnamese monk, was one of the exponents of the concept of Engaged Buddhism, which links mindfulness with social action - 'mindfulness must be engaged'. If, not engaged, then it remains aloof from the core of Buddhism. In his book, *At Home in the World*, he states, "Once we see that something needs to be done, we must take

¹⁸. See. *Buddhism in Social Action*, Collected Wheel Publications, Vol. XIX, No. 285-286, Buddhist Publication Society (BPS), Kandy, Sri Lanka 2012, p.93

action. Seeing and action go together. Otherwise, what is the point in seeing?"¹⁹

Hanh's essential teaching on activism is that mindfulness gives people the ability to find peace in themselves so that their actions come from a place of compassion. Through their practice, both in the world and in meditation, the delusion of a struggling self becomes more and more transparent, while the conflicting opposites of good and bad, pain and pleasure, wealth and poverty, oppression and freedom are seen and understood in a wisdom both serene and vigilant. This wisdom arises as the sensitivity of the heart and the clarity of thought. The mainspring of Buddhist social action arises from the heart of a ripening compassion. Thus, Zen practice is an excellent ground for social engagement. The power or wisdom obtained by practicing Zen in the world of action is like a rose that rises from the fire. It can never be destroyed. "The rose that rises from the midst of flames becomes all the more beautiful and fragrant the nearer the fire rages".²⁰

Mahayana Buddhists cultivate the heart-mind (*bodhicitta*), the mind that strives toward awakening, empathy, and compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings. Renunciation, *bodhicitta* and wisdom, are the three principle aspects of the bodhisattva²¹ path, a path of cultivating wisdom in action. For the sake of all beings, we step onto this path, yet very few of people can claim to fully live it. But neither will we attain the ideal by turning our backs on the world and denying the compassionate Buddha nature in us that reaches out to suffering humanity, however stained by self-love those feelings may be. Only through slowly 'wearing out the shoe of samsara' can we hope to achieve this ideal, not through some process of incubation. In the two-pronged path that is the Buddhist path to freedom, some will

¹⁹. Thich Naht Hanh, and (illustration by), Deantoni, J., *At Home in the World, Stories and Essential Teaching from a Monk's Life*, Parallax Press. 2016 for general reading and also see. <https://yujiearthman.wordpress.com/2017/08/25>

²⁰. Hakuin, ZM. (1971) *Zen Master Hakuin, Collected Wheel Publications* Vol XIX, No. 281-295, Buddhist Wheel Publication, (BPS), Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1971, p. 34.

²¹. It refers to any person who is on the path towards Buddhahood. In the Early Buddhist schools as well as modern in Theravada Buddhism, a bodhisattva refers to anyone who has made a resolution to become a Buddha. However, the Mahayana School of thought has developed a vast body of literature and on the concept of bodhisattva.

favour the way of compassion, while others will choose the way of wisdom; eventually the two faculties must be balanced, each complementing and ripening the other. Meanwhile, we do not know how our actions will turn out. There are simply too many possibilities. But this does not excuse us, one must act.

SKILLFUL MEANS

There is a wonderful Zen *koan* ²² which points to this dilemma: to act or not to act? Nanchuan Kills a Cat appears in a collection of 1,700 *koans* ²³ employed by masters and students alike who dabble in the art of the elusive. The story goes: “Zen Master Nanchuan saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. Seizing the cat, he told the monks: ‘If any of you can say a word of Zen, you will save the cat.’ No one answered, so Nanchuan cut the cat in two. That evening [the monk] Joju returned to the monastery and Nanchuan told him what had happened. Joju removed his sandals, placed them on his head and walked out. As he was leaving, Nanchuan called out to him: If you had been there, you would have saved the cat!”²⁴

This case is one of the best-known and disturbing of all the Zen stories. It is a little similar to a story in the Bible about the wise King Solomon and a baby. Two women are arguing over a baby; both are claiming to be the mother. They come to Solomon to settle their case, each believing they are best suited to raise the child. Solomon’s answer to solving the dispute is to have the baby cut in two so that each woman can have a fair share. But before he can raise his sword, one of the women shouts, “No, don’t do it! I am not the mother. Give the child to her!” Thus, Solomon discovers who is the real mother, for who else but the mother who cares so much for her

²². It is a riddle or a puzzle that Zen Buddhists mobilise during meditation to help them dissect greater and truths about the world and the nature of reality.

²³. See. *Koans 2005 - Nanchuan Kills a Cat*, Zoketsu Norman Fischer (2005). Published in Book of Serenity #9 and the Blue Cliff Record #63 and the Gateless Barrier #14. See also. <http://everydayzen.org.192-96-211-44.sectorshared.net/teachings/2005/koans-2005-nanchuan-kills-cat>. Sighted on 03/10/2019.

²⁴. See. Cleary, T., and Cleary J.C., *The Blue Cliff Record*, (Case #63: Nanchuan’s Cat), Shambala Press, Boulder (2005), p.358.

child's welfare would endeavor to stop King Solomon from killing her child.

In the case of Nanchuan's 'cat story', I don't think you can 'fix it' with the same answer – believe me, I tried! It's more than ten years since I first began to sit with this *koan* and it still has the power to disturb me. There's a great sadness in my heart for all the people involved, indeed for all of us who are caught in this human condition. It's hard to avoid getting caught up in one side or another, in life's endless entanglements; and aren't people all entangled in something? Aren't they all caught up in clinging too hard, so hard sometimes that blood is spilt, literally or metaphorically speaking?

What do you think was going on for Joju as he put his sandals on his head and walked away? I can't help feeling there was a well of grief in him - and isn't that human? Sometimes there's nothing we can do to change a situation, but we can be present to that tender, raw spot in ourselves, that ache of vulnerability, which in such times, is perhaps the best in us. If the elimination of a single life reminds us of our impermanence and of the preciousness of life, perhaps it is the shock we need to wake us from the dream. In Nanchuan's response too, I feel a weary sadness when he says to Joju, "If you had been there, you would have saved the cat!"

CONCLUSION

To be born into this human body is rare indeed.²⁵ And to have access to the great Wisdom teachings and opportunity to practice is even more rare.

In my tradition, with ordination, we also receive the bodhisattva vows which call us back into body lifetime after lifetime, until all sentient beings are liberated from the bonds of karma. On the face of it, such a proposition

²⁵. The story behind this reference is found in the parable of the blind turtle in the Miscellaneous *Āgama Sutra*. A blind turtle, whose life span is immeasurable *kalpas*, lives at the bottom of the sea. Once every one hundred years it rises to the surface. There is only one log floating in the sea where the turtle swims. Since the turtle is blind and the log is tossed about by the wind and waves, the likelihood of the turtle reaching the log is extremely remote. It is even rarer, says Shakyamuni, to be born a human being; having been born human, one should use the opportunity to master the four noble truths and attain emancipation.

would seem untenable. However, if we can grasp that this body and mind are actually empty, that there's nothing for our suffering to rest on, then we are free even as we return into body, lifetime after lifetime. I am reminded of this verse of wisdom and inspiration to end this reflective essay ... When the wind blows on the water it creates bubbles; when the bubbles disperse there is only water.

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