

Why a Naturalistic Approach is important for a Radical Socially Engaged Buddhism

1. Buddhism needs to be socially engaged in order to address social suffering and to develop compassion. There are several reasons for this:
 - Buddhist compassion for all sentient beings – needs to address the causes of suffering – both internal and social.
 - Buddhism speaks to the internal causes – craving, our program of self-cherishing and self-grasping, our reactive tendencies, our difficulty in accepting impermanence and our lack of control
 - However, we need also to confront and attempt to alleviate the social forms of suffering – of impoverishment, of homelessness, of social devaluation and oppression (capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism), militarism, of social delusion, of ecological degradation and climate change. These social forms interact with the internal processes that traditional Buddhism addresses.
 - Recognition that our individual dukkha is connected to social dukkha. This follows from the recognition of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.” Thus, I cannot diminish individual dukkha without confronting the suffering of other beings to whom I am inevitably connected.
2. But social engagement is not enough. Buddhism needs to be radically engaged.
 - The social causes of suffering derive from systematic forms of oppression, exploitation, and domination and are rooted social institutions that have long historical trajectories and are supported by dominant social, economic, and

political forces. Buddhists should join with others in political movements to confront these forces in order to dismantle the institutions that sustains them.

- For example, providing support to those in need - helping people who are homeless, providing material support to the hungry, teaching mindfulness in prisons are worthwhile goals, but the problems will persist unless the systematic causes of homelessness and hunger are addressed. This will require an analysis which goes beyond Buddhism. It will require an analysis of the institutional structures which causes homelessness and hunger and their tendencies to reproduce themselves, and it will require a willingness to challenge those institutional structure. Like Buddhism 's analysis of dependent origination, this analysis will proceed to see a variety of causal links that bring about the forms of social suffering. So, the most immediate social cause of homelessness is the real estate industry which is sustained by political forces to whom they make contributions and behind which is finance capital and the entire structure of corporate capitalism.
- Furthermore, the problems and causal forces which Buddhism identifies interact with the problems and causal forces that bring about social suffering. To quote from a radically engaged Buddhist manifesto that I co-wrote with Mike Slott and Katya de Kadt, “**Social systems of exploitation and oppression** (capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc.) mutually interact with and reinforce our tendencies to crave and to cling and have a delusory understanding of the self. In addition, these structures of exploitation and oppression directly harm individuals and groups in various ways while reinforcing the harmful human tendencies that develop out of the three poisons - greed, hatred, and delusion.”

3. While all forms of Buddhism are becoming or can become socially engaged and even radically engaged, secular Buddhism, because it is a naturalized Buddhism, is in a better position to become radically engaged. This is because it is not tied down with assumptions about karma and rebirth and other assumptions about a transcendent realm, and it's goal is to alleviate suffering and promote flourishing in this life, the only life that we have.

- Specifically, traditional forms of Buddhism assume that what we did in which our past lives are at least partially responsible for our social position. This takes the focus away from understanding how our social position is organized by social, political, and economic institutions. In addition, the idea that we will have future lives takes away the imperative to change the social conditions of this life, since we will can another go at it.
- The problem is, however, deeper. The goal of early Buddhism is to transcend and escape samsara in order to attain nirvana, which means that the forms of social suffering engendered in this life can be transcended.
- Furthermore, since the ultimate goal of traditional Buddhism is that all human beings would escape samsara and attain nirvana, the ultimate goal is mass extinction. Although this goal often operates in the background, it can erode the motive to confront the causes of social suffering.

4. What we need is a binocular approach to social and individual dukkha that combines simultaneously a secular Buddhist perspective with other modes of social analysis. I conclude with an example of how to approach what is undoubtedly the main ecological crisis of our time – the ecological crisis – with an approach from Buddhism and Marxism simultaneously.

- Marxist analysis – capital accumulation leads to exponential growth; capitalism penetrates every corner of the life world understanding nature as

mere resources for its exploitation; financial capital is abstract, removed from nature entirely, a self-expanding machine that needs immediate rewards; creates conditions which foster greed (for profit), cravings (for consumer goods) and a variety of artificial needs that put a huge human footprint on our biosphere.

- Social Praxis: need to dismantle capitalism and create an eco-socialism, a socialism which does not have a growth imperative
- Buddhist approach organizing principle: organizing principle of self-cherishing and self-grasping positing an identity against what is not self; creation of a species-identity; cravings provide the fuel for capitalism and the growth ideology
- Buddhist praxis: extinguish illusion of a species self and embrace interdependence, attempt to preserve the integrity of ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole (if not the biosphere may not be resilient enough to sustain many of the existing forms including our own); reduce consumer cravings; provides the cultivation of the virtues necessary for an ecosocialist society.