

The core life tasks and beliefs for a radically engaged Buddhist

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Introduction

We are three individuals who have had a lifetime of engagement with radical politics but who have also found that core Buddhist insights are essential to living a more fulfilling life and being mindful, compassionate participants in movements for social change. Our particular location within the overall Buddhist community in the U.S. is at the intersection between a secularly-inclined approach to the dharma and a form of socially engaged Buddhism which is oriented toward systemic change.

We recognize that there are many Buddhists in a variety of traditions and lineages who adhere to the notion that the cause of suffering is due to the greed, hatred, and delusion of individuals; and that the solution to suffering is for individuals to develop the wisdom, ethics, and meditative practices to free themselves from these “three poisons.” Within this framework, it is argued that over time, if enough people worldwide engage in the Eightfold Path, the world will become a freer, more peaceful, and loving place. While individuals becoming more mindful and compassionate certainly has a positive impact on society overall, we don’t think that the ripple effects of individual transformation can sufficiently remedy the social causes of suffering. What is required is the simultaneous, mutually related work of individual transformation and working with others in political movements to transform the political, economic and social systems of oppression and exploitation that manifest and reinforce the three poisons.

A significant percentage of Buddhists irrespective of tradition in the U.S. do recognize the need to engage with social problems as part of their practice, but most understand social engagement as the provision of therapeutic and other services to suffering individuals and involvement in various reform efforts. While such activities are important and laudable, we believe that the social problems and crises which are causing so much suffering today – e.g., climate change and the degradation of the biosphere, inequality, poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism – can only be fully addressed through movements to dismantle the social, political, and economic forces in which these problems and crises are rooted.

We also think that a secularly-inclined approach to the dharma – one which focuses on contributing to the flourishing of human and other sentient beings in our time and in future generations – fits well with a radically engaged approach. Advocates of a secular dharma reject the goal of nirvana, of complete liberation from suffering, found in traditional versions of Buddhism. Instead, our aim is to reduce suffering and promote the

flourishing of all beings in this life. Of course, the replacement of nirvana with the goal of flourishing in our life does not necessarily entail support for radical change or even social engagement. Like many Buddhists who are in traditional lineages, there are secular Buddhists whose sole focus is meditation and individual change. Yet, the secular emphasis on this life complements well a radically engaged Buddhism focused on our current social problems.

From our perspective, Buddhism offers us essential insights about the cause of and remedy for suffering, but it lacks an adequate explanation of social dukkha and the need for radical social change. That is why Buddhist insights must be complemented with a radical, non-dogmatic social theory based on political perspectives such as humanistic Marxism, anarchism, socialist feminism, and critical race theory. On the other hand, radical social theory lacks an account of the ways in which, at an existential-psychological level, individuals cause their own suffering and the suffering of others. Thus, both Buddhism and radical social theory are in themselves limited and incomplete. Brought together in a productive dialogue, we believe that they can complement each other and provide us with a theory and practice which can facilitate flourishing at all levels.

What are the implications of this perspective for Buddhist practitioners? In what follows we provide in an outline form the key beliefs and tasks of a radically engaged Buddhism by reconstructing and revising the Four Noble Truths (or the Four Tasks – the secular Buddhist reinterpretation), which is a foundational statement of Buddhism. In so doing, we don't in any way disparage or disrespect the existing formulations. We don't see our approach as the right way or the true form of Buddhism. Instead, based on our interests and values as secular, radically engaged Buddhists, we are attempting to lay out the core beliefs and tasks of a spiritual, psychological, and political path aimed not just at the reduction of the suffering of individuals but also at dismantling the social, political, and economic systems which cause harm and suffering to all beings. And we offer this in the hope that practitioners of all forms of Buddhism will find it useful in developing their path to a radically engaged Buddhism.

In all, we offer this in the spirit of dialogue, to foster a critical examination of what kind of life we ought to live in our time.

There are five key tasks for radically engaged Buddhists based on our core beliefs about the capacities (for good and bad) of human beings, the causes of suffering, and the need to integrate individual transformation with radical social change:

#1 – Recognize, accept, and embrace our finite life in all its complexity.

#2 – Fully understand the three basic causes of suffering.

#3 – Use our human capacities for wisdom, mindfulness, and compassion to reduce suffering and promote flourishing.

#4 – Make transformative changes at both the individual and societal levels.

#5 – Engage in a life-long path of transformative change based on the integrated cultivation of wisdom, an ethics of care and compassion, meditative practices, the brahma-viharas and other virtues, and political praxis.

#1 – Our initial task is the need to face our life, the reality that we experience, as it is. We must recognize, accept, and embrace our finite life in all its complexity, including the tragic dimensions of life. In the time that we have to live, we will unavoidably experience the “10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows” of life. While we have some ability to shape the course of our life to experience more joy and happiness, much of what we experience is beyond our control.

As we face the personal joys and sorrows of our own life, we need to connect with the joys and sorrows of other lives both far and near. Recognizing our connection to the joys and sorrows of others is a recognition of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing,” but it is also a recognition that we need to take on the suffering of other human beings that are in different social locations, statuses, and conditions from our own and of members of other species. Individual dukkha and social dukkha are inextricably linked, and social dukkha operates from different social locations and perspectives.

#2 – We must understand, both cognitively and in an experiential manner, the three causes of the “10,000 sorrows” of life – i.e., the whole gamut of experiences which range from mild unease and discomfort to extreme mental and physical suffering. The sources of our suffering are:

- The **inevitable pains and losses connected with our finite life** and our relative lack of control over the processes of sickness, aging, death, not getting what we want, getting what we don’t want, etc.
- Our biologically evolved tendency to “cling” or relate to what we experience in a reactive way, based on the desire of wanting something (greed) or wanting something removed (aversion, hatred), as well as our fundamental tendency to view ourselves and the world from the perspective of the isolated, egoic self. **The tendencies to cling and a delusory understanding of the self** combine to create surplus suffering (the “second arrow”) on top of the inevitable suffering connected with being finite, limited beings.
- **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.

In understanding the way social systems interact and reinforce our tendency to cling and our attachment to self-constructions, we need to focus on:

(a) the specific ways in which capitalism causes harm, including how this system

i. reinforces our craving for and clinging to material/consumer objects;

ii. fosters the individual's alienation from other human beings, their life activities, nature, and themselves;

iii. facilitates a destructive form of individualism based on pervasive competition and domination; and

iv. is based on an accumulation process which requires continued growth without limit that results in continuing ecological degradation and threatens the life of many species on our planet, including our own.

(b) the way in which inequality and alienation create individual and social suffering which magnifies the existential suffering connected with the recognition that our life is finite.

(c) the way in which our self-constructions are also constructions of oppressive social identities – racist, sexist, etc. – and of the species identity that grounds our anthropocentric attitude to the rest of nature.

#3 – We must use our biologically evolved and socially mediated human capacities for wisdom, compassion, and non-reactivity to reduce dis-ease and suffering and to promote the flourishing of all human beings. While flourishing is the highest good for radically engaged Buddhists, human flourishing is only possible if we value and respect other forms of life and the natural world. In fact, respect for other forms of life and the natural world entails that we embrace the goal of the flourishing of all sentient beings, of all life forms, and of all ecosystems.

#4 – The reduction of suffering and the promotion of human flourishing requires the simultaneous and mutually interactive processes of individual transformation and collective action to achieve an egalitarian, cooperative, and compassionate society that is in harmony with the rest of nature. In short, it requires the construction of a compassionate ecosocialist society. To achieve this, we need to make transformative changes at both the individual and societal levels. The “personal” and the “political”

spheres of life are mutually related and equally important to the process of transformation.

For example, to the extent that we can transform ourselves through meditative practices, we can be more effective in our political practice and can further develop our sensitivity and motivation to engage in activities whose goal is to alleviate human suffering and the suffering of other species. At the same time, our political practice should aim not just at social transformation but at making it more possible for individuals to transform themselves. With this understanding, mindfulness practice is itself a component of political praxis and political praxis becomes a component of mindfulness.

#5 – To contribute to the reduction of suffering and to the promotion of human flourishing through individual transformation and collective action, we must commit ourselves to an integrated personal, political, and spiritual path based on the life-long cultivation of:

- **The ethical virtues** (involving behavior, emotional “feeling tones” and attitudes) of **loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (the brahma-viharas) as well as generosity, refraining from harm, discernment, diligence, patience, truthfulness, determination, etc. (the paramitas)**. The development of these virtues counters our tendency toward self-interest and egoism while enabling us to recognize and embrace our interconnection and commonality with other beings. They provide the basis for peaceful, cooperative, and egalitarian relationships with others and are thus essential for developing a society which promotes human flourishing, the flourishing of other sentient beings, and a sustainable relation to the ecosystems of which we are a part.
- **Wisdom, in the form of a critical and comprehensive understanding of the essential aspects of the human condition and our relationship to the rest of nature, including:**
 - - three basic aspects of human experience: impermanence, interconnectedness (synchronically and diachronically), and the sources of our “10,000 sorrows”
 - the conditioned nature of all events and processes as well as our capacity to effect change within that context
 - the essential aspects of human nature, as biologically evolved, psychologically shaped, and socially mediated
 - the history and processes of socio-economic systems and their relationship to human beings and nature
- **Meditative and reflective practices** which help us to reduce clinging and reactivity, develop a critical and comprehensive understanding of the human

condition, promote ethical behavior, and facilitate skillful engagement in movements for social change.

- **An ethical life based on the values of care, compassion, non-harm (ahimsa), and a respect for the interconnection of all sentient and living beings.**
- **Forms of collective praxis** in sanghas, communities, and political movements which promote individual transformation and a liberatory society based on mindfulness and compassion