



Engaged Buddhism 2020

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This talk was inspired by a [talk](#) Bhikkhu Bodhi gave on July 15, 2020 at an Insight Meditation Community of Charlotte (IMCC) session.

What is engaged Buddhism?

According to Wikipedia: “As early as 1946, Walpola Rahula identified an explicit social ethos present in the earliest recorded Buddhist teachings, noting that the Buddha encouraged early monks to travel in order to benefit the largest number of people and that his discourses to lay people often included practical instructions on social and economic matters, rather than being purely concerned with philosophical or soteriological (salvation) concerns.

The term was coined by the Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh, inspired by the humanistic Buddhism reform movement in China by Taixu and Yinshun and later propagated in Taiwan by Cheng Yen and Hsing Yun. At first, he used Literary Chinese calling it 'Worldly Buddhism'. During the Vietnam War, he and his sangha (spiritual community) made efforts to respond to the suffering they saw around them, in part by coopting the nonviolence activism of Mahatma Gandhi in India and of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States to oppose the conflict. They saw this work as part of their meditation and mindfulness practice, not apart from it. Thich Nhat Hanh outlined fourteen precepts of engaged Buddhism, which explained his philosophy.”¹

Precept 10 is particularly relevant: “Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.”

“Today, there are thousands worldwide who regularly recite the Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism, which remain uniquely applicable to contemporary moral dilemmas. They are guidelines for anyone wishing to live mindfully. By developing peace and serenity through ethical and conscientious living, we can help our society make the transition from one based on greed and consumerism to one in which thoughtfulness and compassionate action are of the deepest value.”²

Bhikkhu Bodhi

Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Theravada Buddhist monk, ordained in Sri Lanka and currently teaching in the New York and New Jersey area. He was appointed the second president of the Buddhist Publication Society and has edited and authored several publications grounded in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

He is the president of the Buddhist Association of the United States and the founder of the Buddhist Global Relief, which funds projects to fight hunger and to empower women across the world.³

What are four major issues facing the world today?

Below are the four issues:

Racism

We have seen acts of racism re-emerge in the last year which has shocked the conscience of this country. Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that our system puts Blacks into extreme situations of disadvantage. For example, exclusion from federal homeownership programs undermined Black families' wealth accumulation in the 20th century.⁴

Great economic disparities of wealth

From the Pew Foundation: "One widely used measure – the 90/10 ratio – takes the ratio of the income needed to rank among the top 10% of earners in the U.S. (the 90th percentile) to the income at the threshold of the bottom 10% of earners (the 10th percentile). In 1980, the 90/10 ratio in the U.S. stood at 9.1, meaning that households at the top had incomes about nine times the incomes of households at the bottom. The ratio increased in every decade since 1980, reaching 12.6 in 2018, an increase of 39%."⁵

Climate Change

The increase the earth's temperature is so gradual so as to make it easy to ignore the scientific warnings and do nothing.

Reliance on Military Dominance Resulting in Conflicts/Wars.

There is a persistence of wars and conflicts. Military spending is a major expenditure; funds that could be used for humanitarian purposes.

How to view these problems.

Bhikkhu Bodhi asks us to look at the problems through the lens of the Buddha Dharma. The Four Noble Truths (what I call the Principles of Suffering) were originally used to address personal problems but we can also apply these to what he calls the collective manifestation. This means society is suffering from the effects of the issues named above. The second principle of suffering states that there is a cause for suffering. We suffer because we want life to be other than it is. In other words, we are attached to a different outcome. This "fever of unsatisfied longing" is often referred to as craving or desire. This alternate outcome is not reality; it is the effect of what the Buddha called the Three Poisons.

The three poisons (greed, aversion, and delusion) cause suffering because each creates craving. This craving does not and cannot lead to lasting happiness, the peace that we seek. With greed, we are attached to getting more or protecting what we have, with aversion, we are attached to getting rid of the unpleasant and with delusion, we are attached to confusion and ignorance.

On a societal level (the collective manifestation), these poisons perpetrate the status quo as exemplified with the four issues above.

Greed affects all of these issues. Bhikkhu Bodhi states that there is commodification of the world where we see no intrinsic value of the world but utility value. So we view everything as a potential commodity. We look at nature as raw materials to be converted for our desires. We destroy forests for building, and we use human beings as a source of labor depriving people of their intrinsic human value. The world becomes in a sense a sphere of relentless competition where people are struggling to prevail against others. Bonds are not based on empathy but rather on expediency. How can I succeed and prevail? Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that political campaigns take so much money; money could have been used to provide social services.

Hatred

Hatred and ill-will becomes manifest in suspicions of others who are different from themselves. Subtle antagonism arises causing us to create fixed boundaries. This leads to more distrust and greater military expenditures.

Delusion

Delusion comes from ignorance which leads to denial. We deny climate change and we value economic growth over the lives of those affected by COVID-19.

How do we address the three poisons and the problems caused by them?

The teachings have us focus on inner change. But we have to do more than just change ourselves. We need have make changes in our understanding, our attitudes, and our ethical standards.

Bhikkhu Bodhi mentions the five precepts (from the Skillful Action step of the Eightfold Path) and how adopting them helps to create a wider global significance

By abstaining from killing, we make a commitment to compassionate action

By abstaining from taking from others what doesn't belong to us (stealing), we make a commitment to integrity.

By abstaining from false speech, we speak the truth, recognize the truth, and promote the dissemination of truth in public life

By abstaining from sexual misconduct, we uphold the intrinsic value of other beings.

By abstaining from intoxicants, we are able to maintain our awareness and keep the other precepts.

All of this leads to gaining a greater sense of human responsibility – conscientious compassion to regard the welfare of all humanity and all sentient beings as inseparable from our own welfare. Our personal responsibility is to be acting for the welfare of the world. With conscientious compassion, when others are suffering, we feel their suffering as our own. This compassion works on our sense of conscience and moves us to put compassion into action. We also make a commitment to social justice. All of this moves us to take concrete steps to promote well being

Bhikkhu Bodhi gives three guidelines to counteracting the three poisons:

In response to **greed**, act with global generosity

As an example, he and his friends founded Buddhist Global Relief⁶ which started with 3 pilot projects in three countries and now distributes over \$600,000 per year.

In response to **hatred**, act to promote peace, tolerance, and forgiveness. Push for consensus to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons and eventually to eliminate all weapons of war. In our personal lives, resolve issues without violence

In response to **delusion**, look for confusion, ignorance, and denial and replace them with wisdom.

The bottom line: we are all interdependent. We are a human community. Good actions can ripple out.

Bhikkhu Bodhi's parting inspiration:

May those in suffering be free from suffering

May those in fear be free from fear

May those in sorrow be free from sorrow

May all living beings also be thus

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engaged_Buddhism#:~:text=From%20Wikipedia%2C%20the%20free%20encyclopedia,and%20economic%20suffering%20and%20injustice.

² <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-fourteen-precepts-of-engaged-buddhism/>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhikkhu_Bodhi

⁴ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472617/systemic-inequality-displacement-exclusion-segregation/>

⁵ <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>

⁶ <https://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/>