



## THE THREE INSTITUTIONAL POISONS

### *Challenging Collective Greed, Ill Will, & Delusion*

David R. Loy

The historical Buddha Shakyamuni lived at least 2,400 years ago. Buddhism began as an Iron Age religion, and all its important 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 dis-ease, 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.

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*This past September, BCBS held a forum titled “Buddhist Responses to Collective Delusion,” with David Loy as the first speaker. This article is drawn from his remarks at the forum.*

According to Pali 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 being stuck with those we don’t want to be with—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 and live now.

The third type of *dukkha* is more difficult to understand. It is *dukkha* due to “conditioned states,” which is a reference to *anattā* (non-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 fact is very important because it 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. 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... if I find the right lover...” and so forth. None of these attempts succeeds, 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 separate from other people *over there*. Our country (culture, religion, etc.) is better than their country.

This insight has a startling if 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, nation, religion, etc., and discriminate our own group from 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. In contrast, Buddhist nondiscrimination does not involve privileging *us* over *them*. Selflessness provides the foundation for Buddhist social action, too. In some ways, however, our situation today 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

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. Such 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.

There is another Buddhist principle that can help us understand this connection between collective selves and collective *dukkha*: the three unwholesome roots, 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/akusala*) 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.

This brings us to a very important question for socially engaged Buddhism: do the three poisons also operate collectively? If there are collective selves, does that mean there is also collective greed, collective ill will, and collective delusion? The short answer, I believe, is yes. 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 become institutionalized, with a life of their own. Today it is crucial for us to wake up and face the implications of these three institutional poisons.

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**Institutionalized greed.** Despite all its benefits, our present 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 through buying and consuming.

Consider how the stock market works. It tends to function as an ethical “black hole” that dilutes responsibility for the actual consequences of the collective greed now fueling economic growth. On one side of that hole, investors want increasing returns in

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the form of dividends and higher share prices. That’s all 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 the 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 such emphasis on profitability and growth are becoming increasingly important as the engine of the world’s economic activity. Everything else, including the environment and quality of life, tends to become subordinated to this anonymous demand for ever-more profit and growth, a goal that can never be satisfied.

Who is responsible for the pressure for growth? That’s the point: 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 short, greed has been thoroughly institutionalized.

**Institutionalized ill will.** Militarism continues to plague the modern world. The United States has been an increasingly militarized society since World War II. 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, almost half spent by the U.S. alone. To put this into perspective, the United Nations including all of its agencies and funds 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 to destroy evil. Ironically, however, one of the main causes of evil historically 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).

Most recently, the second Iraq War, based on lies and propaganda, has obviously been a disaster, and 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, non-militaristic ways to address its root causes.

**Institutionalized delusion.** Buddhism is literally “wake-up-ism,” which implies that we are usually dreaming. How so? Each of us lives inside an individual bubble of delusions, which distorts our perceptions and expectations. Buddhist are familiar with this problem, but 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 has to do with whatever maximizes those profits. It is never in their own interest to question the grip of consumerism. 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 any awareness of the social conditions of the farmers who grow those commodities for me, and, even more disturbingly, without any consciousness 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 many other possibilities. The present role of the media, however, 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 big corporations, including the major media. People move seamlessly from each of these institutions to the other, because there is little difference in their world view or their goals, which is primarily economic expansion. Politics remain "the shadow cast by big business over society," as John Dewey put it a long time ago. The role of the media in this unholy alliance is to "normalize" this situation, so that we accept it and continue to perform our roles, especially the frenzied consumption necessary to keep the economy growing.

Realizing the nature of these three institutional poisons is just as spiritual and just as important as any personal realization we might have as a result of Buddhist 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 inter-connectedness.

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 demilitarize? 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 nonprofit 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?

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I do not think that Buddhism has the answers to these questions. 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 a way 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

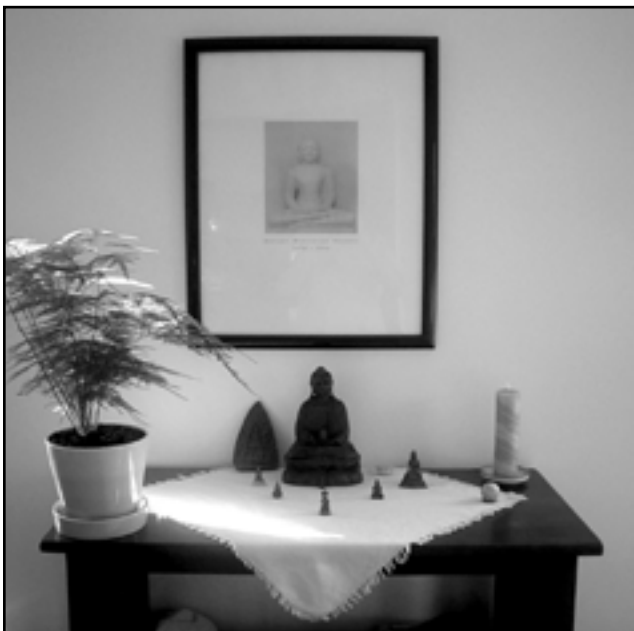
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good will. But Buddhist principles can contribute to the development of solutions. For example:

***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, if 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 sociopolitical 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.

***Commitment to non-violence.*** A nonviolent 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 Buddhist 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. The 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 destroying evil.

***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 others as well.

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 Buddhists do not (or cannot) participate in this transformation, then perhaps Buddhism is not the spiritual path that the world needs today.

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