

Engaged Buddhism: The Buddhist Chaplain and Social Justice

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Legacies of injustice¹ embedded in social systems and structures that cause suffering, play out in all communities, including Buddhist communities. When we provide spiritual care, whether to another person or group, it is essential that we acknowledge, understand and engage the way we suffer and perpetuate harm through unjust inequities. We have a model in engaged Buddhism aligned with the teachings of the Dharma for confronting such inequities in ourselves and the communities we serve. Growing more conscious of our own biases, assumptions, values and beliefs, we can move into action that promotes a transformative justice whose goal is to do our part to reduce harm, promote healing, and liberate all beings from suffering.

Legacies of Injustice.

The experience in 2020 of the novel coronavirus pandemic has surfaced and illuminated legacies of injustice that exist throughout the world, and that we experience in the United States particular to our own history and current conditions. As an example, in the United States imbalances in economic, health, and political resources and power among different

¹ As used in this essay, legacies of injustice include those based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, age, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, anthropocentrism, economic status or class, and any other inequities embedded in social systems and structures that result in suffering. For a broad overview on the topic see **Caste: A brief History of Racism, Sexism, Classism, Ageism, Homophobia, Religious Intolerance and Xenophobia, And Reasons for Hope**, by University Press (2020), **A People's History of the United States**, by Howard Zinn (1980), Harper Collins Perennial Classic 2015, **An African American and Latinx History of the United States**, by Paul Ortiz (2018) Beacon Press, **An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States**, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) Beacon Press, **A Queer History of the United States**, by Michael Bronski, (2012) Beacon Press, and **A Disability History of the United States**, by Kim E. Nielsen (2013) Beacon Press. See also **Awakening Together**, by Larry Yang (2017) Wisdom Publications, Chapter 6, Refuge in a Multicultural World 51-72, **Radical Dharma**, by Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, with Jasmine Syedullah, PhD (2016) North Atlantic Books, Berkeley California, and *Turning to the Present Moment of Racism*, by Doshin Mako Voelkel, **Buddhadharma** Fall 2020, Vol. 18 No. 4, 44-57 for perspective on the impact of such legacies in Buddhist communities. See also *No One Wakes Up Until We All Wake Up*, Tenku Ruff, **Buddhadharma** ibid, 13.

geographies and demographic groups are starkly illustrated in the unequal rates of contraction of COVID19 and death rates that follow.²

Injustice is embedded in our systems and structures based on differences of many kinds—race, ethnicity, national origin, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural, geographical, and economic differences, the preferencing of the human species over other beings, and beliefs in hierarchies based on these constructs. The collective response to these differences has created unequal access to the basic resources of life, and its higher privileges of economic ease, privacy, space to enjoy health, physical and mental wellness, community and solitude, growth, freedom, happiness, welfare and ultimately, liberation from suffering. In a related pattern, centuries of humans acting as the most important residents and stewards of Earth has led to the catastrophic impact of human decisions that ignore other living beings and systems, resulting in the climate crisis that now threatens all of life.

Just as every civic community has its history of bias and inequity, so does every spiritual community. Buddhism in the West initially transported religious and spiritual systems developed in primarily monastic, patriarchal cultures.³ Throughout the twentieth century, Western sanghas and Dharma teachers, were predominantly white, as were their norms. As this state of affairs was questioned in the last twenty-five years, in particular, Dharma teachers and sanghas in the West began to look at the cultural dynamics that preferenced white norms and white teachers in greater numbers than others.⁴ Sanghas founded and developed by new waves of meditators arose in response to the needs and insights of individuals and groups who visioned a greater inclusion of leadership, membership and ways of practicing the Dharma.⁵ Inclusive ways of holding power and cultural norms that reflect the diversity of members have followed.

Older sanghas and programs lead primarily by teachers and leaders who arose under white, patriarchal structures have grown to question those structures, listen to those who have been excluded, change and expand leadership, and ultimately modify norms, programs and the

² As an example, in Alameda County, California, death rates from COVID-19 per 100,000 through October 4, 2020 for individuals identified as Hispanic/Latino (category names established by Alameda County Department of Public Health) are 32.2, for Asians 16.6, for African Americans 48.3, and for whites, 22.5. Moreover, Alameda County case rates of confirmed contraction of COVID19 also reflect disparities per 100,000: Hispanic/Latino 2957.4, Asian 440.9, African American 986.8 and White 464.6. <http://covid-19.acgov.org/data.page>. There is broad agreement among public health experts that the source of health inequities in the United States lies in a combination of socioeconomic factors related to class (jobs and income, access to health care and related food, clean air and water resources, housing and education) and race/ethnicity rooted in long-standing inequities embedded in societal systems and cascading social structures. See East Bay Getting to Zero <https://www.ebgzt.org> and <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/10/12/coronavirus-deaths-reveal-systemic-racism-united-states/5770952002/>.

³ See, e.g., *Putting an End to Buddhist Patriarchy*, Ajahn Brahm, **Tricycle**, January 30, 2015.

⁴ Op.cit. Yang, 67, 93-94, 128, 138, 169, 191, 195, 204.

⁵ Op. cit. Yang, *Training the Buddhist Leaders of Tomorrow*, Gina Sharpe and Larry Yang, **Buddhadharma** Vol. 16 No. 4 Fall 2018, *How Millenials are Reframing the Buddhist Path*, Chenxing Han, Gesshin Greenwood, Matthew Hepburn, Lama Bryn Dawson, Ray Buckner, **Buddhadharma** Vol. 18, No. 3 Summer 2020.

culture of development to better reflect the diversity of sangha members, enhance inclusion and address inequities as they arise.

The state of Buddhist communities of all kinds with respect to injustices remains in process. The question remains, given the current spotlight on the suffering that inequities cause, what are the expectations for Buddhist teachers and leaders in engaging such inequities? Further, how do Buddhist training programs prepare students to address the inequities they find in themselves, in their service to others, and in the norms and cultures of the communities they lead and serve? Of particular concern for programs training Buddhist chaplains, how does such training incorporate what is needed in order to reduce the potential for harm in the spiritual care encounter, wherever it occurs?

Spiritual Care and Bias.

Spiritual caregiving offered by the trained chaplain is provided in settings and situations where healing and injustice are often intertwined. Hospitals, prisons, disaster areas, long term care settings, and hospices are populated by hurting people, whose harm, illness, trauma or dying is affected by systems and structures that often exacerbate inequities, and so suffering. In our profound interconnection, when even a few suffer, all are affected. Moreover, serving in environments where suffering is constant wears on the care giver over time, often leading to moral distress or compassion fatigue. Chaplaincy training is designed to engage suffering by acknowledging the ways suffering is increased by institutional policies, normative approaches that do not take differences into account, and the unremitting nature of exposure to suffering that the chaplain confronts.

On a conscious level, we can be entirely dedicated to relieving suffering, including the effects of injustice in the people and places we serve, and yet be clumsy or unskillful in our efforts to do so. Chaplaincy training and the standards for certification and evaluation of professional chaplains anticipate this in many ways. The first competency for professional identity and conduct requires the candidate for certification to demonstrate that they are self-reflective and aware of their strengths and limitations in providing care. Further, the candidate must be able to articulate ways in which their feelings, attitudes, values, and assumptions affect professional practice. This is where our biases, both those we know of and those that float beneath the surface of our awareness, come into view.

For example, if I instinctively draw back from those who are racially different from me, that will impact the care giving encounter. This is a limitation of which I need to be aware. Am I aware of this? If I am aware, do I understand where this comes from, have I investigated it? Does it cause a strong reactivity in me, from rage to numbness and apathy? What feelings arise in the face of this awareness? All of these are questions to explore in the context of training in order to grow in my self-awareness and engage with bias of any kind. There is an assumption in the psycho-social-spiritual professions that all of us have biases, and in order to fulfill the ethical

expectation to “Do no harm,”⁶ we need to understand and manage our bias in compassionate, healing ways—for ourselves, and for the people and organizations we serve.

Chaplaincy training provides ample opportunities to reflect on our feelings, attitudes and values, and investigate the biases we can name as they relate to the spiritual care we provide. Reflective papers, group exercises, pondering the detail of our volunteer spiritual care encounters, will provide us living examples of how we are and how we act in relationship, including in the spiritual care relationship. As trust in the process and in one’s learning cohort grows, self-disclosure becomes the norm for surfacing what we come to understand as our own particular network of limitations and strengths in the spiritual care-giving relationship. This will include seeing how our pattern of beliefs includes biases and assumptions that cloud our awareness and often skew it in a way that leads to inequities that we impose on ourselves, and on the people and places we serve. This pattern from which we act, or choose to stay silent, perpetuates or interrupts the injustice we find in systems and structures, as well as in our interactions with others whose histories of trauma and privilege, both, intersect with our own.

While chaplaincy training, itself, helps us surface and look into our history of experiencing injustice, as well as the ways we contribute to or act to change injustice, how does this mix with the Dharma? How can Buddhist values and practices, the sanghas and teachers of our Buddhist communities, help our growth in self-awareness and our personal commitment to minimize acting out of bias, or engaging in unjust discriminatory behavior? How can we strengthen our own ethical foundation, our sila, as we honor and embody the buddha within and the values of inclusivity and diversity that are among the foundational values of professional chaplaincy?

Engaged Buddhism.

Deep in the heart of the Dharma is a stillpoint of boundless freedom—freedom from suffering, freedom from the narrow burden of a separate unchanging self, and freedom from attachment to expectations of permanence. Whatever door opened for us to enter the path of liberation, our own felt suffering, a taste of liberation from the confines of a permanent identity, a glimpse into the face of dynamic impermanence, the decision to enter the eight-fold path of liberation tends to rest within a personal experience. Likewise, for many practitioners at some point the urgency to become free from suffering for oneself ignites into a larger fire to be an agent of such freedom for others. The roots of engaged Buddhism—working in daily life alongside others with a profound appreciation for our interconnection, and in the social circumstances we find ourselves, to act from a compassionate response to the suffering we see before us—are found here.

Many trace the modern concept of engaged Buddhism to Thich Naht Hahn’s efforts to bring a non-violent response and end to the Vietnam war in the 1960’s and ‘70s. Rising with others to

⁶ The foundational principle in bioethics of “Do No Harm,” has its source in the Hippocratic Oath “I swear by Apollo Healer. . . I will do no harm or injustice to [my patients],” *Greek Medicine—The Hippocratic Oath*, www.nlm.nih.gov. National Library of Medicine-NIH.

make such a witness met the social justice instincts and background of those in the West, with their Jewish, Islamic and Christian, as well as humanist philosophical legacies, that insisted on the dignity of the human person and the ineluctable value of each life. Working to end oppressive systems of poverty, genocide, and oppressions of many dimensions followed. For example, the Buddhist awareness that all life is sacred and worthy of non-harming has led to engaged Buddhism on behalf of Earth, all its living creatures, and all beings, making Buddhist practitioners leaders in the current movement of ecojustice.

A place to start a deeper investigation into engaged Buddhism is Joanna Macy's approach to blending systems theory with Buddhist teachings and values.⁷ Macy has taken engaged Buddhism to a new level in her global effort, always with others, to bring about positive transformative change that eases suffering. Understanding the systemic and structural nature of injustice that becomes embedded in cultural contexts is key—it results in detaching from the limits of personal responsibility and concern to seeing how the very fabric of reality woven around us from our earliest 'system' our household/family, brings us to values and beliefs, ways of being and doing, that are not so easy to see or shift. Every system, i.e. community, we are a part of from the day we leave our childhood home adds to norms and expectations that concretize into biases, assumptions, judgments that we engage in to makes sense of our lives. At a collective level, the norms that arise from such biases in the hands of those who have power within any given system, result in structures, protocols, procedures, rules, formal and informal, that embody the biases, assumptions and judgments of the organizational gatekeepers.

Macy's approach⁸ to insisting on change that results in reconnecting us with all of our selves, and all those we travel with, begins with gratitude for what is. The second phase of the work moves to providing space for naming what is wrong and grieving the effects of falling short of just actions. Only then, she has learned, does visioning solutions to such short-comings, and acting to bring about life-giving change become vigorous and likely to take root. Hers is a helpful construct for addressing bias in oneself and bias in the relationships we build and the groups we belong to.

The Growing Edge of Consciousness.

To answer the call to provide spiritual care to others is to commit to life-long learning. The growth of self-awareness is an ever-receding horizon: the work of seeing and engaging our own biases and those in the communities in which we serve rises and falls as long as we have breath. I share here one example of how I have turned to my own history to continue to grow in understanding the ways I embody the roots of injustice, and how I continue to interrogate my own story, in order to uproot the causes of injustice and taste freedom—for myself and those I serve.

⁷ **A Wild Love for the World: Joanna Macy and The Work of Our Time**, Ed. Stephanie Kaza (2020) Shambhala.

⁸ Ibid, 16. See also **Coming Back to Life**, Joanna Macy (1998) Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers and <https://workthatreconnects.org/spiral/>.

My grandfather, Alfonso, emigrated to the United States in the 1930's. In those days, the border between Mexico and the United States was fluid, and he and my North American grandmother moved easily back and forth across the Mexico/California border in the late 1920's and early '30s. As their children, all born in the United States, grew to school age, my Texan grandmother, Pola, wanted the children to be educated in the States. My grandfather, a Latin drummer, secured a position at the Santa Barbara Biltmore Hotel in a Latin band, and they made California their home. Eventually, they moved to Los Angeles, where my father, Alfred, their son, grew up, and where my parents met and married.

When I was eight years old, my grandfather and I went to the market one Saturday. My grandparents lived near the Los Angeles river, in a diverse, integrated neighborhood, as was much of Los Angeles in those days. Pioneer Market near their home catered to the many ethnicities of the customers they served, and they had a butcher counter and Mexican food products, making it a good source for my grandmother's elaborate home cooking. As we waited in the check-out line, my grandfather and I were chatting when our turn came up. The checker said something to my grandfather, and still listening to my chatter, he turned to her and said, " 'Mande? Can you say that again?" An Anglo appearing woman, her face hardened, said loudly and quite rudely, "You're in America! Speak English." My grandfather looked down and his face clouded. I tingled with shock and embarrassment. The woman was much younger than my grandfather, and in Latino culture you just did not talk to elders like that. After a moment he looked up at her and said in his Mexican accented English, "Of course," in the courtly way he spoke in public. We finished our transaction and took our bags out to the car.

"Grandpa," I said in English, "Why was that lady so mean to you?" He turned to me with sad eyes and put his hand on my head, "M'ija," he said, "She's ignorant. She didn't know me, and I don't think she likes Mexicans. We should pray for her. Her life must be hard." I was confused and ashamed. I never mentioned the incident to anyone until years later.

This was my first encounter with public contempt that felt laced with racism, and the daily efforts to accommodate it, without allowing it to rob us of our dignity or destroy our humanity. I have reflected on this incident countless times since 1961. Why did that woman feel so free to be cruel? Why didn't my grandfather bark back at her? Should we so easily empathize with perpetrators and forgive them? Yet, I didn't recall this event consciously until I was in chaplaincy training in the 1990s. As noted above, chaplaincy training is designed to surface the underpinnings of our faith, beliefs and values, including our biases and assumptions. I recalled this first explicit experience of what felt like pure hate when investigating my own intolerance of health care workers who made derogatory comments about patients whose first language was not English. Until I cried out my tears and let the shock I still carried move through my body, I was held captive by my own hate of those who had an opposite bias to mine. While my belief that disdain of others for the language they speak is wrong, a conclusion that remains a value judgment I own, grieving the impact of this event was a first step in moving toward less reactivity—freer myself of ill-will and the suffering caused by that experience of contempt, I can be freer in my response to those who continue to express charged disrespect.

This method of identifying the roots of our beliefs, including our biases and assumptions, is central to both Buddhist investigation and chaplaincy training. The more we are aware of our own particular history of suffering, and the more we are willing to examine it, understand it, be clear that it has shaped us and will likely continue to shape us, the freer we can become of the automatic response such suffering evokes in our body/mind.

Equally important, as we grow in our experience and understanding of our interconnectedness, our dependent origination, the more we can move toward action that engages social injustices as systemic concretization of biases and assumptions that have found their way into structures that hold everyone captive to embedded inequities—whatever their basis in individual or group differences and whatever the attendant causes of greed, hate or delusion. The beauty of waking up to injustice is that we are more able to engage skillfully to transform what is—here in this present moment, with this person, this group, this situation, whatever is before us. We become increasingly free to forge connections and help build structures that lessen harm and amplify compassion, more completely embodying our calling as Bodhisattvas to offer healing that leads to liberation for all beings.