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# The Challenge of Mindful Engagement

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David R. Loy

The mercy of the West has been social revolution. The mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both.

—Gary Snyder, “Buddhist Anarchism”

Another way to say it: the highest ideal of the Western tradition has been the concern to restructure our societies so that they are more socially just. The most important goal for traditional Buddhism has been to awaken and put an end to one’s *dukkha* (“suffering” in the broadest sense), especially that associated with the delusion of a separate self. Today it has become obvious that we need both: Not just because these ideals complement each other, but because each project needs the other.

Snyder’s essay on “Buddhist Anarchism” was published over 50 years ago. Now there is a new kid on the block: the mindfulness movement, which straddles West (it is a modern development...) and East (... based on early Buddhist teachings). Yet if “individual insight into the basic self/void” refers to enlightenment, that is not what mindfulness practice is about—it leaves all that religious mumbo jumbo behind, right? And it is certainly not concerned about social revolution, either. So where does it fit into Gary Snyder’s contrast—if at all?

The answer, I think, is that the mindfulness revolution is a psychological movement still in

its infancy and evolving very quickly. One of the important dimensions that remain to be developed is its relationship to the social justice issues that Snyder alludes to. Mindfulness practices address the way my mind works. By becoming more attentive, more aware of persistent patterns of thinking and feeling, I can free myself from the discomfort that those patterns often cause. But what about the “discomfort” caused by inequitable economic and social relations?

Mindfulness meditation is often marketed as a method for personal self-fulfillment, a reprieve from the ordeals of corporate life. Although such an individualistic, consumerist orientation to the practice may be effective for self-preservation and self-advancement, it is essentially impotent for mitigating the causes of collective and organizational *dukkha*. After a mindfulness program, individual employees in a company may feel that their stress, unhappiness, and doubts are self-made. Such training promotes a tacit acceptance of the status quo and can become an instrumental tool for keeping attention focused on institutional goals. When mindfulness practice is compartmentalized in this way, however, there is a disconnection between one’s own personal transformation and the kind of organizational restructuring that might address the causes and conditions of suffering in the broader environment. Such a colonization of mindfulness reorients the practice to the needs of the company, rather than

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mindfulness encouraging a critical reflection on the causes of our collective suffering, or *social dukkha*. Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the foremost American Buddhist monastics, has warned: “absent a sharp social critique, Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism.”

But the mindfulness revolution is still very new, and its future possibilities bring us back to the relationship between East and West that Gary Snyder highlights: “We need both.” Both individual transformation and social transformation. And a closer look at both of those processes will reveal why each needs the other.

The Western conception of justice largely originates with the Abrahamic traditions, particularly the Hebrew prophets, who fulminated against oppressive rulers for afflicting the poor and powerless. Describing Old Testament prophecy, Walter Kaufmann writes that “no other sacred scripture contains books that speak out against social injustice as eloquently, unequivocally, and sensitively as the books of Moses and some of the prophets.”

Is there a Buddhist equivalent? The doctrine of *karma* understands something like justice as an impersonal moral law built into the fabric of the cosmos, but historically karma has functioned differently. Combined with the doctrine of rebirth (a corollary, since evil people sometimes prosper this life) and the belief that each of us is now experiencing the consequences of actions in previous lifetimes, the implication seems to be that we do not need to be concerned about pursuing justice, because sooner or later everyone gets what they deserve. In practice, this has often encouraged passivity and acceptance of one’s situation, rather than a commitment to promote social justice.

Does the Buddhist emphasis on *dukkha* provide a better parallel with the Western conception of justice? *Dukkha* is unquestionably the most important Buddhist concept: according to the Pali Canon, Gautama Buddha said that what he taught was *dukkha* and how to end it. The best

known summary of the Buddha’s teachings, the four noble (or ennobling) truths, is all about *dukkha*, its cause, its extinction, and how to end it. Historically, Asian Buddhism has focused on individual *dukkha* and personal karma, a limitation that may have been necessary in autocratic societies whose rulers could and sometimes did repress Buddhist institutions. Today, however, the globalization of democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech opens the door to new ways of responding to social and structural causes of *dukkha*. In response, a more socially engaged Buddhism has been developing, which also raises an important question for the mindfulness movement: What are the social implications of mindfulness practice?

The Abrahamic emphasis on justice, in combination with the classical Greek realization that society is a collective construct that can be restructured, has resulted in our modern concern to reform political and economic institutions. This has involved, most obviously, a variety of human rights movements (the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement, women’s rights, LGBT liberation, etc.), none of which has been an important concern of traditional Asian Buddhism, and none of which is an important concern of the burgeoning mindfulness movement today.

As valuable as these social reforms have been, however, the limitations of such an institutional approach, by itself, are becoming evident. Even the best possible economic and political system cannot be expected to function well if the people within that system remain motivated by greed, aggression, and delusion—the “three fires” or “three poisons” that Buddhism encourages us to transform into their more positive counterparts: generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom that recognizes our interdependence.

Today, in our globalizing world, the traditional Western concern for social transformation encounters not only the traditional Buddhist focus on individual awakening but also the psychological focus of the mindfulness movement. In what ways do these movements need each other in order to actualize their own ideals?

## Good Versus Evil

The Abrahamic religions are the primary examples of what is often called “ethical monotheism” because they emphasize most of all ethical behavior. God’s main way of relating to us, his creatures, is instructing us how to live. To be a good Jew, Christian, or Muslim is to follow his moral commandments. The fundamental issue is *good versus evil*: Going what God wants us to do (in which case we will be rewarded) and not doing what he does not want us to do (to avoid punishment).

Even the supposed origin of human history, in the *Genesis* story of Adam and Eve, is understood as an act of disobedience against God the Father. Later, because of the wickedness and corruption of the human race—in other words, because people were not living the way God wanted them to—God sends a great flood that destroys all humans (and most animals) except those in Noah’s ark. Eventually God formalizes his moral covenant with humanity by giving the Decalogue to Moses: “Thou shalt not...” Jesus’s additional emphasis on love does not abrogate the importance of living according to God’s commands: of our will submitting to his will.

Although many people in the modern world no longer believe in an Abrahamic God, the struggle between good and evil remains our favorite story. It is the main theme in most popular novels, films, and television shows (think of James Bond, Star Wars, Harry Potter, the Lord of the Rings, not to mention every detective novel and TV crime series). From a Buddhist perspective, however, our preoccupation with that theme is ... well, both good and evil.

The duality between good and evil is a good example of the problem that often occurs with dualistic concepts, when we think in terms of bipolar opposites such as high and low, big and small. In many cases, we want one pole and not the other, but because the meaning of each is the opposite of the other (you do not really know what “high” means unless you know what “low” means), we cannot have one without the other. This is true not only logically but also

psychologically. If it is really important for you to live a *pure* life (however you understand purity), you will inevitably be preoccupied with (avoiding) *impurity*.

The relationship between good and evil is arguably the most problematical example of bipolar thinking, because their interdependence means that we do not know what good is until we determine what evil is (being good means avoiding evil), and we feel good when we are struggling against that evil—an evil *outside* ourselves, of course. Hence, the inquisitions, witchcraft and heresy trials that plagued Christian Europe.

The tragic paradox is that, historically, one of the main causes of evil has been the attempt to destroy evil, or what we have understood as evil. What was Hitler trying to do? Eliminate the evil elements that pollute the world: Jews, homosexuals, Roma gypsies, and so forth. Stalin attempted to do the same with landowning peasants (*kulaks*), and Mao Zedong with Chinese landlords.

That is the problematic aspect of the duality between good and evil, yet there is also a beneficial side, which brings us back to the Hebrew prophets. Isaiah is a good example when he complains about those “who write oppressive laws, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey” (*Isaiah* 10:2). He speaks on behalf of God, to rulers who abuse their authority. Speaking truth to power, such prophets called for social justice for the oppressed, who suffered from what might be called *social dukkha*.

The other source of Western civilization was classical Greece, which discovered the momentous distinction between *physis* (the natural world) and *nomos* (social convention). In effect, this was the realization that *whatever is social constructed can be changed*: we can reorganize our own societies and in that way (attempt to) determine our own collective destiny. This discovery challenged the archaic religious worldview that embedded the traditional social order within the natural order. Now humans could

consciously determine for themselves how to live, which led to Athen's experiment with direct democracy, although a very limited one by today's standards (women and slaves did not participate). The various revolutions that for better and worse have reconstructed our modern world—English, American, French, Russian, Chinese, etc.—all took for granted such an understanding: if a political regime is unjust and oppressive, it should be challenged, because social structures are collective human creations that can be recreated.

Bringing together the Hebrew concern for social justice with the Greek realization that society can be restructured has resulted in the highest ideal of the West, actualized in revolutions, reform movements, the development and spread of democracy, human rights, etc.—in sum, social progress.

So, with such lofty ideals, everything is fine now, right? Well, not exactly.... Even with the best goals (what might be called our “collective intentions”), our societies have not become as socially just as most of us would like, and in some ways, they are becoming more unjust. The obvious economic example is the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States and in much of the rest of the world as well. How shall we understand this discrepancy between ideal and reality? One obvious reply is that our economic system, as it presently operates, is still unjust because wealthy people and powerful corporations manipulate our political systems, for their own self-centered benefit.

I would challenge that explanation, but by itself is it sufficient? Is the basic difficulty that our economic and political institutions are not structured well enough to avoid such manipulations, or might it be the case that they *cannot* be structured well enough—in other words, that we cannot rely only on an institutional solution to structural injustice? Is it possible to create a social order so perfect that it will function well regardless of the personal motivations of the people socially ordered, or do we also need to find ways to address those motivations?

The Greek experiment with democracy failed for the same reasons that our modern experiment

with democracy is in danger of failing: unless social reconstruction is accompanied by personal reconstruction, democracy merely liberates the ego-self. So long as the illusion of a discrete self, separate from others, prevails, democracy simply provides different types of opportunities for individuals to take advantage of other individuals.

If we can never have a social structure so good that it obviates the need for people to be good (in Buddhist terms, to make efforts not be motivated by greed, aggression, and delusion), then our modern emphasis on social transformation—restructuring institutions to make them more just—is necessary but not sufficient. That brings us to the issue of personal transformation.

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## Ignorance Versus Awakening

Of course, ethical behavior is also important in Buddhism. Lay Buddhists are expected to follow the five precepts (to avoid harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, improper speech, and intoxicants) and hundreds of additional rules and regulations are prescribed for monastics. But if we view them in an Abrahamic fashion, we are liable to miss the main point. Since there is no Buddhist God telling us that we must live this way, the precepts are important because living in accordance with them means that the circumstances and quality of our own lives will improve. They can be understood as exercises in mindfulness, to train ourselves in a certain way, like the training wheels on the bicycle of a young child.

In the *Brahmajala Sutta*—one of the earliest and most important Buddhist texts—the Buddha distinguishes between what he calls “elementary, inferior matters of moral practice” and “other matters, profound, hard to see, hard to understand ... experienced by the wise” that he has realized. He makes that distinction because for Buddhism, the fundamental axis is not between good and evil, but between ignorance/delusion and awakening/wisdom. The primary challenge is cognitive in the broad sense: becoming more aware of the way things really are. In principle, someone who has awakened to

the true nature of the world (including the true nature of oneself) no longer needs to follow an external moral code because he or she *naturally* wants to behave in a way that does not violate the spirit of the precepts.

The Buddha emphasized that he taught *dukkha* suffering and how to end it. Did he have in mind only individual *dukkha* and personal karma—that resulting from our own thoughts and actions—or did he have a wider social vision that encompassed structural *dukkha*: the suffering caused by oppressive rulers and unjust institutions? A few scholars such as Trevor Ling (1985) and Nalin Swaris (2011) have argued for the latter, that the Buddha may have intended to start a movement that would transform society, rather than merely establish a monastic order with alternative values to the mainstream. Certainly his attitudes toward women and caste were extraordinarily progressive for his day—more progressive than many if not most of his followers, even today.

Regardless of what Gautama Buddha may or may not have intended, what apparently happened is that early Buddhism as it institutionalized came to an accommodation with the state, relying on not only the tolerance of rulers but also their material support, to some extent. And if you want to be supported by the powers-that-be, you'd better support the powers-that-be. Because no Asian Buddhist society was democratic, that placed limits on what types of *dukkha* Buddhist teachers could emphasize.

The result was that the tradition as it developed could not address structural *dukkha*—for example, the exploitative policies of many rulers—that ultimately could only be resolved by some institutional transformation. On the contrary, the karma and rebirth teaching could easily be used, and was, to legitimate the power of kings and princes, who must be reaping the fruits of their benevolent actions in past lifetimes, and to rationalize the disempowerment of those born poor or disabled, who must also be experiencing the consequences of (unskillful) actions in previous lifetimes.

The coming of Buddhism to the West—more precisely, the globalization of Buddhism—challenges such mystifications. Secularism and democracy are liberating Buddhism from any need to cozy up to autocratic rulers. In most locales, Buddhists and Buddhist institutions are no longer subject to oppressive governments, and we also have a much better understanding of the structural causes of *dukkha*. This opens the door to expanded possibilities for the tradition, which can now develop more freely the social implications of its basic perspective. As Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and insubstantiality suggests, history need not be destiny.

Another way to express the relationship between the Western ideal of social transformation (social justice that addresses social *dukkha*) and the Buddhist goal of personal transformation (an awakening that addresses individual *dukkha*) is in terms of different types of *freedom*. The emphasis of the modern West has been on individual freedom from oppressive institutions, a prime example being the Bill of Rights appended to the US Constitution. The emphasis of Buddhism (and now the mindfulness movement) has been on what might be called psycho-spiritual freedom. Freedom for the self, or freedom from the (ego)self? What have I gained if I am free from external control but still at the mercy of my own greed, aggression, and delusions? And awakening from the delusion of a separate self will not by itself free me, or all those with whom I remain interdependent in so many ways, from the *dukkha* perpetuated by an exploitative economic system and an oppressive government. Again, we need to actualize both ideals to be truly free.

One might conclude from this that contemporary Buddhism and the mindfulness movement simply need to incorporate a Western concern for social justice. Yet that would overlook the distinctive implications of the Buddhist understanding of suffering, craving, and delusion. To draw out some of those implications, the next section offers a Buddhist-type perspective on our economic situation today.

## The Economic Challenge

Despite many optimistic reports about economic recovery—for banks and investors, at least—in the United States, the disparity between rich and poor continues to widen. For example, at the time of writing this, the 20 wealthiest billionaires in America have more total wealth than the poorest half of Americans—about 152 million people.

“It’s not *fair!*” Increasingly, citizen movements are calling for social justice—in this case, for distributive justice. Why should the wealthy have so much, and the rest of us so little? It is not difficult to imagine what the Hebrew prophets might say about this situation. But does the Buddhist emphasis on delusion-versus-awakening provide an alternative perspective to supplement such a concern for social justice?

Two implications of Buddhist teachings stand out here. One of them focuses on our individual predicament, and the other considers the structural or institutional dimensions of that system.

Arguably, the single most important teaching of the Buddha is about the relationship between *dukkha* “suffering” and *anatta* “not-self” or “nonself.” In more contemporary language, our sense of self is a psychological and social construction that does not have any *svabhava* “self-existence” of its own. Being composed of mostly habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, intending, remembering, and so forth—processes that are impermanent and insubstantial—such a construct is inevitably haunted by *dukkha*: inherently insecure, because not only ungrounded but ungroundable.

In other words, the sense of separate self is normally haunted by a sense of *lack*: The feeling that something is wrong with me, that I’m not good enough, or that something is not quite right about my life. Usually, however, we misunderstand the source of our discomfort, and believe that what we are lacking is something outside ourselves. And this brings us back to our individual economic predicament, because in the “overdeveloped” world, we often grow up conditioned to understand ourselves as consumers and to understand the basic problematic of our lives as getting more money in order to acquire

more things, because they are what will eventually make us happy.

There is an almost perfect fit between this fundamental sense of *lack* that unenlightened beings have, according to Buddhism, and our present economic system, which uses advertising and other devices to persuade us that the next thing we buy will make us happy—which it never does, at least not for long. In other words, a consumerist economy exploits our sense of lack, instead of helping us understand and address the root problem. The system generates profits by perpetuating our discontent in a way that aggravates it and leaves us wanting more.

What does this imply about our economic institutions, the structural aspect? The Buddha had little to say about evil per se, but he had a lot to say about the three “roots of evil”: greed, aggression, and delusion. When what I do is motivated by any of these three (and they tend to overlap), I create problems for myself (and often for others too, of course). Yet we not only have individual senses of self, we also have collective selves: I am a man not a woman, an American not a Chinese, and so forth. Do the problems with the three poisons apply to collective selves as well?

To further complicate the issue, we also have much more powerful institutions than in the Buddha’s time. These constitute another type of collective self that often assumes a life of its own, in the sense that such institutions can have their own motivations built into them. Elsewhere I have argued that in the United States, our present economic system can be understood as institutionalized greed; that our militarism institutionalizes aggression; and that our (corporate) media institutionalize delusion, because their primary focus is profiting from advertising and consumerism, rather than informing us about the crucial issues of our day.

Here, let us consider only the first poison: How our economic system promotes structural *dukkha* by institutionalizing greed.

One definition of greed is “never enough,” which functions institutionally as well as personally: Corporations are never large enough or profitable enough, share values are never high

enough, our national GDP is never big enough.... In fact, we cannot imagine what “big enough” might be. It is built into these systems that they must keep growing, or else they tend to collapse.

Consider the stock market, high temple of the economic process. On the one side are many millions of investors, most anonymous and mostly unconcerned about the details of the corporations they invest in, except for their profitability and its effects on share prices. Such an attitude is not considered disreputable, of course: On the contrary, investment is a highly respectable endeavor, and the most successful investors are idolized. So Warren Buffet is “the sage of Omaha.”

On the other side of the stock market, however, the desires and expectations of those millions of investors become transformed into an impersonal and unremitting pressure for growth and increased profitability that every CEO must respond to, and preferably in the short run. Consider, as an unlikely example, the CEO of a large fossil fuel corporation, who one morning wakes up to the imminent dangers of climate change and wants to do everything he (it is usually a he) can to address this challenge. If what he wants to do threatens corporate profits, however, he is likely to lose his job. And if that is true for the CEO, how much more true it is for everyone else further down the corporate hierarchy. Corporations are legally chartered so that their first responsibility is not to their employees or customers, nor to other members of the societies they operate within, nor to the ecosystems of the earth, but to the individuals who own them, who with very few exceptions are concerned primarily about return on investment.

Who is responsible for this collective fixation on growth? The important point is that the system has attained not only a life of its own but its own in-built motivations, quite apart from the motivations of the individuals who work for it and who will be replaced if they do not serve those institutional motivations. And all of us participate in this process in one way or another, as workers, consumers, investors, pensioners, and so forth, usually with little if any sense of

personal responsibility for the collective result. Everyone is just doing their job, playing their role.

From this Buddhist perspective, any genuine solution to the economic crisis will require something more than some redistribution of wealth, necessary as that is. The issue of structural *dukkha* implies an alternative evaluation of our economic situation, which focuses on the consequences of individual and institutionalized delusion: The *dukkha* of a sense of a self that feels separate from others, whose sense of *lack* consumerism exploits and institutionalizes into economic structures that assume a life of their own. It has become evident that what is beneficial for those institutions (in the short run) is very different from what is beneficial for the rest of us and for the earth’s ecosystems.

To sum up, we cannot expect social transformation to succeed without personal transformation as well, and the history of Buddhism shows that the opposite is also true: Teachings that promote individual awakening cannot avoid being affected by social structures that promote collective delusion and docility. As the sociological paradox puts it, people create society, yet society also creates people.

Western attempts at collective social reconstruction have had limited success because they have been compromised by ego-driven individual motivations. The Asian Buddhist traditions, and of course the mindfulness movement today, have also had limited success at eliminating *dukkha* and delusion, because up until now they have not been able to challenge successfully the *dukkha* and delusion built into unjust social hierarchies that mystify themselves as necessary and beneficial. The convergence of those two projects in our times opens up fresh possibilities. They need each other. Or, more precisely, we need both.

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## The New Bodhisattva

The Western (modern) ideal of a collective transformation that institutionalizes social justice has achieved much, but not as much as we

need. Climate breakdown ... mass extinction of species ... a dysfunctional economic system with a growing gap between rich and poor ... corporate domination of government ... overpopulation ... It's a critical time in human history, and the collective decisions to be made during the next few years may set the course of events for generations to come. The problems are so enormous and intimidating—where to start?

For those inspired by Buddhist teachings, or the mindfulness movement today, an important issue is how much they can help us respond to these crises. Of course, we cannot expect to find precise answers to contemporary difficulties in ancient Buddhist texts. The Buddha lived in Iron Age India, and his society faced a different set of problems, most notably aggressive monarchies competing to swallow up smaller states. Pre-modern teachings cannot help us decide whether to rein in growth-obsessed capitalism or to replace it with some alternative economic system. We cannot depend on the Buddha to advise us whether a revitalized representative democracy can work well enough or whether we should push for more local, decentralized governance.

Nevertheless, Buddhism—and by extension, the mindfulness movement—opens up the possibility of a new model of activism that connects inner and outer practice: a fresh version of the *bodhisattva ideal*.

Within Buddhism, the bodhisattva concept became a sectarian and divisive issue. According to one account, there was a conspicuous difference between the Buddha and his followers: The Buddha devoted himself to helping everyone awaken. This perception led to the development of a more altruistic model of practice, in which one vows to awaken in order to help everyone else. Today we can understand the bodhisattva path as a nonsectarian archetype that offers a new vision of the relationship between spiritual practice and social engagement—an alternative to rampant self-centered individualism, including versions of what might be called “spiritual materialism” preoccupied solely with one’s own personal development.

According to the traditional understanding, bodhisattvas are self-sacrificing because they could choose to escape this world by entering into *nirvana*, but instead they take a vow to hang around here in order to help the rest of us. Yet there is a better way to understand what motivates the bodhisattva, if awakening includes the realization that I am not separate from others. Then, the bodhisattva’s preoccupation with helping “others” is not a personal sacrifice but a further stage of personal development. Because one’s realization does not automatically eliminate habitual self-centered ways of thinking and acting, following a bodhisattva path becomes important for re-orienting my relationship with the world. Instead of asking “what can I get out of this situation?” one asks: “What can I contribute to this situation, to make it better?”

One of the most important attributes of a bodhisattva is equanimity, due to nonattachment to the fruits of one’s action. That is not the same as detachment from the state of the world or the fate of the earth. Nonattachment does not mean that one is unconcerned about the results of one’s activism, yet it is essential in the face of the inevitable setbacks and disappointments that activism involves, which otherwise lead to simmering anger, despair, and burnout. Given the urgency of the crises that confront us, we work as hard as we can. When our efforts do not bear fruit in the ways that we hoped, we naturally feel frustrated—but one does not remain stuck there, because Buddhist meditators and mindfulness practitioners have an inner practice that helps them not to hold on to such feelings.

In other words, the path of the bodhisattva is to do the best one can, without knowing what the consequences will be. Have we already passed ecological tipping points and human civilization is doomed? Frankly we do not know—yet rather than being overawed by the unknown the bodhisattva embraces “do not know mind,” because meditation practice opens us up to the awesome mystery of an impermanent world where everything is changing whether or not we notice. If we do not really know what is happening, do we really know what is possible, until we try?

The bodhisattva archetype is a way of emphasizing the important distinction between two basic ways of understanding the path: Do I practice in order to end my own suffering, or to help end the suffering of everyone?

This question is as important for mindfulness meditators as it is for contemporary Buddhists. It speaks directly to an important tension today between “self-help” practice and a socially engaged path. Meditation can provide much-needed relief from the pressures of daily life. Nevertheless, and without denigrating the importance of such practice, we need to ask: Does any approach that focuses solely on our own individual development help to develop an awakened society that is socially just and ecologically sustainable, or does it tend to maintain the present social order? Are Western Buddhism and the mindfulness movement being commodified and co-opted into stress-reduction programs that adapt to institutionalized *dukkha*, leaving practitioners atomized and powerless? Or are they opening up new perspectives and possibilities that challenge us to transform our societies as well as ourselves?

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## Appendix

The letter that follows is self-explanatory. I want to emphasize that the issue is not personal. The basic problem, it seems to me, is that one can be well-intentioned and yet play an objectionable role in an economic system that has become unjust and unsustainable—in fact, a challenge to the well-being of all life on this planet. Mr. George is an important figure in the “mindfulness in business” movement: as well as being a professor in Harvard’s MBA program, he has written some influential books that emphasize the importance of ethics and mindfulness in the marketplace. His position therefore highlights some concerns expressed in my article about the role of the “mindfulness movement,” and also has broad implications for socially engaged Buddhism generally.

16 October 2012

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Dear Mr. George,

We have not met, but I’m taking the liberty of contacting you because you are in a position to contribute in a valuable way to an important debate that is developing within the Buddhist community in North America. (I’m a professor of Buddhist and comparative philosophy, and also a Zen student/teacher.)

The UK *Financial Times* magazine of August 25–26 included an article on “The Mind Business” that begins: “Yoga, meditation, ‘mindfulness’... Some of the west’s biggest companies are embracing eastern spirituality—as a path which can lead to bigger profits.” You are mentioned on p. 14:

William George, a current Goldman Sachs board member and a former chief executive of the healthcare giant Medtronic, started meditating in 1974 and never stopped. Today, he is one of the main advocates for bringing meditation into corporate life, writing articles on the subject for the Harvard Business Review. “The main business case for meditation is that if you’re fully present on the job, you will be more effective as a leader, you will make better decisions and you will work better with other people,” he tells me [the author, David Gelles]. “I tend to live a very busy life. This keeps me focused on what’s important.”

I was initially struck by your position (since 2002) as a board member of Goldman Sachs, one of the largest and most controversial investment banks. Researching online, I learned that you have also been on the corporate board of Exxon Mobil since 2005 and Novartis since 1999. I also read that you participated in a “Mind & Life” conference with the Dalai Lama and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, on “Compassion and Altruism in Economic Systems.” These discoveries led to my decision to contact you, in order to get your perspective on what is becoming a crucial issue for Western Buddhists.

The debate within American Buddhism focuses on how much is lost if mindfulness as a technique is separated from other important

aspects of the Buddhist path, such as precepts, community practice, awakening, and living compassionately. Traditional Buddhism understands all these as essential parts of a spiritual path that leads to personal transformation. More recently, there is also concern about the social implications of Buddhist teachings, especially given our collective ecological and economic situation. The Buddha referred to the “three poisons” of greed, ill will, and delusion as unwholesome motivations that cause suffering, and some of my own writing argues that today those three poisons have become institutionalized, taking on a life of their own.

I do not know how your meditation practice has affected your personal life, nor, for that matter, what type of meditation or mindfulness you practice. Given your unique position, my questions are the following: How has your practice influenced your understanding of the social responsibility of large corporations such as Goldman Sachs and Exxon Mobil? And what effects has your practice had personally on your advisory role within those corporations?

Those questions are motivated by the controversial—I would say problematical—role of those two corporations recently in light of the various ecological, economic, and social crises facing us today. As you know, the pharmaceutical giant Novartis has also received much criticism. (In 2006, Novartis tried to stop India developing affordable generic drugs for poor people; in 2008, the FDA warned it about deceptive advertising of focalin, an ADHD drug; in 2009, Novartis declined to follow the example of GlaxoSmithKline and offer free flu vaccines to poor people in response to a flu epidemic; in May 2010, a jury awarded over \$253 million in compensatory and punitive damages for widespread sexual discrimination, a tentative settlement that may increase to almost \$1 billion; in September 2010, Novartis paid \$422.5 million in criminal and civil claims for illegal kickbacks.) However, my main interest is with your role on the corporate board of Goldman Sachs and Exxon Mobil, and how your meditation practice may or may not have influenced that.

Since you have been on the Goldman Sachs board for a decade, you are no doubt very aware of the controversies that have dogged it for many years, and especially since the financial meltdown of 2008. There are so many examples that one hardly knows where to begin. In July 2010, Goldman paid a record \$550 million to settle an SEC civil lawsuit, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. In April 2011, a Senate Subcommittee released an extensive report on the financial crisis alleging that Goldman Sachs appeared to have misled investors and profited from the mortgage market meltdown. The chairman of that subcommittee, Carl Levin, referred this report to the Justice Department for possible prosecution; later he expressed disappointment when the Justice Department declined to do so, and said that Goldman’s “actions were deceptive and immoral.” Perhaps this relates to an ongoing issue: A “revolving door” relationship with the federal government, in which many senior employees move in and out of high-level positions, which has led to numerous charges of conflict of interest. It may be no coincidence that Goldman Sachs was the single largest contributor to Obama’s campaign in 2008.

In July 2011, a suit to fire all the members of Goldman’s board—including you—for improper behavior during the financial crisis was thrown out of court, for lack of evidence.

Controversy ignited again this year when a senior Goldman employee, Greg Smith, published an OpEd piece in the *New York Times* on “Why I Am Leaving Goldman Sachs” (March 14, 2012), writing that “the environment [at Goldman Sachs] now is as toxic and destructive as I have ever seen it.” He blames poor leadership for a drastic decline in its moral culture—which is especially interesting, given your own teaching emphasis on the importance of leadership. In just the few months since that OpEd, however, Goldman has been fined in the UK for manipulating oil prices, and in separate US cases has paid \$22 million for favoring select clients, \$16 million for a pay-to-play scheme, \$12 million for improper campaign donations, and \$6.75 million to settle claims about how it handled option claims. Such fines seem to be acceptable as

simply another cost of business, rather than a spur to change how the company conducts business.

Please understand that I'm not criticizing you for these illegal activities. Being on the board, you are not usually involved in day-to-day management. However, I would like to know how you view the "toxic environment" at Goldman Sachs, and the larger social responsibilities of such a powerful firm, in light of your own meditation practice. And since you have been on the Goldman board since 2002, how do you understand the responsibility of a board member in such a situation, and what role have you been able to play in affecting its problematical culture?

I am also curious about your position as a board member of ExxonMobil since 2005. It is reportedly the world's largest corporation ever, both by revenue and by profits. According to a 2012 article in *The Daily Telegraph*, it has also "grown into one of the planet's most hated corporations, able to determine American foreign policy and the fate of entire nations." It is regularly criticized for risky drilling practices in endangered areas, poor response to oil spills (such as the Exxon Valdez in 1989), illegal foreign business practices, and especially its leading role in funding climate change denial.

ExxonMobil was instrumental in founding the first skeptic groups, such as the Global Climate Coalition. In 2007, a Union of Concerned Scientists report claimed that between 1998 and 2005 ExxonMobil spent \$16 million supporting 43 organizations that challenged the scientific evidence for global warming and that it used disinformation tactics similar to those used by the tobacco industry to deny any link between smoking and lung problems, charges consistent with a leaked 1998 internal ExxonMobil memo.

In January 2007, the company seemed to change its position and announced that it would stop funding some climate-denial groups, but a July 2009 *Guardian* newspaper article revealed that it still supports lobbying groups that deny climate change, and a 2011 Carbon Brief study concluded that 9 out of 10 climate scientists who deny climate change have ties to ExxonMobil.

Even more important, the corporation's belated and begrudging acknowledgment that global change is happening has not been accompanied by any determination to change company policies to address the problem. Although there has been some recent funding for research into bio-fuels from algae, ExxonMobil has not moved significantly in the direction of renewable sources of energy such as solar and wind power. According to its *2012 Outlook for Energy: A View to 2040*, petroleum and natural gas will remain its main products: "By 2040, oil, gas and coal will continue to account for about 80 % of the world's energy demand" (p. 46). This is despite the fact that many of the world's most reputable climate scientists are claiming that there is already much too much carbon in the atmosphere and that we are perilously close to "tipping points" that would be disastrous for human civilization as we know it.

In response to this policy, I would like to learn how, in light of your meditation practice, you understand the relationship between one's own personal transformation and the kind of economic and social transformation that appears to be necessary today, if we are to survive and thrive during the next few critical centuries. How does your concern for future generations express itself in your activities as a board member of these corporations (among others)? Are you yourself skeptical about global warming? If not, how do you square that with your role at ExxonMobil?

Let me conclude by emphasizing again that this letter is not in any way meant to be a personal criticism. From what I have read and heard, you are generous with your time and money, helping many nonprofits in various ways. What I'm concerned about is the "compartmentalization" of one's meditation practice, so that mindfulness enables us to be more effective and productive in our work and provides some peace of mind in our hectic lives, but does not encourage us to address the larger social problems that both companies (for example) are contributing to. Today the economic and political

power of such corporations is so great that, unless they became more socially responsible, it is difficult to be hopeful about what the future holds for our grandchildren and their grandchildren.

What is the role of a corporate board member in critical times such as ours? I would much

appreciate your reflections and your experience on this issue.

Sincerely yours,  
David Loy

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(Mr. George never replied to this letter.)



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