

## Bursting the Bubbles

An Interview with David Loy



*David Loy studied philosophy at Carleton College, Minnesota and Kings College, University of London. A Vietnam War draft resister, he later decided to spend some time in India. That trek never got further than Hawaii, where he eventually met Robert Aiken Roshi and began Buddhist practice. With Aiken's encouragement, he went to grad school at the University of Hawaii, and eventually ended up at the University of Singapore, where he taught philosophy and earned his PhD. His dissertation became his first book, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. Having sat sesshin with Yamada Koun Roshi in Hawaii, his next stop was to continue Zen practice with him in Japan, where David and his wife, also an academic, had a son. After many years in Japan, he returned to the U.S. in 2006 as Besl Chair Professor of Ethics/Religion and Society at Xavier University in Cincinnati. He studies Buddhist and comparative philosophy/religion and his other books include *Lack and Transcendence*, *A Buddhist History of the West*, *The Great Awakening*, *Money Sex War Karma*, *Awareness Bound and Unbound*, and *The World Is Made of Stories* (forthcoming). He is also co-editor of *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*. A Zen practitioner for many years, David is qualified as a teacher in the Sanbo Kyodan tradition.*

**Insight Journal:** So at what point did you find your work moving into what we now call socially engaged thinking?

David Loy: I think that dimension was always there, but was not always the focus. *Nonduality* is about subject-object nonduality in Buddhism, Vedanta and Taoism. By the time it was published I was reflecting more on the existential and psychological implications of Buddhism, due to some close encounters with death: my father suddenly got cancer and died about the same time as my teacher Yamada Roshi. I was very impressed by Ernest Becker, especially his last books *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, which look at the connections between death repression and social issues.

What Becker says is similar to Buddhism in many ways. But if death is something that threatens us in the future, Buddhism is saying, in effect, that right now the lack of a secure, comfortable self is experienced as the feeling that “something is wrong with me.” I think this is an insightful way to understand *anattā* (not-self)—that one’s sense of self is shadowed or haunted by a sense of lack. But that is understood differently according to the kind of person you are and the society you are part of. Today we are usually conditioned to think that our lack is “not enough money...” Even if you are already a millionaire.

I love something Nisargadatta said: “When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that is wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that is love. Between these two, my life turns.” That’s brilliant! But if there is no inside, there is no outside. The outside is not really outside us. The delusive sense of a separate self inside will always be experienced as ungrounded and therefore insecure, so there is also going to be this sense that something is missing. I think that helps explain our obsession with things like money,

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fame, appearance, and so forth. Thanks to this gnawing sense of lack, we never feel rich enough, famous enough, or beautiful enough.

**It is an important and useful word, “lack.” You coined that usage yourself, didn’t you?**

As far as I know. But I have a poor memory!

**Two caricatures are the Zen practitioners facing the wall, and the academics in the ivory tower, intellectually massaging each other’s backs. What is the connection between those two caricatures and what we are calling socially engaged Buddhism?**

When we practice we realize that our perceptions are being filtered, as if we are inside a mental fog, or a bubble that distorts everything. But we do not just suffer from this individual bubble, we are also together inside a group bubble that today is largely maintained by the media, which have become our collective “nervous system.” The two bubbles interact and work together, in fact they are really parts of the same deluding Big Bubble, which feeds on our sense of lack. Consumerism is so addictive because advertising persuades us that the next thing we buy will make us happy—it hooks onto our sense of lack.

If the two delusion bubbles are not really separate, and if Buddhism is about popping my bubble, so we see things as they really are, can we really just focus on the small one? Don’t we need to find ways to address the larger bubble too? There is not only my own *dukkha*, from my own bubble, there are also powerful social forces creating enormous amounts of *dukkha* in the world. To wake up from my own suffering is to become more aware of all the other suffering in the world, which is not separate from “my own.”

**The guidelines from the classical tradition are that the problem is greed, hatred and delusion—primarily delusion. Anything that works against delusion, through more honesty and clarity of being, is good. Personal practice is to see more clearly, and that is why education is a good thing. But it seems important that we do everything with kindness and generosity. Fighting fire with fire, anger with anger, just multiplies the hostility. Would you agree?**

The Buddha did not say much about evil itself, but he said a lot about the three poisons or “roots of evil” you mentioned: greed, ill will, and delusion. When we are motivated by them, the result is *dukkha*. Today, though, our situation seems somewhat different from what the Buddha faced, because we have much more powerful and impersonal institutions that take on a life of their own and use us. In other words, the three poisons are also functioning institutionally: our economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism is institutionalized ill will, while the media institutionalize delusion. And the three work together and reinforce each other.

Look at how the stock market works, for example. I think it has become an ethical “black hole” that dilutes responsibility for the collective greed that now fuels economic growth. Investors are focused on increasing returns, but on the other side of that hole their expectations become an impersonal but constant pressure for profitability and growth, which pressures all CEOs, no matter how well-intended. Globalization means that this emphasis tends to overwhelm everything else, including the quality of life. The biosphere is converted into “resources,” and people into “human resources.”

So, who is responsible for this growth obsession? This system has a life of its own. We all participate in it, as workers, employers, consumers, investors, and pensioners, without any personal sense of moral responsibility for what happens—that

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awareness is lost in the anonymity of the economic system.

**Is there a workable path of transformation in all this? On the one hand, we describe the problem—because of this, that is happening—but it is another step to say, this piece here can be changed. Are you working toward a set of guidelines, or are you mostly observing and describing?**

The Buddhadharmā shows us how to work on our own personal predicament—how to address our own sense of lack, how to transform the three poisons in our own lives. But when you get to the larger collective issues, about how to address corporate-driven consumerism, for example—well, frankly, I do not see that Buddhism has any simple answers. Neither does anyone else, though, so far as I can see.

Buddhism does not teach us what kind of political or economic system to set up, but how to let go of delusions. Yet it is delusions that keep us from being able to tackle these questions in a conscious and cooperative way—especially the delusion of a separate self whose well-being is apart from the well-being of others.

Actually, Buddhists do not need to start a new movement for peace, justice, and ecology—that movement is already happening. Paul Hawken's book *Blessed Unrest* points out that today there are many, many thousands of small groups all over the planet devoted to such issues. I think, though, that Buddhism does have something to offer this larger movement: a better appreciation of how religion can play an important role in the transformation that is needed. In the past big social movements such as socialism and Marxism have usually been anti-religious—and for good reason. The history of all the major religions, including Buddhism, is pretty embarrassing when you look at how often they have rationalized the authority of oppressive rulers. But I doubt we will be able to solve

the problems with our social, economic, and political systems unless we also come to a new understanding of what the self is—not something separate from other selves, but one node in the big net that includes all other selves too. And that is where Buddhism may have a role to play.

**Social transformation has to start with personal transformation. There is no shortcut.**

That is the point of Buddhism, isn't it? We have plenty of 20th century examples like Lenin and Stalin, the Khmer Rouge, all these idealists with monstrous egos who had the idea that you just get rid of the old order, and create a new one from the ground up. What happens, of course, is they became a new gang of even more ruthless thugs, because people did not realize that it is not enough to take power and reform the system, we also have to take personal responsibility to transform ourselves.

Yet it is not enough just to sit and think in vague terms about raising the collective consciousness. Personal practice is essential, yes, but there also are institutions to be addressed. As sociologists like to say, humans create society, but society creates humans, makes us human. There are very powerful, *dukkha*-creating systems of delusion and social control that are continuing to mold us and to limit our possibilities.

**Are you getting any glimpses of how to work on those institutional kinds of changes?**

I think it has become obvious that the major obstacle today is the way mega-corporations own the political system. The military-industrial-media complex has pretty much taken complete control. Running for public office has become incredibly sophisticated and expensive, and corporations provide the big bucks you need—but you have got to play their game.

The economic crisis—and I think it is just beginning—is quickly educating a lot of

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people about where this country is headed, and I sense a groundswell of protest as national and state politicians lose legitimacy in the eyes of more and more people.

Of course, that dissatisfaction can go different ways. We cannot discount Sarah Palin and the Tea Parties. But if enough people wake up to what the corporate system is doing, and really want to change it, there are ways to do it. Corporations have an umbilical cord: their charters, which can be re-structured to make them more socially responsible.

**Is there really such a thing as socially engaged Buddhism, or is it more about Buddhists who become socially engaged?**

Well, Buddhism in Asia had to be careful. It often depended on royal support, and it could be, and sometimes was, squashed. There was no democracy, no bill of rights to protect you. Now we are in a new situation: the Dharma meets Western democracy, freedom of speech and religion, human rights, the Internet. There are many more ways to spread the Dharma. We are much freer, in that way at least.

On the other side, though, there are also very sophisticated institutions of mental manipulation. Alex Carey, an Australian academic, said that the twentieth century was characterized by three important political developments: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of propaganda as a way for corporate power to protect itself against democracy. Add television and advertising and we are faced with new types of "collective attention traps" that the Buddha never experienced.

**What is the difference between that and the kings that the Buddha talked with, who co-opted the people around them, who wanted their largess as a king?**

It is the impersonality of the institution as a legal entity. In 1886 there was a famous Supreme Court ruling from a case in California\* that gave corporations the same Bill of Rights protections that people have, which is quite ironic given that they are also in principal immaterial and immortal. The new Supreme Court Justice, Sotomayor, has been raising some questions about how that ruling has been interpreted, but look at the direction taken by the Court's most recent rulings.

**Does acting from similar views about the consumer society suffice to make one an engaged Buddhist? Or, if not, what would an engaged Buddhist be doing?**

I would say that an engaged Buddhist is someone aware of the connection between the two bubbles, the bubble of personal and collective delusion. And so is concerned to address both bubbles, not just the smaller, personal bubble.

A lot of engaged Buddhism is very local, personal, right-here-and-now: here are these homeless people, how can I help? And that is needed, so let's not forget those soup kitchens. But we also need to examine the social, economic and political forces that create so many homeless people. Buddhist focus on mindfulness right here and now encourages us to center our energy on the street corner we are walking by. We do not want to become abstract and overlook the people who sleep there because there is nowhere else for them to go. But we also need to be aware of the larger social forces complicit in this situation. Why are so many people losing their jobs and mortgages right now? We cannot ignore that question.

**Correct me if I am wrong, but socially engaged Buddhism is a relatively recent phenomenon, isn't it? The monks were not working the soup kitchens, were they?**

\*Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad

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There have been important exceptions, such as monks and monasteries sometimes responding to natural disasters, but in general you are right.

**So how do we as lay people engage with the push and pull of the world in a way that can bring some Buddhist understanding and some Buddhist modeling of behavior into the world, somewhere between the selfishness of personal awakening and the rhetoric of doing everything for everybody?**

I wonder if we should understand the bodhisattva path in a new way. Usually it is about sacrificing or delaying your own final enlightenment to help everyone else enter nirvana first, but maybe that misses the important point. If awakening means overcoming our dualistic sense of separation, the bodhisattva path is simply a further stage of practice—a natural, perhaps even inevitable stage—where you learn to live in a way that puts into practice what you have realized, so that you overcome self-preoccupation by working for the wellbeing of everyone. Today it is clear that we need new kinds of bodhisattvas, devoted to the well-being of the whole biosphere, for example.

**Are you optimistic about the future? Are we going to figure out a way of this sooner or later, before it consumes us?**

The biggest challenge, of course, is ecological. It is very hard to know yet how that is going to shake things up, but it is obviously going to happen, one way or another. Ecological limits challenge our basic modern orientation toward growth and progress—that “more is more” is always better. It seems to me, though, that our collective response to the coming crisis can go either way. When times get hard, people get afraid, and generally fear does not help people make the best decisions. But there is another side to it: when disasters happen,

people left to themselves can come together and community can develop very quickly. People needing each other often bring out the best in one another. As happened in New Orleans during and after Katrina, government intervention can interfere with our natural inclinations to want to help each other in such situations. In the not-so-distant future we are going to need new kinds of localized communities, and it will be interesting to see how they develop.

I do not spend a lot of time thinking, “We don’t have a chance,” or “The Age of Aquarius is coming.” It does not make any difference as far as what I do, day by day. In either case I am challenged to do the best I can. None of us really knows what the effects of our actions will be. Maybe it is like the question of life after death: will “I” be reborn in some way? For me that is not the important issue. The challenge is to live in such a way that it does not make any difference. The same is true for the political and ecological challenges that confront us, which, admittedly, can look pretty overwhelming sometimes.

**What are your own future plans?**

My position at Xavier University is a visiting one that ends this summer, and I am wondering whether to focus more on Dharma teaching—talks, workshops, maybe Zen retreats. It is such an exciting time to be a Buddhist, and I feel very fortunate to take part in this great dialogue between the Buddhist tradition and the modern world, each transforming the other.

