

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 14, 2019

The Vocational Calling of a Buddhist Spiritual Caregiver A Socio-political Perspective Reflection

Francis Lau

Emmanuel College

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.

The Vocational Calling of a Buddhist Spiritual Caregiver

A Socio-political Perspective Reflection

Francis Lau
EMMANUEL COLLEGE

Buddhism has its soteriological and altruistic elements,¹ and its teachings address individual predicaments, as well as structural and institutional concerns.² The spirit of Buddhism is socially-engaged and is rooted in social justice. Indeed, Buddhist mindfulness has the potential to be socially transformative.³ Amaro describes the efficacy of *Sati-panna* (holistic mindfulness) not only in terms of cultivating wisdom to make the right choices but also in providing a person with the bravery to oppose oppression without harbouring attitudes of hatred or ill-will.⁴ Likewise, as a Buddhist Care Provider, I feel that my role is not limited to helping people release themselves from individual suffering; I must also strive toward attaining collective well-being and social justice.

¹ Ronald E. Purser and Joseph Milillo, "Mindfulness Revisited: A Buddhist-Based Conceptualization," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 24, no.1 (2015): 15.

² David Loy, "Why Buddhism and the West Need Each Other: On the Interdependence of Personal and Social Transformation," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20, (2013): 415.
<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2013/09/Loy-Why-Buddhism-final.pdf>

³ Andreas T. Schmidt, "The Ethics and Politics of Mindfulness-based Interventions," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 42, no.7 (2016): 453.

⁴ Ajahn Amaro, "A Holistic Mindfulness," *Mindfulness* 6, no.1 (2015): 66.

In the Pure Land and Chan Buddhist traditions, there are the Three Sambhara (the Three Essentials)—faith, vows, and actions; and the Four Steps—faith, interpretation, performance, and realization for practices. Emphasis is always put on action and realization because they signal the accomplishment of Buddha's teachings. To strive for social justice is an act that comes from a sense of conscience, from righteousness and humanity.

From the Buddhist perspective, a Noble Person is one of excellent character. This person acts with compassion, non-attachment, and wisdom, and with a larger vision that goes beyond changing individual symptoms of suffering.⁵ As noted by Danny Fisher, the concerns of the Mahāyāna tradition go beyond Nirvāṇa; bodhisattvas re-enter the realm of suffering with the noble heart of compassion.⁶ David Loy remarks, “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. We need to actualize both ideals to be truly free.”⁷

There is a close linkage between the vocational calling to be a Buddhist Spiritual Caregiver and my participation in the democratic movement. Identity formation and social action are not separate.⁸ Looking back, my identity as a participant in the democratic movement was moulded by the June Fourth Incident in China thirty years ago, although

⁵ Lynette M. Monteiro, “Implicit ethics and mindfulness: Subtle assumptions that MBIs are values-neutral,” *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, (2016): 218.

⁶ Danny Fisher, “Three yanas for wise caring: A Buddhist perspective on spiritual care,” in *Multifaith Views in Spiritual Care*, ed. Daniel S. Schipani (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2013), 51.

⁷ David Loy, “Why Buddhism and the West Need Each Other,” 413.

⁸ David Denborough, *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2008), 66.

I was in Hong Kong at the time. The bloody military crackdown on the democratic movement in Beijing, and the massacre in Tiananmen Square broke our hearts and hope, but not our will. The words of the people from Nablus, Palestine, resonate with my inner voice and affect me: “If we lose a friend like that, we cannot simply get on with life. Life can never be the same. We do all we can to honour the friends we have lost” (cited by David Denborough).⁹ For thirty years, every year on the night of June Fourth in Hong Kong, thousands of people have gathered to mourn for the victims of that incident. This is the only piece of territory in communist China where mourning activities for the June Fourth Incident can be practiced publicly and safely.

In 2014, I participated in the Umbrella Movement, which was a widespread protest and occupation movement involving Hong Kong’s people, who were striving for universal suffrage and direct election of chief executives. We resisted tear gas by washing our eyes with tears. We used our consciences and our bare hands to protect students against violence. We slept for nights and planted our hope for true democracy in the streets of the Central Business District of Hong Kong. However, the government cracked down on the movement, and the persecution of many protesters followed. Student leaders of the movement and pro-democracy lawmakers were imprisoned and disqualified. A series of harassing behaviours have been launched by pro-establishment camps against pro-democracy activists and participants. As a result, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, boredom, and unbearable stillness pervade the city, contrasting the conspicuous and superficial economic prosperity and the noise and excitement of tourists from the mainland.

Increasingly, Hong Kong’s people are suffering from mental illness. The moment I thought of this, a sense of calling emerged from

⁹ David Denborough, *Collective Narrative Practice*, 35.

within me. This led me to follow a spiritual path to provide caregiving services to those who are suffering. By doing this, I hope that I can promote a state of tranquility and ease, and remain emotionally stable amidst the social turmoil, through self-cultivation. Also, if their mental health improves, the people of Hong Kong can regain the hope and resilience needed to strive for a better future.

Two insightful questions challenge me. One of these was posed by David Loy: "Can the Buddhist emphasis on delusion-vs.-awakening provide an alternative perspective to supplement such a concern for social justice?"¹⁰ The second was asked by David Denborough: "How can [care providers] ensure our work in some way contributes to healing and justice?"¹¹ I hope that my will and endeavor to follow the vocational calling to be a Buddhist spiritual caregiver can contribute to answering such questions.

Bibliography

Amaro, Ajahn. "A Holistic Mindfulness." *Mindfulness* 6, no.1 (2015): 63-73.

Denborough, David. *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2008.

Fisher, Danny. "Three yanas for wise caring: A Buddhist perspective on spiritual care." In *Multifaith Views in Spiritual Care*, edited by Daniel S. Schipani, 45-64. Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2013.

¹⁰ David Loy, 414-415.

¹¹ David Denborough, 192.

- Loy, David. "Why Buddhism and the West Need Each Other: On the Interdependence of Personal and Social Transformation." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20, (2013): 401-21.
<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2013/09/Loy-Why-Buddhism-final.pdf>
- Monteiro, Lynette M. "Implicit ethics and mindfulness: Subtle assumptions that MBIs are values-neutral." *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, (2016): 210-24.
- Purser, Ronald E., and Joseph Milillo. "Mindfulness Revisited: A Buddhist-Based Conceptualization." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 24, no.1 (2015): 3-24.
- Schmidt, Andreas T. "The Ethics and Politics of Mindfulness-based Interventions." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 42, no.7 (2016): 450-4.