

Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution.

David R. Loy

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Reviewed by **Wayne Codling**

For about the past decade one of the persistent and accelerating issues facing practicing Buddhists has been the application dimension. Beyond the monastery or the dedicated community, how do the basic Buddhist doctrines translate into real action in today's world? In the spirit of "applied Buddhism" David Loy's new book *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* contains fifteen essays which not only identify and explain with subtlety the basic Buddhist practice terms, but which also serve to suggest alternative ways of thinking, speaking and behaving with respect to important social issues such as money, sex and war. Although Buddhist practice is recognized as being concerned with personal liberation rather than being a vehicle for "political or economic revolution", the vocabulary of "self" is useful for understanding and treating the context within which each individual is embedded. To the degree that one suspects that the Buddhist vocabulary pertaining to "self" can be expanded to apply to nations, etc. one will find much of interest in this book. The big question, however, is not theoretical; Loy is reacting to the absolute need to change our relationship to our environment. We all know this, yet so far have been unable to act effectively. We have come to the point where we must change or be changed, perhaps to extinction. Our behaviours and attitudes regarding our place within our environment do not change easily; they cannot be separated from other attitudes and feelings of entitlement. Loy skilfully uses the established Buddhist vocabulary of "interdependence" to help untangle the myriad impediments that threaten the timely implementation of a political or economic will to act.

In one of his essays, "Lack of Money", he makes the very useful point that the value of money exists in the same way that "self" exists; it is a construction. With this simple and accessible example he shows how something can both exist and not exist at the same time, which is the nature of "self", according to Buddhist thought. This then is an excellent teaching on "*anatta*" or "no-self", a basic doctrinal element of the middle way. Nations and multi-nationals too are constructions. He makes an attempt to bring a middle way analysis to the descriptions and prescriptions that pertain to collective entities,

following what he sees as a basic paradigm of Buddhist practice: deconstructing and reconstructing the “self”.

Dr. Loy begins, appropriately, with an explanation of *dukkha* (dissatisfaction, dis-ease) and the four noble truths, culminating in the foundational observation, “...*the self is dukkha*”. He deconstructs the notion of *dukkha* into its traditional three types, offering some description of each; but it is *sankhara* (conditioned states) upon which he focuses. The *dukkha* caused through *sankhara* is connected with deluded (i.e., dualistic) notions about the self; this forms the basis for the doctrine of *anatta* (no self). From this platform it is possible to speak about collective *dukkha* and unwholesome *karma* brought about by “institutionalized greed, ill will and delusion”, the three poisons. Primal forces such as lust and violence make an individual or a collective-self vulnerable to the poisons, although (and this is one of the important contributions that a middle way analysis offers), these primal forces are not seen as evil or even in need of correction. The Buddhist issue is always one of harm rather than being “right” or triumphant. In proper doses the poisons promote the health of the collective entity. Acquisitive impulses and ferocious reflexive attitudes, like oxygen itself, are life giving in small quantities but become corrosive, destabilizing and ultimately fatal past a certain point. We are near or past that point. Typically, in an individual, this is often the point at which one begins to seek out a spiritual solution; so it seems reasonable to think that our civilization, as a *sankhara* self, might be analogously receptive to such a change in awareness.

This is where meditation enters the rhetoric. Loy accepts the Mahayanist ideal of awareness—a formless, non-abiding awareness—as being preferable to the “unremitting connectivity that pulls us in the opposite direction”. Meditation is the vehicle through which individuals can reassert sovereignty over their attention. Similarly some collective awareness of the skills of composition (i.e., meditation) would counter the deleterious effects of institutionalized ill intentions and of the mainstream media, which functions as a collective nervous system. The modern or post-modern collective “attention traps” provided through the media constitute the basic impediments to the lessening of our collective *dukkha* by usurping the collective attention or “cognitive commons” (a purely immaterial equivalent of the village commons of the late medieval era). The diverting and enclosure of the cognitive commons runs against the current of emergent liberation, which a Buddhist paradigm would be seeking to promote. Fragmentation (the inability to focus), commodification (consumerism), and control (propaganda or advertising) of collective attention are the major points of enclosure facilitated by the mainstream media.

The prescriptive element in Dr. Loy's middle way rhetoric is offered in the final chapter, "Notes for a Buddhist Revolution". He summarizes the problem this way, "The fundamental issue isn't our reliance on fossil fuels but our reliance on a mindset that takes the globalization of corporate capitalism (and its dominant role in supposedly democratic processes) as natural, necessary, and inevitable. We need an alternative to 'there is no alternative'." In addition to containing the best line in the book, this keeps the field of contention within the sphere of mind, a natural fit for Buddhism. Loy is careful not to oversell what Buddhism or Buddhist practice can accomplish, especially within existing economic and political systems. Nevertheless he does offer the foundational elements of a genuinely engaged Buddhism, a personal spiritual practice and the moral tether of non-violence, joined with the elements of the Bodhisattva vow. The modern Zen master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi thought that American Zen should have Theravadin rigor and Mahayana sensibility. Loy has made a good effort at doing just that.

Even so there will be plenty of points in the book where the reader can expect to have a reaction to Loy's definitions, assumptions, conclusions and so on. He often seems to skew things in unusual ways; for example, basic Buddhism teaches that the basis of suffering is the mistaken belief that the self is real, but Loy turns that around, claiming instead that it is the knowledge of *anatta* that is "intrinsically uncomfortable". It seems a small point, and most querulous reactions to Loy's narrative will probably prove to be of similar kind. One of the genuinely enjoyable aspects of reading the book, actually, is that many a question about the author's understanding of applied Buddhism and Buddhist doctrine (e.g., *karma*) become resolved if the reader has the patience and persistence to finish read this collection of well-wrought essays.