

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 16, 2021

Buddhism and Social Work: A Primer

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Buddhism and Social Work: A Primer

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While the relevance of Buddhism to social work practice has been a neglected area within social work scholarship, Buddhist practices proliferate in the profession, largely in a secular context. Mindfulness is a burgeoning area in social work and with the growing field of engaged Buddhism, the relevance of Buddhist ethics to activism is becoming increasingly clear. We will briefly examine the potential relationship between Buddhism and multi-level social work practice in hopes of igniting a spark to invite a broader engagement between the two.

The Buddha's teachings on the Eightfold Noble Path are highly relevant to social work. Each factor could be discussed at length. Here, the discussion will focus on right action. Macro-level social work practice involves activism for policy change, driven by the self-identified needs of vulnerable groups. Mezzo-level social work involves community development and engagement, practices that have historically been the precursor to systemic and institutional change. Social work practice, particularly its critical iterations, is not limited to micro-level, individual and group work, but involves a notion of Buddhist right action requiring

social workers to engage in structural activism to address social inequities, demonstrated by the ethical value of the “pursuit of social justice” in the Canadian Association of Social Workers’ (CASW) code of ethics.¹

The *brahma-vihārās* (divine abodes) have a unique relationship to social work values. The CASW’s code of ethics names “service to humanity”² as a core professional value, which naturally lends itself to *karuṇā* (compassion). Compassion also undergirds the CASW’s value of “respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons”³ which can be expanded beyond simple respect to a true honoring of the Buddha nature of service users. A regular lovingkindness practice (*mettā*, another component of the *brahma-vihārās*) can serve as an antidote to cynicism, which is not uncommon in social work—a profession with high levels of burnout.

The four foundations of mindfulness allow social workers to engage not only in the use of meditation as a tool for alleviating suffering, but also in ongoing reflexive practice. Mindfulness of feeling is core to micro-level social work practice. Here it is valuable to consider mindfulness of both one’s own feelings and the feelings of others. Social workers must be attuned to their own biases, emotional triggers, and privileges when working with individuals and groups. In addition, the cultivation of empathy for service users is directly tied to mindfulness of others’ feelings.

The CASW explores “recognition of individual and professional diversity”⁴ in its discussion of diversity of opinion among social workers

¹ Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), “Code of Ethics,” 2005, https://www.casw-acts.ca/files/documents/casw_code_of_ethics.pdf, 5.

² Canadian Association of Social Workers, 5.

³ Canadian Association of Social Workers, 4.

⁴ Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2.

in ethical decision-making. Understanding the three poisons allows social workers to expand this to explore diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) more broadly. Social workers engaged in reflexive practice can be mindful of when aversion arises in professional practice. Indeed, aversion can be conceptualized as an affective response that undergirds oppressive attitudes informed by privilege. The increased visibility of social justice activism as with, for example, the #MeToo movement against sexual violence, the anti-racist protests and increased awareness stimulated by the Black Lives Matter movement, and Indigenous activism, such as the Unist'ot'en camp of the Wet'suwet'en people around anti-racism, have spotlighted oppression and violence in Canada and around the world. Social workers, having contributed to such violence in, for example, the "Sixties Scoop" in which Indigenous children were apprehended and sent to non-Indigenous foster homes, must examine their privileges and acknowledge the harm that unidentified and unaddressed aversion can cause for service users, colleagues, and communities.

Contemporary sociopolitical realities have brought social justice to the fore in conversations in Buddhist communities calling on the tradition of engaged Buddhism. Social work holds the potential to contribute to these conversations and to incorporate Buddhism into its social justice work. Future research is necessary to examine more fully each Buddhist concept we touched on in the context of social work, to identify new directions and developments, and to further assess the relevance of Buddhist practices and principles to the profession.

Bibliography

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Ethics.” 2005. https://www.casw-acts.ca/files/documents/casw_code_of_ethics.pdf

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