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## Applied Buddhism: Past and Present

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# Applied Buddhism: Past and Present

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## **Abstract**

Various aspects of thought and practice from Buddhist traditions are being adapted and applied to meet individual and social needs in our time. The application of Buddhist forms of knowledge and power to meet social needs has historically been part of Buddhist activity throughout Asia and is one reason that Buddhist institutions garnered the social support they needed to become established in those cultures. So, applying Buddhist ideas and practices to meet contemporary needs is not new, but how they are being used now is problematic in two ways. First is the tendency to subsume modern secular applications of Buddhist practice under excessively individualistic, consumer-based agendas that lose the inclusive social-ethical frameworks that had informed such practices in traditional cultures. Second is the tendency to separate modern adaptations of Buddhist practices from the Buddhist institutions those practices are drawn from, thereby directing the social and economic support generated by those practices away from their sources. Three kinds of modern applied Buddhism are noted that help ameliorate those two problematic tendencies: socially engaged Buddhism, Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, and current meditation programs that include robust relational and ethical frameworks.

## Introduction

Many people today, deeply concerned about the world's suffering, inhabit a secularized worldview that considers religious ideas of salvation or enlightenment irrelevant to current needs and ways of thinking. Such people, of course, do not see religious practice disciplines as a resource to help them respond to the suffering. And although ethical teachings of mainstream Western religious traditions today continue to inspire their faithful to serve others in need, most of their adherents have lost touch with contemplative disciplines that were earlier maintained in their monastic institutions. As members of mainstream Christian and Jewish communities report, the modern emphasis in their churches and synagogues on doing good deeds and working for justice, while laudable, can mask a lack of sufficient spiritual grounding from contemplative disciplines for such service to more fully empower those who serve others and those whom they serve.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, even as the modern world has become increasingly secularized in its rejection or forgetting of religious resources. People also increasingly long for what religions (at their best) have provided: access to a primal source of goodness that transcends the world's biased attitudes and entrenched structures of greed and violence, that helps us recognize the profound dignity and potential in ourselves and others, and that empowers us to respond compassionately and wisely to the needs of others. This yearning to re-discover our connection to the primal ground of our being, to live and serve others in a more deeply grounded way, finds expression in a host of modern desires that the materialism of the contemporary world does not address: the search for deep rest from the

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* 131-166; Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* 58, 113-160.

freneticism of everyday life; the desire for a fuller healing of body, mind and spirit than health-spas can provide; the wish to find an unconditional power of love and compassion for self and others in a hyper-competitive world; the desire for a renewed spirituality within or beyond mainstream religions; the urge to protect vulnerable people, beings and the natural world from the predations of our consumer economies; the desire to relieve suffering and establish lasting peace and equity in a world of increasing greed, apathy and aggression. Although many people today believe they have transcended religious ways of thinking, and indeed many blame the world's religions as a major cause of the world's problems, the same people often long for a deeper grounding for their lives and actions, the kind of grounding that was accessed in the past through spiritual disciplines of religious traditions.

The longing for a more grounded basis for living and serving others also manifests in the needs voiced by those who work to address suffering through social service and activism. These include the need to find a place of inner rest and replenishment to heal from the hyper-competitive dynamics of modern capitalistic societies; the need to cultivate a power of compassion that can sustain one's work to address suffering without getting overwhelmed by secondary trauma or compassion fatigue; the need to become more fully present to those one serves to better discern and evoke their hidden strengths; the need for the wisdom, compassion and courage to diagnose and challenge oppressive social structures without losing touch with the essential humanity of everyone involved. As Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have taught, to bring more goodness into the world, we need to be in touch with the source of goodness in ourselves and others. To help people find more peace and wellbeing in their lives, we need to come from a place of peace and wellbeing in ourselves. But such a grounded way of being and serving is not accomplished just by longing for it. Gandhi, King, the Dalai Lama and Nhat Hanh immersed themselves in

spiritual disciplines that put them in touch with the depth of their being, from which they could respond to others in the depth of their being—helping many to see themselves as worthy and capable of great good.

A big challenge of our time, then, is to learn how to cultivate capacities of goodness from the depth of our being within a secularized world that largely rejects traditional religious ways of doing so. It is for this reason, I think, that people of diverse backgrounds, including those of diverse religious traditions and those who are not religious, are taking interest in transformative disciplines of Buddhism. In a way, thousands of years of Asian Buddhist history have prepared Buddhism to help address many of the modern longings and needs mentioned above.

### **Buddhist Applications in Asian History**

Part of the meaning of ‘skillful means’ in Asian Buddhist history has included the ability to draw on Buddhist resources effectively to address pressing individual and social needs of people in Asian cultures. To express the compassion and wisdom at the heart of Buddhist practice traditions in Asia, and to attract the social and economic support necessary for developing Buddhist institutions, Buddhist teachers and monastic communities have had to draw on a variety of resources—ritual, meditative, philosophical, ethical, psychological, literary and aesthetic—in the attempt to meet a wide variety of culturally embedded needs. These have included the need for many kinds of physical and mental healing; for a long life to support worldly and supramundane goals; for help in dying and rebirth; to avert epidemics, floods, droughts, famine, and pestilence; to promote harmonious relationships with ancestors, other clans, indigenous deities, and powerful beings associated with features of the natural world; to protect people and animals from malevolent spirits, pandemics and thieves; to promote peace, prosperity, good fortune and success; to provide cosmological and ethical frameworks to inform social structures,

roles and mutual responsibilities; to promote charitable works; to provide new forms of learning in language, literature, philosophy, medicine, agriculture, architecture, poetry and the arts. The history of Asian Buddhism is thus, in large part, the history of applied Buddhism—establishing ways of applying Buddhist understandings and practices to address a wide variety of perceived needs and concerns of people of diverse cultures.<sup>2</sup>

As many aspects of Buddhist thought and practice from India were gradually developed, adapted, and integrated into each Asian culture, Buddhists working in those societies were learning what culturally based needs they were called upon to address, and what forms of Buddhist response were perceived as meaningful and effective within the worldviews of that culture. As various Buddhist teachers, ritual specialists, yogins, and monastic communities learned new ways to apply aspects of Buddhist thought, ritual and contemplative power to meet concerns of Asian cultures like those listed above, they forged relationships with the social groups and economic classes of those societies who held those concerns. Through this process over time, Buddhist figures and monastic communities were being tutored by each Asian culture on what would be received by that culture as “skillful means,” as applications of Dharmic power that would be perceived as deeply beneficial by those in that culture.

To apply Buddhist forms of knowledge and power to address so many mundane needs of individuals and communities did not have to be seen as contradicting the ultimate Buddhist concern to cultivate

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<sup>2</sup> On practical, mundane applications of Asian Buddhist ethical frameworks and meditative and ritual powers to meet culturally conditioned human needs, see e.g. Arthur F. Wright, “*Studies in Chinese Buddhism*” 1-33; Stephan Beyer, “*The Cult of Tara: Magic and Ritual in Tibet*” 227-360; Geoffrey Samuel, “*Civilized Shamans*” 176-198, 258-269, 309-335. Also see Donald S. Lopez, ed., “*Buddhism in Practice*”; Donald S. Lopez, ed., “*Religions of Tibet in Practice*”; Donald S. Lopez, ed., “*Religions of India in Practice*”; Donald S. Lopez, ed., “*Religions of China in Practice*”; George Tanabe, “*Religions of Japan in Practice*”; Robert Buswell, “*Religions of Korea in Practice*”; David Gordon White, ed., “*Tantra in Practice*.”

supramundane, liberating paths that lead to nirvāṇa and enlightenment. In many Asian Buddhist cultures, mundane and supramundane applications of Buddhist power were both viewed as essential, and as mutually empowering. Basic safety, health, a sense of well-being and long life were viewed as important requisites for human beings to accomplish the practices that lead to enlightenment. The applications of Buddhist knowledge, ritual and yogic power described above were employed to provide those requisites. In addition, many people in Asian societies first took interest in Buddhism for its perceived power to meet deeply-felt personal and social needs like those noted above. And that interest, in turn, supported broadening and growing social interest in the sources of such beneficial power, generating cultural and economic support for Buddhist monastic institutions and communities that preserved the full range of Buddhist learning and practice, both for attaining enlightenment and for addressing mundane needs.<sup>3</sup>

### **Buddhist Applications Today**

In continuity with that historical process of adaptation in cultures of Asia, Buddhist resources are now also being applied in new ways to help address the perceived needs and problems of modern cultures and societies. Buddhist thought is being applied nowadays to inform current

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<sup>3</sup> On skillful means (upāya kauśalya) as a doctrine that helps bridge the pragmatic, mundane goals and the supramundane, enlightenment goals of Buddhist cultures, see Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*”, 269. For historical overviews of ways that Buddhist teachings and practices adapted to meet the worldviews and diverse needs and concerns of Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan cultures, see, e.g.: Wright, *Studies in Chinese Buddhism*; Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*”; Kenneth Ch’en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*;” E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*;” Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*”; Joseph M. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*”; Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*,” 436-573.



problems of economic, social and gender inequality, ecology, education, criminal justice, war and peace, and inter-religious dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Buddhist meditation theory and practice, often in adapted and secularized forms, is now being applied to help treat various kinds of physical and mental illness, to help alleviate stresses of modern life, and to inform new kinds of learning and research in clinical psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and medicine.<sup>5</sup> There is growing interest in adapting Buddhist principles and meditation practices to support social-emotional learning in primary and secondary schools, to inform training of healthcare professionals, social workers, lawyers, and business people. Educators, doctors, nurses, psychotherapists, hospice counselors, human rights workers, social activists are being trained in meditations of mindfulness, loving kindness, and compassion, both to help avert secondary trauma and compassion fatigue and to help them become more fully present, resilient and sustainably responsive to those they serve. Such contemplative trainings are also being drawn upon to inform work with the physically and mentally ill, at-risk families, the dying, prisoners, addicts, trauma survivors, underserved youth, and more.<sup>6</sup> Many of the authors of other articles in

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<sup>4</sup>On contemporary Buddhist social applications, see e.g. Michael Jerryson, ed., "The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism." 487-564; Sallie King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism", Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., "Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia"; Dalai Lama, "Ethics for a New Millennium."

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Germer and Ronald Siegel, "Wisdom and Compassion in Psychotherapy" 203-292; Emma Seppälä, Emiliana Simon-Thomas, Stephanie Brown, Monica Worline, C. Daryl Cameron, and James Doty, eds., "Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science"; Amanda Ie, Christelle Ngnoumen, and Ellen Langer, eds., "The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Mindfulness"; Brian Ostafin, Michael Robertson, and Brian Meier, eds., "Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation"; Paul Gilbert, ed., "Compassion: Concepts, Research and Applications" J. Mark Williams and Jon Kabat Zinn, eds., "Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Multiple Applications at the Intersection of Science and Dharma."

<sup>6</sup> Organizations that convene gatherings and provide programs in such applications include Garrison Institute (<https://www.garrisoninstitute.org>), Spirit Rock

this journal issue are involved in such work. Various Buddhist organizations have launched new initiatives in Asia and around the world to help address poverty, to provide vocational training, care for the elderly, to establish schools, medical clinics and disaster assistance, and to challenge oppressive social and economic structures of their societies.<sup>7</sup>

Buddhism today, as in the past, is thus applying its resources to address what current societies perceive as pressing needs and problems. And as this process continues to unfold, as in the past, Buddhist figures and communities, and others who are now drawing upon their resources, are continuing to develop culturally informed means for applying the power of the Dharma in ways viewed as beneficial by sectors of modern societies.

### **Problematic Aspects of Modern Buddhist Applications**

However, some modern ways of applying Buddhist practices to meet contemporary needs differ in significant ways from traditional Asian ways of applying Buddhist practices noted earlier. I will focus here on two problematic ways that modern applications of Buddhism differ from the past, informed by recent social analyses. First is the tendency to subsume modern secular applications of Buddhist practices under overly individualistic, consumer-based agendas that lose the more inclusive social-ethical frameworks that had informed such practices in traditional cultures. Second is the tendency to separate modern adaptations of Buddhist practices in the public eye from the Buddhist traditions and institutions that such practices have been drawn from, thereby directing much of the social and

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(<https://www.spiritrock.org>), Mind and Life Institute (<https://www.mindandlife.org>), Engaged Mindfulness Institute (<https://www.engagedmindfulness.org>). Buddhist Peace Fellowship (<https://buddhistpeacefellowship.org>).

<sup>7</sup> Sallie King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism" for examples. For a recent example of an excellent Asian Buddhist service organization, see Karuna-Shechen (<http://karuna-shechen.org>).

economic support generated by those modern applications away from the Buddhist institutions that have been the sources for them. We will look at each of these two problematic tendencies in turn.

First, there is the tendency for modern urban societies, with their hyper-individualistic understanding of human beings, instrumental view of persons and natural world, and competitive, profit-focused economies to subsume Buddhist applications under narrowly individualistic and consumer agendas, while dropping the broader social-ethical frameworks that informed such practices in the Buddhist communities of their origin. The danger here is that the modern focus of Buddhist practices too exclusively on the decontextualized individual provides too narrow a framework, both psychologically and ethically, to support the greater potential of such practices to address the fuller needs of people and their larger world

In traditional Asian cultures, the identity of a person has meaning within the many kinds of relationship in which the person is embedded: relationships with one's family, one's familial and spiritual ancestors, one's larger clans and communities, with the landscape, with many kinds of indigenous spirit or power that inhabit the landscape, and with the cosmos at large. In such cultures, an individual's concern for her own benefit and progress is automatically linked to concern for the many kinds of community in which the life of that individual is embedded. When people in traditional Asian Buddhist cultures take up Buddhist practices of refuge, spiritual aspiration, generosity, ethics, cultivation of mindfulness, love, compassion, tranquility, insight and so forth, they are learning to participate in a communal field of care in which the individual has been held by countless others across space and time. That communal field of interconnection includes spiritual ancestors, lineage teachers, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and supramundane protectors, who, as embodiments of the practices that the individual engages, hold that individual and her world

in care, compassion, wisdom and blessing. To participate in Buddhist ethical, ritual and meditative practices, therefore, is to learn how to become part of a vast community of compassion and wisdom that embraces one's whole world and all previous and future generations.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, in modernistic Western cultures and urbanized societies, the human person is largely understood as an independent being, an autonomous entity that pre-exists relations to others. Practices adapted from Buddhism for current secular programs in mindfulness, lovingkindness, self-compassion, and so forth are therefore often understood by participants as self-help techniques, whose purpose is to provide the autonomous self with the means to improve itself in various ways.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, meditation practices tend to be viewed as commodities, valued for their ability to support the individual's autonomous quest for peace of mind, individual happiness, personal health and so forth, analogous to taking up a discipline of jogging, often unrelated to any larger awareness of the world in which that individual is embedded. But this narrow horizon of personal self-concern severely limits the potential of practices from Buddhism to bear fruit in more beneficial ways, both for the individuals who take them up and for their larger world.

For example, even when practices of loving kindness and compassion training are adapted from Buddhism in secular contexts with the goal of cultivating a more sustainable, inclusive and unconditional compassion for work in social service and activism, the modern sense of autonomous self that preconsciously frames any such practices can exacerbate inner

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<sup>8</sup> David McMahan, "The Making of Buddhist Modernism" 198-199; Paul Condon and John Makransky, "Recovering the Relational Starting Point of Compassion Training," In the "Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith" video series (New York: Films Media Group, 1996), Smith reports what a Japanese Zen master told him is the real meaning of Zen: "Zen is infinite reverence for the past, infinite concern for the future, and infinite responsibility for the present."

<sup>9</sup> McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 198-199.

obstacles to the fuller accomplishment of their goals. The modern notion of persons as autonomous agents who engage in meditation to grow personal capacities of compassion through their own efforts alone can ironically reinforce what Asian Buddhists have sought to transcend: the notion of a separate self that stands apart from others. The motivation to do meditation as a self-help project can reinforce the self-clinging frame of mind that impedes fuller access to compassion. This, it has been argued, can exacerbate psychological barriers to the human capacity for more inclusive, unconditional and sustainable compassion. Such psychological barriers to compassion include the lack of a sufficiently secure base in one's own experience of love and compassion to be able to extend those qualities freely to others, fear of exposure to suffering that inhibits compassion for those who suffer, and reductive perceptions of self and others that hide their fuller dignity and worthiness for deep care and compassion.<sup>10</sup>

Previous generations of Buddhists who trained in inclusive, unconditional love and compassion have had a different, more effective starting point for such training—not the hyper-individualistic framework of self-help operative in modern secular programs, but an awareness of deep relationality—the sense that one is encompassed in the loving care and compassion of all awakened beings, a powerful field of refuge. With that starting point, meditation practice has provided a way for the meditator to be incorporated into that field of unconditional care to learn, in turn, to extend its all-encompassing love and compassion to others. Such training was not conceived, as it often is today, as a project of an autonomous self to generate inclusive compassion on one's own from scratch, but as a way for the relational self to extend the power of love and compassion in which it is already held to many others. In this way, the power of care is felt to come not just from one's own efforts, but also from beyond

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<sup>10</sup> Condon and Makransky, "Recovering the Relational Starting Point;" Paul Condon and John Makransky, "Sustainable Compassion Training: Integrating Meditation Theory with Psychological Science."

oneself to inspire and support one's efforts. That unlimited secure base of compassionate support has traditionally provided the means for Buddhist practitioners to experience the sufferings of themselves and others as subsumed within a larger reality of unlimited care, compassion and wisdom that can transform, heal and liberate the suffering. And this has given such practitioners the confidence needed to cultivate increasingly inclusive and unconditional compassion in the face of suffering, beyond limiting perceptions of self and others, helping them to transcend the psychological barriers to compassion noted above.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, since modernist views of the person view the self as ontologically pre-existing relations to others, and modern economies embed that understanding of the self within a highly competitive view of one's place in the larger world, it seems natural in modern societies to view other people and the natural world primarily through the lens of instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality evaluates the value of persons, creatures and the natural world just by their ability to meet the needs or desires of the self or of the group with which the self identifies. This kind of instrumental perspective is so pervasive and socially conditioned in modern societies that it is largely unconscious to many of us.<sup>12</sup>

This modern instrumentalizing framework, when left unexamined, can motivate applications of Buddhist mindfulness that are not attuned to their fuller ethical implications and that limit their potential benefits. Several recent critics of secular mindfulness have argued that it has been widely marketed as a method that corporations have adopted to teach their workers to reduce their feelings of difficulty and stress at work

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<sup>11</sup> Condon and Makransky, "Recovering the Relational Starting Point." John Makransky, "Compassion in Buddhist Psychology" in *Wisdom and Compassion in Psychotherapy* ed. by Christopher Germer and Ronald Siegel.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Himes and Kenneth Himes, "*Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*," 114-115.

through a personal practice of meditation. These critics have argued that, in this way, businesses have been using mindfulness to help make workers more productive without attending to the corporate policies that make the workplace so difficult and stressful for them. Such corporate policies include staff and budget cutbacks, insufficient wages, unhealthy or unsafe working conditions, excessive work hours, and insufficient support for workers' healthcare, childcare, or sick leave. Mindfulness has sometimes also been introduced into schools in disadvantaged communities to help children regulate their emotions, in part to help them become more manageable in school, but often without inquiring sufficiently into why their schools have received such limited resources to support the lives of those children. When workplace difficulty and stress is portrayed too exclusively as an individual responsibility to be addressed just by personal cultivation, the social and institutional causes of stress and illness remain unaddressed.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, when modern programs of meditation practice like mindfulness and cultivations of loving-kindness, tranquility and insight are inscribed within a larger communal and ethical framework of inclusive care and concern, as has been assumed in the Asian cultures of their origin, such practices can support the concern to diagnose and address causes of suffering operative in the larger world in which the individual is embedded. This means that meditation practices adapted from Buddhism can certainly be drawn upon to help inform and empower work for institutional and social structural change when that is made a conscious focus of their application. Examples of this will be noted in the next section.

What has been said implies that modern cultures, when they appropriate Buddhist practices without their fuller ethical and communal

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald Purser, David Forbes, and Adam Burke, eds., "*Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement.*"

frameworks, are reconstructing Buddhism in modernity's own image, as a narrow self-help technique or, in some cases, as an instrument to maintain socially oppressive status quos. To whatever extent this is happening, it hides the fact that Buddhism can offer important critiques of modernism that challenge some of its key assumptions. One such assumption, which a number of Buddhist leaders today are critiquing, is modernity's view of persons as atomized selves whose fundamental purposes are dictated by social and economic competition with other atomized selves, instead of viewing persons as constituted by their relations to all other beings, human and non-human, within an inclusive field of inter-dependence. Modern instrumental rationality can be critiqued from a Buddhist perspective, by pointing out how it functions as a socially conditioned form of delusion that prevents people from seeing the fuller reality of other humans and creatures in their deep worth, dignity and need for love and care. From that Buddhist perspective, modern capitalist economies misidentify the very basis of human well-being as the individual's ability to procure as many temporarily satisfying goods as possible for the self, rather than identifying the basis of well-being with the ability to fulfill one's interdependent nature by contributing beneficially to the lives of many others.

A second problematic way that modern applications of Buddhist practice to meet human needs differ from the past is the tendency to separate such applications from the Buddhist traditions and institutions in which such practices have originated. In traditional Asian cultures, Buddhist teachers, yogins and monastic communities have been the ones that applied various kinds of Buddhist knowledge and power to address perceived social needs. In the modern context, often after an initial stage of learning from Buddhist teachers, Buddhist practices are then adapted and applied within secular programs of meditation and training that are largely divorced from the Buddhist institutions and communities that have been the source of those practices.



The tendency to separate modern applications of Buddhist practice from their Buddhist traditions of origin occurs from two sides: from modernity and from tradition. On one side, modern adapters of Buddhist practices often operate within scientific research institutions and affiliates that distance the adaptations from their traditions of origin under pressure to establish protocols in researchable, largely non-contextual forms that are distanced from their religious, ethical and communal contexts both for simplicity and in the name of non-religious secularism.<sup>14</sup> On the other side, some traditional Buddhist teachers and communities distance themselves from modern Buddhist applications that meet modern needs because they consider such applications too worldly, not fulfilling the fundamental purpose of the Buddha's teaching which is supramundane—liberation from samsara. That latter viewpoint ignores much of the history of Asian Buddhism, noted above, in which worldly applications of Buddhist knowledge, ritual and meditative power, by addressing many kinds of mundane need in societies, helped attract the social and economic support needed for Buddhist institutions to survive and thrive--institutions that could maintain all the Buddhist learnings and trainings for supramundane paths of liberation.<sup>15</sup>

The separation of modern programs of application from Buddhist institutions means that, in many cases, only a small selection of practices from Buddhism are adapted for secular use. And the fuller foundations of Buddhist theory and practice that stand behind those practices, which

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<sup>14</sup> Brooke Lavelle, "Against One Method: Contemplation in Context" in Ronald Purser, David Forbes, & Adam Burke, eds., *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement*, 238.

<sup>15</sup> John Makransky, "The Emergence of Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection in the Academy as a Resource for Buddhist Communities and for the Contemporary World," 137-140.

might more fully inform those practices, often remain unknown and untapped.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, when modern secular programs succeed in applying practices like mindfulness to meet needs such as reducing stress or promoting better physical or mental health, those programs generate a lot of popular interest, which translates into much social and economic support for those programs and their institutions. But that social and economic support is not necessarily directed back to the Buddhist institutions and communities from which the practices have come. So, even though various Buddhist institutions and communities of practice have become important sources of benefit for modern societies through adaptation of select Buddhist practices to meet modern needs, those institutions are not necessarily receiving the support they need to continue to maintain their traditions of learning and practice, the very traditions from which potential future applications may come.

### **Three Modern Kinds of Applied Buddhism that Help Correct those Problematic Tendencies**

Three kinds of applied Buddhism today run counter to, and help correct, the problematic modern tendencies critiqued above: socially engaged Buddhism, Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, and secular applications of Buddhist meditation that include robust relational and ethical frameworks.

The first such modern development, socially engaged Buddhism, has been pioneered by an increasing number of Buddhist figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, A.T. Ariyaratne, Buddhadasa, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Maha Ghosananda, the Dalai Lama, Cheng-yen, David

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<sup>16</sup> David Germano, "Contemplation in contexts: Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Across the Boundaries of the Humanities and the Sciences."

Loy, Bhikku Bodhi, Bernie Glassman, Joanna Macy, Jan Willis, Hsiao-Lan Hu, Rod Owens and others. Socially engaged Buddhism applies Buddhist principles and practices, informed by social science disciplines, to the social, political, economic and environmental problems of the current world. Socially engaged Buddhism newly informs and often challenges modern societies by drawing on Buddhist principles as critique and corrective. It also newly informs Buddhist traditions by drawing on modern social analyses.<sup>17</sup>

So, for example, the teaching of karma in classical Buddhist texts tends to focus on the individual, whose habits of intention and action are understood to condition one's personal experience over lifetimes. This classical concept of karma can be expanded in light of modern social analysis, focusing attention also on ways that individual patterns of thought and action are socially conditioned, and contribute to the social conditioning of others. Thus, as Sulak Sivaraksa has taught, karma is both individual and social, and Buddhist practice must apply not only to the transformation of the individual, but also to the transformation of social structures that condition individuals into ways of thinking and acting that promote inequity, violence and harm to the natural world.<sup>18</sup> As David Loy has written, individuals create social systems but social systems also create individuals. Individuals are born into a world that conditions them toward greed, aversion and delusion, which take social, institutional and political forms that do harm to humans, creatures, and the natural world. To address the individual conditioning of those tendencies without also addressing the social conditioning is to leave half the causality of suffering unaddressed. To relieve suffering, then, involves taking up practices not only for personal transformation, but also inquiring into the structures of

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<sup>17</sup> Sallie King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism"; Queen and King, eds., *Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*; McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," 250-254; Hsiao-Lan Hu, "This-Worldly Nibbana: A Buddhist Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community."

<sup>18</sup> Sallie King, "Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism," 17.

our social conditioning, such as the centrality of consumerism in the globalized economic organization of modern life.<sup>19</sup> In recent years, Black socially engaged Buddhist activists in the West have pioneered new ways of drawing on practices both from Buddhist and Black spiritual and ancestral lineages to help heal inter-generational trauma, inform critical analysis of structural racism, and empower activism to overturn it.<sup>20</sup>

A second modern development of applied Buddhism that helps correct the problematic tendencies of modernism noted above is the emergence of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection in colleges and universities. This is a scholarly expression of socially engaged Buddhism that emerged over the past twenty-five years within the modern academic study of Buddhism. This scholarly movement has also been called “Buddhist theology.” Its mission is three-fold. First, to explore how modern academic disciplines (in philosophy, ethics, religious studies, theology, the social sciences and the natural sciences) may newly inform Buddhist understandings or practices today. Secondly, to explore how Buddhist forms of knowledge and practice can newly inform disciplines, questions and concerns of the modern academy. And thirdly to analyze how Buddhist forms of knowledge may be applied to help address current problems and needs of societies.

On the first mission, for example, social and historical analyses of roles of women in Buddhist traditions are being drawn upon to inform new roles for women in current Buddhist communities, including teaching and leadership roles and the reintroduction of full ordination of

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<sup>19</sup> David Loy, “*The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*,” 87.

<sup>20</sup> see, e.g. Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl Giles, “*Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism can Teach us about Race, Resilience, Transformation & Freedom*”; George Yancy and Emily McRae, eds., “*Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*.”

Buddhist nuns in societies where such ordinations had been lost.<sup>21</sup> Methods for historically contextualizing the development of Buddhist ideas and practices in various Asian cultures inform new ways of understanding and articulating Buddhist thought and practice for current Asian and Western societies.<sup>22</sup> And traditional understandings of Buddhist doctrine are being expanded to include insights from the social sciences, e.g.: expanding traditional karma theory to include social conditioning, expanding traditional Buddhist understandings of interdependence to include modern ecological perspectives and economics, revisiting Buddhist meditation theory through the perspectives of modern psychology and cognitive science, and reframing the four noble truths to include social-structural causes of suffering.<sup>23</sup>

On the second mission of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, scholars use Buddhist understandings to help inform modern academic disciplines and questions. Buddhist thought has been drawn upon to inform current analyses in environmental ethics, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, medicine, political theory, feminist thought, human rights, criminal justice theory, economics, epistemology and metaphysics,

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<sup>21</sup> Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Women in Buddhist Traditions*.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Jackson and John Makransky, *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*; Makransky, "Emergence of Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection." The relevant program unit in the American Academy of Religion is listed here: <https://aar-conference.imis-inspire.com/a/page/ProgramUnits/buddhist-critical-constructive-reflection-unit>

<sup>23</sup> David Loy, *The Great Awakening*; Ken Jones *The New Social Face of Buddhism: An Alternative Socio-political Perspective*; Stephanie Kaza, *Green Buddhism: Practice and Compassionate Action in Uncertain Times*; Sulak Sivaraksa, *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; Francisco Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*; John Wellwood, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*.

philosophy of science and other areas of modern inquiry.<sup>24</sup>

Within the third mission of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, to address needs of modern societies, come scholarly analyses of many of the Buddhist applications noted in the early part of this paper. These include adaptations of Buddhist principles and practices for education of children, for training people in the various caring professions, to help treat physical and mental illnesses, to assist those who are sick and dying, to work with prisoners, to address oppressive social and environmental conditions, to work for peace and justice, and so forth.<sup>25</sup>

A third modern Buddhist development that helps correct the problematic modern tendencies noted earlier is the secular application of Buddhist meditation practices that have robust ethical frameworks for relating the well-being of the individual to the well-being of the wider world in which the individual is situated. This is exemplified in mindfulness programs that explicitly link personal to social transformation and include critical inquiry into dysfunctional aspects of social systems.<sup>26</sup> This also includes emerging compassion training programs that critique the

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<sup>24</sup> Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch “*The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*”; Paul Gilbert and Choden, “*Mindful Compassion*”; Daniel Goleman, ed., “*Destructive Emotions*”; John Stanley, David Loy and Gyurme Dorje, eds., “*A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*”; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., “*Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges and Achievements*”; Sallie King, “*Being Benevolence*.” Also see conferences and publications listed at the Mind and Life Institute (<https://www.mindandlife.org>) and The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (<http://ccare.stanford.edu>).

<sup>25</sup> See such programs and applications listed at the Garrison Institute (<https://www.garrisoninstitute.org>), the Mind and Life Institute (<https://www.mindandlife.org>) and the Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection Group in the American Academy of Religion.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Contemplative Mind in Society (<https://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/initiatives>); The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (<https://acmhe.org>); Buddhist Peace Fellowship (<https://buddhistpeacefellowship.org>); Spirit Rock (<https://www.spiritrock.org/resources/social-justice-resources>).

modernist tendency to see persons as separate entities in light of interdependence and introduce a variety of practices adapted from Buddhism for cultivating inclusive care and compassion within robust relational, communal and ethical frameworks. These include Compassion Focused Therapy, Compassion Cultivation Training, Cognitively-Based Compassion Training, Sustainable Compassion Training, and the Compassion Initiative.<sup>27</sup>

All three of the modern developments in applied Buddhism noted here—socially engaged Buddhism, Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, and ethically-communally robust programs of mindfulness and compassion—retain close connection with Buddhist institutions and communities, which are viewed as ongoing resources to inform present and future applications adapted from Buddhist theory and practice. All of the socially engaged Buddhist leaders mentioned above, most of the scholars who engage in critical-constructive Buddhist reflection, and many of the primary developers of robust ethical-communal frameworks for compassion training retain close, ongoing connections with Buddhist teachers and communities with whom they continue to learn.

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Gilbert, *Compassion Focused Therapy*; Compassion Cultivation Training comes from Stanford University, (<https://www.compassioninstitute.com/the-program/compassion-cultivation-training/>) and is discussed in Thupten Jinpa, *A Fearless Heart* (New York: Hudson Street, 2015); Cognitively-Based Compassion Training was developed at Emory University (<https://www.compassion.emory.edu/cbct-compassion-training/index.html>). The Compassion Initiative is based at Naropa University (<https://www.naropa.edu/academics/cace/research-and-initiatives.php>). Sustainable Compassion Training is available at [sustainablecompassiontraining.org](http://sustainablecompassiontraining.org), and is explained in Condon and Makransky, “Sustainable Compassion Training.” For analysis of such programs, see Brooke Lavelle, “Compassion in Context: Tracing the Buddhist Roots of Secular Compassion-Based Contemplative Programs,” in *Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science*, ed. by Emma Seppälä, Emiliana Simon-Thomas, Stephanie Brown, Monica Worline, C. Daryl Cameron, and James Doty.

## Conclusion

The application of Buddhist thought and practice to meet perceived needs of societies and cultures is part of the entire history of Buddhism in Asia. So, applying Buddhist understandings and practices today to meet many kinds of social need is not new. But how they are being applied today is problematic in two ways that were noted. First is the problematic tendency to subsume modern secular applications of Buddhist practice under extremely individualistic and consumer-oriented agendas that lose the inclusive communal and ethical frameworks that had informed such practices in traditional Buddhist cultures. Second is the tendency to separate modern adaptations of Buddhist practice from the Buddhist institutions such practices are drawn from, thereby directing the social and economic support generated by those practices away from their original institutional and communal sources. Finally, three kinds of modern applied Buddhism were noted that help ameliorate those two problematic tendencies: socially engaged Buddhism, Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, and modern meditation programs that include robust relational and ethical frameworks.



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