**Should Buddhists be Social Activists?**

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**Part 1**

**Compassion and suffering**

Buddhism is widely admired in the West for its commitments to progressive social activism. Saffron-clad monks march to promote peace or condemn repressive governments. The Dalai Lama lauds human rights and assures packed audiences that ‘the Buddha would be green’. When the Vietnamese Zen monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, died this January, he was mourned by high-profile political activists as well as members of the Buddhist monastic community. Buddhists are common sights at marches, protests, sit-ins, and occupations. Magazines like *Tricycle* and *The Lion’s Roar* regularly feature articles on capitalism and social injustice as well as mindfulness and meditation. In my local bookstore, the Buddhism section has many books with titles like *The Dharma of Social Justice*.

The sense of alliances between the teachings of the Buddha and modern social and environmental activism is one of the main reasons for the positive perception of Buddhism in many Western countries. The Buddha’s teachings on suffering and compassion turn out to be allied to the concerns of many feminist and environmental movements. Equality, tolerance, and social justice get confidently related to the discourses that the Buddha preached one and a half thousand years ago. From his criticisms of the caste system to the emphasis on liberating beings from suffering, the Buddha – a man born a prince only to abandon his inherited wealth and power – thus emerges as an acceptable and attractive spiritual teacher.

**‘Engaged Buddhism’**

Is this image of the Buddha as a social activist ahead of his time accurate? It wasn’t always the case that perceptions were so favourable. Late-nineteenth century American, French and English writers saw Buddhism as a pessimistic doctrine encouraging passivity and retreat from life. Life, love, and hope – it was thought – are absent from the life of the monk. For one poetic critic, Buddhists are ‘living under a sky from which no sunlight ever streams’, their world all ‘sadness and hopelessness’. Many of the critics were Christians contrasting the good works, hope, and energy of their own faith with what an early scholar called the ’deep and miserable melancholy’ of Buddhism. Not all, though. Nietzsche was a harsh critic of Christianity but also condemned Buddhism as a ‘life-denying’ creed. There were also admirers of Buddhism – like the Indophile English Theosophists or the enthusiastic readers of Edwin Arnold’s epic poem *The Light of Asia* (which sold a million copies and was later made into a Broadway play).

What changed to change the image of Buddhism from one passivity and pessimism to one of energetic social activism? It is a long story. Historians and Buddhist scholars all emphasise that ‘Buddhism’ is many things, not a single tradition, and that politics, culture, trade, and colonialism all played their parts. I will not pretend to survey all of that work. Many scholars seem to endorse the ‘activist’ image – which is usually called ‘engaged Buddhism’ – even if there are also exceptions. I suspect what most people think of as ‘Buddhism’ is really shaped by some kind of engaged Buddhist image. I think that’s a problem: the fidelity of those images to the teachings of the Buddha is very questionable.

By ‘the teachings’, I mean the *suttas* or discourses that are taken to be the earliest statement of the Buddha’s teachings. It is often hard work to read and interpret these *suttas*. Many are extremely repetitive and need careful scholarly handling. Most admirers of Buddhism rely on the huge popular literature on Buddhism. Endless books, blogs, and podcasts offer explainers about compassion and mindfulness, or ‘advice for living’. Such resources can be useful, but do not always faithfully report what’s in the *suttas*. True, much of the content of the *suttas* will seem odd, obscure, or even unacceptable to modern minds. In those cases, offending content often gets airbrushed-out, explained away, or just ignored. In other cases, Buddhist concepts are left strategically vague – their original meanings are omitted, so that one can project onto them whatever other meanings one likes.

I think a lot of engaged Buddhism relies on strategic vagary about the content of the Buddha’s teachings. Two good places to look are claims typically made about compassion and the ‘overcoming of suffering’.

**Compassion**

Everyone knows the heart of the Buddha’s moral teachings is compassion. The Pali term is *karuṇā* – a term that recurs all through the *suttas* and is one of the ‘divine abodes’ that marks an enlightened being. It is easy to see why engaged Buddhism would focus on compassion. In a world scarred with violence, inequality and avoidable misery, what is needed is compassion and related virtues such as love and empathy. Confronted with a world the Buddha described as ‘[burning](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.028.nymo.html)’ with ‘hatred, greed, delusion’, we constantly encounter people whose very survival will depend on our capacity for compassion.

From these ideas, the path from Buddhist compassion to social activism may seem clear and direct. Is it, though? ‘Compassion’ has many meanings in English – kindness, altruism, feeling sympathy for others, caring and so on. Moreover, the Buddha offered us complicated accounts of the nature and practice of *karuṇā*. To see if there is a path from compassion to activism, we ought to look at the *suttas*.

Compassion has two main senses in the *suttas*. The first is a commitment to personal responses to specific instances of the suffering of the beings one encounters. Helping an injured dog or tending to a sick friend or feeding a homeless person would all be instances of *karuṇā*. Compassionate acts are immediate, direct, tangible. Of course, this is consistent with certain kinds of modern moral action – volunteering at a shelter, caring for elderly neighbours, being a helpful friend. But *karuṇā* in this sense is different from ‘bigger’ sorts of moral activism. In the *suttas*, there is no sense that *karuṇā* should involve changing social structures. On the contrary, the Buddha dissuades his followers from social reformism (as we’ll see in part three of this series). Similar advice is also given to ‘householders’ – ordinary, non-monastic people – in texts like the [*Siggalovada Sutta*](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=006639875531220445029:2z3mhfokk-u&q=https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwjq1Pungfv5AhVL4aQKHc6cBVgQFnoECAQQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1yf6gan8a2MFW-6Lh0o1yh). There’s also no sense that acts of compassion should take place at a global level. The focus is small-scale, local, intimate, direct.

The goals are also different. The [*Karuṇāsutta*](https://suttacentral.net/sn46.63/en/woodward) explains that *karuṇā* matters because it will lead to ‘peace from bondage’ which helps one achieve *mokṣa* – final, permanent liberation from the cycle of rebirth. There is no reference to modern goals like social justice or economic equality, neither of which feature among the Buddha’s goals (he was happy enough for some people to be much wealthier than others, just as long as they acquired and used their riches wisely). Compassion is treated in similar ways in the Mahāyāna tradition with its ideal of the *bodhisattva*, an enlightened being who selflessly postpones their own ‘liberation’ to work for that of others. The great Mahāyānists, Chandrakirti and Santideva, each rejected social activism. In their view, the best instance of compassion is teaching other people the *Dhamma*.

I mentioned there is a second sense of *karuṇā*. This is the ‘[boundless compassion](https://suttacentral.net/snp1.8/en/piyadassi?reference=none&highlight=false)’ felt by the enlightened being for all other creatures. Could this be a path to social activism aiming at changing the world for the sake of all people? No, since that would not make sense given what the Buddha says about this second sort of *karuṇā*. ‘Boundless compassion’ is not a virtue we can exercise for the sake of specific people – the victims of oppression, say, or those suffering due to treatable diseases. It is a transformed way of experiencing the world. The Buddha’s moral teachings are really a sort of ‘[moral phenomenology](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi9z5udgvv5AhVPEsAKHbELD48QFnoECAYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Facademic.oup.com%2Fbook%2F39001%2Fchapter%2F338260482&usg=AOvVaw2jNFJbVIrAsvn7teMkH8JN)’, of practices for disciplined transformation of how we experience and engage with the world.

Peter Harvey, a distinguished scholar, explains that ‘boundless compassion’ consists in ‘the aspiration that beings be free from suffering’. It is one of the four ‘[divine abodes](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html)’ (*brahmavihārās*) – states that make our minds akin to those of the *brahma* gods. When we inhabit a divine abode, we experience the world as they do. A second ‘abode’ is ‘equanimity’ (*upekkhā*) – a deep sense of imperturbability. Contrary to activist emphases on wrongful injustice, this equanimity is rooted in a recognition that all beings suffer or flourish in accordance with their *kamma*. This is one reason the Buddha [describes](https://suttacentral.net/dhp306-319/en/anandajoti?reference=none&highlight=false) certain rebirths – as an animal or a ‘hungry ghost’ – as a ‘bad’ or ‘unfortunate destiny’. A terrible rebirth is a consequence of bad *kamma* (which is why there will always be creatures and social groups whose state is ‘unfortunate’).

‘Boundless compassion’ and equanimity together are not a call to arms for the sake of the victims of injustice around the world. An enlightened being certainly desires they be liberated from suffering, but they do not experience anger or frustration at their circumstances. There is no raging against the elite, no angry calls for revolution, no ardent political campaigning. An enlightened being coolly experiences the truth that suffering is integral to the world: the First Noble Truth is that ‘existence is suffering’.

If this is a truth of the world, then is this a way to connect the teachings of the Buddha to social activism?

**Suffering**

‘Suffering’ is another ambiguous term with different meanings in everyday language and the Buddhist *suttas*. We can talk of different kinds of suffering (pain, starvation, loneliness, social alienation, political estrangement) with different causes (from bad treatment by others to bad personal decisions to bad ways of organising our shared world). The diversity of suffering was certainly a major theme of the Buddha’s discourses. As he said in several *suttas*, ‘What I teach now, O monks, is [suffering and the cessation of suffering](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=006639875531220445029:2z3mhfokk-u&q=https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.141.piya.html&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwi3nZa7hPv5AhWPPewKHaiWDN8QFnoECAAQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1S-HS4wsnCMd3fCT3ytUYj)’. The Four Noble Truths describe the fact, origins, and cessation of suffering. The whole objective of Buddhism is ‘the overcoming of suffering’. If so, is this a basis for engaged Buddhist calls for radical action?

The Pali term translated as ‘suffering is *dukkha*. It also gets translated as ‘stress’ or ‘dis-ease’ or ‘unsatisfactoriness’. Many scholars prefer to leave it untranslated. The Buddha often repeated this [explanation](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.nymo.html):

Birth is *dukkha*, ageing is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are *dukkha*; association with the unbeloved is *dukkha*; separation from the loved is *dukkha*; not getting what is wanted is *dukkha*.

Clearly, this is extremely broad. Every aspect of life is *dukkha* – the beginning, the end, and every mid-stage and the whole experience of things in terms of desires and dislikes. Existence is suffering, as the First Noble Truth tells us: not certain kinds of existence, but *existence* itself. How does this relate to social activism of the sort pursued by engaged Buddhists?

Engaged Buddhists always appeal to the Buddha’s goal of ‘overcoming suffering’. In our world, they argue, suffering takes the forms of poverty, social exclusion, exploitation, and violence and the causes are political corruption and greed, economic inequality, and the environmental emergency. Engaged Buddhists tend to focus on social change, their aim being ‘to uplift individuals, reform societies, and participate energetically in the political and economic spheres’. For Sallie B. King, the ‘Buddhist worldview, values, and spirituality’ encourages engagements with ‘political, social, economic, racial, gender, environmental, and other problems’. In the simpler slogan attributed to Thích Nhất Hạnh, engaged Buddhism just *is* Buddhism. ‘Saving the planet’, promoting human rights, protesting, climate rebellion … all these emerge as ways of helping ‘overcome suffering’.

I doubt the Buddha would agree that social activism counts as ‘overcoming suffering’. Ignoring the specific meanings of *dukkha* looks like another case of strategic vagary – omitting the specifically Buddhist meanings of concepts so one can project onto another one’s own preferred meanings. Here are three complications.

To start with, *dukkha*, for the Buddha, is generated by deep features of reality itself – hence ‘existence is suffering’. *Dukkha* is not generated by social institutions or ideologies. Even if we abolished patriarchy and capitalism, we will still be subjected to *dukkha*. The truth is that *dukkha* cannot be removed from the world – it is one of the ‘[Three Marks of Existence](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=006639875531220445029:2z3mhfokk-u&q=https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/seeingthings.html&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwjk_cK0h_v5AhWeSfEDHfcZABcQFnoECAkQAQ&usg=AOvVaw048ektIYV8YoMa2rzlXarx)’. Its deep causes are akin to laws of nature. There is nothing we can do to alter them to our own advantage. Even the *devas* – the gods – are bound by *dukkha* and *kamma*. The Buddha agreed that social and economic conditions can increase our suffering. It’s worse to be reborn poor, ill, lower-caste, or a woman if one is a human, and terrible to get reborn as an animal (several [*suttas*](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.136.nymo.html) explain the connections between bad conduct and ‘low states of birth’, [often](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.041.nymo.html) to remarkable degrees of detail). In these cases, the dreadfulness of their lives is partly due to the callousness and selfishness of others. But this does not justify radical action for social reform.

Overcoming *dukkha* – this is the second complication – is a matter of disciplined moral self-transformation. It requires us to achieve ‘[right view](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/search_results.html?cx=006639875531220445029%3A2z3mhfokk-u&ie=UTF-8&q=MN+117&sa=Search)’, a lucid understanding of the human condition unobstructed by ‘delusions’. Belief in an enduring self is the most famous of these stubborn false beliefs. ‘Right view’ is the first step of the Eightfold Path. It involves radical transformation of our actions, thoughts, habits, perceptions, and responses to things. The goal is to purge oneself of the attachments, cravings, desires, and ‘wrong views’ which set up objects of desire and then feed our ‘grasping-craving’ for them. In effect, then, ‘overcoming suffering’ is a [personal moral project](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=006639875531220445029:2z3mhfokk-u&q=https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.009.ntbb.html&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwi7o_PMifv5AhUDyaQKHUwHCd0QFnoECAUQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3xehy-4MfHM-a_ysh9Vxp4), not a collective social project. The aim is not to remove suffering from the world, but rather to change how one experiences and engages with the world in ways that reduce one’s own susceptibility to *dukkha*.

An engaged Buddhist who insists that there’s still a role for some sort of social change runs into a third complication. The Buddha *condemns* social activism and political participation. Monks who asked about politics are told to ‘[be refuges unto themselves](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.26.0.than.html)’ and be ‘[islands unto yourselves](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.043.wlsh.html)’. ‘[Right speech](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi5gfOaivv5AhUHXcAKHUlbBnMQFnoECAYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Fptf%2Fdhamma%2Fsacca%2Fsacca4%2Fsamma-vaca%2Findex.html&usg=AOvVaw2sGP65tFTL91o1FWvyrdLm)’, one factor of the Path, includes refusing to discuss politics, war, or other contentious social issues (I explain these points more in part 3). The Buddha abandoned royal life to seek enlightenment and, once he achieved it, never once expressed any desire for political power. When some people asked how to achieve social harmony, they are [advised](https://suttacentral.net/an7.21/en/sujato?layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin) to obey their laws, pay their taxes, and honour their traditions and elders. The desire for social and political engagement is an expression of ‘false views’ and creates powerful attachments and desires – precisely the causes of *dukkha* we’re supposed to be overcoming.

**Fidelity**

I doubt the Buddha’s teachings on *karuṇā* and what it means to ‘overcome suffering’ endorse social activism aimed at grand goals like ‘saving the world’. Claims to the contrary are guilty of strategic vagary and other ways of playing fast and loose with the *suttas*. Sometimes, activists deliberately change the *suttas* to make them suit their needs. The noted Indian activist B.R. Ambedkar – a fierce critic of sexism and caste – edited a set of *suttas* titled *The Buddha and his Dhamma* but added to several of them remarks about gender equality and low-caste groups. While recruiting the authority of the Buddha makes sense, it should not come at the cost of the distortion of his teachings.

Engaged Buddhists might respond to these points in many different ways. Some urge an updating of the Buddha’s moral teachings. Some admit the complications, but gloss over them, seeing Buddhism as a resource to be used as one wills. Others will reject the ideal of fidelity to teachings and tradition as one more obstacle to progressive social change. More scholarly critics will push back on issues of interpretation or point out doctrines I’ve not mentioned. Why not interpret *karuṇā* to be consistent with collective action? What about the ideal of the *cakkavatti*, the ‘Wheel-Turning Emperor’, who governs the world in line with the *Dhamma*? What about the discussions of the *lokadhamma*, the ‘worldly conditions’, like praise and gain, which keep the social world turning? Do we really need to endorse the metaphysical claims about *dukkha* as a ‘Mark of Existence’? Don’t the moral and political realities of our 21st century world of globalised technological modernity demand a different kind of *Dhamma*?

I see these as serious and interesting questions. Despite my scepticism about the ‘fit’ between social activism and what the Buddha taught, there are no quick knock-down arguments. We must read the *suttas*, take them seriously, admit awkward claims, explore differences, resist indulging in strategic vagary, and resist the assumption that his moral vision must align with ours.

I expect the conclusions will be discomfiting for engaged Buddhists. If I am right, the Buddha is not the liberal, feminist egalitarian social activist they’ve been taught to expect. But it’s better to have a truer discomfiting understanding than a false comforting one. If nothing else, such truthfulness and fidelity is one way we can do justice to the Buddha.

**Should Buddhists be social activists? Part 2**

**Condemnations and endorsements**

In the first piece in this series, I challenged the idea that the Buddha’s teachings on compassion and the overcoming of suffering provide support for social activism. ‘Changing the world’, challenging patriarchy, revolution, and the whole ethos of radical reformism is nothing like what the Buddha taught. *Karuṇā* – ‘compassion’ – really means smaller, modest acts of caring responsiveness. It doesn’t involve structural changes or collective actions. *Dukkha* – ‘suffering’ or ‘dis-ease’ – is a cosmic fact to be accepted, not a contingent aspect of our world we could ever ‘tackle’ through collective action. I ended that piece by noting questions a critic might ask. Can the Buddha not endorse our concerns with injustice? Wouldn’t he largely share in our sense of what is wrong with our world? Isn’t large-scale activism a natural extension of the Buddha’s teachings?

In this piece and the next one, I suggest the answer to all these questions is ‘No’.

**Condemnations and endorsements**

A student of mine once remarked that Buddhism seemed to her a ‘suspiciously good fit’ for modern progressive moral outlooks. An Iron Age Indian spiritual teacher born into a richly religious culture turns out to share almost the same values and concerns as late modern advocates of ‘liberal morality’. Like us, the Buddha condemns injustice and social discrimination. Like us, the Buddha takes moral practice to be continuous with radical political goals. Like us, the Buddha is anti-sexist and a champion of equality and climate action. ‘How remarkably convenient!’, said my student. Their suspicions were well-founded. A careful look at the *suttas* reveals a rather more complicated picture.

It is tempting to assume that historical moral figures should share our own values and outlooks. Sometimes, of course, they do – Jesus condemned greediness, Confucius praises honesty, and Native American traditions urged appreciative attention to the lives of non-human animals. Care should be taken, though, not to allow our expectations to take the place of the evidence. Pleasing agreements are often accompanied by uncomfortable differences. Confronted with moral visions from different times and cultures, we should not assume they are or must be basically identical to ours.

We should not presuppose – or invidiously pretend – that the Buddha did or would share our particular moral concerns. Nor should we assume he used or would recognise or endorse our concepts – ‘human rights’, ‘equality’, ‘climate crisis’, and so on. This alertness to differences was at the root of my students’ sense that the fit between the Buddha’s teachings and modern liberal tastes was too good to be true.

Consider some of the Buddha’s condemnations. Many *suttas* vigorously condemn various attitudes, behaviours, and kinds of life. In many cases, the Buddha condemns the same things that the modern liberals do – cruel mistreatment of animals, say, or the enthusiasm of leaders for warfare. Sometimes, though, the Buddha condemns things for different reasons. He did criticise the caste system, which earned him the approval of the eminent twentieth-century anti-caste activists, B.R. Ambekdar and E.V. Periyar.

The reasons are quite different, though. [Caste](https://suttacentral.net/mn98/en/sujato?layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin), for the Buddha, is objectionable because it reflects a confusion about *kamma*. Good *kamma* is determined by the moral quality of our intentions (cetanā), not which artificial social group one is born into. If one’s intentions are hateful, one’s actions accrue bad *kamma*, even if one is a *brahmin*, a term originally meaning the priestly caste the Buddha later redefined to mean a person of noble spirit. For the Buddha, then, caste is irrelevant to *kamma*. The caste system is therefore irrational and to be condemned for that reason. Its wrongs have nothing to do, for him, with injustice. When the Buddha lists types of ‘[outcast](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=006639875531220445029:2z3mhfokk-u&q=https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.07.piya.html&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwi2oMfpjPv5AhUY7aQKHRrqBAwQFnoECAEQAQ&usg=AOvVaw0qUTWf9AH20DHhsFk9IQsS)’, the decisive feature is bad moral motivations – greed, needless violence, ingratitude, lack of self-control. Never injustice. More to the point, the Buddha never, to my knowledge, actually called for the abolition of the caste system.

The Buddha also condemns quite different things to many of his modern liberal and progressive admirers. The [Fifth Precept](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/search_results.html?cx=006639875531220445029%3A2z3mhfokk-u&ie=UTF-8&q=PRECEPTS&sa=Search) prohibits use of alcohol, drugs, and intoxicants. Sex is criticised because it feeds powerful sensual desires and worldly attachments. Meditators are often [advised](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjgx5T9jfv5AhWNFMAKHV30DvQQFnoECAwQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Flib%2Fauthors%2Fsoma%2Fwayof.html&usg=AOvVaw0iPBVLt7Yo6PS-rW1lkyLM) to focus on leprous limbs, rotting bodies, and even corpses. In practice, the Buddha was only strict about monastic celibacy. But the clear message is that bodily pleasures should be disciplined, not indulged and certainly not celebrated.

The Buddha was also very happy to judge and rank different ways of life. The modern liberal rhetoric of tolerance for people’s ‘choices’ of lifestyles is not a feature of his vision. The best way of life is that of a Buddhist monk or nun – the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* who make up the *Sangha*. Theirs is the ‘[Noble Quest](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjO2O6Mjvv5AhUloVwKHV7GBcYQFnoECAUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fmn%2Fmn.026.than.html&usg=AOvVaw3AAPhKqnzi4TlB4ynXQ4Hm)’, set apart from the grubby everyday world. Second-best are lay Buddhists: people who follow at least some of precepts, some of the time. This is a prudent sort of respect: the *Sangha* depends economically on ‘householders’ for alms, food, shelter, members, security, and political support. A wise king – a *cakkavatti* – supports the *Sangha*, but it does not hurt to ‘attract the hearts’ of the people on whom one depends for support and protection.

In distant third are the lives of all the non-Buddhists: the ‘orthodox’ schools which recognise the spiritual authority of the Vedas, materialists, atheists, and all people led by ‘wrong views’ and engaged in an ‘[ignoble search](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.026.than.html)’. Christians, Muslims, scientific naturalists and other later rival communities would all fall into this group, too. The Buddha is explicit about the privileged status of Buddhists: monastics, on the ‘noble quest’, are heedful and resolute, and compared to animals, like swans, symbolic of purity and freedom, as in these [verses](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi_59zKjvv5AhUTS8AKHe6JBeEQFnoECAoQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fkn%2Fdhp%2Fdhp.13.than.html&usg=AOvVaw18NNCNHmFGg_bTdXswQ5db) from the *Dhammapada*:

Blinded this world —

how few here see clearly!

Just as birds who've escaped

from a net are

few, few

are the people

who make it to heaven

The ‘few’ are monastics and a later [verse](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwibhYOrj_v5AhUFlFwKHQJxCIEQFnoECAcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fkn%2Fdhp%2Fdhp.13.than.html&usg=AOvVaw18NNCNHmFGg_bTdXswQ5db) underscores the sort of judgments the Buddha makes of ‘uninstructed worldlings’:

Don't associate with lowly qualities.

Don't consort with heedlessness.

Don't associate with wrong views.

Don't busy yourself with the world.

Many *suttas* repeat these celebrations of the superiority of the monastic life and condemn the lives of ‘worldlings’. Their world is ‘burning’ with hatred and delusion, a ‘[dusty path](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi_h5m9j_v5AhXOS0EAHWbsBuEQFnoECBMQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fdn%2Fdn.02.0.than.html&usg=AOvVaw3Og6nbQXxbNq463lb6rJaA)’, a place of craving and suffering, the constant horribleness of which is compared to a [leper scratching at their wounds](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjzjJH6j_v5AhU1QkEAHWNvBjYQFnoECAgQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsuttacentral.net%2Fmn75%2Fen%2Fsujato&usg=AOvVaw1SIKu94t9vzK2kl8DxXZcw).

The Buddha also endorses different attitudes, behaviours and kinds of life. Sometimes, he endorses similar things to those endorsed today, but for very different reasons. Many *suttas* explores the conditions that help create ‘social harmony’. The Buddha offers means of resolving disputes within and among [monastic](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjB5rS6kPv5AhW-QEEAHT0hAxcQFnoECAIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsuttacentral.net%2Fmn104%2Fen%2Fbodhi&usg=AOvVaw2ZmsnsLzzGlAanLXbc9Mg4) and [lay](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjgzO34kPv5AhUinVwKHYlrA_cQFnoECA8QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsuttacentral.net%2Fdn21%2Fen%2Fsujato&usg=AOvVaw3dwY2hUKng3qGZZMb95Dw1) communities and offers advice on how to [debate](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjPk9-Zkfv5AhWVQUEAHbfnCHcQFnoECAQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsuttacentral.net%2Fmn104%2Fen%2Fbodhi&usg=AOvVaw2ZmsnsLzzGlAanLXbc9Mg4) and manage [anger](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjVj8uGkfv5AhXBWMAKHWhaBFIQFnoECBIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsuttacentral.net%2Fsn11.21%2Fen%2Fbodhi&usg=AOvVaw3SHXApuTyemNGNhm1YYnah). Much of this might seem close to modern values – respect for diversity, say, or protecting vulnerable groups. But none of these are among the Buddha’s motivations for seeking social harmony. For him, it matters because it conduces to the spiritual needs of monastic Buddhists. Social harmony best serves the spiritual needs of the *Sangha*.

Searching other *suttas*, other differences come into view, like the very different attitudes and behaviours admired and upheld by the Buddha. A clear case is the explicit praise of people who enter the *Sangha*. ‘[Going forth into homelessness](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.082.than.html)’ is a standard term for joining the *Sangha* – a term these days extended to include non-monastic Buddhists, too. Many monks take the name Anagārika – ‘homeless one’ – which is often taken to mean giving up worldly possessions. In reality, it is far more radical: monastics abandon their prior lives, identities, relationships and roles. A man must abandon his wife and children, sever all contact with them, and excise them from his concerns.

Consider a monk, [Saṅgāmaji](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=006639875531220445029:2z3mhfokk-u&q=https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.08.than.html&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwjZxbKykfv5AhUPG-wKHdulB1oQFnoECAIQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1HTILeV914MnRMwPyXhaxH), visited by his former wife and young child. Three times she begs him to pause his meditation and attend to them, and three times he refuses:

Ven. Saṅgāmaji neither looked at the child nor spoke to him. His wife, after going not far away, was looking back and saw Ven. Saṅgāmaji neither looking at the child nor speaking to him.

On seeing this, the thought occurred to her, "The contemplative doesn't even care about his son." Returning from there and taking the child, she left.

To modern minds, Saṅgāmaji’s behaviour will seem heartless, cold, even cruel. The Buddha, though, criticises the wife’s own misbehaviour – she was haranguing a monk – and praises Saṅgāmaji for successfully resisting her emotional appeals:

At her coming,

he didn’t delight;

at her leaving,

he didn't grieve.

A victor in battle, freed from the tie:

He’s what I call

a *brahman*.

Saṅgāmaji was not an anomalously callous monk. He is presented as an exemplar, a model for monks to admire and emulate. The Buddha is clear that a spiritually serious person must ‘go forth into homelessness’. Former relationships, concerns, and duties must be cut loose. Why? Because they are causes of suffering, hatred, and attachment. The world of ‘householders’ is a way of life defined by delusions, conceits, ‘wrong views’, appetites, and aversions that corrupt conduct and distort our vision of the world. Such is the world as it is experienced by ‘uninstructed worldlings’.

**Different visions**

The Buddha’s moral vision is very different from that of the majority of his modern admirers. Put in modern language, this vision is hierocratic and hierarchical – there is a moral elite, the highest level occupied by monastics. The spiritual class are best and deserve the most respect. There is pragmatic acceptance of other religious ways of life, who should not be oppressed, but a clear sense they are ‘wrong views’. There is no genial religious ‘pluralism’, and *suttas* that describe the Buddha’s interactions with other religious and moral teachers follow the same [plot](https://suttacentral.net/sn7.9/en/sujato?layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin): he easily trounces them in debate and they either covert to Buddhism or run away. Even *devas* – the gods – seek the Buddha’s teachings and pay him homage.

Suppose I’m right about these significant differences. What’s the best explanation for the fact so many of the Buddha’s moral admirers fail to recognise them? How can those admirers at the same time present him as a progressive social activist who, like them, opposed injustice, fought for equality, and worked to try and ‘change the world’?

Several possibilities suggest themselves. Some simply ignore the offending condemnations and endorsements or studiously avoid the relevant *suttas*. Some might include those *suttas* but fail to note their difference from their own views. Others might even interfere with the *suttas*, altering their content to suit their own purposes. A recent collection, *The Buddha’s Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony*, offers a well-organised set of discourses on social harmony, anger, disputes, and other topics germane to social life. The foreword, introduction, and epilogue – authored by the Dalai Lama and an engaged Buddhist, Hozan Alan Senauke – speak of equality and rights and lead the reader to expect a radical political manifesto. Yet the collected *suttas* say nothing about those issues – no activist agitation, no embrace of anger at the world and its corrupt leaders. There is a disconnect between the presentation of those texts and their content.

I already mentioned Ambedkar, the Indian political leader, social reformer, and a minister in the first cabinet of Jawaharlal Nehru. He was a key figure in the Dalit Buddhist movement and still revered today, after converting in 1956, after founding the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, the Buddhist Society of India. In the posthumously published collection, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, Ambedkar tries to present the Buddha as an ally to his reformist aims. Like many later engaged Buddhists, he uses the Buddha’s decision to allow the ordination of women – unusual for Indian religious culture of the time – as a sign of his social egalitarianism.

While it is true the Buddha allowed women to become nuns, that fact needs qualification. The Buddha initially refused to admit women and only did so after Ananda – a highly respected monk – [appealed](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN8_51.html) to him three times. After grudgingly agreeing, the Buddha on one telling warned that doing so would shorten the effective life of the *Sangha* by five hundred years (some regard this as a spurious later addition). The *bhikkunis* were also subjected to more numerous and more onerous [rules](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=006639875531220445029:2z3mhfokk-u&q=https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/vin/sv/bhikkhuni-pati.html&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwiEp7SCkvv5AhVLPOwKHX2JB9wQFnoECAkQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2lD-pmRmUqU5wvFOLZpiJY) than their male peers. Ambedkar omits these details and also adds to the *suttas* remarks not in the original – like a reference to *shudras*, the manual or labouring classes, and a claim by the Buddha that he was ‘not opposed to sex equality’.

It can be hard to spot these redactions. A direct acquaintance with the *suttas* helps, as does an awareness of the complexities of interpreting them. If one learns about Buddhism second-hand, though, one might never spot them. Writers keen to tell us ‘what the Buddha taught’ may not be giving us an accurate account. Of course, this is not unique to Buddhism: we see it with Christianity, too, many of whose American practitioners somehow take the good preached by the Gospels to be extreme material wealth (the so-called ‘prosperity gospel’).

We can guard against such misperceptions in different ways. One is carefully studying the *suttas*, but that can only get us so far. After all, the Buddha’s instruction was not to take his words on authority: examination and understanding is vital, too. Why, does the Buddha reject social activism? What are the Buddha’s reasons for promoting monastic life as the best way of life? Can we criticise his views, as I’ve presented them, as intolerant and dogmatic? Exploring these questions will give us a better sense of the moral ethos of the Buddha’s teachings.

In the final piece of this series, I try to explain why the Buddha condemned radical, politically-energised activist projects aimed at ‘changing the world’.

**Should Buddhists be social activists? Part 3**

**Quietism and activism**

Engaged Buddhists understand the *Dhamma* to endorse kinds of social activism. Compassion and ‘overcoming suffering’ means an earnest collective effort to radically change the social and political conditions of human life. Justice, fairness, equality, and rights are all pursued by engaged Buddhists. ‘Climate action’ and a rhetoric of ‘saving the planet’ fill Buddhist blogs and pamphlets. Thích Nhất Hạnh came to fame for his anti-war advocacy. My city has a ‘Buddhists for Extinction Rebellion’ group. All this is proof of a ‘sea-change’ in the global Buddhist tradition, says a distinguished scholar, a welcome sign that ‘Buddhists have gotten up off their cushions, recognizing that collective sources of suffering in the world must be addressed by collective action’.

In the first and second parts of this series, I tried to cast doubt on the fidelity of engaged Buddhism to the teachings of the Buddha. My aim isn’t to ‘do down’ Buddhism, or to impugn the moral seriousness of many of those causes. I only want to provoke doubts about whether the ethos of ‘engaged Buddhism’ really is consistent with what the Buddha taught. We can find perfectly good reasons to condemn racism, gross economic inequality, and unsustainable abuse of the environment. But few, if any, of these will be drawn from the teachings of the Buddha.

I focus in this final piece on a neglected aspect of those teachings: the condemnation of social activism and political engagement.

**Society and the Sangha**

The Buddha did not say much about political and social issues. A handful of *suttas* discuss issues like rulership and the origins of the state. Generally, though, the Buddha was reluctant to say very much. Most of what he did say about politics was in response to the requests of the rulers who would occasionally consult him. As a general rule, the Buddha’s advice is straightforward – reward the capable, punish criminals but not too harshly, tax people but not too much, and so on. One scholar calls the Buddha’s political views a sort of ‘[limited citizenship](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjEhPmAq5L6AhWGi1wKHYghAuAQFnoECAkQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fglobal.oup.com%2Facademic%2Fproduct%2Fbuddhism-and-political-theory-9780190465513&usg=AOvVaw25bDe4MvBLBcxo9BcDwPfv)’. Insofar as we live in extended social communities, someone needs to be in charge, and they should have a good moral character.

The great Buddhist king, Aśoka, is often presented as the ideal – a wise ruler who abandoned warfare, made provisions for care of ill and aged people, instituted protections for animals, and so on. As rulers go, Asoka was admirable but also rare. An engaged Buddhist may point to his example as an argument for political participation and engagement. Should we not work to create a fairer and more compassionate social system, one able to systematically serve the needs of the vulnerable and advance such goals as social and economic justice?

Not quite. For one thing, the Buddha distinguishes the concerns proper to rulers and those of ordinary people – ‘householders’ or ‘worldlings’. Moreover, the Buddha accepted the hereditary monarchies standard in India at the time. For another thing, the actions of a ruler should be directed to the promotion of the *Dhamma*. Social justice isn’t part of the picture.

The [*Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.26.0.than.html) is one of the few *suttas* to deal in detail with political issues. It is often cited as evidence that a good king should ‘tackle’ poverty and promote equality. If we look closer, though, we find something rather different. While a king should reduce poverty, the motivation is to maintain social stability. One can’t follow the *Dhamma* properly if poor, hungry people keep rising up and rioting. Moreover, the deep point of the *sutta* is that good social conditions are impermanent – doomed to pass. Spiritually serious people therefore do not wait for, work for, or need, favourable social or economic conditions. They should be ‘islands unto themselves’, devoting their limited energies to self-transformation. I waste my energies by working hard to change the state of society. I might fail, and, even if I actually succeed, the change will never last. Pinning one’s hopes on impermanent conditions is ‘[heedless](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.097.than.html)’, says the Buddha.

The Buddha did endorse one kind of communal social life: this is the monastic life made possible in the *Sangha*. Monasticism is the best kind of life available in *saṃsāra*. (Even better than those heavens inhabited by the *devas*, whose technicolour pleasures are too intoxicating). Along with the *Dhamma* and the Buddha, the *Sangha* is one of the ‘Three Refuges’ in which faithful Buddhists place their confidence. It is not always appreciated by modern Buddhists that the *Sangha* is not *a* way of life – one option among others. It is the *best* way of life – the ‘noble quest’ – a ‘jewel’.

**The superiority of the monastic life**

Why is a monastic life superior? Well, the disciplined, purified routines and ambience of monastic life makes it morally superior to being out among ‘worldlings’. The mainstream world consists of pressures and temptations that fuel attachments and desires – money, sexual gratification, power, pleasure. It is a realm driven by ‘craving’ and sustained by ‘delusions’. The Buddha denounces it as ‘burning’, its miserable inhabitants all ‘[held fast by fetter and by bond](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi2kNfFlfv5AhU1QkEAHWNvBjYQFnoECCUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.buddhanet.net%2Fdhammapada%2Fd_crave.htm&usg=AOvVaw3jNj7xFtxO4ohbDm17PhJJ)’, and ‘[afflicted with thick ignorance](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjikYqxlfv5AhVznVwKHaBHA7cQFnoECAUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fkn%2Fud%2Fud.3.10.than.html&usg=AOvVaw3OMnsuLr6ME1-Cr3fSu9CG)’.

A monastic community is different and better. A *Sangha*, for a start, is an ‘intentional community’ – one people intentionally choose to join for specific reasons. Spiritually-serious people take a decision to devote themselves to a way of life that offers superior conditions for meditative and moral action. Next, the *Sangha* lacks various features that in the outside world feed failings like anger, greed, lustfulness, and selfishness. *Bhikkus* and *bhikkunis* have uniform dress and appearance – shaven heads, standard-issue robes – and only a few personal possessions (a robe, an eating bowl). Moreover, a strict code of celibacy is observed. The absence of these will not remove our problematic dispositions – to complete and seek pleasure – but they do weaken them. A further feature of the *Sangha* is that it is governed by a complicated set of rules and regulations, laid out in the [*Vinaya Pitaka*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwitj4nplfv5AhWBWcAKHSpYBRIQFnoECAoQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fvin%2Findex.html&usg=AOvVaw1UOSplRgxEFGxVnMjGA9Ao),that are far more extensive than those governing ‘worldling’ life. These are comprehensive – governing diet, daily routines, clothing and so on – and are enforced. Violations can mean confession, forfeiture, or even expulsion.

Monastic communities can be more or less strict about these rules and regulations. Moreover, they are shaped by regional and cultural norms. Some monastics are happy to eat fish, others not, some are more relaxed about contacts with the world of ‘householders’. The point, though, is that the Buddha had good reasons for affirming the superiority of monastic life. It is a ‘[refuge](https://daily-philosophy.com/cooper-rhetoric-of-refuge/)’ – a place of safety away from the corrupting forces of the social world, and a hospitable environment for earnest practice of the Dhamma. This is why the Buddha celebrates ‘withdrawal’ (*[viveka](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi2no35lfv5AhUCi1wKHV1MAi4QFnoECAIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fsn%2Fsn09%2Fsn09.001.than.html&usg=AOvVaw3Z978xeymG8hLWk8Iay9pB)*) from the world. Calming or ‘purging’ the appetites, desires, impulses and preoccupations that feed attachment and anxiety is a demanding task. ‘Giving up’ our obsessions requires huge moral self-discipline – like trying to balance a [bowl of oil](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn47/sn47.020.than.html) on one’s head. All this becomes a thousand times harder if one is also constantly buffeted by the pressures and demands of social life. Eliminating our attachments and desires requires strict distancing from the world. A wise person is like ‘[a deer in the wilds](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiWh_eTlvv5AhV0QkEAHaIlChQQFnoECAYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fkn%2Fsnp%2Fsnp.1.03.than.html&usg=AOvVaw2LhLFUl7IqmNBvSuOyxkjO)’ and – in a term that irritated Nietzsche – a ‘world-renouncer’.

The serene withdrawal of the monk in the face of the pulsing moral dangers of the world is nicely illustrated in the [story](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiR0a6mlvv5AhUHXsAKHUb_BuEQFnoECAMQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fsn%2Fsn35%2Fsn35.199.than.html&usg=AOvVaw0v6kyvMfXlQH16P9Fjghh3) of the tortoise and the jackal:

‘Once upon a time, monks, a hard-shelled tortoise was foraging for food in the evening along the shore of a lake. And a jackal was also foraging for food in the evening along the shore of the lake.

The tortoise saw the jackal from afar, foraging for food, and so — withdrawing its four legs, with its neck as a fifth, into its own shell — it remained perfectly quiet and still. But the jackal also saw the tortoise from afar, foraging for food, and so it went to the tortoise and, on arrival, hovered around it.

"As soon as the tortoise stretches out one or another of its four limbs — or its neck as a fifth — I'll seize it right there, tear it off, and eat it."

But when the tortoise didn't stretch out any of its four limbs — or its neck as a fifth — the jackal, not having gotten any opportunity, lost interest and left.’

Monks should be like the tortoise: ever-watchful for the prowling dangers of the world, able to quickly withdraw and protect themselves, utterly impervious to temptation, and utterly composed and self-controlled. Of course, this makes sense give the Buddha’s grim vision of the human world as ‘[cloaked in the mass of darkness](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi9kfq5lvv5AhWLfMAKHek2CCIQFnoECAsQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fsn%2Fsn06%2Fsn06.001.than.html&usg=AOvVaw2Vc4FjSXYdikxOxqUFmA7k)’, but it also will make it hard to reconcile monasticism with social activism. In fact, doubly hard, because the Buddha also condemned social and political engagement. It’s time to see why.

**Quietism**

The very idea of condemning social activism is liable to seem astonishing to many modern minds. Activism has now become built into many people’s ideas about what it means to be a morally-engaged person. ‘Saving the world’ and vociferous calls for ‘change’ and ‘action’ are entrenched in our moral vocabulary. Big issues – sexism, climate change, the evils of capitalism – dominate the moral agenda. Political and religious leaders speak the language of radicalism. Of course, not everyone endorses this activist ethos. Certain voices still speak of different styles of moral action, [some](https://tricycle.org/article/dont-practice-engaged-buddhism/) Buddhist writers among them. However, they are very much in the minority.

The Buddha’s moral ethos was quietist. It eschewed the radical, socially-engaged, world-changing kinds of activity. The focus was upon individual self-cultivation and on such quieter virtues as equanimity, humility, self-restraint, and modesty. I already discussed compassion and suffering in the first part of this series. At this point, though, we should explore how the Buddha’s quietism meant opposition to social activism. For one scholar, the ethos of moral quietism can be characterised as a sort of ‘[disengaged Buddhism](https://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2019/11/Lele_19_FD-1-1.pdf)’.

First, though, a qualification. The Buddha was perfectly aware that the majority of people won’t be able to abandon the values and demands of the mainstream world. No matter how eloquent his discourses, most will default to their cravings and attachments. No matter how earnestly they affirm the value of humility, most will instantly return to their ambitious projects and goals. Only a few people are actually capable of following the *Dhamma*. This is why the Buddha constantly distinguishes his teachings into ones for monastics and ones for householders, where the latter tend to be simpler, watered-down versions. Monks, for instance, are told about the dreadfulness of rebirth in one of the hell-realms, whereas householders are told that bad actions will get one reborn ugly or poor. In practice, social activism and political participation are mainly condemned for monastics – those on the ‘Noble Quest’. ‘Worldlings’ will cling to their ‘causes’ just as much as to their ‘cravings’.

The quietist character of the Buddha’s teachings when it comes to the socio-political world is clear in many *suttas*. A group of Licchavis, a northern Indian people, came to [ask](https://suttacentral.net/an7.21/en/sujato?layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin) the Buddha for advice on ‘non-decline’. What must they do to avoid the deterioration of their society? The Buddha’s advice was to obey their laws, pay their taxes, and honour their traditions and elders. Respectful conformity, and not reformist radicalism. Looking more widely, quietism runs through the specifications of the Eightfold Path, the set of guidelines for proper mental, physical, and social conduct. Consider the explanation of ‘Right Speech’ (*[samma vacca](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjXiuvdlvv5AhUyS0EAHawCAiQQFnoECAkQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Fptf%2Fdhamma%2Fsacca%2Fsacca4%2Fsamma-vaca%2Findex.html&usg=AOvVaw2sGP65tFTL91o1FWvyrdLm)*). ‘Abstaining from lying from divisive speech, from abusive speech’ all sounds very good, especially to those alarmed by slurs and ‘causing offence’.

Look further, though, and Right Speech also extends to political talk. The [lists](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.02.0.than.html#speech) of the ‘lowly’, ‘unwholesome’ topics of conversation includes political, economic, and everyday social issues:

‘[S]ome *brahmans* … are addicted to talking about lowly topics such as these — talking about kings, robbers, ministers of state; armies, alarms, and battles; food and drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, and scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women and heroes; the gossip of the street and the well; tales of the dead.’

A friend of mine, reading this, glumly concluded that ‘wrong speech’ was identical with everyday human discourse. He was right. Most of what people discuss isn’t at all ‘wholesome’. The Buddha’s instruction was that one’s speech should be ‘factual, true, beneficial, and endearing and agreeable to others’. Nothing false, harsh, or likely to cause dissension and hostility. The ‘wholesome topics’ concern morality and liberation – modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, virtue, concentration, and the nature and possibility of ‘right vision’ and *mokṣa*. All this is very far from activist and political discourse: there is nothing of Right Speech in angry denunciations, partisan polemics, divisive ‘us vs. them’ polarisations, scorn for opponents, and other depressingly familiar phenomena. Indeed, the desire to talk politics is a failure of Right Speech.

**Distraction and entrapment**

We could pile up examples of the Buddha’s quietism, but what would be more useful is a systematic account of his arguments against social activism. Unsurprisingly, he rarely offered one, since it is unclear that there was anything at the time to attack. The closest we get may be the [*Mugapakka Jataka*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwic24aFl_v5AhV5QEEAHfuQBwkQFnoECAcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sacred-texts.com%2Fbud%2Fj6%2Fj6004.htm&usg=AOvVaw1VfRrnTsXd2MfrTvXWstBG) tells the story of Temiya, an earlier rebirth of the Buddha, whose memories of hell motivate him to resist worldly powers and pleasures. Temiya’s desperate parents, the king and queen, resort to all sorts of temptations and torments to get Temiya to embrace his royal destiny. At every point, Temiya refuses, explaining that political life is corrupting and fixated on uncertain future conditions, all subject to decay and change. The rewards of the holy life are vastly superior to the alleged rewards of political life.

I think we can order the Buddha’s arguments against social activism under three headings. First, concern for social and political issues is a distraction from spiritual life. Anything which does not ‘[conduce to Nibbana](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjrq6OTl_v5AhUzmVwKHQfzAk0QFnoECBQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fsn%2Fsn56%2Fsn56.009.wlsh.html&usg=AOvVaw0Hw0_4ZvqRJRigndZsH4xm)’ imposes alien concerns and goals which sap our already-limited concentration, energy, and focus. ‘Being political’ imposes a burdensome set of concerns and worries and things to keep up to date with – none of it concerned with *mokṣa*.

Second, activism and political participation entrap us within the social world and, therefore, within saṃsāra. Adopting activist identities and goals intensifies our attachments and desires – the very things we are meant to be weakening and eliminating. The problem is not just the fact of attachments and goals, though; it’s that most activists valorise very strong attachments. Being ‘passionate’, energetic in pursuit of grand goals, always discontented or frustrated – this is the emotional profile of some doomed to remain entrapped. (If activists respond that their emotions reflect good motivations, like promoting social justice, the Buddha would reply that those reflect ‘false views’ of what matters).

Distraction and entrapment are two of the problems of social activism identified by the Buddha. Our urgent task should be the soteriological one of achieving our own ‘release’. It’s already hard for people to grasp this. Few people have *saṃvega* – an acute sense of ‘spiritual urgency’ that sustains clarity, focus, and resolve. But the Buddha offers a third argument against social activism, too. It is corrupting – it feeds personal vices or failings. Recall that the Buddhist project is self-transformation. I should strive to live according to ‘the discipline and the *Dhamma’*. Cultivating virtues, following the Precepts, and following monastic regulations is one part; but the other is destroying our many ‘cankers’, ‘[taints](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiXnKrkl_v5AhXLRMAKHTT8AGgQFnoECAUQAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Foaks.nvg.org%2Ftaints.html&usg=AOvVaw1io4MEdZmlgfCc15FJpiHB)’, and ‘[defilements](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwj0gpHrl_v5AhUSi1wKHdeaAu4QFnoECAsQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fsn%2Fsn27%2Fsn27.001-010.than.html&usg=AOvVaw01DPkd9XdMUxkChy9g2JSL)’. These are deep failings which cause bad moral conduct and erode our spiritual abilities. Greed, delusion, selfishness, callousness, lack of self-control, dogmatism … all these and many others are detailed in the *suttas*.

The Buddha’s listings of our vices is almost certainly the most complex attempted in the history of world philosophy and religion. Social and political life fuels these vices. Conceitedness, dogmatism, dishonesty, manipulativeness, egotism, grandiosity, hubris, self-righteousness … all these are sustained by the goals and methods of many political activists. Encouraging scorn for political rivals is a species of hatred. Feeding grand ambitions in an impermanent world is hubristic. Urging people to think they can collectively impose their will on the world and achieve lasting change is arrogance. None of this is consistent with the project of individual moral self-transformation central to the Buddha’s teachings. A deeper sort of corruption can also be discerned, too. One of the most potent sources of *dukkha* is what the Buddha called ‘[the conceit “I-am”](https://suttacentral.net/sn22.89/en/sujato?layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)’, the distorted sense that we’re stable, potent agents. The ‘self’ the Buddha attacks isn’t a bad metaphysical model of personal identity, so much as it is a set of stubborn conceits. These conceits are fed by worldly ambition, desires for power, a determination to ’make one’s mark in the world’, and much else. Insofar as social activism energies these conceits, it sustains delusions, desires, and ‘false views’ that entrap and corrupt us.

**‘May all beings be free!’**

In this series, I’ve tried to challenge the modern image of Buddhism as a spiritual dispensation that encourages social activism. Contrary to ‘engaged Buddhist’ claims, very little in the *suttas* endorses radical social, political action. Closer attention to ‘key terms’, like ‘compassion’ and ‘suffering’, points to specific meanings that are too often effaced by strategic vagary. Careful examination of the Buddha’s condemnations and endorsements shows a moral outlook quite different from the predilections of many of his modern admirers. Finally, the Buddha was a moral quietist – the best life is one of refuge, restraint, and disciplined devotion to changing oneself. I think the Buddha had cogent, systematic reasons to discourage social activism, at least among those committed to ‘the path of peace’ leading to *mokṣa*. He understood the strong pull political concerns have for people, but saw it as symptomatic of the very attachments, desires, and cravings that fuel dukkha and prolong our subjection to *saṃsāra*. For that reason, that ‘pull’ should be resisted, not indulged.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the [*Karaniya Metta Sutta*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwj6lP6GmPv5AhXGesAKHYy6Dr4QFnoECAcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accesstoinsight.org%2Ftipitaka%2Fkn%2Fsnp%2Fsnp.1.08.amar.html&usg=AOvVaw39lH8FPdYa3MgSVSguQ71u), the Discourse on Loving-Kindness. It contains a line often quoted by engaged Buddhist activists – ‘May all beings be free!’ But those who quote that line as their slogan never quote the rest of the verse. It explains the ideal character and dispositions of a person devoted to ‘the path of peace’:

Let them be able and upright,

Straightforward and gentle in speech,

Humble and not conceited,

Contented and easily satisfied,

Unburdened with duties

and frugal in their ways.

Peaceful and calm and wise and skilful,

Not proud or demanding in nature.

This is not the profile of a social activist – someone typically harsh in speech, ambitious, discontented, dissatisfied with anything less than radical outcomes, who burdens themselves with grand duties like saving the world or overthrowing patriarchy. Berating billionaires, screaming ‘How dare you!’ at political leaders, and agitating for change are not the acts of a person ‘skilled in the path of peace’. Our true goal is release from the world, not reform of it, as we see in the last lines of the *Metta Sutta*:

The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,

Being freed from all sense desires,

Is not born again into this world.

**Texts**

I’ve included links to some good online sources for the *suttas*, mainly *Access to Insight* and *Dhamma Talks*, the latter translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

**Acknowledgments**

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