An Encounter Between Engaged Pure-Land Buddhism and the Dialogical Philosophy of Martin Buber

Hune Margulies
Ph.D.; The Martin Buber Institute for Dialogical Ecology,
Goddar Vaddo, Sao Matias v, Malar, Goa 403403, India
hune@martinbuberinstitute.org

Published online 17 May 2024

Abstract

Engaged Buddhism emphasizes the translation of dharma teachings into social engagement. A proper understanding of Buddhadharma rejects the duality between the realm of the individual and the realm of the social. Therefore, a dharma that does not create a dharmic society will not create dharmic individuals. Martin Buber (1878–1965) was one of the most important and consequential philosophers of 20th-century spiritual thought. The Dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber represents a creative confluence between Western Humanism and some aspects of Zen Buddhism. Buber translated and studied Taoist texts and “oriental” wisdom systems, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. This article argues that Buber’s concept of “God as the between of I and Thou” can be posed in Buddhist terms as “Buddha is the between of I and Thou.” This primordial social spirituality resembles in many respects the teachings of engaged Buddhism, particularly the Pure Land teachings of Master Sheng Yen.

Keywords

Buber – Zen – dialogue – ShengYen – Buddha – God
Discussions

Engaged Pure Land Buddhism and Dialogical philosophy share similar fundamental constitutive principles and social practices. Within the Judaic tradition, the Dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber is a non-institutional, non-religious attempt to define the spiritual realm as the encounter of I and Thou. In this sense, Buber’s philosophy was seen as innovative, radical, and transformative. Dialogical philosophy argues that God, as the summon bonum of the spiritual quest, is not above in the realm of transcendent heaven, but rather, God is the between of an I and a Thou. To understand the uniqueness of Buber’s philosophy, we can contrast dialogue with mysticism. Mysticism can be defined as the pursuit of a direct, inner, and personal experience of the divine or ultimate reality. Dialogue, in contrast, seeks the presence of God in and through the relationship with the other. In other words, God, or the Pure Land, is in the here and now. Buber’s distinction between an I and a You is not a dualistic dichotomy, for the relationship between I and Thou is the non-dual realm. We can ask how we can become what is already inherent in us. The answer is not in the realm of ontology. It is in the mundane, quotidian realm of daily existence. Similarly to the concept of the inborn Buddha nature, it is necessary to awaken our humanity, which requires the existential task of creating a dharmic society.

In other words, similar to Pure Land, I and Thou dialogue is a social practice. The Dialectic practices of I and Thou are translated into the social realm as a Dialectical society akin, in essence, to the Buddha’s Pure Land on Earth. In contrast to Christian Theology, in Buddhism, we are not born with original sin but with original Buddhahood, and only through dharmic relationships with one another can we actualize the Buddha nature inherent in our beings. To be concerned only with one’s salvation is to negate the true salvific power of the Buddhadharma. In the Western world, generally speaking, we observe that the knowledge of Buddhism is often focused on those teachings that can plausibly be conflated with psychological theories. In other words, interest in Buddhism is directed primarily toward particular aspects regarded as

1 Mysticism is also understood as achieving a unity of the self with the self of the divinity. The aim is the obliteration of the self and its subsuming within the “self” of the godhood. Buber maintained a fluid exchange on this topic with Gershom Scholem. Scholem’s studies on Jewish mysticism, even as he defined it as a “revival of the mythic,” which seems to coincide with Buber’s interest in Hasidism in terms of legend or folklore, diverted from Buber’s approach to Dialogue as the foundation of religious experience. See Scholem Gershom, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, Schocken Books, 1941 and *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays*, New York, Schocken Books, 1971.
beneficial “mind therapies.” Buddhism is seen as a skillful means to help calm the mind in the turbulence of daily life. This Buddhist concept is understood mainly as a teaching for internalizing quiet forbearance in the face of suffering and personal losses. Fundamental Buddhist concepts such as suffering and the cessation of suffering, non-attachment, no-self, impermanence, tonglen, karma, and even non-violence are given psychological interpretations, often at odds or only partially connected to their original doctrinal intent. One example is the common misunderstanding of the concept of karma. Karma is not Calvinist predestination. It is the concept of human responsibility extended to its ultimate essence as causes and effects. Karma teaches that we are free to choose our actions and the causes of our actions, but we must know that we are not free to avoid their consequences. The Eightfold Path teaches precisely how to ensure our karma remains within the bounds of positive outcomes.

However, Buddhism is more than breathing exercises after supper or sitting on a cushion while the kids text their schoolmates. To this effect, let us examine the case of Ch’ an Master Sheng Yen’s engaged Buddhist teachings concerning the Pure Land on Earth. Sheng Yen’s teachings are an explicit argument in favor of Buddhism that is engaged in the “redemption” of the world in the “here and now.” For Sheng Yen, Amitabha’s Pure Land should not be understood as referring only to a transcendent realm of the spirit, something akin to a paradise or even para-nirvana, nor is it only an individual’s cultivated mind’s enlightened approach to the comings and goings of daily existence. Sheng Yen explains that Pure Land is a concrete and practical goal attainable in our current lives through actions of social responsibility and mutual solidarity. Master Sheng Yen said:

“The intention of building a Pure Land on earth is not to move the pure lands of the Buddhas in other parts of the universe to earth, nor does it set out to manifest on earth of today the scenery of pure lands as described in the Amitabha Sutra, the Medicine Buddha Sutra, the Akshobhya Buddha’s Land Sutra, and the Sutra of Maitreya’s descending to our World. Instead, it applies the concepts of Buddhadharma to purify people’s minds and applies the exemplary lifestyle of Buddhists to purify our societies. By purifying our thoughts, lives, and minds and putting in step-by-step, persistent endeavors, we work to purify the social and natural

2 In his autobiography Master Sheng Yen wrote: “At this time I realized two important points necessary for practice. The first has to do with cause and conditions. Certain things not entirely under your control-your own karma, the karma of others, environmental factors-must come together in a way that favors making progress in this lifetime. To make great progress in practice you must have this karma affinity-the proper conditions must exist.”
environment. We will perceive that the Pure Land is everywhere once we look at the world with the Buddha’s wisdom.

The emphasis on a Pure Land on earth is a foundational principle of Sheng Yen’s engaged Buddhism and clearly defines the unique redemptory content embedded in Buddhist practice. As Sheng Yen taught, a correct understanding of buddhadorama rejects the duality between the realm of spiritual practice and that of social engagement. Both realms, the spirit and the social, are a unified field of practice. Therefore, as he explains, in order to perfect the “spiritual environment,” we must perfect the social and natural environments, and, at the same time, in order to perfect the social and natural environments, we must perfect the mind.\(^3\) No dharmic distinction allows for separating the human mind from the human relationships with the social, natural, and living realms of existence.\(^4\) All sentient and insentient beings are dharma, and all are the indivisible inter-being parts of the body of the Buddha and the radiant soil in Amitabha’s Pure Land on earth. In other words, the practice of dharma tends to the body of the Buddha. We can ask: If all the earth is the Buddha Land, why are some people still feeling vexations and conducting themselves in unenlightened ways? The answer is that the task of the Buddhist practitioner is to be engaged with society to help it see the dharmic light that dispels the samsaric darkness, blinding our ability to see the beauty of the soil on which we stand. Master Sheng Yen’s teachings of Pure Land on Earth resemble the older teachings of Master Dogen. Dogen Zenji said

> Handle even a single leaf of green in such a way that it manifests the body of the Buddha. This, in turn, allows the Buddha to manifest through the leaf ... The color of the mountains is Buddha’s body, and the sound of running water is his great speech.\(^5\)

We learn dharma by practicing a dharmic relationship with all beings. The environment is the dharma and the body of the Buddha. Therefore, Buddhist

---

\(^3\) Sheng Yen: “Spiritual environmental protection provides a basis for the protection of the physical environment. Environmental protection begins with the simplification and purification of our lives.”

\(^4\) Sheng Yen wrote: “Ch’ an practice unifies our subjective inner world with the objective outer world. Ch ’an practice is not intended to produce some imaginary blissful state, nor self-comforting, nor escape from reality. We, as practitioners, must manifest in the outer world what we experience internally. We must share our practice, concepts and experiences with others and teach others to do the same. Thus we can influence others to help us accomplish the mission of spiritual environmental protection.”

\(^5\) Dogen Zenji *Shobogenzo*. 
practice intrinsically relates to creating a Pure Land on earth. Since all of life on earth depends on our ability to be conscious of the consequences of our deeds and the compassion we offer one another, it is imperative to be proactive in protecting the physical and spiritual environments. Dogen relates this story:

Once a monastic asked the Tang Dynasty Chinese National Teacher, Nanyang, ‘Do the insentient understand the expressing of the Way?’ The National Teacher said, ‘They express the Way continually, energetically, ceaselessly.

Dharma is everything that exists, and all that exists seeks to be engaged with everything that lives. Therefore, for nature to teach and express and for us to learn from her, we must protect and tend to it. This is a central tenet of engaged Buddhism. The Pure Land teachings of engaged Buddhism are a social philosophy flowering from within the lotus ponds of buddhadharma.

The writer argues that a correct understanding of the concepts of Metta and Karuna underlies the practices of Pure Land Engaged Buddhism. In this regard, Buddhism is immensely important for reconstructing genuine spirituality within all East and West traditions. In studying the origins of Engaged Buddhism, we can refer to the text of the Metta Sutta. The Metta Sutta emphasizes Metta as a social practice of relationship with all beings, or in other words, it is a teaching about engagement with the world. Observe the following verses:

Let him cultivate boundless thoughts of loving kindness towards the whole world, above, below, and all around, unobstructed, free from hatred and enmity. Whether standing, walking, seated, or lying down, he should develop this mindfulness as long as he is awake. This, they say, is the divine abiding here.

That the divine (or the sublime in some translations) is said to abide in the deeds of loving kindness toward one another is a foundational concept in teachings of engaged practice, as it is in Dialogical philosophy and many different spiritual traditions. For Martin Buber, the divine resides precisely in the between of I and Thou, and the between is defined as the practice of deeds that actualize loving kindness. Buddha said:

Admirable friendship, companionship, admirable camaraderie is the whole practice life. When a monk has admirable people as friends,
companions, and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path.

In other words, an enlightened community, that is, a sangha, is itself the Pure Land, for the community is the means to the goal and the goal itself. This is consistent with Buber’s idea that genuine spirituality is the practice of dialogue in the community, or as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, enlightenment is in the “interbeing.” Interbeing is a Buddhist referent to Buber’s concept of the between I and Thou. Based on Buber’s definitions, we distinguish between I-Thou as a relationship and I-It as an interaction. A genuine relationship is based on mutuality, while an interaction is only a transactional approach to the other. There is no dualism in I-Thou, and there is no attachment between I-Thou; there is only the relationship, but there is dualism and attachment in the interactions of I-It.

These insights into engaged practice compel us to explore how Metta and Karuna will be implemented in the social realm. Metta and karuna are not only emotional contents or moral commitments. They are, first and foremost, deeds of engagement with one another and all beings. How does engaged Pure Land Buddhism become a daily living practice? As we can see, each term used in the Metta Sutta recitations has a corresponding implementation deed. The proper understanding of metta is to actualize awakening as a deed of engagement with the world. This understanding is built into the fundamental dharmic goal of enlightenment, consistent with the basic teachings of Pure Land. As for Buddhism, reaching an understanding is an intellectual exercise and a way to become awakened and manifest this awakening as deeds of compassion. In other words, dharma is a whole-being enlightenment consciousness. This whole-being understanding is the same practice as the biblical concept of “da’at.” In the biblical book of Genesis, it is said that Adam “knew” Eve, and then they conceived their first child. Da’at is a teaching of knowing through loving, as opposed to partial knowing, that results from intellectual inquiry alone. The teaching of wrong understanding in the Eightfold Path is not only a reference to intellectual failures, but essentially, it is a reference to the wrong manner of practicing buddhadharma in the realm of the social.

In contrast to Buddhism, social engagement is mainly reduced to a sociological discipline rather than a whole-being awakening in the West. This is one essential distinction between cultures that emphasize linear reasoning and cultures of enlightenment: Enlightenment does not deny reason. It only incorporates it into a holistic view of human nature. Metta is one of the four abodes of Brahma. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha describes the meditative states of the “Brahma-viharas” as quintessential characteristics of
the Buddha-dhatu (Buddha-nature or Buddha-Principle.) Metta, therefore, is a pre-requirement to enlightenment, not an optional posterior attainment. In other words, metta precedes enlightenment and is a condition sine-qua-non for its attainment, and to some extent, it is the entirety of the practice. Metta is reaching enlightenment through engagement in dharmic relationships with one another and all beings. The teaching of karuna is indivisible from the teaching of metta. Karuna typically translates in English as “compassion,” a concept used in the spiritual paths of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. However, rather than the sense of emotional sorrow or empathy associated with the Latin root of the word compassion, the word Karuna comes from the Sanskrit kara, which means “to-do” or “to make,” indicating an action-based form of compassion, that is engaged practice.

In contrast, the Latin term “to care” derives from the word “cuore,” which means “heart.” Therefore, compassion is seen chiefly as an inner feeling or a content of the heart. In Buddhist terms, this type of compassion would only be a partial practice, as compassion in the heart needs to be manifested in deeds. In other words, karuna is compassion in actual deeds. In the Buddha’s Pure Land, the personal self is not the locus of enlightenment or salvation but the Buddha Land as a whole. In other words, the personal self is not the locus of enlightenment or salvation but the Buddha Land. We are saved in the Pure Land of the Buddha, where metta and karuna are the guiding practices. Metta is living with primordial intention. That is, metta is the conscious awareness of I-Thou relationships, but metta is an intention that can only be manifested existentially. Metta becomes relational mindfulness once the deeply felt emotions of compassion lead to karuna, that is, to deeds we do. In this sense, awakening is not only a personal perception but a collective deed, and it is the responsibility of all to work toward the salvation of all. This mirrors the Judaic concept that the messiah does not save individuals but the community as a whole. In the Jewish Bible, The prophet Moses took the entire community of Hebrew enslaved people out of Egyptian bondage before he could bring to the people the divinely inscribed tablets of the law.

The Buberian discourse on relationships could also be translated as the essential distinction between a dharmic engagement with one another and all beings and a samsaric approach toward the world, the former encapsulated in Engaged and Pure Land Buddhism and the latter in the unenlightened world of material consumerism. We can say that Buber’s dialectical philosophy differs from other forms of existentialism in that for Buber, the relationship between I and Thou precedes existence, and only then does existence precede essence. I-Thou is the primordial human relationship, and all other forms of living in the world are either approximations of primordiality or alienations. Similarly,
we can argue that Zen Buddhism is a primordial spirituality that antecedes any religious or institutional structure, and we can likewise argue that metta and karuna are practices that precede the attainment of awakening. We do not awaken to metta and karuna, but metta and karuna awaken us. In a similar emphasis on the primacy of deeds, Martin Buber explained that:

There is nothing that can be said in words about God. No theologies or philosophies can explain or define God, but we can embrace him in the embrace of a being.

The relationship, beside and apart words or texts, is the primordial spirituality, and no other discursive accrual is required. This is similar to the story of the Buddha in Vulture Peak: Just as Mahākāśyapa, who indeed had many things he could have said to the Buddha, he found no other way to express his awakened understanding but to hold in his hand a little lotus flower. Therefore, the argument that Zen is the primordial system of awakening from which all other systems and practices of enlightenment emerge is based on the sense that Buddha Shakyamuni awoke to the understanding that the practices of meditation and deeds of metta and karuna are the same, and as such they constitute the entirety of his dharma teachings. Consequently, the Buddha established a sangha, a community based on dharmic relationships, and went out to help spread the dharma to all sentient beings. This is the beginning of Engaged Buddhism. Likewise, the Dialogical I-Thou ‘sangha’ is the primordial existential reality from which all conceptions of ethics and human relationships emerge. In this sense, the writer argued that Zen preceded Buddhism not as a strict historical-chronological fact but as an insight into the teaching itself. The Buddha’s post-awakening sangha and Buber’s dialogical philosophy represent the enactment of the mind of metta and karuna outside and besides religious institutionalism in society. In Buberian dialogue, the standing in the relationship of I-Thou with the neighbor and with all beings is the same as the attainment of God, not just a means to the end, and it is suggested that in engaged Buddhism, nirvana is the same with the practice of the Buddhadharma in the here and now. One does not practice the Buddhadharma to attain nirvana, but nirvana is the dharma practice.\(^6\)

Buber draws his dialogical philosophy from biblical and other Judaic sources that define the attainment of God as the summum bonum of religion, as nirvana is for Buddhism. The biblical book of Deuteronomy (15:8) is written: “You shall

---

surely open your hand to the poor, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need/lack, according as he needs/ lacks”. The Talmud explains the phrase: “According to that which is lacking for the poor person, you are commanded to give him ... if it is appropriate to give him bread, they give him bread; if dough, they give him dough. If they feed him, they feed him. if he is unmarried and wants a wife, they enable him to marry; they rent a house for him and provide a bed and furnishings ...” While the Hebrew Bible does not explicitly itemize the reasons for the fiery demise of Sodom, the biblical prophet Ezekiel found it necessary to explain the motives behind God’s decision to destroy the city: “Behold this was the sin of Sodom. She and her daughters had pride, excess bread, and peaceful serenity, but she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.” The Hebrew Bible, the Torah, contains the very specific and social radical teachings of twenty-one prophets. The Hebrew prophets admonished the people to implement the kingdom of God’s precepts in the earth’s here and now. In the kingdom of God, there is only room for social justice for the poor and the oppressed, peace between nations, freedom of enslaved people, and, generally, a socially conscious society. In other words, as in the teachings of Christian Liberation Theology that places the face of Christ in the face of the neighbor who is oppressed and in need, we can say that the body of the Buddha is in our engagement to end the suffering of the earth and all its beings. Otherwise, the world is “destroyed.”

In addition to metta and karuna, we must reflect on the central Buddhist concept of dukkha to fully understand the teachings of socially engaged Buddhism. One common understanding refers to dukkha as an inner emotional or psychological state of despair. From this, it follows that if dukkha is an inner condition, the only logical path to its cessation is to follow the practice of a thorough inner discipline. However, the Buddhist teaching for the cessation of suffering follows the Eightfold Path described in the Four Noble Truths. The Eightfold Path includes teachings on the right action and the right livelihood. This reflects the Buddha’s insight that inner salvation also requires the implementation of dharmic practices in the “outer” life where we engage in relationships within society. Therefore, a more adequate understanding of dukkha is to argue that dukkha is not just an inner sense of despair. It is also a manner of behavior in society as a whole. The Buddhist masters that conceived social engagement as a manifestation of buddhadharma expanded the concept of dukkha to include the practical, concrete, and quotidian reality of existential despair. In other words, dukkha emerges due to the unawakened exposure to the reality of impermanence and outer social conditions such as poverty, oppression, war, ecological degradation, and social injustice. Impermanence cannot be changed, only our inner reactions to it, but social conditions are
changeable; therefore, engaged Buddhism argues that the cessation of dukkha also requires the application and implementation of buddhadharma in social and public affairs.\(^7\) In this vein, the Mahayana concept of the Bodhisattva is one of the central tenets of engaged Pure Land Buddhism. Master Sheng Yen said:

\[
\text{Bodhisattva's Actions … How does one attain Buddhahood? The bodhi-mind comes first. What is bodhi-mind? First is to benefit others.}
\]

In other words, the relationship precedes the attainment. It is in error to understand the Bodhisattva practice of helping all beings to be free as the postponing of personal entrance to Nirvana to help all other sentient beings attain liberation is entering the Pure Land. Buddhist liberation is not something that occurs in a different realm of existence. It is here and now. The Bodhisattva's actions in the here and now of this earth are precisely the realm of Nirvana the dharma aspires to attain. Master Sheng Yen said:

\[
\text{That is the purification of human society due to the purification of the human heart and the deliberate purification of people. The purpose is to point out that to purify the Pure Land of the Buddha or Heaven in the faith of survival, we must first focus on the purification of the heart, the purification of life, and the purification of the environment in the real world.}\\text{In other words, one purifies the world by purifying oneself, and one purifies oneself by purifying the world. There is no linear dualistic before or after, only here and now.}
\]

All these teachings share the essential principle of engaged Buddhism that accepts no dualistic distinction between personal practice and social engagement. Modern-day India has seen one of the most glaring attempts at socially engaged Buddhism with the establishment of B.R. Ambedkar's school of Navayana Buddhism. In constructing a new India, Ambedkar's arguments encompassed a nationwide conversion to Buddhism to counter the many historically unjust social practices ascribed to some interpretations of Hinduism. Ambedkar railed against the very concept of castes and refused to be content with mere legal protections or social benefits earmarked for the Dalits. Ambedkar became a Buddhist precisely to fight for the complete and absolute abolition of castes. Ambedkar saw in buddhadharma the perfect practice

\[\text{\footnotesize \hspace{1em} 7 See Hune Margulies,} \hspace{1em} \text{Martin Buber and Eastern Wisdom Teachings: The Recovery of the Spiritual Imagination Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021.} \]
to bring about social justice and equality in a country otherwise marred by injustices and inequality. Ambedkar's Buddhism is reformist in many respects. However, it can be argued that Buddhism arose as a reformation of Hinduism, and Buddhism later saw itself variously reformed from within by different sects and doctrines. Ambedkar's views were similar to those of the non-Buddhist Rev. Martin Luther King in rejecting the antithetical and discrepant concept of a compassionate oppressor. For Ambedkar and King, the goal is not improved conditions for the oppressed but the abolition of the system of oppression. We can say that Ambedkar and King espouse unique versions of Pure Land on earth in the here and now. Navayana is a unique understanding of Buddhism as it deals with issues of pertinence in an Indian context, especially the annihilation of castes and the overcoming of the corresponding facts of oppression and poverty. Ambedkar spoke of buddhadharma as a Marga-Data, not a Moksha-Data. That is to say, Buddhism is a “way” or “Path” to salvation, but its practice, unless it leads to a dharmic society, does not in itself confer salvation. According to Ambedkar, prajna, karuna, and samata are the teachings that led him to convert to Buddhism. In other words, Ambedkar's engaged Buddhism is comparable with the perspective of Dialogical philosophy in that the cessation of suffering is attained in the I-Thou relationship with one another and nature. The between of I and Thou is the presence of God; as such, it is not a personal inner experience of a believer and his inner attainment of divine grace. As were Ambedkar's teachings of Buddhism as a path, for Buber, to the extent that conditions in society remain unredeemed, no personal redemption is to be aspired to, nor is it possible. It is worth noting that there are apparent similarities between engaged Buddhism's teachings of Pure Land and the contemporary concepts of Liberation Theology within some Christian churches. Liberation Theology argues that the presence of Christ is to be found not only in the church's sacraments but mainly in the lives of the afflicted and the oppressed. Therefore, the path to God is precisely in the social actions we engage in to alleviate the suffering of the least of us. Pope Francis, while not explicitly an adherent of Liberation Theology, speaks of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a “culture of encounter,” in other words, a sacrament of creating a Pure Land on earth. Jesus's sermon on the mount is a Jewish witness to the reality of earthly life and a teaching of Pure Land.

The sermon's emphasis on peace, humility, love, and compassion were not said to be practices that would be deferred to a future time of divine redemption. The original vision of Jesus that spoke on the mount was that living our quotidian lives on this earth in the light of those same ethical precepts he had proclaimed is the kingdom of God. In the same vein, Sheng Yen explained in his “Four Steps to Magical Powers” that seeing into Buddha-Nature
is a critical step along the way, but it is just a step. If the steps do not lead to the creation of a Pure Land on earth, then we have a wrong understanding of Buddha-Nature. In his Paths in Utopia, Martin Buber advocated the creation of a society based on the principles of “Religious Socialism.” Buber’s religion was not an institutional or theological system but a practice of relationships with one another and the world. Buber said that Socialism without religion is like a body without a soul, and religion without Socialism is like a soul without a body. In other words, neither option is imbued with life. Sheng Yen’s teachings and engaged Buddhism manifest a similar understanding that a Buddhism without justice, compassion, and environmental respect cannot be said to be a correct expression of the buddhadharma. Of course, Buber’s Socialism has no connection to the political socialisms of the 20th century. We see from these teachings that the practices of engaged Buddhism are to lead a conscious dharmic life on earth and not to focus our spiritual attention toward a world-to-come in the realm of the transcendent. After all, it is obvious that right action and livelihood are not ancillary corollaries but integral parts of the Buddha’s eightfold path. Recognizing the importance of work as a central human task and being a fundamental locus for our liberation practices, the Buddha designated several work activities as straightforward, wrong livelihoods. Although Buddhism regards all of life as dharma, from a Dharmic perspective, not all work is conducive to liberation, nor can it be regarded as a genuine manifestation of buddhadharma. As the Buddha instructed, some types of work are incompatible with liberation, and others act as hindrances. Examining the teaching of right livelihood, it seems clear that the practices the Buddha encouraged for the actualization of inner and outer liberation require the creation of a society structured along the lines of “Dharmic Socialism.”

In some Buddhist texts, a person who hoards wealth is likened to a bird called the “mayhaka,” which typically lives in the fig tree. While birds usually fly from tree to tree to find food, the mayhaka stays in one place yelling “mayham,” “This is mine.”

---

8 Martin Buber Paths in Utopia. Syracuse University Press; New edition [November 1, 1996]
In this book, Buber offered a structural analysis that recognized that social injustice, oppression and inequity are deeply rooted in systemic and structural deficiencies. Buber described and interpreted Anarchist thinkers Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin and Gustav Landauer, but he chose not to engage with the writings of Bakunin. Buber’s political “teacher” was Gustav Landauer.

9 Buddhadasa Bikkhu Dharmic Socialism.
The Buddhadharma teaches that greed, being the fuel of Capitalism, ought to be cleansed away from the mind. From “having” (attachment) to “being” (Buddha-Nature), there is a narrow bridge with precarious floors, and the Buddha taught the proper way to walk over that perilous path. Master Sheng Yen taught a humanistic Buddhist dharma that naturally and seamlessly becomes applied to life in society.

In the 17th century, Zen Master Hakuin used to inveigh against the “do nothing Zen” practitioners. Those practitioners believed that after attaining enlightenment, they reached the ultimate goal of buddhadharma. Hakuin, in contrast, asked for post-enlightenment training to send enlightened people to help create an enlightened society. An enlightenment that does not manifest as a practice of justice in a compassionate society is not a true enlightenment. It is another delusion of Mara. We can see Hakuin’s teachings as a clear advocacy of engaged Buddhism. In the 20th century, Zen Master Suzuki Roshi said it well:

Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened persons; there is only enlightened activity.

In other words, deeds are the mark of awakening, for unless we act in society, we cannot be said to be truly enlightened. Similarly, we find the teachings of Buddhadasa Bikkhu in the Theravada tradition, which spoke of “Dhammic Socialism,” which is the realization of Buddhadharma. Buddhadasa Bikkhu spoke of the necessity to transform society in the model of a dhammic Socialist system. For Bikkhu, Socialism was a better social and economic system and the only societal organizing principle in which dharma could be implemented and actualized. Since all of nature is dharma, we learn dharma from nature. When Bikkhu expanded on Buddhism’s observation about the negativity of hoarding, he learned dhammic socialism from the example of nature and her beings. Bikkhu wrote:

Look at the birds: We will see that they eat only as much food as their stomachs can hold. They cannot take more than that. They do not have granaries. Look down at the ants and insects: that is all they can do. Look at the trees: Trees imbibe only as much nourishment and water as the trunk can and cannot take in any more. Therefore, a system in which people cannot encroach on each other’s rights or plunder their possessions follows nature and occurs naturally. The freedom to hoard was tightly controlled by nature in the form of natural Socialism.
This dharmic natural Socialism is the actualization of the liberated mind within the context of life in society. In Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama speaks of being “half Buddhist and half Marxist.” The Dalai Lama explicitly expanded on the need for Dharmic Socialism. Continuing his exposition of Marxism, H.H. stated: “I am humanitarian Marxist, I am Buddhist Marxist, I am not nationalistic Marxist, I am also a socialist. Marxist economic theory is for all; it propagates for equal distribution, and Marxism and Buddhism work similarly. I am totally against the totalitarian system and using force … of all the modern economic theories, the economic system of Marxism is founded on moral principles, while Capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability. Marxism is concerned with the distribution of wealth on an equal basis and the equitable utilization of the means of production. It is also concerned with the fate of the working classes, that is, the majority, as well as with the fate of those who are underprivileged and in need, and Marxism cares about the victims of minority-imposed exploitation. The system appeals to me for those reasons, and it seems fair.”

The Dalai Lama speaks about applying actual dharma deeds to everyday societal relationships. It is essential to emphasize that the Dalai Lama’s understanding of Marxism, as was Buber’s understanding of Socialism, does not correspond to the Leninist theories of a totalitarian dictatorship of the proletariat as the values and practices of Buddhism cannot be imposed from the outside. The Dalai Lama’s views are identical to Martin Buber’s “Religious Libertarian Socialism.” In his “Paths in Utopia,” Buber spoke of two different and opposing kinds of Socialism: “Jerusalem or Moscow,” a socialism of the spirit or a dictatorship of the state. Paraphrasing Buber, we can say that The Dalai Lama’s Socialism speaks of two different and opposing kinds of Marxism: Lhasa and Beijing. Many Buddhist practitioners have been actively engaged in the spreading of a Buddhist Socialist message, some in the past and many in our present days. One of the exponents of Buddhist Socialism in Japan during the Second World War was Girō Senoo, a Nichiren Buddhist who resigned from the sect and created the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism. Senoo was a pacifist who argued that:

The Capitalist system generates suffering, and thus, it violates the spirit of Buddhism.

Senoo’s Socialism was closer to the Dalai Lama’s as it rejected orthodox Marxism in favor of a “Pure Land of Buddhism” founded on “Humanistic Socialism.” One of the principles of the Youth League read:
We recognize that the present Capitalist economic system contradicts the spirit of Buddhism and inhibits the social welfare of the general public. We resolve to reform this system in order to implement a more natural society.” By natural society, Senoo meant a community organized based on the “Teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha and in accordance with the principle of brotherly love.

In 1904, Japanese Pure Land Priest Takagi Kenmyo wrote an essay called “My Socialism.” Kenmyo argued that in the land of bliss, that is, Buddhism’s Pure Land, the community lives in accordance with the principles and practices of humanist Socialism. In Kenmyo’s view, “Namu Amidah Butsu” is a mantra for an egalitarian, Socialist, and Pacifist society. Kenmyo was imprisoned and assassinated by the Fascist regime of Japan for his principled opposition to the imperialist war with Russia. The dharmic society advocated by these masters is what Buber referred to as the Dialogical project, that is, the creation of an I-Thou society that curbs and reverses the economic, social, and political interactions that are both a manifestation of “Itness,” as well as their result. The Buddhist practices of meditation and mindfulness will naturally manifest in the form of a society in which the values of Capitalism and unrestrained materialism will be largely discarded and replaced with the spiritual values of buddhadharma.

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings of “Interbeing” express engaged Pure Land Buddhism. They teach that we must realize that humans and all beings live in a world of “inter-being.” Interbeing is a socially extended insight based on the fundamental Buddhist teaching of “dependent co-arising.” They said: “We are here to dispel the illusion of separateness.” Inter-being teaches that we cannot separate ourselves from society and expect to attain enlightenment thereby. Dharma Holder Master Gun Jun well said:

Retreating from the world will not liberate you. Happiness is not found in a secluded forest hut or an isolated cave. Enlightenment comes when you connect to the world. You become enlightened only when you truly connect with everyone and everything else. You attain liberation only by going deeply and fully into the world.

In the following statement, Master Sheng Yen explains the concept of Pure Land with clarity and specificity:
Buddhists have two great missions: one is to glorify the Buddha land, and the other is to bring sentient beings to spiritual maturity ... The Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra teaches that by helping others achieve enlightenment, you achieve it yourself. Where do we find people that we can help? We can find them in every world in the ten directions, but mostly right in our immediate surroundings, our families, friends, colleagues, and especially, our adversaries, whom we should regard as bodhisattvas ... The precepts are your vows to live peacefully by regulating your body, speech, and mind behavior. In the passive sense, upholding the precepts means vowing not to commit any wrongful act. In the active sense, it means vowing to engage in as many acts as possible that benefit yourself and others; it means taking responsibility. The purpose of practicing meditation is to create inner peace by calming the mind and stabilizing your emotions. Practicing meditation makes you less likely to become angry or agitated in your everyday life. Meditation does not mean just sitting in concentrated states. We also mean bringing mindfulness to all your activities. Through meditation, your emotions and behavior will become more stable, and conflicts with others will lessen. Through this and other practices, we can eventually establish peace in the lives of individuals and societies.

As Martin Buber explained, we become an “I” through a “Thou,” or in other words, “by helping others achieve enlightenment, you achieve it yourself.” The proper understanding of the concepts of metta, karuna, and dukkha underlies the essential practices of Buddhism in general and Pure Land in particular.

In this regard, the writer deems Buddhism necessary for reconstructing spirituality within all East and West religious traditions. It interprets Martin Buber’s philosophy as advancing the fundamental argument that God is not in the relationship between I and Thou but is the relationship itself. Given this, spiritual practice consists entirely of implementing social programs based on peace and brotherhood in society. God, in this Dialogical sense, is the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. The encounter between Buddhist teachings and practices, and engaged Buddhism in particular, with the Judaic Dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber and other similar strands of Humanistic Existentialism, will engender a most fruitful understanding of the urgent needs and vital prospects of a society founded on the values of buddhadharma. Buber insisted that spirituality and social justice intertwine as the same practice, as there can be no genuine spiritual life outside the I-Thou relationship. Interbeing is the intrinsic dharmic relationships between all that lives, which in Buberian terms corresponds to the concept of the between of I and Thou. Hanh did not speak...
of no-being or intra-being but of a being grounded in the relationship with one another and all beings. In Buber’s words: “At the beginning, it was the relationship, and all real life is encounter.

Engaged Buddhism, by integrating the same spiritual practices with a commitment to social justice, individuals and communities can work toward creating a more just, compassionate, and equitable society, a society devoid of systemic injustices. Buber’s philosophy can be represented by the realization that we should not seek God above nor below, not in the spirit or the flesh, for God is not an entity anywhere. God is The Between of I and Thou, and that between is the actualization of the pure land of the Buddha on earth, a society built on freedom, social justice, and radical love. In summary, engaged Buddhism and Dialogical philosophy have a deep and fecund connection. The body of the Buddha is another term for the between I and Thou. The between of I and Thou is the Buddha’s Pure Land on earth. The emphasis is not on the I or the Thou, on the self or the no-self, but in their between, which is only possible when we engage in the dharma deeds of I and Thou. By saying Thou to neighbor and all beings, that is, by practicing dharma deeds of meta and karuna, we create a realm between mind and body, spirit and matter, and that between is the body of the Buddha. The body of the Buddha is the between of I and Thou, and in order to tend to it, to allow it to emerge and bear fruit freely, we must embrace the responsibility and the risks of embracing the ten thousand things.

10 Sheng Yen: “Through purifying the actions of our body, speech and mind, we can purify ourselves as well as society.” Ibid.