

Norman Fischer

*When You Greet Me I Bow*

Week Four: “Engagement”

October 23, 2021



Hi everyone. Today, I want to talk about engagement: engagement with our lives, engagement with the world, engaging our practice. After practicing Buddhism for my whole adult life, in recent decades, it has occurred to me—and you were probably aware of this all along, but it took me a while to catch up to this idea—that I think Buddhism is actually all about conduct. It’s all about the way we live our lives in this world. It’s all about how we live. It’s not about meditation. It’s not about our inner lives. It’s not about robes and chanting. It’s about how we live in this world.

In the Buddha’s time, generally, people took their places according to their caste and according to their family. Life was in a way fatalistic. You did your duty. Life was set out for you before you were even born. And what was really radical about the Buddha, shocking even, was he said no matter what your caste, no matter what your clan, no matter who you were, you could, by your own effort, change your destiny. You could become free according to the effort you made in your life. You could change how you lived and how you were in the world. Yes, meditation was a part of this because meditation was how you strengthened your insight and calmness of mind so that you had the capacity to conduct yourself differently in the world. Conduct was defined in terms of body, speech, and mind—not just outward conduct but inward conduct as well. You could conduct yourself differently so as to be free of passions, and therefore you could be a blessing to others in this world.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the ideal practitioner is called a bodhisattva, a person who, based on the emptiness teachings that I spoke about before, could raise a heart of compassion, see others as oneself, and therefore care for others, not with any special way but just because others were you and love was natural. In the bodhisattva path of compassion, a very important idea was *upaya*, skillful means, to know how to help in any unique situation. That’s a skill of a bodhisattva.

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When you think about it, this is really saying that bodhisattvas are political and that everything is political. Everything is politics. Our personal conduct is politics, whether or not we are kind and compassionate and loving. But also that’s extended to all areas of our conduct, how we can conduct ourselves as responsible members of a society, how we conduct ourselves in the face of violence and conflict. That’s part of our practice too. If bodhisattvas manifest and cultivate and cleave to compassion, to caring for others, that means they care for others on all levels. From the Buddha’s time to the present, fostering a compassionate society has been at the center of Buddhist life and the project of Buddhist practice. For me, over the years, this has meant that I can’t help but think about the issues of our time with my best understanding of compassionate action.

In my book, *When You Greet Me I Bow: Notes and Reflections from a Life in Zen*, I have a section on social engagement. The essays span many, many decades, so many things have been going on in those decades. There are essays about racism and anti-Black racism, which I was writing about in the early 1990s, not that it was a new issue then. There are essays about women and gender equality. There are essays about the many issues of war and peace that have been ongoing over these many decades, especially the environment. But whatever it is I’m writing about, whatever it is I’m thinking about and talking about, the question always is, how do we understand and approach these issues in the light of our practice and in the light of compassion and connection to everyone, not just the people we agree with but everyone?

Now, I’ll read you some passages from the book. First, I’m going to read a section from “Notes on Social Engagement.”

I mention climate change in these essays. I forgot that I have been concerned about this since the early 1970s because now, in 2020, when I’m writing this, my concern is so strong it is almost of a different order. How have we succeeded all these years in being so casual about an emergency whose consequences are so far

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reaching? As of this moment, it seems that we have the know-how and the economic capacity to completely eliminate the burning of fossil fuels on our planet within a matter of decades—which it seems we must do if we’re going to avoid the worst and most nightmarish scenarios of climate dystopia. Finally, our rhetoric is heating up quickly, which is a good thing, but so far, let’s be honest, serious action is not following—not to anything like the extent and the speed needed. I have hope, however, that this will change.

The Buddhist teaching of karma tells us, with great and I do not think misplaced confidence, that good actions bring good results, bad actions bad results, and that the network of good-bad causality is so vast that no one (and certainly no computer model) can encompass it. So we do not and cannot know what will happen in the future. But we can have confidence that good is good and that, as good as practitioners who follow a teaching that emphasizes compassion, we must do good and avoid doing bad because good brings benefit to others and bad causes harm.

In this sense, Buddhist teaching proposes political and social activism as a total life project; it is the heart of the practice. If you believe, as I do, that climate change is an urgent issue, and if you’re in a position, let’s say, to take to the streets to stop a new pipeline or the building of a coal- or gas-burning plant, you should do that. If you can’t do that, you should support the people who do. You should write letters, picket politicians and business owners, exerting pressure but with love and not bitterness. And yes, whatever your position, you should vote and make candidates and officeholders do the right thing.

But the category of good political and social action is larger than such specifically political acts. Good political and social action is also a smile, a word of encouragement, a moment of gratitude and appreciation. It is promoting kindness and fairness among people in any and all ways. It is prayer, meditation, a moment of peace. There is no one who is not capable of practicing, and obligated to practice, political and social action in this widest sense. And if, as may well be the case, we are in for hard times, politically, socially, environmentally, then we will need such good action more than ever to ensure that humanity will be able to meet the challenges ahead with a good spirit rather than with hatred and strife.

Now, I want to read another passage from a different essay in the section on engagement,

“Quick! Who Can Save This Cat?” It’s a commentary on a traditional Zen story. I won’t go into

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the details of the story, but it's a story about monks of the east hall and the west hall fighting over a cat. I'm imagining that one side is a meditation group and the other side is more of an activist group. The teacher says, “Say a word of Zen, or I will cut this cat in two.” Nobody speaks, and he cuts the cat in two. The essay is a commentary on the story.

The problems of the world are actually fairly easy to solve. But people can't get along, can't work together, can't harmonize their views, so nothing gets done. Things only get worse. Technical and social solutions are at hand, but political problems block them at every turn—and that's the worst problem in the world. I think this Zen story that I'm commenting on strikes to the heart of what it means to be a monk in the world, which is our challenge as dharma students: to be fully committed to our practice so that's the only thing in our lives and yet to honor our daily activity in the world as an expression of our practice. How do we do that? We are all monks of the east hall and the west hall. We are all activists and quietists. How do we manage that?

Thomas Merton wrote about the special function of the monk for the world. The monk, he felt, lives life radically in holiness, apart from the world. Monks are unusual people. They are and must be outsiders, meaning they're not on any one side. They are committed to truth, which means love, so they cannot be attached to one side or another. They cannot hate. They cannot justify their views as being right. They must always come back to the center, to zero, to the present moment, to the in-between sacred moment, life itself beyond views. So although monks may live harmoniously in the midst of society, they are always subversives—working internally and externally against the dominant modes of greed, hate, and delusion that make the world go round.

Monks are living examples of an alternative to the self-centered world. They are secret agents of a foreign power—the power of selfless love. But they don't have a superior attitude about this because humility is their most important practice. Humility is the practice of being aware of the selfishness that is a constant feature of our mind, while remaining committed to the usually imperfect effort to go beyond selflessness—and to encourage others to do the same.

I have a friend who is a Christian hermit who has devoted his lifetime to the study of the writings of Simone Weil. Weil was an extraordinary person, a French Jew who became one of the greatest Catholic mystics of the 20th century.

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Her life was a testament to this union of the opposites of activism and quietism. She was a mystic through and through, and yet most of her life was spent in extreme political activism. She was a witness for peace during the Spanish Civil War. She was a Marxist who wrote for a workers’ newspaper. She was active in workers’ parties. She actually had jobs in an automobile plant and as a grape picker so that she could be in solidarity with ordinary working people. She was living in England during World War Two, sick from overwork, and died of starvation because she refused to eat anything more than the French Resistance fighters at the time, who were living underground.

Weil thought of her activism in mystical terms. She spoke not of justice or power but attention, which she defined as “a point of eternity in the soul.” If we can pay attention closely enough, she thought, we will come to know the transcendent, for it lies at the center of the human heart and mind.

What I wanted to convey is that our conduct—how we live in all dimensions of our lives, body, speech, and mind, how we think, how we speak to others, our social and political choices—that’s our practice. In all this, our watchword is compassion and the recognition that others are ourselves, the whole world is ourselves, and the only way to behave is with love and kind consideration of everyone and everything.

Thank you very, very much for listening to this talk and the others. It’s been really fun for me to try to speak about these things with you. On behalf of myself and all of you who have listened, I want to dedicate whatever positive energy and merit we may have accrued through our time together to the benefit of beings in this world everywhere. May they be happy. May they achieve awakening in their own way. May they be well and healthy and have everything they need. May they be free of oppression, violence, illness. And especially for the children, may they be well and loved completely.

Thank you all very much, and thanks to Tricycle for inviting me to do this and for sponsoring this wonderful series of talks by many teachers. Please take care of yourself.