



**William Edelglass:** Ambedkar defines democracy as a political approach that allows for revolutionary change without bloodshed. And the way he unpacks that is that democracy is about getting along with other people with whom we disagree and not bloodying them when we win, not totally dominating them when we win, as we can see in the contemporary moment in the United States, but always remembering that we are still part of a community and we will live to work together in the future, and we are always still maintaining a sense of community across difference and even when we have difference without enmity. And for him, *maitri*, *metta*, benevolence, and *karuna*, compassion, and *prajna*, wisdom, those essentially get articulated as democratic virtues. To be wise, benevolent, and compassionate is to be able to work with others with whom one disagrees, even if one disagrees vehemently, and doing so with a sense of still belonging to a larger community.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard William Edelglass. William is the Director of Studies at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Previously, he was Professor of Philosophy at Marlboro College in Vermont. As a scholar he has written extensively about the Dalit thinker and activist B. R. Ambedkar, who founded Ambedkarite Buddhism and served as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. This October 14th marks the seventieth anniversary of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, so I wanted to sit down with William to discuss Ambedkar's remarkable life and legacy, as well as the state of Ambedkarite Buddhism today. In my conversation with William, we talk about how Ambedkar argued for a revolutionary reconstruction of Indian society grounded in religious transformation, why Ambedkar believed reform was inadequate and true change required complete annihilation of caste, his conversion to Buddhism and his formulation of Navayana, or New Buddhism, and how he understood Buddhism as a path of collective freedom from violence and social inequality. So here's my conversation with William Edelglass.



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**James Shaheen:** Okay, so I'm here with scholar William Edelglass. Hi, William. It's great to be with you.

**William Edelglass:** Good to be with you, James. Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** So William, we're here to talk about B. R. Ambedkar, the founder of Ambedkarite Buddhism and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. So first of all, for our listeners who may not be familiar with his story, can you tell us who Ambedkar was? And we can start with his background.

**William Edelglass:** Yeah. Ambedkar was the fourteenth child of a family who belonged to the Mahar *jati*. So we think of caste, which is how we often think of how Indian society was divided up, and really it's better to think about jatis, which are regional groups. So there are a little over 4,000 in India, and they're endogamous, so you only marry within the group, and they have largely determined occupation and social status and political and economic status as well. And that's different from the four *varnas*, or the four castes, that we typically think of: Brahmins, warriors, merchants, and servants. And so the jatis in some ways fit into the Varna system, and the Mahars that Ambedkar belonged to were a jati that was regarded, the term that was used in those days was untouchable, so subcaste or outcaste.

So his family's lives were determined and limited by his jati. So that meant that in school, for example, he sat in the back on a burlap sack. He was only allowed access to water when the servant was there who could pour it into his mouth because the Brahmin view is that one really needs to preserve purity, and some people are impure because of their status and because of their occupations, and so their touch was regarded as polluting.

So he went through his life regarded as somebody who was polluted and polluting by many people around him. And nevertheless, despite that, he became the first person from his jati, the



first Mahari, to go to college, Elphinstone College in Bombay, and then he was awarded a scholarship to go to Columbia University in New York, where he studied with John Dewey. He studied philosophy, sociology, history, and received a master's and eventually a PhD in economics. He also went to the London School of Economics, where he received a master's and a PhD in economics and was a barrister. He studied law at Gray's Inn. He came back to India as a highly learned man and became an advocate for the rights of Dalits, of people who were outcastes, and went on to live a life that was a life of a scholar, a professor, a teacher, a dean, as well as a politician and an activist.

**James Shaheen:** You know, I want to go back a little bit just because the extraordinary nature of his life trajectory becomes clearer when you talk about, first of all, how did he even get to go to elementary school and secondary school? And what were the conditions? You mentioned water had to be poured into his mouth. I believe you also told me that he had to sit in a separate room on a burlap sack, that people could not touch him, they could not touch books he touched, and so forth. Can you tell me a little bit about that? Because the fact that he even was able to go to school may cause our listeners to wonder.

**William Edelglass:** So yeah, that's a good question. There were very few Dalits at that time who were able to go to school, and he was able to go to school because his father had worked for the British Army, and his father's father and grandfather did also. And so his family background brings up all kinds of questions about colonialism.

For Ambedkar, caste and untouchability was a more significant problem than colonialism. And he thought about it that way in part because his own family was helped by the British by becoming part of the larger military world of the British. And when his father retired, his mother had already died, and Ambedkar was 5 years old, and only five of her fourteen children survived her.



Ambedkar's father argued that, "Look, I served in the military. I devoted my life to the military, and you're telling me that my kids can't go to school?" So he pushed and pushed and pushed, and Ambedkar and his brother were allowed to go to school when they were 6. There were a small number of Dalit boys in a room off the main room where the rest of the children were taught, and periodically, the teacher would come to the door. The little Dalit boys would have to go to the far corner, and the teacher would look at the work that they were doing on their little blackboards that they had that they would write on. And the boys weren't allowed to ask questions, but the teacher would give them some feedback. So that was his first school.

The family then moved, and he was able to go to another school where he sat in the back of the room on a burlap sack. But again, his teachers would not touch his papers. He wasn't allowed to touch the chalkboard. He brought his burlap sack home every day so that no one else would have to touch it. There was one teacher in his high school who actually gave him his name, gave him the name of Ambedkar, with whom Ambedkar had a very close relationship.

That one teacher was a Brahmin, and even though he was very fond of Ambedkar, he still refused to touch him. He brought food for Ambedkar during the day, but he would drop the food into Ambedkar's hands because he wouldn't want to be polluted. But it allowed Ambedkar not to have to go home to eat lunch. And so school was a very complicated place. There was at least one teacher who cared for him deeply and supported him, and he worked very, very hard to be able to become the first Mahar student to matriculate at the University of Bombay.

**James Shaheen:** So you mentioned that he went to Columbia and the London School of Economics, yet when he returned to India, he continued to face discrimination due to his caste and that he began advocating for Dalit rights, but he later came to believe that reforming caste would be impossible, and he boldly argued instead for the annihilation of caste, which is pretty radical. So tell us about this shift in his perspective. Why was annihilation of caste necessary, and how did he understand this in practice?



**William Edelglass:** Annihilation of caste was necessary, James, because from Ambedkar's perspective, he spent fifteen years trying to reform the caste system to do away with untouchability. So for example, in 1923, the Bombay Presidency, which is now the region around Mumbai, declared that all public water tanks would be accessible to everybody.

But in the city of Mahad, as with many other places, the public water tank was only accessible to caste Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and their animals, and outcast people were not allowed to access the water. They had to go to the outcast part of town, which was some distance away, and one of the occupations that outcast people had to do was bring messages. So from villages all around, Dalits were coming in to do errands on behalf of caste Hindus in their local villages, but they were not allowed to access the water, even though by law they were supposed to be able to.

Ambedkar led a Satyagraha, a protest movement, that in March of next year will be its hundredth anniversary. That was a very important movement to access the water tank at Mahad. In fact, March 19 was regarded as Untouchable Independence Day because it celebrates that march to access water. He also led a movement to access temples for untouchables, for Dalits.

Both of those movements went into the courts. Eventually, they won in the courts, but it took eight years, for example, for the Mahad court case to go through. And during that time, what Ambedkar felt was that year in, year out, he's fighting to reform the caste system to do away with untouchability, and he is getting nowhere.

What he comes to realize is that it's not that caste can be reformed because the caste system is so built into Indian Hindu Brahminical culture. It can't be reformed. It needs to be annihilated. And so he wrote what was supposed to be given as a talk to a group of Hindu reformers. And even though they were very progressive and all wanted to do away with untouchability, they didn't allow him to give the talk, which was on the annihilation of caste, because it went too far.



So that became the book published in 1936, *The Annihilation of Caste*. At the same time as he is making this transition away from reforming caste to the annihilation of caste, he comes to recognize that the caste system is inherent to Brahminical Hindu culture. And he declares very famously at the end of 1935, "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu. I had the misfortune to be born a Hindu." And he then sets off on a project of finding a new religious tradition.

**James Shaheen:** I just want to make sure I heard that right, and in fact, I've discussed this with you before. Just to give people a sense of how extreme the caste system was, animals could access the water, but not people, not Dalits.

**William Edelglass:** Animals could access the water and not people, not the Dalits. And when the Dalits did access the water, which led to attacks and beatings in 1927, after the Dalits accessed the water, the caste Hindus purified that water with one hundred vessels of cow urine and cow dung in a ritual purification.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah. Okay.

**William Edelglass:** And can I just say access to water is only one element that is representative of a much wider set of practices that make violence and subordination and marginalization of Dalits a daily, quotidian occurrence where the subordination means not having access to education and arms, but also not being allowed to ride as a bridegroom to your wedding, not being allowed to walk in certain places, not dressing too nicely, in some places not owning your own home. Now, a lot of that has changed, but there's still some places where these dynamics are still very much in force and violently in force.

**James Shaheen:** So Ambedkar argued for a revolutionary reconstruction of Indian society grounded in religious transformation, which may surprise. So how did he view the role of religion in social change, and how did Buddhism become key here?



**William Edelglass:** Ambedkar looked at the comparative study of religion and thought, "You know, this is really helpful to recognize that the monotheistic traditions in Christianity in particular that Europeans have regarded as the one true religion, that there are these other religious traditions and that they also have value." So comparative religion was a helpful discipline for him. At the same time, he felt there was a danger to the comparative religion approach because it seemed to suggest that all religions were equal. And so he also felt there was a need for a normative, philosophical, critical approach to religion which would make evaluative judgments.

In his evaluative judgment, Hinduism or certainly the Brahminical form of Hinduism was violent and problematic because the caste system was at the heart of it, and the caste system he regarded as a system of graded inequality in which those above have contempt for those below, and those below have hatred of those above, that was the religious culture. And he says the people who practice this graded inequality of caste, they're not bad. It's their religion that teaches them to be this way.

So his diagnosis is that religion can be problematic, but at the same time, he feels that there needs to be some kind of sacred morality or a transcendent morality. And the reason for this is that even as he was a politician for a long time, a constitutional lawyer, a professor of constitutional law, he still believed that the political structures were not enough to ensure equality and freedom. So he says the Constitution grants us equality and freedom, but the culture in which we live denies us that equality and freedom.

And the reason for that, he quotes Edmund Burke as saying, "If one person commits a crime, you can punish them. If a whole society commits a crime, they're not punished. It's just the practice of the society." For him, Buddhism is a way of life, cultivating the precepts, cultivating the eightfold path, cultivating the *paramis*, the perfections. For him, it's a way of life which, when cultivated well, allows us to engage with others who are in different groups across difference that builds a broader community through benevolence, through *maitri*, through *karuna*, through



compassion. And for him, Buddhism is primarily about morality. It's about a morality that transcends politics. It's about a morality that is more than just self-interest in a liberal democracy. And so for him, it is a morality that can be the basis for fraternity, liberty, and equality, which he thinks of as being some of the primary teachings of the Buddha.

**James Shaheen:** Liberty, equality, and fraternity sounds very French, but we'll get to that. I know there are differences.

**William Edelglass:** Can I jump in, James? I just want to say my own view here.

**James Shaheen:** Mm-hmm.

**William Edelglass:** I think especially for those of us who might be Western converts, there is a tendency to have a kind of Buddhist exceptionalism, that Buddhism is somehow more scientific or more just or more moral or more nonviolent. And I think it's important to recognize as we discuss this that, say, Burmese Buddhists have practiced ethnic cleansing, genocide, and crimes against humanity against the Muslim Rohingya, that in Sri Lanka there's been a great deal of violence against the Hindu Tamils in the name of Buddhism and protecting Buddhism, Zen nationalism in Japan. I just want to be clear, even as we're talking about this, to acknowledge that Buddhist societies and Buddhist cultures have perpetrated violence in the name of Buddhism, even as we are talking about somebody who has a very high ideal of what is possible with Buddhism.

So it's also important in thinking about Ambedkar's view of why Buddhism is uniquely suited for this particular moral project to think about the broader context. So the broader context in India is that with the revival of Buddhism in the 19th century, the Buddha was often thought of as somewhat like Abraham Lincoln, that's who he was compared with, who was associated with the emancipation of the slaves. And in the early 20th century, the 1920s, there was a lot of comparison of Buddhism with Marxism, and the Buddha as a kind of Karl Marx figure who



emphasized equality. Douglas Ober has a wonderful book, *Dust on the Throne*, where he discusses this.

And then there's the wider international context of Buddhist modernism or Protestant Buddhism, or the reformation of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and the Theravada world that emphasizes rationality and downplays ritual, downplays magic. Ambedkar was part of these larger movements, and so he was reading a lot of other scholars. He was influenced by the figures who came before him. And so it's not unique to him somehow that he emphasizes that Buddhism is a deeply rational tradition. But certainly for him, the reason that Buddhism is unique and uniquely offers a moral teaching for the contemporary moment is because he regards the Buddhism that he is articulating and that other people are articulating as rational and therefore universally accessible in a way that other religious traditions that are dependent on certain kinds of metaphysical beliefs that are not rationally justified and emphasize magical rituals do not have.

**James Shaheen:** So before we started, we did talk about, and we probably will talk about some more his particular formulation of Buddhism, his selective reading of Buddhism. We all read selectively, and we all come up with our understanding of what these teachings are. But the extraordinary thing is that he came up with a framework rooted in Buddhist teachings or his understanding of Buddhist teachings that did support social justice and democracy. But before we get there, Ambedkar eventually converted to Buddhism, as did nearly half a million Dalits. So can you tell us about his conversion and the twenty-two vows he crafted?

**William Edelglass:** So when Ambedkar graduated from high school, there was a public celebration, and he was given a book on the life of the Buddha. And in the 1920s, when he was with some of his associates, they visited some of the Buddhist caves in Maharashtra, and he was very forceful about how these places need to be respected.

In the 1930s, when he was looking at different traditions, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, everybody wanted to have him convert because they felt that there would be all these other Dalits that



would convert to their religious tradition. But it seems pretty clear that it was relatively early on that he decided on Buddhism because it was native to India and because of this long history of Buddhist reformation movements in India that were egalitarian.

So it is true that he only converted on October 14, 1956, and the seventieth anniversary is this year that we are celebrating. And then he died six weeks later. But he had spent the previous decade of his life very committed to Buddhist study, learning Pali, reading hundreds and hundreds of books, and writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. During that time, he formulated what we can think of as Ambedkarite Buddhism, what he called Navayana, or New Vehicle Buddhism. And the twenty-two vows that were articulated in his conversion ceremony, and then there were four hundred thousand other folks who converted the next day, and then several million more by the end of the decade, and there continue to be mass conversions on occasion.

The twenty-two vows are very specific to a conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism. So some of the vows are about following the precepts, following the paramis, following the eightfold path. And some of the vows are very particular to someone converting from Hinduism, not taking the Hindu gods as supreme and not taking the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu, as many Hindus believe in the project of appropriating Buddhism to a form of Hinduism.

So they are vows that really support someone who's been in this context of marginalization and in this context of subordination to fully affirm one's own dignity as a Buddhist. And today, if you look at Buddhists in India, that is, Dalit converts, they have very high rates of literacy. They are doing much better economically. They have a sense of dignity, in part perhaps because of these commitments to not buying into a worldview in which they lack dignity, that they are subordinated.

**James Shaheen:** Ambedkar viewed true religion as social rather than private or personal, because so many people understand Buddhism in this country, convert Buddhism, as private and personal, and specifically social in connection with morality. Did he also understand personal



practice? I think you mentioned this in one of the things you wrote. I mean, if it's social, how is it social? And is it also at the same time supported by individual practice? How does that work?

**William Edelglass:** Yeah. Good question. So much of the talk and scholarship around Ambedkar's Buddhism is about the political and the social. But if you read *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, his last great book, which tells the life story of the Buddha and presents the Buddha's doctrine, it is very much also about training the mind, cultivating the mind in a way that allows one to engage socially and politically with courage and dignity. But that is on the basis of cultivating the mind. So that means that from Ambedkar's perspective, there isn't a kind of dissonance or antagonism between what one might think of as practice on the cushion or individual practice and social practice. For him, they are mutually dependent and totally intertwined. So the studying the dharma is important for him, cultivating the mind through meditation. Study is important for him, and certainly cultivating moral practice, the five precepts, the paramis, the eightfold path. It's all very, very much at the heart of his Buddhism.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you mentioned *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, so let's turn to that. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is Ambedkar's retelling of the Buddha's life. So can you tell us about this text? What are some of the key interpretive moves he makes in retelling the Buddha's story?

**William Edelglass:** Good question, James. So it's helpful to think of three interpretive principles that he offers in the book while he is giving this account. One interpretive principle is to say that the Buddha was rational. If something is irrational, it doesn't make sense, we don't have to think of that as what the Buddha was saying.

The second principle is that the Buddha was interested in presenting teachings for the welfare of human beings. And so what comes to mind here is that there are plenty of places where the Buddha says in the Pali suttas, for example, you don't know what life circumstances come from karma and what come from other sources. You can't look around at someone's social status or



someone's wealth or someone's attractiveness and say, "Oh, that has to do with karma." But there are other places where the status of one's birth or how attractive one is or how wealthy one is is said to be due to one's karma, one's actions in a previous life. So the principle that the Buddha only said things for the benefit and welfare of human beings would allow us then to say we can disregard those suttas where the Buddha says that status at birth in this life is determined by actions in a previous life, because that ends up justifying subordination, justifying something like the caste system.

So the third principle that Ambedkar uses is that the Buddha was clear that sometimes he has a very strong conviction in what he's saying, and sometimes he's not so sure. And in those instances, we don't really have to follow what he said. We can think it through for ourselves.

The important overall point is that for Ambedkar, there is no teaching that is absolutely final. There's no closure. He's a pragmatist through and through, and he regards the Buddha as articulating this also, that there's no one final teaching that we have to follow. That would be, in his mind, a religion of rules. Rather, Buddhism is, as he says, a religion of principles. We are given principles, but we have to think things through for ourselves.

So with that in mind, at the beginning of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he does raise some very provocative questions. He raised the question of why the Buddha left home. He raises the question of the four noble truths. Is that really the Buddha's teaching? He raises the question of karma and rebirth, and he raises the question of the role of monastics. Perhaps you want to get into some of those?

**James Shaheen:** Well, one of the—I mean, first of all, I can hear people screaming foul on all of this, but I find this very interesting. He's participating in a long Buddhist history of creatively reimagining the Buddha's life, and I'll ask you about that in a second. But tell me, according to Ambedkar, why did he leave home?



**William Edelglass:** So there is a traditional story that the Buddha left home because he saw these four sights with his charioteer, Channa. He saw a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and an ascetic. Is that story in the Pali canon? No, it is not. There are elements in the Pali canon. So there is a story about an earlier Buddha who lived eighty thousand years, who earlier in his life, about two thousand years apart, he goes out and he sees these four sights, and then that story becomes a model for what all Buddhas would have to go through. And so post-canonical biographies hundreds of years after the Buddha tell this story about the Buddha. The other element of that story that is in the suttas is that, in fact, there are places where the Buddha says he leaves home because of old age, sickness, and death.

But I begin there because I want to say that the traditional story is not canonical, that it is one example of many examples of people freely and creatively interpreting and reinterpreting and telling new stories. As my friend Vanessa Sasson says, the life story of the Buddha is a library more than a book. There are so many different renditions.

Ambedkar tells a story that is inspired by a text in the *Sutta Nipata*, 415, in its commentary, where the Buddha says he had a sense of urgency because of social conflict, and that's why he left home. And the commentary talks about the social conflict being between the Sakyas, his father's family, and the Koliyas, his mother's family, who have a conflict over access to the river Rohini to irrigate their crops.

So based on that, and also based on a play by a playwright and Pali scholar, Kosambi, he tells a story of the Buddha's departure from home as one which arises in the context of a conflict between the Sakyas and the Koliyas. The Sakya democratic council votes to go to war against the Koliyas over access to irrigation. Gotama, before he's the Buddha, argues against this. And the consequence of losing is that he would have to go with the majority. He would have to fight. And there's a passage where his mother says, "Of course you have to fight. This is your dharma. This is your role as your caste."



In contrast to the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the hero is told, "You have to kill your cousins because that's your dharma," Gautama says, "No, I'm going to leave home." And he leaves home with the blessing of his wife and his parents because he knows that if he stays and doesn't fight, his family's goods and lands will be taken by the community.

When he hears that there's actually been a reconciliation between the Sakyas and the Koliyas, he realizes that, in fact, he wasn't just leaving home to figure out conflict between states. He was leaving home to figure out conflict between people in general, between family members, between friends, between enemies. And what he realizes is that this conflict is the root source—not greed, hatred, and delusion, but this conflict between people, especially between social classes, is the primary source of suffering. So it is a very different account than the four noble truths or the account that one might hear if one goes to most dharma centers.

**James Shaheen:** I'm glad you ended there because I was going to say, well, what does he consider the primary cause of suffering? And it's social injustice. Is that right, or is that partial?

**William Edelglass:** So it's social conflict, especially the conflict between different groups and especially the conflict between groups and hierarchical orders. So the problem in his mind of saying that it's greed, hatred, and delusion is that that individualizes suffering that is much better understood sociologically, if you will.

So if you look in contemporary American society, health, education, marriage, family life, all kinds of metrics of well-being are associated with higher economic status. And I think the Buddha actually was attentive to questions of hunger. The Buddha, in contrast, say, to Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount," does not valorize the poor. And Ambedkar recognizes that poverty and destitution, and I would want to make a distinction between destitution and renunciation. I think it's possible to find happiness and refuge in renunciation, but that is very different from destitution. Poverty and destitution are often associated with suffering. That doesn't mean we have to look at everybody who's poor and say, "Oh, you're suffering all the time." But it would



be naive to think that the suffering associated with poverty and destitution is simply derived from greed, hatred, and delusion.

**James Shaheen:** I think it would be equally naive to, and I don't think he does, assume that people of great means are happy or content. If anything, they seem to only want more.

**William Edelglass:** Yes, well, that seems to be the case today.

**James Shaheen:** Okay, so we're talking about these various interpretations based on his principles and understanding of the texts. Borrowing from a phrase of the scholar Saidiya Hartman, you describe this as critical fabulation. Could you say more about that?

**William Edelglass:** So Saidiya Hartman is a scholar at Columbia, and what I would want to say is that Ambedkar's approach to thinking about Indian historiography by using creativity and imagination bears some resemblance to what Saidiya Hartman calls critical fabulation. For her, she's primarily interested in the lives of those people who are not in the archive due to slavery and colonialism. So we don't have documents about the interiority of their lives or their life experience, or much of their lives at all. The documents that we have are diaries of slave owners, for example, or ship manifests. And so she tells stories that go beyond the bonds of the archive to honor these lives and to make these lives present to us in part, she says, to make a place for the living. That is, how we see our history and who the people are in our history is important for how we live our lives today.

Ambedkar is engaged in a very similar project. Because there is no archive that can tell us about the origins of untouchability, the origins of Dalits, the origins of this very oppressive system, he takes intuitions and takes creative license to tell stories and to give a history in which Dalits used to be Buddhists, but they were defeated and they became outcasts, but they were defeated by Brahminical armies and Brahminical cultures. And in doing so, he suggests that, in fact, Dalits today did have a noble egalitarian culture that was worth preserving and that there's honor and



dignity in their history, and that connecting to that history of honor and dignity and an egalitarian culture allows for Dalits today to have a sense of value, a sense of worth, and they can hold their heads up high as Buddhists and be part of this long tradition of egalitarianism in contrast to and antagonism with what he regards and many other Buddhist reformers regarded as a hierarchical, violent Brahminical culture.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you say that Ambedkar's retelling is about finding an alternative to violence, or what you call antiviolence. So will you tell us about this idea of antiviolence and how it differs from nonviolence?

**William Edelglass:** Antiviolence is a term from the French political thinker Étienne Balibar. And there is a wonderful scholar of Ambedkar, Aishwary Kumar, who in a footnote brought my attention to the ways in which Balibar's term “antiviolence” was appropriate for Ambedkar. And the reason why I use the term “antiviolence” is because it may be the case that violence and nonviolence are too simplistic a dichotomy.

The example that comes to mind in Ambedkar's own life is the example of his conflict with Gandhi around separate electorates for untouchables. What I mean by that is when various representatives of Indian groups negotiated with the British, Muslims, for example, were given separate electorates. That is, they could elect their own representatives. And Ambedkar felt that Dalits should also have the right to elect their own representatives, because if they were subsumed into the wider Hindu fold, they would not have any political power. The fear was that just as with Muslims, there would be a tyranny of the Hindu majority over Muslims and over Dalits. And so he negotiated separate electorates. Gandhi, who felt that that would separate Dalits from the rest of the Hindu population, went on a fast to the death, which was nonviolent, but essentially blackmailed Ambedkar, forced Ambedkar to compromise the separate electorates that he had negotiated with the British.



And what he sees there is something that can appear nonviolent actually can maintain a violent structure. So if you think of the ways in which every society has certain kinds of structures that subordinate and marginalize some and privilege others, those are what one might think of forms of structural violence, and nonviolence can often be employed to preserve structures that are themselves violent. And so he is more concerned with antiviolence, fighting violence, using force against violence in such a way that the least amount of violence would be done. So, for example, the force, the violence that is necessary for the police to preserve the rights of Dalits, he thinks is necessary.

In an article he wrote at the very end of his life on Buddha and Karl Marx, he says, talking about the Buddha, "Look, the Buddha was against violence. But when justice demanded it, violence was okay to preserve justice." So antiviolence is an approach that acknowledges that nonviolence can preserve violent structures and is an approach that emphasizes the ways in which sometimes some violence might be necessary to preserve a larger nonviolent structure.

**James Shaheen:** This brings me back to something we discussed earlier: His is an understanding of Buddhism as a path of collective freedom from inequality and social exclusion rather than individual liberation. So you just talked about this sense of solidarity and freedom from violence. I just think it's remarkable how the emphasis shifts to the collective here. It's a salient quality of his Buddhism, I would say. Is that true?

**William Edelglass:** I do think it's true. And as I was saying before, I wouldn't want to lose sight of the importance of practicing the precepts, practicing all eight factors of the eightfold path and practicing the paramis. But really, without that, everything else doesn't work.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, but to the end of a kind of social justice or harmonious society, that would be not the soteriological goal, but yeah, that would be the goal. Is that right?



**William Edelglass:** Yes, he reformulates Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach when Marx says philosophers have until this time just thought about the world. The point is to change it. Ambedkar says something similar, that the point of this practice is to reconstruct the world to make it more just, to reduce suffering, and to make it more equal.

**James Shaheen:** I won't go into this right now, but the resonance this must have with our listeners living in this country could be great. I mean, you consider how applicable it is to our own struggle right now that many of us see in upholding the democracy.

**William Edelglass:** I think that's a really good point, James, and I think Ambedkar was prescient about some of these issues. Maybe they're perennial issues, I don't know. But for Ambedkar, having the political structures of democracy, elections, legislative bodies, judicial bodies wasn't enough for a true democracy. In addition to that, he believed we needed economic equality.

To the degree that some people have overwhelming amounts of economic power, even with all the political structures of democracy in place, you won't have a true democracy. And he thought that one of the conditions for the kind of economic equality and economic democracy that is necessary for a true political democracy, you need a cultural democracy, a democracy, a democratic culture where everybody is regarded as having dignity, everybody is regarded and treated as having rights and respected, and that is the cultural condition for economic equality and for political democracy.

**James Shaheen:** Right. There are two things that come up that you talk about in your writing. One of them is that a law or laws are not enough. If the majority disregards those laws or ignores them, they're useless and ineffective. The other thing I was wondering is is secular humanism enough? Because he injects into a secular society religion or a sacred morality, as you mentioned earlier. Is that right?



**William Edelglass:** I think that for Ambedkar, secular humanism is not enough. There needs to be something that is transcendent. There needs to be something that is beyond simply self-interest or simply—not that secular humanism is about self-interest, but there has to be something that is beyond us. And it's a tricky path to navigate because it has to be rational, human, universal, and also he wants something that is sacred and transcendent. And that sacredness and that transcendence is what gives power to the morality. And I think we can see with Christianity, Ambedkar himself says, "Look, I'm not going to convert to Christianity because look at the way that Christianity was used to justify slavery in the American South, and it took a civil war to get over that." On the other hand, a lot of progressive movements in the US have been associated with Christianity.

**James Shaheen:** Or even now Talarico's understanding of Christianity.

**William Edelglass:** Yeah.

**James Shaheen:** So I also wanted to ask you about Ambedkar's legacy and the movement he inspired after his death. You give the example of the remarkable story of Chandrika Ramteke, an activist leader in the Ambedkarite movement who was instrumental in spreading Navayana, or New Buddhism, to rural villages. So tell us a bit about Ramteke and the Dalit women who carried on Ambedkar's mission. I know we were talking about this once when we were up at BCBS, but why don't you say something about that?

**William Edelglass:** So her father was an Ambedkarite activist, and because of that work, she was attacked, and she was married off in ninth grade to an older man who mistreated her. Despite that mistreatment, she became a prominent activist. And I think she's an interesting example of what an antiviolent approach might be. So one of the political parties Ambedkar started was the Republican Party of India, which was primarily made up of Dalits. And they were often prevented from voting, or people tried to prevent them from voting.



So she would bring kerosene, matches, and chili pepper to the elections. And if people got in her way or got in the way of Dalit, she would throw chili pepper in their eyes. And if that didn't work, she might go behind the first level of houses and light an outhouse on fire to get everybody to run and go and put out the fire so that people could vote. She once laid down in front of a car that Indira Gandhi was driving in, which led to her having an audience with Indira Gandhi. She was imprisoned.

One of the things that I really appreciate about her is she's a fiery activist. But what she did was walk to different rural villages with other Ambedkarite Buddhist women and teach local Dalit women how to read *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, how to practice the five precepts, how to practice the eightfold path and the paramis, and they had a practice of reading *The Buddha and His Dhamma* a few pages every day.

And so to me, there's a nice example of someone who's focused on the practices of an individual but also focused on the broader context. That would be a nice image of what an Ambedkarite Buddhist life might be like. Not that we should all go to elections with chili pepper, kerosene and.

**James Shaheen:** Or burn down outhouses.

**William Edelglass:** Or burn down outhouses. But that the two are not—it's not an either/or, that the cultivation of right mindfulness, the cultivation of right concentration, the cultivation of right view, the cultivation of right livelihood, that that all includes right action. That includes social engagement because of the ways in which suffering is caused by all kinds of social structures.

I should say, getting back to the question about democracy, Ambedkar defines democracy as a political approach that allows for revolutionary change without bloodshed. And the way he unpacks that is that democracy is about getting along with other people with whom we disagree and not bloodying them when we win, not totally dominating them when we win, as we can see



in the contemporary moment in the United States, but always remembering that we are still part of a community and we will live to work together in the future, and we are always still maintaining a sense of community across difference and even when we have difference without enmity. And for him, maitri, metta, benevolence, and karuna, compassion, and prajna, wisdom, those essentially get articulated as democratic virtues. To be wise, benevolent, and compassionate is to be able to work with others with whom one disagrees, even if one disagrees vehemently, and doing so with a sense of still belonging to a larger community.

**James Shaheen:** Okay, William, one last question. We're now seventy years out from Ambedkar's famed conversion. So can you talk about the state of Ambedkarite Buddhism today?

**William Edelglass:** Ambedkar worked so hard, and he came from a very poor background. Four of his five children died in childhood. He got diabetes, continued to work all the time, and died relatively young. One of the tragedies of the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement was there weren't really leaders in a position to take it on the way he could. There was fragmentation. And so the Ambedkar Buddhist movement has continued to grow and is continuing to develop, including internationally. There are Roma Ambedkarite Buddhists in Hungary. There's an Ambedkarite Roma school in Hungary, because there were Roma who recognized that some of the same dynamics that Dalits were facing, Roma were facing in Europe, and they found his analysis and his response helpful. There are also Indigenous people in Taiwan and Japan who are interested in Ambedkar for similar reasons. And of course, today there's a certain amount of dialogue between Ambedkarite Buddhism and Black Buddhism in the United States.

But still, one of the things that I think Ambedkar would feel is unfortunate is that in India, Ambedkarite Buddhism is too much still Dalit Buddhism. It's not something that has transcended caste. It's something that at times feels like it is still very much caste-bound. That said, seventy years is a long time in one perspective but a very short time in another perspective. My friend Santosh Raut, for example, is working on developing an Ambedkarite Buddhist seminary that would train people in India to teach Ambedkarite Buddhism and also train people to go out



essentially as chaplains to Ambedkarite Buddhist communities to support them, and I'm hopeful for what the future might bring. I am hopeful that the fever of the particular brand of religious nationalism in India might break and that a more open egalitarian approach might be more welcome.

**James Shaheen:** Okay, William, anything else before we close? That was wonderful.

**William Edelglass:** Yeah, thank you, James. I really enjoyed connecting with you, as always. And I think that one thing that I've said before but I want to emphasize is that sometimes there are debates, especially in Western Buddhist convert contexts, about whether Buddhism is political or not, or what's the relationship between individual practice and social practice. And one thing, of course, to keep in mind is there's no one Buddhism, there are many Buddhisms, and Ambedkarite Buddhism is one. And that one provides a profound example of what deep individual practice can be in relationship with social practice, and that they don't have to be either/or.

**James Shaheen:** William Edelglass, it's been a great pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us.

**William Edelglass:** Thank you, James. And let's celebrate the seventieth anniversary of Ambedkar's conversion.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, absolutely.

**William Edelglass:** Jai Bhim. Victory to Bhimrao. Let's end there. Jai Bhim.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with William Edelglass. To read more about Ambedkar, visit [tricycle.org](https://tricycle.org). Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so

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