Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

In essence, there are two fundamental pillars on which Buddhism rests to necessarily engage human well-being both at the individual and a broader social levels. These are the pillars of wisdom and compassion. Socially Engaged Buddhism is essentially contiguous with traditional forms despite different social arenas and cultural contexts. It is the position of the traditionalists that is strongly supported by the Buddhist practitioners in Buddhist organizations spread across Australia. Their view strongly reflects and supports the view that social welfare activities have always been integral to Buddhism, although the cultural forms may vary.

Two Buddhist teachings that strongly resonate with the Western (Australia being no exception) perspectives of spiritual and social change can provide a powerful starting point. These may also inspire institutional and structural changes that help us take care of ourselves and others in the long run. The first teaching concerns the vision and practices of the bodhisattva, one who is dedicated both to individual awakening and to responding to the suffering of others. The second teaching concerns the practice of loving kindness, cultivation of caring attitude and actions.

Mindfulness practice has been called the heart of Buddhist meditation and is central to all forms of Buddhist meditation. The practice involve cultivating the ability to
be directly aware, moment by moment, of what is occurring in one’s experience-including both inner experiences of bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions, and the outer experiences of being with our world, with objects, or with other human beings. When such mindfulness is sustained over time, wisdom, the clear seeing into basic inner and outer patterns of experience, arises, guiding us in our choices.

Yet mindfulness practice, as the open and direct investigation of experience, has proven surprisingly accessible to those who do not necessarily consider themselves Buddhists or even spiritual. There were many Buddhist teachers have offers training in mindfulness practice in retreats for social activists. Some Western philosophers and scientists have even embraced mindfulness practice as a fundamental and universal mode of broadly "scientific" inquiry into human nature, which can be added to the contemporary repertoire of disciplined, systematic ways of knowing.

Mindfulness being the main controlling faculty of the mind is of course indispensable. It brings the mind to the point of concentration skillfully. Besides it guards against defilements and extraneous thoughts. Then it causes us to take the appropriate action to remedy it. It also keeps the mind flexible, workable, soft, and so on. Therefore there must be plenty of mindfulness at various depths.

Moreover, the practice of lovingkindness involves the continual intention to open our hearts- both to ourselves and to others- in all situations. As a practice, it provides the Warmth, caring, kindness, compassion, and joy that balance with the development of
mindfulness and wisdom—a balance that is particularly important for those connecting spiritual and social transformation.

In all, the ethical precepts expatiated upon in chapter one provide training guidelines besides establishing the very conditions of safety that make training and learning possible. It is very hard to learn when feeling unsafe or threatened. The five precepts are essentially about not harming others or ourselves and not causing suffering, whether through hatred and physical harm, through greed for and possession of what belongs to others, or through lack of care with our sexuality, speech, and use of intoxicants. Following the precepts thus help us not to stride on certain paths that typically lead to harmful behaviour.

In following the precepts, which offer safety to both us and others, it is as if we are gradually creating a peace zone around us. This kind of safety is important for most of us to be able to open up to the immensity of life and to ourselves.

This sense of safety that the practice of the precepts offers is well expressed in a number of traditional metaphors. To keep to the precepts is like "seeing the light of a fire in a dark place" or "returning home."

Applying the precepts to our life, the precepts both help support a training environment and strongly incline us toward developing the positive qualities linked with them. Yet, in relatively general formulation, they also invite us to inquire deeply into how to apply them in concrete circumstances and different domains of our lives. For there is
no definitive compendium of how to apply the precepts, and of course our postmodern social conditions differ substantially from the premodern Asian, rural and agrarian societies that existed at the time of the Buddha.

The intention here is to suggest some of the contours of such contemporary ethical practice. It will focus on the first, second, and fourth precepts because of their centrality in linking spiritual and social transformation.

Practicing the first Precept of non-harming is not one-dimensional but complex and full of profound underpinnings. Although all of the basic precepts can be understood as variants of the injunction not to harm, and hence to offer safety to others and to oneself, to follow the first precept is explicitly to commit not to harm others, in the most basic sense of not intentionally taking the lives of sentient beings. Thus, the precept is applied not just to human beings but to all beings. We abandon, according to the Buddha, "Violence in respect of all beings, both those which are still and those which move." Tendencies toward violence are catalyzed especially by various forms of aversion, particularly hatred but also anger and fear. To practice the precept is to work towards uprooting hatred. According to a Mahayana text, "One must not hate any being and cannot kill a living creature even in thought."1

To follow the precept, says the Buddha, is to "abandon the onslaught on breathing beings.... without stick or sword, scrupulous, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of

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all living beings\textsuperscript{2}. In other discourses, the Buddha more broadly characterizes the precept in terms of non-harming (ahimsa), a principle well established in the Hindu and Jain traditions of his time, which later became the center of Gandhi's interpretation of nonviolence.

Historically, Buddhists have considered non-harming as the most fundamental of the five precepts. For the Buddha, it is distinguishing mark of dharma or the teaching of liberation. It is also striking that the precept gives its name (through "nonviolence") to a whole major approach to social change, found in many spiritual and secular traditions. It’s important to understand that the quality of the process we use to get to a place determines the ends, so when we want to build a democratic society, we have to act democratically in every way. If love and brotherhood are desired, we have to incorporate them as we go along, because we can't just expect them to occur in the future without experiencing them before we get there.\textbf{......... A long range goal is a direction that grows out of loving people, and caring for people.}\textsuperscript{3}

Cultivating this understanding of the long goal, and learning what sustains ourselves and our communities, especially when we open regularly to pain and suffering, is crucial both for our spiritual practice and for our action in the world. These suggest perspectives and resources that support such sustained work. Perhaps most fundamental,


as we shall see, is clarifying the relationship between self-care and self-love, on the one hand, and taking care of the world, on the other.

Those of us who aim to transform both ourselves and the world come under heavy pressure, both from outside and inside, that make it very challenging to take care of ourselves and the world over the long haul. We know the outside problems well. There can be politically motivated repression and even violence directed against opponents and critics of local and national governments and policies. There are the difficulties of sustaining adequate funding for (usually nonprofit) social change organizations and the challenges of chronically low salaries and long hours if we work in such organizations, or of fitting in our spiritual and social change our lives experience after regular hours. There may be criticisms and at times distortions from those in power and from the mass media and, perhaps worse and more likely, marginalization and lack of attention from the mainstream.

Yet the inner difficulties are perhaps more daunting than the outer difficulties, for they can paralyze and end our engagement. We must somehow sustain ourselves over a lifetime and work with and through such challenges as burnout, despair and hopelessness, fear, an often burning anger at injustice that can become destructive to ourselves and those around us, a sense of isolation, interpersonal differences and tensions within groups and organizations, cynicism, grief, and a sense of being overwhelmed by pain and suffering. Many people simply spoke of being stressed a great deal of the time, of there being always too much to do. For some of those in their forties or older, this meant
juggling work, family, elderly parents and home. A number of participants stated that regular spiritual practice and retreats seem distant possibilities—luxuries for people with other kinds of lives. Even trying to get help with all the tasks sometimes means adding another item to the “to do” list—an item that won't get done.

To walk a spiritual path is to know more universal insights and enact basic practices, but it is also to know and express what universal means more personally. To neglect either the universal or personal is to go astray. Thus, the most significant aspect of this entire exercise is to have an integrative capability to merge the ‘personal’ with the ‘universal’ and at the same time, stay conscious of their distinctive characteristics.

This concluding chapter not only attempts to present the gist or the quintessence of what has been expatiated upon or dealt with in the preceding chapters, but also specifically points to the very personal dimension of walking this path. In order to realize this purpose, the basic task in hand is to inquire into how we might each come to walk such a path in our own ways—in touch with the mystery and preciousness of our lives.

While exploring how we each might personally act in the world, it is extremely important to realize that what the world most needs are our unique contributions, and our own individual ways of living an engaged spiritual life, rather than our performances of some imagined set of uniform duties. It has been essentialised in the way the great African American mystic and activist Howard Thurman once counseled a young man:
"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world need is people who have come alive."\(^4\)

In spite of that, we can be at times totally confused regarding our personal choices as to how to act and even how to live. In conducting retreats on connecting individual spiritual practice with action in the world, I often hear: (1) I feel isolated, (2) I don't know what to do, and (3) I'm not doing enough. These perceptions and emotions might eventually lead to guilt, burnout, despair, and withdrawal.

To honor such cycles in our lives means that sometimes we need times of refuge, reflection, and renewal, often for an extended period. In social transformation, there is also an important role for the like of Buddhadasa or Thomas Merton who receive activists at their monasteries and wring about spiritual responses to social ills.

At other times, we need to go outward, to bring forward our work for the healing and transformation of the world. However, while doing this, we sometimes need first to gather tools, competences, and support in order to go forth skillfully.

Likewise, there may be occasions when the events of life may call for the need of paying attention to education and training; people who need our care due to their illness; a birth, a death, a call to balance our lives in some way, a version, the demand of beauty. Following these calls, we may not seem to be carrying out inner or outer transformation

in ways that fit the old models, and may sometimes feel confused, unworthy, or somehow of the path. At these times, it is very helpful to keep confused on the fundamental transformative principles and how they are being developed, and on the ways that they can guide us in all domains, in all activities. Taking refuge in this broad vision of the seamless whole of spiritual life can remind us, contrary to some of our internalized voices, that we don't have to do everything all the time.

Developing such a broadened understanding of spiritual practice can enable us to find our personal niche, our own way of connecting our action in the world and our spirituality, depending on our own gifts, strengths, interests and aspirations. We don't have to "do everything," always be on the frontlines, or model a specific socially engaged spiritual path. Aware of the links between the individual, the relational, and the collective, our engagement might be focus on working to develop an alternative community school, on teaching a new way to be with our bodies in movement or yoga, on acting as a counselor in order to benefit for all.

Moreover, our spiritual practice as well as our work in the world commonly begins with an ethical commitment to help, and not to harm or hurt, ourselves and others. Such a commitment is central to establishing a "containers" of safety for ourselves and those around us, facilitating the inner work of opening body, heart, and mind, and guiding and protecting us in our outer actions. We extend a zone of caring, what Martin Luther King Jr. called the "beloved community," outward into the world, into all the domains of our lives. In this sense, ethics is at the center of both spiritual practice and social
transformation. Without a strong ethical foundation, we inevitably fall into contradictions- between means and ends, between our actions and our ideals.

In Australia as well as other countries of the Occident, the first social action of the isolated Buddhist is not to withhold the Dharma from the community in which he or she lives. However modest one's own understanding of the Dharma is, there is always some first step that can be taken and something to be learned from taking that step. Even two or three can be a greater light to one another, and many forms of help are often available from outside.

Social action needs to be organized and practiced in such a way as to build upon its potential for spiritual practice and to guard against its seductions. Collective labor with fellow-Buddhists raises creative energy, encourages positive attitudes and engenders a strong spirit of fellowship. The conflicts, disagreements, obstacles, and discouragements, which will certainly be met along the way, offer rich meditation or recites the Buddha's name besides experiences and opportunity for personal growth, so long as scrupulous mindfulness is sustained. It presents concrete ways of bringing the spiritual principles into the many outer dimensions of our lives, strengthening our ability to act compassionately in the world.

Therefore, the role of socially engaged Buddhist was not like some scholars have pointed out that Buddhism is "other worldly", "passive" or "an escapist". The heart of socially engaged Buddhism is always to look forward in human's suffering in the ways
that they could help and consoler in both spiritual and material needs. This Teaching is right after the enlightenment of the Buddha, who was frequently encourage his disciples to benefit all living beings now we all know as the term socially engaged Buddhism.