

HABITATS OF MIND: DHAMMA, THE WORLD, AND MINDFUL ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

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As a Buddhist, teacher, and a graduate student, coming to know the conflicts and misconceptions that stem from partial views and experiences, I have found it difficult to locate where to stand and how to engage. Buddhist teaching and practice (Buddhadhamma) offers a pragmatic approach to an overarching series of questions and a method of practice designed to address them: What is suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation? These are the Ariya-sacca, the four noble truths (or four ennobling realities), which can be applied to the arising of suffering anywhere in nature—whether internal (mind/culture) or external (environment). This study is situated within the conversation on socially engaged Buddhism. It is a Theravada Buddhist response to ecological degradation and social suffering and the forces that proliferate these conditions, which I call the consumer narrative. I look at examples of Buddhist social action, and how the Eightfold Path applies as a framework for it. Utilizing an immersive, practice-led research, interviews and textual interpretations, arising from a grounded theory methodology, I explore how the application of central Buddhist teachings and practices lead to social action.

I conclude that Buddhadhamma, the teachings and practices, cultivate a mind and heart that is clear, open, and responsive to suffering as it arises, enabling individuals or communities to engage in ways appropriate to the problem as well as the means, ability, and inclination of the individual or community—the Dhamma of each person or group. This conclusion is made evident in the diversity of activism demonstrated by the individuals interviewed in this study, as well as in my own experiences and insights when immersing my daily life in the teachings and trainings of Buddhadhamma. In addition, I conclude the Buddhist way of life, properly developed, is itself a form of activism, resisting the trends of selfishness and consumerism that form the roots of social and ecological suffering. The personal way of life and its consequent expression in social action form a mutually benefiting, interdependent social transformation.

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USE OF PALI TERMS

Pāli is the original scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism. These teachings are contained within a collection called the Tipitaka (Triple Basket), referred to as the Pāli Canon. The texts containing the discourses of the Buddha are called suttas (threads). Texts referenced in this work are cited in text as follows: (Translator, publication date: sutta chapter and number or verse). For example, the Buddha once summarized the teachings of all Buddhas (awakened ones) as “to avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to cleanse one’s mind” (Thanisarro, 2013: Dhp 188). Citing in this way maintains consistency with the suttas while giving credit to the translators. The separate volumes in the Tipitaka are abbreviated as follows:

DN...Digha Nikaya	The Long Discourses of the Buddha
MN...Majjhima Nikaya	The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha
SN...Samyutta Nikaya	The Discourses Related by Subject
AN...Anguttara Nikaya	The Discourses Related by Numbers
Sn...Sutta Nipata	A collection of the Buddha’s teachings, in verse form
Dhp...Dhammapada	The Path of the Dhamma, collected in verse form
Vsm...Visuddhimagga	The Path of Purification, a commentarial compendium
Mv...Mahavagga	The Great Chapter, from the books of monastic discipline

INTRODUCTION

When I reflect on life, my relationship with Buddhhadhamma goes back to my childhood. I was born into a unique space—my father, a white Jewish American, and my mother, an immigrant from Morocco, her family Muslim. I always joked that in Jewish tradition, the mother must be Jewish for the children to be considered Jewish, while in Islam the father must be Muslim for the children to be Muslim, so in my case the two religions canceled out. This wasn't the reason I was raised in a secular household, but nevertheless, I had no exposure to religion growing up. I also had no knowledge of Buddhism during childhood but I would sit or walk quietly with my attention resting on the movement of ants, the grass, or other natural phenomena.

This practice created an intimacy I would later call Clarity or Naturalness. Clarity referred mostly to a mental luminosity that lacked any anxiety or confusion. Naturalness referred to a more embodied presence and a feeling of *everything is exactly as it should be*. The two states most often arose together and were so powerful and tangible that I lost interest in activities that distorted them—namely, school or social interaction. I knew I had discovered something very delicate and easily lost. In my adolescent years, I gave my forming belief system a name, calling my personal practice the religion of the forest. I believed religion arose spontaneously from nature in order to instruct human behavior, as with plants and animals.

My forest religion informed everything I did. The forest, in my mind, was a place where nothing was man made and everything was impermanent and conditional; so, I wouldn't allow myself to develop any type of dependencies. I would explain to my parents that I didn't want to wear shoes, or take medicine, because in a forest these things would not be available. I ditched school to walk aimlessly alone on the hot sidewalks, under the checkered shade of Maple and Oak, until this Clarity or Naturalness would arise. On one occasion, when I was fifteen years old, I had a sudden experience as I was walking to school that was so intense I was filled with an immeasurable bliss for three days, where I had no sense of self, and my bodily impression became an indefinite form of energy flowing with the environment around me. I had been sitting in meditation through first period when I began to feel that unshakable naturalness and clarity. I arose from my meditation slowly and began to walk, barefoot, to school. Maybe one hundred yards into the walk, with my house still visible behind me, the world fell away. I had no language to describe it at the time, and still struggle to describe it today. Everything looked similar in space, shape, color, distance, texture etc. However, the feeling of my "self" within my body had dissolved. It wasn't in my head or at the boundary of my skin. My body instead felt like a flow of energy barely distinguishable from the environment around me. Most intense was the perception that everything, every element, including the concrete sidewalk, contained an impersonal awareness. The selfless awareness of this first experience lasted for a few days but the effects have continued to today.

These experiences were wonderful, but I continued to miss school and failed my classes. I was easily taking advantage of the freedom only the child of divorced parents,

living in a quiet suburban corner of Los Angeles, could appreciate. There was no one to monitor me, and my privilege formed an idealized bubble that protected my sense of ease in the world. But a conflict arose when I began to discover problems like homelessness and drug addiction, inequality, selfishness, environmental degradation, and blatant cruelty in the world. I became stuck between two worlds it seemed, the simple blissful brightness of a silent mind, and what I then perceived as insanity in human society.

I developed an aversion to society as I searched for a place from which I could live without adopting this perceived madness myself. Living between worlds I even became homeless for a short period. In my mind, homelessness was the only way to avoid the insanity I perceived. However, my relationships with my parents and my girlfriend were too important, and living on the streets offered no real solutions. Over the next decade I worked, finished high school, graduated from college, got married, and went to teach English with my wife in Thailand. In Thailand, I was told, after a conversation describing my experiences in adolescence and similar insights throughout my twenties, that I should visit a rather unique Buddhist monastery that held 10 day silent retreats for foreigners. It was there, at Wat Suan Mokkh, where I had the experience that led to the investigation you are about to read.

Talking and moving had become my most well practiced skills by this point in my life. I was often plagued by a mental, verbal, and physical restlessness that was often unquenchable. Silence and stillness would prove to be difficult. For the first five days of the retreat I could not sit still. During morning, afternoon, and evening meditation, I would rock and sway side to side, forward and backward, in an attempt to alleviate the

persistent restlessness plaguing every part of my body. Worse was the silence. Not being allowed to speak stirred up an anxiety that felt like being held underwater or in an enclosed space.

On the sixth day everything changed. During an afternoon Dhamma talk on the teaching of anatta (non self), the monk who had been leading the retreat uttered these words, "there is no self. At each moment of sensory contact the mind simply appears and disappears...at incredible speeds." This triggered a panic attack in me. I couldn't breathe or see for several moments and I had to leave the meditation hall and be alone. I found a quiet place under a tree and fell to my knees with my palms pressed against the soil until I calmed down. By this point in my life, I had lost the ability to easily cultivate that feeling of clarity or naturalness. It came on rare occasions during long walks or while camping at high elevation in the Eastern Sierras. However, pressing my bare hands or feet against unpaved soil would usually bring me down from an anxiety attack.

Later in the day I was sitting in a natural hot spring when it began to rain. I unintentionally fell into a deep concentration while gazing at the water's algae green surface and observed, for the first time, a detail in nature I'd never noticed. As each drop of rain made contact with the water's surface, small bubbles would form and burst repeatedly. Some would linger for a moment longer than others. I became absorbed while observing this phenomenon when the statement arose, "at each moment of sense contact, the mind simply appears and disappears at incredible speeds." My mind saw a reflection of itself and at once the narrative construction of my reality dissolved.

For the rest of the retreat, and for many months following, I kept meditating on

the breath, feelings, formations, and mental phenomena, focusing, as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu instructed, on their impermanence and the fading away, or quenching, of attachment. I did this three times a day at two hours a sitting. I would fall into deep states of peace while sitting, where it would seem that my thinking mind would separate from awareness itself and collapse into the breath, taking my body and the feeling of self with it. I'd experience high levels of energy and clarity while walking, working as a teacher, and eating. I had no anger or restlessness, no doubt or uncertainty, no craving and no boredom. I began repeating the phrase to myself, "there's nowhere to go, and nothing to say." Another insight had arisen during the retreat, which intensified during these months of intense practice. I saw directly, in my own mind, that my sense of self and of the world is constructed and maintained by narrative. The media I consume, what I read, think, and say—the people I talk to and the stories I believe in—are all systems of narrative constructed by the mind in order to maintain a sense of self and the world in order to function in society. This is how the insight took shape in my mind. I saw this as a natural process of evolution. Later, as my awareness grew I began to wonder how I could translate this practice into helping others. After the retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh, I experienced a peace and compassion unlike anything in my life up to that point. Maintaining the practices I learned at Wat Suan Mokkh had finally given me the skillful means to bridge that perceived gap between worlds. However, I wasn't able to maintain this clarity and peace forever. I am certainly no longer free of restlessness or doubt, anger, craving or boredom, but during graduate school, after returning to California, the experience at Wat Suan Mokkh continued to affect me.

I began to spend more time formally studying and practicing Buddhism, especially the talks and writings of Ajahn Buddhadasa. However, I still kept coming up against the same problems. The more I practiced, the less self-centered I became, the more awareness of suffering I developed. The more intimate my awareness of suffering, the deeper my feeling of compassion. But I didn't know what to do about any of it—ecological degradation, poverty, hunger, homelessness, addiction, racism, war, genocide, day-to-day greed and cruelty—and none of it made any sense. What should I do about it? Where would I start? These questions had plagued me for years and my response was most often confusion and hesitation. I had mainly focused on moment-to-moment, person-to-person, kindness and attentiveness. My own reasoning had failed to offer any real path of practice to guide my response to human and ecological suffering. This investigation seeks to bridge that gap with an exploration into engaged Buddhism.

The conversation this study contributes to explores Buddhist individuals and Buddhist movements for social or ecological change. This movement is usually termed “engaged Buddhism,” (Queen, 1996) or “socially engaged Buddhism,” (King, 2009) which the anthropologist, Susan M. Darlington defines as “...the active use of the religion and its teachings to address social issues, such as violence and war, economic development and inequalities, gender issues, and environmental degradation” (Darlington, 2012: 5). It is very important to note Darlington's emphasis on “the active use of the religion and its teachings” when reading the following pages, as I will be unpacking the primary Buddhist teachings that engaged Buddhists, especially in the Theravada tradition, have applied to their social action. I do not attempt to provide a

survey of Buddhism, but rather an application of the teachings to social and ecological issues. The scholar, Sallie B. King, defines socially engaged Buddhism as “...a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political, and ecological problems of society” (King, 2009: 1). The primary purpose of this study is to answer the following questions as part of the ongoing conversation on engaged Buddhism:

How does Buddhist teaching and practice apply as a framework for socially transformative action?

How can I, as a Buddhist, respond to social and ecological suffering?

However, before answering these questions, it is necessary to first understand:

What is the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action?

I seek to first unpack the deeper causes of the problems, the exigence for this research, a storyline I call the consumer narrative. The perception of this storyline first appeared in my mind during the retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh, and continued to grow as I observed and reflected on my own culture. I saw that the cultural narrative from which I came was steeped in a value system that reinforces and institutionalizes an isolated, insecure, greedy sense of self in order to perpetuate the need to consume. I came to call the process instilling this value system the consumer narrative.

I sought to answer these questions by immersing myself in the Buddhist way of life, the cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path, a path I shared among the participants in this study. At the beginning of the research process, I believed that an isolated, or

inactive, approach to Buddhist practice was a misunderstanding of Buddhadhamma.

Many of us in the west appropriate Buddhist practices into our consumer lifestyle, taking the pieces that support our way of life and make us more comfortable. This view is complicated through the experience of the research, finding that the Buddhist way of life is inherently activist, existing in paradigm that is contrary to selfishness and consumerism. My intention in this study is neither to misappropriate Buddhadhamma to fit into a western, consumer context, nor to judge or criticize Buddhist traditions from cultures I cannot claim to fully understand. Rather, it is my sincere effort to share an honest reflection on my own path of practice, which follows the earliest discourses of the Buddha and a lineage I discovered in Thailand, the Thai Forest Tradition. I analyze these insights in the context of the broader conversation on engaged Buddhism, in my continuing effort to bridge the gap between personal and social release from suffering.

I conclude that Buddhadhamma, the teachings and practices, cultivate a mind and heart that is clearly aware of, open, and responsive to, suffering as it arises, enabling individuals or communities to engage in ways appropriate to the problem as well as the means, ability, and inclination of that individual or community—the Dhamma of each person or group. This conclusion is made evident in the diversity of activism demonstrated by the individuals interviewed in this study, as well as in my own experiences and insights when immersing my daily life in the teachings and trainings of Buddhadhamma. In addition, I conclude that the Buddhist way of life, properly developed, is itself a form of activism, resisting and removing the underlying tendencies of selfishness and consumerism that form the roots of social and ecological suffering. The

personal way of life and its consequent expression in social action form a mutually benefiting, interdependent, social transformation.

STRUCTURE OF THESIS

The organization of this study follows a Buddhist logical framework. It begins with a personal experience or insight into suffering followed by seeking out the words of a teacher. In my case, the teachings Ajahn Buddhadasa aimed at social action. It then follows the Buddha's instruction to the Kalamas to avoid taking the words of a teacher as truth until one has investigated and known for oneself that they lead to benefit and happiness. The investigation itself follows the framework of the four noble truths: to understand a problem, investigate and abandon its cause, observe and realize its cessation by removing its cause, and developing the path of practice, or way of life, leading to the ending of the problem.

The first chapter is a review of literature concerning socially engaged Buddhism. For this study, I first outline the scholarly conversation on engaged Buddhism, then focus my attention on reviewing the talks and writings of Ajahn Buddhadasa, and his primary western disciple and translator, Santikaro Bhikkhu. I have chosen to focus on Ajahn Buddhadasa because it was at his monastery, Wat Suan Mokkh, where this research began. Furthermore, Tan Ajahn Buddhadasa is viewed as a central figure in engaged Buddhism, though he never referred to himself in this way, nor did he use the term engaged Buddhism. To Tan Ajahn, there was just Buddhism, properly understood—a view I end up sharing. Though I explore engaged Buddhism in this study, I later discard

the term as I aim to overturn the distinctions made in the literature. The literatures included are specifically concerning Ajahn Buddhadasa's social teachings but it is important to note that these differed little from his other teachings.

The next section, "A Buddhist Deconstruction of the Consumer Narrative," analyzes what I call the consumer narrative through the perspective of the most central Buddhist teaching, dependent origination (*paticcasamuppāda*). The concept of the consumer narrative and the teaching on dependent origination is explained in the conceptual framework, which is included at the beginning of this chapter. Dependent origination is discussed all over the Pāli scriptures, but it is also contained within the four noble truths. The first, second, and third noble truths of Buddhism outline the truth that a problem can be understood if examined with full awareness and removed through the removal of its cause. The interrelationship between causes and effects, and the application of this understanding to the central problem of *dukkha*, is the primary purpose of the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination. The main focus of the second chapter is to explore social and ecological distress (*dukkha*) and identify the causes rooted in the consumer narrative, which form the impetus for Buddhist social action.

The conceptual framework at the beginning of the second chapter includes an excerpt from a nonfiction narrative, "Silent Mind," which I wrote on my experience at Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in southern Thailand. This nonfiction narrative is included to give the reader insight into the Buddhist view of reality, and shares where some of the central concepts I later discuss emerged. It is also aimed at offering the reader a first hand, subjective, experience of what Buddhist practice looks and feels like,

and how it relates to this researcher and the research itself. Since I am using a Buddhist epistemology in several different ways throughout this study, it is helpful for the reader to understand what a Buddhist perspective is like, first-hand, from the perspective of practice.

The third chapter “Research Design,” lays out my methodology and methods, followed by an introduction to my research participants. A central contribution of this study lies in the research design. I apply the Buddhist framework for understanding and responding to reality as a methodology and relate this practice to the academic methods of grounded theory and practice-led research. My goal in this was to immerse myself in the subject of study so that the final product, this thesis, would reflect the results of developing the teachings and trainings of Buddhadhamma, thereby showing how Buddhism leads to social action on multiple levels. The participants I selected represent the diversity of activism the Buddhist way of life leads to and contributes new evidence to the conversation on engaged Buddhism.

While the second chapter addressed the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action by identifying the problem, or exigency, and its causes—the fourth chapter, “Results and Analysis: Mindful Activism,” addresses how Buddhism leads to social action, and how I can respond to social and ecological suffering. This is accomplished by following the activity of the third and fourth noble truths: realizing cessation and the path of practice leading to the cessation of the problem. This section presents the results and analysis of my findings based on the interviews conducted for this research. I restate the central research questions: *How does Buddhist*

teaching and practice apply as a framework for socially transformative action? What's the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action? How can I, as a Buddhist, respond to social and ecological suffering? The underlying intention of these questions is to identify the path of practice for addressing the problems we face in our modern world in a way that is mutually transformative: laying out a Buddhist framework for social action that I eventually call mindful activism. The “Eightfold Path as a Framework for Mindful Activism,” is explicitly laid out in the conclusion of this study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to investigate core Buddhist teachings and practices in order to understand their application to engagement in social and ecological activism—to find out how Buddhism leads to social action. Addressing these questions from a practice-led approach is an essential contribution to the scholarly literature on engaged Buddhism, which is explored in this study. To a larger degree, the literature explored in this study is early Buddhism (the Pāli scriptures), and the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadasa. Though he is viewed as a major figure in engaged Buddhism, Ajahn Buddhadasa did not use that term to describe himself or Buddhism. Instead, he spoke of peace, inner and outer, peacemakers, and world peace (Buddhadasa, 1989). I also want to examine the various dimensions of the application of these teachings to social action, such as applying right view, outlined in the conceptual framework, to analyzing the consumer narrative.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Monk and peace activist, is credited with coining the term, “socially engaged Buddhism” (Darlington, 2012: 5). However, like Buddhadasa, he points out that “engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism” (2003). His perspective that Buddhism is responsive to suffering as it arises, such as when bombs begin to drop on you during the (2003), is a theme that emerges in this study. In Nhat Hanh’s case, the suffering he responded to, that formed the impetus for his social action, came from the Vietnam War. The teacher I focus on in this study, Ajahn Buddhadasa, shares this view with Thich Nhat Hanh.

Scholars have explored the phenomenon of engaged Buddhism in Asia and the West, from the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. The literature often comes from a broad, outside perspective. As a Theravada Buddhist and follower of Ajahn Buddhadasa and the Thai Forest Tradition, I am at a stage in my practice where the question of how to be actively engaged is still unanswered. At the beginning of this literature review, I focus on scholars who have focused on Theravada figures (Queen, 1996; King, 2009; Darlington, 2012). My positionality as someone who is still trying to figure out the answer to these questions is not well represented in the literature. Scholars have compared movements across Asia and the west (Chapell, 1999), explored ecological activism within the monastic sangha (Darlington, 2012), organized collections of essays and writings from prominent voices in engaged Buddhism (King, 2009; Queen, 1996), and sought to establish a well-defined “new Buddhism” (Brazier, 2002). The focus in these studies is largely on major transformative figures and already well-defined movements and organizations or surveys of talks and writings by influential voices. I use this literature in order to enter the conversation. It is quite helpful and has established the breadth of engaged Buddhism. However, I end up following the research process, developing theory along the way, and emerge with a new contribution to the literature, showing the roots of Buddhist social action in the teachings and trainings through my own practice and the first-hand experiences of my research participants.

I seek to answer my research questions from within, rather than outside, Buddhist practice. From a Buddhist perspective, our actions are the fruits of their roots in the mind. Real change begins at the level of the mind, working its way from the inside out. We can

pluck the rotten fruit off of the tree but if we don't change the nutriment in the soil, the tree will continue to bear rotten fruit. This study is my investigation into the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action, into how the Buddhist way of life leads to social action, and finally, to answer a nearly life-long question of how I can respond to social and ecological suffering.

Socially Engaged Buddhism

The breadth of engaged Buddhism ranges from social movements such as “the nonviolent overthrow of the Thai dictatorship in October 1973” (Sivaraksa & Swearer, 2015: 12), to tree ordination as a ritual form of environmental activism (Darlington, 2012), and even powerful critiques on the current complacency of the monastic order in historically Buddhist nations like Thailand, where Thai Buddhist activist, Sulak Sivaraksa, has said it is “difficult to find a temple that is socially engaged with the surrounding communities, especially with the marginalized, the disabled, the youth” (Sivaraksa & Swearer, 2015: 122). The movement is unified only in its reliance on central Buddhist teachings and practices, such as seeing and responding to suffering, as the foundation for diverse individuals', or communities of individuals, engagement in social or ecological actions. In his recent book, *Action Dharma*, Cristopher S. Queen points out that engaged Buddhists “...regard service and activism as essential to the Buddhist path...[a] viewpoint [not] shared by all Buddhists...or by all scholars of Buddhism” (2013: 2). He further articulates that not all engaged Buddhists “embrace the proposition that spirituality and activism are one.... Thus, defining action dharma as

social engagement in the context of more traditional paths of liberation remains an overarching task for scholars of contemporary Buddhism (2013: 3). This is not the task undertaken in this study.

This study does not explicitly engage in the debate over whether Buddhism necessitates an expression in social action. It is also not an attempt to define activism as part of the Buddhist path. It is furthermore not the intention of this research to criticize any monastic order or suggest a more authentic or proper expression of Buddhadhamma. Rather than attempting to establish an overarching definition of engaged Buddhism in the context of Buddhist teaching, the intention of this study is to contribute examples of how Buddhism based in the early teachings can and often does lead to social action. Furthermore, it is my intention to synthesize social science and Buddhist ways of knowing—to contribute an investigation of engaged Buddhism utilizing the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path as the framework for the investigation itself so that the subject, methodology, and results of this research follow, express, and emerge from, Buddhist practice. The results in the following pages are the product of developing the Eightfold Path in conjunction with analysis of interview data. Furthermore, the analysis of the consumer narrative following the literature review is itself an exercise of engaged Buddhism in that it makes use of the religion and its teaching as the lens of analysis in order to clarify the impetus for Buddhist social action. In this way, this study contributes not only an exploration of engaged Buddhism, but makes the research process itself a practice of engaged Buddhism

One of the major figures explored under this body of literature is Ajahn Buddhadasa, the founder of Wat Suan Mokkh, where I stayed for a retreat in southern Thailand. Scholar of engaged Buddhism, Christopher S. Queen, lays out some of the themes across the diverse, international terrain of engaged Buddhism by pointing out that some of the major Buddhist leaders "...have been consistent advocates and activists for world peace..." (Queen, 1996: 5). These lay and monastic figures, such as Sulak Sivaraksa, Ajahn Buddhadasa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama, have a commonality in emphasizing "...the theme of 'inner peace and world peace,' suggesting the conjunction of spiritual and political practice...this as a distinguishing mark of contemporary engaged Buddhism..." (Queen, 1996: 5). The literature on engaged Buddhism spans Buddhist sects and traditions, as well as cultures and nations. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists outline engaged Buddhism very differently than Theravada Buddhists do. One major difference in Theravada Buddhism is the absence of the bodhisattva vow "to save all beings," (Macy, 1996) which is a common impetus for social engagement among Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists. Even among Buddhists within the same tradition the expressions and influences of their activisms are not unified. In her study of "eco-monks" in Thailand, Darlington points out that there was no "...single, unified interpretation of Buddhism used by all activist monks to support their work. Their various interpretations show Buddhism as a lived religion, challenged and adapted by those who practice it to make it relevant to their daily lives and immediate situations" (Darlington, 2012: 15). Buddhism as a lived religion, expressed uniquely in

dependence on where and when the teachings take shape, make it difficult to establish a fixed definition of engaged Buddhism.

Buddhism has taken many forms and expressions over the centuries. The teachings related to social action explored in this study are expressed in the earliest discourses of the Buddha (those recorded in the Pāli Canon, Tipitaka) and the interpretations of those teachings taught by the reformist Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, as well as other Kammatthana (practice-based) monks of the Thai Forest Tradition (Thanissaro, 2013b). The common thread between Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the monks of the Thai Forest Tradition is a rejection of Theravada orthodoxy and the commentaries (Visuddhimagga), while instead relying on the direct insight arising from practice based on the earliest discourses of the Buddha. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and his contemporary Phra Payutto, “call for a reform of Thai Buddhism through a return to the original teachings” (Darlington, 2012: 172). Buddhadasa also “rejected any formal role within the Thai sangha organization, choosing instead to live as a forest monk at his meditation retreat in southern Thailand, Suan Mokkh. His interpretation of the doctrine similarly rejects formal institutionally backed approaches” and “...Buddhadasa has been...influential in the development of social and political criticism in Thailand...” (Darlington, 2012: 171). Sulak Sivaraksa, who was a disciple of Ajahn Buddhadasa, has become the biggest voice in engaged Buddhism over the past several decades. He criticized the monarchy and the effects of industrial capitalism in Thailand, and established the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (Sivaraksa, 2009).

While many scholars (King, 2009; Darlington, 2012; Queen, 1996) seek to outline or establish "...the place of engaged Buddhism within the history of Buddhist tradition as a whole" (Queen, 1996: 4), the approach of this study is more practice-led, and narrow. I will be exploring the subject of engaged Buddhism from the perspective of the Theravada tradition, and more specifically from the interpretations of Ajahn Buddhadasa, and his primary western disciple, Santikaro Bhikkhu, before seeking to test these ideas for myself. Engaged Buddhists of the Theravada tradition look for roots of social action in the meditation practices and core teachings of the early Buddhist scriptures found in the Pāli canon (Tipitaka). Ajahn Buddhadasa was a primary figure in applying these teachings to social engagement. In fact, Queen and Darlington both argue that "Buddhadasa may be regarded as the senior philosopher of engaged Buddhism" (Queen, 1996: 3; Darlington, 2012). In the following pages, I explore Buddhadasa's discussions on core Buddhist teachings, and their necessity in creating tangible social change. Like Buddhadasa, I believe these teachings are essential toward understanding a Buddhist approach to social change. However, I end up contesting that in my own exploration, my central questions are still unsatisfied, necessitating further practice and investigation in order to materialize a more concrete framework for a Buddhist social action, which I later term mindful activism.

While this study contributes to the larger conversation on engaged Buddhism, by the end of the research process I came to define the practices outlined in these pages as mindful activism. My choice to use this phrase developed during the research process due to a common theme I encountered in my interviews: a problem with labels such as

activism and engaged Buddhism. Activism carried the association with self-centered views and conflict, while attaching the adjective “engaged” to Buddhism implies that traditional forms of Buddhism are often disengaged.

Mindfulness has become a popular term in the west, but it has its origins as the seventh factor in the noble Eightfold Path: *samma sati*. The factors are not listed in order of development or importance, but rather work together to co-create a mind free of suffering. They are like eight strands of one single rope (Buddhadasa, 1986: Retreat Talk). Ajahn Sucitto, former abbot of Cittaviveka Forest Monastery in England, explains that “mindfulness has a referential quality; it connects present-moment experience to a frame of reference....body, feeling, mind-state and mental qualities in the ‘establishment of mindfulness’ discourses” (Sucitto, 2015). Throughout the Pāli scriptures, mindfulness is expressed as a reflexive attentiveness related to the faculty of memory.

Mindfulness is a mental faculty that attends simultaneously to the mind and its objects, the knowing and the known. It bends back on the co-creative processes of awareness to observe their activity in the context of right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*): conditionality. In practice this is a continuous reference to the co-arising and co-passing away of mental and physical conditions in order to observe firsthand what gives rise to harmful, unskillful actions and states of mind, and what gives rise to skillful, beneficial states of mind and actions. In my own application, I imaging the mental environment to be a garden and mindfulness to be that agent tending to it, cultivating what is useful and beneficial while removing causes that give rise to harm. This practice is central to social action from a Buddhist standpoint. By creating a term that includes a practice central to

the Buddhist way of life, mindfulness, I hope to clarify and emphasize the roots of social action in traditional Buddhist practice, the development of the noble Eightfold Path.

Roots of Social Action

In his essay, “Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness,” Santikaro Bhikkhu, Ajahn Buddhadasa’s disciple and translator, explains the primary Buddhist teachings Tan Ajahn expressed as the heart of Buddhism and, consequently, social action. For Ajahn Buddhadasa, helping others through social action was the natural expression of correct Buddhist practice. Buddhadasa did not see any reason to make a distinction between personal practice and social engagement because:

For Buddhadasa Bhikkhu there was no ultimate separation between the social and spiritual. They are two interpenetrating aspects of the one reality (Dhamma) according to the Law of Nature (Dhamma), that is, interdependency...The spiritual does not reject the body, society, economics, politics, or any other area of life but understands all the dimensions of life in a fundamental way, that is, in the context of Dhamma. Essentially, the spiritual is concerned with the central issue of life—the illusion of self and the voidness of self—that permeates all aspects of human life (Santikaro, 1996: 155).

Tan Ajahn believed that understanding these core Buddhist teachings on *suññata* (voidness/emptiness), *idappaccayatā* (this/that conditionality), and *paticcasamuppāda* (dependent origination) were imperative to solving the social and ecological problems he observed in his country because these interconnected teachings are the primary antidotes to selfishness. Together these teachings describe the selfless, interdependent activity of nature that gives rise to all life, including human life. In his survey study of engaged Buddhism, Queen agrees that “[t]he liberation that these leaders envision and

articulate...is consistently based on their own distinctive readings of traditional Buddhist doctrines, particularly those of selflessness, interdependence, the five precepts, the four noble truths, non-dualism, and emptiness" (Queen, 1996: 8). These teachings are what primarily distinguish a Buddhist activism from forms of activism that rely on attachment or identification with a particular sense of self or worldview. The development of a mind that is clear and responsive, without attachment to self, is a distinguishing mark of Buddhist practice and Buddhist activism as well. Therefore, they are important to understand if I am to show how Buddhism leads to social action.

Understanding anatta (non-self), emptiness (suññata), and interdependence has implications for how Buddhists ask a question as well. The Phagguna sutta offers a framework for how a question should be asked. In this sutta, the Buddha is asked about the cause of suffering: craving. The questioner asks the Buddha "who craves?" The Buddha replies:

Who now, Lord, is it who craves? Not a fit question...I am not saying [someone] craves. If I were saying so, the question would be a fit one. And I am not saying so, if you were to ask thus: 'Conditioned by what, lord, is craving?' this would be a fit question. And the fit answer there would be: 'Conditioned by feeling is craving.' (Davids, 1969: SN 12. 12)

This passage illuminates the Buddhist framework for understanding arisen phenomena, and how a question should be framed. The Buddha emphasized often that none of the five aggregates of identity (the khandas) could be classified as a self. The aggregation of body, feeling, perception, thoughts, and consciousness we sense at different moments as I, me, or mine, is merely a constellation of natural processes, like a thunderstorm, with which we identify through ignorance. It is important to note that the word self is a

translation of the Pāli term *atta* (*atman* in Sanskrit), which denotes an essential, unchanging sentient entity that is at the core of our experience. This is the definition of “self” the Buddha denies the existence of. The attachment to self—to this is me, this is mine, this is who I am—is considered a fundamental ignorance and leads to craving and suffering. The Pāli term *avijjā* (ignorance) denotes a lack of knowing things as they actually are. When we are children and see a shadow in the corner of our room, mistaking it for a threat, we feel fear, which is a form of craving. However, when the lights turn on, the shadow reveals itself to be a coat rack, and the fear is dissolved through right knowledge (*vijja*). The threat hasn’t left because it was never there. It is the same with the realization of non-self.

From the Buddhist perspective, the perception of a “self” is just like this shadow monster. “Self” is not a thing, but a feeling of identification with, or possession of, mental or physical objects. The question then to be asked through a Buddhist framework is never who, but what condition or conditions. This is the law of process, of this/that conditionality (*Idappaccayatā*). For Buddhadasa, uprooting this feeling of self was the core of Dhamma practice as well as becoming what he called a “peacemaker” (Buddhadasa, 1989: 205). The idea that Dhamma practice and social engagement could be viewed separately was absurd. He emphasized the understanding of *anatta* (non-self) as central to Buddhist practice and social engagement. For Buddhadasa, the sense of self, with its beliefs, views, possessions, needs and opinions, is the basis of selfishness, and the primary root cause of all the problems we see in the world (Buddhadasa, 1989: 196). This was so clear to him it made up the central focus of almost every talk he gave

publicly between 1986 and 1991. However, the understanding, realization, and most importantly, application of these teachings can be unclear.

In my own experiences with meditation and formal Buddhist practice over the years, especially in the process of this research, the truth and useful application of these teachings has become more apparent. But this took many years of regular practice and a dedication to investigating both the original texts and the processes of my own mind and behavior. It is not my intention in this study to persuade the reader to undertake this training, but instead to make a clear presentation of how I see the application of these teachings to my central questions. I will later utilize this understanding of emptiness and interdependency in order to illuminate the harmful effects of the dominant narrative in the West, the consumer narrative.

Understanding Dukkha, its Cause, and its Cessation

All the teachings discussed in the above section, as well as the framework for Buddhist practice and consequently a Buddhist activism, are contained within the Ariya Sacca (the four noble truths). The first noble truth is an acknowledgement, an acute awareness, of dukkha (suffering). For Ajahn Buddhadasa, this truth is the “existential” (Santikaro, 1996: 155) beginning of the path and impetus for social engagement as “the Buddha himself declares the purpose and scope of his teaching: ‘In the past, Bhikkhus, as well as now, I teach only dukkha and the utter quenching of dukkha’” (Santikaro, 1996: 157). Narrowly translating dukkha as suffering can be misleading. The Pāli term, dukkha, used by the Buddha, denotes any form of stress, disease, distress, discomfort, or

dissatisfaction, ranging from the grossest forms of despair, suffering and depression, to more subtle forms of restlessness, doubt, and even boredom. Dukkha is the fundamental inability to be satisfied for any length of time. Dukkha is that feeling of *something is not quite right; something is missing; something needs to be added or taken away*; it stems from the feeling of *this is me; this is mine; this is who I am*. It is something every human being experiences moment to moment. Dukkha is the absence, as well as the impermanence, of harmony or ease, and Ajahn Buddhadasa pointed out that, like physical pain in the body, the presence of dukkha brings our attention to a lack of harmony between the mind and the way things are:

Dukkha provides the existential test to all ideas and experiences. Is there dukkha? Then, something is not yet right (samma). If no dukkha can be found, then things are correct...In this way, spirituality is based in tangible experience rather than beliefs, theories, and concepts. Further, since we need not conceptualize it, dukkha and its quenching is a standard that escapes the confusion of dualities such as good and bad (Santikaro, 1996: 157).

By elevating this everyday feeling of dukkha to the level of a noble truth, the Buddha gave his followers an accessible experience, rather than an abstract philosophical concept, as the basis for entering the spiritual life. Rather than nobility being based on birth, it is gained through the full understanding of dukkha. Queen rightly points out that "...the most distinctive shift of thinking in socially engaged Buddhism is from a transmundane (lokuttara) to a mundane (lokiya) definition of liberation" (Queen, 1996: 11). This "shift in thinking" is not an invention or loose interpretation of leaders like Ajahn Buddhadasa, but rather part of the greater trend in Buddhism of going back to the original teachings (Queen, 1996; King, 2009). The experience of dukkha is immediate,

everyday, and universal. It is the overt symptom of underlying dis-ease in nature and in society. It is something we all have in common, and therefore, can radically affect how we interact with one another and respond to systemic social and ecological problems. Furthermore, it is a symptom that indicates an imbalance or disease in the conditions of the mental or physical environment. Understanding our own dukkha, and reflecting on its presence in others, is the basis for empathy and compassion. Buddhist teaching analyses conditions based on the systemic relationships between causes and effects. Therefore, developing an understanding of conditionality, and an acute awareness of dukkha, is the foundational relationship between Buddhism and social action.

The law of nature (conditionality) runs through all Buddhist teaching, especially within the four noble truths. Ajahn Buddhadasa always organized his teachings by the framework of the four noble truths, discussing a problem, its cause, and the extinction of the problem by the removal of its cause. This is classic Buddhist teaching applied to social issues. He emphasized the need to understand the second and third noble truth, attachment and the quenching or ending of attachment, as the next step toward creating peace in our societies:

the quenching of dukkha only occurs when attachment is quenched. Thus the path is one of non-attachment, of letting go....Is non-attachment just an idea, just a theory? Not for Ajahn Buddhadasa. If we approach it as such, it may not help us very much or may even make us suffer more. But if we see that non-attachment is a natural consequence of the way things are (the Law of Nature), then there will be more to it than just an idea. Here we must come to terms with and personally experience the fact of selflessness (anatta) or voidness (suññata) (Santikaro, 1996: 158).

The application of non-attachment is visible in meditation practice. When practicing Buddhist meditation, we take on the attitude of viveka (non-attachment, non-identification, withdrawal) in order to see things as they are: natural processes, mental and physical, arising and passing away according to the law of nature. We sit experiencing the arising and passing away of sensations of the body, the sounds in the environment, the seeing, tasting, scenting, as well as the feelings, perceptions, thoughts and images that rise and fall in the mind. The mental faculty of mindfulness observes the relationships between mental habits and the arising of suffering. We view all these equally as the arising and passing away of phenomena, applying sati (mindfulness or reflexive attentiveness) to interrupt the usual reaction of upādāna (clinging, attachment, storying, or identification), discarding harmful habits while cultivating harmless, peaceful qualities. As the process of mindfulness is developed, it becomes very clear that everything, all mental and physical phenomena, external and internal, are part of an impersonal process, belonging to nature. For Ajahn Buddhadasa, this right understanding (sammāditṭhi), is essential for peacemakers to realize.

The first teaching the Buddha gave, the *Dhammacakkappavattana* sutta, was an exposition on the four noble truths. What is often left out in discussing these essential teachings, is that he also included a duty, or task, with each truth. The first noble truth was to be *fully understood* and the second was to be *abandoned*. The abandoning of the second truth leads to the third task, the *realization* of the third truth, and finally the fourth is to be *developed*. I come back to this later in the study. What is important in terms of my central questions is understanding that dukkha was not simply a broad claim about

life, but rather a characteristic of experience that the Buddha suggested we turn toward in order to fully understand. The second truth reveals that the cause of dukkha itself is the habits of avoidance human beings develop throughout life. The second duty is to abandon these habits of avoidance called *tanha* (craving). Buddhadasa Bhikkhu saw these duties as *Dhammika* (in accord with *Dhamma*) and the most important aspect of Buddhist teaching relevant to social engagement.

Nature, Natural Law, and Duty

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu established the early version of Wat Suan Mokkh near the town he grew up in in southern Thailand. He focused his energy on reading the Pāli canon for himself while experimenting with the teachings, meditation, and even the effect of different foods on his body and mind (Santikaro, 1996: 153). Buddhadasa came out of this process with a strong emphasis that “Nature is *Dhamma*, *Dhamma* is Nature,” and outlined four meanings of *Dhamma* he found in the suttas:

Dhamma means Nature, which can be distinguished in four aspects: Nature itself (*sabhāvaDhamma*), the Law of Nature (*saccaDhamma*), the Duty of living things according to Natural Law (*patipattiDhamma*), and the results that follow from performing duty according to Natural Law (*pativedhaDhamma*). All four are known by the single word ‘*Dhamma*’ (Santikaro, 1996: 159).

Santikaro Bhikkhu elaborates:

Nature is the sum total of reality; there is no thing that is not Nature, not even the Absolute or Ultimate Reality, whatever we call ‘it.’ Everything is produced out of Nature by the law of Nature. Nature and humanity are not separate; human beings and all their creations are as much a part of Nature as are insects, trees, rivers, and stars. Thus, in Ajahn Buddhadasa’s understanding, we are not set against or above Nature but are only a part of Nature that must find and fulfill its natural role or duty (*Dhamma*) (Santikaro, 1996: 160).

According to Buddhadasa's understanding of Buddhadhamma, all the activity of the universe is Dhamma. The systems of interrelationships in ecosystems are Dhamma: the bees carrying out their duty to pollinate the flowers, the relationship between living organisms and nonliving elements in a watershed, the processes of fusion that creates heavier and heavier elements in the nuclei of stars. In a talk entitled, "Buddhism and Ecology," Tan Ajahn spoke of Buddhism as an evolutionist, as opposed to creationist, religion (Buddhadasa, 1991) "hold[ing] that the law of nature is the only source of all creation and evolution" (Sivaraksa, 1994). For Buddhists, cultivating the Eightfold Path unveils each individual's duty, which often manifests as social action. The "eco monks" of Thailand's environmental movement give evidence to this outcome:

A major aim of Buddhism is to relieve suffering, the root causes of which are greed, ignorance, and hatred. The monks see the destruction of the forests, pollution of the air and water, and other environmental problems as ultimately caused by people acting through these evils, motivated by economic gain and the material benefits of development, industrialization, and consumerism. As monks, they believe it is their duty to take action against these evils (Darlington, 1998: 2).

But if everything is nature, how do we know where to stand or what to stand against? Buddhadasa Bhikkhu pointed to "natures not yet altered by human greed, anger, and delusion" (Santikaro, 1996: 160) as ideal places of practice. But we can also use this point to make a distinction between what we consider a healthy environment—whether internally, within the body and mind, or externally—and an unhealthy environment. It comes back to seeing dukkha through the understanding of emptiness and interdependence, and looking for its causes of craving in the forms of greed, hatred and delusion. Though everything is nature, we can distinguish nature conditioned by the

defilements from nature not conditioned by the defilements. Ajahn Buddhadasa saw the rapid deforestation across Thailand as manifestations of greed, hatred and delusion. This understanding has broad applications for Buddhists inclined toward social or ecological engagement.

Paths of Action

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu believed it essential to study Buddhism through practice, application, and action: “The true Dhamma is not spread by word of mouth or through books; only the paths of action which aim at having the Dhamma appear in the heart can be communicated...” (Buddhadasa, 1989: 81). Buddhadasa’s claim is reflected by Darlington when she points out that “Buddhists have always addressed suffering as a philosophical, spiritual, and metaphysical state of being; socially engaged Buddhists add to this list social, political, and economic forms of suffering...targeting the social, political factors that affect people’s lives, especially those who have little or no power in society” (Darlington, 2012: 6). I find Darlington’s point here to be a somewhat false, but useful dichotomy. It would be incorrect to say that Buddhists have always addressed suffering as a philosophical or spiritual state. And furthermore, as demonstrated, Ajahn Buddhadasa would not separate the spiritual from the social or political. I would also resist the effort to establish a concrete distinction between so-called engaged Buddhism and Buddhism. Establishing such a definitive distinction runs the risk of dividing Buddhist sects and creating a critical western gaze overlooking the diverse practices of Buddhism. Throughout the research process I began to move away from the term

“engaged Buddhism,” in order to avoid separating Buddhists into categories of engaged and disengaged. Rather, I entered the conversation in the context of engaged Buddhism, but the research process lead me to create a new term, mindful activism, as new knowledge arose. I chose the term mindful activism in order to denote the relationship between Buddhism and social action.

While it is very useful to study these teachings, they mean nothing if not put into practice. Ajahn Chah, a major teacher of the Thai Forest Tradition, once compared a purely philosophical interest in Buddhism to taking home medicine from the doctor, picking up and reading the instructions every day without taking the medicine, then complaining and blaming the doctor when you continue to get sick and die (Chah, 2012). Furthermore, most of the teachings cannot be understood solely by the intellect, they have to be practiced through personal investigation and paths of action. Finally, the ultimate aim of Buddhism, to end suffering, would be impossible to accomplish if we simply formed new ideas to chew on out of the teachings.

Much of the analysis that follows emerged directly from meditation practice combined largely with investigation of, and reflection on, the early discourses of the Buddha, and the interviews with participants. I supplement and understand these teachings further through forest monks—reformers like Ajahn Buddhadasa and other major Thai Forest teachers. Academic and scholarly literature is included to a lesser degree in order to add nuance and critical perspective to the study. This literature is especially applied in the section analyzing the consumer narrative. However, my emphasis on practice and on teachers who practice is intentional because Buddhadhamma

is not a philosophy; it is a system of practices—skillful means designed to change one’s locus of experience from self-centered to self-less. This cannot be understood without regular practice. Approaching Buddhism as a philosophy is like reading or writing books on swimming or martial arts without ever undertaking the practices and conditioning exercises themselves, still expecting to understand the skill and develop its results.

The following analysis is explicitly rooted in the insights that have emerged from my own practice, while weighing them against the words of practice-oriented Dhamma teachers largely, and academics to a lesser degree. This is not to lessen the contribution of academics, but to keep this research rooted in Buddhist teaching and practice.

Furthermore, this practice-led approach makes the research relatable to an audience who is seeking a path of practice that stays true to the original teachings of the Buddha while actively responding to the modern conditions of suffering we encounter each day.

A BUDDHIST DECONSTRUCTION OF THE CONSUMER NARRATIVE

This section focuses on an investigation into the causes and conditions of social and ecological dukkha. In my interviews, one of the major themes to emerge was developing a mind that is able to clearly recognize suffering, and respond appropriately and selflessly. Before outlining the paths of action based on the findings from my interviews, the first task is to identify the specific problem eliciting a response, and the causes and conditions that form the origin of the problem. In this section I apply the Buddha's four noble truths to begin to address *how Buddhism leads to social action*. More specifically, this section first seeks to understand *the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action*. It is largely focused on identifying the problem and its origin, which I define as the consumer narrative. In this study I am seeking to find how the consumer narrative relates to Buddhist social action. I find that the beliefs and values of the consumer narrative are the very impetus for Buddhist social action.

During the course of this study I was committed to right practice: keeping the precepts, meditating three times a day, keeping continuous mindfulness and studying the teachings. The problems discussed in the following pages became very clear to me. Furthermore, they were a common theme across all my interviews. This is likely due to the application of the first task the Buddha assigned his followers: to fully understand suffering as well as its causes and conditions in order to elicit a clear, effective response. In the Buddha's first teaching, he introduced the four noble truths containing a task or

duty. For the first noble truth he instructed, “...this, Bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering...this noble truth is to be *fully understood*...this noble truth has been fully understood...” (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995: SN 56.11). The first task of the first noble truth is to recognize the problem of suffering, then to fully understand it, and finally to recognize that the problem has been fully understood. By the end of this section, I hope to apply this first task to the problems forming the impetus and rationale for this study. Secondly, I will seek to apply the second noble truth: “this, Bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering...this noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be *abandoned*...this...has been abandoned” (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995: SN 56.11). I identify the origin related to Buddhist social action as the consumer narrative, which I define as a storyline intended to condition a sense of self characterized by isolation, confusion, fear, anger and chronic dissatisfaction, in order to perpetuate consumption. This concept of the consumer narrative developed during my stay at Wat Suan Mokkh, in the months that followed, and throughout this research process, and emerges from the conceptual framework of this study.

Conceptual Framework: The World and the Dhamma

To understand the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action, it is important to acquire a familiarity with the Buddhist understanding of reality. The flow, framework, and methodology of this study follows the teaching on the four noble truths. These truths are broadly applicable and contain much of the core understanding that informs Buddhist thought and action. I chose to utilize these teachings

as an academic framework and methodology in order to immerse myself in the perspective of the subject of this study while also *experiencing* how Buddhism leads to social action. The following pages contain an elucidation on two important concepts—Dependent Origination and Dhamma language—that will be used in in order to understand how narrative is formed and informs our behavior. This framework is then used a lens of analysis for the consumer narrative. By the end of this section the reader will gain clarity on how Buddhist social action begins with the establishment of right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*)—understanding the systemic relationships between causes and conditions.

Dependent Origination

Dhamma, the four noble truths, and dependent origination, are expressions of the same natural truth. Dhamma is all encompassing. The four noble truths offer greater detail, and dependent origination offers even greater detail. These three make up the foundation of the Buddha’s teaching and are seen as equivalent to one another. This is made clear in the *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta* (the Greater Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint). Sariputta, the Buddha’s chief disciple, addresses the assembly of monks with an elaboration on the four noble truths in order to establish right view in them. Near the end of the discourse he says to the monks: “Now this has been said by the Blessed One: ‘One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination’ And these five aggregates affected by clinging are dependently arisen” (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995: MN 28). The understanding that the aggregates of life arise according to the law of conditionality, as opposed to the view that they are me or

mine, made or created, is the heart of the Buddhist view of reality, and right view is the essential to all Buddhist pursuits. Bhikkhu Bodhi expresses the importance of right view:

Views govern our attitudes, our actions, our whole orientation to existence...they structure our perceptions, order our values, crystallize into the ideational framework through which we interpret to ourselves the meaning of our being in the world...views then condition action. [The Buddha said] there is no single factor so responsible for the suffering of living beings as wrong view, and no factor so potent in promoting the good of living beings as right view (Bodhi, 1998).

This understanding is the foundation for Buddhist social action; it illuminates the relationship between our views, actions, and the conditions of society. The teaching that makes up the foundation of the Buddhist view of reality is dependent origination (paticcasamuppāda), which describes the arising and ceasing of conditions:

Buddhist thought offers...reality as a dynamic interaction of mutually conditioning events...this causal vision, known as paticcasamuppāda...underlies the Buddhist perception of the human predicament and of the liberation that is possible...It represents that character of reality, that truth about the universe, to which Gautama awoke...A genuine understanding of mutual causality involves transcendence of conventional dichotomies between self and world, a transformation of the way experience is processed...[it] is not a theory...so much as a truth one is invited to experience...by virtue of disciplined introspection and radical attentiveness to the arising and passing away of mental and physical phenomena (Macy, 1991: 18-19).

Mutual causality, as Joanna Macy calls it, describes the process of conditioning that takes place in the mind. This process takes place at each of the six sense doors (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and intellect) and is elaborated in many different ways throughout the Tipitaka. Paticcasamuppāda shows that phenomena arise dependent on causes and conditions. Nothing exists in and of itself, independent of everything else. The entire cosmos is part of an interdependent system of processes driven by the natural law of

Idappaccayatā (conditionality). It is a complex teaching that I will be coming back to and elaborating on throughout this study.

Dhamma Language

During most of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s talks, he would take time to explain his understanding of Buddhadhamma by discussing the difference between what he called “everyday language and Dhamma Language” (Buddhadasa, 1989: 158). Everyday language is the conventional; it is the meanings we typically share when we speak in a culture or society. On the other hand, “Dhamma language is the language spoken by people who have gained deep insight into the truth, Dhamma. Having perceived the Dhamma they speak in terms appropriate to their experience” (Buddhadasa, 1989: 126). A word in conventional understanding usually refers to some shared experience. However, Dhamma language may use the same word to refer to an experience outside our everyday understanding. Ajahn Buddhadasa spoke of this distinction especially when discussing the teaching of paticcasamuppāda, or when using words like “birth” and “death” or “the world.” If we apply our conventional understanding of these words to Buddhist cosmology and the doctrine of rebirth or dependent origination, then we understand that beings transmigrate from life to life, being reborn indefinitely into different realms of existence. But Buddhadasa saw this teaching differently.

Ajahn Buddhadasa took the terms birth and death as referring to the self, and the world as the fabrication constructed at each of the sense doors, which makes up our reality. In this understanding, human beings are reborn constantly throughout the day at the arising and passing away of a desire and the attainment of a desire, as well as between

mental states. Dhamma language tends to survive beyond historical, temporal, and cultural context. The Buddha himself said, "Citta, these are the world's designations, the world's expressions, the world's ways of speaking, the world's descriptions, with which the Tathagata expresses himself but without grasping to them" (Thanissaro, 2013b: DN 9). Through the understanding of Dhamma language, we can see that when the Buddha uses the term "world," he's referring to the experience of phenomena as they arise at each of the sense doors. Buddhadasa spoke of this distinction his entire life, discussing words like Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, religion, brahmacharya, work (Buddhadasa 1989: 129-140) and many other key terms in Buddhism as well as other religions and everyday life. This distinction is important to remember in analyzing the consumer narrative, as I will apply it to the formation of the consumer self. For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to understand his point that language is symbolic and contingent upon the context within which it is used.

This understanding is demonstrated by the cognitive linguist and philosopher, George Lakoff, when he states that "...our indirect understanding involves understanding one kind of entity or experience in terms of another kind—that is, understanding via metaphor" (1980: 178). In order to understand the true meaning of words and what they signify, especially within religions texts, we have to look closely and from the perspective of practice, to get beyond metaphor, or at the very least, to understand clearly what the metaphor signifies. Buddhadasa's distinction between worldly language and Dhamma language can be understood as a distinction between metaphor and an experience or reality that has no reality in language because language itself is

representational. The important metaphor to understand in the following pages is the Buddha's use of "world."

In the following excerpt, it is apparent that the Buddhist view of the world can be characterized as constructivist:

Friend, that there is a world's end where one neither is born nor ages nor dies nor passes away nor reappears which is to be known or reached or seen by traveling there—that I do not say. Yet I do not say that there is an end to suffering without reaching the world's end. Rather it is in this fathom-long carcass with its perceptions and its mind that I describe the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world (Ñāṇamoli, 2001: SN 2.36, AN 4.46).

In this passage, the Buddha describes "the world" in the formulation of the four noble truths. He describes the world as a construct dependent on the physical sense organs combined with the mental faculties of feeling, perception, thinking and consciousness. The world is not external to experience nor is it internal because the two co-arise dependent on one another. This view of reality is directly apparent when meditation is developed regularly. To help the reader clarify this understanding, I include here a reflection on my own experience of this reality in the following nonfiction narrative. I wrote this following my stay at Wat Suan Mokkh.

Silent Mind (excerpt)

As I sat now for the evening meditation, I made a determination to follow the instructions the monk had been giving. The first tetrad of Anapanasati (Mindfulness with Breathing) has the body aggregate as its focus.

I spent a few minutes settling into a strong and comfortable posture, placing my legs in half lotus to open the hips, straighten the spine, and lower the knees to the ground, with my hands settled one over the other in my lap, thumbs gently touching. I watched the sensations in my body, the sounds, thoughts, feelings, and images in my mind, all rise and fall, treating all phenomena with equal disinterested awareness. A mosquito wined by my ear and landed lightly on

my neck and I decided to allow it to feed instead of reacting. Its hypodermic mouth slid into a pore for a few minutes. I observed the sensation of its tiny needle and legs become hot, then turn to itching. The itching soon turned to a cool tingling, then relief as my body let go. A pulse of pleasure formed as the mosquito gently droned away.

This relinquishment of possessing the body changed the meditation. As the body relaxed I directed my attention to settle on the breath, rising and falling, utilizing counting to deepen the breath and focus the mind's attention. I remembered the monk's words, "The mind will begin to take interest in the breath, then you'll feel the mind incline towards concentration." The hall was silent, except for the cricket's cadence and the chorus of breathing. Soon, my body became relaxed, then started to fade until it felt like I had no body, only the sensation of breathing, sounds, some thoughts and feelings, arose in my mind. A pleasant feeling arose in me, but I stayed with the breath and my mind seemed to notice this subtle breath for the first time. As my mind became interested, the breath sensation changed suddenly. It became simultaneously subtle and apparent, moving like a whirlpool and flickering audibly at the opening of my nostrils. At this crux, my "mind" seemed to detach from its objects like a helmet being removed. It then collapsed and absorbed, like matter into a black hole, into this whirlpool breath. Thoughts dissolved, then sound, and finally there was perfect silence, except my own breath. For a time, I was in this state with only the feeling of self and breath, feeling light and pleasant in a featureless darkness without fear. Then, the "I feeling" collapsed into the breath and there was only awareness, followed immediately by an ineffable sensation of perfect peace. No thoughts, no sounds, no sensations of body or senses. I simply vanished.

The sensation of peace did not seem to arise from the body. It was more of an absence, a relief, like something heavy had evaporated. I don't know how long I stayed in this state, but when the meditation bell rang, I could hear it, but there was still no sensation of body. I could've sat in this perfect peace all night. As thinking resumed, I began trying to will myself back, remembering it was night and I had to return to my room before I was locked outside. I started to feel my hands first, then legs and back so I started to wobble until I could feel my breath and open my eyes. By the time I could stand up the group of meditators was gone and I walked alone through the darkness, giant ants biting at my bare feet, back to my cell.

Before this experience I would have said bliss, happiness or joy was the ultimate human experience other than love, but after I can affirm that they don't compare to the absolute freedom of silence and stillness, of perfect peace.

The following day I walked slowly to the hot springs after the afternoon sitting meditation was over. The water was hot and deep green, like a pool of boiling chlorophyll. My gaze settled on the water's surface and I unintentionally fell into a state of deep absorption. As I observed the water's surface, it began to

rain and I noticed a detail in nature that had never before stood out. For a momentary flash after each drop of rain impacted the water's surface, tiny bubbles would form and burst repeatedly. Some would remain gliding for a moment, but most would disappear almost as soon as they had formed. Suddenly the monk's words rang through my mind,

"At each moment of sense contact, the mind simply appears and disappears at incredible speeds."

In a flash my mind saw a reflection of its own nature, and I understood completely the meaning of those words. I saw the impermanent conditionality of the feeling of me. I knew then that in addition to the meditation, the silence was the most important practice. My sense of self, it seemed, was merely a constellation of mental and physical activity,--a composition of habitual thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, held together by memory and maintained by an internal and external narrative repeated to myself and others. That concoction was falling apart. I saw that this internal narrative was what maintained my sense of self. It repeated on auto pilot. But in the silence, it was dissolving (Silent Mind, Personal Narrative).

The experiences recorded in this nonfiction narrative were written prior to any formal exposure to Buddhist teaching or the writings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. They arose from both the physical setting and structure of Wat Suan Mokkh and the meditation practices taught there. It has since become my understanding that what I experienced at Wat Suan Mokkh, what I had referred to as a dissolution of my internal narrative, was a temporary experience of what the Buddha called the "cessation of the world." It is important to understand this framework for this study because when researchers make a distinction between Buddhism and engaged Buddhism, it expresses a misunderstanding of the Buddhist view of reality—much of Buddhist engagement is right here, at this immediate arising and ceasing of this co-constructed world. This understanding illustrates the importance of investigating our cultural narrative and its relationship to environmental degradation and social suffering. For an activism to be characterized as

Buddhist, it is imperative to begin right here, at the origin of the world, within this “fathom-long carcass with its perceptions and its mind,” to understand the root causes of social and ecological distress, destruction and suffering. As Buddhadasa pointed out “...if we protect the inner nature, the outer nature will be taken care of by itself. If there is mental and spiritual correctness, physical things will naturally be correct by themselves. The outer correctness in return has a beneficial effect on the mind” (1991).

Realizing the relational causality, or interdependency, of the internal environment of the mind with the external environments of nature and society, is essential to understanding a Buddhist activism. Through this lens we can see the world we share as a co-created habitat of mind, which can be cultivated towards suffering or peace, depending on the causes and conditions of our shared cultural narratives and the actions they elicit. I apply this framework as a lens of analysis in the following section in order to deconstruct the root problems that form the impetus for Buddhist social action, the consumer narrative

Following the insight into the narrative conditioning of my own mind, I spontaneously began to reflect on the relationship between the linguistic processes of the mind, the formulation and representation of self, and how my habits, my personality, my values and beliefs, often manifest as a self whose duty is to consume. After Wat Suan Mokkh, the effects of continuous practice continued to generate peace and compassion throughout my daily life and work, but the question that remained in my mind was an extension of the insight into my own personal narratives: what is our cultural narrative in the U.S.? And how does it affect our sense of self, the world, and condition our actions?

It became clear that no story was as pervasive in U.S. culture as this consumer narrative. This narrative emerged from our history that evolved alongside the industrial revolution. The conditions created by industrial capitalism, as it has spread across the world, has gained the attention of Buddhist monastics and lay practitioners because it is obvious to them what should be made clear to all of us, that the consumer narrative conditions society in a way that creates a simultaneous proliferation of human suffering and environmental degradation.

A Storyline that Supports Capitalism

The role of narrative, or story, is important to understand within the framework of core Buddhist teaching because it forms the foundation of how my interview participants illustrate the problems and solutions that give impetus and structure to Buddhist social action. This becomes clearer in the following section when the topic of consumerism comes up in my interviews. It is due to the way in which this story, the consumer narrative, represents the self, the world, and our purpose in society. The Buddhist understanding of “world” is reflected by educational researcher, Margarete J. Somerville (2007). She explains how broad cultural narratives become concrete storylines that guide our view of, and behavior towards, the world:

A storyline is a condensed version of a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative...Dominant storylines of place ‘deny our connection to earthly phenomena... [and] construct places as objects or sites on a map to be economically exploited’ (Gruenewald, 2003: 624). Deconstructing such storylines is therefore part of the process of decolonization...through which we can analyze ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (Somerville, 2007: 336).

Somerville’s analysis here reflects the Buddhist view that things, people, places, don’t exist independently as value-laden, or identifiable, objects in and of themselves, but rather are mental objects—natural processes objectified by the mind. The Pāli term *papañca*, often translated as conceptual proliferation (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995) or objectification (Thanissaro, 2013b) refers to this mental function. Elements and properties are formed into apparent objects or concepts in the mind. The consumer narrative is a storyline constructed to support capitalism. The effects of this narrative underlie the conditions eliciting a Buddhist social action.

One of the most important mental objects addressed in Buddhist teaching is the sense of self. Buddhist teaching describes the self as an illusory sensation added to the five aggregates (*khandas*) of physical form (*rūpa-khanda*), feeling (*vedanā-khanda*), perception (*sañña-khanda*), mental formations such as thoughts and images (*saṅkhāra-khanda*), and sensory consciousness (*viññāṇa-khanda*). The knowledge that the sense of self is constructed has gradually increased in western psychology as well. However, contrary to Buddhism, this knowledge has not been used as a factor for awakening, but rather to aid in the selling of products. In a collection called *Self Identity and Consumer Behavior*, curator, Jennifer Escalas, pointed out that,

“Consumer researchers have recognized for a long time that people consume in ways that are consistent with their sense of self (Levy 1959; Sirgy 1982). Important thought leaders in our field have described and documented that consumers use possessions and brands to create their self-identities and communicate these selves to others and to themselves (e.g., Belk 1988; Fournier 1998; McCracken 1989)...recent research takes a more granular approach, breaking down the relationship between identity concerns and consumption to

look at the effects of specific self-related goals and of different aspects of self-identity on consumer behavior” (Escalas, 2012: 1).

Escalas makes it clear that consumer researchers have utilized the knowledge of self-identity formation as a means of marketing products in order to drive consumption. For consumer researchers like Escalas, marketing is not something done with harmful intent, it is simply an essential aspect of a functioning consumer society. However, it is necessary also for those of us who live within this narrative to understand its causes and consequences because stories are the way we make sense of the world. The way in which we place ourselves in relation to the world. Scholar, author, and Zen priest, David Loy argues that,

“[t]he discipline of economics is less a science than the theology of that religion, and its god, the Market, [which] has become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation...the Market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as 'secular' (Loy 1997, 275).

Loy’s use of the term religion, as a metaphor, illuminates the power and pervasiveness that, what he calls, “The Religion of the Market” (1997) has become. Immersed in the waters of the dominant storytellers—media, movies, television, advertising, politicians—the consumer self is constructed and maintained in order to perpetuate a set of behavioral traits that serve the needs of a capitalist economic system rather than our basic human needs. The humanist psychologist, Abraham Maslow, described a hierarchy of human needs beginning with the most basic physiological needs through safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem, and self-actualization. Later humanistic psychologists would add the highest achievement of self-transcendence. Humanistic psychologists saw life as

a journey through this hierarchy of needs. Unfortunately, these revelations, like many theories in science and psychology, have been used less in the service of human happiness, but rather in the service of aiding the power of advertising.

Advertisers utilize the strategies of storytelling in order to attach identities to their products so that when we buy a product we buy our “selves.” Through the purchasing and use of products, we become the story created by advertisers. The problem with this is that instead of satisfying these needs, we give birth to a quickly fading sense of self, leading to a state of dissatisfaction. In response, we buy more, entrapped in a cycle of chronic dissatisfaction designed to perpetuate consumption. This consumer condition has two primary effects: personal suffering resulting from the state of chronic dissatisfaction, and environmental degradation resulting from the resources needed to feed the condition. When this condition becomes normalized, we have a culture of consumers.

Global Effects of the Consumer Narrative

These conditions are not isolated to western nations like the U.S. In his book, *From Greed to Wellbeing: A Buddhist Approach to Resolving Our Economic and Financial Crises*, Joel Magnison states that in the early 1990s,

American foreign policy leaders traveled the globe pressuring countries...to conform to American-style Neoliberalism: cutting government spending on social programs, lowering taxes, reducing government regulations on business activity, privatizing publicly owned business activity, and, most importantly, opening up their economies to global trade and financial investments (Magnison, 2017: 119).

Siamese Buddhist activist, Sulak Sivaraksa, who saw the changes brought about by industrial capitalism in his own country, asserts that “...globalization—which really should

be called free-market-fundamentalism—is a demonic religion imposing materialistic values on developing as well as industrialized nations, driving individuals to try to earn more to acquire more in a never-ending cycle of greed and insecurity” (Sivaraksa, 2009: 10). It becomes apparent that, though the names have changed, modern policies are a continuance of the colonial period, and that consumerism has replaced Christianization. Sulak’s causal analysis of this process in his own country make that clear, and is worth quoting at length:

For more than half a century, colonialism has been replaced by neo-colonialism. Countries that appear to be independent are, in fact, under so much economic pressure from the West, they are, as though, still colonized. Rural development policies by aid organizations concentrate on agribusiness, forcing peasants to depend on the marketplace for clothing, electricity, water, fuel, construction materials, fertilizers, pesticides, livestock, and agriculture tools...With their near total dependence on market forces, the underclasses are finding it difficult to purchase enough food to eat. They sell their produce at market prices; pay off their debts for fertilizer, pesticides...and often don’t have enough cash or produce for themselves...production costs increase more quickly than income and they go to moneylenders...plagued by mounting debts...millions flock to the cities to do heavy labor for low wages...Young girls work as servants or unskilled factory workers, or are forced into prostitution (Sivaraksa, 2009: 26-27).

Sulak’s analysis of this process highlights the causes and conditions giving rise to the social and ecological dukkha we see and feel. Additionally, any process enacted on the external environment is also enacted on the internal environment, and vice versa. The historical processes of industrialization, privatization, and commodification, necessary to the spread of consumer capitalism, can also be seen as processes enacted on the mind.

Scholar and Zen teacher, David Loy, defines industrialization as the process of reducing natural elements and organisms, including human beings, into resources and labor (Loy, 1997: 278). Relationships within a society, and between humans and

nonhumans within an environment then act out the ingrained narratives of “...the technical and economic presuppositions of mechanical, machine-like production...” (Loy, 1997: 279). Buddhist teaching reveals that nature, whether human or non-human, living or non-living processes, functions dependent on intricate relationships. However, consumer capitalism does not function on this awareness, but rather it depends on alienation and dispossession.

Loy explains the history of this process as “...disfiguration: the way that the world became converted into exchangeable market commodities...the natural world had to become commodified into land, life commodified into labor, and patrimony commodified into capital” (Loy, 1997: 281). He goes on to explain that “to separate labor from other activities of life and to subject it to the laws of the market was to annihilate all organic forms of existence and to replace them by...an atomistic and individualistic one...” (Loy, 1997: 282). This process of commodification continues forward despite the proliferation of social suffering (poverty, hunger, violence, addiction, and mental illness) and environmental consequences it causes because it operates on its own logic completely removed from the basic facts of nature: that we live in a universe of intimately interdependent relationships.

The dissolving of these relationships has disastrous consequences. This makes the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action very clear: the consumer value system, being the root cause of social and ecological suffering, forms the impetus for social action. In order to begin changing these harmful conditions, Buddhism

first seeks to establish a correct view of nature, and the ethics arising from this view.

These ethics then form the foundation for Buddhist social action.

Buddhist Social and Environmental Ethics

The four noble truths and dependent origination provide a clear lens for understanding the relationship between our shared cultural narratives and social or ecological problems. The law of interdependency is a truth that opposes the individualistic selfishness we find in the consumer narrative. At the core of this teaching is relationships. Dependent origination reveals that all things arise in relationship, dependent on other things, from the processes that make up human experience (seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking) to every other process in nature. It is the revelation that everything in nature exists in relationship to other processes within its environment. During a talk on “Buddhism and Conservation,” Buddhadasa Bhikkhu explained the teaching of dependent origination in this way:

The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise . . . then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish (1990).

From the perspective of Dhamma, there is no such thing as an isolated individual. Each of us is formed dependent on causes and conditions, containing the elements and processes of our environments and communities within us. This has very important implications in our modern age. Understanding this relational perspective is necessary if we are to maintain our humanity and resist the displacement, alienation, and

mechanization of our consumer culture. The measure of a good cultural narrative should be how well it illuminates, creates, and maintains the relationships necessary to life.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu emphasized in his lectures that a true understanding of the word Dhamma was essential for creating harmony in our social and ecological systems. Earlier I discussed that Ajahn Buddhadasa interpreted the four meanings of Dhamma as 1) nature, 2) natural law, 3) our duty in accord with natural law, and 4) the fruits of life in accord with this law. This nuanced understanding of Dhamma generates the correct view and impetus for social or ecological action.

In his public talks, Buddhadasa spoke of duty as the highest interpretation of the word Dhamma (1988). All four meanings of Dhamma refer to one unified truth. Dhamma is the self-organizing activity of the universe. Dhamma is the processes of nature that are the subject of study for biologists, ecologists, physicists, and other scientists, as well as the subject of inquiry to mystics and poets. Dhamma is Nature; Nature is Dhamma. Our confusion lies in drawing lines where they do not exist. Everywhere we look in nature this self-organizing activity is present. It is what grows the flowers, guides the bees, beats our hearts and circulates our blood. For Buddhadasa, it is our human duty (Dhamma) to develop right view and deconstruct the conditioned stories that make us live out of harmony with the laws of nature (Dhamma). And it is through the Buddha's teachings (Dhamma), for Buddhists, that we can experience that truth (Dhamma). Fortunately, Dhamma is not something exclusive to Buddhism. It is only a word. Buddhism, too, is only a word. In fact, according to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, there was no Buddhism during the time of the Buddha. The Buddha instead referred to the practice he taught as

brahmacharya (the sublime way of life) (Buddhadasa, 1989). Modern society needs a new sublime way of life, whether Buddhist or not, that establishes our relationships to each other and to the non-human communities of our local environments. Ways of life that lead to actual peace and happiness, rather than a mechanized condition of chasing after products to alleviate our sense of isolation and insecurity, confusion, and chronic dissatisfaction.

We need narratives that foreground the inherent value of non-human nature. Stories and ways of life that establish ecological relationships are necessary to modern society, where most of our problems are traceable to either dissolved necessary relationships or attachments to harmful relationships. Society is composed of competing narratives, each creating opposing effects. The consumer narrative that perpetuates industrial capitalism paints a story of a universe that is dead, mechanical, predetermined and predictable. This storyline tells us that we are disconnected, our actions and decisions affect only ourselves. It tells us that we are apart from the rest of nature and each other, and that happiness is the ceaseless pursuit of products to satisfy an ever-changing list of desires. The consumer narrative tells us that this ceaseless pursuit is our duty in order to keep the economy strong, and to ignore the social and environmental effects all around us.

Analyzing the consumer narrative through a Buddhist lens clarifies the problems we face and their causes. The ethics emerging from the right understanding of Dhamma offer a way of life that is immediately harmless, and potentially leads to beneficial social action. Having made the problem and its causes clearer, the question of how to respond is

still left. Where do I begin and how do I connect it with my practice? In order to answer these questions, I sought the guidance of Theravada Buddhists who have already figured this out. Most the participants I spoke with were influenced in some way by Ajahn Buddhadasa and are actively involved in some form of social action.

The section that follows outlines the methodology and methods of this study. The ultimate goal of this study is to satisfy the “how?” and “what to do?” of engaged Buddhism, and, through the research process, to build relationships with accessible members of my community. My hope is that by the end of the research and writing process, I, as well as the reader, will have moved closer to the knowledge of our respective roles in developing more peaceful and stable societies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

The methodology utilized throughout this research is constructivist grounded theory. My own positionality as a Buddhist, having grown up in a mostly white, middle-class neighborhood, steeped in the consumer narrative, greatly influences the rationale and approach to this research. Grounded theory is used when the “researcher’s intent is to make sense of, or interpret, the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory, inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2003: 9). Grounded theory aides the researcher in understanding that the results of the investigation give rise, not to objective truth, but rather a story shaped by the relationship between the researcher and the research participants (Charmaz, 2005). The entirety of this study is itself a story co-created between myself, the participants, and progression of the research process, including the meditation retreats and daily practices I undertook as part of the research. This understanding fits grounded theory well within the Buddhist framework (paticcasamuppāda) utilized throughout this study. For Buddhists, the existential quality that guides practice and, consequently, forms the aim of social action is dukkha.

At the experiential level, dukkha is the feeling of *something is not quite right, something is missing, something needs to be added or taken away*. It is like an alarm. For me, growing up in a consumer culture, I found that the dukkha I felt was pointing me

towards something fundamentally wrong with the value system of my society. With a grounded theory methodology, I started my research as a response to this dukkha and the initial insight into its deeper causes and conditions during my stay at Wat Suan Mokkh. I started with a set of ideas that may be contradicted in the research process. Instead of clinging to my preconceived ideas or expectations, and seeking out evidence that proves it, I have allowed the research to move in an inductive process, changing my ideas and building theory accordingly along the way (Creswell, 2003). The constructivist part of my methodology informed me further that there are no a priori “facts” out there for me to gather in my research, but rather that my positionality and the research process itself helped to co-create the meanings along with the research participants I am interviewing.

Methods

Magga-Bhāvana (Development of the Path) as Practice-led Research

Though the experiences, insights, and questions that have led to this research stem back to my childhood and adolescence, the research included in this study began with the retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh in southern Thailand. The concepts (narrative construction of self and reality; the consumer narrative) I emerged with exist in many academic disciplines as well as within Buddhism; the fact that I came to them through meditation practice before any reading gives credence and credibility to a practice-led research method. Cultural theorist, Jennifer Webb, points out that “[r]esearch in the sciences, social sciences and humanities still typically relies on a particular model of knowledge that expects answers to...what can be seen?; what can be demonstrated?; what can be

argued? [u]tilising conventional paradigms (Webb, 2008: 2). The academic tendency to produce fixed knowledge is very different from Dhamma practice, which aims at uprooting the underlying tendency towards developing fixed views and instead cultivates a fluid, clear knowing that adapts and changes in order to know changing conditions as they arise and pass away. This is similar to “practice-led research, which tends to be less systematic, less easily reduced to an interpretive framework, less likely to offer its findings in a transparent mode and less susceptible to rational argument” (Webb, 2008: 3). Webb makes this argument in terms of applying practice-led research to knowledge produced in the creative arts, specifically creative writing. Though this study is largely written in academic prose, it is the creative product of the research experience. The subjective data developed through my own practice, combined with analysis of texts and interview data, come together in a fluid process.

In addition to interpretation of texts and interview data, the product of this research came from magga-bhāvana (development of the path). The insights emerging from that practice during the research process inform much of the content of this study. Furthermore, developing the factors of the Eightfold Path helped me to understand how Buddhist practice leads to social action. I practiced the way of life that is both the subject and method of this study. Ajahn Dtun, a major teacher monk of the Thai Forest Tradition, calls the Eightfold Path the “sacred equation” (2014). This equation is the path groups of sila (virtue), samadhi (concentration), and panna (wisdom), all of which need to be developed in order to gain any benefit from, or understanding of, Buddhadhamma.

For the duration of this study, I developed sila by undertaking the five moral precepts/trainings. I formally undertook these precepts during my stay at Abhayagiri Forest Monastery in Redwood Valley, California. The abbot, Ajahn Pasanno, was both an interviewee and thesis reader. To develop samadhi, I practiced formal sitting and walking meditation for 2 hours in the morning, 1 hour in the afternoon, and 2 hours in the evening. Finally, to develop panna, I continuously studied the fundamental teachings of Dhamma: the four noble truths, dependent origination, impermanence, suffering, and non-self. In other words, I genuinely immersed myself in the subject of which I am studying in order to offer an insider's perspective. This does not make my findings absolute or value free. Rather, it brings Buddhist practice into an academic study.

Semi-structured Interviews

I sought to interview individuals who were Buddhist and who were also engaged in some form of social or ecological activism. Participants were sought through snowball sampling and included Buddhists all over the United States, including male and female monastics, laymen and laywomen, as well as a Buddhist monk who had formerly been a Baptist pastor. I chose to limit my research participants to individuals whose engagement was informed by Theravada Buddhism, Ajahn Buddhadasa, or the Thai Forest Tradition in order to narrow my focus and avoid a proliferation of concepts.

My goal was to explore how the teachings and practices of early Buddhism manifest in a practice that emphasizes a broader social or ecological engagement. For this reason, I narrowed the interviews included in this study to participants whose practice and engagement expressed a grounding in early Buddhist teaching. I followed a

prewritten list of interview questions (see Appendix A). However, I only adhered loosely to these questions, allowing the conversations to evolve organically, centering on the overall theme of formulating a Buddhist response to social and ecological suffering, while positioning myself as a practitioner with the desire to learn from the experiences and insights of my research participants.

The participants whom I had the privilege of speaking with were all at the place in their life where I am hoping to be. They seem to know their particular inclinations and aptitudes toward social action for the benefit of others. I found the process of conducting these interviews to be humbling, insightful, and inspiring. I am grateful for the guidance and clarity this process gave me.

Research Participants

Ajahn Pasanno: Originally from Canada, Ajahn Pasanno is the most senior western disciple of Ajahn Chah (a major teacher of the Thai Forest Tradition) in the United States. He has been a fully ordained monk in the Theravada tradition for over forty years, since 1974. Ajahn Pasanno is well respected in Thailand for his contributions and selfless service. He was recently awarded a rare designation of Chao Kune, which is even rarer for Western monks. Before coming to the U.S., Ajahn Pasanno was abbot of the Wat Pah Nanachat forest monastery. There he was involved in rural development projects as well as forest conservation. Currently he is Abbot of Abhayagiri Forest Monastery, established twenty years ago, in Redwood Valley, Ca. Despite his busy

schedule as abbot, Ajahn Pasanno kindly offered his time as interviewee during my stay at Abhayagiri Forest Monastery and later dedicated more time as a thesis reader.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Bhikkhu Bodhi is the foremost translator and teacher of the Pāli canon (Tipitaka) into English. He became a fully ordained monk in the Theravada tradition over forty years ago in 1973, in Sri Lanka. Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote an essay titled, “A Challenge to Buddhists,” (2007) that led to the creation of Buddhist Global Relief. This organization addresses global problems of hunger, education of women and girls, and food security by supporting local organizations (Bodhi, 2007). Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translations of the Pāli suttas form a foundation of this study and he kindly offered his time as an interviewee.

Pannavati Bhikkhuni: Venerable Pannavati Bhikkhuni is “a former Christian pastor” and “a black, female Buddhist monk ordained in the Theravada and Chan traditions” (Pannavati, 2017). In addition to her work as a Dhamma teacher, she “advocates on behalf of disempowered women and youth globally..., she has adopted many ‘untouchable’ villages in India...ordained the first Tamili Bhikkhuni...is a recipient of the Outstanding Buddhist Women’s Award; received a special commendation from the Princess of Thailand for Humanitarian Acts as she assisted Venerable Dr. Lee in guiding the first 50 Thai Bhikkhunis ordained on Thai soil with Thai monks witnessing and...remains committed to advocacy for social justice, the homeless, sick and disenfranchised, those who are marginalized, abused, neglected and unloved. She lives

the Dhamma” (2017). In addition to all this, Ven. Pannavati Bhikkhuni was kind enough to offer her time as interviewee for this study.

Santikaro Upasaka: Santikaro ordained as a Bhikkhu (fully ordained Theravada monk) in 1985 after his service in the Peace Corps in Thailand. There he “served as Ajahn Buddhadasa's primary English translator for many years” (Santikaro, 2017) before returning to the U.S. sometime after Ajahn Buddhadasa’s death. He has since established Liberation Park and has continued to serve as a major actor and voice in engaged Buddhism. Santikaro’s translations of Buddhadasa’s talks and writings provide a major role in this study. He was kind enough to offer his time as both an interviewee and later as a thesis reader.

Thanissara Upasika: Originally from London, Thanissara first began Buddhist practice in “the Burmese school in 1975” before she met Ajahn Chah, of the Thai Forest Tradition, and spent “12 years as a Buddhist nun.” She “has facilitated meditation retreats since 1989...and her latest [book] is 'Time to Stand Up: An Engaged Buddhist Manifesto for Our Earth'” (Kitissaro, 2016). She was kind enough to offer her time as an interviewee in this study.

Kevin Griffin: Kevin Griffin is “a longtime Buddhist practitioner and 12 Step participant, he is a leader in the mindful recovery movement and one of the founders of the Buddhist Recovery Network” (Griffin, 2017) His unique application of Buddhadhamma combines core teachings with the 12 step program in order to help those

in recovery. He “teaches internationally in Buddhist centers, treatment centers, professional conferences...” (Griffin, 2017). I met Kevin during my stay at Abhayagiri Forest Monastery, where he was kind enough to offer his time as an interviewee for this study.

The participants I have chosen to include in this study represent the diversity and undefinable characteristic of engaged Buddhism. Not one of these participants considered themselves engaged Buddhists or activists. Instead, they were simply individuals whose practice led them to help others in ways unique to their knowledge, inclination, and experience. Their insights reveal that Buddhist practice leads, not to a clearly defined movement or organization, but to a diversity of individuals or groups inclined to help others in whatever way they can or are compelled to do.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS: MINDFUL ACTIVISM

In Theravada Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, the monastic and lay communities exist interdependently. The monastic community, in accord with the Vinaya (discipline) outlined by the Buddha, depend on the lay community for their material needs, and the lay community depend on the monastics for their spiritual needs. The lay community provide the monastics with food and other material requisites, such as fabric for robes, building materials, and labor. The Vinaya forbids monastics from accepting or handling money. This prevents the monastic community from retreating from society or tailoring their teaching for profit, and creates a relationship between the monastic and lay communities.

In Theravada Buddhist cultures laity have direct access to the monastics for spiritual teachings as well as personal guidance. With few exceptions, we do not have this in western Buddhism because we do not have the thousands of years of Buddhist history in our nations. In order to answer my central questions, *how does Buddhism apply as a framework for socially transformative action? And How can I respond to social and ecological suffering?*, I sought Buddhist monks and nuns of the Theravada tradition, as well as laity, who have demonstrated a level of social engagement connected to their Buddhist practice. In our conversations, several themes emerged regarding how these individuals approach social engagement and where their motivation for doing so comes from. In the following pages I discuss the themes that arose from these interviews in order to establish a framework for a Buddhist, mindful activism.

Problems with Activism

At the start of my research I considered each individual who I spoke with to be an activist in one way or another. Each individual was involved in creating positive change around them. Their works included forest conservation and rural development (Ajahn Pasanno), forming a global relief organization that addresses agricultural systems, food security, education of women and girls in India (Bhikkhu Bodhi), treating addiction (Kevin Griffin), aiding the homeless, challenging India's caste system and ordaining women in Thailand (Pannavati Bhikkhuni), HIV/AIDS relief work and challenging apartheid in Africa (Thanissara), perpetuating Buddhadasa's legacy in the west and involvement in local government (Santikaro). However, I quickly discovered that my use of the word "activism" at the beginning of the interviews would elicit a withdrawal from identification with the term.

Where I define activism broadly as any active involvement in creating benefit for others, my research participants had very specific association with the term that they felt didn't apply to them, or was out of line with Buddhist practice. Thanissara Upasika, who was involved in responding to apartheid and the AIDS epidemic in Africa while ordained as nun, expressed, "I don't think of myself as an activist...if you're and activist you are engaging in the political realm; you're mobilizing people...challenging or going to standing rock...it is a very particular thing to be an activist (Thanissara, personal interview, 2017). When I asked Santikaro Upasaka about this perception he explained that there was a problem "...if you use the word activism or not. If you are speaking about

helping others, that is considered to be part of Buddhism. The idea that you would practice Buddhism and not be wanting to help others, would be a major ‘what’s wrong with you?’” (Santikaro, personal interview, 2017). While Santikaro chose the phrase, “helping others,” to define his engagement, Bhikkhu Bodhi liked to use the phrase “transformative social action” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, personal interview, 2017), while Ajahn Pasanno and Pannavati Bhikkhuni, both monastics, chose not to define their work, pointing out that “response to suffering” (2017) is no different than any Buddhist practice, but rather it is interwoven with everyday practice. In addition, many of my research participants had issue with “single issue” or “organizational” activism.

My participants’ perception of the term “activism” was of organized marches, picketing, one-sided views (clinging), self-importance, self-aggrandizing, self-righteousness, divisive and harmful speech, and a tendency towards increasing conflict. The confrontational tactics of activism can create division, further the polarization of tribalism, create new groups of others, and often becomes a cause for violence. Santikaro, who later became the primary western pupil of Ajahn Buddhadasa, came to Thailand first with the Peace Corps but found that “peace organizations are all messed up by selfishness,” and so was later drawn to Buddhism under Ajahn Buddhadasa because he “highlighted selfishness as the root cause of all our problems...” (Santikaro, personal interview, 2017). While activism is largely characterized by good intentions, and often results in positive change toward greater social or ecological well being, it does not contain a set of principles and practices formed for the purpose of pulling out this root

defilement, selfishness. All of my participants expressed hesitation with being labeled an activist.

When I asked about the perceived conflict between Buddhism and activism, Santikaro elaborated that “when activism comes from an ideology, then it is coming from an intellectual place...ideas and opinions...Buddhadhamma is not like that...’ism’ is ideologically driven...activism appears to be in conflict because of the clinging, the egoism, and the identification around being an activist...but Buddhists can do the same thing” (Santikaro, personal interview, 2017). As Santikaro points out, the issues with activism can be found among Buddhists as well. This point in many ways expresses why I chose to investigate this topic of engaged Buddhism, finding it difficult to balance my personal practice, which generated a strong feeling of peace and compassion, and engaging in social change. I found this most difficult in the presence of friends, colleagues, and classmates who identified as activists in a way that appeared self-aggrandizing, othering, and highly conflict driven. My observations would not change the fact that the world needs human beings who are actively involved in helping others and bringing about positive change, neither would it discount the work activists do in accomplishing benefit for other beings.

Still, I could not find where to stand, or how to apply my practice to helping in some way to alleviate the many problems so apparent at the local, state, national, and global level. I could see that the problems in my own life were extensions or projections of my own mind and Buddhadasa highlighted this point in most of his teachings; Santikaro, then Bhikkhu, reflected on his experience as Ajahn Buddhadasa’s pupil: he

pointed out that “selfishness is at the root of human problems, individual and collective...Social Problems are all of our individual selfishness working together..[and] Buddhadhamma made me realize it is not only other people’s selfishness, it is mine too (Santikaro, personal interview, 2017). Santikaro’s point reminds us not to ignore the greed, anger, and selfishness in our own hearts in the process of pursuing social change. Buddhadhamma has a way of turning one’s focus inward toward root causes of individual and collective problems, rather than our usual tendency to focus on the external symptoms. In order for individuals to take action, there must be both, and practice must extend beyond sitting meditation.

Preta Loka (Realm of Hungry Ghosts), the Consumer Self, and Consumer Culture

Buddhist cosmology offers an effective allegory for consumer culture. The Buddha described 31 distinct lokas (planes of existence). Ajahn Buddhadasa believed these realms of existence represent mental states. He saw the teaching as a purely mental phenomenon. This goes back to the distinction he made between everyday language and Dhamma language (Buddhadasa, 1989: 126). Birth, to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, meant the birth of mental states or the birth of action. One can understand the sense in this interpretation just by examining language itself. For example, when a sperm joins an egg, we call that process conception. When an idea enters the mind, we also call that process conception. Conception leading to physical birth has a gestation period, just as conception of mental phenomena has a gestation period. This gestation period is called bhāva (becoming), in the pattern of dependent origination. Becoming then leads to birth

(jati), which leads to suffering. The whole process of dependent origination contains twelve links beginning in ignorance (avijja) and ending in dukkha. The unconscious, cyclical pattern of this process is referred to as bhāvacakra (the wheel of becoming) or samsara (wandering on). This cycle of becoming and birth, understood psychologically, denotes an individual's habits of mind under the intoxication of selfishness, greed, and aversion. Ajahn Buddhadasa stressed understanding dependent origination in this way for its usefulness in understanding and resolving suffering here and now. In my interviews, participants appear share Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's interpretation of the six sense realms and rebirth as they illustrate the conditions of a consumer culture.

Among the six sense realms lies the preta loka (realm of hungry ghosts). The preta of this realm are depicted as having over-swollen bellies, representing excessive desire. They also have tiny mouths and skinny necks, representing their inability to satisfy that desire. The preta is the perfect representation of the consumer self, or consumer identity. The preta-loka, furthermore, is the perfect representation of a consumer culture—that is, a culture whose inhabitants exist in a state of insatiable desire, chronic dissatisfaction. During our interview, Kevin Griffin, who works with applying the Eightfold Path as a method of recovery from addiction, pointed out that “the second noble truth is pointing to addiction as the cause of suffering...” (Kevin Griffin, personal interview, 2017). The preta-loka can easily be seen as the realm of addiction. It is no coincidence that there is a proliferation of addiction in societies whose dominant narrative is that of consumerism.

The consumer narrative is a story that presents itself as a reality. Its proponents—advertisers, media—claim it to be apart from government, politics, science, and religion. There is nothing more dangerous than a story that is taken to be factual and inevitable. It becomes more invisible than the water to the fish. What is the consumer narrative? How does it make sense of, or represent, the world? How does it place the individual in relationship to others, human and nonhuman? What does it say about life's meaning and purpose? And what can analyzing the consumer narrative through a Buddhist lens tell us about suffering in the human and nonhuman communities? Bhikkhu Bodhi offers his analysis:

We are inundated through our commercial culture with the message that happiness is to be achieved by acquiring more and more possessions through consuming more and more products or else by rising to positions of power, status, fame, and also the sort of contemporary ways of thinking that—particularly economic thinking—promotes competition with others as the engine of social development, of economic progress, and competition always means that my success is incompatible with the success of others. My wellbeing is to be achieved by undermining the wellbeing of others (Bhikkhu Bodhi, personal interview, 2017)

The second noble truth identifies craving as the cause of suffering. Craving takes on three forms known as kilesa (defilements). These defilements of the mind are the early root causes leading to suffering in Buddhist teaching. These three defilements are lobha (greed), dosa (hatred), and moha (delusion). Lobha denotes any movement of mind, reacting to pleasant feeling (sukha-vedana), toward something: attachment, desire, lust, longing, want. Dosa describes any movement of mind, reacting to unpleasant feeling (dukkha-vedanā), away from something: aversion, fear, hate, ill will, negativity. Moha, is

the movement of mind in continuous circles due to an inability to see things as they truly are while simultaneously seeing things as they are not; it is a state of confusion of mind due to the perception of oneself as a separate and isolated entity. The perception of self, and all the stories that define one's self, create the perception of other, and all the stories of difference that threaten the security and reality of one's own story of self. These three kilesa, seen as the root causes of suffering in Buddhism, are inflated to an unnatural extreme in the consumer narrative. In our interview, Santikaro, Buddhadasa's disciple and translator, explains how these three defilements become institutionalized:

The greed of many people reinforces each other, and children are socialized to greed...we are educated to be greedy, socialized to hatred and delusion...but also [through] the media we are educated that our primary identity is to be a consumer. That's delusion. When it is widespread through society, [like] racism, that's institutionalized delusion... and it is in me too. We all absorb this (Santikaro, personal interview, 2017).

Santikaro's final statement, "it's in me too. We all absorb this," expresses the interdependent, selfless, view of society. His understanding that each of us is made up of non-self elements (khandas) elicits the perception that mental and physical conditions of our social systems is reflected in each of us. The representations of characters in fiction, or of people in nonfiction forms of narrative, construct our perceptions of ourselves and others. In the consumer narrative, human beings are represented as isolated agents in a world of finite resources, surrounded by others who also want and need those resources. Greed, hatred, and self-interest are sold as virtues in the consumer narrative. We are constantly told stories of those who succeeded because of their greed and self-interest. Furthermore, the world around us is represented as detached, dead, and unrelated to our

behavior. The mainstream media focuses most of its time convincing its viewers that the world is filled with violent others whose primary interest is to take what is yours, whether that be your way of life or our life itself. Bhikkhu Bodhi elaborates:

We can see greed in the emergence of these powerful corporations that are always aiming to enhance their wealth even at the expense of the lives and wellbeing of workers, citizens around the world...hatred flourishes in the development of militarism, militaristic policy, the flourishing of the arms industry, which requires wars, suspicion and conflict in order to generate financial profit...we can see delusion particularly in the attempts in the skeptics and denialists denying the reality of climate change...so if we take our charge or responsibility as Buddhists to eliminate greed hatred and delusion one could argue that it's not sufficient just to focus inwardly and remove it in our own mind, but we have to take measures to counter the destructive manifestation of greed hatred and delusion in our social systems and institutions and governmental policies. (Bhikkhu Bodhi, personal interview, 2007).

The narrative institutionalization of the defilements is so pervasive we take for granted that who we are is often independent of what we observe around us. Immersed in the waters of the dominant storytellers—media, movies, television, advertising, politicians—the consumer self is constructed and maintained in order to perpetuate a set of behavioral traits that serve the needs of our consumer economic system. Advertisers utilize the strategies of storytelling in order to attach identities to their products so that when we buy a product we buy our “selves.” This strategy is called branding. Through the purchasing and use of products, we become the story created by advertisers. We become branded and our products become the symbols of who we are. The problem with this is that we attain a quickly fading sense of self, leading to an ever increasing state of dissatisfaction. In reaction, we buy more, entrapped in a cycle of chronic dissatisfaction designed to perpetuate consumption. This consumer condition has two primary effects: personal

suffering resulting from a state of confusion and chronic dissatisfaction, and environmental degradation resulting from the resources needed to feed the condition.

When this condition becomes normalized, we have a culture of consumers. On the contrary, as Bhikkhu Bodhi pointed out,

Buddhist social ethics teaches that in order for us to flourish, we have to replace that competitive mindset with a cooperative mindset, that human beings flourish best when they help each other to flourish because at the metaphysical or philosophical level, they are not individual self-enclosed ego entities, each of them locked in his or her own subjectivity. We exist interdependently with others in a sort of vast web of interconnections (Bhikkhu Bodhi, personal interview, 2017).

From a Buddhist perspective, transformative social action begins with this expansion of awareness. The shift begins with the removal of the defilements and the establishment of right view, which involves an interdependent, causal view of reality rather than an isolated, inconsequential view of individual action. Each participant addressed this point.

The Root Defilements, Interdependency, and Systemic Change

A major theme to arise from interviewing engaged Buddhists was a need to address the root causes of social and ecological suffering rather than limiting our focus to the outward effects. Many Buddhists would be familiar with this in their personal practice. A main feature of the Buddha's teaching is that the sufferings and stresses of our life are not the problems themselves but rather the fruits of what past and present actions have sewn into our minds. We are trained to witness these patterns of feeling, thinking, perceiving, and acting, in order to bring awareness to the underlying defilements and hindrances, and overall ignorance that allows for this pattern to perpetuate and dictate our

lives. Normal human behavior is reactive and, more and more over time, becomes a predictable pattern leading to a complete absence of freedom. During meditation practice, whether sitting, standing, lying down, walking, working, or eating, we witness the arising of a mental object and pay attention to the subsequent craving (attraction or aversion) and clinging (the stories that inform or justify our reaction in accord with past action) that follows. Each time we allow for the phenomena to arise and pass away without repeating the same patterns of behavior, the mind changes its habit patterns a little, which leads to more and more freedom. Thus, change toward greater peace, freedom, and compassion, begins inwardly with attentiveness.

As I progressed through my interviews, this process was reflected in my participants' approach to social change. Bhikkhu Bodhi expressed the following:

Buddhist text emphasizes the training of the mind to eliminate or to overcome greed, hatred, and delusion and the other defilements...these defilements that originate from the mind take on systemic and institutional embodiments...our responsibility as Buddhists [is] to eliminate greed, hatred, and delusion...it is not sufficient just to focus inwardly and remove it in our own mind, but we have to take measures to counter the destructive manifestation of greed, hatred, and delusion in our social systems and institutions, and governmental policies (Bhikkhu Bodhi, personal interview, 2017).

Buddhist social action is simply a shift in perspective. We can take all the skillful practices applied during meditation to the kilesa (defilements) and nivarana (hindrances) in our own mind and take a nondual response to the arising of these forces anywhere, whether internal or external, personal, social, or ecological. From a selfless (anatta) or void (suññata) perspective, the arising of these forces is neither personal nor collective, they simply arise and pass away throughout nature and society. Their antidotes are

contentment and generosity (dana), compassion, awareness, knowledge, and wisdom. The Buddha taught that the father of these defilements is avijja (ignorance or not knowing). Our duty during sitting meditation is to cultivate mettā (kindness) or compassion, awareness, and non-reactivity as antidotes to these forces.

While Buddhist practice can sometimes over-emphasize personal transformation, secular activism has a tendency to focus more on external, social conditions, but my respondents argued that “both personal and social have to happen in tandem and they support each other and they depend upon each other” so we must “look at things as systems, relationships...even as individuals we are systems...we are part of systems that we don’t see and that’s why things like the BLM movement are so important” (Kevin Griffin, personal interview, 2017). Here in our conversation, Kevin Griffin referred to the Black Lives Matter movement as an example of the Buddhist view that suffering and peace are both rooted in a systemic web of relationships. This illustrates the relationship between personal and social transformation, which are interrelated because we are interconnected aspects of systems we are unaware of. Santikaro explained how going back to the core teachings expressed this exact point:

Actually apply Buddhist teachings rather than identities and muddled thinking or personal proclivities. Actually use the Buddhadhamma...the four noble truths, or four ennobling realities. It just says, “there is dukkha.” Not “my dukkha” or “your dukkha” or “their dukkha.” It just says “there is dukkha.” And dukkha arises from craving. It does not say whose craving...the egoistic tendency often starts with “my dukkha” and “their dukkha”...see the relation between greed, hatred, delusion, which includes fear, pride, envy, hatred, boredom, low self-esteem...what’s the connection between those and dukkha? An assumption that many Buddhists make is that that’s my personal greed, my personal hatred and delusion (Santikaro, personal interview, 2017).

Rather than a narrow focus on social or personal change, a Buddhist approach must be understood as systemic or mutual change, which falls in line with the primary Buddhist teaching of independence (*idappaccayatā*) and selflessness (*anatta*). This view can be very challenging for human beings because of our identification with our personal feeling of self and other.

Thanissara Upasika, formerly a disciple under Ajahn Chah, pointed out, “what we experience in relationship affects the sense of self. The sense of self is not a static thing...you’re opening yourself to feeling a bit groundless because the relational field is a bit groundless” (Thanissara, personal interview, 2017). The sense of self gives us our sense of place and purpose in society. It is the ground that informs us of our roles and responsibilities. However, Buddhist teaching and practice points at this sense of self as the primary cause of conflict and suffering (*dukkha*). The sense of self creates the sense of other. The sense of mine creates a feeling of fear and conflict. As a result, when we begin to build awareness that the self is a mental fabrication, we do feel “a bit groundless.” Nonetheless, as Thanissara pointed out, it is the core teaching of Buddhism, and contrary to how we have always lived our lives, *anatta* is central to our social and ecological responsibility. Because it goes against how we have lived our lives up to this point, learning how to function from this view can be challenging.

The Buddha marked the uprooting of the self-conceited as the first stage of enlightenment (*sotāpanna* or stream-entry), and it is the most difficult and often ignored attainment. Venerable Pannavati Bhikkhuni brought great insight to this challenge, pointing out that social engagement can help in achieving this goal of self-effacement:

Buddha said when you sit in meditation...he doesn't call that practice, he calls that 'a pleasant abiding here and now,' but what he calls practice was effacement, the rubbing out of self, and you do that in real time...when you are in interaction with someone who's yelling and screaming at you and calling you vile names...and how you conduct yourself in that moment...think of them as your kind teacher because they give you the opportunity to train in patience and non-reactivity and it helps to uproot this concrete sense of self that has to be placated, defended, and demanding respect. That's how you really learn. That's what I call practice (Pannavati Bhikkhuni, personal interview, 2017)

Here, Pannavati Bhikkhuni points out that engagement itself can aid in the primary goal of Buddhist practice, "the rubbing out of self," that the Buddha himself expressed sitting meditation only as a "pleasant abiding here and now." This teaching has been largely lost in western Buddhism, where sitting meditation and the sublime states that come with it are seen as the whole of the spiritual life. The more I spoke with my research participants, the more I found that the very questions I was asking were steeped in this misunderstanding. When I asked Ajahn Pasanno, abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, about the relationship between his personal practice and social engagement, he laughed with his whole body before telling me "I don't see [social engagement] as anything different than practicing or fulfilling one's responsibility as a human being or as a monastic because...you've got something to share and you want to be able to share it" (Ajahn Pasanno, personal interview, 2017). Thanissara also laughed at the question when I asked her about her life as a nun with her former teacher, Ajahn Chah, "This word engaged Buddhism. I think Ajahn Chah would have not had that term at all. I mean, he was engaged all the time. They didn't have that distinction" (Thanissara, personal interview, 2017). For Buddhists, whether monastic or lay, who practiced and lived in relation to others, the distinction between personal practice and social action was a false

dichotomy. Even distinguishing between meditation practice and social engagement is false because:

The Buddha said we should be meditating all the time...meditation is kind of like leavening—a little leaven leavens the whole lump—so when you get into a certain state of mind, it begins to alter the structure of appearances ...you see the world differently...engage in the world differently. That is the ultimate meditation, where the mind stream is abiding...in these heavenly and still places when I am engaged in my everyday conduct of activity (Pannavati Bhikkhuni, personal interview, 2017).

This point is made clearer when we look closely at the actual word for meditation in the Pāli canon that the Buddha used. The words often translated as meditation from Pāli are samadhi (concentration), vipassanā (clear seeing or insight), or sati (mindfulness or reflexive awareness). However, the actual word that encompasses the meaning of meditation in its broadest and most Buddhist sense, as Ajahn Buddhadasa pointed out in many recorded talks, is bhāvana, which means cultivation or development. Cultivation is the best expression of what Buddhist meditation really is.

In agriculture, plants and animals are cultivated from seeds and breeding. As agriculture has advanced over time, both plants and animals have been cultivated in such a way as to eliminate undesirable traits, and cultivate desirable traits. In exactly the same way, Buddhist meditation is aimed at cultivation. We cultivate samadhi in order to extinguish the mental obstacles and defilements (nivarana and kilesa), so that we can see clearly (vipassanā), which gives rise to wisdom (panna). Other Buddhist meditation practices aim at cultivating loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkhā) as antidotes to the kilesa and nivarana. These four are called the sublime states (brahmavihārā). Bhāvanā (cultivation), Buddhadasa

pointed out, distinguishes Buddhist practice because it comes as a result of understanding the law of conditionality (*idappaccayatā*)—the law of nature. Just as scientists seek to understand natural law in order to give human beings influence over natural processes, so the Buddha’s teaching on conditionality gives us the ability to cultivate the mind rather than being enslaved by its habit patterns of *taṇhā* (craving), *upādāna* (clinging), *bhāva* (becoming), *jāti* (birth), and the subsequent proliferation of suffering that follows in the cycle known as *bhāva-cakka* (the wheel of becoming) or *samsāra* (wandering on).

Responsivity over Reactivity and Mutual Transformation

The cultivation of concentration, insight, the sublime states, and ultimately, freedom from suffering, cannot be accomplished in isolation. Even the Buddha, who had been following a practice of self-mortification and extreme asceticism, was led to enlightenment by an interaction with a stranger. A woman, who offered him food while he was starving to death, was the trigger for him to change his practice and discover the Middle Way. Isolated practice can be seen as preparation and training the mind to be more aware, free of its conceit and enslavement to its habits, in order to make the mind awake and ready to respond. Responsivity over reactivity was another major theme to emerge in my conversations:

You have to respond to what you recognize...just being present, just having equanimity is not the end of the path. It is in some sense the beginning of the path, to have the clarity and vision to know or to have some sense or intuition of how to respond...the core purpose of practice is to get the clarity and equanimity to be able to respond rather than react...that’s why we practice, to live more skillfully in the world not just be comfortable in the world’ (Kevin Griffin, personal interview, 2017).

Buddhism can make existence in a consumer society more comfortable. This is true in the beginning of the practice. Buddhist practice brings about contentment in any condition. However, awareness increases to include, as in my case, the deeper and broader presence of suffering and a consequent need to respond. The achievement of inner tranquility is not the end of the path. We can look at the Buddha himself as an example of this fact. After his awakening, the Buddha spent seven weeks completely blissed out, walking from place to place, staring at seven different trees for a week at a time each tree. Sounds awesome! During this time, as the new Buddha reflected on his awakening, he felt that there would be no way to teach what he discovered, that human beings were too buried under the force of delusion. He even contemplated wandering into the Himalayas and spending the rest of his life blissing out. Ultimately, though, he decided to teach and spread the Dhamma for the benefit of others, knowing teaching would bring many challenges. He taught for forty-five years, radically upsetting the misogyny that excluded women from the spiritual life and the strict caste system that gave all power and privilege to Brahmins, leaving the Dalit (untouchables) casteless. These conditions still exist in the South Asian subcontinent to this day. During the Buddha's time, anyone could ordain. Much of this radical openness was lost over time. When we look at the Buddha and modern human beings accomplished in the Dhamma, we see that there is no aversion to social engagement. Rather, the practice cultivates a need to respond:

I am not an organization; I am a human being just responding to human suffering. So when I became aware of the homeless youth situation in my town...I stepped forward and started doing it...it was a need to immediately attend to something that needed to be attended to...One whose mind becomes endowed with the

qualities of the Dhamma, these are naturally occurring thoughts and responses to suffering (Pannavati Bhikkhuni, personal interview, 2017).

The Buddha's emphasis on the first noble truth, of becoming acutely aware of suffering here and now, is a path to both awakening and transformative social action. Many of us have experienced those shocking moments of great pain or loss when our usual mental proliferation, the chaotic habit patterns of the mind, cease, and we see our life clearly, giving rise to insight. We experience this clarity after an accident, the death of a loved one, or upon discovering one has a fatal illness. The Buddha's first noble truth elicits an acute awareness of dukkha (suffering) and anicca (impermanence) here and now so that we can trigger this clarity, this wakefulness, and now, without waiting for the inevitable tragedies of life to arrive. It helps us to die before dying (Buddhadasa, 1990). This focus on a common human experience, suffering, helps us to stop wasting time, distracted, disengaged, and displaced, and care for one another. Direct awareness of dukkha, in its many forms, is the whole path and is the impetus for compassionate social action.

This does not mean that every Buddhist in the world has an obligation to be actively involved in systemic change. Ajahn Geoff argues that we must apply "...the same conditions on the pursuit of justice that the Buddha placed on the practice of merit... [p]eople should be encouraged to join in the effort only of their own free will... [e]fforts for change should not involve harming yourself or harming others... [t]he goodwill motivating these efforts would have to be universal, with no exceptions" (Thanissaro, 2017: 7). This means that no individual or group should be othered or targeted as an enemy in the pursuit of justice. Everyone is at different levels with differing capacities

and inclinations. For me to claim that socially transformative action is imperative to Buddhist practice would be presumptuous. It would be especially arrogant if I, or any other westerner, were to criticize Buddhism in any of its expressions in the cultures where it has existed for thousands of years as not fitting my or any definition of worth or value.

Furthermore, I do not want to imply that American Buddhists who find that their Dhamma practice brings them peace of mind or well-being should feel guilty about what they're not doing. If Buddhist practice is helping to counter greed, hatred, and delusion at the individual level, such as reducing racism, consumerism, or addiction to drugs and alcohol, as with the work Kevin Griffin is doing, then radical change is already taking place. After all, Pasanno points out, "there is a difference between recognizing that something needs to be done and feeling guilty or defeated about what one hasn't done...all things arise from causes and conditions....[ask] what can I contribute to causes and conditions of positive change?....what is beyond my ability to influence?...(Ajahn Pasanno, personal interview, 2017). These are important questions to reflect on. Bhikkhu Bodhi elaborates on this point, saying:

I don't want to lay down an imperative and say that every Buddhist must respond but I would say that we would get a rather truncated...and very partial picture of the Dhamma if we...don't bring in the side that stresses the development of loving kindness, compassion, and responsive action to alleviate the sufferings of others and to promote their well-being and happiness at various levels of life—economic, social, communal, political, as well as spiritual (Bhikkhu Bodhi, personal interview, 2017).

Rather than laying down an imperative that says Buddhists must be socially active, I am looking at examples of where the practice can and has extended beyond the realm of the

personal for my own guidance, and for the benefit of those reading this reflection. There is great potential in bringing Buddhism and activism together, because, as Griffin notes, “social movements, cultural movements can awaken people who are ready be awakened...” (Kevin Griffin, personal interview, 2017). Do we wait until our personal practice makes the mind ready to respond? Or do we take Pannavati Bhikkhuni’s insight that social engagement aids us in the ultimate goal of “rubbing out the self?” I think the answer depends on the inclination and the capacity of the individual. My hope would be that a deeper understanding of Dhamma, the truth of interdependence and one’s duty in accord with that truth, would impel more Buddhists to include compassionate action as part of their practice. I would further hope that non-Buddhists could benefit from this understanding in realizing that their attention should turn inward as well. Pannavati Bhikkhuni expressed this point best when I asked for her advice on how I should begin:

Don’t despise small beginnings and don’t diminish the power of one to make a change in the world...the transformation is person by person by person...it changes the attitude and the consciousness of people in such a way that more creative and relevant responses can appear in the mind stream because the mind stream is not bogged down, perturbed, cloudy, depressed angry...almost every problem we have in the world today was caused by man. If we caused the problems, we can also bring the solutions; but the mind that created the problems is not going to be the mind that can bring forth the solution...so we have to transform the mind and heart....allow the mind to drop down into the heart so we can move from that space (Pannavati Bhikkhuni, personal interview, 2017).

From a Buddhist perspective, change must begin internally, uprooting the seeds that bear the fruit of systemic suffering, and planting the seeds that bear the fruit of contentment, compassion, clear seeing and freedom. As long as the mind remains conditioned by fear

and selfishness, our best intentions will still be guided by these roots, whether Buddhist or not.

Taken together, the insights generated from these conversations satisfy my research questions. The consumer narrative, with its web of selfishness and craving, is the context and impetus for Buddhist social action. Buddhist teaching and practice leads to social action when one realizes that cultivation of wisdom and compassion is continuous throughout all postures and activities of one's life. We can see our daily lives, which include social engagement, as a selfless stream of consciousness in which greed, hatred, delusion, ignorance and selfishness, or kindness, compassion, and wisdom, arise and pass away dependent on the causes introduced by our conscious actions of body, speech, and mind. These actions ripple throughout nature and society in a systemic, mutual causality. Therefore, every action of body, speech or mind must be informed and generated by wisdom rather than ignorance. Through this perspective, personal practice as a Buddhist and engagement in social activism becomes a single, continuous practice of mutually transformative action leading to greater and greater social harmony. Envisioning a society that operates in this way can be challenging, so it is helpful to find models.

The Sangha as a Model

When I stayed at Wat Suan Mokkh, I was astonished by the peaceful cooperation of the monastic and lay community there. This astonishment extended throughout my time living in Thailand, observing the relationship between the Thai people and the monastic communities. Later, well into my research on engaged Buddhism, I learned of

Abhayagiri Forest Monastery, a monastery in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah that existed only three hours south of where I live on the North Coast of California. I soon went to stay there where I conducted my interview with its abbot, Ajahn Pasanno, who is well known as the most senior western disciple of Ajahn Chah's tradition in the U.S. I learned, during my research, that Wat Suan Mokkh was established by Ajahn Buddhadasa as an expression of his concept of Dhammic Socialism, and similarly that Ajahn Chah put his primary focus on Sangha (community) as the primary expression of Buddhadhamma. My individualistic mindset had never been more challenged than during my stays at these monasteries. Ajahn Pasanno emphasized the example of Sangha when I asked for his response to those who criticize Buddhism for being too withdrawn:

You can criticize anything. It doesn't take much to actually criticize something, but to actually do something that's a different thing...just coming here [to Abhayagiri] you see a community of people living simply and living with principles of ecological responsibility and creating bonds of trust between human beings and I think that's important for transformation. You know it is why capitalism or communism, which are economic systems, won't provide satisfaction, because they don't foster bonds of trust. From a religious perspective or spiritual perspective, essential for human life is a feeling of safety or security...and that security needs to be fostered in many different ways. Part of it is economic, or social, or moral stability (Ajahn Pasanno, personal interview, 2017).

This statement shook me deeply because at the moment he spoke it I realized that an underlying anxiety characterizes life in American society. This anxiety arises out of an insecurity due to a growing lack of trust and security. Up until this statement, I had not realized what attracted me to Buddhist monasteries. I felt safe. I felt I could trust everyone around me. Growing up in a majority white, suburban corner of Los Angeles, I saw little to no examples of community. I saw no representation of cooperation between

people. In many ways a suburban neighborhood is the perfect expression of the consumer narrative just as the Sangha is the perfect expression of Buddhhadhamma. Our culture could benefit greatly from association with examples like the Buddhist sangha. After asking Ajahn Pasanno to comment on a talk he had given, where he had mentioned that monasteries who live solely on dana (generosity) exist in a different paradigm, he elaborated that:

It does in the sense that...we basically just live on trust. That's pretty radical. And it is a different paradigm because it allows anyone the ability to participate as long as they're willing to live together and by the moral precepts that we have and be willing to give and share...An economy of gifts: it's a different kind of economy where you live by fostering those aspects of giving and sharing (Ajahn Pasanno, personal interview, 2017)

No money is exchanged between the lay community and the monastics. Instead, everything is upheld by dana (giving). This is inspiring and heartwarming to be a part of. And though those of us who “live in the world” and struggle to operate in this way, we can benefit greatly from being part of it.

Community building is not limited to the monastic sangha. Unfortunately, this way of life goes against everything we in a consumer culture have been conditioned to believe, so it is extremely challenging. However, helping to facilitate the establishment of sangha in the United States could gradually change the examples we are raised among. When I asked Ajahn Pasanno for advice on how to begin making gradual change in my local community, he suggested “making contact with like-minded people because a single voice doesn't travel that far...and seeing what kind of action arises from that... only when there are more voices and people are connected to each other that change will

happen” (Ajahn Pasanno, personal interview, 2017). Community building is at the heart of the Thai Forest Tradition because its founder, Ajahn Chah, emphasized this as the best expression of Buddhist practice. In monastic life, sangha members own nothing. They are given a needle, robes, and a bowl for collecting alms food, while everything else is shared. They view nothing as theirs, not even their own bodies, but rather everything is borrowed from nature and they depend on other human beings for food.

This way of life can at the very least offer us a model of a cooperative rather than competitive way of living in the world. Ven. Pannavati Bhikkhuni describes herself as a black, female Buddhist monk. With her background as a Baptist minister, and her years of engagement in working with the homeless, disenfranchised women and youth, I did not know what to expect when I asked Ven. Pannavati Bhikkhuni what she believed the most important work for creating systemic change was, but her answer was creating a Buddhist monastic heritage in the west:

There aren't many places that a Buddhist can go and just go on retreat without there being a cost consideration. We just don't have the thousands of years of history for there to be physical communities for people to go and study the Dhamma...the eastern monasteries—they're more like community centers as well as spiritual centers, the people go there and talk with the monks about problems or issues they're having. Sometimes they just go there to be on the grounds for peace. It becomes like a second home...it becomes a way of life for them not just something they do on Tuesdays and Sundays...and that's how I want to see the Dhamma unfold in the west so that it's like a total living experience...it becomes a part of the movement of their life (Pannavati Bhikkhuni, personal interview, 2017).

This was not something I previously considered when I began asking about these questions. But when I reflect on the whole of my exposure to Buddhism, it is true that I did not feel a major personality change until I began interacting with monastic

communities. It is not necessary for everyone to be ordained, or even for everyone to be Buddhist, to change the effects of the consumer narrative discussed in this reflection. But exposing ourselves to a different way of life, and establishing like-minded communities grounded in mutually transformative practice, has the potential to radically change the gross level of greed, hatred, and delusion that has afflicted our world, and bring forth creative responses. I would love to be a part of the vision these two monks expressed.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this study reflect some of the primary themes found in the literature on engaged Buddhism—that Buddhism is a lived religion whose social action takes a diversity of expressions rooted in the early teachings and practices of the religion itself. In seeking to find out how Buddhism leads to social action, the relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action, and how I, as a Buddhist, can respond to social and ecological suffering, I followed an inductive, practice-led research approach while building theory along the way. The themes generated emerged from analysis of interview data in combination with my own practice as well as interpretations of early Buddhist texts and the talks and writings of contemporary engaged Buddhist activists and scholars. The inductive pattern of inquiry followed the structure of the Four Noble Truths and concludes in the following framework utilizing the Eightfold Path as a way of practice that includes social and ecological action.

Before outlining the path of practice, interview participants, textual research, and immersive Buddhist practice revealed the impetus for Buddhist social action to be a response to social and ecological suffering rooted in the consumer narrative. I defined the consumer narrative as the storyline constructed to support the capitalist economic system—a storyline that casts members of society as isolated individuals whose primary purpose is to consume in order to serve the market. This consumption is perpetuated through narrative tools such as advertising, media, political and economic discourse, which aim at attaching one's identity to products. This product-identification then creates

a cycle of chronic dissatisfaction, which forms the root cause of social suffering and ecological degradation. Members of a consumer culture continuously seek stimulation and identity formation through the purchasing of products, obtaining a quickly fading sense of self and necessitating a chronic need to consume.

This consumer condition became apparent first during my own meditative practice in and after my stay at Wat Suan Mokkh in southern Thailand; it was also a common theme to arise at the beginning of each of my interviews—where participants pointed out that we, in the U.S., are socialized, educated, and conditioned to identify as consumers. This condition is furthermore reflected in the texts and talks of many Buddhist activists, such as Ajahn Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa, studied in the literature on engaged Buddhism. The relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action became clear: the consumer narrative underlies the conditioning of the social and ecological dukkha that forms the impetus for Buddhist social action. Following the results giving insight into the problem and its cause, I then investigated interview data more deeply to outline the path of practice, addressing the primary inquiry of how Buddhism leads to social action.

The Eightfold Path as a Framework for Mindful Activism

Mindful activism can be defined as the middle way between a socially disengaged mediator—who sees their daily sitting as sufficient to call themselves Buddhist—and an outwardly engaged activist who contributes to the persistence of social ills by applying the mind that caused the problem to solving it. The Eightfold Path contains a complete set

of skills put together for the specific purpose of cultivating the cessation of suffering, transforming society from the inside out. The following path factors—outlined in its threefold division (panna, sila, samadhi)—were implicit, and often explicit, in the interviews of all my research participants.

- 1) Wisdom (Panna): This group includes right view (sammādiṭṭhi) and right intention (sammā-sankappa). The themes that emerged in this group were understanding interdependency and the need for systemic approaches to social change. All of my interview participants framed their responses in the context of right view. The foundation of sammādiṭṭhi is the teaching on paticcasamuppāda (dependent origination) which denies the reality of an essential, unchanging, self. Rather, dependent origination asserts that the sense of self, and its consequent dukkha, arises when sense organs function under the influence of ignorance. This conditioned arising follows according to the law of conditionality (idappaccayatā)—the law of nature. The implication of this understanding framed participants' diagnosis of the problems as well as the prescriptions for its solutions. By applying this relational, conditional view of social and ecological suffering, participants emphasized a systemic, inside-out approach to social change, and a deeper, causal understanding of suffering. A common theme to emerge was the need to mutually transform society by doing the work of uprooting the seeds of suffering (greed, hatred, delusion, and selfishness) while responding to external conditions with a mind that has been trained and cultivated so as not to unconsciously perpetuate harmful conditions.

The wisdom group also includes intention. The Buddha outlines right intention (sammā-sankappa) as the cultivation of the antidotes to the three kilesa; the intention to cultivate renunciation/contentment (nekkhamma) as the antidote to greed; the intention to develop good will (metta) as the antidote to hatred; and the intention to cultivate non-harming (ahimsa) as the antidote towards delusion. Together, sammā-sankappa is the intention to cultivate the cessation of suffering (dukkha-nirodha) by relieving its causes. This factor underlay much of the participants' responses to the conditions we face in a consumer culture. The cultivation of contentment, loving kindness, and trust, expressed in the interviews, falls into this fold of the Path.

- 2) Virtue (Sila): Sila-dhamma is the group of the Eightfold Path intended to develop moral or virtuous conduct. It includes right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Themes that emerged in this group were problems with activism, and relying on the precepts as the foundation for Buddhist social action. Right action (sammā-kammanta) and right livelihood (sammā-ājīva) stem from the principle of ahimsa (non-harming) and the five moral precepts. Interview participants expressed an application of the precepts to abandon the taking of life, stealing, sexual misconduct, false and harmful speech, and the consumption of intoxicating substances, broadly to their engagement in society. Right Speech (sammā-vācā) is the intention to abandon false speech, divisive speech, and harmful speech. Participants alluded to this practice in many cases when referring to their discomfort with common expressions of activism, which can generate one-sided

views and intensify conflict and divisions in society. The essence of sammā-vācā is the development of a skill in communication that bridges the gap between groups and leads to social harmony.

- 3) Concentration (Samadhi): The samadhi group includes the factors of right effort (sammā-vāyāma), right mindfulness (sammā-sati), and right concentration (sammā-samādhi). Together this group makes up the powerful inner development that translates into social action. The themes arising from the interviews in this group were responsivity or reactivity, and person-to-person, inside-out change. Participants felt that the application of an undeveloped mind, still under the influence of greed, hatred, and selfishness, could perpetuate the problems they were seeking to solve. Right effort is the abandonment of harmful states of mind while developing harmless and beneficial states of mind, preventing the future arising of harmful states and sowing the seeds for the future arising of harmless or beneficial states. Right concentration, developed most explicitly during sitting meditation, generates the mental strength, clarity, and emptiness needed to respond spontaneously and effectively to suffering. Finally, interview participants revealed that, not only does Buddhist practice lead to social action, but social action aids in the development of the Path itself. Personal practice and social engagement, therefore, have no real separation, and mutually condition the individual, nature, and society, towards the ultimate goal of the cessation of suffering. The cultivation of right mindfulness, is essential in this aspect. Mindfulness is not only a reflexive, non-grasping, awareness; it is the process of

recollection that gathers the insights of practice and delivers them appropriately to their application.

The cultivation (bhāvana) of these factors can be condensed into the single word: Dhamma. When social action emerges from Dhamma it mutually conditions nature and society towards harmony. The basic truth of Dhamma is that all problems arise as a result of ignorance (avijja)—that we don't see things as they truly are and therefore behave in a way that gives rise to endless problems. The teaching on non-self (anatta) reveals that we are different persons to different people in different situations and moments of our life. The ultimate truth, according to Buddhhadhamma, is that there is no independent, isolated entity that we can call a self anywhere in nature, as we instinctively perceive, and is amplified and institutionalized by the consumer narrative. In reality, mental and physical processes arise independently within systems. But we don't see life this way. We see “this concrete sense of self that has to be placated, defended and demanding respect” (Pannavati Bhikkhuni, personal interview, 2017), whose identities, possessions, fears and desires supersede everything.

Understanding the truth of Dhamma has several implications for social action. Dhamma is the way things are as well as the duty or role of each organism within the whole. Pollination is the Dhamma of bees. Photosynthesis is the Dhamma of plants. Imagine any system whose parts operate as we do, seeing things as they aren't—an ecosystem, computer system, or our bodily systems—greedy cells that hoard and fight rather than transport nutrients. Knowing the truth that all things exist within mutually causal systems, the practice of Buddhhadhamma is to abandon causes and conditions that

give rise to suffering and disease while developing or cultivating conditions that are harmless and beneficial. This is the definition of right effort (SN 45.8; AN.2.19).

Mindful activism can be viewed as the art of letting go while holding on. We must let go of all fixed and partial views, attachment and identity, and hold on firmly to the responsibility that arises from understanding reality. We do this by understanding that we are part of relational, interdependent, systems. The body is a system. It is lent to us by nature, through the interdependent process of evolution, and we have a responsibility to maintain its health—to eat, breathe, sleep, bathe, shelter and exercise. We also live in social systems that we are responsible to. We live interdependently with other human beings, other species, and innumerable natural, economic, political, and cultural relationships. This truth is expressed in the image of Indra's net.

Indra's net is described as a vast web that stretches infinitely across the universe with a diamond embedded at each eye of the net. This image is also represented as a spider web after a rain, or strong morning dew, with a drop of water at each link in the web. In each image, the diamond or drop of water, contains within it infinite reflections of every other diamond or drop of water, as well as the contents of the surrounding environment. Indra's net is Dhamma language for the truth of interdependency. Contrary to the consumer narrative, which would have us believe that each of us are isolated individuals whose actions have no connection or consequence outside ourselves, the image of Indra's net shows that each "individual" jewel or drop of water is connected by the strands of the web or net, and also reflect each and every other jewel or drop of water infinitely within.

Reflecting on the whole of this research—from my immersive experience at Wat Suan Mokkh and Abhayagiri Forest Monastery, commitment to developing the Eightfold Path, analyzing the root causes of suffering in the consumer narrative, interviewing inspiring teachers, and my need to respond in accord with Dhamma—I have found that my own role or duty is in education. In a talk posted on the Abhayagiri Forest Monetary website, Ajahn Jayasaro, a teacher monk in the Thai Forest lineage of Ajahn Chah, pointed out that Buddhism is not a belief system. Buddhism is an education system that aims to relieve suffering by removing the ignorance at its root. Having been involved in education for the past ten years—being an aid in pre-schools, teaching English in Thailand, high school in Los Angeles, and substitute teaching in local high schools here in Humboldt County during this research process—I have come to feel that education is one of the greatest agents of social change. Buddhadasa used to say we can address suffering at several levels, but the deepest level is ignorance. This has arisen as the answer to my final question of *how I can respond to suffering*. The topic of education is outside the scope of this research but I feel it is important to share with the reader my own personal Dhamma (duty), as it was clarified through this research process. The Dhamma of each individual is different.

Like the jewels of Indra's net, we are each part of vastly interdependent systems, reflecting within us the contents of each other and of our environments. If we live among forms of institutionalized greed and hatred, such as insatiable consumption, vast inequality, racism, war, and the institutionalized delusion of politics, advertising, and

media, then each of these forces are reflected within us. We have to acknowledge these forces within us by the dukkha they create, and its consequent expressions in society.

The relationship between Buddhism, the consumer narrative, and social action became clearer throughout the fieldwork, analysis, and writing process of this investigation. I found in my research experience that the Buddhist way of life is inherently activist. Buddhadhamma, properly practiced, leads first to the awareness of the social and ecological suffering rooted in the consumer narrative, igniting a need to respond. With further development, the Eightfold Path leads to the uprooting of these forces within as well as around us. This was evident in the lives and insights shared by my research participants. In the development of the path of sila (virtue), samadhi (concentration), and panna (wisdom), our life operates in a different paradigm, outside the consumer narrative. Sila is the factor that gives us something to hold on to. It includes the precepts along with the factors of right action (sammā-kamma), right speech (sammā-vācā), and right livelihood (sammā-ājīva). If we simply let go without holding on, we become enslaved by greed, aversion, delusion and selfishness, or we withdraw into the pleasant abiding of our meditation practice. But if we can hold on to the virtue (sila) that outlines our social/ecological responsibility, while letting go of our enslavement to greed, hatred, delusion and selfishness, we can see this interdependence and understand clearly our responsibility, spontaneously as it arises, and respond within our capacity, from a fit and ready mind, an open heart, effectively and joyfully. This is true Dhamma practice.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What led you to Buddhist study and practice?

What led you to activist work?

How does Buddhist teaching assist or hinder your engagement in activism?

How does Buddhist practice assist or hinder your engagement in activism?

What specific teachings or practices in Buddhism influence your activism either positively or negatively?

Do you see any conflict or relationship between the Buddhist approach to suffering in the mind and suffering in the world?

How does your engagement in activist work affect your Buddhist practice?

Is engagement in the world necessary for you Buddhist practice?

What's the relationship between personal and social transformation?

How should or can Buddhists respond to social and ecological problems?

How can non-Buddhist activists benefit from a Buddhist approach to social transformation?