

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM VI**

**HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM:
WISDOM AND COMPASSION IN ACTION
般若智慧與善巧方便的人間佛教**

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**BUDDHIST RESPONSES TO
CONTEMPORARY ISSUES
OF RACE, RACIAL PREJUDICE,
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

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Introduction

What are the ethical implications of race? Is there a cogent Buddhist riposte to critical race theory, acknowledging both personal and multifactorial determinants associated with racialization? Does conceptually viewing the world through a lens of race foster unwholesome states of *duḥkha*, especially considering an unequal distribution of power and resources? I will explore how the Buddha viewed race and whether there is an appropriate Buddhist response to historical disadvantage. In this paper I will apply a Buddhist outlook to contemporary ethical dilemmas of race, racism, and racialization, particularly within the United States. I will expound upon Buddhist applied ethics consistent with middle way consciousness. I will survey Nietzsche's framing of morality as a response to oppression, calibrating the evolution of suffering, followed by investigating the understanding of separateness, as contrasted to Buddhist interconnection. Then, I will investigate whether the idea of inequality is a result of exploitation, irrespective of personal characteristics and qualities, and uncontrollable factors—or whether this framing is outside of Buddhist purview. Finally, I will apply race to the context of karma, self-realization, and *nirvāṇa*.

Black Buddhism and Critical Race Theory

The critical race theory (CRT) movement has arisen to illuminate power dynamics of race in legal matters, and claims to work to promote equality and overcome systemic racism—in a similar vein to the prior civil rights movement.¹ Furthermore, CRT ideology is critical of colorblindness, instead conceptualizing white supremacy, advocating for reversing black disadvantage by opposing white advantage, and encouraging voices-of-color to be spotlighted. Seeing through racial optics has a range of manifestations, including race's correlation with obesity, and claims obesity is racism's systematic substantiation.² Dorton surveys how the complex terrain of loss of culture, and experiences of historical, emotional distress, ancestral trauma, and grief, are interwoven with discrimination within Native American society.³

How has the Buddha been portrayed within black Buddhist discourse? Black authors interweave the Buddha into the civil rights movement, thus recreating a romanticized version of Eastern resistance against white Western imperialist hegemony.⁴ The Buddha is rebranded as a social reformer, envisioning Afro-Orientalism, an idealized perception of Asia opposing Western dominion. Furthermore, black Buddhists have portrayed themselves as racialized and embraced the Buddha as a person of color. McNicholl describes this reframing of Buddhist history as black internationalism – “crafting black identity on a transnational level.”⁵ Buddhism has been embroiled in what Gina Sharpe calls, “the racist baggage of the West,” with the discourse between the Buddha’s teachings and racial turmoil influenced by resistance against systems of dominance.⁶ A black Buddhist experience includes feeling excluded by white Buddhist *Saṅghas*.⁷ Is this feeling of alienation different from classist snobbery,⁸ or clique formation,⁹ or being a newcomer to any group formation? How does social exclusion equate to racism? How they may be defined and contrasted requires further research.

Identity and Complexity

Issues of race, religion, ethnicity, and social privilege reveal a stratified Buddhism. Schilling describes the view of Buddhism as a peaceful religion as an “orientalist fantasy”—mentioning Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Burma, Korea, Japan, and Cambodia as sites of Buddhist ethnic violence.¹⁰ Since race is a capricious social construct,¹¹ attempts to define it are fraught. A counterargument is that however ambiguous the definition of race is, suffering still results.¹² The narrowing of debate around a black-white binary further marginalizes other minorities historically targeted and racially discriminated against, including Jews, Asians, Muslims, Native Americans, and Hispanics.¹³ As the disenfranchised rise up to fight for utopian social justice—self-identified intersectionality, competition for power, and corruption eat at the fabric of political justice.¹⁴ Feierstein notes complexities of racism and alienation by illustrating the Nazi construction of identity as a force against the demonized other—warning against caricaturing or dehumanizing either oppressor or victim.¹⁵ Primo Levi’s reflections in his essay “The Grey

Zone” outline the moral ambiguities that evolved within Auschwitz prisoner groups, revealing how victims of oppression may become perpetrators in the surrounding anarchy of coercion and concomitant drive for survival.¹⁶ Further, a caveat regarding how narratives of domination are perceived and internalized,¹⁷ and how individual motivations are influenced by dominance hierarchy.¹⁸ Fassin quotes a post-apartheid graffiti line, “As if nothing ever happened” to illustrate the tenuous line between postcolonialism, racism, and living with the contemporaneous consequences.¹⁹ Injustice breeds resentment and grievance, and creates wounds that may never heal.

The Buddha specifically admonished ignorance and accepting norms of thinking—practitioners are encouraged to test out any theory to verify its veracity.²⁰ In fact, the entire concept of race is disorientating, due to the proposition within racial theory that humans are made up of separate genetically-constituted racial groups; in practice what is meant is separate language, cultural, geographical, religious, and national groupings. The formation of *identity* is a multidimensional construct within the context of colonization, post-colonization, immigration, assimilation, and hybridity.²¹ Malalasekera and Jayatilleke propose that the semantics of cultural groups assumes that there is a biological separation between groups, when it is often cultural in makeup.²²

What effect does seeing through a lens of white supremacy have on the hearts and minds of CRT advocates? The metaphor that “we are all fish swimming in white supremacy”²³ seems existentially anti-Buddhist, as racial epithets tend towards the racism that they intend to counter by inflaming tensions unnecessarily, instead of focusing on broader humanitarian interests. The Pali *Attadaṇḍasutta* outlines refinement of base instincts like greed, sensuality, or envy by rising above violent human social interactions that involve misconduct (physically, verbally, or mentally), specifically responding to the fish simile:

Seeing people floundering
like fish in small puddles,
competing with one another...

... The sage doesn't speak of himself
as among those who are higher,
equal, or lower.²⁴

The Buddha's Teachings on Race

The Buddha's commentary on Brahman social privilege, social exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination highlights that a person can neither be judged on social status nor on birth, but must only be assessed on behavior alone. According to Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, in *Vāseṭṭha* (3:9), Buddha Gotama is quoted as emphasizing that one becomes a *brahman* through action not via birth.²⁵ Furthermore, the Buddha highlights that animal species are differentiated by their markings, whereas human beings have no bodily "distinguishing marks made by nature."²⁶ Their designation is noted by convention alone. Furthermore, the Buddha taught non-abiding or non-clinging as a way to relinquish suffering—this encompasses racial categorizations too. The Buddha's view on nonracism is unambiguously outlined in the *Sutta-Nipāta*, "Among humans there is no difference produced by birth."²⁷ Regarding every disgusting feature of corporeal function, the teaching from *Vijaya Sutta* (1.11)—"Whoever would think, on the basis of a body like this, to exalt himself or disparage another"—contemporaneously admonishes any kind of racism or racist pride.²⁸

Buddhist Virtue

One of the most potentially life altering ideas for humanity is that every person, regardless of birth, creed, race, or caste, has the capacity to awaken to reality as it truly is.²⁹ Self-realization, as the primary aim of Buddhism, is not focused on political or social power.³⁰ By emphasizing procurement of equanimity by relinquishing *saṅkhāras*,³¹ self-realization arrives by disentangling oneself from *duḥkha*.³² The five precepts codified within the Buddhist canon outline Buddhist *ahiṃsa* and the prevention of immorality; these include abstention from inflicting harm and refraining from using either exploitative or abusive language.³³ Furthermore, the precepts promote the

preservation of societal consonance and social harmony. Buddhist scholarship has historically ignored race and ethnicity.³⁴ The Buddha’s instruction (to Ānanda) outlines the Buddhist project of refinement in all respects, “good conduct leads gradually up to the summit.”³⁵ This demonstrates how intertwined both morality and kindness are along a path of attainment, culminating in *nirvāṇa*. In this construction, *nirvāṇa* is the perfection of virtue.³⁶ *Nirvāṇa* is the ultimate transformation of self into selflessness, framed within a tradition of dissolving suffering.³⁷ The *Dīgha Nikāya* describes *paññā and sīla* as “washing one hand with another,” demonstrating that wisdom and morality exist inseparably from one another.³⁸ Considering that human beings are imbued with the consciousness of Buddha-self, tied to *ātman*, loving-kindness and equanimity as moral factors of enlightenment are paramount.³⁹ This sense of a moral code is highlighted within *Dhammakāya* as the structure of existence, requiring that Dharma is expressed equally.

Karmic View

Karma and its consequences reveal that prior behavior is directly responsible for the physical conditions in which we find ourselves.⁴⁰ Furthermore, transcending the delusion of selfishness stimulates actions that purify one’s karmic results. Keown explains that while there is no literal concept of subjective entitlement within either the Sanskrit or Pali languages, karma implicitly covers duties and obligations.⁴¹ Ghose posits prejudice along racial lines as the result of “psychic residue” accumulated from previous battles with opposing ethnic or tribal factions.⁴² Richard notes that karmic retribution is the fruit of actions, while *saṅkhāras* act in symphony with craving and ignorance, to karmically sustain a person within *saṃsāra*.⁴³ *Prañya-samutpāda*, a doctrine of interdependent co-arising, applied to racism, implies that nothing is independent of itself—racism is both changeable, relative, and non substantial.⁴⁴ While the utmost goal of the Buddhist project is to eclipse *saṃsāra* (particularly in the Theravāda tradition) toward *nirvāṇa*,⁴⁵ *saṃsāra* is interchangeable with *duḥkha*, as it generates dissatisfaction.⁴⁶ According to the Buddha (cited in *Samyutta Nikaya*), everything causes *duḥkha*, including not getting what is wanted.⁴⁷ The more craving, the more suffering.⁴⁸

Guilt, Resentment, and Compassion

When the enslaved are freed, how is the suppressed anger expressed, and how do the oppressors cope with their guilt? Nietzsche's framing of morality as the byproduct of hatred resulting from oppression confronts the scarring of enslavement and the multiplicity of psychological wounding; he also notes the dangers of building a society on suffering, and seeking to blame others for the evolution of its suffering.⁴⁹ The landscape post-oppression can also easily break down into a morass of wounded victims vying socially and politically for redress.⁵⁰ How does one calibrate the line between vengeance and justice? The Nietzschean concept of resentment sets up the wounds of domination and persecution as an anthropological context for further alienation; oppression generates resentment that needs to be somehow discharged.⁵¹ For Nietzsche, resentment tears at wounds long since healed, as the line between justice and revenge is tethered.⁵² According to Spinoza, compassion is the opposite of resentment—responding to the suffering versus success of others.⁵³ As one part of the four immeasurables, the cultivation of *karuṇā* (compassion), first towards self and then extended to others, both promotes the development of positive virtues and neutralizes jealousy, hatred, and cruelty.⁵⁴ Furthermore, practicing self-compassion leads to increased happiness and aids the liberation of inner turmoil and guilt.⁵⁵

Non-Self

“Each of us, first as a child and then as an adult, clings to an irrational belief in our specialness.”⁵⁶

The idea of separateness is a worldview deeply etched in the Western mind.⁵⁷ Freud proposed the ego as an internal formation or map of consciousness based on causes and conditions. Western societies in particular, via capitalistic policies and technologies (like social media), have trended towards individualism.⁵⁸ The shadow side to this sense of separateness may instead incentivize victimhood, running counter to Buddhist virtue. The Buddhist concept of no-self proposes a radically different doctrine from

Western individuality, proposing emptiness, impermanence, and dependent origination as the building blocks of Buddhist morality.⁵⁹ Holding on to, or clinging to, the self is the ultimate delusion that the Buddha-Dharma nullifies.⁶⁰

Dependent origination (*pratītya samutpāda*) is a Buddhist ethical position that views everything as a manifestation of interconnected causes and conditions, which results in both personal and collective responsibility.⁶¹ *Dharmadhātu* reveals that, while Buddha nature may be concealed by *saṃskāra*, it is still our intrinsic essence.⁶² Regardless of one's perception of *anattā*, perspective frames worldview. A Tibetan Dzogchen poem highlights how all things arise from the self (*non-self*), "Everything, just everything, emanates from me."⁶³ Masao Abe's equivocal description of *anattā* expresses the conundrum of trying to understand non-self, "nothing but the true nature or true Self of humanity which cannot be conceptualized at all and is beyond the self and no-self."⁶⁴

Reflections on Worldview

Kastrup's framing of consciousness as the ontological primitive explains the dissociated alters of our limited conceptual awareness and categorization of thoughtforms perpetuating further division.⁶⁵ The black Buddhist narrative situates racialization as the route to political empowerment by reversing disenfranchisement—yet in the process, the pro-racialization labeling of people as black or white fosters a divisive rhetoric by bringing attention to historical privilege and disadvantage, and the dynamics of wealth and status. The idea of an equal distribution of power is arguably fanciful within any power hierarchy, and hence the *duḥkha* of this existence. Nonduality positions Buddhism philosophically as quintessentially non racialized.⁶⁶ If we view any condition alone, we may come to foster a type of discomfort at disparities (*duḥkha*) in the world. In a Buddhist sense, this in no way mitigates our responsibility to decrease suffering.

Is there an unconscious bias or prejudice against blackness? Sherman and Clore reveal how white and black are perceived—with white associated

with cleanliness and black with dirtiness.⁶⁷ Purity of physical form or racial characteristics are perceived as morally pure,⁶⁸ while darkness in skin tone is associated with immorality.⁶⁹ These stereotypes extend to language in the example of *Snow White*⁷⁰ or the conceptualization of virgin snow as white purity,⁷¹ revealing how moral cognition is shaped by metaphor. Hussein explores the ideological bias that elevates white skin and subjugates darker skin in India and Southern Asian in general.⁷² Schafer, Mullins, and Box examine how cultural stereotypes can become radicalized into white supremacist ideologies, and how this harbors further subjugation, fear, and racial inequity.⁷³

Is whiteness a legitimate or consequential categorization, and is it worth preserving? Contemporary notions of hegemony⁷⁴ are to be considered within a context of changing demographics, with ancestors of European immigrants transforming from 90% of the US population in 1950 to 75.8% today.⁷⁵ Huebner points to the emptiness of whiteness.⁷⁶ This argument presupposes that this whiteness is a category at all. The socially constructed ontological basis for whiteness is skin-deep, as although the perception of our existence as real occurs in a conventional sense, ultimately it is empty.⁷⁷ All phenomenological stimuli exist interdependently, codependent on causes and conditions.⁷⁸

Inada shifts the social justice debate to concerns regarding human nature as the core of Buddhist vocabulary, classing this more as an existential issue than one that can be calculated.⁷⁹ Since Buddhist teaching sets out to relieve suffering through disidentification with self,⁸⁰ the idea of retaining the bonds of identification, and empowering subjective identification, counterposes ultimate truth. However, simultaneously, Mahāyāna in particular accentuates a compassionate orientation,⁸¹ with the bodhisattva's (Avalokiteśvara) conception of emptiness in the *Heart Sūtra* yoking emptiness to compassion.⁸² Adam argues compassion is not comparable or commensurate to entitlement.⁸³ A mindset of moral responsibility for the suffering of others is essentially Buddhist, with the concept of intrinsic-extrinsic interconnectivity.⁸⁴ This is outlined by Thích Nhất Hạnh, "Birth and death cannot touch the *Bodhisattva*, nor the wave once it has realized that at the same time it is water."⁸⁵ Ontologically, compassion emerges as the humanitarian core of a bodhisattva.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Issues of race and social justice raise innumerable emotionally-charged impediments that can light a tinderbox in our collective conscience. Critical race pedagogy has emerged as controversial in the context of political competition against white supremacy—as the battle against discrimination has been increasingly weaponized. While highlighting race or fomenting reverse-racism is on the surface antithetical to Buddhist values and arguably initializes more *duḥkha*, a middle way approach is justified, especially considering any exploitation requires redress and compassion toward its victims. The currency of victimhood fails to engender self-realization by preventing the purification of unwholesome mental states and taking personal accountability, instead incentivising a victim mentality. The pitfalls of attempting to manufacture equity, accentuate victimhood, and unintended consequences of social engineering are misaligned with a sustained Buddhist ethic—premised solely on the five precepts tied to *mahākaruṇā*—acknowledging the manifold causes and conditions implicit in all existences.

This essay contends that while ongoing social (and legal) reformation is essential to provide equal opportunity and a level playing field for all regardless of race, ethnicity, or social caste, the promotion of any race or racialization as a focal point taints the purity of the Dharma. Buddhism teaches purification of the mind as the pathway to uproot all conditioning (innate and adopted), so both the oppressed (and their oppressors) are offered the same Dharma. This Dharma, at its pristine core, is both non-racist and non-racialized, fostering the ultimate in equanimity, purity of thought and action. At a humanistic level, Buddha-Dharma pivots toward compassion. It is incumbent upon practitioners to root out unconscious racism and prejudice from their hearts at every level, and heal from separation consciousness and any sense of otherness. The Buddha's humanitarian message focuses on suffering at its core, and its cessation—not only disregarding race and ethnicity, but highlighting that only actions truly count. The idea that the Buddha stood for equality of outcome negates Buddhist teaching, especially considering the centrality of karma. Rather, self-realization is the most pressing matter to a

Buddhist practitioner. Through the lens of Dharma, all have equal opportunity for spiritual advancement.

Notes

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