

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
MONEY, SEX, WAR, KARMA: NOTES FOR A BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

DAVID R. LOY

A large, stylized illustration of a winding path with various icons representing different aspects of life and culture. The path is a thick, golden-yellow line that curves across the page. Along the path, there are several golden-yellow icons: a Buddha figure sitting in meditation at the top left; a small car; a city skyline; an elephant; a person holding a megaphone; a person holding a shopping cart; a person holding a clock; and a person holding a bag of money. The path also features some stylized clouds and a small airplane. The overall theme is a journey or path through various aspects of life and culture.

ENLIGHTENMENT EVOLUTION *and* ETHICS *in the* MODERN WORLD

Praise for A NEW BUDDHIST PATH

“In this new book, Zen teacher, sage, and activist David Loy offers a fresh Buddhist perspective for a post-Axial age that addresses and challenges adherents of any religion or no religion, as we together face the gravest crises of our history. *A New Buddhist Path* lays out the contours of a liberating spiritual practice, a new story, and an integral vision that links personal transformation with wholehearted engagement toward healing our deeply wounded and fragmented Earth community.”

—Ruben L. F. Habito, author of *Living Zen, Loving God*

“This gripping, important, and ultimately heartening book by David Loy is a wake-up call for Buddhists and everyone else on how to respond to current crises.”

—Lila Kate Wheeler, author of *When Mountains Walked*

“Any book by David Loy makes me sit up and take notice. A favorite Buddhist voice, he reliably brightens my day by giving me confidence in our capacity to preserve the precious gift of life.

“This breathtakingly insightful book captures what the Buddhadharma most distinctively brings to this apocalyptic moment in our crisis-ridden world. For one like me, who loves the Buddha’s teachings with the same heart that grew up loving Hebrew prophets and Jesus, and the same mind that peered at his Dharma through the lens of systems science, David Loy’s presentation of ‘A New Path’ is both trustworthy and thrilling. I have always counted on David Loy for his explication of the systemic, institutionalized forms of greed, hatred, and delusion, the ‘three poisons’ now threatening all life on Earth. With this treasure of a book I equally prize his wide-angle reflections on collective awakening and his good,

grounding presentation of the bodhisattva archetype, so meaningful to so many today, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.”

—Joanna Macy, author of *Coming Back to Life*

“I look to David Loy’s writing to guide me wisely through the snares and thickets of modernity. While the Dharma is ageless, it must be reinvented time and again to meet our circumstances. That is David’s life work, bringing to bear a depth of practice, wisdom, and intellectual vigor. With many others on the Buddhist path I bow to him in gratitude.”

—Hozan Alan Senauke, Clear View Project, Berkeley CA

“In *A New Buddhist Path*, Zen teacher David Loy has re-visioned the middle way for Western Buddhists. He describes a path that fully embraces both the amazing insights of the Buddhist tradition and the wealth of our contemporary critical analysis, while charting a course between the traps of a bare literalism and modernist materialism. He brings an unparalleled depth of both scholarship and deep spiritual insight to the project. I fear it has become a cliché to declare an instant classic, but I really believe this is a book that will mark many hearts for many years to come. This is a manifesto of genuine spiritual freedom, written for our generation.”

—James Ishmael Ford, author of *If You’re Lucky, Your Heart Will Break*

“David Loy is a wonderful guide along the latest turn of the Buddha’s path, as the Dharma moves through the West, encountering science, democracy, and deep ecology. Loy masterfully shows us the relevance of the Dharma in the modern world, and how it can serve the greater good.”

—Wes Nisker, author of *Essential Crazy Wisdom*

“The ‘New Buddhism’ is the perfect tool for integrating ancient wisdom into our rapidly changing world. The discussion in these pages is a crucial one for our future.”

—Jaimal Yogis, author of *Saltwater Buddha*



A New Buddhist Path

enlightenment
evolution
and ethics
in the
modern world

David R. Loy



Wisdom Publications • Boston

“A manifesto of genuine spiritual freedom.”

—JAMES ISHMAEL FORD, AUTHOR OF *IF YOU’RE LUCKY, YOUR HEART WILL BREAK*

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ENLIGHTENMENT?

**HOW CAN ONE RECONCILE MODERN SCIENCE
WITH ANCIENT RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS?**

WHAT IS OUR ROLE IN THE UNIVERSE?

In *A New Buddhist Path*, David R. Loy examines these questions and more, addressing head-on the most pressing issues of Buddhist philosophy in our time. Investigating the unexpected intersections of Buddhist teachings and the modern world, he uncovers a new Buddhist way: one that is faithful to important traditions but compatible with today’s society.

**THIS IS A NEW PATH FOR A
NEW WORLD.**

David R. Loy’s books include the acclaimed *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, *The World Is Made of Stories*, and *The Dharma of Dragons and Daemons: Buddhist Themes in Modern Fantasy*. He lives in Boulder, CO.

To the new bodhisattvas

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: In Quest of a Modern Buddhism

Path

Transcendence?

The Problem with Transcendence

The Problem with Immanence

Mindfulness

Beyond Transcendence and Immanence

Constructing the Self and Its World

Nonattachment

Letting Go

Something Infinite Behind Everything

Implications

Story

A Devalued World

Social Darwinism

Creation Stories

A New Evolutionary Myth

A New Buddhist Story

Progress

Creatures that Create

The Meaning of It All

A Pivotal Stage

Challenge

Good vs. Evil

Ignorance vs. Awakening

The Economic Challenge

The Ecological Challenge

The New Bodhisattva

Conclusion: Reflections on Karma and Rebirth

Acknowledgments

[Recommended Books](#)

[Index](#)

[About the Author](#)

INTRODUCTION:

In Quest of a Modern Buddhism

“MAY YOU LIVE in interesting times,” says the apocryphal Chinese curse, and for those on a Buddhist path these times are doubly interesting. As Buddhism spreads to the West (or to the modern world, since “the West” is globalizing), Buddhism is encountering its greatest challenge ever: the most successful civilization in human history, whose powerful technologies and formidable institutions offer apparently limitless possibilities along with unprecedented perils.

The naturalistic worldview and materialistic values of the modern world are quite different from what Buddhism traditionally has to offer—and they also appear increasingly problematic and vulnerable, due to deeply rooted ecological, economic, and social crises that modernity has created but seems unable to resolve. Our predicament calls for new perspectives that question many of its priorities and presuppositions.

In a conversation not long before his death, the British historian Arnold Toynbee reflected that “The present threat to mankind’s survival can be removed only by a revolutionary change of heart in individual human beings. This change of heart must be inspired by religion in order to generate the willpower needed for putting arduous new ideals into practice.” Does this help us to understand his reputed prediction that the introduction of Buddhism to the West “may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century”? that the introduction of Buddhism to the West “may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century”?

Whenever Buddhism has spread to a new culture, it has interacted

with the indigenous traditions of that society, and the result of their encounter has been something better suited to that culture. Each is changed by the other—and there is no reason to suspect that anything different is happening today: it is a safe bet that the contemporary conversation between Buddhism and the modern world will lead to the development of new forms of Buddhism particularly adapted for the members of an emerging global civilization.

Yet that predictable result does not in itself clarify the role that Buddhism will play within this civilization. Will Buddhist temples and Dharma centers adapt to modern life by helping us cope with the stress of surviving in a deteriorating ecological and economic climate? Or will we appreciate Buddhist teachings and practices because they offer a radically different worldview, with an alternative perspective on what's happening now and what needs to be done? Or do we need both?

As these reflections suggest, the issue is not only what Buddhism can offer to modernity, but just as much what modernity offers to Buddhism. Before Buddhism came to the West, the West came to Buddhism, thanks to European imperialism and missionary proselytizing. It turned out to be a salutary wake-up call. The Mahayana scholar Edward Conze said that Buddhism hasn't had an original idea in a thousand years. Although I'm dubious about his dates—in the thirteenth century Zen master Dogen revolutionized traditional ways of conceptualizing the Dharma—Conze's basic point remains a challenge to Buddhism even if it applies only to the last seven hundred years. Is the encounter with modernity the best thing that has happened to Buddhism in a very long time?

THIS BOOK OUTLINES the basic features of a contemporary Buddhism that tries to be both faithful to its most important traditional teachings and also compatible with modernity, or at least with many of the most characteristic elements of the modern worldview. Despite the ambitious title, the pages that follow inevitably offer a personal perspective on some aspects of the dialogue so far. They do not address the implications

of recent discoveries in neuroscience, nor academic work in the field of cognitive science. And of course the interactions that I do address are, if not quite beginning, still in their early days. There is no question of providing a new version of Buddhism that will stand the test of time. Instead, the best that any of us can hope for is to contribute to the ongoing conversation, in the belief that a collective wisdom is beginning to emerge, which will be something more than the sum of separate voices.

THE MAIN CHALLENGE to developing a modern Buddhism is the difficulty of achieving a genuine dialogue that is not predisposed to evaluate one side in terms of the other.

On the traditional side, for the last few generations the main concern has naturally been to import particular schools of Asian Buddhism and foster support for them. Such a conventional approach might be summarized as follows: “Some adjustments need to be made, of course, but without conceding any significant alteration in the basic teachings and ways of practicing. That such traditions are premodern is not a weakness but their strength, given what the modern world has become and where it seems to be going. The prevalent Western worldview promotes individualism and narcissism, its economic system encourages greed, and society as a whole seems to be entranced in consumerist addictions and fantasies. We need to revitalize this ancient wisdom that can point us back in the right direction.”

On the other side, however, the main concern is to make Buddhism more relevant to contemporary society by secularizing it, replacing its Iron Age mythological roots with a worldview more compatible with science and other modern ways of knowing. “Sure, modernity has its problems, but we must build on the best of what it has discovered. This includes not only hard sciences such as physics and biology but also social sciences such as psychology and sociology. Instead of accepting premodern beliefs that are no longer plausible today, we can also benefit

from what anthropology and archaeology, for example, have learned about ancient ways of thinking. Only that approach can develop a Buddhism that speaks directly to our situation today—the dis-ease of modern people living in a globalizing world.”

Sympathizing with both perspectives is easy; walking the knife-edge between them is more difficult. Can we employ each viewpoint to interrogate the other, without accepting either perspective as absolute? Such an approach can be discomfiting because it is so destabilizing: what remains of one’s own standpoint? This process invokes the understanding of Buddhist practice discussed in part I, which emphasizes the realization of “nondwelling mind”: a mind that does not identify with any particular forms, including thought-forms such as ideologies, whether religious or secular.

Although the Asian Buddhist traditions continue to fascinate many of us, clearly we need to distinguish the essentials of the Dharma from cultural trappings that don’t fit as well into the modern world—do those include karma and rebirth? Yet a secularized Buddhism may assume some of the very things that a Buddhist perspective might critique as problematic. Does the prevalent materialist worldview of modern science express the truth of the world we live in, or has it become questionable—as some distinguished scientists, including Nobel laureate physicists and biologists, now believe? Differentiating science as a methodology from the dominant naturalistic paradigm opens the door to new conceptions of what this world is and to a fresh understanding of our place and role within it, which are discussed in part II.

ONE OF THE CRUCIAL ISSUES for contemporary Buddhism is enlightenment: *nibbana* in Pali, *nirvana* in Sanskrit, awakening, liberation, realization, etc. Although it’s difficult to imagine a Buddhism (literally, “Awake-ism”) without it, there is an ambiguity about the nature of enlightenment that is becoming increasingly problematic as Buddhism globalizes and modernizes.

According to some early versions of Buddhism, this world of *samsara* is inherently infested with craving, delusion, and the discontent they cause. The only really satisfactory solution is to escape it by attaining nirvana, which ends rebirth into *samsara*. This approach is consistent with other Axial Age religions (including Abrahamic ones such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) that also emphasize *transcending* (from the Latin *trans* + *scandere*, “to climb over or surmount”) this world.

In contrast, some contemporary versions of Buddhism understand the Buddhist path as a program of psychological development that helps us cope with personal problems, especially the “monkey mind” and its afflictive emotions. The influence of psychotherapy has led to a greater appreciation of entrenched mental problems and relationship difficulties, which traditional Buddhist practices do not always address well. The mindfulness movement is another promising development, but, like psychotherapy, such perspectives on Buddhism tend to emphasize accepting and adapting to this world. Throughout this book I will refer to this approach as *immanent* (from Latin *in* + *manere*, “to dwell in, remain in”). Although such therapeutic and mindfulness practices have much to offer, do they nevertheless overlook other important dimensions of the Dharma?

Part I argues that neither a transcendent nor an immanent understanding of Buddhism is satisfactory, given what we know today and what we need today. This section offers an alternative version of the path and its goal: the sense of self is a psychological and social construct that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, and that *needs* to be deconstructed and reconstructed, because the delusion of a separate self is the source of our most problematic *dukkha*, or “suffering.” We don’t need to attain anything or anywhere else, just to realize the true nature of this world (including ourselves) here and now—which involves a more nondual way of experiencing that is quite different from merely accepting this world as it is, or as it seems to be.

That the self is a construct accords with what developmental

psychology has discovered, but a Buddhist constructivism opens the door to possibilities that modernity has not considered seriously, because those potentials are incompatible with its naturalistic perspective. In that sense, an *awakened* way of experiencing and living in this world can also be described as transcending it, because the alternative that Buddhism offers does indeed transcend our usual dualistic understanding of the world and ourselves within it.

THIS WAY OF describing the Buddhist path and its fruit raises some other important issues. Is the nondualist perspective developed in part I compatible with what modern science has discovered? Or with what contemporary science is discovering now? It seems difficult to reconcile a spiritual path with the materialist and reductionist paradigm that has been so successful in bending the world to our will—a worldview, to say it again, that many scientists themselves now find problematical.

Another issue raised by this way of understanding the Buddhist path is its social and ecological implications. “History is a race between education and catastrophe,” according to H. G. Wells, and the race is speeding up, on both sides. Catastrophe may not be too strong a term for the future that has begun to unfold. While global warming (a cozy euphemism for climate breakdown) is happening more quickly than most climate scientists anticipated, our collective efforts to address it remain wholly inadequate. Unless you are a banker or investor, there has been little if any recovery from the Great Recession that began in 2008, and the economic future for recent college graduates looks grim. (Bumper sticker on my car: “If the environment were a bank, we would have saved it by now.”) And the political paralysis in Washington looks unlikely to end soon, because it reflects a fragmentation in our national consciousness.

At the same time, something else is struggling to be born. Paul Hawken’s book *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History Is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World* was inspired

by his realization that something historically unprecedented is happening today: an extraordinary number of organizations, large and small, have sprung up to work for peace, social justice, and sustainability. His original estimate was between one million and one and a half million, but since then he has determined that the true number must be well over two million. “Sprung up” is the appropriate verb, because this movement is not organized top-down: groups are mostly independent, with their own leaders and without any unifying ideology. It reflects a transformation in our collective consciousness that may be just beginning, a change that globalizing Buddhism is part of—and might perhaps even become an important part of.

If awakening involves transcending this suffering world, we can ignore its problems because we are destined for a better place. If the Buddhist path is psychological therapy, we can continue to focus on our own individual neuroses. Yet both of those approaches assume and reinforce the illusion—the basic problem, at the root of our dissatisfaction—that each of us is essentially separate from others, and therefore can be indifferent to what is happening to others and to the world generally.

The challenges that confront us today call upon us to do more than help other individuals deconstruct their own sense of separation (the traditional bodhisattva role). The highest ideal of the modern Western tradition has been to restructure our societies so they become more socially just. The most important Buddhist goal is to awaken and (to use the Zen phrase) realize one’s true nature. Today it has become more obvious that we need both: not just because these ideals complement each other, but because those two types of liberation need each other. That relationship between personal transformation and social transformation is explored in part III.