Embodying Engagement: Observations of Bernie Glassman, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Engaged Buddhism in the West

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1. Introduction

Buddhism attracted many American and Europeans in the Nineteenth Century but their feelings were ambivalent and few became Buddhists. An important reason was that they believed it to be opposed to activism which has been defined as:
'the tendency to emphasise the spiritual significance of vigorous moral action in the world … a concern to uplift individuals, reform societies, and participate energetically in the economic and political spheres.'
For this generation, 'engaged Buddhism' – which Christopher Queen defines as 'the application of the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings, to the resolution of social problems' – would have been a contradiction in terms. But since the 1950s many westerners have seen Buddhism as a viable option, and an important part of the western Buddhist world is engaged Buddhism which explicitly combines the inward-looking values of Buddhism with those of activism.
Over the last half-century observers have asked if engaged Buddhism in the West is a faithful re-expression of unchanged Buddhist values; if it is western liberalism in a new guise; if it is 'a fourth yana' that expresses 'a world view and a praxis that is fresh and unprecedented in the history of Buddhism.' With these questions In mind I want to consider the work of two prominent western engaged Buddhists – Bernie Glassman, founder of the Zen Peacemakers Order (ZPO), and Jon Kabat-Zinn, originator of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

2. Bernie Glassman and The Zen Peacemakers Order

Roshi Bernie Glassman founded the Zen Peacemaker's Order in 1994 and in 1997 I traveled to Yonkers – a small city up the Hudson River from New York – to see the social projects of the Greyston Mandala. Glassman started to practice Zen in 1960 and in 1979 his teacher sent him to Yonkers. Soon Glassman wanted to expand activities beyond meditation and Dharma study, and he established a bakery as a right livelihood business for Zen practitioners to work in. Then, as Glassman he responded intuitively to the vitality and poverty of the mainly black population of inner-city Yonkers, he decided to open the Buddhist projects to people from this community. He told me:

'I asked the practitioners if they would be prepared to open up to the unemployed. It

would be much more difficult. By then we had sort of learnt how to run the bakery, but to train people with no skills was a whole different prospect … [So] I stopped hiring Buddhists and the main focus of the bakery became to provide work for the unemployed.'

Greyston Bakery is now a profitable business providing training to formerly 'hard-to-employ' individuals, and its profits help fund other projects. Greyston provides permanent affordable housing for several hundred low-income and formerly homeless people, and Greyston Health Services offers help to people living with HIV/AIDS. Other Greyston projects are concerned with the arts, 'seniors', and 'developing community gardens'. Altogether, Greyston has attracted tens of millions of dollars in funding.

Glassman was closely involved in the running of activities in Greyston's early years, but by1997 he was preparing to move on. Glassman told me that he wanted Greyston to do much more than survive without him. From the outset he had wanted it to be a new embodiment of Zen:

'I told my teacher I felt I had to let go of my training, to become part of the people here and wait until a new buddhadharma arose. It needed to be an appropriate model for the inner city. If we tried to pass on our forms, no matter how much we tried we'd be imposing a form upon them.'

His aim was to establish an interconnected community in place of the fractured society that was failing people, which he envisaged as 'a monastery of the streets … where the whole environment is conducive to the raising of the bodhi-mind.' I wondered if this was a fantasy: it seemed more likely that Greyston would go the way of many religious-based charities and offer good, useful, but essentially conventional social work. Glassman commented that the key was finding people in the community who could make his vision a reality:

'I'm waiting for the leaders to arise, to be trained and to create the forms for Greyston … I need to work with those role models: people who are comfortable with what I'm doing but are steeped in their own culture, and aren't looking to leap out into ours and leave the others behind.'

Nine years after my visit and several years after Glassman himself moved on from Greyston, I have not been back to Yonkers to see how the projects are faring. They seem to be thriving materially. I cannot say if they have fulfilled Glassman's larger hopes, but Greyston has become renowned for its ethos. Most of the staff are not Buddhists, but they meditate or pray together before work; meetings begin with a few minutes of silence; and the entire organization closes down once a year for a staff retreat. Greyston staff aim to

embed cooperation and effective communication in the day-to-day interactions of everyone involved in its work.

I learned more about the ethos underlying ZPO activities in my second contact with Bernie Glassman, when I attended a ZPO-led interfaith 'bearing witness' retreat at Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where millions of people were systematically murdered by the Nazis. The heart of the retreat was several days spent silently meditating and performing simple rituals in the grounds of the camp. Like me, many of those attending had family connections with holocaust victims, so the event was emotionally charged, and it left us asking how to respond to this evidence of inhumanity. This question was pressing, yet imponderable and the impossibility of answering it suggests the ZPO's first tenet: 'not-knowing, thereby giving up fixed ideas about ourselves and the universe.' Glassman explains that this teaching counteracts what he sees as a western emphasis on figuring out problems in order to fix them. As he writes:

'Doubt is a state of openness and unknowing. It's a willingness not to be in charge, to not know what is going to happen next. The state of doubt allows us to explore things in an open and fresh way.'

What you can do in this state of 'non knowing' is to practice the second peacemaker tenet: 'bearing witness to the joy and suffering of the world.' As well as the usual connotations of mindfulness, bearing witness also suggests imaginative sympathy with others and a refusal to take sides. For example, 'bearing witness to someone's kidnapping, assaulting, and killing a child means being every element of the situation,' including the traumatised victim, the suffering relatives, the kidnapper and the police. It also implies placing oneself in real-life situations that confront one with difficult or uncomfortable aspects of reality. By engaging with the black community in Yonkers, Glassman stepped outside the comfortable surroundings of his Buddhist sangha. The Auschwitz retreats confront people with past suffering, and participants in the ZPO's street retreats share the lives of the homeless for several days. In such events participants encounter their limitations and are encouraged to respond with patience and openness. As Christopher Queen notes, Glassman 'identifies the encounter with suffering as the most powerful incentive to spiritual awakening.'

The third ZPO tenet is 'loving actions towards ourselves and others.' The implication is that bearing witness allows solutions to emerge as one develops an awareness of interconnectedness. As Glassman says: 'If this is me and it's bleeding, I take care of it. I don't join a discussion group or wait till I am enlightened or go off to get trained.'

Since 1994 ZPO activities have expanded dramatically in many countries and the

Peacemakers Community has become a widespread, interacting network of sympathetic projects whose directors feel at home with Glassman's teachings and his freewheeling, collaborative approach. Independent projects can affiliate as 'peacemaker villages', and these include the Upaya hospice and environmental project, and the Latino Pastoral Action Centre in New York, while other projects are involved with prison meditation teaching, the arts, refugee relief. The network is becoming an important focus for engaged Buddhists in the US, and to some extent in Europe, and it attracts support and cooperation from many non-Buddhist individuals and agencies who are sympathetic to spiritually-based activism.

3. Jon Kabat-Zinn and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

We are used to thinking of engaged Buddhist activities as those undertaken by Buddhists who are engaging with the material needs of society. ZPO projects differ from this by involving non-Buddhists within a Buddhist-influenced ethos; and another variant is found in the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. He has adapted Buddhist mindfulness practices for use in the US healthcare system, and developed a training for patients called Mindfulness Based Stress Management, or MBSR. Kabat-Zinn is a long-term practitioner of 'vipassana' with the Insight Meditation Society, but he does not call himself a Buddhist. Nonetheless, MBSR is perhaps the most significant way in which Buddhist practices are being applied in mainstream western society.
Kabat-Zinn started the MBSR programme at the University of Massachusetts Medical School when he founded the Stress Reduction Clinic in 1979. The clinic has recently become the Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare and Society (CFM), which offers training, conferences and resources for a burgeoning network of hospitals and practitioners while 13,000 people have taken eight-week MBSR course at the CFM itself. MBSR has been adapted to address chronic pain, anxiety, eating disorders and other conditions and it has prompted other institutions and individual practitioners to offer a burgeoning range of mindfulness programmes not only in healthcare, but also in educational, sporting and corporate across the US.
MBSR is taught through a carefully structured eight-week course for groups of up to thirty that meet once a week to learn and practice techniques that develop mindful awareness. These include breathing meditation, a forty-five minute body scan (in which attention is taken sequentially through the parts of the body), simple hatha yoga exercises, and mindfulness of simple activities such as walking and eating. Other important elements are homework assignments, in which participants are asked to practice meditation and other activities each day, keeping a diary of their experience, and an all-day mindfulness session.

Participants typically embark on an MBSR course because they have a physical or mental

problem. Some have chronic conditions which mainstream medicine has been unable to cure, leaving them with pain or impaired functioning while others experience anxiety, stress or depression. MBSR addresses the mental aspect of both physical and psychological suffering by training participants in responding differently to their experience. Asking participants to become more aware of their body and breath through meditation and gentle movement takes their attention away from unproductive thoughts, while awareness of the body tends to promote relaxation and connection with emotional experience. What makes MBSR more than a relaxation technique is its training in a 'mindful' attitude that is cultivated through noticing physical sensations and gently keeping the mind settled on them.

Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as 'a particular way of paying attention: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.' He adds that the attitude cultivated through mindful awareness and meditation includes patience, 'beginner's mind', trust, non-striving, acceptance and letting go. In this way, mindfulness of the breath and body models a more desirable response to experience in general and students learn to adopt mindful attitudes in the whole of their lives. Especially important is the element of non-judgmental acceptance of experience:
'Mindfulness is cultivated by assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your experience. To do this requires that you become aware of the constant stream of judging and reacting to inner and outer experiences that we are normally caught up in, and learn to step back.'

An aspect of this process that is especially valuable for people whose thought patterns lead them into depression, or who respond to stress with an 'automatic reaction triggered out of unawareness,' is learning not to identify with thoughts.
'Rather than regarding thoughts as necessarily true or as an aspect of the self, patients switched to a perspective within which negative thoughts and feelings could be seen as passing events in the mind that were neither necessarily valid reflections of reality nor central aspects of the self.

The notion of the decentered self mirrors concepts in cognitive therapy, but it is also a re-expression of the Buddhist teaching of anatta/anatman. In the spirit of this Buddhist context, Kabat-Zinn thinks that MBSR's implications in students lives extend well beyond the treatment of pathology:

'What we really offer people is a sense that there is a way of being, a way of looking at problems … that can make life more joyful and rich … and also a sense of being somehow in control. We call this way of being the way of awareness or the way of mindfulness.'

MBSR instructors also seek to embody mindful responses to problems in the way they deal with issues raised by students. They, too, adopt a stance of 'non-judgmental enquiry' and 'curiosity' rather than rushing to offer solutions. The mindful ways of being taught by MBSR is not only a solutions to particular difficulties; they are a more desirable way of living for all.

4. Is it Buddhism? And is it Engaged?

As this paper is written for a gathering of Engaged Buddhists, it seems fitting to ask of Kabat-Zinn and Glassman's work, 'Is it Buddhism?' and 'Is it engaged?' Having come to prominence as a healthcare practitioner, Kabat-Zinn's work is necessarily secular and he emphasises the universal character of mindfulness, while Glassman, for all his status within Rinzai Zen, has an ambivalent relationship with traditional Zen. But if Glassman and Kabat-Zinn are themselves reluctant to accept the label 'Buddhist', does their work nonetheless express Buddhist values?

In the case of MBSR, my reservation is that its concern with mindfulness leaves out other qualities that are valued within Buddhism. Kabat-Zinn stresses the adoption of attitudes such as patience and trust, he has little to say about affective qualities such as loving kindness (metta/maitri), the ethical precepts (sila/shila) or generosity (dana). The cultivation of wisdom (panna/prajna) perhaps lies beyond the scope of MBSR, but where Kabat-Zinn approaches this quality he speaks simply of extending mindfulness to include the whole of life. To offset this criticism we should note that Kabat-Zinn's prioritization of mindfulness reflects a similar emphasis among his Buddhist teachers, and also that Kabat-Zinn never set out to share Buddhist teachings and practices as such, but only to offer mindfulness as a clinical treatment.

Glassman, too, stresses only a particular version of Buddhist qualities. His emphases grow from Zen and behind his teaching of bearing witness with its implication of not taking sides is a Zen-derived non-dual philosophy in which subject and object, cause and effect are considered not-different. Critics of this view argue that it leaves no place for ethical judgments. Much more could be said on this subject, but I will simply note here that Glassman's version of Buddhism is by no means everyone's version.

As for engagement, both MBSR and the ZPO projects clearly grow from sensitivity to human suffering, but they emphasise the attitudes and qualities with which one perceives suffering rather than an enquiry, such as that undertaken by Dr Ambedkar, into 'the systemic causes of suffering.' This does not mean that the work of Glassman or Kabat-Zinn is not socially engaged, just that it limits the sphere of that engagement.

5. Conclusion: Pragmatic Re-expression

These reservations about Kabat-Zinn and Glassman's work point to a tendency in both to emphasise personal experience avoid conceptual clarity. They are wary of ideas about experience, including Buddhist ones. In this respect, they operate in the tradition of American pragmatism, which locates the value of concepts and beliefs in their capacity to affect how we live and act. In his book, One Dharma, Joseph Goldstein identifies a modern expression of pragmatism in what he calls 'the emerging western Buddhism', which is developing as western Buddhist teachers and practitioners make their own sense of the Buddhist teachings, drawing on various strands of the tradition according to the 'pragmatic' needs that emerge through their practice.

In this spirit MBSR and bearing witness are pragmatic attempts to formulate what works in finding an effective response to suffering. If Victorian sympathizers of Buddhism were alienated by the absence of activism, Glassman and Kabat-Zinn have found a way to combine the two, albeit at the cost of conceptual and even ethical clarity and of leaving out some important Buddhist teachings. Their work shows how Buddhist teachings can have a transforming effect on a large scale if they are presented in universally accessible ways.

The key in both cases is the value they place on embodying attitudes such as mindful awareness and bearing witness. This is a useful reminder to other socially engaged Buddhists that it can mean more than just performing social work. Buddhism locates the source of social and political suffering in the minds of human beings, so the solution also lies in our minds. Glassman and Kabat-Zinn teach Buddhists who want to change the world to exemplify in their own lives the qualities they want to see in the world, and encourage others to do so as well. This change is the method of their engaged Buddhism and also its goal.

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