The Buddhist Community as Social Capital: American Buddhism's Contribution to Social Well-Being

By James L. Fredericks

ABSTRACT

Often, the discussion of religions and their contribution to social well-being revolves around the question of how political action can be motivated by religious belief. Among Christians, the voluminous literature having to do with the theology of liberation bears witness to this fact. Among Buddhists, the growing literature having to do with engaged Buddhism does as well.[1]

This essay, however, charts a different course. While the importance of liberating Christian praxis and engaged Buddhist practice are not to be gainsaid, I want to reflect on an aspect of religions and their contribution to social well-being that has received scant, if any, attention. Buddhism and Christianity, each in their own way, promote social well-being by gathering Americans into communities of religious practice. In doing so, they provide Americans with a communitarian alternative to the individualism which drives so much of public life today. By forming social networks of a religious character, Buddhists and Christians contribute what sociologists call "social capital" to American society at large. Social capital contributes to social well-being by increasing levels of trust, cooperation, mutual aid, and collective action. I will also underscore the fact that religious communities contribute social capital to society by cultivating virtues in their adherents.

With this in mind, I want to reflect on American Buddhism and its maturation as a recognizable religious community here in the United States. As Buddhist communities become more established as institutions, Buddhism's contribution of social capital to American society increases. Therefore, I want to reflect on the communitarian aspect of Buddhism and the challenges facing it here in the United States. In order to appreciate Buddhism as social capital, I want to understand Buddhist communities in terms of what Christian theologians call a "community of character." Although I will have more to say about Buddhism in this essay than about Christianity, much of what I have to say about American Buddhism as a community of character applies _mutatis mutandis_ to American Christians as well.

Communities Of Character

"Community of character," an idea made influential by Stanley Hauerwas,[2] is a phrase taken from Christian social ethics and not the Buddhist tradition. Even still, I suspect that the idea will be intelligible to many, if not most, American Buddhists. When I refer to a community of character, I mean, first of all, a community constituted by its commitment to a living religious tradition, a community whose specific religious character distinguishes it from society at large. A Buddhist community of character is a social network based on an identifiably Buddhist view of the human person, society and the world. The "character" of a Buddhist community comes not only from the truths that are taught within this community, but also from the virtues that are cultivated there. In this respect, Buddhist communities are not like other communities within society, including Christian communities. The practice of the paramitas imparts to a Buddhist community a character that is distinctly Buddhist. If this is the case, Buddhism's contribution to social well-being will be distinct as well.

Therefore, a community is Buddhist, in a precise sense, when the dharma is transmitted to members of the community from authoritative teachers rooted within Buddhist tradition. In this respect, a Buddhist community of character might be called

a "community of interpretation." I do not mean to imply that the academic study of Buddhism (i.e. an interpretation of Buddhism from outside the tradition) should be rejected. In fact, intellectual isolation from academic studies would constitute a problem for a healthy Buddhist community. A properly Buddhist reading of the tradition, however, is an interpretation that arises out of the shared lives of Buddhist practioners. For example, the bible functions as Christian scripture in the proper sense only when read from within the moral and religious context of a practicing Christian community and for the benefit of that community. The same is true of the sacred texts of Buddhism. Outside a Buddhist community of character, the sutras can be read as literature of one sort or another. Buddhist texts function as scripture, however, only in relation to a community grounded in the Buddhist narrative and shaped by Buddhist practice.

Buddhist communities of character, therefore, are engaged in a community-based hermeneutics. A Buddhist's understanding of herself and the world arises from with a community shaped by Buddhist practice. The practice of an individual Buddhist arises from within this community to engage life and eventually returns to the community for validation. When the Buddha admonished his disciples to take nothing on his own authority and to test all by one's own experience, I do not believe that he was making a case for the privatization of the Path. I take this teaching as a religious insight that is best practiced in the context of a community characterized by instruction, effort, failure, and guidance that is both authoritative and skillful.

American Individualism

A community of character is also a social network where moral norms are able to make coherent claims on the behavior of individuals and where socially constructive virtues are recognized and cultivated. For this reason, a Christian community of character can be seen as a way to resist extreme forms of moral relativism and individualism in American society. I believe the same is true of Buddhist communities of character. Like Christianity, Buddhism can be distorted by the pathologies of American society. By forming communities of character, Buddhists, like their Christian neighbors, can resist both individualism and moral relativism. This would constitute a major contribution to social well-being.

In recent years, a significant literature has appeared, from various disciplines, on the social impact of individualism in the United States. Sociologists such as Robert Bellah, for example, distinguish between utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism in America.[3] Utilitarian individualism has to do with America's esteem for the self-reliant individual who vigorously pursues his own self-determination, independent of external restrictions. This form of individualism is associated with Calvinist virtues of thrift and self-discipline and capitalist virtues such as entrepreneurial self-reliance. Expressive individualism, on the other hand, is a romantic reaction to utilitarian individualism in which the pursuit of wealth is put aside in favor of a quest for an "authentic" self. For expressive individualism, success is not measured by material acquisition, but rather by a life rich in interior experience and self-realization through self-expression. The expressive individual is often alienated from the bureaucratic structures that reflect the bourgeois values of the utilitarian individual. Utilitarian individualism sees freedom in libertarian terms as the absence of governmental and other constraints to pursue economic goals. Expressive

individualism locates freedom in the ability of the individual to express oneself unrestrained by social conventions.

Some commentators see American individualism as a symptom of a greater social phenomenon: the bifurcation of life into two separate realms. On the one hand, Americans find themselves within a society dominated by huge bureaucratic structures (corporate and governmental) that require individuals to relate to one another competitively. On the other hand, there is the private realm of the (putatively) autonomous individual that has been created as a haven against the demands of these bureaucracies.[4] The bifurcation of American life into the public sphere of faceless bureaucracy and the private sphere of the isolated individual has been accompanied by the breakdown of the local community ties that bind people together in meaningful ways. The communal space between the isolated individual and mass society has been eroded. As bureaucracies become more dominating, the individual must retreat more and more into a purely "private" realm for a sense of personal integrity. Local community, a level of social life that neither confronts the individual with faceless power nor isolates the individual into a purely private realm, is increasingly difficult to maintain.

This division of life into mass bureaucracy and the isolated individual has been a driving force in the privatization of morality. In contemporary America, morality has largely been confined to the private preferences of the individual. When there are few, if any, public criteria for making moral decisions, morality becomes a matter of individual self-expression, an assertion of individual preference.[5] When questions of value spill into the public sphere, which they inevitably do, they are often adjudicated by power politics, not moral deliberation. Therefore, in American society, the individual is encouraged to reject the restraints of society in order to define herself for herself. Moral norms and social conventions are seen as threats to the autonomy of the individual. Ethical dogmatism and dogmatic relativism are both symptoms of our inability to ground moral values in publicly accepted criteria. Moreover, confining moral discernment to the private sphere serves the economic and political interests of the mass bureaucracies. Morality must be removed from the realm of public discourse because the bureaucracies have made society into an arena of contesting wills.[6]

The price paid to secure the moral autonomy of the individual has been high. To the extent that the privatization of morality actually serves the interests of the corporate and governmental bureaucracies, it is a defeat for ethics as public discourse. The loss of public criteria for moral discernment brings with it the erosion of the societal basis for a coherent social ethics. In this regard, the bureaucratic structures that dominate public life in the United States have a large stake in keeping morality confined to the private realm of the individual. In the absence of a basis for public moral discourse, the mass bureaucracies force individuals to compete with one another by means of politics. The bureaucracies themselves and their aims are seldom called into question. The exclusion of ethical discourse from the public sphere has meant that modern Americans live in what Robert Bellah calls a "culture of separation." Stanley Hauerwas' term for this is "living in fragments."[7]

Individualism As A Challenge To American Buddhism

Through the centuries, Buddhism has never been inert to the influences of its ambient social milieu. The dharma's eventual success in China can be attributed, in part at least, to its assimilation of Daoist thought, with its metaphysical and

cosmological interests. Assessing the impact, both positive and negative, of Buddhism's sinification has remained useful topic of discussion.[8] I believe that this will be the case with Buddhism's reception of American values as well. Not a few commentators have raised concerns regarding what they perceive as the distortion of the dharma by American individualism.

In Meiji era Japan, Natsume Soseki looked to Zen Buddhism, however tentatively, as a basis for an indigenously Japanese individualism (kojinshugi). Soseki's experiments with individualism, of course, were carried out in the context of Japan's intrusive sense of social obligation and family duty. Dogen's notion of "authentication" (sho) as "modeling yourself after yourself," therefore, meant something different to Soseki than it does in the American context of an individual isolated from communal responsibilities and morally autonomous. Robert Bellah has noted that, in the later 1960s and 1970s, the appeal of Zen Buddhism lay in its purported ability to free us from middle-class hang-ups. Enlightenment enables us to transcend the constraints imposed by social convention. Bellah has noted that social commentators as different as Fritz Perls and Warner Erhardt looked on Zen as a spiritual technology in service of expressive individualism.[9] Bellah's views are based, in part, on the work of Steven J. Tipton and his investigation of an American Zen center in the late 1970s. Initially at least, the appeal of Zen for the members of the center lay in its ability to set individuals free from conventional morality. These American Buddhists were confident that awakening would lead to morally justified behavior because awakening meant overcoming attachment to social conventions. Tipton found that members of the Zen center knew almost nothing about the precepts, let alone the paramitas.[10] In a similar vein, Robert Aitken Roshi is critical of Buddhist practice that neglect the precepts: "Without the precepts as guidelines, Zen Buddhism tends to become a hobby, made to fit the needs of the ego."[11]

Tipton's research on the Zen center in San Francisco documented not only Zen's initial dalliance with expressive individualism. His study also uncovered, among these American Buddhists, a budding recognition of the need to ground their Buddhist practice in what I have been calling a community of character. Americans were attracted to Zen Buddhism by its promise of "self-realization." As this early interest in Buddhism matured, they came to understand, not only that there was no self to realize, but in order to realize this "no-self," Buddhist practice needs to be sustained within a community that placed emphasis on moral education and the cultivation of Buddhist virtues. In hindsight, perhaps this observation must be counted the most significant finding of Tipton's research. Tipton was studying a Buddhist institution that was evolving into a community of character. In Robert Bellah's view, the gradual emergence of strong Buddhist communities is the most important development in the history of Buddhism in the United States.[12] In what follows, I want to reflect on the import of these America Buddhist communities of character for social well-being.

American Buddhism and Social Capital

Buddhist communities of character constitute what sociologist Robert Putnam calls "social capital."[13] According to Putnam, limited social networks have value in that they contribute to the larger society by elevating levels of trust, respect, cooperation and mutual aid. We may expect a society that is poor in social capital to be ill-equipped for meeting human needs and responding to social challenges. An increase in social capital constitutes an increase in social solidarity as well.

Democratic institutions require large amounts of social capital to function properly. According to Putnam, contributing social capital to American society has measurable effects on concerns as diverse as the success of children in school and mental health among the elderly. Local parent-teacher associations and scout troops, neighborhood associations and bowling clubs, soccer leagues and the local Jewish synagogue: all these limited social networks generate social capital with a measurable effect on social well-being.

Buddhist communities of character must be counted among the limited social networks that contribute social capital to American society. I want to make a few brief observations about Buddhist communities and their contribution to social well-being in the United States.

First, social capital is related to what is often called "civic virtue." As Putam understands it, the notion of social capital "calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations."[14] The virtues that contribute to a society that is humane, democratic and responsive to human need, in other words, depend on more than individuals working in isolation, no matter how charismatic they may be. [15] The civic virtues require vibrant communities. I have already noted that "character" is imparted to Buddhist communities not only by the truths that are taught, but also by the virtues that are cultivated. Clearly, Buddhist community of character should be devoted to the cultivation of Buddhist virtues.

The connection between Buddhist virtues and the promotion of social well-being through the support of civic virtue, however, is less clear. The paramitas, of course, are virtues that have been time-honored within Buddhist communities for centuries. Generosity (dana) leads to a sense of selflessness. Moral uprightness (sila) is rooted in compliance with the precepts. Forbearance (kshanti) promotes the renunciation of malice and the forgiving of injury. Vitality (virya) promotes single-minded dedication. Focused meditation (dhyana) cultivates samadhi. Wisdom (prajna) leads to the "forgetting the self." Skillful actions (upaya) is rooted in compassion. Aspiration for bodhicitta (pranidhana) seeks the liberation of all. Spiritual power (bala) resists doubt and sloth. Knowledge (jnana) brings insight into all the paramitas.[16] How do these Buddhist virtues relate to the civic virtues that are necessary for a vibrant democracy? In other words, how do the paramitas contribute to the developing the skills and articulating the values necessary for human flourishing in a complex, pluralistic and secular society like that of the United States? To my knowledge, this is a conversation that has yet to begin in earnest among American Buddhists. Answering this question, I believe, will shed much light on how Buddhism contributes to social well-being. One aspect of this discussion will have to do with establishing a complex relationship between Buddhist communities of character and American society in general. This leads me to my second observation.

Buddhist communities of character should have a complex, even ambiguous, relationship with American society as a whole. The complexity is made necessary, I believe, by Buddhism's need to make a positive contribution American society in the form of a religious voice heard within the public square of American democracy, while, at the same time, maintaining itself at a distance from that society and as an alternative to it. Here, once again, I must make clear that this reflection is coming from my perspective as an American Roman Catholic. The complexity that I think appropriate for Buddhists applies to Christians as well.[17]

The virtues extolled by a Buddhist community are different than those promoted by American individualism in both its utilitarian and expressivist forms. In this respect, a Buddhist community of character provides an alternative to values that dominate American society. Utilitarian individualism sees virtue in competitiveness. Expressive individualism extols a libertarian sense of self-assertion. Both are driven, in no small measure, by an essentialized and autonomous notion of the self that Buddhism calls into question. The Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, extols virtues that promote relatedness, selflessness, generosity and compassion, not autonomy and self-assertion. Therefore, a Buddhist community of character provides a place for practitioners of the dharma to stand apart from American society in order to call the false-views of that society into question. From the standpoint of a Buddhist community of character, both the dominant bureaucratic structures and the obsessive individualism which plague American society can be recognized and criticized. American society is in great need for compassionate and skillful criticism from Buddhists whose character has been shaped by the paramitas.

Buddhist communities should also make a positive contribution to American society by participating fully in public life. In his investigation of the Zen center, Steven M. Tipton noted that the communitarian life of these Buddhists allowed them to contribute to the transformation of American society without having to change it all at once as envisioned by the counter-culture.[18] Robert Aitken Roshi addresses this issue in his reflections on the Buddhist precepts.

> Selflessness, as taught in the Zen center, conflicts with the indulgence which is encouraged by society. The student is drawn back and forth, from outside to within the Zen center, tending to use the center as a sanctuary from the difficulties experienced in the world. In my view, the true Zen Buddhist center is not a mere sanctuary, but a source from which ethically motivated people move outward to engage in the larger community.[19]

Since a community of character is not merely a life-style enclave, membership in a Buddhist community should not mean withdrawal from American society. Less clear to me, however, is what Aitken Roshi means when he asks that "ethically motivated people move outward to engage in the larger community." The Buddhist notion of "engagement" needs to be clarified. A Buddhist community whose character requires a complex relationship with its ambient society would be the best place to pursue this clarification.

My final reflection has to do with the importance of building networks of cooperation among religious communities in American society today. There is a "dark side" to the idea of a community of character. Religious communities can contribute to the Balkanization of American society into enclaves of intolerance and exclusion. Certainly we live in an era in which the assertion of religious identity is becoming a source of social strife and even violence in many parts of the world. While I acknowledge this danger, I remain optimistic about the idea of strengthening religious communities as a way of building social capital and promoting social well-being.

My optimism is bolstered by Putnam's work. His findings confirm the ability of religious communities to engage with other social networks in American society in building new forms of social capital. Building on earlier research, Putnam argues that social capital can take two forms.[20] First, some forms of social networks are of necessity inward looking. By reinforcing group identity over-against the larger society, social capital is created in the form of the emotional support and sense of security that

accompanies a dense social network of like-minded members united by ethnicity or common religious belief. Putnam calls this form of social capital "bonding." The other form of social capital is called "bridging." In this case, social capital is generated by looking outward from the primary group in order to build social networks between groups. Where bonding networks are homogeneous and reinforce group identity, bridging networks are heterogeneous and inclusive. A Mexican Catholic parish in East Los Angeles providing social capital to recent immigrants would be a good example of a bonding network. The civil rights movement, with its penchant to form coalitions of groups working together for a common goal, would be an example of a bridging network.

I want Buddhist communities to create both kinds of social capital. Let them develop themselves into communities in which Buddhist practitioners are deeply bonded together. Given what I have said so far in this essay, perhaps this goes without saying. Less obviously, I believe that Buddhist communities of character should strive to create social capital in the form of bridging networks as well. This can happen in different ways. For example, specific Buddhist communities can build bridges of cooperation and support with Buddhist communities of other lineages. The Los Angeles region seems to be a particularly good place for this. I would be pleased to see bridging networks linking communities as different as Hsi Lai and Higashi Honganji, the Los Angeles Zen Center and Wat Thai. Along with Bangkok and Kyoto, I think of Los Angeles as a great Buddhist city. What distinguishes Los Angeles from these other Buddhists cities, however, is that an amazing number of Buddhist communities are found here. Bridging networks linking these communities would generate significant social capital not only for Buddhists, but for the well-being of the Los Angeles region as a whole.

There is a second way that Buddhist communities can generate social capital by building bridging networks. Buddhist communities can build networks with other religious traditions. Here, I have in mind both interreligious dialogue and mutual cooperation with Christians, Jews, Muslims and others here in the Los Angeles region. Does dialogue flow naturally out of interreligious cooperation or should cooperation come as a by-product of interreligious dialogue? Either way, Buddhists create social capital for American society by building bridges to believers who follow other religious paths. After receiving a group of Japanese religious leaders, Pope Paul VI read a prepared text thanking his guests for their visit. Then the pope added his own words spontaneously, "We thank you again for your visit and pray to the Lord that we may always be worthy to love you and to serve you."[21] As a Roman Catholic, I believe that service to other religious believers should be the deepest motivation for entering into interreligious dialogue. My Buddhist friends often speak of their motivation for dialogue in terms of the Bodhisattva vow to benefit all sentient beings. Whatever the motivation, when religious communities come together in dialogue for their mutual enrichment, American society at large is the beneficiary. Buddhist and Christians should commit themselves to interreligious dialogue as a way of promoting social well-being.

Notes

[1] For reflections on engaged Buddhism, see Kenneth Kraft, The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism: A New Map of the Path, (New York: Weatherhill, 1999) and Christopher S. Queen and Sallie

B. King, <u>Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia</u>, (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1996).

[2] In addition to his many articles, see Stanley Hauerwas, <u>A Community of Character</u> (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and <u>The Peaceable Kingdom</u> (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). Hauerwas' view has deep affinity with the seminal work of Alasdair MacIntyre. See <u>After Virtue</u> (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[3] For a recent discussion of the privatization of morality from a social-science perspective, see Alan Wolfe, <u>Moral Freedom:</u> The impossible Idea that Defines the Way We Live Now, (New York: W.W. Norton, c2001). See also Robert Bellah et al. <u>Habits of the Heart</u> (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 32-33.

[4] For a discussion of this bifurcation, see Macintyre, <u>After Virtue</u> pp. 33 ff. and Bellah, <u>Habits of the Heart</u>, p. 292.

[5] In the absence of public criteria for moral discernment, ethics is more a matter of a "gut reaction" than reasoned argument. Macintyre's term for the irrational character of privatized morality is "emotivism." See Macintyre, <u>After Virtue</u>, p. 11, 22-34.

[6] Macintyre, <u>After Virtue,</u> p. 31.

[7] Bellah, <u>Habits of the Heart</u>, p. 227. Hauerwas, <u>Peaceable Kingdom</u> p. 2, <u>Community of Character</u>, p. 125-128.

[8] See for example the recently reissued work by Peter N. Gregory, <u>Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism</u>, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

[9] Robert Bellah, "Dogen Today" in <u>Dogen Studies</u>, William LaFleur ed., (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1985), p. 154.

[10] Stephen Tipton, Getting Saved From the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), especially "Antinomian Rules: The Ethical Outlook of American Zen Students," pp. 95-175.

[11] Robert Aitken, <u>The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics</u> (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 3.

[12] Bellah, "Dogen Today" p. 154.

[13] See Robert Putnam, <u>Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community</u>, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 18-24. For a discussion of religious communities in particular as forms of social capital, see Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady, <u>Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics</u>, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[14] Putnam, p. 22.

[15] Hauerwas would probably refrain from any comment on American Buddhism. I am sure, however, that he would object to my claim that a Christian community of character should cultivate virtuous citizens that contribute to the flourishing of a pluralistic society. Hauerwas sees the Christian community of character as a stark alternative to the moral degradation and faithlessness of modern American society.

[16] Robert Aitken, <u>The Practice of Perfection: The Paramitas from a Zen Buddhist Perspective</u> (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1994).

[17] Here again, I am taking the notion of a community of character in a direction contrary to that envisioned by Stanley Hauerwas. For Hauerwas, the relationship between the Christian church and the "world" is clear and unambiguous. The church is the realm of peace and justice. The world is the realm of violence and injustice. Hauerwas, unlike myself, sees Christian community as a complete alternative to American society.

[18] Tipton, p. 140.

[19] Aitken, p. 3.

[20] Putnam, pp. 22-23.

[21] <u>Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teachings of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)</u>, Francisco Gioia ed., (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), #326.