

networks (including the social and political ones): while all actions have consequences, they also have many *unintended* consequences.

Here is another example, to illustrate the *unintended* consequences of actions: We know that it is a good idea to conserve resources and recycle plastic rather than produce more and more new stuff. But even recycling is complicated. It may seem like a good idea to recycle the plastic water bottle, but often, recycled plastic from rich countries is shipped to poorer countries, where it is processed, sometimes burned, and affects the people who live there. Currently, China is the world leader in processing recycled plastic. In fact, for a long time, lots of American plastic was (and some still is) shipped to China where people in many small businesses and some big factories sort and process it into reusable plastic resin. This is environmentally dangerous work, often without protective gear, so workers inhale the fumes and handle chemicals without gloves. As a result, entire communities breathe the polluted air or drink the contaminated water and the children grow up with respiratory illness and severe health problems.

Interestingly, however, burning recycled plastic from America in places such as China affects not only those in China, but it also ends up affecting the Americans who sent the plastic to China in the first place. For example, California has cleaned up some of its air through better regulations, but the increased air pollution in countries like China is so strong that it actually reaches California, erasing most of the gains in fighting smog.

It is difficult to say who *causes* the bad air, since it is the end result of many interconnected actions. We cannot really point to one individual or group that is responsible, because so many connected people and actions are part of producing it. It does become clear that even the best of intentions can become part of actions that have unintended (and at times undesirable) consequences.

This ironic cycle can plunge us into don't know, because confusion results when the responsibility is shared everywhere but unequally.

So what can be done? The serious problems in our current world cannot be solved by one person or one group of researchers. In order to develop sustainability in many different realms, we need to work together across many differences, drawing on many areas of expertise to work in teams. For researchers—and everyone else who is actively engaging their community—this teamwork requires new ways of doing things. Sometimes it requires going outside of our comfort zone, learning new skills and applying them with wisdom and creativity. Creativity, unconventional perspectives or new practical methods for engaging a situation—all these are necessary, but fully embracing the creativity and openness of this don't know is hard, as we have less and less of it as we get older and more caught in our social, political and behavioral patterns.



Photo: Allan Matthews

Facing the at times unpredictable effects our actions and interactions create highlights the importance of practicing don't know. Genuinely cultivating don't know can help us keep the mind open to recognize when and where new ideas, maybe unconventional or seemingly odd ideas and solutions, can help us gain insight and positively engage the interconnected web in which we live—and in which, just like Indra's net, we function as reflections of each other.

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Claudia Schippert has practiced with the Kwan Um School for more than 15 years, currently serves as abbot of the Orlando Zen Center and is an associate professor of humanities at the University of Central Florida.

### ► Like a Fish in Water: Five Ways Buddhist Sanghas Can Recognize the Societal Systems They Are Part of and Help to Make Them Just

Colin Beavan

*From a talk given at Providence Zen Center during the Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference on October 13, 2017*

All over the world, people are faced with the same kong-an about our suffering world. Everywhere people ask this question: Is there any hope, or is it game over? Or, why are some people in denial about climate change? Or why don't the politicians do something?

In fact, the other day I went into an interview with a kong-an teacher and he said, "Do you have any questions?" I said, "Yes, I have a kong-an for you. The world is falling apart. Why don't the politicians do something?" When he answered, he said, "*Oh, the politicians, oh, the politicians . . .*" and he shook his head and looked very sad. Then he lifted his head and he looked straight in my eyes and said, "How can I help?" Then he went back to what he was doing before: "Oh, the politicians . . ."

I like that answer because of course we're all grumbling and scared and worried, but, even when we have that, our

vow must rise to the top: how can I help? And I think for us as a sangha there might be an even better question. For us as a world, there's a better question. Instead of "How can I help?" maybe the question should also be "How can we help?"

With this article, I wanted to try to give us clear steps that we could follow to go beyond just knowing about climate change and environmental degradation—in fact, knowing about any sort of social injustice—to actually doing something. It is a five-step method.

### 1. Choose an Issue of Injustice

So the first question is to choose an issue that we care about. It could be climate change, it might be air quality, it could be water quality, it could be racism, it could be women's rights. What is an issue that your sangha particularly cares about? What is the consensus within the sangha? There could be more than one issue, but sometimes it is easier to concentrate on one issue, at least at first, especially if your sangha wants to design a program of study and action. But of course, a sangha can also choose to take action on one issue for now and then move on to another issue in the future. This way, we can honor the many concerns held by our individual sangha members.

### 2. Examine the Systems That Cause the Injustice

There is a story of a fish. It lives in water all day long and has always lived in water. It was born in water. Water is everywhere to the point that the fish doesn't ever think about the water. So one day, someone comes along and asks, "How's the water?" The fish looks surprised and says, "What water?" It has lived in water so long it doesn't even realize. That is like the societal systems we live in. We have been living in the same systems all of our lives to the point that we don't even realize things could be different.

So the first thing to do is to interrogate the systems. What's actually going into the issue at hand? For example, in the case of children who have asthma in the area of New York City, where all the garbage trucks take the trash—one of the issues I care about—there's the problem of the creation of so much trash. We have a culture of using single-use items like plastic water bottles, for example. Our national government should be regulating water quality so that we don't even need water bottles. We have air quality regulations that should say something about the trucks driving through the neighborhood. And we have the bottled water companies themselves.

The point is to interrogate: What are all the systems that contribute to the problem that I see? What can we do to make those systems visible, so we're not like the fish, asking, "What water?"

Obviously, there are ways to apply pressure to each of those systems. A common question that stops people in their tracks is, "which is the best?" What is the best work to do?

But maybe we can never know. We don't know which

way of acting is going to fix things the best because there are so many problems coming from so many sources. So there are actually solutions that seem mutually contradictory, but when added together will work tougher. So when it comes to arriving at solutions, nobody is really wrong. We need all of the solutions. And if we stop and wait until we figure out which solution will work, we'll be permanently stopped.

So, just do it!

### 3. Understand Why Spiritual Practitioners Are Important in Social Change

It's sometimes said that civic engagement, politics and religion or spirituality should all be separate. And yet some of our best, most effective civic leaders have been spiritual leaders also. For example, Vandana Shiva is a Hindu food justice leader in India. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. led the civil rights movement. Lucretia Mott was a Quaker abolitionist in the United States and a women's rights leader. Father Brent Hawkes is a priest and gay rights activist. Ingrid Mattson is a Muslim activist out of London. Rabbi Sharon Kleinman works in gay rights, and Reverend Sally Bingham is head of Interfaith Power and Light, the Christian climate organization. The list of past and present spiritual activists goes on and on: Mahatma Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, Maha Ghosananda, Thich Nhat Hanh.

There is a photograph I like of a meditator at a political protest being handcuffed while he sits in the lotus position. It's kind of shocking. The fact that the meditator is being arrested says something more than if we just saw somebody else being arrested by the police. There seems something even more unjust about a meditator being arrested.

This points to the idea that a spiritual practitioner has some particular weight when he or she becomes part of a justice movement. Of course, when any of us show up at a march or any social change event, we're just another body. That counts. We're just one more person who's there and that counts. But if we're spiritual teachers or leaders, we are perceived to have a certain moral authority. I'm not saying we do have it, but people assume we have it, and that adds weight to the cause we're working on. Also, many of us are community leaders. So that means if we choose to become involved then other people will follow us and also become involved.

Also, we have an orientation toward nonviolence. I'll tell you that many of the activists I encounter are so filled with fear and stress from doing this work for so long that nonviolence comes hard to them. They need people who are centered and clear to help in that way.

We have tools of resiliency to offer. So one of the things that I think a lot about is actually being a chaplain to communities of change. You don't even actually have to go to the march, but you go to meetings and offer some

spiritual succor. In this way we can use the tools of our wisdom inquiry to help activists not burn out.

Spiritual people are perceived to have disdain for the worldly. So if we show up somewhere, that must mean it's really important, because we supposedly don't get involved in worldly things unless they're important.

#### 4. Learn from Other Buddhists and Spiritual Communities

A lot of other Buddhist sanghas are moving ahead on issues of social change, both within their sanghas and in the work they're doing in the world. We can learn from that. They're just a phone call away. For example, the Brooklyn Zen Center is headed up by a man named Greg Snyder, who recently got transmission in the Soto Zen lineage. Prominent on their website are discussions of their commitment to inclusivity and their work to combat racism within their own sangha.

They've done some interesting work around governance. Greg said he doesn't believe that his sangha will become diverse until its leadership becomes diverse. Sangha leadership rises up as they've practiced for a long time. So how does the sangha leadership become diverse without diverse membership?

Greg has separated the role of abbot from that of teacher. Instead of an abbot they have a diverse board of directors selected from the community. Meanwhile the teachers still rise up the ranks the way they always have, by dharma transmission. So he's done a good job at it.

Another sangha, the Insight Meditation Society, is also working to come up with a handbook and ways of instruction for all of their various sanghas around the country.

At the People's Climate March there was a gigantic contingent of Buddhists. One of them was a woman who's part of the Insight community named Regina Valdez, who started an organization she calls Compassion NYC. She has three buses and has rolling retreats, with a teacher on each bus. This rolling retreat traveled down to DC to participate in the People's Climate March, which, by the way, was the biggest climate march in history. There we were, Buddhists from all sorts of different sanghas.

But Regina is just a sangha member. She's not a teacher. She's a member of the Insight Meditation Society and she decided to put this together and then reached out to other sanghas. So it doesn't have to be a teacher who leads a sangha in this work.

#### 5. Do Together Action

Somewhere in the teaching letters of Zen Master Seung Sahn, the founder of our tradition, I found this and I really like it: The student asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, how do we help people? The Zen master replied, "First, do together action."

This story reminds me of something that Kathy Park JDPSN said: with a low-class Zen master, the students follow the Zen master. With a high-class Zen master, the

Zen master follows the students. So to get involved in climate justice and do together action, we just find the people who are already doing climate justice and follow them. We don't have to figure out what to do, or how our sangha can contribute; we just have to join in.

Here is one simple way to do together action. Outside the temple, meet people in other organizations who care about what you care about and who know more about it than you do. Go and join in with that organization and learn with them, learn from them. Then lend support to their efforts. We don't have to organize our own climate march: we just have to go to somebody else's climate march. Then, finally, if it's appropriate and they're interested, we can also invite them to come back to our temple.

It's not just marches and activism that we can participate in when it comes to social change. There are things like community gardens, or beach clean-ups, or canvassing and talking to your neighbors about various issues, or joining in on community discussions. There are all sorts of things to do, and which thing you and your sangha might find just depends on what you and your sangha might enjoy doing. There are lots of people already organizing these things, and all it takes to join is to look them up online. And then doing together action.

So, in short, as a model for engaged Buddhism: One, choose an issue you care about. Two, try to understand the systems that are contributing to that problem. Three, understand that as spiritual practitioners we have a special role to play in this kind of work. Four, learn from other Buddhist sanghas. Five, just start with together action.

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Colin Beavan, PhD, attracted international attention for his yearlong lifestyle-redesign project and the wildly popular book about it, *No Impact Man*, which also inspired the Sundance-selected documentary film of the same name. Colin ran for the U.S. House of Representatives in New York's 8th Congressional District in 2012. A sought-after speaker, coach and consultant, he founded the No Impact Project; serves on the board of Transportation Alternatives; is a member of the advisory council of 350.org; teaches at Sarah Lawrence College; and is a senior dharma teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen. He is the author, most recently, of *How to Be Alive: A Guide to the Kind of Happiness That Helps the World*.

Photo: Francis Lau

