

**POWER, FREEDOM, COMPASSION:  
TRANSFORMATIONS FOR A BETTER WORLD**

**CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION**

**Problems and Themes**

When I began my working career in the mid-1960s it seemed perfectly obvious to me and my friends (and indeed to most people that I talked to) that although the world was in a dreadful state, because our parents' generation had of course made a total mess of things, *our* generation knew more or less what needed to be done to rectify matters. Forty-five years later history has told a different story and humanity seems to have profited little from our endeavours: more gadgets, yes, but no less global malnutrition, staggering inequality and warfare. So now, nearly half a century later, the world that my grandchildren will inherit remains stricken with injustice, oppression and suffering, in spite of universal expressions of indignation and an endless succession of ineffectual proposals and policies. Hence the question implied in the second part of my title: how can we *transform* this world, in which humanity seems unable to learn from its obvious and repeated mistakes and seems intent on destroying its means for survival? Since our problems have turned out to be so complex and intractable they are clearly in need of some radical re-thinking, but where shall we look for new approaches? What resources do we need in order to transform our conceptions and experiences of, for example, democratic political processes and social institutions that empower its citizens, of justice, well-being, and our various creative capacities, as individuals and as groups?

In seeking these resources I will focus on issues of *Power, Freedom, and Compassion*. Because I believe that in order to have any chance of understanding and transforming our world :

1) We need to focus on the processes of institutional power by which people are oppressed and by which this oppression is denied and disguised, and also on the ways in which people could nevertheless construct their own creative countervailing power: the power to resist and to change;

2) We need to set our analysis of power within a model of human freedom, not as a theory or a distant ideal, but as an urgent goal, as a sustained practice and as a criterion by which oppression and injustice are always understood to be unacceptable and indeed pathological;

3) Our model of freedom needs to establish practical ways in which human beings are enabled to increase their capacity for compassion, without which all attempts to use our freedoms to devise radical change will, in the end, come to nought.

More precisely, and linking these various considerations, the argument of this book is that in order to address the challenges posed by the destructiveness of our current political and cultural institutions we urgently need to synthesize the lessons we can learn from the traditions of Marxism and Buddhism. This will strike many readers as at least unexpected and possibly even bizarre. 'Marxism' has become inextricably linked with images of the inefficient planning and brutal repression that brought about the collapse of twentieth century communist states. And 'Buddhism' tends to evoke images of shaven monks seeking refuge from the social world through mystical beliefs and ritual chanting. In contrast to all of this, needless to say, I will argue that the lessons of Marxism and

Buddhism can be clearly distinguished both from the lamentable results of twentieth century experiments in state communism and from any form of escapist mysticism. I will suggest that, taken together and complementing one another, they provide essential methods of thinking and practice indicating a way forward from our current dilemmas. Thus, for example, I will be focusing on Marx's critique of capitalism and its self-justifying ideology, and on his carefully theorized model of human capacity. And I will be focusing on those aspects of Buddhism that in a quite different way also provide a carefully theorized model of human capacity, and on its experiential methods for developing the forms of freedom and compassion required for both personal and social transformation.

When I began this project in 2004 it seemed Quixotic almost to the point of implausibility. But since then we have had an economic collapse of such proportions that for a time even mainstream commentators talked, briefly, about a 'crisis of capitalism', leading to a short-lived boom in sales of Marx's *Capital*. The term 'bankers' bonuses' has become public shorthand for systematic injustice as well as individual greed, and there is a general and continuing sense that an alien, untrustworthy, inadequately regulated financial system is undermining the well-being of populations even in countries where until quite recently widespread affluence had been taken for granted. As a result, we are currently experiencing almost unprecedented levels of popular pessimism (combining resignation and cynicism) concerning our current economic and political institutions, both national and international. Like a 'tsunami', the economic crisis is symptomatic of deep faults in the underlying structure of our institutions as, with terrifying force, it sweeps away arrangements for financial, social and medical welfare that we had come to take for granted.

At the same time there is a widespread sense of *moral* crisis, a sense that we will not be able to address the problems concerning our economic and political institutions without a radical ethical and even, in some sense, spiritual renewal. The 'spirituality' shelves of large bookstores suggest a growing interest in arguments asserting the importance of a *personal* search for meaning and self-realisation, as an essential part of the remedy for our destructive relationships and fractured societies. 'Compassionate' states of mind have become a focus of inquiry both for theologians and for neurologists [1] and there is even an official and anxious search by politicians for the sources of 'happiness' [2]. 'Spiritual intelligence' has been formulated as the 'ultimate' human capacity: 'the intelligence with which we address and solve problems of meaning and value [providing] a fulcrum for growth and transformation' [3]. And scientific agreement is accumulating that the central method of Buddhism, 'meditation', has a clear and replicable effectiveness in creating psychologically 'healthy' states that are of substantial medical and cultural significance [4].

The motive underlying my argument is, above all, practical, personal and political. I fear that without some radical changes in our understandings and our practices the human race may not survive more than a couple of hundred years; and that my children (possibly), my grandchildren (probably) and *their* children (almost certainly) will – along with the rest of humanity – face a bleak future: whole countries engulfed by rising sea levels; widespread and unstoppable environmental pollution; massive inequalities of well-being both in individual states and globally, which brutally exclude the impoverished from fortified enclaves of affluence; politically fostered inter-communal hatred; and permanent worldwide wars over dwindling resources of fuel, food and water.

At one level *Power, Freedom, Compassion* is intended as a serious contribution to current debates concerning the ‘renewal’ of democratic socialism and the nature of ‘socially engaged’ Buddhism, but I am not, mainly, addressing my argument to Buddhists or to Marxists. So at an early stage in the following chapters I will explain why, surprisingly perhaps, an argument addressed to a *general* readership about contemporary politics and culture is nevertheless based on Buddhism and Marxism. I will argue that *because of* their obvious differences the two traditions provide us with insights and guidelines for action that *complement* one another, each having strengths that the other lacks. And that *in spite of* their differences the two traditions have crucial and helpful points of *convergence*, so that, together, they can form the basis of a unified understanding.

And seeking a synthesis of apparently different traditions is also a way of trying to develop genuinely new ways of thinking and new forms of practice. Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, a member of the first Indian government after independence, and who drafted the independence constitution largely inspired by the Buddhist critique of the injustices of the caste system, must have caused some surprise when he referred to the Buddha as ‘a democrat’. And when he went on to suggest that only Buddhism can produce liberty, equality and fraternity, and to include in a list of *Buddhist* teachings: ‘Private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another’ [5]. But in doing so he provided historical authority for the sort of arguments I will present. And so I hope that both Buddhists and Marxists will find my accounts of ‘their’ traditions acceptable even though they are inevitably selective.

I don’t apologise for being selective. All innovative systems of thought (such as Marxism and Buddhism) arise out of particular historical circumstances, some of which gradually cease to be relevant, and all traditions of thought are continuously evolving. Consequently there is no escaping our responsibility for selecting and interpreting traditional material in the light of its helpfulness for our own current historical circumstances and cultural concerns.

I have tried, therefore, in formulating my accounts of Buddhism and Marxism to avoid as far as possible all specialist terminology and to present my argument in familiar terms. This is because I am trying to ‘rediscover’ for both traditions the contemporary validity of concepts and values that are already, subconsciously as it were, quite familiar in public awareness, but which have been removed from current debate by the ideological pressures justifying current institutions and the assumptions that underpin them. Thus, the Marxist critiques of the injustices of capitalism and the Buddhist critiques of the delusions of egotistical greed are, in a sense, ‘nothing new’, but they have been effectively sidelined. The general minimizing of their significance is justified ostensibly because they are claimed to be peripheral or even old-fashioned. But such claims are put forward, I will argue, precisely because these ‘familiar’ and supposedly no longer relevant critiques pose radical challenges to the various types of vested interest underlying much of our current thinking. They ask awkward and urgently needed questions about ethics and justice, about the exercise of power in our institutions and about how seriously we take our common humanity.

From this perspective, then, my project generates a large agenda of urgent topics: democracy, equality, justice, political change, work, education, spirituality, the nature of the self, creativity, friendship, love, and, above all, perhaps, how the culture we inhabit

continuously undermines our understanding of these things. It is above all an exploration and analysis of the general principles and forms of action we need and an attempt to clarify the links between them.

But, supporting this general argument there is also, of course, my own experience, both my indirect experience through radio, TV, newspapers books and films and also my direct personal experience. I have spent my life as a teacher and as an educational researcher and innovator, and my overall perspective is that although our problems are *created* at the level of politics and economics, their *solution* must involve *educational* processes: not only increasing our understanding but, more especially, transforming our emotional impulses and the ethics of our social relationships. In other words, without including the transformation of our educational institutions, all other attempts at transforming our world are incomplete and destined (in the long term at least) to fail.

And this is why education is the focus of my final chapter. It was when I looked back on my own school years that I became aware of the corrupting affect of continuous competition as a social principle. It was through my experience at an elite university that I became acutely aware of the class origins of success. It was through many years of researching ways of helping to enhance the experience of professional workers that I came to realise how so many people's creative potential is regularly stifled by the normal processes of institutional life. Arising from this work, issues of truth, justice and ethics came to seem inescapable and yet almost insoluble. And it was my experience of meditation, while simply 'finding out about Buddhism' for professional reasons, that I came to appreciate how Buddhism might address those issues and indicate a way forward, both in practice and in principle.

### **Outline of the Argument**

On June 13<sup>th</sup> 2006 the BBC reported that in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu children as young as five were working 16 hours a day with sulphur-blistered fingers producing matches for export, and that some of them were forced to do this by their impoverished families because they owed money to local factory owners [6]. It is easy to be provoked by this (and many similar reports) into a combination of outrage and despair at the brutal insouciance concerning the sufferings of others that is part of the peculiar genius of capitalism. On the other hand, we can also remind ourselves of the many thousands of people all over the world engaged in voluntary work, campaigning and protest on behalf of the vulnerable, indicating (in contrast) the irrepressible courage, altruism and compassion at work in the human spirit. So, in Chapter Two I outline the basis for my own attempt to balance outrage and optimism in subsequent chapters. I start by indicating some of the worrying – indeed horrifying – aspects of current politics that suggest an urgent need for deep-seated changes at both the political and the individual level. And then I contrast these anxieties with some hopeful developments in current events and some general grounds for preserving a belief in our various creative and compassionate capacities.

Chapter Three is a justification of my choice of Marxism and Buddhism as the basic resources for my overall argument. It begins with an account of the particular strengths of the Marxist analysis of society, emphasizing especially its focus on the ideological processes by which injustices are disguised. I then present an account of the Buddhist critique of experience and show how it explains, without recourse to metaphysical beliefs,

that we all possess the capacity to transcend our normal experience. The chapter concludes with an emphasis on forms of convergence between Marxist and Buddhist analyses. First I indicate how in different ways both Marxism and Buddhism contrast our conventional individualism with a deeper level at which human being is fundamentally social. I then describe how both traditions are concerned with forms of understanding and action that directly address the causes of human suffering.

In Chapter Four I consider possibilities for transformation at the level of economic and political institutions. I start with the implications of Marx's analysis of a 'classless' society and its parallels with some Buddhist principles. I then consider why effective radical change always requires us to improvise links between specific conditions and general principles. The third section focuses on the way in which political ideology disguises the underlying structures of capitalist society, so that effectively targeted action to transform institutions requires us to 'transform our knowledge'. And in the final section I argue that effective and sustainable transformation of economic and political institutions will also require practices that can bring about a transformation of our ethical being.

Chapter Five indicates how the resources needed for this ethical transformation can be provided through Buddhist meditation practices. In the first section I distinguish between the secondary role played by meditation in other religious traditions from its central and primary role in Buddhism. I then outline the practices of Buddhist meditation, and the theory that underlies them, in terms of a sequence of stages: awareness, mindfulness and the development of compassion. In a series of 'political notes' I suggest how these efforts to transform our selves and our relationships have practical implications for making our efforts to transform institutions more effective. Finally, I suggest that the Buddhist conception of a community based on developmental companionship can provide us with a general model for 'educative' institutions, anticipating my emphasis on the role of education in chapter eight.

Chapters Six and Seven discuss two of the most important resources for the transformations we need: the universal human impulse of 'creativity' and the widespread belief in 'democratic' forms of governance. The general issue of human creativity is discussed in Chapter Six. Craftwork, the arts, and sport are discussed in turn, using both Marxist and Buddhist arguments to indicate both their potential capacity for transforming our awareness and the limitations and distortions imposed by their current institutional forms.

Chapter Seven argues that although the almost universal commitment to some version of 'democracy' is in principle a basis for optimism, its current forms need radical transformation. The different sections of the chapter analyse, in turn, the problems created for political debate by the overriding emphasis on electoral competition; the mistrust between electors and their representatives created by bureaucratic institutions; the inadequacy of 'free markets' as a basis for democratic values; the restriction of political awareness created by corporate control of the media; and (finally) the way in which democratic participation is undermined by the systematic creation of political myth and cultural illusion.

In Chapter Eight I draw together the various strands of the overall argument in previous chapters that focus on implications for education. I suggest that although the concept of 'education' (like 'creativity' and 'democracy') evokes a potentially transformative

awareness of human possibilities, current educational institutions and relationships serve to restrict its scope and to deny its radical potential. The chapter presents a critique of these limitations. It argues that the supposed ideal of meritocracy is a surrender of the educational ideal to the values of a competitive and individualistic society and presents two directions for radical initiatives: at the level of the curriculum and, more widely, at the level of social and political action.

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## Notes

1) See Karen Armstrong: *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Random House, 2011; Paul Gilbert: *The Compassionate Mind*, Constable, 2010, especially p.288, p. 555

2) On November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, launched a survey aiming to measure ‘the nation’s happiness’, implicitly criticising (without any apparent sense of irony) his own government’s emphasis on wealth accumulation and economic growth.

3) Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall: *Spiritual Intelligence – The Ultimate Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, 2001, p. 3; p.7

4) See, for example, the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre

5) Ambedkar: ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’, in *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, Education Dept, Government of Maharashtra, 1987, p. 451, p. 462, p. 442

6) *Child Labour – India’s ‘Cheap Commodity’*, report by Navdip Dhariwal, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>)