Social Issues in San Francisco: Perspectives from Global Buddhisms

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Social Issues in San Francisco: Perspectives from Global Buddhisms

A Project of the Students in the course "Buddhist Paths in Asia and North America"

Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of San Francisco
San Francisco, Ca.

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Welcome and an Introduction

As you will soon discover, this wonderfully insightful collection of course papers combines research into San Francisco's urban problems with perspectives from Buddhist Studies. It's not a combination of topics one expects to see in academic writing. In fact, the project itself was not in the original course design, and yet circumstances unique to the spring semester of 2020 required it. Here's a brief review of how this happened.

The University of San Francisco is located in the center of the city, with Golden Gate park nearby as are some less-attractive neighborhoods downtown and elsewhere. We are thus perfectly positioned to offer a course on a range of Buddhist topics in the modern period, and then ask our students to volunteer their services in the wider community. One of the learning goals is to imagine the experience of a Buddhist bodhisattva (a fully-enlightened "saint") whose vow is to enter nirvana only after assisting each living being to get there first.

After starting the semester with an overnight retreat at a Zen center near Santa Rosa, the class was ready to begin what is called "service learning" in the community. Non-profit organizations are contacted, duties assigned, supervisors identified, and work begins in earnest. However, the gradual arrival of the Corona virus in the spring of 2020 upended these plans in significant ways.

Despite their outreach and volunteering, students were no longer permitted to interact directly with meal kitchens, tutoring, aid assists, distributing information to neighborhoods, working with HIV/AIDS patients, and so on. We had to come up with a new way to do impersonal research into San Francisco's many social problems and needs. At the same time, students needed to demonstrate ways in which there could be a connection between, let's say, the situation of San Francisco's homeless situation and Buddhist "emptiness."

The class was divided into twelve writing teams who then chose topics from a grid of ideas, first-come-first-served. If one looks at the topics in this essay coming from Buddhist studies, you'll quickly see they are fairly fundamental and are found in almost any introductory course. What makes them special and relevant to our moment is in their creative application to the social problems and issues of San Francisco.

It is our heartfelt hope that you, the reader, can understand some of the significant challenges facing the city of San Francisco, which will exist long after the Corona virus is subdued. The opportunities provided by ideas and practices from Buddhist studies serve as practical applications of both historical and recent understandings about the many types of Buddhisms in the world today. It is truly a historical moment full of twists, surprises, disappointments, and discoveries, all of which are reflected in the work of the class on this project. Their excellent research and cooperation to get their essays written in a collaborative fashion is a testament to their understanding. I feel truly privileged to have had such a fine group of students and I want to thank them here for their solid work on this project. As the old sutra goes, "may we all be happy, well, safe, and at ease..."

John Nelson
Professor

(Students listed with their initials did not return permission-to-publish documents. Their work is highly valued and so may be updated in the future with their real name)
Everything is not how it once was just a few months ago. It was as if we woke up and entered into a new and unnerving world. Earlier this year, the deadly infectious Coronavirus began to slowly spread throughout the world. As it entered the United States, specifically the Bay Area, we began to feel the effects in our immediate community. It was no longer a crisis that we could watch empathetically from the comfort of our homes. We are now forced to take precautionary measures to contain the spread of the virus through social distancing. Schools, businesses, and organizations have closed all throughout the country.

During this time of uncertainty, it is easy to fall into a dark place of hopelessness. As a community, we have this opportunity to take stock and identify the areas that need our help. One of the areas that has seen an increasing amount of need in San Francisco is the health needs of our community. In the media, we see constant coverage of the doctors and nurses on the front lines battling to control the virus. But we don’t see representation of the at risk communities in the city that are the most vulnerable to the effects of government policy and shortages of available resources.

In this essay, we will be exploring the overall strengths and weaknesses of San Francisco’s response to the needs of its citizens' health care needs as it relates to the current pandemic and beyond. We will also touch upon one of the core perspectives of Buddhism and how dukkha, or suffering, can be applied to the current situation in our city. Together with the subsequent essays of this document, our introductory remarks show the way for further exploration into topics of concern in San Francisco such as healthcare, social justice, housing inequality and climate change.
It would be impossible to talk about the current strengths and weaknesses of our healthcare system in San Francisco without mention of the Coronavirus. Looking at this situation through a macro lens it is easy to identify some of the strengths that San Francisco had that allowed it to be somewhat successful in this time of hardship. One of them is that our politicians and citizens were willing to listen to the science and data coming from organizations and research facilities.

Another one of the most evident strengths in our city’s response to the pandemic was the decision to declare a “Shelter in Place” in early March. Because of this, resources were able to be allocated appropriately in preparation to contain an outbreak of the virus as people reduced their risk of infection. Many of the tech companies headquartered in San Francisco enacted mandatory work from home for all of their employees in mid February prompting citizens to begin preparing and reducing the amount of contact with others.

Although these are positive steps that we as a community are doing to mitigate the spread of the virus, some faults in San Francisco’s health care initiatives have become more apparent when taking a closer look. As mentioned earlier in the essay, the Shelter in Place order has forced thousands of businesses and institutions all throughout the city to shut down until it is deemed safe enough to open. According to Payscale, the cost of living in San Francisco is 80% higher than that of the rest of the United States (Web). Mayor London Breed announced on April 29, 2020 that over 60,000 San Francisco residents have applied for unemployment (Web). Many have fled the city in a last ditch effort to escape the financial repercussions that living in San Francisco during the pandemic has presented.

Annie Vainshtein, a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle, reported on how the city’s high cost of living has affected the lives of San Franciscans in the midst of dealing with the virus saying:

The coronavirus pandemic, it seems, has prompted a minor but disorienting Bay Area exodus — back to childhood homes after mass layoffs, or to states where living is more viable on the salaries that remain. The urgent time has forced many people into one of two dimensions — to freeze where they are in hibernation, or to quickly make gargantuan life decisions in the 11th hour. (Web)

For many of those who remain in San Francisco face many challenges especially in terms of healthcare. The hardships that had existed prior to the pandemic have not gone away and are beginning to make themselves more apparent.

When we speak of the Buddhist idea of suffering we refer to it as dukkha. It’s almost synonymous with the actual word “suffering,” except the spectrum for its definition is much more inclusive. There’s the common definition for dukkha, which roughly equates to suffering or dissatisfaction, but there are also three different types of dukkha; which are all present in our current crisis. The first is painful sensations which can be mental or physical (Chodron). This is present within the hospitals that treat the sick and within the aching hearts of those at home wishing for their safety and wellbeing. The current situation puts a great strain on those within our community; for example, some are at risk working because they can’t afford not to, some are immunocompromised and have to be wary of their every action, and there are some who still advocate and protest the for the opening of non-essential businesses and the end of the stay at home order.

The next dukkha, the dukkha of change, explains that over the constant cycle of suffering and rebirth, otherwise known as samsara, we are only able to experience temporary happiness (Chodron). The sudden explosive rise of the coronavirus due to our own lack of preparation in the country caused us all to shift our ways of life or our plans in some way or another. For the students at USF, we were kicked out of our homes and dormitories and are now fighting
to keep up with our academic workload in this confusing time. Our future graduations, family visits, and celebrations (although non-essential), were suddenly toppled by the widespread pandemic; almost proving to us how quickly everything can be taken away.

This speaks to the Buddhist idea of impermanence, where all that exists is impermanent and nothing lasts. The way all of our future plans have been uprooted by the coronavirus is the very embodiment of impermanence; it’s a reminder of how quickly everything can change, ignoring your past way of life.

The last dukkha is of conditioning, where the five aggregates (what makes up a sentient being according to Buddhist studies) are constantly put under the influence of mental afflictions such as the three poisons—ignorance, animosity, and attachment—and bad karma, which enables us to carry out actions under that influence, thus repeating the cycle of dukkha (Chodron). We’ve seen countless examples of panic and fear enabling us to do binge shopping and over prepare at the expense of others, while ignorance encourages others to act when they shouldn’t.

In the first couple of weeks of the virus, grocery stores went barren as shoppers hoarded all of the essential goods while others who didn’t have the means of accessing the grocery store were left with dust. Despite the rising death toll and the news surrounding the pandemic, people have been seen not practicing social distancing, putting themselves and others like the immunocompromised at risk, for the sake of a “good time.” People have been shifting blame all over the internet, exposing and encouraging xenophobic mindsets, only to misdirect their animosity towards people of Asian descent.

These mindsets and examples of blame-shifting are similarly perpetuated by the executive branch as our president himself refers to the virus as the "Chinese Virus" and has halted the funding of the World Health Organization in order to hold them accountable for his own administration’s lack of preparedness. Through whichever definition of dukkha you look at, it is clear that our community is suffering and in need of aid, reassurance, and leadership at national levels.

From any Buddhist perspective, the purpose of working with dukkha is for its cessation. For example, in the Zen tradition, the ideal relationship with dukkha is one where you can identify its causes and choose whether they will cease or resurface again. We can develop this relationship with dukkha through various practices used in Buddhist traditions such as generating great compassion, reacting to dukkha with peace instead of negative emotions, and the “taking and giving” practice. This is where one takes on the dukkha of others with compassion, uses it to eradicate their own self-centeredness, and then wishes them joy and the alleviation of dukkha. We believe these practices to help develop a relationship with dukkha should be used in light of COVID-19, to help relieve our community and others of their suffering.

Even if the pandemic has revealed strengths within the San Francisco healthcare community, it is still in a highly disadvantaged position when compared to systems in Europe and East Asia such as Germany, Norway, Denmark, Korea, Taiwan, and more. Even before the pandemic was in full effect according to the San Francisco Community Health Needs Assessment in 2019, 24% of adults in SF have not had a routine check-up in the past year, 51% have not had a flu shot in the past year, and 8% do not have a usual place to go for medical care. Now because of the pandemic, residents are in an even worse position because San Francisco’s strikingly high cost of living paired with the rising unemployment rate only worsens peoples’ opportunities for safe, accessible healthcare.
The least we can do to help alleviate the dukkha of others in the current situation is to try and be active and engage with the community's needs. Developing the proper relationship with dukkha for the cessation of suffering in the community will be more than just mindful thinking, meditation, and prayers. Being actively aware and compassionate could come in the form of spreading awareness for fundraisers, buying delivery or pick-up from local businesses, making and donating masks and other useful healthcare items, respecting social distancing barriers, refusing to hoard essential items from the grocery store, or checking in on a friend to see how they’re holding up in light of the current situation.

These types of actions will go a long way in the alleviation of dukkha, even if you won’t get to experience the results first-hand. However, we acknowledge that these actions don’t necessarily fix the housing, poverty, and healthcare needs within the community, as those are connected on a deeper level and much harder to remove. But this does not mean that our actions involving the pandemic are for naught; we will work to expose and reduce the needs of the San Francisco community with compassion and solidarity. We have no doubt that our colleagues will examine the pandemic with further detail and through the lens of different Buddhist concepts in the coming pages of this project.

Works Cited


Compassion and the flourishing of all sentient beings often translates to social justice and service. The public good is when one benefits from a good yet does not take it away from others. For example, right now during the COVID pandemic, people of higher socioeconomic status are benefiting from having access to masks, getting groceries delivered, having access to proper health care and higher accessibility to COVID-19 testing. Ideally, those benefiting from these primary goods would not lessen the accessibility for those of lower socio-economic status, but, unfortunately that is not the case.

Those who are not middle class or above are suffering at the advantage of those who have access to masks, grocery delivery and the luxury to stay home and not work. The whole country is struggling to properly take care of, and equally distribute, public services. In this essay we will define the meaning of public goods and how it exists in this country. We will then examine public good services in the city of San Francisco and how it compares to the rest of the country. Through this comparison we will show that the Buddhist concept of the Three Jewels is comparable to the public goods structure in San Francisco.

The public good is that which benefits the well-being of the public within a given society. According to Tejvan Pettinger, the public good has two “primary restrictions: they must be non-rivalrous and non-excludable. This means that people who did not pay into the public good must be able to access it, and that the resource does not become scarcer as people utilize it” (Pettinger 2019).

Public goods include structures such as health care, safety and education. Public goods are essential to the well-being and flourishing of all members within a society.

Admittedly, the United States falls short in how it provides public social goods to their citizens. Public goods such as education and health care are hardly available to all citizens. Unfortunately, this country’s social structures function so that the rich benefit, while those who do not have socioeconomic power are marginalized and left to struggle.

Even though this country falls short in how it distributes public goods to its people, some cities are affected more than others. For instance, the city of San Francisco is known for its progressive and liberal policies. In this essay we will explore San Francisco’s policies on the public good relating specifically to health care.

Out of all the public goods, it is undeniable that health care is essential to the wellbeing of every individual. If we apply scholar John Rawl’s “hypothetical veil of ignorance” which removes all personal bias when deciding on public good structures, it would become clear that free health care is a primary and essential good that should be equally accessible to all (Rawls). As we are confronted with the Coronavirus crisis, the fragility and shortcomings of the country’s health care system has become clearer than ever.

While it is important to note the flaws in the country’s healthcare system and the dire need for reformation, the city of San Francisco offers a small glimmer of hope. San Francisco has the country’s only local law designed to create universal health care. The San Francisco Health Care Security Ordinance “provides access to health services for the uninsured while requiring employers to contribute financially towards employees health care costs” (Jacobs, Lucia). This law created in 2018 by Mayor London Breed ensures that all workers have access to proper health care. Along with this, Healthy San Francisco (a program created in
is a continual source of care for undocumented people. These programs are steps in the right direction.

The concepts introduced thus far fall in line with traditional Buddhist ideologies. All Buddhists everywhere accept the three jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) as a fundamental part of their practice. To proclaim devotion to the three jewels is the essence of being a Buddhist.

The first Jewel, the Buddha, is understood both as the historical figure of the Buddha and as a symbol of Buddhahood. As the first to reach enlightenment and infinite wisdom, the Buddha represents the achievement of nirvana.

In the case of the city of San Francisco, the current mayor Ms. London Breed, would symbolize the Buddha. Although she is not enlightened, she stands in a position of power and authority. Breed demonstrated wisdom, compassion and insight when, in anticipation of the gravity of the Coronavirus, she was the first in the nation to declare a national emergency and place the city on lockdown.

The second jewel, the Dharma, is often understood as “Buddhist law”. It is the teachings and doctrines acquired from the Buddha’s words. To follow the Dharma is to be on the path towards enlightenment and truth. The Dharma symbolizes the rules and policies that maintain order in San Francisco and play an essential role in managing the public good. An example of this would be programs mentioned earlier such as Healthy San Francisco. These programs provide service and security to people, thereby establishing a reciprocity based on respect and justice. If people feel their needs are being honored and respected, they will reciprocate by following and protecting the established rules.

Sangha means “community,” and the sangha, the third of the three jewels, is variously interpreted. For some, it means the community of those who have followed the path of the buddha and achieved nirvana. For others, it means the community of monks and nuns. Most broadly, it refers to the community of followers of the Buddha” (Lopez, 16). For the sake of this paper, the Sangha will represent the community, or the general public. The third jewel, the general public, is extremely important. Without the third jewel, the general public, there would be no one and nothing to apply the three jewels to!

As we have shown, public goods in the United States are in desperate need of reformation. The city of San Francisco is headed in the right direction when it comes to fair and just distribution of health care. Even so, there is a lot that needs to be improved upon in order to equally distribute all public goods to the public. The Three Jewels remind us that a well-functioning society depends on the reciprocity between the established governments (Buddha) and the community (Sangha). This reciprocal harmony will lead to a wiser and more compassionate world.
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San Francisco's Restorative Justice Through a Meditative Lens

Stephanie Lew and Tiffany Tse

We have all seen the discrimination that people of color go through in terms of not being able to access health services or education services. Of all the injustices that exist, wealth inequality, housing segregation, and racial discrimination are three that are seen in San Francisco. As a response, many turn towards institutions that promote social justice to aid those who face these issues.

"Social justice" is the idea that all people should have access to well-being, opportunity, health, education, and even employment regardless of their social status (Web). This also intersects with economic justice because a redistribution of wealth and economic opportunities often affects the social aspect of peoples' injustices. While there is typically a response to injustices on an institutional level, there are also those who feel motivated to act on their own in their own communities.

America has a long history of systemic inequality. One is the wealth inequality cycle that entails the unequal distribution of wealth by race, which leaves people of color economically insecure and with fewer opportunities to change their economic status (Web). The San Francisco Bay area, in particular, has seen a widening gap in recent years due to the influx of workers. In San Francisco alone, SF Chronicle reports that in 2017, “earnings for white residents were $70,200, while for people of color, they were $41,500” (Web). Many residents say that this widening wealth gap comes from the influx of people who come to San Francisco and Silicon Valley for jobs in the tech industry.

As gentrification kicks in and housing in the San Francisco Bay Area becomes more expensive, many low-income residents of color have become displaced. This type of housing segregation has existed since World War II during a large housing shortage and an increase in homelessness as people returned from war. Many people of color, more specifically the Black population, were unable to receive housing loans based on redlining maps drawn by the Home Owners Loan Corporation that informed banks of neighborhoods they believed to be “hazardous” (Web).

Separation of wealth began to form and benefit white homeowners and real estate brokers because they were able to invest the...
wealth that was removed from communities of color in things that they could profit off of in the future. The present-day Bay Area still shows the lasting effects of housing segregation as gentrification and displacement increases in the core of the cities which further pushes out low-income residents, more specifically Black and Latinx populations (Web).

Health is another social issue that intersects with the environment. The hazardous materials from factories have caused and continue to cause many health issues in communities of color (Web). On the redlining map drawn by the HOLC, some neighborhoods were labeled “hazardous,” and researchers from UC Berkeley and UCSF have found that residents who live in “hazardous areas” are more likely to suffer from asthma-related issues as “... the amount of airborne diesel particle matters were nearly twice as high” in those areas when compared to the non-hazardous areas (Web).

In San Francisco, the current COVID-19 pandemic reiterates the health issues that intersect with housing segregation. According to the City and County of San Francisco, as of Monday, April 20, 2020, the highest number of cases are located in the Bayview, Hunters Point, Mission, and Potrero Hill neighborhoods (Web). These areas typically and historically house low-income residents of color, and are often discriminated against not only by the systems that govern them, but also by those around them.

The injustices above all have one theme in common: racial inequality. People of color have long been perceived differently and treated poorly for “foreign” characteristics, including hair texture, skin color, distinct facial features, or cultural practices. America’s systemic oppression of people of color began in the 1600s, stemming from slavery and segregation, and restricts many people to limited socioeconomic resources such as health care, wealth, and adequate housing (Web).

Discrimination still occurs in the present-day, and due to the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in racially charged actions towards Asian individuals in America. One example comes from a state leader, Texas Senator John Cornyn, who assumed that COVID-19 originated from dishes in Chinese cuisine because “people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that” (Web). Statements like this one are dangerous because it perpetuates a Western stereotype that is often expressed to people of Asian descent in America, even if they are not from China or are fully Asian-American.

There is also a huge cultural difference that comes with the COVID-19 response and discrimination. Unlike Asia’s respect for face masks, America’s unfamiliarity with this act of “collective courtesy to others” for sickness prevention, in turn, generates fear and encourages hasty, racist remarks (Web). The notion of “diseased” Asian mask wearers was reinforced when Amanda Law, a mask wearer and dog walker along San Francisco’s Great Highway, was insulted by a woman crying “why doesn’t she go back to where she came from!” (Web). Actions like this are highly recurring and elicit the same anti-Asian sentiment that existed in the 1800s with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, one of the first immigration laws of America (Web).
The social injustices of wealth inequality, housing segregation, health access, and racial discrimination are constantly met with counteractions as organizations do their best to inform institutions of their systemic issues and educate the public. Along the lines of wealth inequality and health access, Stephanie (paper author), noticed a gap in the access of educational services and food access for low income families of color with young children in San Francisco. This motivated her to volunteer at Wu Yee Children’s Services where low income San Franciscan families of color had child care, nutritional food, and early education access.

Growing up in a competitive learning environment, Tiffany (paper author) developed a passion for sharing her knowledge with others to help them overcome their weaknesses within all subjects. She tutored K-6 children from underserved communities of color in Fremont Main Library and Fame Public Charter School, ensuring students of all backgrounds and abilities are not discouraged and presented with equal educational opportunities. Actions like this seem minuscule when compared to the system as a whole, but they can demonstrate a kind of activism that is found in Buddhism. Buddhism is a religion that can be closely tied with social justice. In particular, the practice of meditation contains several themes from different Buddhist traditions that can relate to the topic of social justice: mindfulness, awareness, and visualization.

Stripped of its spiritual roots, mindfulness is a secular technique that enables development of a sense of focus and well-being resulting in improved maintenance and awareness of thoughts, emotions, and presence in the moment (Web). Its goal is to train the constantly wandering mind to observe the present reality without judgment. Practitioners are presented with the opportunity to identify behavioral patterns that contribute to the suffering of the human population when struggling to detach from their emotions during sitting or walking meditation. Rather than urgently responding to social injustice with anger and hatred, the willingness to calmly see the world through multiple lenses can help better understand personal and others’ responses.

Learning “to sit without fighting” is an invitation to appreciate the smaller things in life overlooked by the innate desire for meeting expectations and a reminder to the interconnectedness of humanity (Web). Our hope for pleasant times to persist and ignorance of adversities that inevitably arise over time contribute to the recurring cycle of dukkha for all. Consistent attention to the breath, such as we find in the Zen traditions, helps us cope with accepting the impermanence of ourselves, the loss of our loved ones, and unforeseen changes to our daily routine. Inability to realize the oneness of an individual and community is to deny the relevance of culture, community, and history.

continued...
Awareness is a quality of meditation that is often found in Vipassana Buddhism. In Vipassana, awareness meditation is also known as insight meditation, and it is different from mindfulness. This type of meditation focuses on labeling different sensations that occur during meditation (Web).

In regard to social justice, awareness in this meditation can allow people to link mental and physical sensations together and reflect. For someone who experiences social injustice, insight meditation allows them to figure out the truth about their own lives by eliciting an understanding of themselves. While insight meditation will not fix social justice issues directly, it can give the individual a sense of understanding, awareness, and a connection to the world around them, which will in turn allow them to better understand others and practice compassion.

Visualization is the last technique that we will use as a theme in meditation that relates to social justice. This theme is typically found in Vajrayana Buddhism’s tantric practice. Vajrayana theory says that one’s perception of the world is unique because externally, what an individual sees does not exist and it is not experienced by anyone else. In this case, the practice of visualization is “...to purify our ordinary, impure perception of the phenomenal world by developing ‘pure perception,’” which is the opposite of impure things such as desire, ignorance, or jealousy (Web).

Visualization aids in the reformatting of how we think about things such as desire or ignorance. Through visualization, a person that exhibits racial discrimination can transform their thought process by understanding that what they see is simply their own perception. This theme of visualization meditation takes time to master, but one will be able to move from a close-minded perception to developing a more open, understanding perception that is not quick to form judgement.

All three of these meditation themes have the ability to activate Buddhist-inspired acts under the social justice realm, especially on an individual level. While people volunteer with organizations to help with these inequalities, there are others who take matters into their own hands to help their local communities. In San Francisco, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, many Chinese restaurants have seen a great decline in customers. A man decided to help local Chinatown restaurants by delivering take-out orders to his friends and family all over the Bay Area. His small act of kindness soon blossomed and he now receives more than seventy orders each weekend and he soon began a donation campaign for the Chinatown Community Development Center’s food delivery program to immigrants in SROs (Web). Although this act does not fully compare to large scale social justice movements, it is still one that shows a meditative quality, leading to compassion for others in the community.
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San Francisco's Urban Environment and the Perspective of Theravada Buddhism

Cassidy Riley and Mazzi Tomaiko

The honking of horns, the whizz of vehicles flying by, and the chatter of people. These are the sounds of the city. Urban areas are defined by high population density and infrastructure of built environments. This contrasts from rural areas, which consist of low-density populations outside of towns and cities, that are spread over a broader area (Web).

The urban environment has its drawbacks and benefits. Although the concentration of houses, commercial buildings, roads, and bridges may appear to engulf and trap people, many people see cities as golden opportunities. The industrial boom of the late nineteenth century caused a shift that led Americans and immigrants to leave farm life in rural areas for cities (Web). Discoveries, job opportunities, and technologies that enabled remarkable day-to-day quality of life to improve were a few of the driving factors.

On the downside, a vast number of people living a high-paced lifestyle, packed closely together, raises issues with public and mental health and environmental preservation. Other issues include finding ways to properly educate the public so they can optimize their living experiences within the city.

San Francisco is an urban environment with notably unique issues. The city’s population in 2020 of 896,047 people is spread across a land area of just 46.87 square miles (Web). This is exemplary of urban density. Issues in maintaining cleanliness and managing overcrowding would become prevalent with such a sizeable population inhabiting a small portion of land.

Additionally, the expense of living in San Francisco is one of the most costly in the world. Paying for rent, groceries, utilities and entertainment creates pressures and puts unimaginable levels of stress on city people. To simply get by, whether that be keeping food on the table, paying rent on time, or dealing with mental health impacts, city people must...
exhaust themselves. Stress and expense also ultimately contribute to the abnormally large and growing homeless population. The rate of people becoming homeless is higher in San Francisco due to the region’s lack of housing. The lack of housing reduces the ability to move people into an emergency shelter whose staff gradually aids them getting back into low income housing (Web). More details on this will be discussed later on.

If we take a look at the world today, the majority of people now inhabit cities or suburban areas with a higher density of people than observed previously in history. In 2017, 4.1 billion people were living in urban areas and that number showed to be continuously increasing at a steady rate (Web). So how have people coped with city life? What can guide us in appeasing San Francisco’s unsolved urban dilemmas? And what kind of aid, physical or mental, can be provided across the range of working-class people to those stricken by homelessness? In addition to the major themes, we’ll also look at Theravada Buddhism for some possibilities.

The connection between early civilization and the emergence of religion is clear, although researchers are still not sure which came first. As populations of humans slowly shifted from hunter-gatherer populations with low population density to cities with advanced farming and high population density, religion was a useful tool for ensuring people acted harmoniously. Religion gave people common meaning and shared rules and values. This was important to ensure order was maintained in the stressful environment of prehistory urban life.

The change from smaller communities to large densely populated cities was a cause of dissatisfaction (dukkha) which influenced Buddhism’s first “noble” truth. It was a cyclic process in which religions influenced the social norms and legal systems of a city and in turn, life in the city influenced the development of religion (Web). Because of this interaction, religions like Theravada Buddhism can be looked at to understand both ancient cities and our modern urban environments better.


An important aspect of Buddhism is monastic life. Those who live in monasteries are in close quarters with their fellow monks and must take steps to ensure they live in harmony together. The first step in this is to vow to follow the Five Precepts which are as follows: to refrain from harming living beings, to refrain from taking what is not freely given, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from wrong speech, to refrain from drinking and taking drugs which lead to carelessness (Web). These are the basic social expectations given the lives of Buddhist practitioners. It is important to note that all of the rules are made to ensure that people are doing no harm to others.

An important practice in Theravada Buddhism is Vipassana meditation, a style of meditation using self-observation for the purpose of self-transformation. Part of vipassana includes letting go of all preconceptions, past experiences, and opinions that may be preventing you from seeing the world clearly. This type of meditation is used in the Theravada tradition to explore the root causes of suffering, dissatisfaction, and no-self,
which are referred to as the three marks of existence.

Many of the problems associated with modern cities like San Francisco are forms of unnecessary suffering which could be at least partially alleviated with community-minded urban planning. The first step in the process is to take a lesson from Vipassana meditation and analyze the city as a person would themselves. This will help let go of preconceptions about how a city should look, how land should be allocated, and how people should be treated. It can be argued that in San Francisco the accepted idea is that only those who can afford to live in the city can stay while those that can’t are slowly driven out. When we look at this idea with a Buddhist mindset we can see the pain and suffering this would cause to the thousands of people forced to leave their homes. This teaching ties directly back to one of the Five Precepts, taking what is not freely given.

Urban life in San Francisco should be structured in such a way that people are not forced to give up their homes, jobs, communal areas, or dignity of life so that others, or corporations, can amass more than their fair share. Some of the biggest tech companies in the world are headquartered in the city, such as Twitter, Yelp, Salesforce, and Dropbox. Their presence has caused the city to become astronomically more expensive and is slowly pushing out both middle and lower classes.

Now that the preconceptions and the reality of the situation has been established, Theravada Buddhism can also be a guide for possible solutions. It places emphasis on the importance of monastic life, and a monastery can be seen as a microcosm of a large city. For example, monasteries are kept clean and orderly through communal effort. In a city, this could take the form of anti-littering programs or investment in government street cleaning. Furthermore, in a monastery, the participants are provided for and have the facilities they need in their daily lives. In San Francisco there are larger, systemic causes of unclean streets, mainly the absence of free bathrooms. The city should provide free, safe, and clean bathrooms for the citizens to use which would both account for the needs of all people and serve to improve cleanliness.

There is no easy solution that would dissolve all of the issues that the urban environment brings. There are only small steps we can take to direct the city towards improvement in the lives and living conditions of its people. The principles and monastery structure of Theravada Buddhism provide a great model for leading a peaceful, mindful life in an inevitably chaotic and complex world. Looking to Theravada Buddhism to guide policy making in San Francisco would allow a new perspective that does not revolve purely around politics and monetary costs. It would take a more humanistic approach that would in turn create more efficient and effective policies. Programs that aid in the well-being of its citizens, such as helping the homeless get off the street, gives people a personal sense of worth and appreciation for their city. Planting a seed of appreciation in people will lead them to grow roots of care in all aspects of their lives. Living in an urban environment is inevitably imperfect, but that does not mean that we should stop aiming for harmony between people and their environment.
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Housing Inequality and Mahayana Buddhism

KA and Crystal Tran

When looking at Buddhism as a religion, service to others is rooted deep in the core values of practice and ceremony. The Mahayana sect in particular makes daily service a part of their way of life, serving the less fortunate and fighting social inequality as a form of duty rather than a desire to do so. We see social inequality everywhere, rooted deeply in society, holding an oppressive grip on many different types of people.

This paper aims to analyze the implications of social inequality in the SF Bay Area, specifically, its effects on socio-economic status and housing inequality, and how Mahayana Buddhists play a role in fighting against this economic injustice. This issue is one that directly impacts everyone in the Bay Area with rent skyrocketing and economic gaps growing further by the day, all residents are affected in some way or another. We will analyze how economic inequality and the housing crisis affects those in the Bay Area, and through a Buddhist lens we will identify specific ways in which Mahayana Buddhism serves and directly impacts the lives of those who are most affected.

The phenomena of social inequality, as explained by Ashley Crossman, regards “hierarchies of class, race, and gender that unequally distribute access to resources and rights” (Crossman, 2020). Social inequality is not a new concept: for as long as people have been living together in societies, social inequality has presented itself in one way or another.

One of the biggest forms of social inequality that the Bay Area faces in the modern day is socioeconomic inequality. One’s socioeconomic status, according to the American Psychological Association, “encompasses not just income but also educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class” (APA, 2020). The increasing cost of living has not only impacted the economic status of Bay Area residents, it also pushes them away from resources that used to be readily available.
A recent study titled "Poverty In The Bay Area" found that "the Bay Area poverty rate in 2013 was 11.3%... [and] federal poverty statistics underestimate economic hardship in the region" (SVIORS, 2015). Today, 11.3% of Bay Area residents live in poverty, and this statistic does not take into account those who make income above the poverty line, but struggle to survive in the increasingly expensive Bay Area. This situation pertains mostly to housing prices skyrocketing, leaving once comfortable middle class families and individuals with a rent that is far too high to pay.

A study conducted by the data firm YouGov revealed that "an overwhelming majority (91%) of residents say that the cost of living is high in the Bay Area, with six in ten people (62%) characterizing it as ‘very high’" (YouGov, 2019). Increasingly high rents are leaving many Bay Area residents either unable to stay in their homes, or struggling to make ends meet.

Recent data on the homeless population in San Francisco showed that there were over 8,000 homeless individuals accounted for, which was an increase of more than 14% from 2017 data (City Performance Scorecards). While the city of San Francisco offers low income housing projects, these programs are often overcrowded and difficult to get into. San Francisco is also home to many homeless shelters, all of which seem overrun to help the ever-increasing homeless population. With the economic inequality they face, what resources and groups do low income and homeless individuals have to turn to for support?

This is where Mahayana Buddhism enters the picture. Mahayana Buddhism is one of the two major Buddhist traditions practiced throughout Asia and now more recently the West. There were many different Mahayana Buddhist sects including Chan Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism and Japanese Zen. Mahayana Buddhism began its travel from India through the Silk Road in the 3rd century BCE arriving in the Middle Kingdom in the 2nd century CE and in Japan in 538 CE. It quickly became popular due to their inclusivity, new rituals, and wide concept of nirvana. The tradition emphasized a Bodhisattva's vow to save all sentient beings and how there is one great vehicle to enlightenment that was accessible for everyone.

The Mahayana tradition has entered the Bay Area with many monasteries and centers opening up for its followers. A popular one within the Bay Area is the San Francisco Zen Center. The Zen Center was established with three practice places: the Beginner's Mind Temple, located in the heart of San Francisco; Green Gulch Farm, on the oceanside of Marin County; and the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, which is the first Soto Zen training monastery on the West coast located in inland from Big Sur. All "offer daily meditation, ... classes, lectures and workshops" (About San Francisco Zen Center).

Although many people observing Buddhism believe that you had to rigorously practice meditation to reach enlightenment, meditation was only one of many types of activity that monks participated in. Scholar David McMahan explains that "while meditation has always been considered necessary to achieving awakening, only a small minority of Buddhists actually practice it in any serious way" and that a majority of Asian Buddhists “practiced the dharma through ethics, rituals, and service to the sangha" community (McMahan, 2009).

Not everyone was suited for the hard lifestyle of living in the monastery to constantly meditate, and with Mahayana Buddhism being big on the social work of an individual towards their communities, many people decided to opt out of meditating in the monasteries to go out and do merit based work. Some merit making activities included helping with the construction of stupas and monastic halls, planting gardens and trees, giving out
Monks acted as “agents of acculturation” between the different social classes and used their influence to help those who were suffering (Nelson, 2014).

Aside from the meditation halls provided, San Francisco Zen Center also has multiple programs that reach out to the community which help prisoners, the homeless community, and those in recovery. It is because of programs within Mahayana Buddhism centers that help those who are part of the socio-economic and housing inequalities.

In Mahayana Buddhism, one of the teachings comes from the Heart Sutra, which talks about the importance of emptiness and dependent origination. This sutra shows that even though the tradition does strive for emptiness, it is in the ultimate world where people meditate to reach enlightenment. It is within the conventional world where inequality lies and where the Bodhisattva travels between the conventional and ultimate world to try to undo the inequality. The social work of Mahayana Buddhism in the conventional world aims to serve underprivileged individuals affected by inequality. This is why social inequality—in San Francisco or in any urban environment—ties directly back into the work and preachings of Mahayana Buddhism.
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Aid Organizations and the Bodhisattva Ideal
Yolanda Santiago and Daniel Managlia

As the world moves further into an age filled with social, political, and especially technological advancements, it seems almost paradoxical that the age-old Buddhist ideology of "everything is suffering" still holds true. After a deep inspection of our world, much of what provides ease and comfort to privileged citizens is causing severe amounts of suffering to those less fortunate. To provide a quick example, the food industry often permits cruel and inhumane labor so that we in America might have a cheaper cup of coffee. The list of social issues seems innumerable, and these sources of inequality are what aid organizations throughout the world aim to fix. The San Francisco Area contains vast amounts of these problems, as illustrated in the previous chapter. Social engagement, therefore, has become increasingly necessary to counteract poverty and injustice—in the hopes of one day reaching equality.

With a growing trend of Buddhisms in the West, many practitioners find it is not enough to practice in a monastery with meditation and chanting, but to implement what they have learned about reality—in reality. While not all Buddhist practitioners agree with this level of commitment to worldly issues, it isn’t hard to find examples of social engagement in Buddhist scripture. The teachings of Shantideva on the conduct of a Bodhisattva are often a source of inspiration among many Buddhists who put themselves into the world to alleviate the suffering of sentient beings. The famous Jataka tales of the Buddha also show how he aided countless beings with his compassion in numerous past lives. Although they are great lessons, there is often a spoken warning about such tales: “do not attempt!” This divide in Buddhist thought is why we see some communities isolated in monasteries, while others are commonly found protesting for social change, eager to extend transformative work beyond their individual Sangha (Buddhist community).

Herein lies the most essential characteristic embodied by all Bodhisattva’s in the world, and in history. Best put by the ninth century Japanese monk Saichō: “[bodhisattvas] take the bad upon themselves in order to benefit others. This is the height of compassion.”[2] Mahayana Buddhists claim the fastest way to gain merit, and to advance on the eightfold path is to save sentient beings from a life of ignorance and suffering. In Buddhist communities in Asia, we can see this ideology possibly nowhere more than modern day Japan. Priests have participated in protests, concerts, even fashion shows, all in the hopes of expanding their monastic and temple communities hoping to better the lives of as many individuals as possible.
In the west, this form of compassion is often displayed through entire communities we call aid organizations, committed to the same goal. Aid organizations are dedicated to distributing material and logistic assistance (e.g., food, medical care, employment resources) to people who are in need. Their principal aim is to reduce suffering and save lives. \[3\]

State Law Cracks Down on Free Public Meals

Photo credit: San Francisco Public Press

In the San Francisco Bay Area, there are many aid organizations that pursue the lessening of suffering through their humanitarian efforts. They work with vulnerable populations in our communities, such as the elderly, poor, and homeless. Some of these organizations are secular while others are faith-based. Regardless, they all demonstrate attributes of compassion toward our fellow human beings. \[4\]

Meals on Wheels San Francisco tackles hunger and loneliness among seniors by making a network of services accessible to them. Their focus is on providing meals and social work services that allow seniors to live in their homes. At St. Vincent de Paul of Alameda various services are provided to the poor, unhoused or anyone in need, many of whom are elderly. This organization, located in Oakland, provides a comprehensive amount of services including food, shelter, showers and clothing. They also offer help in finding employment, skill learning services, computers and connect people with other agencies for individual needs. Similarly, Bay Area Rescue Mission provides meals, shelter, counseling, training and more. One example of a Buddhist aid organization in the Bay Area is the San Francisco branch of Tzu Chi. This organization not only provides meals for the poor but have also imparted monetary aid to those displaced by the tragic California fires.

Both aid organizations and the bodhisattva demonstrate a profound devotion to the well-being of humanity and to the necessity of compassion in action. However, they rely on monetary and volunteer contributions to perform their work. That is, they are fueled by the compassion of individuals just like you and me. The unusual times in which we are living due to COVID-19 have made that clearer than ever and highlights the imperative to not only seek solutions for the systematic and pervasive problems we face but to practice compassion. Aid organizations offer alternative ways to reach out to people in need and practice active compassion. Given the public health concerns almost all events of aid organizations in the Bay Area were canceled due to the April 7th mandate. However, it is evident that community need have not ceased to exist but rather it has become more urgent.

Compassion is not be about the individual at all—the concern should only be for others who can be saved and protected with the Dharma (Buddhist teachings). To that end, Bodhisattvas famously have the concept of “no-self” perfected, or to use Western terminology: they are perfectly selfless. Many Buddhists insist that a concern for others as part of the concern for oneself is the height of compassion. It is the truly wise that realize the suffering of other beings is fully inseparable from their own suffering.

The Jataka tales mentioned earlier may provide the most famous acts of any Bodhisattva, but they are no doubt, the very extremities of compassionate wisdom. \[5\] In comparison to some western activist trends, many have called out the dangers to a "feel good activism" in which the primary concern is never truly about others. Making ourselves feel
better, despite others suffering, is not just self-centered, but can perpetuate injustices in the world.

The way in which Western Buddhist organizations conduct their work goes back to some of the most foundational Dharma teachings. The Bodhisattva embodies the wisdom of interconnectedness, best described in the West by Joe Gorin: “each struggle for justice is a part of every other one….”[6] Like a ripple effect, all actions are deeply rooted in society, and dependent on one another. And so, a fight against injustice becomes much greater than any one person or organization, it becomes an all-out war composed of infinite battles. In such an analogy, the Bodhisattva is on the front lines, armed only with love for others. This ideology of connectedness helps aid groups cope with often disappointing results.


It is therefore essential that organizations not get discouraged by the sheer amount of suffering in the world, nor their inability to alleviate it all. To know that simple actions of awareness today can lead to a greater understanding of modern inequalities can be very inspiring. Described fabulously by Maylie Scott, she bears witness to the trafficking of weapons—something she knows likely won’t change for some time.[7] Scott exemplifies how actions that once seemed futile have now inspired thousands to follow in her footsteps in a variety of ways. In truth there is nothing permanent, not even injustice.

Although common ideologies on the Bodhisattva pertain mostly to the Jataka Tales and the Lotus Sutra, the Bodhisattva Ideal must continue to be reframed to better compensate for modern suffering. Foundations for Bodhisattva thought will always begin with the Dharma, often in monasteries and through meditation, yet for ‘Bodhisattvas in practice’ to be isolated in such a setting for too long can limit the addressment of suffering in the world. Any Buddhist would claim that all beings suffer, and that the aim of Buddhism is to overcome this suffering- not just for one’s self, but for all sentient beings. Therefore, to quote Thích Nhất Hạnh: “Anyone who is aware of what is happening and who tries to wake up other people is a bodhisattva. We are all bodhisattvas, doing our best.”[8]

We can all practice compassion and loving-kindness no matter our circumstances, it can begin with thoughts, donations, and simple actions in service of others. Traditional eastern thought may be more critical as to who may claim the exalted title ‘Bodhisattva’, but in truth, such a title presents one more object of aspiration/desire. To equate us all to a Bodhisattva is to righteously start humanity on a long path towards unity.
Endnotes and Citations

[1]. Born in the late seventh century, Shantideva’s poem Bodhicaryāvatāra or "Engaging in the Conduct of a Bodhisattva" contained revolutionary, progressive ideas of active Buddhism, inspiring social engagement among monastic communities. Best summed up in chapter 10, verse 55:

For as long as space exists,
And living beings endure,
May I too remain,
To dispel the misery of the world

All beings suffer, but some have a much greater burden to bear. While Buddhist cosmology blames this on bad karma from past lives, true compassion is the commitment to the alleviation of all the world’s suffering, not just oneself, or one’s community. That is why progressive Buddhists have turned towards this life and social engagement. Some criticize that it has turned away from the traditional goal of Nirvana, but others proclaim this commitment is the only path to such an end. [Web].

[2]. Saichō was the founder of the Tendai sect in ninth century Japan. He states that:

“while beings with Skillful means may be known as Bodhisattva’s in the West, they are simply called gentlemen in the East.”

The distinction Saichō is making is between Japanese interpretations of Buddhism and western Mahayana practices at the time. He was critical of those who claimed the title ‘Bodhisattva’ was so high a figure. He is stating that the title itself was often seen as a means to an end (nirvana). He indicates that social engagement can and should be practiced by all humans, not merely once we become known as perfectly compassionate. [Web].

[3]. For more information on organizations in America, this link below contains list of non-for-profit organizations in the US, categorized by region.

[4]. A quite famous Jataka tale of the Buddha; explained thoroughly in the Tricycle article "Jataka Mind." The ‘soon to be’ Buddha gazed upon a starving tigress and her cubs, knowing she was too weak and frail to hunt for food, he thought, "Why should I go out and kill another being for its meat when my body has plenty!" And so, the future Buddha flung himself off the cliff so that the tigress and her cubs might all survive. [Web].

[5]. Founded in 1995, the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE) was created in San Francisco, under advisement by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. The organization later created a base in Vancouver, British Columbia in 2003. [Web].

[6]. Taken from Kenneth Kraft’s "Practicing Peace: Social Engagement in Western Buddhism." Tricycle Magazine, spring 1993. The quote is meant to exemplify modern interpretations of interconnectedness as it relates to social engagement. Traditional teaching might be understood better as the term "dependent origination" meaning that we are all "who we are" because of other people, past events, and predetermined conditions. But teachings expand on this idea throughout the centuries, eventually coming to this idea that everything is connected, and so every action (for instance me writing this paper) has implications of which I will never know. These consequences inspire aid organizations to continue to fight injustice even if they see no change at all. Change will come. In fact, it is destined to, as stated above; even injustice is impermanent.

[7]. Kraft, p. 25. Maylie Scott states:

“It was very clear to me that the community there was not really based on results, although it was dedicated to stopping the weapons from being exported. Seeing the trucks pass and knowing what's happened—both on the site and as a result of the weapons themselves—you fall into a meditative response; you recognize something.” Her social engagement has yielded few returns when it comes to the transportation of these weapons, and yet much has been written about her, and many are now much more aware of these types of black-market trades.

[8]. Thích Nhat Hanh is a 93-year-old Vietnamese monk and peace activist. He is noted as a very progressive Buddhist famous for his social activism. Close friends to Martin Luther King Jr., "Shay" was exiled from Vietnam for almost four decades. He has since returned to his homeland after establishing a number of foundations for the West’s adaptation of Buddhism.
Public Health in San Francisco and Vajrayana Buddhism

Chloe Freeman and LL

Public health is a global concern but every city struggles with a unique set of circumstances. The 2019 San Francisco Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) outlined the following as the most critical categories for San Francisco: social, emotional, and behavioral health, healthy eating and an active lifestyle, safety from violence and trauma, access to culturally and linguistically appropriate services, homelessness, poverty and racial health inequities (Major Findings, 2019).

In the midst of the novel COVID-19 pandemic racial health inequities are being exacerbated. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) cites that “current data suggest a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minority groups” (COVID-19, 2020). Racial health inequities are a result of institutionalized racism throughout the U.S; including but not limited to the fact that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in housing and communities that contribute to health disparities. In addition, minorities are more likely to have work policies and environments that are restrictive, to have less access to healthcare, and may experience stigma and racism within healthcare systems.

San Francisco Health Improvements Partnership (SF HIP) is one of the major public health organizational structures that is run by UCSF researchers in partnership with other community outreach groups, the local government and the Center for Disease Control. Each year SF HIP sponsors the CHNA, as previously mentioned, outlining the city’s most critical issues to address. SF HIP then uses this information to create informative data and design outreach programs to address such public health issues.

An aspect of Public Health that Chloe (one of the authors of this paper) worked on is health education and physical education. CHNA does not include physical education as part of its physical activity levels factor assessment. Rather, they focus on physical fitness, children who play sports, and physical activity. It is important that people understand the difference between each of these categories. A direct approach to increasing the daily physical activity of youth is by providing...
regular, moderate-to-vigorous physical education. Physical education provides age-appropriate and child-centered activity that is engaging while also teaching kids the skills and habits needed to continue physical activity outside the classroom and into adulthood. Observations of S.F. public elementary schools showed that only 5% of schools were meeting the California guidelines of 100 minutes of moderate-vigorous activity per week (although the state guidelines are well below the CDC recommendation of 60 minutes per day) (Thompson, 2011).

Chloe volunteered with Portland Public Schools where she learned how they are using the Student Success Act Funding to hire over 20 School Social Workers. Social Workers serve as liaisons and provide culturally responsive and trauma informed intervention strategies to address students’ social, emotional, and behavioral health. In order for the Health and Physical Education department to effectively coordinate with social workers, it has designed a comprehensive K-12 "scope and sequence" that provides teachers daily lessons and curriculum to teach mental health, nutrition, violence/abuse prevention, and so on.

Chloe’s time in P.P.S was spent assisting the department in how to organize take home information packets, family nights, and meetings with school counselors so that both teachers and counselors can be student resources. Providing such services with a collaborative approach to mental health in San Francisco public schools is one significant way that the city could address the mental health crisis. Through teaching our youth how to use and access resources, we are able to improve their future.

San Francisco counts around 4,000 homeless, addicted, and mentally ill individuals and the numbers are continuing to rise (Fracassa & Thadani, 2019). Many individuals feel trapped and hopeless due to the lack of social, emotional, and physical care that they desperately need. As a result, individuals turn to unhealthy and often dangerous coping mechanisms such as drugs and alcohol.

Lucy (the second author of this essay), had the opportunity to work with individuals in the Father Alfred Center (FAC) in San Francisco. FAC is an in-house recovery center for individuals overcoming drugs and addiction (specifically alcohol addiction). Many of the men there, due to the lack of mental health resources and social support, turned to drugs and alcohol as a way to cope through their daily stresses.

Lucy spent her time at FAC assisting in leading weekly group discussion sessions. She began each session with a guided meditation. Throughout the meeting the men discussed topics ranging from gratitude to loss, pain to recovery, and even their joys and goals. After the guided meditation, individuals were asked how they felt about their meditation experience and then were asked to share their thoughts with the group. This format provided the individuals with an opportunity for reflection.
After speaking with many of the men, they shared with Lucy that they found the weekly meditation sessions essential piece to their healing time in which they could not only simply breathe, but also they could identify their negative thoughts and emotions and thus turn them into positive ones. This process of reflection and optimism would ultimately help motivate them to quit their addiction.

Today, meditation can seem extremely far removed from its original religious context. However, due to its simplicity, accessibility, and benefits it has become a practice of individuals of all backgrounds—not just Buddhists. Those who are overcoming hardships and internal struggles such as addiction can find it extremely beneficial. Specifically, it is Vajrayana Buddhism that is centered around the purification of energy, or taking one’s negative energy and transforming it into something positive. This transformation is exactly what Lucy saw taking place among the men at FAC through guided meditation and internal reflection.

Within Buddhism, beings called Bodhisattvas are dedicated to helping relieve suffering for all. In Vajrayana Buddhism, it is believed that all individuals have the qualities of a Bodhisattva to begin with and are capable of tuning in to these qualities through meditation and other practices. This suggests that all individuals have the capabilities to practice not only meditation but also the qualities that allow Bodhisattvas to save others. The most important thing to note is that whether or not one wants to attain buddhahood or become a Bodhisattva, it does not mean that one cannot serve and teach others for the greater good (Leighton, 2019). Through using Bodhisattvas as inspirational figures, we can learn from their compassion and in turn give that compassion to both ourselves and others.

Meditation is also a key component to energy purification. More specifically, the bodhisattva, Vajrasattva, is integral to the purification of energy. During meditation, Vajrasattva is envisioned by the meditator as they recite the mantra. As they chant the mantra they imagine that each letter begins to melt and run down through the lotus blossom upon their head thus filling their body with camphor. At the same moment, the karmic impurities begin to expel from the meditator's body as they fill with a new, purified liquid. At once the meditator is transformed into Vajrasattva themself. The entire universe then begins to transform into light; spreading until nothing is left but emptiness. During meditations, the individual pictures oneself as a bodhisattva but also becomes the bodhisattva. Something else to note is that tantric Buddhism and the practice of meditation are applicable and accessible to all beings, not just those in need of healing or recovery. Tantric practices can be used as a way of finding energy balance in all aspects of one’s life. Through mantra recitation and visualization—or even both—for brief periods can allow one’s mind to feel clearer and allow the energy in one’s body to smoothly flow as the practice transforms negative feelings and emotions in one’s body into positive energy that in turn support the individual.
Approaching the healing process is relatively simple and extremely powerful if practiced with strong concentration, clarity, and an appreciation for the quality of the deity. Even a brief period of mantra recitation can yield a dramatic effect in clearing the mind. The simplicity yet profoundness of this practice incites universality and welcomes all to healing and the qualities of the bodhisattva.

Public health resources—especially social, emotional, behavioral health—for all residents of SF is something that is absolutely essential. In an attempt to make necessary changes, legislation in the city has pushed for expanding the Behavioral Health Access Center by extending hours and hiring more mental health professionals. However, we must realize that no single action alone will solve this public health crisis. With that said, it is imperative to tackle this issue with a multifaceted approach: legislation, community organizations and education.

We must provide educational resources for all ages and demographics as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs suggests. We all have the capability to make changes in our own lives and even to make positive changes in the lives of those around us. In a time like this, amidst a novel pandemic, suffering is more prevalent than ever. We must augment our sense of self and do what we can to serve and support others in not only great times of need but indefinitely.
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No one can deny that homelessness in San Francisco is a problem. The homeless population has become more visible than ever before. We see them on public transportation, in parks, underneath the freeway and along the streets of San Francisco. In 2019, there were 8,011 on the streets or in shelters. That number jumps to 9,784 using a more expansive definition (known as the San Francisco method; compared to the federal method). Under the federal method approximately one-third are in shelters, compared to “unsheltered;” this jumps to a roughly 50/50 split between sheltered and unsheltered when using the SF method (sf.gov.org).

Compared to other cities in the U.S., San Francisco has the seventh largest homeless community with 261.19 per 100,000 people. Eugene, Oregon has the largest homeless population with 432.28 per 100,000 people, and Los Angeles is second on the list with a population of 396.98 homeless per 100,000 people (security.org). According to Kevin Fagan, a journalist for the SF Chronicle, the homeless population has decreased since 2004, but comparing the count conducted in 2017 to the 2019 count the population has increased 12.19% (security.org). The homeless problem in San Francisco is serious, and according to the data becoming worse year after year. What steps is the city of San Francisco taking to not only eliminate homelessness altogether, but to aid those individuals in need?

Currently in San Francisco, there are both private and public institutions taking on the homeless problem. One private investment, “The Chronic Homelessness Initiative” powered by the Bay-Area nonprofit Tipping Point, uses a three-pronged approach. First they are going to create 2,200 new houses by 2022. Next, they want to optimize the public sector through data-sharing, technical assistance, program evaluation, and maximizing sustainable sources. Lastly, they are going to invest in programs that intervene before an individual becomes homeless. To-date the Chronic Homeslessness initiative has
engaged 1,046 clients, received 90 entitlements, and 58 additional housing placements that are outside of the traditional rapid rehousing programs (tippingpoint.org). From a public standpoint, in 2019 San Francisco’s Mayor London Breed announced a $5 million investment that will be used to keep people from becoming homeless, and to help newly homeless people rapidly exit homelessness (sfmayor.org).

In 2018 the San Francisco Homeless Project was launched under the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. Their primary goal is to clean up large homeless encampments, and move those individuals off of the streets into temporary shelters and then eventually permanent housing. Many of these encampments were hotbeds for drug abuse, needles sporadically riddled the ground, as well as human feces. To date the San Francisco Homeless Project has managed to clear 30 large encampments. The 1,219 individuals who called these encampments home were offered sheltered beds and service, but only 792 of those individuals took advantage of the offering (sfchronicle.com). The chief of the San Francisco Homeless Project, Jeff Kositsky, has stated that he feels happy about cleaning up these encampments.

Moving from an open-air encampment has proved to be a problem for the homeless population during the current COVID-19 pandemic. 71 homeless individuals contracted COVID-19, which accounts for roughly 8.5% of the total infected population in San Francisco. The city has moved swiftly, securing several local hotels to provide an isolation-space for those homeless individuals.

However, members of the population with severe psychiatric illness do not qualify to stay at these procured hotels, creating a problem. Even those with the most mildest of symptoms are forced to take a bed at local San Francisco hospitals. These beds are usually reserved for individuals who exhibit the most severe symptoms, but with nowhere else for some homeless individuals to go, these hospitals are the only place they can seek shelter during these dire times.

Jahan Fahimi, an emergency room technician at UCSF said he has admitted many homeless patients who exhibit little to no symptoms of COVID-19, for the simple fact that they have nowhere to go. Katie Brooks, a doctor at Safety Net Hospital believes, “…it’s possible that the pandemic may spur long overdue changes to address homelessness such as adequate housing,” (statnews.com). Other issues, such as providing food for the homeless, are also difficult to address.

Zack (paper author) spent about four hours every Sunday, working in a kitchen at Congregation Sherith Israel which provided food to two homeless shelters--one family shelter and one women’s shelter. The food provided by CSI was clearly of great importance, as the shelters expressed urgency and the need for continued service during the COVID-19 crisis beginning in March of 2020 (Nancy Sheftel-Gomes). Zack had to stop working during this time as he is immunocompromised, however others continued to provide to the shelters during this period.

In addition to food made in Sherith’s kitchen, a large number of Safeway goods--usually bread, baked goods, and other starches--are
donated to the shelters on a weekly basis. During the COVID-19 crisis this was also suspended for health reasons, making it even more difficult to acquire enough food for donation. Members of the congregation pitched in, including Zack, by baking and donating to the temple. Time constraints require that large dishes are favored because they are quick and easy to make, hence why there is always a salad and the main meat dish is either a meatloaf or pan-roasted chicken.

“Our City, Our Home” is an initiative more comprehensive than those previously mentioned. Its focus is on creating housing, boosting mental health and substance abuse programs, and creating more sheltered beds. They hope to achieve this using an annual endowment of $300 million (sfchronicle.com). However, the funds promised to the “Our City, Our Home” initiative have been frozen pending litigation at this time. To see how these initiatives affect the overall problem in San Francisco we will have to wait until the next PIT count is conducted in 2021.

Unfortunately simply aiding the homeless in material ways is oftentimes not enough. According to Tyrone Pitman, peer-to-peer specialist at the Illinois Wellness Center, “...if you’re living in a shelter you are looked upon as someone who doesn’t care or have a purpose in life,” (homelesshub.ca). A common misconception is that the homeless are victims of their own bad decisions and choices. In reality, there are both personal and structural triggers that lead to homelessness. Common causations of homelessness are drug addiction, unemployment, family trauma, and various structural triggers. There is rarely a single reason that leads to one becoming homeless, but a combination of factors.

This is where ideas from religions, in particular Buddhism, can help reduce or eliminate stigma. In Buddhism there is the idea of emptiness, that all things are empty of inherent existence or value. Understanding that everything is “empty,” that everything has no independent existence, was paramount to becoming a Buddha (Lopez). Famed Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna blends emptiness with the idea of dependent arising, which looks at an object—a chair, a piece of paper, a human being—and how that object does not simply exist on its own, but is the sum of many parts (Lopez). A chair is not only a chair, but four legs and a seat. It is made of wood, which comes from trees; those trees need water, sunlight, and processing before a workman can craft that wood into the chair that we see. The more one looks, the more one sees things as empty.

How can emptiness link back to SF’s homeless problem? The key lies in perspective. To illustrate this point, let us share a story featured in Tricycle: The Buddhist Review. The author--Kiley Jon Clark--teaches meditation at a homeless facility. In the facility is a young blind man, who consistently attends Clark’s meditation group. One day he approached Clark, asking if he wanted to see his “meditation rocks” (Clark). Clark obliges, and the blind man pulls out three “ordinary” stones, telling him that each one is a
magnificent item of magical power. The blind man then gives Clark a present, a wish fulfilling jewel. This jewel is just an ordinary peach seed, but the blind man must have known it was different from the other rocks he had found (Clark).

The blind man then gives Clark a present, a wish fulfilling jewel. This jewel is just an ordinary peach seed, but the blind man must have known it was different from the other rocks he had found (Clark).

As they were talking they shared stories from their lives, and he told of how he became homeless. It was not due to drugs, or obvious bad decisions. After receiving a job offer, he moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Unexpectedly, his job fell through. Now stuck in a relatively new city with no money or family to turn to, this man had no choice but to live shelter-to-shelter, and some nights on the streets until he could save enough money to get back on his feet. This encounter instantly changed Blaine’s perspective towards the homeless.

We like to think that we control our own destiny, and in many ways we do, but there are experiences in life that have a negative affect on our lives, that we have absolutely no control over. Without a valid support-system, or more government assistance than what is currently being offered, problems such as homelessness seem almost impossible to overcome.

And so we return to the idea of dependent arising, that nothing exists independently. Just as becoming homeless rests on factors often outside of one’s control, so too does success--although the successful rarely like to think this way. There are many things one can influence--one’s work ethic, commitment to study, ability to seek help--but there are just as many things that contribute to success that one has no control over, such as inherited wealth (one’s starting point), good teachers, good bosses, good health, and so on.

If both success and failure are empty of existence, then we aren’t really all different from each other. And there is certainly no reason not to support those of us who are homeless, since we all depend on each other anyway. Ultimately, when viewed through the Buddhist lens of emptiness and dependent arising, we see that we should be aiding the homeless, rather than stigmatizing them.
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Whenever one walks around San Francisco, one cannot help but notice stark disparities between certain street blocks—the opulent wealth of Union Square juxtaposed with the abject poverty of the Tenderloin. The trendy bustling Mission district buttressed against the quiet warehouses and poorly kept residences of Hunter’s Point/Bayview. The politics of aid in San Francisco has left many neighborhoods neglected and marginalized.

A neglected neighborhood or district is one that has been economically marginalized. One primary mechanism of this is when funds and business are divested away towards another section of the city. It is important to understand why some of these neighborhoods are being more invested in than others. Since San Francisco is one of the most exciting cities in America it has led companies eager to locate their headquarters and hotels in San Francisco which also causes a spike in prices in that neighborhood.

Additionally, research has shown that the Bay Area Council was on the hunt to "Manhattanize" the downtown, which they were successful in doing (Domhoff). As a result, the city became a tourist center and a convention location and rustled out nearby low-income neighborhoods. For instance, when analyzing the western addition, centered around Filmore street, it was first seen as the Harlem of the West Coast with the neighborhood filled with Jazz clubs and night spots. However, when redevelopment strolled through the Western addition it led to high-rise apartments, office buildings, and high-end bars and restaurants, pushing out many of the African community and vacating parts of Filmore street. The glamorization and upscaling of San Francisco to a high-end city has forced community members to move elsewhere and have left neighborhoods behind.

An example of a neighborhood that is neglected in San Francisco is the Tenderloin. In the early 1840s, the Tenderloin was known as the entertainment district and by the 1950s was one of the most prosperous in San Francisco (O’Mara). However, the years to come led the Tenderloin to what it is today, a
gritty run-down district. The district now contains a bulk of the city's underprivileged citizens. It is not uncommon to see used drug needles, garbage, and feces line the sidewalks. Tenderloin fell in disrepair due in part to the collapse of movie industry in San Francisco, which was essential to the Tenderloin, as well as police crack downs on quasi-legal businesses. Therefore, without “foot traffic or businesses, crime and drug dealing filled the void” (O’Mara). As a result, it led to business shifting towards Union square leaving the Tenderloin behind.

Nowadays, the Tenderloin has more violent crimes than almost any neighborhood in San Francisco. Many of the residents are unhappy and trying actively to fix the neighborhood with public programs. For example, Clean City, a non-profit that beautifies SF’s streets, originated from Tenderloin’s business owners. Historic walking tours for tourists are meant to bring attention to the positive aspects of the district like its murals, clubs, and parks. Moreover, the city is also trying to change the appearance of the neighborhood by installing newer lights, remodeling parks, opening a new history museum, establishing upscale dining, and adding after school programs (O’Mara). Although Tenderloin will need lots of work to change its neglected status this is a step in the right direction.

Another essential point is to look at how the socioeconomic disparities in the Tenderloin correlate with the high crime and drug use in the neighborhood. For instance, the neighborhood is home to the largest population of homeless and marginally housed individuals in San Francisco. More importantly, about 30% of households survive on less than $15,000 a year (Harder). There are also barriers to food security and nutrition which often reinforce socio-economic conditions. Subsequently, the Tenderloin does not have a full grocery store which leaves residents to find food at either the convenience store or being dependent on community food programs such as food pantries or free dining rooms.

Additionally, during 2005-07, Tenderloin was home to the highest number of annual physical and sexual assaults of any San Francisco neighborhood (Harder). Without adequate resources being implemented such as having grocery stores in the neighborhood and creating programs to help individuals with health and employment it is hard for positive change to occur.

This type of change would require people to unite for the purpose of doing good. Since that is the case, a look into the clear light of Chinese Buddhist doctrine may help us understand better the necessary steps that must be achieved. First let us quickly trace the movement of Buddhism to China.

Buddhism made its way into China from different trade routes that connected China to India, otherwise known as the “Silk Road.” The most popular form of Buddhism in China from the Tang Dynasty (616 to 907) was Chan Buddhism. Because Buddhism was different from the dominant philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism, there was a period of adaptation. Coming from India, Buddhism was “other-worldly”, which means it was focused on enlightenment and required one to enter monastic life.

This obligation ran counter to the social norms of China. The Chinese were more “this-worldly” and believed in the individual maintaining harmony within the society (O’Brien). The requirement of Buddhists to not marry or produce children clashed with the Chinese value of one’s duty to procreate and honor their ancestors. Thus, Chan emerged from the combination of the two philosophies. Through the assimilation of Taoist and Confucian terminology, Buddhist ideas took hold in China, giving rise to their enduring popularity today.
Chan Buddhism has some unique ideas which are relevant to the neglected neighborhoods of San Francisco. The Mahayana emphasis on social stability, social and political harmony, family, and governing the state easily fits into the Chinese and Californian social fabric.

Chan Buddhism and neglected neighborhoods go hand in hand. Within Chan, there is a concept of "merit" that allows the practitioner to gain karmic value. Merit accumulates as one performs good deeds, acts, or thoughts, which carries over through one’s life or subsequent incarnations (Cate). This means that accumulation of merit can lead to spiritual liberation in this or in another life. Monks earn merit through daily activities such as rituals, chanting, and meditation. These practices are still performed today. A layperson also is obliged to perform various acts such as holding vegetarian festivals, building bridges, copying sutras, and donating money. Because of this concept of karmic merit, Chan practitioners are engaging in their community for the better.

In the San Francisco context merit making could be promoted through community activities. Volunteering time at established community centers like Glide Memorial Church serving food, or the Tenderloin community garden (photographed below) would benefit not only oneself, but also the community. One would directly build a personal connection with their community while simultaneous overcoming selfishness. If time is a concern then giving of one’s own abundance can also be a source of merit. A trip to the food bank to donate stable foods and produce helps those who are in need.

A small example of karmic merit working is the story of the neighborhood in Oakland surrounding the corner of 11th Ave and East 19th Street. Once marred with graffiti, junk, heavy drug use, and urine, it is now a site of ritual. After a community member was fed up with the inability of the public works department, they tried something different. They placed a lone Buddha statue on the site. Slowly the junk, graffiti, and drugs were replaced with flowers, oranges, and people. Eventually a Buddhist congregation member caught wind and took it upon herself to take care of it. The caretaker Vina said, “caring for the Buddha statue is symbolic of caring for oneself to help make you a better person — or maybe a better neighborhood” (Silber).

Various programs and organizations are working to make sure that there are no neglected neighborhoods in San Francisco. First is a program that Housing and Urban Development (HUD) runs known as the Rental Assistance Demonstration Program (RAD). RAD is a vital program that protects low income residents by allowing them to remain in their family neighborhoods. This program has invested over $500 million in repairs for public housing since 2015. It has also changed over 3,500 units to ownership and property management by community-based, affordable housing developers (Kelleher).
Moreover, the program has added community rooms in buildings such as exercise classes and educational opportunities to allow neighborly interactions. These resources that are implemented by the RAD are important because they help improve the quality of life and health for the residents. It can be seen that the program has allowed San Francisco residents to not only stay in their community—which helps neighborhoods not be neglected—but also have educational programs that can help attract new people into those neighborhoods as well.

A second organization that advocates for affordable housing and helping residents stay in their neighborhood is the Bill Sorro Housing Program. Bill Sorro was a lifelong activist and helped sparked the housing movement in San Francisco during the late 1960s. The program is a unique center that was inspired by Bill Sorro’s work to support low-income individuals, families, immigrants, veterans, seniors, people with disabilities, LGBTQ, and other highly vulnerable members of the community who are seeking housing and preventing displacement. They offer many free services such as assisting community members in finding affordable housing, housing education, and workshops. More importantly, programs like these allow residents to be represented in their neighborhood and are assisted with any housing problems that they may have.

Lastly, Habitat for Humanity Greater San Francisco is an organization that is also helping with neglected neighborhoods. The organization works to build homes and to sustain affordable home ownership opportunities for families located throughout the Bay Area. Furthermore, the program has been around for about 30 years and has helped many low-income individuals with home repairs such as replacing stairs or putting in insulation. Additionally, they have volunteers to help repair and maintain neglected parts of neighborhoods to make a beneficial impact on the entire community (Habitat). This illustrates how important it is to work together to put a stop towards pushing residents out and allows them to be comfortable in the neighborhood they are in.

As some neighborhoods become more upscale, attracting those who can afford the “entrance fee,” others remain economically hard-pressed. It is imperative that the people of this city begin to think in a different paradigm. Chinese Buddhism’s concept of merit can help to guide one’s thoughts towards a new approach to social wellbeing. A decision to help others and give from oneself may have lasting effect on our spiritual wellbeing. Marginalized districts like the Tenderloin are looking for help and it is the responsibility of the community to begin to make positive efforts towards real change. Organizations like Habitat for Humanity and HUD are just a start towards this way of thinking. If we can get most citizens to understand the importance of merit then we will see something truly unique: a unified city, something worth striving for.

A statue of Avalokiteśvara (or Guan Yin) the Buddhist goddess of compassion, sits on a shrine in Oakland near a Buddha statue placed about 11 years ago. Vietnamese immigrants in the Oakland neighborhood make offerings to the statues as part of a daily ritual.

Photo by Thomas Walden Levy
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Climate Change and Insights from Japanese Buddhism
Graham Hendry and JM

The ways the various Japanese schools of Buddhism have traditionally approached the concept of nature and ecology are distinctly different from the most popular “mainstream” Western views. It has as much to do with pre-Buddhist Japanese culture as the Buddhist traditions we know today. Japan’s ancient Shinto traditions did not really see nature as a distinct concept and did not even have a word for what is typically thought of as “nature” until Chinese culture brought the concept of “heaven and earth” (Tollini 81). Nature and the environment were not major concerns in Buddhism until many Daoist and Confucian principles were assimilated into the Chinese Buddhist traditions that were later brought to Japan during the Asuka and Nara periods (538-794).

Unlike the heavily dualistic and hierarchical Western-style concept of humanity vs. nature, which was not existent in Japan until the Meiji era (1868-1912), the typical Japanese Buddhist views humanity being in harmony with the natural world. A key perspective is that all things are interconnected and cooperate to maintain balance. Under this view, nature abides by the karmic law of cause and effect (inga obo in Japanese) where “Nature is considered to be a complex mechanism where the karmic law of reward is inescapable.” As a matter of fact, "it is the most important law that governs the entire universe” (Tollini 84).

The specifics of how this is realized differ somewhat depending on the particular school of Buddhism. The Shingon denomination believes that “man and nature, plants, trees, rivers, etc. share the same origin, belong to the same dimension, and only the composition of the elements among them make the difference...all phenomena exist in Buddhahood equally, without distinction between animate and inanimate beings” (Tollini 86). Because of this shared origin, Shingon believes that all things have an equal Buddha-nature and ability to reach enlightenment. In contrast, Tendai Buddhism believes that all things share a potential for Buddha-nature and enlightenment but do not necessarily attain Buddhahood in the same way. Tendai believes that natural phenomena like plants and trees are “enlightened as they are” and do not need to make an effort to attain enlightenment the way humans must do.

The Soto Zen view of nature and ecology is significantly different from both Shingon and Tendai. It is also quite possibly the most important influence in the development of contemporary Japanese Buddhist views on ecology. In particular Dogen, the founder of
Soto Zen, wrote extensively about nature and Buddhism. Unlike the older Shingon and Tendai views, Dogen (1200-1253) believed that all things are Buddha-nature rather than just possessing it in some capacity.

Dogen’s Zen stated that “mountains, rivers and the great land all are the ‘Ocean of Buddha-nature’...to see mountains and rivers is to see Buddha-nature” (Tollini 88). Dogen believed that nature was one of the best sources for humans to learn Buddhahood because nature was “just as it is,” free from human trappings such as ego. This realistic view of nature also showed the “irrational, mouldy, cruel, parasitic” dark side of life that must always be remembered (Snyder 213). Dogen also stressed the idea that humans and natural phenomena all belong to the same Buddha-nature “because of the virtues of the stream sound and mountain form, ‘the earth and sentient beings simultaneously achieve the way’” (Tollini 90).

This early emphasis on humanity’s relationship with the natural world led Soto Zen to become one of the first adopters of the kind of “engaged Buddhism” that started becoming popular after World War II. Nowadays Soto Zen has officially codified its stance on environmental issues with the Five Principles of Green Life that encourage “protecting the green of the Earth”, limiting waste, and coexisting with nature (Sotozen.net).

This new “ecological turn” is a synthesis of two Eastern Buddhist views. One is that all humans and natural phenomena are interrelated and interdependent “jewels in Indra’s Net” that all reflect one another. A second view is that the historical ecological ideas of Western thinkers such as Muir and Thoreau were brought in as a result of Buddhism gaining newfound popularity in the post-WWII Western world. This is especially true among more progressive and environmentally-conscious audiences (Tollini 91).

The non-dualistic cause-and-effect interconnectedness present in many Japanese Buddhist schools of thought facilitate using a similar "Green Life" perspective to analyze pressing environmental issues. Topics of pollution and climate change synergize well with modern rational and scientific methods. The emphasis on mindfulness of one’s actions and having a reverence for nature offers a practical template for solving these problems.

These solutions could be something as small as being careful to not litter, recycling as much as possible, and following leave-no-trace practices when out in nature. They can also be as large-scale as collectively campaigning for better environmental regulations and increased sustainability at a nationwide or worldwide level. Raising awareness and promoting both individual and larger-scale collective efforts can mitigate and eradicate the root causes of climate change and pollution.

There is no other way to protect the environment than to do so in our daily lives. The atmosphere is what preserves the Map of the Bay Area showing zones most heavily affected by sea level rise and land sinkage by 2100. Areas in red would be submerged by sea level rise and land sinking, areas in orange would be submerged by sea level rise alone. New York Times.
balance for all life to exist, but humans are on the verge of upsetting that balance. A Japanese belief greatly emphasized is the idea that "in the existence of life in the mountains and rivers, trees and flowers" Buddhism "holds that the life of all creatures in equal value and advocates coexistence with all life-forms" (Dessi 337).

Human activities are largely the reason greenhouse gases are produced and why global temperatures continue to rise. Since the pre-industrial period (between 1850 and 1900), global warming has been observed due to human activities such as fossil fuel burning, which increases heat trapping greenhouse gas levels in the earth’s atmosphere. Professor Stefan Rahmstorf, an oceanographer and climatologist said, "we have emitted so much carbon dioxide that the amount in our atmosphere has increased by about one third in the last hundred years and it is now higher than any time since at least a million years. We expect about three, four, even five degree centigrade warming in this century (because) the warmer it gets the faster the sea level rises."

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which includes 1300 scientists from the United States and other countries, they estimated a temperature rise of 2.5 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit in the next century. The degree of climate change effects on singular areas will vary over time with the ability of different societal and environmental systems to adjust or adapt to change. According to an analysis by NASA, earth’s global surface temperature in 2019 was the second warmest since modern record-keeping began in 1880 and 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than the 1951 to 1980 mean. Mankind has not been responsible in its use of fossil fuels because the past five years have been the warmest of the last 140 years.

The earliest and most structured attempt by institutional Buddhism in Japan to cope with the current environmental crisis was the Green Plan (Güren puran) promoted by the Soto Zen denomination in 1995 (Dessi 337). This plan was meant to spread awareness of the environmental crisis at the international level. It promoted activities such as surveys on acid rain, the distribution of informative material, and a campaign to save water and energy in temples and private households (Williams 2010, Dessi 2013: 52-54).

Since reliable record keeping began in 1880, global sea level has risen by about 8 inches. By 2100, it is projected to rise another 1 to 4 feet caused primarily by two factors related to global warming: the added water from melting ice sheets and glaciers and the expansion of seawater as it warms (“The Effects of Climate Change”). More droughts in the southwest are projected as well as heat waves everywhere are to become more intense and cold waves less intense everywhere. Ben Cook, climate scientist at NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University in New York City and lead author of the study stated that we are going to get a drought like the 1930s dust bowl except the one we are expecting will probably last at least 30 to 35 years (“Earth Under-Water Documentary”).

There is a certain belief in some sectors of the Japanese public that Buddhist values and ideas could correct the contradictions of modern society. The mindfulness philosophies of Buddhism tie into climate change in the way that it encourages us to be more mindful of how we treat the Earth. It is apparent that humans have had a significant impact on climate change. The idea of interconnectedness emphasizes the fact that humans cannot exist without the earth, therefore, we must take care of it.
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The Vulnerable and Buddhist-Inspired Activism

Nicholas Lee and Connor Chen

We live on this earth. Our behavior significantly impacts the climate and everything around us. We cannot exist without the Earth and we have to be mindful about how we treat this world, because without it we can no longer exist. As it is important to protect our planet, we must also protect our health from this pandemic.

Everybody and anyone is susceptible to getting the coronavirus, COVID-19, but older adults are twice as likely to develop serious outcomes versus younger, healthier people (Radio.com). This is because the older adult’s immune system is generally weaker than younger adults, leaving them at a higher risk to contract the virus. Adults with pre-existing medical conditions, such as heart disease, lung disease, and diabetes have to take additional precautions. For young adults and children, they are well equipped to battle the infection because they have less or fewer health complications (Radio.com).

This pandemic is not only threatening our health status and putting us more at risk, but it is also threatening the Asian community. The Asian community is fighting two battles: one against COVID-19, and the other against xenophobia. People perceive that COVID-19 originated in China. This is a reason we are seeing xenophobic and racist behaviors towards the Asian community. Discrimination towards Asians/Asian-Americans has been escalating due to the constant fear of the pandemic and President Trump quoting COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” its emphasizing that all Asians have COVID-19. There have been people that are using their words to discuss and dispute this act of xenophobia and provide insight to Asians who are going through racism.

Every group has faced their own set of prejudices during their time in history. However, COVID-19 politics has singled out Asians and Asian-Americans. When we see the president of the United States incorrectly calling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus,” he is giving an impression to his fellow Americans that it is okay to call it this because Trump states “It comes from China” (Papenfuss). This usage is highly inappropriate because it creates a divide in America between Asians and other races. In addition, introducing this derogatory term will create a bigger divide between foreign relations. When President Trump make statements like these it is shifting the blame to his fellow Asian-Americans, and they will receive discrimination because of it. Rather than uniting the nation, the statement made is creating xenophobic panic in a time of a crisis.

On May 13th 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, President Trump further tweets “As I have said for a long time, dealing with China is a very expensive thing to do. We just made a great Trade Deal, the ink was barely dry, and the World was hit by the Plague from China. 100 Trade Deals wouldn’t make up the difference - and all those innocent lives lost!” (Swan). President Trump is furthering tensions between the United States and China. Even though in early April “Trump said China had sent virus data to U.S. scientists and was sending more after he and Xi spoke by telephone” (Goh), Trump further stated “They have had a very tough experience. And they are doing well ...
President Xi is doing very well. We learned a lot and we have great communication together” (Goh). There is a shift in perspective from President Trump a month later when he is communicating and learning a lot about COVID-19 from his Chinese counterpart.

When thinking of some racially-charged encounters in the Bay Area, we think about the encounters on the BART train, when we hear about Rachelle Cruz’s parents, who are Filipino, being yelled at and told to go back to their own country. The accuser further escalated the issue by calling Cruz’s mother a “Chinese Coronavirus Bitch” and even telling her parents they are carriers of the virus (Wong). Since COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China, Asian Americans have been scapegoats, regardless if they are Chinese. Asian Americans are not only dealing with the virus, but also constant verbal and physical discrimination from their xenophobic counterparts.

Xenophobia against the Chinese is nothing new in America. Lee stated the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is “The country’s first immigration law that singled out an immigrant group for large-scale exclusion based on race” (Lee, 90). In addition, it barred entry of Chinese laborers for ten years, allowing entry only to certain exempt classes, such as students, diplomats, travelers, and merchants. The Geary Act of 1892 prohibited all Chinese from obtaining naturalized citizenship. Moreover, it was “an extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act that required all Chinese in the United States to register with the federal government to obtain certificates of residence (called today as green cards) that proved their legal right to be in the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act was renewed again in 1902 and made permanent in 1904” (Lee 94).

It was not only until 1943 when Congress passed a measure to repeal the exclusion law against Chinese immigrants, but they implemented a quota on how many could enter, which was 105 visas per year. Additionally, in 1924 they implemented the Johnson-Reed Act, which was designed to further reduce the slots available to southern and eastern European immigrants.” No restrictions based on immigration from the western hemisphere, but the act closed the door on any further Asian immigration by denying admission to all aliens who were “ineligible for citizenship.” This was specifically aimed at the Japanese” (Lee, 135). After many decades of anti-Japanese activism, the United States barred Japanese immigrants. These are a few examples of what Asians had to face during this era.

John Nelson coined the term “Buddhist-inspired activism” to avoid confusion on the
phrase “socially-engaged Buddhism.” The latter implies a binary opposition: Buddhism interacting with society, and Buddhism that is distant from social norms. The term “engaged Buddhism” and “socially engaged Buddhism” is interpreted as rectifying social inequalities or promoting social justice, but the scholar Raoul Birnbaum stated that it is “delusional” to think that Buddhist practice is only limited to those themes and the term’s self-righteous manner (Nelson).

Nelson wants to reshape the term to “Buddhist-inspired activism” to give a better understanding of it. The word “inspired” also helps indicate the concept and principles (ex. compassion, independence, non-harming) that integrate easily to the agenda that aims to affect political or social change for the better. However, the term can also apply to right-wing groups such as those in Burma and Sri Lanka who use Buddhism as a weapon against minority groups of other religions (Nelson). It is still “Buddhist-inspired activism,” but from a western or modern point of view, it can be seen as discrimination since modern Buddhism and its practices are more inclusive and don't condone any discrimination.

Discrimination has become a pressing issue in the state due to the pandemic of COVID-19, especially towards Asians. Because of the discrimination against Asians in the US, there have been people who are finding ways to learn about the threats and hatred towards Asians and are discovering the long jeopardy of Asian xenophobia in US history. University of San Francisco professor James Zarsadiaz believes that Trump calling COVID 19 as “the Chinese virus” is the root of the abusive racism and xenophobia towards Asians during this epidemic. Trump’s rhetoric puts all Asians at risk because they are seen as a threat. Despite the call outs and cease of the term “the Chinese Virus,” the damage has still been done.

When talking about protecting the Asian community, Zarsadiaz mentioned Andrew Yang’s quote from the Washington Post. Asian Americans “need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before. … We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need” (Lerner). While this may seem like a possible solution—an attempt of applying Buddhist-inspired activism to improve the politics and society of lessening the idea that Asians are the scapegoat of this pandemic--Zarsadiaz sees this as a down-play of one’s Asian-ness for others. Disregarding or downplaying your Asian-ness for the US to prevent this discrimination can lose one’s self and lessen one’s self-esteem.

San Francisco itself has gone through a myriad of problems within its society such as homelessness, social inequalities, wealth inequalities, racial discrimination, climate change and gentrification. It does not help the nation when President Trump makes statements such as “Chinese Virus” and “Plague of China,” but applying some elements or aspects of Buddhism can be a way to relieve the problems in San Francisco.

Learning about meditation can teach people how to turn their negativity into a positive one, or a simple task of placing a Buddhist statue to eliminate the bad karma and generate positive merit are just a few examples. Although it may not resolve the problems completely, it is to show that there are organizations and people who are using Buddhist elements to help themselves and others make their society a better place. In this time of the pandemic, it is important that we apply these Buddhist aspects and practices to ensure that our own community can be safe. We are all facing dukkha but we have to understand we are interconnected with the world and community around us. We have to adopt a Buddhist perspective and take care of one another because if our community suffers we all suffer.
Works Cited


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