

Confessions

of a Buddhist Environmental Activist

Professor of Buddhism, James Blumenthal, recalls his early days as an activist for the environmental non-profit *Greenpeace* and considers the Buddhist philosophical imperatives to bringing witness to injustice ...

Let me begin with a confession. Though I was quite active in the environmental movement in the late '80s and early '90s (I worked full-time for *Greenpeace* for four and a half years, and was arrested more than ten times for non-violent acts of civil disobedience in defense of the planet), other than conscious living, I have not done a whole lot recently. The inner-activist in me feels guilty.

I was already a Buddhist during my environmental activist days. I saw environmental activism as Dharma activity. After all, the Buddhist notion of dependent-origination, the idea that all phenomena arise in dependence on an interwoven web of causes and conditions, resonates quite well with the basic tenets of deep ecology. When we harm one living being, we – directly or indirectly – harm all living beings. As a Buddhist practicing in the Mahayana tradition, had I not committed to care and work for the well-being of all living beings? Is that not the responsibility that one training to become a bodhisattva accepts?

I found that this Buddhist sense of personal responsibility resonated also with a tenet put forth in the Quaker faith – that we have a responsibility to bear witness, and help to bring the witness of our community to the injustices that we are aware of that are harming living beings. The more people in society who are aware of an injustice, the less likely it is that society as a whole will allow it to continue. There is a profound democratic sentiment underlying this idea.

And this Quaker notion gives us advice about how to move from concern to action. The idea that we have a personal responsibility to bear witness to injustice has inspired and guided *Greenpeace* since its earliest days. *Greenpeace* took the idea one step further. We felt that not only do we have a responsibility to bear witness, but also – in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. – to bear non-violent resistance to an injustice.

I held several different jobs during my time with *Greenpeace*. Probably my personal favorite was a period in the early '90s when I was an Assistant for the Nuclear Campaign in the United States working to end American (and British) nuclear weapons testing at the Nevada Test Site. Many Americans do not realize that our government has detonated over 1,000 nuclear bombs at the test site in Nevada. One of the most memorable events for me from this period was in early 1991 when we organized a massive demonstration at the test site in Nevada where more than 10,000 activists from all over the United States and abroad converged to take a stand against nuclear testing.

Before arriving (and on site), activists were encouraged to take part in “non-violence training.” This training was intended to prepare those in attendance who were planning to engage in civil disobedience as an act of protest to do so with love and compassion in their hearts and to be utterly non-violent in all of their deeds.



It also prepared them for various potential scenarios that could arise during the course of the action, be it with the police, other activists, or the physical conditions of the desert.

Many who participated were not engaging in civil disobedience. They were holding signs and banners and chanting slogans outside the test site grounds. Those of us who wanted to take their statement of protest to the level of civil disobedience did something more. We climbed through or over the four-foot wire fence that marked the test site grounds and “trespassed” on the enormous section of Nevada which was the Department of Energy-administered-Nuclear Test Site.

We did this for several reasons. The first is that the D.O.E. cannot detonate a bomb when trespassers are wandering on the grounds. Thus, we were bearing witness

Socially Engaged Buddhism has grown tremendously in virtually all Buddhist traditions in recent years. A central component of Buddhist activism is the mind of the activist. Buddhist ethics are inextricably tied to intention and motivation. Nuclear testing seemed to me to run utterly contrary to Buddhist principles as I understood them. Not only was it polluting our environment and causing untold harm and misery to thousands of living beings, including causing cancer for many down-winders, but it was also an act of preparation for war. I am reminded of the famous quote by Albert Einstein, “We cannot simultaneously prepare for and prevent war.”

Buddhists see causes as producing related effects. If our goal in entering into this act of civil disobedience was to aid in being a cause for peace, then we must embody peace on the path to that goal. The affinity group that I was a part of

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and non-violently resisting the injustice of nuclear testing. Additionally, the site for American and British nuclear testing was a part of the Shoshone Indian Reservation that was illegally seized by the U.S. government. Armed with permits issued by the Shoshone Nation to wander and gather on their land, we decided to take a walk. Our hope was that once arrested, the state would press charges and we would have our day in court to question the illegal seizure of land and to bring the attention of the nation to nuclear weapons testing. This never came to pass as charges against all trespassers were subsequently dropped.

(the small sub-group of twelve activists with whom I participated in this action) made a conscious effort to truly embody and be instruments of peace, loving-kindness, and compassion. This was not only within our own group, but with other affinity groups, test site employees, the police who arrested us, the guards at the holding cell, the officers who booked us, and the people in the small town seventy miles away where we were booked and released. The bar next to the police station in that small town had a sign in the window that read, “Save a flag, burn a protester.” Many locals who worked at the test site saw us as a threat to their

Scenes of *Greenpeace* activism, circa 1991, including a young Jim Blumenthal



jobs and their livelihood. This was a reality we needed to understand, even if we believed in our hearts that we were doing this for them.

I tried sincerely to consider the perspective of those who wanted the testing to continue and who might see my actions as antagonistic, or those of an enemy – like the local bar owner may have.

Many in this town depended for their livelihood on jobs at the Nuclear Test Site. I also had to consider the potential consequences of participating in civil disobedience and establishing an arrest record in my own life. Would I spend a year or two in jail? Would I not be considered for future jobs because of my arrest record?

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I decided that I was willing to risk a few years of personal freedom to be a serious voice for peace. If not me, who? And I decided that I really did not ever need the type of job where I may not be hired because I took such a stand for peace and environmental justice. So far, my activism has only opened doors, not closed them.

After a number of years of dedicating my life to full-time peace and environmental activism, I began to think more about Buddhism and to reflect more on my activist work. I think the type of work that *Greenpeace* and many other groups and individuals engage in is some of the most commendable work on the planet. But I began to wonder if it was the most important work for me personally.

I took an eight-month leave of absence from *Greenpeace* to travel in Asia and explore Buddhism more deeply. While in Nepal, I did a couple of short retreats. During the second of these retreats, I realized that the true calling for my life's work was still as an activist, but more conventionally toward the Dharma. Though the environmental work is so important, it occurred to me that what fundamentally needed to change was our minds. Until we cut the self-cherishing, self-centered ways of thinking, none of these environmental problems will ever really be solved.

I am not saying that I think we should all just sit on our cushions and meditate. I believe Buddhists have a responsibility to do something concrete to help alleviate the problems and suffering caused by environmental destruction. Activism with the right motivation is Dharma activity. But there are a number of ways in which to approach this, and individuals need to decide what is most appropriate for themselves. And, I think that while we work on these issues it is also critically important to be conscious of and work on our minds. We need to become the peace we want to bring about.

For me, this meant studying and practicing Buddhism more deeply. I attended the University of Wisconsin where

I did my Ph.D. under Geshe Lhundup Sopa, and am now a professor of Buddhism at Oregon State University and the Maitripa Institute. Though I sometimes feel guilty about not being more out on the front lines of the environmental movement, I have come to think more broadly about what constitutes activism. Since college students are at one of the most formative stages of their lives, I believe educating students about philosophical ideas like dependent-origination and the compassionate models embodied by the great bodhisattvas is one way to contribute. I encourage everyone to sincerely ask themselves what they can do to help. We all have something to contribute. ☸

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