

The Politics of Love and Justice™

Engaged Buddhism

Angel Kyodo Williams - Donald Rothberg

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Announcer: Welcome to the Politics of Love and Justice where we're bridging divides and infusing more spirit into social change and helping co-create new global standards based on loving kindness, ethical behavior and reverence for all. We appreciate you sharing this important and uplifting information with your friends and family.

And now your hosts, Michael Lerner, Editor of *Tikkun Magazine*, and Cat Zavis Executive Director of the Network of Spiritual Progressives.

Cat: Welcome to the Politics of Love and Justice, integrating spirituality and activism to build a sustainable caring world. Produced by The Shift Network and hosted by the Network of Spiritual Progressives with Rabbi Michael Lerner and Cat Zavis.

We have on the call Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams and Donald Rothberg. Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams is an author, activist and master trainer who has been bridging the worlds of spirit and justice since her critically acclaimed book, *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*. It was hailed as "an act of love" by Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker, and "a classic" by Buddhist pioneer Jack Kornfield.

She's a social visionary and leading voice for Transformative Social Change which she sees as America's next great movement.

Donald Rothberg is a member of the Teachers Council at Spirit Rock in northern California and also teaches regularly at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, California. He's written extensive and socially engaged Buddhism including *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World*.

An organizer, teacher and former board member for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, he has helped to guide three, six months to two year training program in socially engaged spirituality to the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

On today's call, we will explore what Buddhism can teach us about transforming not only ourselves, but also as society and why they are so deeply linked. And how through the discovery of a radical relationship to love we can begin to see the possibility of radical justice for ourselves, all beings and the planet.

So welcome to the call both of you. Thank you so much for joining us. Each of you have chosen to ground your activism and your Buddhist traditions and teachings. I wonder if you would first share with us what some of those key Buddhist teachings are which you base your activism. Why they are so important to you and how your spiritual practice feed you day in and day out. Angel, do you want to start?

Angel: After years of working with I think lots of different texts and teachings and focus, really for me it comes down to the teaching of liberation from suffering. And I want to say liberation from suffering not just in the sense of -- not just liberation, but also liberation towards a broader liberation in one's life. Not solely focusing on the idea that we're having to get away from, but actually liberation towards.

And so that has become just the one thing that I focus on that it's important to me. And it's because I feel like many of the conditions that we are currently exist in radically alter our sense of the possibility of liberation. And there is a lack of attention or I want to say under attention to the possibility of liberation in this lifetime.

That even within I would say many of the wave in which we're currently talking about Buddhism, it's still even locked within into a frame of a sense of limitation. And I'm deeply of the belief that we can orient towards the most radical expression of Buddhist teachings of the Dharma possible. That is what forms everything that I do.

Donald: Should I add to that now?

Michael: Yeah.

Donald: Yeah. Let me start by saying that the way that I hold Buddhist practice is within a larger framework for our times where I believe that we need the resources of all spiritual traditions now. So even though Buddhist practices as it were my home practice, I also draw tremendously from the Abrahamic traditions and particularly where the origins of in many ways the social justice are in also from indigenous traditions with the connection to the earth and community.

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And within that larger framework, Buddhism adds tremendous resources for the contemporary integration and we might say the inner and outer transformation. And the teachings are often understood as essentially two-fold and then the attempt is to integrate those through wisdom teachings and there are teachings of compassion and of the heart.

And they ultimately are very connected. And the wisdom teachings as Reverend Angel was saying are essentially about liberation from suffering. They are expressed in the pit form in the teaching of the four noble truths which is really about the roots of suffering and the roots of freedom. And those teachings point to ways that suffering is really understood as a kind of compulsive reactivity in relation to experience whether it's individual or relational or institutional.

It's a kind of reactivity which expresses itself most basically in compulsive wanting or greed which we see institutionalized and compulsive pushing away. Reactivity against something which we see in hatred, fear and so forth. And so the teachings are about how to work with those conditions to come to the depth of peace of the heart which is also then expressed through love and compassion.

What Buddhism offers has been particularly valuable for me. And I think for larger expressions of outer transformation as well is those set at inner practices that help one work with all that reactivity in one's self and then bringing that into one's group or organization and bring that onto the outer world. And how that can come out of also a training in compassion and love.

Michael: Beautiful.

Cat: Great. Thank you so much. A great way to start. One of the questions that I have for both of you because you're both engaged in bringing these teachings not only to the inner work to help us have our internal transformation, but also to deal with systemic issues on the societal level. So one of the questions I have for you is what is the training that is needed for someone interested in being a spiritual activist, one who's committed to connecting love and justice not only internally, but also externally?

Reverend Angel, do you want to start?

Angel: Sure. I think that the training begins with acknowledging that we're in pain, that we are holding a great deal of our own lifetime experience and generational -- generation of those experience and societal experience of deep discomfort, confusion, anxiety and fear that disables us from living fully in our own being. That as Donald said, we are in a state of compulsive reactivity. And that hinders what I think is our natural capacity to love and to connect.

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Love in the sense of to connect deeply with not only other people, but also other beings in the natural environment. So I feel like that's really a place that people has to begin. And there are different entry ways into that including for me what I do often with people is just expose. Like help people to expose the ways in which they're not aligned in their own being, right.

That there's a way we seek to be in our good intention and hopefulness. And the way we want to show up in there is there tends to be showing up actually in our body, misalignment with that that reveals our underlying patterns of the ways in which fear and anxiety and desire and aggression are molding our behaviors.

And so the way that we show up is inconsistent with our heart's desire. And I start there because that's a pivotal point of recognition. I was like, "Oh." And it's a kind of moment for people to give up the game and begin to start shedding the mask and say, "Okay. This is what I'm coming with. This is who I am. I have a problem with alcohol. I'm overwhelmed by the life that I'm living. I'm not sure of myself. And this makes me live a contracted and unliberated life."

And so I think that that's the beginning for me is an opening into the potential for people being willing to receive and allow themselves to heal. But in order to do that, they actually have to acknowledge the depth or at least the layers of suffering that they're experiencing.

Cat: Wonderful.

Donald: Maybe I can complement that by like Reverend Angel has helped to develop a number of training programs. Some of them actually interfaith training programs. I directed more academic program called "Socially Engaged Spirituality" for about eight or nine years. But the core of work has been with Buddhist based training programs.

And over the years, we found it helpful to distinguish between more inner training, more relational training that would mean whether going all the way from a dyad to a group or organization to training for action in the social or the collective realm. And to see all of these as totally interrelated in a sense, interpenetrating.

And so there are whole sets of inner practices which are really crucial for what we might call spiritual activist or sacred activist, whatever language we use. The core practices of mindfulness, just to be able to track what's going on in one's own experience helps cut through that reactivity. So not to be on automatic and this is really crucial.

I remember being at the conference, Michael, that you organized on spiritual activism about ten years ago. And leading a workshop about what kind of training would be important and hearing from people. And they'd said, "We need all sorts of things."

But some of our greatest needs lie in the fact that among a lot of activist and in our organizations, we don't get along so well with each other. We snipe at each other. We have all sorts of conflicts where we react towards each other.

So how to develop that inner training that helps one to notice that, to work with that, the part practices, the mindfulness practices, the wisdom practices. And then there are ways to bring that out into the relational realm. I think that's a very important sort of intermediate realm between the inner and the more fully social which helps us to train to be effective in groups.

So there are trainings that could be very helpful in mindful communication or skillful speech in empathy -- which I know, Cat, you teach quite a bit -- in working skillfully with conflict and bringing in sensitivity to different dimensions of diversity and so forth.

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And then another training has to be in how we intervene socially, how we understand the world. I think we still have a long way to go to really integrate our spirituality with our way of understanding the world. Michael, I've learned a lot from your book and from you about having as we're seeing very deeply into the world as it were a spiritual lens which I think we're still early on in doing that in many ways.

So how to intervene socially, how to see the social world -- I think and maybe last thing I'll say is that training can really benefit tremendously from studying the great archetypal figures of the past. The just to study the Jewish prophets or Jesus or Gandhi or Dr. King or indigenous activists and so forth. And to learn -- Dorothy Day -- to learn from these various great beings who have taught us so much really.

Michael: Yeah. It's very impressive to hear about the trainings that the two of you have done. I'm wondering if you might tell us. You both had a lot of years of doing these trainings. If you could point to and tell us how this works, how the people who have done these trainings have impacted on the actual behavior of social change organizations. And maybe if you have any stories of how bringing back from your trainings the wisdom that you've imparted that have been able to have some impact.

Because I think encouraging people on this call, I mean people listening to hear that these trainings actually can make a difference in the day-to-day operations or in the long term thinking of any of the social movements that you've been involved with.

Cat: Okay, Donald, do you want to start?

Donald: Okay. Yeah. The trainings that I've been involved with were all of them for people who are already engaged. And so as a pre-requisite for being in the training was that there were some engagement. And we generally would define that as social service and social action. So some of them would be in health care. Some of them would be working in prison. Some of them would be working with the homeless. Some of them would be activist on foreign policy and so forth.

I think in large part, what we offered was community and was this sense of a place to belong that would really support them fully bringing their own practice into the different venues where they were working. And the -- maybe changing some now, but for large number of the people that I've worked with, isolation is a real issue.

Especially isolation, not feeling linked to people with similar visions. People in a lot of activist organizations might be with people who don't necessarily have spiritual practices or spiritual perspectives. So the chance to really be in a community where there's a sense of belonging where all the parts of themselves as much as possible can show up is very, very crucial.

And I think that as we go forward with this, having a small community is very important. We name the Buddhist Peace Fellowship program the base program to refer to the base community movement connect with liberation theology in Latin America and worked a lot with small groups.

So a lot of this was helping people to process their experiences. I remember one evening, someone came back who had been working with the homeless that whole day and was in incredible distress and just was confused. I remember that evening, we were able to meet that person where she was to hold her with connection to explore the feelings.

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And then we were also able to look at the different dimensions together. We were able to look at her personal experience, but also at that time to look into the institutional roots of homelessness and how there might be institutional responses. So, a lot of the programs really if they help keep this way of seeing, a way of connecting inner and outer together.

So I think that community plays a really crucial role in doing that. There are just many, many times that people were sustained where on their own they might have reached out burnout.

Michael: Right. Beautiful. How about you, Angel?

Angel: Yeah. You know there are two forms that my training has taken. I've spent quite a few years doing training directly with activists that work for social justice --

sorry, social justice, social advocate for the organizations. And the approach of really working with the body has been a big piece of that.

And really where my overall sensibility has leaned -- I agree with Donald in that -- I was stuck by the question about Buddhism at the onset of the call because I don't feel a sense of limiting myself within the frame of Buddhist teachings per se. I think they provide a very strong and useful framework.

But I'm also quite aware of the fact particularly amongst folks in justice organization, many people come with their own familial spirituality. And so I have tended to not focus on overemphasizing Buddhism in any way which is part of why I land in the seat of liberation and likewise in indigenous earth-based teachings and some African wisdom traditions because really I'm less invested in what the vehicle is rather than what the destination is.

So I think that's important to say. And so one of the other things that I do in terms of training which has been actually quite fascinating. I started this 27 days of change training which is online. And it was listed out of a kind of training, but really a practice opportunity that started in my community. And we had it seasonally a period of time, living in community and in an urban environment.

We wanted to give people an opportunity to -- we're not monastics. We're not going to be in sort of like high level practice all the time, but could we create a container with the question of people could really drop in and really work directly with things in their life that felt out of alignment or that they wanted to go through. And eventually that was modified and made into an online version.

And it's been fascinating to see how powerful it is. We've done two seasons of it in January and we've just finished one in the beginning of May. And I would say that the outcome in both cases probably because of that orientation is that I would see many things.

But probably the strongest single thing that comes back as a reflection is people willing to integrate self-care into their lives and their work lives to advocate for it, to release overwhelm as the way in which they function and relate to what it means to be a person bringing about social transformation. So the permission -- people are gaining the permission for themselves within their organization and amongst the organizations with which they collaborate and do work with.

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They're willing to have much more of a conversation and create space both for themselves, care of themselves. As Donald's pointing to in terms of community and care for each other. That my sense is that much of what has been lost in our sort of effort to build movement is we forget that we're building movement for people.

And we fall and I think at times we fall a little bit into the capitalist economic model of building movement for profit. Meaning the profit of the thing, right. Like whatever the thing is we're building and moving to the detriment of connection and care in relationship with people. And ultimately, no matter what it is we're building movement for, doing work for, it's for people. Not for signature on a piece of paper. It's not for a law. It's not for a new building.

So those are outcomes and they're a necessary part of the equation. But the ultimate idea of all of the work that we're doing for social transformation is the care and create the conditions of care and thriving and possibility and potential for people. And movement in organizational work has been suffering deeply from that by being overwhelmed by the pace and by the drive.

And the people that has been most left out are the individuals that are doing the work themselves. So that's what I am really getting an opportunity to see and it's really quite gratifying. To care for one's self, space to care for loved ones and space for care to our community.

Michael: That sounds great. I'm wondering if you might tell us by giving some specific examples or even just one of how somebody who has gotten the nurturance and support that both of you are describing as happening in the trainings you offer. How that has been taken into a social change movement. I know, Angel, that you've given a lot of attention and energy to the issues that emerge in communities of color.

And although I don't know any of the details, I imagine that you must have either you directly or the people you've trained must have played some role in the Black Lives Matter Movement and in other movement to secure more of the human rights of people of color in Oakland. So I wonder if you might be willing to share of course without mentioning names, et cetera, but of somebody that you trained who then did intervention A, B and C inside such a movement that in some ways affected the tenure of that movement.

Angel: I don't actually work in Oakland, just to be clear about that. I live in Brooklyn, but I don't work in Oakland at all. And I actually do not focus on black issues or people of color issues per se. I work with people that are in social justice movements that often as a result of that are people of color. I say social justice as opposed to social change.

And that doesn't change the hue of who is participating and weights it in the balance of it with people of color. I have trained with people that have been -- actually, there was a person I worked with some time ago actually that was quite focused on doing a certain kind of organization, wanted it to be smart and

effective and all of these things and asked me actually to come in and teach them meditation. And I basically got there and said, "No. I'm not going to teach meditation. I'm going to train this thing."

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And so I worked in this sort of space of liberation and recognition of like where one is misaligned and whether you're embodying the change that you want to bring about. And that's what's important, right, whether you're free enough to begin to embody that change. To make the long story short, the result was is that entire organization was started out of that then had ripple effects that impacted an entire region of many people being trained.

And then ultimately, people that graduated or participated in that then went on to create other trainings that are rooted in the sense of we have to take care of our bodies. We have to discover inner alignment in order to bring about effective social transformation. That it's just whatever we're creating, whatever we're inhabiting inside of ourselves, whatever place we're abiding, we will project and create that out into the systems and structures and movements and organizations that we produce.

And so it's critical that we work with the inner lives. And so I know that some of the people, the key people, some significant people from different regions and Black Lives Matter has been a part of those trainings. They don't know that we have anything to do with each other, but I hear the echoes of the generation so to speak of an entirely different frame to movement building being passed down.

Michael: Great. Donald --

Donald: Yeah. Should I add a little bit to that? Yeah. I was thinking of two examples. And I'll try to give the first one without identifying the organization. I'll try as carefully as I can to do that, but I was thinking of one person with whom I worked who's in a fairly long term, let's say, left-wing progressive organization where in the last few years have been quite a number of conflicts and people not always treating each other very well.

All coming from people who have some insights, some part of the truth. But the lack of a good process to work with conflict and the lack of often skillful speech. And so one of the persons who I've worked with has found considerable receptivity in this organization for people giving much more attention to their speech and how they work with conflict.

And having more empathy for those with whom they disagree all coming in this organization where they have shared intentions. So that I think impacts

tremendously the efficacy of that organization. And I think this can give a very different approach in terms of working with one so called opponents.

That was one example. And then the other example I was thinking of was on work with climate issues. And personally, the two issues which I currently feel most drawn to, the two systemic issues are on racism and climate issues and doing different kinds of work in those are areas.

But with the climate issue, we've been able to bring together a group of dharma teachers especially over last year who we're having monthly conference calls and finding ways to bring the issues of climate change, climate justice and so forth into their communities. And then gather together with other teachers to produce statements to connect with people from other faith traditions to be part of the climate march last September and so forth. So there's a way in which people have been bringing a lot of these principles into work on that particular issue.

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Cat: I think those are probably the two main areas that my attention has been spent into so that's just in alignment.

Donald: Yeah.

Cat: So I think that you talk a lot about, Angel, this concept radical love and if we embrace radical love. What that would mean for our life individually and correctively? And I'm wondering if you could speak to that.

Angel: Yeah. I think so. We have a little bit of a language problem when we conceptualize love. It gets kind of something like I have to like you in there too, right. It's the warm and fuzzy, hugs-all-over kind of love. And so when I speak about radical love, really I think at the core of it is it is about radical connection like love in the sense of an unwavering understanding of our connectedness.

And the ways in which our freedom, our liberation are intertwined and interwoven. And so radical love is to say, "I radically belong to you." So connection is belong like I belong to you and you belong to me. And so therefore, I hold a responsibility for you, for how I be with you.

I hold responsibility actually also for how I be with myself and what I have to do in order to show up in the best way and care for myself and work on the areas that are unskillful because of this radical love, this radical belonging to the whole system, right. So not just this people love and certainly that should be a key piece of how we're connecting, but that I belong. I belong.

And so radical love for me is a sense of a deep and abiding sense of one's implicit, unquestioned belonging to this entire enterprise of life and living. And so we don't get to opt out. We're accountable. We're responsible and we expect to be held accountable for how it is that we are showing up in our belonging.

So this notion of radical love is about bringing our self fully into connection. And all of what that connection calls for which are the challenges, the willingness to show up the table and be in conflict and be in collaboration and do conflict well and do collaboration better hopefully. It's all of those things. And it allows us to drop the ways in which we opt out and check out because we say, "That's not mine. That's not my business. That's not the place that I have anything to do with." So radical love just simple amplifies all of the possibilities of a showing up to life.

Donald: Beautiful. Could I add a little bit to that?

Cat: Go ahead.

Donald: Yeah. At the depths of Buddhist practice one finds this what we would call a mind and heart and body that manifest that something like what we could call a radical love. It's an openness, it's a clarity. It's a clear seeing. It's an open heart that one can love. And one can touch it initially sometimes for a short time.

And the practice of really the spiritual practice in Buddhism I think it's really in any tradition is touching that space of radical love initially. And then finding ways to touch it more and more in a sustained way. And to then bring it out into one's life.

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And I think it's that experience and for some of us that experience of love and wisdom maybe found most deeply in meditation, for others in a relational context. But it's that experience of that love which is in a way one's refuge and one's reference point.

And it's that deep sense in one's own experience that this is our deeper nature. And that yes, we can then see that compulsive reactivity. We can see ourselves getting lost. We can see ourselves becoming confused.

But as we have that grounding in practice we know in a way that the reactivity is more superficial. And this gives us both an understanding and a kind of a faith to go forward and to work with one's self, to work with others. And then in the context of our discussion today, to bring this into this very challenging context of social transformation where historically a lot of the motivating energy for social change has been anger and has been demonization of the other.

And I imagine all of us are very much motivated and inspired by, again, many of the figures of the past who would bring a different model, whether it's Gandhi or King or Dorothy Day, to find ways to have that energy of love be there in a social movement. King was very explicit about that. Thich Nhat Hanh was very explicit about that.

He says, "The essence of non-violent movement is love." And so what spiritual practice has helped us then to do is to work with that anger, work with the reactivity. I remember I think King said at one point that the heart of a social movement is the transformation of anger, at least the social movement he was part of.

And so it's a big topic, but this is because certain kinds of anger which can be linked with deep insight into injustice and yet if it becomes compulsive and reactive it can be very destructive as we know.

Michael: That's why righteous indignation can be tied to love and doesn't have to be seen as anger, right. And I think that that's beauty of Angel's message too that radical love is expressed at times in righteous indignation. But how to get that balance right is one that right requires training. And we actually, Cat and I are doing a training for Spiritual Progressives to help people learn some of these skills that we'll be doing in the next few months.

And I certainly think that the trainings that you folks have done, both of you and each of you separately, are such important contribution. Thank you so much for that.

Donald: Thank you.

Cat: We only have about three to four minutes. I'm wondering if each of you want to end with a closing thought to share with the listeners. And then I'll end it after that. We want to have a couple minutes. So each of you have about a minute to add in any additional thoughts.

So Donald, do you want to go first?

Donald: Yeah. I'll start. The world deeply needs right now this connection of inner work and social transformation. And again, I would add that middle piece of the relational is very crucial. And in a sense, we need that integration very, very deeply.

People engaging in social transformation need the resources, the spiritual traditions -- as Angels was saying -- to have the resources to take care of one's self, to have a healthy community of transformation. And so social

transformation deeply requires that spiritual practice. And spiritual practice if it's not connected with responding to the great issues of our times runs the risk of being privileged and even elitist and escapist.

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Cat: Thank you. Angel, would you like to add something to end with here for the listeners?

Angel: I'm just really adding to what Donald offered is I think that the other thing that has been under represented and misunderstood is how much of what is limiting us in terms of really showing up fully is that we have paid too little attention to the connection between our body and our mind, our heart-mind, that embodiment.

We can talk until the cows come home about wisdom and compassion. And I know people that have had decades of training and sit in front of a room and that what they embody is not wisdom and compassion. And what they may be embodying is still the deep habit pattern of racism. What they're embodying still the deep habit of pattern of patriarchy.

So my attention is, my bet is on embodiment and a higher degree of focus on really working below this neckline. And doing our best to assure that our best intentions are aligned with skillful action in the way that we show up in all areas of our life and ultimately the way, what we are putting forward as our hope and our wish for change in the world.

Cat: Wonderful. I can't agree with you more when I do my trainings in empathy and compassion. I do a lot of embodied work and really help people tap into that embodied experience. You can say the right words, but if your body isn't feeling the words will never translate. So I couldn't agree more.

Thank you both so much for your time and participation today. I really, really appreciate it. And thanks to everyone who's listening. This has been a wonderful session. And be sure to join us for the next session to learn more. And to register to receive the upgrade for this summit, you can go to politicsoflovessummit.com/upgrade.

Thank you all for listening and thank you so much, Angel and Donald, for your wonderful participation today.

Donald: Thank you.

Angel: Thank you. Thank you so much.

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