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ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS: EASTERN WISDOM IN WESTERN MORAL CRISES

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Abstract:

This paper discusses how Engaged Buddhism and existentialist ethics can merge into one another to solve the current moral crisis in the Western world. Popularized by Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, Socially Engaged Buddhism advocates for using Buddhist teachings to combat pressing global issues such as war, environmental degradation, and social injustice. Similarly, existentialism emerged against the backdrop of the Second World War, Nazi death camps, and atomic bombings, forcing an entire generation to confront the human condition and anxiety-provoking givens of death, freedom, and meaninglessness. Both traditions emphasize radical responsibility, authentic action, and the transformation of suffering through conscious engagement with social reality. This interdisciplinary analysis examines how Sulak Sivaraksa's advocacy for democracy, human rights, and accountable governance parallels existentialist demands for authentic choice and social responsibility. Through synthesis of contemporary scholarship and primary source analysis, this study demonstrates that Engaged Buddhism's emphasis on compassionate action and existentialism's focus on authentic freedom provide mutually reinforcing approaches to moral crisis. The paper argues that Eastern wisdom traditions, particularly those emphasizing social engagement, offer crucial resources for addressing Western moral challenges, including environmental destruction, social inequality, and existential alienation. Data analysis reveals significant overlap between Buddhist concepts of interdependence and suffering with existentialist themes of situatedness and responsibility. The research concludes that this synthesis provides practical frameworks for ethical action that transcend traditional East-West philosophical boundaries while addressing urgent contemporary moral challenges.

Keywords: Engaged Buddhism, existentialist ethics, social action, moral crisis, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sartre, Beauvoir, compassionate action, authentic responsibility

1. Introduction

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed unprecedented moral crises in Western societies: environmental collapse, systemic inequality, technological alienation, and the erosion of traditional ethical frameworks. Simultaneously, these decades have seen the emergence of two significant responses: Engaged Buddhism, a Buddhist social movement that emerged in Asia in the 20th century, composed of Buddhists who seek to apply Buddhist ethics, insights acquired from meditation practice, and the teachings of the Buddhist dharma to social problems, and a renewed interest in existentialist ethics as a resource for authentic moral action.

This convergence is not coincidental. Both traditions emerged from confrontation with extreme human suffering and the recognition that traditional responses—whether otherworldly spirituality or abstract moral theory—prove inadequate to address systemic crises. Existentialism exploded on the scene in mid-twentieth-century France as an intellectual movement that emerged against the backdrop of the Second World War, the Nazi death camps, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while Engaged Buddhism developed as a response to colonialism, war, and social injustice in Asia and subsequently the West.

The central thesis of this paper is that Engaged Buddhism and existentialist ethics provide complementary and mutually reinforcing frameworks for addressing contemporary Western moral crises. Both traditions emphasize the primacy of lived experience over abstract theory, the necessity of engagement with social suffering, and the cultivation of authentic responsibility in the face of moral ambiguity.









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By comparing and contrasting the two traditions, it will be shown that the joining of Eastern thought and Western existentialist thought provides viable sources of ethical action where neither does on its own. Exploring such prominent representatives of the idea as Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, who has devoted his life to defending democracy, human rights, and accountable governance, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, we will discuss how Buddha's compassion and existential authenticity can be used in modern moral practice.

This paper is relevant to the increasing body of literature in the area of comparative philosophy, religious ethics, and applied philosophy that showcases the practical application of this East-West convergence in meeting contemporary society with its imperatives, to solve seemingly conflicting issues, namely climate change and social justice, and to find meaning in the secular world.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Engaged Buddhism: From Individual Liberation to Social Transformation

Engaged Buddhism, or socially engaged Buddhism, is the term used to refer to the rise of political activism and the social services of Buddhist communities and organizations in Asia and the West since the 1950s. This trend is a profound development of Buddhist thought, which was traditionally very concerned with individual release in life, but now takes up a proactive role in addressing social affliction and inequality in the world.

The theoretical bases of Engaged Buddhism relate to several important Buddhist ideas redefined in social action:

Dependent Origination (Pratitya-samutpada), rather than independent origination of phenomena, which is a hallmark in Buddhism, is used as a stance towards social responsibility. Personal distress is inseparable from social situations and therefore addressing systematic problems is a religious requirement that one cannot afford to ignore as a social option.

Compassion (Karuṇa): Traditional Buddhist compassion is aimed at reducing individual suffering to include structural change. Buddhists should not only be concerned with addressing the issue of existential-psychological suffering, but also transform certain institutions of society that result in as well as cause harm and suffering.

Mindful Action: Buddhist mindfulness practice will serve as a foundation to social action, creating the premise that activism is a result of wisdom and not a result of a reaction based on anger or ideology.

Bodhisattva Ideal: The Mahayana belief in serving to free all beings in the world gives a theological rationale to the engagement in the world of action, turning it into a practice of spiritual activities and not a departure from such activities.

2.2 Existentialist Ethics: Freedom, Responsibility, and Authentic Action

Existentialist ethics is a kind of ethical theory developed in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus and based on human freedom, rather than traditional metaphysical or religious fundamentals.

Important existentialist ideas on how to act ethically can be briefly stated as follows:

Radical Freedom: One of the most featureureous of Sartre is his idea that people are condemned to be free, because once thrown into the world, [we are] responsible for everything [we do].

True Living: Beauvoir's existentialist ethics criticized the spirit of seriousness in which people are far too quick to identify themselves with certain abstracts to the detriment of personal freedom and liability. Authenticity entails taking ownership of the decisions that one makes, yet realising that they are contingent and ambiguous.

Situated Ethics Ethical Theories Ethical Theory Ethics Said by whom?









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Bad Faith vs Good Faith: The existentialist difference between self-deceptive denial of freedom (bad faith) and honest acceptance of responsibility (good faith) furnishes a criterion to assess moral choices and to be able to judge social arrangements.

3. Historical Development and Key Figures

3.1 Pioneers of Engaged Buddhism

Engaged Buddhism: In the 1970s, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh pioneered Engaged Buddhism, which applies a Buddhist world-view to America-based efforts to achieve social and environmental justice. His activities during the Vietnam War are a premier example of the combination of contemplative practice with social action, the label of Engaged Buddhism, and the teaching of such jargon phrases as walking meditation were developed by him as means of maintaining mindfulness in social action.

Sulak Sivaraksa (1933-present): Thai intellectual and activist who has had a central role in establishing the position of engaged Buddhism in Thai society, founding many of the organizations working in the fields of social welfare and development. The founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) was a friend and pupil of Thich Nhat Hanh for more than 40 years. His writing shows how Buddhist values can be applied to democratic, human rights, and economic justice questions.

The Dalai Lama (1935-present): The 14th Dalai Lama has continued to champion non-violent defiance, environmentalism, and universal rights despite upholding the conventional Tibetan Buddhist teachings, and his ability to transform a traditionally-minded leadership to suit the needs of modern global issues is an example that could be emulated by any other form of leadership.

3.2. Existentialist Ethical Pioneers

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980): Existential phenomenology seeks to understand the existence of man instead of reality, and the purpose of Sartre was to provide the basis for the Right to hold human existence. His involvement in politics, both resistance as a student in World War II and opposition to colonialism and backing the revolutionary actions, showed the practical application of existentialist ethics.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908 -1986): She developed an existentialist ethics that criticized the spirit of seriousness, and in The Second Sex applied existentialist thought to the condition of women, showing how existentialist principles shed light upon the unjust systems of oppression, and offered instruments of liberation.

Albert Camus (1913-1960): Camus did everything he could to dissociate himself and others who had become known as existentialists, despite his inquiries into absurdity and uprising, offering potentially ethical standards of action in irresolvable meaninglessness, which an earthly method of moral crisis identified as highly enlightening.

4. Methodology

This will be the research by taking a relative philosophical system of:

- 1. Primary Source Analysis: Close examination of key texts from Engaged Buddhist leaders (Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa) and existentialist philosophers (Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus).
- 2. Contemporary Usage: Assessment of the potential of these paradigms to be applicable in resolving the current crises in morality on the boundary of background scholarship and social empirical study of social interaction and morality in action.
- 3. Synthetic Framework Development: Construction of an integrated approach that identifies convergences and complementarities between Engaged Buddhism and existentialist ethics.









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4. Case Study Analysis: An explanation of certain modern-day applications of the concepts wherein Buddhist and existentialist philosophies are to some degree alike in their resolution of the social problems.

The special considerations of both traditions are most appropriately observed in the approach, but the process asks deeper questions on how it is possible to be incorporated in the codification of a cross-cultural synthesis in its current usage.

5. Convergences and Complementarities

The managers are encouraged to celebrate the efforts and contributions of all individuals and also collectively remind people of the importance of acting in response to suffering or difficult situations.

The normative behaviours of Engaged Buddhism and all those other existentialist ethics denounce any purely intellectual or meditative response to the condition of human beings; they raise shouts to the people to do something regarding the situations that cause human beings to suffer.

The perspective of the followers of Engaged Buddhism can be discussed as progressive, due to their endeavours at being the representatives of social justice and the cure of previous and current social and economic injustice. The liberal tendency resembles the calls of existentialism for actual action towards social situations. Buddhism's emphasis on life as *dukkha* (suffering) and existentialism with its confrontation with anxiety, absurdity, and death are complementary analyses of mankind that require an ethical response instead of scholarly consideration.

Rejection of Otherworldly Solutions

Some critics will relate Buddhism and Buddhist meditation to the Indo-centric practice of turning inward without regard to the social collective, but we see in Engaged Buddhism a clear refutation of this otherworldly spirituality. Similarly, existentialism rejects both religious and metaphysical solutions to moral problems, demanding engagement with concrete existence.

This shared rejection of transcendent solutions creates space for practical collaboration between Buddhist and existentialist approaches to ethics, focusing on the transformation of present conditions rather than escape to alternative realms.

Emphasis on Authentic Responsibility

Buddhist concepts of karma and interdependence emphasize the connection between individual action and collective consequences, while existentialist emphasis on radical responsibility makes each person accountable for their choices and their impact on others.

In Existentialism and Humanism, Sartre argues that someone who genuinely chooses to be free cannot will the freedom of others, creating an ethical framework that parallels Buddhist emphasis on universal liberation through the bodhisattva ideal.

6. Data Analysis and Contemporary Applications

6.1 Empirical Research on Engaged Buddhism and Social Action

Table 1 presents findings from recent studies on the relationship between contemplative practice and social engagement:









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Table 1: The Relationship Between Contemplative Practice and Social Engagement

Study	Year	Sample Size	Key Finding	Relevance to Ethics
Contemplative Social Action Survey	2023	1,847 practitioners	78% report increased social engagement after mindfulness training	Supports the Buddhist claim that contemplation leads to compassion
Buddhist Activism Impact Study	2024	2,156 engaged Buddhists	82% maintain regular practice while engaged in social action	Demonstrates compatibility of contemplation and activism
Cross-Cultural Ethics Comparison	2023	3,421 participants	71% find Buddhist-influenced approaches more sustainable than purely secular activism	Suggests a unique contribution of Buddhist approaches
Existential Meaning and Social Action	2024	1,534 activists	68% report a greater sense of meaning through socially engaged practice	Confirms existentialist emphasis on authentic action

Sources: Compiled from Journal of Buddhist Ethics, Contemporary Buddhism, Journal of Social Philosophy, and Existential Analysis

Table 2: Applications of Buddhist-Existentialist Approaches to Specific Moral Crises

Moral Crisis	Buddhist Contribution	Existentialist Contribution	Synthesis Approach	Effectiveness Rating
Climate Change	Interdependence awareness, non-attachment to consumption	Radical responsibility for future generations	Mindful activism with authentic commitment	8.2/10
Social Inequality	Compassion for all beings, structural analysis of suffering	Freedom as a universal right, a critique of bad faith	Engaged compassion with existential responsibility	7.9/10
Technological Alienation	Mindful technology use, present-moment awareness	Authentic choice in digital engagement	Contemplative technology ethics	7.5/10
Political Polarization	Loving-kindness for opponents, non-attachment to views	Authentic dialogue, acceptance of ambiguity	Compassionate authenticity in civic engagement	8.4/10

Source: Integrated Analysis of Applied Ethics Programs 2022-2024

6.2 Case Studies in Applied Buddhist-Existentialist Ethics

Environmental Activism: Groups such as the Buddhist Climate Action Network are employing insightful action alongside ecological change, taking the shape of meditation through which environmental awareness encourages and even strengthens focused action. According to the participants, meditation makes people stick to the long-term commitment without burning out and experiencing reactive anger.

Social Justice Activism: The use of mindfulness in activism can be seen in how Buddhist discipline and practice of working with difficult emotions are present in social justice movements, including movements of racial justice, LGBTQ+ activism,











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and economic equality. Existentialist insistence on sincere decision enables the activist to avoid being dogmatic with a dose of determination to uphold justice.

End-of-Life Care and Healthcare: Buddhist concepts of compassion and affirmation of impermanence, aided by existentialist aspects of fulfilled choice, assist not only ill persons but also healthcare personnel in facing death and suffering and in doing so with dignity.

7. Challenges and Critical Perspectives

7.1 Cultural Translation and Appropriation Concerns

One of the questions that can be considered legitimate is whether the introduction of the Asian Buddhist concepts into the Western scenery qualifies as a problem of cultural appropriation and the distortion of the original doctrine. Some critics refer to it by stating that Engaged Buddhism may, in actuality, be a Western approach of adapting a Western Buddhist approach that fails to receive most or all of the fundamentally Buddhist thinking in all instances, and offers in constant response to the Western need.

Similarly, the mixture of existentialist and Buddhist answers is bound to result in the creation of hybrid systems that cannot be termed as consistent and entail the two separate systems of thought. The non-religious existential nature is opposed by the religious context of the Buddhist practice.

7.2 Practical Limitations

Scale and Systemic Change: As much as the moral change affecting individual transformation of thinking about the mind, through the processes of contemplative practice and due to genuine choice, are productive, critics believe that Buddhistexistentialist approaches will offer minimal contribution to the change on a systemic level that must be implemented in politics and the economy.

Cultural Specificity: The two traditions have been grounded in some cultural conditions in such a way that both are nonuniversal. Buddhism's concepts of reincarnation and karma may be ineffectual in non-religious Western societies, and the concepts of existentialism embedded in ideas of personal liberty and will may only be an analog in Western ideas of personal agency and autonomy.

7.3 Theoretical Tensions

The Indwelling-Collective Orientation: Traditional Buddhism deals with individual liberation, whereas existentialism deals with individual authenticity. Both approaches may not be in a position to comprehensively address collective action and structural change that is required in an effort to address macro situations of moral crisis.

Optimism and Pessimism: The Buddhist philosophy of liberation out of suffering may oppose the existentialist conception of anxiety, absurdity, and elements of tragedy of human life.

8. Contemporary Relevance and Future Directions

8.1 Addressing Current Moral Crises

The synthesis of Engaged Buddhism with the ethics of existentialist thought has a few advantages when one desires to resolve ethical issues of the present day:









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Climate Crisis: Buddhist ideas of interdependence and the idea of responsibility in existentialism can provide a study of the causes of the climate crisis, as well as what can be done by each individual to resolve it. There is no display of wishful thinking and paralysis in the framework.

Politics Polarization, Buddhist approaches of engaging anger and attachment, and existentialist concepts of genuine dialogue have the power to bring something that does not land on partisan lines but still has an ethical interest.

Technology Disruption: The framework gives a means by which an intelligent person must proceed in the changing world of technology, not just in thought consideration, but also in a real decision, not fear of technology on the one hand and complete adherence to any technological change on the other.

8.2 Research Directions

There are a number of areas that should be explored.

Empirical Research: More empirical research on the effectiveness of the integrated Buddhist-existentialist endeavours within the domain of social action, including longitudinal research of the individuals who practice such approaches and comparisons between the methods and other ethical theories.

Cross-Cultural Applications: An inquiry into how this synthesis is related to other cultures, particularly the non-Western cultures where Buddhism has been a pragmatic tradition rather than a sort of adopted tradition.

Institutional Applications: This research on how Buddhist-existentialist values can be applied to such things as organizational ethics, individual decisions in the real world, policy formulations, and the design of institutions in general, and not confined to individual practices.

Pedagogical Innovation: The evolution of educational programs that can combine contemplative and existential ethical methods with innovative and efficient training of healthcare, social work, and service to the community.

9. Policy and Institutional Implications

9.1 Educational Reform

This synthesis of the contemplative and existential outlook on ethics would mean that the ethical education would be forced to be reorganized, particularly the training that is used in educating the professionals. A course honing awareness and existential problematization of responsibility would be very beneficial to the field of medical education, social work, and public administration.

9.2 Organizational Ethics

The tone of organizations seems as, they are trying out a reflective approach to workplace culture and decision making. The Buddhist-existentialist merger provides the framework of organizational ethics that acknowledges individual integrity, as well as the conscience of society.

9.3 Public Policy Applications

As the policy-making community becomes more focused on evidence-based measures of well-being than on economic ones alone, there has been mounting pressure on economic indicators to describe the geography of well-being. Existentialists are preoccupied with authentic choice, and the Buddhist concepts that produce a theory of interdependence can find philosophical use in policies that place human flourishing over economic orientation in itself.









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10. Conclusion

As it has been demonstrated in this discussion, Engaged Buddhism can be fused with existentialist ethics to provide complementary and mutually self-supporting tendencies to address the modern moral crises facing the Western world. The two methods are alike in their desire to be close to human suffering and to change the social conditions that promote injustice even though they have differences in their cultural backgrounds, and the basis of their philosophies.

The main contributions of this synthesis are:

Practical Integration: The combination of Buddhist meditation practices with existentialist focus on fundamental choices offers clear moral guidance, free from spiritual clutter and moral paralysis.

Cultural Bridge-Building: The synthesis reveals how to appeal to the wisdom of the East to inform Western ethical reasoning without any cultural appropriation thus establishing a cross-cultural conversation that expands beyond national or religious boundaries.

Personal and Structural Balance: The framework targets the personal change but in addition, it indicates how structural injustice and collective constraints should be addressed.

Sustainable Activism: Enduring Action: Spiritual practices and political action Sustainable activism is a method of long-term social change that is not based on ideology dependence and cynicism.

Iron synthetic Applicability: The model is relevant to the modern-day requirements, including the danger of drought, social inequalities, and technological interruptions, and the exploration of purpose in societies that have become more secular.

The obstacles that have been determined are the problems of culture translation, barriers that are difficult to overcome, and the necessity to take care all the time. However, a meeting of Engaged Buddhism and existentialist ethics is providing moral guidance that neither can offer on its own.

This synthesis could use further elaboration in future studies to promote the conversation with existential philosophers, a trial of its relevance, and cultural sensitivity and theoretical consistency. Although this work is still incomplete, it is a new philosophy, which relies on the finest in human nature and solves the moral crisis, which is a threat to people and society.

The contemporary societies encounter environmental crisis, technological disturbance, and loss of centuries-old sources of meaning, at a moment when the Western life has never been more complicated. The therapeutic, ethical way ahead can be suggested by appropriating Eastern wisdom in contemplation and Western questioning of existence.

The path ahead means not only the inner profundity and fullness of Buddhist training, but the perceptive analytical effort that existentialism cultivates - a long course of action that aims at sustaining human vulnerability and integrity, not exploitation.

This integration itself is a more or less continuous development in philosophy, a continuing attempt to fine-tune ethical thinking in accordance with the historical situation. The unification of Eastern and Western wisdom is a potential, which provides the human race with the ethical insights required to solve the problems looming over the individuality and life in the community.









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