

SOME QUOTATIONS RELATED TO SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

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1. *What is Socially Engaged Buddhism?*

When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both—to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. . . . We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help.

--Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 91.

The essence of nonviolence is love. Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally Other struggles may be fueled by greed, hatred, fear or ignorance, but a nonviolent one cannot use such blind sources of energy, for they will destroy those involved and also the struggle itself. Nonviolent action, born of the awareness of suffering and nurtured by love, is the most effective way to confront adversity.

--Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA.: Parallax Press, 1993) [originally 1969], p. 39.

The [Third] Turning of the Wheel in our time is evident in many ways. I see it in the return to the social teachings of the Buddha, in the revitalization of the bodhisattva ideal, in the rapid spread of “engaged Buddhism,” be it among Sarvodayans in Sri Lanka, Ambedkarite Buddhists in India, or Dharma activists in Tibet, Thailand, or Southeast Asia. Western Buddhists, too, are taking Dharma practice out into the world, developing skillful means for embodying compassion as they action to serve the homeless, restore creekbeds, or block weapons shipments. The vitality of Buddhism today is most clearly reflected in the way it is being brought to bear on social, economic, political, and environmental issues The gate of the Dharma does not close behind us to secure us in a cloistered existence aloof from the turbulence and suffering of samsara, so much as it leas us out into a life of risk for the sake of all beings. As many Dharma brothers and sisters discover today, the world is our cloister.

--Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), pp. 240-241.

Buddhism brings special resources for facing and responding to the suffering of our world. The aim of the Buddha's central doctrine of the “dependent co-arising,” the dynamic interdependence of all phenomena, is to liberate us from the prison cell of egocentricity, and from the greed, hatred, and delusion it engenders. Engaged Buddhism refers to the social application of these teachings, as they bring us into responsible relationship with the world around us.

--Joanna Macy, <<http://www.joannamacy.net/html/engaged.html>>.

Engaged Buddhism is a path of social action in the world—as opposed to the paths of ritual, knowledge, and devotion that characterize other, perhaps better known expressions of Buddhism . . . the moral training . . . may be of special interest to engaged Buddhists . . . in ways that meditation training . . . and wisdom training . . . are not.

-- Christopher Queen, "Introduction: From Altruism to Activism," in Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish, and Damien Keown (Eds.), *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 1.

These days, I am thinking that socially engaged Buddhism is to be found in those with a solid Dhamma practice—not just fuzzy, nice intentions—who can bring it to bear on social issues in real live situations. What Dhamma practice can give is enough mindfulness to be present in the moment, enough non-bias to see the situation from various angles (including one's own inner dynamics), enough compassion to want to end suffering, enough wisdom to understand the major causal relationship at play (including intra- and interpersonal) and enough effort to do something effective on the ground.

--Santikaro Bhikkhu, cited in Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), p. 230.

2. "Socially Engaged" Traditional Teachings and Practices

Violence never ceases through hatred. It is only through love that it ceases. This is an ancient law.

--The Buddha, the *Dhammapada*

Let him not destroy life nor cause others to destroy life and, also, not approve of others' killing. . . . Let him not cause to steal, nor approve of others' stealing.

--The Buddha, the *Sutta-Nipata*, 14, 19-20

Thus from the not giving of property to the needy, poverty became rife, from the growth of poverty, the taking of what was not given increased, from the increase of theft, the use of weapons increased, from the increased use of weapons, the taking of life increased.

--The Buddha, Cakkavattai-Sihanada Sutta, in *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Maurice Walshe (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), pp. 399-400.

When there is suffering in others it causes good people's hearts to be moved, thus it is compassion (*karuna*). Or alternatively, it combats others' suffering, attacks and demolishes it, thus it is compassion. Or alternatively, it is scattered upon those who suffered, it is extended to them by pervasion, thus it is compassion.

--Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification* (5th century), IX, 92.

May those who are in danger of being threatened or killed by kings, thieves, or scoundrels, who are troubled by hundreds of different fears, may all those being who are oppressed by the advent of troubles be delivered from those hundreds of extreme very dreadful fears. May those who are beaten, bound, and tortured by bonds . . . distracted by numerous thousands of labors, who have become afflicted by various fears and cruel anxiety . . . may they all be delivered; may the beaten be delivered from the beaters, may the condemned be united with life . . . May those beings oppressed by hunger and thirst obtain a variety of food and drink.

--*Suvarnaprabhasa Sutra* [Mahayana], *The Sutra of Golden Light*, trans. R.E. Emmerick (London: Luzac and Co., 1970), p. 15, cited in Stephen Jenkins, "Do Bodhisattvas Relieve

Poverty?" in Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish, and Damien Keown (Eds.), *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 44.

3. *Socially Engaged Buddhism as Traditional*

Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. If you practice Buddhism in your family, in society, it is engaged Buddhism.

--Thich Nhat Hanh, *BPF Newsletter* 11, 2 (Summer 1989), p. 22.

The primary Buddhist position on social action is one of total activism, an unswerving commitment to complete self-transformation and complete world transformation. This activism becomes fully explicit in the Universal Vehicle (*Mahayana*) . . . But it is also compellingly implicit in the Individual Vehicle (*Hinayana*) in both the Buddha's actions and his teachings . . . Thus, it is squarely in the center of all Buddhist traditions to bring basic principles to bear on actual contemporary problems to develop ethical, even political guidelines for action.

--Robert Thurman, "Nagarjuna's Guidelines for Buddhist Social Action," in Fred Eppsteiner (Ed.), *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988, 2nd ed.), p. 120

The key concepts of Buddhism, in every period of Buddhist intellectual development, are incompatible with gender hierarchy and with discrimination against women.

--Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 4.

This is a problem with the term "engaged Buddhism" in a broad sense . . . Anything one is doing to make themselves whole in their own life, or realizing the Way, or becoming enlightened . . . these are all involved in service, because if we realize the oneness of life, then each person serving every other person and is reducing suffering. . . I still feel . . . that if you keep on practicing, even in the cave, there is no way of not working on social issues, only the method might be different.

--Bernie Glassman, cited in Christopher Queen, "Glassman Roshi and the Peacemaker Order: Three Encounters," in Christopher Queen, *Engaged Buddhist in the West* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 104, 122.

[Activists monks in Thailand] rarely stop to think through in depth the philosophical or scriptural bases of their work . . . [They] are not really concerned with the question of tradition versus innovation. They are, rather, concerned with the suffering people face in their lives today.

--Susan Darlington [writer on ecology monks of Thailand]

4. *Socially Engaged Buddhism as Innovative*

Historically, Buddhist philosophers have failed to analyze out the degree to which ignorance and suffering are caused or encouraged by social factors, considering fear-and-desire to be given facts of the human condition. Consequently the major concern of Buddhist philosophy is epistemology and "psychology" with no attention paid to historical or sociological problems. Although Mahayana Buddhism has a grand vision of universal salvation, the *actual* achievement of

Buddhism has been the development of practical systems of meditation toward the end of liberating a few dedicated individuals

. . . Institutional Buddhism has been conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under.

The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both. They are both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom (*prajna*), meditation (*dhyana*), and morality (*sila*). Wisdom is intuitive knowledge of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one's ego-driven anxieties and aggressions. Meditation is going into the mind to see this for yourself--over and over again, until it becomes the mind you live in. Morality is bringing it back out in the way you live, through personal example and responsible action, ultimately toward the true community (*sangha*) of "all beings."

--Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold*. (New York: New Directions, 1969) [originally 1964], pp. 90, 92.

The primary goal of Buddhism is not a stable order or a just society but the discovery of genuine freedom (or awakening) by each person. It has never been asserted that the conditions of society are unimportant or unrelated to this more important goal, but it is critical to stress the distinction between what is primary and what is not. For Buddhists to lose this distinction is to transform their tradition into something discontinuous with its original and historic essence. Even the vocation of the bodhisattva is not as a social reformer but as the catalyst to personal transformation within society.

--Bardwell Smith, "Sinhalese Buddhism and the Dilemmas of Reinterpretation," in Bardwell Smith et al (Eds.), *The Two Wheels of Dharma: Essays on the Theravada Tradition in India and Ceylon* (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972), p. 106.

Political activism—not social service—is, in my view, the distinctive innovation of engaged Buddhism in the twentieth century. . . [Engaged Buddhism] is the dharma of social service and activism, premised on the belief that suffering is not only the result of individual karma, and that its remediation requires collective effort

--Christopher Queen, "From Altruism to Activism," pp. 22, 27.

Traditional Buddhist texts do . . . say that the ideal ruler should rule justly and distribute goods to those in need . . . However, these ideas are not very clearly worked out beyond a rather rudimentary level, so how these principles should operate in practice in complex modern societies is a job that socially engaged Buddhism needs to tackle. It is true that justice cannot be reduced to the ideal of selfless, compassionate action, but I would suggest that Buddhism in fact has a broader ethical base in which the principle of justice has a place, albeit not very clearly spelled out so far.

--Damien Keown [writer on Buddhist ethics]

We cannot escape this task of reconstructing Buddhism to make it meaningful for us and our culture, so that it best addresses the ways that we experience and understand our most oppressive forms of dukkha. In that fashion, making a new Buddhism that works for us is itself a traditional, indeed inescapable task that Buddhism requires of us as Western Buddhists . . . There is no alternative to reconstructing Buddhism in the West. The question is whether we will do it poorly,

because largely unconsciously, or better, because [we are] more conscious of what we are doing. It is becoming clear that our Buddhism must be and will be socially engaged—not as replacement of earlier teachings, but as a supplement to and development of them.

--David Loy [writer on Buddhist social theory, Zen teacher]

The general pattern of belief and practice that has come to be called “engaged Buddhism” is unprecedented, and thus tantamount to a new chapter in the history of the tradition. . . . Engaged Buddhism may be seen as a new paradigm of Buddhist liberation. Invoking traditional terminology, Buddhist might call it a “new vehicle” . . . or a *fourth yana* in the evolution of the dharma.

--Christopher Queen, “Introduction: A New Buddhism,” in Christopher Queen (Ed.) (2000). *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom Publications), pp. 1-2.

It is a dangerous mistake to characterize engaged Buddhism as “the fourth yana,” that is, a new and distinct Buddhist tradition. Indeed, I would rather not call it engaged *Buddhism* at all, but prefer to speak simply of engaged *Buddhists*.

--Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action*, p. 230.

5. *Socially Engaged Buddhism as Path*

Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

--Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, p. 98.

We may not literally steal in our face-to-face interactions, but do we allow the rich countries to exploit the poor countries through the workings of the international banking system and the international economic order? Do we allow industrial societies to exploit agrarian societies? The First World to exploit the Third World? The rich to exploit the poor generally?

--Sulak Sivaraksa, in Donald Rothberg, “A Thai Perspective on Socially Engaged Buddhism: A Conversation with Sulak Sivaraksa,” *ReVision 15* (Winter 1993): 121-127 (here p. 122).

What is mindfulness? Is it just taste and sensation? If I eat at McDonald’s or purchase Nestle’s chocolate, am I mindful of the McLibel case or the shameless exploitation by Nestle of breast-feeding mothers in poor countries? Go deeper. If I eat a banana grown in the Caribbean am I aware of the struggle for better working conditions by Caribbean workers against the fruit cartels? Do I reflect on the way American and Caribbean economic development, which also helped fuel the industrial revolution, was in large part based on the trans-Atlantic slave trade?

--Dr. Colin Butler [co-founder of the Benevolent Organization for Development, Health, and Insight (BODHI) in Australia]

In the Buddha’s original formulation . . . he neither spoke of “my dukkha” nor of “your dukkha.” He spoke simply of dukkha—“there is dukkha.” It is important that we remember this fact and do not overly personalize the four noble truths such that they become merely a matter of “my dukkha” and getting rid of “my dukkha.” Many Buddhists have fallen into this trap, which is a primary reason why many of them are not concerned with the incredible dukkha that surrounds them in the world. . . . On the other hand, there are many—the “do-gooders”—who are very

concerned with helping others to get rid of “their dukkha.” We find many of these people in the activist world. Often, they are overly concerned with the dukkha of others to the degree that they fail to look within and see the dukkha that is inside them, too. Thus, we must also avoid the trap of “your dukkha” or “their dukkha.”

--Santikaro Bhikkhu, “The Four Noble Truths of Dhammic Socialism,” in Jonathan Watts, Alan Senauke, & Santikaro Bhikkhu (Eds.), *Entering the Realm of Reality: Towards Dhammic Societies* (Bangkok: Suksit Siam, 1997), p. 92.

Engaged Buddhism entails both inner and outer work. We must change the world, we must change ourselves, and we must change ourselves in order to change the world.

--Kenneth Kraft, *The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism: A New Map of the Path* (New York: Weatherhill, 1999), p. 10.

We care passionately about the world, almost too much at times; this is understandable, as our very lives are at stake. But a deep and constantly refreshed detachment must lie at the core of any really passionate relationship.

--Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action*, p. 229.

6. Not Taking Sides

During the war in Vietnam we young Buddhists organized ourselves to help victims of the war rebuild villages that had been destroyed by the bombs. Many of us died during service, not only because of the bombs and the bullets, but because of the people who suspected us of being on the other side. We were able to understand the suffering of both sides, the Communists and the anti-Communists. We tried to be open to both, to understand this side and to understand that side, to be one with them. That is why we did not take a side, even though the whole world took sides. . . . We wanted reconciliation, we did not want a victory. . . . Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then to go to the other side and describe the suffering being endured by the first side. Doing only that will be a great help for peace.

--Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987), pp 69-70.

One Saturday in 1968, there was a big demonstration against the war in Vietnam in San Francisco. Many of us Zen students wanted to go, but instead we came hear Suzuki Roshi’s lecture. At that I was a full-time antiwar activist, working as an organizer and draft counselor. The big issue on my mind was, “How does zazen fit in with my antiwar position?” After the talk, I raised my hand and asked, “Suzuki Roshi, what is war?”

Immediately he pointed to the three-by-six-foot bamboo mat on the floor, and said, “When two people sit down there, they each want to smooth out their side of the mat so there are no wrinkles. And when the wrinkles meet in the center, that’s war.”

--Lew Richmond, “Don’t Take Sides,” *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Fall 2003), 27-29 (here p. 27).