

SOME QUOTATIONS RELATED TO SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM (Donald Rothberg)

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 [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 leads 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.

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.

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.

2. *Socially Engaged Buddhism as Traditional and as Innovative*

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, *Sutta-Nipata*, 14, 19-20

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.

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.

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), p. 120.

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.