

Engaged Buddhism East and West: Encounters with the Visions, Vitality, and Values of an Emerging Practice

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The latter decades of the 20th century witnessed the spread of Engaged Buddhism throughout Asia and the West, championed by Thich Nhat Hanh of Vietnam and building on earlier experiments especially in India and Sri Lanka. Based on wide interpretations of traditional Buddhist teachings, these new practices became tools of social change, creatively utilized by progressive monks, educators, reformers, environmentalists, medical doctors, researchers, activists, and peacebuilders. The experimental nature of a kind of sociopolitical and peace-oriented Dharma brought new followers to Buddhism in the West and revived Buddhist customs in the Asian lands of its birth and development. Traditionally inward and self-reflecting, Engaged Buddhism expanded Buddhist teaching to promote intergroup relations and societal structures that are inherently compassionate, just, and nonviolent. Its focus, embodied in the phrase, *Peace Writ Large*, signifies a greater magnitude and more robust agenda for peace than the absence of war.

This chapter will focus on the emerging phenomenon of Engaged Buddhism East and West, looking at its traditional roots and contemporary branches, and discerning its impact on peacefulness, justice, tolerance, human and environmental rights, and related sociopolitical concerns. It will explore the organizational leadership and participation in engaged Buddhists processes, and what impact this movement has in both primarily Buddhist nations as well as in countries where Buddhists are a tiny minority and its practitioners may not have been born into Buddhist families.

Traditional Buddhism and Social Engagement

What is socially engaged Buddhism? For a religion that has traditionally focused on self-development and realization, its very designation indicates a dramatic departure. According to Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy, the term refers to the social application of Buddhist teachings that guide the practitioner into responsible and resilient relationship with the global community (Macy, 2009). Chris Queen, who has edited two important volumes on Engaged Buddhism, observes that the form has developed “in the context of a global conversation on human rights, distributive justice, and social progress” (Queen 2000, 1). This application of Buddhist teachings to the resolution of communal and national problems is a recent innovation in the 2500 year-old history of Buddhism. Queen calls it “unprecedented and thus tantamount to a new chapter in the history of the tradition” (ibid, 1).

There are perhaps 400-500 million Buddhists in the world (Pew Research Center, 2015). Most of them are not knowledgeable about Engaged Buddhism, yet mainly live in countries undergoing cataclysmic social, economic, and political change. Sallie King notes that contemporary Buddhist social activism was born out of “colonialism, foreign invasion, war, Westernization, oppression, social injustice, poverty, and discrimination” (Queen and King 1996, 401). In Buddhist countries, monks traditionally shared with

monarchs the leadership roles in society. Over the centuries, foreign colonizers dethroned monarchs, became occupiers, imposed harsh economic and social conditions, and drove wedges within communities and between identity groups. As the facts of injustice and oppression by the demanding foreign occupiers became evident to the people of Asia, many turned to the ordained *sangha* (community of monks) as one of the few intact institutions capable of response and resistance. Engaged Buddhism became an active rejoinder to the very contemporary suffering and displacement of the people. Reacting to the ills of the modern world, campaigners for social development remained rooted in time-honored Buddhist philosophy and practice. Its leaders understood that harnessing the tenets of religion as a base for social engagement made the engagement accessible and believable to Buddhist adherents and offered them a path to survive the onslaughts of modernism. It endowed Buddhism with relevance to the social, economic, and political conditions that existed beyond the temple gates or the doors of the meditation hall.

Traditional Buddhism emphasizes individual liberation and awakening through undertaking a committed process of systemized meditation, which in traditional Asian Buddhism was possible for only a small minority of laypeople, the monks, and occasionally nuns. In the 20th century, some monks, such as Achan Chaa and Buddhadasa in Thailand, and Mahasi Sayadaw and U Pandita in Burma, began training Asian and Western disciples in Buddhist disciplines. Some of the Westerners embarked on years of study with these Asian masters and brought the practice of meditation back to the West. At the same time, Suzuki Roshi, a brilliant Japanese meditation master, and others from Japan and Korea, brought Zen practice to California and encouraged a generation of seekers to study in their Asian monasteries. Other Westerners gravitated to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. The Karmapa, a high-level Tibetan teacher, came to the US because Buddhism was already present. Speaking through an interpreter, he said “If there is a lake, the swans will go there” (Fields 1981, xiii).

Serious meditation is now practiced by millions of lay people in the Buddhist homelands of Asia and in the West. This interchange is a significant development in the history of Buddhism and is a movement of great power and promise. Great effort in meditation focuses and disciplines the mind, allowing the ever-present jumble of thoughts to quiet and concentration to increase. In this process of increasing stillness and reducing distraction, insight and awareness can arise. Through direct experience, the meditator can observe the fleeting nature of human experience, the interdependence of all events, and the rising and passing of every happiness and unhappiness. Traditional Buddhism promises a different kind of peacefulness from that of the street or the marketplace. It offers the potential of an inner peacefulness, a mind at rest and at ease, accepting without attachment each momentary encounter with life. Although internal peacefulness contributes to the wellbeing of others, that was not an explicit goal of the traditional practice, and there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the Buddha attempted or expected to change society.

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 crucial to stress the distinctions between what is primary and what is not (Smith in Queen and King 1996, 17).

Socially engaged Buddhist monks and nuns differentiated themselves from traditional, monastic practices, not by rejecting the roots but by incorporating them into their newly developing practice of social responsibility. “*Sila*,” (ethics) had been taught by the Buddha to be essential to the pursuit of an enlightened life; traditionally it was interpreted as a personal code of ethics. Engaged Buddhism expanded the understanding of *sila* to include standards of ethical behavior for society as a whole. This thinking came naturally to Western practitioners informed by religious traditions with long histories of social doctrines. As the number and sophistication of Western Buddhists grew, the influences on the growing Engaged Buddhist tradition began flowing back from West to East. Socially active lay Buddhists still practice meditation, ascribe to the essential teachings of the Buddhist canon, and regard the historical Buddha as the “awakened one.” This new role for Buddhists is an activism that flows out of Buddhism, thus rooted in self-awareness and conscious of the external realities facing the human and natural world. It brings to engagement with life the very qualities cultivated by intense meditation practice, a balance of wisdom and compassion.

Buddhism in a Changing Asia

The role modern, socially engaged Buddhism has played in the independence movements of the various South Asian nations has varied profoundly and the impacts have often been mixed. Walpola Rahula (1907-1997), ordained early in the 20th century as a Sri Lankan monk, became a scholar and author active in the transitional time of Sri Lanka’s independence from the British Empire. He believed that an activist role for monks was contiguous with ancient traditions, noting that monks had always played a role in guiding their village communities in practical advice as well as ethics and moral behavior. Encouraging monks to engage in building the new nation, participating in social services, and developing their scholarly capacities was, in his understanding, within the bounds of monastic culture. While his focus was not on structural issues of war and peace, as a monk he vocally supported the independence movement and concerned himself with welfare for the lay public. Among Rahula’s modern day successors in Sri Lanka is Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, founder of the Sarvodaya movement, with its focus on village development, the sharing of labor, and the awakening of all. The growth of Buddhist nationalism and the action of members of the *sangha* supporting war against the Tamil population in the civil war, mobilized Engaged Buddhists to oppose the manipulation of racist sentiments in the name of Buddhism. Some today are working to cool nationalist fervor among the *sangha* and encourage moderate Buddhists to engage in projects of social and political change.

Unlike Sri Lanka, its giant neighbor India where Buddhism had first arisen, by the colonial period had become largely a Hindu and Muslim region. There might have been no Buddhist impact on the modern national history of India if not for the existence of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). Arguably the most influential and controversial

of the new breed of lay leaders in 20th century Buddhism, he was born a Hindu into a low caste, “untouchable” family at a time when there were firmly fixed boundaries of class and daunting obstacles to social mobility. It was also an India where the British Raj was under challenge by a growing movement for Indian independence, and in the ferment of revolution, democratic change and demands for justice and the rights of man were possible and inevitable. It was a world in which a young dalit (a member of the lowest caste) might dream, might come to reject the degradations and humiliations of low caste status as monumentally unjust and unnecessary.

Ambedkar had genius and ambition. He escaped India to seek and gain a first class education in law in New York and London, and returned to India determined to abolish the caste system. The leaders of the Congress Party recognized his extraordinary legal abilities. He argued successfully with many of them that the caste system had no place in a free and democratic Indian nation, and in the new constitution that they drafted to write, a document that is still the basic law of India, there was no recognition of caste. However, the traditions of caste in this vast and conservative society have been very slow to change even to the present, and in Ambedkar’s day, beyond his liberal and enlightened friends in Congress, his challenges to the restrictions of Hindu based caste were met with outrage, rejection, and violence.

Perceiving that Hinduism would never provide liberation from caste, much less justice and opportunity for his people, he saw that they could free themselves most easily by rejecting their identity as Hindus and adopting a new religion. Ambedkar undertook a vast and public study of the world’s religions with a goal of finding the most satisfactory faith to which the dalits might convert. He proposed four criteria for a satisfactory religion. “Such a faith must foster morality, accord with scientific reason; offer liberty, equality, and fraternity; and not sanctify or ennoble poverty” (Queen and King 1996, 47). He reasoned that Buddhism best fit these criteria and felt that it could best provide a spiritual and cultural vehicle for advancing the freedom and dignity of the untouchable classes. His analysis instigated a mass conversion unprecedented in Buddhist history. In 1956, Ambedkar and his wife converted to Buddhism, witnessed by several hundred thousand members of untouchable castes. The next day, about half a million former low caste Hindus followed their example.

Then and now, Ambedkar remains a controversial figure. His critics claim that his stripped down Buddhism, void of adherence to Buddhist texts, doctrine, rituals, and the practice of meditation, fails to teach its converts the way to inner peace, compassion, and wisdom. But for Engaged Buddhism, his fiery resistance to oppression, his commitment to social, economic, and political liberation, and his vision in the possibility of advancing human society, offered a formidable challenge. In the name of Buddhism he sought justice and dignity for millions of oppressed people. How could Buddhists committed to human dignity and social uplift fail to support this movement? According to Queen, who has studied the Ambedkar movement for many decades, “Ambedkar provided rich resources for a new hermeneutics of liberation, a new sense of identity and hope for millions of his low-caste followers in India, and a new conception of social activism for Engaged Buddhists of the coming generation” (Queen in Queen and King 1996, 67).

S.M.Goenka was born in Burma (Myanmar) to a high-caste Brahmin near the other end of the Indian caste hierarchy. With an ambition to return Buddhism to India, he studied for fourteen years with Burmese meditation master U Ba Khin, until his teacher authorized him to move to India to lead meditation retreats. A charismatic leader and skilled businessman, he established hundreds of meditation centers in India and around the world. He taught a pure form of Vipassana (Insight) meditation, with slight reference to the trappings of cultural and religious Buddhism. His movement was strictly for the purpose of mind training, expanding this liberating practice from the monastery to the lay community. He promoted no political, economic, or social agenda, though a strong case can be made that the best way to serve society is to help people attain higher consciousness. For Buddhists who struggle with the balance of social action and individual development, Goenka and Ambedkar represent different approaches to awakening and social uplift. Each has had a far-reaching impact on contemporary Buddhism.

Burma was ruled by a king whose power was absolute until the British overthrew the monarchy in the mid 19th century. A profoundly Buddhist country, the ordained *sangha* was very large. The monks had been generously provided for by the king and expected in reciprocity to uphold the monarchy and to provide education and social services for the populace. During the more than one hundred years of British occupation, with its imposition of foreign norms and a secular curriculum, the *sangha* held on because of the deep faith and symbiotic relationship between the population and the monks. Independence came at the end of World War II, after the Japanese were expelled and the British, under pressure from the growing self-determination movement led by General Aung San, withdrew from the country. A turbulent period of democratic rule was ended by a military coup in 1962 that killed Aung San, and the country fell under a long dark period of brutal dictatorship that is only now beginning to ease.

During these years of oppression, the ordained *sangha* related to the military dictatorship as it related to the kings of previous centuries, accepting government largesse and supporting the government in return. Many brave monks, however, were on the front lines of the 1988 resistance against the military, and in 2008, very large numbers of monks left the monasteries to march in the streets in their Saffron Revolution, demanding an end to military rule. Some outspoken monks now openly support Aung San Su Kyi and her National League for Democracy, and engage with lay Buddhist colleagues and international donors in progressive social development and the establishment of civil society organizations. Most monks remain politically conservative, many cooperating in a campaign to alienate and persecute the small Muslim minority. At the same time, the *sangha* continues to produce influential and non-political meditation teachers who provide rigorous, high quality traditional meditation training to thousands of foreign and native seekers through large and organized meditation centers throughout the country.

Thailand was never colonized, and is still ruled by a king. Traditionally, as in Burma, the King supports the Buddhist *sangha* and the *sangha* supports the king, leads rituals and meditation retreats, and serves the laity through the temples. Young boys ordain for a few

months once in their lifetimes during a rains retreat, and some eventually ordain for their lifetime. Thais use their temples actively for personal prayers and worship, support the monks by donating daily alms, and identify deeply with Buddhist culture and traditions. Most are neither politically engaged nor adept at meditation. However, there have been extraordinary Engaged Buddhist monks, most especially Buddhadasa, and remarkable activists, most prominently Sulak Sivaraksa, who founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, discussed later in this chapter. A subgroup of monks is part of a noteworthy Buddhist environmental resistance movement that will also be explored below.

In Japan, largely a secular country, less than 40% of the population identify themselves as Buddhists, and very few claim Shintoism. Although the temple is not central to the lives of most Japanese, as it is to a large portion of the populations of South East Asian Buddhist countries, much of the Japanese population worships ancestors, maintains shrines or altars, and depends on the priesthood for funeral services (www.wikipedia.org). Japanese Buddhism has been exported successfully in the form of Zen, thanks to East-West exchanges of students and teachers such as Suzuki Roshi and popular writers like Alan Watts. Nichiren Buddhism is also active in Japan and the West, especially with Soka Gakkai, which boasts about eight million members, and Nipponzan Myohoji, a small but extremely engaged sect that has an impact far beyond its numbers. Both of these Nichiren sects engage in efforts for world peace and harmony, each in very different ways. Nipponzan Myohoji will be examined below in the section on Engaged Buddhist exemplars.

In each of these national settings we see Buddhism at work, focused as it has been for millennia on the purification of the mind. Profoundly insightful in human psychology and possessing highly refined techniques developed over the centuries for helping practitioners recognize and root out defilements, Buddhist teaching excels at the task of cultivating wise, compassionate, and peaceful individuals among those who work hard at the challenges of meditation. With its perceptive understanding of how unconscious mind-states can corrupt the best intentions, Buddhism offers awareness of one's attitudes and behaviors to Western Buddhist social change workers. They, in turn, have offered a gift to Asian Buddhism in the form of social concern and application of Dharma teachings to the affairs of state and community relations. The multiplication of dysfunctional social, economic, and political institutions and the compounding of human misery in the present time has caused an unavoidable and irresistible challenge to Asian and Western Buddhists to address the woes of the world in a systemic and conscious way.

Kenneth Kraft has noted, "...the principles and some of the techniques of an engaged Buddhism have been latent in the tradition since the time of its founder" (Kraft in Eppsteiner 1985, xiii). In the present era, many Buddhists search for social applications of teachings that may have existed in pre-modern Asia and are relevant to their own contexts. Western Buddhists, coming from religious traditions where social ethics, activism, and egalitarianism are strong, have been quick to recognize and adopt these latent principles and techniques. This experimentation then returns to influence and reinforce Engaged Buddhist movements in the Asian homelands. The foundational

teachings of Buddhism support and inspire social engagement, and those who both engage in activism and simultaneously devote themselves to the practice of meditation, although small in number, find themselves in positions of leadership and teaching East and West, shaping the next generation of Buddhists and imbuing their societies with Buddhist-inspired ways and means of working toward peace and justice.

Foundational Teachings of Buddhism and Social Engagement

Buddhists from all persuasions and backgrounds understand that the development of wisdom requires a measure of stillness and equanimity. Those who study and practice the science of mind training believe that although we will never be wise enough to foresee all the repercussions and unintended consequences of our actions, skillful and compassionate responses are essential. The Buddha's grasp of interdependence, which could be akin to current systems thinking and describes the interrelationship of all parts of a society or institution, can guide the community organizer in social analysis. Buddhist disciplines of meditation and contemplation offer valuable experiences in awareness, interconnection, and impermanence through which to formulate sound interventions. The multiplication of calamities perpetrated by human behavior has created such a threatening momentum that blocking actions and fresh starts are required to save the habitable planet.

Although time and circumstance have amended and updated the foundational teachings of Buddhism, contemporary social activist Buddhists, living 2500 years after the life of the Buddha in many different contexts and countries, are guided by the same elemental teachings that the Buddha enunciated in the forests of India. Each of these core principles can be said to contribute to individual liberation and communal peace. First and foremost among the treasures of the canon are the insights of the Four Noble Truths and the moral guidance of the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha's primary insight, gained according to the stories by forty days of concentrated meditation, became known as the Four Noble Truths. "These four truths are the truth of suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to that end. This teaching is the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma, a wheel of awakening that over the centuries would roll over much of Asia and eventually cross the great oceans to arrive in the West" (Goldstein 2002, 24). The essence of these truths is that suffering is common to all sentient beings and that a path exists for the cessation of suffering, which is non-attachment or letting go. Craving, grasping, desiring, and clinging, whether to relationships, ideas, material goods, the past or the present, or even one's current state of health, creates suffering, because it is in the nature of reality that everything is ephemeral, impermanent, and in flux.

To aid in this seemingly impossible task of reducing attachments to oneself, significant others, and one's treasured objects, the Buddha offers a prescriptive guide of self-restraint and morality called the Noble Eightfold Path. In translation from Pali, each of the steps on the path begins with the word "right." Many English-speaking Dharma teachers now prefer to substitute "skillful" or "wholesome," as "right" contains judgment and polarity. The path includes right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Each step focuses on non-

harming, contributing to the wellbeing of others, paying attention, behaving appropriately, and living as much as possible without delusion. Taken as a whole, the Eightfold Path offers a comprehensive and challenging guide to ethical choices and honorable behaviors.

The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path impart a positive influence on the thoughts and actions of socially concerned Buddhists. Activists are often motivated by awareness of the harmful consequences of war and injustice, and unless they are mindful, can become righteous or divisive in expressing views, judgments, and opinions. In the best of circumstances, Engaged Buddhists following the Eightfold Path will develop wholesome communication patterns and skillful means, thus adding positively to the social good. The Eightfold Path helps remind those engaged in social change to choose livelihoods carefully, restrain mindless consumerism, and remain vigilant about the consequences of their thoughts and actions. Right effort, mindfulness, and concentration, the final three qualities of the Eightfold Path, encourage consistent reflection on the insights gained through meditation practice. Reframed positively, the path encourages care, compassion, and kindness in all of one's interactions, contributing to peacefulness and serving as a barrier against aggression and violence.

The Buddhist texts make repeated references to what they describe as the Three Poisons or Three Afflictions, which are unwholesome mental factors that contaminate the mind and must be transformed. "The Buddhist image of the Wheel of Life contains various realms of beings; at the center are three figures representing greed, hatred, and delusion. They chase each other around, generating endless suffering, perpetrating a false sense of self or ego. Liberation from attachment to this false self is the central goal in Buddhist practice" (Kaza in Queen 2000, 167). To this writer, the "poisons" and their antidotes have particular salience in teaching peacebuilding, and are referred to frequently as a guide to understanding the deepest causes of violent conflict. These three mental poisons are known as greed, anger, and delusion, the latter also described as foolishness or ignorance.

Greed and anger are more accessible and will be discussed first. There is no escaping the fact that greed in one guise or another is rampant in the human mind. Greed takes many forms: greed for fame, recognition, control, wealth, love, possessions, experiences, power, comfort, sensual pleasures, and more. Greed can be for the protection, advantage, or aggrandizement of the self, or for one's identity group or one's nation, and it can easily disguise itself as, for example, patriotism or ethnic pride. It may appear in the form of desire, avarice, lust, and longing, often masked because of its negative connotations, but recognizable as "wanting mind." In the world of war and peace, greed for land, water, and other natural resources, for dominance, for victory over one's opponents, or in defense of one's position and prosperity creates armed conflict and thus endless harm. For the sake of living a life freed from the trap of endless craving as well as for the pursuit of justice and the security of the collective future, mastering one's greedy impulses is a lifelong project for each human being.

Anger takes the form of hatred, prejudice, violence, resentment, envy, competition, aversion, repulsion, fanaticism, xenophobia, and other extremely toxic emotions. Such negative predispositions and defilements exist within the human mind. Identifying and taming these negative thought-forms requires introspection and mindfulness so that the poisons can be rooted out and replaced with compassionate service. In communal and international relations, the toxicity of religious, ethnic, racial, gender, and national prejudice and stereotypes create havoc, destroying individuals and nations. Daily news is filled with stories of women despised and rejected, races vilified, ethnics cast aside, religions disparaged, and nations obliterated. All of these crimes arise from hatred and greed in the mind, the consequences of which cause interconnected and overlapping cycles of wounds and wounding, violence and revenge. A disciplined and cultivated mind, on the lookout for hindrances, will refrain from toxic warrior behaviors, remaining focused on creating the conditions for peace.

Anger at political greed, oppression, gratuitous violence, armed conflict and other harmful behaviors on the world stage also arise in the minds of activists and often catalyze motivation for oppositional action. Burmese meditation master U Pandita of Myanmar, shortly before his death at age ninety-five, told this author in a private interview that such anger was the “near enemy” of compassion and a defilement that would taint subsequent behavior. “The traditional term ‘near enemy’ points to some spiritually unhelpful quality or experience that can be mistaken for a helpful quality or experience” (“The Near Enemy of Even-minded Love.” *Wild Mind*. www.wildmind.org/tag/near-enemy). U Pandita recommended that Engaged Buddhists take time to quiet the mind, discern and subdue the elements of anger, greed, and ignorance within it, and apply wisdom to any plan or activity. In that way, the action would be pure, untainted by even subtle manifestations of anger.

The third poison has been described by various writers and translators as the mental factor of delusion, ignorance, or foolishness in the mind. Buddhist meditation teachers use the phrase “monkey mind” to describe the constant movement, fantastic variety, and incoherence of the fleeting thoughts that cascade through the mind from moment to moment. As even a limited exposure to meditation reveals, believing this jumble of unexamined thoughts to be reality is a form of ignorance. In the world of social relations, delusion includes not perceiving the truth of our interdependence and our need for each other. Delusion creates the experience of separation and fear, keeping us blind to the fundamental truth of our interrelatedness and the deep web that connects us. Because the mind is cluttered with fear, anger, greed, and self-concern, we are unable to discern and experience our own true nature or recognize what Venerable Thich Naht Hanh calls our “inter-being” (Hanh 1987, 87). A central task of peacemaking is to guide communities and policy makers in the discovery of our common humanity and our interdependence, a fact made ever more visible in the current age of planetary climate change and threats to overall human existence.

Antidotes to mental poisons exist. Buddhist teachers recommend the active practice of generosity as an antidote to greed, compassion and kindness as a response to anger, and wakefulness or awareness as an antidote to delusion. Our spiritual struggle, and our

opportunity to contribute to a world of peace and justice, depends on our waking up and staying awake, free of delusion and open to the moment-by-moment unfolding of life.

It is through the spiritual struggle to continually orient our lives toward respecting others and working for the broader good of all that we are able to transcend and transform these poisons. The poisons undermine our individual happiness, impede our relationships and hinder the unfolding of our unique creative potential. Their influence, however, goes beyond this. On a societal level they well forth from the inner lives of individuals and become the cause of conflict, oppression, environmental destruction and gross inequalities among people. One Buddhist text expresses it this way: "Because anger increases in intensity, armed strife occurs. Because greed increases in intensity, famine arises. Because foolishness increases in intensity, pestilence breaks out. And because these three calamities occur, earthly desires [delusions] grow more numerous and powerful than ever, and false views increasingly flourish" ("Three Poisons--the Source of the Problem." Soka Gakkai International. SGI Quarterly, October 2005. www.sgi.org).

The last illustration of the Buddhist canon to be explored in this chapter is called the Five Precepts. Sharing the same basic concerns for ethics and morality as the guidelines mentioned above, the precepts are a training base for strengthening mindfulness and wholesome conduct. According to the Buddha, progress toward wisdom cannot be made in the absence of *sila* (morality). Buddhist practitioners take precepts, also described as vows, at the start of meditation retreats and at other important moments. Serious Buddhists make mindfulness of the Precepts a lifetime practice. The Five Precepts have been enlarged and augmented for Engaged Buddhism by such leaders as Thich Nhat Hanh from Vietnam and Sulak Sivaraksa from Thailand (Hanh 1987, 89-102; Sivaraksa 1992, 73-79).

The first precept, to refrain from killing, sets forth a prohibition against armed conflict and other forms of taking life. The vow reminds Buddhist practitioners to seek whatever means possible to protect life and to solve problems through nonviolent means. For some Engaged Buddhists, this precept may extend to actively opposing national defense budgets, the ideologies of war, weapons production, the death penalty, and the spread of violence in the media. The most life-affirming course of action can, in some situations, be agonizingly difficult to discern. At times, keeping the precept has required standing courageously against great provocation and threat. Buddhists are not exempt from wrestling with the challenges of when, for example, taking a life appears to protect many other lives. "Through accepting this precept," Sivaraksa writes, "we recognize our relationship to all life and realize that harming any living creature harms oneself" (*ibid*, 72).

Stated simply, precept number two prohibits stealing or refraining from taking what is not ours. The social implications of this vow are profound and require the exercise of discernment, for theft is ubiquitous and often hidden in our societies. The precept can be applied widely to such issues as protecting resource extractions, restricting the plunder

that accompanies neo-colonialism, advocating for appropriate development models, supporting equal distribution of the goods and services needed for life, and correcting the injustices of the capitalist economic order. The lens of the second precept can sometimes provide a refreshingly clear view of a complicated economic issue. The heart of this precept encourages a daily personal cultivation of generosity as part of living a spiritual life. The Buddha was said to have commented “If you knew what I know about the power of giving, you would not let a single meal pass without sharing it in some way” (Goldstein and Kornfield 1987, 8).

The third precept, to refrain from false speech, guides practitioners to speak respectfully and constructively, to avoid gossip and discord, and to be aware of the energy and motivation behind one’s words. In this age of the Internet and mass media, ever greater harms arise from destructive speech. Inter-faith encounters and dialogue processes advocated by Engaged Buddhists follow this precept by using careful speech to build bridges of understanding across differences and refraining from negative characterizations about others. “Spiritual practice reveals the emptiness of any stereotyped enemy and the presence of the same violent and greedy tendencies in oneself” (Sivaraksa 1992, 77). Remaining mindful of this vow is an essential asset for those who would be peacemakers.

The fourth and fifth precepts relate to very personal harmful behaviors regarding the misuse of sexuality and intoxicants. The fourth is stated as refraining from sexual misconduct and the fifth to restrain from heedless use of intoxicants. Hanh emphasizes such admonitions as “do not lose yourself in dispersion” and “do not mistreat your body” (Hanh 1987, 94, 99). Fourth precept concerns for Engaged Buddhists may include examining global male dominance, exploitation of women and children, and support for issues of inclusion based on gender identity. For the fifth precept, a mind clouded by alcohol and drugs functions poorly, often leaving destruction in its wake. “In Buddhism, a clear mind is a precious gem” (Sivaraksa 1992, 78).

Human behavior lags behind human ideals and vows. Buddhist or not, socially active or not, humans are works in progress, striving to improve and struggling with the demons of greed, anger, and delusions that haunt the human condition. Spiritual teachings, amended to suit current sensibilities and norms, serve as ethical maps for seekers and social change implementers. Activists can become lost in the compelling passions of their actions and benefit from the reflective nature of Buddhist practice with its focus on equanimity. The quality of consciousness that one brings to the tasks of peacemaking impacts its outcomes. Buddhist teachings balance the two wings of compassion and wisdom. Used consciously and magnified with an eye toward social change, compassion and wisdom stabilize and steer the peacemaker, who brings those qualities to the wounded world. Exemplary Engaged Buddhist leaders, whose own wings fly on wisdom and compassion, point the way.

Exemplars of Engaged Buddhism

In the current era, the most visible Buddhist in the world is most likely His Holiness the Dalai Lama. As the spiritual, and formerly also political leader of the Tibetan people, he models active concern and engagement for the welfare and wellbeing not only of the Tibetans, but also on behalf of all people. He advocates ceaselessly for the freedom and liberation of Tibetans inside occupied Tibet, and for decades has held to a strict commitment to nonviolence as the only means to obtain that liberation. Despite pressure from young Tibetans in exile frustrated with the lack of progress and despairing for the future of their country, the Dalai Lama holds firmly to the previously discussed first precept of not killing or causing another to kill. Understanding the relationship between means and ends, he believes that violence begets further violence and will not lead to a peaceful and just solution for Tibet.

The Dalai Lama is engaged in worldwide speaking and teaching, reforming Tibetan practices to conform to the modern world, hosting seminars on brain science, technology, medicine and other knowledge pursuits, participating in interfaith activities for the sake of interreligious harmony, and using his compassion and wisdom as a wise elder, mentor, advocate, humanist, and spiritual teacher. A winner of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, he has unexpectedly become a popular iconic figure, a true model of internal and social peace.

In recent years, the Dalai Lama, who has been a monk for more than 70 years, has searched for a means to circumvent the divisions that have sharpened globally in the name of religious identity. His hope is that human beings can transcend sectarianism and instead follow a shared ethics based on universal humanitarian principles. He titled a 2011 book *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, in which he discusses his search for a secular ethics that appeals to all, whether religiously identified and not, that neither contradicts nor depends on any particular religion. He speaks of two pillars of secular ethics:

Both of these can be easily grasped on the basis of our common experience as humans and our common sense, and both are supported by findings of contemporary research, particularly in such fields as psychology, neuroscience, and the clinical sciences. The first principle is the recognition of our shared humanity and our shared aspiration to happiness and the avoidance of suffering; the second is the understating of interdependence as a key feature of human reality, including our biological reality as social animals.... Together, I believe, they constitute an adequate basis for establishing ethical awareness and the cultivation of inner values. It is through such values that we gain a sense of connection with others, and it is by moving beyond narrow self-interest that we find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 2011,19).

Another monk and exile from his country, mentioned above, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, has been an outstanding spokesperson of peace from the Buddhist tradition. Originally from Vietnam, but long a political exile in France, he was thrust into activism as a young monk in the tragic years of the US war in Vietnam. Credited with coining the phrase “Engaged Buddhism,” he has been one of its leading figures for fifty years. Thich

Nhat Hanh explains that Engaged Buddhist practice occurs on the meditation cushion, in the home, on the streets, and in the halls of power, each form reinforcing and edifying the other. Like the Dalai Lama, his peacemaking is worldwide; going forth to teach and preach from his base community of Plum Village in Southern France to many countries, his light and sensitivity has attracted thousands of followers. Referencing the Three Poisons and the pain of violence and hatred, he notes “our enemy is our anger, greed, fanaticism, and discrimination against people” (Hunt-Perry and Fine in Queen, 2000, 38).

During the years of war in the 1960s-70s, Thich Nhat Hanh traveled throughout the United States, seeking a ceasefire and winning the affection of many Americans in anguish about the war and touched by his depth, gentle presence, stirring poetry and prose, and the message of nonviolence. On tour through the US Fellowship of Reconciliation, he connected with important activists of the times, including poet, priest, and activist Daniel Berrigan and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was, in fact, so drawn to Thich Nhat Hanh’s message of humanity and his interweaving of spirituality and activism, that he nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Through his travels, Thich Nhat Hanh recognized beneath the prosperity, the “roots of violence, loneliness, materialism, and sorrow in Western society” (Hunt-Perry and Fine in Queen, 2000, 61). Most remarkably, for years he has offered meditation retreats to Vietnam veterans, helping former soldiers who fought in a war that destroyed his country and who have lived with the suffering of trauma ever since. Leading these retreats demonstrates a profound example of forgiveness, reconciliation, and moral courage, visible for others to emulate as a unique path to peace. Now an elder, felled by a stroke but apparently still very much present in Plum Village, this beloved master instructs new generations of practitioners with the power of his presence and his radiant peace.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s Engaged Buddhism, as well as the writing and anti-war activities of Aitkin Roshi, an American Zen teacher, inspired the formation of the US Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) in 1978. A number of religiously identified peace fellowships had existed for decades under the auspicious of the pacifist ecumenical organization US Fellowship of Reconciliation. Based in California and welcoming Buddhists from a wide variety of backgrounds and practices, BPF quickly became a focal point for those members of the lay *sangha* with an activist bent. Most were Westerners in the first generation of exploring Buddhism in the US; not born into Buddhist families, they were free of cultural restrictions and began to shape Buddhism toward protest and engagement. When Thich Naht Hanh returned to the US in 1983, after years of absence during the war against Vietnam, he went on tour with BPF, and through attraction to his “...vision, pragmatism, and compassion,” the organization grew in size and stature (Simmer-Brown in Queen 2000, 76). BPF’s foundational principles of peace, environmental, feminist, and social justice concerns have remained, and its current generation leaders have appropriately added current concerns with racism, economic injustice, heterosexism, prisons, labor, immigration, and oppression (Buddhist Peace Fellowship: “Cultivating Compassionate Action.” www.bpf.org). Each of these issues is approached in the Buddhist way, identifying interdependence, the co-arising of multiple and systemic forms

of harm, the expression of compassion, and the fundamental commitment to a world that refrains from personal and structural violence and protects all beings.

Awareness of our rapidly deteriorating environment and the impact of threats to life in the nuclear age have loomed large on the BPF agenda since its formation, led primarily by scholar and Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy. Macy is a proponent of systems thinking, which studies the interrelationship and flow of complex ideas and problems so as to serve the entire system and avoid unintended consequences. She considers ecosystems, for example, as complex wholes, where an intervention in one part of the system, such as deforestation, has disastrous consequences for all the other interdependent aspects of the system, such as water reserves, erosion, animal shelter, and human usage of forest products. Macy has devised compelling workshops based on systems thinking that attract large numbers to grieve the losses from environmental destruction and commit to sound and compassionate policies and behaviors on behalf of the global commons. She has also created workshops to overcome the despair of nuclearism and encourage empowering anti-nuclear responses. The basis of her workshops and her accompanying books, especially *Coming Back to Life*, and *Active Hope*, is the Buddhist insight into the interdependence of all phenomena and the co-arising of mutually dependent systems. Called *paticca samuppada* in Pali, this is an ancient Buddhist teaching applied by Macy to contemporary problems. Thich Nhat Hanh expressed this concept of the interaction of causes and conditions succinctly as “this is like this, because that is like that” (Thich Nhat Hanh. “The Sutras on Dependent Co-Arising and Great Emptiness.” 1998. *buddhist-canon.com*).

When the Buddha taught, he was said to turn the Wheel of the Dharma. Indeed, his central doctrine is like a wheel, for through it he taught the dependent co-arising of all things, how they continually change and condition each other in interconnections as real as the spokes in a wheel....The recognition of our essential nonseparateness from the world, beyond the shaky walls erected of our fear and greed, is a Dharma gift occurring in every generation....Along with the destructive, even suicidal nature of many of our public policies, social and intellectual developments are converging now to bring into bold relief the Buddha's teaching of dependent co-arising--and the wheel of the Dharma turns again (Engaged Buddhism. Dependent Co-Arising. 2009-2012. *joannamacy.net*).

One organization that has taken seriously the destruction of the forests and the web of unintended consequences is the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) founded by the remarkable Sulak Sivaraksa in Bangkok in 1989. INEB assembles Buddhist activists from Asia and the West, mounts conferences, develops workshops for monks and supporters, and inspires a movement of progressive Buddhists who advocate for equality, environment, and ethics in their own *sanghas*, home countries, and beyond. In Buddhist countries that have been closed to the outside world for decades, such as Myanmar, INEB plays a role in educating and empowering marginalized monks and social organizers eager to promote change. A new phenomenon in the Asian Buddhist world, where Buddhists have been divided over the centuries by history and sectarianism, INEB exerts a moral challenge to make Buddhism relevant to the current contexts of

oppression and destruction of culture and nature. Although modest in size, INEB's inclusiveness brings together Buddhists from East Asian countries such as Japan and China, South Asian Indian Ambedkarites and Sri Lankans, and Southeast Asia Thais and Burmese, each with its own very different culture, economy, religious expressions, and social norms. Common ground is balancing tradition with modernism in society and *sangha*, advancing liberation, encouraging ethical practices, and protecting life in all its forms and varieties.

Sulak Sivaraksa, a Buddhist scholar, author, keen social critic, and expansive activist, challenges structural injustice and exploitation in all its forms. He has been imprisoned for criticizing the king, a crime in Thailand, which has brought him measures of fame and blame. According to one of his biographers, Donald Swearer, "Sulak's fame as a social critic, intellectual gadfly, and activist has made him a controversial figure, especially in Thailand" (Swearer in Queen 1996, 196). Sulak has developed cherished friendships and accolades through worldwide travels as a spokesperson for Engaged Buddhism, environmental protection, alternatives to capitalism and consumerism, and appropriately scaled development. He has supported dissenting monks from Thailand and abroad, nudging Buddhism toward partnering to renew society and refresh outdated beliefs and practices within the *sangha*.

A visionary and a maverick, Sulak Sivaraksa has won the Right Livelihood Award, considered a people's alternative to the Nobel Peace Prize, for which he had been nominated in 1994. His nomination noted "Sulak has all his life been a courageous and articulate voice for peace, human rights, and social justice. Rooted deeply in his Buddhist faith...he has helped to form a community of persons dedicated to nonviolence in a region torn by violence and war" (ibid, 198). As founder and guide, Sulak and INEB are linked; he inspires and leads the organization, which in turn offers him a platform to influence Engaged Buddhists East and West with his analysis of society and his remedies for reform and rejuvenation. Engaged Buddhism would be far less visible, resonant, and collegial without Sulak's passions and total commitments to a Buddhist renewal. One innovative approach to protect the environment, the ordaining of trees, arose through his and INEB's outreach and encouragement of social responsibility in Thailand.

Susan Darlington documented this unusual effort at environmental preservation by monks in *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (2012). An issue in Thailand is the destruction of the forests, clearcut to satisfy business and government financial interests but utterly destructive to rural Thais who depend on the forests for animals, birds, foraged food, fuel, clean water, and their protective spirits. Protests and advocacy campaigns failed to stop the deforestation. Local monks, whose lives are intertwined with the villagers, conceived of the image of making a tree holy so that loggers would not cut it down. Wrapping a piece of saffron clothing around a tree symbolizes the reverence offered to monks; a woodcutter would respect an "ordained" tree much as he would refrain from harming a monk. The movement, so visible and visceral, took hold, and eventually monks and villagers ordained entire perimeters of forests scheduled for clearcutting, which indeed stopped the woodcutters in their tracks.

Darlington's book outlines the historical precedents, rituals, trajectory of the movement, and future direction of this innovative approach to forest preservation.

In Thailand, Buddhism is a lived religion, one that responds to ever-changing circumstances and a variety of agendas. How it is interpreted and acted upon impacts not only how people perceive the world and their place within it, but their social responsibilities as well. Ordaining a tree is a radical, provocative and controversial act that challenges people to take responsibility—for themselves, their society and the natural environment” (ibid, 1).

In neighboring Burma, political circumstances have offered far less freedom and access to the wider world than in Thailand. Overtaken by a military coup in 1962, the Burmese have endured fifty plus years of dictatorship and its attendant hardships. Monks have an activist history in Burma, also known as Myanmar, but expressing their solidarity with the struggling population resulted in severe punishment. Nonetheless, in 2007 the monks rose up in what became known as the Saffron Revolution, taking to the streets for days of demonstrations and demands for freedom. In Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries, each monk carries an alms bowl which is filled daily by the laity, demonstrating the interdependent reciprocal relationship between monks and ordinary citizens, one receiving food and the other receiving all-important merit for offering food. During the demonstration days, monks turned over their alms bowls, indicating their refusal to receive food from the junta, denying them the possibility of attaining merit. The demonstrations grew by the day, monks and laity walking together, nonviolently protesting military rule.

On 22 September around two thousand monks marched through Yangon and ten thousand through Mandalay, with other demonstrations in five townships across Myanmar. Those marching through the capital chanted the "Myitta Thote" (the Buddha's words on loving kindness) marching through a barricade on the street in front of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, still under house arrest....As of 22 September 2007, the Buddhist monks were reported to have withdrawn spiritual services from all military personnel in a symbolic move that was seen as very powerful in such a deeply religious country as Burma. The military rulers seemed at a loss as to how to deal with the demonstrations by the monks, as using violence against monks would incense and enrage the people of Burma even further, almost certainly prompting massive civil unrest and perhaps violence...On 24 September eyewitnesses reported between 30,000 and 100,000 people demonstrating in Yangon...The marches occurred simultaneously in at least 25 cities across Myanmar, with columns of monks stretching up to 1-kilometre (“Saffron Revolution: September 22 Escalation” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saffron_Revolution).

The Saffron Revolution demonstrates the power available in the monastic community, especially in alliance with the citizens of Burma, to lead efforts that might liberate the country from oppression and destruction. Unsuccessful in 2007, the repercussions of this rebellion contributed to the eventual weakening of the junta, which now shares power

with Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy.

A Japanese peace movement led by a small Nichiren sect, Nipponzan Myohoji, will close this sampling of exemplary Engaged Buddhist leaders and organizations. Founded by Nichidatsu Fujii in 1945, he devoted this new Buddhist sect to the abolition of nuclear weapons, appropriate not only for a Japanese but poignantly for one whose sixtieth birthday fell on August 6, 1945, forever remembered as Hiroshima Day. “A monk since 1916, a disciple of the thirteenth-century prophet Nichiren, and a Japanese Buddhist with a profound tie to Mahatma Gandhi, Fujii held an unwavering commitment to nonviolence and peace” (Green in Queen 2000, 128). Fujii’s band of monks, concentrated in Japan but spread around the world, participate in movements for peace and justice, attend demonstrations against war and tyranny, organize lengthy peace walks, and erect Peace Pagodas, or *stupas*, wherever they live as a way to purify the land and build resistance communities. Their Buddhist practice involves chanting a mantra while beating a hand drum, as well as reciting *sutras* (Buddhist texts). Unlike the Southeast Asian Buddhists or the Zen practitioners in Japan, there is no silent meditation, but for the monks and nuns of Nipponzan Myohoji, their drumming and chanting provides meditative concentration.

This author has known a number of monks and nuns ordained in this tradition through the coincidence (or perhaps twist of fate) of residing near their first Peace Pagoda and community in the US. For thirty-plus years, this author has connected with, and been inspired by, the monks and nuns of this order, for whom every moment of life is engagement and opportunity to serve, to practice peace, to become peaceful. Kato Shonin, the head monk of the order in the US, affirms that “Life itself is engagement and we do not need to separate into engaged or not engaged Buddhism. The Buddha’s teaching is not a tool or an ornament, but exists to bring peace to the world. We follow the teaching because it leads to peace” (ibid 154). This most politically active Buddhist sect, typically humble and always generous, can be counted on as participants in the peace movement, contributing their nonviolent commitments and high-minded values to whatever issues of justice or environmental preservation present themselves, and inspiring citizen activists in Japan and the West to eschew violence and build peaceful societies.

Shadows and Challenges

Nations with majority Buddhist populations do not rank as the most peaceful in the world. In fact, the Global Peace Index rates only Bhutan in its list of the twenty most peaceful countries in the world (Global Peace Index 2016. *visionofhumanity.org*). Sadly, Buddhists are not exempt from greed, anger, and delusion, resulting in their spawning warriors, demagogues, fierce nationalists, rapacious capitalists, and unjust societal structures. Cambodia, an almost all Buddhist country, collapsed into an auto-genocide led by the Khmer Rouge in 1975 that killed two million of their fellow citizens. Sri Lanka majority Sinhalese Buddhists led a twenty-five year civil war against their Tamil, non-Buddhist minority. The Burmese Buddhist military staged a coup in 1962 that gave them total control over the country, which they brought to ruination in a fifty-year regime. Currently, factions of Burmese Buddhist monks engage in Islamophobic hate campaigns

against their under-ten-percent Muslim population. Japanese, including Buddhists, fought and committed war crimes in World War II.

Engaged Buddhism generally exists as a positive force in the creation of just and harmonious communities and nations. Most of them today oppose war and there is little support for Just War Theory among Engaged Buddhists. However, they represent a tiny fraction of the world's Buddhist population and exert only modest influence in their societies. The violence and sectarianism in Buddhist countries represents the struggle of all human beings to align the ethical teachings of their religion with the delusions of the mind, a fundamental ignorance that results in separation, fear, and self-protection. Buddhists, like all beings, are in an ongoing process of development and awareness, not yet prepared to live the truth of this Buddhist teaching from the Dhammapada (Byrom 1976, 3-4)

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with an impure mind
And trouble will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

In this world
Hate never yet dispelled hate.
Only love dispels hate.
This is the law,
Ancient and inexhaustible.