

Socially Engaged Buddhism

A Buddhist Practice for the West

by Philip Russell Brown

This article presents the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), The "Tiep Hien" Buddhist Order (The Order of Interbeing) and the work of the Sakyamuni Buddhist Centre as examples of Non-Sectarian, Socially Engaged and Ecologically Responsible Buddhist Practice. The author believes that these kinds of organisations are likely to be of interest to those Western Buddhists for whom spiritual practice is inseparable from social action on humanitarian and environmental issues.

Socially Engaged Buddhism defined and its Role in the West

The term "Socially Engaged Buddhism" refers to active involvement by Buddhists in society and its problems. Participants in this nascent movement seek to actualize Buddhism's traditional ideals of wisdom and compassion in today's world.

Because Buddhism has been seen as passive, otherworldly, or escapist, an "engaged Buddhism" may initially appear to be a self-contradiction. "Isn't one of the distinguishing features of Buddhism its focus on the solitary quest for enlightenment?" (Kraft, 1985) The view taken by many engaged Buddhists is "that no enlightenment can be complete as long as others remain trapped in delusion" and that "genuine wisdom is manifested in compassionate action". (Kraft, 1985)

Furthermore, the engaged Buddhists who contributed to the recent work "The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism" (ed. Eppsteiner, 1985), found that in re-examining Buddhism's 2500-year-old heritage, "the principles and even some of the techniques of an engaged Buddhism have been latent in the tradition since the time of its founder. Qualities that were inhibited in pre-modern Asian settings, they argue, can be actualized through Buddhism's exposure to the West, where ethical sensitivity, social activism, and egalitarianism are emphasized" (Kraft, 1985).

According to an American Zen teacher: "A major task for Buddhism in the West, it seems to me, is to ally itself with religious and other concerned organizations to forestall the potential catastrophes facing the human race: nuclear holocaust, irreversible pollution of the world's environment, and the continuing large-scale destruction of non-renewable resources. We also need to lend our physical and moral support to those who are fighting hunger, poverty, and oppression in the world". (Kapleau, 1983, p. 26.)

One can get the impression from some Buddhist commentators that to take immediate social action is rather futile because only massive and widespread change in the level of human consciousness will significantly reduce suffering in the world. Take for example Ayya Khema's words on world peace:

"Every thinking person bemoans the fact that there is no peace between nations. Everybody would like to see peace on this globe. Obviously there isn't any. In this century there has been a war somewhere practically all the time. Every country has an enormous defence system where a lot of energy, money and manpower is used. This defence system is turned into an

attack system the minute anyone even makes the slightest unfriendly remark or seems to be moving towards an invasion of airspace or territorial waters. This is rationalised and justified with, 'We have to defend the border of our country in order to protect the inhabitants'.

Disarmament is a hope and a prayer, but not a reality. And why? Because disarmament has to start in everyone's heart or wholesale disarmament will never happen. The defence and attack which happens on a large scale happens constantly with us personally. We're constantly defending our self image. If somebody should look at us sideways or not appreciate or love us enough, or even blame us, that defence turns into attack. The rationale is that we have to defend this person, 'this country' which is 'me', in order to protect the inhabitant, 'self.' Because nearly every person in the world does that, all nations act accordingly. There is no hope that this will ever change unless every single person changes. Therefore it is up to each of us to work for peace inside ourselves. That can happen if each ego is diminished somewhat, and ego only diminishes when we see with ruthless honesty what's going on inside us." (KHEMA, 1987, pp46-47)

In stark contrast to this, Fred Eppsteiner of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship made the following comments about the Fourth Precept of the socially engaged "Tiep Hien" Buddhist Order:

"The fourth precept goes to the heart of Buddhist compassion and directs a challenge to all practitioners. Is it enough to practice formal Dharma in order that some day in the future we'll be able to help all living beings? Or, rather, can the suffering of these beings diminish through our compassionate involvement in the present? This precept seems to imply that contemplative reflections on the suffering of living beings is not enough, and that the lotus can grow only when planted deep in the mud."

Eppsteiner goes on to recall "talking to a Vietnamese monk about Kuan-Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. He (the monk) remarked that people mistakenly think that the only way to worship her is by putting offerings in front of her image and praying. Holding up his own two hands and looking directly in my eyes, he said, 'These are the best offerings one can give Kuan-Yin.'" (Fred Eppsteiner in Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987b, p.6) (Italics mine)

In their book "Seeking the Heart of Wisdom", Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield suggest that both inner practice and social service are important elements of the spiritual path. "Vipassana in the West", they say, "has started by placing a great emphasis on inner meditation and individual transformation. Buddhist teachings have another whole dimension to them, a way of connecting our hearts to the world of action."

Their first universal guidelines teach about the moral precepts and the cultivation of generosity. These are the foundation for any spiritual life. Beyond this, Buddhist practice and the whole ancient Asian tradition is built upon the spirit of service. For some, service may seem to be simply an adjunct or addition to their inner meditation. But service is more than that; it is an expression of the maturity of wisdom in spiritual life. Understanding of this spirit of service and interconnectedness grows as our wisdom deepens." (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p165). It is this spirit of service which the following Buddhist Organisations exemplify.

The Tiep Hien Order (The Order of Interbeing) and its Precepts

The Tiep Hien Order was founded in Vietnam in 1964 during the war. It derives from the Zen School of Lin Chi, and is the 42nd generation of this school. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987a,p85) "The words "Tiep" and "Hien" have several meanings. "Tiep" means to be "in touch with" and "to continue". "Hien" means "to realise" and "to make it here and now". (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987b,p11)

The order was founded in the following manner. "In 1964, responding to the burgeoning hatred, intolerance and suffering, a group of Vietnamese buddhists, many deeply grounded in Buddhist philosophy and meditation, founded ..(the).. Order to become an instrument of their vision of engaged Buddhism. Composed of monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, the Order of Interbeing (Tiep Hien) never comprised great numbers, yet its influence and effects were deeply felt within their country. Highly motivated and deeply committed, members of the Order and their supporters organized anti-war demonstrations, printed leaflets and books, ran social service projects, organized an underground for draft resisters, and cared for many of the wars suffering innocent victims.

During the war, many members and supporters died, some from self-immolation, some from cold-blooded murder, and some from the indiscriminate murder of war. At this time, it is impossible to say whether any remnant of the Order still exists in Asia, even though several members did emigrate to the West, and have recently ordained a number of Westerners and Vietnamese refugees.

Yet (the) Fourteen Precepts that they recited weekly, while war, political repression, and immense suffering tore apart their familiar world, are now being offered to us". (Eppsteiner, 1985, pp152-153)

"The fourteen precepts of the Tiep Hien Order are a unique expression of traditional Buddhist morality coming to terms with contemporary issues. These precepts were not developed by secluded monks attempting to update the traditional Buddhist Precepts. Rather, they were forged in the crucible of war and devastation that was the daily experience for many Southeast Asians during the past several decades." (Eppsteiner in Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987b, p5.) They are as follows:

The First Precept:

Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means: they are not absolute truth.

The Second Precept:

Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.

The Third Precept:

Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness.

The Fourth Precept:

Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering by all means, including personal contact and visits, images, sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

The Fifth Precept:

Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy and material resources with those who are in need.

The Sixth Precept:

Do not maintain anger or hatred. As soon as anger and hatred arise, practice the meditation on compassion in order to deeply understand the persons who have caused anger and hatred. Learn to look at other beings with the eyes of compassion.

The Seventh Precept:

Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Learn to practice breathing in order to regain composure of the body and mind, to practice mindfulness and to develop concentration and understanding.

The Eighth Precept:

Do not utter words which can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

The Ninth Precept:

Do not say untrue things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things that you are not sure of. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

The Tenth Precept:

Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

The Eleventh Precept:

Do not live with a vocation which is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation which helps realize your ideal of compassion.

The Twelfth Precept:

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

The Thirteenth Precept:

Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from enriching themselves from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.

The Fourteenth Precept:

Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. Sexual expression should not happen without love and commitment. In sexual relationships, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.

The Order is truly non-sectarian. It "does not consider any sutra or any group of sutras as its basic text. Inspiration is drawn from the essence of the Buddhist Dharma as found in all sutras. The Order does not recognize any systematic arrangement of the Buddhist teachings as proposed by various schools of Buddhism. The Order seeks to realize the Dharma spirit within primitive Buddhism as well as the development of that spirit throughout the sangha's history and the teachings in all Buddhist traditions". (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987)

In the Order "there are two communities. The Core Community which consists of men and women who have taken the vow to observe the 14 precepts of the Order. Before being ordained as a brother or sister of the Order, one should practice at least one year in this way.

Upon ordination, the person has to organize a community around himself or herself in order to continue the practice. That community is called the Extended Community. This means all those who practice exactly the same way, but have not been ordained into the Core Community. The people who are ordained into the Core Community do not have any special sign at all. They don't shave their heads, they do not have a special robe. What makes them different is that they observe a number of rules, one of them is to practice at least 60 days of retreat, of mindfulness, each year, whether consecutively or divided into several periods.

If they practice every Sunday, for instance, they will have 52 already. The people in the Extended Community can do that, or more, even if they don't want to be ordained. In the Core Community people can choose to observe celibacy, or lead a family life." (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987a, pp87-88).

The Zen Buddhist Master, Thich Nhat Hanh, believes that this type of Buddhist practice will be acceptable to many Western practitioners. He and his colleagues have experimented with it for 20 years and in his opinion it seems suitable for modern society. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987a, p85.)

The Tiep Hien Order has a small but committed membership in Australia. (See below for more information)

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF)

The "Statement of Purpose" of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship is as follows: "To make clear public witness to the Buddha Way as a way of peace and protection for all beings; to raise peace and ecology concerns among American Buddhists and to promote projects through which the Sangha may respond to these concerns; to encourage the delineation in English of the Buddhist way of nonviolence, building from the rich resources of traditional Buddhist teachings a foundation for new action; to offer avenues to realize the kinship among groups and members of the American and world Sangha; to serve as liaison to, and enlist support for, existing national and international Buddhist peace and ecology programs; to provide a focus for concerns over the persecution of Buddhists, as a particular expression of our intent to protect all beings; and to bring the Buddhist perspective to contemporary peace and ecology movements."

The fellowship "was founded in 1978 to bring a Buddhist perspective to the peace movement and the peace movement to the Buddhist community. Buddhists of many traditions join the Buddhist Peace Fellowship to explore personal and group responses to the political, social, and ecological suffering in the world. Drawing on the teachings of nonviolence and compassion, and recognizing the essential unity and interdependence of all beings, BPF members and chapters seek to awaken peace where there is conflict, bring insight into the institutionalized ignorance of political systems, and offer help in the Buddhist spirit of harmony and loving kindness where it is needed."

"As a network of individuals and local chapters, BPF serves to promote communication and cooperation among sanghas in the work of nourishing all beings and resisting the forces of exploitation and war. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship is a member organization of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and participates with other denominational peace fellowships in programs of ecumenical concern. National staff and local chapters respond to regional, national, and international peace and social action issues. Operating within the broad guidelines of the BPF Statement of Purpose, chapters retain their autonomy and function independently. New chapters may form wherever BPF members and friends are actively supporting each other in practices of engaged Buddhism. Members and local chapters have been involved in disarmament, environmental activities, and human rights, including campaigns opposing political oppression of Buddhists in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Tibet. Chapter and national activities have included":

- education and support for personal choices to live simply, conserving energy, and resist harmful products and policies
- sponsoring teaching retreats and conferences
- letter-writing campaigns for human rights
- participation in vigils and demonstrations
- work with refugees from struggling countries
- support for socially conscious financial investment and consumerism,
- days of mindfulness practice

(The above information has been quoted from the BPF Membership information Leaflet.)

The Sakyamuni Buddhist Centre (ACT)

"The Vietnamese tradition of Mahayana Buddhism to which the Abbot of the Van Hanh Monastery and director of the Sakyamuni Buddhist Centre, Venerable Thich Quang Ba, belongs is engaged Buddhism. In this tradition, to practice the Buddha's teaching is not to withdraw from society but to become engaged with it as Dharma practitioners. Accordingly, the Sakyamuni Buddhist Centre operates a range of social welfare programs." (Robleski, in Sakyamuni News, Oct, 1991) Two particularly noteworthy programs are the Refugee Assistance Fund and the Vietnam Sangha Appeal. The aim of the Refugee Assistance Fund is "to assist one of those groups most in need, those who have found the Government in their native country so oppressive that they have risked their lives to escape. The program assists mainly (but not only) Vietnamese refugees, most of whom have been in refugee camps for years." (Robleski, in Sakyamuni News, Oct, 1991, p3.)

The Vietnam Sangha Appeal aims to provide financial support for the training of monks and nuns who will be reestablishing Buddhism in Vietnam. "Since the Communist victory in Vietnam Buddhism has suffered persecution and oppression, leaving it in a very weakened state. Although conditions are still bad, over the past few years the Vietnamese Government has found it necessary to develop contacts with the outside world and attend to its international image, and so there has been some toleration of religious activities. As part of this new reform policy about ten Buddhist training institutes have been allowed to open, for the education of monks and nuns."

"These institutes are under Government control, but still Sutra Vinaya and other Buddhist subjects can be studied by approximately 1,000 students. These institutes are, however, desperately poor. They are in need of even the most basic requirements - food, clothing and shelter - as well as money for books and their study materials."

"If Buddhism is to revive in Vietnam it must have the leadership of a trained and educated Sangha.... In a country as poor as Vietnam a little hard currency goes a long way, and even \$7.00 a month would provide a scholarship that could support a student monk or nun."

"Thich Quang Ba hopes to be able to provide these institutes with much-needed financial support. He plans to send money direct to the individual institute, and also wants to launch a scheme in which people can sponsor a single sangha member, providing him or her with a personal scholarship. These students, the best and brightest, would be selected by the head of their school." (Kearney, 1992)

Has Buddhism ever been Socially Disengaged ?

It is strictly speaking incorrect to see Buddhism as "engaged" or "disengaged". There is simply Buddhism and it is by its very nature "engaged". So when we speak of "socially engaged Buddhism" we are in fact implying that a significant degree of "engagement" is part of the particular Buddhist practice being discussed.

In a recent conversation with Venerable Thich Quang Ba, he emphasized the inherently "engaged" nature of Buddhism and the fact that "engaged Buddhism" is not a recent innovation. Supporting this view he made the following observations: Firstly, the place of "interdependence" in Buddhist philosophy predisposes Buddhism to social engagement. Secondly, in the Buddha's lifetime, very few Bikkhus asked for or were granted permission to live solitary lives of practice. His followers were deeply engaged in work at the village level. Thirdly, we are constantly being engaged by life. It is extremely difficult to be disengaged from life and hence it is really how we engage life as Buddhists which matters. Fourthly, the Golden Ages of Buddhism in India, China and Vietnam provide significant examples of socially engaged Buddhism. Thich Quang Ba is pleased that Thich Nhat Hanh has coined and popularized the term "socially engaged Buddhism" in his writings. He also agrees that it may provide an emphasis in practice which is appealing to Westerners but counsels them to see it not as a new form of Buddhism but as Buddhism with a particular emphasis. (Brown, 1992)

It is this emphasis which may have particular appeal to Western practitioners who are not so much interested in the traditional life in and around the Temple as they are with individual meditation practice and the humanitarian and environmental issues of the day.

Let us conclude with the words of the world's most renowned socially engaged Buddhist, Tenzin Gyatso, the XIVth Dalai Lama:

"Each of us has the responsibility for all mankind. It is time for us to think of other people as true brothers and sisters and to be concerned with their welfare, with lessening their suffering. Even if you cannot sacrifice your own benefit entirely, you should not forget the concerns of others. We should think more about the future and the benefit of all mankind." (Tenzin Gyatso in Eppsteiner, 1985, p8.).

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