

Active Visions

Four Sources of Socially Engaged Buddhism

by Donald Rothberg and Hozan Alan Senauke

What is socially engaged Buddhism? It is dharma practice that flows from the understanding of the complete yet complicated interdependence of all life. It is the practice of the bodhisattva vow to save all beings. It is to know that the liberation of ourselves and the liberation of others are inseparable. It is to transform ourselves as we transform all our relationships and our larger society. It is work at times from the inside out and at times from the outside in, depending on the needs and conditions. It is to see the world through the eye of Dharma and to respond empathically and actively with compassion.

Those of us following this path can draw from many resources in the past. While the history of Buddhism offers many exemplary movements and figures, here we briefly explore four key movements and leaders, identifying how each develops a core intention that can deeply inform our engaged practice today. We begin with the Indian movement of the Untouchables against systemic oppression based on caste, led in the first half of the 20th century by Dr. Ambedkar and continuing to this day. We then explore the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, founded by Dr. Ariyaratne, guided by a Gandhian vision of intertwining personal and community development based on shared work and practice. Thirdly, we focus on the Vietnamese Buddhist movement during the war and the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, Chan Khong, and others to widen the scope of Buddhist practice, developing a deeply influential understanding of nondual social action and conflict transformation. Finally, we move to North America to examine the work of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), growing from Robert Aitken Roshi's broad notion of decentralized and self-regulated Buddhist communities.

Responding to Institutionalized Oppression

Bhimrao R. Ambedkar was born in 1891 in central India, what is now Maharashtra. Though his family came from the Hindu Untouchable Mahar caste—subject to intense economic and social discrimination—Ambedkar's father, a noncommissioned officer in the Indian colonial army, found places for his children at the government school. But the reality of discrimination meant that Mahar children were ignored by their teachers and literally compelled to sit outside the classroom.

Ambedkar later reflected: My poor Untouchable brothers live in a condition worse than the slaves. Slaves were at least touched by their lords. Our very touch has been deemed a sin. Not even a British government has been able to do anything for us.

Ambedkar was a brilliant student, and in 1907, he was among the first Untouchable youths to enter the University of Bombay, later receiving a fellowship to

study political science at Columbia University in New York. By the time he re-established himself in India, he held PhDs from Columbia and the London School of Economics and had been admitted to the British Bar. But Ambedkar was once again confronted with discrimination; upper-caste lawyers and clerks would not meet with him. However, his reputation among the Untouchables, or Dalits, as they were beginning to call themselves, was growing quickly.

Ambedkar's original public focus was on improving the position of his people with regard to the British colonial system. Over time, however, he came to see that

Active Visions

Four Sources of Socially Engaged Buddhism

by Donald Rothberg and Hozan Alan Senauke

W

hat is socially engaged Buddhism? It is dharma practice that flows from the understanding of the complete yet complicated interdependence of all life. It is the practice of the bodhisattva vow to save all beings. It is to know that the liberation

of ourselves and the liberation of others are inseparable. It is to transform ourselves

as we transform all our relationships and our larger society. It is work at times from

the inside out and at times from the outside in, depending on the needs and condi-

tions. It is to see the world through the eye of Dharma and to respond empathically

and actively with compassion.

Those of us following this path can draw from many resources in the past. While the

history of Buddhism offers many exemplary movements and figures, here we briefly

explore four key movements and leaders, identifying how each develops a core intention

that can deeply inform our engaged practice today. We begin with the Indian movement

of the Untouchables against systemic oppression based on caste, led in the first half of

the 20th century by Dr. Ambedkar and continuing to this day. We then explore the

Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, founded by Dr. Ariyaratne, guided by a Gandhian

vision of intertwining personal and community development based on shared

work and practice. Thirdly, we focus on the Vietnamese Buddhist movement during the war and the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, Chan Khong, and others to widen the scope of Buddhist practice, developing a deeply influential understanding of nondual social action and conflict transformation. Finally, we move to North America to examine the work of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), growing from Robert Aitken Roshi's broad notion of decentralized and self-regulated Buddhist communities.

Turning Wheel/Summer-Fall 2008 21

Active Visions

the entrenched Hindu caste system formed an almost insurmountable social and economic obstacle for Dalits. Despite pious intentions and legal reform, caste was not about to disappear from Hinduism. So Ambedkar began a systematic study of world religions, seeking a spiritual path that would lead to social equality, while also attempting to understand the religious roots of institutional oppression. At a 1935 Mahar rally he said, "I say to you, abandon Hinduism and adopt any other religion which gives you equality of status and treatment."

As India moved towards independence, Ambedkar was often highly critical of Mahatma Gandhi's Congress Party. Ambedkar's views were controversial, but he was an exemplary jurist and scholar. The Congress-led government invited Ambedkar to serve as independent India's first law minister and charged him with writing its new constitution.

By this time, Ambedkar had seriously turned his attention to Buddhism as an egalitarian faith native to India. He found the rigorous dialogue, process, and democratic basis of sangha life described in early Buddhism to be a solid grounding for India's new constitution. On presenting this constitution he wrote:

Democracy's life is based on liberty, equality and fraternity; there is a total lack of equality in India. We have equality in politics, but inequality reigns in the sphere of society and economics. How can a people be divided into thousands of castes and sub-castes be a nation? The way to grow strong and united is to remove all such barriers.

In 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, receiving the traditional Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a senior Buddhist monk in a public ceremony. Then Ambedkar offered the refuges and precepts to the nearly 400,000 Dalits in attendance. However, only six weeks following this historic mass conversion, he passed away, three days after he had completed his abiding work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

His untimely death left a void of leadership among the Dalits that took years to fill. Still, Ambedkar had reframed traditional Buddhism. By emphasizing its social teachings and clarifying karma as moral opportunity rather than fate, he offered a dharma that would clearly resonate with and uplift the oppressed and dispossessed.

His legacy can be seen in India among multitudes of ex-Untouchables and hundreds of communities and organizations, some highly political and some religious. An impressive nonsectarian network of Buddhist communities across India, called TBMSG (Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana), closely intertwines dharma and social service. TBMSG provides grassroots, indigenously led meditation retreats and Buddhist training for thousands of Dalits, many of whom live in urban slums. Meditation and practice inform TBMSG's social work, which includes childcare, schools, literacy projects, libraries, medical programs, and training for self-sufficiency and livelihood.

After nearly 30 years, a new generation of Dalit leaders is emerging in TBMSG, building new and

confident dharma communities in India for the first time since Buddhism's decline there nearly a thousand years ago.

There have also been initial connections between Dalits and Buddhist people of color in the United States and an exchange of experiences and ways of practicing. Much like Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders, Ambedkar saw the inseparability of spirituality and social liberation. His work is a powerful legacy for those of us now working to connect Buddhist practice and attention to various forms of oppression such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

Community Development

If Ambedkar's vision was about linking spirituality to a movement for the rights of a downtrodden people, then Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya movement point to the importance of what we might call community development.

Dr. Ariyaratne, or Ari, as he is familiarly known, was born in November 1931 in Galle, Sri Lanka. His middle-class family was devoted to education and Buddhism, and the young Ariyaratne advanced through school quickly. In 1956, he was hired as a science teacher at the prestigious Nalanda College. In that first year, on his own, he surveyed the Rodiya communities of Untouchables living in terrible poverty. The following year he visited rural Gandhian communities across India, meeting and traveling with Gandhi's famed disciple, Vinoba Bhave. Bhave had formed a nonviolent social movement based on giving, particularly giving land, for which he used the Gandhian term sarvodaya, meaning "the welfare of all." This combined social-spiritual vision deeply influenced Ariyaratne.

22 Turning Wheel/Summer-Fall 2008

Dr. Ambedkar

Active Visions

Returning to Sri Lanka, Ariyaratne reflected on how these principles might guide a form of communal action that he called shramadana, "a gift of labor." In December 1958, Ariyaratne, along with a group of Nalanda students and teachers, organized the first shramadana work camp in the Rodiya village of

Kanatoluwa.

The volunteers worked with the villagers to survey the area, assess resources, discuss what needed to be done, and clarify the spiritual principles supporting the project. After the first work camp's success, requests for shramadana camps soon came from numerous impoverished villages. Each camp created new local infrastructures grounded in the empowerment of all involved. Ariyaratne was finding that his amalgam of Buddhist and Gandhian principles and practices was working very well, resulting in roads, clinics, and schools as well as empowerment and cooperation. The workers' motto was, "We build the road and the road builds us."

From these seeds, an organization—Sarvodaya—grew to become the largest grassroots development network in Sri Lanka. Today, this network comprises some 15,000 villages and 34 district offices.

Sarvodaya reframes the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, giving it a social interpretation designed to resolve community problems, asking, "What is the problem? What are the roots of the problem? What is the solution? How do we get there?"

The first truth, the truth of suffering and unsatisfactory conditions, translates as the fact of a village in trouble. The scholar George Bond writes, "This concrete form of suffering becomes the focus of mundane awakening. Villagers should recognize the problems in their environment such as poverty, disease, oppression, and disunity."

Understanding the second truth, the origin of suffering, is to see the role of factors like greed, hatred, and selfishness.

The third truth is that the villagers' suffering can cease.

The means to solve the problem lies in the fourth truth, the Eightfold Path. This truth encompasses all the shared abilities, wisdom, and efforts of the community, organized for its own liberation. Ariyaratne writes, "The struggle for external liberation is the struggle of internal liberation from greed, hatred, and ignorance, at the same time."

Sarvodaya has played a vital peacemaking role in the context of the violent civil war in Sri Lanka that

erupted starting in 1983. It has carried out the difficult and dangerous work of creating connections across Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamil lines, creating a peace movement based on such connections, despite great risks.

At the first BPF

Summer Institute in 1991, Ari told us how Sinhalese nationalists came into his home office one day with guns drawn, ready to kill him. His response was to say, "Well, you can do that if you wish to, but please explain to me how that is going to be a resolution to the suffering you've experienced."

They left without harming him or anyone else.

Today more than 100,000 young people are involved in Shanthi Sena, the nonviolent peace brigade responding to religious and communal strife. They have organized huge peace gatherings in the last 10 years; in 2002, some 650,000 people met and meditated together in support of the recently enacted peace accords and ceasefire.

Sarvodaya also played a huge and highly praised role in the wake of the December 2004 tsunami. Tens of thousands of volunteers brought material, psychological, and spiritual help to devastated villages, and are continuing to support their rebuilding.

The work of Dr. Ariyaratne and Sarvodaya has had a significant impact on many Western engaged Buddhists, in part through Ari's regular visits to BPF and other sanghas in North America. Dharma teacher Joanna Macy, for example, spent a year with Sarvodaya in 1979–80, which deeply impacted her own highly influential work in developing groups, organizations, and communities able to transform the pain of the

world, as well as in articulating social interpretations of many core Buddhist teachings.

Nondual Action in the Midst of War

The engaged approach to Buddhism in Vietnam goes back more than 1,000 years. This history is often connected with the defense of the country and the people, and offers many examples of engagement as a place of practice, liberation, and social change. Hence, when a new wave of engaged Buddhism emerged in the 1930s, in large part aiming to end French colonialism (France had invaded Vietnam in 1858), there was considerable historical resonance.

According to Thich Minh Duc, the engaged movement in Vietnam had three broad phases. The first, starting in the 1930s, was called “Buddhism for Turning Wheel/Summer-Fall 2008 23

Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne

Active Visions

Everybody.” The intention was to bring Buddhist teachings and practices out of the monasteries, to help guide daily life.

The second, starting in the 1950s in the midst of war, was called “Buddhism Goes into the World.” This was expressed especially through service—to meet the basic needs of the people, particularly refugees, for shelter, food, education, and medical care.

The third phase, “Getting Involved,” started after the government crackdown on Buddhism in 1963 and involved explicit activism, intended especially to stop the war and the persecution of Buddhists.

Thich Nhat Hanh, born in 1926, participated in all three phases. After entering the Tu Hieu monastery in Hue at 17, he soon rebelled against the limited monastic curriculum and moved to Saigon, where he could connect traditional Buddhism with the exploration of contemporary literature and philosophy.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, he founded or co-founded a number of organizations, including several centers of Buddhist studies and activism, the School of Youth for Social Service, and the Tiep Hien Order, for practitioners of engaged Buddhism. He also was very involved in speaking and acting against the war.

After his 1966 Western speaking tour—during which he met Thomas Merton and Martin Luther

King Jr., influencing significantly King's decision to speak out against the war in 1967—Thich Nhat Hanh was advised by Buddhist leaders in Vietnam not to return, for fear of assassination or imprisonment. He was forced to begin life in exile.

In the years since then, he and a number of collaborators, particularly Chan Khong, have articulated a highly influential interpretation of engaged Buddhism centered on a nondual approach to transforming conflicts. This approach, on our interpretation, has six basic elements:

Identifying the dualistic system of conflict: These Buddhist leaders pointed to the roots of the war as the struggle between apparent polar opposites, communists versus capitalists, a struggle that reflected the projections of the superpowers onto Vietnam.

Their intention was to transform this oppressive system of conflict, which they saw as the source of immense suffering.

Not taking sides: Their strategy was to avoid both extremes, pointing beyond the dualistic conflict. They did not posit either side as “enemy” or “oppressor.”

According to Thich Nhat Hanh:

The Vietnam War was, first and foremost, an ideological struggle. To ensure our people's survival, we had to overcome both communist and anticommunist fanaticism and maintain the strictest neutrality. Buddhists tried their best to speak for all the people and not take sides, but we were condemned as “pro-communist neutralists.”

Grounding in the ethics of nonharming: Their commitment to nonviolence expressed the basic Buddhist

ethical precepts and led to a strategy for peacemaking through ending the cycles of violence.

Responding to suffering: Their focus was in large part to respond to suffering—of the people, of the war, and of the two sides. Thich Nhat Hanh comments: “We were able to understand the suffering of both sides, the Communists and the anti-Communists. We tried to be open to both...to be one with them.”

Not taking sides does not mean not responding:

Through their actions, they showed that nondualism does not mean standing aside. They rebuilt homes and schools, dispensed medical care, set up clinics, helped refugees, and demonstrated to end the conflict.

The aim is reconciliation, not victory: Their long-term intention was not defeat of the “enemy” but rather, reconciliation. These efforts required considerable patience. Thich Minh Duc comments, “We did not think that by demonstrating we’d turn things around immediately. Rather, we had to look to the long-term process of practice (tu). Tu means to transform bad to good—today one inch, tomorrow another inch.... For 100 years, we were controlled by the French. We knew that it would take years to untie the knot.”

A Network of Communities

BPF was born in 1978 on the back porch of Robert Aitken Roshi’s Maui Zendo. It was a gathering of practitioners who were appalled by American proxy wars in Central America and by the flourishing Cold War arms race. Originally, their idea was to organize a chapter of the nonviolent Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). But FOR, which has separate fellowships for different faiths, suggested that they start a “Buddhist Peace Fellowship.” Cofounders Nelson Foster, Robert and Anne Aitken, and other local Zen friends were soon joined by many Western Buddhists drawn to social engagement, including Gary Snyder, Joanna Macy, Jack Kornfield, Tai Unno, Al Bloom, Ryo Imamura, and others.

By the time BPF began, Aitken had been an activist

24 Turning Wheel/Summer-Fall 2008

Thich Nhat Hanh (photo: Don Farber; www.buddhistphotos.com)

Active Visions

for decades, speaking out on labor issues, nuclear disarmament, and opposition to war. For some years he

was a tax resister. His Buddhist practice originated during his three years in an internment camp in Japan during World War II. By chance, the well-known teacher and translator R. H. Blyth was interned in the same camp, and in the course of their captivity, Aitken received a vivid introduction to Zen, haiku, and literature in general.

After the war, Aitken took up Zen practice with Nyogen Senzaki in Los Angeles, and he went to Japan to study Zen in the early 1950s. In 1959 Robert and Anne Aitken founded what was to become the Diamond Sangha in their home in Honolulu, which continues to be Koko-An Zendo.

Aitken's study of anarchist writing—Proudhon, Kropotkin, Landauer, Emma Goldman, and many others—reinforced his belief in personal autonomy, decentralization, and spiritual community. These are principles that are also the essence of Buddhist sangha, as he has written:

The traditional Sangha serves as a model for enterprise in this vision. A like-minded group of five can be a Sangha. It can grow to a modest size, split into autonomous groups and then network. As autonomous lay Buddhist associations, these little communities will not be Sanghas in the classical sense, but will be inheritors of the name and of many of the original intentions. They will also be inheritors of the Base Community movements in Latin America and the Philippines—Catholic networks that are inspired by traditional religion and also by 19th-century anarchism.

Aitken's intention for BPF was not the creation of a new mass organization or religious order but a web of like-minded Buddhist activists. In its early years BPF was a loose ecumenical network linked by friendship and common purpose, with members clustered especially in Hawaii and the San Francisco Bay Area.

Within three years the network had grown to several hundred members, moved its office to Berkeley, hired a part-time coordinator, formed the first chapters, organized several conferences and meetings, and begun publishing a newsletter that later became this magazine. Local BPF chapters still function with great autonomy, bound by their mutual practice.

This web of sanghas is a small step in the direction

of what Aitken calls Buddhist Anarchism, which itself is a small step towards the healthy remaking of society. Aitken frequently cites the old Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) motto: "Build the new within the shell of the old."

Aside from addressing the pressing realities of U.S. militarism and the encroachment of an all-devouring corporate capitalism, BPF early on was drawn to matters of religious freedom and human rights in Asia. In the first BPF newsletters,

one reads about the plight of Buddhists in Tibet, Vietnam, and Bangladesh.

And just as we are still wrestling with the deprivations of militarism and global capitalism, it is interesting to see we have many of the same international concerns today as 30 years ago.

BPF has grown from that initial vision as straight and true as we could manage. The network of decentralized communities remains, and BPF's Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE) program, founded by Diana Winston and named to reflect affinity with the Catholic Base Community movement, has organized or facilitated more than 30 six-month trainings for small autonomous groups of practitioners.

BPF's many other projects have included working in prisons, organizing youth, investigating race and diversity, and seeding social activism in countless Buddhist centers and sanghas in America.

BPF draws strength from the history of modern engaged Buddhist communities including those led by Dr. Ambedkar, Dr. Ariyaratne, and Thich Nhat Hanh. Its mission is limitless, like the bodhisattva vows themselves.

Donald Rothberg, a member of the Spirit Rock Teachers Council and the faculty of Saybrook Graduate School, is the author of *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World*. He directs "The Path of Engagement," a two-year Spirit Rock training program in socially engaged Buddhism.

Hozan Alan Senauke is vice-abbot of Berkeley Zen Center, senior advisor to Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and founder of the Clear View Project, which provides Buddhist-based resources for relief and social change. He is a father, musician, writer, and activist.

Rothberg and Senauke adapted this essay for *Turning Wheel* from their presentation at the May 2008 "Path of Engagement" retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

Turning Wheel/Summer-Fall 2008 25

Robert Aitken Roshi