

The Work of Engaged Buddhism
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How can the Dharma transform our societies and save our planet? Our efforts are always moving from individual practice, to sangha practice, to a linking of communities with common values even across religious lines.

A Zen story about the thousand hands and eyes of Avalokitesvara begins this way: “A monk asked Master Tao Wu, ‘What does Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion use so many hands and eyes for?’ Tao Wu responded, ‘It’s like reaching around for a pillow in the middle of the night.’” Avalokitesvara has an instinct for saving suffering beings. With all her skills and awareness, she acts completely as the need arises. In our sleep, we reach around for a pillow at night to make our selves comfortable. Avalokitesvara makes herself comfortable by saving sentient beings. I like to think we can become more like her.

The prospects for socially engaged Buddhism and for BPF are good. Many Dharma centers and local practice groups feed the homeless, do hospice work, tutor inner city children, conduct meditation sessions for the incarcerated, campaign against nuclear weapons and nuclear waste. This is reaching around for your pillow in the middle of the night. In America the soil of social action has already been well tilled by various religious traditions. Most of us, even when we find a home in the Dharma, still carry Christian and Jewish values. The more settled we are in our selves, the more we come to understand that the Dharma involves looking deeply, bowing to all ancestors, east, west, north, south, and returning the Dharma in culturally appropriate forms to all our communities.

The challenges for BPF, for all of us, are still numerous. We keep working for peace regardless of success or failure. I once heard Sulak suggest that our greatest teachers are failures. Thich Nhat Hanh is unable to return to Vietnam, his fellow monks and nuns still endure repression. H.H. the Dalai Lama has not liberated Tibet from China's grip. They each persist in ways that are peaceful and unflagging. The first challenge is to make BPF a truly national organization, offering face-to-face activity beyond the bounds of Northern California. We are working on this, building on our large membership, and on the ever larger circle of friends and Dharma centers. This year we are planning modest workshops in Chicago, Boston, Seattle, and the Southwest. We are also talking with people in various parts of the country about forming BASE groups, modeled loosely on the ones we have been organizing here.

Some challenges cut deeper. How can the Dharma transform our societies and save our planet? Our efforts are always moving from individual practice, to sangha practice, to a linking of communities with common values even across religious lines. H. H. the Dalai Lama recently urged Western Buddhists to translate Buddhist ethics, values, and practice into forms accessible to non-Buddhists. What Sulak calls “Buddhism with a small ‘b.’” But for now, the crisis in America deepens, right along with our understanding of structural greed, anger, and delusion. BPF members, friends, and chapters have been very

good at social service and at a limited kind of political action. We work in hospice programs and homeless shelters, we sit on the tracks to block the shipment of arms. But this kind of work does not necessarily bring structural transformation. What does? I leave this as an open question.

Without an Engaged Buddhist analysis, an understanding of how things work now, we remain in the dark about how to get from here to a Dharmic society. This isn't just a Buddhist problem. It's a failing that has always plagued progressive movements in the United States. Our best teachers, with all their wisdom, have offered useful but incomplete visions: Sulak Sivaraksa's "Buddhism with a small 'b.'" Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's "Dhammic Socialism," Thich Nhat Hanh's "Order of Interbeing." Even Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne's (pictured in photo at right) Sarvodaya movement has fallen into a trap of dependence on "development" funds from the North. We need a critical understanding of interbeing as detailed and various as the maps of individual consciousness we use in our spiritual practices. Some of us here and in Asia have been groping towards such an analysis. There are years of work ahead.