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# Evading the Transformation of Reality

Engaged Buddhism at an Impasse

Ken Knabb

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*“A very popular error: having the courage of your convictions. The point is to have the courage for an attack on your convictions!” (Nietzsche)*

In 1993 I wrote *Strong Lessons for Engaged Buddhists*, a leaflet welcoming the emergence of socially engaged Buddhism as a healthy development but also pointing out a number of its shortcomings. Several thousand copies were handed out at Thich Nhat Hanh appearances in Berkeley and San Francisco or mailed to engaged Buddhist groups around the world, and over the next few years my friends and I continued to distribute it at local appearances of Gary Snyder, Robert Aitken, the Dalai Lama, etc. It has been reprinted several times, including in *Turning Wheel: Journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship* (Summer 1994), and can now be found online at this website.

Despite the predictable negative reactions (“How dare you criticize Thich Nhat Hanh!”) and even a few unsuccessful at-

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tempts to prevent the circulation of the text, the great majority of the responses were positive (“It’s about time someone raised these issues!”). Unfortunately, most of these positive responses do not seem to have had much practical follow-through. While many people, including several BPF authors and board members, *privately* informed me that they agreed with much of what I said, their subsequent public writings have contained no mention of the leaflet and scarcely any discussion of the issues it posed. I hope that the following remarks will provoke a more public debate.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship’s stated purpose is “to bring a Buddhist perspective to contemporary peace, environmental, and social action movements” and “to raise peace, environmental, feminist, and social justice concerns among Western Buddhists.” In the most narrow sense, I suppose the BPF has indeed been “raising” such “concerns” over the last two decades. But I doubt if either its founders or most of its subsequent participants intended to limit themselves to such a meager goal as merely making Buddhists passively “aware” that people are socially oppressed in various ways — something that practically everyone in the world is already only too well aware of, even if they have little idea of what to do about it. I think it is fair to say that the spirit of the BPF’s aim could be summed up as:

- (1) Buddhism has some contributions to make to radical social movements.
- (2) Buddhists also have some things to learn from such movements.

I agree with (1) (if I didn’t, I wouldn’t even bother to make these critiques), but the point I wish to make here is that engaged Buddhists have largely evaded (2). While they constantly imply that social activists would do well to adopt meditation, mindfulness, compassion, nonviolence and other Buddhist qualities, they rarely acknowledge that they

themselves might have anything to learn from non-Buddhists – except for predictable nods to kindred spiritual figures like Gandhi or Martin Luther King who merely confirm their own preconceptions. If they occasionally venture into the secular realm, it is only to echo a few left-liberal platitudes from trendy commentators like Ralph Nader, Jerry Brown, Jeremy Rifkin or E.F. Schumacher, none of whom represent any radical challenge to the dominant social order, however cogently they may denounce a few of its more glaring absurdities.

The two aspects are interrelated. The fact that engaged Buddhists have not bothered to investigate truly radical movements is the main reason that such movements have remained equally indifferent to any advice from engaged Buddhism (assuming they are even aware of its existence, which in most cases they are not).

In 1992 a number of Buddhists in various countries, apparently dissatisfied with the level of discussion on these issues in the BPF and INEB (International Network of Engaged Buddhists), organized a Buddhist Social Analysis Group. More recently some of the same people have formed an online “think tank” called the Think Sangha.<sup>1</sup> The first notable public expression of this seemingly promising development is a book entitled *Entering the Realm of Reality: Towards Dhammic Societies* (ed. Jonathan Watts, Alan Senauke & Santikaro Bhikkhu; INEB, Bangkok, 1997).

In the Introduction the editors call for new visions, then slip into a myopic pretension:

We urgently need visions and maps. Some of us are on the front lines of social change, working with refugees, prisoners, the homeless, and AIDS victims. Some are campaigning for the abolition

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<sup>1</sup> Information on these and other engaged Buddhist organizations can be obtained from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, P.O. Box 3470, Berkeley, CA 94703, USA, or at the BPF website: [www.bpf.org](http://www.bpf.org).

of nuclear weapons, land mines, and handguns, issues that differ in payload but stem from the same source of fear and hatred. Some are protecting our fragile environment, standing up for the trees, the waters, for the wide circle of all beings. [p. 9]

Far from being “on the front lines of social change,” most of these activities have nothing to do with social change. Those listed at the beginning are forms of social *service*. The rest are *defensive reactions* against a few of the more glaring *symptoms* of the social system. This does not necessarily mean that such activities are not worthwhile. It’s simply a matter of being clear about what you are doing and what you are not doing.

These are all social, structural issues that we must meet in an organized social way. Individual heroics will not address the problems. Leave that to the cowboy movies. So we create communities on every scale, lay and monastic, from Dawn Kiam at Suan Mokkh in Siam and Plum Village in France to Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka’s vast network of self-empowerment communities. [pp. 9-10].

The fact that social issues ultimately need to be dealt with collectively does not imply that the first step is to “create communities.” As a matter of blunt historical fact, most would-be alternative communities over the last two centuries (utopian colonies, communes, coops, affinity groups, etc.) have either failed or, if “successful,” have ended up being coopted and reinforcing the system they wished to transcend. One of the articles in the book in fact admits the failures of Sarvodaya (pp. 256-260), pointing out how such organizations function primarily as temporary stopgaps among sectors neglected by capitalist development and are generally abandoned the moment such development becomes accessible to them.

tion of Buddhist stars like Thich Nhat Hanh or “His Holiness” the Dalai Lama is silly enough when confined to a “spiritual” level; when it is extended to the sociopolitical domain it becomes simply reactionary. But even if overt hierarchical manipulation is not a major problem among the more independent-minded engaged Buddhists, and even if many of their groups are participatory and democratic, a more subtle problem remains. Those who find themselves in positions of responsibility or “leadership” may be relatively free from the desire to cling to those positions, but they generally remain very *attached* to the idea of protecting their “sanghas” — the communities and organizations they have built up over the years. There is a natural tendency to avoid rocking the boat. Divergent tendencies are discouraged from developing into healthy rivalries. Conflicts are dealt with by trying to bring about “reconciliation” (which, as Saul Alinsky noted, usually means that the people on top remain in power and the people on the bottom are reconciled to it). Critics are mollified and neutralized. (“That’s a very interesting viewpoint! Thank you for sharing your feelings with us. Please join with us in working on these issues.”)

If such attempts at cooption don’t work, criticisms such as mine are often evaded by complaining about their “arrogant” or “contemptuous” tone. I admit that I don’t have a very high opinion of many of the engaged Buddhists’ tactics and ideas. But I have enough respect for the persons themselves to feel that they merit being leveled with. It seems to me that the people who are really being contemptuous are those in positions of influence who avoid publicly discussing important issues on the grounds that their audiences are not capable of understanding them, or are not ready for them and might be upset and scared off. As for arrogance, is there any better term to describe those who claim to be bringing wonderful new perspectives to radical movements while disdainfully ignoring virtually the entire history of such movements?

Buddhism sees our problems as ultimately rooted in *ignorance*. The first step in overcoming ignorance is to be aware of it, to be aware of what we do not know. How much do engaged Buddhists really know about Karl Marx (as opposed to pseudo-Marxist “Communism”)? Or about anarchists such as Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman? Or utopian visionaries such as Charles Fourier and William Morris? Or social-psychological critics such as Wilhelm Reich and Paul Goodman? Or situationists such as Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem? Or popular nonauthoritarian revolutions such as Spain 1936, Hungary 1956, France 1968, Czechoslovakia 1968, Portugal 1974, Poland 1980? Or more recent events such as the Tiananmen Square occupation or last year’s jobless revolt in France? (“We don’t want full employment, we want full lives!”) How many engaged Buddhists have seriously explored any of these movements? How many are even aware of their existence?

It’s not enough to respond, “Okay, so tell me about them — I’ve got five minutes.” Buddhists often carry out their spiritual studies and practices with an exemplary diligence, yet when it comes to social issues they somehow expect a *Reader’s Digest* level of knowledge to suffice. Millions of people have been trying in a variety of ways to bring about a radical, truly liberating transformation of this society for hundreds of years. It’s a vast and complex process that has included many disasters and dead ends, but also a certain number of still-promising discoveries. It takes careful investigation to discern which tactics were mistaken and which remain potentially useful. Just as you don’t expect to understand Buddhism or Zen by reading one article, you can’t expect to get a real grasp of the range of radical possibilities without a fair amount of exploration — and personal experimentation.

It’s not just a matter of finding out what has happened to other people in other times or places, but of taking a clear look at your own situation. The uncritical adoration and consump-

When people are sick, hungry, or filled with bitterness and hatred, it is not enough to suggest that they let go of attachment to self or to show them how to meditate . . . . Our difficult task is first to understand our complex relationship to their suffering, then help us together to grasp the underlying conditions for collective identity and liberation. And maybe then it is time to teach meditation. [p. 10]

That is well put, except that I would question the priority given to “our complex relationship to their suffering.” In practice such existential, “we-are-all-partly-to-blame” moralizing usually serves as a means to evade real possibilities. Like many other people, engaged Buddhists waste a lot of time guiltily berating themselves for their vague “complicity” in social-systemic evils they can do little about while paying no attention to specific faults that, with a little initiative, they *could* overcome (such as their passive reliance on leaders or their ignorance of radical history).

Without a social analysis, a Buddhist social analysis, we may not know where our attention and energy should be directed. Without an open, flexible social vision, we have no idea where we are heading. [p. 11]

A social analysis is indeed needed, but the editors are prejudging matters by assuming that it must be a “Buddhist” one. A truly open and flexible analysis, investigating all the factors without attachment to preconceived views, might lead to conclusions that contradict some aspects of Buddhism. Although engaged Buddhists deserve credit for calling attention to discreditable episodes of Buddhist history (an excellent recent example is Brian Victoria’s book *Zen at War*), they still tend to

take it for granted that “Buddhism” itself is inherently good — as if the only problem were that for some strange reason it has sometimes been corrupted or misinterpreted. Like Christians with the Bible, they go into elaborate contortions to fit their political and ethical biases into a Buddhist framework, hunting up some out-of-context scriptural quotation that with a little stretching can be interpreted to accord with their views and ignoring anything that contradicts them. The implication is that *authentic* Buddhism (if we can just determine what that may be) already has all the answers.

Earlier in the Introduction, for example, the editors flatly declare that “our violent self-centeredness and, by extension, society’s self-centered ills are the root problem” (p. 8). While it is true that a narrow, “unenlightened” self-centeredness can create or exacerbate many problems, the editors’ unmindful Buddhist dogmatism leads them here to overlook the fact that people have *also* remained oppressed because they have been conditioned into accepting hierarchical conditions without being “self-centered” enough to insist on getting a fair shake. The notion that we must “lower our expectations” and be more self-sacrificing and altruistic is just buying into the system’s con, transferring the blame from an absurd exploitive system onto the victims of that exploitation, as if the problem were that the victims were too greedy.

Similar confusions can be found throughout the book. The “social analyses” are usually naïve and often crudely dualistic (East versus West, North versus South, “globalization” versus local communities, “modernization” versus traditional practices, “consumerism” versus abstinence). The system’s complex dialectical processes are reduced to simplistic quantitative terms: “The fundamental problem is scale” (p. 230). “Small is the watchword. Huge is ugly” (p. 9). The huge power structures are nevertheless largely taken for granted: since overthrowing them is never even considered, the only option seems to be to convince the system to reform itself. “Once

we are more *awake*, we can join with others to pressure government for changes in policy” (p. 232). Corporations should be made “more accountable”; tax breaks for coops and small businesses will lead to “fuller employment and truly free markets” (p. 236). Korean Buddhist leaders are praised for advising “rich people and employers to share more with the poor and with labor, as well as asking the government to improve the social welfare system and to protect human rights” (p. 203).

Apart from a remarkably trite and insipid utopian fantasy by Ken Jones and a few rather vague speculations in Santikaro’s article as to what would constitute a “Dhammic Socialism,” the book contains little discussion of a possible alternative society. None of the contributors have any serious notion of how a transition to such a society might occur.<sup>2</sup> Jones imagines his utopia being ushered in by a “Great U-Turn” that somehow happened when “a different kind of person started to go into politics” (pp. 282, 284). Aitken envisions “our human network having more and more appeal as the power structure continues to fall apart,” but admits that the latter “might not collapse until it brings everything else down with it” (pp. 7, 9). Most of the others don’t even address the issue. They all seem to hope that the dominant system will simply fade away if only we can develop a sufficiently extensive and inspiring network of NGOs and alternative communities and general good vibes. In the entire book there is scarcely so much as a mention of the movements that have actually challenged the system. The presumption seems to be that such movements are of no relevance because they were too “violent” or too “angry” or too “materialistic,” or simply because so far they have failed. (Has Buddhism succeeded?)

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<sup>2</sup> My own views on these topics are summed up in *The Joy of Revolution*.