Strong Lessons for Engaged Buddhists

Ken Knabb

October 1993

Have you learned lessons only of those who admired you,
and were tender with you, and stood aside for you?
Have you not learned great lessons from those who reject you,
and brace themselves against you? or who treat you with
contempt, or dispute the passage with you?

—Whitman, "Stronger Lessons"

In the middle of the Vietnam war Thich Nhat Hanh and a few other Buddhist monks, nuns, and laypeople broke with the 2500-year tradition of Buddhist apoliticism and founded the Tiep Hien Order in an effort to relate Buddhist ethical and meditational practice to contemporary social issues. Members of the order organized antiwar demonstrations, underground support for draft resisters, and various relief and social service projects. Though the movement was soon crushed in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh has carried on similar activities from exile in France, and the idea of "socially engaged Buddhism" has spread among Buddhists around the world. One of its main expressions in the West, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, defines its purpose as being "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."

The emergence of engaged Buddhism is a healthy development. Despite the bullshit that Buddhism shares with all religions (superstition, hierarchy, male chauvinism, complicity with the established order), it has always had a core of genuine insight based on the practice of meditation. It is this vital core, along with its freedom from the enforced dogmas characteristic of Western religions, that has enabled it to catch on so readily even among the most sophisticated milieus in other cultures. People engaged in movements for social change might well benefit from the mindfulness, equanimity, and self-discipline fostered by Buddhist practice; and apolitical Buddhists could certainly stand to be confronted with social concerns.

So far, however, the engaged Buddhists' social awareness has remained extremely limited. If they have begun to recognize certain glaring social realities, they show little understanding of their causes or possible solutions. For some, social engagement simply means doing some sort of volunteer charitable work. Others, taking their cue perhaps from Nhat Hanh's remarks on arms production or Third World starvation, resolve not to eat meat or not to patronize or work

for companies that produce weapons. Such gestures may be personally meaningful to them, but their actual effect on global crises is negligible. If millions of Third World people are allowed to starve, this is not because there is not enough food to go around, but because there are no profits to be made by feeding penniless people. As long as there is big money to be made by producing weapons or ravaging the environment, someone will do it, regardless of moral appeals to peoples' good will; if a few conscientious persons refuse, a multitude of others will scramble for the opportunity to do it in their place.

Others, sensing that such individual gestures are not enough, have ventured into more "political" activities. But in so doing they have generally just followed along with the existing peace, ecological, and other so-called progressive groups, whose tactics and perspectives are themselves quite limited. With very few exceptions these groups take the present social system for granted and simply jockey within it in favor of their particular issue, often at the expense of other issues. As the situationists put it: *"Fragmentary oppositions are like the teeth on cogwheels: they mesh with each other and make the machine go round — the machine of the spectacle, the machine of power."*[1]

A few of the engaged Buddhists may realize that it is necessary to get beyond the present system; but failing to grasp its entrenched, self-perpetuating nature, they imagine gently and gradually modifying it from within, and then run into continual contradictions. One of the Tiep Hien Precepts says: "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."[2] How is one to prevent the exploitation of suffering if one "respects" the property that embodies it? And what if the owners of such property fail to relinquish it peacefully?

If the engaged Buddhists have failed to explicitly oppose the socioeconomic system and have limited themselves to trying to alleviate a few of its more appalling effects, this is for two reasons. First, they are not even clear about what it is. Since they are allergic to any analysis that seems "divisive," they can hardly hope to understand a system based on class divisions and bitter conflicts of interest. Like almost everyone else they have simply swallowed the official version of reality, in which the collapse of the Stalinist state-capitalist regimes in Russia and East Europe supposedly demonstrates the inevitability of the Western form of capitalism.

Secondly, like the peace movement in general they have adopted the notion that "violence" is the one thing that must be avoided at all cost. This attitude is not only simplistic, it is hypocritical: they themselves tacitly rely on all sorts of state violence (armies, police, jails) to protect their loved ones and possessions, and would certainly not passively submit to many of the conditions they reproach others for rebelling against. In practice pacifism usually ends up being more tolerant toward the ruling order than toward its opponents. The same organizers who reject any participant who might spoil the purity of their nonviolent demonstrations often pride themselves on having developed amicable understandings with police. Small wonder that dissidents who have had somewhat different experiences with the police have not been overly impressed with this sort of "Buddhist perspective."

It is true that many forms of violent struggle, such as terrorism or minority coups, are inconsistent with the sort of open, participatory organization required to create a genuinely liberated global society. An antihierarchical revolution can only be carried out by the people as a whole, not by some group supposedly acting on their behalf; and such an overwhelming majority would

[1] *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 124 [Basic Banalities].

[2] *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Parallax Press, 1988), p. 152.

have no need for violence except to neutralize any pockets of the ruling minority that may violently try to hold on to their power. But any significant social change inevitably involves *some* violence. It would seem more sensible to admit this fact, and simply strive to minimize violence as far as possible.

This antiviolence dogmatism goes from the dubious to the ludicrous when it also opposes any form of "spiritual violence." There is, of course, nothing wrong with trying to act "without anger in your heart" and trying to avoid getting caught up in pointless hatred and revenge; but in practice this ideal often just serves as an excuse to repress virtually any incisive analysis or critique by labeling it as "angry" or "intellectually arrogant." On the basis of their (correct) impression of the bankruptcy of traditional leftism, the engaged Buddhists have concluded that all "confrontational" tactics and "divisive" theories are misguided and irrelevant. Since this attitude amounts to ignoring virtually the entire history of social struggles, many richly suggestive experiences remain a closed book to them (the anarchist experiments in social organization during the 1936 Spanish revolution, for example, or the situationist tactics that provoked the May 1968 revolt in France), and they are left with nothing but to "share" with each other the most innocuous New-Agey platitudes and to try to drum up interest in the most tepid, lowest-common-denominator "actions."

It is ironic that people capable of appreciating the classic Zen anecdotes fail to see that sharp wakeup tactics may also be appropriate on other terrains. Despite all the obvious differences, there are certain interesting analogies between Zen and situationist methods: both insist on practical realization of their insights, not just passive assent to some doctrine; both use drastic means, including rejecting pointless dialogue and refusing to offer ready-made "positive alternatives," in order to pull the rug out from under habitual mindsets; both are therefore predictably accused of "negativity."

One of the old Zen sayings is: *If you meet a Buddha, kill him.* Have the engaged Buddhists succeeded in "killing" Thich Nhat Hanh in their minds? Or are they still attached to his image, awed by his mystique, passively consuming his works and uncritically accepting his views? Nhat Hanh may be a wonderful person; his writings may be inspiring and illuminating in certain respects; but his social analysis is naïve. If he seems slightly radical this is only in contrast to the even greater political naïveté of most other Buddhists. Many of his admirers will be shocked, perhaps even angered, at the idea that anyone could have the nerve to criticize such a saintly person, and will try to dismiss this leaflet by pigeonholing it as some bizarre sort of "angry leftist ideology" and by assuming (incorrectly) that it was written by someone with no experience of Buddhist meditation.

Others may grant that some of these points are well taken, but will then ask: "Do you have any practical, constructive alternative, or are you just criticizing? What do you suggest that we do?" You don't need to be a master carpenter to point out that the roof leaks. If a critique stirs even a few people to stop and think, to see through some illusion, perhaps even provokes them to new ventures of their own, this is already a very practical effect. How many "actions" accomplish as much?

As for what you should do: the most important thing is to stop relying on others to tell you what you should do. Better make your own mistakes than follow the most spiritually wise or politically correct leader. It is not only more interesting, it is usually more effective, to pursue your own experiments, however small, than to be a unit in a regiment of units. All hierarchies

need to be contested, but the most liberating effect often comes from challenging the ones in which you yourself are most implicated.

One of the May 1968 graffiti was: *Be realistic, demand the impossible.* "Constructive alternatives" within the context of the present social order are at best limited, temporary, ambiguous; they tend to be coopted and become part of the problem. We may be forced to deal with certain urgent issues such as war or environmental threats, but if we accept the system's own terms and confine ourselves to merely reacting to each new mess produced by it, we will never overcome it. Ultimately we can solve survival issues only by refusing to be blackmailed by them, by aggressively going beyond them to challenge the whole anachronistic social organization of *life.* Movements that limit themselves to cringing defensive protests will not even achieve the pitiful survival goals they set for themselves.

BUREAU OF PUBLIC SECRETS
October 1993

Ken Knabb
Strong Lessons for Engaged Buddhists
October 1993

https://www.bopsecrets.org/PS/buddhists.htm