

## Engaged Buddhism as a Unifying Philosophy

Christopher S. Queen  
Harvard University

I had the good fortune to begin my Buddhist studies under two of the great masters of the field in the 1960s and 1970s. Donald Swearer was still writing his doctoral dissertation on the *Visuddhimagga* when he became assistant professor at Oberlin College in 1965 – his first appointment and my first opportunity to be a teaching assistant; and Masatoshi Nagatomi became my teacher in 1975 after occupying the first chair of Buddhist Studies at Harvard following his own doctoral studies there. Both professors – one devoted to Pali literature and Theravada Buddhism, and the other to the literatures and schools of the Mahayana and Vajrayana – warned their students that the quest for a unifying philosophy of Buddhism was a fool’s errand, and that anyone who spoke of “one Buddhism” had not done his homework. Nagatomi, in particular, would often begin his lectures with the proclamation that “Today, we will finally discover *what Buddhism is all about!*” With that, his eyes would twinkle, he would smile to himself, and we would get to work – analyzing a particular word in a particular text from a particular time and place in the long history of the traditions we still call Buddhism, as if they were a single religion.<sup>1</sup>

These pleasant memories of my teachers lead to some not-so-pleasant memories, as I disregarded their warnings and I immersed myself in the Buddhist canonical writings, commentaries and modern interpreters. As a graduate student, I wanted desperately to find a central idea or principle on which to hang all the others, if only to prepare more efficiently for the comprehensive examinations I would face before proceeding to the dissertation. And I discovered, to my surprise and delight, that there were many commentators ready to argue that a certain teaching, doctrine, or perspective *was indeed what Buddhism is all about.*

These commentators may still be found. In his recent study, *What the Buddha Thought*, a homage to Walpola Rahula’s popular *What the Buddha Taught*, Richard Gombrich wrote in 2009 that “Karma is my favorite point of entry to the Buddha’s worldview. ...I believe that it is not only fundamental to the Buddha’s whole view of life, but also a kind of lynchpin which holds the rest of the basic tenets together by providing the perfect example of what they mean.” The law of karma (*kamma niyāma*) is akin to a

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Robinson has written, “*Buddhism*—as a term to denote the vast array of social and cultural phenomena that have clustered in the course of time around the teachings of a figure called the Buddha, the Awakened One - is a recent invention. It comes from the thinkers of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and their quest to subsume religion under comparative sociology and secular history. Only recently have Asian Buddhists come to adopt the term and the concept behind it. Previously, the terms they used to refer to their religion were much more limited in scope: *the Dharma, the Buddha’s message, or the Buddha’s way*. In other words, they conceived of their religion simply as the teaching of the Buddha, what the Buddha himself called *Dharma-Vinaya* (Doctrine and Discipline). Whereas Dharma-Vinaya is meant to be prescriptive, advocating a way of life and practice, *Buddhism* is descriptive in that it simply denotes the actions of people who follow a vision of Dharma-Vinaya without suggestion that the reader accept that vision or follow it, too.” Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, Fourth Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 1-2. It is significant that the fifth edition of Robinson’s text (co-authored by Willard Johnson and Thanissaro Bhikkhu) has been renamed *The Buddhist Religions* and treats the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions as “separate religions.” Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, Fifth edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1004).

“law of nature, analogous to a law of physics,” and it is the content of the first step in the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path, the quintessential “right view” (*sammā diṭṭhi*).<sup>2</sup>

Reading Gombrich last summer, I was reminded of a wonderful book I had used to prepare for my general examinations – which also promised to help organize Buddhism into a unifying philosophy: Junjiro Takakusu’s *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy*, published in 1947. Under the rubric, “Fundamental Principles of Buddhist Philosophy,” the author begins with the Principle of Causation. He avoids reference to “karma” “because it is often confused with the idea of soul and thus leads to misunderstanding of Buddhist Doctrine.” Instead, Takakusu prefers to relate the idea of causation to the teaching of dependent co-origination, *pratītyasamutpāda*, and the 12-fold cycle of birth, death and rebirth, the *nidānas*.<sup>3</sup> But what happened to the Buddha’s first sermon, the Middle Path and the Four Noble Truths? I wondered. Here, the modern Theravada philosopher, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, points to the passage from the *Majjima-nikāya* that reads, “In the past, Bhikkhus, as well as now, I teach only *dukkha* and the utter quenching of *dukkha*.” Anyone who calls himself “the servant of the Buddha” (a play on the author’s name, Buddhādāsa) must faithfully carry out the Buddha’s word. “*Dukkha* and its quenching” is a summary of the Four Noble Truths, he asserts, which is, in turn, the framework of all Buddhism. Santikaro, a disciple of Buddhādāsa, comments, “Here we have the entire scope and range of the Buddha’s teachings, although its heights and depths may not be immediately apparent.”<sup>4</sup>

Buddhādāsa goes on to stress the central importance of “nature,” including perceptible reality, the law that governs this reality, the duties that flow from this law, and the results that follow the performance or neglect of these duties. All of this is contained in the word *Dhamma*.<sup>5</sup> Here he is in agreement with the Russian Buddhologist, Theodor Stcherbatsky, whose book title from 1923, *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the word “Dharma,”* speaks for itself. But we cannot end this rehearsal of arguments for the One True Idea upon which all the other Buddhist ideas hang, without reference to another famous work, T. V. R. Murti’s *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (1955), which begins with the claim, “The entire Buddhist thought turned on the Śūnyatā doctrine of the Mādhyamika,” which, we learn a few pages later, is Nagarjuna’s re-interpretation of the ancient *pratītyasamutpāda*.<sup>6</sup>

Are these competing arguments for the primacy of different core concepts in Buddhist philosophy mutually complementary or mutually cancelling? In a world in which competing ideologies, markets, and political entities are increasingly irreconcilable or even violent – are we more inclined to heed the warnings of Swearer and Nagatomi than we were forty years ago?

I share this experience with you, both because I suspect that you have had a similar one in your journey through Buddhist philosophy, and also because it reminds us of the hazards of system-building, to which philosophers, even Buddhist philosophers, are heir. At the same time, here we are, on an international panel titled “Unifying Buddhist Philosophical Views.” And here am I, inviting you to consider the possibility that

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009), pp. 11, 19, 27. It may be noted that Walpola Rahula makes no such claims, presenting “the Buddhist attitude of mind” and the range of early teachings as an organic and evolving whole, allowing for contemporary (some would say “modernist”) interpretations that resonate for readers and practitioners today. *What the Buddha Taught* (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd., 1959).

<sup>3</sup> Junjiro Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass, 1947), p. 23-24.

<sup>4</sup> Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness,” in Queen and King, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, pp. 156f.

<sup>5</sup> Santikaro, p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> T. V. R. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1955), pp. vii, 7.

socially engaged Buddhism, as it has been manifested by social and political movements, non-governmental organizations, religious and philosophical thinkers, and a new literature over the past sixty years, throughout Asia and the West, may be a common ground for a convergence of the theory and practice of Buddhism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In the limited space that follows, I will not be able to lay out all the implications of the convergence that I have in mind. But what follows should be enough to suggest that such a convergence is underway and that a unifying Buddhist philosophy that transcends the traditional divisions of the Dharma – the Three Yānas – is possible. The methodology of my argument is empirical and inductive, drawing upon a cumulative body of field reports, case studies and published reflection by engaged Buddhists themselves.

Following a brief survey of some of the leading figures and groups, I will examine, again briefly, what we may call Three Marks of Engaged Buddhist philosophy – after the canonical *ti-lakkhana* of ancient Buddhist philosophy. These are Suffering (*theodicy*), Karma/Samsara (*consciousness/mind*), and the Five Precepts (*ethics*). Our texts will be drawn from the writings of three of the most influential engaged Buddhists: Thich Nhat Hanh, B. R. Ambedkar, and Sulak Sivaraksa. Finally, we will conclude with remarks on the challenge of engaged Buddhism as a unifying philosophy for future research and for the teaching of Buddhism in the university classroom.

### **The Scope of Engaged Buddhism**

The rise of socially engaged Buddhism since the middle of the last century has been intensively documented and analyzed by scholars for more than thirty years. Widely identified with the anti-war activism of the Vietnamese Thien master, Thich Nhat Hanh, who coined the expression “engaged Buddhism” in the 1960s; the decades-long struggle for Tibet led by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama; the Buddhist conversion of millions of India’s Dalits, launched by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in 1956; the Sarvodaya Shramadana village development and peace movement in Sri Lanka, founded by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratna in the 1950s; and the liberation movements for Cambodia and Burma led respectively by the late Maha Ghosananda and the Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the principles of Engaged Buddhism have shaped thinkers, activists, and non-governmental organizations throughout Asia and the West.<sup>7</sup>

To encompass the range and depth of this evolution in Buddhist precept and practice – sometimes called a Fourth Yana or *Navayāna* (“new vehicle”) – one must include the Pure Land practitioners of China and Taiwan who employ the term *Humanistic Buddhism* (人間佛教; *Rénjiān Fójiào*), including Foguangshan, Ciji Gongdehui, and Fagushan in Taiwan, and temples affiliated with the Chinese Buddhist Association and Hong Kong Buddhist Association in the People’s Republic of China; and the international peace groups inspired by the Nichiren traditions of Japan: Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai, and Nipponzan Myohoji. In the West, Engaged Buddhism is represented by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Zen Peacemakers, and Buddhist Global Relief (founded by the renowned scholar-monk Bhikkhu Bodhi), among many others in the United States, and by peace, justice, and service groups in the UK, Europe, Latin America, South Africa, and Australia. Finally, we make note of two organizations that

---

<sup>7</sup>More than forty scholars have contributed to the anthologies I have co-edited on the history and phenomenology of Engaged Buddhism since 1996: *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996, with Sallie B. King); *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Somerville, Mass., Wisdom Publications, 2000); *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, with Charles Prebish and Damien Keown). Hundreds of articles and monographs may be added to this bibliography over the past thirty years.

represent engaged Buddhists from all the traditional *yānas* and sects: the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), and Sakyadhītā, “Daughters of the Buddha,” devoted to the revival and support of *bhikkhuni sanghas* worldwide.

In addition to the international dispersion of Buddhist organizations explicitly devoted to social action and social service – both within the traditional branches of the Dharma and transcending them – we must consider a much larger phenomenon throughout the Buddhist world. This is the fact that local Buddhist sanghas have begun to include social outreach and service *as an integral part of their spiritual practice* – not to be mistaken for outreach for new members or public sponsorship of traditional Buddhist rituals and study. This outreach typically takes the form of service or fundraising for the poor and needy, for victims of natural disasters, and activism for progressive social change. Peace and justice work, environmental protection, and voluntary service in hospices and prisons are among the actions that rank-and-file Buddhists have taken up with greater determination and focus since the appearance of large-scale liberation movements and NGOs on the world stage.<sup>8</sup>

Overarching the great variety of challenges these groups confront in the world today – war, poverty, caste, terrorism, environmental and natural disasters, to name only a few – and the widely divergent practice vehicles from which the practitioners come – Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana – *there is growing evidence of a unifying philosophy or set of universal principles that uniquely transcend local Buddhist cultural and sectarian histories*. The most salient example of this is the profound evolution of the very notion of “suffering,” as it was presented in the Four Noble Truths of the earliest scriptures. Engaged Buddhists universally see the political, economic, and ecological causes of “social suffering,” in addition to the psychological and spiritual suffering that Buddhist ritual and mental training has traditionally addressed. Second, ancient conceptions such as karma, rebirth, interdependence, merit-making and merit-transfer are seen in new ways that facilitate global Buddhist cooperation and alliances with other religious and civil-society associations. Finally, new methods of social action and interpretation inform many familiar formulations of the dharma. The Eightfold Path, the Five Precepts, the Brahmaviharas and the Paramitas are now invested with social and collective meanings related to the rise of information technology and social networking, geopolitical and economic interdependence, and revolutions in healthcare and education. Let us consider an example from each of these categories.

### **Three Marks of Engaged Buddhist Philosophy:**

**Suffering:** A classic expression of socially engaged Buddhism is the poem, “Call Me by My True Names,” by Thich Nhat Hanh. Written in 1976, after the author heard of a twelve-year-old girl, one of the boat people crossing the Gulf of Siam, who was thrown herself into the sea after being raped by a sea pirate, the poem was eventually included in a collection of “writings on nonviolent social change” titled *Love in Action* (1993). Nhat Hanh, already an international figure following his anti-war activism in the 1960s, confessed his anger at the story of the girl, but realized after meditating for several hours that he could not “just take sides against the pirate. I saw that if I had been born in his village and brought up under the same conditions, I would be exactly like him. Taking sides is too easy. Out of my suffering, I wrote this poem.”

---

<sup>8</sup> These local initiatives are regularly documented in the pages and on the website of *Turning Wheel*, the quarterly journal of Engaged Buddhism, published by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Berkeley, California. They may also be increasingly found in the more mainstream glossy magazines of American Buddhism, *Tricycle*, *Shambhala Sun*, and *Buddhadharma*, each of which has an active online community.

In addition to the stanza telling of the girl's violent death, and identifying with both the girl and the pirate, the poem also contains these stanzas: "I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks. And I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda. I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands, and I am the man who has to pay this 'debt of blood' to my people,' dying slowly in a forced-labor camp. My joy is like spring, so warm that it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth. My pain is like a river of tears, so vast that it fills all four oceans. Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up and open the door of my heart, the door of compassion."<sup>9</sup>

Here the central teaching of "*dukkha* and its quenching" and the Four Noble Truths that it summarizes, is subjected to a profound transformation. Suffering is still presented as universal for sentient beings. The poem begins with an evocation of life-and-death in the predatory cycles of nature, as the bird swoops down to swallow the mayfly, and grass-snake "silently feeds itself on the frog." But the causes of the suffering of the creatures and humans caught in webs of violence and death range far beyond the characteristics of the sufferers themselves – called hatred, greed, and delusion in the canonical accounts. Instead we see the workings of Darwinian selection and of global marketing. We see personalities twisted by poverty and politics and we see children helpless to escape the conditions that have descended upon their families and countries. In a word, we see victims whose suffering is not attributed to their own blighted karma or their own willful cravings and ignorance. We see a world that is truly interdependent, not the world that would appear to be implied by the traditional formulation – where suffering and its quenching is the sole responsibility of the sufferer.

Finally, Thich Nhat Hanh calls the recognition of his "true names" – his identification with all who suffer and all who rejoice – an awakening. This is his interpretation of the third noble truth, the experience of Nirvāna, the opening of the heart to compassion for all beings. It is a deep perception of the interdependence, *pratīyasamutpāda*, and of *śūnyatā*, the absence of definitive essences (*svabhāva*) in the dramas of life: predator and prey, evil pirate and innocent girl, genocidal cartel and virtuous villager.

***Karma/Samsāra*** In the introduction to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, written in the final, turbulent years of his life and published posthumously in 1957, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, principal draftsman of the Indian constitution, voice of the Dalits or ex-Untouchables between the 1920s and 1950s, and convert to Buddhism just before his death, highlights four problems for modern readers of the life and teachings of the Buddha. Referencing Pali sources, Ambedkar questions the story of the Buddha's "going forth" at the age of 29: the idea that a gifted young man would abandon his family and career after witnessing illness and death for the first time "is not plausible." Ambedkar calls the Four Noble Truths "a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism," rooting universal suffering in the hearts and minds of sufferers but ignoring its social causes. Ambedkar finds the teachings of non-self, karma and rebirth to be contradictory, invoking the age-old question of how moral effects can be transmitted from moment to moment or life to life by a non-entity. Finally, Ambedkar questions the motivation and mission of the Buddhist clergy: are monks dedicated to their own perfection or to the service of others?<sup>10</sup>

As the bible of millions of Dalits who followed Ambedkar into Buddhism, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is not a rejection of the traditional jewels of Buddha, Dhamma,

---

<sup>9</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "Please Call Me by My True Names," in *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), pp. 107-109.

<sup>10</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, third edition (Bombay: Siddharth Publication, 1984), pp. xli-xlii.

and Sangha, as it might sound from these initial queries. But in his analysis of the central doctrines of the tradition, Ambedkar subjects the earliest records to what I have called “the hermeneutics of Buddhist liberation.” Each teaching is viewed through the “subaltern” eyes of those who, like Ambedkar, have experienced the social shunning, poverty and violence of the Indian caste system. For these witnesses, the story of a young man of privilege who renounces family and social responsibilities is baffling. A reading of human suffering that stresses the sufferer’s ignorance and craving hits close to home: don’t the poor crave education and the basic necessities of life? Teachings that dissolve or disparage the struggling, embodied self by reference to invisible forces and previous lives are mystifying, if not humiliating. And the luxurious lifestyle of the cloistered monks Ambedkar met in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Nepal seemed to him a travesty of the Buddha’s injunction to wander “for the benefit and happiness of the many-folk, out of compassion for the world.”

The uneven texture of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* reveals Ambedkar’s advancing illness in his final years. (It became necessary for him to marry his medical doctor in order for her to care for him without scandal; no other Brahmin doctor would enter the house of an Untouchable.) His principles of selection and analysis were stated clearly in a section of the work titled “Causes of Misunderstanding” (254-255). Noting that the Pali canon remained an oral tradition for hundreds of years before it was written down, and citing five *suttas* in which the Buddha is shown correcting his followers’ memory slips or willful distortions in reporting his words, Ambedkar warns that, “One has to be very careful in accepting what is said in the Buddhist canonical literature as being the word of the Buddha.”

Singled out for special mention in the section on misunderstandings are the teachings on karma and rebirth. Just as there are natural laws governing the movement of heavenly bodies and the growth of plants – *rutu niyāma* and *bija niyāma* – so there must be a moral order in society. This is the meaning of *kamma niyāma*, the law of Karma. Indeed, no one can fail to benefit from positive actions, *kusala kamma*, or escape the ill effects of negative ones, *akusala kamma*. But the effects of karmic intentions and actions are unpredictable: they may be immediately apparent, or they may be delayed, remotely discernable, too weak to operate, or counteracted by karma from another source. Karmic effects cannot be limited to the actor; sometimes actions affect others more demonstrably than they do the actor.

Here Ambedkar moves inexorably toward the collective or social perspective that he called Navayana, “new vehicle,” – and that we may identify as engaged Buddhism. *Kusala kamma* will bring about a *beneficial moral order for humanity*, he argues, while *akusala kamma* will lead to a broken moral order. In the end, *kamma niyāma* “has nothing to do with the fortunes or misfortunes of an individual. It is concerned with the maintenance of the moral order in the universe.” “Individuals come and individuals go, but the moral order of the universe remains.” In this way, *kamma niyāma* takes the place of God in other religions, he concludes.<sup>11</sup>

What about *saṃsāra* – not only the notion of rebirth, but particularly the transmission of individual karmic effects from one life to the next? The Buddha believes in rebirth – *but of what or whom?* At death the body returns to its constituents, whether considered as the traditional earth, air, fire, and water, or the chemical elements and energy of modern science. Yet these elements and forces are not annihilated. Rather they return to the pool of matter and energy from which new bodies and minds emerge. Only in this sense can the Buddha be said to have believed in rebirth. His analysis of the self

---

<sup>11</sup> Ambedkar, pp. 170-173.

into the *khandas* or heaps of psycho-physical patterning is compelling and congruent with current psychological research, Ambedkar argues, but it does not provide a platform for personal reincarnation.

If one must look for a mechanism of transmission of influence from the past, we are better served by the sciences of genetics and embryology. After noting the biology of conception as understood today, Ambedkar cites a text in which the Buddha explains the facts of life to a *yakkha* on Indra's Peak. Following the four stages of fetal development, nourished by the mother's diet, a child is born with characteristics inherited from the parents. Yet it was the Hindus that believed that the body is genetic, but the soul is implanted into the body from outside – from an unspecifiable source. Here Ambedkar lowers the gavel on the doctrine of transmigration: if a characteristic is neither inherited from parents nor acquired from experience – presumably in the womb or after birth – then it cannot be detected by scientific means. It remains “an absurdity.”

Why, then, did the teaching of karma/*saṃsāra* have such powerful currency at the Buddha's time and up to the present – even to the extent that it was imported into Buddhism by renegade editors? “The only purpose one can think of is to enable the state or society to escape responsibility for the condition of the poor and lowly. ...It is impossible to imagine that the Buddha, who was known as the *Maha Karunika*, could have supported such a doctrine.”<sup>12</sup>

**Five Precepts** Along with Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Ambedkar, who fought courageously to end the ravages of war and caste in their respective societies, the Thai intellectual and activist, Sulak Sivaraksa, has earned international recognition as a crusader for human rights and environmental justice in his native ‘Siam’, as he insists on calling a country still controlled by a military-industrial complex. Jailed more than once for exposing public corruption, Sulak is the founder and guiding spirit of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists today.

In his most widely read work, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* (1992), Sulak addresses the “politics of greed,” “the religion of consumerism,” “development as if people mattered,” “personal and societal transformation,” and “Buddhism with a Small ‘b.’” Perhaps the most memorable section of the book is his engaged Buddhist readings of the *pañca śīla* or Five Precepts of moral discipline, which constitute, along with the Three Refuges (*ti-saraṇam*), the central formula of Buddhist identity in the Theravada world. By “engaged Buddhist readings,” I mean that in each case the admonition to refrain from *akusala kamma*, unskillful and unwholesome conduct, is related to a wider world of social and institutional relationships than the dyadic paradigm implied in the canonical texts. Now it is the ripple effects of violent speech and actions, of the abuse of sexuality and intoxicants, and of confiscatory behavior that comes into view. It is the institutions that cause mass killing through the manufacture of armaments and insecticides, and through industrial animal farming that fall under the precept “to abstain from taking life.” The second precept, “to abstain from stealing,” is extended beyond petty theft or shoplifting. Sulak writes:

Economic justice is bound up with Right Livelihood. We must take great pains to be sure there are meaningful jobs for everyone able to work. And we must also take responsibility for the theft implicit in our economic systems. To live a life of Right Livelihood and voluntary simplicity out of compassion for all beings and to renounce fame, profit, and power as life goals are to set oneself against the structural violence of the oppressive status quo. But is it enough to live a life of

---

<sup>12</sup> Ambedkar, pp. 242-248.

voluntary simplicity without also working to overturn the structures that force so many people to live in involuntary poverty?<sup>13</sup>

The precept against sexual misconduct directs the practitioner “to look at the global structures of male dominance and the exploitation of women,” while the precept against false speech is applied to abuses of “the mass media, education, and patterns of information that condition our understanding of the world. ... The Quakers have a practice of ‘speaking truth to power.’ It will only be possible to break free of the systematic lying endemic in the status quo if we undertake this truth-speaking collectively.” Finally, the precept against taking intoxicants” is extended to the disastrous effects on Third World economies of the promotion of the cash crops of heroin, coca, coffee, and tobacco, when an agrarian system based on locally distributed food crops – rice and vegetables – is consistent with principles of economic justice and self-sufficiency. Citing the “unloading of excess surplus cigarette production onto Third World consumers through intensive advertising campaigns,” Sulak concludes that we must also “examine the whole beer, wine, spirit, and drug industries to identify their power base.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism has been a universal religion from the beginning – the Buddha’s *dharmma* was directed to all people, not only to members of a tribal or sectarian group. Yet the local variations of Buddhism that evolved in places like Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, Cambodia, and Indonesia remained largely isolated from one another following their introduction by itinerant merchants and missionaries. Local assimilation and varieties of Buddhist thought and practice advanced in a branching-coexisting fashion over the centuries, making it unreasonable to speak of “Buddhism” in the singular throughout most of the history of the tradition. Even within countries as small as Sri Lanka and Tibet, doctrinal and ceremonial differences among the local monastic orders and lineages engendered intense rivalries over the centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Today, these patterns of differentiation and diffusion continue. But at the same time, with the rise of socially engaged Buddhism, we see the outlines of a counter-tendency. As a result of accelerating communication and travel, engaged Buddhism has emerged as a truly global impulse, growing out of and interacting with all the sectarian and cultural expressions of the ancient tradition. For this reason, Dr. Ambedkar suggested a new name for the socially engaged Buddhism that he envisioned on the eve of his historic conversion in October 1956. Answering a reporter’s question about the branch of Buddhism he and his followers planned to join, the Dalit leader proclaimed, “Our Buddhism will follow the tenets of the faith preached by Lord Buddha, without stirring up the old divisions of [Theravada] and Mahayana. Our Buddhism will be a New Buddhism—a *Navayāna*.”<sup>16</sup>

It must be noted that the majority of engaged Buddhists in Asia and the West are not involved in political activism. A great many are involved in “service dharma” – helping the poor, ministering to the incarcerated, the dying, and the socially marginalized. In this they are no different from the teaching and medical missionaries from the Christian denominations and secular organizations such as the International Red Cross,

---

<sup>13</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1992), p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Sulak, pp. 76-79.

<sup>15</sup> Some scholars, like the late Prof. Masatoshi Nagatomi of Harvard, speak of *Buddhisms* in the plural, to disabuse students of the erroneous impression that a monolithic tradition with universal teachings and practices may be found.

<sup>16</sup> This paraphrase of Ambedkar’s press conference is based on Dhananjay Keer’s account in *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, 3rd ed. (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971), 498.

Red Crescent, and Doctors Without Borders. Yet the Engaged Buddhists offer something not offered by the others. This is a philosophy of interdependence, impermanence, and universality which sees all people is equally subject to suffering and exploitation, and equally capable of realizing freedom and dignity. They have conceptions of loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity which are supported by specific techniques of cultivation. *Mettā bhāvanā* (loving-kindness meditation), for example, begins by wishing oneself peace and wellbeing; then it extends this wish, successively to loved-ones, acquaintances, persons in general, and then to those who would harm you – your enemies. Jesus taught the love of enemies too, but he didn't offer specific techniques to cultivate loving responses in situations of imminent danger and over a lifetime.

Finally, there is great unity among the engaged Buddhists on one point: that the existence of suffering in the world evokes in them a feeling of “universal responsibility,” as the Dalai Lama has called it, and the traditional Mahayana vow to “save all beings.” Engaged Buddhists agree that such a feeling impels them to go beyond the vow, by rising together to act “in the world.” In a time when those who speak of “saving the world” can expect snide derision, if not social ostracism, engaged Buddhists are uninhibited in their expression of universal compassion (*maha karuna*). I have argued here that this impulse – and its grounding in the Buddha as *Maha Karunika*; in a Dharma that sees the social and institutional causes of suffering alongside the spiritual sufferings that accompany one's own decay and death; and a Sangha made up of lay and ordained volunteers and activists dedicated social service and reform – is the ground on which a new, unifying Buddhist philosophy is coming into view.

As one who has taught courses on socially engaged Buddhism over the past twenty years, I can attest that students have shown a keen interest in following and writing about the activities and the nascent philosophy of this movement. Now it remains for scholars to take up the task of studying these developments with the kind of energy and rigor that we associate with the historical and exegetical studies of classical Buddhism. It is my belief that such attention will be richly rewarded.