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and
Nan Tien Institute, Australia

TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS OF DHARMA AND DEVELOPMENT: ENGAGED BUDDHISM IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya

Associate Professor, University of Delhi

The various Buddhist social reformation and liberation movements are broadly referred to as Engaged Buddhist movements. While addressing issues concerning their communities, they have also acquired global dimensions as evident from the transnational networking among Buddhists/Buddhist organizations in Asia, as well as in the West, and the multicultural following that has come to characterize these contemporary Buddhist social movements. This paper, through an analysis of emerging patterns in Engaged Buddhist movements in Japan, particularly the transnational volunteerism of Japanese Buddhists and the interactions among Buddhists of Japan (Mahayana schools of Buddhism) and other Asian countries as well as with western Buddhists (Mahayana as well as Theravada), will highlight the transformations in Engaged Buddhist movements, particularly the changes in Buddhist missionary and philanthropic activities, under the impact of globalization. This paper, based on the author's fieldwork on Buddhist peace and development activities in Japan and Cambodia, will illustrate how international aid and voluntary activities by Japanese Buddhist organizations in Cambodia are shaping the Engaged Buddhist movements in both these countries.

The paper has the following three areas of discussion: 1) the transnational voluntarism or cross-border activism of Buddhists/Buddhist organizations that characterizes the contemporary Engaged Buddhist movements, and its impact on social and economic development of Asian countries; 2) the "glocal" i.e. global-local interactions in Engaged Buddhist movements; 3) multiculturalism and transnational networks of spirituality in Engaged Buddhist movements and its impact on Buddhist revival movements in Asia.

The first area of study is the transnational voluntary activities of Buddhist organizations. The fact that international philanthropy characterizes the

Engaged Buddhist movement worldwide reveals the impact of globalization on contemporary Buddhist movements. Moreover, the study of transnational volunteerism by Buddhist organizations also reveals their potential role as “nongovernmental” agencies in peacebuilding and socioeconomic development. Here I would like to focus on overseas voluntary activities by Japanese Buddhist organizations in Southeast Asia and their impact on the civil society of Japan, as well as of those Asian countries where the Japanese Buddhists are involved in overseas aid activities.

This paper, through the study of overseas development aid activities by Japanese Buddhist voluntary organizations, such as the Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) of the Sōto sect of Japanese Buddhism and a few others in Cambodia, will examine how the overseas voluntary activities by Buddhist NGOs of developed countries such as Japan, which entails the transfer of resources (finance, material relief, human resources, ideological support, etc.) to developing countries of Asia, are empowering grassroots Buddhist organizations to take up larger roles in the social and economic development of their communities and thereby strengthening the civil society movements in these countries.

The second area of discussion is how the “glocal” engagement of Buddhist organizations, i.e. their activism at the local/grassroots as well as at the global/transnational levels, reveal the impact of globalization on Buddhist communities and on their social activities. In order to understand the “glocal” aspects of Engaged Buddhist movements, this paper will analyze the international aid activities by foreign Buddhist organizations, such as by Japanese Buddhist groups in Cambodia and their relationship to grassroots social engagements by Cambodian monks, *wats*, and local Buddhist organizations. The purpose is to understand the organizational and ideological changes that are initiated into local Buddhist movements as a consequence of their interactions with Buddhists from other countries. It is evident from my study that international aid and voluntary activities by foreign Buddhist organizations, such as Japanese Buddhists, are strengthening the Engaged Buddhist movement in that country. The international aid by Japanese Buddhists targets the monks and *wat* (temple-monastery complex) of Cambodia, which is consequently strengthening the role of monks and temple committees in the peacebuilding and developmental activities of their communities. This paper

discusses specific examples of international aid activities by Japanese Buddhist NGOs in Cambodia and their support to the Engaged Buddhist movements and Buddhist revival in Cambodia. This will emphasize that the “nativist” grassroots social engagements of Cambodian monks and laypeople need to be perceived in the wider context of the global Engaged Buddhist movements, i.e. transnational voluntarism and international networking of Buddhists/Buddhist organizations across the world, accentuated by various factors such as war, environmental degradation, globalization, etc.

The third aspect is multiculturalism and transnational networks of spirituality in Engaged Buddhist movements. Attention will be given to the cross-cultural and transnational networking among Japanese Mahayana Buddhists and Cambodian Theravada Buddhists, e.g., how the Engaged Buddhists of Japan and Cambodia inform, interact with, and support each other, and the new spiritual and ideological trends emerging out of these interactions. The role of Japanese Buddhists, particularly Nichiren sect Buddhists, in the making of the *Dhammayietra*, is shown to be the most important Engaged Buddhist movement of Cambodia.

Cambodian Refugee Crisis and the Transnational Volunteerism of Japanese Buddhism

Although Buddhist organizations of Japan have a history of involvement in missionary activities in Asia, it was the involvement in relief activities for Indochinese and Cambodian refugees in late 1970s and 1980s that gave an impetus to international voluntary activities by Japanese Buddhists, especially in the post second World War period. The tragedy of Southeast Asian refugees, most of whom were Buddhists, evoked the sympathy of Japanese Buddhists and prompted relief activities by Buddhist organizations of Japan. During the Vietnam War from the mid-1960s through mid-1970s, Japanese Buddhists assisted Vietnamese refugees by donating relief materials (food, clothes, medicine, etc.), raising funds, and building shelters for “boat people,” etc. The outpouring of Cambodian refugees into Thailand and the voluntary activities by Japanese Buddhists in the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodia border in the late 1970s gave further impetus to overseas voluntary activities by Japanese Buddhists. Some of the Buddhist NGOs that helped carry out relief activities for Indochinese refugees include: the

Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) of the Soto sect, the Rinzai Asia Center Kobe (RACK) of the Rinzai Zen sect (renamed as Supporting Friends of Asia RACK, where RACK stands for Relief, Assist, Comfort, Kindness), and the Association for Rengein Tanjoji International Cooperation (ARTIC) established by Rengei Tanjoji, a temple in Kyushu of the Ritsu sect of the Shingon school of Buddhism. Since the involvement in relief activities for Indochinese refugees in the late 1970s and 1980s, there has been a significant increase in overseas voluntary activity by Japanese Buddhists. Now almost every sect of Japanese Buddhism is engaged in some kind of international relief activity, such as raising funds, dispatching volunteers, emergency aid at the time of natural calamities or war, providing medical aid, establishing educational facilities, and various other developmental activities. The Buddhist NGO Network (BNN) lists about seventeen Buddhist NGO affiliate organizations.

The International Aid Activities by Japanese Buddhists and the Engaged Buddhist Movements in Cambodia

Here I would like to discuss the Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA), a major Buddhist voluntary organization associated with the Soto Zen sect of Japanese Buddhism that arose in response to the huge outflow of refugees from Cambodia in 1979. SVA continues to engage in education, development, and cultural activities in Southeast Asia, e.g., Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and since 2003 in Afghanistan. It also carries out emergency relief aid at the time of natural calamities, e.g., support for earthquake victims in India (2000) and Iran (2003), for tsunami victims in Thailand (2005), etc.

SVA was founded by the Soto Zen sect of Japanese Buddhism, and is one of the major Buddhist voluntary organizations in Japan. In 1980, the Japan Soto-shu Relief Committee (JSRC) was established by Soto-shu volunteers involved in relief activities for Cambodian refugees in the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodia border. In 1981, it was reorganized as the Soto-shu Volunteer Association (SVA), and then in 1999, when it incorporated, it changed its name to the Shanti Volunteer Association. It is mainly involved in cultural and educational aid activities, such as operating mobile and permanent libraries, sending picture books for children, printing and publication of books, etc. Initially, it's activities

were in the refugee camps of Thailand, but after Cambodian refugees started to return to their country, and with the eventual closure of the refugee camps in 1992, SVA moved its office to Phnom Penh and its libraries to the slums of Phnom Penh and primary schools in various provinces of Cambodia. Besides operating mobile and permanent libraries, it has constructed schools, vocational training centers, and supported various community development projects (e.g. training of school and kindergarten teachers) in these countries. In order to preserve the Buddhist culture of Cambodia, SVA is involved in reprinting and distribution of Buddhist texts and books on Cambodian culture. However, SVA's attempt to revive Buddhism in Cambodia is not restricted to printing and distribution of Buddhist texts. The development projects of SVA, such as establishment of schools, libraries, rice banks, and environmental preservation in the rural areas of Cambodia, actively engage the monks and temple committees in the implementation of these projects, thereby reviving the role of monks and *wats* in the community. Moreover, through its workshops and seminars, SVA is training monks to take up leadership roles in the development of their community. This became evident from my survey of SVA aided activities in three Buddhist temples—Wat Tuol Sala, Wat Krol Kor, and Wat Angkor Sar—in the Svay Rieng province, close to the Cambodia-Vietnam border. The underlying purpose of SVA's cultural activities in these three temples was to foster the role of Buddhist monks and temples in the social and economic development of their community. In other words, this study reveals how transnational voluntary activities by a foreign Buddhist organization can become a potent force for social change, economic development, as well as religious revival at the grassroots level of the recipient country, and can strengthen the Engaged Buddhist movement in that country.

The international voluntary activities by Japanese Buddhists are also strengthening the civil society of the donor country, as it has led to the establishment of voluntary organizations (e.g., Buddhist NGOs) and the expansion of civil society movements in Japan. The increasing numbers of NGOs established by Buddhist groups (eg, SVA, Ayus, the inter-sectarian voluntary organization, Buddhist NGO Network, etc.) in Japan that are engaged as “nonstate actors” in international development aid activities is indicative of the influence of globalization on social activism of Buddhist organizations and its impact on the civil society of Asian countries.

The *Dhammayietra*: Multiculturalism and Transnational Networks of Spirituality in Engaged Buddhist Movements

Globalization has universalized life experiences and social and political concerns. Moreover, globalization has also facilitated cross-cultural networking and information exchanges among Buddhist organizations on a worldwide scale. It could be said that the transnationalism of Engaged Buddhist movements is supported by the multiculturalism that we find in Buddhists today. This could be understood by studying the cross-cultural and transnational networking among Japanese Mahayana Buddhists and Cambodian Theravada Buddhists, e.g., how Engaged Buddhists of Japan and Cambodia inform, interact with, and support each other, and the new spiritual and ideological trends emerging out of these interactions.

The *Dhammayietra*, often translated as “pilgrimage of truth,” is the most important Engaged Buddhist movement in Cambodia. The *Dhammayietra* is an annual peace walk in Cambodia that originated during the historic repatriation of refugees along the Thai border camps during the United Nations monitored transition to democracy in 1992. The peace walk takes place in early May and usually involves an assemblage of Buddhist monks and lay persons who travel various routes in Cambodia. The assemblage is often greeted by villagers along the route who expect a blessing (*tuk mon* or blessing with lustral water) from the marching monks. Maha Ghosananda, the internationally famous monk of Cambodia, who was also the patriarch of the Buddhist Saṅgha of Cambodia, initiated this movement. The *Dhammayietra* is a Gandhian style peace walk that Maha Ghosananda learned from Nichitatsu Fuji, a Japanese monk of the Nichiren sect and founder of Nipponzan Myohoji, a Buddhist organization actively involved in peace and anti-war movements. He led the first *Dhammayietra* as he returned from exile following the war. The pedagogies of non-violent and non-partisan means of peacebuilding that this movement uses were developed not by Maha Ghosananda alone, but in interaction with American Buddhist leaders and scholars, Jesuits, Quakers, Thai and Japanese monks, and others. This peace walk, although aimed at restoring peace in the war-torn provinces of Cambodia, is now regarded as a major international peace movement and joined by people of different walks of life and nationalities.

The *Dhammayietra*, as well the case studies discussed above, demonstrates that the transnationalism of the Engaged Buddhist movements, while strengthening the social engagements by Buddhists at the grassroots, also enables them to take on larger “global” issues (such as war, environmental protection, etc) and expand their activities beyond the cultural-specificity of their traditions.

Impact on Cambodian Society and Buddhism

This study reveals how developmental activities by a foreign faith based voluntary organization can become a potent force for social change, economic development, and religious revival at the grassroots level of the recipient country. The Buddhist background of SVA is a major factor that determines its allocation of resources, the kind of activities they support, and their collaboration with local people and organizations (e.g., monks, temples). Although in 2003 SVA started educational aid activities in Afghanistan, a non-Buddhist country, the majority of its overseas aid activities are concentrated in the three Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, i.e. Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. In spite of the fact that Japanese Buddhism and Cambodian Buddhism belong to different Buddhist traditions—the former belonging to Mahayana Buddhism and the later to Theravada Buddhism—it is the Buddhist identity of SVA that motivates this organization to invest its resources in the revival of Buddhism and training of Buddhist monks in Cambodia.

From my fieldwork, it became evident that SVA is playing an important role in the making of socially engaged Buddhists in Cambodia. Cambodian monks have a tradition of engaging in activities for the benefit of the community, such as teaching in schools, building and maintenance of village roads, digging ponds, planting trees, etc. SVA makes use of the traditional roles of monks and temples in the community to implement its projects, and in the process transforms their “traditional roles” into large scale development activities that have far-reaching impacts on the community. Moreover, faith based international NGOs like SVA that operate in several countries can act as harbingers of globalization at the grassroots level. “Development monks” and “environment monks” are phenomena associated with Buddhist monks of Thailand, and not often heard of in Cambodia. By introducing the developmental activities of Thai Buddhists to

Cambodian monks, SVA is importing into Cambodia new ideas about the role of Buddhism in social development and also promoting global consciousness among these monks.

Implications for the Civil Society and Buddhism of Japan

Buddhist organizations of Japan, venturing into voluntary activities overseas, often emulate the activities of SVA. For instance RACK, another Buddhist NGO that was involved in relief activities for Indochinese refugees, also operates libraries and classrooms in slums on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. The transformation in the voluntary activities of SVA, i.e., from relief activities for refugees to educational and developmental activities, is a trend that is also apparent in the voluntary activities of other Buddhist NGOs of Japan. The Buddhist Aid Center (BAC) is a Buddhist NGO established in 1982 by Buddhist priests, who as members of All Japan Young Buddhist Association had participated in the relief activities for Indochinese refugees. Initially BAC was involved in educational and medical aid activities in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. Since 1993, its main activity is the construction of school buildings in Laos, and by 2004 it had completed the construction of 102 buildings.

SVA is not only a major Buddhist voluntary organization but it is also an important player in the civil society movement in Japan. Its internship programs give training to young Japanese aspiring to work in the emerging voluntary sector of Japan. SVA's overseas developmental activities have received funding from the Japanese government (ODA) and it has carried out projects in collaboration with JICA. It is associated with committees that advocate Japanese government on its foreign aid policies.

Engaged Buddhism and Globalization

Globalization, with all its consequences, is the main factor in a number of processes in economic, political, social, and religious areas. It could be said that the Engaged Buddhist movements are the consequence of, as well as a response to, the process of globalization. The flow of people, resources, and information is the consequence of globalization, and has facilitated transnational networking

among Buddhists and Buddhist organizations. Moreover, social activism and global consciousness are important factors leading to international networking among socially engaged Buddhists worldwide. As evident from the case studies discussed above, globalization exposed Buddhists to cultural diversity within the Buddhist world and, additionally, introduced them to new and alternative ideologies, as well as practical means for peace-building and development.

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Notes:

- 1 Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya, *Nihon no Shakai Sanka Bukkyo: Hoonji to Rissho Kosei-kai no Shakai Katsudo to Shakai Riniri* [Engaged Buddhism in Japan: Social Activities and Social Ethics of Hoonji and Rissho Kosei-kai] Toshindo Publications: (Tokyo, Japan, 2005).
- 2 Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya, "Universalizing Salvation: Modernization, Globalization and Transformations in Buddhist Social Welfare in Japan," edited by Ruben Habito, *The Practice of Altruism: Caring and Religion in a Global Perspectives* (Cambridge Scholars Press: London, U.K. June, 2006.)
- 3 Shanti Volunteer Association (ed.) *Ajia Kyosei NGO: Thai, Cambodia, Laos Kokusai Kyoiku Kyoryoku no Genba kara*. Meiiishi Shoten, Tokyo, 1996.
- 4 Shanti Volunteer Association, *SVA Annual Report*, Cambodia, 2005, 2006, 2007.
- 5 Helen Hardacre, "Religion and Civil Society in Contemporary Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2004): 389-415.