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ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM: A COMPARISON OF PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

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In this paper, I refer with the term, “Humanistic Buddhism,” to three major Buddhist organizations in Taiwan: Tzu Chi, Fo Guang Shan, and Dharma Drum Mountain. The founders of each of these movements was influenced by the great Chinese Buddhist reformer, Taixu, the founder of “Humanistic Buddhism,” or *Renjian Fojiao*. In the term, “Engaged Buddhism,” I include all other leaders of Buddhist movements and forms of contemporary Buddhism that emphasize engagement with the problems of the world; thus Engaged Buddhism includes: the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Liberation Movement; Thich Nhat Hanh and the Struggle Movement of Vietnam; Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the dalit Buddhist movement and TBMSG; Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement; Sulak Sivaraksa; the Soka Gakkai; Aung San Suu Kyi and the Buddhist democracy movement in Burma; Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia; Venerable Dhammananda of Thailand and the bhikshuni movement; Roshi Bernie Glassman in New York; and Buddhist environmentalists like the “ecology monks” of Thailand, Joanna Macy, and Gary Snyder.

To the extent that both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism believe that Buddhists should be actively engaged with the problems of the world, as opposed to withdrawn from the world, they are clearly variants of the same fundamental impulse, different idioms of the same language. Below I shall attempt to lay out points of similarity and difference in their underlying principles and overt practices.

Modernity, Reform, Popularization, and Westernization

Both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism in all their guises are deeply involved with the inter-related tasks of modernizing Buddhism, reforming Buddhism and popularizing Buddhism. This is both inevitable and welcome.

Great parts of Asia, of course, have been rapidly modernizing, especially since the middle of the 20th century. If Buddhism is not going to be left behind, it simply must find ways to work with new conditions and address new challenges as they develop. Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism have both taken up this challenge. In modernizing Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism both turn away from other-worldliness and superstitious tendencies and instead emphasize more contemporary principles, namely: rationality, morality, idealism, self-transformation through practice, and the betterment of the world. As might be expected, since Taiwan has progressed much further with modernization than South and Southeast Asian countries, Humanistic Buddhism is much more extensively involved with the use of modern technology to communicate the Dharma.

One of the noticeable differences between Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism is the extent to which they have been subject to Western influence. Of the Engaged Buddhists, Dr. Ambedkar, Aung San Suu Kyi, Sulak Sivaraksa, Venerable Dhammananda and Thich Nhat Hanh all received significant parts of their education in the West. TBMSG was co-founded by a British monk. Virtually all of the Engaged Buddhists have been highly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, who himself received higher education in the West. There are also a number of prominent Western Engaged Buddhists. Western social sciences, especially sociology, economics, and political science, have entered into the thinking of some Engaged Buddhist leaders in significant ways.

Of the three Humanistic Buddhism founders, none received Western education, though Venerable Sheng Yen received a doctorate in Japan and lived much of his life in the United States. Possibly the most important Western influence on Humanistic Buddhism has been of a reactive kind: both Master Taixu and Venerable Cheng Yen reported being greatly impressed by the accomplishments of the Christian Church in the field of charitable action and both very much wanted Buddhism to be able to do the same.

We should recognize that the give and take between Buddhism and the West has moved in both directions. In this regard, both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism have been making contributions that have begun to

influence the West. The works of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are widely read in the West; the institutionalization in America of the forms of practice of Fo Guang Shan, Tzu Chi, and Dharma Drum Mountain are quite significant, as are those of Thich Nhat Hanh on the Engaged Buddhist side. Ironically, some influences have come full circle: Don Pittman points out that in 1998 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan declared their wish to emulate the effectiveness of the Tzu Chi movement in responding to emergencies!¹ In short, while many Buddhist scholars in the West worry about inappropriate Western influence in Engaged Buddhism, I see the influence very much as mutual.

History

It is useful to note that Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism have quite different historical roots, which accounts for a good deal of the differences between them. Humanistic Buddhism began with Master Taixu (1889-1947), the great modernizer and reformer of Chinese Buddhism. Taixu believed that Chinese Buddhism was overly focused on death, funerals, and future lives, and consequently neglected to deliver its message for the present life in which one was living. It was his life's project to transform Chinese Buddhism by de-emphasizing the focus on death and reviving the focus on life. His disciples, while not neglecting the issues surrounding death, have continued and extended Taixu's emphasis upon having Buddhism address the needs of the living. As a result, for example, Fo Guang Shan's emphasis is on having its Buddhist institutions address all human needs, from birth to death and beyond. This translates in practice into Fo Guang Buddhist institutions that run preschools and orphanages, provide free health care to those who need it, teach the Dharma in innovative ways designed to reach all kinds of people with all levels of spiritual development, run retirement communities for the aged, perform funerals, and care for funerary tablets and crematory urns.

In contrast, Engaged Buddhism has no single founder comparable to Taixu. Engaged Buddhism is a group of independent movements that came into being in the twentieth century in direct response to the crises that were besetting Buddhist Asia. Each Engaged Buddhist movement addresses the problems of its own society—Chinese invasion and occupation in Tibet, poverty and civil

war in Sri Lanka, ecological crisis in Thailand, war in Vietnam, and so forth. The orientation of each Engaged Buddhist movement, therefore, is upon forging a practical Buddhist response to a particular, acute social, economic, or environmental problem or set of problems. Consequently, while both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism are relatively this-worldly in comparison to traditional Buddhism, the historical circumstances that brought each into being are sufficiently different that they result in differing, though overlapping, overall orientations—towards serving living human beings in Humanistic Buddhism and towards addressing crises in Engaged Buddhism.

Motivation

The motivating idea behind both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism, as I perceive it, is virtually the same. It is twofold: (1) as a part of one's practice, to cultivate and develop selflessness, generosity (*dana*) and paramitas by working in challenging real life situations; and (2) as a part of one's realization, to manifest active benevolence, whether understood as compassion, loving-kindness, or love. Contrary to what those with a Mahayana perspective might possibly expect, differences in motivation of the activists among the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana branches of Buddhism are negligible. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists may be motivated by their bodhisattva vows and perspective, but Theravadans are just as motivated by their commitments to cultivate selflessness and the four Brahmavihara, especially *metta* (loving-kindness). In fact, there is at least as much active Buddhist engagement in Theravada countries as there is in Mahayana and Vajrayana countries.

Issues and Needs Engaged

One of the notable differences between Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism emerges when we consider the kinds of issues and needs with which they respectively work. Engaged Buddhists engage with a great range of issues, including: economic issues, in the effort to eradicate systemic poverty; political issues, in efforts to end a war, overcome a dictatorship, establish democracy, and achieve self-determination; social issues, in efforts to overcome the bigotry of the caste system and discrimination against women; and environmentalism and

animal rights work.

The primary worldly undertakings in Humanistic Buddhism include: humanitarian assistance at times of natural disaster; the provision of health care and human services; actions to protect and heal the natural environment; education; work to improve the status of bhikkhunis. This list of engagements is noticeably more conservative and focused on humanitarianism than is the list of Engaged Buddhist engagements. The work of Engaged Buddhism, particularly in the area of political engagements, but also in their economic and social engagements, are of the sort that may require challenging vested interests, and may earn one bitter opposition. Indeed, the path of Engaged Buddhism has been very bitter in Tibet, Vietnam and Burma, in particular. Comparatively speaking, such good works as providing disaster relief, free health care and protection of the environment are uncontroversial.

The enterprise of intentionally engaging in social engineering—that is, intentionally undertaking to change the institutions of society—is a significant part of Engaged Buddhism. The primary cause of Engaged Buddhist efforts in social engineering is the fact that some of these movements and their leaders find their societies to be unacceptable in their present form and thus in need of re-engineering. The absorption into Engaged Buddhism of Western social scientific thinking, as mentioned above, has influenced these efforts. This is not to say that Engaged Buddhist leaders think about social institutions in the same way that Westerners do, nor are they shaped by Western ways of thinking. Instead, they choose those parts of Western social scientific thinking that they find to be compatible with their non-negotiable Buddhist values and apply them in creative ways to their situations. For example, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, the Engaged Buddhist leader who I believe has achieved the most in improving the lives of millions of people in concrete ways, has invented so-called “Buddhist economics.” Whereas he may have been influenced to do this by knowing about Western economic theories, he has created his own unique Buddhist approach to economics and put it into practice. His social engineering consists of constructing alternative systems of banking, small businesses, communications, etc., on the basis of alternative economic principles of environmental friendliness, sustainability, economic empowerment of the poor and “small is beautiful.” These are not dominant

Western economic principles. In the realm of governmental systems, Ariyaratne has been promoting the rewriting of the Sri Lankan Constitution and replacing the Sri Lankan polity with a network of autonomous village democracies. This is intentional social engineering on a very ambitious scale. Another example of an ambitious attempt at social engineering is Dr. Ambedkar, who found the caste system of India unacceptable. Consequently, he and, later, the TBMSG organization, set out to restructure Indian society with respect to the caste system.

Social engineering also exists in Humanistic Buddhism, though it is less extensive and less intentional than it is among Engaged Buddhists. Where it exists, it also is primarily a response to an aspect of society that is felt to be unacceptable. Among Humanistic Buddhists, the most extensive social engineering is the system of free health care created by the Tzu Chi movement. In this case, Venerable Cheng Yen's compassionate concern to provide health care to the poor ultimately resulted in the construction of an alternative system of health care in Taiwan. It seems, then, that social engineering may be, in at least some cases, a matter of size; in the case of Tzu Chi's health care system, social engineering emerged when small scale compassionate acts on the part of a few grew into compassionate acts on the part of a great many people and thence into major institutions that were needed to effectively channel those many compassionate acts.

A second case of Humanistic Buddhism's social engineering is Fo Guang Shan's work to revitalize and restore the bhikkhuni order (the order of nuns). Fo Guang Shan has directly acted to raise the educational level, training, responsibilities and visibility of bhikkhunis within their own (Fo Guang Shan) order, and has helped to restore the bhikkhuni order in Theravada Buddhism by having Fo Guang Shan bhikkhunis participate in ordination ceremonies for Theravada bhikkhunis, thus making those ordinations possible. Clearly, these are reforms internal to Buddhism. However, with these two very intentional efforts, Fo Guang Shan has contributed in a tangible and significant way to the broader societal effort to end the subordination of women to men.

The Value of Happiness: a "Pure Land on Earth"

Many people with only a superficial acquaintance with Buddhism think that

it is pessimistic. They think it teaches that all of life is suffering and that there is no escape from suffering without leaving *samsara* altogether. Both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism challenge this understanding. For example, Venerable Master Hsing Yun says, “I don’t know when Buddhism began being colored by pessimism. Whenever Buddhists see each other, they inevitably say such things as, ‘Life is suffering! Such suffering! All is impermanent! Oh, impermanence!’ Buddhism is happy in character and joyful in spirit. It speaks of boundless happiness, endless compassion, and covering all the world with joy.”²

Some Engaged Buddhist leaders have also spoken to this point. Thich Nhat Hanh has written, “Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time.... To practice meditation is to be in touch with both aspects. Please do not think we must be solemn in order to meditate. In fact, to meditate well, we have to smile a lot.”³ Similarly, the Dalai Lama says, “Everyone is trying to create happiness. To do so is right. However, it is very important to follow a correct method in seeking happiness.”⁴

In a way it is surprising that Buddhists have to make this kind of argument. After all, though the First Noble Truth is *dukkha* (commonly translated in English as “suffering”), this First Noble Truth states the problem that Buddhism is working to overcome. The whole point of Buddhism is to remove suffering. In more positive language, that means that the point of Buddhism is to cultivate happiness, for oneself and others.

A frequent idiom in Humanistic Buddhism for the promotion of happiness is to speak of building a “Pure Land on Earth” (*renjian jingtu*). This language goes back to the founder of Humanistic Buddhism, Master Taixu, who said, “The building of pure lands is not accomplished by Nature; neither are these lands created by gods. Pure lands have come into being from minds of goodness which have arisen in human and other sentient beings. ... All persons have this force of mind, and since they already have the faculty to create a pure land, they can all make the glorious vow to make this world into a pure land and work hard to achieve it.”⁵ Certainly before Taixu, most Buddhists saw the Pure Land in utterly

dualistic terms, as a different place from this world and this Earth, and utterly different in its nature from the suffering of life here. Taixu and his Humanistic Buddhism Dharma descendents very much challenge this traditional, dualistic thinking. To undercut dualistic thinking is a necessary part of establishing an Engaged *or* Humanistic Buddhism. That is because if one believes that life in samsara is hopeless and cannot be improved in any significant way, one will not make an effort to improve life here and now but look for a way out, an escape to an other-worldly Pure Land. Humanistic Buddhism's focus is on this world, on curing dukkha and suffering here and now.

For example, Venerable Sheng Yen is quoted on the Dharma Drum Mountain website as saying, "In the past, I have used the phrase ... 'establishing a clear and cool pure land in the burning house.' ... By 'establishing a clear and cool pure land in a burning house,' we can insure that we are not burned by the 'fire.' The house that is on 'fire' is the three realms of desire, form and formlessness, which include the human world we live in. Fire is a metaphor for such afflictions as sorrow, anxiety, anger, fear, suspicion, jealousy, obsession, and clinging. Shakyamuni hoped that, after the Dharma had been spread throughout the three realms, people would be able to avoid worry, fear, arrogance, dejection, disappointment, and depression, and manifest a clear and cool pure land within their mind, in all circumstances, whether favorable or unfavorable. This is precisely Dharma Drum's vision."⁶ We see in Venerable Sheng Yen's comments the same thinking that we see in some Engaged Buddhist thinkers: the problem is not the world, it is the human mind. Therefore, a goal of escaping the world is misconceived; we need to fix what is wrong with our minds.

Along these same lines Engaged Buddhist theoretician Buddhadasa Bhikkhu has said, "Having not fully appreciated or examined the Buddha's teaching regarding *dukkha*, many people have misunderstood it. They have taken it to mean that birth, old age, sickness, death, and so on are themselves *dukkha*. In fact, those are just its characteristic vehicles.... Anything that clings or is clung to as 'I' or 'mine' is *dukkha*. Anything that has no clinging to 'I' or 'mine' is not *dukkha*. Therefore birth, old age, sickness, death, and so on, if they are not clung to as 'I' or 'mine,' cannot be *dukkha*."⁷

Harmony and Adversariality

One interesting point of comparison has to do with the manner in which Buddhists engage with social issues. Do Buddhists in principle prefer to limit themselves to improving society by acting constructively to do useful things? Or can a Buddhist confront what is wrong in society head on, in an adversarial manner, with lawsuits, street demonstrations or political campaigns? The Buddhist worldview stresses interdependence; the value systems in many Buddhist cultures stress interpersonal harmony. In what direction do these ideas and values point those Buddhists who want to make the world a better place? Is there a cultural difference between South/Southeast Asia and East Asia in this regard? It is interesting to compare Humanistic Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism on this point.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun is known for advocating the cultivation of “links of affinity” (*jieyuan*). The practice of cultivating links of affinity is the intentional development of good interpersonal relations in the belief that these will, sooner or later, help in the spread of the Dharma. When ties of affinity are made between Venerable Master Hsing Yun and Taiwanese government officials the result is a relationship of mutual respect and trust. Such a relationship can be mutually beneficial. On the one hand, it may provide an opportunity for the Master to give moral guidance and occasional practical assistance to politicians, such as when he mediates disputes or convinces disagreeing parties to compromise. The other side of the coin is that it is certainly beneficial to a Buddhist institution like Fo Guang Shan to be regarded favorably by powerful people. Mutual ties and benefits of this nature might be looked upon with suspicion in Western culture, but in East Asian culture they actually manifest an ideal, the ideal of harmony. Especially deriving from Confucianism, social harmony represents an exalted ideal to which everyone should contribute.

It is worth asking whether the lack of friction between Humanistic Buddhism and the Taiwanese government is a result of this ideal of harmony and practices like cultivating links of affinity. Certainly in Engaged Buddhism there are often adversarial relations with the government: during the war in Vietnam, the Buddhist Struggle Movement took to the streets against the government; the same thing

occurred in Burma in 1988 and 2007; the Tibetan liberation movement is deeply at odds with the government of the PRC; the layman Sulak Sivaraksa has several times severely criticized his government and been charged more than once with lese majeste as a result. Do Engaged Buddhists engage in adversarial behavior and Humanistic Buddhists not engage in such behavior because the latter prize the value of harmony while the former do not?

East Asian Buddhists may be surprised to learn the extent to which many Engaged Buddhists have similar tendencies to avoid confrontation and value harmony.⁸ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu of Thailand shows how Engaged Buddhist concerns with harmony come from the Buddhist worldview's emphasis on interdependence. He writes, "The principle of the good for the whole pervades all aspects of life. The body, for example, is unhealthy if its various parts are not working for the good of the whole; the well-being of a particular village depends upon the cooperation of the villagers, and, in turn, cooperation among villages. ... In short, nothing in the world can exist in isolation. ... This, in sum, is the way of nature or the way things are constituted in essence or in truth (*dhamma-sacca*)."⁹ Because this is the nature of reality, he states that, "Sila [morality] means normalcy, or at equilibrium (*pakati*). ... *Pakati* ... means not colliding with anyone, even oneself, not disturbing one's state of calm; not clashing with others and disturbing their state of equanimity."¹⁰ To be moral, then, for this Thai Engaged Buddhist, is precisely to be harmonious, to fit in and avoid clashes in order that the larger whole may function smoothly.

The Dalai Lama also bases morality in this same fundamental reality when he says, "due to the fundamental interconnectedness which lies at the heart of reality, ... 'my' interest and 'your' interest are intimately connected. In a deep sense, they converge."¹¹ Since our interests are so inter-connected, it follows that our relations should be nonadversarial. The stance of nonadversariality, seeing one's own true interests as fundamentally in harmony with the true interests of others, is typical of most Engaged Buddhists. Knowing that we are interconnected, Engaged Buddhists in struggling situations typically tend not to look for a victory over an opponent, but to look for win-win solutions, in which everyone's needs are met.

The present Kalon Tripa (“prime minister”) of the Tibetan government in exile, Samdhong Rinpoche, expressed his views on this subject in an interview. When asked about the relationship between the individual and society, he said that if the individual is doing something harmful to the larger group, “the individual’s right does not override civic or society’s right. The larger group is more important—that is quite clear in both Theravada and Mahayana.” He went on to say that not only does society’s right override the individual’s right, “a society’s rights must be balanced against all humankind, all sentient beings, the entire planet. Each is trumped by the level above: the individual by the community or state, the community or state by all humankind, humankind by all sentient beings.”¹² In sum, it is clear that the worldview of such Engaged Buddhists as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the Dalai Lama, and Samdhong Rinpoche is based upon interdependence; their values consequently stress what comes from that interdependence—the need for the parts to fit into the larger whole, for the individual to live in a non-adversarial manner, “without clashing” in society, and for the individual to act for the good of the whole.

Samdhong Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama see things this way and speak this way and yet they strongly oppose the actions of the government of the People’s Republic of China in Tibet. Because I see as much concern with harmony in the language of most Engaged Buddhists as in the language of Humanistic Buddhists, I believe that the fact that many of the Engaged Buddhists have been willing to take up adversarial postures in their struggles has more to do with their circumstances than it does with ideology, beliefs or values. I suspect that no matter how much one may believe in harmony, when an individual or group is doing something that is causing massive suffering, many Buddhists, Engaged or Humanistic, might well find themselves needing to take up an oppositional stance, opposing the actions of those who are causing harm. Note that this is a very limited kind of opposition: it is nonviolent and seeks the other’s welfare and true interest, along with one’s own.

The fact that Humanistic Buddhist leaders have not yet had to take up an oppositional stance has, I believe, more to do with the peace and democratic governance that Taiwan has enjoyed in the last several decades than with any differences in worldview or values between Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic

Buddhism. Those Taiwanese Humanistic Buddhists who see Engaged Buddhism as too confrontational or too engaged in political struggles might ask themselves this question: What would I do if Taiwan were in Burma's situation with a military government that brutalized the people, or in Tibet's situation with an occupying power that did not allow free practice of Buddhism and traditional culture? One greatly hopes such things will never happen to Taiwan! However, it might help Humanistic Buddhists to understand some Engaged Buddhist struggles if they were to imagine themselves in those situations.

Politics

With regard to politics, there is a wide spectrum of views, but the positions on this spectrum do not line up with one's affiliation as an Engaged Buddhist or Humanistic Buddhist.

The trickiness of the political issue for activist Buddhists may be introduced by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who states, "I do not think that monastics should engage in any political activities." He continues, "But we can cultivate lay people to pay attention to politics. Monastics should emulate Master Taixu: show concern, but do not interfere with politics."¹³ Similarly, Venerable Sheng Yen advocates that people should, "advise all religious and spiritual leaders that while they should pay attention to politics they should not harbor political ambitions. ..."¹⁴

The question raised here for both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism is what it is to "pay attention" to politics, to "show concern" but not interfere. This can be a fine line, indeed. The underlying problem that these statements raise is that even if one would prefer to avoid politics, if one is actively involved with the affairs of society, politics are all around and often unavoidable. This is especially true when we realize that politics in the larger sense is really the art and methods of organizing and tending to our corporate life as a society of human beings. In this sense, wherever there is a society, there is politics. Politics in the narrower sense is just the formalization and institutionalization of this larger, unavoidable process. Thus, if one is concerned with social issues, one can't avoid being concerned with politics. As Venerable Master Hsing Yun puts it, "social progress requires entrance into politics. For example, if you care

about social welfare and other matters, then the politics are very complicated.”¹⁵ I take the majority of both Engaged Buddhists and Humanistic Buddhists, then, to hold that while monastics should be careful not to be active in partisan politics, all Buddhists should have a good understanding of social and political issues; activist Buddhists, moreover, will be involved with political concerns as part of their work to improve society, though this may or may not involve engagement in partisan politics.

In general, Engaged Buddhists are far more involved with political struggles than Humanistic Buddhists. As discussed above, I believe this difference is primarily due to the difference in their respective political situations. However, even in the case of Engaged Buddhism, often this involvement in political struggle is a matter of identifying with a cause or political position, not with a political party. This is the case in the Tibetan struggle for autonomy or self-rule, a struggle that is entirely political in nature but in which no political parties are involved. Also, in Sri Lanka the Engaged Buddhist group Sarvodaya Shramadana has for decades worked to bring an end to the civil war in that country, sometimes helping to mediate between the two sides of the war, sometimes directly advocating for a cessation of violence. This is unquestionably political work but Sarvodaya Shramadana consistently avoids identification with a political party.

In other cases, identification with a political party is involved in an Engaged Buddhist struggle. For example, in Burma the main struggle is to free the people from the oppression of the military dictatorship and attain democracy and human rights; however, this struggle is to a large extent identified with Aung San Suu Kyi’s political party, the National League for Democracy. I believe that the Vietnamese experience demonstrates that it is a good thing for Burma that it does have a political party ready to step into power if and when the Burmese dictatorship is overthrown. In Vietnam, during the war years, the aim of the Buddhist “Struggle Movement” was to bring the war to an end. That Movement had sufficient political power to bring down governments in South Vietnam but it was not able to replace those governments with a government whose principles matched their own. Thich Nhat Hanh reported that in the midst of this struggle, “at least one million people have come and said, ‘We need a Buddhist political party. If you are not organized politically, you cannot succeed.’ Everyone has been

saying that.”¹⁶ As a monastic, he strongly advocated that monastics have nothing to do with political parties. Nonetheless, it was true that the people who identified with the Struggle Movement needed a political party in order to channel their views in a constructive way. In other words, you can bring down a government without having a political party, but you need to get organized—and that usually requires a political party—in order to have your perspective be the perspective that governs the society. In the end, Buddhists in the Struggle Movement during the war in Vietnam did form an ephemeral Buddhist political party called the “Vietnamese Buddhist Force.” The party was a lay-monastic amalgam. However, it was quickly suppressed.¹⁷ In this regard, it seems to me a very good thing that the National League for Democracy is organized and ready to take up governance of Burma when the great day of Burmese liberation from tyranny finally arrives.

Also involved in partisan politics, to very different degrees, are the Soka Gakkai, which formed the political party Komeito, and Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who endorsed a political candidate. Since the Soka Gakkai is a lay Buddhist group, it is relatively uncontroversial that it has formed a political party, though one can always raise questions about whether the “Buddhist” identity of the party is being exploited for the sake of gaining power, and whether a party that calls itself “Buddhist” is in fact a manifestation of Buddhist principles and values.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s work with some politicians is an extension of his cultivation of links of affinity with them. On more than one occasion his intervention with politicians has directly promoted social harmony, such as when he convinced a candidate not to run for office in a situation that would have provoked an awkward contest, and when he convinced another politician not to contest the legal outcome of an election.¹⁸ These are actions taken in pursuit of the ideal of harmony. On at least one occasion (the 1996 presidential campaign) Venerable Master Hsing Yun explicitly endorsed a candidate for office.¹⁹ The issues this raises are not different from issues we have discussed above. On the one hand, as in the case of the Buddhists in Vietnam, if one does not have a party, or a candidate, to take one’s vision forward and make it a reality, one is severely limited in the constructive contribution one is able to make to society. On the other hand, when a Buddhist cleric takes the step of endorsing a candidate or party, as in the case of the Soka Gakkai’s Komeito party, there are always

implicit questions of whether the name of Buddhism is being exploited for political purposes and of whether a given political party or individual does in reality manifest Buddhist principles and values. This is especially so inasmuch as it will always be impossible for any individual or party to make real and concrete the lofty ideals of Buddhism in more than a partial and imperfect way.

A minority view on the political question is that followers should have nothing whatsoever to do with politics; this is the view of Tzu Chi. Venerable Cheng Yen herself never makes any comments on political issues or involves herself or her organization in any way in politics. She stresses that change comes from within and emphasizes the development of compassion, rather than any kind of political or institutional change. “Improvements in society do not come from society itself but from its members. It is through personal growth that profound changes can be possible on the greater level of society. The Master sees the individual as the crucial agent for change. This awakening in a person comes from the nurturing of compassion.”²⁰ She expects her followers to observe the “Tzu Chi Ten Precepts,” one of which states that members must not “participate in political activities, protests or demonstrations.”²¹ This view contrasts dramatically with the view of the Engaged Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, who has re-interpreted the first of the five Lay Precepts potentially to require of his followers that they take action of the kind prohibited in Tzu Chi. His version of the first Lay Precept reads in part, “I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.”²² I recall hearing Thich Nhat Hanh giving a Dharma talk shortly before the start of the first Gulf War in which he told his American students that if they did not do something to try to prevent this war from occurring, they were violating the first precept. Here is a difference, indeed, but it does not qualify as a difference between Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism since other Humanistic Buddhist leaders are not resolutely non-political, as is Venerable Cheng Yen.

In the end, these differences on politics seem, at least to a degree, to be a question of skillful means. Different tasks require different approaches. Some tasks that must be done to relieve suffering are political; the Burmese struggle is a good example of this. However, it is surely because Tzu Chi is so entirely non-political that it is able to work in the PRC and North Korea.

Inter-Religious Friendliness

In taking up the topic of inter-religious relations, I note that Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism share an interest in promoting good relations among religions. They also seem to have very similar beliefs underlying this interest. Both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism take as foundational the Buddha's teaching in the Parable of the Raft, which distinguishes between Truth itself and the means to realize that Truth. Buddhism is identified with the raft that is able to take us to the other shore; that is, Buddhism is the means to realize Truth, just as the raft is the means to reach the other shore. Both Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism by and large have taken an additional step in that they often state that they regard all religions in this way; they are all means to realize Truth. By distinguishing means from ends, such a view relativizes all religions, including Buddhism, and makes likely an attitude of respect towards other religions and a readiness to cooperate with them.

To quickly survey some Engaged Buddhist movements on this point: (1) I have a photograph of an altar in an orphanage run by Sarvodaya Shramadana in Sri Lanka. On that altar are images of Vishnu, Buddha and Jesus. I take this as just a straightforward effort to make all the children in the orphanage, with all their religious backgrounds, feel at home. Moreover, this seems only sensible for a Buddhist peacemaking organization in a situation of acute conflict between Hindus and Buddhists. (2) The Dalai Lama often points to shared values among the major religions and has stated that if someone has practiced Buddhism seriously for years and has failed to clearly benefit from it, that person should consider practicing another religion. (3) During the Struggle Movement in Vietnam, in a conflict in which there were tensions between Catholicism and Buddhism, Nhat Chi Mai committed self-immolation kneeling before a statue of the Virgin Mary and a statue of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Quan Am (Kuan Yin). (4) American Zen master Bernie Glassman tells a tale of his early days as a teacher when he was listening to a group of Catholic nuns, who were committed meditators, talking about God. He thought to himself with chagrin, "They've been meditating for so long, and they still believe in God!"²³ He caught himself immediately and realized that the problem here was his attitude, and the assumption that he knew all there was to know about meditation and God. Since then he has worked cooperatively

in both spiritual and activist capacities with persons of many religions.

Turning to the Humanistic Buddhists, we note that Venerable Sheng Yen, like many of the Engaged Buddhists, regards inter-religious friendliness as playing a key role in peacemaking. After the September 11 attacks on the United States, he emphasized that the most “thoroughly effective” means to overcome religious violence is for individuals to extend friendship, understanding and respect to people of different religions, ethnicities and cultures.²⁴ He is also explicit in speaking of the relative status of all religions: “The definition of the ‘sacred’ varies according to time, place, and individual. ... The supreme truth revered by every religion should be absolute and flawless. It is definitely sacred. But once secular elements and outside agendas are incorporated into the interpretation, it becomes a subjective notion and thus generates diversity.”²⁵ Recognizing the relativity of religions means that everyone should regard religions other than one’s own with respect. It does not mean that one must regard them as absolutely equal, however. “We acknowledge that all virtuous religions ... have the right to proclaim themselves to be the world’s best religion. Likewise, I myself would say that Buddhism is the best religion.”²⁶ After all, one has chosen, in this age of religious pluralism, to practice Buddhism, so one must regard it as the best, at least for oneself!

For his part, Venerable Master Hsing Yun expresses a respect to the deities of other religions that have something in common with Sarvodaya’s approach. He states that Buddhists may actually worship the deities of other religions so long as the spiritual being is not evil in nature and no one is harmed in such worship. This is a matter of respect and courtesy. Moreover, he regards all the major world religions as manifesting genuine spirituality based on wisdom and all as able to fulfill the human potential.²⁷ Nevertheless, he, like Venerable Sheng Yen, does not hesitate to say that he regards Buddhism as the best religion.

Among the Humanistic Buddhists, inter-religious friendliness has emerged most strongly in Tzu Chi. Tzu Chi makes a point of responding to other religions in the same way that they believe in responding to other persons, with unconditional love. An example of how this is manifested in an inter-religious context may be seen in Tzu Chi’s relationship with an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia. This

school was started after Muslim mobs in Jakarta rioted against the ethnic Chinese community. The Muslim founder of the school wanted to teach Islam in a spirit of compassion and love free of intolerance and hatred. By 2003, the school had so many students that they could not feed them all. When Tzu Chi learned of this, they set about providing food donations to the school. From this foundation a relationship of mutual respect and affection has developed, such that the staff and students of the school all became Tzu Chi volunteers, and Tzu Chi members attended a celebration at the school of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. It is easy to see how Tzu Chi's gift of love has made an important contribution to peacemaking in a highly volatile situation.

Conclusion: In sum, I see Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism as forms of activist Buddhism sharing the same fundamental principles. The differences between Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism do not seem to me any greater than those that exist between some Engaged Buddhists. Some activist Buddhists speak of *metta* (loving-kindness) while some speak of *karuna* (compassion). Some speak of interdependence and some speak of harmony. Some speak of happiness and some speak of a Pure Land on Earth. I don't think these differences are very significant. The differences among all the activist Buddhists stem primarily from their differing political situations and the different issues and struggles that are urgent in their societies. What they share is fundamental: all are cultivating selflessness, generosity and benevolence by working in challenging real life situations; and all are actively manifesting benevolence, each in its own situation and its own way.

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Notes

- 1 Don A Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 292.
- 2 Quoted in Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 102.

- 3 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, ed. Arnold Kotler. (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1987), 34.
- 4 Tenzin Gyatso, the XIVth Dalai Lama, "Hope for the Future," in Fred Eppsteiner, ed. *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, rev. 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1988), 4.
- 5 Taixu, "Jianshe renjian jingtu lun" (On Establishing a Pure Land on Earth), in *Taixu dashi quanshu (Complete Works)*, 14:47.5, 426-427. Quoted in Pittman, 224.
- 6 Venerable Sheng Yen, "The Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign: Integrating the Spirit with the World," accessed April 5, 2009, http://www.dharmadrum.org/fivefold/fivefold.aspx?cid=C_00000003.
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- 8 On this subject, see Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), Chapter Four, "Individual and Society."
- 9 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Dhammic Socialism*, ed. and trans. Donald K. Swearer (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1986), 34-35.
- 10 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 159.
- 11 Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 47.
- 12 Samdhong Rinpoche in an interview with the present author, September 24, 2000, Cincinnati, Ohio. The quotations are taken from notes made at the time of the interview and should not be considered literal.
- 13 Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization*, 109.
- 14 Venerable Sheng Yen, "Violence and Terrorism in Religion," *Chan Magazine*, Fall 2003, accessed April 6, 2009, <http://www.chan1.org/ddp/chanmag/fal2003.html#violence>.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Daniel Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 82.
- 17 Tadashi Oka, "Buddhism as a Political Force," I-VI. Institute for Current World Affairs, *Newsletter*, TO-22, July 4, 1966, 9-11.
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- 19 Ibid, 112-113.
- 20 Tzu Chi website, accessed April 11, 2009, "Dharma Master Cheng Yen"; <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/master/index.html>.
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- 22 Thich Nhat Hanh, *For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Wonderful Precepts* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993), 13.
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Development in Taiwan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 98.

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Modernization and Globalization*, 140-141.

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