

Engaged Buddhism and Activism Version 2

**by
Midge Quandt**

Among those who advocate a socially engaged spirituality, and I count myself among them, social-justice activists known as engaged Buddhists apply Buddhist principles to expediting social change. Among other things, they criticize materialism, exploitation, and environmental degradation. And they have put forward a sophisticated analysis of what changes are necessary to bring about a better world. With this said, I want to take issue with the strategies for transformation proposed by some leading theorists and activists. One thread that runs through many of their writings is the suggestion that inner change must be the basis for any larger shift in social arrangements. This focus on psychic and spiritual, as opposed to institutional solutions, springs in part from a rightful distrust of all reforms that rest solely on an alteration of outward circumstances. As Sulak Sivaraksa, a prominent Thai Buddhist activist and a founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, put it:

We have more than enough programs, organization, ... for the alleviation of suffering and injustice. In fact, we place too much faith in the power of action. Social activism tends to preoccupy itself with the external. Like the secular intellectuals, activists tend to see all malevolence as being caused by “them” — the “system” — without understanding how these negative factors also operate within themselves. They assume that personal virtue will result from a radical restructuring of society.

He goes on to argue that meaningful social change depends fundamentally on personal and spiritual transformation.

As someone who habitually leans toward the idea of changing the system, I found myself struggling with this newly appealing idea. Who could argue with something so obviously useful as a shift in values? Then, as often happens with my political ruminations, I tried to imagine what my progressive Sandinista friends in Nicaragua

would think. The average income in that country being \$500 per year, they might well react thus: “What’s proposed sound okay, but it won’t enable our country to pay off its external debt of \$63 billion; it won’t help the (literally) starving coffee farmers currently camping out in front of the President’s mansion; nor will it provide people with the 2,600 calories per day that the World Health Organization deems adequate.”

The consequence of the viewpoint of engaged Buddhists, however well grounded in ethical teachings, is to weaken inquiry into how, in fact, the “system” does work and works to the detriment of those in Nicaragua and all the others in the global South who live on \$2 a day or less. It also derails a probe into what chinks in the system’s armor offer the best opportunities for strategic intervention. Maybe the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is fast losing its legitimacy, is a vulnerable point; or perhaps it’s the current crop of free trade agreements against which a group of third world countries revolted in Cancun in September 2003; or both. The crux is that from the perspective of the world’s poor majority, which is my political reference point, moral exhortation and general prescriptions for what a just society would look like can’t do the work of political analysis.

Even when engaged Buddhists consider institutional reform as crucial, much of the penchant for subsuming socioeconomic issues under moral ones remains. The emphasis on values almost always has priority. And this priority overshadows the need for both a theoretical and a practical grasp of the structures of domination that exist both in the North and in the global South. For example, much of the writing on “small is beautiful” — the notion of decentralizing and humanizing the economic system, which owes much to E.F. Schumacher’s 70s classic, — revolves around injunctions to alter habits of shopping til you drop or lusting for the latest Pentium chip. By thus defining problems in mainly ethical terms, engaged Buddhists side-step some knotty questions. What does the politics of radical transformation require? What structural obstacles must

be addressed, and of those, which most urgently if we are to move toward sustainable development, peace and justice?

In addition to perpetuating this conceptual imbalance, there is a further problem. Those who talk about small-scale economic development and change from the bottom up, such as several contributors to *Entering the Realm of Reality: Towards Dhammic Societies*, harbor what I believe to be problematical assumptions about how capitalism can be replaced by a kind of socialism in line with Buddhist principles. Grassroots initiatives — textile cooperatives, fair trade crafts — are simply not enough to challenge the capitalist-led globalization of the world economy. Donald Rothberg, a philosopher who works with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, makes an important point in *Faces of American Buddhism*. In his view, engaged Buddhists need to develop more far-reaching strategies for transforming deeply entrenched structures of domination which enable 20% of the world's population to commandeer 80% of the world's resources.

On the international level, this perspective suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the role that governments in the North and organizations like the IMF and the World Trade Organization (WTO) play in perpetuating these structures. Their policies, with their worship of an unbridled free market, promote the kind of globalization that oppresses the world's poor. In light of this, shouldn't we be joining more of what Ken Jones of the Network of Engaged Buddhists (UK) calls oppositional campaigns? I am thinking here of the campaign mounted by a movement called Jubilee 2000. It aims to cancel the Third World debt, itself perpetuated in large part by the U.S.-dominated IMF. Without lifting the crushing burden of debt from the global South, hopes for economic development that is broadly transformative, whether small or large-scale, are arguably utopian.

We could also be making alliances with the groups that took to the streets in Seattle in November of 1999. The target of that action, the WTO, implements policies in the name of free trade that result in dumping toxic waste next to sweatshops and

punishing workers who try to form unions. Seattle put the public spotlight on economic globalization and its consequences for the first time. What is finally becoming clear to many movement activists is that the WTO, as well as the international lending agencies, impose rules that put profits before people and the environment,

Citing the success of Seattle in influencing policy, Mathew Williams in *Turning Wheel*, the magazine of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, counseled engaged Buddhists to “take part in more vigorous forms of dissent, such as protests and nonviolent direct action.” He notes that many are satisfied with engaging the powers-that-be in dialogue because to them disruptive actions are violent in spirit. Then Williams goes on to make a case for direct action as part of a tradition of nonviolence in the East and West, arguing that it causes significant change and with the least amount of suffering (witness Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement). And it is necessary because elites do not enter into dialogue with the oppressed, they do not listen unless forced to. “If we do not interfere with the actions of the oppressors and merely counsel them to change, while they blithely ignore us, we are letting violence and oppressions continue,” he concludes. Along with Williams I hope that engaged Buddhists will support the globalization of liberation through confrontational, organized action as well as education and dialogue.