CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the twentieth century, a politically and socially active form of Buddhism called Engaged Buddhism came into being and quickly became a large and powerful movement throughout Buddhist Asia; toward the end of that century, it also became very influential among Western Buddhists. In the Buddhist-majority countries of Asia, Engaged Buddhism became a vehicle capable of giving voice to the people’s political aspirations and bringing down national governments. It became a path of psychological and practical liberation to oppressed peoples and of economic development to impoverished peoples. The reader may be surprised to hear of Buddhists engaging in this way with the problems of the world. It is true that the West has a considerably greater history of this kind of activism than Buddhist Asia. Nonetheless, Engaged Buddhism is a thoroughly Buddhist phenomenon.

What is Engaged Buddhism, and why did it emerge so dramatically in the twentieth century? Engaged Buddhism is a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political, social, and ecological problems of society. At its best, this engagement is not separate from Buddhist spirituality, but is very much an expression of it.

Engaged Buddhism is not a centralized movement. It did not begin with the vision of a single charismatic leader and spread from there. Consequently, it is not defined by geography but is found wherever there are Buddhists with sufficient political freedom to engage with social and political issues as they see fit. It also is not defined by sect; Engaged Buddhism is neither a new Buddhist sect nor does it belong to one of the established sects. Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and nonsectarian Buddhists all may be involved with Engaged Buddhism,
though not all Buddhists of any of these forms are Engaged Buddhists. Engaged Buddhism is defined and unified by the intention of Buddhists of whatever sect to apply the values and teachings of Buddhism to the problems of society in a nonviolent way, motivated by concern for the welfare of others and as an expression of their own Buddhist practices. With this kind of profile, there are no absolute lines defining who is and who is not an Engaged Buddhist. Some individuals and groups clearly belong at the core of this movement, such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Sarvodaya Shramadana, and others are borderline, such as groups and individuals that conscientiously put loving-kindness at the center of their practice but avoid societal or institutional engagement. We will focus in this book on groups and individuals that are at the core of the movement.

Engaged Buddhism came into being in the form of many individual movements in the various Asian Buddhist countries as a response to particular social, economic, political, and ecological crises facing each country. Its philosophical and ethical roots lie deeply within traditional Buddhist philosophy and values, which it applies to contemporary problems. This is the source of the unity evident among the Engaged Buddhists despite their dispersed and multiple origins throughout Buddhist Asia. However, Engaged Buddhism is also a modern phenomenon and as such has been influenced by modern social, economic, psychological, and political forms of analysis of Western origin. It has also been strongly influenced by the great example of Mahatma Gandhi, who pioneered spiritually based, nonviolent social engagement for the entire world.

The multiple crises that hit Asia in the twentieth century were devastating to much of Buddhist Asia. Large parts of World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War/war in Southeast Asia were fought there, directly affecting Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and much of the rest of Southeast Asia and resulting in millions of deaths. There has been genocide in Cambodia and foreign invasion and cultural genocide in Tibet, again resulting in millions of deaths in both countries. Countries such as Sri Lanka have been impoverished and politically uprooted by colonial occupiers. Buddhist Asia has generated some extremely repressive governments—for example, Burma/Myanmar. Ecological
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crisis has become quite acute in some areas, such as Thailand, where
deforestation has devastated some of the fishing and agricultural foun-
dations of the economy.

Buddhist Asia has also seen some long-term social ills come to a
head in the twentieth century, owing in part to the encounter with
Western cultures—notably the extreme social inequality, bigotry, and
poverty suffered by the ex-untouchables in India and the repressed
and inferior status of women in much of Buddhist Asia. Finally, in the
latter half of the twentieth century, Buddhist Asia was subjected to the
powerful and related forces of rapid modernization, Westernization,
and globalization, transforming foundational cultural patterns that
have existed for centuries and even millennia.

It should be clear that if Buddhism had nothing to say about and did
nothing in response to crises, challenges, and problems of this magni-
tude, it would have become so irrelevant to the lives of the people that
it would have had little excuse for existing, other than perhaps to patch
up people’s psychological and spiritual wounds and send them back
out into the fray. It simply was necessary for it to respond somehow.
Fortunately a generation of creative, charismatic, and courageous lead-
ers emerged throughout Buddhist Asia in the latter half of the twenti-
eth century, responding to these crises in ways that were new and yet
resonant with tradition.

Not every activist engagement of Buddhism with social and politi-
cal issues can be considered Engaged Buddhism, however. Certainly
the chauvinist Buddhist nationalism of contemporary Sri Lanka is not
Engaged Buddhism inasmuch as its stance is based upon opposition
and ill will toward the other—in this case, non-Buddhist Sri Lankan
minorities—a stance that easily escalates into acts of violence, as has
frequently occurred in recent decades. Engaged Buddhism is by defini-
tion nonviolent. It is also by definition an effort to express the ideals of
Buddhism—including loving-kindness or universal goodwill toward
all—in practical action, and on this point as well, nationalistic and
chauvinistic Buddhism cannot be considered to be Engaged Bud-
 dhism; it is indeed the antithesis of it.

There are many Engaged Buddhist leaders and movements through-
out Buddhist Asia and in the West today. The Buddhist teachers that
are best known and most beloved in the West are two Engaged Buddhists: the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. They are both good examples of the characteristic nonviolence of Engaged Buddhism, even in the face of the greatest provocations: foreign invasion and war. Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people and head of the Tibetan Liberation Movement, which struggles nonviolently for Tibetan self-determination. He fled Tibet in 1959, following the Chinese invasion and occupation of his country. Since that time he has lived in exile in Dharamsala, India, where he has prompted and overseen the transformation of the Tibetan government (now the Tibetan government in exile) from a medieval institution into a modern democracy. Despite the “worst case scenario” of foreign invasion and occupation and although his peace proposals to the Chinese have fallen on deaf ears, the Dalai Lama remains staunchly committed to a nonviolent approach to resolving Tibet’s problems. With his engaging personality, good cheer, steadfast adherence to his ideals, and globe-trotting habits, he is almost universally known and admired and is the very face of Buddhism to most non-Buddhists. The Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Thich Nhat Hanh is the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and poet who was the most important ideological leader of the Vietnamese “Struggle Movement,” which strove to bring an end to the war in Vietnam. Trained in Theravada as well as Zen, Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term “Engaged Buddhism,” using it to refer to the kind of Buddhism that he wanted to see develop: one that would translate the wisdom and compassion that Buddhists strive to develop into concrete action on behalf of all sentient beings (that is, all beings with awareness, principally humans and animals). He cofounded the School of Youth for Social Service to train young Buddhists to serve the needs of the Vietnamese people, particularly in the countryside. During the war, he worked for peace by advocating a “Third Way,” siding not with the North, not with the South, not against anyone, but with the people and with life. Since the war, he has lived in exile in France, unable to return to Vietnam for a visit until 2005. Nhat Hanh is one of the most important leaders creating and articulating Buddhist spiritual social activism, speaking to a global audience of Buddhists and non-Bud-
dhists and frequently leading workshops all over the world for meditators, activists, families, veterans, artists, and therapists.

These leaders, while well known in the West, are but the tip of the iceberg of Asian Buddhist sociopolitical engagement, which is constituted not only of charismatic leaders but of millions of ordinary Buddhists as well. In every Buddhist country with sufficient political freedom, Asian Buddhists have responded to the crises facing their countries in creative ways. The Sarvodaya Shramadana, founded and headed by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, is the largest nongovernment organization in Sri Lanka. Ariyaratne pioneered the invention of “Buddhist economics” as an alternative to both capitalist and Communist economics, trying to build a society in which all needs are met—not only the economic, but social, cultural, psychological, political, and spiritual needs as well. Over half the villages of Sri Lanka have invited Sarvodaya to assist them to organize self-help economic development programs. In recent years, Sarvodaya has turned more and more of its attention to working for peace and reconciliation between the Sinhalese and Tamil populations.

In Cambodia, Somdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, sometimes called the Gandhi of Cambodia, was an important leader for peace and reconciliation. Fortuitously out of the country training in Thailand during the Khmer Rouge era, Maha Ghosananda was one of the few Cambodian monks to survive that era. He led the restoration of Buddhism after the Khmer Rouge had all but wiped it out, and as head of Cambodian Buddhism, he worked hard to heal the profound wounds of the Cambodian people, both at home and abroad. He created the annual Dhammayietra, or Peace Walk, which accompanied refugees returning home from the camps, and in subsequent years he drew significant attention and engagement to remaining areas of conflict. He was one of the major leaders of the international movement to ban land mines. Despite the fact that his entire family died during the Cambodian Holocaust, he always radiated infectious joy. He died in 2007.

In Thailand a number of “development monks” pioneer ways to help impoverished villagers, such as by providing loans for seed from donations made to the temples. “Ecology monks” work to protect the
highly endangered environment, with particular concern for loss of land to deforestation and dams. Such work can challenge vested interests and is therefore dangerous; it can expose the monks to charges of political activity unbefitting a monk, with defrocking occasionally following as a consequence.

In Burma, also known as Myanmar, laywoman and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi leads the movement for democracy and human rights. Her party, the National League for Democracy, has worked since 1988 to bring an end to the brutal military regime ruling Burma and institute civilian democratic government. In the summer of 1988 the streets of Rangoon (now Yangon) were filled with students and Buddhist monks calling for an end to the military government and the institution of human rights. When her party won a landslide electoral victory in 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest, where she has been kept most of the time since. Whenever she is released, she resumes political activity, and after a time she is once again placed under house arrest. She is under house arrest at this writing. Monks and students demonstrated in the streets of Burma again in 2007.

Based in Taiwan, the nun Venerable Cheng Yen is the founder of Tzu Chi, a huge charitable organization with over four million members in Taiwan and abroad. Tzu Chi’s most important contributions have been the establishment of free medical care, in Taiwan and elsewhere; the establishment of the world’s third largest bone marrow data bank; and the provision of international emergency relief. Unlike other Engaged Buddhist groups, Tzu Chi has a policy of remaining strictly unengaged in political issues. This has allowed it entrée to the People’s Republic of China and North Korea, where its offers of emergency aid have been welcomed in times of natural disasters.

There are many other Engaged Buddhist leaders and movements throughout Asia. Many of these movements involve hundreds of thousands or even millions of active participants. While Engaged Buddhism can sometimes be controversial simply because it challenges tradition by working in innovative ways, it is by no means a fringe movement. Many of the best educated, most idealistic and progressive monastics and laypeople are its leaders, thinkers, activists, and par-
participants. There are certainly conservative and reactionary groups in the Buddhist world, but the liberal and progressive Engaged Buddhist movement very much holds its own against them.

In the West, because Buddhism is much smaller, Engaged Buddhism is also much smaller. But Westerners likewise are proving very attracted to Engaged Buddhism and very adaptive in developing new expressions of it. To name just a few examples, Western Engaged Buddhists work to end capital punishment; guard nuclear wastes; challenge racism, sexism, and militarism; and protect the lives and well-being of animals. American Zen master and Engaged Buddhist leader Bernie Glassman, one of the most creative of the Western Engaged Buddhist leaders, founded the Zen Peacemaker Order, with such programs as “street retreats,” in which the affluent make a spiritual retreat by living on the streets of New York; pilgrimages to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the retreatants bear witness to the events of the Holocaust and sit with minds and hearts open to insight and transformation; the Greyston Mandala, a network of social and economic development programs focusing on self-help employment and housing for formerly homeless and poor people; and housing and health services for people with HIV/AIDS. Laywoman and environmental activist Joanna Macy has created “despair and empowerment” workshops to help both activists and ordinary people overwhelmed by their concern for the present shape of the world. She created the nuclear guardianship project to help us face up to the responsibilities inherent in creating nuclear wastes, which remain dangerous for millennia. Glassman and Macy are just two examples of the more creative of the Engaged Buddhist leaders in the West, but there are many more and thousands more ordinary practitioners who look for ways to express their Engaged Buddhist values through their occupations—perhaps by choosing a service profession as a means of livelihood or by trying to make their workplace more humane and peaceful—or in political or environmental activism.

This brief overview of the history and scope of Engaged Buddhism has perhaps left the reader with a nagging question: Why are Buddhists engaging with the social and political problems of the world? The terrible crises of the twentieth century have been named as the major
reason for engagement, but surely there have been terrible times in the past, in the long history (two and a half millennia) of Buddhism. Is it not contrary to well-established Buddhist habits to engage with the problems of samsara (the world of birth, death, rebirth, and redeath)? Doesn’t the Buddha teach that we should practice nonattachment from worldly things?

Here we open up what is controversial about Engaged Buddhism among more traditional and conservative Buddhists in Asia, many of whom argue exactly this point. Perhaps all of their lives they have thought of the bhikkhus (monks) as “fields of merit,” the means by which laypeople may earn merit, or good karma. This view is based upon the idea that giving is a meritorious act and therefore earns the giver good karma. The purer the recipient of the gift, it is believed, the more merit one’s gift earns. Since the bhikkhus practice a considerably more exacting self-discipline than laypeople, the bhikkhu is widely believed to be the purest, or best, object of giving for the purpose of earning merit. Many laypeople, especially in Southeast Asia, want their bhikkhus to stay in the temples, where they will be “pure” and thus more fit as recipients of their dāna (giving). They can be rather dismayed when they see their bhikkhus out helping to dig a road with Sarvodaya Shramadana or carrying a briefcase off to a meeting with a government official. In the West, some Buddhist scholars argue that since engagement with the problems of the world is a Western habit, Engaged Buddhism, which developed in the twentieth century just when Westernization was overwhelming Asia, is simply Westernized Buddhism and hence distorted Buddhism. In this way, Engaged Buddhism is sometimes criticized by both Asians and Westerners.

In response to the question “Why engagement?” Thich Nhat Hanh has a simple answer: Buddhism has always been engaged. All of Buddhism is engaged because all of it addresses human suffering. That is true. Siddhartha Gautama does not fully become the Buddha when he experiences enlightenment sitting beneath the Bo tree; the wisdom gained beneath the Bo tree is only the first of the two defining characteristics of a Buddha. Gautama fully becomes the Buddha when he turns back toward humankind within samsara and begins to teach, demonstrating his compassion—the second defining characteristic of
a Buddha—specifically his compassion for sentient beings suffering within samsara. A Buddha is distinguished in tradition from a *pratyekabuddha*, a “solitary” Buddha who, like Gautama, is enlightened on his own but, unlike Gautama, does not teach humankind. A *pratyekabuddha*, while recognized by Buddhism as a spiritual possibility, is on a different path from that followed by the founder of Buddhism. Therefore, inasmuch as Buddhism is founded not only in Gautama’s enlightenment but also in his decision to teach, it is fair to say that it has always been engaged, always focused on the problem of *duhkha* (Pali, dakkha, loosely translated as “suffering”) and the overcoming of *duhkha*.

A. T. Ariyaratne also answers the question “Why engagement?” by arguing that Buddhism has always been engaged, but he takes a different approach, also well founded. Ariyaratne points out that before the advent of colonialism, Buddhism was very much engaged with secular matters in society; it was the colonial occupation, he argues, that drove Buddhism away from this engagement. It is true that one can find secular matters discussed in the Buddhist scriptures in considerable detail. The Buddha taught about proper and considerate behavior within the family and with teachers, friends, and acquaintances of all kinds; he gave teachings on financial matters, such as how much money to save and how much to invest in business; he gave teachings on ethical and unethical ways of earning a livelihood; he gave teachings on proper behavior for rulers; he personally advised rulers and intervened to try to stop a war; he personally nursed a sick disciple and urged his followers to learn medicine. In addition, throughout Southeast Asia in the premodern period, one typically found a Buddhist temple in every village of any size. The bhikkhus of such a temple performed many secular functions—they taught children the rudiments of literacy and math, attended to the villagers’ medical needs, advised the village elders from a nonpartisan perspective, and counseled individuals—in addition to their more religious functions of teaching the Dharma, setting a moral example, and providing the villagers the opportunity to give and earn merit. In the capital, bhikkhus often served as advisers to the rulers. One can hardly look at these examples and conclude that Buddhism was not engaged with worldly matters.
Ariyaratne points out that in Sri Lanka all of this changed when the British took control. The British brought in Western education, so the bhikkhus were less needed as teachers; they brought in Western medicine, so the bhikkhus were less needed as medical consultants. Clearly the bhikkhus were not wanted as advisers to the British rulers. Thus the more secular functions of the bhikkhus were steadily and intentionally eroded, allowing the Christian missionaries who came with the British rulers to criticize Buddhism as being unconcerned with the mundane welfare of the people! To this day, Sri Lankan Christians continue to rebuke Buddhism for being otherworldly and unconcerned with the welfare of the people; in one generation, the true historical perspective has been forgotten.

For historical accuracy, we must qualify these statements that Buddhism has always been engaged, never disengaged. The matter is more complex. While it is true that in Southeast Asia one could find a Buddhist temple in every village, there have always been both village and forest-dwelling bhikkhus within traditional Buddhism. The village bhikkhu was engaged with the villagers as teacher, doctor, adviser. However, there was also the hermit, the forest-dwelling bhikkhu who intentionally withdrew from society and village life—at least for a time, maybe for a lifetime—in order to focus on intensive meditation practice, with the goal of attaining enlightenment and nirvana. In other regions of Asia, some bhikkhus, and sometimes laymen, also took up the more eremitic option, seeking out caves or building huts in the mountains for the same purpose of intentionally cutting themselves off from society in order to focus exclusively on practice. Clearly Buddhism can and does accommodate those whose spirituality leads them to withdraw from society, though this has always remained a minority option, an important point to bear in mind. The Dalai Lama notes that very few people possess the vocation of the forest (cave, mountain) dweller; it is right, he says, for only a handful. Very few people will flourish if they take themselves away from human society. The village-dwelling monastics, as well as the vast majority of laypeople, are pulled by their very practice and the loving-kindness and compassion that it engenders to help in whatever way they can. For them, Engaged
Buddhism, which asks only that loving-kindness and compassion be expressed in a concrete way, is a natural fit.

As for the charge that Engaged Buddhism is Westernized Buddhism, it must be recognized that there has been considerable Western influence on its leadership. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar received an extensive Western education. Aung San Suu Kyi was married to an Englishman (until he died) and lived for decades in the West. Thich Nhat Hanh spent some formative years in the West and received some education there. Most of the Engaged Buddhist leaders are in regular touch with the Western world and travel in the West frequently. Western ways of thinking do turn up in Engaged Buddhism, such as in the ideas of structural violence and institutionalized poverty. This does not mean, however, that Engaged Buddhism is Westernized Buddhism in the sense that it is the product of Western influences.

Generally, one finds that Engaged Buddhism is based in a Buddhist worldview and builds its ideas primarily from traditional Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and spirituality. Engaged Buddhist leaders interpret these ideas with a concern to apply them to the problems facing their societies today, motivated by the traditional Buddhist virtue of compassion. The greatest influence from non-Buddhists comes from Gandhi (himself Western educated), who has exerted a great influence on the Engaged Buddhist leaders, with the exception of Dr. Ambedkar (who worked with Gandhi but eventually broke with him owing to Gandhi’s refusal to reject the caste system). Western influence comes from the example of Christian charitable work and activism and elements of Western analysis drawn from the social sciences, particularly sociology, economics, and political science.

Two important points must be understood with respect to Western influences on Engaged Buddhism. The first is that the Engaged Buddhist leaders have not been passive recipients of Western ideas and practices. They have embraced Western ideas that they have found useful, such as human rights, and largely left alone those that they have not found compatible with their Buddhist worldview, such as the idea of political justice. They also sometimes challenge Western ideas and practices, such as the anger in anti-war protests during the Viet-
nam War or what they perceive as excessive individualism in Western societies.

The second point is that Engaged Buddhism has not been distorted by Western influence. I hope this book will demonstrate how thoroughly Buddhist Engaged Buddhism is. Everything the Engaged Buddhists say and do can be, and is, justified on the basis of traditional Buddhist views and values. Most convincingly, all the projects and actions are permeated with Buddhist spirituality in such a way that they are subtly, or not so subtly, different from similar projects and actions in the West. Work for national or international peace is presented as inseparable from the cultivation of inner peace. Work to eliminate poverty is seen as interdependent with efforts to cultivate spirituality and protect the environment. To engage in social work requires profound adjustment in the sense of “self” and “other.” Environmental work weakens the feeling of separation between oneself and the natural world.

It is then primarily a Buddhist intellectual and spiritual world that the Engaged Buddhists inhabit. It is also, however, a modern world. All religions change over time; the Asian Engaged Buddhists are important modernizers of Buddhism, adapting tradition to contemporary challenges, as has been done in every religion around the world time and again. The Engaged Buddhist world is, finally, a globalized world. We live in a time in which the world is shrinking, as news and ideas instantly circle the globe electronically; people, products, and pollution travel with small attention to national boundaries; and cultures and societies become ever more tightly knit together. In such a triple world, the Engaged Buddhists skillfully balance their roles as transmitters of traditions and values, transformers of tradition, and negotiators of tradition in a world in which the old boundaries are falling down.