

Political Buddha

Part 1: Engaged Buddhism

During the 2007 anti-government demonstrations in Burma (Myanmar) thousands of Buddhist monks joined students and political activists in the streets to protest the country's increasing economic crisis and the corruption of the ruling military junta they believed was at least partially responsible. During this (misnamed) Saffron Revolution, many co-workers, friends and family asked me—as their “resident Buddhist” and political junkie—the same question: Should Buddhists, who seek detachment and the Middle Way, even get involved in politics?

According to Buddhist history and teachings, I believe the short answer is “Yes”. But the reason why I believed this is a little more complicated.

First, Equal Time for Those Who Say “No”

As we've seen all over the world (including many times in United States' history) there's an inherent problem when people mix politics and religion. The basis of most religions is morality, purity and faith, while the basis for government is power. Many historical tragedies have occurred when religion was used to justify wars, atrocities, persecutions, rebellions, destruction of works of art, and oppression of aboriginal cultures—when the true purpose was to give legitimacy to political leaders and the exercise of their power.

There are many Buddhists who believe that every time the State and the Dharma merge, the Dharma always loses because it's not possible to reform the State to any great degree. As a result of this belief, traditional Buddhism promotes withdrawal from the affairs of the world and emphasizes that everything—including war, suffering, power, and oppression—is temporary and illusory. Many Buddhist lamas teach that to become involved in politics requires attachment—something the Four Noble Truths defines as the cause of suffering—and a belief that life is something other than an illusion.

I see the validity of these arguments, as I can also see a real danger of Buddhists—particularly those practicing in a culture dominated by a conservative religious right—starting to perceive themselves as morally superior and dismissing those who disagree with them as moral or mental inferiors. When this happens, even people whose agendas seem to be in the spirit of loving-kindness can develop a form of zealotry that is both in contradiction to the Middle Way (since extremism in any form runs counter to what the Buddha taught) and psychologically unhealthy.

However, a modern form of Buddhism has emerged, teaching that mindfulness requires an awareness of the real suffering around us and action to help alleviate it. It draws this belief from one of the most basic of all Buddhist tenets: to “save all sentient beings.” To many Buddhists, this means rolling up their sleeves and getting involved.

Saying “Yes” to Political Involvement

This modern Buddhist practice is called *Engaged* (or Humanistic) *Buddhism*. First coined by Zen Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh, the movement grew out of the suffering he and others saw during the Vietnam War. They formed a community to not only become aware of the suffering they saw around them but to respond to it directly with mindfulness and compassion.

Although Thich Nhat Hanh introduced the term “engaged Buddhism” around the late 50s–early 60s, he didn’t pull the philosophy behind this movement out of his venerable ear—he developed it from the teachings and actions of the Buddha himself.

Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) never held any direct political position—but he was born a prince from the warrior caste and often counseled kings, ministers, Brahmins, generals and lay people in government. As a result, he spoke and wrote extensively about politics and social justice. These teachings show that from the very beginning, the Dharma supported becoming engaged in society. In other words, the term “engaged Buddhism” is just a modern reminder that Buddhism has been engaged all along and the bodhisattva ethic of active compassion is at the very heart of engaged Buddhism—the protection of living beings and bringing Buddhist values into interactions with others.

While the Buddha saw the wisdom of separating religion from politics and believed political systems had a limited ability to bring about peace and happiness, many of the Buddha's teachings are applicable to today’s political issues. These teachings include:

- The equality of all human beings and how divisions of class and caste are artificial barriers erected by society. According to the Dharma, the only classification of human beings that’s important is based on the quality of their moral conduct.
- Encouraging social cooperation and active participation in society.
- The importance of the rule of law. The Buddha didn’t appoint a successor because he believed the Sangha, as well as other members of society, should be guided by the rule of law rather than a cult of personality.
- Encouraging the spirit of consultation and the democratic process. Within the Buddha’s own Sangha, all members had the right to decide matters of general concern. They even used a council of monks in a matter similar to democratic parliamentary systems that exist today!
- Non-violence and peace, including the declaration that there is no such thing as a “just” war.
- The importance of good government and how a country could become corrupt, degenerate and unhappy if the government becomes corrupt and unjust.

Most importantly, in the *Jataka* (morality tales), the Buddha suggested rules for good government, known as “Dasa Raja Dharma.” These ten rules can still be applied to any modern-day government that wishes to rule peacefully and successfully.

1. **Dana**—Be liberal, charitable and avoid selfishness.
2. **Sila**—Maintain a high moral character.
3. **Comfort Pariccaga**—Be prepared to sacrifice one's own pleasure for the well-being of the people.
4. **Ajjava**—Be honest and maintain absolute integrity.
5. **Maddava**—Be kind and gentle.
6. **Tapa**—Lead a simple life, as an example to others.
7. **Akkodha**—Be free from hatred of any kind.
8. **Avihimsa**—Exercise non-violence.
9. **Khanti**—Practice patience.
10. **Avirodha**—Respect public opinion to promote peace and harmony.

The Practice of Engaged Buddhism

To define the practice of engaged Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote *Interbeing* where he described the 14 precepts for building and maintaining peaceful/healthy individuals and communities. As the Political Buddha series continues, I'll explore these precepts and other ways that Buddhist principles can be applied to political and social activism.

- Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.
- Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.
- Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrow-mindedness.
- Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.
- Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.
- Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and understand the nature of your hatred.
- Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy,

peace, and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.

- Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.
- Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.
- Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.
- Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.
- Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.
- Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.
- Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. For brothers and sisters who are not monks and nuns, sexual expression should not take place without love and commitment. In sexual relations, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.