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Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism



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No recent event has revealed the social and political dimensions of modern Buddhism as powerfully as the fiery death of Thich Quang Duc on a Saigon street in 1963. Because the image of a meditating monk in flames was broadcast by wire service and television, and because Quang Duc and thirty-six other monks and a laywoman died voluntarily, their message of anguish and protest over the Vietnam war was engraved on the heart of the world. Yet the Buddhist meaning of these deaths was lost on most viewers and commentators. Was it common for Buddhist monks to engage in political protest? Did these monks represent broad popular sentiment or were they a radical fringe group? Was self-immolation a traditional practice or an aberration?¹

Thich Nhat Hanh, a young leader of the Buddhist movement that contributed to the fall of the repressive Diem regime, later wrote to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors, and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese.²

Nhat Hanh explained that candidates for ordination in the Mahayana Buddhism of Vietnam traditionally burn small spots on their bodies while vowing to observe the 250 precepts of the order. The idea is that words uttered while experiencing intense pain “will express all the seriousness of one’s

heart and mind, and carry much greater weight." Thus the immolation of a monk will carry the greatest weight of all.³

What Thich Nhat Hanh did not attempt to explain to Dr. King, to mention in his speaking tours to nineteen countries, or to record in his book on the struggle, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, was that self-immolation by fire reminds Mahayana Buddhists of dramatic episodes in the *Lotus Sutra*, one of their oldest and holiest scriptures. In the twenty-third chapter a bodhisattva, or enlightened being, burns his fingers, toes, arms, and finally his whole body in a living sacrifice to the Buddha. So the sacrifice of Thich Quang Duc and the others held meanings that only those raised in a Mahayana Buddhist culture could fully fathom.⁴

Despite the great distances of space and culture separating the Vietnamese and Americans, the message of peace of Quang Duc, Nhat Hanh, and other Vietnamese Buddhists has touched many in the West. Dr. King, the Nobel laureate and soon-to-be martyr for racial justice, nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for a Nobel prize. Thomas Merton, the Trappist author and mystic, described him as "a contemplative monk who has felt himself obliged to take an active part in his country's effort to escape destruction in a vicious power struggle between capitalism and communism. . . . [He] speaks for his people and for a renewed and 'engaged' Buddhism that has taken up the challenge of modern and Western civilization in its often disastrous impact upon the East."⁵ And now, thirty years after the death of the Saigon monks, thousands of Americans—many of them new converts to Buddhism—follow the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Master who coined the expression "engaged Buddhism" and introduced its implications to the West.⁶

Today many more Buddhist voices and movements have entered the world stage. Perhaps the best known are the recent Nobel Peace laureates Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet (1989), and Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese opposition leader (1991). The forced exile of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans and the systematic repression of their compatriots who remained (or were born) in Tibet since the Chinese crackdown in 1959, have made the Dalai Lama's tireless campaign for reconciliation and restoration a model of engaged Buddhism. Likewise, the resolute courage of Aung San Suu Kyi, a Buddhist laywoman and diplomat, elected national leader in democratic elections in 1989 and then held under house arrest in Rangoon by the ruling military junta, is another striking example of Buddhist nonviolent resistance.⁷

Less well-known movements and leaders have also helped to define the meaning of socially engaged Buddhism. The mass conversion to Buddhism of millions of India's "Untouchables" since 1956 is the legacy of Dr. B. R.

Ambedkar, India's fiery civil rights leader and statesman, and an ongoing experiment in urban economic development and grass roots religious revival.⁸ In Sri Lanka, the participation of 8,000 villages and 300,000 volunteers in the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement ("All Awaken through Volunteer Service") represents the oldest and largest Buddhist-inspired rural development program in Asia. And the gathering momentum among Asian Buddhist women to restore full ordination for women and to rebuild the Buddhist Order of Nuns, or *bhikkhuni sangha*, connects engaged Buddhism to the global struggle for gender equality.⁹

Three of the studies presented here do not deal with "liberation movements," as that term is commonly understood. Two are devoted to individual figures—the Thai reformers, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa—whose followers are only loosely organized, while a third presents a movement that is highly organized, materially prosperous, and politically influential—the Soka Gakkai lay movement of Japan. Yet these three cases exemplify essential traits of contemporary engaged Buddhism and the liberation movements surveyed. The late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was arguably the most prolific scholar-teacher in the history of Theravada Buddhism. Leaving more than fifty volumes of religious and social commentary and founding the temple-retreat-training-conference center of Suan Mokkh in Chaiya, Thailand, Buddhadasa may be regarded as the senior philosopher of engaged Buddhism. Thousands of pilgrims, students, ecumenical and community leaders, resident monks, and lay practitioners are likely to use Suan Mokkh ("Garden of Liberation") for generations to come. Similarly, the lay Thai activist and author, Sulak Sivaraksa, a longtime protégé of Buddhadasa, has become a kind of a one-man liberation movement, founding numerous grass-roots, volunteer organizations for peace, community development, and ecumenical dialogue, including the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB, founded in 1989), and publishing a flood of pamphlets, articles, and books, including *A Socially Engaged Buddhism* (1988) and *Seeds of Peace* (1992). Although not representing a specific constituency (such as the Untouchables or Buddhist women), Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa, like Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, speak the universal language of human suffering, wisdom, compassion, and liberation we associate with traditional Buddhist teachings.

The inclusion of a chapter on the Japanese lay Buddhist movement, Soka Gakkai, has raised objections. In spite of its energetic engagement in the political, economic, educational, and cultural realms of Japanese society; its consistent espousal of material as well as spiritual well-being (both tenets shared by other engaged Buddhists); and its significant size for a movement founded less than fifty years ago (numbering 8 million in Japan

and 1.26 million in 120 other countries), some Buddhist practitioners and scholars argue that Soka Gakkai is fundamentally unlike the liberation movements in South and Southeast Asia. Because of its considerable wealth, its appeal to the class aspirations of its members, and its affiliation with the Komeito, Japan's third-largest political party, critics question its "social location." Secondly, the Gakkai's intolerance of other Buddhist sects and practices (not to mention other religious traditions), its aggressive missionary outreach through one-to-one proselytizing, and, most recently, the breakup of its historical ties with the orthodox Nichiren Shoshu priesthood have raised questions about its status within the Nichiren tradition and its compatibility with the rising spirit of world Buddhism. Finally, the public activities of Soka Gakkai's energetic leader, Daisaku Ikeda, have perplexed and offended some observers, who question his motives and admit that they prefer a more retiring and "gentle" style of Buddhist leadership. It has been said that Ikeda's high-profile meetings with world leaders, frequent lecture and book promotion tours, and even the focus on global issues such as human rights and environmentalism are unfitting for a Buddhist public figure whose sect (if not he himself) stands to benefit materially from the attention.

For the purposes of this volume, such worries over Soka Gakkai's designation as a Buddhist liberation movement or as an exemplar of socially engaged Buddhism have underscored the need to analyze the similarities and differences of the movements and individuals surveyed, and to introduce the larger topic of the place of engaged Buddhism within the history of the Buddhist tradition as a whole.¹⁰ The first task—the need for a phenomenology of Buddhist liberation movements—is addressed in the following section, while the historical question—engaged Buddhism's relation to traditional teachings—is addressed in the final sections of the Introduction.

Buddhist Liberation Movements: A Phenomenology

Beginning our discussion on the streets of Saigon in 1963, we enter a world of people's movements and liberation fronts surrounded by war, violence, and superpower intervention. In the developing nations and border states surrounding the great powers, the immediacy of death by bullet, car bomb, and poverty has spawned liberation theologies and religious revival movements for generations. Yet the presence of religion has been no guarantee of social harmony or diminished violence. Indeed religion, when embodied by true-believers and closed communities, often increases tensions, triggers new outbreaks of hostility, and prevents adversaries from

resolving their differences.¹¹ Sadly, Buddhists cannot claim exemption from this pattern, as Stanley Tambiah has shown in his study of religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka.¹² Nor have Buddhists, compared to other religious people, played notable roles in the resolution of local and international tensions. Like the followers of other faiths, Buddhists have responded to local challenges in provisional ways, sometimes pursuing collective action, including institutional pronouncements, nonviolent intervention, and even the principled use of force. On the other hand, like the followers of other faiths, Buddhists have as often declined or failed to lead in shaping the flow of social change.

Despite these caveats, all of the engaged Buddhists in our collection—from Thich Nhat Hanh to Daisaku Ikeda—have been consistent advocates and activists for world peace. The unprecedented awarding of Nobel Peace prizes to two Buddhists in a three-year period, and the prevalence of the theme of “inner peace and world peace,” suggesting the conjunction of spiritual and political practice, in the writings of Buddhadasa, Sulak Sivaraksa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama suggest this as a distinguishing mark of contemporary engaged Buddhism. The tone and style of Buddhist activism does not always match the stereotype of the mild and self-effacing monk; indeed, the tensed arms and clenched fist of a robed monk addressing a public gathering in Sri Lanka makes a striking cover for Tambiah’s *Buddhism Betrayed?*, while Ambedkar’s slogan “Educate! Agitate! Organize!” sounds unlikely as an update of the ancient Buddhist precepts.

In a comparative study of Third World liberation theologies, Deane William Ferm observes that Christian liberation theology has two salient features. First, “it stresses liberation from all forms of human oppression: social, economic, political, racial, sexual, environmental, religious”; and second, it insists that theology must be truly indigenous. “For this reason liberation theology coming out of Peru cannot be merely transported to Sri Lanka or South Korea”; each locality must devise its own moral and political response to the vicissitudes it faces.¹³

While the first of Ferm’s observations—the worldly perspective of liberation theologies—is fully consistent with the Buddhist liberation movements surveyed, the second feature—the cultural particularism of liberation theologies—does not match (despite obvious local elements) the pervasive universalism of engaged Buddhism.¹⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh’s letter to America’s best-known civil rights leader was motivated not by a desire to promote Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism, self-immolation, or a particular political outcome to the war. It was rather, like the sacrifice of Quang Duc, “to call the attention of the world to the suffering” of the Vietnamese in a universal language—not unlike the ecumenical or nonsectarian expressions and gestures of many engaged Buddhists chronicled in this volume.¹⁵

As an expedient way of presenting several related aspects of engaged Buddhism in Asia, let us use the terms “Buddhist,” “liberation,” and “movement” to stand, respectively, for the personal, doctrinal, and institutional dimensions of the phenomenon. Like the traditional Three Refuges (*tisarana*) or vows of homage to the Buddha (personal exemplar, savior, or symbol of enlightenment), the Dharma (doctrine, truth, way), and the Sangha (practicing community, both ordained and lay), this threefold scheme will enable us to draw out important patterns of thought and action in the emerging Buddhism.

Interpretive Pattern for Comparing Buddhist Liberation Movements

Buddhist	Liberation	Movements
personal	doctrinal	institutional
leader	teachings	actions
[Buddha	Dharma	Sangha]

A New Kind of Leader

Each of the movements surveyed here has coalesced around a popular leader or leaders whose identity and mission are understood by followers to be distinctively *Buddhist*. Perhaps the preeminent example in this respect is that of the Dalai Lama, who is venerated as an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the patron saint of Tibet and the epitome of divine compassion. Throughout the world, followers of the Tibetan tradition show respect for the Dalai Lama by displaying his photograph on altars or on the walls in their homes. Similarly, in the years since Dr. Ambedkar’s death, a devotional cult has grown up among his followers, who display his image in their homes in the form of posters or small busts, or outdoors in the form of plaster, stone, or bronze monuments. What is significant in both instances, one old (Dalai Lamas have long been venerated as symbols of wisdom and compassion by Tibetan Buddhists) and one new (never before had an Indian Untouchable been venerated as a Buddhist leader), is that the image is often combined or juxtaposed with that of the Buddha, and the ensemble is found not only in a temple or shrine complex but in the home or on the street corner.

In a study of religious symbolism and political change in Ceylon, Gananath Obeyesekere noted the appearance of images and statues in the home and on street corners—Buddha statues that sprang up on nearly

every major intersection in urban Sri Lanka, and private Buddha altars or *Budu ge* that became a common sight in middle-class Buddhist homes by the 1960s.¹⁶ Obeyesekere called this importation of religious symbols into the secular realm “a spatial shift symbolizing the entry of Buddhism into the ‘world,’ ” and went on to analyze its key elements:

1. the emergence of a leader who provides a charter for change, a model for emulation, and becomes a symbol of a new order;
2. role shifts, specifically a this-worldly asceticism directed to political and social goals; and
3. ‘a rationalization of the religious life’ involving the discrediting of folk religious elements (such as theistic devotionism or ritualism) and an emphasis on mental and moral development through education and virtuous living.¹⁷

Many leaders of the Asian Buddhist liberation movements embody these elements. Most came from relatively privileged circumstances and benefited from intensive early education.¹⁸ Indeed, when one considers the Dalai Lama’s rarefied monastic education, Ambedkar’s doctoral degrees from Columbia and London universities, and the origins of Soka Gakkai in the educational reform movement of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, we can see the extraordinary role that formal education has played in the origins of engaged Buddhism.¹⁹ On the other hand, none of the leaders chose the most traditional role for Buddhist leaders in the past, that of the forest or temple monk. Buddhadasa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama, three ordained movement leaders, have embarked on nontraditional careers involving travel, administrative responsibilities, contact with members of the opposite sex, and financial affairs. Most ordained women of Taiwan and female lay renunciants of Sri Lanka (*dasa sil mata*), Thailand (*mae ji*), Burma (*thila shin*), and Tibet (*ani*) eschew the traditional monastic rules of subordination to monks and emphasize community service. When one adds the institutional and temporal duties of head of state (Dalai Lama), cabinet minister, minority leader, constitutional lawyer (Ambedkar), and chief executive officer of nongovernmental organizations numbering thousands or millions of members (Ariyaratne, Ikeda), one recognizes the magnitude of the social, psychological, and ideological shifts that have occurred.

In spite of the fortunate backgrounds and extensive influence of the liberation movement leaders, each one has had to confront and overcome daunting obstacles. Ambedkar’s childhood (and perhaps more painfully, his adulthood) as an Untouchable was the source of his moral authority and his attraction to Buddhism. The activist women, especially in South Asia, have confronted staunch resistance to change from lay and ordained sectors of

Buddhist society. Other leaders have had great personal sadness to bear: for the Dalai Lama, exile and the near extinction of his culture; for Thich Nhat Hanh, the protracted civil and superpower war in his country; for the first Soka Gakkai leaders, Makiguchi and Toda Josei, imprisonment and (for Makiguchi) death at the hands of the wartime Japanese government; for Sulak Sivaraksa, imprisonment and exile for denouncing the Thai throne; for leaders of the Ambedkarite movement in central India and the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, the intractable poverty and backwardness of rural and urban slum populations; and for Buddhadasa, the deterioration and decadence of Sangha and society in rapidly industrializing Thailand. In the process of struggling through these hardships, the new Buddhist leaders exemplify Obeyesekere's role models for change, popular emulation, and a new symbolic order.

New Readings of Ancient Dharma

The *liberation* that these leaders envision and articulate in their addresses and writings is consistently based on their own distinctive readings of traditional Buddhist doctrines, particularly those of selflessness, interdependence, the five precepts, the four noble truths, nondualism, and emptiness. Virtually all of these leaders have written creatively and copiously on the contemporary application of traditional Buddhist teachings. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* was conceived and written as a kind of Buddhist bible for the Untouchable converts to Buddhism, while the flood of addresses and essays from the other leaders has been directed at a full range of religious and social issues.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has identified "scripturalism" as a distinctive mark of religious change in classical cultures. By this he meant a heightened reliance on ancient teachings in rapidly changing times. Such attention to tradition might take the form of new popular reverence for scripture and for scriptural literacy, a belief in the inerrancy of the canonical tradition, or alternatively, the prodigious efforts of scholars and public figures to reinterpret ancient teachings in the light of modern problems. One thinks, for example, of the contrast between the Vietnamese association of a monk's death by fire with a well-known chapter in the Lotus Sutra, on the one hand, and the Soka Gakkai faith in the single-minded chanting of the title of the same scripture, on the other hand.

Given such a wide range of possible responses, Geertz offered the following caution:

For scripturalism to become a living religious tradition rather than merely a collection of strained apologies, its adherents would have to undertake a serious theological rethinking of the scholastic tradition they can, apparently, neither live with nor live without.²⁰

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's historic rereading of the Theravada tradition is already regarded as a major contribution to Theravada commentarial literature, as the Dalai Lama's writings and pronouncements on Buddhist philosophy and ethics occupy a similar place in the Tibetan context. Sulak Sivaraksa and A. T. Ariyaratne have been notably resourceful in invoking traditional Pali scriptures, such as the *Kutadanta Sutta*, *Sigalovada Sutta*, *Jatakamala*, *Buddhacarita*, and others to formulate a viable lay ethic in a world of multinational corporations, mass media, political corruption, and mounting violence. Daisaku Ikeda's imaginative melding of doctrines from the T'ien T'ai and Nichiren traditions—especially those of *mappo*, “degenerate age,” and *obutsu myogo*, “engaged religion”—with contemporary reflections on a wide range of planetary issues (and in dialogue with well-known political and academic figures) have been appearing at a rate of nearly a book per year, translated and distributed in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Chinese, Korean, Thai, Indonesian, and Malay.

It has been said that the word “liberation” is like a chameleon, “changing its color with each new attachment: animal liberation, women's liberation, liberation theology, gay liberation, or the liberation of Kuwait.”²¹ In traditional Buddhism, liberation (Pali *vimutti*, Sanskrit *vimoksha*) has also meant many things, from the Theravada freedom from desires, passions, and delusion to the Mahayana freedom from conventional views of reality to the Vajrayana freedom from moral and ethical dualism. All of these meanings have been tied to the ultimate promise of a personal, spiritual liberation that transcends the material, psychological, and social confines of this world: *nirvana*, a state of peace, devoid of passions and attachments; *bodhi*, the condition of wisdom and compassion that is “gone far beyond” (*parasamgate*) mundane conditioning and comprehension; or *mahasukha*, the sublime happiness that results from advanced ritual practice.

Yet in the socially engaged Buddhism of modern Asia, the liberation sought has been called a “mundane awakening” (*laukodaya*), which includes individuals, villages, nations, and ultimately all people (*sarvodaya*), and which focuses on objectives that may be achieved and recognized in this lifetime, in this world. George Bond has summarized the comprehensive nature of the liberative vision that inspires volunteers in the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, including moral, cultural, spiritual, social, political, and economic dimensions. Thus, in addition to being a society based on the Buddhist precepts and offering opportunities for obtaining wisdom, happiness, and peace, Ariyaratna and his colleagues have focused on the “ten basic human needs” that must be met for liberation to be possible: a clean and beautiful environment, an adequate and safe water supply, clothing, balanced diet, simple housing, basic health care, communication facilities, energy, education related to life and living, and free access to cultural

and spiritual resources. The list is offered as a modern version of the Buddhist “middle way”—a balancing of the material and spiritual aspects of social change.²²

We may conclude that a profound change in Buddhist soteriology—from a highly personal and other-worldly notion of liberation to a social, economic, this-worldly liberation—distinguishes the Buddhist movements in our study. The traditional conceptions of karma and rebirth, the veneration of the bhikkhu sangha, and the focus on ignorance and psychological attachment to account for suffering in the world (the second Noble Truth) have taken second place to the application of highly rationalized reflections on the institutional and political manifestations of greed, hatred, and delusion, and on new organizational strategies for addressing war and injustice, poverty and intolerance, and the prospects for “outer” as well as “inner” peace in the world.²³

Skillful Means for Social Engagement

It is this new awareness of the social and institutional dimensions of suffering and the liberation from suffering that has contributed to the rise of contemporary Buddhist liberation *movements*. Let us stipulate that a modern liberation “movement” must be more than a collection of people who happen to live in a geographic area and participate in a cultural tradition—whether religious, ethnic, or political. Moreover, a liberation movement must be more than a voluntary association guided by exemplary leaders and a common vision—when that vision is related only to the personal or spiritual needs of its members. (Most intentional religious communities, including the order of monks that followed Shakyamuni Buddha, would fall within that definition.) Rather, let us propose that a modern liberation movement is a voluntary association guided by exemplary leaders and a common vision of a new society (or world) based on peace, justice, and freedom. Today’s Buddhist liberation movements in Asia exemplify these features, appropriately expressed in language and styles of conduct that its members deem to be “Buddhist.”

In framing our definition in this way, we avoid language that would restrict the membership of liberation movements to those persons who are objectively oppressed, disadvantaged, or marginalized—or who regard themselves as such. For if it is true that liberation movements have initially grown out of historical oppression—from the Hebrews of the Biblical exodus, to the industrial “proletariat” of the nineteenth century, to the Christian liberationists of Latin America—it is also true that the theologies and institutions that emerged from these roots were formulated and nurtured by leaders and groups who had escaped (or been “liberated”) from oppressive circumstances.²⁴

We have noted that the most distinctive shift of thinking in socially engaged Buddhism is from a transmundane (*lokuttara*) to a mundane (*lokiya*) definition of liberation. Accompanying this shift is a de-emphasis on the stages of transmundane liberation (for example, the Theravada stages of “stream-enterer,” “once-returner,” “non-returner,” and “arahant,” or the Mahayana stages of the Bodhisattva path), and a new focus on the causes, varieties, and remedies of worldly suffering and oppression. Thus contemporary Buddhist liberation movements are as likely to apply their interpretive and organizational efforts to the critique and reform of social and political conditions as they are to propose and practice new spiritual exercises. The evils of war and genocide, of ethnic hatred and caste violence, and of economic disparity and degradation figure prominently in engaged Buddhist writings. On the other hand, the democratization, if not the transformation, of spiritual practices—for example, meditation and ritual initiations as now appropriated by lay practitioners—has been seen as an integral concomitant to the shift to mundane awakening.²⁵

To advance their vision of a new world, Buddhist liberation movements have harnessed modern methods of education, mass communication, political influence and activism, jurisprudence and litigation, and yes, even fund-raising and marketing. Many examples of these new “skillful means” may be cited.

If practical education is a basic human need, according to villagers in Sri Lanka, then the Buddhist liberation movements have concentrated major resources to this end. Among the first activities of the Buddhist women reformers in Sri Lanka at the turn of the century was the founding of primary schools for girls. Today the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG), or Western Buddhist Order in India, is proud of its nursery schools, which permit parents to work full-time or to attend school themselves. The TBMSG also offers vocational training in tailoring and other trades for women, who would ordinarily not have the opportunity or the skills to work outside the home. Sarvodaya Shramadana has carried on the ancient tradition of founding and supporting Buddhist primary and secondary schools in cooperation with the Bhikkhu Sangha in Sri Lanka. To promote higher education, Ambedkar founded the People’s Education Society and its member institutions, Siddharth and Milind colleges, and Thich Nhat Hanh and his associates were instrumental in founding Van Han University. The Soka Gakkai, in recognition of its founder’s lifetime commitment to educational reform, has established the Soka schools from kindergarten through graduate school, with Soka University and its affiliated research institutes at the apex of the system. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the Dalai Lama have labored to preserve and improve monastic education but also to broaden access of the laity to spiritual and cultural training.

The printing press, the public address system, and the speaking tour have been skillfully employed by Asian Buddhist liberation movements and leaders, as we have seen; yet some of them have gone considerably farther. By staging highly newsworthy media events and by associating—or “networking”—with celebrated personalities to reach a worldwide audience, engaged Buddhists have sought to bring international pressure on governments and individuals perpetrating violence and suffering. Was this not, after all, the effect of the Buddhist self-immolations in Saigon in 1963 and of Thich Nhat Hanh’s follow-up letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., two years later? The letter explicitly places the matter in the context of mass communication (“The press spoke then of suicide . . .”) and then goes on to underscore the intention of Thich Quang Duc and his followers, “moving the hearts of the oppressors, and calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese.” If Mahatma Gandhi used street theater, newsreel, and print media to communicate with his adversaries during the Indian struggle for independence, now television, Fax, and E-mail make it possible for engaged Buddhists to enter the offices and homes of the rich and powerful: heads of government and multinational corporations, and the middle class who rule by checkbook and ballot box.

The memoirs of Ambedkar’s close associates offer a revealing glimpse at the feverish planning that led up to the mass conversion of Untouchables to Buddhism in Nagpur on October 14, 1956—and a prime example of the role image making has played in twentieth-century engaged Buddhism. The date had been set for years (Ambedkar had decided to convert at least five years earlier): 1956 would mark the worldwide celebration of the 2,500th birthday of Buddhism, and October 14 was the traditional date of the conversion of Asoka Maurya, Buddhism’s greatest king. But the location and the text of the ceremony were sources of contention among Ambedkar’s inner circle up to the final weeks. Some said Bombay, with its millions of potential converts; others said Nagpur, with its central Indian location and legendary associations (the Naga people played a key role in protecting and preserving the Buddha’s teachings). More controversial was the question of the Three Refuges: Ambedkar reportedly refused until the final days to take refuge in the Sangha, because of the wealth and apathy of monks he had met in Sri Lanka and Burma (“an army of idlers”). At last, Ambedkar’s aides convinced him that the conversion would not be authentic unless the universal custom of taking all three refuges was observed. India’s oldest Theravada monk was invited to preside.²⁶

Can it be doubted that these negotiations, like the plans surrounding the Saigon immolations, were intended to maximize the social and political, as well as spiritual, impact of the events? It is interesting to compare

the public relations skills of the Dalai Lama and Daisaku Ikeda, both of whom have met frequently with statesmen, scholars, and scientists to promote their movements; have cooperated with film and publishing interests to place their views before the largest audience; and have waged highly sophisticated campaigns for the understanding and support of followers at all strata of society, not least, the educated elite.²⁷ As the Dalai Lama has impressed the world with his sincerity and integrity, so Mr. Ikeda must be credited for his skillful leadership of the most rapidly growing and widely dispersed Buddhist sect on earth.

To sum up our phenomenology of Buddhist Liberation movements, it is instructive to return to the Soka Gakkai as a kind of test case. Clearly, Soka Gakkai shares essential elements of leadership, doctrine, and organization with the other groups. It fits the definition of a liberation movement we have proposed, and it is dedicated to the social and political ideals of engaged Buddhists elsewhere: a dual emphasis on *inner peace* (associated with spiritual practice—chanting for Gakkai members, meditation, devotional ritual, and study for most other groups) and *world peace* (the use of a wide range of educational, social, cultural, and political means to reduce violence, injustice, and environmental degradation). The sticking points for some critics remain the historical intolerance of Nichiren Buddhists for other sects, and Soka Gakkai's overt use of politics and propaganda to achieve public acceptance and influence.²⁸ Yet when these aspects of Nichirenism are compared with well-known and recurrent patterns of exclusivism and political power found elsewhere in Buddhist history—the strident sectarianism of the early Mahayana, as manifested in the Lotus Sutra, for example, or the proclamation of ideological and political hegemony through the mass media of the Indian Asoka Maurya's rock and pillar edicts or the Japanese Prince Shotoku's Ten Article Constitution—the critique loses much of its force.²⁹

In 1970 Donald Swearer wrote in the introduction to his influential *Buddhism in Transition*, "The times in which we live demand that the historic religions find within themselves the strength of reorientation and the wisdom of genuine reformation. Certain aspects of Buddhism in Southeast Asia indicate there is some hope that such revitalization will take place."³⁰ Twenty-five years later, as Swearer's and other chapters in this volume confirm, Buddhist revitalization, in the forms we have come to call "engaged Buddhism" and "Buddhist liberation movements," is a fact—albeit still "in transition." With these reflections on the common characteristics of the movements surveyed in this volume, we turn now to the question of engaged Buddhism's origins, including the complex issue of its continuity or discontinuity with models of traditional Buddhist social teaching and action.

Buddhism and Social Service

"Buddhism is based on service to others," wrote Walpola Rahula, the eminent Sinhalese scholar-monk and activist, in 1946. The occasion was a heated debate over the social role of the Buddhist monk (*bhikkhu*) in Sinhalese society in the final months before independence. Responding to the disparaging remarks of the new prime minister, a rising chorus of letters and editorials in the press, and the official warnings of chief monks of the ancient monastic orders—all denouncing the involvement of monks in public affairs—Rahula delivered a major address in which he argued on historical grounds that political and social engagement was the "heritage of the bhikkhu" and the essence of Buddhism.³¹

Rahula was not alone in this view. One of the premier monastic colleges in Ceylon, the Vidyalandara Pirivena, had earlier issued a declaration on "Bhikkhus and Politics" that read, in part:

We believe that politics today embraces all fields of human activity directed towards the public weal. No one will dispute that the work for the promotion of the religion is the duty of the bhikkhu. It is clear that the welfare of the religion depends on the welfare of the people who profess that religion. . . . We, therefore, declare that it is nothing but fitting for bhikkhus to identify themselves with activities conducing to the welfare of our people—whether these activities be labeled politics or not—as long as they do not constitute an impediment to the religious life of a bhikkhu.³²

Within months the firebrand Rahula founded the United Bhikkhu Council to promote "a great awakening of the bhikkhus and laymen regarding current religious, social, economic, and political problems," organized mass meetings and strikes, and published *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu: A Short History of the Bhikkhu in Educational, Cultural, Social, and Political Life*.

In calling his essay a "short history," Rahula did not mean to imply that the involvement of Buddhist monks in politics was a recent phenomenon. His thesis was that Buddhist monks had traditionally "resolved to remain in *samsara* (the circle of existence and continuity) to serve the world," and moreover that monks, following the example and exhortation of the Buddha, have always vowed "to wander from village to village preaching to the people for their good and for their well-being."³³ Rahula's book, then, stands as a manifesto of socially engaged Buddhism, written by a movement leader who was shortly to land in jail for his public agitations, a monk who exemplified the new religious militancy, and a recognized scholar and university administrator. Like other Sinhalese Buddhist works

of the period, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* was the work of a passionate participant-observer.²⁴

Rahula's summary of the history of monastic engagement in the social and political life of Ceylon begins with a picture of the primitive sangha at the time of the Buddha. Here the founder and his followers are seen giving practical advice to villagers who were "poor, illiterate, not very clean, and not healthy . . . [who] needed simple moral ideas conducive to their material well-being and happiness rather than deep and sublime discourses on philosophy, metaphysics, or psychology as taught in the *Abhidhamma*."³⁵ Such ideas, taken from early Pali scriptures (*suttas*) Rahula was well-qualified to interpret, included the view that crime and immorality in society are rooted in poverty (*Cakkavatti-sihanada-sutta*), that employment opportunities must be provided to ensure the common weal (*Kutadanta-sutta*), that merchants should be diligent, savvy, and scrupulous in their dealings and that laypersons should seek economic security, freedom from debt, good health, and wholesome associations (*Sigala-sutta*; *Anguttara-nikaya*), and that political leaders should observe the Ten Duties of the King, including liberality, morality, self-sacrifice, integrity, nonviolence, and so on (*Dhammapadatthakatha*). In short, "the Buddha and the bhikkhus taught such important ideas pertaining to health, sanitation, earning wealth, mutual relationships, well-being of society, and righteous government—all for the good of the people."³⁶

In the following chapters, Rahula traces the evolution of monks' roles and social teachings in Sinhala Buddhism, stressing the unique and intense symbiosis that developed between the sangha and the state in Ceylon between the third century B.C.E. and the nineteenth century C.E. Not only did the monastic establishment legitimate the throne by developing an ideology of Buddhist kingship, but monks ended up in key advisory and bureaucratic roles throughout the government. In addition to serving as king makers (in a kind of ancient electoral college), monks served as education ministers, physicians, judges, architects, and military advisers. We learn of the rise of state Buddhism and Buddhist holy war. During the reign of Sri Lanka's most illustrious king, Dutthagamani (101–77 B.C.E.), large numbers of bhikkhus accompanied the king on his military campaigns, some disrobing to join the army and others providing moral blessing by their presence. During this period "both bhikkhus and laymen considered that even killing people in order to liberate the religion and the country was not a heinous crime."³⁷

In the course of time, according to Rahula, a profound evolution of monastic roles took place, from a sangha founded on the preeminence of religious practice (*patipatti*) to one founded on study (*pariyatti*), from the prestige of the ascetic monk (*pamsukulika*) to that of the learned monk (*dhammakathika*), and from the dominance of the forest-dweller (*aranyavasi*)

to that of the village-dweller (*gramavasi*). And if the reader grants Rahula's thesis that scholarship is a form of service, and that the vocation of book-wielding scholar-monk (*gantha-dhura*) increasingly attracted more talented and service-oriented youth than the vocation of meditation-master (*vipassana-dhura*), then one is persuaded that, in Ceylon at least, the heritage of the bhikkhu lay in the public sphere and not in monastic retreat.

In the last chapters of *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, Rahula chronicles the forced reversal of Buddhist monastic engagement by successive waves of European colonialists and their Christian missionary allies. With the arrival of the Portuguese (1505), the Dutch (1602), and the British (1815), most of the traditional roles of the Buddhist sangha—especially their social and welfare activities—were usurped by the missionaries. Finally, all that was left to the bhikkhu was “the recitation of the *Suttas* (*Pirit* chanting), preaching a sermon, attendance at funeral rites and alms-giving in memory of the departed, and an idle, cloistered life in the temple.”³⁸

Rahula convincingly shows that the Buddhist revival that began in the nineteenth century with the new militancy of such monastic leaders as the Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala and the Ven. Migettuvatte Sri Gunananda was the heroic response of the sangha to three centuries of political and religious domination. Once again “political monks” could join in the traditional tasks of nation-building and public service, protected both by a restored national government (independence came to Sri Lanka in 1948) and, not incidentally, by the historical legitimation of scholarship like Rahula's.

Buddhism: Spiritual or Political?

The reactions of historians to *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* have been mixed. S. J. Tambiah found Rahula's treatment of the colonial period “innovative and compelling” and endorsed the epitome of the book's thesis offered in its introduction by Edmund F. Perry, that “colonial administrators dispossessed the bhikkhus of their influence on the public life of their people, and actually succeeded in instituting a tradition of Buddhist recluses, to the near exclusion of other types of clergy.”³⁹ Nevertheless, Tambiah shows how Rahula's career and writings, along with those of numerous other ordained and lay supporters of the political bhikkhu cause, contributed to the rise of religiously inspired violence in postindependent Sri Lanka.

Other reviewers have not been as favorable. The Ven. Sangharakshita, an English Buddhist monk whose own credentials as an engaged Buddhist are documented in Chapter 3 of this volume, denounced *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* as suffering from “extreme confusion of thought,” especially with respect to its central proposition that “Buddhism is based on service to others.” Sangharakshita reminds the reader that the earliest bhikkhus

were sent out to preach enlightenment and *brahmacarya*, the holy life, not primarily to give practical advice. Yet, in Rahula's account,

the impression is created that 'a true Buddhist' is concerned with the promotion exclusively of the material well-being of humanity. In other words, having in effect dismissed Nirvana as a sort of anti-social selfishness, the Bodhisattva ideal [of postponing one's own liberation for others] is equated with the secular concept of social service. Could the degradation of a sublime spiritual ideal be carried further than this? Despite his extensive scholarship, the author seems totally unaware of the true significance either of the 'transcendental' state of Nirvana, the goal of the Theravada, or of the transcendental 'career' of the Bodhisattva, the ideal of the Mahayana schools.⁴⁰

Sangharakshita defends his position with a detailed critique of Rahula's argument, noting, for example, that villagers in the Buddha's time were more likely to be prosperous and healthy than poor and dirty, judging from the large numbers of Buddhist monks supported by public philanthropy.⁴¹

Scholars have long questioned the ancient origins of engaged Buddhism. In an influential study, Max Weber depicted ancient Buddhism as an "anti-political status religion, more precisely, a religious 'technology' of wandering and of intellectually schooled mendicant monks . . . the most radical form of salvation-striving conceivable, [whose] salvation is a solely personal act of the single individual."⁴² Today, after eighty years of new research, many specialists are inclined to agree with Weber that, in its essence, primitive Buddhism was not based on service to others, but on the quest for individual enlightenment. Bardwell L. Smith writes,

The primary goal of Buddhism is not a stable order or a just society but the discovery of genuine freedom (or awakening) by each person. It has never been asserted that the conditions of society are unimportant or unrelated to this more important goal, but it is critical to stress the distinction between what is primary and what is not. For Buddhists to lose this distinction is to transform their tradition into something discontinuous with its original and historic essence. Even the vocation of the bodhisattva is not as social reformer but as the catalyst to personal transformation within society.⁴³

Richard Gombrich adds that the Buddha should not be seen as a social reformer: "his concern was to reform individuals and help them to leave society forever, not to reform the world. . . . He never preached against social inequality, only declared its irrelevance to salvation. He neither tried to abolish the caste system nor to do away with slavery"—and ultimately

the sangha came to own slaves and to be submerged in the caste system of greater India.⁴⁴

Joseph M. Kitagawa's "Buddhism and Social Change: An Historical Perspective," (a chapter written, significantly, for the *Festschrift* honoring Walpola Rahula) extends the discussion to China and Japan.⁴⁵ In a survey of the evolution of Buddhist beliefs and institutions amidst historical change throughout Asia, the author concludes that, "while Buddhism had lofty universal principles (Dharma) as well as moral codes for individual life, it made little effort in developing what might be called 'middle principles' to mediate between universal principles and the empirical socio-political and economic situations in any given society."⁴⁶ Kitagawa joins others in pointing out that, "contrary to the popular notion that the Buddha was a crusading social reformer, fighting for the cause of common man against the establishment of his time, there is no evidence that he attempted, directly at any rate, to change society."⁴⁷

Later stages of assimilation and symbiosis placed Buddhism under the patronage of kings in India, China, Japan, and neighboring states. According to Kitagawa, this left the sangha "detached from the everyday aspect of life—typically uninterested in customary law and political matters, marriage and family affairs, contracts, and business relationships." In China, for example, amidst the vast property holdings of the sangha, and its popularity among the genteel classes, the cosmic bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya (known for their heroic intervention on behalf of suffering humanity) are transformed, respectively, into the gentle Kuan-yin and the pot-bellied Pu-tai, epitomizing "the long and tragic process of particularization and domestication of the 'universal' dimension of Buddhism throughout its history in China."⁴⁸ Similar transformations are cited in other culture areas, yielding the conclusion that

rarely did [Buddhist] rulers, even the pious ones, tolerate a prophetic judgment, based on Buddhist principles, directed toward the norms and structures of the socio-political order.⁴⁹

We may conclude that engaged Buddhism, as exemplified in the liberation movements in this volume, has not been a typical pattern in the social history of Asia. This is not to say that the role of Buddhist monks in the political life of premodern Ceylon is without parallel. The continuous and often intimate relations between sangha and state in the Theravada lands of Southeast Asia, in China, Tibet and the Himalayan region, and in imperial Japan from the time of Shotoku Taishi are well documented.⁵⁰ But the kind of Buddhism exemplified in the careers and writings of figures like Thich Nhat Hanh, Ambedkar, Ariyaratne, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Daisaku

Ikeda—and, incidentally, in the nonviolent activities of the political bhikkhus in Sri Lanka since the 1940s—is significantly different from the state-sponsored “service to others” in Rahula’s account.

The model of engaged Buddhism presented in *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*—that of monks legitimating and staffing the government in all of its functions, including warfare—does not resemble contemporary engaged Buddhism. The intimate relationship between sangha and state, which lies at the heart of Rahula’s account, is antithetical to the independent, sometimes adversarial, relationship between movements and power structures claimed by many Buddhist activists today. Even in the cases of the clerically directed Tibetan community-in-exile, and the lay-directed Soka Gakkai, where great authority is vested in the leader and where the community is actively involved in political affairs, these movements are neither state-controlled nor state-sponsored.⁵¹

A liberation movement, we proposed, is a voluntary association of people, guided by exemplary leaders and a common vision of a society based on peace, justice, and freedom. Such a movement is significantly different in character and function from a sovereign state, which exercises temporal power over its citizens in the name of a common purpose. Socially engaged Buddhists direct their energies toward social conditions over which the state has legal authority, if not control; but their objective is to influence the exercise of temporal power, not to wield it. Sulak Sivaraksa is fond of contrasting the “capital-B Buddhists” who cultivate privileged relations with state power brokers, with the “small-b Buddhists” who change society by manifesting qualities of wisdom, compassion, and peace:

Buddhism, as practiced in most Asian countries today, serves mainly to legitimize dictatorial regimes and multinational corporations. If we Buddhists want to redirect our energies towards enlightenment and universal love, we should begin by spelling Buddhism with a small “b.” Buddhism with a small “b” means concentrating on the message of the Buddha and paying less attention to myth, culture, and ceremony.⁵²

This does not mean a strategic retreat from social activism, but rather the avoidance of excessive wealth and power.⁵³ Consequently, the status of non-governmental organization or “NGO” well describes Sulak’s International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Sarvodaya Shramadana, Soka Gakkai International, TBMSG, and other Buddhist groups treated in this volume—groups working for social change with or without the alliance of the nation-state.

We may also conclude that the history of engaged Buddhism, as exemplified in the liberation movements presented here, is a brief one. Once we

have identified the common characteristics of contemporary Buddhist liberation movements (voluntary groups and nongovernmental organizations committed to realizing a just and peaceful society by Buddhist means), and once we have rejected two extremes of historical reconstruction (the extreme of a primitive Buddhist counterculture bent on social reform, and the extreme of a sangha directing social change from its position within the power elite), we recognize that the shape and style of contemporary engaged Buddhism does not appear in Buddhist history until about the year 1880. Here we may thank Rahula for providing the setting.

It is only in the late nineteenth-century revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka—and particularly in its two principal figures, the American Theosophist, Col. Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and his protégé, the Sinhalese Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933)—that we first recognize the spirit and substance of the religious activism we call “socially engaged Buddhism.” And it is only in this context that we first meet the missing ingredient—in effect, the primary explanation for the appearance of socially engaged Buddhism in its contemporary form following the arrival of Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky in Ceylon on May 17, 1880. This ingredient is the influence of European and American religious and political thought (and perhaps equally important, western methods of institutional development and public communication) on the evolution of modern Buddhism.

Imagine the scene, as the first Americans to embrace Buddhism as a personal faith arrived in the coastal town of Galle.

The harbor was lined with brightly painted fishing boats, a thousand flags flew in the sun, and white cloth was spread out on the dock to lead them to their carriage. On May 25, [Blavatsky] and the Colonel knelt before a Buddhist priest at a temple in Galle and performed the ceremony of “taking *pansi*”—the five lay precepts of undertaking to refrain from killing, lying, stealing, intoxicants, and sexual misconduct. They repeated the vows in Pali, as well as the refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, before a large crowd. “When we finished the last of the Silas,” Olcott wrote in his diary, “and offered flowers in the customary way, there came a mighty shout to make one’s nerves tingle.”⁵⁴

Engaged Buddhism as Cultural Interpenetration

In “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon,” Gananath Obeyesekere coined the term “Protestant Buddhism” to refer to the Buddhist revivals associated with Olcott’s Buddhist Theosophical Society in Ceylon (1880) and Dharmapala’s Maha Bodhi Society in India (1891). Not only were these societies and the attitudes, institutions, and literature they

fostered deeply derivative of the Victorian Christianity which Olcott and Dharmapala encountered and imported from the West, but they were also, significantly, a *protest* against Victorian religion and the political dominance it represented in preindependence South Asia. Thus, according to Obeyesekere, we cannot consider the Buddhist revival in South Asia in purely Buddhist terms. We are forced to acknowledge and to trace the ways in which Buddhist and Christian—Asian, European, and American—traditions have become inextricably intertwined in the brief history of socially engaged Buddhism.⁵⁵

A narrative history of the Buddhist revivals of Sri Lanka and elsewhere since the 1880s is not our purpose here. Rather, to give a sense of the profound cultural interpenetration that shaped the personalities of Olcott and Dharmapala and laid the groundwork for engaged Buddhism today, let us return to the three schematic “refuges”—the personal, the doctrinal, and the institutional—that structured our earlier analysis above. Here we may refer to the reformers, the scriptures, and the public symbols of Buddhist modernism. To illustrate the correspondence of the careers and contributions of Olcott and Dharmapala with those of our current survey, let us add Ambedkar to the account, as a leader who embodied the goals and methods of the later Buddhist liberationists.

Three Exemplars: Olcott, Dharmapala, Ambedkar

While 1880, the year of Olcott’s arrival in Ceylon, may be taken as a focal date in the appearance of engaged Buddhism as we know it, 1891, the year of Ambedkar’s birth in a British army barracks near Bhopal, offers a more useful introduction to our three *reformers*.⁵⁶ Ambedkar was the fourteenth child in an Untouchable family. His father, thanks to the British policy of recruiting and promoting Hindus of all castes in the colonial army, served as a military school headmaster and for years as young Bhimrao’s academic tutor. These childhood years of a provincial outcaste were decisively to shape the future direction of engaged Buddhism.

It was also in 1891 that the Baptist Missionary Society in Ceylon reported resistance to its efforts to Christianize the population:

The Buddhist opposition . . . is now an active and organized force which must be reckoned with. With a European at its head to direct, it is strenuously waging war against us. The head men are gathering around their European leader, and are using all their influence to overthrow our week-day and especially our Sunday-school. . . . In the Buddhist newspapers have appeared columns of print against us. Public subscriptions have been started for funds to oppose us. Buddhist emissaries have been sent out from

Kandy to stir up the people. Now, after twelve months' agitation, their school is to be started in the very next compound to ours. We cannot but lose ground.⁵⁷

The "European" in question was, rather, the American Colonel Olcott, age 59, who had been agitating against the British since he and Blavatsky arrived. The son of New Jersey Presbyterians, Olcott had served in the Civil War, investigated military procurement fraud for the War Department, and worked as an attorney and journalist in New York City before returning to his youthful interest in spiritualism.

In 1891, we also meet the twenty-seven-year-old Anagarika Dharmapala, born Don David Hewavitarne to a wealthy furniture merchant in Colombo, educated in Catholic and Episcopal missionary schools, and then "born again" as a militant Buddhist under the influence of Blavatsky and Olcott. Making his first pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in northeast India, the traditional site of the Buddha's enlightenment, Dharmapala was shocked at the condition of the shrine, which had been under the control of Hindu landlords for generations. Nevertheless, in a passage reminiscent of the call of the Biblical prophet Isaiah, the young activist (who had memorized much of the Christian Bible in missionary school) illustrates the cultural interpenetration of Christian and Buddhist sentiment that typified the Theosophy of Blavatsky and Olcott:

Jan. 22. How elevating: the sacred Vihara—the Lord sitting on his throne and the great solemnity which pervades all around makes the heart of the pious devotee weep. How delightful: as soon as I touched my forehead to the Vajrasana, a sudden impulse came to my mind. It prompted me to stop there and take care of the sacred spot.

A few weeks later, after a midnight return to the Maha Bodhi temple:

February 17. This night at 12 for the first time in my life I experienced that peace which passeth all understanding. How peaceful it was. The life of our Lord is a lofty and elevating subject for meditation. The Four Truths and the Noble Eight-fold Path alone can make the devoted pupil of Nature happy.⁵⁸

In the following months, Dharmapala wrote hundreds of letters to Buddhist leaders in India, Burma, and Ceylon to raise funds to purchase the Maha Bodhi temple and surroundings; he sailed to Rangoon and Colombo to meet with leaders; he founded the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta; he installed four monks at the Burmese Rest House in Bodh Gaya with representatives from Ceylon, China, Japan, and Bengal; and he made prepara-

tions for the publication of the *Maha Bodhi Journal*, which, with the society, was to wage a successful public relations and legal campaign for the renovation of the ancient Buddhist shrine.⁵⁹

These highlights of the events of the year 1891 illustrate some of the common features of the careers of Olcott, Dharmapala, and Ambedkar—features we may list as characteristics of contemporary engaged Buddhism, and evidence of its multicultural parentage

First, *the engaged Buddhists were high-profile personalities whose careers straddled and sometimes blended East and West*. All three were trained in English-speaking or Christian schools and universities. Olcott was the “White Buddhist” with flowing beard, a military title, and the anomaly of adult conversion to a religion that was practically unheard of back home. Ambedkar renounced Hinduism for a religion that was now of greater interest to the British than to most Indians. He is revered as “Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar,” a mixture of Eastern and Western honorifics, whose followers have been known to chant his academic degrees like a mantra: “M.A., Ph.D., D.Sc., LL.D., D.Litt., Bar.-at-Law.” He is usually pictured in horn-rimmed glasses and Western suit and tie in the ubiquitous wall calendars and memorial statuary. Hewavitarne, more the survivor of a foreign religion than a convert to one, invented for himself the liminal persona “Anagarika Dharmapala,” “homeless protector of the doctrine,” betwixt and between layman and monk, Asian and European. He wore white robes, the traditional garb of Buddhist laity, and practiced celibacy, the universal mark of the monk; he wore his flowing hair long, in the manner both of the Indian sadhu and the Victorian artist, yet spent decades in the Indian courts seeking legal control of the Bodh Gaya shrine. With his biblical diction and his gift for oratory, Dharmapala made an unforgettable impression on the Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus of Asia, and with Swami Vivekananda, he was a star attraction at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

Second, *the engaged Buddhists were dauntless activists for cultural renewal, social change, and an ecumenical World Buddhism*. Olcott, Dharmapala, and Ambedkar were spellbinding orators and prolific writers who used the print media and the mass rally to further the causes they espoused. All three traveled widely in Asia and the West to publicize their campaigns, win concessions, or raise money. All three founded journals and newspapers to promote their aims; all three used the courts and lawmaking bodies to achieve their objectives; and all three faced physical dangers and threats at various points in their careers.

Olcott’s and Dharmapala’s trip to Japan in 1889, and their shuttle diplomacy between Rangoon and Colombo were taken up in the spirit of a dawning unity among Theravadins, Mahayanists, and Vajrayanists. Sixty years later, Ambedkar was to give addresses at the first three meetings of

the World Federation of Buddhists, held in Colombo, Rangoon, and Kathmandu. Of course, for Ambedkar and Olcott, the oddness of being a Buddhist and then serving as a missionary took some getting used to. Recalling his recitation of Buddhist vows in Pali before a Jodo Shinshu altar in Kyoto, Olcott later wrote,

I could not help smiling to myself when thinking of the horror that would have been felt by any of my Puritan ancestors of the seventeenth century could they have looked forward to this calamitous day! I am sure that if I had been born among them at Boston or Hartford, I should have been hanged for heresy on the tallest tree.⁶⁰

Third, *the engaged Buddhists are honored by their followers as saints and bodhisattvas*. On Olcott Day, an annual school holiday in Sri Lanka, brass lamps and incense are lit to commemorate the death of the American Buddhist saint. Saffron-robed monks bow before the Colonel's photograph as children offer gifts and pray, "May the merit we have gained by these good deeds pass on to Colonel Olcott, and may he gain happiness and Peace."⁶¹ Dharmapala Day is similarly celebrated in Sri Lanka to commemorate the native son who took higher ordination as a monk in the last weeks of his life and was buried amid the ruins of Sarnath, the traditional site of the Buddha's first sermon. Today, followers of Dr. Ambedkar reverently call him Babasaheb or simply Baba ("father"), but they have also been known to refer to him as a Bodhisattva or enlightened being, and as the Second Manu, linking the ancient Hindu law giver with the architect of the modern Indian Constitution.

In the opening scene of his book on the rising sectarian militancy in India in the 1980s, V. S. Naipaul described his taxi ride from the Bombay airport one April day:

Bombay is a crowd. But I began to feel, when I was some way into the city from the airport that morning, that the crowd on the pavement and the road was very great, and that something unusual might be happening. . . . Many of them seemed freshly bathed, with fresh puja marks on their foreheads; many of them seemed to be in their best clothes: Bombay people celebrating an important new day, perhaps.⁶²

Unable to question his Marathi-speaking driver about the festive crowd, now five deep and extending more than a mile along the road, the author finally learned the answer from a cleaning woman: April 14 is the birthday of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, savior of the Untouchables. In spite of Ambedkar's untimely death only weeks after his conversion to Buddhism, "he had remained their leader, the man they honoured above all others; he

was almost their deity.” And despite the chaos and pathos of the “million mutinies” described in the course of Naipaul’s 500-page journey, the atmosphere of the Ambedkarites’ witness—a quiet gaiety, a new confidence—stands out as an unexpected glimpse of liberation Buddhism.

Catechism, Discipline, and Bible for Engaged Buddhists

A new reliance on the authority of *scripture*—indeed a propensity to create new scriptures, that is, authoritative and prescriptive texts—in the Buddhist liberation movements is exemplified in radical forms by the early engaged Buddhists. Not content with the mere veneration or reinterpretation of the ancient canon, the new Buddhists contributed quasi-canonical works of their own. Olcott’s *Buddhist Catechism* (1881), Dharmapala’s *Gihi Vinaya* or “Lay Discipline” (1898), and Ambedkar’s *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957) aimed at re-presenting the essence of the ancient Dharma for modern practitioners.

Olcott wrote his *Buddhist Catechism* within a year of his arrival in Sri Lanka, frankly hoping to counter the effects of “similar elementary handbooks so effectively used among Western Christian sects.”⁶³ Prefaced by a “Certificate” from “H. Sumangala, High Priest of the Sripada and Galle, Principal of the Widyodaya Parivena,” authenticating the faithfulness of the work to the teachings of the southern (Theravada) Buddhists and recommending it to Buddhist school teachers and beginners waiting to learn “the essential features of our Religion.” Here is a sample of its style and contents:

127. Q. *Are charms, incantations, the observance of lucky hours, and devil-dancing a part of Buddhism?*

A. They are positively repugnant to its fundamental principles; they are the surviving relics of fetishism and pantheistic and other foreign religions. In the Brahmajala Sutta, Buddha has categorically described these and other superstitions as pagan, mean, and spurious.

137. Q. *Are there any dogmas in Buddhism which we are required to accept on faith?*

A. No; we are earnestly enjoined to accept nothing whatever on faith, whether it be written in books, handed down from our ancestors, or taught by the sages. Our Lord Buddha has said that we must not believe a thing said merely because it is said. . . .⁶⁴

The *Buddhist Catechism* eventually went through forty editions and appeared in more than twenty languages. It is still used in Buddhist parochial schools today.⁶⁵