Buddhist Perspectives on Social Justice and Poverty

The eyes through which one perceives the world become accustomed to a particular view. Like the way a contact lens sets into the wearer’s eye over time and then becomes difficult to remove, one’s perspective can grow so ingrained that it may become accepted as natural perception, instead of interpretation. When this occurs, the individual draws near to the real danger of claiming one’s subjective perspective as absolute truth. To avoid such self-deceptive analysis of the world, one must intentionally take on the perspective of another. While an impossible task to fully achieve, the attempt alone provides a more thorough understanding of the shared landscape, and even of one’s own bias. This greater understanding, in turn, avails any action taken on behalf of the one land seen differently by so many.

This becomes incredibly important when the shared landscape is the desolate field of poverty. If anyone seeks to end, or even lessen its effects, there must exist a greater understanding than that understanding produced by any one society. Therefore, it becomes necessary to engage with and study other perspectives. Buddhism offers an extremely different approach to social justice and poverty work. Through the study of Buddhist histories, theologies
and leaders, one can begin to understand how such a religion interacts with poverty\footnote{Buddhism incorporates two forms of poverty into its understanding of the world. The first, simplicity, incorporates religious piousness and willed poverty. This includes most Buddhist monks, including those of the Saffron Revolution discussed later. Because the monks choose such poverty, it is not relevant to the study of social justice. I will not address it with any thoroughness within this text. The second form of poverty, known as deprivation or destitution, defines the focal study of this paper. Ergo, any discussion of poverty herein (unless otherwise noted) will be in regards to deprivation-poverty, not simplicity.}, oppression, and the societies that created them.

Several sources have called Buddhism a ‘featherweight’ or ‘lightweight’ in terms of social justice movements\footnote{Buddhism and Human Rights. ed. Damien V. Keown, Charles S. Prebish and Wayne R. Husted (Surrey, England: Curzon Press), 1998. p. 15.}: even some of it’s great supporters, such as Cheng Yen\footnote{Founder of ‘Buddhist Compassion Relief General Hospital’ in Taiwan (quoted in S. King’s Being Benevolence)} of Taiwan find that such a critique is more true than they would care to admit:

I left home because the teachings of kindness, compassion, joy and unselfish giving in the sutras touched me deeply. However, for the last two thousand years, from India to China, there is little concrete evidence of Buddhist contributions to society. While other religions such as Christianity and Catholicism have acted to improve public welfare, I felt ashamed about being a nun who could not implement the Buddhist teachings of compassion and wisdom in society\footnote{Sallie B. King, Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 2005), p. 2.}.

Does Buddhism truly lack ‘evidence’ of social justice and poverty-work? Is it devoid of this social critique that is gaining ground elsewhere in the world? The literature disagrees. An analysis of Buddhism as a religion finds a rich history of, teaching on, and movement towards social justice, specifically poverty. While meditative practices and theologies of not-self often appear as the conclusive and exhaustive portrayal of Buddhism within western culture, there is little doubt that compassion, specifically in terms of righting economic stratification, thrives within the many folds of Buddhist thought and action.
The Three Jewels

Buddhism seems to have developed a theology of numbered lists. First, Buddhism generally holds that, to become a practicing Buddhist, one must ascribe to ‘The Three Jewels’: an acknowledgement of the Buddha, an acceptance of the Dharma, and commitment to the Sangha. This paper analyzes these three aspects of Buddhism in terms of their definitions of and actions toward social justice and poverty.

The Buddha

Buddhism began with the life and teaching of the first recorded, enlightened, Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. A study of Siddhartha immediately establishes compassion as ‘inseparable’ from Buddhism. Buddhist texts define the life of the Buddha as “for the sake of the salvation of all creatures”, because the Buddha seeks to end suffering by the teaching and leading of others to the way of enlightenment.

However, ‘teaching’ merely names the mission of the Buddha. The way in which the teaching occurs provides another layer of visible compassion and social justice within Buddhism, for the Buddha “[teaches] high-caste and low-caste people alike”. Breaking from Hindu tradition, early Buddhism demonstrates overt disregard for social hierarchy and income distinctions through the lifestyle and actions of the Buddha himself. In India, Hinduism contained an unyielding caste system of religious and economic gradations that the Buddha challenged and countered through his relationships with those around him, seen when the

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5 The Buddha’s teachings (or the theology of Buddhism)
6 The Buddhist community
8 Ibid., 55.
Buddha “puts the prostitute Amrapali ahead of the wellborn Licchavis; he does not hesitate to expose the faults of the high and mighty”\textsuperscript{9}. The same author describes the Buddha as having an “absence of preference for the highborn and [an] association with the lowborn”\textsuperscript{10}. He states

the Buddha’s association with the lowborn is important to his sainthood because here he reveals his freedom from bondage to social, economic, and political structures. In this, he demonstrates his solidarity with ultimate reality, which does not align itself with such merely relative and social distinctions.\textsuperscript{11,12}

In this text, the very breaking of social norms by the Buddha denotes his freedom from those norms, and additionally his freedom from the world that produced them, a significant goal of Buddhism today. This means that breaking economic distinctions on an individual level manifests movement towards nirvana, the breaking free of this world and its sufferings.

Likewise, early Buddhism rejects the Hindu restriction of nirvana-attainment to the upper castes. The Buddha’s teaching of lower- and upper-caste members demonstrates the attainability of nirvana by all classes.

Obviously the Buddha himself maintains high regard for social equality and even equal opportunity (specifically of education) regardless of socio-economic status. This provides bedrock on which to build a Buddhist theory of social justice.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} It is important to note that not all social distinctions are dropped “the Buddha counsels his five former companions on the need to address him with an appropriately respectful address….for their own [karmic] good” (Ray, p. 56). Still, this is of little consequence when compared to the rigor of Hindu class distinctions and the Buddha’s neglect of it.
Common Dharma

The many divisions of Buddhism agree on some fundamental teaching of the Buddha. For example, the Four Noble Truths\(^\text{13}\) “(1) of suffering, (2) of craving as the cause of suffering, (3) that suffering will cease with the end of craving, and (4) of the Noble Eightfold Path\(^\text{14}\) as the way to eradicate craving and thus suffering”\(^\text{15}\) are common to most Buddhist sects. These Four Truths provide the underpinning for much Buddhist thought and action. Proponents for social activism, specifically in regards to poverty, often draw heavily from the responsibility of the Buddhist to decrease the amount of suffering as a reason for their action. The Eightfold Path delves deeper into what action is necessary and how to accomplish such action.

The Noble Eightfold Path includes 8 multi-faceted ‘right ways-of-being’. While they all hold significance and result in various actions of the Buddhist\(^\text{16}\), only a few can be seen to relate directly to social justice and poverty.

‘Right View’ (the first) includes knowing the Four Noble Truths listed above.

‘Right Action’ is initially described as not killing, not stealing, and not participating in sexual misconduct. Bodhi expands this teaching, stating, “right action means refraining from unwholesome deeds that occur with the body as their natural means of expression”\(^\text{17}\). While not directly mentioning poverty, unwholesome acts include those that do not benefit the ‘whole’.

This illustrates a theory of not-self that finds no singular self, but an interconnected, 

\(^{13}\) Dukkha, (2) Samudaya, (3) Nirodha, (4) Marga

\(^{14}\) Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right concentration.

\(^{15}\) Burton 71


interdependent, “relational origination”\textsuperscript{18}. When one becomes enlightened with such understanding, one naturally acts to end suffering in such a way that does not hurt others. According to the Dalai Lama “No one truly benefits from causing harm to another being”, it only “creates anxiety, fear and suspicion for oneself”\textsuperscript{19}. Again, “each of us must learn to work not just for oneself, one’s family, or one’s nation, but for the benefit of all humankind”\textsuperscript{20} because, in reality, there is no ‘oneself’\textsuperscript{21}. The suffering of any results in the suffering of the whole, ergo the call to avoid unwholesome acts, seen again in the context of ‘Right Effort’ Below.

‘Right Livelihood’ mandates right occupation, rejecting any occupation that is part of the weapons trade, the meat trade, intoxicants, poisons, or the slave trade, and states that one cannot make profit from usury\textsuperscript{22}. While this does not directly relate to poverty, the indirect links abound. The weapons trade supports violence in developing countries, where rising poverty rates and income stratification correlate with increased crime, organized or otherwise, and unstable governments are much more likely to fall into civil or domestic conflict. The meat trade is incredibly unsustainable and will lead to water shortages worldwide if the first world does not reduce its meat consumption. Intoxicants abound in impoverished areas, and generate abuse, violence, escapism, and addiction. Poisons, especially pesticides and other industry wastes create what is known as ecological discrimination, as the impoverished are forced to live and work in unsafe conditions due to air-, ground-, or water-borne poisons. The slave trade preys on the impoverished, and creates cyclical poverty that is near impossible to break without the destruction of the entire social structure. Usury, or loaning with large interest, often preys upon

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Buddhism and Human Rights}, 26., relational origination- that is, there is no individual, but merely commingling responses to consciousness and our environment.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. xvii-xviii.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., xx.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 23.
those that cannot, by their own means, afford capital investment, and can quickly turn into slavery, in third-world sweatshops and within the loan offices of the first world.

‘Right Effort’ reiterates the call to ‘Right Action’ above. Specifically, ‘Right Effort’ delineates ending and preventing of unwholesome action, and creating/continuing wholesome activity. This again correlates to the doctrine of interdependence, because no act is without consequences on the whole. The Dalai Lama claims once more that “lack of understanding of the true cause of happiness is the principle reason why people inflict suffering on others” and states that “to me it is quite clear that however important I may feel I am, I am just one individual while others are infinite in number and importance”. This emphasizes the theory of interconnectedness. All actions are of the whole to the whole, and therefore should be directed towards the good of the whole. Because Buddhism sees the individual as an illusion, Buddhism sees true enlightenment as the path to cease acting as an individual and begin living as part of the collective whole.

Division

Because the various ‘theologies’ of Buddhism come from differing opinions of what the Buddha said and how one ought interpret it, a clear understanding of Buddhism demands a firm differentiation between the major sects of Buddhism; for, as in most major world religions, there

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23 *Buddhism and Human Rights*, xvii.
24 Ibid., xxi.
25 It is not completely accurate to ignore the other extreme of the Dharma. One of the eight paths that seems to contradict social activism is ‘Right Mindfulness’. According to the Maha-Satipathana Sutta, this means, “a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself”. This is a seeming contradiction to the prior emphasis towards ‘not-self’. In some ways, it describes a previously unmentioned doctrine of Buddhism. However, this one path does not negate the fervency with which the other paths are pursued, nor does it discount the validity of their teaching. It simply offers another direction to be pursued when seeking Nirvana.
are many points of view. This paper studies the theologies of two main divisions, Theravada and Mahayana, and includes traces of the next-most-influential sect, Vajrayana. However, because Vajrayana so closely resembles Mahayana (many scholars include Vajrayana as a subcategory of Mahayana Buddhism), they are combined into the general category of Mahayana Buddhism for the means of this paper. On the other hand, Theravada and Mahayana are fairly distinct, with separate canons of teachings and stories of Buddha, and therefore have distinct forms of Dharma and Sangha. Therefore, the rest of this paper cannot be applied directly to Buddhism as a whole, but only to the branches of Buddhism specified in each section heading.

**Dharma – Theravada**

Theravada Buddhism clings to the Paali Canon\(^{26}\) as a primary source for the teaching and stories of the Buddha. The Paali Canon maintains a heavy connection with the Hindu concept of karma, a stance often criticized as fatalist, and for good reason. According to King,

> In the Canon of Pali scriptures the Buddhist Way was not conceived as having much responsibility or concern about making over the samsaric \[sic\] socio-political order of the world. The samsaric world, driven by greed, hatred, and delusion, was one ruled by the desires for power, wealth, fame, sensual enjoyment, and was intrinsically unsalvable \[sic\].\(^{27}\)

This seems to call for surrender to current conditions, and in some way it does. Buddhist doctrine often takes the slant of removing oneself from making value judgments on the world around, disregarding good and bad as inconsequential, man-made distinctions. However, the role of karma also provides an avenue of change. Again, according to King, “every state of existence, good or bad, animal, ghostly, hellish or heavenly is caused by ethically good or evil

\(^{26}\) Paali and Pali refer to the same language of Buddhist scriptures. They are simply different translations of the same root word.

deeds” through the ever-present force of karma. The fact that ‘ethically good deeds’ can better one’s position encourages the Buddhist to act in compassion and kindness towards others, and provides an avenue through which the religious can challenge those in power, as seen below with the Buddhist monks of the Saffron Revolution.

The text of the Anguttara Nikaya, part of the Pali Canon, recounts some of Buddha’s comments that discuss Poverty. One of these states “that for a person who enjoys sense-pleasures poverty… is miserable, because it leads to… ever increasing suffering.” The call of the Buddhist (and therefore the call of Buddha as well) to end suffering demands, then, an ending of the suffering of those within poverty.

The Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta, another part of the Pali Canon, is described as “the most significant discussion of poverty as deprivation (dāliddiya) and its effects” within Buddhist texts. While the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta provides little by way of individual responsibility to action in the original Buddhist text, it places a heavy emphasis on the role of government, specifically of the cakkavatti (king/ruler) to end poverty wherever it occurs. For example, it teaches that the perfect, just ruler provides:

“shelter and protection for all segments of the realm including the animals and the birds, ensuring that no wrongdoing occurs, providing wealth for those who are without wealth, being advised by the religieux.”

The quote above delineates a right to housing and a redistribution of wealth, a moderately progressive welfare policy, even today. Similarly, the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta addresses the way in which a business or economic leader ought to act towards his workers:

\[28\] Ibid.
\[29\] David Loy, “Buddhism and Poverty”. (Kyoto Journal, 1999)
\[31\] Ibid., 106-107.
\[32\] Ibid., 101.
There are five ways in which a master should minister to his servants and workpeople at the nadir (direction): by arranging their work according to their strength, by supplying them with food and wages, by looking after them when they are ill, by sharing special delicacies with them, and by letting them off work at the right time.  

This seems a far cry from modern ‘industrialized nations’ and their division of profit. The universal, work-provided healthcare, food and wages seem more like a socialist commune than a business. The ‘sharing of special delicacies’ calls for a profit/luxury sharing structure to the marketplace. These are radical calls to structurally implemented equity within the economics of globalization.

**Dharma – Mahayana**

Mahayana Buddhism holds many texts (called the Sutras) sacred in seeking Nirvana. Within the Mahayana Sutras, the office/person that is a Bodhisattva is hailed as a hero of Buddhism because of its direct relationship to compassion and activism.

From birth, a bodhisattva is determined to reach enlightenment “for the good of the world”\(^{34}\) and in doing so “he rejects the ideal of personal salvation”\(^{35}\). The bodhisattva chooses to wait just before achieving enlightenment so to aid others as they follow the path to nirvana.

Ray defines a bodhisattva as united with wisdom, [giving] birth to great compassion…and exhibits pity and concern for others….He does not retire into rest, but works to free gods and humans, and shows beings the way to liberation …He takes rebirth again and again, according to his wish, to aid beings.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{34}\) Ray, 51.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 255.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 257.
The story of ‘The Bodhisattva Never Despise’ exemplifies this ethic. As a man near Buddha-hood, the Bodhisattva Never Despise seeks to act towards everyone with the respect due to a Buddha, for he knows that one day all will achieve Buddha-hood, demonstrating an equality of treatment across caste distinctions, but also an equality of value for all humanity. This bodhisattva is beaten and cast out, but always returns to teach respect though living respectfully of those around him. In an odd allusion to Christianity, Ray describes this selfless monk as “[looking] upon [all beings] as he would upon his only son. He makes the resolve to free all beings.”

The self-sacrificing compassion of the bodhisattva directly counters poverty when it is revealed both though helping the individual and through “the purification of the (Buddha)field (ksetra), in which he has taken rebirth.” The purification of the ksetra speaks of the bodhisattva’s role in challenging the world to end suffering, but specifically through structural, societal, or other external means (distinct from individual aid). This is the first call to societal-reform to end suffering, which, in terms of poverty, means challenging the systems, structures and policies that produce it.

**Sangha – Theravada**

The Burmese Monks [Myanmar] provide a striking current example of the Sangha within the Theravada tradition. The Burmese monks have been associated with peaceful protest for decades. However, in 2007 the Saffron Revolution altered the world’s perspective on Buddhist social activism. After the price of gas across Burma [Myanmar] quadrupled in a week’s time,

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37 *Buddhism and Human Rights* 29
38 Niwano 30
39 Ray, 263.
40 Ibid.
the monks ‘marched’ on the capital, Rangoon (formerly Yangon). Thousand of monks walked through the capital in protest to the detestable economic conditions within the small country that was booming before the bloody coup-de-tat in 1962. While there were some protestors for democracy, this was not the initial motivation of the monks. Indeed, according to a news article, “Myanmar’s citizens just want a better life. ‘Most people don’t know much about democracy,’ said a Yangon-based former political prisoner. ‘They just want enough money to feed their family’”\(^4\) The ‘All Burma Monks Alliance\(^4\) has made several corresponding statements: “We pronounce the evil military despotism, which is impoverishing and pauperizing our people of all walks, including the clergy, as the common enemy of all our citizens”\(^3\).

We are prepared to confront the worst. We are working for truth and justice, and we will prevail… The UN Security Council is paralyzed and has failed to undertake its major responsibility to protect the citizens of Burma, who continue to be severely oppressed by their own government, as has been the case for decades. We denounce the governments of China, Russia and South Africa for their strong protection of the most brutal military junta, ruling our country against the will of our people.\(^4\)

The monks take a vow upon entering the order that does not allow them to take part in normal society nor politics. The only exception occurs if the government is seen as interfering with Buddhism or Buddhist teaching, at which point “the Sangha (order of monks) is permitted to issue what is regarded as the ultimate moral rebuke: refusing to accept donations. The act is known in the Pali language as “patam nikkujjana kamma”—turning over the bowl”\(^5\). It seems like a futile gesture until one remembers the role of Karma in Theravada Buddhism. The inability of the military and/or government to make donations to the cause of the monks negates

\(^4\) Ingrid Jordt, “Turning Over the Bowl in Burma” (Religion in the News, 2008)
\(^3\) Established by U Gawsita (pseudonym) to challenge the authority of the ruling government.
\(^4\) “Joint Statement by the All Burma Monks’ Alliance and the 88 Generation Students” (26 March 2008)
\(^5\) Jordt
their ability to gain good karma. Like a Catholic excommunication, the ‘turning over the bowl’
denies the would-be-giver’s ability to attain nirvana. Moreover, this calls into question the
legitimacy of the government, as it is supposed to “[avoid] anything that might cause the
religiuex [sic] to give up their practise [sic]”\textsuperscript{46}.

This Sangha clearly acts to counter poverty, even through structural reform. While the
revolution was forcibly dispersed by the military government, the story of the Burmese Monks
defends the position that Buddhism has social, economic, and political ramifications when
poverty and social injustice occur.

\textbf{Sangha – Mahayana}

Western Society often regards the Mahayana sect (incorporating Vajrayana) as leading
Buddhism’s social justice movement because of its incredibly active and incredibly vocal
Sangha. This includes many organizations and individuals from across Asia, specifically within
the far East.

Two Japanese Buddhists, Nikkyo Niwano and Myoko Naganuma, began Rissho Kosei
Kai in 1938 as a peace-making organization to work with UN, NGOs, and various other
communities in order to “bring peace to our families, communities, and countries and to the
world”\textsuperscript{47}. Following the Mahayana emphasis on the concept of a bodhisattva, “Rissho Kosei-kai
promotes appealing to politicians and citizens for the need for political reform as its members' bodhisattva practice, aimed at achieving peace and prosperity in the nation and the world”\textsuperscript{48}.

They take the ‘Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World’ as their theological forefather of

\textsuperscript{46} Fenn,101.
\textsuperscript{47} “Rissho Kosei Kai”. (Rissho Kosei Kai main website 2008)
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
sorts. As a “lay organization”, “Rissho Kosei-kai strongly urges the importance of political reform” while calling individuals to “lend a helping hand whenever [one sees] others in trouble”\(^49\), creating a multifaceted approach to ending all kinds of suffering, including poverty, that incorporates a call to democracy and government-monitoring. It has created several programs to solve such suffering, including individual and group counseling/advising, and larger programs like the ‘Niwano Peace Foundation’ and the ‘Donate-a-Meal Movement’.

Better known is the current Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of the Tibetan Buddhist population. After being exiled from China and Chinese-controlled Tibet, the Dalai Lama has built an independent Tibetan democracy in exile- a government that has the ability to severely limit his own powers. His statement on the United Nation’s “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, titled “Human Rights and Universal Responsibility”, provides one of the most directly stated Buddhist stances on poverty today. In regards to the ‘Asian Values Debate’, the Dalai Lama clearly states that the concept of human rights is completely compatible with Asian culture, and that any regimes that disagree (an understood reference to China) “must be made to respect and conform to the universally accepted principles in the larger and long term interests of their own peoples”\(^50\). Moreover, the 14\(^{th}\) Dalai Lama challenged current economic theory, stating:

There still remains a major gulf at the heart of the human family. By this I am referring to the North-South divide. If we are serious in our commitment to the fundamental principles of equality… today’s economic disparity can no longer be ignored. It is not enough to merely state that all human beings must enjoy equal dignity. This must be translated into action.\(^51\)

\(^49\) Ibid.
\(^50\) *Buddhism and Human Rights*, xix.
\(^51\) Ibid.
This demonstrates the Dalai Lama’s firm stance on social justice and provides another angle of the Buddhist Sangha’s perspective on poverty and how it is to be rectified. His Holiness deems economic reform necessary to end human suffering, and challenges the ‘global North’s’ dominant position.

Further, the Dalai Lama calls for solidarity. He states “When we do not know someone or do not feel connected to an individual or group we tend to overlook their needs” and “I try to develop compassion within myself, not simply as a religious practice, but on a human level as well”\(^{52}\). His call to end poverty rivals those of western Christianity, challenging anyone who claims Buddhism to be fatalist at its center.

Clearly Buddhism has much to say in terms of social justice and poverty. However, to find what it says, one often must know where to look. The Engaged Buddhism community is the widest, most comprehensive ‘organization’ bent on the Buddhist role in social justice and ending poverty today. Any analysis of modern Buddhism would be lacking unless Engaged Buddhism was included.

**Engaged Buddhism**

“Engaged Buddhism” serves as an umbrella term for the Buddhist movements that are engaging with compassion the “problems of society as conscience and Buddhist principles dictate”\(^{53}\). It is not a unified body, for it is born of all major Buddhist sects independently. Currently, those within the Engaged Buddhism community are aligned through the International Network of Engaged Buddhists for the purpose of sharing ideas. According to King,

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\(^{52}\) Ibid., xx.  
\(^{53}\) Sallie B. King, 5.
there are no institutional or ecclesial structures formalizing Engaged Buddhism as a sect
or as a sociopolitical movement, nor are any such structures likely to develop. They
would serve no purpose. Engaged Buddhism exists as an intention and a practice within
existing forms of Buddhism.\footnote{54}

Because Engaged Buddhism does not have a strict structure or hierarchy, its aligned
members range across many ethnicities, traditions, and beliefs. The founder, Sulak Sivaraksa, is
a peace and democracy activist from Thailand. Other prominent members include:

- The Dalai Lama
- Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Monk who originally coined the term
  “Engaged Buddhism”
- Buddhadasa Bhikku, the Thailand, activist, concerned with creating relationships
  between religions and teaching foreigners about Buddhism.
- Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratically elected leader of Burma/Myanmar, who is
currently being held under house arrest (and has been for the last 16 years) by the military
  junta who are currently in power. She has won the Nobel Prize for her peace-work.
- Maha Ghosenanda, the late Supreme Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism
- and A.T. Ariyaratne from Sri Lanka, an anti-violence activist who “pioneered the
discovery of Buddhist economics as an alternative to capitalist and communist
economics”\footnote{55}.

Engaged Buddhism has varying reasons and theologies behind its compassion and
justice-work, which flow into its response to poverty. There is a heavy emphasis on
interdependence: all things are connected. “Our interests are inextricably linked…all want to be

\footnote{54} Ibid.
\footnote{55} Ibid., 8.
happy, and we all have an equal right to be happy”\textsuperscript{56}. Some Engaged Buddhists act out of the understanding that meditation for others produces emptiness, or self-lessness through, acknowledging the absence of individuality or independence\textsuperscript{57}. Their action toward structural change is reflected in their theory of karma, which is found “[applicable] to human societies” as well\textsuperscript{58}. Often, scholars associate Engaged Buddhism with the traditional compassion, living kindness, and giving\textsuperscript{59}, as well as extreme nonviolence, egalitarianism\textsuperscript{60}, and social responsibility, especially in the case of the Dalai Lama\textsuperscript{61}.

Buddhism also maintains strong bonds to the Mahayana tradition of Boddhisattva vows and theologies of equal value due to the final attainment of enlightenment by all\textsuperscript{62}, much like the Boddhisattva Never Despise (discussed earlier).

Due in part to the influence of the Dalai Lama, the Engaged Buddhist community has also taken a firm stance on economic justice, stating “there is no justification for the vast disparities in wealth that exist between individuals or between regions of the world. There should be no exploitation of one part of the world’s population and resources by another part”\textsuperscript{63}. Ariyaratne even advocates for the refusal of developing countries to pay back their debts\textsuperscript{64}. In the most all encompassing statement of Engaged Buddhist ethics, King states “to be ethically sound, economic activity must take place in a way that is not harmful to the individual, society,

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 14, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 221.
or the natural environment." Engaged Buddhism asserts that all humans must “have their basic needs met, and they need to be engaged in meaningful activity”.

Conclusion

While Buddhist philosophy may be unusual to the western mind, one thing is strikingly clear. Within the many elements of Buddhist philosophy, theology and practice, there runs a rich vein of compassion and social justice that brings about action, action bent on removing the suffering of a world filled with craving. The existence of the many divisions within Buddhism serves as a foil to the unity of Buddhist practice in social justice and poverty-resolution through individual persons or groups like the Dalai Lama and Rissho Kosei-kai, and such interdependent work as the International Network of Engaged Buddhist. While its justifications may come from different texts and traditions, the research finds that Buddhism cannot be ignored or played down in the global sphere of social justice and poverty-resolution. It is the responsibility of members of every religion, culture and heritage to extend their perspectives to the benefit of the others, that the world may gain a broader perspective on poverty, and therein discover an educated solution. In the words of noted Buddhist leader Rev. Vajiragnana, “Each of us has a role to play in sustaining and promoting social justice and orderliness… No one has been left out.”

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65 Ibid., 222.
66 Ibid.
67 Buddhism and Human Rights, 21.


“Maha-satipatthana Sutta: The Great Frames of Reference”. translated by Thanissaro


