

Buddhism in a New Key: The Roots and Growth of Engaged Buddhism¹

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In the context of our symposium on transnational Buddhism I thought it would be of interest to our Rangjung Yeshe students and staff, and our guests, to shine an historical light on an aspect of Buddhist Modernism we call Engaged Buddhism.

Fifty years ago, in his book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, the famous Vietnamese monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term “Engaged Buddhism”. The term quickly gained currency in the Buddhist community and beyond. And in the half-century since then Engaged Buddhism has taken many forms, and has had many exemplary proponents.

While it is a quintessentially modern development within Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism has specific philosophical underpinnings that can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century, to the Buddhist reformer Taixu and his disciples, and the rise of Humanistic Buddhism in China. This morning I would like to explore the genealogy of these ideas and their influence over the past century, especially in the context of Chinese Buddhism.

Engaged Buddhism can, of course, take many different forms. In its original usage Master Nhat Hanh applied it to political activism oriented toward peacemaking, in the context of the Vietnam War in which his country was embroiled. Through his friendship with, and influence on, figures such as Dr Martin Luther King Jr, and the Trappist monk Father Thomas Merton, he had a significant impact on the development of the anti-war movement in the US and around the world.

For others Engaged Buddhism connotes attending to the physical and material welfare of the needy, through disaster relief, or by providing food, shelter, clothing, and medical care to the needy, as organizations such as our own Rangjung Shenpen do. For some it takes the shape of education and awareness-raising and activism to overcome historical social inequalities. In recent years a surge of attention to climate change and ecological degradation has meant that Engaged Buddhism means protecting the environment.

Apart from Thich Nhat Hanh, there have been a host of Buddhist practitioners who are associated with the practice of Engaged Buddhism. Though they do not specifically embrace the label the followers of Dr Ambedkar, for example, are a clear -- and even earlier -- example of applying Buddhist principles to overcome the political and social injustices of the caste system.

Other outstanding examples are: Robert Aitken Roshi and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship; Bernard Glassman Roshi's and Joan Halifax Roshi's work with the Zen Peacemakers Order, Sulak Shivaraksha in Thailand, Bhikkhu Bodhi in the US, and the late Cambodian Sangharaja Maha Ghosananda. But these are just a few stars in a large galaxy. I could go on for the next 20 minutes just listing examples. But I won't

¹ This presentation was delivered at Symposium 2017, a conference organized by Rangjung Yeshe Institute in celebration of its twentieth anniversary.

Being kind and generous, and taking concrete action to relieve others' suffering, are not new to Buddhism, of course. What IS new is the deliberate thematizing of the motivation for compassionate action and the articulation of guiding convictions and principles for action. [Added during talk: Later this morning Dr Ong See Yew will, no doubt, delve into the principles of Humanistic Buddhism. My focus will be on its historical development. So I hope there will be a nice complementarity to our presentations.]

When naming exemplary practitioners of Engaged Buddhism, it is important to avoid a kind of "essentialist" error. To put that more plainly... new trends can arise spontaneously and simultaneously in different places without the need for a direct historic link between them.

I believe that increased immigration, the globalization of communication, and Buddhism's spread to the West over the past several decades has brought Buddhism into contact with other religious traditions, particularly the Jewish and Christian ones, with their long history of organized charitable efforts -- as well as into contact with secular models of social service and upliftment of the less fortunate. Obviously many western Buddhists come from that very background. For Buddhism as a whole, I think, this has generated what we might call a "sense of discrepancy" between compassion as a purely spiritual virtue and compassion as a compelling motivation for concrete action on others' behalf.

THICH NHAT HANH'S "ENGAGED BUDDHISM"

In order to talk usefully about the phenomenon of Engaged Buddhism, however, we can give a greater specificity to the term. Master Thich Nhat Hanh first used the term in 1967, in the book already cited, where he speaks of "promoting the individual's active role in effecting change". He expands on this in his book *Interbeing*, published in 1993, where he outlines fourteen principles of Engaged Buddhism.

Engaged Buddhism, or "Socially Engaged Buddhism" was his way of rendering the Vietnamese term *Nhân gian phật giáo*, which literally means "This-world Buddhism". It is his way of translating the Chinese expression *renjian fojiao*, which is usually translated as "Humanistic Buddhism". This highlights the historical origins of Engaged Buddhism in the writings and teachings of Dharma Master Taixu, an activist monk and Buddhist reformer in early 20th century China.

Seeds planted by Taixu were nurtured primarily by his disciple Yin Shun, who lived to the ripe old age of 99, from 1906 to 2005. It is Yin Shun who systematized and promoted Taixu's teachings on "Buddhism for the Human Realm", or Humanistic Buddhism. The seeds bore fruit in the work of his 4 chief successors, who are known in Taiwan as the "four heavenly kings of dharma", and as founders of the "Four Mountains" of Buddhism. I'll say more on them later. For now lets take a closer look at Taixu.

MASTER TAIXU

Taixu -- whose dharma name translates Great Emptiness, *Mahā-śūnyatā* -- was born in 1890, during the reign of the Guangxu emperor, and the Empress Dowager Cixi. If you have ever seen Bertolucci's film "The Last Emperor", she's the one who tells the young Pu Yi that he'll be the next king, then promptly dies and has a black pearl popped into

her mouth. This marked the beginning of the end of the Qing Dynasty, and it was a time of social and political ferment in the Middle Kingdom.

Orphaned at an early age Taixu became a monk at age 16 in the Linji sect of Chan Buddhism. This is the original form of what migrated to Japan – and is better known in the West -- as the Rinzai School of Zen Buddhism. Taixu lived until 1947, and died in Shanghai, two years before the declaration of the People’s Republic of China. In order to understand Taixu’s efforts and achievements we need to understand the situation of Buddhism in his lifetime.

Taixu was born toward the end of a 30-year period of China’s history known as the “Self-strengthening Movement”; it lasted until he was 5 years old. This was a time of modernization of Chinese industry and, especially, of its military, after embarrassing defeats in the Opium Wars. It was a period of growing nationalism, in which the populace had an emerging sense of identity as Chinese citizens – and not simply as subjects of the Qing rulers.

Taixu was heavily influenced by revolutionary thinkers of his period, especially the leaders of the unsuccessful “100 Days’ Reform”, which had taken place with the partial support of the Guangxu Emperor – and no support from Empress Dowager Cixi (who had them all beheaded) --when he was 8 years old. A few years later he lived through the Boxer Rebellion, which attempted to eradicate foreign encroachment in Chinese affairs. He witnessed the revolution of 1911, which brought an effective end to a 2000 year old monarchy, and was 22 years old when the Chinese Republic was declared the following year.

From his youth he was steeped in the writings and teachings of nationalist, progressive, reform-minded thinkers who were advocating for a republic or, at least, a nominal constitutional monarchy. Their political and social philosophies emphasized the value and rights of the individual human being. In his autobiography he wrote “My social and political thought was based upon ... the Republican Revolution, Socialism, and Anarchism”. By the latter he met a non-hierarchical society, with self-government by the people.

Taixu brought the spirit of these social and political movements to the religious sphere. The reform of the political system could be paralleled by a reformation of religion. And so Taixu advocated for the revival of Buddhism in China.

In their book *Rebuilding Buddhism*, about the Theravada Movement here in Nepal, Levine and Gellner observe that Buddhist revival movements typically start as efforts to reform the monastic *sangha*. This is clearly true in the case of Taixu.

Taixu believed that a re-organization of the sangha was essential to Buddhism’s survival. From the time of the Ming Dynasty, which lasted from the 14th to 17th centuries, and throughout the Qing Dynasty, China’s last imperial government, the *sangha* of Chinese Buddhism had evolved a three-fold structure of specialist monks. There were meditation monks, teaching monks, and what we translate as “yoga monks”.

The yoga monks were ritual specialists who supported themselves by being on-call to perform ceremonies for a stipend, mostly funerals. Their ceremonies focused almost entirely on prayers for the dead to ensure a happy rebirth, and appeasement of the spirit world. But simply explaining the tri-partite *sangha* structure does not give an accurate picture. By the end of the Qing Dynasty and the start of the first Chinese

republic, these on-call ritual specialist monks formed the vast majority of the Chinese *sangha*.

Taixu's re-organization of monastic life proposed a great reduction of the *sangha* to a committed core of 20,000 monks. Bear in mind that, even then, the population of China was over 400 million. Monks would be a very small, committed percentage. The great majority of the *sangha* should be what he referred to as "*bodhisattva* monks". Most would be involved in teaching and propagating Buddhism, and administering Buddhist-oriented schools. About 10 per cent of this hard-core *sangha* would engage in direct charitable work and material relief of the poor.

During a sojourn in Europe Taixu was impressed by the organized charitable work of church groups, and he imitated the organizational structure in several lay Buddhist associations dedicated to charity.

Taixu's chief religious critique of East Asian Buddhism at the beginning of the 20th century is that it focused almost exclusively on the dead and the realm of spirits, rather than on the living. It emphasized the hereafter, rather than the here and now. It is in contrast to this that he asserted that Buddhism should focus on living human beings in this world. He called on Buddhists to take an active role in politics and to improve the economic conditions of the country. He also called for temple properties, which traditionally passed through family lineages as private property, to become the collective property of the *sangha*.

Though the lineage in which he had been ordained was Chan (or Zen) there was, as in most of China, great influence from Pure Land Buddhism. Taixu believed and taught that the Pure Land was not an other-worldly realm to be attained through the grace and merits of Amitabha or the other great bodhisattvas of the Mahayana tradition. Rather, the Pure Land is something that ordinary earthly bodhisattvas should build in this world through selfless action on behalf of others, making this world a place of liberation for all sentient beings.

It almost goes without saying that he faced serious resistance from more conservative and traditionally-minded monks – especially the ones who owned the temples. In an incident remembered as the Jinshan Temple Uprising, the 23 year old Taixu and his associates were threatened with violence and driven from the place which they had made their base.

Taixu's life coincided with one of the most turbulent periods of Chinese history, witnessing the end of two millennia of monarchy, failed first attempts at establishing a republic, and a civil war that ended only two years after his death with the declaration of the People's Republic in 1949. It was, perhaps, a less than opportune time to ask the country to worry about religious reform.

MASTER YIN SHUN

While, in his own lifetime, Taixu had limited success in achieving his goals, the work of reform was carried on by some of his disciples, especially by Masters Yin Shun and Dongchu, who refined and promoted the teaching of Humanistic, or Socially Engaged, Buddhism. Yin Shun, like several Buddhist leaders, followed the Kuomintang government to Taiwan after the Chinese Revolution. It is there that he had a great, and long influence: he lived into his 100th year... more than twice as long as Taixu.

Like his mentor, Yin Shun was discouraged by the state of the *sangha* in his youth, and by the criticism that Buddhism focused on funeral rites, and was irrelevant in the modern world. He described the transformative insight he received on reading a verse from the Agama Sutra... “All Buddhas arise in the human world; no one achieves Buddhahood in heaven.”

Yin Shun was less politically active than his predecessor. By disposition it seems he was a more retiring figure – though deeply respected by the younger generation of Buddhist masters establishing themselves in Taiwan. As mentioned earlier, he is credited with having a profound influence on the four great dharma masters, or “Four Heavenly Dharma Kings”, as they are known today.

THE FOUR DHARMA MOUNTAINS

These teachers are: Wei Chueh, founder of Chung Tai Shan; Sheng-Yen, the abbot of Dharma Drum Mountain; Hsing Yun, of Fo Guang Shan; and Cheng Yen, the Taiwanese nun who founded Tzu Chi. The latter three, especially Master Cheng Yen, claim a direct influence from Taixu, through the teachings of Yin Shun.

Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi, in very different ways, have made a mark on Buddhism here in Nepal. Let me explain. Fo Guang Shan, which means “The Mountain of Buddha’s Light”, is Taiwan’s largest monastery. It celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. In addition to the extremely large original monastic complex in Kaoshiung, Taiwan, they have 173 branches overseas, with over 3500 monks and nuns. Though Hsing Yun, the founding abbot, is from the same Chan lineage as Taixu, he decreed that Fo Guang Shan would include all eight schools of Chinese Buddhist thought.

Master Hsing Yun, unlike Yin Shun, has had no hesitation in expressing strong political opinions in Taiwan, sometimes controversial ones. He has also been criticized by some for holding very traditional and somewhat patriarchal views of the role of women in society. But I think this should be evaluated in a balanced way. Fo Guang Shan has an enormous range of social advancement, medical and educational programs, including four universities -- and women play active roles in the running of them. More importantly, from the Nepal perspective, he has been a strong proponent of women’s full ordination as *bhikkhunis*.

Probably because Nepal is not an historically Theravada country, the traditional customs and conservative attitudes one might find in Sri Lanka, Burma or Thailand are not so deeply ingrained here. There is less resistance to innovation. As a result a significant number of Nepalese Theravadan women have opted to take full *bhikkhuni* ordination.

The ordination of Nepal’s most famous Theravada nun, Guruma Dhammawati, took place in an event organized by Fo Guang Shan at its branch monastery, His Lai, in Los Angeles in 1988. Fo Guang Shan has since organized a number of ordination ceremonies, including large ones in Bodhgaya, in which Nepalese nuns have taken part.

BUDDHIST TZU CHI FOUNDATION

The group I would like to say more about, in the context of Humanistic and Engaged Buddhism, however, is the Tzu Chi Foundation established by Cheng Yen. This is simply

because it's the group I know best, and know personally. And It's always better to talk about what you know, rather than about what you don't know.

Tzu Chi is usually translated “compassionate relief” – which indicates the primary focus of this community. Master Cheng Yen was described by *Time* magazine in an article about her organization as the “Mother Theresa of Asia”. This might make you wonder if *Time* magazine knows where Calcutta is. I've always thought that Mother Theresa was the Mother Theresa of Asia. Perhaps a better way to put it would be to describe Chang Yen as Buddhism's Mother Theresa.

In the past few years, I have had the opportunity to interact with Master Cheng Yen and work with members of the Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation. So have many others here in Nepal. After the April 2015 earthquake Tzu Chi was one of the very first disaster relief organizations to arrive with medicine, surgical supplies, temporary shelters and food. I received a call on the night after the earthquake to say they were ready to come. They quickly mobilized outstanding volunteer teams of doctors, surgeons, nurses and engineers. Over the next several months these volunteer teams came in several contingents, giving many days of their time and committing hundreds of thousands of dollars to relief, recovery and reconstruction.

Although Tzu Chi is based in Hualien, on the east coast of Taiwan, it has branches throughout the Asia and North America, with outposts in Europe. It has a strong presence in the overseas Chinese communities of these countries. It also has a significant presence in the People's Republic of China, where it is a recognized and well-respected NGO. Over the past few decades disaster relief work in Mainland China has become what Cheng Yen describes as a “bridge of love” between the People's Republic and the Republic of China

Founded by Cheng Yen in 1966, Tzu Chi started with a group of 30 local women. It now counts over 10 million members, an astonishingly rapid growth over the past 50 years. Originally a self-ordained nun, Cheng Yen became a disciple of Yin Shun, and took full ordination in 1963. Yin Shun impressed on her the principles of Humanistic Buddhism and, in particular, inspired her to promote the Buddha's teachings through compassionate service to others.

During the years after her ordination, Cheng Yen lived at Pu Ming Temple in Hualien and devoted herself to studying the Lotus Sutra, especially the text that is sometimes described as its prologue, the “Sutra of Innumerable Meanings”. This text forms the basis of most of her teachings, which are broadcast throughout Taiwan.

While at Pu Ming she had what she describes as a life-changing encounter with three Catholic Taiwanese nuns who came to pay a visit. The Catholic sisters praised the profound Buddhist teachings about compassion, but then pointed out that, while the church was involved in building schools and hospitals for the poor, the same could not be said for local Buddhists. In effect they asked her “What do Buddhists actually do to help other people?” This question lodged in her heart, and is one of two watershed incidents that prompted her to found Tzu Chi.

The organization has some distinctive features. Its motto is “The Four Endeavors and the Eight Footprints”. The first of the four endeavors is simple charitable support, their initial work. This expanded to include medicine, education and the promotion of culture. Tzu Chi now runs some of the finest hospitals in Taiwan and has a university with several campuses -- all of which are accessible to the poor. The eight footprints

include such things as disaster relief, bone-marrow donation and transplant, environmental protection and education of the poor.

Unlike Mother Theresa, Cheng Yen readily embraces the advances of modern science. Unless I am mistaken, their bone-marrow registry is now the world's largest and most effective. Their medical research team does very advanced research on umbilical cord stem cell research, which gets around the ethical dilemma that entangles embryo-derived stem cell research.

In Chinese culture, the integrity of the body at the time of one's funeral is essential. Therefore donating organs, or leaving one's body to science, is taboo. Tzu Chi has made an amazing contribution in this area. They have created something called the "Silent Mentor" program in their medical school. Young doctors-in-training, as Anatomy students, are taught to treat those who have gifted their bodies as bodhisattvas -- making a gift for the future health of others.

The bodies are treated with genuine reverence and respect. Rather than working on anonymous cadavers, the medical students get to know the families of the deceased, and sometimes meet those who are donating their bodies during their final weeks of life. Afterwards the medical students help organize and take part in very moving memorial services, in which they express their gratitude toward the deceased, whom they regard as their teachers. The medical school corridors are a shrine to the memory of these Silent Mentors, with photos and biographies of donors prominently displayed.

Unlike Taixu, whose principle of Humanistic Buddhism she espouses so profoundly, Cheng Yen and her followers adhere to a strict policy of avoiding politics in the context of their relief work. Similarly, their charitable work is never linked with proselytizing. In Indonesia they have built mosques and madrassas -- Muslim schools. In the Philippines they have built churches. For Tzu Chi, this is simply an application of skillful means; allowing them to overcome resistance to their work and message.

Cheng Yen's monastery in Hualien has a small community of nuns, for whom she serves as teacher; but Tzu Chi is, overwhelmingly, a lay organization, with a large *sangha* of lay men and women. While she delivers teachings each morning that are drawn from her study of the Lotus Sutra, she insists that her role is not that of a scholar or philosopher; and that she is not promoting any special interpretation of Buddhism.

Nonetheless, one can argue that Cheng Yen articulates a very specific and profound interpretation of the Buddha's *dharma* for the modern world. Tzu Chi sees the Eightfold Path as more than a guide for personal growth. It is, rather, a practical guide for effective action in the world and a model for human interaction. It is only through compassionate action on behalf of others that one experiences progress on the path. Altruism, she teaches, is a practice that leads directly to enlightenment and is, finally, constitutive of enlightenment.

Engaged Buddhism, as understood by Thich Nhat Hanh, has clear roots in the "Buddhism for the human realm" that Taixu first envisioned. Though his ideas had a limited influence during his own lifetime, they have -- through the quiet teaching of Yin Shun -- eventually flowered in several movements, particularly the large and growing Tzu Chi Foundation which offers a very unique interpretation of how to live the dharma in the modern world.