Chapter One

Socially Engaged Buddhism: A Conceptual Study

Apart from being a religious order, Buddhism is also a set of ideas and ideals and, above all, a time tested way of life. This fact has been vividly exemplified and profusely illustrated centuries after centuries in the form of the Buddhist precepts and ideals like Sikkhapada-s, stages of Purisa-puggala-hood, Brahmavihara-s, Bodhisattva-cariya-s, Bodhisattva-bhumi-s, and so on. A newer and contemporary incarnation of all these elements has come up in the form of Socially Engaged Buddhism. In terms of Buddhist teaching, socially engaged Buddhism is an embodiment of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva literally a "being" (sattva) oriented to "awakening" or "enlightenment" (bodhi), is a great vow and archetypal figure found particularly in Mahayana (great vehicle) Buddhism. The Bodhisattva ideal has roots in the original teachings of the Buddha, who was himself described as a bodhisattva, understood at that time as one on the way to becoming a Buddha, a fully awakened one.

In the Mahayana Buddhist traditions, there developed a pantheon of archetypal bodhisattva, each of them suggesting and guiding a different kind of mature spiritual activity in the world. There is Avalokiteshvara, the male bodhisattva of compassion in India, who becomes Chenrezig in Tibet, and the female Kwan Yin in China and Kannon or Kanzeon in Japan, who is perhaps the
most popular and well-known Bodhisattva. Avalokiteshvara is sometimes depicted with a thousand hands, each with an eye-to see what is happening in the world and to respond, suggesting both the receptive and active dimensions of compassion. Kwan Yin is often described as the one who "hears the cries of the world." Manjushri is the bodhisattva of discriminating wisdom, one who sees deeply into the nature of things, and is typically shown wielding a sword said to cut through delusive thoughts and views. Samantabhadra appears as the bodhisattva of enlightening action in the world, particularly making more apparent the interconnection of all beings. Kshitigarbha is the bodhisattva who watches over the vulnerable.

Such archetypal bodhisattva figures also manifest in ordinary human beings, who may not take particularly prominent social roles. They might appear as the radiant and kind grandmother or the generous and friendly owner of a town's general store, as well as better known people such as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King Jr.

The ordinary bodhisattva follows a specific training, a series of disciplines. Such training begins with the orientation to awaken oneself, and to do so for the benefit of all. This intention is often expressed in the "four inconceivable vows":

Living being are infinite, I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to cut through them.
Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.

The Buddha Way is unsurpassable, I vow to realize it.

On a rather pragmatic plane, socially engaged Buddhism or engaged Buddhism can be looked upon as a relatively new Buddhist movement that lays stress on social service and nonviolent activism\(^1\). It draws upon the Buddha’s teachings and practices of the moral conduct in order to commit the precepts to non-injury and compassion to others. This can be done by teaching them a right view and thereby help them relieve their delusion. That is precisely the way the practice of socially engaged Buddhism proposes to look upon the contemporary world. However, if we take a retrospective look at how Buddhism has evolved over millennia into a prominent faith with worldwide following, it might not be difficult to notice that social service has appeared in the Buddhist record since the time of the Buddha only. Thus, socially engaged Buddhism is not an absolutely new Buddhist movement as some scholars believe.

**Definition and Scope of Socially Engaged Buddhism**

According to the Australian scholar Patricia Sherwood, “Socially Engaged Buddhism” is a Buddhist practice that seeks to make a conscious contribution to the liberation of sentient beings including oneself as well as others from the shackle of suffering. This position has been categorically and elaborately expounded by the Thai reformer Sulak Sivaraksa who touches upon the essence of

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\(^1\) E. Buswell, Jr., Editor, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Vol.1, United Stated of America, p. 248
Buddhism and notes, "It means deep commitment and personal transformation. To be of help we must become more selfless and less selfish. To do this, we have to take more and more moral responsibility in society. This is the essence of Buddhism, from ancient times right up to the present."²

The Socially Engaged Buddhism is a topic which has attracted worldwide attention. Because of its immense relevance in the contemporary world, the researcher proposes to develop insights into the authoritative texts and their interpretations centred on the concept in different perspectives. In the proposed research, the concept of socially engaged Buddhism will be discussed with exclusive focus on Australia.

It seems that the term “Engaged Buddhism” was originally coined by the venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in 1963. Subsequently, the expanded term, “Socially Engaged Buddhism” became popular during the 1980s. The term “Socially Engaged Buddhism” essentially signifies an active involvement of Buddhist members in society and its problems. Those who are associated with this nascent movement attempt to actualize the ideals of wisdom and compassion which have long been rooted in the historical tradition of Buddhism. Based on the ethical and social teachings of traditional Buddhism, engaged Buddhism tries to apply them to social life as also to social issues. Any movement of “engaged Buddhist” is

comprised of a wide range of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Inspired by the core values and ideals of Buddhism, they stand in perfect unison to lessen the suffering of the world, specifically by “engaging” (as opposed to renouncing) various social, political, and economic institutions, structures and systems prevailing in the society. This kind of engagement can assume several forms, such as voting, lobbying, peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and so forth. However, the fundamental aim of all those is essentially to actively challenge and change those institutions, etc. which are looked upon as perpetual means of suffering through various forms of oppression, injustice, and the like.

Basically, engaged Buddhism is not just an answer to those opinionated scholars who depict Buddhism as a passive, other-worldly or escapist religion, but it also offers effective long-term solutions to the problems and challenges of the contemporary society.

Another important aspect of Buddhism is that it has never existed in isolation, and changes within are often connected to the changes outside the sangha. That is why socially engaged Buddhism suggests that Buddhists are socially active capable of applying Buddhism to the ‘liberation’ of the society in many ways. These leaders are instrumental in helping the sangha to catch up with the demands

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4 Sangha: The Buddhist community, especially those who have been ordained as monks and nuns but originally referring to the ‘fourfold sangha’ of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.
of a secular society with the true spirit of Buddhism. Thus, it can be stated that socially engaged Buddhism per se is not new to Buddhism, but it is instead the way Buddhist leaders have engaged themselves and are being engaged that is new and deserves clarification.

Within the specific context of socially engaged Buddhism today, the application of the Dharma or of Buddhist teachings to the resolution of social problems has emerged as pivotal to myriad global discourses on human rights, distributive justice, and social progress. In this regard, the timing of observing its practical components is of utmost relevance. For instance, it has been clearly instructed that one should engage in meditative practice early in the morning and then consciously remain mindful throughout the day of the motivation of practice, which is genuine compassion for all sentient beings. Likewise, one should regularly consider during the daytime whether or not one’s actions are truly beneficial to others. Then, before going to bed, one should review the day’s activities to evaluate what one has done for others. As a style of ethical practice, engaged Buddhism may be looked upon as a new paradigm of Buddhist liberation.

**Conceptualisation of “Socially Engaged Buddhism” During the Time of the Buddha**

At the time of the Lord Buddha, the term “Socially Engaged Buddhism” was already in existence but it did not have the same connotation as today.
Basically, the words used then for the set of practices it signified were different because the language in which the practical essence of socially engaged Buddhism was conceived was different from our language. In spite of that, the fundamental implications of socially engaged Buddhism have always been identical. Given the fact that it has been existing since the enlightenment of the Buddha, it is hard to say that socially engaged Buddhism is a new form of Buddhism as some scholars have argued.

There are evidences in the ancient Pali canon which indicate that Shakyamuni Buddha saw individual serenity and social concord as inseparable. Based on his enlightened observation, he laid down a set of guidelines for the development of just social institutions. The Jataka tales note that “the Buddha is shown as not withdrawing from the world, but as acting with compassion and wisdom for the benefit of all living beings”. About two centuries after the passing away of Lord Buddha, Nagarjuna, the erudite founder of Madhiyamika, also undertook an elaborate discussion on the application of Buddhist principles in the social realm\(^5\).

It is worthwhile here to note a prolonged misconception which asserts that the Buddha’s teaching can be followed strictly by those people only who are on the verge of retiring from life. In all likelihood, it can be regarded as nothing but an unconscious defense against practicing it. In the Buddhist literature, there are

numerous references to men and women who, despite living ordinary, normal family lives, successfully practiced what the Buddha taught, and went on to attain *Nirvana*. Vacchogatta the Wanderer once asked the Buddha straightforwardly whether there were laymen and women, who followed the Buddha’s teaching successfully and attained high spiritual status even while leading a family life. The Buddha kindly stated that there not one or two, not a hundred or two hundred or five hundred, but many more laymen and women leading the family life who followed his teaching successfully and attained high spiritual status.\(^6\)

It may be agreeable for certain people to live a retired life in a quiet place away from noise and disturbance. But it is certainly more praiseworthy and courageous to practise Buddhism while living among fellow beings, helping them and being of service to them. In certain cases, it may perhaps be useful for a person to live in retirement for a time in order to improve his or her mind and character, as preliminary moral, spiritual, and intellectual training, to be strong enough to come out later and help other. But if someone lives an entire life in solitude, thinking only about their own happiness and salvation, and without caring for their fellow beings, this surely is not in keeping with the teachings of the Buddha which are based on love, compassion and service to others.

Furthermore, it is baseless to think that Buddhism is focused on lofty ideals, high moral and philosophical thought, while ignoring the social and economic

welfare of people. The fact that the Buddha was always interested in the happiness of people is beyond any debate now. In his opinion, the state of perfect happiness was impossible to achieve unless one led a pure life based on moral and spiritual principles. At the same time, he was also absolutely conversant with the hard and practical reality that leading such a life was never easy for a common spiritual practitioner in unfavorable material and social conditions.

In this regard, it is important to remember that Buddhism does not consider material welfare as an end in itself: it is only a means to an end- a higher and nobler end. But as a means to a great end, it is indispensable for the realization of a higher purpose for human happiness. So Buddhism recognizes the need of certain minimum material conditions favorable to spiritual success even for a monk engaged in meditation in some solitary place.⁷

The Buddha did not take life out of the context of its social and economic background. Instead, he looked at it as a whole, in all its social, economic and political aspects. Like an expert physician, the Buddha took upon himself the marathon task of curing his patients and in order to accomplish this mission, he went on to discover how to lead them out of suffering by teachings on ethical, spiritual, and philosophical problems. However, a lot about his teaching on social, economic, and political matters is still unknown to a great extent, particularly in the West. Notwithstanding this, there is no denying the fact that numerous

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⁷ Majjihima-nikayatthakatha, Papancasudani, I (Pali text society), p. 290
discourses dealing with these problems constitute the core of several ancient Buddhist texts. Let us consider a few examples.

A part of the *Cakkavattisihanadasutta* in the Digha-nikaya\(^8\) clearly states that poverty (daliddiya) causes immorality which results in the occurrence of crimes such as theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, cruelty, etc. Much like modern governments, the ancient kings tried to suppress crime through punishment. The *Kutadanasutta* of the same Nikaya explains the futility of this practice. It says that this method can never be successful and effective. In order to eradicate crime, as the Buddha argues, the economic condition of the people should be improved: grain and other facilities for agriculture should be provided for harmers and cultivators; capital should be provided for traders and those who are engaged in business; and adequate wages should be paid to those who are employed. When people thus get opportunities to earn a lot, they will be contented, will have no fear or anxiety, and consequently, the country will be peaceful and free from crime.

Keeping this in mind, the Buddha told lay people as to how important it was to improve their economic condition. This does not mean that he approved of hoarding wealth with desire and attachment, which is against his fundamental teaching, nor did he approve of each and every way of earning one’s livelihood. The fact is that there are certain trades like the production and sale of armaments, which he condemns as evil means of livelihood.

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\(^8\) Digha-nikaya. No. 26
Once upon a time a lay disciple named Dighajanu visited the Buddha and asked: “Venerable Sir, we are ordinary laymen, leading the family life with wife and children. Would the Blessed One teach us some doctrines which will be conducive to our happiness in this world and hereafter?”

The Buddha replied that there are four things which are conducive to a man’s happiness in this world. First, he should be skilled, efficient, earnest, and energetic in whatever profession he is engaged, and he should know it well. Second, he should protect his income, which he has thus earned righteously, with the sweat of his brow. Third, he should have good, faithful, learned, virtuous, liberal, and intelligent friends, who can help him along the right path away from evil. Fourth, he should spend reasonably, in proportion to his income, neither too much nor too little. In other words, he should not hoard wealth avariciously, and instead of being extravagant, should live within his means. The Buddha expounds the four virtues conducive to a layman’s happiness:

1) He should have faith and confidence in moral, spiritual, and intellectual values (Saddha).

2) He should abstain from destroying and harming life, from stealing and cheating, from adultery, from falsehood, and from intoxicating drinks (Sila).

3) He should practice charity, generosity, without attachment and craving for his wealth (Caga).
4) He should develop wisdom which leads to the complete destruction of suffering, to the realization of Nirvana (Panna).\(^9\)

Sometimes, the Buddha even goes into details on how to save and spend money. For instance, he tells the young man Sigala that he should spend one fourth of his income on his daily expenses, invest half in his business and put aside one fourth for any emergency.\(^10\)

Thus, one can see that though the Buddha considered economic welfare as requisite for human happiness, he did not recognize progress as real if it was only material, and devoid of a spiritual and moral foundation. While encouraging material progress, Buddhism always lays great stress on the development of the moral and spiritual character for a happy, peaceful, and contented society.

The Buddha was just as clear on politics, as on war and peace. It is worthwhile here to reiterate that Buddhism advocates and preaches nonviolence and peace as its universal message, thereby disapproving of any form of violence or destruction of life. According to Buddhism, there is nothing that can be called a “just war” which is only a false term coined and put into circulation to justify and excuse hatred, cruelty, violence and massacre. After all, who decides what is just or unjust? Going by what usually happens, the mighty and the victorious are “just” while the weak and the defeated are “unjust”. To the former, war is always “just”

\(^9\) Anguttara-nikaya, ed. Devamitta Thera (comlombo,1929) and Pali text Society, p.786.
whereas to the latter, it is always “unjust”. This position is not acceptable to the Buddha.

The Buddha not only taught nonviolence and peace, but also went to the battlefield itself and intervened personally to prevent war, as in the case of the dispute between the Sakyas and the Koliyas, who had locked horns over the question of the waters of the Rohini. Also, it was his words that once prevented King Ajatasattu from attacking the kingdom of the Vajjis.

Like many rulers today, there were rulers in the time of the Buddha too who governed their countries unjustly. People were oppressed, exploited, and persecuted. They were also subjected to excessive taxes and cruel punishments. The Buddha was deeply moved by the suffering of the common masses caused by these inhuman practices. The Dhammapadatthakatha records that he directed his attention to the problem of good government. His views should be appreciated against the social, economic and political background of his time. He had shown how a whole country could become corrupt, degenerate, and unhappy, when the head of its government, that is the king, the ministers, and administrative officers become corrupt and unjust. Thus, for a country to be happy, it must have a just government. The way this form of just government could be realized is explained
by the Buddha in his teaching of the “Ten duties of the King” (*Dasarajadhamma*),
as given in the Jataka text.\(^\text{11}\)

The term “king” (Raja) of yore has now been replaced by the term “Government.” So, “The Ten Duties of the King” are applicable to all those who constitute the government such as head of state, ministers, political leaders, legislative and administrative officers, and so on.

The first of the “Ten Duties of the King” laid down by the Buddha is adherence to a set of positive and morally empowering values like liberality, generosity, and charity (*dana*). The ruler should not have craving for and attachment to wealth and property, but he should give it away for the welfare of the people.

The second duty of the king is to have a high moral character (sila). He should never destroy life, cheat, steal and exploit others, commit adultery, utter falsehood, and take intoxicating drinks. In other words, he must at least observe the Five Precepts, the minimum moral obligations of a lay Buddhist- 1) not to taken life of other, 2) not stealing, 3)not to commit adultery, 4) not telling lies, and 5) not taking intoxicating drinks.

The third of the king’s duties prescribed by the Buddha is to sacrifice everything for the good of the people (pariccaga). To put it otherwise, he must be

\(^{11}\) Jataka I, 260,399;II, 400,274; v, 119,378.
prepared to give up all personal comfort, name and fame, and even his life, in the interest of the people.

Fourth of the king’s duties is to have honesty and integrity (ajjava). According to the Buddha, the king must be free from fear and favor in the discharge of his duties, must be sincere in his attentions, and must not deceive the public.

To have kindness and gentleness (maddhava) is the fifth of the king’s duties. He must possess a genial temperament.

As the sixth duty, the king should be austere in habits (tapa). He must lead a simple life, and should not indulge in a life of luxury. He must have self-control.

Freedom from hatred, ill-will, and enmity (akkodha) is the seventh duty of the king. He should bear no grudge against anybody.

Eighth duty of the king is to stick to the principle and practice of nonviolence (avihimsa). It not only means that he should harm nobody, but also that he should try to promote peace by avoiding and preventing war, and everything which involves violence and destruction of life.

Ninth and last duty of the king is to have patience, forbearance, and tolerance with understanding (khanti). It implies that he must be able to bear hardships, difficulties and insults without losing his temper.
Tenth and last duty of the king is to observe non-opposition and non-obstruction (*avirodha*). Thus, he should not oppose the will of the people, should not obstruct any measures that are conducive to the welfare of the people. In other words he should rule in harmony with his people.\(^\text{12}\)

One should overcome anger through kindness, wickedness through goodness, selfishness through charity, and falsehood through truthfulness. That is the essence of what the Buddha has taught as regards the moral strengthening of the king’s character.

Buddhism aims to create a society where the ruinous struggle for power is renounced; where calm and peace prevail away from conquest and defeat; where the persecution of the innocent is vehemently denounced; where one who conquers oneself is more respected than those who conquer millions by military and economic warfare; where hatred is conquered by kindness, and evil by goodness; where enmity, jealously, ill-will and greed do not infect men’s mind; where compassion is the driving force of action; where all, including the least of living things, are treated with fairness, consideration and love; where life in peace and harmony, in a world of material contentment, is directed towards the highest and noblest aim, the realization of the Ultimate Truth, Nirvana.

**The Conceptualisation of Socially Engaged Buddhism in Contemporary World**

The term “Socially Engaged Buddhism” has been coined by the most venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, an expatriate Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk who was born on October 11, 1926 in central Vietnam. A teacher, author, poet and peace activist, he joined a Zen monastery at the age of sixteen, studied Buddhism as a novice, and was fully ordained as a monk in 1949. He is commonly referred to as Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich is a title used by all Vietnamese monks and nuns. It means that they are part of the Shakya (Shakyamuni Buddha) clan.

During the early 1960s, he laid the foundation of the school of Youth for Social Services (SYSS) in Saigon, a grassroots relief organization that rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, and resettled families left homeless during the Vietnam War. In course of his numerous trips to the U.S., he studied at Princeton University, lectured at Cornell University and taught at Columbia University. But the major purpose of those travels was to urge the U.S. government to withdraw from Vietnam. He urged Martin Luther King, JR. to oppose the Vietnam War publicly and spoke with people and groups about peace. In a January 25, 1967 letter to the Nobel Institute in Norway, King nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Venerable Nhat Hanh led the Buddhist delegation to the Paris Peace Talks.

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh is one of the best known Buddhist teachers in the West, his teachings and practices appeal to people across various religious, spiritual, and political backgrounds. He offers a practice of mindfulness adapted to
Western sensibilities. He created the Order of Interbeing in 1966, and established monasteries and practice centers around the World. He has traveled worldwide giving retreats and talks. The term “Engaged Buddhism” or “Socially Engaged Buddhism” was coined by him in his book *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*.

Engaged Buddhism: Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh is considered to be one of the primary thinkers behind the concept of Engaged Buddhism. The ideal that enlightenment can be sought not only through study and formal meditation, but also by mindfulness of daily life, extended to all actions. In particular, Engaged Buddhism advocates for a compassionate, Buddhist approach to social justice and social engagement covering a range of issues such as environmentalism, human rights, education, and poverty among others.

“Engaged Buddhism” teaches a cyclical process. By understanding the true nature of the self, we can better understand the truth of the society; then we use that enhanced understanding to gain an even deeper understanding of self, which leads to deeper understanding of the society and so on. Ultimately, we understand that the self and the society have no separate existence. They are just two ways of looking at the same unified reality. Society per se makes it hard to realize this. In fact, it teaches us to worry about the relationship between individual and society, as if the two were separate pieces of puzzle that must somehow go together, though they cannot fit together. Society perpetuates this false problem because it wants us to be asleep, so that we will not do anything to change the status quo.
Awareness of interdependence makes it immediately evident that each of us shares responsibility for all that happens and will happen. Therefore, there is no phenomenon in the universe that does not immediately concern us. As soon as we recognize that responsibility, we are moved to act to improve the situation: “If we are very aware, we can do something to change the course of things.” We are most motivated to work for change when we realize that our sense of being a separate self is illusory. We are all part of the same human process and driven by the same processes. Changing that process means changing both situation and self: “Mindfulness is to see deeply into things, to see how we can change, how we can transform our situation. To transform our situation is also to transform our minds. To transform our mind is also to transform our situation, because the situation is mind, and mind is situation.”

Since the individual and society co-exist each must nourish the other, or both will wither. The preservation of oneself is the same thing as the preservation of all; the improvement of oneself is the same thing as the improvement of all; the healing of one’s own suffering is the same thing as the healing of all suffering. This is what Buddhists mean by compassion. It does not mean reaching out to another. It is (as the literal meaning of the word suggests) “feeling together with” in a broader sense, compassion means experiencing one’s own fate and the fate of the supposed other as identical. Thus, it also means experiencing the other’s suffering as one’s own suffering.
Compassion does not make any moral judgments about who is innocent and who is to blame. While making such moral judgments, we usually tend to take the stance of a subject observing objects. Thus, we lose the sense of immediate interbeing which is the essence of compassion. But when we identify with everyone, we realize that our own being and society’s good and evil aspects all share the same essential nature. “When we realize our nature of interbeing, we will stop blaming and killing, because we know that we inter-are.” So we stop splitting the world into good versus evil. Instead, we will love and become friends with everyone.

When we are truly mindful, we recognize that nothing in life is any more permanent or secure than an ocean wave. We are always riding the crest of a wave. Try to hold on to anything is to pursue an impossible illusion of security. When we accept the truth of this impermanence, we realize that all boundaries are human constructs imposed on the unpredictable, and therefore uncontrollable, process of reality. So we make no effort to control or impose ourselves on others. We simply respond to the demand of the moment, without expecting to control the future.

Why is it necessary to respond? It is a natural impulse to give vent to our own suffering. If we accidentally put a finger in the fire, we do not think about what to do; we instinctively take the finger out of the fire. Compassion implies the tendency to have the same instinctive desire to ease all suffering, irrespective of
where it occurs and who experiences it. This is the motive of engaged Buddhism and its efforts to create a more just world.

Compassion also allows us to be more objective, because we can see things more clearly and be more fully aware of the whole situation. This is in keeping with the assumption that “To love is to understand.” This assumption suggests that when suffering is humanly caused, the perpetrators actually suffer along with the victims. It also implies that the perpetrators are causing suffering because they themselves have suffered. In the nutshell, the better we understand the causes of suffering, the more effectively we can work to relieve it. So, when we offer love and understanding to others, no matter how evil their deeds are, we may be able to defuse the anger that is often the source of those deeds. Certainly, we can be better models of the behavior we expect from others.

Furthermore, we cannot reach out to the world compassionately unless we become the compassion we want to offer others. As it has been observed by the Buddha, if we cannot be compassionate to ourselves, we will not be able to be compassionate to others. We can only be happy when we accept ourselves as we are. We must first be aware of all the elements within us, and then we must bring them into harmony.” This is certainly not easy to practice. All of us have a desire for security, which makes it hard to accept the truth of impermanence. We all have emotions and ignorance, which create illusions that block our accurate perception. Most difficult of all, usually, is our own unacknowledged anger. It's only after
recognizing our own seeds of anger that we can stop nurturing them. Besides that we can convert them into constructive feelings of forgiveness and understanding, nurturing the seeds of compassion.

Ironically, even knowledge can block accurate perception. We seek security from our sense of certainty by clinging to what we are sure we know. When we resist new ideas and refuse to change our views, we cannot see the truth clearly. Most importantly, we cannot see the truth that the world is always changing and the next moment is unknown and unpredictable. Therefore, the world always keeps changing. No ideas are absolutely and permanently true. Ideas are only useful as means to reduce suffering. We should always be ready to give up our current ideas and knowledge when circumstances call for new ones.

In traditional Buddhist teachings and practices, the Buddha was most often presented as the one who knows how to heal suffering because he is “wide awake” (the literal meaning of the name Buddha). “Engaged Buddhism” broadens its horizon by teaching that each one of us can do this. Each of us has a Buddha nature, which is our innate capacity to wake up, to understand the truth of interbeing, and to love all reality. Everyone who is awake embodies the Buddha and therefore becomes a Buddha in body. In that sense, “you yourself are the Buddha.” We need not go to a monastery or a far–off mountain top to become the Buddha. Anyone or anything can help us wake up. It imparts the essence of Buddha’s teachings, just by being what it is, a part of the endless web of
interbeing. There are fourteen guidelines\textsuperscript{13} for the engaged Buddhist formulated by venerable Thich Nhat Hanh. These can be sum up as follows.

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bend yourself compulsively to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, including even the Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; one should not be accepted as absolute truth.

2. Do not think that the knowledge you possess at present is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow minded and hardcore stickler of present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others’ viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn and to observe reality in yourself and in the world throughout your life.

3. Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrow-mindedness.

4. Do not avoid or ignore suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the worldly life. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

5. Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not make fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure as the aim of your life. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are needy.

6. Do not harbour anger or hatred. For anything or anyone learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still nascent stage in your consciousness. The moment they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and understand the nature of your hatred.

7. Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breath to get back to what is happening in the present moment. Be touch with what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside and around you. Sow seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in yourself so as to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.

8. Do not utter words that can lead to discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

9. Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you know may not be true. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

10. Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however,
should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

11. Do not associate yourself with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Choose a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.

12. Do not kill and let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

13. Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

14. Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. For brothers and sisters who are not monks and nuns: Sexual expression should not take place without love and commitment. In sexual relations, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others and respect the rights and commitments of others, be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.

Western Buddhist Social Engagement

In the past two hundred years West society has undergone a more fundamental transformation than at any period since Neolithic times, whether in
terms of technology or the world of ideas. While this complex revolution is undercutting traditional Buddhism in the east, it is also stimulating oriental Buddhism. In the West, it is creating problems and perceptions to which Buddhism seems particularly relevant. Throughout its history Buddhism has been successfully reinterpreted in accordance with different cultures, whilst at the same time preserving its inner truths. Buddhism has thus spread and survived. The historic task of Buddhists in both East and West (in the twenty-first century) is to interpret perennial Buddhism in terms of the needs of industrial man and woman in the social conditions of their time, while demonstrating its acute and urgent relevance to the ills of that society. To this great and difficult enterprise, Buddhists will bring their traditional boldness and humility. Clinging to dogma and defensiveness is certainly against the spirit of the present age.

In the modern Western society, humanistic social action, with its variety of forms, is seen both as the characteristic way of relieving suffering and enhancing human well-being and, at the same time, as a noble ideal of service and of self-sacrifice, by humanists of all faiths.

Buddhism, however, is humanism as it rejoices the possibility of true freedom as something inherent in human nature. For Buddhism, the ultimate freedom is to achieve absolute liberation from the root causes of all suffering: greed, hatred and delusion, which are also the root causes of all social evils. Their grossest forms are those which are harmful to others. To weaken, and finally
eliminate them in oneself, and, as far as possible, in society, is the fundamental objective of Buddhist ethics. It's on this ethical bedrock that Buddhist social action takes place.

The experience of suffering is the starting point of Buddhist teaching and also that of any attempt to define a distinctively Buddhist social action. Notwithstanding, misunderstanding can arise at the start, because the Pali word *dukkha*, which is commonly translated simply as "suffering," has a much wider and more subtle connotations. There is, of course, much gross, objective suffering in the world (*dukkha-dukkhaka*), and much of this arises from poverty, war, oppression and other social conditions. We cling to our good fortune and struggle at all costs to escape from our bad fortune.

This struggle may not be so desperate in certain countries which enjoy a high material standard of living spread relatively evenly throughout the population. Nevertheless, the material achievements of such societies appear somehow to have been "bought" by social conditions which breed a profound sense of insecurity and anxiety, of restlessness and inner confusion, in contrast to the relatively stable and ordered society in which the Buddha taught.

To live thus, in developing countries, "in the context of equipment," has become the great goal for increasing numbers of people. They are watched sadly
by Westerners who have accumulated more experience of the disillusion and frustration of perpetual non-arrival.

Obviously, from the experience of social conditions there arises both physical and psychological suffering. But more fundamental is still that profound sense of unease, of anxiety or angst, which arises from the very transience (anicca) of life (viparinama-dukkha). This angst, however conscious of it we may or may not be, drives the restless search to establish a meaningful self-identity in the face of a disturbing awareness of our insubstantiality (anatta). Ultimately, life is commonly a struggle to give meaning to life — and to death. This is so much the essence of the ordinary human condition and we are so very much inside it, that for much of the time we are scarcely aware of it. This existential suffering is the distillation of the various conditions which we have referred to above — it's the human condition itself.

To the individual human being Buddhism offers a religious practice, a way, leading to the transcendence of suffering. Buddhist social action arises from this practice and contributes to it. From suffering arises desire to end suffering. The secular humanistic activist sets himself for the endless task of satisfying that desire, and perhaps hopes to end social suffering by constructing utopias. The Buddhist, on the other hand, is concerned ultimately with the transformation of desire. Hence, he contemplates and experiences social action in a fundamentally different way from the secular activist. This way will not be readily
comprehensible to the latter, and has helped give rise to the erroneous belief that Buddhism is indifferent to human suffering. One reason why the subject of this pamphlet is so important to Buddhists is that they will have to start here if they are to begin to communicate effectively with non-Buddhist social activists. We should add, however, that although such communication may not be easy on the intellectual plane, at the level of feelings shared in compassionate and collective experience of social action, there may be little difficulty.