

Review Article

**Engaged Buddhism, its history, practice and social benefits**

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**Abstract**

*The article is primarily dedicated to the Buddhism in action, 'the engaged Buddhism'. The roots of engaged Buddhism and its evolution and practice from the ancient time to the modern era have been reviewed. Though majority of researchers tend to link engaged Buddhism with the original philosophy of Buddhism, some of the researchers differ and try to emphasize that the idea of engaged Buddhism is against Buddhist's original philosophy. Despite differing views on the origin of engaged Buddhism, the modern practice of engaged Buddhism round the globe has been found more advantageous for the better societies and better world than ever before.*

**Keywords:** Engaged Buddhism, Responsible consumption, Non-violence, Sustainable development

**1.0 Introduction**

Engaged Buddhists advocate for systemic change through peaceful means, relying on Buddhist teachings like *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *karuna* (compassion). This kind of peaceful approach of engaged Buddhists offers several benefits across multiple spheres of society by promoting social justice, compassion, and sustainable solutions to the existing problems in society. Such an approach also promotes non-violence and active participation in addressing social injustices and inequalities.

Though the history of participation of Buddhists for sociopolitical cause can be traced back in the sociopolitical activities of King Ashoka of Magadha (A kingdom in ancient India) and Korean rulers, widespread misunderstanding persists about linking such activities with the original philosophy of Buddhism. The general perception of Buddhism as a path of isolation from society, focused solely on personal enlightenment is common. However, the 20th century witnessed a paradigm shift in the understanding of Buddhism, with the emergence of a socially and politically active form of Buddhism known as *engaged Buddhism*. This form of Buddhism emphasizes the active involvement of Buddhist teachings in addressing social issues. The purpose of this article is to review the popularization, practice, and positive sociopolitical aspects of engaged Buddhism.

Researchers are divided on the question of whether the activities of engaged Buddhism can be linked to the original philosophy of Buddhism. After reviewing the roots and practices of engaged Buddhism, this article focuses on the social benefits of its practice.

**2.0 Roots and Evolution of Engaged Buddhism**

Buddhist ideology of selflessness is linked to the Bodhisattva ideal. The word Bodhisattva is constructed from the Sanskrit root *bodhi*, meaning “awakening” or “enlightenment”, and *sattva*, meaning “being”. Thus, Bodhisattva translates into “a being on the path of enlightenment.” In

Mahāyāna Buddhism, Bodhisattva is open to all and everyone is encouraged to become Bodhisattva (Skorupski, 2000). However, in Theravāda Buddhism, Bodhisattva is seen as rare and exceptional achievement. Only a few select individuals are eventually able to become Bodhisattva (Samuels, 1997).

According to Cho (2000), both selflessness and the Bodhisattva's ideal demand social engagement to alleviate societal woes. Historically, Buddhist temples served as centers for community activities and social engagement, which demonstrates the practice of engaged Buddhism in ancient times (Moksnes & Melin, 2013). In a similar vein, Toh (n.d.) emphasizes that the growing interest in engaged Buddhism does not imply that the Buddha or his teachings were "disengaged" from social practices and relationships. Lefebure (n.d.) relates *anacakkd* (socio-political wheel) as the sociopolitical wing of early Buddhist tradition. Queen (2013) describes suffering (*dukkha*), action-rebirth (*karma-sasāra*), and the Five Precepts as the "Three Marks of Engaged Buddhist Philosophy," and further clarifies that engaged Buddhism is philosophically distinct from Christian denominations and secular organizations such as the International Red Cross, Red Crescent, and Doctors Without Borders. Duoc and Dac (2018) relate engaged Buddhism to the concept of *Nibbāna* (Pali) or *Nirvāṇa* (Sanskrit), which historically referred to personal enlightenment and salvation but has evolved in modern times to encompass social and universal realization. Likewise, Temprano (2013) echoes the view of Loy (2010) that engaged Buddhism is one avenue through which Buddhism has adapted itself to survive the postmodern tumult.

In the 20th century, prominent figures such as the 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), Aung San Suu Kyi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and the Sarvodaya Shramdan movement in Sri Lanka all exemplified the sociopolitical dimensions of engaged Buddhism (Queen, 1996). Queen (1996) further describes the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc and his companions in 1963 as a key example of modern Buddhist activism. The movement by Asian Buddhist women demanding the Bhikkhuni Sangha can also be seen as part of a global struggle for gender equality. Queen credits Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh for coining the term "engaged Buddhism." During the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh and his spiritual community (*sangha*) responded to the suffering around them, in part by adopting the non-violence principle of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. (Sleber, 2015). However, Gregory (2021) traces the origin of engaged Buddhism to the Buddhist reformer Taixu and his disciples in China, as well as to the rise of Humanistic Buddhism. Gregory also points to Dr. Ambedkar as a clear example of applying Buddhist principles to combat the social and political injustices of the caste system. Bharati Puri (n.d.) considers the 14th Dalai Lama as an activist who has significantly changed the image of Buddhism from a "quietist and introverted spirituality" to a socially relevant and dynamic force.

The evolution of engaged Buddhism is also the result of modernization as described by King (2009, p. 2). According to King, Engaged Buddhism is also a modern phenomenon and as such has been influenced by modern social, economic, psychological, and political forms of analysis of Western origin. King also views engaged Buddhism influenced by the great exemplary efforts of Mahatma Gandhi, who pioneered spiritually based, nonviolent social engagement for the entire world.

Anita Sharma (n.d.) highlights prominent engaged Buddhists such as A.T. Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka, Thich Nhat Hanh of Vietnam, Ajahn Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, with the latter regarded as the most prominent exemplar of socially engaged Buddhism.

Kraft (1995) notes that while today's engaged Buddhists may not rigorously follow Buddhism's ethical tradition, their work reflects a longstanding *Mahāyāna* ideal. Kraft cites the practice of peace through Buddhism in North America and Europe as notable examples. Toh (n.d.) emphasizes that engaged Buddhists are inspired by the values and principles of Buddhist philosophy, and engage in a range of social, political, and economic initiatives that contribute to sustainable development and education.

Despite widespread scholarly support for the sociopolitical engagement of Buddhism, some critics reject the notion that Buddhism should engage in social or political activities. For instance, Lele (2019), in contrast to Thich Nhat Hanh's belief that all Buddhism is engaged, argues that engaged Buddhism contradicts the core Buddhist ideology. Lele rejects the idea of engaging in social or political activities, arguing that the causes of suffering cannot be addressed through such activities, and that such engagement interferes with the tranquility required for liberation. Kitagawa (1980) and Jones (1988) further assert that Buddhism is primarily concerned with religious and spiritual aspects, with Jones rejecting social involvement altogether.

### 3.0 Practice and Social Benefits of Engaged Buddhism

#### 3.1 Worldwide

Moksnes and Melin (2013) describe the involvement of today's engaged Buddhists in various activities, including social work, poverty alleviation, ecology and development programs, political activism, and human rights. Toh (n.d.) similarly highlights engaged practitioners' efforts to promote sustainable development. Kraft (1995) observes that these efforts reflect the *Mahāyāna* (one of the two primary branches of Buddhism which believes in good works, *karmas* as Great Vehicle for achieving Buddhahood) ideal of Buddhism, and emphasizes that modern engaged Buddhism as a force for addressing all dimensions of society.

One notable example of engaged Buddhism is the "Social Flock" project in the Baikal region of Russia, an initiative of the Buryat Buddhist Sangha aimed at reviving nomadic cattle breeding. This project addresses both economic and environmental issues, offering a model for sustainable development (Dondukov et al., 2021).

In Thailand, Phrakhru Somkit Jaranathammo, a monk in Nan Province, initiated Dhammic agriculture to support both the forest and the well-being of farmers. This demonstrates how Buddhist spiritual ecology integrates teachings with environmental and agricultural sustainability (Darlington, 2019).

On an organizational level, the Tzu Chi Foundation, founded by Venerable Cheng Yen in 1966, is a large-scale Buddhist organization in Taiwan that has significantly contributed to medical care, humanitarian efforts, and education. The foundation runs several hospitals and free clinics worldwide and operates the largest bone marrow data bank of the Chinese diaspora (Huang, 2017; Yao, 2012).

The non-violence approach by Dalai Lama (1999) is one of the great examples of engaged Buddhism for political movement. This approach significantly raised awareness about Tibet's cultural and political struggles, drawing international support through nonviolent methods. Moreover, engaged Buddhist practices have inspired activists to focus on building bridges across cultural divides, creating spaces for dialogue rather than conflict.

In the environmental and economic spheres, engaged Buddhism advocates for sustainable living and responsible consumption. By recognizing the interconnectedness of all life forms, engaged Buddhists encourage a reevaluation of human practices that exploit natural resources and contribute to ecological degradation. This approach has motivated Buddhist communities to promote ecological sustainability, such as the establishment of eco-monasteries and organic farming initiatives for sustainable living (Schumacher, 2003).

### **3.2 Nepalese Context**

Nepal despite being the birth place of Buddha, the practice of engaged Buddhism is not as prominent in the country as one might expect. However, there are examples of practice of engaged Buddhism at both individual and organizational levels. At individual level, one prominent example is the work of Lama Tenzin Zopa Rinpoche (Tenzin Zopa, 2019). He is involved in both humanitarian and environmental projects which include supporting the education of disadvantaged communities, promoting environmental sustainability, and providing disaster relief. His approach is guided by the principles of compassion (*karuṇā*) and social responsibility which are the fundamental tenets of engaged Buddhism.

At organizational level, Nepalese Buddhist Institute (NBI, 2020) has been actively promoting humanitarian works like social justice, women's right and interfaith dialogue. The organization is also involved in providing shelter and education for marginalized women. These activities of the institute are realizations of Buddhist teaching for social cause.

### **4.0 Conclusion**

The overwhelming majority of scholars agree that modern engaged Buddhism has roots in the original teachings of Buddhism. While some researchers reject the association of social engagement with Buddhist philosophy, the social benefits of engaged Buddhism are undeniable. Its emphasis on non-violence movement for political goals appears more and more important in today's world witnessing wars in different parts of the globe. The sustainable living practice by engaged Buddhism is another important aspect for food security and its role toward the mitigation of worsening environment. Thus, engaged Buddhism covers wide spectrum of activities ranging from sustainable agriculture, environment, health care, education, poverty alleviation and sustainable living practices which are important contribution toward making the world better. With all these benefits, there is need for the planned and proactive promotion of practice and popularization of engaged Buddhism in Nepal also.

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