

Startled awake: the nature of engagement

Anyone who is a Vietnamese ... when it's sunset, approaching a temple in a daze, upon hearing the compassionate sound of the temple bell, cannot fail to be startled awake from mundane dreams, Nguyễn Mực Tiên, 1927, DeVido, E., In: Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam

Readers of this newsletter know that BODHI attempts to engage constructively with the real problems of the world. In particular we try to reduce the physical and mental suffering of poverty, whether manifest through disease, despair, vulnerability or oppression. I recently attended the ninth biennial meeting of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, held in Taiwan for the first time. We then toured this crowded island, visiting two beautiful and wealthy Buddhist temples, each with a worldwide network of daughter institutions. Temple spokespersons claimed that their evangelical work was socially engaged. However, even through interpreters, I sensed a large gulf between my conception of social engagement and theirs.

The scope and outreach of these temples are tremendously successful. Both are very large, immaculately kept and surrounded by beautiful gardens. Thousands of Buddha images adorned vast halls. People were calm, friendly and seemed happy — traits which mirrored this prosperous and comparatively egalitarian society as a whole. I saw no beggars in Taiwan, perhaps due to the penetration of Buddhism into ordinary everyday life.

Yet, nowhere in these palaces of faith did I sense any recognition of the world's material and environmental crises. In one monastery, thousands of dollars had been spent to ensure the survival of individual trees in recognition of the importance of nature; yet there seemed no parallel awareness of the need to conserve energy or reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Perhaps this simply reflects a general lack of understanding within Taiwan of climate change — even though that country seems to be experiencing more typhoons which very likely are climate change related.

More importantly, I detected no hint in these monasteries of awareness of the extent of global poverty and exploitation. Their Buddhism seemed to emphasise faith, prayer and material generosity, the last more to construct and operate religious centres than to help the poor. My limited knowledge of these daughter centres is that devotees are encouraged to continue these activities. Status primarily comes from one's material ability to foster even more centres. The model is very successful. Doubtless these beliefs give many devotees satisfaction and some mental peace, but does this method help to reduce global poverty and exploitation? Could it worsen these conditions, including by discouraging analysis?

Evangelism & social engagement

The psychologist Abraham Maslow described a hierarchy of needs, from basic survival to self-actualisation. I think at its core this hierarchy is self-evident. We should be sceptical of those who argue that enlightenment is attainable by the extremely poor, especially if such claims are made by the well off. While there may be a few saints who thrive in material poverty, these people are very rare. They have usually consciously chosen their poverty, as did the Buddha following his life as a privileged prince. Such freedom to choose reflects a very different experience from that of those born into poverty with little prospect of escape.

Preaching to the wealthy has a place. I do not deny the dissatisfaction of many people who lead materially acquisitive lives. Everyone benefits from greater spiritual awareness, including that attainable from sanctuaries such as the ones I visited. But I think there is a hierarchy of suffering. Material poverty, disease and exploitation are common, especially in developing countries. Some Buddhist scholars argue that all Buddhism is inherently 'engaged.' Though this has many contested meanings (which I lack space to properly discuss) the scale of human exploitation, rather than the inherent suffering from disease, ageing and so on, indicates to me that much more could and should be done. More good would be done if religions worked harder to reduce physical suffering, poverty and vulnerability than to preach to the wealthy.

Many missionaries, Christian as well as Buddhist, appear to believe that spiritual evangelism is of equal or greater value than the provision of material aid or the promotion of health and security. This belief system seems to have two central propositions. First, good mental well-being in this life can be attained by following various spiritual practices, such as the Buddhist Eightfold Path. The second core proposition is that life after death is more important than life on Earth.

For most religions, a better future life includes improved material circumstances. (Descriptions of heaven never include poverty.) It follows that spiritual development in this life can have a material payoff in the next, even if there is little material improvement in this life. Actually, I argue, the quest to provide essentials such as adequate food, shelter and a legal framework which protects basic rights — for example, protection from displacement without compensation, receiving an education or seeking justice if attacked — is more important than the next life.

It seems very hard for any individual to make much of a difference. Few can be charismatic human rights lawyers or dedicated health or

aid workers. But could not spiritual leaders — including Buddhists — draw more attention to the scale of exploitation? Fear of being criticised as 'political' often precludes this. However, ignoring these issues is itself political. If more spiritual figures spoke out about global injustice, then this would surely change government and business policies in ways which would be of lasting benefit. Similarly spiritual outreach, if mainly concerned with conversion, is not only unlikely to be socially engaged but also may be harmful, for example by promotion division or by suppressing social analysis. However the forthcoming high-level Buddhist meeting in Hanoi (p 3) suggests that change is possible.

If we can reduce population growth, increase education and find leaders who speak out for greater human rights, then our world has a chance. Not for utopia, but for sustainable survival. Spiritual leaders who encourage their followers to ponder these issues — as well as to say prayers, follow precepts and pursue a right livelihood — might not be able to erect as grand buildings but, I believe, will contribute to a more just and enduring civilisation.

The example of Burma

In September monks led a huge protest in Burma (Myanmar), which the military government cruelly suppressed. Many governments, including some in Asia protested — although not the Chinese, who gain considerable material benefit from their support of the Burmese government. The Japanese government announced it would revise its aid policy following the killing of a Japanese journalist.

The critical reaction of the UN and many foreign governments is encouraging. Yet Aung Sun Su Kyi, the elected leader of the Burmese people, has been held under house arrest for more than a decade. The exploitation, poverty and semi-slavery of the Burmese people are well documented. Why then has this strong international criticism, which includes sanctions, been so recent?



A Pure Land painting, monastery, Taiwan