



# Engaged Buddhism for Social Welfare

**Judy Lief**

Teaching/ Writing/ Editing

[judylief.com](http://judylief.com)



## Abstract

Buddhism has been playing a significant role in the modern world and in the rise of “engaged Buddhism” in particular. For many years, the spread of Buddhadharma took place primarily in Asia, but more recently, Buddhism has begun to take root in the west. Like myself, many western Buddhists came to the dharma with strong backgrounds in political action, arts, health, psychology, or education, which are related to engaged Buddhism. My teacher Trungpa Rinpoche, encouraged his students to apply their dharmic view and training to the smallest details of their daily lives. The reputation of Buddhism in the west could be reconsidered when talking about engaged Buddhism because Buddhists tended to be viewed as dis-engaged in the past, especially when compared with Christians. Although all Buddhists are engaged in the world in one way or another, the term Engaged Buddhism emerged in 1978 in association with a group known as The Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Since that time, the engaged Buddhism movement has continued to grow, and it has become an important stream of dharma in the west. One of the most prominent voices has been the Zen teacher Bernie Glassman. Other activists have focused on issues such as environment, racial bias, as well as in the area of death and dying and prison mindfulness. The biggest and most rapidly growing development stemming from engaged Buddhism has been the rise of the secular mindfulness movement.

*Keywords:* Engaged Buddhism, Buddhadharma, Modern world

In this discussion, I will be exploring the role of Buddhism in the modern world and in particular the rise of “engaged Buddhism.” The encounter of Buddhism and western culture has been a fertile and challenging one in which both sides are being changed. In exploring this development, I would like to begin by offering a little background and by sharing my own story.

The Buddhist tradition started quite simply, with the story of Gautama Buddha, his awakening, and his relationship with his early disciples. From this humble beginning, Buddhism developed into one of the great world religions, inspiring people from all walks of life.

From the birthplace of the Buddhadharmā in India and Nepal, Buddhism spread to many other parts of the world. As the Buddhadharmā entered different regions and cultures, new forms and expressions of the Buddha’s teachings were birthed, forms that spoke to the peoples of each unique place and the needs of the times. As the teachings of the Buddha spread from India to Sri Lanka, Burma and other parts of Asia, the way in which these teachings took shape was marked by the particular culture it was entering. This creative encounter with the specific languages, cultures, and spiritual traditions preceding Buddhism’s arrival in a particular locale led to innovations in views, practices, and institutional expressions. So as mahayana Buddhism took root in Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, and Japan, in each country it developed a unique style. In some countries, Buddhism became a defining feature of the culture and the dominant religion of the region.

For many years, the spread of Buddhadharmā took place primarily in Asia. But more recently, Buddhism has begun to take root in the west. A rich array of Buddhist traditions can be found there — Burmese Buddhism, Japanese Zen, Chinese Chan, Pure Land Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and others. These great traditions are not only intersecting with the western cultural paradigm marked by its Judeo-Christian heritage but are engaging with one another in new ways as well. In North America, there continue to be ethnically-based Buddhist sangha composed primarily of immigrants from Buddhist countries. In parallel, there are a growing number of Buddhist sangha composed primarily of western converts to Buddhism. As an example of a western convert, let me briefly tell my story.

I was raised in the protestant Christian tradition, but like many young people, I had become disillusioned with institutional religion. I had deep spiritual yearnings, but the ministers I met did not have the answers I sought. I became involved in political activism, especially in regard to anti-war activities and women’s rights. This was in the 60’s and 70’s, a time of political upheavals and much creative ferment. In that era there was also a growing fascination with India and the east. Many Hindu and Buddhist teachers were traveling around, teaching

and gathering disciples. I had spent a year in India in 1967-68, and I loved India, but I did not share this fascination or the tendency to romanticize the “exotic east” or “mystical Tibet.” As a graduate student in sociology and Asian studies, my focus was on social and political issues rather than on searching for a guru. However, in 1971, seemingly by chance, I met the person who would become my root guru, and my life took a turn. I dropped what I had been doing and moved to Boulder, Colorado to study with the Tibetan teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. He was my gateway into the vajrayana tradition and to the study and practice of the Buddhist path altogether.

I am sharing this story because it touches directly on the theme of engaged Buddhism and social welfare. Like myself, many western Buddhists came to the dharma with strong backgrounds in political action, in the arts, in health, in psychology, or in education. Along with this, anyone growing up in the west has at least some extent been infused with the Judeo-Christian worldview, with its emphasis on good works, aiding the poor, social justice, and civic engagement. Christian activists aspired to “be in the world, but not of the world,” that is, to be fully engaged in the world but not fall prey to worldliness. This idea would come to resonate quite well with the Buddhist idea of bodhisattvas, enlightened beings drawn by compassion and generosity to work in the world for the benefit of all beings.

My teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche, the eleventh Trungpa Tulku, had been trained since childhood as a high lama in the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition. He fled Tibet in the 1950’s in a harrowing journey across the Himalayas into India. He later went to England to study at Oxford University and to Scotland where he established a meditation center known as Samye Ling.

In 1968 Trungpa Rinpoche was invited to Bhutan where he did a meditation retreat at the famous cave known as Taksang, or Tiger’s Nest. That retreat was pivotal in shaping Trungpa Rinpoche’s entire approach to teaching in the modern western world. He had come to realize that simply transplanting the Tibetan system of monastic education unchanged into this new environment would not be that effective. So Trungpa Rinpoche made daring and innovative changes to how he went about teaching the dharma in the west. On the personal side, he replaced his monastic robes with suits and ties, married a young British woman, and moved to America. To authentically connect with western students, he presented the dharma using the forms of western culture itself.

Trungpa Rinpoche had studied the way in which Buddhism had taken root in Tibet, first as an Indian import and later as fully integrated with the Tibetan culture, taught by Tibetans in Tibetan and with unique Tibetan forms. I think that he saw the arrival of Buddhism in the west to be a similar process. Trungpa Rinpoche taught for seventeen years in North America,

from 1970-1987. In teaching his students the views and practices of the Vajrayana tradition, he made use of existing societal forms and forms from westerns Zen sangha to support his students' study and practice. He also made deep connections and was influenced by America's indigenous spiritual traditions. Trungpa Rinpoche created new models and retreat forms to provide deep immersion into the Vajrayana tradition, based on a balance of dharma study and meditation practice. He put great effort into language. He taught in English and felt it was important that all relevant practice texts, chants, and commentaries be translated into English so that his students could study in their own tongues. He published his own books in accessible vernacular English.

Throughout his teaching, Trungpa Rinpoche, encouraged his students to apply their dharmic view and training to the smallest details of their daily lives. But his interests went beyond simply training individuals. He saw the possibility of infusing dharma throughout all the institutions and activities of secular society—the arts, law, education, government, even the military. He showed how the very institutions known to perpetuate samsaric neurosis, could when joined with dharma become catalysts for a saner and more just world. He referred to this as “creating enlightened society.”

Based on this vision, Trungpa Rinpoche founded schools and practice centers. He encouraged students to develop their talents, whether in the arts, literature, music, health, science, psychology, education, business, politics—not as separate from dharma, but as expressions of dharma. Most prominently, in 1974 he established Naropa University, which became the first accredited Buddhist-inspired university in the United States. From his arrival in North America in 1970, Trungpa Rinpoche modeled a style of practicing the Buddha dharma that was deeply engaged with the challenges and concerns of both individuals and of society as a whole. Although he was not referred to as such, Trungpa Rinpoche was a pioneer in what came to be called “Engaged Buddhism.”

In talking about engaged Buddhism, it is important to look into Buddhism's reputation in that regard. In the past, at least in the west, Buddhists tended to be viewed as dis-engaged rather than engaged. They were seen as people who had renounced the world and were completely absorbed in their own spiritual attainments. Buddhists were critiqued for practicing “navel gazing,” while Christians were involved in the hard work of opening hospitals, creating schools, helping the poor, and performing all kinds of good works. The engaged Buddhism movement has been an important force in undermining that stereotype.

In fact, even in its earliest days Buddhism inspired actions for the social good, the benevolent leadership of the Indian King Ashoka being one example. According to Buddhist

scripture, it is important to cultivate both wisdom and compassion as complementary, intertwining paths. As practitioners we need to train ourselves; there are times when we need to withdraw from the world and focus solely on dharmic training and personal transformation. But we do not live in a vacuum; we are connected to all the other beings in this suffering world, so we need to cut through the temptation to escape. Through practice, compassion naturally arises, and that compassion compels us to act.

Although all Buddhists are engaged in the world in one way or another, the term *Engaged Buddhism* emerged in 1978 in association with a group known as The Buddhist Peace Fellowship. This nonprofit was founded by Zen teacher Aitken Roshi and other notable Zen practitioners to focus on peace and reconciliation work. Its work has expanded to include environmental issues, the challenge of AIDS, and prison reform. They publish a quarterly magazine called *The Turning Wheel*.

Since that time, the engaged Buddhism movement has continued to grow, and it has become an important stream of dharma in the west. Buddhists from many different groups of sangha have taken their practice out into the world, so that at this point Buddhists are no longer viewed solely as disengaged spiritual seekers. In fact, Buddhists are being turned to as leaders in addressing very pressing human and environmental issues. I would like to touch on a few examples to give you an idea of the liveliness and diversity of this movement.

One of the most prominent voices in engaged Buddhism has been the Zen teacher Bernie Glassman. The Zen Peacemaker Order he started with his late wife Sandra Jishu Holmes pioneered work in social enterprises, and the issues of poverty, homelessness, and the struggles of the poor and disadvantaged in America's inner cities. Zen Peacemaker activities range from street retreats and bearing witness retreats at sites such as Auschwitz to job training and ventures such as the Greyston bakery, AIDS work, and prison dharma teaching.

Activists such as Joanna Macy, Gary Snyder and others have focused on environmental issues, drawing on Buddhist teachings of interconnectedness.

The Insight Meditation Society, founded in 1975 by Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, and Joseph Goldstein has brought vipassana style meditation to people from many backgrounds and has made strides in addressing racial bias within western Buddhist sangha.

A well-known example of Buddhist social engagement has been in the area of death and dying. There are many programs that train caregivers and health care professionals ways of working with end-of-life care based on Buddhist principles and practices. Early examples stem back to the AIDS epidemic and the forming of Buddhist hospices. Frank Osteseki and

Roshi Joan Halifax have been prominent in providing support and education to caregivers, health professionals, and the sick or dying. More recently, Sensei Robert Chodo Campbell and Sensei Koshin Paley Ellison founded the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care, a program that trains interfaith chaplains to serve in New York area of hospitals and nursing homes.

Fleet Mall is another example. He formed the Prison Mindfulness Institute to provide meditative and dharmic training for prison inmates. Florence Wald, Fleet, and Nealy Zimmerman also created The National Prison Hospice Association to help people dying who were incarcerated.

Perhaps the biggest and most rapidly growing development stemming from engaged Buddhism has been the rise of the secular mindfulness movement. As neuroscientists have shown the ways in which mindfulness alters the brain, meditation practice has become more common, and people are recognizing its benefits. There has been a move to offer mindfulness training in inner city schools, in businesses, in hospitals, law firms, and many other venues. The magazine *Mindfulness* has grown to be a prominent voice for the many creative ways mindfulness is being used to help deal with the stresses and challenges of modern life.

There are many such examples of how dharma is contributing to societal well-being. I could go on and on. There has been a flourishing of activities and approaches. The entry of Buddhism into western culture has provided enormous benefit, exposing many people for the first time to meditation practice and to Buddhist values and world view. Buddhism is changing the culture for the better.

There are also examples of how the entry of Buddhism into the west is contributing to dharmic well-being and the future of Buddhism. The encounter of primarily Asian forms of dharma with contemporary western cultural forms has inspired new approaches and possibilities. For instance, in the West, there has been a greater emphasis on lay practitioners both as students and as teachers. So, the transmission of the dharma is not in the hands of the monastic community alone, but is shared by many prominent lay teachers, both men and women. In western dharma, women are taking on leadership roles, and many well-known and empowered western teachers are women. Also, in many western sangha meditation practice is central: the practice of meditation, both individually and in groups, is considered to be essential. Altogether, there is a strong focus on this life time and less emphasis on preparing for future lives. As a corollary, there is an emphasis on compassionate engagement in the world, and the model of the bodhisattva.

When Buddhism is not yet fully established in a new culture, there are opportunities to reflect, to innovate, and to create new forms. For the Buddhist tradition to be relevant, it must speak to the culture in which it has landed in ways that can be understood. The challenge is to keep what is essential and let go of what is not. The engaged Buddhism movement, though relatively new, is already making a positive contribution to western society. I think that this movement and other innovations of western dharma are also making a positive contribution to the flourishing of Buddha dharma in the modern world.