Mindfulness (2023) 14:2516–2531
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01847-1

ORIGINAL PAPER

Mindfulness, Compassion and Skillful Means in Engaged Buddhism

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Accepted: 16 February 2022 / Published online: 11 March 2022
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Abstract
Engaged Buddhism, also known as Socially Engaged Buddhism, is a form of socially and politically activist Buddhism that arose throughout the Buddhist world in the twentieth century. The various Engaged Buddhist movements share an ideology of principled nonviolence and the effort to put into practice Buddhist ethical ideals—non-enmity towards all, universal compassion, and the wish to put an end to suffering of all kinds, spiritual and material, psychological and physical, individual and social. Engaged Buddhists are intentional about putting their compassion and/or loving-kindness into action. These actions may be major and history-changing, or small parts of everyday life, depending upon circumstances. The article begins with an examination of the words of the Dalai Lama, who takes us step by step from empathy to compassion to action. It next examines the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, who demonstrates a close internal connection between mindfulness, compassion and skillful means. The remainder of the article focuses on the larger Engaged Buddhism movement to consider examples of how loving-kindness and compassion are expressed in concrete social action. In Asia, these actions have constituted major events in the histories of countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, and they have contributed to a significant development in the cultural ethos of Taiwan. In the West, these actions are on a smaller scale, yet with significant depth and power. These examples demonstrate that loving-kindness and compassion can be, and in the hands of the Engaged Buddhists are, understood as things that can and should be manifested in concrete action on all levels, from an individual's personal life all the way to society-wide social action.

Keywords Buddhism · Engaged compassion Dalai Lama · H. H. the Macy · Joanna Thich Nhat Hanh

Engaged Buddhism, also known as Socially Engaged Buddhism, is a form of socially and politically activist Buddhism that arose throughout the Buddhist world in the twentieth century. It is found in all three of the major branches of Buddhism—Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. It did not begin from a single leader or geographical starting point but arose again and again in many different countries in response to the tremendous crises faced by Buddhist Asia in the twentieth century—war, occupation, genocide, atomic bombing, tyranny, post-colonial degradation, environmental degradation—as well as deep, entrenched challenges—casteism, sexism, deep poverty and under-development. What the various Engaged Buddhist movements and practitioners share is an ideology of principled nonviolence and the effort to put into practice Buddhist ethical ideals—non-enmity towards all, universal compassion, and the wish to put an end to the suffering of all kinds, spiritual and material, psychological and physical, individual and social. (For a useful bibliography, see Rothberg, n.d.)

Engaged Buddhism must be strictly differentiated from Buddhist nationalism. These are two very different ideologies. Buddhist nationalism is a form of religio-ethnic nationalism that favors and acts for the good of the Buddhist group. This is one of its major differences from Engaged Buddhism, which espouses *universal* benevolence—the good of *all*. Buddhist nationalism, in its more extreme forms, can be associated with hostility and even violence against the non-Buddhist group(s). This is another major difference from Engaged Buddhism, which maintains principled nonviolence.

In Engaged Buddhism, it is expected that loving-kindness and compassion will be expressed in practical, skillful action. The article begins with an examination of the words of the Dalai Lama, who takes us step by step from empathy to compassion to action. It next examines the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, who demonstrates a close internal connection

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between mindfulness, compassion and skillful means. The remainder of the article focuses on the larger Engaged Buddhism movement to consider examples of how loving-kindness and compassion are expressed in concrete social action.

Empathy, Compassion and Action

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The claim that empathy is natural to humankind is central to Buddhism. When asked why the monks in his country went out from the temples during the war, Nhat Hanh replied that even though the bombs were not falling directly on them, but on others, the bombing and oppression "hurts us too much. We have to react" (Thich Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, 2001, 107). We see here that for these practitioners, their empathy was such that when others were bombed, it hurt them as if they themselves were bombed. In his important book, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, the Dalai Lama calls empathy the "supreme emotion." He defines our capacity for empathy as "the inability to bear the sight of another's suffering." He argues that it is innate to humankind and is the foundation of all ethics (Dalai Lama, 1999, 64–6). This language is the same as the language used by the Chinese Confucian sage, Mencius (fourth-century BCE). Both the Dalai Lama and Mencius argue that anyone who sees someone in acute distress will feel alarmed and have an immediate impulse to help. The Dalai Lama uses the example of seeing an elderly person in front of one trip and fall; he says that most people seeing this will have an impulse to help. Perhaps something will intervene and prevent us from acting on that impulse, but the fact that that impulse spontaneously arises in a human being demonstrates that this is something that is natural to us as human beings (unless, as he points out, some life experiences, such as repeated violence, have beaten down such an impulse, or twisted it from its original form) (Dalai Lama, 1999, 65).

For the Dalai Lama, then, empathy is innate to humankind and it is a crucially important emotion; however, it is even better if it is cultivated into compassion. For His Holiness, empathy is the basis from which compassion develops but the latter requires development:

> Our innate capacity for empathy is the source of that most precious of all human qualities, which in Tibetan we call *nying je* ... 'compassion.' *[N]ying je* denotes a feeling of connection with others, reflecting its origins in empathy. ... Although it is clear ... that *nying je* ... is understood as an emotion, it belongs to that category of emotions which have a more developed cognitive component. ... We can thus understand *nying je* in terms of a combination of empathy and reason. ... To me, this suggests that by means of sustained reflection on, and familiarization with, compassion, through rehearsal and practice we can develop our innate ability to connect with others, a fact which is of supreme importance.... The more we develop compassion, the more genuinely ethical our conduct will be. (Dalai Lama, 1999, 73–4)

The ultimate attainment, in His Holiness' view, for both ethics and spirituality, is the attainment of *nying je chenmo*, "great compassion," a state in which, through intentional cultivation, one has developed one's innate empathy to such a degree that:

> not only does our compassion arise without any effort, but it is unconditional, undifferentiated, and universal in scope. A feeling of intimacy toward all other sentient beings, including of course those who would harm us, is generated, which is likened in the literature to the love a mother has for her only child. (Dalai Lama, 1999, 123)

Moreover, this universal compassion will, by its very nature, move us to take action. Individuals with great compassion, says the Dalai Lama, feel "so moved by even the subtlest suffering of others that they come to have an overwhelming sense of responsibility toward those others. This causes the one who is compassionate to dedicate themselves entirely to helping others overcome both their suffering and the causes of their suffering." He acknowledges that few have reached this advanced state, but others may keep it as an aspiration that can itself shape our behavior. On this basis, he advocates for what he calls a "sense of universal responsibility," whereby, "when we see an opportunity to benefit others, we will take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests" (Dalai Lama, 1999, 124, 162–3). His Holiness himself, of course, has spent his life acting in precisely this way, doing all he can to advocate for and protect the Tibetan people while strongly urging nonviolence in all their dealings with the Chinese, and indeed promoting nonviolence throughout the world.

We may draw two key principles from the Dalai Lama's words that we will see echoed again and again throughout the examples in this article. First, compassion itself, in the understanding of the Engaged Buddhists, by its very nature produces an imperative to act, to express one's compassion in deeds; this is a felt imperative that becomes more and more spontaneous as one's compassion develops. Second, as we see in the Dalai Lama, the compassion that one develops is universal in its scope, more and more clearly so as one's compassion develops. The universality of this universal compassion and universal responsibility is a key to the ethos of Engaged Buddhist action which does not stand "for" one's own side and "against" the other, but "for" everyone.

Mindfulness and Skillful Means

Thich Nhat Hanh

Perhaps the best place to see the interplay between mindfulness, compassion and skillful means is in the work of Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh was a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk who was one of the leaders of the Buddhist antiwar movement during the Vietnam war and a major leader of the Engaged Buddhism movement throughout his life. Due to his anti-war activities, he was exiled from South Vietnam in 1966 and took up residence at the practice community he founded in southern France, Plum Village. He remained in exile after the war, traveling the world to teach. He suffered a severe stroke in 2014 and in 2018 came to reside once again in South Vietnam until his death in 2022. For Nhat Hanh, mindfulness was the primary practice, compassion the constant ethos, and skillful means the constant action. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr. during the Vietnam war years.

In Nhat Hanh's teaching and practice, three central Buddhist practices—mindfulness, compassion and skillful action—arise together. We can see this in his treatment of the five lay precepts. The five lay precepts are an ancient set of minimal moral practices especially emphasized in Theravada Buddhism but influential throughout the Buddhist world. In their traditional form, one who undertakes to observe these precepts commits to *not* destroy life, steal, commit sexual misconduct, lie, or ingest intoxicants. In Nhat Hanh's hands, these precepts are considerably transformed, though a case could certainly be made that he has not so much transformed them as brought out their implications.

First, Nhat Hahn refers to these as the five "mindfulness trainings," thus rooting them in the practice of mindfulness. He writes, "The Five Mindfulness Trainings have their root in the *Five Precepts* offered by the Buddha. They have been expanded and updated so that they represent a way to bring mindfulness into every area of life" (Thich Nhat Hanh, n.d.). This statement already establishes that, for Nhat Hanh, mindfulness is something that one cultivates and then applies to all aspects of life—one's life as a friend, a parent, a member of a community, a citizen of a nation, an inhabitant of Earth—thereby turning that mindfulness into action. This is a direct extension of an ancient Buddhist awareness, well expressed in the much-loved Pali language text, *Dhammapada*, which states:

> All (mental) states have mind as their forerunner, mind is their chief, and they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts, with a defiled mind, then suffering follows one even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox. All (mental) states have mind as their forerunner, mind is their chief, and they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts, with a pure mind, happiness follows one as one's shadow that does not leave one. (Rahula, 1974, 125)

What we need to notice here is the awareness, fundamental to Buddhism and foundational to mindfulness practice, that the state of one's mind directly determines the nature of one's speech and action; i.e., it strongly shapes what one says and does and how one says and does it. It is for this reason that the Buddhist tradition has taught, for some 2500 years, the crucial importance of mental training and discipline. If we seek to discover a link between mindfulness and skillful means, this is a key point.

Second, we should note in passing that whereas the traditional five precepts are regarded as definitively Buddhist, Nhat Hanh has a very different view of them:

> The Five Mindfulness Trainings are one of the most concrete ways to practice mindfulness. They are nonsectarian and their nature is universal. They are really the practices of compassion and understanding. All spiritual traditions have their equivalent to the five mindfulness trainings. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2009, 35)

Mindfulness training and the ethical outlook and action that accompanies it are, for Nhat Hanh, universal and nonsectarian. This means that they are applicable to any society.

Let us now look at the first of the five mindfulness trainings in its current form (Nhat Hanh was tremendously creative throughout his life, and his presentation of these five trainings underwent several iterations). He calls the first mindfulness training, "Reverence for Life."

> Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, non-discrimination, and nonattachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world. (Thich Nhat Hanh, n.d.)

This is Nhat Hanh's much "expanded and updated" version of the traditional first precept which states simply, "I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from the taking of life" (Saddhatissa, 1987, 73). There is much to be seen here. As stated above, this training is rooted in the practice of mindfulness, here referred to as being "aware." If one is aware, if one is walking through life mindfully, one cannot help but see that the destruction of life causes suffering. For one practicing mindfulness, this immediately produces

compassion. Why? Because mindfulness practice strips away the filters that, among other functions, we use to screen what we see in order to protect ourselves from the pain of seeing others' misery. So if we are practicing mindfulness, we see the misery that is there and, if we are a normally functioning person, we will respond spontaneously with empathy.

Nhat Hanh's mindfulness training also indicates that if compassion has welled up in one, one will want to take some kind of action. This is a fundamental difference from the original form of the precept, where all that was required (in order to avoid negative karma) was that one *avoid* the act of taking life. In this version, one cannot be satisfied only with one's own avoiding of taking life, one will want to not let others kill, and one will be aware of wanting not to let others kill. This will lead to action. What that action will be will depend upon many things; i.e., one will need to employ good judgment and skillful means. One example of this: while this author was in residence at Plum Village (Thich Nhat Hanh's practice center in France), the USA was threatening to go to war with Iraq over its invasion of Kuwait. Nhat Hanh gave a talk in which he told the Americans present that each one of us needed to *do something* to try to prevent the war. If we did nothing, he told us, we violated this precept. He did not in any way specify what we should do; he simply made it clear that we should be aware of the suffering that would be caused by the war and do whatever we could to try to prevent it.

Returning to the mindfulness training, if one is training in this way, it will be part of one's regular practice to mindfully examine one's own thinking and way of life to see if there is something there that supports or increases the likelihood of harmful acts. If so, it is clear, one should change that thinking or way of life. As one's mindfulness deepens, one will become aware of the deeper causes of killing—anger, fear, greed, intolerance, discriminative thinking—and one will resolve to take further action to transform one's own way of thinking. This would be a major, life-long commitment for most of us, and one based in mindfulness, being aware of what goes on in one's mind, in ever subtler ways.

Simultaneously, and without waiting for oneself to be entirely freed of these deeper causes of killing, one does what one can to transform such attitudes in the world, in our societies and cultures—perhaps by one's contributions as a teacher, artist, or helping professional, perhaps by learning active peacemaking skills or being socially active in one's community or just through one's daily interactions with others. Nhat Hanh considers his entire Sangha, his practice community, as resources for peacemaking in their communities, through their personal examples and interactions, and through their skillfulness in knowing and modeling how to "be peace," how to prevent and defuse conflict, and how to work towards building a community of peace.

This leads us to Nhat Hanh's treatment of the fourth precept, traditionally stated as, "I undertake the precept to abstain from false speech" (Saddhatissa, 1987, 73). In Nhat Hanh's hands, this precept becomes the fourth mindfulness training, "Loving Speech and Deep Listening," which reads, in part:

> Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations... I will speak and listen in a way that can help myself and the other person to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations. (Thich Nhat Hanh, n.d.)

Nhat Hanh's Sangha members are all trained in "deep" or "compassionate listening" and "loving speech," forms of conflict prevention and resolution. The need for this is again based in mindful awareness of the world we live in, in which "unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others" cause a tremendous amount of suffering. The training takes this form:

> If the other person ... begins to share, be prepared to practice deep, compassionate listening. Listen with all your mindfulness and concentration. Your sole desire is to give him or her a chance to speak out.... At first, their speech may be full of condemnation, bitterness, and blame. If you can, continue to sit there calmly and listen.... If you interrupt, deny, or correct what they say, you will be unable to go in the direction of reconciliation.... While listening deeply to the other person, not only do you recognize his wrong perceptions, but you also realize that you, too, have wrong perceptions about yourself and the other person. Later, when both of you are calm ... [u]sing loving speech, you can point out how they have misunderstood you or the situation. By using loving speech, you can also help the other person understand your difficulties. (Thich Nhat Hanh , 2005, 17)

Clearly, this practice is strongly based in mindfulness, which is in use here not only in listening in an open-minded and non-judgmental way to the other person, but also very much in monitoring one's own reactions to what one hears—often leading to insights into one's own blind spots, lack of knowledge or reactivity—and in careful monitoring of one's own speech, all with the intention to heal present suffering and prevent future suffering. Nhat Hanh offered retreats at his practice center to Palestinian and Israeli youth, using this method. The retreatants spent the first several days in silence, practicing mindfulness, and then engaged in several days of practicing deep listening and loving speech

with each other (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2004). Of course, such a retreat does not immediately solve the problems of the Middle East, but it provides a forum where people can and do hear each other, and themselves, and in so doing, it sows seeds of understanding that are necessary if a lasting resolution and peace are someday to be found.

Let us consider another example in Thich Nhat Hanh's work of the meeting place of mindfulness, compassion and action. There is an ancient Buddhist meditation practice of meditation on a corpse or skeleton. To many, this meditation seems to be the epitome of Buddhist "other-worldliness," a meditation seemingly designed to turn the practitioner away from the world in revulsion. Nhat Hanh has written that as a young monk he himself had "resisted" this meditation, but during the war years, he came to see that he was wrong. The following is from a long letter addressed to his students during the war years:

> Then I thought that such a meditation should be reserved for older monks. But since then, I have seen many young soldiers lying motionless beside one another, some only 13, 14, and 15 years old. They had no preparation or readiness for death. Now I see that if one doesn't know how to die, one can hardly know how to live—because death is a part of life....
> The Buddhist Sutra on Mindfulness speaks about the meditation on the corpse: meditate on the decomposition of the body, how the body bloats and turns violet, how it is eaten by worms.... Meditate like that, knowing that your own body will undergo the same process. Meditate on the corpse until you are calm and at peace.... Thus, by overcoming revulsion and fear, life will be seen as infinitely precious, every second of it worth living. And it is not just our own lives that are recognized as precious, but the lives of every other person, every other being, every other reality. We can no longer be deluded by the notion that the destruction of others' lives is necessary for our own survival. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975, 1976, 50–51)

Again, there is much to consider in this passage. The meditation on the corpse is a standard meditation practice for monastics in forms of Buddhism that practice mindfulness. It is part of the Buddhist mindfulness practice of seeing reality as it is. How one contextualizes and understands the implications of this practice no doubt varies from one meditation teacher to another, but in Nhat Hanh's hands, it becomes a pro-life practice. First, the practice, if successful, would go a long way towards helping the practitioner to be able to face the fact of death, one's own and that of others, and to overcome the fear and revulsion surrounding death. This in itself would be very empowering. Note that Nhat Hanh was not offering this meditation to soldiers, but to the social service workers whom Nhat Hanh and others were training in the school he and others had co-founded, The School of Youth for Social Service, who had to cope with corpses, the threat of being under bombs or gunfire, and other dreadful aspects of working in a war zone. It would be a strong protection in time of war or other danger if one could avoid the arousal of strong, negative emotions such as fear and revulsion when encountering and handling corpses—and if one can handle corpses calmly, without fear or revulsion, without losing one's head, one can probably handle most crises calmly. This was the first, immediate practical outcome of this practice.

In fact, for Nhat Hanh, not only the corpse meditation, but mindfulness practice in general—seeing reality as it is, accepting that this is the present reality, without adding unhelpful reactivity—is able to produce people who can cope with reality as it is and therefore can help. In 1987 he wrote:

> In Vietnam, there are many people, called boat people, who leave the country in small boats. Often the boats are caught in rough seas or storms, the people may panic, and boats can sink. But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive....
> Our world is something like a small boat.... We are about to panic because our situation is no better than the situation of the small boat in the sea. You know that we have more than 50,000 nuclear weapons. Humankind has become a very dangerous species. We need people who can sit still and be able to smile, who can walk peacefully. We need people like that in order to save us. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987, 11–12)

For Nhat Hanh, then, mindfulness practice is eminently practical and can even be seen as a vital practice for an activist.

Second, this practice leads one to see the infinite preciousness of life, all life, every life. When one sees the fragility of life and stops denying the reality of death, one can no longer take life for granted. This evokes the mind of compassion that accepts the reality of death, yet at the same time also sees the preciousness of life, the two being the two sides of a single coin. If one sees this clearly enough, for Nhat Hanh this means being able to see through the lies promoting war. In short, the meditation on the corpse, mindfulness of death, becomes a pro-life, anti-war (and anti-anything destructive of life) practice.

During the war, Nhat Hanh offered meditations based on compassion as well as mindfulness as aids to his trainees and anyone engaged in the anti-war effort. He offered the following meditation on war to cultivate compassion and, on that basis, to engender skillful action to bring the war to an end:

> [T]ake the situation of a country suffering war or any other situation of injustice. Try to see that every person involved in the conflict is a victim. See that no person, including all those in warring parties or in what appear to be opposing sides, desires the suffering to continue. See that it is not only one or a few persons who are to blame for the situation. See that the situation is possible because of the clinging to ideologies and to an unjust world economic system which is upheld by every person through ignorance or through lack of resolve to change it. See that two sides in a conflict are not really opposing, but two aspects of the same reality. See that the most essential thing is life and that killing or oppressing one another will not solve anything, Remember the Sutra's words:
>
> In the time of war
> Raise in yourself the Mind of Compassion
> Help living beings
> Abandon the will to fight
> Wherever there is furious battle
> Use all your might
> To keep both sides' strength equal
> And then step into the conflict to reconcile
> *Vimalakirti Nirdesa* (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975/1976, 95)

This meditation sees with the mind of compassion and invites others into that mind. A terrible situation—war—presents itself, but upon examination, one finds no one to blame. The situation is not due to one or a few people, it is not even due to the "other side," but to ignorance, ideology and global injustices that have people in their grip. There is no place for anger or hostility, but only for understanding, compassion and skillful action to try to change the situation. Indeed, skillful action is required by the situation, because the situation exists as it does partly due to "lack of resolve to change it." Once one understands, one will raise the mind of compassion and once that is present, one will resolve to change things, using skillful means.

In Buddhism, understanding/wisdom and compassion go hand in hand. Nhat Hanh relates a simple story to convey this:

> Understanding and love are not two things, but just one. Suppose your son wakes up one morning and ... decides to wake up his younger sister, to give her enough time to eat breakfast before going to school. It happens that she is grouchy and instead of saying, 'Thank you for waking me up,' she says, 'Shut up! Leave me alone!' and kicks him. He will probably get angry... But then he remembers that during the night his sister coughed a lot, and he realizes that she must be sick.... He is not angry any more. At that moment there is *buddh* in him. He understands, he is awake. When you understand, you cannot help but love. You cannot get angry.... And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987, 14–15)

For Nhat Hanh, mindfulness is to see reality as it is, and to see reality as it is includes seeing the causes and conditions that have produced reality as it is. This applies to all things. Above, we saw that understanding the Vietnam war included seeing its causes in ideology and global economic injustice. Here, we see that understanding a person includes seeing the causes and conditions that have shaped that person as they are in this moment. Seeing the present reality and seeing its causes and conditions produces understanding and, if we see clearly and deeply enough, helps free us of negative reactivity, enabling compassion (here called love) to arise for the suffering of all involved. And, for Nhat Hanh, when that compassion is present, it is natural to act on it. Indeed, understanding and compassion are two of the keys to the "skillfulness" of skillful means. It is very helpful to be free of two kinds of things in order to act skillfully—conceptual distortions and unskillful emotions. That is, one needs as much as possible to be free of the thick lens of ignorance, misunderstanding, bias, etc. through which one might otherwise look, in order to see reality clearly as it is. This is the job of mindfulness. One also needs to be free of fear, anger and other distorting emotions in order to see reality as it is. This again is the job of mindfulness. When mindfulness removes these two kinds of obstructions to clarity, one will be able to develop correct understanding. With correct understanding, and without distorting emotions, one should be much more capable of skillfulness.

John Seed and Rainforest Action

Let us turn to another example of mindfulness practice leading to compassion and skillful means. One striking story comes from John Seed, founder and director of the Rainforest Information Centre in Australia and co-founder of the US Rainforest Action Network. Since 1979, he has led conservation programs, tree planting projects, educational programs, workshops and direct actions all over the world in defense of rainforests. He was awarded the Order of Australia Medal by the Australian government for his services to conservation and the environment (Rainforest Information Centre, n.d.).

Seed's skillful action evolved out of his mindfulness meditation practice learned from S. N. Goenka. For about seven years, he engaged in intensive meditation practice, doing several ten-day retreats a year plus a regular daily practice. One day, as he tells it, he was participating in a demonstration to protect a rainforest near where he lived, though at that time his interest in the issue was not yet strong. He relates,

"All of a sudden, the forest was inside me and was calling to me, and it was the most powerful thing I have ever felt." After this experience, he gradually stopped his Buddhist meditation practice, and the rainforest itself, he says, became his practice. He relates that this was a "no-self" experience in which the artificial separation between himself and the natural world dropped away:

> There is also a definite correspondence for me in the realization of no-self. I find myself surrendering completely to the rain forest. The closest thing to meditation practice for me now is to lie down in the forest when it's dry, cover myself in leaves and imagine an umbilical cord reaching down into the earth. Then I visualize myself as being one leaf on the tree of life, both as myself personally and as a human being, and I realize that the sap of that tree runs through every leaf, including me, whether I'm aware of it or not. I don't believe this to be a mystical notion. It's very matter of fact. In reality, every breath of air we take connects us to the entire life of the planet - the atmosphere. I feel it very physically.... [T]o my amazement, I found the illusion of separation to be very flimsy, and that there are just a few conceptual filters that prevent us from reuniting with the earth. (Seed & Nisker, 1992)

Are Seed's hearing of the rainforest calling to him and his subsequent upwelling of energy to work on its behalf the fruit of his years of mindfulness practice? Seed is asked this question and replies: "I have no doubt that it was the same warm current that led me from LSD to meditation, which then picked me up again and took me into the forest. My sense is that I'm not getting lost from the path" (Seed and Nisker, 1992). Certainly, Seed's understanding of his transformative experience with the rainforest as a "no-self" experience is in line with the understanding taught by Thich Nhat Hanh when he said that in Vietnam during the war years, the bombing and oppression "hurts us too much. We have to react." This is a no-self experience: the bombs falling on others hurts us. Here, Seed feels the rainforest inside of him, and he has to react. His mindfulness has led him to a no-self-awareness of oneness with the rainforest and in this state of being/awareness, a powerful impulse of compassion resulted. He reacted indeed, with the great upsurge of energy, concern, creativity and skillful action that has characterized his life since.

Compassion/Loving-Kindness and Skillful Means

Let us turn now to some examples of skillful means based upon compassion. While we have considered above the role played by mindfulness in Engaged Buddhist action, and this role is considerable in Thich Nhat Hanh's work and in much Western Engaged Buddhism, most Asian Buddhists don't speak of mindfulness as underlying their actions, but they do speak a good deal of compassion—or its sister emotion, loving-kindness (*mettā*), which is emphasized more in the Theravada world—as motivating their action. Please note that, in terms of quantity, the vast majority of Engaged Buddhist activity has occurred, and continues to occur, in Asian countries. Many people think that Buddhist engagement with social and political issues is the result of Western influence, but they could not be more wrong. Asian Buddhists have participated in Engaged Buddhist actions by the millions, in some countries risking, and sometimes giving, their lives and freedom; in less extreme cases, donating untold hours of labor, or perhaps fundamentally changing their way of life. Western Buddhists are the students of Asian Buddhists with respect to Engaged Buddhism.

In the Vietnamese, Sri Lankan and Cambodian examples that follow—in places beset at the time by tremendous, deadly violence—we will see that understanding, compassion and skillful means come together in producing an ideology of nonviolence, non-enmity and reconciliation alongside energetic and sometimes heroic skillful action. We saw the same ideology above in Thich Nhat Hanh.

Vietnam

Let us begin with the Buddhists in South Vietnam during the twentieth-century war years. There were very many South Vietnamese who struggled nonviolently and heroically to bring the war to an end. We cannot know how many of them were practitioners, but we can be sure that some of them were, in this country that was considered to be 80% Buddhist at the time. We will limit our discussion here, however, to two groups whom we may safely assume were compassion cultivators: the Vietnamese monastics and Nhat Hanh's group.

Actions by Buddhist practitioners in Vietnam during the war years grew out of the following context: In 1963, Vietnam was divided between two warring states, the communist North and the American-backed South. At that time, the South Vietnamese government, led by Catholic leaders, was suppressing Buddhism. On Buddha's birthday, the government refused to allow Buddhist flags to be flown and a Buddhist radio program to be aired in celebration. When a crowd gathered at the radio station, eight people were shot and killed by government troops, without warning. In response, there were huge street protests and several monks immolated themselves. Over several months, the pagodas became centers of planning for political change. Marches, strikes and fasts, led by the monastics, grew. In reprisal, there were government raids on Buddhist pagodas and a large number

of arrests, and some killings, of monks, students and others resulted.

On the heels of these events, the various sects of Buddhism in South Vietnam united into a single organization, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), the better to protect itself from government suppression and to engage in joint action when needed. The monk Thich Tam Chau, one of the leaders, expressed the aim of the organization: "This organization does not aim to dominate, but to guide, educate, and aid disciples to fulfill their social duties. What are those social duties? They are the practice of Buddhist doctrine in daily life, the propagation of this doctrine to the people around them. In other words, the Buddhists have to participate in social and cultural activities" (Kahin, 1986, 184). Thus, they let it be known that Buddhist citizens, lay and monastic, had every intention to involve themselves in civic engagement as citizens and as Buddhists, and as part of their practice of Buddhism, and this organization intended to assist in that civic engagement.

As the war proceeded and grew, much civic engagement did ensue. Many of the South Vietnamese people did not support the war; they wanted instead a ceasefire and a negotiated political settlement. The UBCV became their voice. Monks and nuns (and students) staged multiple street protests and led strikes against those rulers who were enthusiastic about pursuing the war and suppressing the anti-war voice. The monastics directly negotiated with government leaders to draw down the war and pressed them to agree to hold elections (hoping to elect leaders that supported ending the war). Meanwhile, in their highly visible saffron robes, they evacuated villages caught in the crossfire or in the line of approaching battle and helped establish cease-fire lines outside of villages.

At the same time, Nhat Hanh and others founded the School of Youth for Social Service to engage in skillful means action based on compassion for the rural poor, caught in the violence of war. Buddhist social workers rebuilt villages destroyed by war, sometimes multiple times. They established multiple programs to support war orphans and "half-orphans" (fatherless children) and continued their rural social work—educating, teaching new agricultural methods, providing basic medicine and sanitation, etc.—while the war went on.

All of this was a movement of principled nonviolence based in love and compassion. Nhat Hanh put it this way, in a poem titled "Do Not Shoot Your Brother" that circulated throughout South Vietnam:

> Our enemy has the name of hatred
> Our enemy has the name of inhumanity
> Our enemy has the name of anger...
> Our enemy is not man.
> If we kill man, with whom shall we live? (Forest, 1978, 12)

In their "Do Not Shoot Your Brother" campaign, the UBCV asked people to "extinguish the flame of war" and accept four vows:

> demonstration of love and respect for life; acceptance of the truth and of justice; determination not to speak, not to listen to, and not to do anything which can create division, hatred and conflict; and determination to refuse taking up guns to attack our brothers. (Forest, 1978, 12)

The Buddhist Struggle Movement (movement to end the war) came to be known as the Third Way, from its refusal to align with either North Vietnam or South Vietnam (and thus against the other), and its refusal to be against anyone, but only to be on the side of life (King, 1996). With this thinking, the movement did their best to prevent escalation of the war and advocated through all nonviolent means possible for a political, negotiated end to the war, rather than a military end. They succeeded in a number of ways: they overturned a number of South Vietnamese governments that were eager to escalate the war; they increased the rate of desertion from the army; and they persuaded parts of the South Vietnamese army, including two generals, to declare for the Struggle Movement.

The Struggle Movement, however, did not succeed in ending the war. Nhat Hanh has reflected on this as follows:

> Despite the results—many years of war followed by years of oppression and human rights abuse—I cannot say that our struggle was a failure. The conditions for success in terms of a political victory were not present. But ... [we] never lost sight that the essence of our struggle was love itself, and that was a real contribution to humanity. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1993, 47)

The Buddhist Third Way movement was years of "love in action," as Nhat Hanh frequently called it. This love in action is compassion, in the sense expressed above by the Dalai Lama. It is a universal compassion that knows no sides, but cares for all; it is a compassion with an intrinsic cognitive component, understanding the web of causes and conditions that produce war and suffering and recognizes the victimization of all that are caught in its web, including its perpetrators; and it is a compassion with an inherent imperative to take action, expressed in concrete acts on behalf of all.

Sri Lanka

Sarvodaya Shramadana, a major Engaged Buddhist development and peacemaking movement and for decades the

largest non-government organization in Sri Lanka, was created in 1958 by the Buddhist layman, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, with a Buddhist-Gandhian ideology. It began very modestly as a program of work camps for high school students and grew to offer a comprehensive program to eliminate the deep poverty of Sri Lankan villages and a comprehensive peacemaking plan for overcoming the country's deep ethnic divisions. Though it is now smaller, at its height, Sarvodaya was active in over 15,000 of Sri Lanka's approximately 24,000 villages.

The signature program of Sarvodaya is the *shramadana* (meaning "to give labor") work camp. Such camps begin with a village contacting Sarvodaya and asking them to send an organizer. The organizer invites all the villagers to a "family gathering," which ideally everyone attends—all ethnic groups, religions and ages, and both genders. This is critical, because a major aim in this form of nonviolent development is to overcome divisions within the village. In a friendly and semi-religious atmosphere, usually in the presence of the village monk or other religious leader, villagers share the meditations and prayers of their respective religions and then talk until they reach a consensus on the single, concrete village need they would like to take on (e.g., building a road or a well). When the desired action is decided, a date is set and on the appointed date, ideally everyone turns out to share their labor to get the problem fixed, in work groups composed of members of varying ethnic groups, religions, etc. Sarvodaya helps with the necessary expertise. A celebration and shared meal to which everyone contributes caps the event. Ordinarily, once a village has had a taste of both the practical accomplishment of a shramadana, and the sense of satisfaction and empowerment that comes with it, they want to engage in further Sarvodaya programs, of which there are a great many.

This giving of labor is based in *mettā* or loving-kindness. Joanna Macy, to be profiled later, studied this movement and reported, "*metta* or lovingkindness is presented by the Movement as the fundamental attitude that must be cultivated to develop motivation for service, capacity to work harmoniously with others, and, above all, the nonviolence that is a central premise of Sarvodaya. The Movement promotes it through sermon, song, and slogan, and also through the practice of the *metta* meditation, which is expected of all participants…." Moreover, compassion "is seen by the Movement as the translation of *metta* into action on behalf of others. It includes the concepts of service and 'self-offering' that have been central to Sarvodaya since its inception." Macy quotes a Shramadana guideline: "Feeling sorry for people is not enough. Act to help them" (Macy, 1983, 1985, 38–39).

Sarvodaya sees this giving of labor as a way of both expressing one's loving-kindness and compassion and of cultivating it (becoming less self-centered by thinking and acting in terms of the good of the community). Spiritual development and worldly service thus go hand in hand. Sarvodaya expresses this in its slogan, "We build the road and the road builds us." In other words, selfless service to the community—its daily practice—*is* a form of spiritual practice.

Sarvodaya Shramadana also played a major peacemaking role during Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-Tamil civil war. Between 1983 and 2009, an estimated 80,000–100,000 Sri Lankans were killed in that civil war. The Buddhism that played a major role in the justification of this war was *not* Engaged Buddhism but a Sinhalese ethno-nationalist Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism, including Sarvodaya Shramadana, has a different ideology, one based in universal compassion that entirely precludes acting with hostility towards one ethnic/religious group on behalf of one's own ethnic/religious group. During the Sri Lankan civil war, on the basis of the same loving-kindness and compassion that fueled its development work, Sarvodaya Shramadana was heavily involved in peacemaking efforts. Citing its history of village-level peacemaking (in which shramadanas and family gatherings plant seeds for gradually overcoming ethnic and other differences), along with its Hindu (Gandhian) as well as Buddhist roots, its history of working in Tamil villages, and its history of having Tamil staff at very high levels of the organization, Sarvodaya presented itself as an organization with the trust of both sides in the civil war and focused on helping the two sides to overcome their enmity.

Sarvodaya used the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha as a template to formulate its "People's Peace Plan" to resolve the civil war. In their analysis, the First Noble Truth states the problem: violence. The Second Noble Truth identifies the primary causes of violence: poverty and ethnic enmity. The Third Noble Truth articulates the goal and hope as "a sustainable, spiritually balanced island that works for all." The Fourth Noble Truth states that the way to reach the goal is through a host of peacemaking and development programs. It is important in this analysis that the "problem" faced by Sri Lanka in the First Noble Truth analysis is identified neutrally as "violence"; in other words, the problem is not identified as the actions of one side or the other, the Tamil Tigers or Sinhalese Buddhists, it is identified as the fact that violence is happening. Similarly, in the Third Noble Truth, Sarvodaya avoids voicing any idea of one side or the other "winning" the war. Instead, they envision a state of reconciliation, a "win–win" outcome as the ideal. In this neutral and reconciliatory approach emphasizing non-enmity, Sarvodaya's approach to peacemaking brings out the cognitive element of compassion in a way that is in line with the universal benevolence of the Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese "Third Way," understanding that the welfare of one group is interdependent with the welfare of all.

A great deal of effort was spent by Sarvodaya in an effort to change the culture in Sri Lanka from a culture of ethnic division and hatred to a culture of universal loving-kindness, by working to remove popular support for violent acts, whether committed by the Sri Lankan government or by the Tamil Tigers. One way that Sarvodaya strove to do this was by holding massive public peace walks and meditations. A 1999 peace meditation in Colombo attracted 170,000 participants. In 2002, 650,000 people attended a peace meditation in the ancient capital, Anuradhapura; this is considered to be probably the largest public meditation ever held. Altogether, about two million people are believed to have participated in peace meditations with Sarvodaya—10% of the population of the country. At these peace meditations, leaders of all Sri Lanka's major religions stood before the crowd, blessing the event. The crowd was led through a *mettā* (loving-kindness) meditation, cultivating *mettā* for themselves and their communities, for all the communities in Sri Lanka, and for all beings. In this meditation, the cultivation of *mettā* expressly included the cultivation of non-enmity. Before leaving, participants were urged to spread peace by asking everyone they knew to stop violence, to stop supporting violence, and to speak and act for peace at every opportunity. Another major Sarvodaya peacemaking initiative was the "1,000 Village Link-Up" program, in which villagers from the more prosperous Sinhalese areas volunteered to work in Tamil areas, giving their time, labor and friendship, and sharing everyday life. This again was a program based in universal loving-kindness designed to cultivate non-enmity and promote reconciliation. For his leadership of these efforts, Ariyaratne won the Gandhi Peace Prize and the Niwano Peace Prize.

Because of the large number of people who participated in these events and programs, many observers give the lion's share of credit to Sarvodaya for creating the atmosphere that made possible the cease fire of 2002–2008. In the end, however, the cease-fire could no longer hold and the war finally ended with great violence in 2009. Sarvodaya's view is that the cease-fire was only a pause in the violence that provided an opportunity for the underlying causes of violence to be addressed; since those causes were not adequately addressed, it was inevitable that violence broke out again.

Cambodia

Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda and the Dhammayietra again embody social action based in universal compassion and non-enmity, with the goal of reconciliation. Maha Ghosananda was in training in Thailand when the Khmer Rouge came to power. In 1978, as the Khmer Rouge began to lose its grip on power, refugees began to pour out of Cambodia, thousands entering the Sakeo refugee camp in Thailand. Maha Ghosananda immediately met them in the camp, though it was potentially dangerous for him to do so. (The Khmer Rouge had targeted Buddhist monks for killing; of approximately 60,000 pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodian monks, only 3000 were known to be alive after the Khmer Rouge era.) In this camp and others, Maha Ghosananda built Buddhist temples and urged the exhausted and traumatized survivors of war and genocide to find forgiveness and loving-kindness in their hearts for all beings, including the Khmer Rouge. Over and over, he taught these words of the *Dhammapada* in the camps of survivors:

> Hatred never ceases by hatred
> but by love alone is healed.
> This is the ancient and eternal law. (Kornfield, 1991, viii)

For Maha Ghosananda, the traumatized victims of the Khmer Rouge could not be healed of their own suffering until they let go of their hatred. For him, healing the land of genocide required a foundation in love and forgiveness.

In the years that followed, Maha Ghosananda took up his life's work of promoting the healing of Cambodia and Cambodians, at home and abroad. On the level of personal healing, he built Buddhist temples and gave countless Dharma talks and trainings on loving-kindness and finding personal peace. On the level of national healing, he sponsored training programs in human rights and nonviolent conflict resolution, co-founded interfaith peace programs, and met with global religious leaders and United Nations officials. He also strove to bring about full pacification of a still dangerously divided and volatile Cambodia by working for the reconciliation of the mutually hostile factions maneuvering for power. He understood both the personal and the national healing to be based in universal loving-kindness or, as he also put it, "compassion without concession":

> Peacemaking means the perfect balance of wisdom and compassion, and the perfect meeting of humanitarian needs and political realities. It means compassion without concession, and peace without appeasement. (Ghosananda, 1992, 52)

In 1992, Maha Ghosananda initiated the program of Dhammayietras (also Dhammayatra; loosely, peace walk or pilgrimage of Truth) that contributed greatly to the pacification of Cambodia. At that time, a complete end to hostilities had not yet been achieved; refugees were being urged to return to their homes from the refugee camps but they were apprehensive of what might happen as they walked through unsafe Cambodian territory where firefights might break out at any time. The Dhammayietra was called to accompany some of the refugees home, in order to ease those fears. A group of approximately 350 Cambodian and international monks, nuns and laypersons set out from the camps with about 100 refugees on a month-long walk from the refugee

camps on the Thai border to Phnom Penh. Everywhere they went, people came out to join the walk for a few miles or for the duration, to receive a traditional water blessing from Maha Ghosananda or to offer food. When the walk entered Phnom Penh, a thousand people were at its core, and tens of thousands of people joined them; the walk stretched for twelve kilometers (Moser-Puangsuwan 2000, 129-130). The walk was credited with easing many repatriating refugees' fears and giving hope to the people in the areas through which they walked.

After the success of the first Dhammayietra, in light of the fact that Cambodia was still far from peaceful, it was decided to make the Dhammayietra an annual event. Each year the walk took a different route and focused on a different issue. The second Dhammayietra began with near tragedy, when the temple where the walkers were gathering came directly under the crossfire of a battle, and two walkers were wounded. The walk went on nevertheless, proceeding through areas of active battle. Some soldiers laid down their weapons in order to ask for a blessing before returning to their units (Moser-Puangsuwan 2000, 131). The aim of this Dhammayietra was to calm fears as Cambodia's first elections approached. Thus, upon reaching Phnom Penh, the Dhammayietra concentrated on spreading a message of peace and urging people to vote. The elections were peaceful and elicited very heavy participation. Again, much credit for the successful election was given to the Dhammayietra for relieving the atmosphere of fear.

The 1994 Dhammayietra walkers allowed unarmed soldiers to accompany them while showing them a mine-free route for the walk. When the walk encountered soldiers of a different faction, a battle broke out and two marchers were killed. The march continued, but after this event, new guidelines were established which prohibited marchers from wearing uniforms or carrying flags or weapons. Marchers were required to train in mindfulness, nonviolence, peacemaking, the handling of fear, and mine avoidance. No further violent incidents occurred.

Over the years, the Dhammayietras focused on a variety of issues that are very serious inCambodia, such as land mines, domestic violence, deforestation and HIV/AIDS. Maha Ghosananda, who died in 2007, was often called the "Gandhi of Cambodia." He was nominated five times for the Nobel Peace Prize and was awarded the Niwano Peace Prize in 1998. Clearly, universal *mettā* and compassion were foundational to all that he did.

Taiwan

Another major example of compassion as the motivation behind extensive social action is Taiwanese Humanistic Buddhism. In 1987, when the Taiwanese government lifted what had been a very heavy-handed martial law, it became possible for new organizations, including new Buddhist organizations, to develop. This unleashed a tremendous pent-up energy that sparked a Buddhist renaissance on the island and the birth of Taiwanese Humanistic Buddhism. There are several major Humanistic Buddhism institutions, all of which share the intention of modernizing Buddhism to meet contemporary needs and conditions. Within that purview, they all place particular stress on compassion and putting that compassion into action with one's deeds. This compassionate action takes the form of a host of charitable, medical, educational, environmental and emergency relief projects, along with the volunteerism needed to make these into realities. Millions of Taiwanese volunteer with these programs every year. It is fair to say that this emphasis on compassionate action has had a profound effect on the cultural ethos of contemporary Taiwan. Moreover, these Taiwanese Humanistic Buddhist organizations are active in many countries around the world and are beginning to be very influential in mainland China. Within the Humanistic Buddhism group, we will focus on the Buddhist charitable organization, Tzu Chi, or Compassionate Relief, founded by the nun, Venerable Cheng Yen. Compassion is in the name of the organization and is its founding impulse.

Before her ordination as a Buddhist nun, Venerable Cheng Yen first lived as a quasi-nun, shaving her own head and living a very ascetic life. Out of compassion for the deep poverty of the people of eastern Taiwan, where she was living, she and the nun with whom she lived did not accept any donations from the local people but lived in an extremely poor but self-sufficient manner, supporting themselves with small sums earned from minor handicrafts. When Cheng Yen met the eminent monk Venerable Yin Shun, he spontaneously agreed to sponsor her ordination. Thereafter, she continued to live a penurious life, eating very little. The nuns' order she founded also requires the nuns to support themselves and not accept donations for their personal support.

The story of the founding of the Tzu Chi organization (which is different from the nuns' order) is known by almost everyone in Taiwan. When the Venerable Cheng Yen visited a hospital, she saw a pool of blood on the floor in the entryway. Upon inquiry, she learned that the blood was from a Taiwanese "aborigine" woman who was miscarrying. Her family did not have the funds for the required entrance fee for treatment in the hospital, so she was turned away. A few days later, Ven. Cheng Yen was visited by three Catholic nuns who challenged Master Cheng Yen. As a follower relates it, they said that "there are all sorts of Catholic hospitals and schools and charity organizations, but never any Buddhist ones. They told the Master that, in the eyes of the world, the Buddhists are but a passive group of people contributing nothing to society" (Ching, 1995, 65–66). With the shock of the pool of blood, the example of Christian charities, and

the prodding of the Catholic nuns, Ven. Cheng Yen determined to create an organization that would express Buddhist compassion in practical ways. In this way, and from the humblest possible beginnings, the Tzu Chi "Compassionate Relief" organization was born. It has grown into the largest charitable organization in the Chinese-speaking world, with millions of members in multiple countries all over the world and major missions in the fields of medicine, international emergency relief, and other areas.

In the medical area, Tzu Chi operates six hospitals in Taiwan, manages the world's fifth-largest bone marrow registry, trains doctors and nurses, and runs many free and low-cost health clinics in low-income areas, as well as mobile dental and vision programs and preventive health education programs. Tzu Chi uses professional doctors, nurses and other medical professionals, as well as huge numbers of volunteers. The volunteers are so many that they must wait in long waiting lists for the opportunity to serve. Tzu Chi estimates that they provide free medical services to more than two million people worldwide (tzuchimedical.us, n.d.). All of these services and programs operate at the highest medical standards and with particular emphasis on providing medical services with compassion:

> What is special about our medical service is the attitude of the personnel. Our doctors and nurses are taught to treat patients as they would their own relatives, and to heal them in both body and mind.... Our hospital volunteers—the unique "software" of the Tzu Chi Hospital—gently console patients' hearts and care for their bodies. Patients facing the end of their lives are taught how to maintain tranquility and peace of mind. (Cheng Yen, 1999, 49)

In their medical school, Tzu Chi makes use of "silent mentors." These are the bodies donated by the deceased themselves which the students will dissect and learn from. Before beginning their studies, the students visit the families of the silent mentors to learn about their lives through photos and stories. Photos of the silent mentors and short biographies of them are placed at the dissection tables and in the hallways. Complete respect and love is to be shown the silent mentors at all times throughout the studies. After the studies are complete, the students write letters of gratitude to the silent mentors and a formal cremation ceremony is held (Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, 2019). In this way, students are trained in respect and compassion at the same time that they are trained in anatomical knowledge. The deceased who donate their bodies are given a last opportunity to give, typically feeling that they are taking something they no longer have use for and making it into something that will be useful to someone else. Families are given compassion and a new meaning to the death of their loved ones.

Ven. Cheng Yen's overall vision is to put compassion into concrete action. Their image for responding to need is the great bodhisattva Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, often depicted with multiple heads and arms representing her ability to hear, see and respond to the needs of the multitude of suffering people. A devotee writes:

> [T]he Master [Cheng Yen] looked at the crowd.... Suddenly she realized that by joining all these eyes and hands a force could be formed—a force with enough eyes to locate the suffering ones and enough hands to grant them help.
> The Master smiled when she thought of Kwan-yin [Guanyin], the Goddess of Mercy and the Protector of All in Distress, who, according to legend, has a thousand observing eyes and a thousand helping hands. The Master then said, 'We will become Kwan-yin's watchful eyes and useful hands....' (Ching, 1995, 6)

The Bodhisattva Guanyin is the embodiment of compassion. Tzu Chi, with its millions of members, is the embodiment of Guanyin and its millions of volunteers are Guanyin's active hands.

Tzu Chi volunteers not only act compassionately, but they also cultivate compassion through their compassionate service. Ven. Cheng Yen has conceived this as a foundational component of Tzu Chi:

> In our charity work, we provide material necessities, medical care, and spiritual consolation for the sick and elderly. We not only help the poor, but also educate the rich by showing them that giving and service are more meaningful than pursuing wealth, power, and prestige.... The poor and wretched receive help, the rich and fortunate activate their love, and thus both can be grateful to each other. (Cheng Yen, 1999, 49)

Thus, compassion in Tzu Chi is not only their foundation, it is also one of their ends. In Tzu Chi, above all, acting on compassion is the most important thing. Their frequently heard slogan is "Just do it!".

United States

There are many actions by Engaged Buddhist individuals and groups in the West, and though their scope is a fraction of the scope of the Asian actions discussed above, this is not to say, of course, that their importance is small. Let us first look at the innovative and skillful action undertaken by Cheri Maples, then an officer in the Madison, Wisconsin (USA), police. Maples went to a retreat led by Thich Nhat Hanh and learned mindfulness practice, as well as Nhat Hanh's interpretation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings. She continued the practice at home after the retreat and discovered that it was changing what she did on the job as

a police officer. She connected better with people, listened well to them and gave them more time. For example, she tells of responding to a domestic violence call and, after getting those at risk to safety, she says:

> I could tell how hurt and scared he [the perpetrator] was beneath the anger and just sat there with him and talked to him until he started crying. Then, I held him.... I could see and feel his pain. Three days later I was at an AA meeting, and this same man walked in. He pointed at me and said, "You! You saved me that night." And he gave me a big bear hug. Those kinds of events are so nourishing and reinforcing because you know you are really connecting with people....
> I had a number of those experiences and I started enjoying being out on the street. I used to be in a hurry to finish one call and get to the next so other officers would not think I was slow. But after the retreat with Thay [Nhat Hanh], I started taking the time to be with people wherever I was. I was much more compassionate in my work and as my energy changed and my demeanor softened so did the energy of people I was encountering on the street, even people I had to arrest. It was seldom necessary for me to use force after that. I am absolutely convinced that the energy you put out is what you get back, no matter who you're with. (Maples, 2002)

After multiple experiences like this, Maples invited Nhat Hanh to come and lead a retreat for police and criminal justice professionals, which he did. She later shared this reflection:

> After the retreat, the sixteen officers from my department who attended held hands and did walking meditation. Sixteen police officers holding hands, creating peaceful steps on the earth together, forming a circle afterwards, and bowing to each other, and hugging each other. Never in my wildest imagination did I think I'd ever see anything like that. (Maples, 2012)

People who are familiar with American police know how astonishing this is. Maples, moreover, came to be in charge of personnel and training in the Madison police department and skillfully worked these principles (of course, in a nonsectarian way) into the training across the board. Maples' work is an example of a micro-intervention, motivated by compassion but also drawing strongly upon mindfulness, that is so profound and skillful that if it could be replicated in multiple places across the country and repeated again and again, the effect on the country could be immense.

A final example from the USA of social action based on compassion is found in the work of Joanna Macy. Macy's practical, compassionate social action has arisen primarily in response to two things: the degradation of the ecosystems of planet Earth and the despair that many people, including herself, have felt in response to the magnitude of that degradation and the real risk the world faces of unrecoverable ecological disaster. This work has had several names, one of its earliest being, "Despair and Empowerment Work," and more recently, the "Work that Reconnects." She has spent decades leading countless group workshops in many countries (and with other facilitators leading her workshops in many more countries) in which participants concerned about the state of the planet's physical health engage in a four-step experiential process of transforming their despair for the planet into action on its behalf. This is a process of training in compassion.

The first step in the process, "coming from gratitude," invites participants to call to mind their gratitude for the gift of a human life on planet Earth. They reflect upon how extraordinary it is to be a form of life with humankind's rich sensory experiences and interactions with the planet. They also reflect upon what a gift it is to be interactive, conscious beings who are able to choose intentional actions that contribute to the ongoing formation of the world. Macy notes that "gratitude helps to steady and ground us…. That our world is in crisis … in no way diminishes the wonder of this present moment…. There is so much to be done, and the time is so short. We can proceed, of course, out of grim and angry desperation. But the tasks proceed more easily and productively from an attitude of thankfulness…" (Macy and Brown, 2014, 92).

In the second step, "honoring our pain for the world," participants acknowledge and honor their pain for the world in its current endangered condition. "We bring to awareness our inner responses to the suffering of our fellow-beings and the destruction of the natural world—responses that include dread, rage, sorrow and guilt. These feelings are healthy and inevitable" (Macy and Brown, 2014, 106). Most Buddhist teachers would not accept that emotions of this kind are part of compassion; from a Buddhist perspective, if this pain or grief is compassion, it is a compassion in need of clarification and purification. Macy ultimately agrees, but also points out:

> Please observe how far the concerns you've just shared extend beyond your personal ego, beyond your individual needs and wants. This says something very important about who and what you are. It says you are capable of suffering with your world. That capacity to suffer-with is the literal meaning of compassion, a central virtue in every spiritual tradition. It says you are a compassionate being. (Macy and Brown, 2014, 107)

Many people, Macy discovered, need to disentangle their emotions to discover what is at their root. It turns out, says Macy, that their root is compassion, a "suffering-with" the world. A key to the process of untangling

is discovering that one's pain is not really a private pain, but a pain on behalf of all life. As Macy points out, this is a crucial discovery. She writes, "The critical passage or hinge of the workshop happens when, instead of privatizing, repressing and pathologizing our pain for the world (be it fear, grief, outrage or despair), we honor it. We learn to re-frame it as suffering-with or compassion. This brings us back to life." (Macy, n.d.)

This realization that one's grief is not only one's own leads directly to the third step in the process, "seeing with fresh eyes." Here, one leaves behind the sense of self as separate and isolated and "reconnects" with the web of life of which we are a part, feeling and seeing one's inseparability from the dynamic flow of life in which we constantly give and receive: "We turn around or turn over into wider awareness of who and what we are—as Jewels in the Net of Indra.... [W]e perceive once again the interdependence of all things and build a Life-Sustaining Society upon that understanding" (Macy and Brown, 2014, 136, 138).

As participants deepen their awareness of interdependence here and now they are also invited to inhabit "Deep Time": "As we take part in the Great Turning to a life-sustaining society, we learn to act like ancestors of future generations. We attune to longer ecological rhythms and nourish a strong felt connection with past and future beings" (Macy and Brown, 2014, 171). Participants thus cultivate a broader sense of self, reaching for what the Dalai Lama called a sense of "intimacy" with all beings through space and time.

After the emotional work of the second step, this third step is conceptual work. It is supported by practices such as "Widening Circles," which helps people grasp perspectives different from their own, a practice which is meant to help widen the sense of the "self" with which one is concerned, using "I" language for multiple voices:

> Each person will speak to their issue from four perspectives...: from their own point of view, including their feelings about the issue; from the perspective of a person who holds opposing views on this issue, introducing themselves and speaking *as* this person using the pronoun I; from the viewpoint of a nonhuman being that is affected by that particular situation; lastly, in the voice of a future human whose life is affected by the choices made now on this issue. (Macy and Brown, 2014, 146–7)

This and other practices are meant to help the participants solidify their understanding that the concern they feel is a concern for all beings and for life itself. In short, it is a training in a compassion that can now be understood as universal. Macy writes,

> The shift in perception is a figure-ground reversal: from separate entities to flows of relationship, from substance to process, from noun to verb.... Humans are seen as both unique and inseparable from our matrix, the web of life; our genuine self-interest includes that of other beings and the living body of Earth. (Macy and Brown, 2014, 138)

In addition to untangling compassion from ego-self and its privatized cares, this has also been a process of untangling compassion from fear. Macy's summing up of compassion brings out both these qualities:

> Compassion is ... an expression of your larger being and can be understood as integral to your belonging or interbeing in the sacred living body of Earth. Compassion boils down to not being afraid of the suffering of your world or of yourself. It involves being open to what you're feeling about that suffering (grief, fear, rage, overwhelm) and brave enough to experience it. It helps to know that we are all going to die. And you have this precious moment to get close to the suffering and see what it has to tell you. You can't heal something you're afraid to get near. Compassion is what impels you to act for the sake of the larger whole—or put more accurately, it is the whole acting through you. (Macy, 2014)

Macy's understanding of compassion, like the others we have discussed, is a state of being, an emotion joined to an awareness and understanding. Participants in her workshops are led, through cultivation, in the direction of expanding their experiential sense of unity with all beings, diminishing negative emotions like fear, and discovering a wellspring of energy for action on behalf of all beings.

The final step of the process in Macy's workshops is "going forth," in which one takes action to help protect the world from harm. Of course, there is no blueprint for these actions, but Macy invites participants in her workshops to take five vows as they prepare to go:

> I vow to myself and to each of you to commit myself daily to the healing of our world and the welfare of all beings. I vow to myself and to each of you to live on Earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products and energy I consume. I vow to myself and to each of you to draw strength and guidance from the living Earth, the ancestors, the future beings and our brothers and sisters of all species. I vow to myself and to each of you to support you in your work for the world, and to ask for help when I need it. I vow to myself and to each of you to pursue a daily spiritual practice that clarifies my mind, strengthens my heart and supports me in observing these vows. (Macy and Brown, 2014, 214)

These vows commit the participants to ongoing, daily skillful action on behalf of the Earth and its inhabitants and to what is needed to sustain that action. This commits them to an Earth-friendly way of life, to mutual support, to maintaining their understanding of themselves as beings inseparable from others and from the Earth, and to ongoing spiritual cultivation.

Some of the meditations that Macy gives participants to take with them as options for their ongoing spiritual cultivation include meditations on the web of life and on Gaia. In one such meditation, participants are guided thus:

> What are you? What am I? Intersecting cycles of water, earth, air and fire—that's what I am, that's what you are.... The inner furnace of your metabolism burns with the fire that first sent matter/energy flaring out through space and time.... (Macy and Brown, 2014, 272)

These are meditations that help us remember who we are in this interbeing sense. We are invited here to understand and experience ourselves as passing moments of processes as old as time.

The meditations offered also include meditations on loving-kindness and compassion. In the compassion meditation, "Breathing Through," one is guided thus:

> [O]pen your awareness to the suffering that is present in the world.... Let it come as concretely as you can ... images of your fellow-beings in pain and need, in fear and isolation, in prisons, hospitals, tenements, refugee camps....Now breathe in the pain... and out again into the world net... let it pass through your heart.... Be sure that stream flows through and out again; don't hang on to the pain.... With Shantideva, the Buddhist saint, we can say, "Let all sorrows ripen in me." ... Should you feel an ache in the chest, a pressure in the rib cage, as if the heart would break, that is all right. Your heart is not an object that can break.... But if it were, they say the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. Your heart is that large. Trust it. Keep breathing.... (Macy and Brown, 2014, 277–8)

This is a practice for cultivating a purified, universalized compassion that will help one to act in the world, replacing the privatized, debilitating pain with which many participants began.

Conclusion

These are some examples of the skillful work being done by loving-kindness and compassion practitioners in Asia and the West. If one wonders why all these examples come from the contemporary world, there are two parts to the answer. First, innumerable acts of kindness and compassion *were* performed by countless practitioners over the millennia throughout the Buddhist world. Much of this was on the level of an individual to individual action—e.g., feeding a hungry person. A substantial amount of these actions was on the moderately large scale of building bridges, roads and canals; dispensaries, hostels and hospitals; homes for the aged, infirm and orphaned; epidemic relief and famine relief (Jenkins, 2021). Second, it is important to bear in mind that the very idea that it might be possible to change the structures and institutions that constitute society is the product of a kind of thinking that does not arise until modernity arrives, and modernity only came to most of Asia in the twentieth century. With the arrival of modernity, efforts to introduce society-wide transformations have sprung up throughout the Buddhist world, wherever there has been sufficient freedom for this to be possible. But the marriage of compassion and action based upon compassion has been present in the Buddhist world since the time of the Buddha. Siddhartha Gautama himself did not fully become the Buddha upon his enlightenment beneath the Bo tree; he became the Buddha when his compassion impelled him to take action by teaching sentient beings.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This article does not contain any studies performed with human participants or animals.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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