

# Humanistic Buddhists and Social Liberation

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## ABSTRACT

*Humanistic Buddhism has arisen in modern times with the goal of liberating humans and society. However, many of the conditions that led to the rise of Humanistic Buddhism are part of modern secular reforms and have also helped to liberate Buddhism from some forms of political and cultural captivity. In particular, this article explores the role of five factors as necessary conditions for Humanistic Buddhism—an independent judiciary providing some protection from the state, a humanistic enlightenment movement that encourages independent intellectual inquiry, a modern communication systems to support individual developments, relative peace, and a global economy. These have enabled new models, networks, and groups of Buddhists to emerge and to become socially engaged in new ways. Humanistic Buddhism may be working to liberate society, but a byproduct has been a transformation and liberation of Buddhism as well as the improvement of society. In this way, it is perhaps a new illustration of the maxim that "benefiting others benefits oneself."*

## Introduction

Buddhism began as an individual quest for liberation and peace, but quickly became a social movement. The social forms of Buddhism changed each time it moved into a new culture, but also experienced significant changes within cultures, such as the rise of Mahayana and Vajrayana in India to form the "three vehicles" (*triyana*), or the Kamakura reformation of Japanese Buddhism. Today "humanistic Buddhism" has been adopted as a label by several modern Buddhist groups (such as Fo Kuang Shan and Soka Gakkai), as a commitment to apply Buddhism in society as a prime responsibility. However, the most widely used label for this humanistic Buddhism of today is "socially engaged" Buddhism.

Buddhism has never existed in isolation, and often internal changes are connected to social changes outside of the sangha. While socially engaged Buddhism suggests that Buddhists are socially active and applying Buddhism to "liberate society," in many ways these leaders are instruments for helping the sangha to catch up to secular society and to "liberate Buddhism." Being socially engaged is hardly new, but the way that Buddhist leaders are engaging each other and are being engaged is new and deserves clarification.

As a community that draws its members and support from society, Buddhism has always been humanistic. Of course, many individuals join Buddhism to free themselves from society in retreat and contemplation. Paradoxically, these forest recluses and mountain meditators have often won fame and admiration from society, partially in recognition of their capacity to transcend the social stresses that drive and divide ordinary life. Dale Cannon in his book *Six Ways of Being Religious* has clearly established that there are a variety of ways to be religious in every major tradition—devotional, socially active, meditative, intellectual, ritualistic, and shamanistic. Being

humanistic and socially engaged is one way, whereas being a recluse is another. Neither way is uniquely Buddhist nor non-Buddhist.

What is new is that those Buddhists who are socially concerned are adopting many new methods and styles: they are being more international in scope, more educated in their training, more democratic and gender inclusive in their organizations, more aware of ecological destruction, more innovative institutionally and technologically, and more concerned than ever before to move society toward nonviolence, justice, truthfulness, and peace. Certainly these new activities and values constitute a radical departure from some earlier forms of Buddhist practice, but are they different Buddhist values or just different applications. Since this new humanistic Buddhism is becoming more pervasive, it is perhaps worth taking stock of its content and significance.

### **The New Humanistic Buddhism**

In order to be specific about this New Buddhism, it is useful to look at leaders who exemplify many of its patterns. Certainly Ven. Hsing-yun, founder of Fo Kuang Shan, is a major leader of international Buddhism who embodies humanistic Buddhism. Others who also embody these new values include the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist political leader of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, the Chinese nun Ven. Cheng-yen, the Thai social activist Arjun Sulak Sivaraksa, the American Tibetan nun Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, the Japanese sect leader Daisaku Ikeda, and the Sinhalese layman A.T. Ariyaratne.

The fact that the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are living as exiles and unable to return to their homelands without imprisonment, and the frequent arrest of Sulak in his native country, make them powerful embodiments of social injustice in the modern world. As a result of struggling with the burdens of their own people, however, they have also become models of how to give enlightened and compassionate responses to the conflicts of modern society. In addition, they and Shih Hsing-yun, Shih Cheng-yen, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Daisaku Ikeda, and A.T. Ariyaratne have all devised new institutional forms to implement Buddhist ideals of compassion, reform, and gender inclusiveness. As a group these leaders are models of a new way to be Buddhist by being active internationally, by being socially engaged, and by participating in interreligious activities.

I would propose that these Buddhist leaders represent a new kind of Buddhism because, unlike the past, these leaders are honored not just for their leadership within and for Buddhism, but as spiritual and social leaders for the world. In particular, they are popular in non-Buddhist cultures because they represent the hope for new approaches to global problems by showing new ways of relating to the world and each other, not by leaving the world, but within it. As the Dalai Lama said recently: "We need a new concept, a **lay spirituality**.... It could lead us to set up what we are all looking for, a **secular morality**." (*Tricycle* Fall 1995 39a) As a result, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but others have been nominated (Cheng-yen, Ariyaratne, and Sulak).

What is socially engaged Buddhism? It is true that 2500 years ago Gautama, the Buddha, left home and never again returned to take up his former responsibilities as husband, father, and ruler. Also, his new community, the monastic sangha, offered an alternative to conventional society. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that in its early history the sangha was not set up against society, or in isolation from society, and that the Buddha spent forty-five years after his enlightenment in constant service to society. In his role of teacher, he **never abandoned society**.

- a. Even though he recognized that his understanding "went against the stream" of conventional life, he realized that there were many people who saw the limitations and failings of ordinary life who needed and were ready for his teaching, so that after his enlightenment, he began to **teach others**.
- b. After teaching others, he also **sent them out** "for the profit and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the profit, gain and happiness of gods and humans."
- c. Within the first two years of his enlightenment, the Buddha visited the kings of the two largest Kingdoms in northeast India, Magadha and Kosala, that controlled a region over 500 miles wide and he successfully **won their political support**.

Based on the example of the Buddha, the Mahayana reform movement later outlined three ethical principles as foundational to Buddhism: to avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to **save all beings**. Accordingly, when the Dalai Lama is asked what his goals are, he replies by quoting the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva:

For as long as space endures,  
and for as long as living beings remain  
until then may I, too, abide  
to dispel the misery of the world. (Tricycle Fall 1991: 20)

From this traditional point of view, Buddhists have always had a **global responsibility to relieve suffering**, but how this is done today has some new features which need to be mentioned.

1. Humanistic Buddhist leaders have a strong commitment to ACTION IN SOCIETY and physical relief as well as spiritual teachings. Reliance on meditation alone is rejected as inadequate. For example, the Dalai Lama observed that "the sole reliance on prayer had created a 'religious sentiment' that became an obstacle to human efforts to save Tibet." (Tricycle Fall 1995:5b) Unlike the old Buddhism, the new international Buddhism finds that meditation without action in society is not enough. However, the new Buddhism does not abandon meditation, but emphasizes "mindfulness in action." In contrast to the reforms of the 1960s that had activism but no mindfulness, the creativity of this new Buddhism is based on inward calmness, mindfulness, and compassion that is (a) aware of the interdependence of self, others, and the environment,

and (b) based on the impermanence of self and others; has compassion for others that is free from ego.

2. This New Buddhism has a NEW MORALITY. For example, the "Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing" established by Thich Nhat Hanh are designed not primarily around monasticism, but nonviolence and interdependence in the world. All Buddhist morality is based upon "right view," namely, the quest for enlightenment. Even though others may not wish to seek enlightenment, the concern of the Dalai Lama is to build a "secular morality" that persuades all people that for our common survival, all humans need to: (a) restore a more balanced ecology, (b) establish a more just economy, (c) ensure more balanced relationships between the sexes, (d) avoid absolutizing any ideology or doctrine, but be open to all ideas, and (e) be open to change based on consensus for the common.
3. This New Buddhism also has a NEW COMMUNITY that is diffused and cuts across religious boundaries. New networking organizations support the leaders of the New Buddhism dedicated to social justice, ecology, and human rights that exercise influence through the popular media and new interactive information technology. The influence of these international leaders is spread through various media such as retreats, videos, the internet, international conferences, and magazines, such as *Tricycle*, *Seeds of Peace*, *Turning Wheel*, *Sakyadhita*, *Living Buddhism*, and the *World Tribune*. Although the *Sakyadhita* mailing list is only a few thousand, the largest quarterly magazine, *Tricycle*, and weekly newspaper, *World Tribune*, each have a circulation of about 40,000 subscribers. Although Daisaku Ikeda's SGI organization is in 164 countries, it would be a mistake to limit the influence of these leaders only to temple membership.
4. This New Buddhism is INTERRELIGIOUS. Many Western Christians also should be counted as part of the "community of concern" represented by the New Buddhism. An increasing number of activities and books involve these New Buddhist leaders with other religions. Daisaku Ikeda is presently completing a book called *Choose Dialogue* that he is writing with an Iranian Muslim, Majid Tehranian. Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* is a bestseller, as is the Dalai Lama's book and video, *The Good Heart*, that consists of his comments on Christian scriptures.
5. The New Buddhism reverts MOTHER EARTH. Understanding the interconnectedness of all life, and the destructive history of humankind on this planet, this New Buddhism: involves a sense of shame about past human arrogance, it respects the regular patterns of life and death, it tries to restore the balance of nature both within and around ourselves, and it engenders affection and respect for the wild.
6. The New Buddhism involves the search for a more just and sustainable NEW ECONOMICS. Although the world is increasingly unified under a global market system, social groups are increasingly being separated from

each other based on the division of the rich and the poor, and nature is becoming increasingly damaged. Since this economic system is increasingly divisive, the new Buddhists are committed to finding ways to make it more just and sustainable by developing more consumer activist groups, minimal standards of safety for workers and the environment, plus fair pay for all employees regardless of gender or position. At present, the CEOs of the 365 biggest companies in America make 326 times the amount earned by the average factory worker, and thousands of times more than the workers in third world countries who are sub-contracted to produce many goods for American companies. These figures contrast dramatically with CEOs in the 1940s who made only 12 times the wage of an entry level employee. The economic institutions are drastically different today and so are our responsibilities for reform.

7. This New Buddhism is GENDER INCLUSIVE, so that all social power and decisions should be shared and balanced among the sexes. In February 1998 at Bodhgaya the nun's lineage was restored to Sri Lanka and Burma after centuries of absence, and was begun for the first time in Tibet, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Still ahead is the need to change the eight vinaya rules that place monks above nuns. Equal gender participation is more important than cultural traditions.

Enhancing all of these features are two elements that are entirely new. One is the new science and information technology that enables Buddhists to understand much better what is involved with saving all beings locally and in other countries of the world. The other major element that is new is the proliferation of institutions, some destructive and others that enhance life, that radically changes the work of Buddhists. The task of reforming individuals is joined with the responsibility to improve institutional structures (laws, education, governments, hospitals, and business) as crucial instruments for "saving beings." These two elements provide a radically different setting for practicing Buddhism today in contrast to traditional Buddhism.

### **Kamakura Married and Engaged Buddhists**

New Buddhist movements in the Kamakura period (1185-1333) liberated Buddhist practice from government control and aristocratic ownership in Japan. This "reformation" consisted of the spread of Buddhist teachings among ordinary people that transformed religious practice. While this popularization of Buddhism was a benefit to many, the new religious structures of Kamakura Buddhism also adopted organizational styles that contrast sharply with our age of democracy, equality, and information. Whereas elite Japanese Buddhism was socially married to the power structures of the government and nobility, the Kamakura reform movements of liberation and popularization built opposing forms of Buddhism that suited their times, and which may also contradict contemporary leadership trends. To illustrate how different periods require different methods, a brief comparison will be made between the innovations of the pioneer of Kamakura reforms, Honen Genku (1133-1212), and the patterns of the New Buddhism of today.

Certainly Honen is notable for challenging the limits of the traditional Buddhist institutions by bringing Buddhism out of the monastery and into the street, and he was attacked by the monastic elites for attracting commoners and disreputable people, the humble and the outcaste. In this way, Honen was like the reformers of today by practicing a "socially engaged" Buddhism. However, in other ways he was quite different:

1. Honen's greatest work, *Senchakushu*, begins by quoting the Chinese Pure Land thinker, Daocho (562-645), who divided all Buddhism into two kinds, the way of the sages and the way of Pure Land devotionism. Honen argued that for this age of mappō (when Buddhism was in decline), only exclusive devotion to Amida Buddha and rebirth in his Pure Land would save us. In this way, Honen was **reductionistic and exclusive**. In contrast, the New Buddhism affirms our interdependence and works to be as inclusive of all spiritual resources of our human heritage, including interfaith dialogue.
2. Honen rejected hope for salvation in this world and undermined confidence in any human activity, placing total reliance on the saving compassion of Amida Buddha and **otherworldly salvation** through rebirth in his Pure Land. By contrast, all the leaders of the New Buddhism of today are committed to working in **this world** to seek relief of suffering through compassion and enlightenment here-and-now. Modern Chinese Buddhist leaders such as Cheng-yen, Hsing-yun, and Sheng-yen, were inspired by the Chinese reformer and internationalist, Tai-xu (1889-1947), who was committed to education and building the Pure Land here on earth. Similarly, the leaders of the New Buddhism are working to save beings in this world here-and-now, both spiritually and physically, as much as possible.
3. Whereas Honen was impressed by the **karmic debt** that humans had incurred based on beginningless karma that totally obstructed salvation by their own efforts (*jiriki*), the present Buddhist reformers affirm the inherent goodness of the human heart (Dalai Lama) and seek to empower ordinary people by emphasizing their **Buddha nature**, dignity, and inherent worth here and now.
4. Honen had a **pessimistic view** of human history, believing that he was living in the age of the decline of the dharma (*mappō*) when all human effort was fruitless and the only hope was in another rebirth in another land, the Western Pure Land of Amida. By contrast, contemporary leaders of the New Buddhism work with a profound sense both of individual evil tendencies and institutional structural violence here-and-now, while also being buoyed up by faith that the dharma can be effective in this world when we remove ego and work collaboratively. The many examples of the improvement of knowledge, institutions, and technology provide **encouragement** to believe that the combination of mindfulness and work can reap some positive decrease in suffering. Also, awareness of the unpredictability of life and the transformations brought by recent

inventions suggest that even when there is no rational hope of improvement, one should still try.

5. Honen went outside the monastery into the streets, but today's Buddhists are finding the streets are not as effective as the information highway. Honen's society was **institutionally impoverished** by having very few options—basically there was only the government and the monastery—so he advocated freedom and hope by rejecting the elitist institutions and emphasizing individual empowerment with the single tool of *nembutsu* for salvation. However, today's Buddhist leaders can seek to reform their institutions by collaborating with more **diverse and inclusive institutions**, such as education, democracy, and the internet to ensure diversification, maximum participation, and fulfillment of all one's potential.
6. Honen had total confidence in the absolute **authority of the Buddhist scriptures**. However, today's leaders are returning to the skepticism of Gautama Buddha who pointed up the relativity of all words and concepts (*Sutta-nipata VIII*). Today we live in the age of spin doctors who can artfully twist any words or concepts to their advantage. Accordingly, education has led to skepticism about any single book or point of view or institution, while technology has offered a host of **alternative sources** of information. Honen was brilliant but limited to his tradition and in awe of the written word, whereas today's leaders have a wealth of information from various media (TV, telephone, internet, and so on) with the postmodern awareness that no single source is adequate or authoritative.
7. Honen and Daocho never realized that the reason their Chinese or Japanese contemporaries found it difficult to understand Buddhist scriptures was not just because of the decline of the dharma (*mappō*), but because of cultural differences between India and China, or India and Japan. Today's leaders recognize these cultural differences not as barriers or failures, but as sources of diversity and enrichment. Rather than hoping to copy another culture and its mode of enlightenment, that led to Daocho and Honen's despair of duplicating Indian Buddhism, today's leaders accept the differences and work interactively for mutual enhancement as a source to stimulate new creativity.

In the Kamakura period, common people were freed from the control of the aristocratic establishment through a method of empowerment that was otherworldly, exclusivistic, pessimistic about this world and human abilities, authoritative, reductionistic, and monocultural. Today in order to check the destructive power of the economic elite, new coalitions are needed to protect and build on the diversity of cultures, religions, ecosystems, and communities. While recognizing that each form of life has its own integrity and value—whether biological or human—no person or group is all sufficient, no matter how powerful. Because of our interdependence, everyone is partial and cannot long survive without collaboration and renewal from others, while each individual is precious and needed to balance and improve the whole. Whereas the liberating documents of the Kamakura period were isolated selections from the Buddhist scriptures, today all religious scriptures need to be balanced

by each other and interpreted in the light of the Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter. Each being may be married to a particular form and practice to live, but will become narrow and destructive without engagement with a wider diversity of life.

### **Five Conditions for the New Humanistic Buddhism**

A very helpful summary of the major movements and issues that constitute socially engaged Buddhism has been given by Christopher Queen and Sallie King (*Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*). But the meaning of these new Buddhist activities cannot be understood just in contrast to traditional forms of Buddhism since the new forms of socially engaged Buddhism could not have arisen in traditional cultures. Buddhism could change because the cultural context had changed. Why Colonel Olcott could be an early model of socially engaged Buddhism for Queen is not just because of Olcott's Buddhist practice or distinctive ideas, but because the British brought a form of government and culture to Sri Lanka that encouraged democratic and individual initiative, social reform, and the partial separation of Church and State. When the various kinds of socially engaged Buddhism are discussed solely in terms of Buddhist history, we miss the changed cultural context which makes the New Buddhism possible.

1. Throughout Asian history beginning with King Asoka, Buddhist movements that organized and spread books were controlled and suppressed by the state-sangha. One of the blessings of British colonialism was an independent legal system. South and East Asia did not have sources of law separate from the government like Hebrew prophets and British common law. An independent judiciary provided norms beyond the cronyism of state and sangha/church that gave religious reformers some freedom to operate. It was British law and popular education based on printing technology that gave Protestants, Colonel Olcott, and the international leaders of the New Buddhism the means to develop independent organizations, education, and publications. These new conditions were not the invention of Protestantism, but Buddhists like Olcott learned to take advantage of these new conditions to enable Buddhists to flourish in new ways. New constitutional governments after World War II further instituted the separation of church and state. The reforms in Taiwan, Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka could never have advanced without these new instruments that freed Buddhist groups from absolute government control.
2. Asia also did not have a strong humanistic tradition like the one that evolved in the West from the Greek critical thinkers and the European enlightenment that posited human life and reason as a legitimate source of truth and value. Confucianism moved in that direction, but was never independent from the state. In the West, the state came to be seen as neither divine nor all-powerful, but as a social contract based on consensus that had to meet ethical standards beyond the self-interest of rulers. This encouraged individual initiative based on the legitimacy of human reason and popular society. In contrast to the authoritarianism of

established Buddhism, this humanistic tradition provided not only critical reflection on the state and sangha, but also empowered people to take initiatives based on their own reason and conscience.

3. Modernity brought improved technology and communication methods that enabled people to network and interact in ways never before possible. This meant the solitary voices in one culture could gain energy and conviction through contact with similar people in other cultures. The international women's movement is still very small, but it has made the historical achievement of establishing new nun's lineages for Tibet, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Cambodia in February 1998. Sulak's initiatives like the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, as well as the power of the Dalai Lama, is based in large part on modern communication methods.
4. Relative global peace also is needed to communicate across cultures in a way that was not possible during the first and second World Wars, during the Cold War, or when China was isolated. Without peace there cannot be an independent judiciary, humanistic reason, freedom of conscience, and consensus that are the resources socially engaged Buddhists use to bring about social change.
5. Also, without a modern media and the global economy there is not the infrastructure for the communication technology and travel that enable people to network and support each other with new models, ideals, and visions of social harmony.

It seems to me that these five conditions—an independent judiciary providing some protection from the state, a humanistic enlightenment movement that encourages independent intellectual inquiry, a modern communication systems to support these individual developments, relative peace, and a global economy—are what have enabled new models, networks, and groups of Buddhists to emerge and are what have enabled Buddhists to become socially engaged in new ways. Humanistic Buddhism may be working to liberate society, but this is possible only because society has also liberated Buddhism from its past restrictions. The result has been a transformation and liberation of Buddhism as much as the liberation of society.

### **Is Global Interactive Buddhism a Fourth Yana?**

Does socially engaged Buddhism constitute a new teaching of Buddhism comparable to Early Buddhism, Mahayana, or Vajrayana? In the past, each of these "three turnings of the wheel" was marked by the production of new Buddhist scriptures, as well as new ways of understanding the world, new technical terminology, new practices, and a new community of practitioners. The new scriptures, practices, and institutions that embody the new socially engaged Buddhism exist in scattered experiments among small groups of Buddhists in the last forty years. Much of the core vocabulary of socially engaged Buddhism is from traditional Buddhism (mindfulness in daily life, compassion, inner peace and world peace), or is derivative from other social activists and is not distinctive. For example, the power

words imported into Buddhism from our global, interactive culture, include "human rights," "gender inclusiveness," "sustainable development," and "economic justice." Although new books are emerging, the new inspirational sources more often than not are through various media such as *Tricycle*, *Seeds of Peace*, *Turning Wheel*, *Sakyadhita*, *Living Buddhism*, *Dharma Gate*, and the *World Tribune*.

Being socially compassionate is not new for Buddhism. The monastics were always in a symbiotic relationship with the societies within which they existed, and in traditional society areas often provided medicine and education, and served as a refuge for women, orphans, and elders. In China in the sixth century, for example there were instances when Buddhists were socially engaged—with welfare projects, road building, hospitals, and famine relief. However, when the government became strong, social welfare projects were forbidden under threat of imprisonment or execution. Being socially engaged is not new for Buddhism: what is new is the supportive social, political, legal, technological, and economic context that motivates, enables, and supports Buddhists to be socially engaged.

Those Buddhist reformers who are changing and evolving Buddhist practices are doing so on the fringes of their tradition in relation to each other and based on cross-fertilization with activists of other religions and cultural movements. As a result, humanistic Buddhist groups also are expressions of interfaith activity, gender inclusive activity, ecological responsiveness, peace activism, and humanistic volunteerism. Just to focus on the Buddhist roots of socially engaged Buddhists is not an adequate way to describe the major forces which inform, inspire, and support their activities.

Since socially engaged Buddhists also expresses modern global interactive culture, it may come to constitute a fourth yana of Buddhism. New values have emerged as primary, for example. Buddhist social activists include among their deepest religious convictions the commitment to gender inclusivism, ecological responsibility, participatory democracy, social justice, and peace. It seems clear that if early texts show that the Buddha ignored, or violated, these principles—or when contemporary Buddhist institutions violate these principles—Buddhist social activists work to transform the tradition rather than abandon these values. (Fortunately, most of these values can be found within the Buddhist tradition. Also, Buddhist mindfulness training, morality, and Buddhist methods to increase our awareness of interdependence and change, can be used to enhance and implement these values.) But it is clear that these values are foundational and that those parts of the Buddhist tradition that support these primary values are the elements of Buddhism that are emphasized by Buddhist social activists. In contrast, the ritual, doctrine, mythology, and lifestyle of traditional Buddhism is taking second place. Thus, there is a constellation of new values, practices, and worldview linking together new communities of practitioners located not in buildings but in networks, projects, and the subscription lists of socially engaged journals. In this sense, and to this degree, interactive Buddhists form a new yana, a new vehicle for Buddhist practice.

### Conclusion

Gananath Obeyesekere is famous for writing in *Buddhism Transformed* that many new Buddhist activities are merely an echo of Protestant missionary work:

publishing magazines, forming colleges, building hospitals, and empowering women. While education, gender inclusiveness, publications, and medical treatment may have been sponsored by Protestant missionaries, it is clear by now that they were neither invented by them nor owned by them. Rather, they are ideas and inventions that benefit humanity, and social activists of every stripe will be deficient if they do not use these new mediums. Calling them Protestant because of the way they were introduced into Buddhism is hardly an adequate way to describe their significance.

Today all religious leaders use computers and the internet based on a microchips for processing and memory that were first invented by Intel in 1971. When President Clinton began his presidency in 1992, there were only 50 users of the internet, but today there are millions. Cellular phones, television, and satellite communication are human tools of information, but is the use of these tools being Protestant, or just being informed? If Buddhists have social concerns, and many Buddhists define their practice by vows to save others, then isn't the criterion to be used, not whether something is Asian or Western, Buddhist or Christian, but whether or not it is helpful to relieve suffering? Old labels for religious identity are becoming less adequate to describe religious practice.

"A powerful trend in challenging traditional styles of practice is a change from unquestioned acceptance of hierarchical authority to a more consensus based form of decision making." While this sentence could apply to the new socially engaged forms of Buddhism, it is equally true for new styles of business management, new styles of education, and new styles of political decision-making. Hierarchy was not the earliest form of Buddhist organization in which people were seated in order of seniority in the practice, but it has become the dominant form of organization in virtually all traditional societies. Since successful Buddhist traditions in every culture were not just socially engaged, but socially married, to the organizational values of those cultures, all traditional Buddhist organizations had become hierarchical.

It is not a form of Westernization to make Buddhist groups more democratic. Rather, modern technology and education inform us how Buddhist groups have changed through time and what a wide range of choice now lies before everyone. No Buddhist scripture or practice or teaching is pure or original, since all have been passed down to us through the minds and mouths and cultures of numerous people. No Buddhist authority is ultimate. The offices of a sangharaja, or a Buddhist sectarian leader, or a Dalai Lama, or a Zen master, are institutional structures with no particular Buddhist authority outside their particular community. Information and education shows us this variety. How to use this information is now the challenge to all Buddhists. But if Buddhists claim to have social concerns, then not to make this information available to as many Buddhists as possible could be seen as a form of lying by covering the truth, and not to include them in the discussion and decision making process could be a new form of stealing by taking away their leadership opportunity. The leaders of the new humanistic Buddhism who are engaged in a global, interactive community sometimes have become disengaged or divorced from some traditional structures (such as the break by Soka Gakkai from Nichiren Shoshu or the independence of Fo Kuang Shan from the Chinese Buddhist Association) when those structures remained too wedded to old cultural patterns. While many new forms are emerging, the most important changes in this interactive global culture have been

the enrichment of new information, the purging of old structures and obstacles to individuals, and the discovery of our connectedness with others as expressed in new institutional developments. Being socially engaged has liberated Buddhists as much as it has liberated society. Or in classical terms, humanistic Buddhism is the mutual liberation of self and others in a global and interactive cultural context.

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Buddhism is an eminently practical religion because it teaches us how to live in this world. It is also the most mystical of religions because it shows us how to experience transcendental awareness in every moment of our lives. The Buddha is sometimes called "the great doctor" because he shows us how to cure ourselves of the ills of ignorance. He is sometimes called "the great teacher" because he teaches us how to free ourselves from the greed and anger that bind us to the world. He is sometimes called "the great ox" because he uses his strength to draw us toward the truth.

– *Buddhism: Pure and Simple*, Hsing Yun, p. 17