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## Engaged Buddhism & Women in Black: Our Grief Is Not a Cry for War

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## Engaged Buddhism & Women in Black: Our Grief Is Not a Cry for War

### Cover Page Footnote

Candace Walworth is Associate Professor at Naropa University, a Buddhist-inspired university in Boulder, Colorado.

# Engaged Buddhism & Women in Black: Our Grief Is Not a Cry for War

Candace Walworth

5:15 p.m., Oct. 10, 2001: I had just left work and was headed west on Canyon to pick up a Nick-N-Willy's pizza for dinner. On the corner of Canyon and Broadway in front of the Boulder Municipal Building, an unexpected silence and stillness caught my eye. The silent stillness was dressed in black and female. Among the 80 to 100 assembled women were friends and colleagues. I recognized a familiar nose and a beloved head tilted to one side.

I was stunned and delighted. Who were these women? What were they doing? What was their purpose? Their message? I rolled down my window to hear what they had to say, but this was a feast for eyes, not ears. No petitions to sign. No candidates to promote. No initiatives. No money to raise. Except for a lone banner that I couldn't read, the customary signifiers of social action were strikingly absent. I was taken aback by the powerful collective presence: a steady, alert gaze and relaxed posture. Were these women practicing street-corner standing meditation? Drive-by communion? Performance art?

The light changed from red to green, and reluctantly I accelerated to keep pace with the congregation of buses, trucks, and homeward-bound motorists. But something had shifted. Eighty local women publicly demonstrating silence bounced the post 9-11 commentary out of my brain. I was touched by an unwritten law of social and spiritual action: once you've been touched, you desire to touch.

The next day I ran into friend and colleague Anne Parker whose silhouette I had seen in the twilight.

"I saw you on the corner of Broadway and Canyon last night. What *was* that?"

"Women in Black."

"What's Women in Black?"

Women in Black started in Israel in 1988 with a small group of women protesting the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Jewish and Palestinian women stood together at a busy intersection in Jerusalem once a week. Women in Black caught on, stretching across scores of war zones to Australia, Canada, Europe, and the U.S. In Boulder, two local women organized WIB by getting on the phone and calling friends. They decided if no one else showed up, they would simply stand together on the corner of Canyon and Broadway from 5-6 p.m. on Wednesday evenings. But others did, and continue to, show up.

5:15 p.m. Oct. 17, 2001: I'm standing on the corner of Broadway and Canyon dressed in black coat, pants, gloves, and boots. The driver of a US West truck leans out the window, grins, and waves. A woman with a crying baby in her arms hurries to the bus stop on Broadway. Two women in black toting backpacks walk across Broadway. The woman next to me steps to her left while I step to my right, making room for the newcomers, exercising the permeable boundary between "actors" and "audience."

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A half-hour passes. My eyes are tired. The tension in my eyes reminds me to *experience* the tension and notice the placement of my attention. Am I grasping at something, trying to produce an effect? Do I believe this action ought to produce a result, sound an alarm, or wake someone up? I discover a cluster of thoughts revolving around the belief that social change requires agents whose actions produce or instigate change. As I relax my eyes and rest my gaze half way between the traffic and the earth in front of me, I notice a subtle shift from an aggressive desire to change others to awareness itself. Gratitude and appreciation arise.

For the next half-hour my attention comes and goes, wandering to the war in Afghanistan, experiencing anger, returning to the sound of buses and trucks grinding gears, occasional horns honking, sensations of cold in my hands and feet. Breathing in. Breathing out. Branches of nearby trees against the pink sky catch my eye. Their presence reminds me of the power of roots, of standing still, and of Pablo Neruda's poem:

And now we will count to twelve  
and we will all keep still. . .

For once on the face of the earth  
let's not speak in any language;  
let's stop for one second,  
and not move our arms so much . . .

If we were not so singleminded  
about keeping our lives moving,  
and for once could do nothing,  
perhaps a huge silence  
might interrupt this sadness  
of never understanding ourselves  
and of threatening ourselves with  
death (qtd. in Amidon and Roberts 394)

After 9-11 I had distributed the poem to my classes, but I had not found a way to embody, *to live*, the poem. Inadvertently I had relegated the poem to art, something to read and appreciate rather than to call to social activism deeply rooted in contemplation. "Art offers a bridge between thinking and doing because it is at its best a little of both, whether it remains in the galleries or gets out on the streets. Art isn't supposed to be practical, but it's great when it is," writes activist and art critic Lucy Lippard in *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (118).

For me, Women in Black has been such a bridge between thinking and doing. I had been thinking about how to speak out against war as a response to terrorism when the silent vigil of Women in Black shook me with a bolt of beauty and the gift of unexpected stillness. WIB offered me, the activist, an affinity group with which to stand for peace and me, the practitioner, a regular time and place to practice being peaceful, doing nothing with others, interrupting grief and sadness with a huge silence.

*Saturday morning, February 16, 2002:* I'm headed down Arapahoe to return overdue books to the Boulder Public Library when unexpectedly I make a right onto Broadway heading to Canyon, taking the scenic, sacred route to receive the blessings of the Women in Black intersection and its trees who will stand still long after I have departed. Since October I have driven through this intersection

many times, sometimes lost in thought, “singleminded about keeping my life moving,” suddenly reminded to turn off the inner radio, the nearly continuous stream of commentary I often mistake for me.

In times of war, small actions ripple through our communities, creating new forms to help us find our way. We name and classify these actions: art, social action, spiritual practice. But before we name them, they work on us, leaving us momentarily undefended.

## Buddhist-Inspired Social Action: From the Streets to the Classroom

Often I do not know the woman in black standing next to me. She may be Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Pagan, or atheist. She will, of course, have her own understanding of the significance of WIB both personally and politically. Because my interest—both in life and in this paper—is in the relationship between Buddhist practice and social action, I have identified four aspects of my WIB narrative that characterize social action informed by Buddhist practice. From there I explore contributions of well known Buddhist teachers and activists and offer examples of how Buddhist principles and practices can operate in the classroom. The final section is a review of engaged Buddhism in action.<sup>1</sup>

### 1) Start with Yourself

*My eyes are tired. The tension in my eyes reminds me to experience the tension and notice the placement of my attention. As I relax my eyes and rest my gaze half way between the traffic and the earth in front of me, I notice a subtle shift from an aggressive desire to change others to awareness itself.* The willingness to investigate our own hearts and minds is basic to Buddhist practice. Honest meditators with an activist orientation would, I think, agree with Joan Tollifson when she says, “One of the shocks of meditation practice has been to discover that all the behaviors and attitudes that I hated ‘outside’ are residents of my own mind as well: the same reactive, defensive, conditioned processes have been going on in me as well. There is no ‘other’ to blame” (qtd. in Friedman and Moon 23).

In the abstract I’m committed to being in the present moment and experiencing the truth of things as they are; in reality I am often upset, inconvenienced, and even outraged by “what is.” The trick of practice is to keep returning to the here and now, mustering the courage to experience my own anger, fear, helplessness, and insecurity—noticing when I seek out a target in my immediate family, across

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<sup>1</sup> While the focus of this paper is socially engaged Buddhism, I think it’s important to note contributions of socially engaged leaders of diverse spiritual traditions. Mohandas K. Gandhi, perhaps the most well known spiritual social activist of the twentieth century, was a devout Hindu. Gandhi’s close Muslim associate, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan (also known as the “frontier Gandhi”), led the Pashtun people who live on the Afghan-Indian border on the path of nonviolent civil disobedience. Socially engaged Christians such as Septima Clark, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks helped end legal segregation in the United States. The Trappist monk and widely acclaimed writer Thomas Merton engaged issues such as civil rights, nonviolence, and the nuclear arms race from a hermitage in Kentucky. Under the leadership of Rabbi Michael Lerner, the journal *Tikkun: A Bimonthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture & Society*, continues a long tradition of Jewish activism. The January/February 2003 issue of *Tikkun* features an article called “Activism from the Heart” which includes contributions by eleven diverse activists.

the hallway in the English department, or in an abstraction reachable only by proxy, like the US military.

Starting with yourself includes paying attention to your sense perceptions: touching, tasting, smelling, hearing and seeing. My grade science teacher, Mr. Conrad, showed up one day with a candle and a book of matches for each member of the class. The experiment he proposed for his rambunctious bunch of eighth graders was that we each light a candle and sit quietly observing as it burned. It's the only time I remember in elementary school, high school, or college where a teacher guided me in "bare attention" – open, non-interfering awareness of the phenomenal world. I doubt that Mr. Conrad would have called his experiment "mindfulness practice" or practice in "not knowing," but I'm sure he hoped we would notice the difference between our assumptions and direct experience. I remember slowing down and becoming still, not because I wanted to but because the flame held my attention in a way I hadn't been held before. My attitude of boredom and exasperation disappeared as I participated in the miracle of fire. The flickering, alive quality of the flame reminded me that I too was breathing and that this was worthy of my attention.

Many Buddhist-based practices involve heightening awareness of our physical presence; thus, many classes at Naropa University begin and end with a simple bow. We start with ourselves: feet on the ground, backs straight, hands resting gently on thighs, and shoulders relaxed. Bowing is a way of acknowledging our basic presence and the presence of others. It's a gesture that gives us a moment to drop the speed of our lives, a moment of doing nothing together before doing something together.

## 2) Notice Gaps, Silence, & Stillness

*On the corner of Canyon and Broadway in front of the Boulder Municipal Building an unexpected silence and stillness caught my eye. The silent stillness was dressed in black and female . . . . Except for a lone banner that I couldn't read, the customary signifiers of social action were strikingly absent. I was taken aback by the powerful collective presence: a steady, alert gaze and relaxed posture.* In the late-seventies if you had suggested to me, the political activist, that stillness and silence could be the ground for activism, I would have scoffed. I had very little experience with silence as anything other than something imposed from the outside. Silence equaled "being silenced" and "speaking out" was the antidote. Like many feminists, I agreed with Adrienne Rich that "Where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, violence" (qtd. in Belenky 23). It didn't occur to me that speech nourished by silence has different qualities than speech intended to influence or persuade.<sup>2</sup>

I was visiting one of Dee Coulter's Cognitive Studies classes at Naropa one

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth investigation of the relationship between silence and expression, see George Kalamaras's *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension: Symbolic Form in the Rhetoric of Silence* and for a side-splitting critique of negative ideas about silence and ways of nurturing silence in the classroom, see Mary Rose O'Reilley's *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Activity*. Anne Klein in "Mindfulness and Silence" from *The Meeting of the Great Bliss Queen* writes that "The silence of mindfulness comes from a capacity of mind, not a failure of speech. This capacity, moreover, can be intentionally, deliberately, cultivated [. . .]. The silence of mindfulness is not a means of communication, not another form of speech, but a deep listening" (83-84). Klein's Buddhist perspective on contemporary feminist theory may also be of interest to readers.

day when Dee asked that we form two circles. She invited those for whom public speaking was stressful or anxiety provoking to sit in the inner circle. Anyone not in the inner circle became a member of the outer circle, a circle that agreed not to talk but to listen while the inner circle spoke. I placed myself in the outer circle and found myself both irritated and intrigued, irritated with the pauses and gaps where “nothing happened” and intrigued by the pauses and gaps where “everything happened.” Most of the inner circle spoke in hushed, barely audible voices, requiring an unusual level of attention. By reversing the usual speaking-listening dynamics, we collectively created space, a welcome silence not usually encountered in public discourse.

In meditation practice we learn to pay attention to the space (gaps) between thoughts, not to make thinking *prima donna* but to practice “resting the mind” rather than feeding the mind. Naropa faculty Lee Worley joined one of my classes recently to give us a taste of Space Awareness practice.<sup>3</sup> We stood in a circle for about five minutes. As we stood, Lee guided us:

Pay attention to the space inside you . . . in front of you . . . behind you . . . to the sides . . . above you . . . and below you . . . . When you find your attention wandering, come back to your body. When you feel restless and want to wiggle or giggle or scratch your head, see if you can just notice it and put that awareness into your body.

Slowly, Lee directed us to begin to move through the room, asking us to “keep your awareness of space and body as you move.” Space Awareness practice is available to us anytime or place; paradoxically, one of the benefits of this practice is that we see how rarely we are at home in our own bodies while engaged in the ordinary activities of daily life.

### 3) Practice with Emotion-Thoughts

*For the next half-hour my attention comes and goes, wandering to the war in Afghanistan, experiencing anger, returning to the sound of buses and trucks grinding gears, occasional horns honking, sensations of cold in my hands and feet.* Shortly after 9-11 the front cover of *The Turning Wheel*, a journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, carried a photo of four women dressed in black with their backs to the camera, their arms linked around one another’s shoulders and waists. On one woman’s back sat the bold caption “Our Grief is Not a Cry for War,” a reminder that when we’re willing to experience our grief and anger, we don’t need to turn it outward in aggressive action against others. The Dalai Lama, Tibet’s leader in exile, describes the relationship between world problems and emotions in this way:

World problems also cannot be challenged by anger or hatred. They must be faced with compassion, love, and true kindness. Even with all the terrible weapons we have, the weapons themselves cannot start a war. The button to trigger them is under a human finger, which moves by thought, not under its own power. The responsibility rests in thought. (Eppsteiner 5)

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<sup>3</sup> Lee Worley’s book *Coming from Nothing: The Sacred Art of Acting* includes a chapter on Mudra Space Awareness. Dee Coulter’s audiotape catalog and selected articles are posted on her website at <http://www.kindlingtouch.com>.

Intellectually it's easy to agree with the Dalai Lama that anger cannot be overcome by anger, yet to touch anger rather than to get angry or get angry at anger—mine and yours—takes practice.<sup>4</sup> Prompted by a paper her son wrote on “Thermal Pollution from Nuclear Reactors” in his freshman year at Tufts, Joanna Macy, Buddhist scholar, activist, and systems theorist, undertook an intensive study of nuclear proliferation. The more she learned the more overwhelmed she felt by the apocalyptic implications of her study. Like many of us, she unconsciously opted for depression and denial. Seeing clearly was too painful. Too overwhelming. From the down-under place, Macy developed what became known as Despair and Empowerment work.<sup>5</sup> By choosing contradictory words to name her work, Macy challenges a common assumption: if I allow myself to feel despair at the state of the world, I will become immobilized, paralyzed, disempowered. To the contrary, Macy's intention is “to acknowledge and explore our deepest responses to threats to life on Earth, in ways that overcome numbness and paralysis and open us to the power of our interconnectedness in the web of life” (*Widening Circles* 214). I was first introduced to this work in the early 1980's at a time I did not want to experience my pain or, for that matter, anyone else's. Ten years later when I re-encountered Macy's work, I was ready to explore this basic Buddhist tenant: to experience compassion for others, we must first experience our own pain.

Mr. Conrad's assignment to observe the flame of a candle provoked mild emotional resistance in his students, mostly annoyance and boredom. I suspect that *JAEPL* readers bring texts that evoke strong emotional reactions into the classroom: novels, short stories, and essays that depict the tremendous suffering humans inflict on one another. Among the novels I teach is Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which portrays the intersection of race, class, and gender in the life of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove. In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison reflects on one of her challenges as a novelist: how to keep from dehumanizing characters who have hurt or failed to help Pecola (211). In the same chapter in which Cholly rapes Pecola (his daughter), readers learn about the neglect and abuse Cholly suffered as a child (132-63). By showing the causes and conditions of Cholly's behavior, Morrison connects us with his humanity. As readers, we face the same choice as Cholly: can we create a gap between an act of violence and our response? Once hurt and poised to retaliate, can we stop, be still, and

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<sup>4</sup> Many Buddhist teachers, who include a sizable number of psychologists, emphasize practicing with emotions. I recommend Thich Nhat Hanh's *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* for working with the emotions of everyday life. Feminists who would appreciate reading a Western woman's perspective, see Rita Gross's “Anger and Meditation” in *Being Bodies* edited by Lenore Friedman and Susan Moon. “The point of feminism is not to fight wars but to alleviate the suffering caused by conventional gender roles. Practice can tame the anger and unleash the clarity of feminism so that communication is more possible,” writes Gross (101).

For a series of conversations between the Dalai Lama and Western scholars on the subject, see *Healing Emotions: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Mindfulness, Emotions, and Health* edited by Daniel Goleman. To explore the overlapping and non-overlapping domains of psychotherapy and meditation, see Jack Kornfield's Chapter 17 (“Psychotherapy and Meditation”) in *A Path with Heart*.

<sup>5</sup> Macy has collected many of the exercises from the Despair and Empowerment work in a chapter called “Taking Heart: Spiritual Exercises for Social Activists” (*World*).

actually experience our pain?

To work with the strong emotions that many students experience while studying *The Bluest Eye*, I adapted an exercise on compassion from Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, poet, and activist. Each student selects a character from the novel who is especially difficult to stomach and then writes *as that character*: “I am Cholly, I am Mr. Henry, I am Soaphead Church, I am Geraldine. . . .”<sup>6</sup> Almost without exception, my students and I have found “the despised” within as well as without.

#### 4) Abandon Hope of Fruition

*Do I believe this action ought to produce a result, sound an alarm or wake someone up? I discover a cluster of thoughts revolving around the belief that social change requires agents whose actions produce or instigate change.* One of the trickiest states of mind for an activist is the desire to produce results, to change something. From there it’s easy to slide into aggression and manipulation, attempts to force a particular outcome, admonishing others to change their views, to mend their ways. The first tenant of the Zen Peacemaker Order, an international organization of activists, is “not knowing.” Bernie Glassman, one of its founders, explains that bearing witness to suffering must be followed by letting go. He describes bearing witness and letting go as a continual process, an antidote to burn-out and self-righteousness characteristic of activism at its worst. In *Bearing Witness: A Zen Master’s Lessons in Making Peace*, Glassman writes,

In the Peacemaker Order we don’t ask ourselves what are the right methods of handling conflict. Instead we try to approach the situation with no attachment to ideas or solutions. Only then can we really bear witness. And as we become each situation that arises, as we find in ourselves the place of suffering, illness, or despair, the healing arises. (88)

Pema Chödrön, an American Buddhist nun, reminds us that we can act decisively without attachment to the outcome of our activity. Chödrön writes:

It’s important to remember, when we’re out there nonaggressively working for reform, that, even if our particular issue doesn’t get resolved, we are adding peace to the world. We have to do our best and at the same time give up all hope of fruition.[. . .] When circumstances make us feel like closing our eyes and shutting our ears and making other people into the enemy, social action can be the most advanced practice. How to continue to speak and act without aggression is an enormous challenge. The way to start is to begin to notice our opinions. (112-13)

Whether we’re trading stock options, baseball cards with kids, or ideas with students and colleagues, we can simply notice when our opinions take over, leaving us with little awareness of others or ourselves. Once we notice where we are (caught in our thoughts about how things ought to be), we can return to “not knowing,” to space itself. As activists and academics we have been trained to quickly fill in the gaps of what we don’t know to avoid discomfort and

<sup>6</sup>For Thich Nhat Hanh’s meditation “on the suffering of those who cause us to suffer,” see *Peace is Every Step* (83).

embarrassment. Shortly before she died of cancer, a friend of mine joked, "I'm happy to say, I *don't know* where I'm going or even *who* is going. I'm stepping beyond the knowledge of Western science. How many times in your life have you been able to say that?" The practice of "not knowing" continues as long as we do.

In *The Un-TV and the 10 MPH Car*, sociologist Bernard McGrane explains his work with "applied meditation" or "liberation sociology." My favorite of his classroom experiments is called "un-occupied, un-employed," which could be seen as a solo version of *Women in Black*. McGrane's instructions to students are simple and straightforward: Do nothing for ten minutes, preferably in a busy place and "see what you can see" (13).

Not unlike the experience of meditation or my experience standing with *Women in Black*, McGrane's students found that while their bodies could stand still, their minds were occupied, restlessly seeking escape or entertainment. By breaking a taboo—the social expectation that all activity should be "productive"—students reported experiencing fear and anxiety. According to their teacher, they began to question where "self" ends and "society" begins, tasting what Bernie Glassman calls "bearing witness"—simply *being with* or *becoming* each moment, each situation. Bearing witness, the willingness to take action while letting go of the demand for a particular outcome, is at the heart of engaged Buddhism.

### Engaged Buddhism in Action

The term "engaged Buddhism" is attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh whom Martin Luther King nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967.<sup>7</sup> Nhat Hanh's many books describe the ground for Buddhist social engagement as mindfulness. Mindfulness is a quality of attention we can bring to each moment: washing dishes, reading a poem or a student paper, or standing on a street corner protesting war. For Nhat Hanh, activism is simply an extension of mindfulness practice in daily life. During the Vietnam War he formulated the precepts of the Order of Interbeing (*Tiep Hien* in Vietnamese), which provide a compelling example of how Buddhist precepts apply to social action. For example, the precept "Standing Up to Injustice" expresses the desire to "transcend all partisan conflict" while at the same time exposing the truth concerning unjust situations, enumerating the causes of injustice, and proposing measures for removing the injustice (*Interbeing* 39). The precept "Social Justice" focuses on "bringing to our awareness the pain caused by social injustice" and the importance of not "profiting from human suffering" (43-44). Rather than siding with the North or the South during the war, the *Tiep Hien* monks viewed the suffering of the North Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, and the Americans as identical, thus expressing the Buddhist perception of interdependence.

<sup>7</sup> For a genealogy of the term "engaged Buddhism" and an analysis of the dimensions, challenges, and possible directions of engaged Buddhism, see Donald Rothberg's "Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America" in *The Faces of Buddhism in America* edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka. Also, see Christopher S. Queen's excellent anthology *Engaged Buddhism in the West* and Ken Jones's *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism*, especially Part Five, "The Rationale and the Forms of Buddhist Social Activism" (193-224). For "Critical Questions Concerning Engaged Buddhism," see the final section of Donald Rothberg's essay "Buddhist Responses to Violence and War: Resources for a Socially Engaged Spirituality."

Where Nhat Hanh uses the word “mindfulness,” Robert Aitken Roshi, a co-founder of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, uses the word “practice.” Aitken describes engaged Buddhism as “practice within or alongside poisonous systems” (229). Practice (or mindfulness) refers to bringing our attention precisely, yet gently, to the moment.<sup>8</sup> Aitken does not define what he means by “poisonous systems” but, based on his other writings, he could be referring to widespread environmental destruction, military solutions to diplomatic problems, or homophobia. Another articulation of the relationship between poisonous systems and practice comes from Zen teacher Phillip Kapleau:

More than any previous society in human history, capitalist industrial society has created conditions of extreme impermanence, terrifying insubstantiality, and a struggling dissatisfaction and frustration. It would be difficult to imagine any social order for which Buddhism was more relevant and needed. Surely Buddhists should be sharp and active critics of all social conditions and values that move [. . .] humanity to increase pain and suffering, greed and violence. At the same time, they must remain compassionately responsive toward the individual men and women who drive others and are themselves driven by their own undisciplined impulses. (qtd. in Kaza and Kraft 244)

Aitken, Kapleau, and Nhat Hanh identify “self” and “world” as co-arising, not separate from one another. In his remarks about how Buddhism contributes to a culture of peace, Aitken includes “practical organizing in the Buddhist spirit to ameliorate suffering and to challenge covetous and exploitative systems” (qtd. in Chappell 93).

To challenge covetous and exploitative systems, Western Buddhist practitioners have created organizations such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the Zen Peacemaker Order, and many environmental organizations ranging from the Dharma Gaia Trust, which raises money for Buddhist-inspired ecological restorative projects in Asia, to the Nuclear Guardianship Project guided by Joanna Macy. The religious studies department at Naropa University inaugurated a Master’s degree in Engaged Buddhism “to couple contemplative practice with training in social engagement, a combination designed to tame fanaticism in the activist even while it arouses engagement in the potentially complacent contemplative” (Simmer-Brown qtd. in Chappell 118).

Buddhist practitioners have written memoirs that intimately depict the nuances of lives dedicated to activism and contemplation. In *Dreaming Me: An African-American Woman’s Spiritual Journey*, Jan Willis vividly portrays the moment she stood poised either to join the Black Panther party or return to Nepal to study with her Tibetan teacher, Lama Yeshe. She chose Lama Yeshe (124–29). Joan Tollifson’s *Bare-Bones Meditation: Waking up from the Story of My Life* provides a fascinating exploration of one woman’s journey to reconcile her Buddhist practice with activism on behalf of the disabled (she was born without a right hand), Central American solidarity work, and lesbian-feminism. To explore racism, sexism, poverty, and compassion, *The Shambhala Sun*, a journal inspired

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of practice in everyday life, see Joko Beck on “What Practice Is Not” and “What Practice Is” in *Everyday Zen: Love & Work*.

by Buddhist practice, published a dialogue between scholar and activist bell hooks and Pema Chödrön (“News You Can Use”); to examine loving kindness practiced in a painful world, *The Sun* interviewed writer and activist Alice Walker who discusses, among other things, her work to help end female genital mutilation.

Though this paper has focussed on the work of Buddhist activists who live and work primarily in the United States, engaged Buddhism is a worldwide movement. One of Thailand’s most prominent social critics, activists, and proponents of engaged Buddhism, Sulak Sivaraksa, founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. His book *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* explores such issues as the relationship between Buddhism and nonviolence and the impact of Western consumerism on Asian culture. Professor A. T. Ariyaratne, founder of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, gives voice to the nonviolent movement to end the war between the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. Finally, this list would not be complete without mention of Myanmar’s (Burma’s) human-rights activist Aung San Suu Kyi who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.<sup>9</sup>

By happenstance, Professor Ariyaratne and I were both visiting Auroville, South India, several years ago when we were offered a tour of the surrounding villages by Tamils and Westerners working together on village action projects. Given the noisy vehicle, the potholes in the road, and my busy, spinning mind, I missed most of the explanation of what we were seeing. The knot in my stomach teamed up with a massive demonstration of thoughts, the leader of my thoughts complaining, “Social activism back home is a drop in the bucket compared to the enormity of human suffering here. Does it *really* make a difference?”

If I were working on village action projects in South India, under the influence of the same logic, I could easily think, “Even if *this* village gets a well, what good will it do? What about all the villages without wells? Even if every person in the village learns to read, it will do nothing to alter the concentration of wealth protected by violence. . . .”

Yes, building wells, teaching reading and writing, and standing silently on street corners are “small” actions. But perhaps the tendency to measure actions as “large” or “small” does nothing but rob us of our power.

*January, 19, 2003:* Thousands of people showed up in Washington, D.C. and San Francisco yesterday to protest the war with Iraq threatened by the Bush Administration. Last night the local TV station in Denver flashed a photo of Denver’s Women in Black standing together on the corner of 15<sup>th</sup> and Colfax. The coverage included a four-second interview with a Woman in Black who had just enough time to say, “It’s time to make our voices heard, whether through words or silent, symbolic actions.”

Anyone driving through central Boulder these days finds an alternate route to avoid the intersection of Canyon and Broadway, once the location of Women in Black, now cluttered with giant cranes and bulldozers owned and operated by the Boulder Public Works Department. Women in Black has moved south to the

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<sup>9</sup> See books such as Sally King and Christopher Queen’s *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Joanna Macy’s *Dharma and Development: Religion as Resource in the Sarvodaya Self-Help Movement*, and Aung San Suu Kyi’s *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*.

outskirts of the Basemar Shopping Mall at the corner of Broadway and Baseline. I remind myself that even sacred sites do not last forever and any place is a good place to practice street-corner standing meditation — no “them” to oppose and no “me” to oppose them. ☺

## Works Cited

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