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The Center for South Asian Studies, Ryukoku University

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## Engaged Buddhism in Asia and Its Possibilities

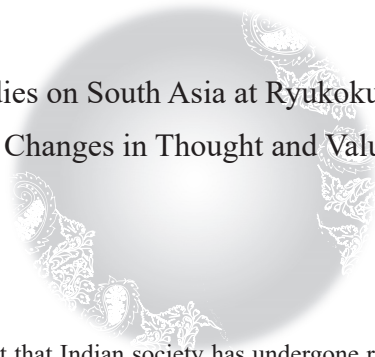
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# The Center for South Asian Studies, Ryukoku University

## Integrated Area Studies on South Asia at Ryukoku University (RINDAS): Fundamental Changes in Thought and Values in South Asia



In many studies, it has been pointed out that Indian society has undergone radical changes since the 1990s. This is seen in the political sphere in the spread and the deepening of democracy. In terms of the economy, changes are remarkable in the development of the market economy, improvements in living conditions and widening of economic gaps, which is one of the negative impacts of such economic growth. Societally, this has been expressed through the appearance and rise of various social movements. Culturally and religiously, it has been expressed through a parallel rise in assertion of identities by diverse communities. These changes can be seen as the results of embryonic fundamental changes in thought and values of people in India and South Asia.

The unified theme of this project is “Fundamental Changes in Thought and Values in South Asia.” One perspective being used to approach this theme is genealogical research along the long timeline of philosophy and thought in South Asian societies, using Ryukoku University’s extensive accumulation of research. Another is analysis of fundamental changes in values based on fieldwork research of actual conditions. These perspectives are combined in comprehensive research, with the aim of identifying the sources of changes in the foundations of contemporary Indian and South Asian societies, and the driving power behind them. Special attention is paid to the rise of the Dalits, other lower strata people, and religious minorities, a phenomenon that represents dynamic changes in contemporary Indian and South Asian societies. The project examines the background and theory behind this, with relation to the history of philosophy and thought, and investigates and analyzes changes in peoples’ living conditions, consciousness, and sense of values, based on fieldwork research.

The "South Asian Area Studies" Project (FY 2016 to 2021) is being operated and conducted by expanding upon the National Institutes for the Humanities’ “Contemporary India Area Studies” Project (Phase 1: FY 2010 to 2014, Phase 2: FY 2015). Ryukoku University is one of six institutions working together, conducting joint networked research. It is joined by Kyoto University (the central research hub), the National Museum of Ethnology (the secondary research hub), the University of Tokyo, Hiroshima University, and the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

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## 1 What is Engaged Buddhism?

It is said that the term “engaged Buddhism” was first used by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-, Photo 1) in a leaflet *Engaged Buddhism* in 1963 during the Vietnam War.

The term “engaged” was inspired by the term “engagement” of French existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). Engagement means that a person lives a life as a free agent that gives a historical meaning by involving himself/herself in a real social situation, and that a person who is aware of issues facing real society actively participates in politics and society and determines his/her attitude. Specifically, while facing the reality that people were running around to get away from bombings and bullets amid the ravages of the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh became aware of the real social situation, involved himself in the real social situation and started to wage a movement to free people from the agony of war, not devoting himself to meditation in a monastery in isolation from society as a Buddhist monk.

It was after the 1980s when the term “engaged Buddhism” was often heard among Buddhists in Western countries, rather than Buddhists in Asia. In this period, many organizations advocating engaged Buddhism were established, including the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), UK Network of Engaged Buddhists, Engaged Zen Foundation, UK Network of Engaged Buddhists, and Engaged Zen Foundation. Peace movements, environmental movements and movements to resolve poverty and human rights issues conducted by Buddhist groups in Western countries were called engaged Buddhism, and the term came to be widely used in this context.

For example, the BPF founded in 1978 in Berkeley, California in the U.S.A. now has branches in 12 countries. Most of its members are Buddhists belonging to existing Buddhist sects. They have a keen interest in addressing social issues from a Buddhist

perspective, and believe that Buddhism that encourages Buddhists to actively participate in social movements can be said to be Buddhism today. As its charter clearly states that its “purpose is to help beings liberate themselves from the suffering that manifests in individuals, relationships, institutions, and social systems. BPF’s programs, publications and practice groups link Buddhist teachings of wisdom and compassion with progressive social change,” BPF has set Buddhist concepts, such as wisdom and compassion, as its basic philosophy. Its activities cover a wide range of issues, from peacemaking to environmental protection and crime.

Sally King, who has been engaging in research concerning engaged Buddhism movements in Western and Asian countries after the 1990s, defines engaged Buddhism as a form of contemporary Buddhism and a movement actively and non-violently engaging in social, political and ecological issues facing society today. (King, 2009) As just described, engaged Buddhism is derived from the word used in a movement launched by a Buddhist in Asia. In recent years, however, the term has been widely known as a slogan for Buddhism activities in Western countries.

## **2. Engaged Buddhism in Western Countries and Its Major Characteristics**

According to *A Dictionary of Buddhism* published by the University of Oxford in 2003, engaged Buddhism movements in Western countries have the following five major characteristics:

- (1) A movement that present solutions to social, political or ecological issues from the perspective of Buddhism.
- (2) A movement that is conducted in collaboration beyond the boundaries of monks and lay believers or those from traditional Buddhist countries and Buddhists in the West.
- (3) A movement that started in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is becoming the nucleus of Buddhist thought and practice
- (4) A movement that engages in activities to relieve suffering or oppression by reforming unequal and oppressive social and political systems, without ever losing sight of inner mental development on which Buddhism has placed emphasis traditionally
- (5) A movement that arises in response to the criticism that traditional Buddhism, which emphasizes the importance of meditation and the transmundane rather than actively getting involved with others, is very passive and apart from real world

(Keown, 2003)

Engaged Buddhism refers to a movement that seeks to present solutions to social, political and ecological issues from the perspective of Buddhism, engage in activities beyond the boundaries of monks and lay believers or beyond national boundaries and ethnic differences, and relieve suffering by reforming an unequal, oppressive social or political system. In addition, engaged Buddhism is defined as a response of Buddhism to the criticism that Buddhism is very passive in getting involved in these issues.

Sally King characterizes engaged Buddhism ideologically by the following three factors:

- (1) Engaged Buddhism is a form of contemporary Buddhism, which actively and non-violently engages in movements on social, political or environmental issues facing society today.
- (2) Engaged Buddhism is neither based on the vision of a single leader nor limited by a particular religious sect. It is a movement that allows various groups—including those from Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and non-sectarian Buddhism—to be involved.
- (3) Engaged Buddhism is a movement for people, inspired by other people's happiness and the practice of their Buddhism to seek to apply the value and teachings of their Buddhism to social issues in a non-violent manner.

(King, 2009)

In other words, King regards the nature of engaged Buddhism as solidarity beyond the boundaries of sects or those of monks and lay believers. King also argues that this is a movement that engages in activities to relieve suffering or oppression by reforming unequal and oppressive social and political systems, without ever losing sight of inner mental development on which Buddhism has placed emphasis traditionally.

It can be said that these two definitions represent a general understanding of engaged Buddhism today.

### **3. Two Stances Observed in Engaged Buddhism Movements**

Historically, engaged Buddhism movements, which can be said to have arisen originally in Asia, were widely accepted as social activities by Buddhists in Western society. After that, Buddhists in Asia started to participate in society and conduct socially engaged activities in their local communities, gradually drawing public attention.

For example, the antiwar and peace movements led by Vietnamese Buddhist monks, represented by Thich Nhat Hanh, and other Buddhists in the 1960s drew attention and were highly regarded as an Asian form of engaged Buddhism. When he visited the U.S.A., Hanh met the then U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Martin Luther King, Jr., a key figure of the American civil rights movement seeking equality and human rights for African Americans. Reverend King in particular expressed empathy toward Hanh's activity.

To coincide with engaged Buddhism movements by Hanh and other people, Putthathat Pikkhu, a Thai Buddhist monk, launched a Dhammic Socialism movement. This movement inspired by socialist thought was implemented by Thai Buddhists to address social issues, including poverty and social inequality. In Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement was launched by Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne, a lay Sri Lankan Buddhist. This was a rural development movement promoted by connecting the "awakening of people" based on the teachings of Buddhism and the revitalization of rural communities (local communities). In Taiwan as well, located in East Asia, humanistic Buddhism movements were inaugurated based on the belief that the world is the Pure Land, as represented by Hsing Yun, Master of Fu Guang Shan, an international Buddhist organization engaging in social services with the aim of realizing the Pure Land in the real world. After the 1980s, these Asian forms of engaged Buddhism became widely known in Western countries.

As the term "engaged Buddhism" came into wide use in Western society, however, its meaning and definition were gradually broadened. In the late 1980s, two major different understandings were shaped over engaged Buddhism.

One idea is that the philosophy of engaged Buddhism had already been included in the teachings of Buddhism. The other is that engaged Buddhism was a new development of Buddhism as a social movement.

The former stand was mainly taken by those involved in engaged Buddhism movements in Asia, and the latter stance was largely taken by those participating in engaged Buddhism movements to conduct various social activities.

For example, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, and Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai Buddhist activist, have been taking the former stand. In other words,



they were seeking to clarify the meaning of various social activities they are engaging in by linking such activities with traditional Buddhist philosophy. On the other hand, the latter stance tends to be observed among activists promoting engaged Buddhism in Western countries and some of scholars who have been carrying out research on the thought and theory of Buddhism. For example, Joseph Kitagawa of the University of Chicago and Ken Jones defined engaged Buddhism as the fourth vehicle of Buddhism next to the three vehicles of Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajiriyana. In short, they regarded engaged Buddhism as a new development of Buddhism—at least not at the center—in the form of a social movement in Western society.

In the late 1980s, there was a dispute over the philosophy of engaged Buddhism between those taking these two different stands. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk who first coined the term “engaged Buddhism,” showed a critical attitude toward the dispute. In 1992, he made a declaration: “Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. If you practice Buddhism in your family, in society, it is engaged Buddhism.” In other words, he clearly explained that he had originally used the term “engaged Buddhism” to express the significance of Buddhism in contemporary terms, not to add a new modern dimension to traditional Buddhism. Later, however, he declared that he would no longer use the term “engaged Buddhism” because the term he originally created had come to be used in an expanded sense. Instead, he started to use the word “mindfulness” as the term to express an intrinsic value of Buddhism, which he had incorporated into the term “engaged Buddhism.”

The latter stance was often observed in Western countries, where NPO and other social activities were at their peak. Grassroots movements which had evolved from peace/antiwar movements or environmental movements advocated engaged Buddhism by linking the philosophy of their movements and the teachings of Buddhism. For such activity groups, it did not carry much weight to understand traditional Buddhism or traditional Buddhist frameworks, including difference between monks and lay believers. They rather used the term “engaged Buddhism” deliberately to differentiate themselves from traditional Buddhists. They taught about the Buddhist faith by connecting it to practical activities from a new perspective, receiving empathy from social activists in Western countries in particular. However, this stance often allowed people to interpret the teachings of Buddhism at their own discretion to fit their ideas and principles, or to excessively politicize their movements or stage violent movements, thereby often receiving strong criticism from those in the former stand. This was a major reason why

Hanh gave up using the term “engaged Buddhism.”

#### **4. Understanding of Engaged Buddhism in Japan**

In the late 1990s, the term “engaged Buddhism” began to be heard gradually in Japan. However, it was not until the 2000s that after engaged Buddhism movements in the West and Asia attracted attention, movements using the term “engaged Buddhism” began to be conducted in Japan,

In the 1990s in Japan, there were non-profitable organizations conducting activities in refugee camps in Cambodia. Most of the groups started working there as part of activities by specific Buddhist sects. Although their movements did not espouse engaged Buddhism, they had many similarities to engaged Buddhism movements in the West. In Japan where Buddhism has long been rooted in society, Buddhism activities had been conducted basically within the framework of a sect or a religious community. To flexibly develop various activities on site, however, Buddhism activities gradually turned into support and other activities free of religious influence. Then, such activities were expanded as citizens’ movements.

On the other hand, the notion of engaged Buddhism in the West began to be imported to and recognized in Japan in the 1990s. In the beginning, the term “engaged Buddhism” was translated in several ways. For example, it was translated into Japanese terms for “fighting Buddhism,” “social Buddhism,” “action Buddhism,” or “Buddhism for creating a society.” This indicates that the term “engaged Buddhism” had been widely used for a variety of activities in Western countries. In Japan, the understanding of engaged Buddhism split into two main stances, as in the West.

One stance was that engaged Buddhism refers to social activities by Buddhists. It has been considered that MARUYAMA Teruo of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism is the first person to express engaged Buddhism in Japanese. He depicted it as “fighting Buddhism” in Japanese. Maruyama, an activist of the peace and antiwar movement, understood this term by connecting it to his movement, causing public misunderstanding about engaged Buddhism in a way. Later, a Japanese term for “social Buddhism” came to be used, with the intention to soften the harsh word “fighting Buddhism” used by Maruyama. In any event, engaged Buddhism was understood as a social movement that sometimes shows willingness to fight against political power or the social mainstream.

Some people, like Maruyama, understood engaged Buddhism as a social movement. However, some people who used the philosophy and value of Buddhism as the base in understanding engaged Buddhism began to use other expressions. For example, AMA Toshimaro translated the term into Japanese as “Buddhism for creating a society” and argued that engaged Buddhism aims to realize the value of Buddhism in society. Ama considered that engaged Buddhism, which regards social injustice, system abuses and systems as major causes of human sufferings from the perspective of the dharma (truth) of Buddhism, is a movement to encourage people to act for the solution of those issues. Ama argued that although traditional Buddhism considers major causes of “suffering” as an inner problem of individual people, for example, Vietnamese Buddhists, amid the agony of war, noticed that the reason for suffering lie in structural problems created from society and decided to actively involve themselves in reform of the social structure. (Ama, 2003) He stated that engaged Buddhism is not merely a social movement but also the social ethic of the religion of Buddhism.

As mentioned earlier, these differences of viewpoint are similar to the different stances observed in engaged Buddhism movements in Western countries. In Japan, however, few people considered engaged Buddhism movements in Asia to be an engaged Buddhism movement because those movements in Asia were not understood deeply enough by those involved in social activities of traditional sects.

## **5. The Philosophy of Engaged Buddhism in Asia**

This section provides an overview of engaged Buddhism movements in Asia except Japan by first looking at the movement inaugurated by Thich Nhat Hanh, who coined the term “engaged Buddhism,” in Vietnam, and then the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement launched by A.T. Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka.

Hanh spend his adolescence as Buddhist monk during the Vietnam War. Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, burned himself alive in the hope of the end of the war that causes people to suffer. Seeing the self-immolation of his mentor, Hanh inaugurated a movement toward the end of the war. He not only issued a statement appealing for ceasefire to the world, but also began to act based on the spirit of Buddhism by declaring (1) the establishment of an educational institution on Buddhism to foster permissive and even-minded leaders, (2) the establishment of a school to train social

service members to create a society in which social change can be implemented, and (3) the establishment of The Order of Inter-being. Consequently, Hanh was oppressed by the Government of South Vietnam and was forced to seek refuge in France in 1966. However, this event led to the global development of his movement.

Hanh's views on war and violence were based on the Buddhist philosophy of interbeing (interdependence based on the understanding of dependent arising in the teaching of the Hua-yen) and mindfulness. He understood real-life problems through the teachings of the Buddha called the "Four Noble Truths"—the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering in particular. In short, he understood the cause of suffering by connecting it to national and social systems, not by connecting it to individual people's worldly desires and ignorance as observed in the interpretation of traditional Buddhism. Considering that the cause of suffering expounded by the Buddha not only as the ignorance of individuals but also as structural suffering (violence) created by national and social systems, Hanh clarified the root of various contemporary issues from the perspective of Buddhism.

Moreover, Hanh pointed out that:

Meditation is not for shutting oneself off from society or escaping from society, but for preparing for return to society. We call this "engaged Buddhism." When you enter a meditation center, or a temple, you may think that you escape the inconvenience of everyday life, including your family and society, and practice meditation, as an individual, to seek peace of mind. This is an illusion because being an individual is not in Buddhism.

(Hanh, 1987b)

Hanh emphasized the importance of mindfulness, stating that the perspective of engaged Buddhism is included in Buddhist ascetic practices. It can be said that mindfulness refers to spiritual awakening in the moment in everyday life. While admitting that it is difficult to describe the notion of "mindfulness" in English, Hanh explained with the following example:

For example, when you have tea with other people, you are so engrossed in the conversation that you are not aware of what you are doing. However, you pay careful attention to your own behavior. You have a direct experience of having tea. ... Experience is all there. It is only experience without being aware of experience at that time. ...

Mindfulness is a light that gives a path to you, which is the Buddha who is living within you. Mindfulness provides you with insight, awakening and love. Each of you has the seed of mindfulness within yourself. You can touch it by making a practice of sensing your breath (Zen Buddhism).

(King, 2001)

Hanh's understanding of engaged Buddhism is that one can open one's eyes to deep insight into oneself and society and the root of the problem of suffering by arriving at the awareness of mindfulness through Buddhist practices ("Zen sitting meditation" in the case of Hanh), based on which one can work on the development of the peace of oneself and the world.

Another example of early engaged Buddhism movements in Asia is the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement of Sri Lanka inaugurated by A.T. Ariyaratne (1931- ), a driving force behind engaged Buddhism movements, along with Thich Nhat Hanh.

The Sarvodaya Shramadana movement is a movement for rural development launched by Ariyaratne, a former high school teacher in Colombo. The term "Sarvodaya" means "the awakening of all people" or "the rise of all people on an equal basis." The term "Shramadana" means "shared labor" or "self-dependence of community." This movement placed importance on spiritual and ethical values based on Buddhism, seeking to create an independent rural community based on "necessity," not on "desires." Specifically, young people from urban areas live in a rural area, where through shared labor, young people who provide aid not only respond to the needs of those in difficulty but also awaken to the cause of such reality in society, and both those providing support and those receiving support awaken to the true meaning of needs.

This movement was designed to foster local community leaders through collaborative work with local residents to build or improve the infrastructure of a rural area, and to involve those young people as key members in preparing and promoting a rural development project by creating a financial organization called "seeds" to help the local community become financially independent. The movement's ultimate goal was to make rural communities independent in both politically and economic terms. The driving force behind the self-dependence of a rural community was "sarvodaya," or the awakening of people and the awakening of a local community.

Although it faced various issues later, the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement was highly acclaimed by Joanna Macy (1929- ), an American activist engaging in various civil movements, including peace movements, in the U.S., having a significant impact on NPO activities in the West and Asia.

Macy introduced this movement to the world theoretically based on her own interpretation of Buddhism. She explained that this movement is about understanding suffering in real life from the Buddhist perspective: the awakening of self and the awakening of society, which is the idea of dependent arising in Buddhism, which she called “the co-arising of self and society.” Macy theorized the movement by connecting such socially engaged Buddhism to sociological system theory, and theorized it as the paradigm of freedom that Buddhism can present to various issues, including the issue of suffering, in the contemporary world. She held various forms of workshops throughout the U.S., having a significant influence on the development of engaged Buddhism in the West.

Macy criticized some Buddhists, stating that some Buddhists understand “liberation from earthly desires” as the state of being liberated from the world and paying no attention to its fate, but they have forgotten that what the Buddha taught is liberation from their egos, not from the world. (Macy, 1993) On the other hand, Macy pointed out that the social structure is not merely a reflection of the human mind and that human ignorance, fear and desires, all of which are structurally combined, are working with unique dynamics. She worked to promote and expand engaged Buddhist movements into which a sociological perspective was incorporated, arguing that according to the Buddha’s teachings, both self and society are real-world, acting factors dependent on each other; therefore self and society are linked as co-arising.

## **6. Engaged Buddhism Activities in Asia**

### **Activities by the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)**

Today, engaged Buddhism activities have been seen in various places in Asia. However, different types of engaged Buddhism activities have been conducted in different regions or societies. To learn about specific engaged Buddhism activities being conducted in Asia today, this section looks at examples of activities by the Thailand-based International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), and Ambedkarite Buddhist social activities conducted throughout India.

In 1989, INEB was established in Thailand in response to a call from Sulak Sivaraksa (1932 - ), a former Thai journalist and social activist. This large organization advocating engaged Buddhism is a network created to promote mutual exchanges and solidarity among groups engaging in engaged Buddhism activities around the world. As honorary consuls of INEB, Thich Nhat Hanh and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism called for participation in the network. At present, 59 organizations worldwide are members, including groups from Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the U.S., Canada, and Australia.

The charter of INEB proclaims the following five basic principles.

The deepest resource of the INEB vision is our contemporary understanding of taking refuge in the Three Treasures, Buddha: our enlightened nature; Dharma: the teachings of reality; and Sangha: the community of practitioners.

1. To promote understanding and cooperation among Buddhist countries, Buddhist sects, and socially conscious Buddhist groups.
2. To identify and address the structural and personal suffering facing our communities, societies, and the world.
3. To articulate the perspective of engaged Buddhism regarding this suffering, and to train Buddhist activists to respond effectively.
4. To serve as a network of information and resources on engaged Buddhism.
5. To cooperate and collaborate with activists from other spiritual traditions and social change organizations.

(<http://www.inebnetwork.org/ineb/concept>)

INEB engages in activities to identify and address the cause of various issues facing contemporary society from the perspective of Buddhism and provide information and resources necessary to develop Buddhist human resources who can play an active role in the network's activities. In addition, INEB participants work in solidarity beyond the boundaries of monks and lay believers and beyond differences in Buddhism traditions, and works in collaboration with religions other than Buddhism. For example, INEB is working together with local Buddhist and Muslim leaders to address the Rohingya issue in Myanmar, which has been attracting international attention.

Major activities of INEB include holding meetings for local activist leaders in various places in Asia to exchange a variety of information and make activity reports. In addition, it holds a conference for young people every two years to provide training and promote interaction among them. In the conference, for example, the outcomes of the Young Bodhisattva Project to support specific social activities proposed by young activists around the world are announced, and reports presented and discussions held on various activities, including those for climate change issues, peacebuilding and reconciliation, Buddhist arts, gender and women's empowerment, and the Buddhist and Muslim Forum. Buddhists from East Asia, Southeast Asia or South Asia are living in different social, natural and cultural environments. However, they have a lot in common in the experience they have gained through their activities. It may be said that this represents the embodiment of "mindfulness" on which Thich Nhat Hanh places great importance.

Recently, INEB have been working hard on the higher education program implemented in a suburb of Bangkok, Thailand. This program is designed for young Buddhists engaging in local activities to systematically understand the idea of engaged Buddhism and develop the knowledge and skills required for actual practices in society.

It can be said that INEB is a loosely associated body for various groups practicing engaged Buddhism, with the thought of Sulak Sivaraksa as its mental mainstay. From the 1960s, Sivaraksa heavily criticized contemporary Buddhism, stating that contemporary Buddhism is turning a blind eye to the suffering of society and people and forgets what Buddhism should be. In such a context, inspired by the engaged Buddhism movement developed by Thich Nhat Hanh, Sivaraksa inaugurated a Buddhism movement to engage in society and called the experience he gained from the movement "Socially Engaged Buddhism."

Sivaraksa states that fundamental problems facing the contemporary world are imperialistic environmental destruction and economic disparity, both of which have been caused by globalism, or the latest phase of capitalism. He argues that self-rule based on personal transformation and the creation of a new collective agent are needed to resolve these problems. Sivaraksa argues: "Our way of living determines what kind of seeds is watered. In conflict, the seeds of wrath sprout easily come to the surface. If we are living peacefully and calmly, the seeds of happiness come out. Sivaraksa has been working to achieve the potential of a creative collective agent through INEB activities."



### **Ambedkar Buddhism as engaged Buddhism**

Conflicts and violence in contemporary society, economic disparity and poverty, discrimination and injustice, the negative legacy from colonialism, and the negative impact of globalization not only have direct influences on people and society in a physical manner. They are reproduced in a social system or economic structure created in history. Dalits in the lowest stratum of Indian society governed by Hinduism have long been suffering from the traditional caste system.

In 1956, Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891 - 1956, Photo 2), who was an author of the new Constitution of India, liberated from colonial rule by Britain after the end of World War II, converted from Hinduism to Buddhism, together with his followers in the Mahar community, who had been abused as those outside the caste system and discriminated as the untouchable. It is said that a total of 300,000 or 600,000 people mass-converted to Buddhism. In addition to legal liberation by abolishing the caste system, which Ambedkar proclaimed in the new constitution, this mass conversion was a significant event that psychologically liberated those called the untouchable. Although it cannot be said that the constraints of the caste system have been eradicated, it was a meaningful event for people who had been marginalized and oppressed in society on unreasonable grounds. Ambedkar's final work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), which was published after his death, became a sacred book for Ambedkarite Buddhists.

Before the Buddhist conversion ceremony, Ambedkar stated why he decided to convert to Buddhism:

Why did I choose Buddhism? It is because Buddhism has three principles of wisdom (intelligence against superstition and supernaturalism), compassion and equality. These are required for people to live a better and happier life. God or the spirit cannot save society. (Speech in May 1956)

Ambedkar said that he decided to convert to Buddhism because Buddhism is a very rational and scientific religion.

He also states:

It is poor people who need a religion. It is because hope, a source of actions in life is given by a religion. ... the Buddha's teachings are of an eternal nature, but he allowed flexibility in his teachings and did not make it sacred or infallible. He also did not make

himself deified. Buddhism rest on wisdom, which can be accepted compatibly by contemporary people. ... There is no doubt that Buddhism is far superior to Marxism and the world's most powerful religion. ... Buddhism is an indispensable religion to the progress of humankind and the peace of the world. Only Buddhism can save the world. (Ambedkar, translation by Yamazaki, 1979)

Ambedkar claims that Buddhism is a religion indispensable to the progress of humankind and world peace and that it is the only religion that can save the world. From the viewpoint of traditional Buddhism, some may feel something different about Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism. However, it can be said that he tried to understand Buddhism from his situation. This attitude may overlap that of Sulak Sivaraksa, who has been seeking what Buddhism should be through his criticism of contemporary Buddhism. Ambedkar gives those who have converted to Buddhism a sense of pride and courage to escape from the restraints of traditional society. Although he took social behavior based on such an understanding of Buddhism before the creation of the term engaged Buddhism, it can be said that his behavior is a trailblazing example of engaged Buddhism in Asia.

SASAI Shurei (1935 - ) succeeded Ambedkar and became one of leaders of those Dalits. Sasai's activity will be remembered in history as an example of Japanese Buddhism playing a role in the revival of the contemporary Indian Buddhism.

In 1960, Sasai entered the priesthood in Takao-san Yakuo-in Temple (Chisan school of the Shingon Sect) in Hachioji, Tokyo. After going to Thailand for study in 1965, he traveled to India and settled in Nagpur, Maharashtra, where he noticed that an elderly man who had appeared in his dream was Ambedkar.

Sasai performed Buddhist conversion ceremonies for Dalits and engaged in a movement to restore control of Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha achieved enlightenment, to Buddhists. In 1988, he acquired Indian citizenship and called himself Arya Nagarjuna. He settled in a district where many Dalits live, enjoying deep trust from local people.

Another engaged Buddhism activity in India that has attracted attention is Nagaloka, an educational and training institution for Dalit children founded by British Buddhist Lokamitra, a member of Triratna, the Indian branch of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, established by Sangharakshita (1925 - 2018), a British spiritual teacher

and writer. Nagaloka provides education to Dalit children from across India free of charge. Triratna has been operated by lay Buddhists, unlike Sasai and other people who have been engaging in activities as monks.

## **7. Conclusion**

When we consider the roles and significance of Buddhism in the contemporary world, the development of engaged Buddhism provides various perspectives to us.

As previously mentioned, engaged Buddhism that originates in Asia was accepted in the West and its movements were spread in various ways in the 1980s. Some argued that it is a new form of Buddhist movement in Western countries. On the other hand, some sought to theorize engaged Buddhism to find the basis for its movements in the fundamental teachings and value of traditional Buddhism. After the 1990s, engaged Buddhism was introduced to Japan, having significant influences on Buddhist NPOs in the nation. Engaged Buddhism's sense of solidarity beyond the boundaries of religious sects and its grassroots movements had a great impact on social activities in Japanese Buddhism, which had been conducted on a sect-by-sect basis. However, engaged Buddhism movements have not yet been spread widely throughout Japan.

When looking outside Japan, it is found that groups leading engaged Buddhism movements in Asia and the West have shared information, forming a loosely connected network while respecting one another. Although these groups' activities are categorized as "engaged Buddhism," there are a wide variety of different issues they need to address as Buddhists in individual areas and regions. Different regions have many different issues to be tackled from everyday issues to global issue, including poverty, conflicts, environmental destruction, the racial persecution of Rohingyas, and education of Buddhist children, a minority group in Muslim states. Engaged Buddhism activist groups have been jointly working by actively exchanging information on specific measures to address those issues. This may be the future of Buddhism, including Japanese Buddhism.

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