

THE QUESTION OF ENGAGED BUDDHISM: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SHAMBHALA TRADITION

A redefinition of Buddhism is currently under debate. We discuss the traditions of Buddhism in terms of Mahayana, Hinayana, and Vajrayana, the three established “vehicles” or paradigms of the Buddhist religion. The new player on the scene is the notion of “Engaged Buddhism.” While interpretations of Buddhist doctrine and opinion may be debated to nuance, this current question of social action as a component of the Buddhist philosophy and religion poses a departure distinct enough to warrant discussion of a new “yana,” a new model of Buddhist thought. In his discussion of the evolution of Engaged Buddhism, Christopher Queen popularizes the description “Navayana,” first coined by Indian civil rights leader Dr. Ambedkar (2).

A basic characteristic of Buddhism is compassion. Particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, beyond learning to alleviate one’s own suffering, the practitioner wishes for all beings to be free from suffering. The world we live in is one filled with war, oppression, injustice, and isolation. Is it enough for a Buddhist practitioner to wish for all beings to find happiness and peace? At what point does the individual have a responsibility to actively endeavor to ameliorate suffering in the lives of others beyond simply wishing for it? As a Buddhist on the spiritual path, the tumultuous climate of modern times begs this question.

Revered Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has been a leader in the call to action directed to the Buddhist community. The consideration of Buddhist responsibility has rippled through the sangha to include all traditions. The Buddhist approach to social action involves the certainty that enacting positive change and growth in oneself is inseparable from enacting positive change and growth in society and the world (Kraft 12). As the Buddha observing suffering in the world for the first time, we must come to terms with how we will interact with this suffering. How will we react and respond? Particularly for Mahayana Buddhists who take the bodhisattva vow to save all beings, how do we begin this Herculean task?

The most basic and fundamental teaching that underscores Buddhist beliefs is the concept of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddhist novice realizes that life is suffering, that suffering is caused by attachment, that it is possible to let go of our attachments and thus be free from suffering, and that the path to freedom from suffering is the “middle way,” the Buddhist Eightfold Path. The central tenet of Buddhism emerges as the aim to overcome suffering in oneself and others. Arising from this doctrine, ethical action constitutes a major emphasis of the Buddhist path (Harvey 33). Buddhists practice compassion and generosity to others not merely for their own enlightenment or merit, but also simply for the good of others. Beginning with the earliest Buddhist practitioners, practicing the dharma was to “regard others’ good and welfare with equal consideration” to one’s own (Tachibana 99).

In today’s discussion of social action within the Buddhist tradition, arguments abound over the term and idea of “Engaged Buddhism.” Many have observed that in modern times there is an increased emphasis and focus on social change, social responsibility, and positive social action in Buddhism. The new emphasis on the social aspect of the path to cessation of suffering has inspired the description “Engaged Buddhism.” Professor Christopher Queen of Harvard University has written extensively chronicling the establishment of Engaged Buddhism as the emergence of a fourth yana (1). Thich Nhat

Hanh, the Vietnamese monk who was the first to coin the phrase “Engaged Buddhism,” has also vocally emphasized that all Buddhism is engaged. Some members of the Buddhist community have taken offense to this new discussion, responding that a basic element of Buddhist philosophy is and has always been a sincere desire and action to help others in the world. Revered teachers have pointed out that the Buddha was “a social radical, a social transformer” (Reoch 2). The recent discussion of Engaged Buddhism could be seen to imply that Buddhism is not inherently socially engaged and that historical precedents of Buddhist ethics were not focused on taking action to help others.

However, scholars and teachers have not been able to help but notice the energy surrounding initiatives for social change that are popping up across the Buddhist community and continue to gain momentum. These trends have encouraged academics to question why this emphasis is occurring now. Is this time more turbulent, more violent, more volatile than other periods of history? What is it about our modern situation that has inspired such a drive for social commitment, exceeding historical precedents? The president of Shambhala International, Richard Reoch, commented that, “with the world in a spiral of violence and war, more and more Buddhists are seeking a role in promoting peace, supporting conflict resolution, and providing humanitarian assistance to victims of violence” (Reoch 3). The exploration of the causes of this renewed focus on social action is beyond the scope of this paper, which will focus on the current social dimensions of one particular school of Buddhism; however, these important questions should be kept in mind.

There are many different manifestations of social action stemming from spiritual practice. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider Engaged Buddhism from a schema dividing social engagement into three types of activity¹. The schema we will use to examine the stratifications of Engaged Buddhism parallels the typology in literature that defines the theme of a text in terms of man vs. himself, man vs. man, and man vs. the world. The first expression of social engagement is personal spiritual cultivation and growth. This stratum is parallel to the literary schematic theme of man vs. himself. This approach focuses on the self as the primary vehicle to cultivate beneficial change. The philosophy of personal spiritual cultivation as primary practice maintains that the merit one achieves from spiritual growth ripples outwards, affecting one’s interactions with others and ultimately positively influencing society and the world in general.

The second division of our schema defining social engagement is interpersonal communication and relationships. In literary terms, this idea would be expressed in the schematic theme of man vs. man. This expression of social action focuses on individuals’ interactions with each other. The idea is that one can effect positive social change through the way one relates to another person. The Buddhist spiritual practice guides us to examine our selves and our motivations, which causes much spiritual growth and change in our lives. The focus of this stratum is the powerful influence this work has on our relations with those we come in contact with on a daily basis. Our motivations, thoughts, and actions towards family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and even strangers are influenced by our spiritual practice to strive towards peace and the cessation of suffering for all sentient beings.

The third and final manifestation of our social engagement schema is the level of action inspired from spiritual practice expressed through community service and social work. In literary terms, the schematic theme of man vs. the world would represent this sphere of interaction. This stratum widens the focus to include the way an individual relates to the world at large. In this model, Buddhist study and spiritual cultivation lead an individual to dedicate their energy to public service through their choice of employment, volunteer activity, or pro-bono work. Depending on an individual’s talents and experiences, this drive to act directly to effect positive social change may guide an individual to be a non-profit worker, a social worker, a teacher, a health care center worker, or even a political activist.

¹ I developed this schema based on a class discussion with Professor Christopher Queen on October 6, 2004.

The primary examination of this paper is the socially engaged nature of one particular branch of Tibetan Buddhism called Shambhala Buddhism. The founder of Shambhala Buddhism, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, was one of the first teachers to bring Buddhism to the west. He fused Tibetan Buddhism with the secular lineage of Shambhala teachings and created a sangha in the United States, Canada, and Europe that nurtures a religious tradition dedicated to cultivating enlightened society (Simmer-Brown 114). Shambhala is both a mystical legend and a tradition alive and thriving based on ancient teachings. The Shambhala Buddhist Meditation Centers created by Chogyam Trungpa offer Shambhala training, Buddhist study, and meditation instruction as part of their mission to create enlightened society.

The legend of Shambhala tells of a mythical kingdom hidden deep in the mountains somewhere near Tibet, adopted in western imagination as the tale of “Shangri-la.” The story, first recorded in writing around the eleventh century A.D. from earlier oral transmissions, is of a society ruled by enlightened kings instructed in the most secret teachings of Buddhism where all of the citizens live in peace and act with compassion and wisdom. Only the spiritually pure are said to be able to reach this magical land of Shambhala. Despite skepticism, many Tibetans and Buddhist teachers maintain that Shambhala is a real, material place that exists in this world. Even the Dalai Lama has said that he believes Shambhala exists in this physical realm (Bernbaum 10).

While scholars may debate where and if the land of Shambhala is materially located, the search for Shambhala is also believed to be an inner journey. The tradition of Shambhala Buddhism taught by Chogyam Trungpa originates from ancient wisdom of the Kingdom of Shambhala, but it focuses on the practical reality of how to be human in the world. The study of Shambhala Buddhism is the study of the basic goodness inherent in human nature. For the practitioner, the world of Shambhala Buddhism is characterized by the dichotomy of the symbol of Shambhala from legend and myth underlying the inner spiritual teachings of Shambhala training. The outer vision provides a structure and basis for inner transformation. In historical accounts, spiritual seekers who hunted the mythical paradise of Shambhala were directed inwards on their journey. As an adventurer sets off to try to find the hidden land of Shambhala, in asking for directions and information s/he may be told that, “the Kingdom of Shambhala is in your own heart” (Brook 2).

Shambhala Buddhism in the west combines traditional Tibetan Buddhist teachings and practices with the esoteric lineage of Shambhala wisdom. Chogyam Trungpa taught the path of “enlightened warriorship,” which was to be walked with courage and gentleness. The concept of Shambhala practitioners as warriors does not mean that we don battle armor and weapons. Our weapons are our minds, and the enemy we seek to conquer is the source of violence in the world: fear. Our tactics are based on the sitting practice of shamatha meditation. We endeavor to open our minds and hearts: to wake up. Shambhala warriors cultivate fearlessness. Chogyam Trungpa liked to create his own meanings for words. “Fearless” is one of the words he re-defined. To be fearless is not to be without fear. It is to sit with your fear and move through and beyond it. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche instructed, “True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear, but going beyond fear. Unfortunately, in the English language, we don’t have one word that means that. Fearlessness is the closest term, but by *fearless* we don’t mean ‘less fear,’ but ‘beyond fear’” (Gimian 36).

This journey leads us to discover “basic goodness,” an openhearted tenderness and authenticity experienced as a “‘genuine heart of sadness and joy’ in which all struggle, aggression, and alienation actually stops and real care for others arises” (Simmer-Brown 115). A favorite metaphor in Shambhala Buddhism is of the sun in a cloudy sky. Teachers describe basic goodness as the sun. It is always there, even on a cloudy day. The clouds are our discursive thoughts, our neuroses, our attachments, and our desires. The sun in its brilliant blue sky is always there, even when it is covered up by the clouds of our thoughts. Meditation, fearlessness, and enlightened warriorship are the practice of slowly clearing away

the clouds. This is the path that every individual must take, through his or her respective religion, culture, or beliefs, for enlightened society to manifest.

The most central of the Shambhala texts is Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior. This seminal text was published in 1978, just a few years after Chogyam Trungpa introduced the secular discipline of the Shambhala teachings for the first time to a small group of senior students from his sangha (Gimian 149). These teachings formed the basis for Shambhala training, a series of workshop retreats called "The Sacred Path" that train the Shambhala student in how to be a warrior in the world, discovering basic goodness, fearlessness, and other central concepts in Shambhala Buddhism. Chogyam Trungpa died in 1987. Chogyam Trungpa's son, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, is his spiritual heir and now heads the international Shambhala sangha.

The path of Shambhala Buddhism involves working not only for oneself, but for others as well. By waking up to the basic goodness inherent in ourselves, we cannot fail to see basic goodness in others and in the world around us. One of Chogyam Trungpa's senior students and close friends, Jeremy Hayward, who taught with Trungpa and helped him develop Shambhala training in America, said of the Shambhala path of the warrior, "when you are authentic, genuinely being just who you are, you can be open to that basic goodness in yourself and others, even when it seems obscure or buried altogether. Warriors never give up on anyone, including themselves" (xiii).

In the context of the current debate over responsibility for social action among Buddhist schools, this paper seeks to define the socially engaged nature of Shambhala Buddhism. Having explored the meaning of "Engaged Buddhism" and the background of the tradition of Shambhala Buddhism, we can now consider the question of whether and in what ways Shambhala Buddhism is socially engaged. We will look at the features of the social dimensions of Shambhala Buddhism through the lens of our schema defining activity as personal spiritual cultivation, interpersonal relationships, or community service. This report will survey the teachings and actions of the Shambhala community of practitioners and teachers to examine how they fit into the concept of socially engaged Buddhism.

Social involvement in the sangha may be inspired directly from the teachings, encouraged by teachers, or embraced and developed by the members of the sangha on their own initiative. Ideally, social engagement will develop as a result of all of these motivations. In the current Shambhala sangha, I have seen a tremendous amount of energy and passion stirred up around the topic of social action. I have seen Shambhalians who came to the path with a desire to affect positive change in society. These practitioners deepened their understanding, awareness, and determination through Buddhist study. I have also seen warriors who became aware of the world and a desire to help others through their spiritual practice. At whatever point of altruistic motivation, the path of Shambhala Buddhism encourages the active desire to make a difference in the world.

One of the most well known Shambhala teachers is American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron. She is a major figure in Buddhism today and is one of a very small number of western women to have become a fully ordained Buddhist nun, or bhikshuni (Friedman 105). One of Pema's primary teachings is the practice of tonglen. This is a practice that particularly is done after one takes the bodhisattva vow to dedicate themselves fully to the benefit of all sentient beings. However, this practice of breathing in the pain of a situation and breathing out peace and calmness can be done by anyone. The tonglen practice begins with the desire to open yourself up to the world and benefit yourself and others. Pema talks a lot about "bodhicitta" or awakened heart. By doing tonglen practice, we cultivate bodhicitta, which Pema describes "has the qualities of gentleness, precision, and openness, being able just to let go and open up" (58).

Pema's approach to the warrior's engagement with the world focuses at the base on personal spiritual cultivation. Fundamentally, this is where we must start. We must learn to love and benefit ourselves before we can love and benefit others. The natural outcome of walking this path is that the individual develops compassion for others. The model moves from the fundamental instruction of

working on one's own mind to paying attention to one's interactions with others and working for their best interest, to finally expanding the circle of concern outwards to include a genuine concern for all sentient beings. A typical instruction on cultivating bodhicitta illustrates this progression. The meditator begins by arousing the image of and feeling for a loved one. We begin with someone in our lives that we have an uncomplicated love towards, whether this is a family member, close friend, or beloved pet. We practice the sincere desire and wish for this being to be free from suffering. We feel this desire and will this wish fully with every fiber of our being.

Next, after we are comfortable with this level of dedication to a loved one, we move to practicing the sincere desire for an acquaintance to be free from suffering. We focus on someone in our lives that we have a neutral feeling towards, perhaps a co-worker. We then progress from focusing our energy to benefit someone neutral in our lives to selecting a stranger to practice for. This feeling may be generated for the world in general, the suffering people of a nation at war, or the person standing in front of you in line at the grocery store. Finally, when we have learned to sincerely dedicate ourselves to wishing the best for strangers, we begin to practice focusing on an enemy, someone who has hurt us deeply, and sincerely desire for this being to be free from suffering. In this way, these teachings progress to embody all three of our schema's manifestations of social engagement. Shambhala Buddhism manifests social action at every stratum.

Another major figure in Shambhala Buddhism today is Richard Reoch, who is the head of Shambhala International, the administrative organization that supports the Shambhala Buddhist community in the world. Mr. Reoch has an extensive and impressive list of accomplishments working with Amnesty International for 23 years before he accepted Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche's invitation to become the president of Shambhala International in 2002. He has also been extensively active in the process of working for peace in Sri Lanka, chairing the International Working Group on Sri Lanka ("Conference on World Affairs – Participants"). Currently he is involved in an initiative to create an "International Buddhist Peace Service" organization dedicated to creating "cooperative national and international programs to address violent conflicts and assist the victims" (Reoch 4).

Mr. Reoch was kind enough to agree to an interview via email for the purposes of this paper (see Appendix). One of the questions I asked Mr. Reoch was if he thought his extensive background in social action and nonprofit organizations was significant to his being asked to be the president of Shambhala International, and whether this indicates an increased focus on social action in the Shambhala tradition. He replied:

I'm certain my background in international affairs was one of the considerations that Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the head of the Shambhala Mandala, had in mind when he asked me to serve as the President of Shambhala. He has asked me to teach publicly, basing my talks on the work I have been doing in the world. This emphasis on social engagement is important to the Sakyong. He has recently introduced a new practice for advanced students in Shambhala, which is now to include, as part of it, a period of social service. Nothing could more clearly indicate the intimate linkage between the inner work of our contemplative community and its ambition to be of service to the world at large. (5)

Mr. Reoch makes absolutely clear that the outlook of Shambhala Buddhism is increasingly focusing on social engagement in the world through active public service. This indicates that Shambhala Buddhism clearly fulfills the promise of social action on all levels of our schema, including the third expression of community service and social work. While the basic teachings and historical emphasis of the Shambhala path has been on individual spiritual cultivation leading to an increased awareness, wisdom, and gentleness in one's interpersonal relationships, there is movement to extend this engagement even further. The desire is mounting to move forward and take the level of socially engaged activity to new heights of structured, purposeful outlets for expressing spiritual practice in outward involvement with

the world. Sangha members and teachers are pushing the expectations of the path of Shambhala to include direct action to effect positive social change, to manifest our ideals and beliefs in service beyond our own personal sphere.

The evolution of public service as part of the Shambhala path is an idea that has been developing for some time, as Chogyam Trungpa's first generation of senior students have become renowned teachers themselves. Chogyam Trungpa founded the Naropa Institute in 1974, which was hugely successful and grew to become the first fully accredited Buddhist university (Goss 330). Naropa is the only university in existence that offers a masters degree in Engaged Buddhism. Judith Simmer-Brown, who is a Shambhala Buddhist acharya, or senior teacher, helped establish Naropa's Engaged Buddhism program ("Judith Simmer-Brown").

The interest in Engaged Buddhism and social action is continually and constantly growing in the Shambhala sangha. Recently, there has been a persistent stream of activities, emails, meetings, groups, and programs referencing and focusing on social action. The current activities of the sangha have been heavily influenced by the ideals of social engagement. Perhaps the most inspiring example of social engagement in the sangha is among the youth. Shambhala Buddhism is a young tradition that has developed primarily around the last generation of students. Now, the first generation of senior teachers is looking for students to whom they can transmit their knowledge and wisdom.

Coming onto the scene, we find a crew of practitioners known as "dharma brats," progeny of the Shambhala community who grew up hanging around outside the Shambhala centers' programs and celebrations and listening to Buddhist chants outside their parents' shrine rooms. Many of these young adults grew up rebelling somewhat against their parents' "hippie" ways, but now as they settle into adult life, they are realizing that most of their ideas are very "Buddhist," and they are embracing the teachings anew.

Added to the ranks of "dharma brats" are the "converts," like me. We are young adults who grew up either dissatisfied with or unconnected to our religious tradition, or we were never fully indoctrinated into a belief system. As we pass, for better or worse, fully beyond adolescence and find ourselves moving unavoidably out of student days and into "the real world," many of us have found a vague sense of emptiness leading us to search for a spiritual path. For some, the exotic nature of Buddhism appeals to them, or its brief flirtation with pop-culture sparked their curiosity. For many young westerners, the openness, liberality, and acceptance of Buddhism offer what they need to feel comfortable in a religion. And for some, the ideas jibe, and they can deal with saying they follow the Buddhist "philosophy," while not having to call themselves "religious." For all of us, the spirituality we find in Buddhism fits. We embrace the Shambhala Buddhist philosophy and call the sangha our own.

So as the grown-up hippies of the first generation of Shambhala Buddhists look to those who will carry on their lineage, they find a mélange of dharma-brats, Buddhist converts, and non-Buddhist practitioners who connect Shambhala meditation with whatever tradition, if any, they follow. And somehow, this patchwork sangha is a perfect fit for the Shambhala vision. Whether due to their diversity, their open-mindedness, their youth, or their time in history, the youth of the sangha have seized social action as their mission and calling.

In 2003, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche organized the first gathering of the youth (ages 18-30) of the sangha: the first annual Vajra Dawn conference. It was a retreat program weekend dedicated to empowering the youth of the sangha to begin to take leadership roles within the Shambhala community. As I was fortunate enough to be able to attend, I saw first-hand the emphasis that the Sakyong is placing on the youth of the sangha. There is an awesome amount of energy in the next generation of Shambhala teachers. Vajra Dawn was an amazing opportunity to harness and tune this energy and spirit. Senior Shambhala Buddhist teachers, in their wisdom, made themselves available to help and teach the youth to cultivate their potential. The Vajra Dawn participants polled their interests and passions to create an agenda for their aspirations.

One of the highest priorities that came out of the Vajra Dawn conference was the desire for the sangha to be involved in social action. This was a universal and general desire: youth representatives from every region brought the same suggestion to initiate social engagement in any way, shape, or form in their centers. This motivation for social involvement is not restricted to the youth, but is present in the sangha as a whole. Later that year, in November 2003, our community held the first Shambhala Congress in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which brought together the directors and leaders of regional Shambhala centers across the world. Eight working groups and two advisory groups were formed out of this congress to address major issues that the community had identified. One of them was the Social Engagement Advisory Group (“Shambhala Congress Online”).

Programs and workshops focusing on social engagement abound. My own Atlanta sangha is hosting a workshop entitled “Boundless Compassion” in January for anyone concerned with the suffering of others and focusing particularly on human services. In December, the Atlanta Shambhala Center hosted a free program entitled “The Shambhala and Buddhist Views of Social Engagement: Working in the World,” taught by a sangha member who founded the Shambhala Prison Community. In Vermont, the Karne Choling Shambhala retreat center hosted a weekend in December called “Exploring a Shambhala Path of Social Action.”

In the last year, Shambhala centers internationally have continued to move forward in their objectives, including the push for social action in local communities. Shambhala regional centers formed local chapters of the Social Engagement Advisory Group to work towards the goal of social involvement. The youth of the sangha have maintained contact through an online forum called the Kikisoso Group. Annual Vajra Dawn conferences are continually being planned, and youth from regional groups such as the Boston Shambhala Center have even hosted mini-Vajra Dawn’s to keep the momentum flowing throughout the year.

Another regional sangha in the Baltimore area, also spearheaded by the youth of the center, formed a group called Active Compassion to bring together Shambhalians involved in and interested in community service and social action. This group maintains an online forum, sharing ideas and information about socially engaged activities and discussing such topics as meditation in action and the spiritual component of activism and advocacy. They are planning their second annual weekend program, after the success of the first Active Compassion conference, which explored the relationship between meditation and social change. One suggestion for this year’s theme is, “How do we go about applying our spiritual practice to transform the world?” (Active Compassion).

All of these social action groups formed from Shambhala sangha communities encompass all three levels of our social engagement schema. They reflect both personal spiritual cultivation and interpersonal relationships, and furthermore, they raise social involvement to the level of community service. These groups focus their efforts on how the Shambhala community of practitioners can take their personal spiritual practice and translate the merit they work towards into positive social change for the world around them.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that all Buddhism is engaged. In the sense that Mahayana Buddhism is directed to helping and being compassionate towards others, this is true in all aspects of the Shambhala tradition. Shambhala Buddhism has the goal of creating enlightened society. The intentions of Shambhala Buddhists are very much focused around engaging in a positive way with society to change it for the better. Shambhalians see the means by which change is possible as focused fundamentally on spiritual teachings and personal cultivation. This approach is based out of the first category of our schema: changing the world one person at a time. The basic teaching, where a practitioner begins, is always with himself/ herself. As Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche explained:

The way to begin is with ourselves. From being open and honest with ourselves, we can also learn to be open and honest with others. So we can work with the rest of the world on the basis of the goodness we discover in ourselves. Therefore, meditation is

regarded as a good, in fact excellent, way to overcome warfare in the world: our own warfare as well as greater warfare. (Reoch 1)

As the warrior progresses along the sacred path, s/he becomes more aware of the basic goodness of others and more present and authentic in all interactions. The Shambhala practitioner will notice a profound change in the nature and quality of his/ her interpersonal relationships and communications as s/he continues to learn. Being a practicing Shambhala Buddhist, there will be a shift in the way one interacts with others. Consequently, the fearless warrior embodies the second tier of our schema of social engagement in Shambhala Buddhism: interpersonal relationships.

As an individual continues along their spiritual path, s/he becomes more and more concerned with the welfare of others and society as a whole. This tendency manifests in the teachings through the Buddhist doctrine of Right Livelihood. As a person focuses on using his/ her life to alleviate suffering, many are drawn to social work and volunteering, whether in their profession or personal activities. Inevitably, the way a Shambhala warrior views the world changes to incorporate the notions of fearlessness, basic goodness, and gentleness. The Shambhalian begins to genuinely desire to help others and cultivate freedom from suffering in the world. The third expression of social engagement is manifested, culminating in the Bodhisattva vow. In our interview, Mr. Reoch described the social dimensions of Shambhala Buddhism:

The instructions to the members of the Shambhala mandala on responding to suffering in the world are intimately linked to how we respond to our experience of suffering in our own lives... compassion can then be trained through practices associated with the Mahayana (great vehicle) or Bodhisattva path, which entails constantly working for the benefit of all beings. (Reoch 1)

In my training and involvement with the Atlanta Shambhala Center, I saw the desire to engage in meaningful action to assuage the suffering of others as a dominant trend. A number of practitioners in the sangha worked at non-profits or social work organizations. Many of the sangha members who had more traditional professional jobs performed pro bono work as an important part of their practice. All of the Shambhalians directed their talents towards helping the center, the sangha, and the greater community in a variety of activities and endeavors. Some of the members became involved in volunteer work with the non-profit organizations with which other sangha members were affiliated. I noticed a direct and active desire to be involved in the community, both the Shambhala community and society at large, working to ameliorate suffering and engender happiness. A recent survey of the Shambhala sangha estimated that two-thirds of our members are actively engaged in some sort of social service, whether through their employment or through volunteer and independent activities (Reoch 3).

A criticism that may be raised about the engaged nature of Shambhala Buddhism, as is prevalent among most schools of Buddhism today, is the lack of a more directed, active arm working towards social justice. If the nature of Buddhist beliefs is for all beings to enjoy freedom from suffering, what responsibility does that place on the Buddhist practitioner to work actively towards this goal? Is it enough to practice nonviolence and compassion in one's personal encounters? Is it necessary in Buddhist ethics to avoid actions that may indirectly harm other beings, such as eating meat or purchasing goods produced in a sweatshop? Does the Buddhist doctrine require a full-on activist approach to fully embrace its ideals? These are the questions that are currently being explored in the Shambhala sangha. The motivation is present and the momentum is building to create a more organized approach to structure opportunities for the warrior to engage his/ her personal spiritual practice in interactions with the larger society, to develop ways for Shambhala practitioners to actively work to benefit others and alleviate chaos and suffering in the world.

This paper examines the socially engaged aspects and activities of Shambhala Buddhism, which is just one form of Tibetan Buddhism. This larger question of the nature of responsibility that comes with religious beliefs can be grappled with and examined in terms of all other schools of Buddhism as

well as other religions. Most schools of thought that call for moral or ethical living engage in positive social change to some degree. The question is how outwardly directed or how passive that action is. While attending a lecture by Richard Reoch at the first assembly of young Shambhala warriors, Vajra Dawn 2003, I was inspired as I listened to a call to action. Mr. Reoch brought tears to the audience members' eyes as he related his experience with a group of women from Bosnia who survived the war with horrible visions of the death camps they witnessed. As he taught us how to feel and sit with our empathetic suffering, Mr. Reoch referred to the Red Cross relief organization representing Christianity and the Red Crescent organization representing Islam. To end his talk, Richard Reoch left us contemplating why there is no Red Wheel organization. The question actively on the minds of many Shambhala practitioners, teachers, and future leaders today is: "How can we as Buddhists manifest our beliefs in action?" What is our responsibility, beyond practicing compassion, to actively work to change the structural causes of suffering? As we move into the 21st century with war, genocide, and starvation still very much a part of our world condition, we must actively and intensely explore our options to effect positive social change as we progress along the Buddhist path.

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**Email Interview Questions
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from Tally Briggs
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Tally Briggs (TB): How does the idea of social action or social engagement fit into Shambhala Buddhism? Does Shambhala Buddhism offer instruction to its sangha on how to react to/ respond to/ what to do about (if anything) the suffering we see and encounter in the world?

Richard Reoch (RR): The founder of the Shambhala mandala, the Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, was clear about the social dimension of the Buddhist and Shambhala teachings he brought to the West. In one his most widely read books, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, he wrote:

“The current state of world affairs is a source of concern to all of us: the threat of nuclear war, widespread poverty and economic instability, social and political chaos, and psychological upheavals of many kinds. The world is in absolute turmoil... The Shambhala teachings are founded on the premise that there is basic human wisdom that can help to solve the world’s problems... Shambhala vision teaches that, in the face of the world’s problems, we can be heroic and kind at the same time... We must try to think beyond our homes, beyond the fire burning in the fireplace, beyond sending our children to school or getting to work in the morning. We must try to think how we can help this world. If we don’t help, nobody will. It is our turn to help the world.”

The instructions to the members of the Shambhala mandala on responding to suffering in the world are intimately linked to how we respond to our experience of suffering in our own lives. First, we are encouraged to face our own suffering as a fact of life. From the Buddhist point of view, suffering is one of the three “marks of existence”. Second, instead of seeking constant distraction and avoiding suffering, we are encouraged to face it directly, “placing that fearful mind in the cradle of loving kindness”. The key practice that enables us to do this is shamatha meditation, “peaceful abiding”. Third, when the mind has settled sufficiently through this practice, we have a direct experience of the true nature of our compassionate heart. This inherent quality of compassion can then be trained through practices associated with the Mahayana (great vehicle) or Bodhisattva path, which entails constantly working for the benefit of all beings.

This approach is reflected in these words of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche:

“In some sense, we should regard ourselves as being burdened: we have the burden of helping this world. We cannot forget this responsibility to others. But if we take our burden as a delight, we can actually liberate this world. The way to begin is with ourselves. From being open and honest with ourselves, we can also learn to be open and honest with others. So we can work with the rest of the world on the basis of the goodness we discover in ourselves. Therefore, meditation is regarded as a

good, in fact excellent, way to overcome warfare in the world: our own warfare as well as greater warfare.”

TB: Some would argue that the trend towards “socially engaged Buddhism” is a recent phenomenon in the history of Buddhism. Are there roots in Shambhala Buddhism that have always encouraged practitioners, on any level, to enact positive change in the world?

RR: I had the unusual experience for a westerner of growing up in a Buddhist family, practicing traditional Pure Land Japanese Buddhism. Most of the weekly service at the temple was in Japanese, but there were a few chants that were in English. At the end of each service we recited these words:

“We pledge to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha, and to work earnestly for the welfare of all humanity. Particularly to those who are standing forth to the great change we call death, we send forth oceans of wisdom, mercy, and love.”

It was much later in my life that I came across the term *engaged Buddhism*. I remember being genuinely perplexed, and actually irritated. The Buddha was a social radical, a social transformer. We pledged every day at the Buddhist temple to devote our lives to working for humanity. Why would you need to add the word *engaged* to *Buddhism*?

The great project of the Buddha’s life was the creation of an alternative society. He repudiated the entrenched structural injustice of his day, rejecting the entire caste system and establishing his own classless communities wherever he went. The early followers of the Buddha were contemplative social radicals. They shaved their heads and wore robes so that, as they approached in the distance, it was virtually impossible to distinguish one from another and certainly not a male from a female. That was the idea. They were working on a new social experiment that would manifest, not their differences, but their common humanity.

As they walked through the towns and villages of the North Gangetic plain, they were throwing off the shackles of social privilege, gender oppression and the entire economic model of their day. They didn’t seek to own anything. They ate only what others offered them and whatever they received they shared as a community.

They knew exactly what they were challenging. They put their lives on the line, yet they carried no weapons. In fact, there is a story of an Indian King who comes to beg the Buddha not to accept the droves of young men who were coming every day to be his followers, because it was placing the very existence of his armed forces at risk.

One of the greatest examples of a follower of someone who tried to apply Buddhist principles in society was Ashoka, the Indian emperor who turned from the path of bloodshed to become a great humanitarian. The British historian H.G. Wells wrote: “Among the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone—a star.”

Ashoka was a sacred administrator who took a deep interest in foreign policy, religious tolerance, and the administration of justice and humanitarian affairs. He is credited with starting one of

the first hospitals in human civilization. He extended his concern not only to the realm of human beings, but also to animal life and the environment.

TB: Do you see more of an emphasis in recent times on social engagement or social action in the Shambhala tradition or Buddhism in general? If so, why do you think this is?

RR: With the world in a spiral of violence and war, more and more Buddhists are seeking a role in promoting peace, supporting conflict resolution, and providing humanitarian assistance to victims of violence. This is not limited to solely to war-related concerns, but extends much more widely to include violence and harm of all sorts – including to our environment.

One of the challenges is to understand the roots of violence and injustice around the world and to apply the wisdom and compassionate practices of Buddhist traditions effectively for peace and an end to suffering.

Many Buddhist leaders and practitioners worldwide are already engaged in such efforts. Recent research in which I have been engaged shows that there are well over a hundred (and possibly many more) Buddhist organizations engaged in a wide range of social endeavours.

TB: In class, my professor, Chris Queen, suggested that there are several possible interpretations or styles of social engagement through Buddhism. Perhaps one style of changing the world in a positive way is through personal spiritual cultivation, the idea that the merit of spiritual growth will ripple outwards through one's interaction with the world, changing the world one person at a time. Another style or manifestation of social action through Buddhism might be on the level of social service. A practitioner might feel drawn to respond to the suffering in the world by becoming a social worker and actively seeking out and working to ease the pain of others. A third style of social change through Buddhism could manifest in political activism. The ethics and beliefs of Buddhism might lead a practitioner to speak out against injustice and actively struggle against oppression.

How would Shambhala Buddhism be described in these terms? Are there teachers or practitioners who advocate for social action on any or all of these levels: personal spiritual cultivation, social work, or political activism?

RR: These personal styles of social engagement are all present in the Shambhala Mandala. A sample survey among our members at six major centers in North America and Europe suggests that as many as two-thirds of our members are actively engaged, including in their professional work, in social service of some sort.

We have had two major programs to examine ways in which our members are involved in social service of one form or another. We identified a spectrum of possibilities that included:

1. People engaging individually in activities in their professional lives, support for voluntary organizations and so on.
2. Programs to support for social activists, including Shambhalians, to support compassionate action in society.

3. Providing space within our community for listening, inquiry and discussion on social issues.
4. Engaging with social issues through independent organizations that exist under the broad umbrella of Shambhala, such as Naropa University, which runs a program on socially engaged Buddhism.
5. Making statements or submissions on vision and general principles in the name of Shambhala -- as has been done, for example, to the European Community on the Future of Europe and to the United Nations before the invasion of Iraq.
6. Collaborating with other organizations that have expertise and inspiration on social questions, including inter-religious or inter-Buddhist cooperation.

TB: When I met you at the Vajra Dawn conference in June 2003, you posed the question: given that there is suffering in the world and there is a Red Cross and a Red Crescent, why is there no Red Wheel Organization? Could you say more about your idea for a Buddhist Red Wheel Organization?

RR: A number of Buddhist practitioners from organizations in Asia, Canada and the United States are working together to create an International Buddhist Peace Service to create cooperative national and international programs to address violent conflicts and assist the victims.

This is a non-partisan, non-sectarian global initiative. Its aims are twofold: to enact the Buddha's vision of wisdom and compassion at this time of worldwide conflict and fear, and to serve Buddhist communities throughout the world who wish to cooperate in building peace and relieving suffering.

To accomplish these goals, the International Buddhist Peace Service will convene Buddhist organizations engaged in humanitarian work, development, human rights and peace building for strategic interventions in challenges facing the global community. It will provide an international vehicle for Buddhist voices expressing the principles of interdependence and compassion in preventing violent conflicts, supporting humanitarian aid for the victims and offering assistance in the healing of trauma. It aims to offer a platform for Buddhist practitioners throughout the world to express their aspirations for peace to international public opinion, the media, governments and international organizations. To be effective, it will secure consultative status at the United Nations so that this perspective can be included in the appropriate deliberations of the Economic and Social Council, particularly as it works to implement the Millennium Goals of the United Nations. Naturally, it will work with others, regardless of philosophical or other orientation, who share this aspiration.

The International Buddhist Peace Service is deeply committed to building a network that represents the true diversity of Dharma. The aim is to create a link between Asian, Asian-American and western communities and draw on the wisdom and experience of all schools of Buddhist thought and practice. We see peace work as spiritual practice, and we seek the skillful means and unique qualities that Buddhist practitioners can bring to this work.

The first planning session of the International Buddhist Peace Service in May 2003, brought together representatives from a dozen Buddhist organizations. Future meetings will bring together an even wider body of practitioners and experts in peace and humanitarian affairs. We are delighted to have the support of The Garrison Institute in New York's Hudson Valley, a new center for contemplation and action based on a broad and ecumenical spiritual foundation.

TB: In looking at your personal background, it is immediately striking that you have an impressive career of social action working for Amnesty International before you became the president of Shambhala. Do you think your background in social action was significant in your becoming the president of Shambhala International? Does this indicate that Shambhala Buddhism is looking to focus more on social action, that this is or will become a major component of the Shambhala tradition?

RR: I'm certain my background in international affairs was one of the considerations that Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the head of the Shambhala Mandala, had in mind when he asked me to serve as the President of Shambhala. He has asked me to teach publicly, basing my talks on the work I have been doing in the world. This emphasis on social engagement is important to the Sakyong. He has recently introduced a new practice for advanced students in Shambhala, which is now to include, as part of it, a period of social service. Nothing could more clearly indicate the intimate linkage between the inner work of our contemplative community and its ambition to be of service to the world at large.