

THE FOURTH YANA

The Dharma of Healing, Service, and Social Change

By Christopher Queen

On the eve of the historic conversion of nearly a half-million ex-untouchables to Buddhism in Nagpur, India on October 14, 1956, Dr. Ambedkar, their leader, held a press conference to explain the event. Reporters wanted to know why a former cabinet minister and the architect of India's constitution would abandon the country's majority religion for a faith that had virtually disappeared from India eight hundred years before.

Ambedkar reminded the audience that Shakyamuni Buddha was an Indian who offered equality and compassion to people of all backgrounds and circumstances. The Dalits or untouchables have struggled for centuries to escape the misery of caste and poverty – often incurring a violent backlash. But Buddhist social change, like Gandhi's *satyagraha*, is nonviolent, nonsectarian and open to all.

“Well, then,” the reporters inquired, “exactly what kind of Buddhism will you be embracing?” “Our Buddhism will follow the faith and practice of Lord Buddha himself,” Ambedkar replied, “without stirring up the old divisions of Hinayana and Mahayana. Our Buddhism will be a neo-Buddhism—a *Navayana*.”¹

Students of world religions will recall the ancient terms Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, representing the three major “vehicles” or *yanas* of Buddhist practice. In Hindu mythology, the great gods were pictured riding on birds or animals that

¹ This paraphrase of Ambedkar's press conference is based on Dhananjay Keer's summary account in *Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission*, third edition (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971), p. 498. Parts of this article have been adapted from Christopher Queen, “Engaged Buddhism: Agnosticism, Interdependence, Globalization,” in Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

represented their unique power or domain (Shiva on the Bull Nandi, Vishnu on the bird Garuda, and Brahma on the swan Hamsa). In Buddhism the metaphor of a boat or raft was associated with the practice of Dharma from early times: “Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.”² After “crossing over” to the other shore of Nibbana or final awakening, the practitioner should leave the vehicle of beliefs and practices behind. Vehicle imagery was reinforced by the image of the “wheel” (*chakra*, representing a cart or chariot) of Dhamma, which the Awakened One “turned” in his first sermon at the Deer Park at Sarnath.³ Finally, we read in a famous passage of the *Lotus Sutra* that a “rich man” (the Buddha) lured his children out of a “burning house” (cyclic existence) by offering them “ox-drawn carriages, goat-drawn carriages, and deer-drawn carriages” (the various practice traditions of Buddhism), only to give them “a single great ox-drawn carriage” (the *Ekayana* or “Single Vehicle” or *Mahayana* or “Great Vehicle” of bodhisattva practice) when they emerged safely from the house (entered upon the path to Buddhahood).⁴

Today we can see that the three ancient yantras are still alive and well after hundreds of years, like the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communions of Christianity. The “small” or “elite” *Hinayana* tradition survives in the Theravada

² *Alagaddupama Sutta* (Sutta 22, The Simile of the Snake), *Majjhima Nikaya*. See Bhikku Nanamoli, trans. and ed., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 228-229.

³ See O. H. DeA. Wijesekera, “The Symbolism of the Wheel in the Cakravartin Concept,” in *Buddhist and Vedic Studies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), pp. 267-273; and Christopher S. Queen, “The Peace Wheel: Nonviolent Activism in the Buddhist Tradition,” in *Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence in Religious Traditions* (Boston: Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 1998), pp. 49-66.

⁴ Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sutra)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 58-61.

Buddhisms of Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), Sri Lanka, and the Vipassana or “Insight Meditation” practice centers of the West. The “great” or “universal” *Mahayana* tradition is represented by the Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren Buddhisms of East Asia and the West; and the “diamond” or “esoteric” *Vajrayana* vehicle survives in the Tibetan monastic lineages—Gelukpa, Kagyupa, Nyingmapa, and Sakyapa—and the esoteric Shingon Buddhism of China and Japan. In a world city like Los Angeles, one may see all of these Buddhist yantras flourishing and evolving side-by-side and down the street from the churches, synagogues, and mosques of the theistic faiths.

So why did Ambedkar suggest a “new yana” or a Fourth Yana, and why did he regard it as the authentic “faith and practice of Lord Buddha himself”? To answer this question, we must look at the Socially Engaged Buddhism that the new Buddhist converts of India and the Buddhist liberation and service organizations have developed all over the Asia and West since the 1950s.

For the past half-century, political activism and social service have emerged as salient features of the globalization of the Buddhist tradition. Along with the democratization implicit in the new roles that laymen and women are playing in Buddhist institutions, and the pragmatism of a tradition that increasingly stresses actions—meditation, chanting, morality, and “the art of happiness”—more than words, doctrines and philosophies, the social engagement of Buddhism may be said to parallel the activism, if not the militancy, of other world religions, notably Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.⁵

⁵ For the rise and scope of engaged Buddhism in Asia and the West, see Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996); and Christopher S.

In prisons, hospices, refugee camps, and a wide range of social ministries and chaplaincies, engaged Buddhists are as visible as the Hari Krishnas were a generation ago. But engaged Buddhists are not robed or shaven-headed dropouts, and they do not dance and leaflet at airports and street corners. In the West, they are more likely to be laymen and laywomen of all ages, often highly educated professionals, committed not to achieving bliss or levitating themselves or the Pentagon, but to applying the Buddha's teachings to social challenges of the day—human rights, economic justice, ethnic tolerance, racial healing, and environmental protection. In Asia, engaged Buddhists are more likely to be ordained or lay volunteers of the village development movement in Sri Lanka, the Dhamma Yietra peace walk movement in Cambodia, and the Tzu Chi Foundation, offering natural disaster relief in Taiwan and around the world.ⁱ

Activists and scholars do not agree on the origins of engaged Buddhism. Did it spring directly from Gautama Buddha's teachings of compassion, interdependence, and morality, or his acceptance of society's marginalized members—particularly untouchables and women—to the Sangha, his religious order? Or did it emerge later, during the reign of Asoka Maurya in the third century BCE, or during a thousand years of cultural assimilation in China, Korea, and Japan, as Buddhist personal ethics encountered the institutional formalities of Confucian civil society? Did it come into being in the nineteenth century, when Buddhist reformers, Western colonialists and Christian

Queen, ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000); for summary accounts, see Donald Rothberg, "Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America," in Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 253-265; and Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): 201-215. For a concise survey of engaged Buddhist organizations active in Asia and the West, see David W. Chappell, ed., *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999).

missionaries began to debate the merits of their respective cultures, to compete for the hearts and minds of citizens, and to maneuver for strategic control of Buddhist Asia? Or did engaged Buddhism appear full-blown only in recent times, as the world began to restructure economically, politically, and culturally at the global level—since the middle of the twentieth century?⁶

These movements and organizations have two things in common, aside from their Buddhist roots and their commitment to relieve suffering. They presume that suffering and its relief have a *social dimension* that cannot be addressed by private spirituality and morality alone. And they have established themselves as *global agencies*, inviting participation, membership, and material support from sympathizers around the world—by the high visibility, mobility, and collaboration of their leaders, through traditional print and broadcast media, and increasingly by high-speed information systems, the internet, and wireless communication.

For readers of *Bearing Witness* and long-time participants in the mandala of organizations founded by Roshi Bernie Glassman and his spiritual family – the Grayston Mandala, the Zen Peacemakers, the House of One People, and the Maezumi Institute – these reflections on the rise of the Fourth Yana will not seem so new. For Roshi Bernie and his students and friends have been bearing witness to the sufferings of the world through loving action for more than a quarter century. The New Vehicle that Dr.

⁶ On the origins of engaged Buddhism, see Christopher S. Queen, “Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism,” in Queen and King, pp. 1-44; Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, “All Buddhism is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing,” in Queen, pp. 35-66; and Thomas Freeman Yarnall “Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved? Made in the USA of Asian Materials,” in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, Christopher S. Queen, Charles S. Prebish, and Damien Keown, eds. (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, in preparation).

Ambedkar, Thich Nhat Hanh, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and many others in Asia envisioned a half century ago has been cultivated, ripened, and served as a Supreme Meal to the hungry ghosts of our twenty-first century world. For this we must be grateful, and to this we must commit our talents and our aspirations in the coming generation.

Christopher Queen is lecturer on the study of religion, Harvard University. He serves on the board of the Zen Peacemakers/Maezumi Institute, and as board president for the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. He has edited four books and numerous articles and reviews on Engaged Buddhism in Asia and the West.