

# Introduction

## Engaged Buddhism at a Crossroads

So we are now at a point unlike any other in our story. I suspect that we have, in some way, chosen to be here at this culminating chapter or turning point. We have opted to be alive when the stakes are high, to test everything we have learned about interconnectedness, about courage—to test it now when Gaia is ailing and her children are ill. We are alive right now when it could be curtains for conscious life on this beautiful water planet hanging there like a jewel in space.

—Joanna Macy, “Our Life as Gaia”<sup>1</sup>

At the Lakeside Buddha Sangha in Evanston, Illinois, where I practice, we frequently chant the “Discourse on Love,” Thich Nhat Hanh’s translation of the *Metta Sutta*. We vow to cultivate boundless love for all living beings, “beings who are frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or invisible, already born or yet to be born. May they all live in peace and security.”<sup>2</sup> Loving-kindness coupled with equally boundless compassion are of the essence of Buddhist engagement. They are also an endless task and they are not enough.

A simple story will illustrate this point. Two persons walking by a river see a baby floating downstream. They wade in and rescue the baby, but as they reach the shore, they see another, and then another, and another. Each time they rush in to rescue the baby. Then as the next baby floats into view, one person heads upstream. “Where are you going?” asks the remaining person. “I need help.” “I am going to find out who is throwing babies into the river,” the other responds.” The traditional story ends here, and my activist students love it. They, too, are ready to head up the river,

but in my version, there is a different ending. The person heading upstream discovers not one or two evildoers but a factory that dumps babies into the river and an interlocking complex of social institutions—economic, political, religious—coupled with social practices, laws, and customs, all undergirded by ideology. In short, not evildoers but an unjust social system. The workers in the town’s factory have only a dim idea of the consequences of their actions, and besides, they have babies at home needing to be fed. The stockholders of the factory are you and me through our retirement investments. Dismantling the system will take more than a single generation. Meanwhile, the “waste” continues to be dumped into the river. We should be glad that someone remained behind to rescue and care for the infants. But that is not enough. At some level Engaged Buddhists recognize this as a compelling insight. They (we) struggle, however, to lay out just what sorts of strategic actions are necessary to reconstruct an unjust system.

Engaged Buddhism is an international movement of Buddhists who seek both personal and collective liberation from suffering.<sup>3</sup> Sallie King defines Engaged Buddhism as “a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political . . . and ecological problems of society.”<sup>4</sup> Christopher Queen, another pioneer in the study of this movement, sees it as “the application of the Dharma . . . to the resolution of social problems . . . in the context of a global conversation on human rights, distributive justice and social progress. . . . It may be seen as a new paradigm of Buddhist liberation.”<sup>5</sup> Founders of a new paradigm of Buddhism though they may be, Engaged Buddhists have had to think in a new language, using terms such as “oppression” and “social justice” and to revise their understanding of the meaning of liberation.

Classical Buddhism, like virtually all premodern religious traditions, lacked an understanding of systemic injustice baked into social institutions as structural violence.<sup>6</sup> Despite the teaching of impermanence, classical Buddhist schools viewed social institutions as given and sought world renunciation not world transformation.<sup>7</sup> So Rita Gross, a practicing Buddhist, history of religions scholar, and feminist, boldly affirmed, “I am taking permission, as a Buddhist, to use a prophetic voice.”<sup>8</sup> Gross was caught by a boundary-transgressing spirit. Putting the prophetic voice to use, she pioneered a new and deeper form of social engagement for Buddhist practitioners.

Writing in the *Guardian* in the wake of Thich Nhat Hanh’s death in January 2022, the Buddhist practitioner, essayist, and social critic Rebecca Solnit brought to consciousness the impact of Buddhism in the West. Buddhism, like a tributary within a watershed that includes feminist, antiracist,

and ecological movements, emphasizes equality and nonviolence. It joins others in criticizing the rampant exploitation of the earth and its peoples. Thich Nhat Hanh affected millions, Solnit argued, through his ideas, retreats, books, and practices in ways that are hard to measure. He personified a stream “flowing through the West from which many have drunk without knowing quite where the waters came from.”<sup>9</sup>

*Prophetic Wisdom* explores a complementary narrative, namely, how Engaged Buddhism has been shaped and reshaped by those who have drunk from the waters of the prophetic ethos. Without quite knowing, to parrot Solnit, where these waters came from. Thich Nhat Hanh, our elders, and a new generation of Engaged Buddhists have refreshed their body, speech, and mind through these waters. Multiple streams constitute our cultural watershed. Western Buddhists practicing today—and, to an increasing extent, all Buddhists—are the heirs of multiple religious and secular streams, including those stemming from the Hebrew prophets. It is no longer possible for Buddhists to hold themselves aloof from the “prophetic call for judgment, criticism and responsibility.”<sup>10</sup> To recognize our multiple sources of wisdom and the ways in which specific streams nourish us is to invigorate our continuing struggle for social justice and complete liberation. The prophetic ethos, as a religious-ethical mode of being, is accessible to all whose search for the common good opens them to transformation.

In a previous comparative study, *The Prophet and the Bodhisattva: Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Ethics of Peace and Justice*, I celebrated Christian theologian Paul Knitter’s approach to interreligious dialogue as mutual transformation in his book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. He followed the lead of Notre Dame theologian John Dunne by adopting a threefold method: (1) stating a problem or struggle that he has with a particular Christian teaching or practice; (2) “passing over” to examine a related Buddhist teaching or practice; and (3) “passing back” to affirm his commitment as a Christian but now in a transformed way of thinking and acting.<sup>11</sup> I suggested that, in my case, the figures of the prophet and the bodhisattva each constituted one pole of an ellipse and that I found myself in the magnetic field generated by these two classic forms of religious and moral agency. Instead of passing over and back, I saw myself passing back and forth, back and forth.<sup>12</sup>

Now the idea of Buddhists borrowing a prophetic voice has opened a different horizon. Why wouldn’t Buddhists embrace the idea that Buddhist teachings and practice might be amplified by incorporating aspects of the prophetic ethos? Doesn’t that reflect the truth of interdependent coarising?

Thich Nhat Hanh pointedly said that Buddhism is made up of non-Buddhist elements.<sup>13</sup> The new possibility is to see the prophetic ethos as an integral element in Engaged Buddhism. So, playing upon Knitter's title, I suggest that without Jeremiah I could not be a Buddhist.

The prophetic tradition offers a socially and religiously powerful concept—the concept of justice—that reconfigures the Buddhist dharma. Unjust systems stigmatize certain groups. They also warp all who are shaped by them in ways that affect our relationships, our practices, and even our personalities while imposing more oppression on some than on others. Given the prevalence of oppressive forces within political and economic structures, gender roles, and culturally imposed psychological formations, Rita Gross argues, “it is hard to imagine being serious about liberation or the bodhisattva path without being involved in social action at some level.”<sup>14</sup>

*Prophetic Wisdom* argues that tapping into the prophetic ethos will enhance Buddhism's understanding of and commitment to collective liberation, its commitment to ending collective suffering. There is a vast literature on liberation from oppression, and the term “liberation” has been used in widely different ways. What these ways hold in common is a commitment to the removal of barriers to the self-realization of persons and communities. *Prophetic Wisdom* will focus on liberation from socially constructed barriers, that is, institutionalized forms of oppression. In Buddhist terms, complete liberation requires overcoming collective dukkha.<sup>15</sup> Underlying this particular focus are several assumptions:

- Oppression as the thwarting of the self-realization of persons and communities operates through social structures that empower some and disempower others. It expresses and maintains itself through direct violence but primarily through structural violence.
- Social structures are constructed. Human beings are socialized into these structures from birth. Human beings are as they are because of cultural conditioning and institutionally shaped barriers and supports.
- Social constructions are impermanent. They can be deconstructed and reconstructed.
- Human beings, more or less consciously, reenforce these barriers or work to remove them. They can become agents of liberation.

- Engaged Buddhists agree that an existential revolution, a transformation of the self, must accompany the transformation of ideologies, social institutions, and cultural values and practices. Most Buddhists have emphasized this mode of liberation. This book, however, will focus on systemic change, the transformation of collective dukkha for which we need prophetic wisdom.

Here is a now obvious example of socially constructed structural violence. When I was growing up, curbs on sidewalks were part of the built environment. They were taken for granted. They did not slope down at the intersections. Growing up, it never occurred to me that these curbs thwarted the mobility of people with certain disabilities, and consequently created a barrier to their self-realization. I remain astounded at how long it took before the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) made me and many others aware of this very tangible form of oppression. So I ask myself what forms of oppression am I totally unaware of right now?

In mid-March 1965, in the aftermath of one of the bloodiest attacks by police on nonviolent civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, I found myself in a Montgomery jail. Like significant numbers of Northern college students, I had heeded a call from John Lewis and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to come to Montgomery to keep the pressure up until the march from Selma to Montgomery could be completed. During an initial march on the capitol shortly after I arrived, deputy sheriffs on horseback galloped into our ranks, slashing back and forth with their long clubs. Within a day I was committing civil disobedience protesting this indiscriminate violence. I was part of the student groups packing Montgomery jails.

A naive Northerner, I was feeling, if only in a minor way, the lash of a terrorist state. Lying in jail, isolated, my head throbbing from a police-inflicted scalp wound, I heard a woman wailing, pleading to be let go. At that moment I could think of no reason on earth why she should not be freed from that jail. In the Hebrew Bible, God orders the prophet Jeremiah to call for the women “keeners” whose dirges will wake a somnolent people to the crisis that has come upon them (Jer 9:17–20).<sup>16</sup> I know nothing of the keening woman in Montgomery jail or her fate. I do know that her voice revealed to me what Rabbi Abraham Heschel called “the monstrosity of injustice.”<sup>17</sup> Whatever her offense, some solution other than imprisonment seemed imperative. The echo of her voice has never faded. Taking refuge in Jeremiah and thousands of hidden and manifest prophets, I offer this book in honor of her suffering.

## Plan of the Book

### PART ONE: THE PROPHETIC WISDOM OF ELDERS

As I write, Thich Nhat Hanh, who first coined the term “Engaged Buddhism,” has died in Hue near his ancestral home in central Vietnam. Many others who were the first generation to develop an Engaged Buddhism, including B. R. Ambedkar and Rita Gross, have died as well. Engaged Buddhists face a generational passage. New and diverse voices are articulating and living different forms of Engaged Buddhism. They deserve our deep listening. At the same time, it is important to take stock of the visions and actions of those who first blazed a trail for new generations to follow. These elders developed ways of thinking and acting that bear a “family resemblance” to those of the Hebrew prophets. Four such elders will exemplify Engaged Buddhism’s ability to tap into the prophetic dimension.

#### *Chapter One: Like a Fire in the Bones: The Prophetic Voice*

But first we examine the prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible to develop a more detailed understanding of the prophetic ethos. Classics speak to us across boundaries of time and space. A genuine classic has the power to transform our ways of thinking and acting. Chapter 1 argues that the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible still retain the power of classics. The prophets did not predict the future; they were not soothsayers. Rather they read the signs of the times. But they did much more than this. Amid the collective trauma brought on by the crushing force of imperial invasions, they charted a way out of despair. In the process they became a wellspring sending forth a stream that has surfaced at times and coursed underground at others. It has been and can be tapped into by anyone who cares about justice.

#### *Chapter Two: Crossing Boundaries: Rita Gross and the Transformation of Patriarchal Buddhism*

While Rita Gross was the youngest of the four Buddhist elders whose internalization of a prophetic voice we will study, she is also the most explicit in her borrowing. She deserves to go first. Chapter 2 looks at that borrowing. Using the prophetic voice in her case meant uncovering the pervasive ambiguity of the Buddhist tradition in its portrayal of women, its estimation of their religious potential, and its gender-based hierarchical institutional arrangements. Gross’s appropriation of the prophetic voice

entailed (a) a willingness to engage in social criticism and self-criticism, (b) protest against the abuse of power, (c) a vision of an alternative social order, and (d) a commitment to social activism.<sup>18</sup> While this formulation is true as far as it goes, it does not go far enough. It does not get at the mode of being religious at the core of the prophetic ethos. By referring to what she calls the “prophetic dimension” in Buddhism, Gross suggests that a prophetic stance and mode of being in the world is intrinsic to, but perhaps concealed within, Buddhist teachings and practices.<sup>19</sup>

*Chapter Three: Thich Nhat Hanh: A Buddhist Monk in the Conflagration of War*

Chapter 3 studies the poetry of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who first coined the term “Engaged Buddhism.” At a superficial level Thich Nhat Hanh would seem to be the last Buddhist to assume a prophetic voice. Not, I hasten to add, because of any deficiency in his way of “being peace” or in his steadfast exemplification of loving speech but because he so deeply incarnates the ethos of a bodhisattva. However, if we steep ourselves in Thich Nhat Hanh’s antiwar poetry, we can indeed see the bodhisattva catch fire with the spirit of a prophet.

*Chapter Four: Joanna Macy and the Work That Reconnects*

Joanna Macy is the visionary elder whose “work that reconnects” we will examine in chapter 4. As we see in the myth that opens this introduction, Joanna Macy has called on Engaged Buddhists and their many allies rooted in other traditions to take part in the Great Turning. If the millions of living species that we, as Buddhists, seek to liberate are not to perish in a sixth great extinction, the human species will need to put the brakes on its blind rush to a cliff’s edge and turn in a new direction. In seeking how to combat the psychic numbness that is our default response to the twin threats of a nuclear holocaust and climate change, Joanna Macy also has offered to Buddhists a new understanding of the role of emotions—even ones that Buddhists have labeled as negative—in reconnecting ourselves to our living planet.

*Chapter Five: B. R. Ambedkar: The Annihilation of Caste and the Liberation of the Dalits*

Except for key essays written by Christopher Queen, Western scholars of Engaged Buddhism have neglected B. R. Ambedkar. A younger contemporary

of Gandhi, Ambedkar, a Dalit (Untouchable), was a fierce opponent of the caste system. His unrelenting battle frequently placed him at odds with the Mahatma himself. We learn how any prophetic vision must itself be subject to a prophetic critique. But Ambedkar is even more important because his boldly revisionist form of Buddhism became a source of hope culminating in a mass conversion of his fellow Dalits shortly before his death.

## PART TWO: LIBERATION IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

*Prophetic Wisdom* focuses upon the struggle for social justice and collective liberation in the American context. Scholars have pointed to the “American Jeremiad” as a distinctive rhetorical strategy developed by those engaged in this struggle. Engaged Buddhists need to learn this language if they are to communicate beyond their denominational boundaries.

### *Chapter Six: The American Jeremiad: Creating the City upon a Hill*

Chapter 6 argues that the American Jeremiad was a rhetorical strategy designed for a people on a mission, called by God to be a City upon a Hill. Tailored to New World circumstances, it was a goad to world transformation. In the nineteenth century it was appropriated by African Americans who challenged the nation to cure itself of the cancer of slavery. In succeeding generations, it became the idiom through which reformers sought to move the nation to live up to its ideals. Repeatedly it challenged the brutality of the status quo and awakened the conscience of a nation drifting into complacency.

### *Chapter Seven: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: America's Jeremiah*

“The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King,” insisted Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a civil rights and peace activist and a prophet himself.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was America's Jeremiah of the twentieth century. More than any other leader, he articulated and embodied the prophetic ethos. It is hard to imagine how any group committed to nonviolent action, such as Engaged Buddhists, could seek liberation from collective suffering without coming to terms with Dr. King's mark on the twentieth century. So Dr. King's immense contribution to the jeremiad's call for fundamental social change is the topic for chapter 7.



### PART THREE: FROM PROPHECY TO PRAXIS: STRATEGIC ACTION AND SOCIAL LIBERATION

Compassion without insight/wisdom, Buddhists insist, is blind. Wisdom uncovers and nurtures seeds of liberation. It holds fast to concrete reality and therefore depends upon knowledge and analysis. The next three chapters challenge Engaged Buddhists to draw upon several disciplines to expand their knowledge of the causes of collective suffering and to develop more consciously their understanding of the means and ends of social transformation.

#### *Chapter Eight: Nonviolent Action: The Dynamics of Love, Power, and Justice*

A commitment to use only nonviolent means to create social change is a hallmark of Engaged Buddhism as an international movement. But nonviolent action is an exercise of power. Buddhists are wary of exercising power because it is easily infected by dualistic thinking, group egoism, and patterns of domination. To enter the sphere of politics seeking social change is to wade into swamps of ambiguity. What sort of power can Engaged Buddhists justify exercising? Chapter 8 grapples with this dilemma.

#### *Chapter Nine: From Prophecy to Praxis: Thinking Strategically about Action*

Chapter 9 is the most theoretical in the book. It asks how we move from a diagnosis of the pervasive sickness of American society to an analysis of its causes and conditions, how we proceed from there to a constructive vision of an alternative future and, ultimately, to strategically directed action to bring about social transformation and healing. The blinding insights of the prophet become practical guidance through the contributions of a critical social theory and of a Buddhist constructive imagination. We move from prophecy to praxis.

#### *Chapter Ten: Facing Up to Evil, Abolishing Our Racial Caste System*

Today numerous issues demand a prophetic critique. Dr. King's version of the three (collective) poisons included militarism, economic exploitation/poverty, and racism. *Prophetic Wisdom* focuses on racism in the American

context because it preceded the founding of the country by more than 150 years but also because its venom poisons every aspect of American life. A serpent is entwined around the legs of Lady Liberty. In chapter 10 we will examine systemic racism, account for its persistence in American life, and treat the recent argument by Isabel Wilkerson that it can best be understood as a caste system. *Prophetic Wisdom* must face up to this poison's presence in the American bloodstream and offer a vision of an alternative future. Chapter 10 focuses on one aspect of systemic racism—mass incarceration—and argues that Engaged Buddhists have something distinctive to offer to overcome it.

### Buddhist Reflections in a Prophetic Key

Special features of this book are the Buddhist Reflections in a Prophetic Key that appear at the end of the first five chapters and that are tied to the issues raised in their respective chapters. They offer a glimpse of prophetic wisdom giving new twists to old stories, challenging sacrosanct assumptions, and pushing forms of social engagement toward more radical actions. They are intended as spurs to your own imagination.

At one point in their trek through the wilderness, Moses and the elders of the Israelites had gathered outside the main camp in the presence of YHWH when a young man arrived bearing the news that two men had begun to prophesy. Joshua urged Moses to squelch this unauthorized manifestation of the spirit of God. But Moses refused, saying “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them” (Num 11: 24–29). In fact, the spirit of the Hebrew prophets, or what I call the “prophetic ethos,” has become contagious. Increasingly this ethos has spread beyond the boundaries of Western religious traditions. Numerous aspects of the thoughts, speech, and actions of Engaged Buddhists bear a family resemblance to the key traits that characterize the prophetic ethos.

“So, we are now at a point unlike any other in our story.” “Would that all engaged people were prophets.” Aren’t Joanna Macy and Moses (slightly amended) strange collaborators? Maybe not. To choose to be here, actively doing our best to shape our world in a time of unprecedented peril, requires creative hybrid visions of all sorts, drawing on multiple pasts, projecting alternative futures. Engaged Buddhists at a crossroads are challenged to internalize a prophetic ethos. We need prophetic wisdom.<sup>21</sup>