

# The Intimacy of Engaging with Suffering

by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

As naturally compassionate beings, we want to take action on behalf of those suffering in as many ways as possible. In doing so, we may feel we have not satisfied our mission. However, what may appear unsuccessful is not always so, and what may appear successful is not always so. We may never know for sure how our actions will impact others, or whom we will affect.

Many of us in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and in the larger Buddhist community find ourselves somewhere along a continuum of ideas and actions. Recently, I have been in a dialogue with BPF members about what is right action: marching in demonstrations or setting up soup kitchens in your local neighborhood. Some might say one action has more impact than the other. Some might say the answer is that both are right actions.

Yet the answer is not so simple. Instead of pondering what is the right action, I find that exploring the practice of social engagement through my own life and dharma practice is revealing in many ways.

Through my practice of sitting meditation, I have learned that truly effective social engagement is the result of both awareness *and* intimacy. In other words, there is an evolutionary process that starts with awareness but then must move into intimacy before we can arrive at engagement. Many of us are aware of the human conditions of suffering, but we are not necessarily intimate with such suffering. To me, intimacy means living in the midst of the suffering with which we are intending to engage.

If we lack this kind of intimacy, we tend to act *upon* a situation rather than from within it. Zen master Eihei Dogen, founder of Soto Zen, uses the term *shinzo*, which means “ever intimate.” When we are ever intimate, we experience liberation within the tensions of suffering.

Many of the public actions of the socially engaged Buddhist movement in the United States are directed outside our own environments. Often we express our engagement through solidarity or through philanthropic actions. As a result, we may feel ineffective and frustrated with the results of these actions, and sometimes hopeless about our engagement with suffering in faraway places. It is difficult to be truly socially engaged in India while living in Chicago. We can sympathize politically to some extent, but we cannot elect officials in a land in which we are not

citizens. We can write and talk about suffering brought to us in images through the media, but it is difficult to directly know the experience of a child who has lost her leg in the midst of war. We can only imagine.

Social engagement is not a practice or action outside of where I live and breathe; it comes up through a deep intimacy with the suffering around me. I ask myself, What am I aware of right in my own environment? What am I intimate with in terms of feeling, seeing, touching, and hearing all that is suffering right in front of me, in my own neighborhood? If I can experience the answers to those questions, then practicing social engagement means that I am responding to suffering with body, mind, and speech.

So I practice solidarity with Burma’s suffering at the same time that I am intimately engaged with the suffering of black youth in my home city of Oakland, who are being killed in numbers disproportionate to their population. Thich Nhat Hanh and His Holiness the Dalai Lama are engaged, because they are intimate with the suffering that has directly affected their lives and their communities. Even the Buddha espoused that wisdom comes from direct knowledge.

If there is hunger near you and you can feed the hungry, this is good. If you march in solidarity for the Burmese monks, this is good. There is no difference between serving in the soup kitchen and marching for Burma. It is all right action as long as we are also intimate and engaged with the suffering of a neighbor losing her home in foreclosure, of an elderly friend unable to afford necessary medicine, of a child who is receiving a poor-quality education in a local public school.

Of course, we cannot do it all. So we see to what extent we can engage in ending suffering, both as individuals and by joining with compassion-based activist communities such as BPF. There are few answers on the dharma path, but an important question for us to hold is, What is the balance of our work and practice as spiritual activists? ■

*Dr. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, executive director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, has been a dharma practitioner for many years, initially as a student of Nichiren Buddhism and currently in the Soto Zen tradition at San Francisco Zen Center and Berkeley Zen Center. She is a contributing author to Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism (Parallax Press, 2004), an anthology of essays by Buddhist teachers and practitioners of color.*