



ENGAGED BUDDHISM

Dickson K. Yagi

Pema Chödrön just wrote a very helpful essay on the Buddhist basic principle of anicca, “impermanence”. Since everything is changing, we should hold everything we love with open hands. Suffering comes when we cling to things. The logical advice is **letting go** of everything good or bad before they cause us pain—“**non-attachment**.”

In Japan Rev. Tairyū Furukawa was counselling death row prisoners. He found two prisoners who were innocent. To his amazement, every official knew the two men were innocent. However, they could not be set free because the powerful judge who pronounced them guilty would “**lose face**.”

Rev. Furukawa was outraged. Rev. Furukawa appealed to his Shingon Buddhist denomination for funds necessary to defend these two prisoners. He was infuriated when his denomination turned down his request. They told him to reverse his counselling 100%. The Buddhist message was that the prisoners were to accept their guilty verdicts. To fight against their verdicts was to fight against the will of the Buddhas, even if they were innocent. “**Don't fight it, accept it.**”

Rev. Furukawa was furious. He was a social justice warrior by birth. Rejected by his Buddhist denomination, he came by our Baptist university seeking out the chaplain. I was the chaplain. Like all institutions our funds were distributed by competitive compromises between the various university departments. His request would be less ridiculous if we were a Buddhist university. He was a Shingon Buddhist priest.

Rejected by his own religion he must have made his request to us because we were just two blocks away from the prison. I could not give him university funds, of course, but I reached into my wallet and gave him a 10,000 yen bill—equivalent to about \$100. We had different religions, but the same moral conscience.

Guess what! Rev. Furukawa **sold his house** and used the money to defend the two innocent prisoners. Guess what again!! After some months the powerful judge who condemned the two prisoners died. The next day it was all over the front page of the newspaper. Because the judge died, one innocent prisoner would be set free. The other had already been executed by hanging. Rev. Furukawa and the prisoner to be freed had their photos on the front page.

Rev. Furukawa is the epitome of Hebrew prophets fighting kings and elite classes to defend the poor—exactly the opposite of the Asian Buddhist advice—“**accept it, don't fight it.**” The legacy of the Hebrew prophets was “**don't accept it, fight to the death** for the poor and oppressed.”

But the monumental move from fatalism to social justice activism (**Engaged Buddhism**) took more than the heroic sacrifice of one Buddhist priest. It took cataclysmic national tragedies in East Asia at the end of World War 2. There was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then the “killing fields of Cambodia.” Then the Chinese takeover of Tibet. Then the Vietnam War with communist Viet Cong nationalists in the North and CIA Catholics in the South.

The extraordinary Vietnamese Zen monk, **Thich Nhat Hanh**, became an activist for social justice, desperately saving refugee boat people. It was his zealous activism, speeches, and writings that launched the movement, **Engaged Buddhism** in Vietnam.

In Thailand was the courageous Buddhist reformer, **Sulak Shivaraksa**. An incessant activist and prolific writer, he was a parallel source for the theme, Engaged Buddhism. Having breakfast with Sulak at an International Buddhist-Christian Conference at Tacoma, I said how impressed I was with his courageous activism fighting all authorities and even the police. I could never do that because I was a coward, lecturing in the safety of a university classroom. He leaned over and whispered, "**We are all cowards.**"

"**Engaged Buddhism**" is now a popular theme for American Buddhist conferences. American Buddhists are ashamed of their Mother Church in Japan for failing to speak truth to power. They faced the fascist regime of the Shinto Emperor + nationalist racism 天孫民族 + Japanese colonialism + militarism 軍風. The German Lutheran Church did not do any better against the Third Reich. But let us not be too condemning against Japanese Buddhists or German Lutherans. Look before you leap! Count the cost to family and church before you fight the Gestapo or Kempeitai!

Let us all open our eyes and see this new turn in **Engaged Buddhism**. But truth be told, there is a reluctance for social justice activism among Asian Buddhist temple communities in the U. S. Whether Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, or Cambodian Buddhist communities, they are **timid** as minority sub-cultures in the U.S. It is, rather, the **Caucasian Zen Centers** that naturally generate social justice activism. They are not subject to the cultural captivity of Asian temples. We must ask whether this social activism is because of their **Engaged Buddhism** or because Caucasians have always enjoyed dominance at the very top in racist American society?

Note 1: An immediate cause of the War was the **ABCD blockade**--the blockade of crucial supplies to Japan by American, British, Chinese, and Dutch ships.

Note 2: My aunt, Shizuko, born and raised in Hawaii, was caught in Okinawa by the start of the war. She could not return. She married an Okinawan and was sent to the Palau Islands as a colonist for the new Japanese Empire. Palau is one of the poorest of the Pacific Islands. Some decades after the war we brought her back to live in Hilo, then Honolulu--with her husband and three sons.

Note 3. My family in Hawaii were **Koyasan Shingon Buddhists**. Rev. Sasai was our head priest at Hōgan-ji Temple near Ho'olulu Park in Hilo. As a sign of our common dedication to Buddhist-Christian reconciliation, Rev. Sasai gave me his **AJI-KAN** esoteric meditation mandala that he used in daily meditations. He presented it to me formally before the extended Yagi clan at the funeral service for Uncle Seinan Yagi some 35 years ago. That **AJI-KAN** is a peg anchoring me to everything inspiring in Buddhism.

Note 4. See more of Rev. Furukawa's ties to Albert Schweitzer in *Pacific Asian Vision*, p.2, October, 2017. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's Albert Schweitzer was the favorite hero of Japan. Schweitzer was renown as a Bach organist, New Testament specialist on Jesus studies, and a dedicated physician bringing modern medicine to the people of Africa. There were hundreds of adult Schweitzer Clubs throughout Japan. Rev. Furukawa somehow gained some of Schweitzer's ashes and would you believe that he actually named his Buddhist Temple "Schweitzer Temple" (シュワイツァ寺?).

Note 5. One example of **Engaged Buddhism** in Los Angeles is the successful **OKAERI movement**. It is a large joint Buddhist-Christian ministry among Japanese and Japanese-American LGBTQ people meeting monthly. There is a large national conference every two years. There are separate groups for English and Japanese languages. I have attended four OKAERI meetings. There is substantial support by Buddhist ministers, especially from Shin Buddhist West.

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Dickson taught for some 27 years at Seinan Gakuin University in Fukuoka, where he is Prof. Emeritus in Christian Studies. He served a term as Head Chaplain of the university. For a decade he was a member of **Tōzai Shūkyō Kōryū Gakkai**, an advanced level of Buddhist Christian Dialogue mainly by university professors.

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THE NEXT WAR

Jesus taught us to love our enemies, forgive our enemies, pray for our enemies, and Jesus Christ died for his enemies. If in times of war the government tries to draft church youth into the army to **kill the enemy**, should Christian youth refuse? Who would disagree that **Jesus was a pacifist**?

Only **Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren Churches** hold seriously what Jesus taught on loving enemies. These churches teach their youth what Jesus taught. So their denominations are called "**Historic Peace Churches**." Their youth are committed as **conscientious objectors** to serve in "alternative services" instead of killing enemies.

Most other churches ignore Jesus and choose rather to obey the call of the government to defend our country--**patriotism**. There is much anger against conscientious objectors who live while others die to defend the nation. It takes courage to declare you are a conscientious objector to face the anger of the public and be called "**coward**."

What do you think about ignoring Jesus and obeying the military chain of command instead? On the other hand, do you want to be called a coward? During the Vietnam war, many youth escaped to Canada. If compulsory draft is re-instated in preparation for the next war, **our daughters**, of course, will be drafted, too. Women serve in all fighting roles in today's military. What do you think?

Rev. Dickson Kazuo Yagi

Note 1: I had already passed the Selective Service physical examination in Honolulu for the Vietnam War. I was granted clergy exemption as I enrolled in Tokyo Union Theological Seminary in 1961. Some 45 years ago I published an essay, "Problems in Christian Pacifism" in the journal of Seinan Gakuin University, International Cultures Department, Fukuoka, Japan.

Note 2: In one U.S. city, my neighbor four houses away served several years as a **conscientious objector** during the Vietnam War. He was an outstanding Christian activist for social justice.

Note 3: Reinhold Niehbur discussed the "love" principle of Jesus and the "justice" principle of "**just war**."

Note 4: **Glen Stassen** was a nuclear physicist working for the government. He switched fields to become a Christian Ethics Professor at Southern Baptist Seminary (Louisville) and later at Fuller Seminary (Los Angeles). He was the driving force in the formation of the **Baptist Peace Fellowship** (pacifist) during the Vietnam War. He was the most significant **pacifist Baptist theologian** in my lifetime. We renewed acquaintance when he was a dinner guest of Dr. John Cobb at Pilgrim Place Retirement Community some 10-15 years ago.

Stassen's books available at Amazon.com:

Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace, 1992.

Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context, 2004.

Peace Action: Past, Present, and Future, 2007.

Formation for Life: Just Peacemaking and Twenty-First-Century Discipleship, 2013.

Note 5: Collapse of the Draft: One of the factors moving the society against the Vietnam War was the growing anti-war demonstrations of college students. The vicious verbal attacks by President Nixon, questioning protesting student patriotism and courage threw fuel on that fire. Then there was the police mass shooting of protesting students at Kent State University, which inflamed society. But it was the anti-war speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., that first broke the dam. Television anchors condemned King for losing all the hard-won fruits of the Civil Rights Movement by his antiwar speeches. But in the following weeks the **masses turned against the war**. Losing student support, the military **terminated the compulsory draft system**, switching to an all-voluntary military. King was not only right, but his **timing** was perfect. He had no enmity against the Viet Cong, and the war was destroying the lives of Blacks and the poor.

Note 6: Just War. About 10 years ago in Los Angeles there was a Jewish, Muslim, Christian Dialogue on "**Just War**," the main justification for war in the West. The dialogue centered on perhaps the most respected men of these religions in Los Angeles, meeting in their church/mosque/synagogue. They were George Regas of All Saints in Pasadena, Maher Hathout of MPAC (Muslim Public Affairs Council), and a Jewish Rabbi (Synagogue on Fwy 405 near Getty Museum). Of course, Dr. John Cobb, Jr., was a major consultant. I was on the committee that wrote the concluding document sent to the U. S. State Department. We worked in the basement of All Saints Church. The heavy pronouncements of Maher Hathout remains in my mind as the verdict on "Just War." Hathout said that the "Just War" arguments were defective, not in their logic, but **in their conclusion**. Whether the argument was Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, "**Why is it always that my war is just and your war is unjust?**" To this day Maher Hathout's verdict remains my verdict, also.

DON'T KNOW

Dickson Kazuo Yagi

"What was your original face before you were born?" I had walked into a Zen Buddhist session of the Interfaith Dialogue Group of our university. The Obaku Zen Temple was only 3 blocks by walking from our university in Fukuoka City.

This question--**What was your original face before you were born?**--this was a famous Zen kōan, unanswerable riddle to stimulate us towards Enlightenment. I was shaken! I didn't need to hear anything more. I already knew that I didn't know who I was. I didn't know where I came from at birth. And I don't know where I was going at death. I certainly don't know what face I had before I was born. My reply to all the most important questions is...**DON'T KNOW**.

We learn so much in kindergarten, elementary school, jr. high, and high school. Scientists know how to fly to the moon, heart-lung-kidney transplants, and even about DNA. We are impressed by how much we know. Then a baby is born or an old man dies. We are reminded that we really don't know anything at all! **DON'T KNOW**. Mystics turn inward where God is the Great Mystery.

Tom Ambrogi is my favorite preacher. He died here at Pilgrim Place about 5 years ago. He prayed for me every day for 3 years when my wife Ellen died. He would stretch out his arm up in the air to remind me that he was holding me up in prayer every day. That's why I survived my wife's dying.

For Tom Ambrogi everything was good news in mystery. Creation was mystery, incarnation was mystery, atonement was mystery. Holy Communion was mystery. God is the Great Mystery. Mystery means that

everything in their depth is a thousand times more wonderful than our small human brain can understand. And a thousand times more wonderful than our human language can express. I can't explain God. I can't explain the sun. I can't explain my wife, Ellen. I can't explain love. I can't even explain who I am. What was my original face before I was born? **DON'T KNOW.**

About the only thing I know is that every cell of my body is saturated by the Spirit of God. And the Great Mystery of God is unconditional Love. I have received this path I walk from birth to death. And I have received also this **companion** to walk the path with me. This is the Paraclete, the Spirit of Jesus.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is
Romans 8:14 *"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."*

Everything else--**DON'T KNOW**
What was your original face before you were born?
Who are you anyway?



A CALLING

Dr. William Malcomson

"When in seminary, fellow seminarians used to accuse me of not being called to ministry. Their idea was you had to be called directly by God. That was not my experience as mine was an interaction with Jesus.

My idea was that I would look at various aspects of someone's personality to see if they exhibited certain aspects of what a minister should be. I believe ministry is something you fall into. It happens or it doesn't.

The best prepared are those who are most fully engaged in the life of the community of faith. I think that to be the best minister is to be the best fully realized you can be. It is only recently that I have fully understood that my calling is in the deepest part of me. I embraced being called to ministry so my life would be so much greater than might ordinarily be the case.

A calling can also be a little scary, because of what it asks from you. May your calling go deep and may it be a bit frightening, *Bill.*

Dr. William Malcomson is retired in Washington State. He was Dean of the American Baptist Seminary of the West, a founder of the School of Theology and Ministry of Seattle University, former President of the Council for Pacific Asian Theology, and former Theologian-in-Residence at Seattle First Baptist Church. He is blessed with two sons, one of whom is a Christian Buddhist, one daughter, and 5 grandchildren. Bill has a Ph.D. from Princeton University in World Religions. **He recently suffered a stroke**, 2/05/21. Bill dictated this homily **from hospice**. The source of his wisdom is not religious logic, but experience—the joys and tears of the briar patch of life. Many of us are his secret disciples. *DKYagi.*



Quakers

The Religious Society of Friends

Quaker Origins

Dr. Leroy Seat

The beginning of the Quaker movement goes back to Englishman George Fox (1624~91) and the “openings” (revelations) he experienced 375 years ago, in 1646. A few years later, the Religious Society of Friends was the name settled on by Fox and his followers. They were also called Quakers.

In spite of considerable opposition, the number of Quakers in England grew quite rapidly, and by 1655/6 the first Friends arrived in North America, where there was also great opposition and great growth.

In 1681, 340 years ago, British King Charles II granted a land charter to William Penn, a Quaker, and that was the beginning of what became the state of Pennsylvania—and a period of significant Quaker influence in North America.

Quaker Beliefs/Practices

According to Quaker.org, “Quakers are a worldwide, global community of people who are diverse in every way, including what they believe and practice. There are Quakers who are progressive Christians, there are Quakers who are Evangelical, and Friends who are . . . even atheist.”

A foundational belief of Quakers from their beginning is that there can be direct, unmediated relationship with the Divine. Fox emphasized there is “that of God in every person,” and through the centuries since their beginning, Friends have stressed the Light Within or the Inner Light.

Because of that basic belief, Quakers originally, and many still, reject having clergy, creeds, or sacraments/rituals (including baptism and Communion).

Quaker Contributions

Even though there are many differences among contemporary Quakers, the historic contributions of the Religious Society of Friends are considerable. They include the following:

1) Their consistent emphasis on peace and opposition to violence.

Perhaps that is the position for which they are best known, and that is one reason I developed such a good opinion of the Quakers in the 1970s, when I learned about the work of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC).

[AFSC's current website](#) gives this vision statement: "A just, peaceful, and sustainable world free of violence, inequality, and oppression." They also state that their mission is to work "with communities and partners worldwide to challenge unjust systems and promote lasting peace."

2) Their emphasis on equality and opposition to the subordination of women and to slavery.

Margaret Fell (1614~1702) was one of the co-founders of the Religious Society of Friends, and she was prominent in the early years of the Quakers in England. (More than ten years after the death of her first husband, she married George Fox in 1669.)

In the U.S., the Quakers were the first religious body to protest slavery publicly. In 1790 they presented a petition to Congress calling for the abolition of slavery, and the Quakers are positively mentioned in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Several of the most prominent advocates of both the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage in the U.S. were Quaker women: Sarah & Angelina Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Alice Paul, and others.

3) Their emphasis on simplicity and opposition to ostentation and unnecessary consumption.

Friends have traditionally believed that people should use their resources, including money and time, deliberately in ways that are most likely to make life truly better for themselves and others. "Live simply so that others may simply live" is a saying often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. But long before Gandhi was born in 1869, simple living was a cornerstone of Quaker practice.



So, even though I have some misgivings about the underpinnings of Quaker theology, I say, emphatically, Thank God for the Quakers and for their 375 years of emphasis on peace, equality,

and the simple life! The world now would be better off if there were more of them and more of us like them.

** In background preparation for writing this article, I found Thomas D. Hamm's *The Quakers in America* (2003) to be helpful. And now I am looking forward to reading J. Brent Bill's brand new book *Hope and Witness in Dangerous Times: Lessons From the Quakers on Blending Faith, Daily Life, and Activism*, which is scheduled to be delivered to my Kindle tomorrow.

**This essay was first published on 7.30.21 on Dr. Seat's blog, TheViewFromThisSeat.blogspot.com
Presented here by permission of author.

Dr. Leroy Seat and I studied together under the same professors for some years in graduate school in Louisville. Then we taught together for several decades on the same faculty of Seinan Gakuin University in Fukuoka, Japan. An outstanding professor, pastor, and administrator, he was elevated as Chancellor of the university for many years. You can enjoy the inspiring and insightful writings of this incurable reformer, creative thinker, and follower of Jesus by reading his blog. *D.K. Yagi*

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Additional notes by editor Yagi:

- * Quakers focus on the **Holy Spirit**, while standard Protestants center on God the Father.
- * Quakers are **Pacifists**, along with Mennonites, and Brethren Churches, called "**Historic Peace Churches.**" In wartime their members are expected to be "**conscientious objectors**" doing alternative service instead of killing the enemy. When attacked by classmates, their children are taught not to fight back.
- * Quakers do not "pray for you" with expectations of **miraculous healing**, which might pit your will against God's will. Rather they will "**hold you to the Light**" for calming peace with assurance of Jesus being near. Zen Buddhists and Shin Buddhists also reject "**intercessory prayers**" that pits your will against the will of Buddhas or Karma. Shingon Buddhists are known to pray for any earthly blessing.
- * Quakers called us "**FRIENDS**" during WW2, while the U.S. press called us Japanese Americans citizens "**Enemy aliens.**"
- * Quakers arranged for Japanese youth in the WW2 concentration camps to matriculate in Eastern colleges by raising scholarships.

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