Inverted Bowls: Buddhist contemplative practice as protest vocabulary

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abstract

Buddhist practitioners in both Asia and the West participate in political protests, especially marches and occupations, in ways that overtly represent them as Buddhist or as practitioners of Buddhist contemplative exercises. By bringing meditation, mindfulness, chanting, and walking into the protest itself, or by altering an exercise to turn it into a political protest, practitioners perform their view and ethics in the public sphere, and alter the performativity of the exercises themselves. Examples of contemplative practice being performed for political purposes are recorded as far back as the Pāli Canon, and are a common expression of convert Buddhist identity in American progressive politics. Monks taking part in the 2007 uprising in Burma known as the "Saffron Revolution", performed a symbolically altered form of *pindabat*, walking for alms, as a tool of political expression and defiance, while public meditations organized by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship at Occupy Wall Street and other demonstrations show American meditators performing their practice as a public political gesture. In both cases the situated nature of the practices affects both their semiotic content and their performativity.

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On a windy afternoon in October 2011, Zen priest Taigen Dan Leighton lead members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) and others in walking meditation in front of the Bank of America building on LaSalle Street in Chicago.[1] The same day, Occupy Wall Street groups in cities around the country engaged in meditation and other Buddhist-based contemplative practices, organized by BPF or other Buddhist organizations, such as the InterDependence Project.[2] In the San Francisco Bay Area, where I live and protest, groups of people meditating quietly (often invited and coordinated by the Bay Area-based BPF) on the edges of major actions and rallies are a common sight. Embodying what is ostensibly a private internal practice in the Habermasian public sphere, the meditators assert a positionality

alongside the main stream of social action, present but often only minimally interacting with the rallies, participating, yet in their seeming passivity, almost not. This framing of an intimate personal practice as part of a vocabulary of social activism reflects a general tendency of American Buddhism to understand, via the feminist revelation, the personal as political, and to emphasize the performativity inherent in contemplative practices themselves. This frame may seem like a typical Western appropriation: the repurposing of an ancient discipline for hybrid postmodern purposes, or an unconsidered orientalism, and it may contain elements of both, but the use of Buddhist contemplative disciplines as protest vocabulary is a venerable practice in Asia as well, with examples as far back as the Buddha himself as recorded in the Pāli Canon. Does the performance of meditation in public change the effect of the practice for the meditator? What does the visibility of meditators in potentially charged political actions contribute to the performativity of the protest and the experience of those nearby? And does meditating at protests change the nature of the meditation itself?

Founded in 1978 by Robert Aitken Roshi, Anne Aitken, and Nelson Foster, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship is one of the largest networks of Buddhist social action in the Western world.[3] Their projects include peace work, prison ministry, activist training through their offshoot, the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), and collaboration with Asian Buddhist organizations on social issues worldwide. In the US, one of their most visible activities is their presence at rallies, marches, and other protest events, their old blue banner with the logo of a hand holding a lotus flower moving silently amid a group of calm walkers. The image is a visual reference to the Mahāyāna story of the Buddha at Vulture Peak (Mt. Gṛdhrakūṭa, near Rājagaha, modern Rajgir in Bihar, India), transmitting the *Dharma* ("truth", "law", "way", often capitalized as a proper noun) by wordlessly holding up a flower.[4] The soft white outline of the hand, upturned, with its tapered, ambiguously Asian fingers, is itself a contrast to the loud and often angry signage that may surround it, and seems of a piece with the small group of quiet walkers who tend not to join the common "Hey Hey, Ho Ho…" chants, choosing instead to walk in silence or talk softly in pairs. Perhaps through their silence and calm presence the Dharma is again transmitted, as the Zen tradition says, "beyond words or scriptures".[5] "Transmission",

a traditional word to describe the awakening possible through direct contact between teacher and student, is the process by which the Dharma passes between generations. Woven into prominent Buddhist activist and Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh's popular statement that the "next Buddha may take the form of a community", the transmission metaphor deepens.[6] A community of Western students, themselves recipients of the Dharma through lineages of teaching that have come from Asian countries, continues to transmit its blessings through a wordless offering of calm presence and an enigmatic image. When they set up the banner at stationary locations, an informal but serious meditation period will often be undertaken, with a leader keeping time and sometimes ringing a small bell to begin and end the sitting. Their public meditations in protest settings perform several possible functions (in no specific order):

1. Advertisement for BPF, drawing attention to its many social justice activities
2. Proselytizing for Buddhism in general and meditation practices in particular
3. Embodying an alternative stance and action in relation to the content of the event
4. Demonstration of the effects of meditation as calm, relaxation, and equanimity
5. Proposing contemplative practices as a means toward the end of peace and justice
6. Continuation and support of participants' personal meditation practice
7. Deepening of participants' inner process and meditative skills in a challenging context
8. Asserting the necessity of inner work for those concerned with social justice
9. Bearing witness, through calm presence, to the unfolding of the action and issues

Many of these functions rely for their power on the inseparability of internal and external process, perhaps the core soteriological implication of modern Engaged Buddhism. The act of practicing in public amplifies the performativity already inherent in the meditation exercises, turning the gestures

of sitting, walking, or any contemplative exercise into both internal and external performance. The meditating body visible at a protest might simultaneously be a site of inner turbulence for the individual practitioner, a symbol for the meditator and/or viewers of an abstract concept such as peace or justice, a wordless teaching on ethical action in the face of discord, or an invitation to join the sitting and possibly the religion. The complex interplay of internal and external meaning makes public meditation a many-layered and contingent space for either personal or communal transformation. Public meditation can also be seen as performing aspects of practitioners' dedication to, or refuge in, the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. It supports and challenges the individual meditator on their contemplative path (*Buddha*), spreads the tradition and teachings of Buddhism through example and acts in accordance with views about the nature and power of ethical action (*Dharma*), and brings practitioners together in community, both in the affinity group of the meditation circle and in the gaze of the larger crowd, including participants, observers, police, and media (*Saṅgha*).

The phrase "going for refuge" describes the traditional act of joining the Buddhist community and implies that each of the Three Jewels can be seen as a safe harbor for the practitioner in a chaotic world. Small islands of quiet meditators on the edge of busy, expressive crowds themselves become a refuge from a certain amount of chaos, at least until the situation turns violent or the crowd is told to disperse. Many Buddhist teachers and traditions talk a lot about what we take refuge *in*, but since protest is by definition *against* something, it is also fair to ask what we are taking refuge *from*. One traditional answer might be "from *saṃsāra*", a Pāli and Sanskrit word that indicates the nature of the material world as that which spins endlessly between gain and loss, life and death, pleasure and pain. Literally, saṃsāra refers to the "round of birth and death" in which beings are trapped through habitual and seemingly endless grasping, aversion, and ignorance.[7] The word is common in Western pop culture, including appearing in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) meme as a twitter hashtag (#OccupySaṃsāra), which is also the website name for a 2011 letter of support for OWS from Buddhist and yoga teachers, which named three broad motivations for "public protest meditation" similar to those I've identified above.[8] "Occupation" of the world of birth and death may be read as a gloss of the

Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching of the non-separation of saṃsāra and *nirvāṇa* (lit. "extinguished", as a flame is when separated from its fuel, the Buddhist word for the state of Realization), expressed by Nāgārjuna via British teacher Stephen Batchelor as "Life is not different from Nirvana, Nirvana no different from life".[9] The world, *as it is*, is always already the site of liberation; there is no *other* place or state to arrive at. Meditation sessions at protests and the OWS encampments manifest a refuge not just from the chaotic world of the front lines of the action, but from the larger front lines of the action of each person's life: a momentary refuge from *saṃsāra* itself. They perform peace, offer to all sides of a conflict the image of another way, and embody the practice of seeing the immanent experience of conflict and pain and the transcendent experience of liberation as not separate.

Perhaps the most potent difference between meditation as a private exercise that relates primarily to the individual practitioner's inner life and the public performance of meditation is the presence of external non-meditating witnesses. The shift in effect between private and public performance is then conditioned by shifting intentions embedded in the act of meditation itself. Bringing contemplative practice into the contested public square reveals an intention to affect others in a more direct way than sitting and walking at home or in the sheltered calm of a practice center seems to. But there are also many different historical and doctrinal intentions that are taught to support the practice of meditation, and these differences are partly reflected in the meditation traditions themselves. In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition as practiced in Burma (Myanmar), one of the sources of Western *vipassanā* (Insight Meditation), meditators generally practice with eyes closed, either alone in a *kuti* (meditation hut), or sitting in rows facing an altar or teacher dais, focusing on the movement of breath and other sense objects, developing concentration to a significant intensity. This style of practice is often cultivated in both Burma and the West on long meditation retreats, during which participants practice "noble silence", abstaining from all kinds of interaction between practitioners, including touch, speech, and eye contact. Meditation under these conditions and with these instructions is a substantially internal gesture, in which little attention is given to other people or the meditator's surroundings. This sensory seclusion can be contrasted with the Rinzai Zen style of meditation, another lineage at the root of

American Buddhism, in which practitioners sit facing the center of the room and thus each other, and practice with eyes open. A Zen retreat may also be characterized by relatively more “work practice” than a vipassanā retreat, and the work periods might not be silent. A communal practice ethos develops in Zen in which interiority is not as prized as in the Southeast Asian traditions, supplanted by the cultivation of a broad mindfulness and communally-oriented presence throughout every action of the day, including interpersonal interaction. This contrast is not offered to suggest a facile opposition, as each style of practice contains aspects of the other: work meditation in Insight Meditation, silent inward practice in Zen. However, the different styles do entrain specific views and intentions around practice, as well as the skills needed to thrive in that tradition. The different practice cultures practitioners train in will thus affect the intention and skills they bring to the public performance of contemplative exercises as well as whether they choose to place themselves in such situations at all.

One implication of varying methods and intentions is a shift in the subjectivity of the practitioners. The practitioner undertaking meditation as an internal practice meant to uproot the psychological and existential causes of suffering situates an individual subject in doing so, even if cultivating the important insight that a discrete and permanent soul (Pāli: *ātta*, Sanskrit: *ātman*) cannot be found to inhere in any experience or object. The implication of an individualist soteriology in this approach was derided by early Mahāyāna Buddhists (200BCE-200CE) as inclining the practitioner toward disdain for the world and a desire for individual transcendence.[10] The early Mahāyāna textual tradition known as the *prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) supplants a putative individualist soteriology with one based in the cultivation of empathy for others and grounded in the radical vision of *śūnyatā* (Emptiness, Voidness). The Mahāyāna tradition took root in Tibet and China, spreading from there to Vietnam, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. American Zen, with its roots in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, shares the Mahāyāna emphasis on turning outward toward the suffering of the world rather than inward toward a liberation defined by solitude, epitomized by Joanna Macy in her book on Buddhist-inspired social action, *World as Lover, World as Self*.[11] Though traditional Mahāyāna arose in opposition to Early Buddhist doctrines on the nature of liberation that now persist in the Theravāda sects of Thailand, Burma, and

Sri Lanka, contemporary Theravāda has substantial Mahāyāna leanings, though teachers who tend far in that direction, like the Thai activist monk Buddhadāsa, may receive criticism for it. American convert Buddhism being deeply syncretistic, practitioners of schools that would have been on opposite sides of this ancient debate like Zen and Theravāda now broadly and easily share the Mahāyāna emphasis on externality and social action.

The divine being at the heart of mythic Mahāyāna is the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, known popularly in her Chinese manifestation of Quan Yin. Both names describe her primary stance, "s/he who hears the cries of the world".[12] Quan Yin as an archetype portrays that which is primarily concerned with that which is *outside* her, at least if considered in a dualistic model. The "cries of the world" are object to the subject that is her selfless compassionate listening action. She embodies the practice of "bearing witness", one of the oft-repeated intentions behind the performance of contemplative practices in public. Filtered through the understanding that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are "not two" (*advaita*) leads to a non-dual vision of compassionate presence: the view or understanding that subject and object are completely interdependent and therefore not distinguishable as separate. This view fuses the empathy and Emptiness aspects of the Prajñāpāramitā revelation.

> Here the Bodhisattva, the great being, thinks thus: "countless beings should I lead to Nirvana and yet there are none who lead to Nirvana, or who should be led to it." However many beings he may lead to Nirvana, yet there is not any being that has been led to Nirvana, nor that has led others to it. For such is the true nature of dharmas, seeing that their nature is illusory.[13]

The ancient vision of the Bodhisattva's paradoxical soteriological action transcends positionality along with subject and object, taking a stand that does not *stand* anywhere, proposing a radical revision of the power dynamics of subject and subjectivity. "Dharmas" in this case refers to all phenomena, so the being who is devoted to the liberation of all other beings does not recognize the separation of self and other or any essential identity of anything as other than illusion. The paradox resolves itself in tautology: if there are no beings to be saved, then all beings must already be saved! It is the very

recognition of beings as *not other* that liberates, and that liberation carries no object: it is not the bodhisattva who is liberated, or beings who are liberated. Who was ever in bondage? The beautiful inclusivity of Mahāyāna non-dualism shines through the very individual-oriented American Buddhism, and somehow still manages to ground the very subjective, action-dedicated lineage of Socially Engaged Buddhism.

Origins of Engaged Buddhism in ancient India

Though caricatured as world-denying, Buddhism has a long history of involvement in social action and protest, beginning perhaps with action by the Buddha himself, in which the practice vocabulary itself (primarily sitting and walking meditation, along with ordination, chanting, and alms receiving) may have been performed for social or political ends. The Buddha himself is said to have intervened in the invasion of his home country of the Sakyans by the neighboring Kosalans, sitting in meditation in the path of the invading army. Questioned by the invading king Viḍūḍabha as to why he was sitting under a spindly tree that gave no shade in the full noon sun while nearby (just across the border) was a large, leafy tree, the Buddha replied, "Let be, O king! the shade of my kindred keeps me cool." The king understood that the Buddha was there "to protect his clansmen", and moved by the Buddha's empathic action, withdrew. As the story proceeds, the Buddha intervenes similarly twice more, but before a fourth attempt, seeing that the *kamma* of the situation was such that his intervention would ultimately fail, he abstains from action and the invading king massacres the Sakyans.[14] The story is a *Jātaka* tale, a story of the Buddha in former lives or in parable-like situations, and the massacre is not corroborated by the historical record, but the Jātaka collections contain many stories of the Bodhisatta (as the Buddha was called before his liberation) cultivating the perfections of the heart (Pāli: *pāramī*) such as generosity (*dāna*), patience (*khanti*), or compassion (*karuna*) by acting in the service of others' well-being or safety. One possibly historical, though mythicized, example from the Buddha's lifetime concerns not his own activism, but the actions of his step-mother and a congregation of women protesting their exclusion from the Saṅgha.

After the Buddha's awakening, he returned to Kapilavatthu to visit his family, the Sakyans. He taught the Dharma to several family members who were then inspired to join him in the renunciate life, but the women who wanted to join were rebuffed by him. Undeterred, the Buddha's aunt and step-mother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, led 500 women to cut off their hair, put on the yellow robes of the Saṅgha, and walk barefoot to reach Vesālī (348 kilometers away) where the Buddha had moved on to. Meeting him, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī requested again to be able to join the Saṅgha of bhikkhus and was again denied. Much criticism has been directed at this refusal in recent years, with reason, though the cultural factors conditioning the Buddha's reticence were substantial and not perhaps easily understood from our distance. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī went to the Buddha's assistant and cousin, Ānanda, asking for help, and Ānanda challenged the Buddha on his denial of their ordination based on women's potential for realization and the Buddha's personal debt to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī as his surrogate mother. The Buddha relented, affirming that women possessed as much capacity for full liberation as men, and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī became the senior nun (*bhikkhuni*) and founded the lineage of ordained Buddhist women.[15] Her successful protest action was rooted in three contemplative practices: the ascetic gestures of cutting of the hair, wearing simple robes, and walking barefoot; walking in meditation over long distances, as the Buddha and the *bhikkhus* regularly did; and "occupation": she refused to go home when told to, and instead stayed to argue for admission. This founding episode in the history of the bhikkhuni Saṅgha, alongside the Jātaka myth of the Buddha's peaceful occupation of the border shows members of the nascent community as those who while devoted to liberation through inner work, would perform their contemplative practice as a means to an external end when necessary. This gentle beginning prefigures later nonviolent activism on the part of devoted Buddhist practitioners.

Despite the complex historicity of the Pāli Canon and non-consensus as to the activist intent of the Buddha's actions, social justice-oriented modern practitioners often see in the early structure of the monastic Saṅgha principled resistance to the color (*jati*) and caste (*varna*) system in India. The monastic hierarchy was (and remains, in Theravāda orthodoxy) structured on seniority of ordination date, rather than caste and social origin, and central to the Buddha's teaching on caste is not just that membership

in the saṅgha erases one's previous social standing, but that ethical action and wisdom make one a brahman (the highest of the traditional four varna), not birth. The power of this reframing is poignantly reflected in the last verse of the liberation poem of"Sunita the Outcaste", who is venerated by deities after his attainment of *arahant*-ship, full liberation, and is declared a brahman.

> Seeing me, arrayed with a squadron of devas,
>
> the Teacher smiled & said:
>
> > "Through austerity, celibacy,
> >
> > restraint, & self-control:
> >
> > That's how one is a brahman.
> >
> > He is a brahman supreme."[16]

The naming of the outcaste as a brahman as the crowning affirmation of his liberation carries both transcendent and immanent soteriological force, as both Sunita's ordination and ostensibly personal liberation become socially radical. This feature of the Buddhist order was in part responsible for the revival of Buddhism in modern India when Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a Mahar (one of the "untouchable", or *dalit* caste groups) Indian politician converted publicly to Buddhism, along with 500,000 followers, in 1956. Ambedkar converted following a visit to Sri Lanka and study of Theravāda attitudes toward converts and social action, but remained critical of its leaning toward transcendence, and wrote about his attraction to the Mahāyāna model, with its archetype of the engaged Bodhisattva. In many Maharashtrian Buddhist shrines, pictures of Ambedkar and the Buddha hang side by side, the activist politician next to the great renunciate.[17] In the Buddha's organization of the monastic saṅgha as caste-exempt and Ambedkar's embrace of conversion as the pathway out of the strictures of caste, the putative soteriological reasons for ordination as a monastic or conversion to lay Buddhist status expand to include the performative force of the gesture of ordination as a political symbol.

In promoting conversion to Buddhism as a political act, Ambedkar altered the demographics of Indian caste culture, particularly in Maharashtra, where 55% of the Scheduled Castes converted, made a strong gesture toward reestablishing Buddhism in India, and embedded caste rejection into the conversion act.[18] Conversion to Buddhism consisted in part of the acceptance of a set of 22 vows, written by Ambedkar, which prohibit a set of defining Hindu activities including "faith in" Hindu deities, doctrines like the "incarnation of god", and the purification rituals around death, and include a declaration of renunciation of Hinduism due to its being "based on inequality", and the belief that the convert is having a "re-birth".[19] Ambedkar's action, unlike Sunita's, focuses on membership in the religion itself as the pathway out of caste strictures rather than either ethical action or realization of liberation. While the 22 Vows include the traditional five ethical precepts, it is conversion itself that erases caste rather than any particular attainment. As the act of conversion becomes a tool for social liberation on a large scale, the act changes from being primarily personal to being substantially communal. It becomes a performance in which the rest of society is the audience.

Burmese monastic practice as protest vocabulary

On August 8, 1990, during demonstrations marking the two-year anniversary of the 1988 massacre of 600 monks and thousands of lay-people protesting for democracy, two monks were shot in Mandalay, Burma (known as Myanmar at the request of the ruling junta, leading to some activists abjuring the name out of resistance to the junta). This led to a widespread religious boycott known as "turning over the bowl" (*pattam nikkujjana kamma*), a charged form of protest that monks, ordinarily not permitted by their precepts to participate in worldly political affairs, may undertake under specified circumstances.[20] The practice of refusing alms from the military later became famous as news of its use spread during the monk-led protests of 2007, sometimes called the "Saffron Revolution".[21] The repurposing of the alms round as a symbolic political act transforms it, like Ambedkar's ordination and the BPF's meditation practice, into a performative gesture with import beyond the literal or individual.

Theravāda monastics, dependent on the laity for support, walk through the streets every morning accepting alms donations of food in their bowls. The ancient ritual, called *pindabat*, is central to monastic practice, assuring the continued interdependence of the monastic and lay communities. Giving alms thus is central to the performance of devotion and religious membership for lay believers. The refusal to receive alms draws on the moral power of the monastic position to perform an ethical judgment of the lay people that are subject to the refusal, implying that their actions have made them ineligible for the honor of giving alms and the Merit (*puñña*) that accrues from such Generosity (*dāna*). Pindabat in Burma is a highly systematized practical ritual, with donors to monasteries vying for status as generous, regular donors, and a complex hierarchy governing the transfer of value in both directions between lay people and monastics.[22] Donations to the Saṅgha are among the first teachings emphasized for lay Buddhists in Asia. The emphasis on dāna not only encourages material support for the Saṅgha, but establishes the ground for the subtler renunciation (*vairāgya*) into which the teachings unfold. Renunciation of material resources (through giving them to the Saṅgha) prefigures the renunciation of self-cherishing and ego that arises in the meditative process, leading to the final release of the belief in the reality of the self with the realization of *nibbāna*. Thus the monastics and the laity share the practice of dāna as both internal and external.

The vinaya prohibits monastics from announcing their level of realization, but the laity scrutinize the monastics for visible signs of enlightenment like humility, concentration, and equanimity, and donate in proportion to the recipient's perceived level of virtue. The public giving of dāna to respected monastics thus confers social prestige on the donor, formalized through the immaterial currency known as merit (puñna). Giving dāna sincerely, and the perceived sincerity of donors is a common topic in Burmese conversation, creates merit for the donor, while the gracious receipt of dāna, the sincere commitment to the ordeals of meditation and the monastic life, and the return of wisdom in the form of teachings creates merit for the monastic recipient.

The Burmese military governs with a combination of Marxist state control of resources and industry and significant folk Buddhist superstition. Shame in the eyes of the devoutly Buddhist populace has

generally been an effective weapon against the junta, who participate vigorously in the economy of dāna, with individual military officers vying to be seen as a great Buddhist donors and the state itself giving conspicuously to the Saṅgha. In a culture where monastics possess little physical power but great spiritual power, the junta still needs conspicuous dāna to maintain the image of legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Refusal to receive alms from members of the military and their families thus remains a powerful gesture, undercutting the regime's legitimacy through an implicit disbelief of the sincerity of their dāna. The refusal to receive alms constitutes an effective socially-supported excommunication from the Buddhist community.[23]

In the performance of the vinaya-mandated practice of pindabat as protest vocabulary, the monastics recognize the interpenetration of the state and spiritual ideological apparatuses. The symbolic gesture of turning over their bowls performs the exclusion of a class of persons from participation in the communal ritual, and thus excludes that class from civil society.[24] Following the massacre of monks by the military in the 2007 uprising, the government suffered the shame of being declared illegitimate in the eyes of the Burmese people, a judgment previously rendered more often in private. The popular Burmese understanding of kamma (the conditionality of all actions and their results, "cause and effect") may have supported the view that the regime, though despotic, was the unfolding of past unskillful (*akusala*) actions on the part of the Burmese, and thus a legitimate, if unpleasant, historical reality.[25] The murder of monastics, however, crossed a line, triggering an ancient Buddhist understanding that a "bad king", one who did not maintain, or acted against, the Dharma, no longer had a right to rule.[26] A September, 2007 cartoon by Harn Lay from the Burmese exile newspaper, *The Irrawaddy*, shows the Buddha sitting in meditation on a lotus, surrounded by the army, guns pointed, helicopters and tanks arrayed, and a general who looks like Elmer Fudd screaming into a megaphone. The caption reads, "Cornered but unbeaten — the true leader."[27] The moral authority wielded by the Saṅgha fuels the powerful performativity of the monks' chosen protest image.

In September 2007, I walked through downtown San Francisco in a sea of maroon. A march in solidarity with the Burmese had been planned by the Bay Area Theravādan Buddhist community, and was

attended by a couple hundred supporters, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, from many different communities. The request was to wear dark red or carry red cloth, and organizers handed out swaths of cloth for marchers to wrap themselves in or wave. The hope was that photographs of Americans marching in the Burmese monastic color would slip through the internet into the hands of the struggling Burmese, offering an image of solidarity. I walked with friends and teachers, many of whom like myself had been temporarily ordained in Burma or had practiced in Burmese Theravāda lineages. I carried my old monk's robes folded neatly, but did not wear them, in deference to my position as a lay person. We walked mostly in silence, then sat in a park in the Embarcadero to meditate and chant the Three Refuges. Performing our practice: walking, chanting, and sitting, a hybrid congregation of American Buddhist practitioners and friends honored the source of this path that meant so much to us (Buddha), attempted to practice what we had been taught by our Burmese (and other Asian) teachers (Dharma), and offered our presence in public as a gesture toward the Great Community of practitioners (Saṅgha) in the West, in Burma, and wherever the wheel of suffering and liberation turns. As I walked and sat, I felt layers of content swirling around me. I felt that perhaps the most important aspect of what we were doing was the resultant photographs, and I knew that I was performing the role of the devout American Theravādan. I felt the eyes of onlookers present and distant as we meditated, and how that witness punctured the inwardness of the meditation practice. And I remembered the Buddha, sitting in meditation at the border, trying and ultimately failing to stop a massacre by sitting alone in an inhospitable place. I was pretty sure our protest would be useless, and that the monk's revolution would fail to unseat the government, if that was one of their ends. But the bonds of shared faith and community deepened for some who were there, and I know from friends that the photos got through to at least a few people. I remember it was a beautiful fall day in the city.

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[1] Ryan Thompson, "Occupy Meditation," The Merit Exchange, http://www.themeritexchange.org/2011/blog/occupy-meditation/.

[2] Margarita M., "#Occupysamsara: 99+1 Meditation at Liberty Plaza," The InterDependence Project, http://www.theidproject.org/blog/margoshka/2011/11/22/occupysamsara-991-meditation-liberty-plaza.

[3] Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003). 202.

[4] The Buddha stands up in front of a crowd to teach, and simply holds up a flower. Nobody in the congregation understood except Mahakassapa (Skt., Mahakaśyapa), who smiled, indicating his recognition and enlightenment. The myth is recounted in the Mumonkan, a book of koan (teaching stories used as seeds of inquiry) used in the Rinzai Zen tradition, the tradition in which Robert Aitken had trained in Japan. See Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku* (New York: Weatherhill, 1977). 41.

[5] Attributed to Bodhidharma, who brought Zen/Ch'an from India to China. See Nelson Foster; Jack Shoemaker, ed. *The Roaring Stream: A New Zen Reader* (Hopewell: Ecco Press, 1996). 6.

[6] "The Buddha, Shakyamuni, our teacher, predicted that the next Buddha would be Maitreya, the Buddha of love. [...] It is possible that the next Buddha will not take the form of an individual. The next Buddha may take the form of a community, a community practicing understanding and loving kindness, a community practicing mindful living. And the practice can be carried out as a group, as a city, as a nation." Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Next Buddha May Be a Sangha," *Inquiring Mind* 10, no. 2 (1994).

[7] Bikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005). 3-4.

[8] Ethan Nichtern; Shōken Michael Stone, "An Open Letter from Buddhist and Yoga Teachers and Leaders in Support of the Occupy Movement," Occupy Samsara, http://occupysamsara.org/. Nichtern is also the founder of the InterDependence Project, referenced above. [At time of publication, the website has expired.]

[9] Stephen Batchelor, *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime* (New York: Riverhead, 2000). 128.

[10] see Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary*, Wheel Series (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973). The text strongly promotes the Bodhisattva ideal in opposition to the earlier "disciple" path.

[11] Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).

[12] See Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 247. Avalokiteśvara is generally depicted as male, while Quan Yin is female. Sometimes both gendered pronouns are even used in the same scripture. Zen writings tend to use her Chinese/Japanese name: Quan Yin/Kwan Yin, and conceptualize her as female. Indian and Tibetan traditions use Avalokiteśvara.

[13] Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary*, 90.

[14] W. H. D. Rouse, *The Jataka, Vol. 4*, ed. E. B. Cowell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1901), 96.

[15] (Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.51) Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 2012), 1188-92. See also Bhikkhu Anālayo, "MahāPajāPatī'S Going Forth in the Madhyama-āGama," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 18 (2011). for a discussion of the historical incongruities of the story, including the possibility (emphasized in the Ekottarika-Āgama parallel) that the Buddha had himself suggested the women shave their heads, don robes, and live a celibate life *at home* as an alternative to formal admission into the renunciate saṅgha. While this version diminishes the performative aspect of the head-shaving and robes as protest gestures, they still are potent symbolic gestures when combined with the long, difficult walk included in both accounts. The proclamation of gender equality in relation to contemplative potential is common even among the now perhaps more socially-conservative Theravāda laity, as expressed by Bengali Buddhist teacher Dīpa Ma, who responded to the conventional belief that a person had to be reborn as a man to become a Buddha saying, "I can do anything a man can do". See Schmidt ***

[16] Pāli: *Tato disvāna maṃ satthā, deva-saṅgha-pu-rak-kha-taṃ; Sitaṃ pātukaritvāna, imamatthaṃ abhāsatha. 'Tapena brahmacariyena, saṃyamena damena ca; Etena brāhmaṇo hoti, etaṃ brāhma-ṇa-muttaman'"ti.* (Theragāthā 12.2) https://suttacentral.net/thag12.2 on 25/06/2015.

[17] Fitzgerald, Timothy, "Ambedkar, Buddhism, and the Concept of Religion" in S. M. Michael, ed. *Untouchable, Dalits in Modern India* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

[18] Jayashree B. Gokhale, "The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change: The Buddhist Conversion of Maharashtrian Untouchables," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45, no. 2 (1986).

[19] http://www.ambedkar.org/impdocs/22Vows.htm accessed 6/25/15.

[20] Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Lay Mass Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 134.

[21] A colorful but misleading label. Burmese Buddhist robes are brick red, not saffron yellow/orange, and of course it's not really a revolution of it fails, is it? I prefer "monastic uprising" as describing more precisely the situation.

[22] Much of my discussion of the politics of *dāna* in Burma is informed by Ingrid Jordt's wonderful book, especially her chapter, "Sacred Giving and the Politics of Sincerity", as well as my personal experience as an ordained monastic in Burma in 2002. Ibid., 96-138.

[23] Ibid., 134-36.

[24] Ibid., 134.

[25] Ibid., 196-97.

[26] Bertil Lintner, "The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma," (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), 84.

[27] Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjectures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 129.