

# AN ENGAGED BUDDHIST RESPONSE TO JOHN RAWLS'S *THE LAW OF PEOPLES*

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## ABSTRACT

In *The Law of Peoples*, John Rawls proposes a set of principles for international relations, his "Law of Peoples." He calls this Law a "realistic utopia," and invites consideration of this Law from the perspectives of non-Western cultures. This paper considers Rawls's Law from the perspective of Engaged Buddhism, the contemporary form of socially and politically activist Buddhism. We find that Engaged Buddhists would be largely in sympathy with Rawls's proposals. There are differences, however: Rawls builds his view from the idea of independent nation-states, while the Buddhists see the world more in terms of a single humankind, the members being highly interdependent with one another, and also with the physical world. The Buddhists would also push harder than Rawls for global structures building multilateralism, restrict more severely justifications for war and behavior in war, stress economic justice more heavily, and insist on all the human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

KEY WORDS: *Engaged Buddhism, globalization, international law, multiculturalism, John Rawls, human rights*

JOHN RAWLS IS WIDELY REGARDED as the most important philosopher of Western liberal political thought of the twentieth century. In *The Law of Peoples*, he takes the idea of justice articulated in his magnum opus, *A Theory of Justice*, and on that basis constructs a set of basic principles and norms for international law and practice (Rawls 1999, 3). Importantly, Rawls claims that his Law of Peoples could be accepted and followed by a "decent" society—defined as a nonaggressive society that respects human rights and in which the citizens play a substantial role in making political decisions (Rawls 1999, 3, 88)—that does not embrace Western liberal political theory; he demonstrates this using the hypothetical case of a nonliberal Muslim people. Thus Rawls implicitly invites consideration of his *Law of Peoples* from the perspective of other cultures, particularly those based on different fundamental principles. In this paper, I will take up this implicit invitation to consider the possible response of other peoples to Rawls's vision of a Law of Peoples. I will do so from the perspective of Buddhism.

Buddhism, like any major world religion, is vast. It has existed for 2500 years, spread throughout much of the world, and developed a great

many sects and schools of thought. Consequently, when one composes a Buddhist response to a topic, one must choose a particular Buddhist perspective from which to speak. As this is a topic in political philosophy, I will speak from the perspective of Engaged Buddhism. That is, my thinking in this paper is based on the thinking on social and political issues articulated by the Engaged Buddhists. The particular engagement with John Rawls in this paper, however, is my own.

Engaged Buddhism is a form of socially and politically activist Buddhism that has flourished throughout the Buddhist world in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It has no central origin, creed, or institutional headquarters, but developed separately in each Buddhist country with sufficient political freedom, in response to the social, economic, and/or political issues and crises facing that people. While its origins have thus been multiple, it has manifested again and again a rather consistent pattern of values, including (1) emphases on the preciousness of human life, compassion, social engagement, and nonviolence; (2) an approach shaped by the traditional Buddhist philosophical principles of interdependence, causality, and no-self (*anatman*); and (3) Buddhist self-transformative practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and moral self-discipline. In the West, its best-known leaders are the Dalai Lama of Tibet, Thich Nhat Hanh of Vietnam, and Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma/Myanmar, who need no introduction from me, but there are many other important leaders, among whom must be mentioned A.T. Ariyaratne, who founded and heads Sarvodaya Shramadana, a huge development and peace organization in Sri Lanka and the largest NGO in Asia; and Venerable Maha Ghosananda, the head of Cambodian Buddhism, often called the Gandhi of Cambodia, a critical leader for peace and reconciliation in that part of the world. There are many other important leaders and thinkers as well as millions of ordinary Buddhists engaged to one degree or another in these movements.<sup>1</sup>

While this movement is flourishing, it must be admitted from the start that its political philosophy is in its infancy. Nevertheless, its political philosophy is far more developed than that of any other branch of Buddhism. Its approach has been to draw on classical and core Buddhist philosophical and ethical principles and extend them in new directions, such as discussions of democracy and human rights, of liberalism and communitarianism, of economic development and North-South relations. It has made particularly significant contributions to the theory and practice of nonviolent activism. Let us, then, turn to Rawls and consider what an Engaged Buddhist response to his work might be.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Engaged Buddhism, see Queen and King 1996, Queen 2000, and King 2005.

If one were to paint with the broadest possible brushstrokes the practical content of Rawls's *The Law of Peoples*, it would clearly be a proposal with which Engaged Buddhists would have a great deal of sympathy. As pragmatic perfectionists committed to eliminating as much suffering from life as possible, Engaged Buddhists would embrace Rawls's goal of a "realistic utopia" (Rawls 1999, 11). They would strongly approve the Law of Peoples's overall aim to remove the underlying causes of war, its affirmation that human rights transcend national sovereignty, its respect for cultural pluralism, and its effort to establish a duty to help the less fortunate. Given this generally positive view of Rawls's Law, let us examine the details of that Law from an Engaged Buddhist perspective.

Rawls's Law of Peoples consists of eight principles, of which the following five merit discussion from an Engaged Buddhist perspective:

1. Peoples are free and independent, and their freedom and independence are to be respected by other peoples.
2. Peoples are to observe a duty of nonintervention.
3. Peoples have the right of self-defense but no right to instigate war for reasons other than self-defense.
4. Peoples are to honor human rights.
5. Peoples have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime [Rawls 1999, 37].

Rawls's first principle, "Peoples are free and independent, and their freedom and independence are to be respected by other peoples," is immediately striking from a Buddhist point of view. On the one hand, and, most important, Engaged Buddhists are certainly interested in the principle of political self-determination, which I understand Rawls to mean by "independence" here. Tibetan Buddhists, in particular, are waging an international campaign for political autonomy or political independence from China based on a right to political self-determination and the Tibetans' identity as a separate people. In this regard, Engaged Buddhists in general, and Tibetan Buddhists in particular, would strongly welcome this first principle of Rawls's Law.

On the other hand, Buddhist metaphysics constitutes a sustained challenge to the very idea of independence. This raises several questions. Rawls claims not to be speaking of metaphysical independence here, but only of political independence. This is an important qualifier, but does it entirely resolve the issue for Buddhists? From a Buddhist point of view, one cannot help wondering whether Rawls's claim that peoples universally *are* free and independent, even as a political claim, may be more substantively based in metaphysical assumptions than Rawls would have us believe. I see three possibilities here: (1) A Buddhist might

suspect that Rawls conceives *peoples* as free and independent because of a metaphysical commitment to freedom and independence as such. If this were the case, Buddhists might have a problem with Rawls's first principle, at least to some extent. (2) However, as we have seen, Tibetan Buddhists are waging an international campaign for political independence. Is the Tibetans' political campaign then inconsistent with their metaphysical views? (3) Or is Rawls simply correct in suggesting that his political ideas are separate from, and do not require, any particular metaphysical set of beliefs? Let us explore this.

From a Buddhist point of view, when one looks carefully, freedom and independence are found nowhere. To a Buddhist, we live in a world of interdependence, or mutual causality, summed up in the term, *idappaccayatā*, that is, conditionality, or the state of having "this" as condition. The broadest formulation of this concept is expressed thus by the Buddha: "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases" (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, 927). That is to say, things come into being through the causation and conditioning of other things; what is brought into being by causes and conditions serves, in turn, as cause and condition of other things. Reality is a great web of mutual construction or interdependence.

While interdependence is a basic metaphysical principle in Buddhism, it is also a generalized observation of the world. In the political realm, for example, there is no absolute independence *as such*, and the Tibetans are well aware of this even as they press their claim for self-determination. This awareness has concrete and practical consequences for the kinds of outcomes that they seek in their struggle with China and for the way in which they engage in their struggle. To the Tibetans, the fact that Tibet and China exist side-by-side means that they are *not* independent of each other and necessitates that they find a form of *living with each other* that is mutually satisfactory. Can Tibet and China ever be independent of each other? Historically, Tibet and China have invaded each other again and again, and have exercised varying degrees of influence, threat, suzerainty, and dominion over varying portions of each other for centuries. They are distinct peoples, but independence does not correctly state their relationship. Tibet wants political self-determination and certainly wants to put an end to Chinese destruction of its culture, religion, and way of life. However, in important respects, they recognize that Tibet will never be free of China and China will never be free of Tibet. They will always be a part of each other's existence. To speak too freely and unqualifiedly of political freedom and independence obscures an important aspect of political reality.

Shall we conclude, then, that the Tibetans contradict themselves insofar as they struggle for independence yet do not believe in independence?

Let us consider further. A second central Buddhist concept, *anātman*, or no self, may help clarify this matter. This concept holds, first, that there is no self, soul, or other core of identity in the human being. We are composite beings, made up of many constantly changing parts. Much of which “I” am constructed, moreover, is or was what one might call “not-I”: air, food, and water, ideas learned from parents and teachers, social roles learned from all those around one, pop music lyrics, images ingested from TV and advertisements, and the like. Thus there is no absolute line between “I” and “not-I.”

Because of the interdependence, the same applies to “things” in the world around us; there is no absolute separation between things and in this sense, things lack a “self.” The Buddha says, “All formations are impermanent; all phenomena are nonself” (Bodhi 2000, 946). As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, “a sheet of paper is made of non-paper elements” (Nhat Hanh 1987, 46): sunlight, rain water, minerals, the logger, the manufacturer, and the like. This is the nature of all of life. The world is not a container of objects, but a dynamic, constantly evolving pattern of intricately, mutually constructing elements (in Mahayana Buddhism, even these elements are so interactive that they cannot be conceived as separate things). This applies to human-constructed realities, such as societies or states, as well. Tibet is made of non-Tibet parts (India and China, most significantly); China is made of non-China parts (India, all of East Asia, and certainly its “minorities,” which might well be conceived as separate peoples).

Yet there is a certain nominal self as well. Individual persons have names, bodies, and unique histories. Countries have their soil, rocks, and water, their national language, traditions, culture, and way of life. So, there is a nominal selfhood that can be and is used for practical purposes. It is a mistake with serious significance, however, to think that this nominal selfhood is an absolute reality, to overlook the vast interconnectedness, to think that persons, things, or countries can be correctly understood as separate. They are not separate. They are themselves, and they are not themselves.

In sum, there *is* uniqueness, but there is no separation, no independence. This applies to persons, things, and societies/states. There is a Tibet, not in an absolute sense, but as a unique pattern that has evolved from the interaction of nominal self (soil, mountains, biota, indigenous religion, and cultural mores) and nonself (Buddhism from India, Chinese interactions of all kinds). Those whose lives are inseparable from that unique pattern naturally want it to flourish. There is no justification for crushing it. But that pattern is importantly inclusive of nonself parts.

All of this may sound quite abstract and removed from political realities, but it is not. The reality of interdependence has significant consequences for one’s view of international relations. The Dalai Lama is a

good example of the kind of thinking that starts from the fact of interdependence. He writes, “[T]he modern world is such that the interests of a particular community can no longer be considered to lie within the confines of its own boundaries” (Dalai Lama 1999, 165). That is, due to globalization and its effect of heightening international interdependence, it is no longer possible to think of one’s “own” legitimate interests separately from the interests of “others.” Our interests are highly interconnected. In his well-known “Five Point Peace Plan for Tibet,” the Dalai Lama writes,

The world is increasingly interdependent, so that lasting peace—national, regional, and global—can only be achieved if we think in terms of broader interest rather than parochial needs. . . . In order to resolve regional conflicts, an approach is required that takes into account the interests of all relevant countries and peoples, large and small [Dalai Lama 1987, 1].

This thinking is the foundation of the Dalai Lama’s approach to Tibet’s struggle with China. The Tibetans not only insist that what the Chinese are doing is wrong and demand that they stop; they go on to look at the pattern of regional interdependence between India, China, and Tibet. With the Chinese occupation of Tibet, China came to border directly on India. Pointing out that historically Tibet served as a buffer between the great powers of India and China, the Tibetans proposed that Tibet be made into a demilitarized “zone of peace” (Dalai Lama 1987, 4). In this way they proposed that the interests of all parties—India, China, and Tibet—would be served by asserting a particular form of political independence for Tibet based upon the particular form of interdependence of the countries in the region.

This kind of thinking does not apply only to Tibet’s situation *vis-à-vis* China. The challenge for political theory, from the perspective of an Engaged Buddhist like the Dalai Lama, is to express the correct balance between the reality of interdependence, on the one hand, and the reality of the nominal selfhood of peoples and their just desire for self-determination, on the other. For the Dalai Lama, then, heightened interdependence in a globalizing world is changing the political landscape for everyone:

[T]he more the world economy evolves, the more explicitly interdependent it becomes. As a result, every nation is to a greater or lesser extent dependent on every other nation. The modern economy, like the environment, knows no boundaries. . . . And the more interdependent our economic relationships, the more interdependent must our political relationships become [Here he cites the European Union as the most developed example, with other regional groupings as lesser examples]. . . . Each of these testifies to the human impulse to join together for the common good and reflects the continuing evolution of human society. What began with relatively

small tribal units has progressed through the foundation of city-states to nationhood and now to alliances comprising hundreds of millions of people which increasingly transcend geographical, cultural, and ethnic divisions. This is a trend which I believe will and must continue [Dalai Lama 1999, 198–199].

Thus, as is typical for Buddhist intellectuals, he sees reality as dynamic and evolving; in this case, reality is evolving in such a way as to make our interdependence more and more apparent and prominent as an economic, environmental, and political reality.

The other side of the picture is the nominal selfhood of Tibet and other peoples. Attention to interdependence must be balanced by attention to nominal selfhood. Again, the Dalai Lama:

We cannot deny . . . that parallel to the proliferation of these political and economic alliances there is also a clear urge toward greater consolidation along the lines of ethnicity, language, religion, and culture. . . . What are we to make of this seeming paradox—the trend toward transnational cooperative groupings, on the one hand, and the impulse toward localization on the other? In fact, there need not necessarily be a contradiction between the two. We can still imagine regional communities united in trade, social policy, and security arrangement yet consisting of a multiplicity of autonomous ethnic, cultural, religious, and other groupings. There could be a legal system protecting basic human rights common to the larger community which left the constituent communities free to pursue their desired way of life. At the same time, it is important that the establishment of unions comes about voluntarily and on the basis of recognition that the interests of those concerned are better served through collaboration. They must not be imposed. Indeed, the challenge of the new millennium is surely to find ways to achieve international—or better, *intercommunity*—cooperation wherein human diversity is acknowledged and the rights of all are respected [Dalai Lama 1999, 199].

It would seem that the Dalai Lama agrees with Rawls that *some* kind of divisions among humankind is both inevitable and desirable (Rawls 1999, 36). Looking at current international trends, he sees these groupings as being primarily based on commonalities of ethnicity, culture, and religion. Inasmuch as these groupings should be based on self-interest, it would seem that they could and should be relatively transient and evolving. People should be free to establish themselves in whatever groups they choose; as their interests evolve, the groups would naturally evolve. From this perspective, to think in terms of nation-states is to introduce a false selfhood—a fixed, independent entity—into the picture in a way that distorts reality.

What, then, shall we conclude with respect to the questions raised above? Is Rawls's first principle based on a metaphysical view in such a

way that Engaged Buddhists, with a different metaphysical view, must reject the former? Alternatively, are the Tibetans inconsistent in demanding political independence while adhering to a metaphysical view denying independence? Or, finally, is Rawls correct in stating that his political proposals are independent from any particular metaphysical view? I believe we may reject the second alternative immediately. The Tibetans are not inconsistent. They are demanding political self-determination for a group with nominal selfhood but, importantly, they are doing so in a way that never loses sight of their interdependence with their neighbors. They ultimately imagine a multiplicity of shifting autonomous groups arranging themselves into a multiplicity of regional communities for the welfare of all—in other words, they attempt in their version of a realistic utopia to balance nominal selfhood and interdependence, self-interest, and the good of all.

With regard to our first and third alternatives above, we should conclude that neither quite states the case. The Engaged Buddhists would not wish to reject Rawls's first principle; as we have seen, political independence or self-determination is vitally important to the Tibetans in particular. However, it also seems that Rawls's political vision is not entirely independent of his other philosophical views. Consequently, the Engaged Buddhists, while fully endorsing Rawls's call for political self-determination as a necessary component of a Law of Peoples, would nuance that call with a much greater emphasis, in the larger vision of a "realistic utopia," on interdependence and its consequences. Let me elaborate on this point.

Rawls reads to a Buddhist as if he sees the world, politically, as a container with fixed, separate objects (nation-states) in it. A Buddhist will suspect that Rawls does not recognize just how interdependent/globalizing the world we live in is, and the inevitability (barring catastrophe) of its becoming evermore so. Of course, there has always been ecological interdependence. The same is true of culture; ever since the development of human civilization, the world has never been a container with separate cultural objects—people travel, trade, share ideas and artifacts. With the explosion of the human population and the development of technologies, the interaction of peoples becomes evermore pervasive, evermore significant a part of cultural, economic, social, and political reality. For example, we may call to mind the spread of populations over "borders" (refugees, people in search of a livelihood), the spread of disease (AIDS, SARS), and environmental pollution over "borders," the spread of information and ideas by means of electronic communications; we may think of global trade with multinational companies and cartels, the World Bank and the IMF, NAFTA, OPEC, and the European Union; we may consider the spread of Western culture, American culture, and the English language. There *are* peoples; there *are* states. But they are



very much made of nonself parts. From a Buddhist perspective, Rawls invites criticism for attempting to construct a forward-looking vision of a “realistic utopia” that does not foreground these hugely powerful aspects of interdependence.

The limited nature of Rawls’s engagement with issues of interdependence, and the great significance of that limitation, can be seen in his discussion of the “role of boundaries.” He acknowledges that a society’s boundaries may well be arbitrary but sees them nonetheless as inevitable and pragmatically useful. He has strong arguments on both points. With regard to the inevitability of boundaries between peoples, he points out that “in the absence of a world-state,” which he sees as highly undesirable, “there *must* be boundaries of some kind.” He explains their pragmatic usefulness in constructing a state as a form of property:

As I see it the point of the institution of property is that, unless a definite agent is given responsibility for maintaining an asset and bears the loss for not doing so, that asset tends to deteriorate. In this case the asset is the people’s territory and its capacity to support them *in perpetuity*; and the agent is the people themselves as politically organized. . . . [T]hey are to recognize that they cannot make up for their irresponsibility in caring for their land and its natural resources by conquest in war or by migrating into other people’s territory without their consent [Rawls 1999, 38-39].

Rawls appends a footnote acknowledging that the last statement implies “at least a qualified right to limit immigration” in a world in which “well-ordered” societies accept a duty to assist “societies burdened by unfavorable conditions.”

There is a certain truth to these points, but from an Engaged Buddhist perspective their adequacy seems nonetheless quite limited. There are other truths that impinge upon this issue. The notion of regarding territory as property is especially problematic in the context of global economic realities. Rawls divides the world into “well-ordered” and “burdened” societies (Rawls 1999, 105). He conceives the distinction between the two in terms of their political ordering (more on this later). However, most people—correctly, I believe—see a more significant global division between wealthy and poor nations, and the Engaged Buddhists should be counted among those with this latter view. From an Engaged Buddhist point of view, Rawls’s view that territory is property is inadequate in a world in which some of the most prominent “well-ordered” societies (the United States and Canada, for example) have, in fact, taken that territory from other peoples, in the process reducing those peoples to tiny and ailing remnants of their former numbers and well-being.

Moreover, Engaged Buddhists’ compassion, as well as their view of economic justice, would make it difficult for them to affirm Rawls’s “right to limit immigration” if left at that. From this perspective, Rawls’s approach

is simply asking the wrong questions. Engaged Buddhist views of economic justice are based upon their views of human equality or, as they often put it, human sameness. Sri Lankan scholar L.P.N. Perera has written a commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights supporting the declaration from the point of view of Theravada Buddhism and the teachings of the Buddha. He writes,

Buddhism is one of the earliest religions to recognize the fundamental equality of all human beings belonging, as they are, to one community in the sense that peoples' essential natures are the same whatever their individual differences . . . may be. This sense of equality is further reinforced by the Buddhist view that (a) all human beings, in the final analysis, face the same basic phenomena of birth, decay and dissolution . . . , and (b) that at the same time human beings are capable of overcoming these problems by attaining the very highest moral and spiritual level by a development of the human potential [Perera 1991, 23–24].

In a similar vein, the Dalai Lama derives universal human rights from human sameness:

No matter what country or continent we come from we are all basically the same human beings. We have the common human needs and concerns. We all seek happiness and try to avoid suffering regardless of our race, religion, sex or political status. Human beings, indeed all sentient beings, have the right to pursue happiness and live in peace and in freedom [Dalai Lama 1998, xviii].

On the basis of this affirmation of human sameness and our consequent equal right to happiness, Engaged Buddhists derive an affirmation of a universal right to the economic wherewithal needed for happiness, a decent standard of living. Samdhong Rinpoche, the current Kalon Tripa of the Tibetan government in exile, writes that “all persons have a right to a decent standard of living for themselves and their families” (Samdhong 1996, 18).

The Engaged Buddhist notion of economic justice requires that all people's basic economic needs (“not greeds”) be met. Thus, their vision of a decent society, let alone a “well-ordered” society, is one in which people's basic needs for food, shelter, and the like are universally met. Thus, A.T. Ariyaratne, the Engaged Buddhist leader who has done by far the most serious thinking on economic issues, declares that the superpowers “have no moral right to spend \$900 billion a year for armaments when 900 million people are starving” (Ingram 1990, 133). Similarly, when he heard that the number of millionaires in the United States was multiplying, the Dalai Lama said, “This I consider to be completely immoral. . . . While millions do not even have the basic necessities of life—adequate food, shelter, education, and medical facilities—the inequity of wealth distribution is a scandal” (Dalai Lama 1999, 175–76).

On the basis of this understanding of the Engaged Buddhist concept of economic justice, let us contrast Rawls's statement with this statement from the Dalai Lama:

It is time for all those living in the industrially developed nations to give serious thought to changing their lifestyle. . . . [T]his is not so much a question of ethics. The fact that the population of the rest of the world has an equal right to improve their standard of living is in some ways more important than the affluent being able to continue their lifestyle. If this is to be fulfilled without causing irredeemable violence to the natural world—with all the negative consequences for happiness that this would entail—the richer countries must set an example [Dalai Lama 1999, 194].

Here the starting assumptions are quite different. Assumption one: "The population of the rest of the world has an equal right to improve their standard of living." In the Dalai Lama's approach, the correct starting point is not "us" and "them" or any form of divided humanity, but all persons viewed together, at once, as equally and objectively having the same rights, the same claim on the world and on life, and the same right to happiness regardless of any other considerations. Assumption two: avoiding "irredeemable violence to the natural world" is of transcendent importance. In this worldview, the fact of the inseparability of the human world from the natural world is of first importance, alongside the equality of persons, and this fact therefore needs to be taken into account in all visions of what might be. For Engaged Buddhists, interdependence, inclusive of human interdependence with the natural world, is perhaps the most significant fact of life; it should therefore be a guiding principle in all our thinking.

Thus, from an Engaged Buddhist point of view, Rawls's focus on the selfhood of the nation-state (concern with the boundary line—the border which must be protected from the nonself, the "other"—must be the epitome of concern with this national selfhood) causes him to lose his focus on the main point, human suffering. In fairness, the mitigation of human suffering is the overriding concern of Rawls's book. However, in this context, his thinking in terms of nations as fixed entities, or "selves," causes him to lose his focus on that larger concern. In fact, he fails altogether to see that the borders of the nation-states play a significant role in the complex of causes and conditions that construct that suffering, as, for example, in the vast imbalance in wealth between the global North and South.

We live in a world in which what Rawls calls the "well ordered" societies have so much more wealth than some of their near neighbors that the life expectancies of their respective populations can differ by decades, and people from the poorer countries will risk their lives to enter the wealthier countries in order to work illegally at jobs that no one in the wealthier countries wants and send home money making it

possible for those at home to have enough to eat. The image of a vastly wealthy and wasteful country such as the United States making itself into a fortress while outside millions of the destitute pound on the walls we erect to keep them out is not one that Engaged Buddhists could possibly embrace. Rawls does affirm a duty on the part of more affluent states to assist “burdened” societies. While this might help assuage such differences, it seems to be a Bandaid, not a solution, and not a principle that could construct a utopia, however realistic.

From a Buddhist perspective, our habit of thinking of the world as a container, itself inert, of separate objects is an important part of our difficulty in determining how we can best live together. It would seem that in order to think through this problem in any kind of adequate way we need to be able to see the extent to which the world is constructed of interdependent, mutually constructive parts. We need to be able to see that this is a world in which, while the United States is the United States and Mexico is Mexico, the United States is also Mexico (How many Mexicans work in the United States? How many Mexicans cross the Rio Grande every day?) and Mexico is the United States (How much “American” money is sent home to Mexico every day? How many American corporations operate factories in Mexico in order to profit from cheaper labor costs?). Shoring up the divisions between us seems exactly the wrong approach.

The Buddhist sense that Rawls pays insufficient attention to interdependence can be seen as well upon examining his second principle: “Peoples are to observe a duty of non-intervention.” What kind of meaning does this principle have in a world that is globalizing head-long? Left unqualified, and as a general principle in the twenty-first century, such a principle would be nonsense. We intervene constantly in the lives of other societies. Indeed, “intervention” is too weak a word: we play huge *constructive* roles in the lives of other societies. Of course, Rawls is not referring to general patterns of international interaction. His principle means that, outside of certain specified circumstances, peoples have a duty not to intervene “by diplomatic and economic sanctions, or in grave cases by military force” in each other’s societal lives (Rawls 1999, 80).

What is Rawls’s concern here? There are two possibilities. One is a concern with the suffering that might be caused by such intervention. The other is a concern to emphasize the importance of national sovereignty. While these two concerns overlap, Rawls’s concern is clearly the latter. Buddhist concern is much more with the former. From a Buddhist point of view, one wants to ask why we should privilege national sovereignty so heavily. There are important pragmatic reasons for taking national sovereignty seriously, of course. However, the *exclusive* way in which Rawls focuses on national sovereignty once again obscures some forms of pain and suffering that are caused by our international interdependence. Clearly, global or regional eco-catastrophe or financial market

crash is capable of causing immense suffering. How can one begin to envision a utopia if one does not take into account the need to prevent such catastrophic fruits of our interdependence? Yet there is not a word about these concerns in Rawls's Law. Why focus, as Rawls does, so exclusively on protecting one's border, when one's border is already so porous, unable to keep out the devastating pollution that drifts with the wind and water, unable to prevent the arrival of the poor seeking a better life, unable to prevent the effects of the September 11, 2001 attacks from reverberating around the world? However can we speak of a "duty of non-intervention"? Should we not, perhaps, speak instead—as a Buddhist might—of a "duty to interact in ways that do not harm others"?

Contrast again the comments of the Dalai Lama above, which claimed that, "the challenge of the new millennium is surely to find ways to achieve international—or better, *intercommunity*—cooperation wherein human diversity is acknowledged and the rights of all are respected" (Dalai Lama 1999, 199). In some respects, this statement says the same thing that Rawls's Law says. In both, the concern is to find an international *modus vivendi* constructed primarily of a respect for cultural diversity and an insistence upon universal human rights. The crucial difference between them is that the Dalai Lama assumes that the way to achieve this is by focusing upon our interconnectedness, a single humankind, and constructing the optimal forms to shape the way that communities cooperate and work together, while Rawls assumes that the right approach is to start from the assumption of separation, that is, national sovereignty, and encroach upon it very little. Again, the Dalai Lama's view here is not that all peoples should blend into a single unity of one flavor where there are no more Tibetans or Chinese, but only a blend of the two. Such a view might be held to be the contrary of Rawls's view, but it is not a Buddhist view. Indeed, Third World Buddhists struggle energetically against such a world, a world which, in practice, would mean the elimination of Tibetan culture by the Chinese, the swallowing of Thai culture by American. Buddhists consistently characterize themselves as following the Middle Way, a mean that avoids extremes. In this case the Middle is between the extremes of Rawlsian individualism on the one hand, and single flavor melting-pot world unity on the other. In the above quotation in which the Dalai Lama speaks of optimizing intercommunity cooperation, his point is to emphasize the challenge of wisely working with the fact of interdependence while respecting and preserving human diversity. Does this seem contradictory? Note that the Dalai Lama himself is the leading proponent of Tibet's autonomy and particularity at the same time that he regularly describes himself as an internationalist. He is the most important Buddhist leader in the world at the same time that he is a great exemplar of inter-religious understanding and cooperation. This is what the Buddhist Middle Way

looks like. The self is constructed of nonself parts. The Dalai Lama is a living example of being oneself in an interdependent world.

In the end, how much difference is there between Rawls and an Engaged Buddhist such as the Dalai Lama on the points that we have thus far canvassed? Rawls assumes a social contract model of political relations. He starts from the current political realities of nation-states and contemplates where negotiations between political actors in such states could take us. The Dalai Lama sees nation-states as transient structures in the evolution of an ever-dynamic, evolving political reality in which interdependence is a more salient fact than it is for Rawls. The Dalai Lama emphasizes forms of power and aspects of reality—economic power, environmental constraints, population pressures, globalizing communications media—that highly constrain political realities, while Rawls strongly emphasizes the political to the near exclusion of other factors. Thus their respective “realistic utopias” are somewhat different, Rawls’s envisioning relatively greater separation between peoples or states, the Dalai Lama’s recognizing and embracing relatively more mutual give and take. Nonetheless, the Engaged Buddhists would strongly endorse the political self-determination that Rawls calls for in his first two principles; they just would have stated this principle rather differently.

Rawls’s third principle states: “Peoples have the right of self-defense but no right to instigate war for reasons other than self-defense.” War is in some respects a difficult subject for Buddhism. There has never been a broadly accepted just war doctrine written by any serious Buddhist thinker.<sup>2</sup> There is much in Buddhism that points toward principled pacifism. On the other hand, Buddhist countries have always had armies and fought wars. Among the Engaged Buddhists, none of whom is actually in power in any country, there is no unity on this subject. Aung San Suu Kyi has expressed her expectation to have an army for self-defense purposes

<sup>2</sup> In her “In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka,” Tessa Bartholomeusz (1999) makes the case that some prominent Sri Lankan Buddhists have constructed a just war ideology justifying the Sinhalese war against the Tamils on Sri Lanka. This justification is based largely on a fifth century, postcanonical text, the *Mahavamsa*. This text chronicles purported events on Sri Lanka and is of great importance on that island; outside of Sri Lanka, however, this text has not been influential. I agree with Bartholomeusz that Sri Lankan Buddhists can and do construct a just war ideology largely on the basis of this text. However, this ideology, along with the *Mahavamsa* on which it is based, is peculiar to Sri Lanka and has not been duplicated elsewhere. Bartholomeusz also names the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* as a text cited by Sri Lankan Buddhist just war ideologists. Unlike the *Mahavamsa*, this text has canonical status and importance outside Sri Lanka. However, none of the Engaged Buddhists cite it in their efforts to think through Buddhist political philosophy. I suspect that outside Sri Lanka, just war ideology has not developed in Buddhism because of the fundamental incompatibility of killing with Buddhist ideas of karma. See King 2003.

were she to take power in Burma. The Dalai Lama, as we have seen, has proposed that all of Tibet be made a “zone of peace,” entirely free of all armaments, serving as a demilitarized buffer between India and China.

Certainly, there is no question among the Engaged Buddhists that if war can be justified at all, it can only be justified for the purpose of self-defense. However, to speak of a “right” to engage in war for self-defense seems at once to say too much and too little. Recall again the Dalai Lama, writing that, “the challenge of the new millennium is surely to find ways to achieve international—or better, *intercommunity*—cooperation wherein human diversity is acknowledged and the rights of all are respected.” If there is such a thing as a “right” to engage in defensive war, language that seems to me questionable from a Buddhist perspective, it must be balanced against a *duty* to engage in intercommunity cooperative behavior of all kinds—not just as a last moment effort to prevent a particular war, but as the normative behavior expected of all societies. Perhaps one could say that if it is a right, defensive war is not the kind of right, like a human right, to which one is entitled by virtue simply of existing, but the kind of right that one earns. Rawls seems to have something like this in mind when he indicates that “decent” peoples, that is, nonaggressive peoples who honor human rights, have the right to war in self-defense (Rawls 1999, 92). From a Buddhist perspective, this stipulation does not seem to require enough. For Buddhists, a society perhaps has earned a right to engage in defensive war only if it has fulfilled global norms of cooperation; that is, if it has eschewed unilateralism—acting in its own interest without regard for the welfare of other societies and the planet as a whole—in favor of multilateralism—working together with others for the good of the whole.

Let us take this thinking a step further. From an Engaged Buddhist perspective, one of the most important political facts is that we share one small and increasingly crowded planet. In such a world, pro-social, multilateral behavior should be the norm. Increasingly, it must be if we are to survive. In such a world, there should be many channels and structures that build cooperative relationships and work out challenges to cooperative relationships as they develop. Not only that; in such a world, individual societies should be integrated in so many ways—economic, political, social cultural—into the larger whole that any individual society’s interest and well-being would be highly integrated with the interest and well-being of others. If a society consistently behaved as a good global citizen in this kind of world, one would expect that such a society would have many good friends. Such a society would not stand alone. The deterrence effect of pro-social behavior in such a world would be great. This observation parallels Rawls’s belief that well-ordered peoples would not wage war against each other (Rawls 1999, 94). It also echoes the rationale for the creation of the European Union.

In such a world, and under such circumstances, if a society were attacked, it would perhaps have fulfilled the traditional just war stipulation not to go to war except as a last resort, after all else had been tried. More important for Engaged Buddhists is the conviction that, until such a world is in being, it is an urgent and primary duty to act energetically to bring such a world into being. One cannot imagine a Buddhist Law of Peoples that did not make the envisioning of cooperative, multilateral relationships and institutions a primary focus. Such a world is not beyond realism; it is under construction, in a limited way, in the European Union.

Returning to Rawls's just war view, we note that he specifies surprisingly few limitations on the right to self-defense in his "realistic utopia." From a Buddhist perspective, this is again not adequate. From the latter perspective, even for a "realistic" utopia more or less within Rawls's parameters, one would expect prohibitions like the following: 1) The use of nuclear weapons would be prohibited, even for reasons of self-defense. Their destructive and killing power is simply too great and indiscriminate. The elimination of nuclear weapons is universally urged by Engaged Buddhists. Rawls is somewhat unclear on this point. On the one hand, he states that nuclear weapons need to be retained by "decent" peoples to keep outlaw states "at bay and to make sure they do not obtain and use those weapons against liberal or decent peoples" (Rawls 1999, 9). On the other hand, he sees the use of nuclear weapons against just such an outlaw state as morally wrong inasmuch as such weapons are an attack on a civilian population which is itself not responsible for the actions of its government (Rawls 1999, 95). This point needs some clarification in Rawls; it is difficult to understand how he can have it both ways. Engaged Buddhists press for the elimination of nuclear weapons—the Japanese, not surprisingly, particularly intensively. 2) The use of weapons that leave a lasting effect in the physical world after the conclusion of hostilities would be prohibited, including landmines, defoliants, and chemical and biological weapons. The protection of noncombatants, which is ordinarily part of just war theory, should be understood to embrace the physical world as well as those people who come after the conclusion of hostilities. 3) Rawls asserts that there must be an exemption from the prohibition of attacks on civilians—which must be the general rule—in cases of "supreme emergency" (Rawls 1999, 98). Such an emergency, in his view, exists when there is no other way to overcome an evil of the nature and magnitude of German Nazism, which recognizes no possibility of a political relationship with enemies, which relies exclusively upon force, brutality, and terror to gain its ends, and which intends to impose a regime that will eliminate all well-ordered human societies (Rawls 1999, 99). Buddhist ethics—like the Catholic ethics which Rawls cites (Rawls 1999, 104–105)—simply does not and cannot condone the



killing of innocent human beings. Moreover, Rawls's emergency exemption opens the door to an extremely dangerous slippery slope in which anyone can claim that the threat they face constitutes an emergency.

A word should also be said in response to Rawls's assertion that a statesman cannot be a pacifist. Rawls argues that a Quaker, for example, who opposes all wars, could not serve in the highest offices of a state since a statesman "must be prepared to wage a just war in defense of liberal democratic regimes," as the citizens of the state ordinarily expect. "The statesman must look to the political world, and must . . . be able to distinguish between the interests of the well-ordered regime he or she serves and the dictates of the religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine that he or she personally lives by" (Rawls 1999, 105).

This view might well strike an Engaged Buddhist as peculiar. Assuming that the statesman allowed the public to know his/her moral commitments before taking office and was nonetheless voted in, is there a moral problem if s/he then acts on those commitments? It seems improper to require a statesman to support the idea of war in an era in which war has become so dangerous to the life of the planet that many are looking for a way to end war. It may be like the situation in legal proceedings in which only people who accept the death penalty are permitted by prosecution attorneys to join a jury; such people turn out not to be neutral about applying the death penalty, but somewhat in favor of applying it. If there were someone who opposes all wars and who was visionary enough to see a way to help us progress toward the goal of bringing an end to war, would we want to bar his/her way? The Quakers who served in the early Pennsylvania legislature opposed going to war against the Native Americans at a time when many of their neighbors were eager to do so. However, since Quakers kept their word and honored their treaties with the Native Americans, the latter never had cause to go to war with the Pennsylvanians as long as the Quakers controlled the government, but indeed had amicable relations. "Penn's colony had no army and yet maintained peace with its native [American] neighbors for 70 years, a record unmatched in American colonial history" (Fager 2002, 1). Sometimes principled opposition to war may be part of a larger social/ethical vision and commitment that envisions establishing intercommunity relations on an entirely different footing, a footing that might have the potential to significantly lower the likelihood of the development of hostilities. Is this what one would want to bar out of hand without giving it the opportunity to be brought forward at a high level of visibility and authority?

Rawls's fourth principle holds that "peoples are to honor human rights." Human rights play a central role in Rawls's Law of Peoples. For Rawls, while "they set a limit to the pluralism among peoples," "their fulfillment is sufficient to exclude justified and forceful intervention by

other peoples” (Rawls 1999, 80). In other words, peoples are to be allowed to do whatever they want within their societies (thus allowing for cultural pluralism) so long as what they do does not violate the human rights of the individuals in that society (thus limiting cultural pluralism at this point).

Engaged Buddhists have a keen interest in the subject of human rights. The demand for human rights has formed a cornerstone of two major Engaged Buddhist struggles: the struggle of the Tibetans against the Chinese annexation of their country, and the struggle for “democracy and human rights” in Burma/Myanmar led by Aung San Suu Kyi. In addition, in its struggle to recover from the Khmer Rouge era, the Buddhist leadership and monkhood of Cambodia has turned to teaching human rights as part of its effort to restore a functioning society where normalcy and decency was lost. While some Buddhist intellectuals have some philosophical reservations about human rights, those Buddhists who are directly engaged in political struggle and those who live without human rights under inhumane regimes very much insist upon the universality of human rights and want the protections that they represent (King 2005, 118). Thus the lyrics of a popular song from the streets of Burma declare, “I am not among the rice-eating robots . . . Everyone but everyone should be entitled to human rights” (Suu Kyi 1991, 174). For the Tibetans and Burmese, the usefulness of human rights is lodged very much in their challenge to national sovereignty.

If this were all that there was to Rawls’s incorporation of human rights into his Law, the Engaged Buddhists would see eye to eye with him. However, it is not. Rawls intends for human rights to mark the limit of “decent,” or internationally acceptable, behavior within any given society. He limits the list of human rights that he regards as able to play this role, that is, to trump national sovereignty and thereby invite intervention from other societies. Of rights not involved in this demarcation he has nothing to say. From a Buddhist point of view, there is a problem here. When the Engaged Buddhists discuss human rights they often make a point of saying that they seek for their countries the entire list of human rights listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Of course, they are not trying, like Rawls, to specify rules for international intervention. They are, however, speaking from experience of what is necessary for the living of a decent human life. The point at issue, then, is what is necessary for a decent human life.

If I read him correctly, Rawls specifies the rights named in articles 3-18 of the UDHR as rights that a society must respect in order to be considered “decent.” These include the rights to “life, liberty and security of person”; freedom from slavery and torture; equality before the law and fair legal process; and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Rawls 1999, 65). He specifies that the latter rights are not “equal” inasmuch as a decent society may privilege one religion over others and may require

membership in a given religion in order to serve in some public positions, and a state religion “may be the ultimate authority within society and may control government policy on certain important matters” (Rawls 1999, 74). However, religious freedom must be sufficient to prevent any religion from being “persecuted, or denied civic and social conditions permitting its practice in peace and without fear” (Rawls 1999, 74).

The rights that Rawls excludes, then, include, among others: article 2’s protection of minority rights (prohibiting unequal recognition of human rights based upon “distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin”); article 19’s right to freedom of opinion and expression; article 20’s right to assembly; and article 26’s right to education. This is a sobering list. Certainly Engaged Buddhists would insist upon these rights as necessary for a decent human life. Here the discussion begins to hinge on one’s definition of a decent human life. Of course, the latter is a philosophical matter. Rawls wishes to avoid this discussion inasmuch as he wants the Law of Peoples to be free of dependence upon any particular religious or philosophical doctrine of human nature (Rawls 1999, 68). However, it seems to this author that it is impossible to define “decency” in societal or national behavior without a fairly clear notion of human nature to set the standard.

In the Buddhist case, at any rate, a decent human life is defined by the opportunity to engage in a process of self-development. A human being is a being very much in process. Our task as human beings is to continually work on realizing our potential, that potential being self-perfection or Buddhahood. Here is how an important Engaged Buddhist thinker, Phra P.A. Payutto of Thailand, puts it:

Man is the best of trainable or educable beings. He has the potentiality of self-perfection by which a life of freedom and happiness can be realized. In order to attain this perfection, man has to develop himself physically, morally, psycho-spiritually and intellectually. Right development of oneself leads naturally and by necessity to self-perfection. This is the law of the Dharma [here, natural law, or reality itself] . . . . By this law, it entails that every individual should be let free, if not provided with the opportunity, to develop himself so that his potentiality can unfold itself and work its way towards perfection. Ideally, all conditions, both social and natural, should be made favourable to and all kinds of help should be provided for the self-development of every individual . . . . That is to say . . . that every individual has the right to self-development . . . .

If the right to self-development is denied or restricted, it is right to struggle for it. If help and favourable conditions are not provided for it, it is good to make exertion towards the encouragement of the same. . . . That every human being has the right to self-development and, thus, to freedom and happiness is an imperative of the ethics which is based on the law of the Dharma [i.e., Buddhism] [Payutto 1982].

The language that Phra Payutto uses here is most striking. The great themes of his social thought are interdependence and cooperation. It is *only here*, in speaking of the “right” to self-development, that Payutto speaks positively of “struggle.” Other Engaged Buddhist thinkers are similar. For such Buddhist thinkers, the opportunity to engage in self-development is so essential to who we are as human beings that it is of transcendent importance and simply cannot be given up. Of course, this “right,” if one calls it that, is inclusive of many other rights. The process of development of which we are speaking requires a very free and open society in which there exists a climate conducive to the free and open discussion and exploration of views, in which people can meet freely and openly at will, in which all people have real access to the most broadening kind of education—a society, in short, that makes possible access to a wide variety of ideas, beliefs, and practices, and that allows people to experiment with these ideas and practices. Rawls’s omission of articles 19 and 20 could limit the free exchange of ideas. His omission of articles 2 and 26 seems to indicate that a “decent” society could restrict a woman’s, or a minority’s, access to education. His qualification of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is worrying. These characteristics would not fit an Engaged Buddhist definition of a decent society. (Of course, we are not discussing this matter in the context of defining criteria for external intervention; Buddhists have a very different idea of intervention, as we have seen above.) Egalitarianism is a critically important principle among Engaged Buddhists. They point out that it is a defining feature of Buddhism that it separated itself from Hindu society’s caste system. It is a defining feature of Buddhism and crucial to its ethics that all persons, male and female, and all classes are accepted as having the potential of enlightenment. Indeed, during the lifetime of the Buddha, persons of both sexes and all classes were confirmed as having achieved this goal. To make this goal available to everyone and to remove any restrictions on its pursuit by anyone is not something that Buddhist thinkers can regard as optional for a decent society. The Dalai Lama writes,

[I]t is the inherent nature of all human beings to yearn for freedom, equality and dignity, and they have an equal [right] to achieve that. . . . Diversity and traditions can never justify the violations of human rights. Thus discrimination of persons from a different race, of women, and of weaker sections of society may be traditional in some regions, but if they are inconsistent with universally recognized human rights, these forms of behavior must change. The universal principles of equality of all human beings must take precedence [Dalai Lama 1998, xviii–xix].

In short, Engaged Buddhists would agree with Rawls’s idea that a “decent” society should be defined, at least in part, as one that respects

human rights. However, unlike Rawls, they would insist upon the full list of rights recognized in the UDHR.

One wonders why Rawls gave up such things as full egalitarianism and the protections represented by all the rights represented in the UDHR. Rawls's stated concern is to demonstrate that the Law of Peoples is not ethnocentric or specific to Western liberal democratic regimes (Rawls 1999, 121). The UDHR has received such widespread international and multicultural support that it is difficult to understand why Rawls felt it necessary to offer the world fewer rights than those that are already widely accepted in this document. However, if ethnocentrism is his concern, it seems a shame that Rawls did not consider a hypothetical Engaged Buddhist regime as his example of a non-Western "decent" people. This might have allowed him to demonstrate the congruence between the Law of Peoples and a non-Western (Engaged Buddhist) society which, in turn, would not have required him to give up any of the human rights in the UDHR. This would work as follows.

While an Engaged Buddhist regime would embrace all the human rights of the UDHR in addition to a "right to self-development," it would probably not fully fit the cultural pattern of Western liberal societies. We have seen that the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* results in a view in which the individual and society are highly interdependent and mutually constructive. This view is culturally expressed in a relatively greater emphasis in Buddhist societies, as compared to Western liberal societies, on the importance and value of the group (the family, the community, society as a whole, the eco-system), as opposed to the individual. There is a great emphasis on harmony within the group, on fitting in, on give and take. Teachings stress awareness of how much one is dependent upon the group and how much one owes the group in return. Thus there is a certain communitarian tendency in Buddhist culture which pulls it away from Western individualistic culture. This is a matter of degree, however. Certainly, it is vitally important in Buddhist culture, as we have seen, for the individual to have the socio-political freedom and freedom of thought necessary for self-development. However, that self-development is by no means expected to produce a self-centered individual; quite to the contrary, the process of self-development is expected to produce growth in selflessness and in compassionate concern for others.

Because of this ethos, Engaged Buddhist intellectuals from time to time voice rather pointed concern about what they take as Western liberalism and what they see as its individualism run amok. There is often a negative view of the fruits of liberalism in the West. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu of Thailand writes,

Liberal democracy . . . upholds the ideal of freedom. . . . But the freedom it upholds is so ambiguous that it seems always to be controlled by the power

of human defilements [vices] . . . The ambiguity of the meaning of liberal democracy promotes the idea that anything one wants to do is all right. The thug as well as the wise man claims freedom for himself. . . . We must accept the fact that we all have defilements . . . Liberal democracy cannot deal effectively with this fact [Buddhadasa 1989, 184–185].

Aung San Suu Kyi shares this concern and speaks for many Buddhists in modernizing Asian countries when she expresses her mixture of admiration for Western society's freedoms and her apprehension of its perceived excessive individualism. She states,

I have always said that once we get democracy, there will be people who misuse their democratic rights and use them just for their own pleasure or personal gain . . . Democracy is far from perfect. . . . I don't agree with everything that's happening in the West, which is why I say that I would like our democracy to be a better, more compassionate and more caring one. That is not to say we have fewer freedoms. But that we will use these freedoms more responsibly and with the well-being of others in mind [Suu Kyi 1997, 157–158].

Aung San Suu Kyi, among others, is searching for a way to have Western freedom without its individualism and selfishness. How this could be achieved is unclear. P.A. Payutto, like Suu Kyi, suggests that a greater sense of responsibility is necessary when he writes, "the more freedom there is, the more is a sense of responsibility necessitated. If liberty is coupled with a sense of responsibility, a balance—a Middle Way—will result, ensuring the creation of a true democracy" (Payutto n.d., 11). For these Engaged Buddhist thinkers and leaders, the interdependence of individual and society, consciously or unconsciously necessitates the discovery of a middle way between individualism and communitarianism. In short, while this is obviously political philosophy in its infancy, the concern is clear. Engaged Buddhists want the freedoms that are essential to human self-development, but they do not want to be a Western individualistic society.

Rawls's fifth principle states, "Peoples have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime." Rawls argues that this duty of assistance is a duty to assist societies to become politically well ordered rather than wealthier (Rawls 1999, 106). For Rawls, "the aim is to realize and preserve just (or decent) institutions, and not simply to increase, much less to maximize indefinitely, the . . . level of wealth" (Rawls 1999, 107). Rawls believes that the cause of being a "burdened" society lies primarily in its political culture and that therefore the latter is the appropriate target of international intervention and support.

Rawls's duty to assist others, as such, is sure to win admiration from Buddhists. The first virtue among Buddhists is compassion, defined as

caring about the suffering of others. Buddhist practice is intended to make one an evermore compassionate person. The Dalai Lama points out, characteristically, that “my right to happiness carries no more weight than others’ right” (Dalai Lama 1999, 184). The issue here for Buddhists is whether the definitive criterion of this duty to help others rests in the kind of political structures a society has, as Rawls argues, or whether this duty would be better defined in terms of suffering, a great deal of which is caused by poverty. On this point, we can be brief.

At base, Buddhism is a very simple ideology, holding that suffering is bad, effort to eliminate suffering is good, and the goal of life is to eliminate all eliminable suffering. Rawls asserts that the root cause of being “burdened” is political, but this assumption is highly debatable. Engaged Buddhists observe that suffering is rooted in numerous causes of highly interdependent spiritual, psychological, economic, social, political, and other natures. If one wants to eliminate suffering, attention must be paid to all of these causal factors.

For Engaged Buddhists, with their focus on suffering, the most acute forms of suffering are what come to the fore. Certainly much of this suffering is rooted in political structures, but a great deal of acute global suffering is also rooted in economic structures and entrenched poverty. A world divided between deep poverty and great affluence elicits the strongest language from the Engaged Buddhists, as we have seen. More just global economic structures that do not privilege the haves against the have-nots, the global North against the South, are urgently called for by the Engaged Buddhists. Would it not be simpler to define the duty to assist others in terms of suffering and whatever causes that suffering, rather than to restrict one’s efforts to political institutions? Moreover, Rawls is concerned to define this duty to assist others in such a way that its limits become clear. If Buddhists were to do such a thing, the duty of assistance would be defined in terms of meeting the basic necessities of life, as exemplified in the quotation from the Dalai Lama above.

The present essay has taken up John Rawls’s implicit invitation to test his Law of Peoples from the perspective of a non-Western worldview. What may we conclude? From a Buddhist perspective, a world such as Rawls envisions would be a great step forward and therefore much to be desired. Engaged Buddhists would agree with Rawls’s effort to remove the underlying causes of war, his affirmation that human rights transcend national sovereignty, his respect for cultural pluralism, and his effort to establish a duty to help the less fortunate. Engaged Buddhist differences with Rawls are largely matters of degree, emphasis, and nuance. Because of the Buddhist core focuses on interdependence and *anātman*, they see the world more in terms of a single humankind, the members being highly interdependent with one another, and also with the physical world. Because of their emphasis on nonviolence, they would push harder

for global structures building multilateralism and mutual reliance and limit more severely justifications for war and behavior in war. Because of their view of human beings as equal and perfectible, as well as some of their own current political struggles, they would insist on the full list of human rights in the UDHR. Their view of the importance of interdependence would require them to highlight economic and environmental considerations alongside Rawls's emphasis on political considerations. Compassion and a strong sense of human equality, plus their own direct experience of conditions in the Third World, would cause them to urge more just global economic structures as a high priority. These differences of degree, emphasis, and nuance notwithstanding, an Engaged Buddhist people would be happy indeed to be part of a Rawlsian Society of Peoples.

Nonetheless, from an Engaged Buddhist point of view, Rawls's vision of a "realistic utopia" is insufficiently visionary. In a rapidly globalizing world, focus on nation-states seems rather backwards looking. From a Buddhist perspective, when attempting to envision a future, ideal or otherwise, interdependence should form the basis of the conceptual framework.

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