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SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND PRINCIPLED HUMANITARIAN ACTION DURING ARMED CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will highlight the correspondences between the Socially Engaged Buddhism movement, especially as defined in the practice of the late Thich Nhat Hanh, and the core principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence originally adopted by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. These principles also underpin the neutral, impartial and independent approach to humanitarian action, used by agencies working under the auspices of the United Nations' Inter-Agency Standing Committee and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, along with those who have signed the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief. We hope this paper is a modest but useful contribution to create better understanding and to generate dialogue among different stakeholders in the humanitarian field, particularly in the context of armed conflict.

KEYWORDS Socially Engaged Buddhism; humanitarian principles; humanitarian action; armed conflict; Red Cross; Red Crescent; OCHA

Hatred never ceases through hatred in this world.

Through love alone, they cease. This is an eternal law.

The Dhammapada, v. 5 (Narada Thera 1978)

Introduction

Contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB), and its founding figure, the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), emphasise meeting the needs and responding to the suffering of our time (Plum Village Monastery [n.d.a](#)). From the experience of war in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh's form of Buddhist activism was born of a desire to bring assistance to those suffering under the bombings and turmoil of war. This Engaged Buddhism movement has since been dedicated to the work of inner transformation for the benefit of individuals and society. It is important to keep in

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mind that SEB does not consider itself to be a ‘new movement’ – rather, it regards its teachings as a restatement of early Buddhist doctrine. Indeed, Thich Nhat Hanh claims that ‘Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism’ (Nhat Hanh in Malkin 2003). The movement, as understood by Thich Nhat Hanh, recognises that the Buddha-Dharma has always had the flexibility to adapt its ‘skilful means’ (*upāya-kauśalya*) to the historical, cultural, social and economic context of a particular place and age. In this paper, we will consider from a philosophical perspective the correspondence between the core values of SEB and humanitarian principles. In doing so, we hope to strengthen the universality of the norms that underpin each.

Contemporary SEB: Meeting the needs and suffering of our time

In the mid-twentieth century, a distinctive – yet non-centralised – movement was developed as an ‘ecumenical’ Buddhist endeavour to contextualise and actualise the ancient teachings of loving-kindness and compassion (respectively known as *mettā* and *karuṇā* from the four *Brahma-vihāras*, or sublime ways of living). Intended to meet the needs and suffering of modern times, this movement was called ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism’ or ‘Engaged Buddhism’ (SEB). Although the SEB movement first appeared in a Mahāyāna context (i.e. Chan/Zen Buddhism) – and can be understood as a contemporary expression of the Bodhisattva ideal of striving to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings – the development of Engaged Buddhism involved many teachers from nearly all Buddhist Schools.¹ Their common objective has been to translate the wisdom and compassion that is at the heart of the Buddha’s teaching into ‘skilful means’ (*upāya-kauśalya*), in order to alleviate the suffering of all people – and of all sentient beings.

SEB was influenced by earlier efforts in the twentieth century to apply Buddhist foundational principles to address social problems in a tangible way. One notable predecessor of SEB is Dr B. R. Ambedkar’s (1891–1956) neo-Buddhism movement in India, which championed social equality, particularly for those of the Dalit (a former ‘untouchable’) class. In addition, the Humanistic Buddhism developed by Chinese Buddhist monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) served as an inspiration for the later work of the so called ‘Four Heavenly Kings’ of Taiwanese engaged Buddhism, namely the monks Hsing Yun 星雲 (b. 1927), Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (1931–2009) and Wei Chueh 惟覺 (1928–2016), and the nun Cheng Yen 證嚴 (b. 1937) (Sharkey 2017). Taixu’s idea of *renjian fojiao* (人間佛教, i.e. ‘Buddhism for this world’), was well received by Buddhist reformers in Vietnam during the 1930s and 1940s who would in turn inspire the teachings and actions of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (DeVido 2009, 435–439; Gleig 2021). It is well known that a young Thich Nhat Hanh had the opportunity to interact very closely with the monk Yen Pei 演培 (1917–1996), another key exponent of the

Chinese movement of Humanistic Buddhism who then became active especially in Southeast Asia.² Nhat Hanh is widely considered to be one of SEB's founding figures and was the first to use the term 'Socially Engaged Buddhism' to describe this non-sectarian and activist strand of Buddhism (Plum Village Monastery n.d.a). In a spirit similar to that which animated Henri Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Thich Nhat Hanh was moved to action in order to respond to the suffering caused by war:

When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on – not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you. When I was a novice in Vietnam, we young monks witnessed the suffering caused by the war and were very eager to practice Buddhism in such a way that we could bring it into society. That was not easy because the tradition did not directly offer Engaged Buddhism, so we had to do it by ourselves. That was the birth of Engaged Buddhism. (Nhat Hanh in Malkin 2003)

In 1964 during the Vietnam–American war, the country was afflicted not only by the war itself, but also by various disasters (what today might be referred to as 'complex emergencies'). All around the country people were affected by these compounding crises, unable to meet their basic needs and, in most cases, being without access to any supplies. At that time, Sister Chan Khong (b. 1938) and her teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, with a group of volunteers, founded the School of Youth and Social Service, a grassroots relief organisation. With nearly 10,000 volunteers, this politically neutral movement was based on the Buddhist principles of non-violence and compassionate action (Valente 2016). In addition, Thich Nhat Hanh created the Order of Interbeing in the early 1960s to support young monks, nuns and lay practitioners who wanted to make a positive contribution in a country torn by war (Eppsteiner 1998). Of one early intervention by the Order after a flood, Sister Chan Khong recalled:

The flood victims that the volunteer relief workers had come to help were either on the verge of death – starving, shivering, and homeless – or else they were dead, bloated and rotting. The volunteers themselves were also in danger. They knew that at any moment they could be killed in the crossfire. (quoted in Miller 2017)

Travelling to remote impoverished areas, they started distributing rice, beans, clothing, cooking utensils and medical supplies. Besides providing this relief, they have developed a way of delivering aid with love, compassion and calm (Miller 2017).

While the movement has inspired its adherents to improve the lives of others, it is necessary to also acknowledge some of the criticisms that have been levelled at Engaged Buddhism. From a doctrinal perspective, Sallie King

claims that some conservative Buddhists argue the objective of Buddhism is to cultivate an attitude of non-attachment to the problems of *saṃsāra* (i.e. the world of birth, death, rebirth) and SEB compels its adherents to become stuck in *saṃsāra*. Relatedly, in many sects of Buddhism, it is seen as a meritorious act for laypeople to give gifts to monks (i.e. *dāna*) – the purer the recipient of the gift, the better. There is a fear that by getting involved in (or attached to) worldly affairs, monks who are active in SEB do not allow the local laity to accrue as much merit through their *dāna* (King 2009, 7–8).

These criticisms seem to overlook an important dimension of Buddhist philosophy: the differentiation between two levels of reality, between relative or conventional reality (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate reality (*paramārtha-satya*). In the realm of ultimate truth, only Enlightenment can truly overcome the roots of suffering and should therefore be the focus of the practice. However, in the realm of relative truth, the aim *is* to enhance happiness for self and others and alleviate suffering for self and others through the practice of active compassion. These two aspects of the Buddhist path are related to the non-duality of Wisdom (relating to ultimate truth) and compassion (relating to relative truth).

Moreover, Thich Nhat Hanh argues that Buddhism has always been engaged in the problems of the world. He claims that while Buddhism allows for the possibility of ‘solitary Buddhas’, that was not the path taken by the historical Buddha – after his enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama did not stay under the Bodhi Tree. Rather, he returned to teach both monastics and laypeople (King 2009, 9). Indeed, A. T. Ariyaratne, the founder of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, claims that up until colonial times, Buddhist monks would have had a greater role in secular affairs, such as medicine, education and government. By favouring their own Western institutions, colonial governments pushed the monks out of the secular sphere. Consequently, he regards Socially Engaged Buddhist monks as simply reclaiming their traditional role in society, rather than inventing a new (modern) one (King 2009, 10).

Since the protection of lives, the preservation of the dignity of human beings, and the alleviation of suffering are all historically at the heart of SEB (and, indeed, of Buddhism more generally), these themes provide us with an entry point to explore the tradition’s convergences with international humanitarian law (IHL) and the humanitarian principles.

The humanitarian principles and their relationship with IHL

The humanitarian principles have their origins in the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (RC/RC). Although they were first proclaimed in their current form at the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1965, they could be

considered to be a codification of the Movement's mission and ways of working since its origin a century earlier.

In 1991, the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality were then adopted by United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 46/182³ to guide the work of the newly created Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which was established to coordinate international relief actions undertaken by organisations that are active in the humanitarian sphere. In 2004, UNGA Resolution 58/114⁴ added the principle of independence to this list. These principles also guide the work of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which helps to coordinate the day-to-day operations of humanitarian actors on the ground.

The humanitarian principles have since underpinned the 'Neutral, Impartial and Independent Humanitarian Action' or 'NIHA' approach. All agencies that work under the auspices of IASC – whether they be an RC/RC organisation, inter-governmental organisation (IGO), non-governmental organisation (NGO), or faith-based organisation (FBO), acting either individually or as part of a consortium – have agreed to be guided by these principles. This includes the Tzu Chi Foundation, an organisation that was expressly set up as an engaged Buddhist group.

The humanitarian principles have also influenced the development of the RC/RC and NGO Code of Conduct,⁵ a voluntary code that guides humanitarian action outside of situations of armed conflict and which can be adopted irrespective of an organisation's affiliation with IASC. In addition, the NIHA approach also forms part of the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, another voluntary code that is widely used throughout the humanitarian sector (CHS Alliance, Groupe URD and the Sphere Project 2014, 8).

The humanitarian principles are not formally part of IHL. However, they have been recognised as being indispensable for helping humanitarian organisations to comply with their obligations under IHL, thereby maintaining the security of their personnel and their access to affected populations during armed conflict. Humanitarian actors are protected from attack in their own right during international armed conflicts⁶ and they are protected during both international and non-international armed conflicts because of their medical⁷ and/or civilian status.⁸ However, to benefit from these protections, they must not take 'a direct part in hostilities'⁹ nor (in the case of medical units) may they 'commit, outside their humanitarian function, acts harmful to the enemy'.¹⁰ Therefore, the safety of humanitarian actors depends upon their ability to observe strict neutrality in military affairs.

IHL requires parties to a conflict to allow and facilitate humanitarian relief to civilians in need (except where restrictions are in place for reasons of imperative military necessity).¹¹ Although it is primarily the responsibility of the state to ensure that the basic needs of the civilian population are met, if the state is unwilling or unable to provide such assistance, then access for

humanitarian actors becomes vitally important (Schwendimann 2011, 997). For their part, humanitarian actors must not 'exceed the terms of their mission',¹² and their relief must be 'impartial in character'.¹³ Therefore, to maintain their access (particularly in territories controlled by the state), humanitarian actors are expected to uphold the principles of neutrality and impartiality.

In addition to the role that the principles play in helping humanitarian organisations to comply with IHL in a formal sense, adherence to these principles helps them to build trust in a more informal way, especially when working with more than one party to a conflict. For example, when working with non-state armed groups (NSAGs), humanitarian actors' independence (both real and perceived) becomes especially important and can determine whether they are able to operate in areas under the control of a particular NSAG (Geneva Call 2016).

So, it is clear that organisations working in times of armed conflict – including those associated with the SEB movement – should adhere to the humanitarian principles if they wish to benefit from the protections and access that IHL bestows upon humanitarian actors. With this in mind, it may be helpful to further explore where the tenets of SEB align with the core humanitarian principles and – equally importantly – where they might diverge or be difficult for particular SEB groups to put into practice.

Core values of SEB and humanitarianism

When studying Buddhist texts deeply, one realises that they are not only about setting boundaries to negative behaviours. They also promote the development of positive attitudes, or 'virtues' in the Aristotelian sense. Similarly, the humanitarian principles at the same time represent practical guidelines to help humanitarian actors comply with their obligations under IHL and positive values that help to build trust and guide humanitarian response to armed conflicts and other emergencies.

In the Mahāyāna tradition, this aspect of Buddhist virtue ethics underwent a profound development at Nalanda University in Northern India during the fifth to twelfth centuries CE – an era that can be considered a golden age of Indian Buddhism. The most famous text of this time is probably *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*) by Shantideva (c. 685–c. 763). We would like to quote a few verses from Chapter 3, considering that they make an interesting link with the mandate of most humanitarian actors, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Verse 8. For all those ailing in the world,
Until their every sickness has been healed,
May I myself become for them
The doctor, nurse, the medicine itself.

Verse 9. Raining down a flood of food and drink,
 May I dispel the ills of thirst and famine.
 And in the aeons marked by scarcity and want,
 May I myself appear as drink and sustenance.

...

Verse 18. May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
 A guide for those who journey on the road.
 For those who wish to cross the water,
 May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.
 (Shantideva 2011, 48–49)

These three verses provide a sense of the deep compassion that is the guiding principle of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. These verses of Shantideva are considered by some to be a metaphorical rather than a literal call to action. However, to Socially Engaged Buddhists this is not simply a poetic description of otherworldly virtues, but a guide on how to conduct their lives and to engage with the world.

Similarly, contemporary humanitarianism represents a way to give practical effect to lofty values. In his *Commentary to the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, the ICRC jurist Jean Pictet (1914–2002) defined humanitarianism in the following terms:

Humanitarianism is a doctrine which aims at the happiness of the human species, or, if one prefers, it is the attitude of humanity towards mankind, on a basis of universality.

Modern humanitarianism is an advanced and rational form of charity and justice. It is not only directed to fighting against the suffering of a given moment and of helping particular individuals, for it also has more positive aims, designed to attain the greatest possible measure of happiness for the greatest number of people. In addition, humanitarianism does not only act to cure but also to prevent suffering, to fight against evils, even over a long term of time. The Red Cross is a living example of this approach. (Pictet 1979, 13)

Of course, Pictet was writing from a Red Cross perspective. However, since the humanitarian principles have their roots in the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, his observations regarding the humanitarian spirit that underlies the principles is nevertheless helpful for our analysis.

We will limit our investigation to the four core humanitarian principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – rather than the seven Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as the former play a central role in humanitarian responses during armed conflicts for a wider range of organisations, including FBOs. We argue that these four principles reflect standards and practices that are aligned with SEB ethics and values. They are not merely ‘imported Western norms’, but

rather present a way to embody Buddhist values in providing humanitarian assistance during situations of armed conflict and other emergencies.

The principle of humanity and correspondences with loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity (maitrī, karuṇā, muditā and upeksā), as well as the First Precept

It may be helpful to begin our analysis with OCHA's formulation of the principle of humanity, which describes a succinct but powerful call to action:

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings. (United Nations 2012).

The wording used to describe the same principle in the RC/RC and NGO Code of Conduct is slightly longer, but it similarly recognises that the aim of humanitarian action is to reduce human suffering:

The humanitarian imperative comes first

The right to receive humanitarian assistance, and to offer it, is a fundamental humanitarian principle which should be enjoyed by all citizens of all countries. As members of the international community, we recognise our obligation to provide humanitarian assistance wherever it is needed The prime motivation of our response to disaster is to alleviate human suffering amongst those least able to withstand the stress caused by disaster (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC 1994)

Of course, the problem of suffering is central to the teachings of Buddhism. According to tradition, the Buddha said, 'In the past, as today, I describe suffering and the cessation of suffering'.¹⁴ Moreover, in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the first teaching given by the Buddha after having attained Enlightenment, the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths that form the common ground for all schools of Buddhism.¹⁵ It is clear from this teaching that the fundamental goal of Buddhism is to alleviate suffering. Although this aim can be understood at a spiritual level as the aspiration towards enlightenment, it also applies to the worldly dimension of suffering, even in times of armed conflict. This is why we believe that the values and practices of SEB are fully compatible with the humanitarian principle of humanity.

One could even argue that the two first Noble Truths – (1) the truth of suffering (*dukkha*) and (2) the truth of the origin of suffering (*samudaya*) – describe reality as it is, rather than how one might wish it to be. Similarly, IHL acknowledges that wars and conflicts are a reality of the human condition, even though one may wish it to be otherwise. The third and fourth Noble Truths – (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and (4) the truth of

the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*marga*) – show the way to transform and heal suffering in oneself, and to enable others to do the same, and are of practical relevance to humanitarian responses and principles aimed at reducing and relieving suffering.

Four sublime states of mind have been taught by the Buddha: loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuna*), empathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*). These four attitudes are said to be excellent or sublime because they are the right or ideal way of conduct towards living beings (Pali *sattesu samma patipatti*). In addition, a series of four Buddhist virtues and the meditation practices used to cultivate them, known as the ‘Four Immeasurables’ (*brahmavihāras*), provide answers relevant to all situations arising from social contact. They are the great removers of tension, peace-makers in social conflict, and great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. They help to level social barriers, build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity, revive joy and hope, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism. They can be seen as a key Buddhist formulation of the principle of humanity.

In addition, the first Buddhist lay precept is ‘I vow to abstain from taking life’. We recognise our relationship to all life and realise that harming any living creature harms oneself. According to Sulak Sivaraksa (b. 1933), the Buddha said of the First Precept: ‘Identifying ourselves with others, we can never slay or cause to slay’ (Sivaraksa 1992). Here is a modern reformulation of the First Precept as used in the field of Engaged Buddhism:

Reverence for Life – Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insights of interbeing and compassion, and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, non-discrimination, and non-attachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world. (Plum Village Monastery n.d.b)

Whilst most Buddhists would understand the focus of the First Precept to be on abstaining from taking life, the concept of ‘reverence for life’ in SEB sets forth a positive duty to cultivate compassion and to protect the lives of others – an idea which is similar to the motivation expressed in the principle of humanity. The main difference between the two is that the Western cultural background that gave rise to the principle of humanity emphasises humankind as a unique species, while Buddhist teachings speak of protecting ‘all sentient beings’, which would include non-human life forms such as animals. The classic formulation of this principle is expressed in the *Metta Sutta*:

May everyone be happy and safe, and may all hearts be filled with joy. May all beings live in security and in peace – beings who are frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, invisible or visible, near or faraway, already born, or yet to be born. May all of them dwell in perfect tranquillity. (Nhat Hanh 2017)

The principle of impartiality and correspondences with the Edicts of Ashoka and equanimity (upeksā)

Whilst the principle of humanity establishes the motivation behind humanitarian action, the other humanitarian principles set out how humanitarian action should be conducted. As such, the principle of impartiality describes the way in which assistance should be rendered to others. This principle has its roots in the requirement under IHL for states to treat the wounded of both sides ‘without any adverse distinction founded on sex, race, nationality, religion, political opinions, or any other similar criteria’.¹⁶ As above, we shall begin our analysis with the OCHA wording of the principle: ‘Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions’ (United Nations 2012).

The only bases that may be used to help humanitarians decide who to assist and the order in which they will be seen are need and urgency of distress. The RC/RC and NGO Code of Conduct expands upon this principle:

Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone . . . Human suffering must be alleviated whenever it is found; life is as precious in one part of a country as another. Thus, our provision of aid will reflect the degree of suffering it seeks to alleviate . . . (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC 1994)

This version of the principle of impartiality restates the humanitarian imperative that requires human suffering to be met with a response. Interestingly, it also makes the claim that ‘life is as precious in one part of a country as another’. This value judgement helps to explain why it is so important for humanitarian assistance to be rendered with regard to need alone and not on the basis of extraneous matters, such as nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class, political opinions or who is my friend/enemy.

Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Dynasty, who ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent from 268 to 232 BCE, represents the first and most impressive example of Buddhist ethics and values applied in the field of governance and law (Rattini 2019). It is said that his full conversion to Buddhism came in the aftermath of the massacres during a war against the state of Kalinga, which reportedly killed over 100,000 people – including

many civilians – and resulted in the deportation of over 150,000 people. Ashoka wrote that he was ‘deeply pained by the killing, dying, and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered’ (quoted in Rattini 2019).

After his conversion, Ashoka formalised a set of ethical principles derived from Buddhist values in the famous Edicts of Ashoka (Rattini 2019). These edicts represent an inspiring effort to organise the state and government in accordance with the Buddha-Dharma. Here is a short excerpt from the *Kalinga Rock Edicts*, addressed to government administrators:

All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men While being completely law-abiding, some people are imprisoned, treated harshly and even killed without cause, so that many people suffer. Therefore, your aim should be to act with impartiality. It is because of these things – envy, anger, cruelty, hate, indifference, laziness or tiredness – that such a thing [acting with impartiality] does not happen. (Rattini 2019)

The 14 Edicts of Ashoka may be understood as customary rules that had a lasting influence within the Buddhist world. As such, the reign of Ashoka had a profound impact on later Buddhist conceptions of good governance and justice. Even at this early stage in the history of Buddhism, one can find an example of a leader who recognised the importance of treating others impartially, without fear or favour towards characteristics that might otherwise cause division. In order to achieve this, one needs to overcome and transform what is known in the Buddhist literature as the three poisons of the mind: ignorance, greed and hatred.

Likewise, the Buddhist principle of *upekṣā*, which means ‘equanimity’ but also ‘inclusiveness’ or ‘non-discrimination’, invites practitioners to treat all people equally. According to Asanga,¹⁷ we should consider that all beings have been our mother in some past lifetime and, therefore, we should treat all beings in the way we would treat our own mother (Wangyal 2002). This serves as a basis for loving-kindness meditation – which regards friends and foes equally. Thich Nhat Hanh put this understanding into practice by working with US veterans of the Vietnam–USA War. As King recounts:

It might seem strange that a Vietnamese should offer healing retreats for American veterans, but it is consistent with Nhat Hanh’s teaching about the way to deal with suffering Veteran Claud Thomas, who was carrying profound psychological wounds from the war, speaks of his shock when he first encountered Nhat Hanh at a retreat. He says he never knew the Vietnamese in any way other than as the enemy. Seeing Nhat Hanh, he suddenly realised that he was not his enemy. And he just started to cry. (King 2009, 82)

Upekṣā means cultivating equanimity in every situation, but it also means maintaining an equal attitude towards everyone. According to the Buddha's teaching, there is no fundamental difference between any humans. Every individual is valued and should be treated fairly and therefore with justice. Moreover, according to Mahāyāna Buddhism, everyone should be treated equally because all have 'Buddha Nature', i.e. the ability to become enlightened. Criteria such as nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions are therefore irrelevant.

The principle of neutrality and reflections from SEB

The corollary of impartiality is the principle of neutrality. Both principles denote a level of non-attachment to particular attributes, but the principle of neutrality specifically describes how humanitarian actors should conduct themselves in the face of (1) hostilities/conflict (i.e. military neutrality) and (2) controversies that could limit humanitarian access (i.e. political/racial/religious/ideological neutrality). The OCHA formulation of this principle is as follows:

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. (United Nations 2012)

As mentioned above, the price for humanitarian actors to be allowed to continue to pursue their objectives during times of armed conflict is that they remain completely out of the fight. In this regard, the principle of neutrality represents an affirmation that humanitarian actors will not engage in any hostile conduct which could jeopardise their protection or access during armed conflict. As a concrete example of how neutrality has been used by those affiliated with the SEB movement during the Vietnam-American War, King claims that:

Buddhist monks and nuns, dressed in their bright yellow robes and carrying Buddhist flags for visibility, entered into the villages and walked the villagers out, while armies waited on both sides to engage the battle. At other times, monastics helped establish cease-fire lines outside of villages by approaching both sides at considerable personal risk and convincing them to retreat to lines at a distance from the village. (King 2009, 80)

This description bears a striking resemblance to the role of the ICRC in providing protection to civilian evacuees during armed conflict – including by using a distinctive sign to make combatants aware of their presence and intentions. Unlike the red cross emblem, Buddhist flags are not recognised under IHL treaties. Nevertheless, the use of Buddhist flags in this specific context would have informally signalled to combatants that the nuns and monks were not in the fight. Underpinning the ability of both groups to move

around the battlefield with as little hindrance as possible and to access affected populations is their neutrality in military affairs – both real and perceived.

One important scriptural touchstone for SEB groups coming from a Mahāyāna tradition is the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sutra*. This sutra – which likely dates to the first century CE – recounts the story of Vimalakīrti, who is described in the text as having attained a level of spiritual development that surpasses that of many Bodhisattvas – perhaps even being second to the Buddha himself. However, what makes Vimalakīrti all the more remarkable is that he perfects the dharma as a layperson – a wealthy householder – rather than as a monk (Watson 1997).

This text was an important point of reference for the Chinese promoters of *renjian fojiao* from Taixu (Goodell 2008, 105–106) to Hsing Yun and Sheng Yen and, indeed, it is a common touchstone between Humanistic Buddhism in East Asia and SEB in South East Asia and the West.

In his own writing on ‘suffering caused by the lack of wisdom’, Thich Nhat Hanh quotes some verses from Vimalakīrti’s discourse on the Buddha Way – these verses may have some bearing on how SEB groups could approach military neutrality:

In the time of war
 Raise in yourself the Mind of Compassion
 Help living beings
 Abandon the will to fight
 Wherever there is furious battle
 Use all your might
 To keep both sides’ strength equal
 And then step into the conflict to reconcile. (Nhat Hanh 1987, 95)¹⁸

Moreover, non-violence should be a natural and necessary part of Buddhism, because violence is a product of dualism – i.e. an ‘us versus them’ ways of thinking. But when we are truly mindful, we realise that all phenomena are interdependent and endlessly interwoven. In Buddhism, particularly in those traditions that gave rise to SEB, there is no such thing as a separate individual. There is no such thing as a separate object, event, or experience, because no part of the world can exist apart from all others. Rather, everything that looks like a separate entity is dependent on, and interwoven with, everything else.

Therefore, from this perspective, taking sides in any kind of conflict is always the consequence of an ignorant state of mind that discriminates between aspects of reality that are ultimately interdependent. In contrast, the Order of Interbeing and other engaged Buddhist groups stand as a contemporary example on how the Buddhist values of non-violence and the recognition of interdependence can be applied to help improve society, especially during times of armed conflict.

In addition to abstaining from taking part in hostilities, the principle of neutrality also obliges humanitarian actors to refrain from becoming involved in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. This helps them to gain the trust of the entire population of a country and to maintain their freedom of access – regardless of who is in charge of an area or situation. RC/RC organisations tend to interpret this obligation strictly, while certain NGOs – especially those associated with particular political or religious causes – may apply the principle more liberally. This variability in approach is reflected in how the principle is formulated in the RC/RC and NGO Code of Conduct:

Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.

Humanitarian aid will be given according to the need of individuals, families and communities. Notwithstanding the right of [non-governmental humanitarian organisations] to espouse particular political or religious opinions, we affirm that assistance will not be dependent on the adherence of the recipients to those opinions. We will not tie the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to the embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed. (United Nations 2012)

Since the Code of Conduct relates to disaster relief outside of situations of armed conflict, there is no mention of neutrality in the military sphere. To a certain degree, the wording used in the passage above conflates neutrality with impartiality. Nevertheless, it still urges humanitarian actors to avoid giving the impression that their actions are designed to advance a particular political or religious cause. Indeed, many FBOs, such as Caritas and Islamic Relief, have agreed to follow this principle as it relates to their own operations.¹⁹ It stands to reason that this would not pose a problem for SEB groups either.

In fact, among the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings formulated by Thich Nhat Hanh that serve as the basis of SEB's engagement, several trainings emphasise the importance of maintaining a non-dogmatic worldview – and refer to the necessity of not taking sides in times of conflict. We draw attention to the first one below which states:

The First Mindfulness Training: Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, *even Buddhist ones*. We are committed to seeing the Buddhist teachings as a guiding means that help us learn to look deeply and develop understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for. We understand that fanaticism in its many forms is the result of perceiving things in a dualistic or discriminative manner. We will train ourselves to look at everything with openness and the insight of interbeing, in order to transform dogmatism and violence in ourselves and the world. (Nhat Hanh 2012) [emphasis added]

There is an obvious convergence between the principle of neutrality and these mindfulness trainings, which are essentially Buddhist reformulations of

ancient values as applied to our time. In both cases, the higher good – seen as the duty to alleviate suffering – supersedes allegiance to a specific sense of belonging such as a political, national, racial, ideological or even religious affiliation.

The Tzu Chi Foundation is an example of a humanitarian FBO based on Taixu's *renjian fojiao* that expressly claims to maintain political neutrality. As such, it has been allowed access to North Korea (King 2009, 6), and Myanmar during military rule (The Economist 2008). Tzu Chi (Hsing 2017, 188–192) and another Taiwanese humanistic Buddhist group, Fo Guang Shan (Johnson 2017), are two of the few Taiwanese organisations that are able to operate in the People's Republic of China. Their presence is tolerated by the authorities because they are not politically active in a way that might challenge the Chinese Communist Party. It should be noted, however, that despite their reputation for neutrality abroad, Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan seem to be more politically active within Taiwan.²⁰

There are certainly other engaged Buddhist organisations, such as some members of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, that have a stronger social or ecological agenda and may therefore find it difficult to remain strictly neutral when trying to advocate for social/ecological justice. These groups may regard engaging in potentially politically controversial matters as necessary in order to support the victims of oppression – and marginalised people more generally.

SEB is not a formal, structured movement with a common governance, and many different organisations within the Buddhist world are inspired by its underlying principles. All of them certainly abstain from taking part in hostilities. However, some organisations adhere to strict neutrality in the humanitarian sphere and others take a more activist approach.

As a practical matter, those organisations that follow strict neutrality in the political sphere may have fewer difficulties securing access to affected populations across the entire territory where there is an armed conflict. However, it is important to keep in mind that whilst IHL requires humanitarian actors to maintain absolute neutrality in the *military* sphere, the law does not require such actors to adhere to *political* neutrality as a condition for their protection. Therefore, SEB aid groups that adhere to either strict or activist interpretations of political neutrality represent equally valid expressions of humanitarianism and, indeed, Buddhist humanitarianism.

The principle of independence and further reflections from SEB

On the face of it, one may find it odd for a tradition that emphasises the radical interdependence of all beings to ever embrace 'independence' as a guiding principle. However, it is important to understand the specific meaning of this principle in the context of humanitarian action.

Since National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are auxiliaries to their respective governments in the humanitarian field, the original formulation of the principle emphasises the need for these organisations to retain their autonomy so they can act in accordance with the other principles at all times (e.g. a National Red Cross Society should never be obliged to follow a request from government to only give assistance to one ethnic group since that would violate the principle of impartiality). The principle of independence may also be read even more broadly to include *any* undue interference in a humanitarian organisation's work, whether it comes from the government or any other actor. This broader understanding is captured in OCHA's phrasing of the principle:

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented. (United Nations [2012](#))

The wording used in the RC/RC and NGO Code of Conduct reaffirms this idea that humanitarian actors should be free to make their own decisions about how to deliver assistance. In addition, it specifically includes donors in the list of potential actors who may try to steer the course of humanitarian work in a way that serves ulterior purposes.

We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy

... We will never knowingly – or through negligence – allow ourselves, or our employees, to be used to gather information of a political, military or economically sensitive nature for governments or other bodies that may serve purposes other than those which are strictly humanitarian, nor will we act as instruments of foreign policy of donor governments. We will use the assistance we receive to respond to needs and this assistance should not be driven by the need to dispose of donor commodity surpluses, nor by the political interest of any particular donor In order to protect our independence we will seek to avoid dependence upon a single funding source. (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC [1994](#))

This understanding of independence is reflected in Thich Nhat Hanh's Tenth Mindfulness training which states:

The Tenth Mindfulness Training: Protecting and Nourishing the Sangha

Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the practice of understanding and compassion, we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal power or profit, or transform our community into a political instrument. As members of a spiritual community, we should nonetheless take a clear stand against oppression and injustice. We should strive to change the situation, without taking sides in a conflict. We are committed to learning to look with the eyes of interbeing and to see ourselves and others as cells in one Sangha body. As a true cell in the Sangha body, generating mindfulness, concentration, and insight to nourish ourselves and the whole community, each of us is at the same time a cell in the Buddha body. We will actively build brotherhood and sisterhood, flow as a river, and practise to develop the three real powers –

understanding, love, and cutting through afflictions – to realise collective awakening. (Nhat Hanh 2012)

In addition to this specific instruction from Nhat Hanh to protect the Sangha from instrumentalisation, the general Buddhist predisposition towards non-attachment to views could be seen as encouraging non-attachment to the will of external actors of any stripe.

The practical value of the humanitarian principles for SEB groups

To better understand how SEB groups view the practical utility of the humanitarian principles and their compatibility with SEB generally, the authors approached Somboon Chungprampree, Secretary of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), to seek his thoughts on each principle.²¹ His response echoed much of what has been mentioned above. INEB sees the principle of humanity as fundamental. Similarly, impartiality is regarded as a principle that must be followed absolutely in all circumstances.

However, Chungprampree indicated that INEB takes a nuanced approach with regard to the principles of neutrality and independence; it views the application of these principles as depending on the particular circumstances prevailing at the time and whether one side or another upholds Buddhist and/or humanitarian values. Like other FBOs and NGOs, certain SEB groups reserve the right to engage in advocacy and protest – and to take sides to support oppressed people, as required. However, a group may adhere to neutrality and independence more strictly if it makes practical and humanitarian sense to do so, for example if it is involved with mediation or peace negotiations. Although some SEB groups may adopt a more liberal understanding of the principles of neutrality and independence than others, it must be said that no SEB group would ever endorse participation in hostilities.

Chungprampree's comments combined with our own analysis of the convergence between the humanitarian principles and SEB values show that it should not be challenging for SEB or other engaged Buddhist groups to publicly adopt the humanitarian principles and to apply them to their ways of working. When working in situations of armed conflict, adherence to these principles, in turn, could help such groups to qualify for certain protections and facilitations under IHL.

For their part, those who promote the humanitarian principles and the NIIHA approach within the humanitarian sector could benefit from a better understanding of how certain humanitarian values are understood in non-Western religions and traditions. It is our hope that this study will help to promote a pluralistic understanding of the roots of the humanitarian

principles in order for them to be more universally accepted in practice – by both humanitarian actors and authorities alike.

Conclusion

Considering the humanitarian principles, we can argue that they are highly related to the guiding principles of SEB. They both relate to an ethic of action, leading people to align attention with intention, and intentions with actions. Moreover, the practical ways of working that the principles promote also accord with the way that SEB groups approach humanitarian action. As we have shown, there are even some congruencies between specific formulations of the humanitarian principles and SEB Buddhist teachings.

In conclusion, spreading and deepening the knowledge of fundamental Buddhist values, and supporting the practice of mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation, not solely in a scholarly or ritualistic way, but as a foundation of social engagement, could help foster the understanding of and adherence to IHL in Buddhist populations. The dissemination of such Buddhist values will, in addition, support the action of Buddhist humanitarian workers and FBOs in situations of armed conflict by helping them to uphold the internationally recognised humanitarian principles.

We end with a quote from Shantideva that summarises the Bodhisattva aspirations of SEB:

With a wish to free all beings
I shall always go for refuge
to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha
until I reach full enlightenment.

Enthused by wisdom and compassion,
today in the Buddha's presence
I generate the Mind for Full Awakening
for the benefit of all sentient beings.

As long as space endures,
as long as sentient beings remain,
until then, may I too remain
and dispel the miseries of the world. (Shantideva in HH The Dalai Lama 2012, 115–116)

Notes

1. See, for example, King (2009, 1) who considers the broader movement of Engaged Buddhism to transcend any of the established Buddhist sects and states that one can find proponents of Engaged Buddhism in Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and non-sectarian branches of Buddhism. Some notable

individuals involved in the SEB movement include the founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhism, Sulak Sivaraksa from Thailand (The Right Livelihood Foundation [n.d.](#)); Maha Ghosananda from Cambodia who led many peace pilgrimages known as ‘Dhammayietra’ (Khmer-Buddhist Educational Assistance Project [n.d.](#)); Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi from Taiwan (Tzu Chi [2014](#)); and Dr. Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne, the founder of Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka (Sarvodaya [n.d.](#)). These are in addition to Dharma teachers from the Western world, such as Bernie Glassman (Zen Peacemakers [n.d.](#)) and Joan Halifax (Upaya Institute and Zen Center [n.d.](#)), among others.

2. Yen Pei remembers his encounter with a young Thich Nhat Hanh in his autobiography (Yen Pei 演培 [1989](#), 300–301), where he also writes extensively on his travels and lectures on Humanistic Buddhism in Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore. See also Chia ([2020](#), 91).
3. UNGA Resolution 46/182 established the principles of *humanity*, *impartiality* and *neutrality* as core principles for all humanitarian actors working within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (United Nations [1991](#)).
4. UNGA Resolution 58/114 added *independence* (United Nations [2004](#)).
5. See International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC ([1994](#)). A full list of the signatories to this Code of Conduct can be found at <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/the-movement/code-of-conduct/signatories-to-the-code-of-conduct/>.
6. Art 71(2), API; Rule 31, CIHL (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
7. Art 15, API; Art 9, APII; Rule 25, CIHL (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
8. Art 48, API; Art 13(1), APII; Rule 1, CIHL (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
9. Art 51(3), API; Art 13(3), APII; Rule 5, CIHL (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
10. Art 13(1), API (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
11. Art 70, API; Rules 55 and 56, CIHL (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
12. Art 71(4), API (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
13. Art 70, API; Rule 55, CIHL (ICRC [n.d.](#)); (Nicaragua v United States [1986](#), paras 239–245).
14. SN XXII 86 (Sujatu [2018](#)).
15. SN LVI 11 (Bodhi [2000](#)).
16. GCI Art 12 (ICRC [n.d.](#)).
17. Asanga was a fourth-century Buddhist master and philosopher, one of the founders of the Yogacara School of Mahāyāna Buddhism together with his half-brother Vasubandhu.
18. See also chapter 8 of Watson ([1997](#), 101) for an additional translation of the same verses from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*.
19. Caritas International was one of the original sponsors of the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct and recently published a blog on the humanitarian principles, including neutrality for World Humanitarian Day (Caritas [2020](#)). Islamic Relief is a signatory of the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct and recently reaffirmed its commitment to neutrality after dismissing a trustee for behaviour which contravened the principles (Islamic Relief [2020](#)).
20. For a critical analysis of these groups’ engagement with the Taiwanese government and politics more generally, see Laliberté ([2004](#)).
21. Somboon Chungprampree, interview by Andrew Bartles-Smith, 30 October 2020.

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Abbreviations

API	Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, 8 June 1977 (accessed from ICRC n.d.)
APII	Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts, 8 June 1977 (accessed from ICRC n.d.)
CIHL	ICRC Study on Customary IHL (accessed from ICRC n.d.)
FBO	faith-based organisation

GCI	Geneva Convention I for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. Geneva, 12 August 1949 (accessed from ICRC n.d.)
IASC	UN Interagency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IGO	inter-governmental organisation
IHL	international humanitarian law
INEB	International Network of Engaged Buddhists
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIIHA	neutral, impartial and independent approach to humanitarian action
NSAG	non-state armed group
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
RC/RC	International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
SEB	Socially Engaged Buddhism
SN	Samyukta Nikāya

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