

Sallie King

Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism.

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One of the remarkable effects of European colonization and subsequent globalization has been the stimulation of a new historical era in Buddhist social and ethical thinking, which has become particularly prominent in the last couple of decades. In this book Sallie King, who has been long active in research on Engaged Buddhism, provides an outstanding summary and synthesis of the current intellectual state of the movement, focusing on the ideas of nine of its most active representatives while attaching her own important commentary about each of them. The thinkers include A.T. Ariyaratne (Sri Lankan layman, founding director of Sarvodaya Shramadana, the largest NGO in Asia), Aung San Suu Kyi (Burmese political leader), Buddhadasa Bhikku (Thai Buddhist monk and interpretive modernist), Master Cheng Yen (Taiwanese nun, founder of the huge Tzu Chi foundation), the Dalai Lama (Tibetan tradition), Maha Ghosananda (Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism), P.A. Payutto (Thailand, leading Theravada scholar and theorist of social issues), Sulak Sivarak (Thai Buddhist layman and social activist), and Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnamese Zen monk and social activist).

King sees the thought of these figures, like they see it themselves, not as a response to colonialism and one-way Western influence but rather as the product of a rich modern dialogue in which the Buddhists are active agents of their own transformation.

The term Engaged Buddhism was first coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, but King uses it as a unifying concept for the concerns of her nine main thinkers, although it is no way centrally organized and only exists as “an intention and a practice within existing forms of Buddhism.” (p. 5) What makes engaged Buddhism a coherent concept, in the author’s view, is a common thread of contributions to global ethical thought and the practice of social activism. These contributions include: a distinctive, *sui generis* kind of ethical theory, in which human beings and situations are approached wholistically; a morality relatively free of judgmentalism; an emphasis on the influence of projecting peace or “being peace;” a nonadversarial ethical perspective; a view of international conflict situations which critiques the typical hard claims of “justice;” an exemplary behavior in nonviolence; and finally providing the world with the leading edge of modernization and popularization in Buddhist thought. (pp. 229-231)

King condenses the common threads at the very end of the text (p. 249) as follows:

Engaged Buddhists’ core values include benevolence (compassion, loving kindness, and giving); the necessity of putting Buddhist values into practice with active service on behalf of all beings; self-development on the path to enlightenment; and progressive altruism. Their picture of the Buddhist path is one in which self-development and service to others are inseparable. They believe that society and the individual are interdependent and mutually

constructive. In political theory, they are beginning to envision a democracy that has human rights as well as communitarian values and a greater sense of social responsibility than Western democracies. In economic theory, their first priority is for the basic needs of every person to be met. They support social institutions that promote humanitarian values, self-development, cooperation, nonharmfulness, and benevolence. Harm to the environment is completely unjustifiable, in their view. Nonviolence is a priority among them; they are engaged in creatively testing nonviolence in practice and taking it as far as it can go. They consistently look for ways to heal the web of interbeing when adversariality intrudes, promoting harmony and reconciliation. These fundamental values, beliefs, and goals seem more than enough to unify Engaged Buddhism.

King structures the body of her study around the movement of her thinkers from their various more conservative background traditions towards the current modality of Engaged Buddhism. In Chapter Two, "Building from Tradition," she examines how the thinkers have handled classical Buddhist teachings such as interdependence and causality, karma, the Four Noble Truths, enlightenability, compassion, giving, self-transformation, precepts, meditation, devotionalism, and work.

That foundation leads to Chapter Three on "Engaged Buddhist Ethical Theory," in which, while emphasizing that the overall pattern of this Buddhist thought "does not fit neatly into any Western school of ethical thought" (p. 43), she evaluates a number of themes which recur in her thinkers. A sense of a natural ethical law derivable from observations of the natural world and the appropriate human responses is prominent in Payutto and Buddhadasa. All of the thinkers deal with the developmental aspect of Buddhist ethics, which is to be achieved through the practice of precepts. King suggests that this understanding of precepts is close to certain Western traditions of virtue ethics, though not close to a rule-following ethic. All of the engaged thinkers also tend to a wholistic view of ethical experience, coordinating different dimensions of the mind such as both reason and emotion. The sense of interdependence of "self" and other leads in all cases to a characteristic nonadversarial stance. Finally, the thinkers reflect a traditional streak of Buddhist pragmatism and a deep appreciation of the imperative to act.

King's Chapter 4 on "Individual and Society" explores how any social ethics metatheory must address the relationship between those two elements. Regarding the self, Engaged Buddhists carry forward traditional views of *anātman*, often with a special emphasis on egalitarianism. The consequent understanding of self-society interdependence leads to questions of responsibility, self-society balance, and the interpretation of karma, but also to ambiguity and uncertainty in specific cases. The difficulty of theorizing the best balance between the individual and society particularly emerges in the somewhat contrasting views of Payutto and Buddhadasa on a political theory for an ideal Engaged Buddhist society. And from a somewhat different point of view, Ariyaratne and Sulak hold that the best form of self-society balance is obtainable in "a small community that uses participatory democracy and is free of outside domination." (p. 117)

This leads King to extended considerations of three recurring and rather more specific topics in three separate following chapters.

Chapter 5 concerns human rights, the issue which has generated more discussion than any other and which often centers around the politicized question whether rights theory is narrowly “Western” or instead truly universal. These discussions have been influenced by international diplomatic documents, such as rights statements by the United Nations. In King’s evaluation, Engaged Buddhist intellectuals tend to agree with the overall direction of rights theory, but to sometimes have objections to the deeper philosophical implications of rights language, which include hard individualism. King finds that in practical terms such objections to rights language are mistaken and have usually been resolved by Engaged Buddhists. Nevertheless broadly she finds that these intellectuals often have a certain difficulty in their handling of the concepts of social power, the rule of law, and adversarialism. The main trend is to show how traditional Buddhist morality and rights theory can be mutually supportive, in areas such as the lay precepts, equality, or human freedom (especially Payutto and the Dalai Lama have focused on freedom).

Chapter 6 takes up “Nonviolence and Its Limits,” a topic which has involved many practical behavioral dilemmas. Principled nonviolence has been represented by Ghosananda, Ariyaratne, Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama in their respective countries, and pragmatic nonviolence by Suu Kyi in Burma. However, some Engaged Buddhists are also aware of the limits of nonviolence, and have taken increasingly complex views of peace and conflict under the conditions of globalization.

Finally, Chapter 7 examines the problems of justice and reconciliation. This is an especially interesting section because these sorts of inquiries have long been the speciality of Christian/European religious and ethical reflection, and a richer interaction with the global conversation requires more development on the Buddhist side. King points out that Engaged Buddhists have been much less willing to use justice language in their works than rights language. Insofar as justice language appears at all, these Buddhists are typically unwilling to speak of political justice. She evaluates the political justice views of her various thinkers against the background of karma and nonviolence theory, emphasizing how incommensurable with Western ideas the results occasionally are, as some encounters of Palestinians/Israelis vs. Buddhists have revealed. On the other hand, these thinkers are often very willing to speak of economic justice (it has a clear relation to the ethic of nonharming). And yet in the third field, Engaged thinkers are almost silent on the topic of criminal justice. In the end, despite many nuances, King finds that Buddhists tend to have a continuity of perspective about the challenge of “justice,” which she summarizes as:

compassion; a nonadversarial posture; and an awareness of interconnectedness, whether between individual and society, between human communities, or between humankind and the natural world. There is an overriding wish to ameliorate suffering, a consistent search for win-win outcomes that benefit everyone, and a great desire to reconcile any elements of the web of interbeing

that have fallen into adversarial relations. It is a great challenge, at least in the political and criminal justice areas, to find the best ways and create the best institutions to apply these principles. (p. 228)

In her conclusion, besides the survey of common points mentioned earlier which give the concept of Engaged Buddhism a certain heuristic coherence, King addresses issues which particularly seem to require further thought. These include the tension between emphasizing personal or institutional change, the better delineation of a Middle Way society which negotiates between individualism and communitarianism, the development of a significant criminal justice theory, and more analysis of the problems of violence and war.

King is an unapologetic, undistanced partisan of Engaged Buddhism, and the reader sometimes wonders if the strong claims for the uniqueness of its ethics, for example in the area of peace work, or wholism, are a bit overstated. Further, it is clear that while this ethical discourse has made great strides in recent decades, it still has at least some distance to go before it is as richly and fully developed as the discourses in the Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or secular Euro-American traditions.

A striking feature of the book is the almost total absence of Japanese Buddhism (the exception is a few pages on Soka Gakkai International). As newer research is beginning to demonstrate (see e.g. Stephen Covell, *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005) contemporary Buddhism in Japan has a reasonable amount of energy left, and has dealt at some time in its own modern (Japanese-language) tradition with virtually all of the issues raised by King's Engaged Buddhist thinkers. While King's omission may reflect some lingering false assumptions and prejudices on the author's part regarding the complete enervation of 20th century Japanese Buddhism, it is also true that postwar Japanese intellectuals in the traditional established Buddhist organizations (that is, with the exception of the SGI, though it is often considered a New Religion) have not offered creative leaders of the caliber of King's nine thinkers and have thus genuinely failed to get into the international conversation at the same level as the others and make their appropriate contribution. As a result, it is as if current Japanese Buddhism's social welfare activities, educational institutions, peace promotion, resistance to the Yasukuni Shrine, and so on exist in a universe parallel to that of Engaged Buddhism, despite the fact of Japan's weighty role in the world.

Despite that question mark, however, this book is a quite wonderful contribution to summarizing, evaluating and making accessible the ideas of the Engaged Buddhists with whom the author engages.

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