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*Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia.* Edited by Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King. New York: State University of New York, 1996. xii + 446 pages. ISBN 0-7914-2844-3, \$24.95.

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**E**ngaged Buddhism is a collection of eleven articles that focuses on engaged Buddhism in Asia, Buddhism that arises out of “a new awareness of the social and institutional dimensions of suffering” (p. 10) and seeks to “influence temporal power” in ways that will reduce institutionalized suffering (p. 19). Taken together, these articles provide an excellent introduction to the field of engaged Buddhism and to the major leaders, issues and activities that constitute Buddhist liberation movements in Asia.

The central nine articles are framed by an introductory essay by editor Christopher S. Queen and a conclusion by Sallie B. King. In his introduction, Queen outlines the ingredients he feels characterize a liberation movement. It is defined as “a voluntary association guided by exemplary leaders and a common vision of a new society (or world) based on peace, justice, and freedom” (p. 10). It is this emphasis on the social and on the here-and-now that distinguishes a liberation movement from the more traditional notion of liberation, “a highly personal and other-worldly notion of liberation” (p. 10). In addition, ritual and spiritual practices like meditation, traditionally associated with religious specialists, have been appropriated by the laity.

Queen traces the origins of engaged Buddhism, beginning with the thorny issue of whether or not it represents continuity or discontinuity with traditional Buddhist social teaching and action. He reviews the work and influence of Walpola Rahula, including brief summaries of criticisms directed to Rahula’s view of the early *saṃgha*. This section provides a valuable summary for anyone interested in scholarly views of the socio-political content in the Pāli Canon or its place in Theravāda Buddhism. The type of engaged Buddhism envisioned by Rahula—“that of monks legitimating and staffing the government in all of its functions, including warfare—does not resemble contemporary engaged Buddhism” (p. 19). Nor, concludes Queen, has it been “a typical pattern in the social history of Asia” (p. 18).

The history of contemporary-style engaged Buddhism dates from the late 19th century Buddhist revival movement in Sri Lanka, and central to its impact was the influence of European and American religious and political thought and western methods of public communication and institutional development. Queen provides another useful summary of how this cultural interpenetration shaped the lives of several early reformers—Olcott, Dharmapala, and Ambedkar—and laid the foundation for future leadership and development. Their critique was directed not only at the colonial powers that oppressed Buddhism but at traditional Buddhism as well. Their approach tended to be rationalist and moralist; and, according to critics such as Gananath Obeyesekere, this approach has had a disastrous effect on the faith of ordinary people in Sri Lanka whose practice is “religion of the heart.”

Having destroyed the rich mythology and cosmology of Buddhism,

Buddhist modernism has failed “to communicate vital social values to the masses,” and must take some responsibility for unleashing the current wave of violence (p. 29). Queen concludes this section with the comment that “the connection between Buddhist modernism and ethnic warfare in Sri Lanka is not an obvious one,” and he asks us to consider other equally, if not more important reasons for the island’s instability: “The long-term depredations of Western colonialism, the restive presence of the Tamil minority, acute population pressure, deteriorating economic and environmental conditions, the uneasy ethos of a multicultural island society, and the rise of revolutionary socialism” (p. 29).

Again, one of the strengths of Queen’s article is that he gives voice to a wide range of positions before providing his own, equally thoughtful, position. The introductory essay concludes by addressing the question as to whether engaged Buddhism constitutes ‘heritage’ or ‘heresy’. The answer, not surprisingly, is that the principles and practices utilized by engaged Buddhists, regardless of the origins of these principles and practices, are practiced in the name of the Buddha and Dharma, and are in accord with the teachings of wisdom, compassion and the spirit of the Three Refuges.

I cannot think of one area that Queen has neglected to address in his introduction, and I consider it worth ‘the price of admission’ on its own. The only limitation I can see is that its focus is primarily on Southeast Asia while the volume also contains an article on Soka Gakkai by Daniel Metraux, and one on Tibet by Jose Ignacio Cabezon. Donald Mitchell, in his review (Cross-Currents 46, p. 554–9) has raised this issue with reference to the entire volume. While his observation is valid, I found the inclusion of these articles sufficient to indicate that, although the focus of the volume is on Southeast Asia, the phenomenon of engaged Buddhism is quite widespread. Any one volume can only do so much, and we can hope that there will be subsequent volumes that focus on other geographic areas. Indeed, I believe there is a sequel, *Engaged Buddhism In America* about to appear shortly.

The articles are divided into two sections, with ten pages of pictures between them. Included in the first section are the following: “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation” by Christopher S. Queen; “TBMSG [Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana]:A Dhamma Revolution in Contemporary India” by Alan Sponberg; “A.T. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka” by George D. Bond; “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Life and Society Through the Natural Eyes of Voidness” by Santikaro Bhikkhu; and “Sulak Sivaraksa’s Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society” by Donald K. Swearer.

George Bond’s article on the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka highlights the dual aim of many Buddhist liberation movements: to

rediscover their Buddhist heritage and identity in a post-colonial world and to respond to the challenge of modernity (p. 121). In its rediscovery, Buddhist heritage is also transformed. Personal liberation is understood to be intimately connected to social liberation, and to be as accessible to laity as to monks (p. 122). Sarvodaya's Indian influences exemplify Queen's description of Buddhist liberation movements as social and world affirming: selfless service is considered the highest form of religious practice; sarvodaya is understood to refer to a new social order that is non-violent, and the village is considered to be the heart of this new social-economic-religious order (p. 123). The ability of the village to be both the focus of a movement that allows for the recovery of a collective heritage and an adequate response to the challenges of modernism is problematic. As Bond points out, Ariyaratne's vision of ancient village life is romantic and idealized (pp. 132–133).

Such idealization of an ancient culture is one response to colonial oppression and is also found in the urbanite's romanticisation of the 'natural life'. The belief that village economics can solve the financial as well as the spiritual woes of modern Sri Lanka is simply naive. That is not to say that Sri Lanka should follow blindly the Western model of development, nor is it to suggest that grass roots village initiatives are not productive. Small scale village economic development must be an integral part of any management plan. And, Sarvodaya's reinterpretation of mundane awakening, its belief that the path to individual liberation is through the social, and its insistence that there is an intimate connection between material development and spiritual development, combined with its view that Buddhist liberation is universal liberation, can make a very positive contribution. As the Sarvodaya slogan goes: "We build the road and the road builds us." I was most interested in the section on the historical development of Sarvodaya, especially since the riots of 1983. Sarvodaya has been very involved in various peace initiatives, and the movement appears to have been able to maintain its inclusiveness. Indeed, as Bond notes, Ariyaratne's 1994 trip to Jaffna to meet with the leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stands as evidence of his national status (p. 137). I found the movement's recent problems with foreign donors most interesting as they seem to parallel the problems found in the West not only with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) but in public policy. Sarvodaya donors want more control over all aspects of financing, and donations are based upon a strictly quantitative basis rather than a qualitative one. That is, donors are concerned only with economic factors and not with people-centered factors such as enhanced self-esteem or community solidarity. In 1993 Sarvodaya had its finances cut by 42 percent (p. 140). Time will tell if the movement survives. Bond appears to feel hopeful as the United Nations Development Program indicates that development

planners are beginning to see the value of a people-centered approach that regards economic growth as a means to human welfare rather than an end in itself.

The articles in the second section of the book include: “Buddhist Women and the Nuns’ Order in Asia” by Nancy Barnes; “Buddhist Principles in the Tibetan Liberation Movement” by Jose Ignacio Cabezon; “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church: Nondualism in Action” by Sallie B. King; and, “The Soka Gakkai: Buddhism and the Creation of a Harmonious and Peaceful Society” by Daniel A. Metraux.

Nancy Barnes’s article on the particular situation of Buddhist women in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Tibet is a most welcome inclusion. While the information provided on women’s status, education, and spiritual practices in these three countries is itself valuable, the discussion Barnes provides on the complexity of the issue of women’s re-ordination is even more valuable. It is clear that, in all cases, full ordination of female monastics would provide them with better access to financial support, education—both spiritual and secular—and status. Chances of establishing the *bhikṣunī saṃgha* are highest in the Tibetan tradition for a variety of reasons, the most important of which are that the foremost leaders of the *bhikṣu saṃgha*, including the Dalai Lama, favor it and, having already had tradition broken through exile, further changes to tradition are easier to accomplish (p. 286). In addition, Tibetan women already have access to novice ordination.

The case of Tibet highlights another important aspect of the discussion regarding re-establishment of the *bhikṣunī saṃgha*, the whole question of traditionalism. In the case of Sri Lanka, for example, some influential monks argue that the *bhikṣunī saṃgha* cannot be re-established because the line of Theravāda transmission has been broken (p. 267) and Chinese ordination is unacceptable. That said, traditionalism cannot be interpreted as a simple gender issue: monks being traditional and potential nuns being liberal. Many of Sri Lanka’s female mendicants, the *dasa sil matavo*, do not wish to have the *bhikṣunī saṃgha* reinstated as they would then fall under the control of the male *saṃgha*. They prefer to maintain their in-between status as neither lay nor monastic, although that means less respect and financial assistance, in order to preserve their independence (p. 266).

Closely related to traditionalism is the question of class. The movement for full ordination has been spearheaded by highly educated women like the Venerable Ayya Khema, a Western renunciant and Dr. Chatsumarn Kabil Singh, a laywoman in Thailand. While one should not make the mistake of simply identifying upper class with a pro-ordination position, education—a key identifier of class—is clearly relevant, as is the urban-rural distinction. In Thailand, for example, the majority of the monks, rural and not

well-educated, hold and presumably pass on traditionally negative views of women (p. 270). Laity in Southeast Asia have had no experience with fully ordained Buddhist women and so the idea of a female *saṃgha* is unacceptable to many, especially rural villagers (p. 270).

Barnes makes a distinction between the desire of a few educated Thai women for full ordination, and the needs and aspirations of the majority of the *mae ji* (p. 270), women who have followed their desire to “break their ties with worldly life and devote themselves to pious activities” (p. 267). Indeed, Barnes says that the state of the *mae ji* and the push for full ordination of women in Thailand are separate issues because ordination is “not something that *mae ji* have imagined for themselves” (p. 270). I found this statement somewhat odd as Barnes also states that a few *mae ji* have already taken novice ordination in the United States (p. 271) and that some *mae ji* have argued that the Thai government should fully recognize them now as the first step in improving their situation (p. 268). Clearly, some *mae ji* have imagined ordination for themselves, they are the only religious vocation available to Buddhist women in Thailand and efforts are under way by the Thai government—guardian of the *saṃgha*—to improve their lot. Why, then, would they be considered separate issues? The answer seems to be that the unorganized and generally wretched state of the *mae ji*—primarily poor, uneducated, with many elderly members—makes the religious vocation as identified with the *mae ji* unacceptable to better educated urban women (p. 268). The full ordination of women, separate from, and unidentified with the *mae ji*, would solve that problem. Prominent and active women like Dr. Kabilsingh work tirelessly for both causes, and it would be unfortunate if the distinction between *mae ji* and prospective *bhikṣunī* (a distinction that currently appears to be that *mae ji* have no aspirations for a fully institutionalized life while prospective *bhikṣunīs* do) became one of class rather than aspiration.

It is to the Chinese *bhikṣunī* tradition and to Taiwan that Barnes believes we must look for precedence and model. The Chinese *bhikṣunī* ordination was established in China by Sri Lankan nuns in the 5th century (p. 275). Sixty to seventy percent of all Buddhist monastics ordained between 1958 and 1987 were women. These women chose the life of a *bhikṣunī*, they continue their education within the *saṃgha*, they teach and engage in a wide variety of social services. Their responsibilities are equal to that of the *bhikṣu saṃgha*, they are well-respected and have emerged as leaders in modern Buddhism (p. 278). Barnes concludes her article with a summary of the critical issues involved with the restoration of the *bhikṣunī saṃgha*. The first is that of the vinaya, especially the eight rules that place the *bhikṣunī saṃgha* under the control of the *bhikṣu saṃgha*. These cannot be simply dispensed with, as they are accepted as having been established by the Buddha himself

(p. 281) and the *dasa sil matavo*, for one, are not willing to give up their independence. The Chinese ordination is rejected by the Theravāda as it cannot be established as a certainty that it originated with the Theravāda school (p. 284). The second issue is that of class. The movement for full establishment of a *bhikṣunī saṃgha* centers in the West and among well-educated Asian women and Western converts. Their aspirations for full status with the *bhikkhu saṃgha*, spiritually as well as socially, and the ability to become equal leaders in both the Buddhist and broader community, are not aspirations shared by many currently practicing religious women like the *mae ji* who tend to be rural, poorly educated, and primarily interested in religious devotions and rituals rather than meditation and social service. Related to this is the question of traditionalism. The *bhikṣunī saṃgha* cannot hope to be established and survive without the support of the *bhikkhu saṃgha* and the laity. And, this support appears to be lacking currently in Southeast Asia (p. 284), although in North America even the Theravāda have taken part in ordaining novices (p. 285). It is hoped that current tensions of class and culture will not harden into divisions. Perhaps a variety of ways of being a Buddhist woman will exist mutually, ranging from well educated, financed and respected nonordained groups to an established *bhikṣunī saṃgha*. The support given by women like Chatsumarn Kabilsingh to both causes bodes well for the improvement of both the material and spiritual conditions of all Buddhist women.

The concluding essay by Sallie B. King attempts to thematically organize the material presented, and to reflect on engaged Buddhism as a whole. While all the movements may be said to fit Bellah's description of reformist some, like Sarvodaya, Ambedkar, TBMSG and Sulak Sivaraksa fit the profile most closely (p. 402), while others, like Soka Gakkai, also contain neotraditional elements (p. 403). Each of the movements formulates a Buddhist justification for social action, and develops programs that grow out of their understanding that the material and spiritual are intimately connected (p. 409). Even Soka Gakkai, whose criticism of capitalism is more muted than that of the other movements, pushes for a "merging [of] the best features of capitalism (freedom), socialism (equality), and Buddhism (humanism) in a benevolent, democratic welfare state" (p.412). The desire to balance the spiritual and the material presents a particular challenge for Soka Gakkai, King states, because membership is getting wealthier and a shift to a less materialistic emphasis may be necessary if balance is to be maintained (p. 412). Balance is also important in ensuring that spiritual pursuits and social activism are mutually supportive. Here she draws our attention to leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh who point out the value of remaining calm and mindful in a crisis (p. 413), and the importance of happiness amid suffering (p.

417).

The biggest difference between the groups is in the area of Buddhism and politics. Soka Gakkai wholeheartedly endorses party politics, Ambedkar was a national political figure and founded a party himself, the Buddhist Church in Vietnam founded a party, and the Dalai Lama is a global political figure. On the other hand, the quasi-nuns, nuns, Buddhadasa and TBMSG have almost nothing to do with politics. In between, men like Sulak Sivaraksa and Ariyaratne are not active in party politics but have been critics of the status quo. Ambivalence is found in the Vietnamese and Burmese practitioners—an aversion to political machinations but a desire to serve the populace by helping them gain the political ends they seek (pp. 420–421). King also discusses the tension between Buddhist identity (a cultural artifact) and Buddhist self-negation—Buddhism as a means, not an end in itself (p. 422). Buddhist self-negation has led to an inclusivism that has fostered interreligious dialogue and a feeling of the oneness of humankind. The exception here is Soka Gakkai, known for its intolerance and exclusivism directed at other Buddhists as well as non-Buddhists, although this appears to have been toned down recently (p. 424). The problem with Buddhist self-negation is that it may invite absorption or destruction. In this regard, Buddhism as an important part of cultural identity can be effective in resisting colonialism, communism, Westernization and social bigotry (p. 424). The problem here is the potential for ‘mistaking the finger for the moon’. King feels that best means of handling this tension is exemplified in Sulak Sivaraksa and the Dalai Lama (p. 426). Sulak Sivaraksa is supportive of Thai Buddhist identity—the essential Buddhist core which is also the core of the world’s religions—as a means for resisting Westernization, consumerism and secularization but is critical of the Thai ruling powers’ oppressive use of cultural Buddhism—conventionally ritualistic, identified with Thai militarism, a pro forma civil religion (p. 427). The Dalai Lama has as his first priority the effort to preserve Tibetan religious culture and regain the homeland—Tibetan Buddhist identity is his major concern. At the same time, his belief in Buddhist self-negation provides an inclusivist perspective that allows him to value love, kindness and compassion wherever he finds it, even in secular culture (p. 427).

While all the major figures in the liberation movements wish to change society, King divides their approaches into those of Love and those of the Prophetic Voice. The Prophetic Voice(s)—Ambedkar, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Soka Gakkai—maintain a separation between self and other and do not hesitate to denounce error. Those who take a Love approach—Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and Buddhadasa—fundamentally recognize no enemy, avoid taking an oppositional stance, and try and effect change without enemies (p.



430).

It is a difficult task to try and find commonalities among such disparate groups as Soka Gakkai and the Ambedkar Buddhists and I confess that I sometimes found King's categorizations somewhat forced. That said however, I felt that the exercise was valuable as it forces us to hone our own analytic skills as we compare our reflections with those of the editor.

King concludes by noting that Buddhists constitute a disproportionately large share of the world's peace leadership (p. 434) and that engaged Buddhism has been a major influence on the social and political landscape of Asia and a major turning point in the development of Buddhism (p. 435).

I enjoyed Engaged Buddhism a great deal. It is a fine introductory volume and I would not hesitate to use it as a text. I have already referred students of Buddhism, Women and Religion, and Political Science to various articles in it—each with its own decent bibliography.