

Journal of Buddhist Ethics  
ISSN 1076-9005  
<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

## Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism

Reviewed by Ethan Mills

University of New Mexico  
Email: [emills@unm.edu](mailto:emills@unm.edu)

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: [d.keown@gold.ac.uk](mailto:d.keown@gold.ac.uk)

# Review of *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*

Ethan Mills\*

*Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism.* By Sallie B. King. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005, 291 pages, ISBN 0824829352 (paper),

The movement known as Engaged Buddhism has emerged in the last several decades as one of the most original and fascinating developments in recent Buddhist history; therefore, it is fitting that a volume on the subject should be part of the Topics in Contemporary Buddhism Series, published by the University of Hawai'i Press. Sallie B. King, a specialist in the study of Engaged Buddhism, has previously co-edited an anthology that was more descriptive and informational in nature (*Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, 1996). In this volume, however, King presents what may be the first book-length philosophical treatment of the social ethics underlying the movement as a whole, a task whose time has come given the movement's influence in contemporary Buddhism.

Concentrating on Asian Engaged Buddhists, including A. T. Ariyaratne, Aung San Suu Kyi, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, King notes that there are differences in idiom (e.g., Theravāda vs. Mahāyāna) and some differences of interpretation among Engaged Buddhists. However, the basic ethical structure of Engaged Buddhism can be summarized as an effort to put Buddhist concepts such as interdependence, loving-kindness, and compassion into action in social and/or political spheres as opposed to the rather individualistic, withdrawn

---

\* Department of Philosophy, University of New Mexico. Email: emills@unm.edu

outlook of some traditional forms of Buddhism. King's most prominent thesis, supported throughout the book, is that Engaged Buddhism is a native Buddhist reformist development. This is important, as Engaged Buddhism has often been dismissed as merely a product of Western influence rather than an authentically Buddhist movement. While it is true that many Engaged Buddhists adopt Western terminology such as talk about human rights or justice, King shows that this is always done via Buddhist interpretations and with Buddhist motivations. Thus, Engaged Buddhism is an organic outgrowth of the Buddhist tradition.

Chapters two, three and four are concerned with the fundamentals of Engaged Buddhist ethics, while chapters five, six and seven apply these insights to human rights, nonviolence and justice and reconciliation respectively. Chapter two shows how Engaged Buddhists have reinterpreted classic features of Buddhist philosophy such as dependent origination, the four noble truths, and meditation techniques. Dependent origination proves to be one of the most important reinterpretations and King returns to it throughout the book. The idea here is that "... human beings are social beings—that is, each one of us lives in a condition of interdependence within society." (p. 13) This social interpretation proves to have dramatic and far-reaching effects on a large range of Engaged Buddhist theories from responsibility and punishment to nonviolence and economic justice.

Chapter three places Engaged Buddhism in the context of debates about which Western ethical theory most closely resembles Buddhist ethics. King suggests that Engaged Buddhism exhibits features of several Western systems while showing the prevalence of such ideas as natural law, holism and an outlook that is nonadversarial and pragmatic. Chapter four shows how a holistic, socially interdependent theory of the relationship between the individual and society has emerged. Largely expanding on Engaged Buddhist interpretations of dependent origination and no-self, the most interesting discussion of the chapter focuses on a reaction to the Western debate between free will and determinism. King argues that neither the free will nor determinist positions are suitable and shows how Engaged

Buddhists think about moral responsibility given their theories about causality, no-self and personal development.

The more practically oriented chapters begin with a discussion of human rights, centered on the debate about whether human rights can be defended in an Asian Buddhist context (often referred to as the "Asian values debate"). While most Western interpretations of human rights are too individualistic and adversarial for Engaged Buddhism, some Engaged Buddhists have argued for the pragmatic necessity of human rights to end suffering, especially in countries such as Cambodia or Myanmar/Burma. Others have argued that human rights can be interpreted as expressing a nonadversarial stance, namely that violation of human rights is morally good neither for the abused nor the abuser.

While acknowledging that all Engaged Buddhists promote nonviolence, chapter five details a spectrum of views from principled to pragmatic nonviolence, often along similar lines of nonviolence found outside of Buddhism. Aside from the more familiar views of personal nonviolence as developed in the tradition, the chapter includes an innovative discussion of the role of violence in the military and how Engaged Buddhists may or may not promote a defensive military force.

In the chapter called "Justice/Reconciliation," King notes that Engaged Buddhists have tended not to use language of justice as much as that of human rights. However, she finds that almost all Engaged Buddhists are concerned with economic justice out of their efforts to promote equality and to eradicate the greed caused by economic models of perpetual growth and the suffering caused by extreme poverty. In terms of political justice, King suggests that Engaged Buddhists move more toward a model of reconciliation in which both sides of a conflict benefit. This does not mean, however, that Engaged Buddhists have no concepts of blame and punishment, as the section on criminal justice details. Here Engaged Buddhists opt for a rehabilitative model rather than a retributive model, although King adds that there is much work to be done to fully develop this model in Buddhist terms.

Although King's book does a great service by taking Engaged Buddhist writings seriously as philosophical theories, there are a few points where deeper philosophical questioning could better serve the purpose of the work. For instance, the discussion of free will and determinism, while it rightly points out that this is not an exigent issue for Buddhism, occasionally conflates determinism with fatalism and sidesteps the issue of whether Buddhism could be interpreted as hard determinism given the Buddhist view of causality. King points out that Buddhism requires that we make wholesome choices, but remains largely silent on whether these choices themselves could be causally determined. Instead she insists that choices are causally influenced, leaving some room for freedom, although not the entirely uncaused freedom proposed by Western libertarian theories. Perhaps this idea simply needs more work, but it seems somewhat philosophically incomplete as presented.

However, King's achievement as a whole should not be taken lightly. The fact that she has broached the subject of Engaged Buddhist ethics at all has created fertile ground for further philosophical exploration of Engaged Buddhism. Scholars who aspire to study the development of Buddhist philosophy into the twenty-first century should look to this volume for inspiration.