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Engaged Buddhism at Sixty-Five: Nuancing The Consensus

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Abstract

After more than 65 years of public activism and social service by engaged Buddhists in Asia and the West, it is time to reconsider the nature of engaged Buddhism and how faithfully it has been represented by scholars. In "Beyond Queen and King: Democratizing 'Engaged Buddhism,'" Donna Lynn Brown argues that the category should be expanded to include "overlooked Buddhists" who may have traditional, ethnic, national, state-supported, or conservative orientations; those who perform social service; and those who engage in violence. Furthermore, Brown claims that engaged Buddhism is a narrative imposed by Western scholars on Asian Buddhists who may not know or approve of it. In this response, I will focus on three characteristics of engaged Buddhism that Brown and other scholars she cites have misunderstood or rejected in their critique: (1) the practice of compassionate service by engaged

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Buddhists; (2) the commitment of engaged Buddhists to nonviolent social change; and (3) the decentralized, hybrid, and evolving nature of engaged Buddhist ideology and praxis which reflects the contribution of voices and values from Asia and the West.

Introduction

In "Beyond Queen and King: Democratizing 'Engaged Buddhism,'" (Brown) Donna Lynn Brown argues that the time has come to expand the interpretive category of socially engaged Buddhism to include "overlooked Buddhists" who may have traditional, ethnic, national, states-supported, or conservative orientations, those who perform social service, and those whose militancy may spill over into violence—and thus to "democratize" the study of engaged Buddhism. She argues that engaged Buddhism is a "narrative" imposed by Western scholars on Asian Buddhists who may not know or approve the term but who act in their own ways to relieve social suffering. She cites other scholars who share her views.

Professor Brown offers some useful points for discussion, but she also displays a misunderstanding or an outright rejection of many of the findings of engaged Buddhism scholarship. In this response, I will focus on three characteristics of engaged Buddhism that Brown and the scholars she cites have either misunderstood or rejected in their critique: (1) the practice of compassionate service by engaged Buddhists; (2) the commitment of engaged Buddhists to nonviolent social change; and (3) the decentralized, hybrid, and evolving nature of engaged Buddhist ideology and praxis.

In this article, to emphasize the decentralized, hybrid and evolving nature of engaged Buddhism, I do not capitalize "engaged." While

precursors to some elements of engaged Buddhism may be found throughout Buddhist history, I date the pattern of thought and action that has come to be called engaged Buddhism back to the 1950s and 1960s, when increasing numbers of Buddhist activists in Asia began to write about social suffering and social change (Ambedkar; Nhat Hanh), and when Buddhist liberation movements in Asia began to be documented by journalists and scholars (Schecter; Zelliot). Thus, *engaged Buddhism at sixty-five* reflects this period of time, and *consensus* is the term that Brown and others have given to the broad agreement of a generation of scholars who have studied engaged Buddhism. By *nuancing* I mean the consideration of the changing face of engaged Buddhism and the ways that engaged Buddhists understand their practice and how it is shaped by traditional teachings and contemporary values.

Social Service as Engaged Buddhism

Among the useful points that Brown raises is that social service, along with political activism, should be considered Buddhist engagement. With this we all agree. Indeed, a vast range of social services—the founding of schools, hospitals, prison ministries, disaster relief missions, and so forth—have been documented in engaged Buddhist studies. Obvious examples are the educational, vocational, and medical services provided by the Ambedkarite TBMSG organizations in India, the rural infrastructure projects of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, and the educational and cultural institutions founded by the Soka Gakkai in Japan. These were all described in detail in the first collection of scholarly studies of engaged Buddhism in Asia (Queen and King). Many more examples of Buddhist social services have been discussed in subsequent anthologies (Queen *Engaged*; Queen, Prebish, and Keown), monographs (King *Being*, *Socially*), and scores of articles on engaged Buddhism.

In 2000, I described four overlapping paths or "styles" of Buddhist ethical action—discipline, virtue, altruism, and engagement—the last of which I identified as the distinctive pattern of engaged Buddhism in contemporary societies (*Engaged* 11-17). At the same time, I and others have observed that altruistic service, certainly not new in Buddhist history, is a common feature of Buddhist liberation movements. In fact, all four paths of Buddhist ethics are widely practiced by those who call themselves socially engaged: *discipline* (refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, harmful speech, and intoxication), *virtue* (cultivating lovingkindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, generosity, morality, patience, vigor, concentration, wisdom, and more), *altruism* (doing good works for the benefit of society), and, of course, *engagement* (collective action to address the social and institutional causes of human suffering and environmental harm).

If all these paths may be found in the spiritual and social practices of engaged Buddhists, then what makes engaged Buddhists different? Quoting the fourth century Mahāyāna thinker Asaṅga, Stephen Jenkins points to the wide range of social actions performed by bodhisattvas (enlightened practitioners) in the fields of agriculture, commerce, conflict resolution, economics, and politics—even unseating kings or ministers who "are excessively fierce, merciless, and solely set out to afflict others" ("Compassionate" 48). In Jenkins's formulation, these acts of compassion "bless the compassionate" themselves, but also lead to prosperity, national security, and a good life for all. "The idea of a socially disengaged Buddhism is incoherent" (49). One may add that the Buddhist *saṃgha*, an innovative institution for spreading spiritual and ethical practice in the ancient world, also fostered the activities Asaṅga attributes to the bodhisattva, but in a collective manner that decisively shaped the economic and political structure of the societies they inhabited.

Thus, we see elements of ethical discipline, virtue, and collective altruism in Buddhist history and in the liberation movements that arose since World War II. *But these movements reflect something more and something new.* I have argued that the distinctive traits that prompted Thich Nhat Hanh and others to coin a phrase, calling these movements "engaged Buddhism" were grounded in modern notions of human rights, social justice, nonviolent protest, peacemaking, institutional reform, and systemic social change—notions that have not been characteristic of Buddhist thought and action in the past. Furthermore, numerous studies have shown that these features reflect a convergence of Asian and Western value systems in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, culminating in the engaged Buddhist movements that emerged and spread globally since World War II (Queen and King, 20-28; Queen *Engaged* 1-4). Accordingly, it is correct to say that engaged Buddhism may include traditional values and practices—such as social service—but it is not correct to say that "all Buddhism is engaged and always has been." Nor is it justified to "democratize" engaged Buddhism by claiming that Buddhist attempts to protect the country, an ethnic identity, or Buddhism itself, *by whatever means*, must be considered "engaged Buddhism."

Activism and Militancy Can Be Nonviolent

Brown lists elements of thought and practice that scholars have documented among engaged Buddhists. The consensus linking these elements is a holistic pattern, however, not a procrustean bed. Engaged Buddhism is not an exclusive club; not all elements are shared by every Buddhist group; and scholars cannot check all the boxes in their analysis. Some activists may be considered *modernist* in their focus on the suffering caused more by social conditions than by psychological attitudes, and by their deemphasis or rejection of cardinal teachings such as heavenly realms,

karma, and rebirth. But other engaged Buddhists are distinctly *traditionalist* in their embrace of Buddhist cosmology and soteriology. The ordained leaders—Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Maha Ghosananda, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, Cheng Yen, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and many others—fall into the latter category, of course. These Buddhists have not been overlooked or disrespected in the study of engaged Buddhism!

One defining feature of engaged Buddhism that Brown and her colleagues wish to abandon is its nonviolence. Buddhist violence is not new. A rich literature of its canonical roots and modern manifestations is now available. Buddhist violence has been perpetrated by individuals, organizations, and governments. But the organizations that have been studied under the rubric of engaged Buddhism have been, by and large, nonviolent. The contrasts are notable. The state-sponsored Buddhist warfare conducted by the Japanese in World War II and in the civil wars and ethnic cleansing campaigns mounted by the Sri Lanka and Myanmar governments since then cannot be farther from the nonviolent paradigm historians have identified as engaged Buddhism. At the same time, these governments have channeled the passions of local Buddhist groups that engage in terrorism to protect their ethnic and religious heritage. It is hard to comprehend the grounds on which Brown and her colleagues believe that these violent ethnocentric and nationalist Buddhists should be called "engaged Buddhists."

Ethnic and national pride need not entail violence, however. Many engaged Buddhists express their pride and commitment to preserve and protect their national, ethnic, and religious heritage. *But they would not kill to protect it*. When Ambedkar proposed the ancient Buddhist king Aśoka's *dharmacakra* and lion capital as modern symbols for India's flag and currency; when Maha Ghosananda walked the length of Cambodia to call citizens out of their hiding places in the former killing fields; and when Sulak Sivaraksa repeatedly faced arrest for upholding the religious values of

Buddhist Siam, not authoritarian Thailand, these engaged Buddhists expressed their deep patriotism. Their motives were rooted in the soil and in the Dharma, and their actions were nonviolent. It is significant that the scholarly literature on Buddhist violence pioneered by Brian Victoria, Trevor Ling, and Michael Jerryson does not reference engaged Buddhism, socially engaged Buddhism, or Buddhist liberation movements; these terms do not appear in the indexes of their works. Violent engaged Buddhism is an oxymoron.

The only example of violence that Brown mentions in connection with engaged Buddhism is the militancy of the Dalit Buddhists whom Tara Doyle documented in 2003. In their decades-long fight to liberate the Mahābodhi Temple from Hindu control, the Ambedkar-inspired activists, "utilizing angry, aggressive rhetoric, [took] their movement—through processions, strikes, demonstrations, and agitations—into the streets. While these are standard items in the nonviolent activist's toolbox, there has been an implied threat of violence in several of the Mahabodhi Liberation campaigns" (256). *Implied, but not carried out:* despite minor skirmishes (a statue disrobed, water pots broken, a priest shoved), the anti-caste Buddhist movement has eschewed physical violence for sixty years. The Dalit Panthers were poets, not terrorists. The engaged Buddhism of grass-roots ritual activism and rhetorical militancy should not be confused with the mass murder committed by Buddhist governments, advocated by the 969 and MaBaTha sects in Myanmar, or carried out by the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult in Japan in the 1990s.

Scholars admit that the terms "violence" and "religion" are impossible to define for all times and places (Juergensmeyer, Kitts, Jerryson 3). But for the purpose of engaged Buddhist studies, I believe it is useful to distinguish ritual activism and rhetorical militancy from physical assault, rape, torture, killing, and ethnic cleansing. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, B. R. Ambedkar imagines the Buddha enjoining his followers, "We wage

war, O disciples, therefore we are called warriors . . . for lofty virtues, for high endeavor, for sublime wisdom. Where virtue is in danger, do not avoid fighting, do not be mealy-mouthed" (237). Yet readers and followers of Ambedkar's Buddhist "bible" have never interpreted these words as a call to physical violence. Rather, they hear the call to "educate, agitate, and organize" through words and gestures, protest poetry and posters, book burning and book writing, marches, boycotts, demonstrations, lobbying, and lawsuits, (Queen *Right Speech* 2). And these nonviolent activities have been the staple of engaged Buddhists East and West.

Who Invented Engaged Buddhism?

Brown quotes a critique of engaged Buddhist studies by Thomas Yarnall, who charged that its theory of origins constituted "a substantial form of neocolonial, neo-Orientalist bias" (289). She goes on to elaborate the basis and implications of this charge:

> . . . that Buddhist history was disengaged; that modernity's sufferings are unique and require innovation from Buddhists; that Asian Buddhists were passive, individualistic, other-worldly, and static until they met the active. social, this-worldly, and innovative West; that Western input activated social teachings only latent in Buddhism; that Buddhist modernists invented engagement; and that Western scholars are objective experts qualified to speak "authoritatively for the tradition," explain it to the West and Asia, and intermediate between them. (30)

The task of sorting and naming movements in literature, society, and history is one of the things scholars of religion do. When it is done well, the *emic* perspectives of the religious actors form the basis for the *etic*

categories proposed by the observers. The term engaged Buddhism was first used by Thich Nhat Hanh to describe the nonviolent anti-war movement led by monastics in Vietnam in the 1960s. (The violence of self-immolation by activist monks in Vietnam and Tibet should be distinguished from violence against others, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama have said.) Since the 1950s and 1960s, engaged Buddhism has been adopted and adapted by numerous actors and scholars. The range of meanings that has resulted is widely acknowledged in scholarship, for example, by proposing a continuum from *"soft-end" engagements* (service-based and mindfulness-based) to *"hard-end" engagements* (militant and political)—and by noting that some engaged Buddhists ignore or avoid the term altogether (Queen *Engaged* 7-9).

In all its variety, then, engaged Buddhism cannot be regarded as a unified, global movement, but rather a pattern of thought and action that has inspired and motivated individuals and groups around the world. Elements of it can be found in most places where Buddhism is practiced. Its origins are fairly debated, but it is most definitely not "made in the USA of Asian materials," as Yarnall claimed, to be imposed upon unsuspecting Buddhists in Asia. It is not a neocolonial, Orientalist conspiracy. Since the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, Asian Buddhists have boldly presented their own visions of a future, global Buddhism that reflects their own, independent embrace of contemporary values: science, social justice, and human rights. Engaged Buddhist leaders in Asia have long incorporated Western ideas and values into their teachings, just as Western Buddhists and scholars have pored over ancient Buddhist writings and practiced in the zendos and temples of Asian *sensei*s and lamas. It is too late to dispute the inexorable globalization of ideas and aspirations shared by people of faith, linked by education, travel, and social media. This is the latest instantiation of Buddha's dependent origination and Indra's net.

In 1996 I argued that the American Henry Steel Olcott, the Sinhalese Anagārika Dharmapāla, and the Indian B. R. Ambedkar exemplified the hybrid character of modern Buddhist thought and activism, dating back to the late nineteenth century but flowering among writers and movement leaders in the late twentieth century. These clarion voices of Buddhist reform and social protest were joined by many others—such as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, A. T. Ariyaratna, and Daisaku Ikeda—who selected and modified narratives and philosophies of the West, blended them with their own understanding of Buddhism, and applied them to address the threats to human life and dignity they faced. These were indeed elite thinkers and leaders who contributed to the evolution of Buddhist thought and practice—as were the authors of the Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese canons of classical Buddhist literature.

The most vivid example of this process I have studied up close is the vast library of English language books on the history and literature of Buddhism, European and American philosophy, economics, and political science that B. R. Ambedkar collected during his graduate studies in New York, London, and Bonn. These books are heavily marked with the Dalit leader's colored pencils, underling and circling the ideas he embraced and those he rejected in his service to the emerging Indian republic and in his radical construction of a socially engaged Buddhism (Queen "Ambedkar's"). The voice that can be heard in the writings and speeches that resulted was not that of Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln, Gary Snyder, or even John Dewey, with whom Ambedkar studied and whose notions of a social democratic republic shaped his activism as a Buddhist convert. It is Ambedkar's own distinctive voice that speaks forth throughout (Queen 2021; Stroud). The same process of appropriation and application of Western ideas is exemplified by other Asian exemplars of socially engaged Buddhism. In return, Western thinkers and activists continue to learn and absorb the teachings of Asian Buddhism.

In the future, I believe the meaning of the terms *engaged Buddhism, socially engaged Buddhism, and Buddhist liberation movements* will continue to be interrogated and redefined by scholars and commentators. At the same time, the practice of nonviolent social action and service by committed Buddhists, by whatever name, will continue to be manifested with originality and courage wherever social suffering is found.

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