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Action Dharma:  
New Studies in Engaged Buddhism

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Review of *Action Dharma:*  
*New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*

Alexander Soucy\*

*Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism.*

Edited by Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish and Damien  
Keown. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. 365 pages.

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“Engaged Buddhism” as introduced by Thich Nhat Hanh, “humanistic Buddhism” as first used by Taixu and adopted by Xingyun, and “action dharma” introduced in this volume, are all terms that refer to the same Buddhist movement. But what are these things? Are they really new? Are they even Buddhist, or are they missing the point completely? These are some of the themes that are explored by the contributors in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*.

Christopher Queen suggests in the introduction that the title refers to a fourth path separate from the paths of ritual, knowledge or devotion. Though he cautions that none of these paths should be thought of as exclu-

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sive, he contends that engaged Buddhism is a distinct break with past ways of being Buddhist and represents something entirely unique. This bold proposition seems to be the organizing principle behind the book, which is divided into four parts: the first explores the historical roots of “Engaged Buddhism”; the second looks at engaged Buddhist movements in Asia; the third deals with movements in the West, and; the fourth consists of three essays that critique the engaged Buddhist project and the ways that academics have approached it.

It is in the final section and in the introduction that the main debate rages about whether or not engaged Buddhism is a new and distinct “action” path, whether it is even Buddhism and whether it is worth studying as something distinct. The positions that are taken at either end of the collection could not be further apart, while the sections between seem to serve largely as an extended reminder that something is indeed afoot which should not be ignored.

James Deitrick, in Chapter 13, argues that the notion of engaged Buddhism is based on a false interpretation of the meaning of *dukkha* or suffering. Engaged Buddhists, he charges, take the term literally to mean physical and psychological suffering in this world rather than referring to the profound dissatisfaction that arises from clinging to permanency in a world-in-flux and to a self when, in fact, none exists. He therefore accuses engaged Buddhists of having “mistaken the boat for the shore”. In doing so, practitioners of engaged Buddhism are avoiding the only escape from suffering: personal liberation arrived by cutting attachment to this world and to the false conception of a self. While couched in nuance, Deitrick appears to conclude, somewhat alarmingly, that engaged Buddhists are not Buddhist at all, because they do not hold the fundamental notion of *dukkha*. Along with engaged Buddhists, Deitrick in one stroke banishes the vast majority of self-defined Buddhists into his category of “nominal Bud-

dhist”, retaining (I imagine) a few monastics and philosophers in the pristine group of “basic Buddhists”.

As an anthropologist, I find this formulation far too dismissive of the beliefs and practices of most Buddhists in favor of a purely philosophical interpretation. Queen points in his introduction to the essays in the first section which indicate that the idea of *dukkha* has been evolving and that altruistic service was present from early on. For example, Stephen Jenkins illustrates that *bodhisattva* compassion and service to the poor were distinctly present from the outset of Buddhism in India. Daniel Zelinski shows in Chapter 2 how altruistic action was seen by Japanese Zen master Dōgen (1200-1253) as an essential part of Buddhist practice, entirely consistent with his conception of nonattachment. Jacqueline Stone shows that political activism also has a long and intimate relationship with Buddhism in Japan. Saichō (767-822) and Nichiren (1222-1282) both linked veneration of the Lotus Sutra with peace and prosperity, and their ideas have, in modern Japan, led directly to political activism by the Soka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Nipponzan Myōhōji sects (Ch. 3).

The second critic, Derek Jeffreys, similarly draws a hard line on what Buddhists can and cannot do (Ch. 14). In this case Jeffreys refutes the possibility of human rights being an issue for Buddhists because an underlying concept of Buddhism is the principle of *anatta* – that there is nothing essential or permanent in us, such as an eternal soul that can be said to have a right, or be the basis of fundamental equality. Queen’s rebuttal to Jeffrey’s rigid interpretation of *anatta* is that by a strict measure Buddhism itself cannot be seen as something fixed. Therefore, innovation and change has been an historical reality and a philosophical imperative. In this light, incorporating non-Buddhist elements, such as rights-based activism, are quite compatible with Buddhism. Certainly the examples given in the second section illustrate how social and environmental activ-

ism have been successfully incorporated into Buddhist movements from Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Korea and Japan (Chapters 4 to 9 respectively) and give ample credence to Queen's claim. The examples of engaged Buddhism in the West in the third section further illustrate how tradition and innovation are being incorporated by contemporary Buddhists, while nonetheless showing the reader that what is going on is not merely a repetition of past practices.

Thomas Freeman Yarnall's final essay may be the most challenging of all, though his abundant use of quotation marks, parentheses, italics and exclamation marks is extremely distracting, (giving the impression that he is alternately sneering and yelling at the reader.) Rather than critiquing practitioners, his essay is aimed at the scholars who study engaged Buddhism. These he breaks into two groups: "traditionists" who feel that Buddhism has always been engaged and "modernists" who feel that engaged Buddhism, as we see it today, is a result of confrontation with uniquely modern issues and, more importantly, with Western ideas. Yarnall issues an important warning that the modernist perspective comes dangerously close to an Orientalist perspective that assumes that Buddhism would have been unable to confront these issues without the assistance of the West. The best that Yarnall can do, however, is to issue a warning and a call for more scholarship, without providing examples that indicate that there is justification for his critique of the "modernists". Queen points out that the editors of the volume worked hard to solicit articles that would argue from the "traditionist" perspective, but received none. The dilemma with Yarnall's critique is that rather than revealing anything, it closes the debate.

In essence, what is offered to the reader in *Action Dharma* is an important debate regarding the category of engaged Buddhism, which looks at whether engaged Buddhism is Buddhism at all and whether the

study of "engaged Buddhism" as a distinct category is useful. The fact that the main debate occurs in the introduction and in the final section makes it seem as though the center three sections are examples for Queen's thesis at best and merely incidental to the main thrust of the work, at worst. This does not do justice to the high quality of essays found in the first, second and third sections. However, given the inclusion of the critiques in the final section, the preoccupation with answering them in the introduction may have been unavoidable.

The essays in *Action Dharma*, taken as a whole, grapple with some important questions regarding the emergence of engaged Buddhism and whether it is contiguous with the Buddhist tradition, whether it is something new or whether it can even be called Buddhism. The essays that serve as examples are rich and illustrative, but it is the introduction on one end and the critiques on the other that unify the collection. However, the placement of the critiques against engaged Buddhism at the end, with the rebuttal to these critiques appearing in Queen's introduction seems backward, as it requires the reader to reread the introduction after finishing the book in order to fully appreciate the arguments on either side. This minor inconvenience aside, *Action Dharma* is a compelling collection, richly illustrating engaged Buddhist movements and giving fair voice to some of the criticisms against engaged Buddhists and those who study them. It is an extremely valuable work for anyone interested in how Buddhists are dealing with contemporary issues and exploring both precedents for, and the innovations of, an *Action Dharma*.