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Disengaged Buddhism

Amod Lele¹

Abstract

Contemporary engaged Buddhist scholars typically claim either that Buddhism always endorsed social activism, or that its non-endorsement of such activism represented an unwitting lack of progress. This article examines several classical South Asian Buddhist texts that explicitly reject social and political activism. These texts argue for this rejection on the grounds that the most important sources of suffering are not something that activism can fix, and that political involvement interferes with the tranquility required for liberation. The article then examines the history of engaged Buddhism in order to identify why this rejection of activism has not yet been taken sufficiently seriously.

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Introduction²

In a chapter entitled “All Buddhism Is Engaged,” Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine quote Thich Nhat Hanh as follows: “Buddhism is already engaged Buddhism. If it is not, it is not Buddhism.”³ (Hunt-Perry and Fine 36) What does this quote actually mean? Hunt-Perry and Fine do not spell it out. It could be a simple tautology: by “engaged Buddhism” we simply mean “Buddhism,” such that a forest monk who refuses all contact with society counts as an engaged Buddhist. Such an approach would be entirely unhelpful; for, in that case, there would be no need to speak of “engaged Buddhism” rather than simply of Buddhism, and to do so would merely confuse the issue.

More commonly, “engaged Buddhism” is used as a shorthand for *socially* engaged Buddhism, a Buddhism that embraces social and political activism. Hunt-Perry and Fine themselves use the term this way. If “engaged Buddhism” is indeed understood in this way, then the quote could

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³ It is not clear to me whether Thich Nhat Hanh ever made this statement, although he has said some similar things. Hunt-Perry and Fine put the phrase in quotation marks, and in their bibliography they say “see” Nhat Hanh’s *Love in Action*. They provide no page reference for the quote; and, as far as I can tell, the phrase never actually appears in that book. That concern is not my focus here, however. It reflects an attitude current among many Western Buddhists; whether or not Nhat Hanh ever actually spoke these words, one can find Hunt-Perry and Fine’s citation of him itself widely cited on the Internet.

mean one of two things. It could be a factual claim that everyone practising Buddhism has, in fact, been socially engaged, or it could be a normative definition that says self-identified Buddhists who are not socially engaged are not truly Buddhist.

The factual claim that everyone practising Buddhism has been socially engaged is false. For in fact many revered Buddhist thinkers have not merely refrained from social engagement, they have actively discouraged it. As a consequence, the normative definition is far more exclusionary than Hunt-Perry and Fine would likely want it to be.

I refer to the Buddhism of these thinkers as *disengaged* Buddhism.⁴ Disengaged Buddhists, in this sense, reject involvement with social and political issues as unfruitful and even harmful. I intend no negative connotation to the term “disengaged.”⁵ In colloquial conversation, when a friend is involved in conflict surrounding other acquaintances that has negative emotional effects, we might give that friend the helpful advice that “You need to disengage from that situation”—advice that, we will see, has an analogue among the positions of the disengaged Buddhists.

This article does not argue that a Buddhist disengaged view is correct. Rather, I argue that disengaged Buddhism is a coherent, thoughtful position to be found across a variety of at least classical Indi-

⁴ A recent work of Justin McDaniel’s uses this term in a different way, referring to “leisure—what I like to call socially disengaged Buddhism.” McDaniel identifies this leisure-based Buddhism in contrast to the Buddhism usually studied by scholars, “monasteries and monks and the art they create and books they write . . . places defined by discipline and obligation” (McDaniel 14-15). He does not justify his usage of “disengaged” to refer to Buddhist leisure activities. I find the usage and contrast rather odd, since it is not clear from the context what makes monks and monasteries “socially engaged,” nor is that a way in which the term “engaged Buddhism,” or especially “socially engaged Buddhism,” is generally used.

⁵ Such as the connotation that Thomas Yarnall takes it to have in his paper.

an Buddhist texts; as such, it deserves more constructive ethical attention than it has so far received. Western engaged Buddhist scholars, in particular, have typically given the claims of disengaged Buddhism insufficient attention in two different ways: either they act as if it never existed, or they treat it as an unwitting lack, a vacuum to be filled. They have generally not taken it as a thoughtful position worthy of response and debate.

This article is a response to those Western scholars, because they occupy a very prominent place in the scholarly field of Buddhist ethics, especially constructive or normative Buddhist ethics. It is not in response to Asian or other engaged Buddhist activists, who are outside this article's purview. The aim of this article is not to critique what engaged Buddhists *do* (that would be a very different article), but how they *think and write*, especially about the Buddhist past. I am critiquing the scholarship and advocacy, rather than the practice, of engaged Buddhism.

This article is in sympathy with James Deitrick's claim that, to date at least, American "socially engaged Buddhist social ethics is derived less from Buddhist sources than from the American religious culture in which it has grown" (i). It aims to go beyond Deitrick by examining those Buddhist sources and the positions they take in opposition to contemporary Western engaged Buddhist thought. I will present several texts from classical South Asia (roughly the eighth century CE and before) that directly discourage involvement in politics or other forms of activism, and I will explain the reasoning that underlies this discouragement. I have intentionally selected a broad range of texts from across the period in question—mainstream⁶ and Mahāyāna, narrative and phil-

⁶ The term "mainstream Buddhism" is in widespread use among scholars of Indian Buddhism to refer to non-Mahāyāna traditions in a non-pejorative way. "Theravāda" is a narrower term, referring to one sub-tradition of mainstream Buddhism that emerged in Sri Lanka long after some of the texts discussed here. Although most Buddhists today

osophical—to highlight how widespread disengaged ideals were across this context.

I stick to this classical South Asian context to avoid losing focus, though disengaged Buddhist ideals extend beyond this context.⁷ I am not claiming that *every* Buddhist text from this period is disengaged in the sense I use here. Steven Collins acutely notes two “modes of *dhamma*” in the Pāli literature, one of which accommodates both politics and violence, and one of which resists them both (*Nirvana* 419-423). I am deliberately focusing on texts in the latter mode in order to highlight an aspect of classical South Asian Buddhism that has been unjustly neglected in contemporary Buddhist ethical reflection. Still, I hope that the wide variety of texts in this article shows that even if the disengaged tendency is not universal in classical Indian Buddhism, it is nevertheless widespread—widespread enough that a normative definition of Buddhism as socially engaged would bar a wide variety of revered thinkers and texts as not truly Buddhist.

I will begin the article by articulating the ways in which engaged Buddhist scholars have so far approached historical Buddhist texts, noting that those approaches take two different forms, though neither form has so far done justice to the positions the texts articulate. Next, I will introduce the classical texts at issue and explain the methodological reasons why the claims of these texts matter. I will then show how these texts reject the idea that social engagement is a duty, and then explain their reasoning. Briefly, they claim that the significant sources of suffer-

are affiliated with Mahāyāna traditions, most in classical South Asia were not so affiliated.

⁷ For example, recently Thanissaro Bhikkhu has constructively made some of the sorts of arguments I describe here as disengaged, with reference to some of the texts cited here. Later in the article we will also see Judith Simmer-Brown speaking of contemporary Buddhist teachers who advocate disengaged Buddhism.

ing are not the sort that social engagement can address, and that political participation is typically harmful to well-being.⁸ Finally, I will look at the history of engaged Buddhism to explore why disengaged Buddhism has so far been generally ignored.

Engaged Buddhist Scholarship and the Buddhist Past

The movement of engaged Buddhism is well-studied, in part because it includes many religion scholars among its members. They have offered a variety of definitions of engaged Buddhism, though not necessarily precise ones. One of them, Christopher Queen, identifies engaged Buddhism in terms of “energetic engagement with social and political issues and crises” (ix). Another term for this “engagement” is *activism*. Thomas Tweed identifies activism as “the concern to uplift individuals, reform societies, and participate energetically in the political and economic spheres” (xxiv).

Sallie King similarly says engaged Buddhism consists of Buddhists who “engage with the problems of their society—inclusive of political, social, economic, racial, gender, environmental, and other problems—on the basis of their Buddhist worldview, values, and spirituality” (“Problems” 166). Not explicitly included on this list are psychological or spiritual problems of craving, anger, and ignorance. A call for papers for a 2000 conference on engaged Buddhism (published in *JBE* vol. 7) made that exclusion explicit, stating that engaged Buddhism is

⁸ Matthew Moore recognizes correctly that Buddhist texts often do not treat politics as an obligation, and therefore portrays the Buddhist tradition as one of “limited citizenship” (Moore 87-111). However, he misses that many texts go further and actively portray political engagement as bad and dangerous.

[c]haracterized by a reorientation of Buddhist soteriology and ethics to identify and address sources of human suffering outside of the cravings and ignorance of the sufferer—such as social, political, and economic injustice, warfare, and violence, and environmental degradation. (qtd. in Jenkins 2000)

The *political* element of engaged Buddhism is particularly important. We may note first that all three definitions just quoted include the term “political.” I have not yet seen an engaged Buddhist article that defines “political,” but they seem to be in line with the definition proposed by the political scientist Matthew Moore in his examination of Buddhist political theory, as having to do with government:

I understand government to be the processes and institutions either authorized to make or effectively capable of making binding decisions for a geographically bounded population, including the power to enforce those decisions coercively. Politics, more broadly, is the set of practices and institutions that are concerned with the operation, staffing, maintenance, and possible modification of government, including the extreme of wanting to abolish government altogether or at least radically change it. (89-90)

Thomas Freeman Yarnall’s examples of social engagement—“voting, lobbying, peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and so forth” (1)—are all political in this sense, of practices involved with government. Likewise, in looking for a historical exemplar or precursor of engaged Buddhism, many scholars turn to the figure of Aśoka/Asoka, the third-century (BCE) emperor who united most of the Indian subcontinent under his rule. Joanna Macy, for example, proclaims:

One of the great heroes of Buddhist tradition is King Asoka, who in his devotion to Dharma built hospitals and public wells and tree-lined roads for the ‘welfare of all beings.’ Historians recognize his efforts in the third century B.C.E. as the first public social service program in recorded history. (173)

The reasons that engaged Buddhist ethics urges activism vary, but they typically involve a conviction that ethical action requires the sort of *systemic change* that government can provide. As Main and Lai describe it,

socially engaged reasoning recognizes action as moral only when it changes the nature of the social relations and situations that cause the other to experience pain, privation, and exclusion. From early in the twentieth century, this has meant systematic solutions and broad reform to properly address social problems. (24)

It is conceptually crucial to distinguish social and political engagement, in this sense of activism, from other different phenomena which are sometimes confused with it. First, as Queen (14-17) rightly notes, engagement is not at all the same thing as altruism, kindness, or compassion.⁹ *Karuṇā* and *maitrī* are praised throughout the Indian Bud-

⁹The way Queen himself employs the distinction does not quite reflect the way altruism works in many classical texts, as his examples of non-engaged altruism still involve material benefit: “nursing the sick, leading the blind, helping the down-trodden, feeding those who are hungry, and providing lodging for those who are needy” (14). For Śāntideva the paradigm altruistic activities are teaching others the dharma that will save them from suffering, as I discuss in “Ethical Revaluation,” “The Compassionate,” and later in this article. I cite Queen because he is right to notice that there is a distinction: classical advocates of compassion like Śāntideva and Candrakīrti are not advocat-

dhist world, and they are particularly important for Mahāyāna Buddhists. Mahāyāna Buddhists like Śāntideva take altruistic action as an essential part of the good life. But for several important Mahāyāna Buddhists, neither *karuṇā* nor *maitrī* nor altruism implies social or political activism at all. We will see, indeed, that Śāntideva and Candrakīrti explicitly *reject* political engagement while nevertheless singing the praises of compassion and altruism. For them altruism and political engagement are entirely different from each other.

Nor is engagement identical with “living in the world,” with a life within *saṃsāra* that rejects the detachment of the forest monk. Contra Thich Nhat Hanh,¹⁰ living with one’s family as a Buddhist is not sufficient to make one an engaged Buddhist, if the term “engaged Buddhism” is to mean anything of significance at all. Classical texts on a householder’s conduct, like the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, do not indicate that a householder should address issues “inclusive of political, social, economic, racial, gender, environmental, and other problems.” They do not advocate political activism or systemic change, and so should not count as engaged Buddhism. Likewise, the altruism of Śāntideva and Candrakīrti requires them to engage with other people in society, but that engagement may well take the form of recommending those others *reject* political involvement.

Engaged Buddhist scholars often claim that engagement with social and political problems (“outside of the cravings and ignorance of the

ing the kind of political activism for systemic change pursued by engaged Buddhists. As we will see, in many respects they oppose it.

¹⁰ In a 1989 lecture at First Unitarian Church in Houston, Texas, Nhat Hanh said “Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. If you practice Buddhism in your family, in society, it is engaged Buddhism” (White). Like the earlier “Buddhism is already engaged” quotation, this quotation is often quoted without the original source, although in this case I was able to track it down.

sufferer”) is a *duty*, an obligation. Kenneth Kraft closes the *Engaged Buddhism in the West* collection with these words:

How best to respond to the plight of the world? The twenty authors of this book concur unanimously on the first part of the answer:

We must be engaged. (506)

Those last four words get their own paragraph, to emphasize the idea that social engagement is a duty, a necessity, something we *must* do. Engaged Buddhist writers often believe that something is wrong or lacking with people or traditions who are not engaged in the ways specified.

The major point of disagreement among Western engaged Buddhist scholars is about the extent to which the Buddhist past fits that description, of lacking a proper degree of engagement. It is a matter of some controversy among engaged Buddhist scholars whether engaged Buddhism, in fact, amounts to a *reorientation* of Buddhist ethics, as the 2000 call for papers had proclaimed, or whether it was always present.

Yarnall helpfully distinguishes between two major orientations on this latter question. He refers to these as “traditionist” and “modernist.” I agree with his assessment that these terms are not ideal, but they do serve present purposes, so I adopt them rather than attempting to coin further neologisms.

“Modernist” writers, in Yarnall’s sense, emphasize the discontinuity of engaged Buddhism with the Asian Buddhist past. They assert that Buddhists in the past were not socially active, but they rarely treat that disengaged past as an intellectual opponent worthy of response and refutation. More commonly, they speak of that past as if it were an unwitting lack, a primitive stage that Buddhists would have progressed beyond if they’d just thought about it enough. Gary Snyder argues that

“Historically, Buddhist philosophers have *failed* to analyze out the degree to which ignorance and suffering are caused or encouraged by social factors, considering fear-and-desire to be given facts of the human condition” (Snyder 82). Sallie King says that a concern for individual spiritual growth “has tended, especially in some sects like Zen, to *retard the development* of an attitude that more energetically embraces social activism as a good thing” (King, “Social Engagement” 167). George Tanabe similarly identifies traditional Buddhist philosophy’s refusal to engage with political concerns as a sign of premodern Buddhism’s lack of advancement:

Whereas Buddhists throughout the ages have been involved with society, their development of a social and political philosophy has not been as *advanced* as their teachings on inner spirituality. Engaged Buddhism arises from and responds to this *vacuum* . . . (Editor’s preface to King, *Benevolence*, ix; emphases added to all quotes)

By contrast “traditionists,” like Yarnall, often see modernist ideas of “advancement” beyond a “vacuum” as disrespectful to the existing Asian Buddhist past. However, not only do the traditionists give disengaged Buddhism no intellectual consideration, they deny that it was widespread or even that it existed. So Yarnall says his traditionist “group of scholars maintains that Buddhists have *never* accepted a dualistic split between ‘spiritual’ and ‘social’ domains. To engage in the spiritual life *necessarily* includes (though it cannot be reduced to) social engagement” (4; emphasis added).

Traditionist scholars often cite textual evidence from classical Indian Buddhism to support their position. Stephen Jenkins argues that in traditional texts, “in order to create the conditions necessary for benefiting people spiritually, one must first attend to their material needs.” He claims that in the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*, “Material well-being is a prerequisite for moral development, and its absence leads to social disas-

ter.” Likewise, Joanna Macy invokes *Bodhicaryāvatāra* chapter VIII’s famous arguments for altruism in order to claim that Śāntideva “saw service to others as the path leading to enlightenment . . .” (Macy 173)

I dispute both the traditionist and modernist engaged interpretations of classical Indian Buddhism. Against the traditionists, rejections of social and political activity were widespread among Indian Buddhist thinkers, including in some texts that the traditionists take as examples of engagement. The modernists are an interpretive step up from most traditionists in that they recognize how often premodern Buddhism was disengaged; what they rarely acknowledge is the thoughtful reasoning underlying that disengagement.

Method in Buddhist Ethics

Engaged Buddhist scholarship occupies both descriptive and normative ground, and I take this to be a good thing. However, such Buddhist normative ethics needs to respond to classical Buddhist claims it disagrees with, such as disengaged Buddhist claims.

Kenneth Kraft notes that there is a potential ambiguity in the term “engaged Buddhist studies:” although it *can* mean simply the study of engaged Buddhism without any commitment to it, it nevertheless also “suggests approaches that incorporate personal religious beliefs, political commitments, or other forms of involvement” (79). It is easy to see that engaged Buddhist scholarship in practice takes such normative approaches frequently. Kraft’s own “we must be engaged” is an obvious example. Sallie King, likewise, often claims in her works that they are written “from the perspective of engaged Buddhism” (“Social Engagement” 179n3; “Response” 638). Even the works of King’s that do not explicitly proclaim a normative perspective nevertheless implicitly take it

up, such as when she proclaims that “it is easy to take expressions of contempt and acts of violence as criteria for discerning what is *not* a valid expression of the Dharma” and uses explicitly normative language of “at best” and “at worst” to describe various forms of Buddhist political expression (*Socially* 25-26). Franz-Johannes Litsch introduces a description of German engaged Buddhism by proclaiming: “To practice engaged Buddhism is to unlock the deepest potential of persons, to serve others, and to become enlightened” (423). Brian Victoria (“Skeleton” 72) proclaims that “I personally am a strong supporter of this movement” (i.e. engaged Buddhism). Acknowledging his status as a fully ordained Zen priest (*Zen* xiii), he then declares it a “glaring deficiency” of his second edition that it “fails to address the question of how Japanese institutional Buddhism, most especially Zen, can be restored to its rightful place as an authentic expression of the Buddha Dharma” (*Zen* 232). These examples of engaged Buddhist scholars’ normative commitments could easily be extended.

Importantly, Kraft says of this ambiguity in “engaged Buddhist studies” that “perhaps it is a welcome one” (79). I agree with Kraft on this point. When done well, normative engaged Buddhist scholarship can help to fill the unfortunate “void” identified by José Cabezón (27) “in the triangle between a) purely descriptive philology, b) uncritical traditionalism and c) uncritical popular literature.”

Such a void is created when Buddhist or other theological or constructive concerns are considered to have no place in scholarship. David Chappell (371), for example, recommends that his conclusions’ “validity and usefulness now need to be measured by trying to apply them as a guide for various ethical decisions. But perhaps this is a task for Buddhists rather than scholars”—as if somehow one could not be both. When one assumes that scholarship is not Buddhist and Buddhism is not scholarly, one limits and deprives both of them.

Chappell makes no argument for this separation of Buddhism from scholarship; in my experience, such a separation is typically more assumed than argued. There *have* been some scholars of religion who have argued for it, most notably Donald Wiebe. Wiebe argues that university scholarship must be “scientific,” which in his view requires a commitment to “description, analysis and explanation” alone, not hermeneutic interpretation or the dissemination of social or cultural values. (95) But such a criterion would rule out not only the entire discipline of philosophy, but the normative dimensions of political theory and of fields like gender studies, literature, and art. Wiebe frequently attacks “humanists” (112-113, 281, 286), so he seems to accept this implication; but it seems unlikely to me that Chappell and most others who would make such claims in Buddhist ethics are willing to do so.

Nor should they. The separation of “scholars” from “Buddhists” leaves no room for scholars to *do* Buddhist ethics, only to study other people’s Buddhist ethical beliefs. If Buddhist ethical scholarship were to be limited in that way, it would be analogous to limiting biologists to the study of other people’s beliefs about biology without their ever making any biological claims of their own. The scholarly field of Buddhist ethics needs to include normative ethical work. Yet typically scholars have been too timid to include it; thus, even when Damien Keown expresses the genuine need for Buddhist ethics to move “beyond simple descriptive ethics,” he still moves only to a descriptive meta-ethics, explicitly avoiding normative ethics (3, 6). Keown’s approach is striking since the study of ethics, from Aristotle’s coining of the term onward, has been an overwhelmingly normative discipline—as one would expect, since, for most people studying ethics over the centuries, normatively identifying how human beings should live has been the point.

It is, then, an enormous *virtue* of the field of engaged Buddhist studies that it has often avoided such an impoverished, merely descrip-

tive, view of Buddhist ethics: engaged Buddhist studies has aimed to articulate what is good and bad for us Buddhists to do, not merely what others have said about the topic; and it has done so within a scholarly context.

What engaged Buddhist ethics has not yet had is sufficient rigor in *defending* its constructive ethical claims—a task central to making any claims that one makes as a scholar. A key difference between biology and Buddhist ethics is that, in the latter, descriptive historical and sociological claims are directly relevant to constructive and normative claims. Most engaged Buddhist scholars make normative inferences from *some* Buddhist texts; they agree that the question of whether the texts or the Buddha said something is relevant to whether it is true or should be adopted. But once one agrees with that premise, then one must take seriously the claims of those *other* Buddhist texts that disagree. Many engaged Buddhists would take texts addressed in this article as canonical; indeed, some of them, such as the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* and Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, are among the very texts that engaged Buddhist scholars typically quote. Therefore, it is critical for engaged Buddhist scholars to confront the disengaged arguments made in those texts, as to date they have not. As Cabezón notes, the norms of scholarly humanistic discourse require “breadth of analysis,” which

implies that no source will be dismissed in an ad hoc manner. I take such a commitment to imply a willingness to grapple with what, from a contemporary perspective, might be considered the most problematic and anachronistic portions of the tradition. (35)

Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* and the recent works of Stephen Jenkins (“On the Auspiciousness,” “Making Merit”) have been exemplary in this regard. Victoria and Jenkins have shown how wide swaths of Buddhist tradition have argued for violence and war in the name of the

dharma. They have done an excellent job of bringing engaged Buddhists face-to-face with parts of the tradition (including revered texts and thinkers) that argue for a politics contrary to contemporary engaged Buddhist scholars' ideals. Considerably less "grappling" has so far occurred with those elements of Buddhist tradition that contradict contemporary engaged Buddhists in urging their audiences not to participate in politics *at all*.

In the sections to follow, I will show the claims of these disengaged Buddhists using an intentionally wide variety of classical Indian Buddhist texts. The earliest texts at issue here come from the Pāli Canon (Tipiṭaka), a collection dating from the first Buddhist millennium and still held sacred by contemporary Theravāda Buddhists. The Pāli texts cited here include several *suttas* (discourses of the Buddha) and the *Mūgapakkha Jātaka*, one of the Ten Great Jātakas (the stories of the Buddha's ten last births before his final birth as Gotama Buddha).

I also include Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* (*Acts of the Buddha*, abbreviated BC), a famous Sanskrit courtly poem (*kāvya*) from approximately the first century CE, which recounts the Buddha's life story and is considered authoritative in China as well as India (Li). To demonstrate that the disengaged Buddhist approach is found in Mahāyāna as well as mainstream ("Hīnayāna") sources, I also refer to the seventh- and eighth-century Mahāyāna Madhyamaka philosophers Śāntideva and Candrakīrti. On the latter I refer specifically to Śāntideva's two major works, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA) and *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (ŚS), and to Candrakīrti's *Catuhśatakatīkā* (CŚṬ), a commentary on the *Catuhśataka* (CŚ) verses by the earlier Madhyamaka philosopher Āryadeva. These Madhyamaka works were all composed in Sanskrit, though the CŚ/CŚṬ is now only extant in Tibetan.

Is Engagement a Duty?

Against Yarnall's claim that "the spiritual path necessarily includes . . . social engagement" or Kraft's claim that "we must be engaged," several classical Indian texts explicitly reject involvement with social and political issues. Let us first consider first the figure of the *cakravartin* (in Sanskrit, *cakkavatti* in Pāli), the ideal "wheel-turning" ruler. When a *cakravartin* is the head of state, many classical texts claim, his society is uplifted tremendously for the better. The *Lakkhana Sutta* proclaims that his polity will be "a land open, uninfested by brigands, free from jungle, powerful, prosperous, happy and free from perils" (DN III.146). He even has the power to "end all strife" (DN III.173). The act of becoming a *cakravartin* enables one to create a world where social systems are perfected, idyllic.

Becoming a *cakravartin* is something that every buddha is capable of doing—and yet every buddha decides *not* to do it. The Pāli texts repeatedly proclaim that a great person (*mahāpurisa*) has only two options: to be a *cakravartin*, or to be a buddha.¹¹ Several texts praise the buddhas for declining the former option and selecting the latter. They have the option of not merely improving, but effectively perfecting, society—and they decline it.

The *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (DN II.16-30) tells the story of Vipassī, a prince of an age long before ours. A prophecy informed Vipassī's father, the king, that only two options were open to his son: to become either a *cakravartin* or a buddha. The king was excited that his son could make the kingdom flourish and afraid that the son would leave him to be a monk, so he built luxurious palaces full of sensual pleasures to keep Vipassī around, hooked on the delights kingship had to offer. But soon

¹¹ DN I.88-9, for one example.

enough the prince left the palace to see the outside world, and saw what later tradition would immortalize as the “Four Sights.” That is, he saw an old man, a sick man, and a dead man, and realized that all these fates awaited him in the end, even as a king. On his fourth trip out, he saw a monk. He immediately recognized the monk’s path as a better one, a way beyond the clinging that characterizes the ruler’s life, and he explicitly chose that life as one better than political rulership.

Later sources tell a similar story about Siddhārtha or Gotama Buddha, the buddha of our age. Asvaghōṣa makes it the central drama in his story of the Buddha’s life. First Siddhārtha’s father, the king, tells him that his dharma, his duty, is to remain in the family and be a king (BC V.32); then the family priest (*purohita*) tells him to abandon his idea of monkhood for the sake of dharma (*dharmārtham*) (BC IX.15). But the Buddha-to-be rejects their claims in both cases, specifically responding by saying “a kingdom thus provides neither dharma nor joy” (BC IX.42). We might think that the king’s main reason for telling his son to be a king was his familial love rather than a desire to make the kingdom prosper, but later in the text the Buddha-to-be encounters a *different* king (Śreṇya, the king of Rājagṛha¹²) who offers his own kingdom if the hero will not accept his father’s. He pleads for Siddhārtha to become king because he will create great prosperity: “association with the virtuous makes the virtuous prosper” (BC X.26). But Siddhārtha turns Śreṇya down too.

The *Rajja Sutta*¹³ (SN I.116-117) goes yet further. Here, even to rule according to dharma (*dhammena*) is presented to the Buddha as a *temptation from Māra*, the evil tempter figure. As the Buddha comes closer to

¹² Known as Seniya Bimbisāra in Pāli texts.

¹³ I found the *Rajja*, *Gilāna*, and *Tiracchāna Kathā* Suttas through the thoughtful work of Matthew Moore.

awakening, he wonders: “Is it possible to exercise rulership righteously [*dhammena*]: without killing and without instigating others to kill, without confiscating and without instigating others to confiscate, without sorrowing and without causing sorrow?” Māra replies that he can and should indeed rule righteously. But the Buddha, of course, refuses this temptation, and proceeds instead on the monastic path.

Classical Buddhist texts do not merely claim that buddhahood is such a lofty goal that it exceeds the goods a cakravartin could provide, or that only a monk should reject the path of the ruler. In the *Gilāna Sutta* (SN IV.302-304), the highly regarded householder disciple Citta is sick and about to die, and the gods ask him to vow that he will become a cakravartin. But he turns them down, saying: “That too is impermanent; that too is unstable; one must abandon that too and pass on.” Citta is not a bodhisattva or aspiring to be a buddha; he is simply aiming at arhatship, the lower kind of awakening possible for a normal person. But even that is a greater goal than being a ruler who will bring general prosperity and flourishing to his society.

Nor is it merely rulership *per se* that the texts reject. The *Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta* rejects even *talking* about social problems and institutions: “Do not engage in the various kinds of pointless talk: that is, talk about kings, thieves, and ministers of state; talk about armies, dangers and wars . . . talk about relations, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, and countries . . .” (SN V.419)

So far, I have cited only mainstream (non-Mahāyāna) texts. One might imagine that the thoroughgoing altruism of the Mahāyāna would demand political engagement for the benefit of the world. But Śāntideva, one of the greatest Mahāyāna ethical thinkers, lists learning about law and politics (*daṇḍanīti śāstra*) among the kinds of learning that are fruitless, against liberation, and leading to delusion, which should therefore be avoided by bodhisattvas (ŚS 192). When he offers advice to kings, the

advice is that they give their kingdoms away (ŚS 27). Nor does the alleviation of poverty take high priority in his work, as he asks: “If the perfection of generosity consists in making the universe free from poverty, how can previous Protectors [buddhas] have acquired it, when the world is still poor, even today?” (BCA V.9). Candrakīrti, too, quotes and comments approvingly on a verse that a “sensible person does not acquire a kingdom” (CŚ IV.13).

It should be clear, then, that a wide range of classical Indian Buddhist texts look with suspicion on, or even actively reject, engagement with social and political problems. The next three sections will explain their reasons for doing so.

Arguments Against Engagement: Where Does Suffering Come From?

Why do many Indian Buddhist texts reject engagement? First, they reject the idea that social problems such as war or poverty are significant causes of suffering (*dukkha*), when that suffering is properly understood. The Second Noble Truth states that the origin of suffering is craving; disengaged texts typically agree that the causes of suffering are primarily or entirely within the sufferer’s mind. To the extent that these texts identify causes of suffering beyond the sufferer’s mind, they are inevitabilities of life from which no amount of privilege will allow escape, such as old age, illness, and death. For that reason, they claim, attention to social problems is a distraction at best. So, the *Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta* explains why one should abstain from talk of society and its problems: “Because, monks, this talk is unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and does not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna” (SN V.420).

For Aśvaghōṣa, when Siddhārtha's father begs him not to become a monk, he says that he will agree on four conditions: "My life shall never be subject to death, disease shall not steal this good health of mine, old age shall never overtake my youth, no mishap shall rob this fortune of mine." Of course, the king cannot make such a guarantee, and he allows his son to leave. Becoming a ruler will not help Siddhārtha fix the real problems of life (BC V.32-35).

In the *Rajja Sutta*, Māra notes the Buddha is so powerful he could create great prosperity, sufficient to turn the Himalayas to gold. But the Buddha refuses, noting that any wealth always leaves one wanting more: "If there were a mountain made of gold, Made entirely of solid gold, Not double this would suffice for one . . ." (SN I.116-117).

Śāntideva, as is well known, takes the well-being of others as his first priority. That he is an altruistic thinker, concerned with others' well-being, is not in dispute. And yet, as we saw clearly in the previous section, he still explicitly rejects social and political engagement. Why? Because that social engagement does not actually remedy the real causes of suffering. For him as for the non-Mahāyāna thinkers, the real causes of suffering are mental: "all fears and immeasurable sufferings arise from the mind alone" (BCA V.6). Furthermore, the things of this world are unworthy of our attention because they are metaphysically empty. (See Lele "Metaphysical" 273-277.) They will not get us out of suffering; they may even trap us there further. (See Lele, "Revaluation" 98-100 and 124-28 for a detailed discussion of Śāntideva's reasoning.)

For Śāntideva, as a consequence of all these points, the way one can best benefit others is to help them learn to follow the bodhisattva path, not to alleviate any social problems they might be facing. Jenkins disputes this interpretation of Śāntideva, noting correctly that on occasion Śāntideva does say the bodhisattva gives to the poor (ŚS 274, for example). But as I have argued elsewhere (Lele, "The Compassionate"), for

Śāntideva the primary purpose of the bodhisattva's compassionate gift-giving is to make the recipient better disposed to receive the teaching.¹⁴ The bodhisattva gives to the rich as well as the poor; the recipient, rich or poor, receives no real *material* benefit from the gift.

It is a common mistake in discussions of Mahāyāna to miss this point: they *assume* that Śāntideva's concern for others must necessarily imply social or political engagement, even though (as we saw in the previous section) he explicitly rejects it on multiple occasions. So, while King is correct to note that Śāntideva's meditations on self and other are designed to lead us to *compassionate* action, she is wrong to equate compassionate action with *social* action ("Social Engagement," 164). And while Macy is correct, strictly speaking, to say that Śāntideva "saw service to others as the path leading to enlightenment," she is not correct to identify that service with *social* service, or to segue as she does into the Sri Lankan reformer A. T. Ariyaratne and his movement to build "repaired roads, de-silted irrigation canals, nutrition programs, and schools" (Macy 174-175). For Śāntideva, such an approach does not provide the benefits that people really need. To Macy he might reply: "Our duty to others is to save them from the suffering their own cravings inflict on themselves. It helps to give them material goods, but not because possessing the goods helps prevent their suffering; instead because the

¹⁴ Śāntideva also recognizes another purpose of gift-giving which is not directly connected to compassion, and that is giving for one's own spiritual benefit. This is especially the case for *pariṇāmanā*, the redirection of good karma, which is the context in which Śāntideva makes many of his wishes for the well-being of the poor and sick. In this case, too, material benefit to the recipient is irrelevant. See Lele, "Compassionate" 716, and "Revaluation" 167-169.

goods allow them to listen to the message that wealth and poverty are not what really matters.”¹⁵

The *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*: Detachment from the Passage of Time

The *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* (*Discourse on the Lion’s Roar of the Cakravartin*) makes for a particularly helpful case study in disengaged Buddhism because engaged Buddhist scholars often take it as a key text advocating the reform and uplift of society. A reading of the discourse in context, however, shows that it actually advocates social *disengagement*. This sutta begins with the Buddha exhorting monks as follows:

Monks, be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves with no other refuge. Let the Dhamma be your island, let the Dhamma be your refuge, with no other refuge Keep to your own preserves, monks, to your ancestral haunts. If you do so, then Māra will find no lodgement, no foothold. It is just by the building-up of wholesome states that this merit increases. (DN III.58)

The Buddha adds that one can put this advice into practice by mindfully contemplating body, mind, feelings and *dhammas*. He then tells a story that extends from the past into the future, which takes up the bulk of the text.

The story goes as follows. Once upon a time, the Buddha says, a cakravartin ruled a flourishing kingdom where people lived for eighty thousand years. His descendant mostly ruled well but neglected to give

¹⁵ I develop this interpretation in more detail with additional references to the text in Lele, “Compassionate.”

to the needy, so the kingdom became poorer, and criminal violence ensued. Once the decline began, the sutta continues, people began to take worse and worse actions, and as they did so, lives got worse and lifespans continued to decrease further (typically by about half each time), until “the children of those whose life-span had been two and a half centuries lived for only a hundred years” (DN III.59-71).

At this point the story’s past tense gives way to the future: “Monks, a time will come when the children of these people will have a life-span of ten years.” This future time is dystopian in multiple ways: families will be torn apart by hatred, even murder; even food with tasty flavours will disappear. But one desperate group of people will come together and say “It is only because we became addicted to evil ways that we suffered this loss of our kindred, so let us now do good! What good things can we do? Let us abstain from the taking of life—that will be a good practice” (DN III.73). This abstinence will start to give them a more beautiful appearance; lifespans will soon increase back to twenty years. So the group will learn to refrain from other sorts of bad actions. As a result, lifespans will continue to move back upward until they again reach eighty thousand years and a new cakravartin will arise, as will the future buddha Metteyya (Maitreya).

From that point the text returns to the original frame, exhorting the monks to “be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves, with no other refuge,” to enter states of meditative concentration (*jhāna*), and to take the dhamma as their refuge (DN III.73-79).

Some readers have perceived a tension between the embedded past-future narrative and the solitary exhortations that frame it at the beginning and end. Mavis Fenn, for example, claims that “the effect of the frame tale on the embedded story is to undermine the strong socio-political thrust of the embedded story” (104). Richard Gombrich goes considerably further, proclaiming that

the myth is set in an inappropriate frame. Most of the Buddha's sermons are presented as preached in answer to a question or in some other appropriate context; but this one has a beginning and an ending in which the Buddha is talking to monks about something totally different. Either the whole text is apocryphal or at least it has been tampered with. (85-86)

It is noteworthy that Gombrich says nothing about what is actually *in* the beginning and ending—namely the exhortations to be islands unto themselves and take the dharma as their refuge—nor why he takes them to be “totally different.” Perhaps he is agreeing with Fenn and Jenkins that the embedded story has a “strong socio-political thrust” (as the frame story does not). But does it?

Steven Collins provides a reading of the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda* that does far more justice to the text's features. Collins notes that there are several phrasings that occur in both the frame story and the embedded story, suggesting the same author was at work in both. We cannot know for sure whether the *Cakkavatti* is a composite text or not, but even if it were a composite text, there was a redactor who tried to give it unity, and it is that redactor's version that we have. So, we have textual reason to attempt to read the story as a consistent work (*Nirvana* 491-492). For his part, Gombrich recognizes “The Theravādin tradition itself, however, does not doubt that the text is authentic . . .” (85-86).

Collins argues that the purpose of the whole *Cakkavatti* is “to induce in its audiences—or at least to make possible as a reaction from some among them—a sense of detachment from, or at least a (briefly) non-involved perspective on the passage of time.” The embedded story gives “narrative form” to a “sense of the futility of temporal goods . . .” (*Nirvana* 481). That is, the embedded story—taken as a whole, rather than taking the passage about poverty and crime in isolation—serves to show that

good and bad social systems will come and go, and they will get worse before they get better. So the narrative provides a reason why the text's audience should build personal virtue and embrace the dharma, *rather than* placing its hope in those social systems or any idea of progress therein.¹⁶ Read in this way, the message of the frame and embedded stories is entirely consistent—but to the extent that either can be seen as having a “strong socio-political thrust,” that thrust turns out to be a disengagement from society and politics.

Earlier I noted Stephen Jenkins's claim that the embedded story shows “Material well-being is a prerequisite for moral development, and its absence leads to social disaster.” He argues this because it is the king's failure to provide for the poor that causes theft and creates the downward cycle. But the later sections of the embedded story themselves show that material well-being is *not* a prerequisite for moral development: beings come together and improve themselves by learning to refrain from bad actions amid fantastically bad material conditions. Rather, that moral improvement is what ultimately makes the material conditions better. The frame story prepares the audience to be able to improve morally even in such a dire situation. To do so, the text says, audience members can and should disengage from society: keep to their own preserves, be islands unto themselves. Then they will no longer be dependent on social conditions for their well-being.

When placed in the context of this sutta, the aforementioned prophecy that a buddha can choose to be a cakravartin, but does not do so, is particularly striking. If the Buddha of our era had decided to be-

¹⁶ I suspect it is significant that this text only says to take refuge in the dharma, where more common formulations of refuge-taking include the Buddha and saṅgha (monkhood) as well. In the envisioned future of ten-year lifespans, there may well be no extant buddha or saṅgha to which one can turn.

come a cakravartin instead of a buddha, he could have *stopped* the downward spiral and taken us to a better era. But he did not do so. Finding the path to liberation was so important that it was worth allowing the disastrous future where lifespans are a mere ten years.

Arguments Against Engagement: The Harshness of Politics

Let us turn now to politics and government, an area that, as we saw, plays a major role in engaged Buddhists' engagement. Many classical Indian Buddhist texts reject the activity of governing because they view it as inimical to advancement on the Buddhist path because of the kinds of acts and mental states that governing requires. This is not to say the texts are anarchistic. Governing is a necessary evil—but it is no less evil for being necessary. One will be better off, progress further on the path, if one can avoid engaging in the processes of government.

The *Aggañña Sutta*'s brief section on the kingly (*khattiya*, equivalent to *kṣatriya*) caste has become renowned for expressing a “social contract” theory of government. (See Collins, “Discourse” 387-389.) That is, once people first begin to steal and do other bad things, other people decide together that if someone takes on the job of punishing these wrongdoers, they will reward him with a portion of rice, and the *sutta* presents this as the origin of government.¹⁷ What is less frequently noted is that the text explicitly proclaims that accusation, punishment, and banishment are *bad* (*pāpaka*, *akusala*), just as the original thefts are (DN III.93). Their role in maintaining society does not stop them from creating bad karma and interfering with one's progress to nirvana.

¹⁷ Candrakīrti's *Catuhśatakaṭikā*, which we will examine shortly, repeats this story.

Likewise, in the *Mūgapakkha Jātaka*, the Bodhisatta (buddha-to-be)¹⁸ is born as a prince whose father rules according to dharma (*dhammena*). Yet even so, when the Bodhisatta sees his father punishing criminals, he thinks: “Ah! my father *through his being a king*, is becoming guilty of a grievous action which brings men to hell” (Ja VI.3, emphasis added). So, the prince pretends to be deaf and mute in order to get out of the burden of rulership—so concerned to avoid it that he resorts to deception.

Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita* makes this point as well. The family priest (*purohita*) tells Siddhārtha that he will fulfill *dharma* better as a king than a renouncer (BC IX.15-17). Siddhārtha responds that kingship is dangerous and interferes with liberation because of the harshness or fierceness (*taikṣṇya*) that it requires:

As for the scripture that householder kings have attained release, that cannot be! The dharma of release [*mokṣadharmā*], where calm prevails, and the dharma of kings [*rājadharma*], where force prevails—how far apart are they!¹⁹ If a king delights in calm, his realm [*rājya*] falls apart, if his mind is on his realm, his calm is destroyed; for calmness and fierceness [*taikṣṇya*] are incompatible, like the union of fire and water, heat and cold. (BC IX.48-50)

Notice here the dramatic contrast to the claim of Yarnall’s traditionists, noted earlier, that “Buddhists have never accepted a dualistic

¹⁸ Pāli *bodhisatta* becomes *bodhisattva* in Sanskrit. In the *jātakas* this term simply refers to the Buddha of our age, in his previous lives before he became the Buddha.

¹⁹ The contrast between *rājadharma* and *mokṣadharmā* echoes the names of the sections of the *Śāntiparvan*, the longest book of the *Mahābhārata*; the *rājadharma* section articulates a theory of rulership. See Hildebeitel for a broader discussion of the ways in which the *Buddhacarita* critiques the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*.

split between ‘spiritual’ and ‘social’ domains.” In the *Buddhacarita*, a major Buddhist author not only makes an explicit distinction between the domains of *mokṣa* and of *rājya*, he claims that the mental states they involve are *incompatible*. Perhaps there were some classical Buddhists who did not accept such a split, but Aśvaghōṣa was not among them. So, likewise, the idea of engagement as a duty is explicitly rejected: the kings tell the buddha-to-be that dharma requires his political involvement, and he says no. Indeed, the higher Buddhist dharma of liberation requires the exact opposite.

These are mainstream (non-Mahāyāna) thinkers. One might think that since governing produces a more functional society, the more altruistic Mahāyāna thinkers might see governing as a necessary self-sacrifice, such that the ruler should sacrifice his own well-being for the sake of a better society. But this is not the case.

We saw earlier how Candrakīrti says a sensible person does not become a king. For Candrakīrti, the most important reason for this decision is the harshness in which a king must engage to maintain order: “he cannot reign without oppressing the people” (commentary on CŚ IV.24). For him, that punishment is a necessary evil does not make it any less of an evil. Introducing CŚ IV.10, he entertains the objection that “If the king punishes evil people in order to protect his people, he accumulates no bad karma [*sdig pa*]²⁰ because he benefits the good people.” The objector wants to make the utilitarian claim that the net benefit of punishment makes it a karmically good act. But to this objection Candrakīrti says *no*:

²⁰ Lang’s translation renders the Tibetan *sdig pa*—which would have been *pāpa* in Candrakīrti’s lost original Sanskrit—as “harm.” I have changed her translation here to render it as the more literal “bad karma” (and the adjective as “karmically bad” rather than “harmful”), to highlight that Candrakīrti views the ruler’s acts as morally, and not merely psychologically, problematic. See Lele “Ethical Revaluation” 71-73 for a more general defence of the translation of *pāpa* as “bad karma.”

The king believes that punishment is his job and that there is nothing nonvirtuous about it. In this way, reasons that are satisfying are created. But the bad karma of these actions is not destroyed. It is just the same for the king. Since the king mostly engages in karmically bad actions, he will experience the maturation of that bad karma in bad rebirths.

Western Engaged Buddhist Presuppositions

The disengaged Buddhist texts we have considered—the *Mūgapakkha Jātaka*, the works of Aśvaghōṣa, Śāntideva and Candrakīrti, and various Pāli *suttas*—are at odds with claims of both “traditionist” and “modernist” engaged Buddhists. Against the traditionists, we have seen that South Asian Buddhists not only made an explicit separation between liberation and socio-political domains but thought that the two were in direct opposition to each other. Against modernists we have seen that, far from constituting a “failure” or a lack of development, these Buddhists had plausible, considered reasons to oppose social and political engagement. The texts in question are hardly obscure; the Ten Great Jātakas and the works of Śāntideva are among the most beloved works in contemporary Theravāda and Tibetan traditions respectively. The widespread nature of disengaged Buddhism in classical South Asia should have been easy to see.

Yet somehow many Western engaged Buddhist scholars have, indeed, failed to see it. This failure is despite the fact that some Western scholars have observed Buddhist anti-political tendencies for a long time. While Max Weber’s (206) depiction of Buddhism as a “specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion” was in important respects

exaggerated, it captures the ideas we have encountered here far better than many engaged Buddhist scholars have.

Sometimes disengaged Buddhism is not even unseen so much as intentionally ignored. Consider Judith Simmer-Brown's description of the group that would become the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. The implications of this passage are striking enough to merit a close reading. Simmer-Brown says this group

was concerned that Buddhist practice centers and groups had become entirely removed from the social and political issues of the day: some teachers and organizations were even actively discouraging political involvement. The Maui group envisioned an organization which would attract a wide range of Buddhists, fomenting political discussion and action. Something had to be done, and specifically something political needed to be done by Buddhists. "Anyone, feeling compassion, seeing no boundary between self and others, would feel compelled to do something," observed Nelson Foster, reflecting on the occasion. (69)

In this passage, Simmer-Brown describes the teachers' discouragement of political involvement with "even," strongly suggesting that she finds this discouragement surprising, unexpected, or extreme. Does Simmer-Brown then react as one would expect a scholar would react to a surprising or unexpected development, by probing further and exploring the reasons for it? No. Simmer-Brown does not deem the teachers' objections relevant enough to be worthy of any recognition, regard, or consideration beyond this half-sentence. Nothing further is said about them, not even their names.

Instead, Simmer-Brown proceeds with the story of what the group did in apparent defiance of its teachers, by saying something *had* to be done. This “had to” is a claim of normative necessity, like Kraft’s “We must be engaged.” As I’ve argued above, it is a good thing that engaged Buddhist scholars make normative claims. However, they also need to justify them, and Simmer-Brown does nothing of the sort. The teachers, after all, were explicitly saying that something did *not* “have to” be done. If they were right, the claim that “Something had to be done”—a premise that underlies the laudatory tone of Simmer-Brown’s overall story—would therefore be wrong, and vice versa. So, from this passage I can only infer that she thinks it *obvious* that these teachers were wrong, and that she believes her audience will share this sentiment. She thinks, that is, that her audience will take it as obvious that this group “had to” disregard the advice of *its own teachers*, so much so that there is no need to discuss their reasons in a story constituted by the actions the group took in defiance of those teachers. The teachers’ voices are deemed irrelevant; only the defiance matters. Indeed, since those teachers apparently did not “feel compelled to do something,” Nelson Foster’s claim, approvingly quoted by Simmer-Brown, has the further eye-opening implication that the group’s own teachers were *not* feeling compassion. Yet even after implying this startling accusation against the group’s teachers, with no evidence provided for it, Simmer-Brown still does not deem it relevant to give the teachers a voice or a chance to defend themselves against it.

This sort of neglect of disengaged Buddhism—an assumption that political disengagement is *obviously* bad—itself calls for explanation. A significant part of the problem is that engaged Buddhists have often been blind to their movement’s own history. Consider this additional claim of Foster’s:

I find no evidence that the emerging [engaged] culture of the American Zen sangha has been forced upon it as a protective adaptation to yet another foreign environment. Rather, the new forms seem to have taken root spontaneously, from within, as teachers and students found them helpful to express realization. After all, the values that have cropped up in the American sangha are hardly those that prevail in the population of the United States. (52)

This last sentence is deeply misleading. American engaged Buddhists' values may be at odds with those that prevail in Alabama or rural Michigan, but they are not easily distinguished from the values of their non-Buddhist fellows in Berkeley and Vermont and Boulder. Indeed, some of the characteristics Foster attributes to engaged Buddhists are stereotypically so, like "recycling, gardening, and organic farming" (52). Such values appear far closer to those of their non-Buddhist neighbors than they do to the values in the classical Buddhist texts we have considered.

Foster's earlier sentences are more misleading still. Far from having "taken root spontaneously," the values of American engaged Buddhism are fully contiguous with the early reception of Buddhism in the United States. In documenting that early reception, Thomas Tweed has noted the remarkable degree of normative agreement between American Buddhist apologists and their (typically Christian) critics on one key point. That is: "Whether there is a personal creator or a substantial self . . . there still *must* be optimism and activism" (155, emphasis in original). Notice the exact parallel with Kenneth Kraft's contemporary claim that "we must be engaged."

Americans and Englishmen of the late nineteenth century shared a great suspicion of Buddhism for its perceived lack of social engage-

ment. Charles Henry Appleton Dall, a Unitarian missionary to India, proclaimed that Buddhism is to be judged by its contributions to society: “What Buddhism has accomplished in the world, that it is.” Dall found it lacking because of its emphasis on renunciation, which left it unable to generate the requisite “energy”²¹ for worldly accomplishment, such that “the properly Buddhist nations of the world are all asleep” (quoted in Tweed 144). Henry Melville King, on the executive committee of the American Baptist Missionary Union, claimed that Buddhism promotes a way of life in which the individual is “wholly idle, and to all besides himself absolutely useless” (quoted in Tweed 145). And in the *Atlantic* in 1894, the mainline Protestant writer William Davies wrote:

If we make a comparison of Buddhism and Christianity, however great a similarity may appear in some of the elements of its teaching, its distinct inferiority in scope, purpose, and adaptability will become apparent. The religion of the Buddha could never be brought to combine with the advancement and progressive amelioration of society. It works by abandonment, leaving the world every way as it finds it. It lacks the helpful and actively loving spirit of Christianity. (quoted in Tweed 145)

Such views took on a particular poignancy in a colonial context, when Buddhists’ Western political rulers took their subjects’ social disengagement as grounds for discouraging Buddhism in favor of an alien tradition. George Bond (124) notes that British officials and Christian missionaries took Buddhism’s “other-worldly” nature “as an argument for promoting Christianity and Christian schools. Since Christianity was

21 Recall how both Tweed’s definition of activism and Queen’s definition of engaged Buddhism, quoted above, include the word “energetic” as a key component.

identified with Western culture and knowledge, the British praised it as progressive and condemned Buddhism as backward.”²²

It was this context that formed the background for the newfound activism of Anagarika Dharmapala, the Sinhalese reformer in whom Queen (20) says we “first recognize the spirit and substance of the religious activism we call ‘socially engaged Buddhism,’” and whose message, as Bond notes, “profoundly influenced later Buddhist reformers” like A. T. Ariyaratne, the Gandhian *sarvodaya* social reformer often taken as an inspiration by Western engaged Buddhists. Dharmapala “stressed ‘the constructive optimism’ and fundamental ‘activism’ of authentic Buddhism. ‘Buddhism’, he claimed, ‘teaches an energetic life, to be active in doing good work all the time’” (Tweed 148). Bond agrees that in “advocating a Buddhism of activity and service, Dharmapala was undoubtedly responding to the Western and Christian criticism of Buddhism as too other-worldly”; Dharmapala agreed with his colonial rulers in referring to Sri Lankan monks as “‘indolent’” (124).

22 Christians’ project of denigrating Buddhists for their lack of activism also continues into the present day, though the more liberal among them no longer think of this project in terms of Christian anti-Buddhist apologetics. For example, when the contemporary Christian Reverend Joseph Cheah interviews several Burmese Buddhists about their experiences of racism, they tell him that those experiences were not really important to them and not worth complaining about, in ways that Aśvaghōṣa and Śāntideva would likely have approved. But rather than respecting his marginalized Buddhist subjects’ voices as something from which he might have something to learn, Fr. Cheah, just like his Christian predecessors in the colonial era, instead chides them for their lack of activism: he claims that in their rejection of activism they have “internalized the neoconservative stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority,” an “internalization of the prevailing ideology of white supremacy” (Cheah 90-1). Given that Fr. Cheah’s work claims to be deeply concerned with historicizing, it is striking how little he thinks to historicize his own insistence on political activism—or perhaps not so striking, given how much Christians and other Westerners have taken activism for granted (as we see elsewhere in this section).

Dharmapala made these criticisms as what Yarnall would call a traditionalist, writing Buddhist activism back into the past. He claimed his “indolent” contemporaries had “lost the spirit of heroism and altruism of their ancient examples” (quoted in Bond 124). H. L. Seneviratne (31-32) claims that Dharmapala agreed with the criticisms “that Buddhism is other-worldly and provides no basis for a progressive society, that Buddhism is selfish, and that the Sinhala are lazy”—but also believed that these criticisms were true “only of the modern-day Sinhala, not the true Sinhala of old.”

Views like those of Dall, King, Davies and the British rulers of Sri Lanka remain alive and well in the modern West. And they continue to form the present background to contemporary engaged Buddhism, just as they did to the incipient engaged Buddhism of Dharmapala. Stephen Batchelor notes:

Most Buddhist practitioners have been asked at one time or another—“Why do you go off on these retreats? Isn’t it selfish? Why don’t you go out and do something useful in the world?” Engaged Buddhism is, in a way, counter to that objection. (quoted in Bell 414)

Such questions echo the critiques of previous generations of Western anti-Buddhist critics, and engaged Buddhism is a product of that context. Batchelor responds as follows:

The question is what motivates a person to adopt engaged Buddhism? Is it because they feel they have to somehow justify themselves in the light of Western criticism of Buddhism? Or is it a spontaneous and genuine outflow of their Buddhist practice? (quoted in Bell 414)

I submit that the emphasis on “spontaneity,” here as in Foster, is misplaced, at least insofar as it implies a personal attitude independent

of historical context. Engaged Buddhism in the West is the product of a long Western history of assuming that activism is a good thing and even an obligation. Western engaged Buddhist scholars, of *both* “traditionist” and “modernist” varieties, share more in common with the early Western anti-Buddhist critics described above than they might like to think. For clarity, we may phrase those critics’ argument as a deductive categorical syllogism:

1. Not to engage in social activism is to be deficient.
2. The tradition of premodern Buddhism generally does not engage in social activism.

3. Therefore, the tradition of premodern Buddhism is generally deficient.

This syllogism is valid: if premises 1 and 2 are true, then conclusion 3 must be as well. Naturally, Buddhists will aim to avoid the implication that Buddhism as such is inferior. Traditionists attempt to avoid that implication by rejecting premise 2, in ways that (as we have seen above) typically do interpretive injustice to a significant portion of premodern Indian Buddhist tradition. Modernists reluctantly accept the whole syllogism, instead aiming to build a newer, modern Buddhism about which premise 2 ceases to be true.

But the traditionists and the modernists share something not only with each other, but also with Dall, King, Davies and the colonial rulers of Sri Lanka. That is, they all share an endorsement (even if only implicit) of premise 1: there must be something wrong with a tradition that is not activist. To refrain from activism and political involvement would be “selfish” or “indolent,” not “useful.” We *must* be engaged.

It is *that* premise, so widely shared among pro-Buddhist and anti-Buddhist Westerners alike, that the disengaged Buddhists reject. But the premise is taken so much for granted among Westerners that they often refuse to take its rejection seriously, choosing instead to ignore or silence its rejectors. This refusal has existed for a long time; Tweed “found no evidence that any midcentury American who encountered the challenge of Buddhist negation seriously considered abandoning Victorian presuppositions,” including the presupposition that activism is necessary (Tweed 13).

Viewed in this light, Yarnall’s militant criticism of “modernist” engaged representations of traditional Buddhism takes on a very different cast. Because modernists treat engaged Buddhism as a new improvement on an Asian failure or vacuum—the approach we have seen in Tanabe and Snyder—Yarnall accuses them of “a subtle form of neocolonial, neo-Orientalist bias” (Yarnall 6). But Yarnall’s grounds for this criticism turn out to apply to his own “traditionist” work at least as much as to theirs.

Adapting criticisms of Carl Jung made by Donald Lopez and Luis Gómez, Yarnall claims the modernists create a “neo-colonial economy” because they “judge the raw materials of Buddhism to be valuable, but unusable and even dangerous (or irrelevant) to the modern Westerner in their unrefined form” (Yarnall 33). As his preferred alternative, Yarnall approvingly quotes David Seyfort Rugg on the need for an analysis that “will not superimpose from the outside extraneous modes of thinking and interpretive grids in a way that sometimes proves to be scarcely distinguishable from a more or less subtle form of neo-colonialism” (Yarnall 76-77).

But elsewhere in his piece, to “superimpose from the outside extraneous modes of thinking and interpretive grids” is exactly the agenda that Yarnall calls for. To wit, “Interested scholars (both traditionists as

well as open-minded modernists) should now revisit the history of pre-modern Buddhist Asia *with the express purpose of discovering examples of engagement as defined (more or less) by Queen and/or other modernists*" (Yarnall 71, emphasis added). That is, he takes a mode of thinking defined in the terms of modernists extraneous to premodern Buddhist Asia, and urges that scholars superimpose that very extraneous mode of thinking on the history of premodern Buddhist Asia when they revisit it. Moreover, he makes both this call and this accusation of neo-colonialism with no more than one passing parenthetical reference to any premodern text.²³ We should, it would seem, read our own modern Western preferences for social activism and engagement onto premodern Buddhist texts from the outside, irrespective of anything those texts actually happen to say. We can't allow those texts to *advocate* political disengagement, because then they would be unusable, and even dangerous or irrelevant. Our extraneous mode of thinking and interpretive grid tells us so.

Yarnall, then, apparently misses the irony that he advocates *exactly* that mode of analysis which he himself has labelled "scarcely distinguishable from a more or less subtle form of neo-colonialism." I want to emphasize here that I do not myself think that Yarnall's project, or that of any other engaged Buddhist, is in any way a form of neo-colonialism, subtle or otherwise. I take neo-colonialism to be a serious accusation, and one uncalled for by the evidence at hand. As Gadamer reminds us, we all come to inquiry with a set of preexisting presuppositions of some sort or another; that Western engaged Buddhist scholars'

23 That one is a mid-sentence reference to "the scriptural 'evidence' that the traditionists cite (Nāgārjuna's *Jewel Garland*; Aśoka's edicts; the *Cakkavati-* [sic], *Kūṭadanta-* and *Sigālovāda-suttas*, and so forth) . . ." (Yarnall 22). I have already shown in some detail how one of these texts, the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*, is not the engaged text that the traditionists think it is.

endorsement of activism is Western in origin by no means makes it wrong. One can be justified in one's views while acknowledging their historical roots; a view does not need to be a "spontaneous" historical anomaly for it to be justified.

Rather, I dwell on Yarnall's accusation of neo-colonialism only because it makes so visible the lack of self-scrutiny among too many engaged Buddhists to date (a lack that an insistence on spontaneity tends to worsen). Yarnall's article never once considers as a possibility the idea, so widespread in premodern Indian Buddhist texts yet so rarely expressed in the West, that social or political engagement might be a *bad thing*. Instead he follows the longstanding tradition, with its deep roots in the West, of assuming activism is a good and taking that good for granted; as a result, he assumes that to describe premodern Buddhism as disengaged must be to criticize it. In that lack of introspection his article is typical of the present Western engaged Buddhist literature—and because of it, he inadvertently accuses himself of neo-colonialism!

Responses to Disengaged Buddhism

It is rare for Western engaged Buddhist scholars to acknowledge that disengaged Buddhists have reasons and arguments for disengagement. But the arguments of disengaged Buddhists have not gone *entirely* unnoticed by Western engaged Buddhist writers. Hsiao-Lan Hu and Sallie King, in particular, pay them *some* attention, but not enough. For they do not address the arguments made in the historical sections of this article, as made either by the thinkers I have quoted or by anyone else.

Hu's *This-Worldly Buddhism* is one of the more systematic expressions to date of an engaged Buddhist ethic. Hu shows admirable clarity about engaging in normative ethics—acknowledging that "I am joining

those who engage in critical and constructive Buddhist thinking” (Hu 5). She justifies her points with detailed references to the Pāli suttas, especially the *Samyutta* and *Majjhima Nikāyas*. Yet the disengaged *Rajja*, *Gilāna*, and *Tiracchāna Kathā Suttas*, which are all in the *Samyutta*, get no mention in the book. The *Cakkavatti Sihanāda* appears only for the brief portion of the story where the king’s inattention to poverty causes decline, and not for any of the story’s wider advocacy of disengagement. She cites the *Aggañña* approvingly on greed creating a need for punishment (Hu 112), but does not mention the way the text treats punishment as bad.

Hu improves on most engaged Buddhist scholars by referring briefly to the arguments of Buddhists who have “not provided much direct critique of existing social structure . . .” But the particular arguments she mentions only justify those social structures in terms of past karma (Hu 120). She does not reply to the kinds of Buddhist arguments discussed in the previous sections, that the causes of suffering are mental or that politics interferes with tranquility.

Neither does King. Possibly alone among Western engaged Buddhist ethicists, she does refer directly, by name, to texts that appear to advocate disengagement, and cites their arguments, referring specifically to the Fire Sermon (*Ādittapariyāya Sutta*) and *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. She looks at these texts in order to examine “what is controversial about engaged Buddhism,” and notes that “many Buddhists have taken teachings like this to mean that samsara is inherently flawed, that the correct response toward it is to feel revulsion and to flee it if at all possible” (*Socially* 40-45).

King’s response notes other texts, like the *Mettā* and *Sigālovada Suttas*, that do advocate living in the world of saṃsāra, and reads the Fire Sermon to note that its critique is really directed at the “three poisons” of craving, hatred, and delusion:

If these three poisons are indeed the root of the problem, then the problem is *in our minds, not in the world*. We can free ourselves of *duḥkha* by practicing Buddhism in such a way that we rid ourselves of this craving, hatred, and delusion. This has nothing whatsoever to do with leaving the world and everything to do with transforming ourselves, here and now. (*Socially* 43; emphasis in original)

King interprets this text correctly in this passage. Yet *everything King says in this passage is compatible with the disengaged arguments made in previous sections of this article*. If “the problem is in our minds, not in the world,” that is itself a reason why it is folly to seek the kinds of worldly goods that social activism can secure, rather than the more important goods of mental cultivation. It is also why one must avoid participation in the political action that is likely to increase the hatred (*dveṣa* or *dosa*) in our minds. Or so the texts claim, anyway, and to these points King has offered no refutation.

An alternate response to disengaged Buddhists comes from Matthew Moore, who does not identify with engaged Buddhism and demonstrates considerably more awareness of disengaged Buddhist views, which he cites extensively under the rubric of “limited citizenship” (Moore 87-111). He notes further how this “limited citizenship” approach contrasts with a Western tradition from Plato onward that assumes the good life must be political: “It is virtually always true that the cure proposed for anomie, alienation, sectarian conflict, disempowerment, and other political ills is . . . more politics!” (Moore 136). But Moore’s normative response, too, is unsatisfactory, when he identifies this contrast as

an irreconcilable conflict between value preferences. The pro-politics party argues that the virtues that can be cultivated only through politics are more important than the

virtues that can be cultivated only by eschewing politics in favor of some other important pursuit like meditation, while the limited-citizenship party argues the opposite. Absent a noncontroversial rank ordering of the relevant moral values, there is no principled way to choose between the competing options, and neither choice can be shown to be universally morally preferable. (109-10)

Moore, then, presents engagement and disengagement as a choice between options, entirely up to the chooser. What is important to note about this approach is that it expresses a strong *disagreement* with the disengaged texts discussed above—and also, for that matter, with more politically engaged thinkers like Plato. The disengaged thinkers do indeed believe that the disengaged path is universally morally preferable, and they make arguments to show why this is the case; more political thinkers do the opposite. Both engaged and disengaged thinkers believe they have provided a principled way to choose between the options, partially on the basis of a rank ordering of values. The ordering is controversial, of course, but so is the theory of evolution; the presence of controversy does not imply that both sides or both options are equally valuable.

There is no substitute for weighing the arguments on both sides and coming to a resolution—a task that is yet to be undertaken. *Is it the case* that the goods activism can provide are inherently unsatisfactory and therefore unworthy of our seeking, for ourselves and for others? If so, then social activism is indeed a worthless pastime, just as the disengaged Buddhists say it is, and the engaged Buddhists are sadly deluded, for they are leading themselves and others *away* from liberation. *Is it the case* that political participation necessarily makes it impossible to attain the tranquility that has been held throughout the ages as a central Buddhist

goal?²⁴ If so, then Buddhists *should not* be politically engaged, and perhaps nobody should. I am not endorsing either of these disengaged conclusions; I am arguing that Buddhists should take them, and the arguments that lead to them, with the utmost seriousness, and that to date they have not.

Conclusion

Against traditionist engaged Buddhist scholars, we have seen that social and political disengagement has a long Buddhist history, one that extends to some of the texts the traditionists take as their sources. Against modernist scholars, we have seen that a thoughtful logic and reasoning underlies that disengagement: social and political problems are not the primary causes of suffering, so one is best served by detaching oneself from the passage of time, and participation in government fills one with harshness of mind. One may certainly disagree with the reasoning behind a disengaged Buddhist position, but that position is not a “vacuum” or a “failure.”

It is not my aim to rule out either traditionist or modernist engaged Buddhism as viable intellectual positions, but rather to argue that they must think differently than they typically have. Modernists must engage intellectually—no pun intended—with premodern disengaged Buddhism, in the details of its arguments, and articulate what it is they reject about its premises and why. If the traditionist project is to continue, traditionists must acknowledge the large number of premodern

²⁴ There is a strong psychological element to these Buddhist claims, so psychological evidence is relevant to evaluating them. Such evidence is beyond the scope of this article; I have provided a very preliminary discussion of it in Lele, “Psychological.”

works that are disengaged; they must not only identify engaged works that they find as a counter-current, but explain how they interpret the disengaged works in light of the engaged ones.

It should, I hope, be clear by now that it is *not* the case that all Buddhism is socially engaged. If one still wished to claim with Hunt-Perry and Fine that what is not already engaged is not Buddhism, it would need to be as a normative claim—and that normative claim would exclude Aśvaghōṣa, Śāntideva, the author of the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, and many others as not true Buddhists. That claim is radical and drastic, and one that I doubt Hunt-Perry and Fine, or others who quote them approvingly, would actually want to make.

If it is to remain an intellectually defensible project, I submit, engaged Buddhism must take the value of activism as a conclusion to be defended, not as a premise to be assumed. Engaged Buddhists must recognize the ways in which the likes of Aśvaghōṣa and Śāntideva *oppose* politics and social activism, and explain why they reject these thinkers' positions. It should no longer be considered acceptable either to pretend disengaged Buddhist views did not exist or to dismiss them as a “failure” or “undeveloped.” Rather, we must respect them and take them on as partners in dialogue.

Abbreviations (primary works cited)

- BC *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa. Edition and translation: Olivelle.
- BCA *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva. Edition: Vaidya. Translation: Crosby and Skilton.

- CŚ(Ṭ) *Catuḥśataka* of Āryadeva with Ṭikā commentary of Candrakīrti. Edition: Peking Tanjur P 5266, v. 98, ya, ff. 33b-273b. Translation: Lang.
- DN *Dīgha Nikāya*. Pali Text Society edition. Translation: Walshe.
- Ja *Jātaka*. Pali Text Society edition. Translation: Cowell.
- SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Pali Text Society edition. Translation: Bodhi.
- ŚS Śikṣāsamuccaya of Śāntideva. Edition: Bendall. Translation: Goodman.

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