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An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism

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A Review of *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*

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An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism. By Paul Fuller. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 248 pages. ISBN 978-1-350-12907-8 (hardback), \$63.00/978-1-350-12906-1 (paperback), \$19.47/ 978-1-350-12909-2 (e-book), \$18.86.

Modern movements of socially engaged Buddhism began to appear after World War II, launching mass campaigns for social, economic, political, and environmental justice in India, Vietnam, Tibet, Sri Lanka, East Asia, and eventually the West. Along the way, leaders of these movements produced a new literature based on traditional Buddhist teachings, while often redefining central concepts of suffering, morality, interdependence, and liberation. Some turned away from the metaphysics and ritualism of the past and embraced new ideas of human rights, social equality, and public activism. These ideas helped to shape emerging notions of Buddhist identity and conduct, while remaining close to the streets and neighborhoods where communities struggled for survival and respect.

In the 1980s, scholars began to investigate and document these movements in monographs, journal articles, anthologies, and reference entries. They investigated the origins and dynamics of the new Bud-

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dhism, its debts to the past and its synergy with intellectual and social values in the present. Early on, they identified a core of common characteristics of “engaged Buddhism” as it is manifested internationally, namely, its focus on earthly rather than transcendent notions of liberation, on social rather than psychological causes of human suffering, on nonviolent collective action grounded in grassroots, nongovernmental organizations, on humanitarian values shared with non-Buddhist traditions, and on a non-dogmatic ecumenism that linked Buddhists with other progressive communities around the world. The terms “socially engaged Buddhism” and “engaged Buddhism” (with or without a capital “E”) came to be defined by these markers, while movements, literatures, and thinkers that lacked or opposed them were not included in the conversation.

Now, at a time when the emergence of engaged Buddhism and its scholarly investigation have matured and found their way into general works and survey courses on the Buddhist tradition in colleges and universities, we are offered for the first time a textbook primer in the field, *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*, by Paul Fuller, a teaching fellow in Buddhist Studies at the University of Edinburgh, published by Bloomsbury Academic in London in 2021. Certainly, the publication of such a resource will be of interest to professors and general readers who have had to cobble together reading lists to cover the evolving and far-flung manifestations of engaged Buddhism.

Fuller’s *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism* has much to recommend it. Its scope is appropriate to a survey course, beginning with a chapter on the origin of the term “engaged Buddhism” and the range of its interpretations; and continuing with chapters on the foundational ideas and practices of the engaged Buddhists; their emphasis on nonattachment to fixed ideologies; “dismantling metaphysics: *nirvāṇa*, rebirth and interdependence”; engaged Buddhism and politics; “Eco-engaged Buddhism”; engaged Buddhism, sexuality, and gender; and finally, controversially, two chapters on movements the author describes as “not

part of the more usual types of engaged Buddhism,” namely, the violent and intolerant monastic and lay movements in Myanmar that Fuller terms “ethnocentric engaged Buddhism” and “protectionist engaged Buddhism” The book is illustrated by sixteen black-and-white photographs and contains an extensive bibliography and a useful index. Each chapter closes with discussion questions and suggestions for further reading.

Normally, one would expect an introductory text to survey the methods and findings of contemporary researchers in the field. But in *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*, the reader is warned at the outset that the author plans to introduce a new definition of the subject: “I think we need to widen our understanding of precisely what constitutes engaged Buddhism” (2). Unlike other scholars, Fuller asserts that engaged Buddhism is “not necessarily liberal, progressive, and non-violent” (2). The book is “not intended to be a history of engaged Buddhism, exhaustive in discussing Buddhism from different cultures, schools or groups, or to offer case studies of engaged Buddhism (though I do occasionally discuss the latter)” (2). Rather, the book may be considered “a theology of engaged Buddhism” (3).

More precisely one could term the approach a critical, constructive Buddhist theology. By this I mean that I am myself engaging with the material; my selections made of what I discuss are made, in part, because I think that they are important themes, ideas, conceptual categories, doctrines, and Buddhists who taught them. (3)

Throughout the volume, the author presents a sampling of familiar engaged Buddhist themes, ideas, conceptual categories, and doctrines as promised. His departure from these tried-and-true examples occurs in the final chapters. Fuller’s decision to designate the Buddhist anti-Muslim 969 movement and MaBaTha (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) movement in Myanmar, led by the dissident monk

Ashin Wirathu, as “ethnocentric engaged Buddhism” and “protectionist engaged Buddhism” illustrates his “widening understanding” of engaged Buddhism. In 2013 *Time Magazine* called Wirathu “the face of Buddhist terror” for preaching hatred against the Rohingya Muslim minority and denouncing Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (Beech). Wirathu has asserted that Muslims, who number less than five percent of the population, pose an existential threat to the survival of Buddhism. Since 2017, nearly 1,000,000 Rohingya Muslims have been killed or fled ethnic cleansing and genocide in Buddhist Myanmar. Despite two jail terms, denunciation by the state *saṅgha* council and banning by social media for spreading hate speech, Wirathu continues to attract tens of thousands of followers.

Defending his departure from the consensus of movement leaders and scholars who have identified nonviolence as a hallmark of Buddhist social engagement, Fuller questions whether engaged movements need to be morally exemplary:

Ethnocentric engaged Buddhism is the term I use to describe a localized form of engaged Buddhism which is often at odds with more universalistic understandings of engaged Buddhism. The term describes new and emerging Buddhist identities which are often protectionist in their outlook. They also embrace forms of action which are sometimes in considerable tension with more passive forms of Buddhist behavior. My use of these ideas also problematizes the tendency to understand engaged Buddhism as predominantly positive, non-violent. . . .

The categories of good or bad, passive or violent, should not be a defining consideration in evaluating specific groups as types of engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhists do not need to be pacifists. They often are, but they need not be. (141-142)

Fuller is surely correct to assume that naming and classifying patterns of human behavior and social action—or any object of scientific study—is the prerogative of the researcher, and that new evidence and arguments for a change in terminology or classification are welcome considerations in the academic arena. Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm shifts come to mind, when mounting data may undermine a dominant theory and lead to new understanding and the acceptance of a new paradigm. But in the case of adding leaders and movements advocating intolerance and violence to the classification of engaged Buddhism, given its consistent identification with liberty, equality, and fraternity (to cite B. R. Ambedkar’s grafting of Western revolutionary ideals to his “new vehicle” Buddhism), the reader is entitled to ask what has influenced this departure.

One basis for Fuller’s dissent lies in his interpretation of the title of an early book by Thich Nhat Hanh, who is generally credited with coining the term “engaged Buddhism.” Indeed, it was the title first translated into English as “Engaged Buddhism” (1965). The original Vietnamese title *Dao Phat Di Vao Cuoc Doi* literally means “Buddhism entering into society,” according to a list of Nhat Hanh’s works provided by Plum Village, Nhat Hanh’s community. But Nhat Hanh, fluent in English, endorsed the term “engaged Buddhism” as the best translation to describe the ways in which Buddhism is practiced in the realms of education, economics, politics, and society at large. Yet Fuller, preferring the literal translation, identifies engaged Buddhism as *any practice that “enters into society,”* i.e., goes beyond personal, spiritual, or ritual practice. The nature of this practice should not be predetermined or judged. Engaged Buddhism may promote “ethically sound principles,” Fuller asserts, or it “can be a compassionate or divisive influence in society, politics and culture” (6). In either case “it simply means [a] Buddhism that is involved in society, and the concept loses some of its prevailing meaning of being an overt form of Buddhist activism” (6).

Surely, this is not what Thich Nhat Hanh or other preceptors of engaged Buddhism had in mind. Regarding divisive influences in society, for example, Nhat Hahn includes in his “Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism” the precept, “Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small” (*Interbeing* 18 qtd. in “The Fourteen Precepts,” par. 12). Yet Fuller doubles down:

Engaged Buddhists can support blasphemy laws and political institutions that are racist, and be part of violent uprisings. This understanding of engaged Buddhism allows for a larger debate about how modern Buddhists, ethnic Buddhists, white Buddhists, Asian Buddhists, gay Buddhists, queer Buddhists, trans-Buddhists, straight Buddhists, genocidal Buddhists, racist Buddhists and Buddhists fighting racism, eco-Buddhists, new-age Buddhists, punk Buddhists, Buddhist politicians, Buddhists fighting addictions, Buddhist monks and Buddhist nuns – in fact, anyone professing Buddhist identities – interact with society. This is the engaged Buddhism described in this book. (6)

Another element of Fuller’s argument is that violence employed for the protection of the Dharma is socially engaged. He argues that the movements commonly identified as engaged Buddhism have been “primarily passive.” Rather than limiting the category to nonviolent movements, he asserts, “I will not ignore more local and aggressive expressions [that] . . . tackle inequalities, problems, injustices, political and social structures in ways that might not meet with general approval” (2). Yet we know that the Buddhist liberation movements for peace in Vietnam, for freedom from Chinese domination in Tibet, for economic justice in Sri Lanka, and for an end to caste violence in India are not passive as they set about to tackle the scourges of war, intolerance, and poverty. Indeed, nonviolence is hardly passive in these circumstances, where pro-

testers have been beaten, jailed, and killed for their engagement. The leaders—such as Thich Nhat Hahn, the Dalai Lama, A. T. Ariyaratne, and B. R. Ambedkar—are consistent in their determination to accomplish these tasks nonviolently—resolutely, defiantly, doggedly, perhaps, but not aggressively.²

Fuller credits predecessors in support of his expanded definition of engaged Buddhism. Yet these authors fail to offer convincing arguments for abandoning what Ann Gleig calls “the consensus” and “normative parameters” for the study of engaged Buddhism, including nonviolence, grassroots activism, and humanistic values (Gleig pars. 39-42). In attempting to remove nonviolence and the grassroots non-government basis for engaged Buddhism (what Sulak Sivaraksa has called “small-b buddhism”), Fuller cites Jessica Main and Rongdao Lai’s “Introduction: Reformulating ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism’ as an Analytical Category,” which proposes a new context for four engaged Buddhism studies in a special issue of *The Eastern Buddhist* in 2013. Main and Lai argue that modern engaged Buddhism began before World War II with the religious-social movements associated with the Chinese monastic reformer Taixu and the Japanese Shin Buddhist priest Takeuchi Ryō’on. Both leaders fought the marginalization of Buddhism to a private sphere of personal spirituality as China and Japan entered the modern period, and both attempted to ally a modernized Buddhism with national revival and patriotism. Both movements endorsed social service projects on behalf of the poor, the incarcerated, and social pariahs like the *burakumin* minority in Japan. “Therefore, participation in social welfare, politics, and

²Thich Nhat Hanh lived in exile from Vietnam for forty years for his anti-war activism; Sulak Sivaraksa, founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, has been exiled and jailed for opposition to Thai government policies; B. R. Ambedkar, leader of the Dalit Buddhist conversions, was beaten and denied housing and medical care as an Untouchable; and protesters in Vietnam and Tibet have practiced self-immolation to bring international attention to the atrocities of war and oppression in their countries.

military actions for the defense of the nation during the war was subsumed within the duty of a modern-day bodhisattva” (21).³

Fuller cites the numerous works of Brian Victoria, Michael Jerryson, and Stanley Tambiah in his bibliography. These authors have contributed to our understanding of Buddhist sectarian violence perpetrated by mainstream sects—Sulak’s Capital-B Buddhism—as well as schismatic groups in South and East Asia, as *saṅgha* and state forged symbiotic ties for defense and legitimization and trained their clergy for combat. Indeed, Buddhist studies have documented the economic, political, and military hegemony of Buddhist nation-states over the centuries. Yet these studies are not mentioned in Fuller’s discussion, as such titles as *Zen at War*, *Buddhist Fury*, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, and *Buddhism Betrayed?* do not fit comfortably in his argument for violent ethnocentric engaged Buddhism and protectionist engaged Buddhism. On the other hand, Fuller cites Amod Lele’s argument in “Disengaged Buddhism” that traditional Buddhism has opposed political engagement, and Sulak Sivaraksa’s advocacy of a small-b buddhism in contradiction to the nationalistic movements that Main and Lai describe:

Buddhism, as practiced in most Asian countries today, serves mainly to legitimize dictatorial regimes and multinational corporations. If we Buddhists want to redirect our energies towards enlightenment and universal love, we should begin by spelling Buddhism with a small “b.” . . . It is not a Buddhist approach to say that if everyone practiced Buddhism, the world would be a better place. Wars and oppression begin from this kind of thinking. (Sivaraksa 68, qtd. in Fuller 47-48)

³ For an analysis of the distinction between engaged Buddhism and Buddhist nationalism, see King. For a distinction between the ethics of engaged Buddhism and traditional practices of Buddhist discipline, virtue, and altruism, see Queen.

Following his opening chapters on the meaning and foundations of engaged Buddhism, Fuller devotes a chapter to “the danger of attachment to views in engaged Buddhism.” Citing canonical passages from the *Sutta Nipāta* and contemporary teachings from Thich Nhat Hanh’s “Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism,” Fuller argues that Buddhism uniquely identifies dogmatic rigidity as a source of suffering in the world, and “that the teachings about views are a key to understanding engaged Buddhism” (37). The three opening precepts of Nhat Hanh’s guideline proscribe idolatry of doctrines, theories, and ideology, even Buddhist ones. For this reason, it is puzzling and illogical that Fuller devotes his final topic chapter to “Buddhism on the edge, Buddhists offended: Engaged Buddhism and blasphemy” (157-170). In it he returns to the notion of “protective engaged Buddhism” practiced by the MaBaTha movement in support of state judicial authority. In 2014, a New Zealand citizen and two Burmese citizens were charged with blasphemy and jailed for two-and-a-half years under the Myanmar Penal Code. Their crime: promoting a bar in Yangon with an image of the Buddha wearing headphones and portrayed as a DJ in a trance. Monks of the MaBaTha, Fuller’s prime example of a protective engaged Buddhism movement, expressed outrage at the convicts’ blasphemy and approval for the sentences (166-167).

The blasphemy chapter references passages in the Buddhist Pāli Canon that forbid disrespect for the three refuges of Buddhist practice—the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—and for symbols and practices of the tradition. Fuller then proposes that these passages contribute to what Stephen Collins has termed the “Pāli imaginaire,” the value system within which Buddhists in Theravāda countries, such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Cambodia, reside. He speculates that Burmese Buddhists “might become offended by a lack of respect shown towards images of the Buddha . . . though the monks themselves might not be aware of the passages in the Pāli canon” (159). The author stresses that this is his “contention,” “argument,” and “idea,” but denies repeatedly that there is any evidence of direct influence of the texts on the angry outbursts

and political activism of the “protective engaged Buddhists”—perhaps better termed the protective *enraged* Buddhists in his telling.

Fuller concludes his *Introduction* with a summary chapter asking rhetorically whether “all Buddhism is engaged?” His initial answer is in the negative, recalling that engaged Buddhists find the origins of suffering in society as well as the human mind. Liberation from suffering is sought in this life, not in the extinction of future rebirths, and Buddhist practice is extended to include collective responses to the structural stressors of political, economic, social, and environmental disfunction. Engaged Buddhists serve their communities with charitable acts and agitate for societal reforms. These patterns do not typically appear among traditional Buddhist communities in Asia, we note, or in the West, where the mindfulness industry has once again privatized the practice of Buddhism.

But here is where *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism* diverges a final time from the findings of thirty years of engaged Buddhism scholarship. In so doing, Fuller concludes that all Buddhism is engaged. In the final sentences of the book we read,

Engaged Buddhism has a focus on politics. Political involvement can alleviate suffering and a Buddhist can act politically without destroying the purity of the Buddhist tradition. It is involved in the mundane and supramundane worlds – the religious life enters the social life. Engaged Buddhism can be involved in ethnic and local identities and in these situations can support violence and aggression. Finally, it can also be involved in defending the sanctity of Buddhist material culture. These are all central features of engaged Buddhism. As many engaged Buddhists have suggested, engaged Buddhism is simply Buddhism when practiced to alleviate suffering – in this understanding, *all Buddhism is engaged*. (174; emphasis added)

For first-time students of socially engaged Buddhism, as well as general readers who wish to investigate the field or continue their studies, I do not recommend Paul Fuller's *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*. Scholars may make their own evaluation. To my mind, a better introduction to the field remains the selected readings of instructors who have understood the teachings and actions that link the nonviolent, non-state Buddhist actors who have addressed social suffering in unprecedented ways. If one author or one book must suffice, one may scarcely do better than select one of the seventy volumes of the late Thich Nhat Hanh (October 11, 1926–January 22, 2022), coiner of “engaged Buddhism” and founder of the Order of Interbeing—known to his students simply as Thầy, Teacher.

Thầy was once asked, “What if Buddhism cannot survive in Vietnam? Will you accept that in order to have peace in Vietnam?” Understanding that the Communist victors in the war may set about violently to destroy religion, the teacher replied,

[I]f you have to choose between Buddhism and peace, then you must choose peace. Because if you choose Buddhism, you sacrifice peace and Buddhism does not accept that. Furthermore, Buddhism is not a number of temples and organizations. Buddhism is in your heart. Even if you don't have any temple or any monks, you can still be a Buddhist in your heart and life. (Nhat Hanh and Berrigan 22-23)

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