

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 30, 2023

Buddhist Visions of the Good Life for All

Reviewed by Timothy Loftus

Temple University
timothy.loftus@temple.edu

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
vforte@albright.edu

A Review of *Buddhist Visions of the Good Life for All*

Timothy Loftus¹

Buddhist Visions of the Good Life for All. Edited by Sallie B. King. Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2021, xvi + 256 pages, ISBN 978-0-367-56181-9 (hardback), \$160, 978-1-00-310045-4 (e-book), \$44.05.

Sallie King's edited volume *Buddhist Visions of the Good Life for All* asks the question: what does a Buddhist good life for *all* look like? In formulating this question, King seeks to complicate standard text-focused answers that center on individual pursuits of *nirvāṇa*. Instead, this volume starts by populating and complicating the category of Buddhism by focusing on how living Buddhists think about the good life *now*. In this sense, the Buddhist actors and movements presented in this volume are necessarily embedded in social networks and act, as Buddhists, for the benefit of all. In some ways, this volume is a continuation of King's well-known work in the field of contemporary Buddhist social movements and Engaged Buddhism, but in other ways it reflects some of the more recent tensions reflected in the field of Buddhist Studies around issues of politics and (dis)engagement. Although some of the chapters of the volume echo familiar Engaged Buddhist text-based appeals to theoretical Buddhist

¹ Department of Religion, Temple University. Email: timothy.loftus@temple.edu.

concepts like dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and no-self (*anātman*) to make a case for the Buddhist good life, others reflect a larger disciplinary move toward the ethnographic and take “engagement” to be a fundamental feature of being human. While proponents of a disengaged Buddhism have appealed to the literary tradition to critique “engaged” Buddhism or have noted that “engaged” Buddhism necessarily implies a disengaged standard, a larger postcolonial push to move past literary privileging and toward a populated lived-Buddhism, as given voice in this volume, represents a move forward for the discipline. It lets us see Buddhists as embodied agents, rather than abstract ideals.

The volume is divided into two parts: the ancient and contemporary Buddhist worlds. Although the bulk of the volume is dedicated to the contemporary world, the comparatively smaller first two chapters offer ground for thinking about what a Buddhist good life might mean in the textual tradition and provide a frame within which the following chapters unfold. Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi’s chapter, “A Map of the Good Life,” offers an exegetical treatment of the *Maṅgala Sutta* to make the case that the ground for a Buddhist moral life, both lay and renunciate, can be found therein. In place of characterizations of early Buddhism as world-denying, Bodhi offers a picture of early Buddhist moral life that is very much concerned with ethical behavior as a critical means to a Buddhist spiritual end.

In the second chapter, “Compassion Blesses the Compassionate,” Stephen Jenkins makes a diverse appeal to classical Indian Buddhist textual material, both Pāli and Sanskrit, to deftly draw out the implications of privileging texts and philosophy in order to think about the Buddhist good life. Jenkins’s chapter locates this volume theoretically in the emerging scholarly conversation around engagement and politics in Buddhist moral thought and represents a strong response to those voices who challenge the legitimacy of “engaged” Buddhism. Jenkins’s main argument, grounded in a lived-religion approach that acknowledges that “in the past, as today, the vast majority of Buddhists were neither philosophers

nor meditators” (36), offers a commonsense appeal to engagement as basic to human life, Buddhist or otherwise. He suggests that the majority of Buddhists, past and present, have conceived of compassionate action in terms of a distinction between self and other, and this paradoxical sense of self-benefit through compassionate action has been fundamental to conceptualizations of the Buddhist good life. For Jenkins, both personally and socially, “nothing could be more self-beneficial in Buddhism than altruistic motivations” (43) and based on this, he answers proponents of a “disengaged Buddhism” directly arguing that there “may at times have been disengaged Buddhists, but the idea of a socially disengaged Buddhism is incoherent” (48). In grounding his argument for the Buddhist good life in a lived-religion approach to self-interested altruism, and in thinking about engagement as basic to human social organization, instead of the usual engaged Buddhist appeals to textually based concepts like *anātman* and *pratīyasamutpāda*, Jenkins’s contribution to the volume represents the most direct response to voices of “disengagement” and pushes the volume into new theoretical territory.

The second part of the volume moves to the contemporary period and considers, as King states in the preface, “what kind of cultures, societies and world would contemporary progressive, activist Buddhists seek to build?” (xiv). Focusing on founders of movements in the modern period, this section offers a diverse array of approaches to the Buddhist good life that, taken together, complicates any easy definition of “Buddhism” as a category. Chapters three and four offer two contrasting modernist iterations of South Asian Buddhism. In chapter three, Christopher Queen outlines a Buddhist vision of the good life from a marginal perspective in Ambedkar’s *Navayana* Buddhism and demonstrates how Ambedkar’s commitment to liberalism and his social position created a reformist Buddhist position that can critique power. In chapter four, on the other hand, George Bond considers how mainstream Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been able to leverage nationalist sentiment toward ethical engagement via A. T. Ariyaratne’s Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, which, through a

revolutionary union of Buddhist dharmic values and Gandhian ideals, offered an engaged countermovement to state-aligned Buddhist nationalists.

Chapters five and six shift to the Himalayas, where both Barbra Clayton and Jay Garfield imagine Buddhist possibilities for alternative ways of being and well-being. Where most debates around the good life are waged in terms of material in Euro-American thought, Clayton's nuanced and careful consideration of the Bhutanese concept of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH), and Garfield's survey of Tibetan-Americans' perception of the good life demonstrate alternate Buddhist frames from which to imagine moral life-worlds and social organizations. Clayton's treatment of GNH lauds its groundbreaking vision but resists papering over some of the less liberal-friendly implications. Garfield offers an image of a Buddhist good life guided more by abstract ideals and less by individualist and material concerns, and considers the implications for this alternate imagination.

Chapters seven, nine, and ten move to East Asia and situate Buddhist engagement and moral imagination in contexts characterized by the long Buddhist sociocultural history there. In chapter seven, Sujung Kim situates the movement of the charismatic "national mentor monk," Venerable Pomnyun, in a contemporary Korea, where an achievement-oriented, hypercompetitive social context prevails. In contrast to more mainstream forms of Korean Buddhism, Pomnyun's Jungto Society is characterized by an egalitarian, cooperative spirit. Chapter nine moves to Taiwan, where Richard Madsen explores the relationship of the Buddhist Compassionate Relief Foundation, Tzu Chi, with its Buddhist *saṃgha* parental organization, Abode of Still Thoughts. Although the nuns of the Abode of Still Thoughts remain separate from the vast transnational outreach work of Tzu Chi, the religious influence of the community through the charismatic leadership of Cheng Yen provides a Buddhist moral ground for their vast relief work. Chapter ten moves to Japan, where Daniel Métraux presents Soka Gakkai, a transnational Lotus Sūtra-based

Buddhist movement based on the Kamakura-era priest Nichiren (1222–1282). Métraux highlights how Soka Gakkai emphasizes active engagement in the world to bring about world peace and to “transform the human spirit” (193).

Chapters eight, eleven, and twelve explore three well-known transnational Buddhist modernist movements. In chapter eight, which in the volume is grouped with East Asian traditions but could also be grouped with the Western Buddhist modernist movements, as done in this review, Sallie King presents the teachings and activity of Thich Nhat Hanh and his vision for a nonviolent society. She unpacks the central idea of “interbeing” and the way in which contemplation and mindfulness can bring about personal change that positively affects the world and lays out a grand vision for what a good life for all might look like following Nhat Hanh’s vision. In chapters eleven and twelve, a moral frame grounded in the Buddhist principle of deep ecology and dependent origination are offered. Christopher Ives explores the implications of Gary Snyder’s call to return to simpler, nature-based social organizations, while Stephanie Kaza turns to Joanna Macy’s concept of mutual causality found in her system-theory-based reading of Buddhist principles.

This volume is a timely addition to the growing literature on Buddhist ethics, Buddhist modernism, and contemporary Buddhist social movements. Jenkins’s lived-religion approach, and his theoretical push to think critically about the privileging of texts in Buddhist moral thought in particular, offer a new frame for thinking about questions of the Buddhist good life and Buddhist engagement as presented in part two of the volume. This volume will be of interest to scholars working in the field of contemporary Buddhist studies and is appropriate for assignment in graduate courses and upper-level undergraduate seminars.