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Are Ethnocentric/Nationalist Buddhists Engaged Buddhists? Certainly Not.

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Are Ethnocentric/Nationalist Buddhists Engaged Buddhists? Certainly Not.

Sallie B. King¹

Abstract

This is a brief response to Donna Lynn Brown's article, "Beyond Queen and King: Democratizing 'Engaged Buddhism'," (*Journal of Buddhist Ethics* Vol. 30, 2023) and indirectly to others who have argued that ethnocentric and/or nationalist Buddhism could be a part of Engaged Buddhism. To this question, I will argue that this is not possible. Secondly, I take up the question of the "oneness" of Engaged Buddhism.

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question, I will argue that this is not possible. Secondly, I take up the question of the “oneness” of Engaged Buddhism.

I invite us to examine these questions by considering the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB). Here is its own statement of its founding, nature, and purpose, taken from its website:

In 1989, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) was established in Siam (Thailand) by Sulak Sivaraksa and a group of Buddhist and non-Buddhist thinkers and social activists. INEB operates as an autonomous organization under the Bangkok-based Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation. Over the years the network has expanded to include members, both individuals and organizations, from more than 25 countries across Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia. From this diversity, an understanding of socially engaged Buddhism has emerged which integrates the practice of Buddhism with social action for a healthy, just, and peaceful world. (INEB “About”)

As can be seen, this is an Asia-based organization, founded by an eminent Engaged Buddhist leader, the Thai layman Sulak Sivaraksa. On the question of “oneness” or unity, it is important to note that this is a *network*. As such, it draws for its membership upon people who already understand themselves to be Engaged Buddhists or who, minimally, are in sympathy with the INEB network’s understanding of Engaged Buddhism, viz., the integration of “the practice of Buddhism with social action for a healthy, just, and peaceful world.” A network is a very appropriate form of organization for Engaged Buddhism insofar as Engaged Buddhism is a movement that did not arise from a single founder with a specific location in time, place, culture, and Buddhist sectarian identity, but arose again and again throughout Buddhist Asia, and later the West, in response to the grave challenges facing the region in the twentieth century. Such a

movement could never have the kind of clean lines marking who is in the group and who is out that might be possible in an organization with a single founder and formal membership criteria.

Here is some of what INEB has to say about its own institutional structure and what being a network means to it:

INEB is distinctive for its autonomous and rather anarchic network structure that emphasizes human relationship and shared values over organizational structure and ideology. The Secretariat in Bangkok does not dictate an official ideology or policy to the network, but rather, acts to circulate knowledge and understanding of the network to the entire web as best it can. Kalyanamitra (“spiritual friendship”) is INEB’s most core value and practice.

We come together not out of a series of policy agendas but a deeper felt connection with sentient life and the common struggle to overcome suffering

The focus of INEB’s work as such is not the promotion and glorification of Buddhism but the overcoming of suffering through the practice of dharma, which means creating solidarity with individuals and groups who hold similar such values from other religions and other fields of social work. In this way, INEB has never wavered from its commitment to non-violent engagement and the articulation of positive social development. (INEB “About”)

Please note that what binds the membership of INEB together is “shared values” and that those values specifically include the integration of the practice of Buddhism with social action and never wavering from the commitment to non-violent engagement. Here, let me stress, are Engaged Buddhists, the great majority of them Asian, naming *for themselves* who

they are and what their core commitments are. Self-identifying Engaged Buddhists may choose to join the network and in so doing are embraced by other self-identifying Engaged Buddhists, all of whom in the very act of choosing to belong to this network are identifying with and publicly embracing its core values. It is clear that those values *preclude* the acceptance of any hostility towards any other or any actions that would tend to promote enmity. Their concern is the *universalist* concern for the suffering of all forms of sentient life, a suffering with which they feel a “deep connection.” Note that they profess solidarity with groups and persons of other religions, so long as they share the same core values. These core values *rule out* the inclusion of ethnocentric or nationalistic Buddhism as a form of Engaged Buddhism.

This understanding is supported when we see who the members of INEB are *and who they are not*. Readers are invited to look for themselves if they wish. INEB lists on its website its Patrons, Honorary Advisors, Advisory Committee, Executive Committee, and Executive Secretary (INEB “2023 AC EC Roster”). The list is overwhelmingly, though not entirely, constituted of Asian Buddhists. Not recognizing all of the names, I wrote to the INEB Secretariat and asked them if they include any Buddhist nationalists or ethnocentric Buddhists in their group. I received this answer from the Secretariat: “INEB does not include any Buddhist nationalists-ethnocentric Buddhists in its organizational structure” (INEB Secretariat email 2/14/2023). That is to say, there are *no* Buddhist nationalists or ethnocentric Buddhists in INEB. Here again are Engaged Buddhists *defining for themselves who are and who are not* Engaged Buddhists; ethnocentric/nationalist Buddhists are *not*. This is not surprising, considering that INEB and Buddhist nationalists or ethnocentric Buddhism have *opposite* ideologies—equal benevolence for all vs. primary concern for the own group; nonviolence vs. open hostility towards the “other,” leading in some cases to aggression and violence.

Of course, it is important in general to recognize that there are ethnocentric/nationalist Buddhist groups, and it is clearly valuable for scholars to study them. There is no question about this. It is just not okay to call them “Engaged Buddhists” since they are an *incompatible* ideology, and the name “Engaged Buddhism” (and “Socially Engaged Buddhism”) is *already taken!* It has been defined by its members in such a way that ethnocentric/nationalist Buddhists do not fit the definition. We must listen to the voices of those who self-identify as Engaged Buddhists. If certain scholars insist that ethnocentric/nationalist Buddhists are Engaged Buddhists just because they engage in social-political action, those scholars are forcing a new definition upon Engaged Buddhists, one that changes the very identity of Engaged Buddhism so much that Engaged Buddhists could no longer recognize themselves as part of it. It is not enough to simply consider the question of whether a group or individual is socially and politically active. It is also essential to consider core values and ideology. When these are brought into the picture, it is clear that Engaged Buddhism and ethnocentric/nationalist Buddhism should be kept distinct from each other. There is no problem if scholars will simply choose a different name for Buddhist social-political activists who are not Engaged Buddhists.

In my email to INEB I also asked the INEB Secretariat whether INEB has had dealings of any kind with Buddhist nationalist groups. I received two responses. The first referred me to INEB’s “public statement” pages (INEB “Resources”) where are posted several statements, including: (1) “Conflict in Myanmar’s Rakhine State” (2012) in which, among other things, they “call on Buddhist monks across Myanmar to set aside fear and the delusive religious discrimination; to honor the Buddha’s robe and example by being peacemakers for all people” (“Conflict in Myanmar”); and (2) “Towards the Creation of a Fact-Finding Commission on Relations Between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar” (2013), in which INEB declares

that “INEB’s mission is to respect the integrity of all religions and people, restoring harmony wherever possible.” They call for a:

fact-finding commission [that] would have three objectives:

1. to bring forth the facts of Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Myanmar;
2. to ascertain the causes of this conflict;
3. to develop resources and proposals for the establishment of inter-religious peace and harmony in Myanmar. (INEB “Fact-finding”)

The second response I received was a statement written by the Peace Team of the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), the latter a constituent institution of INEB, about their Peace Project in Myanmar. They report:

The overall Peace Project goal is for targeted Buddhist Sangha [i.e., monks and nuns] [to] contribute to communal harmony by actively opposing violence and nurturing a climate of tolerance, respect and compassion

SEM has spent time to sensitively engage and bridge connections with a broad spectrum of difficult-to-reach Sangha members [defined by SEM as “those who may be resistant to change due to their hard-line stance and adherence to militant Buddhist ideology”]—including ultra-nationalists. We focus on relationship and trust-building, in order to create an inclusive space for dialogue and critical conversations to better understand and examine the Sangha’s role in the current context. This is facilitated through an intra-faith [i.e., among different Buddhist

groups] approach as a vital step in the process towards inclusive peacebuilding. . . .

Overall, SEM's approach is guided by an engaged Buddhist theory and practice. Our approach recognises that changing behaviours require not only a shift in theoretical understanding, but a shift in the heart; away from the language of separation that has institutionalised violence at all levels of society, and towards a language of connection, as a positive pathway towards a culture of peace. . . .

SEM's status as an external [to Myanmar] organization with connections to socially engaged Buddhism (through SEM's co-founder, Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa, and sister organization, International Network of Engaged Buddhists), has also enabled a level of trust to grow with the Sangha, and a commitment from them to engage in this inclusive intra-faith process. . . .

As a result of interactions over the past several years, there . . . has been a clear shift in mindsets of many of target Sangha, from being unchallenged in their views and actions, to accepting the need to be open to others and their perspectives and accepting their own internal contradictory perspectives. The process has also given them opportunities to create personal and collaborative solutions to address conflicts they are facing. . . .

According to external evaluation of the Project (2016-2018), 'SEM activities have had a transformative impact in the mindset of the sangha and this is reflected in their speech and action'. . . .

Quantitative Data Tracking of Changes with Sangha (60 target Sangha):

1. Hate Speech: Use of hate speech in public (social media, dhamma talks, etc) dropped from 47% before [the SEM workshops], to less than 1% after
2. Nationalism: Reduction of strong chauvinistic nationalist mindset from 90% before to less than 1% after. (email from SEM 2/22/2023)

This is a statement from a self-identified Engaged Buddhist group that is a constituent part of INEB. They report that they are actively engaged with “difficult to reach” members of the Myanmar Sangha in an effort to reduce or eliminate hate speech and what they call chauvinistic nationalism among them. They do this in an effort to reduce or eliminate inter-communal violence and nurture “a climate of tolerance, respect and compassion” in Myanmar. This is a good example of how Engaged Buddhist ideology and mindset is antithetical to that of ethnocentric/nationalistic Buddhism. Indeed, here the former is striving to fundamentally transform the latter. It would make no sense to present under the same name—i.e., as a single phenomenon—both SEM and MaBaTha (Myanmar nationalist Buddhist group), i.e., two ideologies in which the first ideology is trying to profoundly transform the second. Indeed, such an approach can only confuse the reader and distort the nature of what is happening on the ground.

Finally, and definitively, the SEM report noted:

According to external evaluation of the Project (2016-2018), ‘SEM activities have had a transformative impact in the mindset of the sangha and this is reflected in their speech and action. During these three years most of their targeted alumni have progressed in terms of self-

awareness (75%); and their approach to their teachings and community work (60% increased understanding of peace-building in their communities and the causes of conflict; **90% label themselves as socially engaged**). (Spirit 2/22/23; bolding by essay author)

The statement, “90% label themselves as socially engaged” of course speaks directly to the issue addressed in this short paper. Wanting to be 100% clear as to what SEM meant by this statement, I wrote and asked for clarification. I received this response: “[I]t means that they used to be Buddhist nationalists, but now they have left that way of thinking and see themselves as socially engaged Buddhists in INEB’s sense instead” (Spirit 3/9/2023). In other words, to these socially active Buddhists, nationalist Buddhism and socially engaged Buddhism are two incompatible and irreconcilable identities. Becoming a socially engaged Buddhist displaces being a nationalist Buddhist. One cannot be both.

In sum, many things are open for discussion with respect to Engaged Buddhism. But it should not be made to include its opposite. Nationalist/ethnocentric Buddhists are not Engaged/socially engaged Buddhists.

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