Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism

Reviewed by Ethan Mills
University of New Mexico
Email: emills@unm.edu

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Review of Being Benevolence: 
The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism

Ethan Mills


The movement known as Engaged Buddhism has emerged in the last several decades as one of the most original and fascinating developments in recent Buddhist history; therefore, it is fitting that a volume on the subject should be part of the Topics in Contemporary Buddhism Series, published by the University of Hawai'i Press. Sallie B. King, a specialist in the study of Engaged Buddhism, has previously co-edited an anthology that was more descriptive and informational in nature (Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia, 1996). In this volume, however, King presents what may be the first book-length philosophical treatment of the social ethics underlying the movement as a whole, a task whose time has come given the movement's influence in contemporary Buddhism.

Concentrating on Asian Engaged Buddhists, including A. T. Ariyaratne, Aung San Suu Kyi, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, King notes that there are differences in idiom (e.g., Theravāda vs. Mahāyāna) and some differences of interpretation among Engaged Buddhists. However, the basic ethical structure of Engaged Buddhism can be summarized as an effort to put Buddhist concepts such as interdependence, loving-kindness, and compassion into action in social and/or political spheres as opposed to the rather individualistic, withdrawn

*Department of Philosophy, University of New Mexico. Email: emills@unm.edu
outlook of some traditional forms of Buddhism. King’s most prominent thesis, supported throughout the book, is that Engaged Buddhism is a native Buddhist reformist development. This is important, as Engaged Buddhism has often been dismissed as merely a product of Western influence rather than an authentically Buddhist movement. While it is true that many Engaged Buddhists adopt Western terminology such as talk about human rights or justice, King shows that this is always done via Buddhist interpretations and with Buddhist motivations. Thus, Engaged Buddhism is an organic outgrowth of the Buddhist tradition.

Chapters two, three and four are concerned with the fundamentals of Engaged Buddhist ethics, while chapters five, six and seven apply these insights to human rights, nonviolence and justice and reconciliation respectively. Chapter two shows how Engaged Buddhists have reinterpreted classic features of Buddhist philosophy such as dependent origination, the four noble truths, and meditation techniques. Dependent origination proves to be one of the most important reinterpretations and King returns to it throughout the book. The idea here is that "... human beings are social beings—that is, each one of us lives in a condition of interdependence within society." (p. 13) This social interpretation proves to have dramatic and far-reaching effects on a large range of Engaged Buddhist theories from responsibility and punishment to nonviolence and economic justice.

Chapter three places Engaged Buddhism in the context of debates about which Western ethical theory most closely resembles Buddhist ethics. King suggests that Engaged Buddhism exhibits features of several Western systems while showing the prevalence of such ideas as natural law, holism and an outlook that is nonadversarial and pragmatic. Chapter four shows how a holistic, socially interdependent theory of the relationship between the individual and society has emerged. Largely expanding on Engaged Buddhist interpretations of dependent origination and no-self, the most interesting discussion of the chapter focuses on a reaction to the Western debate between free will and determinism. King argues that neither the free will nor determinist positions are suitable and shows how Engaged
Buddhists think about moral responsibility given their theories about causality, no-self and personal development.

The more practically oriented chapters begin with a discussion of human rights, centered on the debate about whether human rights can be defended in an Asian Buddhist context (often referred to as the "Asian values debate"). While most Western interpretations of human rights are too individualistic and adversarial for Engaged Buddhism, some Engaged Buddhists have argued for the pragmatic necessity of human rights to end suffering, especially in countries such as Cambodia or Myanmar/Burma. Others have argued that human rights can be interpreted as expressing a nonadversarial stance, namely that violation of human rights is morally good neither for the abused nor the abuser.

While acknowledging that all Engaged Buddhists promote nonviolence, chapter five details a spectrum of views from principled to pragmatic nonviolence, often along similar lines of nonviolence found outside of Buddhism. Aside from the more familiar views of personal nonviolence as developed in the tradition, the chapter includes an innovative discussion of the role of violence in the military and how Engaged Buddhists may or may not promote a defensive military force.

In the chapter called "Justice/Reconciliation," King notes that Engaged Buddhists have tended not to use language of justice as much as that of human rights. However, she finds that almost all Engaged Buddhists are concerned with economic justice out of their efforts to promote equality and to eradicate the greed caused by economic models of perpetual growth and the suffering caused by extreme poverty. In terms of political justice, King suggests that Engaged Buddhists move more toward a model of reconciliation in which both sides of a conflict benefit. This does not mean, however, that Engaged Buddhists have no concepts of blame and punishment, as the section on criminal justice details. Here Engaged Buddhists opt for a rehabilitative model rather than a retributive model, although King adds that there is much work to be done to fully develop this model in Buddhist terms.
Although King's book does a great service by taking Engaged Buddhist writings seriously as philosophical theories, there are a few points where deeper philosophical questioning could better serve the purpose of the work. For instance, the discussion of free will and determinism, while it rightly points out that this is not an exigent issue for Buddhism, occasionally conflates determinism with fatalism and sidesteps the issue of whether Buddhism could be interpreted as hard determinism given the Buddhist view of causality. King points out that Buddhism requires that we make wholesome choices, but remains largely silent on whether these choices themselves could be causally determined. Instead she insists that choices are causally influenced, leaving some room for freedom, although not the entirely uncaused freedom proposed by Western libertarian theories. Perhaps this idea simply needs more work, but it seems somewhat philosophically incomplete as presented.

However, King's achievement as a whole should not be taken lightly. The fact that she has broached the subject of Engaged Buddhist ethics at all has created fertile ground for further philosophical exploration of Engaged Buddhism. Scholars who aspire to study the development of Buddhist philosophy into the twenty-first century should look to this volume for inspiration.
Mills, Review of Being Benevolence. 2. outlook of some traditional forms of Buddhism. King's most prominent thesis, supported throughout the book, is that Engaged Buddhism is a native Buddhist reformist development. This is important, as Engaged Buddhism has often been dismissed as merely a product of Western influence rather than an authentically Buddhist movement. Chapters two, three and four are concerned with the fundamentals of Engaged Buddhist ethics, while chapters five, six and seven apply these insights to human rights, nonviolence and justice and reconciliation respectively. Chapter two shows how Engaged Buddhists have reinterpreted classic features of Buddhist philosophy such as dependent origination, the four noble truths, and meditation techniques. Engaged Buddhism refers to Buddhists who are seeking ways to apply the insights from meditation practice and dharma teachings to situations of social, political, environmental and economic suffering and injustice. Finding its roots in Vietnam through the Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhất Hạnh, Engaged Buddhism has grown in popularity in the West. The term “Engaged Buddhism” was coined by the Vietnamese Thích Nhất Hạnh in the 1950s in his collection of articles, “A Fresh Look at... Engaged Buddhism is the contemporary movement of nonviolent social and political activism found throughout the Buddhist world. Its ethical theory sees the world in terms of cause and effect, a view that discourages its practitioners from becoming adversaries, blaming or condemning the other. Its leaders make some of the most important contributions in the Buddhist world to thinking about issues in political theory, human rights, nonviolence, and social justice. It identifies the roots of Engaged Buddhist social ethics in such traditional Buddhist concepts and practices as interdependence, compassion, and meditation, and shows how these are applied to particular social and political issues. Since Buddhists have always been socially engaged, a socially engaged Buddhism is nothing new. Indeed, even Thich Nhat Hanh, who is himself credited with coining the very term “engaged Buddhism”, does not seem to consider the engaged aspect of Buddhism to be anything new as Kenneth Kraft reveals. In reflecting on Buddhism and social engagement, Kato Shonin believes that since the Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma on this earth, this earth is where we obtain his teachings and reach enlightenment. If individuals practice the Lotus Sutra correctly, Kato Shonin says, “life itself is engagement and we do not need to separate into engaged and not-engaged Buddhism.” Buddhism upholds lofty and demanding ethical values, but recognizes the need to adapt those values to the conditions of the real world. From a Buddhist point of view, animal life is precious, and human life is even more so. Ideally we should refrain from killing animals, adopt a vegetarian diet, renounce all forms of violence and live in harmony with nature. Yet there are some difficult cases in which violence and killing seem almost unavoidable. Some Buddhist writers have offered guidance on how to act appropriately and realistically in such situations, without abandoning the compassion and lovingkindness that form the basis of the Buddhist approach to ethics. Ethical action is thus both an important part of the Buddhist path and an important aspect of the results said to flow from that path.