

**Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism.
Sallie B. King. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005.**

Sallie King's *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* provides an overdue and thoughtful scholarly analysis of the often misunderstood and completely maligned traditional philosophical foundations of the transnational Engaged Buddhist movement. Westerners, and in particular Americans, have certain conceptions of Buddhists, which King, by her choice of study, calls into question. Nonviolent, enlightened self-discipline, and non-adversarial detachment are all conceptual frames commonly associated with Buddhists. In this discerning work, King complicates these understandings of modern Buddhists in order to critically analyze Engaged Buddhist's social ethics. In King's own words, her work aims to "dig more deeply into the philosophical substructure beneath the Engaged Buddhist movement as a whole ... to raise questions, opening doors for further thought and investigation where there is thinking yet to be done" (7). In being careful not to overlook "the agency of individual Buddhist leaders" (3) in exploring the ongoing dialogue among contemporary Buddhists over important social problems, King is cautious, intentional, and thorough in her analysis. As ambitious as King's task is, such work is extremely important. Despite the fact that the socially Engaged Buddhist movement has "many faces and involves many different perspectives," as David Loy notes in *Money, Sex, War, Karma*,^[1] King makes clear that the movement also has a coherence that has "much to offer the global community" (229).

King's attention to contested philosophical issues that are often avoided by Buddhists themselves opens new avenues of inquiry and reflection on not only exactly what Engaged Buddhists have to offer the global community, but also what Engaged Buddhists themselves can learn from engagement with the global community. This is a two way street, and King is perceptive in realizing this fact. Her ability to weave important insights on justice, reconciliation, human rights, individualism, and communalism into a respectful critique of modern Engaged Buddhist thinkers is impressive, as well as useful to not only Engaged Buddhists, but also nonviolent activists and scholar-practitioners of conflict resolution. Beginning from a foundation of Buddhist natural law based on karma, King traces the

pragmatic ethical stance of socially engaged Buddhists and their insistence that all humans “need to have their basic needs met” (222). Such language, reminiscent of secular conflict resolution scholars like John Burton, is uncomplicated yet important. Citing Howard Zehr and Gene Sharp, King draws attention to an important connection between Western secular thinking on justice and power and the social ethics of Engaged Buddhism.^[2] Always aware of her broad-based and cross-cultural audience, King does a nice job of positioning herself as both an authentic translator of East to West and a tour guide through her own culture’s minefield of philosophical problems. Near the end of King’s study, she astutely writes: “The reader may have noticed that the word ‘power’ has not appeared in these pages in the words of Engaged Buddhists themselves” (245). King’s realization that this is not insignificant is testament to her ability to blend insightful philosophical scholarship with practical moral reasoning. Her reflection on power as not only adversarial but interdependent, provides an important area of insight for Engaged Buddhist activists. That Engaged Buddhists could learn from nonviolent activists, as opposed to learning only in the other direction, is a valuable insight for not just Engaged Buddhists, but for peace scholar-practitioners as well.

Of course, as with any excellent piece of scholarship, there are places where further reference and probing would be valuable, or seemed lacking. For one, King’s work seems to be very South East and East Asia focused. She provides only scant examples or references to Engaged Buddhist movements in South Asia, and when she does, she misses some of the important contributions this region’s Buddhists have made to the wider Engaged Buddhist movement. It is telling that King’s section on justice and reconciliation does not return to any mention of Ambedkar Buddhists in South Asia and their struggle for freedom from caste injustice. In fact, the issue of caste injustice figures rather inconsequentially in King’s account of Engaged Buddhist social ethics—a weakness that, with remedy, could provide further important insights into King’s question as to whether Buddhist values are “adequate to analyze the issues and justify the social change that Buddhists seek and to construct the good society that they are beginning to envision” (203). As someone who has studied the dharma work of the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG) in India,^[3] I believe their unique vision of social justice could add to King’s discussion of Engaged Buddhist’s confrontation with injustice. In particular, the injustice narratives that TBMSG members and activists tell highlight a unique identity position from which to justify social change and envision social justice. Not only are the so-called neo-Buddhists of India largely forgotten, the context and place from which the Dalai Lama is working also seems

overlooked. Though not reasons for major revision, these minor critiques of King's work point to the complexity of culture and context in understanding the social ethics of such a diverse movement. Further, King's own cultural frames deserve more attention and her continual privileging of Buddhist frames as the sole unit of analysis leaves unattended the deep analysis of important themes of difference in power and social responsibility. Further, as briefly mentioned above, when King discusses needs approaches within Buddhism, she misses an opportunity to engage the rich literature on basic human needs theory within the field of conflict resolution.^[4]

King's broad-based quotations from Engaged Buddhist leaders provides for an objective telling of not only what values underlie Engaged Buddhist activism, but also what gaps exists in these activists' ability to create successful outcomes. While much of the material written on Buddhist ethics has focused on impermanence and co-dependent origination (see for example Swaris and Chappell^[5]). King's work expands our understandings of these doctrines and practices by focusing on how the speech acts of Engaged Buddhists represent a syncretism and evolution of global thought. Her work is a valuable addition to anyone interested in socially Engaged Buddhism, social justice, or conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Jeremy A. Rinker
DePauw University

1. 1. David Loy, *Money Sex War Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 152.
2. 2. Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1990); Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 vols. (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).
3. 3. Jeremy Rinker, "Justpeace Prospects for Peace-building and Worldview Tolerance: A South Asian Movement's Social Construction of Justice" (Ph.D. diss., George Mason University, 2009).
4. 4. See, among others, John Burton, *Conflict: Basic Human Needs* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990, 1997); Richard Rubenstein, "Basic Human Needs: The Next Steps in Theory Development," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 6, no.1 (2001); and Paul Sites, *Control: The Basis of Social*

Order (New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1973).

5. 5. See for example Nalin Swaris, *Buddhism, Human Responsibilities and Social Renewal* (Bangalore: Pipal Tree, 2008); and David Chappell, ed., *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999).