

# Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism

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Sallie B. King

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Sallie King's *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* provides an overdue and thoughtful scholarly analysis of the often misunderstood or completely maligned traditional philosophical foundations of the transnational Engaged Buddhist movement. Westerners, particularly Americans, have certain conceptions of Buddhists; King's choice of study calls these common conceptions into question. Nonviolent, enlightened self-discipline and non-adversarial detachment are conceptual frames commonly associated with Buddhists, and in this discerning work, King complicates these understandings of modern Buddhists in order to critically analyze the social ethics of Engaged Buddhist. 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 to not 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 Engaged Buddhist movement has "many faces and involves many different perspectives"<sup>[1]</sup> as David Loy has argued, 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 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. In citing Zehr (1990) and Sharp (1973, 1993), King draws attention to important connections between Western secular thinking on justice and power and the social ethics of Engaged Buddhism. 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 that power is 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 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 seem lacking. For one King's work is very focused on South East and East Asia. She provides only scant examples or reference to socially-engaged Buddhist movements in South Asia, and

when she does she misses some of the important contributions Buddhists in this region 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 whose 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,<sup>[2]</sup> I believe that 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, but 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, there is a missed opportunity to engage the rich literature on basic human needs theory within the field of conflict resolution (see Burton , 1990, 1997; Rubenstein , 2001; and Sites, 1973; among others).

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 exist in these activists' ability to create successful outcomes. While much written on Buddhist ethics has focused on impermanence and co-dependent origination (see for example Swaris, 2008, and Chappell, 1999), 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.

Dr. Jeremy A. Rinker Visiting Scholar and Assistant Professor Conflict Studies  
DePauw University

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1. David Loy, *Money Sex War Karma: Notes For A Buddhist Revolution* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 152.

2. 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).