Engaged Buddhism FREE

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Summary

Engaged Buddhism emerged in Asia in the 20th century as Buddhists responded to the challenges of colonialism, modernity, and secularization. It is often dated to Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's challenge to caste discrimination in India in the 1950s and the antiwar activism of Vietnamese Buddhist monastic Thich Nhat Hanh, although recent scholarship has pointed to the influence of Chinese Buddhist reforms occurring in the 1930s. Hanh coined the term "engaged Buddhism" to describe social and political activism based in Buddhist principles in the 1960s. The terms "engaged Buddhism" and "socially engaged Buddhism" were taken up by loosely connected Buddhists in Asia and the West who adapted Buddhism to a range of nonviolent social activist projects such as peacemaking, human rights, environmental protection, rural development, combatting ethnic violence, and women's rights. With globalization and technological advances, engaged Buddhist organizations and efforts have spread across the globe. Reflecting the culture shift from the modern to the postmodern, generational and demographic shifts within these communities are marked by increased attention to intersectionality and postcolonial thought. Engaged Buddhists see their social and political activities as extending Buddhism's classical focus on individual suffering to the suffering generated by unjust structures and systems, and set collective as well as individual liberation as a soteriological goal. While there is a consensus in academic scholarship that engaged Buddhism is an expression of Buddhist modernism, recent debates have arisen around whether conservative, nationalist, and even ethnocentric modern forms of Buddhism can be considered as forms of engaged Buddhism.

Keywords: engaged Buddhism, socially engaged Buddhism, Buddhist activism, collective liberation, Buddhist modernism, Fourth Turning, Navayana, environment, racism, women and gender

Subjects: Buddhism

Introduction

In August 2014, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship hosted its first national gathering since 2004. It opened with a dialogue between two keynote speakers: Thai activist and founder of the International Engaged Buddhist Network Sulak Sivaraksa, and American environmentalist

Joanna Macy. Over the next three days, 400 attendees participated in workshops on longstanding engaged Buddhist concerns such as environmental justice and caste discrimination in India and new areas of focus such as the erasure of Asian Americans in American Buddhism and the ethics of the secular mindfulness movement.[1] These workshops were held at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, California, a nonsectarian Buddhist community, which was founded on the principles of multiculturalism, radical inclusivity, and social engagement.[2] After the gathering, a small group formed a meditation blockage outside a nearby Marriott hotel in protest at the Urban Shield conference, a weapons expo and militarized police training event, it was hosting.[3]

In bringing together engaged Buddhist pioneers such as Sivaraksa and Macy with an emerging generation of millennial Buddhist activists and interweaving global and local concerns, the 2014 Buddhist Peace Fellowship Gathering offered a glimpse into the trajectory of engaged Buddhism since its emergence as a loosely related wave of Buddhist social and political movements in Asia in the mid-20th century. This article will survey the ever expanding landscape of engaged Buddhism by mapping four major areas: (a) engaged Buddhist activism across the globe, (b) engaged Buddhist hermeneutics, (c) engaged Buddhism as an academic category, and (d) ongoing debates and new directions in engaged Buddhism.

Global Engaged Buddhism: Established and Emerging Figures and Communities

The term engaged Buddhism was coined not by a scholar but by the Vietnamese monastic peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1960s to describe social activism based on Buddhist principles.[4] While it has been dated to 1963, Hanh dates it to 1964 when he used it as the English translation for a book composed of previously written essays that he published on his return to Vietnam after lecturing at Columbia University in 1963–1964.[5] The extended term “socially engaged Buddhism” was taken up in the 1980s by Asian and Western engaged Buddhist activists on the ground and in print.[6] Since its emergence in Asia in the 20th century, engaged Buddhist individuals, organizations, and ideas have emerged and traveled via the transnational routes forged by Buddhist modernism. While not comprehensive, the following offers a glimpse at both established and emerging figures and communities with attention to demographic and generational diversity. Many of the newer organizations have not been studied academically so information comes from primary material that must be treated with caution. Similarly, there remains a lacuna of critical historical analyses of established engaged Buddhist figures or communities, with most studies produced by engaged Buddhist advocates or insiders from the communities.

While engaged Buddhist activism spans a wide range of projects, there are central areas of focus across the international landscape: militarism, anticapitalist developmental work, ethnic violence and oppressions, environmental concerns, women and gender rights, and poverty relief. Engaged Buddhist priorities have shifted, however, in response to historical developments, cultural shifts, and urgent societal needs. Whereas early engaged Buddhism, which emerged in the shadow of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the nuclear threat, focused heavily on peace activism, the pressing climate and ecological crisis has become a major current concern.[7] Alongside work on caste oppression against the Dalits in India and the burakumin in Japan, in the context of #BlackLivesMatter engaged Buddhism in the United

States has turned more fully to addressing structural racism.[8] A further development is the emergence of an intersectional and decolonizing engaged Buddhist sensibility that links feminism, environmental activism, and indigenous rights together as a force of resistance to the interlocking systems of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and the military-industrial complex.[9]

Engaged Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia

Most engaged Buddhist narratives begin with Vietnamese Thien (Zen) monk Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926), who coined the term engaged Buddhism. Hanh gained international prominence due to his Buddhist-based peace activism during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. He studied comparative religion at Columbia University and Princeton University in the 1960s and became inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He returned to Vietnam in 1963 and in 1964 founded the Order of Interbeing (Tiep Hien), which centered on extending Buddhist thought and practice to promote peace and social responsibility. Sister Chan Kong (b. 1938) was one of the original members of the Order. He also cofounded the School of Youth for Social Services (SYSS), which applied Buddhist principles to a range of activities included leading antiwar demonstrations, rebuilding bombed villages, and providing medical treatment. Each week, the SYSS practiced a day of mindfulness in which they would recite the Fourteen Mindfulness trainings and chant the Heart Sutra.

Due to his antiwar work, Hanh came under fire from both the American-controlled South Vietnam and the communist-controlled North Vietnam and many of his supporters were jailed or killed. In 1967, he was exiled from Vietnam by the Vietnamese government and Nhat Chi Mai, one of the first six Order of Interbeing members, immolated herself as a peace protest. In the same year, Hanh was nominated for a Noble Peace Prize by Dr. King. Hanh, Sister Kong, and other community members were granted asylum in France where they focused their efforts on helping Vietnamese refugees. The community eventually grew into a thriving monastic and lay community know as Plum Village Buddhist Center, which has branch monasteries in the United States, an international community, and its own printing press. Through a series of books and international tours, Hahn has promoted engaged Buddhist ideals through the practice of mindfulness. At the very center of his mindfulness work is the conviction that “peace is the way” and that individual and societal transformation are inseparable. He presents his engaged Buddhism as continuous with the tradition rather than signaling a new or radical break.[10]

Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne (b. 1931), the founder and president of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, has been at the forefront of engaged Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Trained as a teacher, Ariyaratne first developed a “service-learning program” to help rural villagers in Kanatoluwa in 1958. Sarvodaya Shramadana works on a “bottom-up” self-governance model by collectively identifying basic community needs such as systems of clean water, sanitation, housing, or education and then collectively meeting those needs through combining the skill sets of Sarvodaya Shramadana volunteers and village members. Its success is indicated by the fact that it has grown into the largest nongovernmental organization in the country. Ariyaratne bases his work on what he calls a “Buddhist economics” model, which combines secular postcolonial development principles with Buddhist values of generosity. The word “*sarva*” means “all” and “*udaya*” means “awakening,” signifying Ariyaratne’s engaged Buddhist

conviction that the Buddhist soteriological goal of liberation can be expressed in all activities including social and economic development.[11] Since the 1990s, Ariyaratne has expanded his efforts to nonviolent peace activism to aid the ethnic violence between the Sinhala Buddhist majority and the Tamil Hindu minority. He has been the recipient of a number of international peace prizes including the Gandhi Peace Prize in 1996 from the government of India. He founded Vishva Niketan International Peace and Meditation Centre, which is centered in the core engaged Buddhist belief that "enduring peace can only be attained when individuals achieve inner peace—cessation of conflict—within themselves."[12]

In Thailand, both monastics and lay Buddhists have been active in forging engaged Buddhist movements. Modern reformist monk Buddhadasa Bhikku (1906–1993) developed what he called a "Dhammic Socialism," which rejected the traditional Theravadin distinction between the mundane and supramundane and placed the nonviolent reform of society, politics, and economics at the center of Buddhist practice.[13] Alongside Thich Nhat Hahn and Mohandas Gandhi, Buddhadasa was one of the inspirations behind the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), which was cofounded in 1989 by fellow Thai Buddhist Sulak Sivaraksa (b. 1933).[14] Sivaraksa is a lay Buddhist social critic, lawyer, prolific author, and grassroots activist who has been a major force in engaged Buddhism across the globe. Combining Buddhist thought and values with a Marxist systemic critique, his activities span rural development projects, nonviolent peace activism and reconciliation, developing Buddhist economic models, environmental activism, advocating for women's rights, and promoting interfaith work. A vocal critic of the Thai government and Buddhist monastic orthodoxy, he has faced exile and imprisonment and was nominated for a Noble Peace Prize in both 1993 and 1994.[15] Since the 1980s, Thai monastics led by Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun have wrapped orange clerical robes around trees in an innovative "tree ordination movement" to protect them from deforestation and its resultant environmental harms.[16]

Efforts to reestablish the Theravada bhikkhuni movement have been led by Thai and Sri Lankan nuns. On the face of much opposition, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda became Thailand's first fully ordained bhikkhuni in 2003 and is the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the country's first all-female Buddhist monastery. Former director for the Women and Gender program at INEB, Buddhist feminist activist Ouyporn Khuankaew leads trauma-informed retreats and workshops for women dealing with domestic violence, retreats for activists suffering from burnout, and leadership training to empower Buddhist nuns and laywomen. Founded in 2002, her organization, the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IPPJ), is rooted in Buddhism and intersectional feminism and offers programs for Buddhist peacebuilding, nonviolent resistance, and social change for women.[17] In Cambodia, Maha Ghosananda (1913–2007) led an annual Dhammayietra, or peace walk, which has come to signify the revival of Buddhism, which was all but wiped out during the brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge and the following Vietnamese communist occupation, as well as an international expression of engaged Buddhism. Ghosananda had been living in Thailand for a decade when refugees began forming camps along the Thai–Cambodia border. He distributed thousands of booklets on the metta (lovingkindness) sutta from the Pali canon and began to work in the camps, eventually becoming a consultant to the UN Economic and Social Council and cofounder of the Inter-religious Mission for Peace in Cambodia. Influenced by Nipponzan Myohoji, a Japanese Buddhist organization dedicated to world peace, and Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness, Ghosananda began the Dhammayietra in 1992 when he led 350 refugees on foot back to Cambodia with the teaching that "each step is a meditation." This was the first of

what became an annual pilgrimage taken by Buddhist monastics and laity and organized around pressing social themes: repatriation, elections, the Khmer Rouge/government conflict, land mines ban, and illegal logging. Ghosananda was honored as the Supreme Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism and nominated six times for the Noble Peace Prize.[18]

In Myanmar, formerly Burma, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was heralded as an icon of engaged Buddhism for her opposition to the country's military regime and her advocacy for democratic government and human rights. She was born in 1945, while Burma was under British colonial rule; her father, Aung San, secured independence from the British empire in 1947 but was assassinated the same year. Educated at Oxford University, Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar to oppose the repressive military regime that had seized power in 1962. In 1988, she cofounded the National League for Democracy and in 1989 she was placed under house arrest, which would last until 2010. During this time, Suu Kyi developed a political rhetoric of resistance that drew heavily on Buddhism, particularly the teachings of metta or lovingkindness, and emphasized the compatibility of Buddhism with liberal democracy.[19] In 2015, Suu Kyi was elected head of government, but not only has the expected democratic revolution failed to materialize, her government has been accused of jailing opponents, silencing the press, and, most damagingly, ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya, Myanmar's minority Muslim population. Suu Kyi's failure to denounce the attempted genocide of the 700,000 Rohingya who have been forced to flee the country after a brutal military campaign has led to her being stripped of a number of human rights awards. Many engaged Buddhists, including the INEB and Sister Kong from the Order of Interbeing, have written public letters to Suu Kyi pleading with her to denounce the ethnic cleansing and support the Rohingya.[20]

Engaged Buddhism in South Asia

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), who led the mass conversion of the Dalits (also historically referred to as outcastes and Untouchables) to Buddhism in India to liberate them from the oppressive hierarchical social and religious caste system, was a pioneer of engaged Buddhism in India. Ambedkar was born into a Dalit Hindu family and became one of the first Dalits to attend college in India before studying at both Columbia University and the London School of Economics. There he trained in Western liberal thought, pragmatic philosophy, and the Protestant social gospel, all of which shaped his political vision and interpretation of Buddhism. He played a major role in the Indian independence movement and became a dedicated activist for Dalit rights under the slogans "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" and "Educate, Agitate, Organize." He became India's first Law and Justice minister and was the chairman of the constitution drafting committee in Jawaharlal Nehru's first government.[21] After suffering at first hand the relentless discrimination against Dalits, Ambedkar concluded that the Hindu caste system could not be reformed and had to be rejected. He converted to Buddhism in 1956 and immediately initiated a mass conversion of his fellow Dalits to Buddhism, which led to a revival of the tradition in India. Ambedkar's book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), which was published posthumously, is a seminal engaged Buddhist text and remains the foundation of Ambedkarite Buddhism today. It radically reinterprets the individual liberation from suffering found in traditional Buddhism through a progressive, pragmatic social lens. Recognizing his departure from tradition, Ambedkar framed his socially liberative Buddhism as a *navayana* or "new vehicle" in the history of the Buddhadharma.[22] The

conversion of Dalits to Buddhism continued after Ambedkar's death and the growth of his community was nurtured by the English monastic Sangharakshita (1925–2018), formerly Dennis Lingwood, who played an important role in Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. Sangharakshita founded Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG), which is the Indian branch of Triratna, the organization Sangharakshita founded on his return to the United Kingdom.[23] TBMSG runs a number of social justice programs combatting poverty, promoting education, and fighting against caste discrimination.[24] Another engaged Buddhist organization that focuses on empowering women and children from the lower caste is the Bodhicitta Foundation. Founded by Ayya Yeshe, an Australian Tibetan Buddhist nun, who is an outspoken critic of the patriarchy in Buddhism, it provides food, healthcare, housing, education, and job skills training as well as legal support for victims of domestic abuse.[25]

Tibetan Buddhist spiritual and political head the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso is also considered a key representative of engaged Buddhism because of his leadership in the Tibetans' nonviolent struggle for self-determination. In his early twenties, he was forced to flee Tibet in 1959 after it was invaded by the Chinese and has since resided in Dharamshala in India, which is the seat of the Tibetan administration in exile. Since 1966, the Chinese occupation has resulted in the systematic destruction of Buddhist communities, monasteries, libraries, and cultural artifacts. The nonviolent resistance Free Tibet Movement emerged in the Tibetan refugee camps in India in the 1970s, with the Tibetan Youth Congress and the Tibetan People's Freedom Movement at its center and the Dalai Lama as its international face. Through a series of world tours and books, he has drawn on Buddhist principles and practice to promote world peace through inner peace as well as advocating for the development of a transnational secular ethics of peace and kindness. In 1989, the Dalai Lama won the Noble Peace Prize in recognition of his nonviolent campaign to end the Chinese occupation. Other major Tibetan Buddhist leaders who have embraced engaged Buddhism include His Holiness Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the seventeenth Karmapa, who is the head of the Kagyu lineage and has foregrounded environmental concerns and promoted vegetarianism in his teachings and activities framed through the Buddhist principles of nonharm and compassion.[26]

There has also been an embrace of socially engaged Buddhist initiatives in the Northwest Indian region of Ladakh, which have taken place as part of wider resistance to secularization processes in the region and have involved both monastic and lay communities. Buddhist monastic and political leader Bakula Rinpoche (1917–2003) set the stage by promoting a "social work ethos" as a key part of Buddhist practice. Bhikku Sanghasena, an internationally renowned Ladakhi monk within the Theravada Buddhist tradition, founded the Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre (MIMC), which runs a number of educational, health, and service programs under the mantra "Compassion in action. Meditation in action."[27]

Engaged Buddhism in East Asia

While most engaged Buddhist narratives start with Thich Nhat Hanh, scholars have shown that Hanh was influenced by the Chinese monastic Taixu (1890–1947), who spearheaded a modern reform of Buddhism in China in the 1920s. Taixu taught "*renjian fojiao*," translated as "Buddhism for this world" or "Buddhism for this human life," which emphasized the importance of education, publishing, social work, and lay Buddhism for Buddhism to remain relevant in the modern world. In service of "creating the Pure Land in the human realm," his

reforms shaped the Chinese Buddhist Revival and initiated the emergence of “humanistic Buddhism,” which saw innovations such as Buddhist clinics, orphanages, and schools as well as teaching in prisons. Taixu traveled to Vietnam in 1928 and 1940 and his teachings significantly shaped the climate in which Hanh’s engaged Buddhism emerged.[28] Recent scholarship has established that Taixu was deeply involved in radical anarchist and socialist political movements in his formative years and this greatly influenced his interpretations of Pure Land Buddhism and the Maitreya school he founded in 1924.[29] While scholars disagree on whether Chinee Buddhist modernizers such as Taixu, Daxing (1900–1950), and Fafang (1904–1951) are best labeled humanistic Buddhists, engaged Buddhists, or “activist Buddhists,” the close historical and structural relationships between them and normative engaged Buddhists such as Hanh requires attention.[30] Against the backdrop of the 1949 Chinese Communist Party victory, humanistic Buddhism migrated to Taiwan, where Yinshun (1906–2005) played a major role in establishing it. Since Taiwan’s democratization there has been a remarkable growth in humanistic Buddhist groups, with six major organizations emerging: the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Fo Guang Shan, Dharma Drum Mountain, Chung Tai Chan Tzu, Ling Jiou Shan, and Fu-chih. While each group differs in its approach and services, common to all is the commitment to the concept of *renjian fojiao* and establishing a Pure Land on earth through social improvement. For instance, Dharma Drum Mountain was started by the Chan Buddhist monastic Master Sheng Yen. It has a robust social welfare and education program, which it promotes under “the Pure Land on Earth” movement. It runs an extensive meditation retreat program and refers to students who have attended retreats as “Ambassadors of Peace.”[31]

Aided by a combination of financial resources, improved education, transportation, and communications, Taiwanese *bhiksunis* or nuns have been particularly active in Buddhist social service since the 1970s.[32] *Bhiksuni* activism includes both radical social and political activism and mainstream humanitarian activities. On one end of the spectrum is Bhiksuni Chao Hwei (b. 1957), who is actively involved in the political arena with a focus on human rights, particularly women’s rights. Trained as an academic, her work is explicitly feminist, seeking to dismantle expressions of the hierarchical, oppressive “gender order” in both Buddhist institutions and society. On the other end is the Venerable Cheng Yen (b. 1937), who founded the Tzu Chi Foundation in 1966, an organization with more than 4 million members.[33] The Tzu Chi Foundation leads emergency relief efforts across the world and funds national and international projects focused on free medical care, providing education, and environment. Tzu Chi has been careful not to align with an explicit political agenda, and Venerable Cheng Yen has presented her work as an expression of traditional Buddhist values and traditional feminine gender roles of self-sacrifice and nurturing.[34]

Just as Pure Land Buddhism has been at the heart of engaged Buddhist efforts in Taiwan, so have new interpretations of Nichiren Buddhism been at the center of engaged Buddhism in Japan. Nichiren (1222–1282) believed the world had entered a degenerate age in which liberation was only possible through the recitation and chanting of the title (*daimoku*) of the Lotus Sutra. In the 20th century, three new Nichiren groups emerged that are typically viewed as examples of socially engaged Buddhism: Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai, and Nipponzan Myohoji.[35] While all three groups direct their Buddhist practice toward world peace and believe that social improvement can only come about through individual transformation, each group interprets Nichiren distinctively and each pursues a particular style of social activism. Soka Gakkai was founded in the early 1930s and through intense

proselytizing has grown into one of Japan's largest new religions, with an international membership of 12 million. Since its early years it has equated the spread of Buddhism with world peace. In 1938 Niwano Nikkyo (1916–1999) and Naganuma Myoko (1889–1957) founded Rissho Kosei-Kai, and since the 1960s, when Nikkyo became involved with the nuclear disarmament movement, the group has framed the Lotus Sutra as expressing "an ideology of peace." Nipponzan Myohoji is a much smaller sect that was founded in 1924 by monastic Nichidatsu Fujii (1885–1995), who was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. It became active in the Japanese antinuclear war movements in the 1950s. It is much smaller than the other two but has gained international prominence through its peace marches, which influenced Maha Ghosanda's Dhammayietra, and its peace pagodas.

Engaged Buddhism in the United States

Engaged Buddhism in the United States is typically traced back to beat poet, Zen Buddhist, and environmentalist Gary Snyder.[36] His 1961 essay "Buddhist Anarchism," which calls for the union of the "social revolution" of the West and the "individual insight into the basic self/void" of the East, set the analytic framework for much of engaged Buddhism in the West.[37] The nonsectarian Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) was the first engaged Buddhist organization in the United States. It was started by Robert Aitkin Roshi, Anne Aitkin, and Nelson Foster in 1978 after the Vietnamese antiwar movement and had a strong peacemaking focus.[38] In 1983, BPF and the San Francisco Zen Center coorganized Thich Nhat Hanh's first retreat for Western Buddhists in the United States and sponsored some of his subsequent North American tours. Among BPF's many initiatives are the training program Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), which ran from 1990 to 2005, and its *Turning Wheel Journal*, which has featured the work of many engaged Buddhist leaders.[39]

Among BPF's directors and board members are the most prominent first-generation engaged American Buddhists. Soto Zen priest Alan Senauke established BPF's international presence and founded the Clear View Project, which is a partner of the INEB, with a focus on Burma and India.[40] Donald Rothberg has been a leading voice of engaged Buddhism in the Insight community with a specialization in conflict resolution.[41] Author and activist Joanna Macy has developed "The Work That Reconnects," a training program that unites Buddhism, deep ecology, and systems thinking.[42] Soto Zen priest Zenju Earthlyn Manuel has confronted the suffering of racial, gender, sexual orientation, and class oppressions in her writings.[43] Representing a second generation of engaged Buddhists, in 2013 Katie Loncke and Dawn Haney launched the "radical rebirth" of BPF on a social media platform and expanded its focus to address antiblackness, racism against Asian American Buddhists, and indigenous rights.[44]

In 1996, American Zen teacher Bernie Glassman (1939–2018) and his wife Sandra Jishu Holmes founded the Zen Peacemaker Order to expand the work they had been doing with the Greyston Foundation, which served homeless populations including those living with HIV/AIDS, through providing housing, child care, and healthcare. Zen Peacemakers has grown into an international community that includes many prominent Buddhist teachers such as Joan Halifax, whose Upaya Institute has developed Buddhist chaplaincy programs.[45] Glassman and the Peacemakers are particularly known for their creative approaches to socially engaged

Buddhism based on their three tenets of not knowing, bearing witness, and taking action. These include Bearing Witness retreats at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Native American Bearing Witness Plunge.[46]

In 2007, American Theravadin monastic Bhikkhu Bodhi (b. 1944) and a group of his students founded Buddhist Global Relief, an engaged Buddhist organization focused on ending world hunger and promoting equitable and ecologically sustainable food systems.[47] Bodhi is also a prolific translator of Pali texts, and he has provided a foundation for engaged Buddhism by drawing attention to the often neglected communal and social teachings of the Buddha.[48]

In 2014, at the first White House–US Buddhist Leadership Conference, engaged Buddhists presented two letters—one on climate change and one on racial justice—indicating current pressing concerns. Alongside Joanna Macy's pioneering work, David Loy started the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center as a geographical base for his focus on developing Buddhist practices to respond to the ecological crisis.[49] Similarly, One Earth Sangha, a Buddhist climate justice group, cofounded by Insight practitioners Kristin Barker and Lou Leonard, that has blended ecology with the Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva to develop an "Ecosattva training".[50]

In 2007, the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) in Oakland, California, opened to unite the wisdom teachings of Buddhism with social justice. It operates on the principles of radical inclusivity, gift economics, and environmental sustainability.[51] EBMC teachers such as Larry Yang and Mushim Patricia Ikeda have been at the forefront of racial justice initiatives within American Buddhism and have developed spiritual activist programs. Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owen, and Jasmine Syedullah have developed Radical Dharma, a teaching and community that puts Buddhism into conversation with the Black Lives Matter movement.[52] Led by scholar-practitioner Duncan Ryuken Williams, Japanese American community leaders have formed Tsuru for Solidarity, a nonviolent and direct-action project to protest the inhumane treatment of immigrants detained in the United States.[53] One can also see the adoption of engaged Buddhist values, particularly diversity, inclusion, and equity values and ecologically sound practices, across a number of American Buddhists communities that do not explicitly identify as engaged Buddhists. An example is the "statement of repentance and recognition" ritually delivered at the 2018 Soto Zen Buddhist Association conference, which acknowledged the "collective karma" of participating in colonialism, racism, and capitalism.[54]

While engaged Buddhist efforts have been mostly tracked in meditation-based convert communities, other convert and heritage Buddhists have also made significant contributions to engaged Buddhism in the United States.[55] Unlike meditation-based convert communities, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is marked by significant racial and class diversity and was a lead organization for the First White House–US Buddhist Leadership Conference in 2015. This continued SGI's established history of engagement with racial justice issues. For instance, in 1993, SGI's president, Daisaku Ikeda, met with civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks and she accepted his invitation to visit Soka University in Japan the following year.[56]

Shin Buddhists have also been engaged in a variety of social activism programs.[57] One such initiative is the Dana Project, which provides services to the elderly and vulnerable as an expression of the Buddhist practice of *dana* or selfless giving.[58] Myokei Caine-Barret, the first African American and Western woman to be ordained as a priest and bishop in the Nichiren

Order, has led social justice efforts in her community such as developing a diversity program for the Nichiren Shu Order of North America, being a leader in racial justice work in American Buddhism, and working with incarcerated populations in Texas.[59]

Engaged Buddhism in Europe

While Buddhism in North America is often considered synonymous with Western Buddhism, and many US-based engaged Buddhist organizations have branches in Europe, it is important to recognize the particularities of Buddhism in Europe.[60] The Amida Trust has been at the forefront of engaged Buddhist efforts in the United Kingdom.[61] Founded in 1998 by the then married couple David and Caroline Brazier, the Amida Trust is a Pure Land Buddhist organization that developed with an explicit engaged Buddhist agenda. Framing their work as an expression of devotion to the "other-power" of Amida Buddhism, members have participated in a range of activities such as antiwar protests and developing Buddhist alternatives to neoliberal economics. Triratna, formerly Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, was founded in 1969 by Sangharakshita, a British man who had trained as a Buddhist monastic in Asia. It is a nonsectarian international Buddhist modernist organization that has focused on socially beneficial forms of "right livelihood," including sustainable living and social activism. The Community of Interbeing, the UK sangha that follows Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching, began to grow in the 1980s and was registered formally as a charity in 1994. Centered around the practice of mindfulness, their focus has been on transforming society through transforming the individual.[62]

Welsh Chan Buddhist activist and author Ken Jones (1930–2015) cofounded the UK Network of Socially Engaged Buddhists (1983–2014) and developed a model of a "socially radical culture of awakening."[63] Insight teacher Christopher Titmuss has also taken a prominent role in developing a Buddhist social critique and organizing engaged Buddhist responses to environmental harms.[64] An emerging force is Extinction Rebel Buddhists (XRBuddhists), which functions as a Buddhist subgroup of Extinction Rebellion, a global movement using nonviolent civil disobedience to combat the global climate emergency.[65] It shares many members, goals, and strategies with the Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement (DANCE).[66]

A similar environmental focus is shared by the Ecodharma Center in Catalonia, which runs engaged Buddhist meditation retreats, study seminars, and training camps focused on healing climate change, economic precarity, and social injustice.[67] The Ecodharma Center and its sister secular group the Ulex Project are marked by intersectional and decolonizing sensibilities that characterize generational shifts in engaged Buddhist communities in the West.[68] They center sustainable activism, self-care, understanding power and privilege, and trauma-informed approaches and have trained activists across Europe. These newer approaches are circulated across and beyond more established networks such as the German Network of Engaged Buddhists, which has long been active in peace work, providing emergency aid to Asia, women's liberation, and human rights movements.[69]

Australia, South Africa, and International Groups

The emerging intersectional and decolonizing ethos in engaged Buddhism is fully demonstrated at Dharmagiri: Sacred Mountain Retreat on the border of South Africa and Lesotho. This center was started by former Theravadin monastics Thanissaro and Kittisaro, who have been active in initiating and supporting responses to HIV in South Africa. Under the ethos of the bodhisattva ideal, it combines insight meditation, Buddhist dharma, indigenous wisdom, and permaculture in service of an "equitable, just and sustainable world."[70] In Australia, engaged Buddhist efforts include international aid as well as a range of social welfare activities.[71] The Association of Engaged Buddhists, which was started in 1993, is a monastic and lay organization focused on active social service.[72]

Many of the figures and organizations mentioned previously have international reach and some are part of wider engaged Buddhist networks. One example of an engaged Buddhist organization that began as an international collaboration is Sakyadhītā: International Association for Buddhist Women, which was formed in 1987 after the first international gathering of Buddhist women in Bodhgaya, India, by the German nun Ayya Khema, the American nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and the Thai professor Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhuni Dhammananda). Sakyadhitā translates as "Daughters of the Buddha," and its focus is on advancing the spiritual and secular welfare of women as well as working for gender equity in Buddhism. It hosts biannual conferences across the world that bring together Buddhist nuns and laywomen, many of whom are academically trained, to collaborate on a range of initiatives from providing education and health services for vulnerable women to promoting female ordination and leadership.[73] In response to sexual abuse in Buddhism, Sakyadhita members have launched "The Alliance for Buddhist Ethics," an organization that aims to develop codes of ethics for safe teacher–student relationships and produce educational material for monastic and lay Buddhists on what constitutes abuse and what organizations can do to reduce the risk of harm.[74]

Engaged Buddhist Hermeneutics

While engaged Buddhists see the core teachings of Buddhism as congruent with their social and political activism, they acknowledge that key Buddhist doctrines have not always been taught in a beneficial way and, in some cases, have been used to justify and reproduce social inequities. They see this as due to the wider conservative religious, social, and political context of traditional Buddhism. Some engaged Buddhists argue, for instance, that the teachings of the historic Buddha have been distorted by the gender bias and social class privilege of the monastic elites who controlled canonical texts. These monastic elites were also materially supported by the ruling classes and so they reinforced rather than questioned oppressive social hierarchies.[75] Others emphasize the encounter with Western modernity as the key factor in actualizing the progressive social potency of key Buddhist doctrines.[76]

Common to engaged Buddhist hermeneutics is a shift from thinking about core Buddhist doctrines from an individual/existential level to a collective/structural level.[77] For instance, engaged Buddhists consider how the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion manifest on a social and institutional level through exploitative labor practices and racist ideologies. In some cases, engaged Buddhists explicitly identify alternative systems of knowledge that have

influenced their reading of Buddhist doctrines, such as feminism or systems theory.[78] For others, the emphasis is on how their lived experience with different forms of suffering inspired their interpretations. One emerging pattern within engaged Buddhist hermeneutics is an emphasis on the social context in which a doctrine is taught, for instance, how Buddhist teachings on no-self and anger have a different impact on marginalized populations than they do on those from dominant cultures.[79] A brief glimpse at how engaged Buddhists have interpreted key concepts demonstrates both continuity and innovation within engaged Buddhist hermeneutics and reflects generational and demographic shifts currently underway in engaged Buddhist communities.[80]

Just as the encounter with *dukkha* or suffering forms the core of Buddhism, so the encounter with social suffering lie at the heart of engaged Buddhism. As Paul Fuller notes, “engaged Buddhism is simply a form of Buddhism with a wider discourse of suffering, with types of suffering, with the causes of suffering, with the origination of suffering, and with overcoming and eradicating suffering.”[81] The signature doctrine of engaged Buddhism is dependent-arising, which refers to a cosmic web of causes and conditions that constitutes samsara. Whereas early Buddhist readings cast the chain of dependent-arising as something to be liberated from, engaged Buddhists draw on the Mahayana concept of Indra’s net and embrace dependence-arising as the sustaining network between all sentient beings. Renaming dependent-arising as “interbeing”—being with others and the world—Thich Nhat Hanh has placed it at the very center of his work to denote the mutual dependency between humans, animals, and the ecological systems of which they are part. Similarly, Joanna Macy’s “Work That Reconnects” interweaves dependent-arising, systems theory, and deep ecology to forge an ecological Buddhism.[82]

A similar revision occurs with the teachings on karma. Engaged Buddhists acknowledge that the traditional teachings on karma perpetuate oppressive social conditions in Southeast Asia by encouraging passivity and placing the blame on individuals for their own suffering rather than on social structures. For this reason, Ambedkar reinterpreted the teaching of karma from his new Buddhist community Navayana composed of former Dalits.[83] Others have similarly reinterpreted karma on a social level. Thai Buddhist feminist Khuankaew, for instance, notes that the violence against women is not a fruition of their “bad” individual karma but a result of oppressive gender conditioning and sexism. Engaged Buddhists have forwarded a way of thinking about karma on a societal level in which working to counter unjust systems is viewed as taking responsibility for collective karma.[84]

The Five Precepts (*Panca-Sila*) are the foundational ethics for lay Buddhists. Engaged Buddhism extends these precepts to social, collective, and institutional levels. For instance, the first precept of nonharm is commonly extended to promoting nonharm by actively supporting peace movements, resisting militarization processes, protesting the weapons industry, and adopting a vegetarian diet. The second precept of not taking what is not freely offered is commonly interpreted to include not overusing the earth’s natural resources or engaging in consumerist behavior that supports unjust economic systems and protesting against capitalism and unjust labor practices. The third precept of refraining from sexual misconduct is commonly interpreted to protest against exploitative sexual labor and has been recently extended to include forms of gender or sexual discrimination. The fourth precept of refraining from false speech is commonly interpreted to include engaging in racist or discriminatory language against vulnerable minorities. The fifth precept of not using

intoxicants includes reflecting on the precarious conditions under which intoxicants such as coffee are produced and being caught up in the consumer culture that produces new intoxicating technologies.[85] Thich Nhat Hahn developed the Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism, which include speaking out in situations of injustice and not accumulating wealth in the face of global poverty.[86]

The Mahayana figure of the bodhisattva, and the bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings from samsara, figure prominently in engaged Buddhist hermeneutics. Tzu Chi, a Taiwanese Mahayana Buddhist organization, frames its social service work as part of the bodhisattva path and describes bodhisattvas as those who take voluntary action to help relieve the suffering of others.[87] Engaged Buddhist scholars have provided canonical support by turning to Mahayana sutras that depict bodhisattvas being called upon to relieve material suffering as a prerequisite for teaching the dharma.[88] Similarly, much of the work done by engaged Buddhists, be it feeding the hungry or protesting environmental exploitation, is framed as an expression of the wide range of *upaya* or skillful means at the bodhisattvas' disposal.

The Two Truths doctrine in Mahayana Buddhism, which differentiates between absolute truth (*paramartha-satya*), the ontological ultimate nature of reality, and relative truth (*samvrtti-satya*) or conventional daily existence, has been harnessed by engaged American Buddhists to legitimate attending to suffering in the relative realm. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel offers a sophisticated hermeneutic of the two truths to work with the embodied differences of race, gender, and sexuality that often lead to systemic discrimination.[89] The Mahayana doctrine of Buddhanature, that all beings have the potential for awakening, has been adopted by engaged Buddhists working in prisons who report it as a powerful antidote for inmates who feel they are innately ethically defective. Buddhist narratives of ethical transformation have also been taken up in prison work. One Buddhist chaplaincy organization is named after Angulimala, a fearsome mass murderer whose killing spree came to an end after his encounter with the Buddha and who eventually became an *arhant*.[90]

For early proponents, it is the absence of anger that marks engaged Buddhism as a uniquely Buddhist form of social activism.[91] For some Gen X and millennial Buddhists, however, anger is considered an appropriate response to an unjust situation and they warn against its premature dismissal. Lama Rod Owens offers a tantric approach to anger, which liberates its wisdom energy in the service of racial justice.[92] Similar generational differences can be seen in approaches to right speech. While Sallie King turns to a close reading of the Pali suttas to show that right speech does not always involve being gentle and can include sharp rebuke, Edwin Ng draws on critical race theory to deliver a much more provocative reading of how right speech is weaponized to shut down conversations about white privilege and racism in Buddhist communities and beyond.[93] Central to racial justice work in American Buddhism is the revisioning of the traditional fourfold sangha into the "beloved community" in which the building of diverse and inclusive sanghas is offered as a corrective to the individualism that has historically marked meditation-based convert Buddhism.[94] Similarly, Asian American Buddhists have reformulated the Buddhist practice of "taking refuge" to "be the refuge" to signify the creation of safe spaces for practitioners who have been harmed and marginalized in majority white Buddhist and wider cultural spaces.[95]

Engaged Buddhism as an Academic Category

The first wave of academic scholarship on engaged Buddhism appeared in the 1990s and was produced by Buddhist scholar-practitioners who were advocates as well as analysts of the phenomenon. Pioneers of the subfield of engaged Buddhism Christopher Queen and Sallie King adopted the term to describe Buddhist social movements such as Hanh's peace activism, Ambedkar's challenge to caste discrimination in India, A. T. Ariyaratne's alleviation of rural poverty in Sri Lanka, and the Tibetan fight for self-determination that emerged after World War II in Asia against the backdrop of militarism, nationalism, and colonialism. Their coedited *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996) was the first academic scholarship on the topic and set the normative parameters for its study: identifying its historical parameters, its modern Western influences, main characteristics, and relationship to traditional Buddhism.

First, it set the historical parameters for engaged Buddhism by starting the narrative in Vietnam in the 1960s with the antiwar movement of Thich Nhat Hanh, but it asserted that the groundwork for engaged Buddhism began in the late 19th century with reforms resulting from the encounter between Buddhism and Western modernity under the conditions of colonialism. Queen dates these reforms to 1880 with the arrival of American Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon. Olcott and his protégé Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) produced an ecumenical vison of Buddhism that blended Buddhist and Western thought and has since been identified as Buddhist modernism.[96]

Second, it highlighted the modern Western philosophical, cultural, and theological discourses that shaped engaged Buddhism: Christian liberation theology rooted in the Hebrew Prophetic tradition and the modern Euro-American Enlightenment discourses of individual rights, democracy, and social reform. Third, it identified the main characteristics of engaged Buddhism, with the most significant being (a) a commitment to nonviolence, (b) a grassroots movement around a charismatic leader, and (c), signifying a shift from a transcendent to a mundane liberation, "we may conclude that a profound change in Buddhist soteriology—from a highly personal and other-worldly notion of liberation to a social, economic, this-worldly liberation—distinguishes the Buddhist movements in our study."[97] Fourth, in relationship to traditional Buddhism, it noted that while engaged Buddhism was a new phenomenon in the history of the tradition, it was a legitimate innovation and an authentic expression of its core ideals that was well captured by the Buddhist hermeneutical framework of *upaya* or skillful means.[98]

Just a few years after this groundbreaking collection marked the beginning of engaged Buddhism as a subfield within the larger field of Buddhist studies, a number of academic books, journals, and conferences on the topic appeared.[99] The scholarship produced through these early networks has generally remained faithful to the historical, analytical, and evaluative parameters set in Queen and King's seminal collection, although its geographical scope has extended to North America and Europe.[100] While some have sought to emphasize the traditional "Buddhist" side of engaged Buddhism, either by drawing historic parallels with early Buddhist reformers such as Indian King Ashoka (304–232 BCE) and Japanese Buddhist reformer Nichiren (1222–1282) or by highlighting canonical contributions, the scholarly consensus is that engaged Buddhism is an Asian and Western culturally hybrid form of

Buddhism that falls under the theoretical category of Buddhist modernism.[101] A number of studies identify key characteristics of engaged Buddhism, and while there are minor differences, nonviolence, critique of the nation-state, and collective liberation remain foundational principles.[102]

Evaluations of engaged Buddhism reflect wider debates on the legitimacy of Buddhist modernism, with the main area of dispute revolving around its relationship to traditional Buddhism.[103] On the one side, scholars have emphasized its historical precedents and canonical Buddhist foundations and its valid and necessary extension of Buddhist ideals for modern political and social contexts.[104] On the other side, scholars have argued that the profound shift from individual suffering and liberation to structural suffering and collective liberation marks it as historically discontinuous with classical Buddhism but have stressed its soteriological validity as a "new vehicle" or a "fourth yana in the evolution of the Dharma."[105] Less vocal but not absent were scholars who concluded it was only nominally Buddhist.[106]

Another area of debate is what counts as "engaged" action.[107] Some suggest a widely inclusive understanding of engagement that includes mindful actions in all areas of life.[108] Others push for a more specific definition of actions marked by systemic analysis and social engagement. Ken Jones offers the categories of "soft" engagement for those Buddhists primarily committed to practicing "mindfulness in daily life," who tend to be more interested in personal practice, and "hard" engagement for those committed to social analysis and institutional transformation.[109] The mainstreaming of mindfulness in areas such as business, medicine, and education rendered by the secular mindfulness movement has reignited this debate.[110] Despite differences about what counts as engagement, however, the consensus was that engaged Buddhism referred to liberal and progressive Buddhist figures or groups rather than conservative and reactionary ones.[111]

Finally, another notable characteristic is that the majority of the first generation of scholars of engaged Buddhism are also engaged Buddhist activists and, in many cases, have produced both academic and popular literature on the topic.[112] This crossover between the study and practice of engaged Buddhism has undoubtedly contributed to an overwhelmingly positive portrayal of it and the theoretical dominance of a critical-constructivist approach in the academic subfield of engaged Buddhism.[113] Engaged Buddhist scholar-practitioners have brought Buddhism into conversation with not just modern but also postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial thought. Reflecting generational and demographic shifts, new scholarship sees an increasing attention to intersectional feminism and critical race theory.[114] In the field of Buddhist studies, engaged Buddhism has been closely aligned with Buddhist ethics and American Buddhism.[115] Other methodological and theoretical approaches include the anthropology and sociology of religion.[116]

New Directions in the Academic Study of Engaged Buddhism

While the term engaged Buddhism has been commonly used to describe and celebrate movements emerging in the mid-20th century that extend Buddhist principles to nonviolent social activism such as peacemaking, environmental justice, and women's rights, more recently, scholars have questioned the historical, structural, and ethical range of the term as normatively employed. These scholars make two major interventions: first, they demonstrate connections between engaged Buddhists of the mid-20th century and Buddhists who were

active in the pre-World War II period, thereby extending the term's historical range. Second, they question the structural features of the term, particularly nonviolence and critique of the nation-state, thereby extending the category to include Buddhists whose social actions include nationalism and violence.

Jessica Main and Rongdao Lai offer a revised version of the analytic category of socially engaged Buddhism, which they ground in their respective scholarship of Buddhist movements in China and Japan occurring in the first half of the 20th century.[117] They problematize the normative definition on two grounds: first, they argue that it locates engaged Buddhism with a particular form—pacifist and independence from the nation-state—of Buddhist activism; and second, they question the moral praise bestowed on these groups. For Main and Lai, the academic category of engaged Buddhism should be detached from both moral evaluation and particular forms and be understood more broadly as the performance of action—typically collective or group action—that is characterized by a type of moral reasoning, soteriology, and resistance to secularism. They explain:

> We argue that Buddhist social engagement is a modern phenomenon that relies on a particular form of modern reasoning, which resonates with some of the axioms of liberation theology: this reasoning depicts society as fundamentally unjust and in need of change, social ills as systemic and in need of systematic solutions, social activity itself as Buddhist practice, and positions religious modern action within the putatively "secular" sphere of the modern nation-state.[118]

According to Main and Lai, socially engaged Buddhism arose primarily in response to secularization, which relegated religion to the private sphere, thereby reducing its societal and political impact. Rejecting the secular insistence on the distinction between public and private, certain Asian Buddhist groups began to view social action occurring within public spheres as essentially soteriological in nature. They point to the religious-social activism of the Chinese monastic reformer Taixu (1890–1947) and his student monks in the 1930s and 1940s and the efforts of Japanese Shin Buddhist priest Takeuchi Ryo'on (1891–1967) from the 1920s to the 1950s. Not only do such prewar figures expand the historical range of engaged Buddhism, they also undermine core ethical characteristics because they were nationalistic and not pacifist.[119]

Paul Fuller has also exerted analytic pressure on the normative definition of engaged Buddhism.[120] He returns to Hanh's definition of engaged Buddhism as Buddhism "entering into life," and he delineates between two meanings of engaged Buddhism: (a) the prevailing nonviolent and progressive form and (b) a more general meaning that allows for a wider perspective on the multiple ways in which Buddhists engage with issues in society. As he notes,

> engaged Buddhism in this sense can get messy, because it is involved, it is a Buddhism which has a social, ethical, political, ecological and even ethnic voice. It can tackle issues of identity, whether national or sexual, and can lend its voice to support liberal or conservative agendas.[121]

Employed in this wider sense, Fuller includes the Burmese Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu (b. 1968), the leader of the ethnocentric nationalistic 969 movement, which has incited violence against the Burmese Muslim population, alongside renowned pacifists such as A. T. Ariyaratne (b. 1931), who has attempted to reconcile the Sinhala Buddhist majority and the Tamil Hindu minority in Sri Lanka in his survey of engaged Buddhism.

As noted, there have been debates within normative engaged Buddhist studies on what engagement signifies—with some scholars emphasizing “soft” and others “hard” engagement; however, these new studies go much further by undermining two core characteristics: nonviolence and critical distance from the nation-state. In interrogating core assumptions of what constitutes engaged Buddhism, the work of these scholars not only expands the historical and ideological parameters of the field of engaged Buddhism but also raises serious questions about the utility of the category itself. What kind of modifiers are needed to delineate between the structurally similar but radically different agendas of Buddhist radicals and Buddhist conservatives, nationalistic Buddhists and cosmopolitan Buddhists? Should one, for instance, discriminate between “progressive” engaged Buddhism and “ethnocentric” engaged Buddhism? Or do the radically different agendas and activities of these forms render the category itself limited and in need of replacement?

Ongoing Debates and New Directions in Engaged Buddhism

Relationship to Tradition and Questions of Legitimacy

Since the emergence of engaged Buddhism, there has been much debate over its relationship to traditional Buddhism and its legitimacy as a Buddhist movement. This is often framed as a debate between “traditionalists” and “modernizers,” with the former arguing for its continuity with traditional Buddhism and the latter emphasizing its distinctiveness.[122] Some traditionalists argue that Buddhism has always been socially engaged but this engagement was neglected or ignored in modern representations of the tradition because it served Christian missionaries and the colonial enterprise to depict it as an apolitical and asocial religion. Others stress that the misrepresentation of Buddhism as apolitical is due to limited scholarship that relied too heavily on Max Weber’s flawed categorization of Buddhism as “other-worldly asceticism.”

Traditionalists look for precursors of social action in Buddhist texts such as enlightened Buddhist monarchs and government, or Buddhist reformers. They also stress engaged Buddhist activities as contemporary expressions of classical Buddhist ethics such as compassion and altruism.[123] Others go even further by looking beyond both modernity and tradition to early Buddhist doctrines and practices and argue that the radical social potency of these teachings was thwarted by both male monastic elites and modern Orientalist scholars.[124]

Modernizers acknowledge the historic and ethical distinctiveness of engaged Buddhism. They suggest that traditional Buddhism has either had little interest in social engagement or that the type of social actions it has conducted are categorically distinct from modern engaged Buddhism. In terms of the former position, they suggest that the soteriological focus of Buddhism on freedom from samsara rendered the social and political landscape as largely

irrelevant to its ultimate aims. Those who hold the latter perspective argue that unlike earlier Buddhist elite leadership, engaged Buddhism is rooted in grassroots, nongovernmental movements and has an explicit political critique absent in socially beneficent Buddhist monarchs. Most significantly, they recognize that the shift from the classical focus on individual suffering and liberation to the engaged Buddhist focus on collective and structural suffering and liberation marks it as a significant departure from the classical tradition. They propose that the radical social and political potency of Buddhism has only been ignited by its encounter with Western modernity. In recognition of its uniqueness, they have developed signifiers that recognize its innovations, such as Ambedkar's "*navayana*" or "new vehicle" or Queen's "fourth yana" and "action dharma."[125]

Some seek to destabilize or delegitimize engaged Buddhism by arguing that it is an entirely modern phenomenon that represents modern values such as human rights that have been imposed onto the tradition. Drawing on Buddhist texts from the 7th and 8th centuries, for instance, Amod Lele identifies "disengaged Buddhists," who explicitly "look with suspicion on, or even actively reject, engagement with social and political problems." He argues that scholar-practitioners of engaged Buddhism have failed to attend to the significant doctrinal challenge posed by disengaged Buddhism.[126] On a similar note, others have argued for maintaining the distinctive Buddhist canonical focus on wisdom rather than blending or replacing it with Western concerns of justice.[127]

Others accept the legitimacy of engaged Buddhism as a Buddhist movement but disagree on its relationship to canonical Buddhism.[128] For traditionalists, this legitimacy is ultimately rooted in relationship to tradition; for modernizers it is rooted in a necessary extension of Buddhist individual ethics to the social and political realm, an extension only made possible by the encounter with Western modernity. Later scholarship, however, has troubled certain assumptions in both modernist and traditionalist perspectives. One critique suggests that modernists reproduce colonialist and Orientalist textual approaches to Buddhism by exclusively focusing on Buddhist texts and not paying sufficient attention to the ways in which those texts have been put to use by Asian Buddhists in service of sociopolitical goals. This lack of attention is undergirded by the Orientalist binary of a mystical/passive East and a rational/active West and a "Western savior" model in which modernity rescues Buddhism from its supposed apolitical, asocial slumber.[129]

The Mainstreaming of Mindfulness

The first round of academic scholarship on engaged Buddhism was produced at the turn of the millennium, when mindfulness was little known outside Buddhist circles. The 2010s, however, saw the growth of the secular mindfulness movement and the mainstreaming of mindfulness practice across education, health, business, and other secular domains.[130] The mainstreaming of mindfulness raises new questions and challenges for what counts as "engagement" in engaged Buddhism: what conditions are necessary to make mindfulness an engaged practice? In what ways does the individualism, self-help, and commodification that mark sectors of the secular mindfulness movement threaten its force as a tool of engaged Buddhism? How can one differentiate between engaged and nonengaged mindfulness practice when it has been decontextualized from its Buddhist context and recontextualized in various

domains of public life including the military and capitalism?[131] How can engaged Buddhists resist what has been dubbed “McMindfulness”—the commodification of mindfulness in service of neoliberalism and capitalism?[132]

One useful typology in assessing different types of engagement is the delineation between “assimilative” and “radical” currents in the adoption of mindfulness as a force of social change.[133] The assimilative current is based on the assumption that individual mindfulness practice will naturally lead to social transformation and underlies the incorporation of meditation into established institutions such as schools and hospitals, capitalist business enterprises, and the political arena. An example here is US Congressman Tim Ryan’s book *The Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit*, which inspired “The Mindful Nation Foundation,” a nonprofit organization begun in 2013 with the mission of building a “national grassroots, ambassador-led community” to support mindful living for “veterans, children, teachers, leaders and healthcare professionals.”[134] The radical current shifts focus from individual practice to radical structural change and collective liberation and is most visible in progressive social activist communities, which have adopted meditation as a strategy of self-care and a creative tool of protest. An example here is the mass meditations organized by the Interdependence Project, a secular Buddhist organization in New York City, organized in Zuccotti Park, the site of the anticapitalist Occupy Wall Street protests in downtown Manhattan.

Ethnocentric “Engaged” Buddhism

Early scholarship on engaged Buddhism insisted on a fundamental distinction between nonviolent grassroots movements and violent nationalist forms. As Sallie King notes,

> not every activist engagement of Buddhism with social and political issues can be considered Engaged Buddhism, however. Certainly, the chauvinist Buddhist nationalism of contemporary Sri Lanka is not Engaged Buddhism in as much as its stance is based on opposition and ill-will towards the other—in this case, non-Buddhist Sri Lankan minorities—a stance that easily escalates into acts of violence, as has frequently occurred in recent decades.[135]

New definitions proposed by Main and Lai and by Fuller, however, reopen the question of who can be considered an engaged Buddhist.[136] Their respective broader definitions of engaged Buddhism open the door to a whole new cast of engaged Buddhist figures and concerns including those whose overt agendas stand in direct opposition to normative engaged Buddhism. Whether one thinks engaged Buddhism is a legitimate signifier for these movements will depend upon what definition of engaged Buddhism is accepted.

The most controversial new movements to be considered as engaged Buddhism are those that promote what Fuller has called “ethnocentric Buddhism,” Buddhist forms of identity that collapse religious and national identity and result in violent social and political action against those deemed to be a threat to Buddhist nationalism.[137] Fundamental to such groups is the idea that the teachings of the Buddha are under threat and need to be protected through action in the social and political realm. Here the collective preservation and defense of the *sāsana*, a term used to denote the Buddhist order, teachings, and practices, takes precedence over the individual goal of liberation, signifying a shift in concern from the supramundane to

the mundane. A prominent example is the Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, famous for his association with the nationalistic 969 movement and leader of the “Organization to Protect Race and Religion” (*amyo barthar thathanar*), commonly known as the Ma Ba Tha movement, which has been at the forefront of violence against Burmese Muslims. Similar sentiments are also displayed in Burmese Buddhist monastic reactions to what is perceived as the misuse of images of the Buddha, which have resulted in the public denouncement, fines, and imprisonment of Burmese citizens and foreign nationals.[138]

Generational Shifts, Intersectionality, and Decolonization

New generations and demographics of Buddhists drawn from Generation X and millennial populations are emerging and reshaping the landscape of engaged Buddhism in America.[139] Such shifts have been amplified by the impact of new social medias and technology that enable easy flows of information and the development of new formats and modalities with which to practice engaged Buddhism. One characteristic of the generational shift has been an increased focus on the lack of racial diversity, white privilege, and racism within American convert Buddhism and the wider American culture. While African American Zen teacher Zenju Earthlyn Manuel served as a director of the BPF, and an early initiative of the BPF was the development of antiracist training programs, the first generation of engaged Buddhists in the United States comprised an overwhelmingly white middle-class demographic. BPF’s millennial director Katie Loncke, and her former Generation X codirector Dawn Haney, have prioritized addressing structural racism, healing antiblackness, and countering the erasure of Asian Americans in convert Buddhist circles.[140] BPF’s membership is marked by significant race, class, gender, and sexual orientation demographic diversity, including a new generation of Asian American engaged Buddhist activists.[141] BPF members are drawing on critical race theory and postcolonial thought to foster an intersectional engaged Buddhist hermeneutics. One characteristic of this hermeneutic is to center marginalized experience and draw attention to the troubling ways in which Buddhist doctrines can be weaponized in ways that shut down conversations about oppression in Buddhist circles.[142] A similar intersectional and marginalized lived experience commitment is found in *The Arrow*, a virtual journal produced by second-generation Shambhala students, which explores the relationship between contemplative practice, activism, and politics.[143] Scholar-activist Rima Vesely-Flad demonstrates the ways in which Black Buddhists expand the parameters of engaged Buddhism with their focus on the particular suffering generated from racialized bodies.[144]

A related development has been increasing connections between engaged Buddhist and Native American indigenous communities and more attention to the ongoing harms of colonialism in the United States. In 2014, the Zen Peacemakers, after twenty-five years of witnessing retreats, held their first Native American Bearing Witness (NABW) retreat in the Black Hills of South Dakota. One of the largest environmental protests in the history of the United States was the Dakota Access Pipeline protests that began at the start of 2016 at Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota. A number of different indigenous groups came together as “water protectors” to stop the construction of an oil pipeline project that posed a serious threat to the ecological safety of the land and the treaty rights and well-being of the Standing Rock Sioux. A number of engaged Buddhist groups and individuals such as the BPF, One Earth Sangha, and the Zen Peacemakers set up a Buddhist camp and protested alongside indigenous activists.[145] This reflects growing connections between engaged Buddhism,

environmental justice, and indigenous activism.[146] The encounter with indigenous communities has also impacted engaged Buddhism on a theoretical level. For instance, Joanna Macy's *Deep Times: A Journal of the Work that Reconnects*" contains a new section, "Evolving Edge," which attempts to decolonize certain assumptions and practices within the Work that Connects.[147] Recent scholarship has also recovered some of the anticolonial roots of early Buddhist modernism, which links contemporary turns with earlier engaged Buddhist expressions.[148]

Another development reflecting a decolonial turn is the strengthening of ties between marginalized Asian and Western communities, which is taking place in a global context in which boundaries between engaged Buddhists in Asia and the West are being crossed and blurred due to the transnational flow of information, organizations, and activism. One example here is the presentation by Lama Choyin Rangdrol, an African American Tibetan Buddhist teacher, at the 2017 B. R. Ambedkar International Conference in Bangalore, India, where he drew a parallel between the sufferings of African Americans and the Dalits in India.[149] Given ongoing generational and demographical shifts within engaged Buddhist scholarship and activism, one can expect further developments along intersectional and decolonial lines.[150]

Links to Digital Materials

The Alliance for Buddhist Ethics *<https://allianceforbuddhistethics.com>* is a collective to promote ethical behavior in Buddhist communities particularly related to sexual abuse in Buddhism.

The Arrow: A Journal of Wakeful Society, Politics and Culture *<https://arrow-journal.org>* is an online journal that explores the relationship between contemplative practice, politics, and activism.

Buddhistdoor Global (BDG) *<https://www.buddhistdoor.net>* is an online nonsectarian Buddhist media platform that includes a focus on engaged Buddhists and Buddhist progressive action

International Network of Engaged Buddhists *<http://inebnetwork.org>* is the website and journal of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

The Mindfulness Bell: Journal of the Community of Mindful Living *<https://www.mindfulnessbell.org>* is the online journal of Thich Nhat Hanh's Interbeing community.

Donald Rothberg's website *<http://www.donaldrothberg.com/resources/resources-on-socially-engaged-buddhism>* contains a comprehensive list of resources on socially engaged Buddhism; dharma and climate change; and race, whiteness, and dharma.

North American Buddhist Alliance *<https://www.northamericanbuddhistalliance.org>* is the website of a network of North American Buddhist communities that hosts a "Justice Resource" section including the "Buddhists for Racial Justice" initiative.

Sakyadhītā: International Association for Buddhist Women *<https://www.sakyadhita.org>* is a hub for resources on women and gender in Buddhism.

Turning Wheel Media Buddhist Peace Fellowship *<http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/our-work/turning-wheel-media/>* is the online journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

Trans Buddhists <https://transbuddhists.org> is a collective of Buddhist practitioners who seek to address systemic exclusion of transgender and gender nonconforming people from Buddhist spaces.

Tsuru for Solidarity <https://tsuruforsolidarity.org> is a nonviolent, direct action project of Japanese American social justice advocates working to end detention sites and support frontline immigrant and refugee communities.

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