

Defining Engaged Buddhism: Traditionists, Modernists, and Scholastic Power

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ABSTRACT

Thomas F. Yarnall's 2003 categories of 'modernist' and 'traditionist', used to classify accounts of the origins of engaged Buddhism, have proven useful as methodological tools but today need considerable reevaluation. This article investigates two more recent accounts dealing with engaged Buddhism — David Loy's The Great Awakening and Sallie B. King's Socially Engaged Buddhism — in order to critique and ultimately to go beyond Yarnall's categories. It touches on questions concerning the legitimacy and obligations of scholars in defining Buddhism for practitioners and for fellow academics, and makes the case that a significant shift is needed in order to avoid problems of Orientalism at work in some academic accounts of engaged Buddhism.

Keywords

Engaged Buddhism, Orientalism, scholar-practitioner

INTRODUCTION

This article will, as its main task, seek to reveal and question some of the assumptions at work in the project of defining what scholars today call 'engaged Buddhism'. Traditions that are classified as engaged are categorized as such because of a particular, but as yet largely unspecified, style of social, political, or activist engagement with local or international communities. Definitions are vague at best, and little consensus has been reached, as evidenced by continuing debate over the meaning of the term.

Some regard engaged traditions as a recent phenomenon in the history of Buddhism; others see them simply as expressions of a practice of engagement visible in Buddhist history and texts.¹ Thomas F. Yarnall, in his 2003 paper 'Engaged

1. Thích Nhất Hạnh, who coined the term in the 1960s, uses it in ways that reflect this ambiguo-

Buddhism: New and Improved? Made in the USA of Asian Materials', reviews a number of different accounts concerning the origins of engaged Buddhist traditions and categorizes authors as either *traditionists* or *modernists*. Traditionists are described as follows:

One group of scholars maintains that Buddhists have never accepted a dualistic split between 'spiritual' and 'social' domains. To engage in the spiritual life necessarily includes (though it cannot be reduced to) social engagement. Thus, for them, since the time of Sakyamuni the Buddhadharmas has *always* had a more-or-less fully articulated socio-political dimension in addition to its (*supposedly* 'other-worldly') spiritual/soteriological dimension. (Yarnall 2003, 286)

For traditionists, Buddhism embodies a certain spirit of social engagement; *continuity* exists between Buddhisms of the past and modern engaged Buddhisms. Through the posited existence of a traditionally engaged Buddhism, traditionists argue that engaged communities today are but the latest incarnations of age-old Buddhist practices and beliefs. 'Modernists', on the other hand, tell a narrative founded upon a sense of *discontinuity* with traditional Buddhism:

A second group takes a very different approach and arrives at a decidedly different conclusion. While this group admits that there have been doctrines and practices with socio-political relevance *latent* in Buddhism since its inception, it insists that these latencies have always remained relatively untapped, that they have not been (or often *could* not have been) fully realized until Buddhism's encounter with various Western elements unique to the modern era. (286–287)

Modernists argue that engaged Buddhism must be seen as inextricably bound up in the advance of the modern world and Western ideas in particular. Engaged Buddhism, these authors hold, is born from the meeting of West and East, and from the efforts of both Western scholars and Asian Buddhists who have sought to reform the teachings for a modern audience. This mixing of Western ideas with Buddhist texts and cultures, modernists hold, should be regarded as something distinct from other historical forms of Buddhism, or even as distinct from Buddhism in general.

Using these categories of modernist and traditionist as laid out by Yarnall, I will, in this paper, examine two authors who have written about engaged Buddhism since the publication of Yarnall's essay. This will allow me to critique his categories in detail, and to explore questions of authorial identity that he raises but largely ignores. The two accounts I will use are David Loy's 2003 *The Great Awakening* and Sallie B. King's 2009 *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. I have chosen these accounts because of their well-known and accredited authors, and because both works typify a style of writing in Buddhist Studies that seems to blur a line between religious writing and academic analysis.

ity: he says that the 'birth of engaged Buddhism' happened during the war in Vietnam, but at the same time, he states that 'Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism.' See John Malkin, July 2003, 'In Engaged Buddhism, Peace Begins With You', *Shambhala Sun*: <http://www.shambhala-sun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1579>.

DAVID LOY'S *THE GREAT AWAKENING*

Loy's 2003 work *The Great Awakening*, in which he attempts to formulate a modern Buddhist social theory of ethics, represents a scholastic account that arguably enters into a more public or popular arena; it is not published by an explicitly academic press (Wisdom Publications), although its separate chapters have appeared in a variety of journals. Loy begins his account of Buddhism on a distinctly modernist note, focusing on what he considers the greatest, most powerful shift in human history: namely, the Western 'discovery' of the essentially constructed nature of beliefs:

Postmodernism has had extraordinary individual and social effects. ... [including] insight into the constructed nature of our truths and therefore our 'realities.' Our previous innocence about such matters cannot be regained, now that we have begun to lose it. ... The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has defined postmodernism as incredulity toward all meta-narratives, and no narratives are more 'meta-' (the Greek word for more comprehensive) than religious ones. The postmodern revolution may signify the beginning of the end for traditional religious beliefs, practices, and institutions. (Loy 2003, 2-3)

In his first few pages, Loy makes his case for the absolute and unavoidable necessity of reforming Buddhism for the modern world. 'Traditional' religion is no longer enough: it is assailed on all sides, whether from technology, secularism, or skepticism. It is not, he argues, merely that today is different; today is *radically* different from the 'Iron Age' — and from 'most of Asia until recently' (Loy 2003, 2-3) — an assertion echoing modernist claims of discontinuity. Buddhism, Asia, the premodern world: none can possibly remain the same as they were before.

He points to engaged Buddhism as one avenue through which Buddhism has been, and is, able to update itself in order to survive this postmodern tumult (Loy 2003, 17-18). And this updating is itself Buddhist, for though the educated West's postmodernism is absolutely new, Loy presents the Buddha and early Buddhism as a unique historical exception:

The early Buddhist teachings focus almost exclusively on the path of self-transformation, with a minimum of dogma or metaphysics ... These original teachings not only deny a creator God and the salvific value of rituals such as sacrifice, they also emphasize the constructed nature of both the self and the world. ... interconnectedness — not just an intellectual insight but an experience — was an essential aspect of the Buddha's awakening, and *it is congruent with the essential postmodern realization*. (Loy 2003, 5; emphasis in original)

For Loy, Buddhism is, in a *truly* traditional understanding, postmodern in its very essence.

Loy posits continuity between this 'postmodern tradition' and reform movements like engaged Buddhism. He explains that the Buddha was himself an engaged Buddhist (something that Yarnall notes is anathema to modernists²):

2. Modernists '... insist that "early" Buddhists in particular (including Sakyamuni himself) were completely socially disinterested' (Yarnall 2003, 306).

What, if anything, is new about socially engaged Buddhism today? According to the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, all Buddhism is (or should be)³ socially engaged. Shakyamuni himself never abandoned society. According to the Pali sutras he often gave advice to laypeople on their social responsibilities. Kings consulted with him, and on several occasions he intervened to stop battles, albeit not always successfully. (Loy 2003, 17)

As a result of Loy's reverence here for what he considers to be a Buddhist tradition of engagement, it seems fair to describe his understanding of modern engaged Buddhism as traditionist. Different claims to Buddhism, for Loy, hold little water; he disparages 'traditional' religions, particularly those in Asia that focus on rituals and salvation, as 'sacred canopies' created for and by 'humanity's collective childhood' (Loy 2003, 3); Buddhist or not, these must be rejected wholesale as immature premodern fantasies.

In this combination of modernist discontinuity and traditionist continuity, Loy makes the case that, first, the Buddha was engaged and therefore engaged Buddhism is true Buddhism, and second, that Asians have corrupted this ideal. He explains that, 'the Buddhist message too has been domesticated into a reassuring worldview — a "sacred canopy" — that provides psychic and social stability' (Loy 2003, 3), something he regards as untenable in the modern world.⁴ 'Traditional' Asian religions must be ejected and a return to what Loy considers *true* tradition, represented in one case by engaged Buddhism, must be effected, if Buddhism is to survive modernity.⁵

SALLIE B. KING'S SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

Socially Engaged Buddhism, Sallie B. King's 2009 book, seems at first to contrast with Loy. It comes from an academic press (University of Hawai'i) and endeavors to 'defend' engaged Buddhism against claims that it is somehow inauthentic. She begins with a traditionist tone, assuring the reader of the fundamentally Buddhist nature of engaged traditions:

In the twentieth century, a politically and socially active form of Buddhism called Engaged Buddhism came into being ... The reader may be surprised to hear of Buddhists engaging in this way with the problems of the world. It is true that the West has a considerably greater history of this kind of activism⁶ than Buddhist Asia. Nonetheless, Engaged Buddhism is a thoroughly Buddhist phenomenon. (King 2009, 1)

3. Note that this is a rather telling misquote from Thich Nhat Hanh, who does not advocate that all Buddhism 'should be' socially engaged. Thich Nhat Hanh holds that all Buddhism is, no matter what its practice, essentially engaged with the world. Loy thus puts his words — which are far more exclusionary and suit his later arguments — in the mouth of his Asian Buddhist source. See Malkin, July 2003, 'In Engaged Buddhism, Peace Begins With You'.
4. As opposed to the use of religions as 'vehicles for self-transformation', which Loy regards as the highest form of religious practice (Loy 2003, 2–4).
5. Loy does emphasize that this is only one possible interpretation that will allow Buddhism to survive; but, in any case, his point remains that traditional Buddhisms in Asia must die out sooner or later.
6. By 'this kind of activism', King is referring to 'movements' that are 'capable of giving voice to the people's political aspirations and bringing down national governments', and which give 'psychological and practical liberation to oppressed peoples and [economic] development to impoverished people' (King 2009, 1). King's claims regarding a historical Asian quietism are supported by citations.

Immediately, King informs readers that not only is engaged Buddhism something positive in the world, but it is something with a clear *Asian* pedigree. No one need fear its corruption by the West; she repeatedly points to Buddhist texts, the Buddha, and Asian Buddhists as engaged Buddhism's ultimate source. Throughout the book, she focuses on explaining how the core values of Buddhist tenets (such as the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination) correspond to practices and beliefs of engaged Buddhists, thus making a case for continuity between traditional and engaged beliefs.

King defines engaged Buddhism in a variety of ways, but the focus of her definitions is always towards asserting its fundamentally Buddhist nature: 'everything the Engaged Buddhists say and do can be, and is, justified on the basis of traditional Buddhist views and values' (King 2009, 12). Engaged Buddhism is 'concrete' and is 'by definition an effort to express the *ideals* of Buddhism... in practical action' (King 2009, 3, 11). She offers, rather vaguely, that:

Engaged Buddhism is defined and unified by the intention of Buddhists of whatever sect to apply the values and teachings of Buddhism to the problems of society in a nonviolent way, motivated by concern for the welfare of others and as an expression of their own Buddhist practices. (King 2009, 1-2)

In King's definitions, it is clear that, *no matter what*, engaged Buddhism is *always* fundamentally Buddhist. Despite this strongly traditionist narrative, King does have an important modernist point to make about the discontinuity of traditional Asian Buddhism with engaged Buddhism:

It should be clear that if Buddhism had nothing to say about and did nothing in response to crises, challenges, and problems of this magnitude [World War II, genocides, poverty, repressive governments, deforestation, social inequality, rapid modernization, Westernization, and globalization], it would have become so irrelevant to the lives of the people that it would have had little excuse for existing, other than perhaps to patch up people's psychological and spiritual wounds and to send them back out into the fray. It simply was necessary for it to respond somehow. Fortunately a generation of creative, charismatic, and courageous leaders emerged throughout Buddhist Asia in the latter half of the twentieth century, responding to these crises in ways that were new and yet resonant with tradition. (King 2009, 3)

This quotation echoes Loy's notions concerning the absolute need for modern reevaluations, and recalls the modernist perspective, which always emphasizes a certain modern break with premodern times (Yarnall 2003, 300). For King, it is the *modern encounter with the West* that has caused the emergence (and activation) of engaged Buddhists. Furthermore, King argues that without engaged Buddhism, Buddhism would have become 'irrelevant' in Asia; she thus shares Loy's assumptions about the inevitable extinction, and uselessness, of non-modern perspectives. For King, traditional Buddhism is a thing of the past, and today's modern world demands new, modern solutions; engaged Buddhism is the perfect solution, because it is both *modern and traditional*.

THOMAS YARNALL'S CRITIQUE

Yarnall thoroughly critiques the modernist perspective in his essay, and makes the case that it is often based upon Orientalist ways of thinking. Drawing on Luis O. Gómez's 'Oriental Wisdom and the Cure of Souls: Jung and the Indian East', Yarnall explains that a three-part Orientalist method of 'recognition, appropriation, and distancing' undergirds modernist narratives.⁷ In short, modernists distill ancient texts in order to find ideals they consider valuable, extract occasional examples and figures from Asian history in order to legitimize these ideals, and embrace a sense of objective distance in order to position themselves as the ideal interpreters of Buddhism for a modern world. Modernists create their own 'neocolonial economy' (Yarnall 2003, 306), disinheriting Asian Buddhists from their own traditions by portraying their practices as pollutants (typically caused by culture) and substituting for such practices ostensibly Buddhist ideals that in fact reflect their own sensibilities. In this fashion, modernist arguments express Edward Said's description of Orientalism as a 'Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said 1978, 3).

These processes can be seen at work, in varying degrees, in King's and Loy's traditionalist *and* modernist arguments. Take, for example, the way that King discusses notions of karma and rebirth in Asia:

A second way in which karma is a problem for the Engaged Buddhists is with the traditional interpretations that karma implies passivity. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democracy struggle in Burma/Myanmar, states that one of the greatest difficulties her movement faces is that the Burmese people typically think that karma means fate ... Aung San Suu Kyi and many other Buddhists remain on *solid scriptural ground* when they argue that the understanding of karma as passivity is *contrary to the teachings of the Buddha*. ... Karma takes us only to the present moment; at this moment, we must make an effort, creating new causes and conditions that will shape our experience in the future.

... It is an uphill struggle in many Asian and even Western contexts to convince Buddhists that karma does not mean passivity, even though the Buddha clearly rejected this understanding and strongly emphasized the importance of making an effort. Aung San Suu Kyi struggles to convey to traditionally minded Burmese that karma means action and is therefore the opposite of passivity, but she seems to make little progress in convincing *such people* to change their understanding of an idea *so deeply entrenched in the culture*. (King 2009, 161–162; emphases added)

King constructs *truly* Buddhist beliefs using texts and statements about the Buddha, and ultimately it is a distillation of these texts and sayings that make up her essentials of Buddhism. She, as a scholar with distance, considers herself to be in a position to judge the legitimacy of Aung San Suu Kyi's extracted claims, and indeed makes many claims herself regarding acceptable notions of karma. Instead of exploring differences in how karma is interpreted in regards to the Suttas, King opts to authorize what she considers the correct view; she distances the Buddha from so-called 'passive' notions of karma by revealing that the roots of such beliefs lie in Asian culture. She then shows how a modern perspective

7. Yarnall 2003, 306. Also see Gómez 1995, 288.

can make karma meaningful, helpful, and useful — as the Buddha (mediated by King) always meant it to be. Aung San Suu Kyi plays at best a marginal role in this passage, as her particular views are never specifically described; nor are any sources cited as to this apparent passivity in Burma. We are left to rely on King's scholastic capital — gained through her certification in the Western academy — regarding the fact that 'traditional interpretations of karma ... imply passivity' (King 2009, 161) in Asian cultures in general.

King strongly stresses that certain groups should not be regarded as fully Buddhist: for example, Sri Lankan nationalists, whose 'expression of their own Buddhist practices' (King 2009, 2) does not jive with the 'views and values' (King 2009, 12) of Buddhism she presents. She explains, 'it is easy to take expressions of contempt and acts of violence as criteria for discerning what is not a valid expression of the Dharma' (King 2009, 25–26). By employing her perceived ability as a scholar to objectively evaluate Buddhist actions, she strips certain self-described Buddhists (those whose actions she finds distasteful) of their claims to the Dharma. While she does not directly state that such traditions are non-Buddhist, the reader is left aware that groups like those in Sri Lanka, whose views are said to be the 'antithesis' (King 2009, 3) of the Dharma, only appropriate the label of Buddhism. Thus King not only *explains* the essentials of Buddhism, but also bestows upon the reader the prestige of the academic in *judging*, as she does, whether or not a particular group is truly 'Buddhist' or only a corruption.

Loy also denounces what he considers incorrect Buddhisms in modern and historical Asian societies. He explains that he finds Japanese interpretations of Buddhism which have supported violence 'embarrassing' and 'discomforting', and explains such views away by stating that they 'flatly [contradict] the basic spirit of Shakyamuni's teachings' (Loy 2003, 151–152). Loy's claim to having accessed the 'spirit' of Shakyamuni's teachings betrays his assumption that such a spirit exists objectively; yet it is also reasonable to consider that essentializations of the teachings are derived from particular readers and teachers, and that different Buddhists have, at different times, found different essential messages and 'spirits' within the teachings of the Buddha. Loy, for his part, is more interested in uncovering a true essence of Buddhism in order to judge 'discomforting' beliefs as incorrect, than in exploring the diverse interpretations of the Buddha's teachings throughout the ages.

Elsewhere, Loy states that:

Even more radical than now, the original Buddhist teachings, not surprisingly, eventually became elaborated into another sacred canopy, focused on a transcendental liberation from this world. (Loy 2003, 5)

And he goes on to make it clear that:

Buddhism needs the contribution of Western modernity — such as democracy, feminism, and the separation of church and state — to challenge its institutional complacency and to liberate its own teachings from such traditional social constraints. (Loy 2003, 8)

In the first passage, Loy laments that Buddhism's original teachings have been obscured and diminished by Asian culture. This led to a deterioration of what Loy considers the true path of Buddhist self-realization. Having thereby distanced

Asia from its own Buddhist tradition, Loy offers his solution: a Buddhism true to the ‘spirit’ of the Buddha’s teachings, which of course incorporates the apparently emancipating effect of his own Western culture. Loy does all this with the authority of the Western academic; his supposed objective distance, text analysis, and scholastic certifications seem to lend credence to his ability to communicate Buddhism’s true meaning.

Both a modern break and a traditional resonance — discontinuity and continuity — are central to King’s and Loy’s definitions of engaged Buddhism, as is the three-part Orientalist process of ‘recognition, appropriation, and distancing’. Both embrace the idea of Buddhism — and the Buddha — as essentially engaged, *as well as* the idea that the modern age has ‘activated’ unique insights long obscured by Asian culture. These objective academics, by showing that certain Buddhists are not *really* Buddhist after all, offer Western readers a Buddhism of the future — a religion of peace, love, and light that can lead humankind into a new age of justice and compassion. Indeed, if the reader learns anything from these works, it is that reformed, modern, and engaged Buddhisms are a *good thing* — they, not other Buddhisms, represent *a positive and legitimately Buddhist response of Buddhism to modern crises*.

The dual claims made here — that engaged Buddhism is both objectively good and objectively Buddhist — point to an underlying anxiety concerning the legitimacy of engaged Buddhism. This anxiety is, I believe, more telling than any categorization as modernist or traditionalist: Loy’s and King’s definitions are, after all, not merely different ways of accounting for the origins of engaged Buddhism, but ways of defining what true Buddhism really *should be*. The resulting denunciation, judgment, and exclusion of threatening Buddhisms expresses the deep sense of authority that academics can feel in regards to their ability to concretely define *who is* and *who is not* a Buddhist. Yet Buddhists are practicing diverse traditions already; there is no need to present certain forms as somehow more ideal than others. Why are claims to engaged Buddhism’s status as true or ideal Buddhism so important for King and Loy?

In order to look into these matters, it is crucial that we investigate these authors themselves, something Yarnall did not do in his 2003 essay. Despite using writers from across a spectrum of scholars, Buddhist leaders, and scholar-practitioners, Yarnall never delves into questions of identity with any great detail: he takes all his writers at face value, describing them as ‘groups of scholars’ (Yarnall 2003, 286), and assumes they write from similar, more-or-less neutral positions in relation to Buddhist traditions. Yet the diverse variety of his sources means that many *do* write in considerably different contexts and with considerably different purposes than others.

The most important line that Yarnall does not draw is one that scholars may informally assume exists between Buddhist leaders and academics. Buddhist leaders, when defining engaged Buddhism in works directed towards a Buddhist community, must concern themselves with *how to be a Buddhist*: this involves questions of religious and secular legitimacy and the delineation of bounds of tolerable belief. Buddhist Studies scholars, on the other hand, are not, as part of their certification, handed the authority or responsibility to determine which forms of Buddhism are true and which are false. Yarnall’s traditionalist authors all are Buddhists — many are leaders of large Buddhist communities — while many

of his modernist authors are not; but this seems of little significance in Yarnall's arguments, despite the fact that Orientalism is bound up in questions of identity. Here, Thomas A. Tweed's comments in 'Who Is A Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures' help to illustrate the ways that identity should indeed be considered in questions of definition:

Personal religious commitments and role-specific obligations can shape our responses on this issue [of defining who is a Buddhist]. For practitioners, and especially for religious leaders, it might make sense to draw boundaries, to set limits on acceptable belief and practice. In one sense, religious leaders have a role-specific obligation to disallow certain practices and contest certain beliefs. Some followers might insist, for example, that *authentic* Buddhists do not condone violence or affirm theism. Yet scholars, and practitioners who are working as scholars, do not have the same obligations to establish right practice or right belief. Scholars' duty, I suggest, is to understand as much as possible about religion and culture. (Tweed 2002, 27)

Tweed lucidly illuminates the fact that obligations and identities can heavily influence how people write about, and for, their own religious traditions. It is not, of course, the case that all scholars write in one way and all religious leaders another; the matter is far more hazy. Buddhist scholars who understand themselves as Buddhist leaders — or whose Buddhist communities consider them, by virtue of their Ph.Ds, reliable religious authorities — may commonly find themselves explaining Buddhist scriptures or beliefs to practitioners.⁸ Buddhist leaders who are scholars as well, such as Thich Nhat Hanh or the Dalai Lama, may employ techniques common in scholastic writing — such as a style of objective distance and particular types of text analysis — in strengthening their arguments about how to properly interpret Buddha's teachings. Buddhism in Western culture in particular has been disseminated at least in part through the academy,⁹ meaning that scholastic and religious obligations and authorities often seem to mix; this is evidenced by presses like Wisdom Publications, institutions like Naropa University, and the emergence and continual growth of the number of scholar-practitioners since the 1960s and 1970s.

Rather than categorizing arguments concerning the origins of engaged Buddhism into traditionalist and modernist, and then picking a side (as in Carman 2010), scholars should become more aware of *who* is writing, and of *how* engaged Buddhism is being presented. The question of whether or not a practice is truly Buddhist is largely a question for practitioners to debate, not for scholars to determine. Traditionalist writers, rather than being seen as those who believe in continuity between engaged Buddhism and traditional Buddhism, should be considered as writers for whom it is important to label engaged Buddhism as true Buddhism. That is not to say that arguments presented are irrelevant in light of adherence to any particular tradition; but writers and their arguments should

8. Charles S. Prebish states of the scholar-practitioner: 'In the absence of the traditional scholar-monks so prevalent in Asia, it may well be that the scholar-practitioners of today's American Buddhism will fulfill the role of quasi-monastics, or at least treasure-troves of Buddhist literacy and information, functioning as guides through whom one's understanding of the Dharma may be sharpened' (Prebish 2002, 78–79).

9. See Prebish 2002, 69, 79; for a longer history, see Pierce 2010, 87–109; see Baumann 2002, 51–55, 59.

also be considered in relation to their Buddhist communities, and not artificially separated for the sake of preserving a sense of academic objectivity.

Buddhist leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, important traditionists for Yarnall, should be read as having different obligations and identities to contend with than scholars who may not even be Buddhists. Many engaged traditions, including the Order of Interbeing, practice in vastly different ways than older Asian communities; when new practices are developing, it is undoubtedly important for leaders to communicate a sense of continuous Buddhist identity to followers. Modernist authors not in positions of authority within Buddhist communities are less concerned with the idea of labeling a particular practice or belief 'Buddhist'; instead, the main concern seems generally to be that of arguing for Buddhism's *usefulness* for a Western audience. Many modernist authors, such as Ken Jones, are progressive activists: they concern themselves with the idea of making a better world using Buddhism, and use Buddhism to evaluate history and social theories:

Buddhism implies that unless there is some significant personal and individual change in the ways we feel and think about ourselves and about other we shall try to go on evolving societies which express and reinforce the futile struggle of each of us to escape from our root fear into varieties of acquisitive and aggressive belongingness identity. (Jones 1989, 123)

As in this passage from Jones, modernists often use Buddhist ideas in order to reinforce critical narratives of (usually Western) history and social institutions, and to argue for the need for modern reform and spiritual revolution.¹⁰ To this end, they regularly regard Buddhism as a static set of ideas which one might pick at and play with as one wishes; these extractions, because they are performed without any Buddhist community in mind, naturally lead to the appropriative Orientalism Yarnall describes.

KING AND LOY AS SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONERS

With these points in mind, let us re-examine King and Loy, in order to glean whatever is possible concerning their religious and secular obligations and identities. Both authors do, in fact, seem to hold obligations within *both* academic and religious realms connected to Buddhism. Sallie B. King, a Quaker, has been noted in the *Buddhist Ethics Network* as 'co-leading a vipassana Buddhist mediation group'¹¹ and, in her books, occasionally makes references to her personal involvement in various Buddhist traditions and practices (e.g. King 2009, 168–169). She has also written extensively on engaged Buddhism and is regarded as a leader in the field; she currently teaches at James Madison University. David Loy, for his part, was ordained into the Sanbo Kyodan Zen tradition in 1988, and sees himself as undertaking necessary religious reforms in bringing Buddhism to the West.¹²

10. This can also be seen in King's Conclusion to *Socially Engaged Buddhism*.

11. 'Sallie King,' Buddhist Ethics Network, accessed June 17 2013, <http://buddhistethics.net/index.php/network-members/itemlist/user/118-sallieking>.

12. Loy in 2000: 'We cannot escape this task of reconstructing Buddhism to make it meaningful for us and our culture, so that it best addresses the ways that we experience and understand our most oppressive forms of *dukkha*. In that fashion, making a new Buddhism that works for

Yet he is also heavily integrated into the academy, having received a Ph.D. from the National University of Singapore and having held professorships for over a decade around the world.¹³ He is well known and often cited due to his numerous academic publications on interactions between Buddhism and modernity.

These authors typify Charles S. Prebish's scholar-practitioner, with one foot in the academy and one foot in Buddhist communities; additionally, both seem to regard themselves as authorities in terms of being able to define what Buddhism is and should be in the modern world. Furthermore, while an explicitly academic press, the University of Hawai'i, publishes King's work, she also places Loy's book (published by Wisdom Publications) on her 'Recommended Reading List'; and although Loy's book is published by Wisdom Publications, the majority of its chapters have also appeared in academic journals.¹⁴ It is impossible, of course, to fully access the complexity of these authors' religious and professional identities, but even this cursory glance does help to illuminate how their works and social roles exist in a hazy space between Buddhist and academic communities; a hazy space that, for the most part, has been emphatically ignored by Buddhist Studies scholars.

In light of their identities and obligations, King's and Loy's claims concerning both the traditionalist 'truly Buddhist' and the modernist 'truly useful' nature of engaged Buddhism become clear. Both seem to, somewhat understandably, feel that they not only have the authority but the *obligation* to delineate correct and incorrect belief for their fellow Buddhist practitioners; this comes out, for example, in arguments against traditional interpretations of karma (in King, as previously quoted) and traditional Buddhists, as in the following passage from Loy:

Shakyamuni Buddha had nothing to do with funerals, yet in Japan (where I live), most people identify Buddhism with funerals and memorial services — that is the only time most Japanese care to visit a temple. The main social (and economic) function of Buddhist priests is performing these expensive ceremonies ... a far cry from the path to liberation taught by Shakyamuni.

In contrast, the practices in Zen monasteries, such as *zazen* meditation and focusing on koans, works against such a reappropriation by emphasizing a letting-go of mental phenomena and promoting the direct, unmediated realization of our emptiness (*shunyata*). (Loy 2003, 6)

Loy disparages Japanese Buddhism as practiced by Japanese people (aside from Zen monks, presumably most of all those of his own Sanbo Kyodan order), in order to make a point about the way to *legitimately* be Buddhist; 'most Japanese' are simply misguided, most Japanese priests corrupted by money. King's similar dismissal of typical 'Burmese people' (King 2009, 161) concerning incorrect ideas

is itself a traditional, indeed inescapable task that Buddhism requires of us Western Buddhists' (Queen 2003, 31; originally from an online conference April 9 2000).

13. For more biographical information, see 'David R. Loy', DavidLoy.org, accessed June 17 2013, <http://www.davidloy.org/>.
14. This is not to say one cannot cross-reference or use sources from different publishers, or that Wisdom Publications does not publish academic works. Instead, this cross-referencing points to a powerful convergence of academia and religion in modern Buddhist Studies, and is further evidenced by Yarnall's uncritical inclusion of writers like Thich Nhat Hanh or the Dalai Lama into 'group[s] of scholars' (Yarnall 2003, 286–287)

of karma serves the same purpose. Yet this delineation by King and Loy concerning what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate expressions of Buddhist belief arises not only from a Western Orientalist perspective; it also speaks to their obligations and roles as Buddhist authorities within their own Buddhist communities. If such arguments were not endowed with the secular prestige of the Western academic, they could easily be perceived as inter-Buddhist religious arguments about proper and improper ways of practice.

Yet, these authors *do* have prestige in the Western academy, and they actively use that prestige to strengthen their claims; their total lack of acknowledgement of the limits of their religious authority opens them to exactly the same criticism Yarnall makes of modernist authors. This critique — that a process of isolation, distancing, and appropriation of Buddhist beliefs and history is at work in disinheriting Asian Buddhists from their own traditions — is equally applicable in any scholastic work where academics, *writing as academics*, delineate what constitutes a legitimate expression of Buddhism.

It is indeed the case that religious legitimacy is *necessarily* appropriative; new narratives must reinterpret old stories from cultures that no longer exist, and must account for today's practices in a way that can sustain the identity of a living community. Religious traditions are continually evolving, changing, and splintering, and laying claim to ancient figures and ancient texts in different ways is part of this process. Yet when religious legitimacy is evaluated within the academy, it becomes much more problematic, because scholars may see themselves (and often are regarded by wider society) as disseminators of objective truth. Scholars do have a duty to investigate the ways in which there is continuity and difference between engaged beliefs and traditional Buddhisms, and face complex questions about the influence of Western culture; but these can be investigated without the need to determine whether a particular Buddhism is objectively legitimate or not.

Yarnall, for his part, considers it both right and necessary for scholars to search for and to generate an essential Buddhism by scanning Buddhist texts and history. Armed with this core Buddhism, Yarnall argues, we as scholars will be better able to discern whether engaged Buddhism is *truly* traditional or *truly* modern.¹⁵ Yet it is worth asking the question of whether or not scholars have any ability to access a core essence of Buddhism at all. Different traditions relate themselves to a core in a variety of ways, but this is done within traditions and should be studied, instead of confirmed or disconfirmed, by academics. King and Loy should be criticized not on the basis of their Buddhist adherence, but because they are *scholars*; because their works, by virtue of their accreditations, hold value in the secular world as objective accounts in a way that Thich Nhat Hanh's narratives do not.

When scholastic and secular authority, embodied in the symbolic capital accrued by King and Loy upon completing Ph.Ds and becoming widely published, is directed towards supporting and authorizing one Buddhist tradition and towards denigrating and delegitimizing others, it is entirely a different beast than squabbles between religious traditions themselves. Evaluations of religious traditions end up relying mostly on personal prejudices, and ignore entirely the reality that Buddhists of different traditions legitimately practice in a vast variety

15. Yarnall 2003, 288–289, 331–340.

of different, and even opposing, ways. Scholars can certainly discuss how views on anger and violence in Buddhist traditions in communities have changed over the years, but to use these observations to make a judgment on how traditions *should* practice is questionable at best. The condemnation of violence as not simply bad, but as *un-Buddhist*, is a judgment that *Buddhists* must make, not a judgment for scholars to disseminate to a global society through the academy.

Such judgments attempt to efface entire cultures and traditions from even being considered for study as truly Buddhist, for fear that such traditions might contain beliefs that seem threatening to certain practitioners; they are regarded as cultural corruptions labeled as Buddhist yet not truly deserving of the tradition. In this approach, there is no openness concerning the fact that the Dharma can be and has been interpreted in vastly different ways. Rather than attempting to understand and study Buddhists, scholars find themselves hoping to re-educate them, as does King:

As for the passivity that many Buddhists have taken from the teaching of karma, it is simply a misunderstanding of the Buddha's teachings. The problem is that this misunderstanding is widespread and deeply entrenched in many Buddhists' minds. The only remedy for this problem is education. (King 2009, 164)

The *academic* project of finding true Buddhism, which Yarnall enthusiastically supports despite his critique, is, I believe, fundamentally inappropriate for scholars to undertake. Those who believe themselves infused with the power and obligation to determine true or false versions of Buddhism risk falling into Orientalist styles of writing; of stripping Buddhists, and particularly Asian Buddhists, of their right to define and represent their own Buddhist traditions on a global stage. Instead, Western scholars step in as the protectors, promoters, and definers of Buddhism in a seemingly dangerous modern age.

CONCLUSION

In terms of defining engaged Buddhism, these issues mean that scholars should move away from efforts to determine, in any objective sense, whether or not reform traditions constitute 'real' Buddhism or Western appropriations. There are differences and continuities, and these need to be closely studied in order for scholars to understand changes in Buddhism; they should not be studied so that scholars may judge the legitimacy of any particular tradition in calling itself Buddhist. Such a project is *essentially* bound up in the Orientalist project of 'extraction, appropriation, and distancing', and makes use of the privileges of Western academics in order to hand down ultimate judgments on Buddhists. Not only is this approach arrogant, but it is foolhardy: for in disinheriting living Buddhist communities, academics become alienated from who and what they study, and without clear methods, analyses can shift slowly towards theological arguments. Indeed, King's and Loy's writings examined here may be best understood within the framework of Buddhist theology, though the contours of such a field are still uncertain;¹⁶ if so, this needs to be clearly stated in order to avoid the problems elucidated in this article. In any case, what engaged Buddhism is, we can still hardly say; the definitions are vague and difficult, the traditions diverse, the ori-

16. For some discussion on this field and how it may function, see Jackson and Makransky 2000.

gins unclear — but yet this lack of clarity need not be a weakness. Indeed, ambiguity is embodied in the understudied and shifting nature of engaged Buddhist communities themselves, and moreover in the hazy space between academia and religion that makes up the very study of modern Buddhism in the university today.

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