

Book Review



Buddhism, International Relief Work, and Civil Society

Edited by Hiroko Kawanami and Geoffrey Samuel. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 224 pages, ISBN-13 978-1-349-47916-0 (hardcover), \$105.00.

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When people encounter disasters happening in the world today, they come to appreciate the fact that life involves various kinds of misfortune, injustice, and confusion. Historically, Buddhists have been contributing to civil society through international relief and humanitarian work, as “often among the first providers of immediate assistance” (35). The past decade has witnessed voluntary initiatives sponsored by various Buddhist organizations and individual actors (e.g., monks, nuns, lay Buddhists, international networks), that have provided shelter for disaster victims, distributed medical aid, helped meet basic needs for food and clothing, and cooperated with other faith-based relief organizations. Do Buddhist civil societ(ies) make specific contributions to international relief? What does international relief mean to Buddhist civil societies around the world?

Buddhism, International Relief Work, and Civil Society, edited by Hiroko Kawanami (Senior Lecturer at Lancaster University) and Geoffrey Samuel (Professor at Cardiff University), reveals that Buddhist civil societies have made specific contributions to international relief in a particularly Buddhist fashion, or rather fashions. The editors and contributors to this edited volume examine how Buddhist civil societies engage in international relief in various contexts.

The volume has eight chapters. In chapters one to three, Elizabeth J. Harris, Monica Lindberg Falk, Carine Jaquet, and Matthew J. Walton analyze the work of local Buddhist civil societies in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar in the aftermath of the tsunami in 2004, and of cyclone Nargis in 2008. Financial support from international and local nongovernmental organizations was essential to relief efforts, particularly when the cost of taking care of victims and organizing food distribution became greater than the funds local Buddhist civil societies made available. In these cases, although different Buddhist civil societies engaged in the relief work, in the words of Elizabeth J. Harris, “an interesting reversal of roles appears to have taken place” (20). At the initial stage of the disasters, members of the Buddhist civil societies (e.g., laypeople), were, as usual, dependent on the organizations for basic requisites (e.g.,

food), but later, members became the active distributors of essential goods and services to other vulnerable people in the post-disaster recovery.

The following chapters (chapter four by Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya and chapter five by Hiroko Kawanami) focus on the nexus between local Buddhist civil societies and international relief work in Cambodia and Japan. As the contributors suggest, there is a significant difference between the Buddhist civil societies in the two countries. In Cambodia, the local Buddhist civil societies were powerless during the Khmer Rouge era, and were reconstructed with the logistic and ideological support of foreign Buddhist civil societies, especially the Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA). In the post-WWII period in Japan, Engaged Buddhist movements enabled the local Buddhist civil societies to act as centers of religious authority as well as active agents of relief work in their own community.

Chapter six (Jung-Chang Wang) and chapter seven (Sik Fa Ren) explore emerging Buddhist civil societies in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, which are very active in international relief work. In chapter eight, Kory Goldberg highlights international aid to non-Buddhists in North India provided by The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. These three chapters reveal a higher spiritual meaning in Buddhist civil societies' engagement in relief work, that is, "a process of self-cultivation" through offering direct or indirect assistance (e.g., donation) to victims, survivors, and their families (Jung-Chang Wang, 135).

What does international relief work mean to Buddhist civil societies? In the words of Jung-Chang Wang in chapter six, relief work "provide[s] a social platform for members to practice Buddhism and strengthen their religious beliefs through social participation" (130). For many Buddhists, participating in relief work entails a process of self-cultivation in which they "put their faith in the practice" and eliminate human ego (Wang, 135). Wang's above-mentioned assertions characterize other contributors' claims, and it is easy for readers to find similar expressions in other chapters.

Many Buddhist organizations are examined in this volume, including the Damrivi Foundation and the Foundation of Goodness in Sri Lanka, Santi Asoke in Thailand, and Sitagu in Myanmar. As the editors and contributors stress, the work of Buddhist civil societies is irreplaceable in the initial phase after disasters or emergencies. Vulnerable populations across Asia have turned to Buddhist civil societies, which have remained independent of the governments of afflicted nations, for "ceremonies, counselling, and temporary ordination, and to listen to the Buddhist teachings" (Lindberg Falk, 32). In this way, as Mukhopadhyaya highlights in chapter four, Buddhist relief efforts have presented "faith-based, community-centered, and culture-specific models of development" (92). This claim typifies others made throughout the book.

The book contextualizes the interconnections between Buddhist civil societies and relief work. In the eyes of different readers, different chapters will stand out. Although the contexts vary across chapters, the editors and contributors to this

volume agree that the ultimate aim of Buddhist civil societies is self-cultivation through eliminating negative karma, rather than doing charity work.

To a Chinese reviewer such as myself, however, there are two omissions in this volume. First, when the contributors discuss Buddhist civil societies in mainland China, they give little attention to the Buddhist Association of China, which is one of the official institutions supervising China's Buddhism. How has the Buddhist Association of China developed a network of support throughout the country to provide Buddhist relief? How does the association make use of its network and develop partnerships with other Buddhist civil societies both at home and abroad? In this volume, these questions are left unasked.

Second, Mongolia and Bhutan are not covered, despite Buddhism being the dominant religion in each nation. This reviewer is highly interested in the extent to which the arguments of the editors and contributors are applicable to the Buddhist civil societies in those nations. Have local Buddhist civil societies engaged in relief work there? If yes, were the Buddhist civil societies motivated by self-cultivation? If not, what is the difference between the Buddhist civil societies in these two countries and elsewhere?

In the current literature on contemporary Buddhism, there is no other book examining the topic of Buddhist relief work transnationally. *Buddhism, International Relief Work, and Civil Society* is important reading for scholars of both Buddhism and Asian cultures, as well as a curriculum resource for Buddhism courses. This up-to-date and challenging volume succeeds in guiding the reader through a series of cases that make a timely contribution to the literature on contemporary Buddhism, as well as the interconnections between Buddhist civil societies and international relief work in the early 21st century.