




Research Article

Coming to Terms with “Engaged Buddhism”: Periodizing, Provincializing, and Politicizing the Concept

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Whatever happened to “Engaged Buddhism”? Twenty years after a flurry of publication placing this global movement firmly on the map, enthusiasm for the term itself appears to have evaporated. I attempt to reconstruct what happened: scholars turned away from the concept for its reproducing colonialist understandings of traditional Buddhism as essentially world-rejecting, and they developed alternate discourses for describing Buddhist actors’ multifarious social and political engagements, especially in contemporary Asia. I describe the specific rise and fall of the term in Anglophone scholarship, in order for scholars to better grasp the evolution of contemporary Western, Anglophone Buddhisms, to better understand what Buddhists in Asia are in fact doing with the term, and to better think through what it might mean politically for us as scholars to deploy the term at all. In particular, I identify “Academic Engaged Buddhism” (1988–2009) as one hegemonic form of Engaged Buddhism, a Western Buddhist practitioner-facing anthological project of Euro-American scholars with potentially powerful but unevenly distributed effects on Buddhist thought and practice around the world.

Keywords: Engaged Buddhism; Humanistic Buddhism; modern Buddhism

“Is ‘Engaged Buddhism’ [still] a thing?” I worried out loud in my e-mail responding to Buddhist Studies scholar Ann Gleig, tasked with writing an encyclopedia article on the topic in early 2020.¹ She had kindly invited me, a newly minted PhD specializing in early Chinese Buddhism but a novice in the field of contemporary Buddhism, to read her first draft with my untutored eyes, based on friendly interactions we had had over social media. “If so, what kind of thing is it?” I added. Based on our conversation on the state of the field—and prompted by her survey—I have come to some provisional conclusions about how scholars might better engage with the term, by tracing its evolving uses over time (*periodizing* it), in and out of the Anglosphere (*provincializing* it), and between fields of scholarship and practice (*politicizing* it). Just as Buddhist Studies has continually generated new schema of multiple Buddhisms in order to plot how ideas, practices, and communities change and reconstitute themselves in interdependent relation to one another over time, so too might it be helpful to *pluralize* Engaged Buddhism, carefully delimiting when, for whom, and how each Engaged Buddhism becomes or ceases to be “a thing.”² I argue below that a hegemonic form of Engaged Buddhism concretized as an Anglophone scholarly project in the late 1990s that I will label

¹ The finished product, Gleig (2021), would surely testify to her belief that it is!

² The Sinologically inclined wing of Buddhist Studies will recognize that my title riffs off of Robert H. Sharf’s *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism* (2002), which argued both that Buddhism in medieval China be conceptually rethought in Chinese terms instead of in continual reference to a putative Indian original Buddhism, and also that “Esoteric Buddhism” was never a thing in medieval China in the way that it defined unique sectarian identities in Tibet and especially Japan. My approach to the Study of Global Buddhism, then, is shaped by my training as a critical philologist, attending to when and for what ends particular identitarian labels are claimed and deployed, and by examining how certain discourses circulate within and come to shape social worlds. I also considered “Who Gets To Ride in the Navayāna?” (“Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle?” (Harrison 1987), on whom “Mahāyāna” may have denoted, and how, in early Buddhist texts).



“Academic Engaged Buddhism” (1988–2009), as conceptually built on but distinct from how Anglophone Asian Buddhist leaders deployed “Engaged Buddhism” in the postcolonial Cold War era. While the particular form of post-Cold War, academically sponsored Engaged Buddhism has often hidden from view older, alternative Buddhisms, Engaged and otherwise, it also stimulated new forms of scholarship and practice around the world that embrace, ignore, and reject this project. I suggest in the following literature review that disputes over the coverage, validity, and custody of the label continue to shape both our scholarship and Anglophone Buddhist practice, though these themes are not always made explicit. Because Western Engaged Buddhist scholarship and practice may inform each other deeply, I suggest greater attention be paid to the various kinds of things we and others, as scholars or not, are doing with the term.

“Engaged Buddhism” in Asia and its Critics in the Study of Global Buddhism since the 1990s

My reflections arise in response to recent blowback against a term that seems to have reached its zenith in scholarly popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s. The capacious edited volumes *Engaged Buddhism* (1996), *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (2000), and *Action Dharma* (2003), each involving Christopher S. Queen (1945–), capture the energies of the moment, and Sallie King’s (1952–) *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (2009) offers a snapshot of a subfield confident it had identified its object of study, identifying it as “a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political, and ecological problems of society” (1). Engaged Buddhism emerged “in the twentieth century... a large and powerful movement” (2009: 1) encompassing many individual movements formed in the colonial crucible of Buddhist Asia, though Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022) named it “Engaged Buddhism” in the 1960s. According to King’s narrative, Buddhist leaders like Nhat Hanh, Indian Dalit social reformer Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), Sri Lankan development planner A. T. Ariyaratne (1931–), Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa (1933–), the spiritual leader of Tibet-in-exile, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (1935–), Taiwanese nun and NGO director Master Cheng Yen (1937–), and Burmese politician Aung San Suu Kyi (1945–) have developed its practical ethics through interpreting Buddhist texts and traditions so as to bring them to bear on social ills: war, oppression, poverty, and environmental ruin. Western Engaged Buddhists—with leaders like Robert Aitken (1917–2010), Joanna Macy (1929–), Ken Jones (1930–2015), Bernie Glassman (1939–2018), and David Loy (1947–)—are said to support, build upon, and adapt the Asian framework. Such a narrative identifies Engaged Buddhism as a rather recent mid-twentieth century “modern” development, in dialogue with (and in shared care of) those who would identify as “Western.”

Work in Buddhist Studies over the last decade, however, has challenged this easy identification. First, historians of early twentieth-century East Asian Buddhism Jessica Main and Rongdao Lai (2013) have argued for scholarly license to apply the term “socially engaged Buddhism” to Buddhist movements that developed before World War II or that were cultural-nationalist in nature (or both), so long as they challenge a secularizing regime that demands religion remain in its private sphere. Second, in his ethnography of how contemporary Japanese temple priests pursue forms of progressive social action, John K. Nelson eschews “socially engaged Buddhism” for what he terms “Buddhist-inspired activism” because the former term, in his view, unnecessarily reifies an aloof, disengaged, insufficiently modern Buddhism against which it is implicitly contrasted (2013: 83–86). In my view both of these interventions respond to a fundamental gap in translation, between an Anglophone academia that reserves a right to its own terms of social analysis and practicing Asian Buddhists (living or historical) who might not recognize themselves as fitting under the description. I read both interventions, then, as underscoring critical power differentials between English and other languages, between Western scholars and non-Western people of study, and between hyperliterate, midcentury Buddhist activists of postcolonial elite background like Nhat Hanh (not to mention prominent Anglophone convert Buddhists) and a great preponderance of ordinary Asian Buddhists (not to mention

Asians who “do” some kind of Buddhism) on whose behalf they might speak. In this vein I see their efforts as echoing Victor Temprano’s even stronger contention in his critique of King’s work that the very act of Western scholar-practitioners defining “Engaged Buddhism” is “essentially bound up in the Orientalist project of ‘extraction, appropriation, and distancing’” (2000).³ In this section, I direct attention to how Anglophone historians and social scientists studying Asian Buddhism since the 1990s have acknowledged, negotiated, or ignored both the gap and the bind.

Recent work on late modern East Asian Buddhist organizations like Taiwan’s Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi or Japan’s Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōsei Kai has embraced a host of tactics in negotiating the appropriateness of the label “[Socially] Engaged Buddhism,” from uncritical adoption of the term without scare-quotes to the principled selection of alternatives: emic self-ascribed terms or etic neologisms. In the earliest English-language monograph on Fo Guang Shan, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth*, Stuart Chandler differentiates Chinese/Taiwanese “Humanistic Buddhism” (Ch., *renjian Fojiao* 人間佛教) from Sallie King and Christopher Queen’s “Engaged Buddhism” through comparing phenomena that are placed under these labels (2004: 78–79). It is perhaps indicative that this scholarly distinction may reflect distinctions observed among Sinophone communities that presently the Wikipedia page for English “Engaged Buddhism” links not to the Chinese page *renjian Fojiao* but to a separate entity *zuoyi Fojiao* 左翼佛教, literally “Left-Wing Buddhism” (Wikipedia 2020a, 2020b). C. Julia Huang does not adopt “Engaged Buddhism” to describe Tzu Chi in her monograph on the movement, *Charisma and Compassion* (2009), but adopts “engaged religion” as an appropriate analytic in a more recent co-authored work (Weller et al. 2017); Yu-Shuang Yao, on the other hand, features “Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism” in the title of her monograph on the movement (2012), but analyzes it in other terms in a co-authored article from the following year (Gombrich and Yao 2014).⁴ Scholars of Japanese New Religious Movements have built on the work of Jacqueline Stone (2003), who tested the limits of the label in her now classic contribution to *Action Dharma* (“Nichiren’s Activist Heirs”). In her *Nihon no shakai sankā Bukkyō* 日本の社会参加仏教 (*Japan’s socially participating Buddhism*) (2005), Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya embraces the term, translating it into Japanese (Jp., *shakai sankā Bukkyō* 社会参加仏教) for describing Risshō Kōsei Kai; and she develops a typology to further extend the category throughout Japanese history.⁵ Levi McLaughlin’s *Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution* (2019), however, develops alternate frameworks with which to understand the activist Gakkai. These choices in academic labeling reflect an uneven salience of—or even discomfort with—the term in East Asian Studies and perhaps East Asia in general. The scholarship itself reveals that much contemporary East Asian Buddhist social engagement eludes capture under the label “engaged Buddhism,” though the English word and its cognates may offer unique affordances for certain more globally minded Buddhists to pursue new forms of religiously inspired activism. For instance, Hyun Mee Kim and Si Hyun Choi’s study of young Seoulites’ participation in the recently established Jungto (Pure Land) Society in Seoul (2016) argues that its guiding vision of “Engaged Buddhism” (Kor., *silch’ōn[jōk] Pulgyo*, lit. “Practical Buddhism”) comprises a core ethos for self-fashioning among the precariously middle-class youth they interviewed, eager for forms of religious activity that relieve suffering “here and now,” both

³ Harris puts it bluntly, “the term ‘engaged Buddhism’ is problematic. It implies Buddhism is normally disengaged from society” (1998: 99), quoted in Henry (2013: 8).

⁴ Neither do Laliberté (2004); Madsen (2007); Ip (2009); or Jones (2009) appropriate the term in their studies of these Taiwanese organizations. Ip defends “Buddhist activism” as more appropriate than “Engaged” or “Humanistic Buddhism” (146–152). Schak and Hsiao (2005); Schak (2007); and Kuah-Pearce (2014) on the other hand, embrace the term as a transparent translation of *renjian Fojiao*. Scholarship on activist Taiwanese nuns is also keen on the label – see, for instance, Tsomo (2009) and contributions to Tsomo (2006).

⁵ *Engejido buddizumu* エンゲイジド・ブツヂイズム (see Ama 2003) may also serve this scholarly function, but I would like to learn more about its circulation in Japan. The extensive bilingual website for the Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists (JNEB) maintained by Jonathan Watts (International Buddhist Exchange Center @ Kodosan 2021) charts JNEB’s efforts to consolidate a community of Japanese Buddhist social activists as a movement. Other Anglophone studies locating “Engaged Buddhism” in late 19th and early 20th c. Japan include Snodgrass (2014) and Auerback (2019).

their own and those addressed by Jungto’s commitment to causes like environmentalism and North Korean refugee resettlement.⁶

Perhaps nothing is more illustrative of the field’s turn away from “Engaged Buddhism” than the title of Justin McDaniel’s *Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asia’s Museums, Monuments, and Amusement Parks* (2016), which inaugurated University of Hawaii Press’s ambitious Contemporary Buddhism series (the reincarnated [?] Topics in Contemporary Buddhism series [2004–2015]). McDaniel himself avoids reflecting on the citational riff, and encourages readers to take his diversion into Buddhist theme parks as seriously as his scholarly engagements with texts, doctrine, and politics. Neither do “Engaged Buddhists” feature as any of the titular *Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia* (2016, co-edited by McDaniel along with Jeffrey Samuels and Mark Rowe), a book that profiles over sixty modern Buddhists across the continent, many of whom are activist leaders: the term does not appear in the index. Recent scholarship on Buddhist-inspired humanitarianism in South and Southeast Asia is also keen to develop its own categories beyond “Engaged Buddhism,” often in consultation with the communities they study.⁷ Perhaps the rise in awareness of “bad” Buddhist nationalism in Buddhist-majority countries—think here of Suu Kyi’s fall from grace in light of her inability to respond to the Rohingya genocide—has also dampened enthusiasm for the term, or at least its commitment to equating authentic Buddhist identity with “good” nonviolent politics.⁸ The field, paralleling Nelson’s “Buddhist-inspired activism,” seems to have flipped the adjective and the noun, preferring to examine what we might call “Buddhist engagement,” by detailing how Buddhists run universities, NGOs, and political campaigns. It is difficult for me to avoid the conclusion that “Engaged Buddhism” no longer seems to describe the contemporary Asian figures or communities that scholars are interested in working with,⁹ and I suspect the waning of the term reflects shifts in both scholarly interest and the Asian Buddhist world overall, away from, if not in reaction to, the term and groups that organize under it.

“Academic Engaged Buddhism” for Western Scholars and Practitioners of Buddhism

If the descriptive-analytical side of Buddhist Studies displays less surety that it can find Engaged Buddhists out there in the field or the archive, the constructive-reflective side still locates them in their classrooms and offices. In “Disengaged Buddhism” (2019) Amod Lele confidently interpellates “Engaged Buddhists” as his interlocutors, directly citing their hermeneutical labors and challenging them to better account for Śāntideva’s (eighth century; read: the authoritative traditional Buddhist) arguments against monastic engagement in projects of imperial governance. Following Lele, we might identify Engaged Buddhism as a textual project, and contemporary Engaged Buddhists as a privileged community of hyperliterate Anglophone scholar-practitioners.¹⁰ Even though Nhat Hanh coined the term for his transnational,

⁶ Kim and Choi are less ambivalent about “Engaged Buddhism” as an analytical category than previous studies of Jungto – compare Tedesco (2003: 155–56); Park (2010: 29). Kim and Choi’s is the first of these three to cite the Jungto founder Ven. Pomnyun Sunim’s publication “*Engaged Buddhism (Silch’ŏnjŏk Pulgyo sasang; 1985)*” (2016: 15). Sujung Kim (2021) describes Jungto as “Engaged Buddhism” but translates *Silch’ŏnjŏk Pulgyo sasang* as “*Action Buddhism*” (139–140).

⁷ Seoung and Lee (2017) discuss the “Revitalization of Buddhist peace activism in post-war Cambodia” without reference to “Engaged Buddhism” (though it features as a keyword). Craig, Gerke, and Sheldon (2019) on Tibetan Buddhist medical camps in India and Nepal also avoid the term. Yeophantong (2019) discusses “the origins and evolution of humanitarian action in Southeast Asia” with reference to Buddhism, but not “Engaged Buddhism.” Gagné (2019) discusses “caring for glaciers” in Tibetan Buddhist Ladakh. The contributions collected in *Buddhism, International Relief Work, and Civil Society* (2013) wring utility from the term across contemporary Asian contexts, though always with attention to scale. Gajaweera (2015) and Rajkopal (2019) discuss Sri Lankan non-Buddhist humanitarian relief and holistic development efforts respectively with respect to A.T. Ariyaratne’s “socially engaged Buddhism.” Contributions to Whalen-Bridge and Kitiarsa (2013) embrace the term, though sometimes with scare-quotes.

⁸ I gesture here toward the expansive literature on explicitly political forms of modern Buddhism. Fuller (2021) argues that “Engaged Buddhism” ought to include its overtly nationalist and militaristic expressions. King (2018) insists that it excludes these forms.

⁹ *Figures of Buddhist Modernity*, for instance, explicitly turns to “non-eminent Buddhists” (Samuels, McDaniel, and Rowe 2016: 11). While champions of “Engaged Buddhism” have long been attentive to its marginal, elite character in Asia, they still often portray it as representative of Asian Buddhism as a whole or of Asian Buddhism’s future.

¹⁰ See also Lele (2013) for an earlier iteration of his argument. Henry (2013) identifies “Socially Engaged Buddhism in the UK” as overwhelmingly dominated by white, politically progressive converts. Vesely-Flad (2017) can identify “Socially Engaged Buddhism” as a predominantly white, middle-class social formation in the U.S. as well. Engaged Buddhism, whatever it might be, is also explicitly

multilingual community of followers, and even as Sivaraksa founds the International Network for Engaged Buddhists in 1989 (though still going strong!),¹¹ for Lele “Engaged Buddhists” are simply among the readers of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*.¹² I propose “Academic Engaged Buddhism” as a label for this community of English-speaking scholars and practitioners of Buddhism and the theoretical discourse they produced.

Academic Engaged Buddhism as a late twentieth-century textual project curated a canon of saints, scriptural citations, and interpretations through academic conferences and edited volumes. By repurposing suttas, invoking skillful means and interdependence, and juxtaposing the Engaged Buddhisms of diverse figures like Nhat Hanh, Ariyaratne, or Cheng Yen on the same page, it actually called the parent species “Engaged Buddhism” and its living non-Asian lineages into being. It was overtly theoretical in nature, primarily concerned with reconstructing the thought of prominent twentieth-century Buddhist social activists in the Gandhian non-violent, nation-building mold, especially as that thought was presumed to be in the process of fuller realization within enduring social practices, movements, and institutions.¹³ It facilitated greater academic prestige for a cadre of Asian Buddhist leaders it honored, as well as cultivated a sense of activist purpose for a generation of Western scholars in Buddhist Studies that wished to faithfully articulate the thought and practice of their Asian contemporaries. This exchange was especially fruitful as so many of the Western scholars were also religiously invested in the category (see Temprano (2013: 270–73) on King as a “scholar-practitioner”) and the Asian Buddhists they admired were also fluent in their own textual traditions (as well as Western ones).¹⁴ But it also sowed seeds of discontent by asserting itself as the most evolved and inclusive vision of Buddhism, best able to “see things as they are,” when it was actually unable to account for the positionality of the universalism it claimed.¹⁵ It flattered its Western proponents into imagining themselves as vanguard, “countercultural” spiritual progressives, leading Asia, Buddhism, and the rest of the world out from a violent, illiberal past;¹⁶ and many traditionalist Buddhists around the world, it would seem, have not appreciated the condescension and reject their account of the “real” Buddhism’s origins, trajectories, sociology, and politics.¹⁷

rejected by some Sri Lankan lay meditation gurus as a “Western import” (Bond 2000: 144). See Yancy and McRae (2019) for a collection of essays critically interrogating the “Whiteness” of Western Buddhism and Buddhist Studies.

¹¹ A news release from October 21, 2019 describes Sivaraksa and the Dalai Lama convening INEB (The Office of His High Holiness the Dalai Lama 2019).

¹² See William Chong’s (2020) gigantic bibliography of Anglophone scholarship on “Humanistic Engaged Buddhism” to garner a sense of which journals target self-identified “Engaged Buddhists”: *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1981–), *Contemporary Buddhism* (2000–), *Journal of Global Buddhism* (2000–). Conversely, *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism* (2000–2007), as one might expect, seems to have encouraged its scholars to write about “humanistic Buddhism” —not merely in its diasporic Chinese forms—throughout the Buddhist world.

¹³ “Buddhist social thought”—a topic of interest for ethicists and intellectual historians—may often substitute for what Academic Engaged Buddhists called “Engaged Buddhism.”

¹⁴ Prominent “Engaged Buddhism anthologies” for practitioners mirror and anticipate those produced for scholars in both range and content. They include Eppsteiner (1988), Kotler (1996), and Moon (2004). Kraft (1992) may be seen as a forerunner to Queen’s three anthologies. See McLaughlin on the “shared textual space” of Anglophone Buddhism wherein “academics and religious people knowingly and unknowingly reinforce each other’s assumptions” (2019: 2). Gleig (2021) observes that “crossover between the study and practice of engaged Buddhism has undoubtedly contributed to an overwhelmingly positive portrayal of it,” suggesting the limits of Academic Engaged Buddhists *being overly identified with the object they seek to represent*.

¹⁵ Consider Queen’s defensive response to Yarnall’s critique in his introduction to *Action Dharma*, declaring “[we] know better than to feel superior to [our] subjects,” only to insist on narrative control, doubling down on an Anglophone-hybrid origin for “modern Engaged Buddhism” in late 19th c. colonial Sri Lanka (2003: 22–25). In his recent summary of “The Ethics of Engaged Buddhism in the West” (2018), Queen points backward to the thought of Joanna Macy and John Dewey as resources for re-engaging the ascendant quietist McMIndfulness Buddhism of the West that has yet to make “the sociological turn.” Perhaps scholars have been put off by Queen’s “Engaged Buddhism” as “New Vehicle” and “Fourth Turning,” especially when his narratives about “Engaged Buddhism” would seem to necessitate inclusion of and utility for the (colonial?) West, planting white liberal convert Buddhists at its origin and apex. Also see the special issue of this journal focusing on scholar-non-practitioner and scholar-practitioner identities titled “Blurred Genres” (2008) edited by Cristina Rocha and Martin Baumann.

¹⁶ In addition to charges that “Engaged Buddhism” discourse tends to participate in Orientalism and colonialism, we might add that it is often expressed in tones of theological supersessionism, that is, the notion that a newer religious expression completes and invalidates an older one. On early Mahāyāna texts using the concept of “skillful means” to subordinate “earlier” forms of Buddhism, see Federman (2009).

¹⁷ “There certainly has been a lot of talk lately about Socially Engaged Buddhism, and whether or not it is crap, real, necessary, or unavoidable,” an American Buddhist blogger at flylikeacrow.wordpress.com mused in 2010 (Fitzpatrick 2014: 64). On the jargon of “real” modern Buddhism, see Quli (2009).

I have identified Fred Eppsteiner’s *The Path of Compassion* (1988) anthology for Buddhist practitioners and Sallie King’s academic introduction to *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (2009) as bookends for Academic Engaged Buddhism, which places Queen and King’s three scholarly anthologies (Queen and King 1996; Queen 2000; Queen, Prebish, and Keown 2003) squarely in the middle of a two-decade period. As I traced above, the decade or so since has seen intensified critique and reformulation of both the concept and the discourse in the academic study of Buddhism. At its best Academic Engaged Buddhism was radically inclusive, seeking to represent modern Buddhist thought and practice from around the world and to provide platforms for quite distinct visions of what Engaged Buddhism might be, including voices that preferred other modes of conceptualizing social action. It thematized Buddhist creativity, authenticity, and hybridity in its encounter with “modernity” and “the West,” and prominently countered Western Orientalist stereotypes that Buddhism was necessarily quietist or world-denying; but it was perhaps less interested in inter-Asian and South-South exchange in Buddhism’s traditional homelands and underattentive, by today’s standards, to dynamics of Orientalist appropriation, romanticism, and erasure.¹⁸ It rashly took parts for wholes—a social movement or a humanitarian NGO for a full-blown religion, a leader’s dream for his followers’ aspirations and self-understandings, a left wing for the entire sangha, a strategic coinage (the Chinese modernist reformer monk Taixu’s [1890–1947] “*renjian Fojiao*,” Nhat Hanh’s “*le bouddhisme engagé*,” Ambedkar’s “Navayāna”) for the new universal dispensation. At worst, it presumed the unity, coherence, and utility of its object of study as a given, often under the banner of what Western Buddhists at the time took for granted as “progressive,” championing to lesser and greater extent a cosmopolitan global order, liberal democracy, human rights, western or white feminism, and individualizing solutions to structural problems. Academic Engaged Buddhism, I believe, reflected the political preferences of highly educated, liberal, predominantly white Anglo-American Baby Boomers in search of an umbrella concept with which to canonize the Buddhist heroes of the Cold War Era that had just ended, and Nhat Hanh’s term “Engaged Buddhism”—developed extensively in different directions by Anglophone Thai, Sri Lankan, and Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leaders—fit the bill.

“Engaged Buddhist Studies”: Skillfully Negotiating with Engaged Buddhisms in the Anglosphere

The term “Engaged Buddhist Studies” (Kraft 2000; Morgan 2004) was coined at the height of the Anglophone Engaged Buddhism period in order to distinguish a scholarly, self-reflexive discourse and community (“Studies”) from its object (“Engaged Buddhism”).¹⁹ I endorse this invitation to greater reflexivity, and propose that we scholars further query and operationalize the “Engaged” in “Engaged Buddhist Studies.” “Engaged Buddhism” is not solely for scholars to define; its practitioners and scholars co-constitute it within a broader field of power.²⁰ Practitioner identification with the “Engaged Buddhist” label takes place in an English-language discursive politics where both a) religious identities are presumed to be bounded, exclusive, and reflective of authentic inner belief and morality, and b) Western Buddhist, spiritual-but-not-religious, and Religious Left discourses encourage their participants to dispense with, play with, or minimize the importance of labels. At the same time, core ideas and commitments presumed to be shared exclusively among self-identified Engaged Buddhists (reverence for Nhat Hanh and Buddhist traditions; recognition of interdependence of the personal and the political; careful study of Buddhist text and practice in light of

¹⁸ On these points I have found special academic focus on the “traditionism” or “modernity” of Engaged Buddhism (Yarnall 2000; Deitrick 2003; Queen 2003; Temprano 2013; Henry 2013; Gleig 2021) somewhat unhelpful, merely serving to underscore a default presumption that the passive, reactionary East and active, progressive West are pre-existing, mutually oppositional categories to be skillfully hybridized. As a premodernist, I appreciated the “traditionist” voices in this debate pointing out that even according to normative Buddhist models, monastic social “disengagement” was underwritten by compulsory lay sponsorship and the maintenance of dharmic imperial rule.

¹⁹ Cited by Henry (2013: 26, 38).

²⁰ I am inspired here by authors who have responded to J. Z. Smith’s declaration that “religion” itself is a category for scholars to define however they may choose: no, in fact, “natives” have appropriated it too, and mean specific things by it [Gottschalk (2013); Rocklin (2019), pp. 11–12]. Other relevant literature on the definition of (Eastern) “religion” as a site of contest within a field of power may include King (1999), Masuzawa (2005), and Josephson (2012).

current events; aspiration to embody selfless compassion by promoting nonviolent social justice) may also be held by self-identified Buddhists at large and the more loosely identified Buddha-curious.²¹ I conclude by considering the interpenetration of scholarly and practitioner discourses and suggesting some avenues for exploration.

In his critique of the definitional project, Temprano (2013: 269) cites Thomas Tweed's (2002) article on Buddhist identities to argue that an academic's scholarly obligations should forestall them from defining authentic from less authentic Buddhism; this task might fall to religious leaders, but is inappropriate for the scholar when wearing their scholar hat. Users of the term "Engaged Buddhism," whether they support the textual project or not, would do well to reflect on the history of the term and the hats they may be wearing at any given time. The fact of the matter is that the term has always been, and so continues to be, political. I mean this in the sense that critical scholarship on secularism construes all social activity, including principled refusal to engage in governance (or commitment to politics-transcending scholarship for that matter) as political—analogueous to how Engaged Buddhists have taken up Nhat Hanh's nondualistic slogan that "all Buddhism is engaged."²² Scholars' decisions to reify or repurpose "Engaged Buddhism," or to criticize or ignore it, then, are perforce political. They both draw on religious, activist discourses and contribute to them. And they speak from certain, privileged positions within broader fields of power, with their attendant affordances. Those whose Buddhisms we represent and testify on behalf of—"nightstand," "Engaged," or unmarked—we also authenticate. My decision to specify Academic Engaged Buddhism as one among several putative Engaged Buddhisms is meant to clarify a social location from or against which we might speak, and to encourage other scholars and practitioners to contrast it against other, specific kinds: individually authored textual Engaged Buddhisms (e.g., "Donald Rothberg's" or "Alfred Bloom's"),²³ or Engaged Buddhisms articulated through specific movements and communities (e.g., those of the Upaya Zen Center or the Buddhist Churches of America).

Elise A. DeVido's (2009) genealogical excavation of Thich Nhat Hanh's term (evolving from *đạo phật đi vào cuộc đời* [lit. "Buddhism comes to life"] to *le bouddhisme engagé*) not only credits Taixu and other Chinese Buddhist modernizers for their articulations of "Buddhism in this world" or "Humanistic Buddhism" (*renjian Fojiao*), but also French colonial Vietnamese discussions of Sartrean *engagement* (though "more research is needed," 436–437). Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), a fervent critic of French colonialism, had not only counterposed *la littérature engagée* to literature for its own sake, but in fact underscored how all literature was inherently political. Sartrean *engagement* in fact demands a writer's honest admission and defense of their political commitments given their place in the world, and it is worth asking to what degree the "engaged" in "engaged literature" mirrors the "Engaged" in the early Nhat Hanh's "Engaged Buddhism."²⁴ For Nhat Hanh's own peacework, at least, the moniker allowed him to forge his own community's nonaligned path amidst the Cold War; and his later slogan that "all Buddhism is engaged" may be read as an irenic attempt to acknowledge and neutralize political differences between various Buddhist communities in reaction to his movement.²⁵ It may well also be worth looking into how the submerged transpolitical or antipolitical politics of various Engaged

²¹ On the complexities of religious identification—how they may be specified by a social scientist as "explicit" or "implicit," and how identity categories defined by knowledge-making institutions can alter people's relationships to religious identities through "looping effects"—see Sun (2020).

²² On the origins of the slogan see Lele (2019: 240) and Yarnall (2000: 290–91).

²³ Rothberg (2006); Tanaka and Nasu (1998); Bloom (2012).

²⁴ Sartre's insistence that the individual necessarily bears responsibility for global ills resonates interestingly with Nhat Hanh's "nondual" approach to conceptualizing karma, but not with more individualizing approaches propounded by other modern Buddhists. See Heter (2006) on Sartrean engagement, and King (2005: 92–104) on how the views of Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama differ on "universal responsibility."

²⁵ It may be helpful to consider the "engaged" in Nhat Hanh's "engaged Buddhism" as a kind of strategic Occidentalism, imagining Western "engagement" in a religiously prophetic mode. For research showing Nhat Hanh and his colleagues increasingly translated him as an "engaged Buddhist" and "Zen master" for non-Vietnamese, global audiences in the 1960s, see Soucy (2021).

Buddhisms and their cognates may offer affordances for effective transnational or international NGO work (see, for instance, Weishan Huang (2018) on Tzu Chi’s ability to navigate mainland China). Whatever legacies contemporary Engaged Buddhists inherit from the high modern moment, Sartre’s voice and Nhat Hanh’s choices amidst the immediate postwar context may offer important lessons to us on why “socially” rather than “politically” was the adverb of choice for the first generation of Engaged Buddhists.

It may well be the case that the majority of Engaged Buddhists who identify as such today exist in the West—heritage or convert Buddhists who read, cite, and work to transform themselves with respect to the late twentieth-century textual project, extending and transforming it thereby.²⁶ I encourage Ann Gleig to share any insights from her post- or ultra-modern American Buddhist informants of older and younger generations: do they (still) recognize themselves under the label of “Engaged Buddhism”?²⁷ If so, are they curating new saints and texts? How, if at all, does a contemporary Engaged Buddhist think about their relationship to the past or other non-Engaged Buddhists, especially given ongoing movements within Western Buddhism to address, in today’s language, its own whiteness as a field and its ongoing acts of cultural appropriation?²⁸ Does the label sound old-fashioned, high modernist, neocolonial—a relic of the late twentieth century? Or does its datedness in fact confer to it a retro, classic flavor?²⁹ How and with what does their Buddhism “engage,” in distinction to what? Can their constructive work—their own continued, self-critical reconstructions of the traditions for which they take political responsibility—help the scholar-hatted among us produce scholarly work that is richer and more precise?

The enthusiasm with which Gleig’s encyclopedia article (2021) attracted positive feedback from so many progressive Western Buddhists working on social justice issues today suggests a community of Engaged Buddhists still finds the label useful and encouraging. Similarly, the degree to which politically “Alt-Right” reactionary Western Buddhists (see Gleig and Artinger 2021) instinctively organize against “Engaged Buddhism” seems to reveal its continued salience in the Anglosphere. Still, I am unaware how the Gen-X and Millennial Western Buddhist activists profiled in Gleig’s (2021) encyclopedia article, who work to address structural racism, confront anthropogenic climate change, and critique the secular mindfulness movement, identify with “Engaged Buddhism” as self-description or a body of texts. The opening anecdote of Gleig’s article stitches Sivaraksa, Macy, and millennial activists together as participants in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship’s 2014 national meeting in Oakland, CA; it is certainly within scholarly prerogative to identify them all as sharing in the same Engaged Buddhism, but it would be interesting to collect participants’ accounts of their identifications with one another. I would read Gleig and Artinger (2021) as a case study of the politicization of “engagement,” detailing a set of position-takings that seem to have resulted in the localized naturalization of “Engaged” and “Alt-right Buddhist” identity categories along antiracist, LGBTQ+ activist versus anti-DEI lines in American convert Buddhism since 2014. The authors identify these

²⁶ Henry finds his sampling of white convert UK Buddhists in the early 2000s largely disinterested in academic discussions of Socially Engaged Buddhism, though they overwhelmingly identified as “Socially Engaged Buddhists” and replied positively to the suggestion that “all Buddhism is engaged” in his survey results (2013: 238–43). I am tempted to read these findings as indicative that academics and religious leadership are more invested than general memberships in articulating Engaged Buddhism as a distinct community with unique discourses and practices. Positive identification here as a “socially engaged Buddhist” might be analogous to simply answering yes to “Can you connect your Buddhist practice to your societal commitments?” While Western Buddhists are reputedly highly interested and literate in academic Buddhist Studies, further research is needed on whether and how they might consume Academic Engaged Buddhism. See Fitzpatrick (2014) for various Australian Buddhist rejections of the label altogether in open-ended interviews, and Gleig and Artinger (2021) for recent U. S. American right-wing convert Buddhist expressions of identification against “Engaged Buddhism,” and for evidence that they read the literature of Academic Engaged Buddhism selectively and dismissively.

²⁷ Gleig tests the “postmodern” and “ultra-modern” labels for American Buddhists in her book’s conclusion (2019: 281–98).

²⁸ As I argued above, Academic Engaged Buddhism may be imagined as essentially nostalgic for a small cohort of mid- and late twentieth-century post-colonial Buddhist leaders. I would be curious to learn whether other self-identified Engaged Buddhists share this kind and degree of historical, lineage self-consciousness.

²⁹ My quick survey of the current homepages of Buddhist Peace Fellowship (Whabi 2021) and Zen Peacemakers International (2021) suggests that neither organization nor its members identify as “Socially Engaged Buddhist” as much as they may have once used to. Other terms (“social justice” and “liberation”; “taking action” and “bearing witness”) feature more saliently. BPF’s *Turning Wheel Magazine: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism* printed its final two issues in 2010.

as representing “progressive” and “ethnocentric” species of Engaged Buddhism, following the lead of Fuller (2021: 23). Here there is an unsettling mismatch between scholarly and practitioner categories, with scholars identifying activist “progressive” and “Alt-right” Buddhists as equally “engaged,” and the “Alt-right” Buddhists identifying the label solely with their political opponents—likely including the ethnographers themselves. Scholarly acts of denomination—even the act of writing an encyclopedia article—can have powerful looping effects.

I also desire careful scholarly attention to how transnational activist groups engage with the English-language label, its translations, and “local” and “global” actors. How do members and staff of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, for instance, carry Sivaraksa’s projects (and Nhat Hanh’s label) forward? How do they navigate rhetorical strategies between an Anglophone language of legitimacy on the global stage (interfaith, human rights, development, justice) and vernacular languages of power at regional or national or local levels? How and for which audiences do they cite Anglophone Buddhist discourses, confessional and/or scholarly?³⁰ If one is comfortable with wearing the hat, what is it like to be an Engaged Buddhist or to practice a form of Engaged Buddhism today? If our partner informants are not comfortable wearing the hat, why not, what are they labeling themselves instead, and should we as responsible scholars follow their lead? How do they do and think the various activities we in the Anglosphere file under the labels of “engagement” or “activism”: social service, disaster relief, development work, peace-brokering, consciousness-raising, policy-writing, lobbying, protesting, electioneering? What do we, and they, lose and gain when we collapse these activities into the singular frame of “Engaged Buddhism”?

I recommend scholars may better build upon the work of Sallie King and others by acknowledging a complex variety of Engaged Buddhisms, each with its own history, discursive community, and political positioning on definitional questions and its own niche amidst other Buddhisms.³¹ This recommended pluralization is not intended either to denigrate scholarly enthusiasm for or practitioner identification with the term, nor do I want to deny the work of Engaged Buddhists around the world in recognizing their shared and separate political projects through one another. Rather, it is necessary for taking stock of the diversity of communities who share investment in and curatorship over the term, including our own specially situated English-speaking community of scholars. At any rate, I would certainly appreciate further scholarship attending to the movement of the label (or failure to move) between English and other languages, as well as between the interdependent worlds of academia and activism, as a generation of mid-century scholar-activists pass the project down to future scholars, activists, and scholar-activists. Whatever kinds of thing Engaged Buddhism may have been or still is, scholars should be able to account for their own individual roles in its continued arising and ceasing to be.

³⁰ Consider, for instance, INEB featuring a quotation from Joanna Macy as the first item on its website: “We have to liberate each other and ourselves. We can do this because we have a love a life. / It is calling us in all our converging streams through the teachers of the main religions. / I see structural violence as a way to address if we speak together that we are all victims and we are all accountable. / It is the work we are born to do.” (International Network of Engaged Buddhists 2021). On the other hand, the multilingual homepage for Plum Village promises “a global community of mindfulness practice centers offering retreats and teachings on engaged Buddhism and the art of mindful living, founded by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh” the English (and Dutch, French, German, Italian, Malay, and Spanish) “engaged Buddhism” (“geëngageerd boeddhisme”; “le Bouddhisme engagé”; “engagierten Buddhismus”; “buddhismo impegnato”; “agama Buddha terapan”; “budismo comprometido”) is “translated” as “cultivating the seeds of goodness” (*gengyun xinzhong meishan de zhongzi* 耕耘心中美善的種子) and “taking action Buddhism” (*kōdō suru bukkyō* 行動する仏教) in Chinese and Japanese respectively (Plum Village 2021). More research is needed on these organizations’ translingual legacies, translational strategies, and web design.

³¹ We must be careful not to collapse too quickly Nhat Hanh’s “Engaged Buddhism” with those of Queen’s and King’s anthologies of the late 1990s, or Sivaraksa’s (2005) and the Dalai Lama’s (Puri 2006) book-length treatments that followed. Nhat Hanh’s “Engaged Buddhism” itself may vary considerably across decade, genre, and audience. King herself in more recent work (2018) has pluralized the Engaged Buddhisms of Asia as “Nondualistic” (Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama), “Prophetic” (Ambedkar), and “Humanistic” (Cheng Yen). King (2021), in my estimation, downplays the term for “the good life for all” and tends to locate its samples of “Engaged Buddhism” firmly in the twentieth century in the theoretical writings of Ambedkar, Ariyaratne, Nhat Hanh, and Macy; Jungto’s twenty-first century Pomnyun (S. Kim 2021) is the exception.

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