



Book Review

An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism

Paul Fuller. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 228 pages, ISBN 978-1-350-12907-8 (hardback), £65.00; ISBN 978-1-3501-2906-1 (paperback), £21.99.

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PAUL Fuller is a Teaching Fellow in Buddhist Studies at the University of Edinburgh whose research focuses on early Buddhist philosophy, modern Buddhism, ‘views’ (*ditthi*) in the Pali canon, belief and attachment in modern forms of Buddhism, and blasphemy, as well as ethnicity and nationalism in engaged Buddhism. The theme of dialogue is the focus of his soon-to-be-published volume, co-authored with David Webster, entitled *Waiting for Gotama: A set of Buddhist dialogues* (Fuller and Webster in press). In this work, two monks explore key Buddhist ideas through a series of chance meetings. His ability to bring people, texts and ideas into dialogue is also at work in the volume being reviewed here.

In the preface to their seminal book *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King argued that Buddhist liberation movements ‘are characterized by a fundamental commitment to making Buddhism responsive to the suffering of ordinary Buddhists’ (1996: x). Some issues addressed by Queen and King are also prominent in Fuller’s work: the concept of suffering, the reinterpretation of Buddhist teachings in order to address contemporary problems, and the question of whether engaged Buddhism is historically unprecedented or instead true to the core tenants of the tradition. However, Fuller’s attention to ethnocentric and protectionist Buddhist movements represents a departure from Queen and King’s assertion that ‘Buddhist movements are always nonviolent and, indeed, often contribute innovative ideas and actions to the global discourse on the theory and practice of nonviolence’ (1996: x). While Queen did note that the presence of Buddhism ‘has been no guarantee of social harmony or diminished violence’, he nevertheless claimed that peace activism was a ‘distinguishing mark of contemporary engaged Buddhism’ (Queen 1996: 4–5). As recently as 2009, King held that ‘engaged Buddhism is a contemporary form of Buddhism that engaged actively yet non-violently with the social, economic, political, and ecological problems of society’ (King 2009: 1). *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism* challenges this idea.

Fuller’s book comprises ten chapters. In the introductory chapter Fuller states the importance of the concept of suffering, asserting that it may manifest itself in the inner, but also in the outer, life of individuals, and that engaged Buddhism appreciates the relevance of the latter kind of suffering. Fuller calls into question the idea that engaged Buddhism is essentially and completely non-violent and pacific by proposing a wide definition of it (6). By taking into consideration ethnocentric and protectionist expressions, the author encourages us to try to understand why some Buddhists might employ violence (albeit in specific contexts), and prompts us to think about the different agendas and strategies of engaged Buddhist organisations. He then examines



the origins of the phrase ‘engaged Buddhism’, its main figures and organisations, and past scholarship on the subject. The author also provides an overview of the ongoing debate about whether engaged Buddhism is a traditional or a modern phenomenon.

Chapter two looks at engaged Buddhism’s application of Buddhist soteriology to social, economic, ecological, and political issues. The reinterpretation of concepts such as suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anatta*) is pivotal to this process. Fuller also argues that engaged Buddhism tends to lessen the dichotomy between worldly and religious activity, highlighting the relevance of both personal and social transformation. The chapter concludes by focusing on the five mindfulness trainings as explained by Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022) in order to show how engaged Buddhism reworks traditional practices in innovative ways.

Chapter three deals with the role played by attachment to views (*ditthi*) in engaged Buddhism. Through specific references to the Pali canon, the author outlines the Buddha’s claim that doctrinal arguments and disputes are not conducive to awakening. The danger of reifying views (including Buddhist ones), and the major importance of mental fluidity, form the heart of the chapter. The author also focuses on the first three of the fourteen precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Order of Interbeing. Fuller interprets the *Patali-sutta* as a ‘call to social activism’ and investigates the concept of Buddhism ‘with a small “b”’ (46).

Chapter four begins with an analysis of Buddhist modernism, underlining its connection to engaged Buddhism and addressing the issue of ‘postmodern Buddhism’. It then examines the way in which engaged Buddhism reconceives nirvana, karma, and rebirth. Fuller reinterprets interdependence as a hybrid of five Buddhist ideas: dependent-origination (*paticca-samuppada*), not-self (*anatta*), emptiness (*sunyata*), conditionality (*sankhara*), and impermanence (*anicca*). He differentiates between the traditional concept of dependent-origination and the notion of interdependence preferred by engaged Buddhists. For Fuller, the first is more ‘pessimistic’ (for it highlights the fact that conditionality binds human beings to the cycle of rebirths), while the second is more ‘optimistic’ (characterised as it is by a sense of wonder deriving from the perception of the cosmic interconnectedness of all beings). A striking image of this positive approach is Indra’s net, from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. I would also suggest considering the existence of an artificial interdependence of induced needs brought about by a global trading system. This latter interdependence differs from the primordial interdependence represented by Indra’s net and nuances our view of the challenges faced by engaged Buddhism.

In the fifth chapter, Fuller problematises Max Weber’s characterisation of Buddhism as an ‘apolitical and other-worldly’ religion (74) by pointing out that the German sociologist did not take into consideration the historical role Buddhism played in Asian societies. Fuller proposes four possible scenarios of interactions between Buddhism and politics. This section centres on the idea that the ancient Buddhist tradition distinguished between two different areas of human activity—the religious and the mundane—whereas engaged Buddhism de-emphasises this distinction or rejects it entirely. The chapter concludes its examination of Buddhism and politics by exploring the possibility of a ‘dictatorial dhammic socialism’ (80), relating it to the ten royal virtues found in the *Nandiyamiga Jataka*.

Chapter six examines how the doctrine of not-self (*anatta*), and the concepts of Buddha-nature, non-duality, and interdependence play roles in breaking down the boundaries between the self and the natural environment. Here Fuller discusses the history of eco-engaged Buddhism and again identifies a tension between dependent-origination and interdependence. He asserts that eco-engaged Buddhism does not represent a departure from tradition or a completely new form of Buddhism, but is instead a ‘natural extension of Buddhism’s focus on alleviating suffering’ (106).

Chapter seven, the book's longest, deals with the historical, patriarchal, and misogynistic narrative of Buddhism in the Pali canon. It examines the five precepts, paying particular attention to the third, and argues that sexual activity is problematic not due to the sex of the participants but due to the sexual craving that causes suffering. The chapter then turns to the role of the female gender, specifically looking at Buddhist nuns' place in the sangha. It considers the debate about whether misogyny in Buddhism is a cultural accretion or an integral part of the religion, and addresses homosexuality by introducing the notion of 'karmic sexuality' and by showing how Buddhist reformist movements try to de-emphasise karma in order to prevent it from being used as a discriminatory weapon. The chapter details how some LGBTQIA+ Buddhists regard rules against homosexual acts as 'cultural Buddhism' and rely instead on the concepts of not-self and emptiness to support their queerness within Buddhism. This brings up possible tensions between queer Buddhist identity and traditional Buddhist identity, as well as the issue of suffering generated by heteronormative approaches, even in engaged Buddhism. The chapter concludes by presenting how engaged Buddhists are reinterpreting the doctrine of not-self, the notion of Buddha-nature, and the idea of two levels of truth (conventional and ultimate) in an 'attempt to break down binary gender identities and find in Buddhism conceptual support for non-binary gender identities' (127).

In chapter eight the author examines localized, ethnocentric, and protectionist forms of engaged Buddhism. In order to problematise the tendency to understand engaged Buddhism as predominantly positive and non-violent, he concentrates on modern Myanmar, where certain Theravada Buddhist narratives promote particularly virulent forms of nationalism. After examining ideas underpinning ethnocentric Buddhism, Fuller notes that some concepts within traditional forms of Buddhism 'can be used to justify extreme reactions' (154) such as those now happening in Myanmar.

Chapter nine also focuses on Myanmar, this time analysing campaigns there against the commercialization of Buddhism, including of its images and symbols. Fuller introduces the notion of blasphemy, challenging the belief that it does not exist in Buddhism. He examines passages from the Pali canon in which the term 'disrespect' (*agarava*) appears, suggesting it identifies actions committed against venerated objects or people and that some of these ideas might be considered close to the notion of blasphemy as conceived in monotheistic religions. While the Burmese bhikkhus do not themselves justify their position by reference to Pali scripture, Fuller wants to show how such scripture could in theory justify their position so as to show his reader that 'episodes in modern Burma are not necessarily a departure or deviation from the Buddhism described in the Pali canon.' (169).

The volume concludes with Fuller's argument that 'engaged Buddhism is a this-worldly, outward-facing Buddhist movement' (172) and with a summary of the book's main arguments, leaving the reader with the intriguing question of whether or not *all* of Buddhism is engaged. My own research, carried out in 2018 on British and Italian Buddhists' social engagement, suggests that one can differentiate between an 'outward/active approach' to social engagement and an 'inward/contemplative approach'. My purpose was to take into account both those who considered their path of meditative inner research to be the most prominent element and those who thought that there cannot be Buddhism without an active engagement with society. I would suggest that we ask whether engaged Buddhism must be 'outward-facing' or whether instead it can also be a purely inward and contemplative commitment to the common good. This latter approach, although seemingly devoid of impact on the outer world, was regarded as highly relevant by some of those whom I interviewed.

Fuller's book, which is intended to be a textbook for undergraduates, is clear, readable and engaging. It avoids difficult syntax and vocabulary that would alienate students or non-native English-speakers. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter will help students think critically about the material and rearticulate the

knowledge they are acquiring. Similarly, the suggestions for further reading after each section spark readers' curiosity. Finally, the extensive bibliography and the vivid images enrich a volume that is also graphically pleasing.

Fuller strives to address the study of engaged Buddhism by suggesting exploratory pathways rather than by providing apodictic responses. Accordingly, each chapter leaves the reader with intriguing questions. For example, Fuller writes that the scenarios regarding the interaction of Buddhism and politics he proposes 'are in no way exhaustive, but are intended to give rise to further discussion' (80). This way of bringing the readers into the academic debate allows them to critically reflect on the book's ideas. The volume also contains two witty gems. Fuller begins chapters five and six with, respectively, an imaginary political party (the 'Interdependence Party') and Gary Snyder's 'Smokey the Bear Sutra'. These devices should prove highly effective at encouraging even younger readers to speculate on possible futures of engaged Buddhism, and in stimulating their sociological imagination.

Fuller clearly states that his book is an introduction to—not an exhaustive history of—engaged Buddhism. Given this aim, his limited selection of themes makes sense. He also rightly acknowledges limitations in referring primarily to the Pali canon and South East Asia, thus giving relatively little attention to contemporary Buddhism elsewhere. However, this is perhaps unavoidable in an introduction addressed to undergraduates, and this approach allows Fuller to take advantage of his particular expertise. Nevertheless, he reminds us that engaged Buddhism is not homogenous. In fact, Western Buddhism and engaged Buddhism, in order to be understood beyond the generalisations and simplifications, have to be considered in their multiple geographical and cultural expressions. Further research, undoubtedly inspired by Fuller's volume, will be able to explore this complexity. As for his work, it not only succeeds in its stated aim of providing 'some of the skills to become literate in the understanding of engaged Buddhism' (3), it reaches far beyond by expanding the boundaries of the field, exploring novel research paths, and stimulating lively debate.

References

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