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Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism  
(review)

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Henrion-Dourcy in her study of female performing artists, also in this volume, gravitate much more strongly around ethnicity than gender. The use of the body in what Barnett sees as “ritualized” political acts in the case of both elite women in official state-sanctioned positions and activist nuns brings both categories of women into the dialogue on asceticism and difference. Both lifestyle and intention serve as stringent measures in the public interpretation of the success of these women in performing their “Tibetanness.” Material and emotional overindulgence often indicate an inauthentic performance, while emotional reserve and humility may communicate powerful messages about ethnic, religious, and communal identity. Furthermore, the symbolic picture created by these signs gives the performances of these women a significance that transcends the often liminal and highly regulated social stage upon which they are enacted. However, the divide between the symbolic and the social becomes troubled not only in lived political circumstance but also in the view of the scholar himself. In designating the nonviolent political activity of nuns as “feminizing,” Barnett walks a fine line, reminding the reader that the project of opening up new conceptual spaces for the narratives of individual females requires the scholar to conscientiously evaluate the potential of particular notions of femininity to clarify or obfuscate narrative meaning.

Dan Martin provides perhaps the most instructive account for the project of navigating the historical record to recover female spiritual virtuosity in his appropriately titled essay “The Woman Illusion?” In unrelentingly questioning the accessibility of roles of real or symbolic female empowerment within the religious and social climate of eleventh- and twelfth-century Tibet, feminisms themselves are revealed as historically contingent phenomenon always more reliably sought within the accounts of appropriately situated historians and actors than within those of their descendents.

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**BEING BENEVOLENCE: THE SOCIAL ETHICS OF ENGAGED BUDDHISM.** *By Sallie B. King.* Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005. 291 pp.

This discussion of the social ethics of Engaged Buddhism is organized into chapters on four basic issues: the relationship between individual and society, human rights, nonviolence and its limits, and justice/reconciliation. Setting the context for these issues are an introduction, a chapter on how Engaged Buddhist social ethics is built from Buddhist tradition, and another surveying Engaged Bud-

dhist ethical theory. The author's conclusions and evaluations of the movement, for the most part, are found in the last chapter, the book's eighth.

In her preface, King explains a crucial decision she made regarding the extent of her analysis of Engaged Buddhism. She realized that an important question about Engaged Buddhism concerns its relationship with Western thought and decided that she could better focus on that question and "avoid muddying the waters" (p. xii) by not including Western Engaged Buddhist thinking in her survey. She further justifies this decision by claiming that Western Buddhists are still largely students of Asian Buddhists who need to overcome familiar cultural habits "to clearly perceive the otherness of Buddhism and what it has to offer" (p. xii). This decision makes sense in its own context, and I agree that many Western Buddhists seem to not understand that the spiritual and philosophical foundations of Buddhism are quite different from those of Western religions. Unfortunately, the decision to not include Western Engaged Buddhists also furthers a view that Buddhism is "foreign," and, therefore, not directly relevant to Westerners or to the issues that most occupy Westerners in our day. Many Western Buddhists are at pains to undercut precisely that view of Buddhism. However, I do concede that including Western Engaged Buddhists in her analysis would have complicated her task enormously.

King's concerns about the relationship between Engaged Buddhist thinking and Western thinking have more to do with refuting the claim made by "traditional" Buddhists, both Asian and Western, that the Engaged Buddhist movement is merely the product of Western influences and, therefore, not truly Buddhist. She refutes this claim by demonstrating that the most influential Asian Engaged Buddhist leaders are intelligent, well-educated people who are unlikely to meekly adopt foreign ideas. Cogently, she argues that Western influences on Engaged Buddhism do not make Engaged Buddhism "the *product* of Western influences" and that the claim that Engaged Buddhism is the result of Western cultural imperialism denies what it is trying to protect: "the subjectivity and agency of the Engaged Buddhist leaders themselves" (p. 3). She demonstrates that Asian Engaged Buddhist leaders are selective about which Western concepts they include in their discussions of social ethics and that their thinking about social ethics has deep consonance with utterly basic Buddhist concerns, such as interdependence, the Four Noble Truths, *anatman* (lack of independent abiding self), the enlightenability of human beings, the importance of compassion, the importance of varied self-transformative practices, and nonviolence.

Before delving into Engaged Buddhism's major concerns in depth, King provides a lengthy chapter in which she outlines Engaged Buddhist ethical theory. She does not claim that Engaged Buddhists have worked out a systematic ethical philosophy, but rather that certain ideas and claims underlie their recommendations and actions, although not all of them are used by every Engaged Buddhist or in every situation. Natural law ethics, which claims that ethical requirements are not culturally relative because they stem from the nature of reality itself, not human invention, is an important element in Engaged Buddhist thinking, she

claims. (King, however, does not discuss the difficulty that the different religions have very different analyses of the nature of reality.) Engaged Buddhists also use a developmental perspective, recognizing that, as individuals develop, ethical understanding also develops. That developmental perspective implies that ethics is more about principles than about rules. Engaged Buddhist ethics are holistic, in that intellect and emotion are not thought of as at odds with each other in ethical decision making, but are well integrated with each other. A nonadversarial stance is critical for Engaged Buddhist ethics and flows from the basic Buddhist claim that self and other are interdependent, not separate from each other. Like all Buddhist ethics, Engaged Buddhist ethics is intensely pragmatic, focused on developing kindness and compassion, and distrustful of verbal absolute claims. Finally, for Engaged Buddhist ethics, an imperative to action is central. King claims—rightly, I would contend—that all these Engaged Buddhist ethical principles are in direct continuity with Buddhist tradition, although the imperative to act is probably stronger and more insistent in Engaged Buddhism than in traditional Buddhism.

After constructing this foundation for her survey of Engaged Buddhist social ethics, King delves into four issues in more depth.

Regarding the relationship between the individual and society, King claims that Engaged Buddhists envision a situation in which both the individual and society can flourish, in which the interests and needs of each need not be sacrificed to satisfy the other. Individuals need not be curtailed and restrained to promote social cohesion and social good, and society need not be repressive and domineering over individuals. However, Asian Engaged Buddhist leaders also claim that such interdependence requires small communities using participatory democracy and free of outside domination. King wonders whether this vision is viable in an increasingly urbanized and globalized world.

A long chapter is devoted to human rights and thoroughly examines the controversial claim that human rights is a Western concept not appropriate for societies in which individualism is not pronounced and adversarial relations are avoided. Buddhist thinkers can have deep concerns with the philosophical foundations of human rights language, asking if such language is necessary for developing more humane societies and compatible with other Buddhist values, such as a nonadversarial stance and Buddhism's tendency to emphasize the individual's responsibilities, not his or her rights. King, obviously quite sympathetic to claims for human rights pursued nonviolently, devotes a great deal of attention to two Asian Engaged Buddhist leaders, Phra Payutto and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Both have written and spoken extensively about human rights and the continuity between traditional Buddhist values and practices and concern for human rights. King does concede that the extent to which human rights claims will be heard in Asia remains an open question. She also says she understands more fully now than she did earlier how difficult it is for many Asians to assume the required adversarial stance needed to claim rights that are not freely granted by others.

The chapter on nonviolence and its limits addresses the tension between individual ethics and the obligations that states must fulfill. In matters of individual ethics, Buddhists strongly prefer nonviolence, which is seen as an extension of the first precept of nonharming, but for governments and states, the situation has never been so simple. Buddhists analyze how violence and aggression always lead to reactions that produce more violence and aggression. But how does a state protect its citizens against aggression without the use of armies, weapons, and some violence? Buddhist majority countries have always had armies and have engaged in warfare. Many leaders of the Engaged Buddhist movement advocate nonviolence in principle. They claim that violence is never, under any circumstances, the appropriate course of action, for both individuals and groups. Some of these leaders have acted nonviolently in very difficult circumstances. For all of them, nonviolence is more a state of being, “being peace” in Thich Nhat Hahn’s felicitous phrase, which is the result of Buddhist disciplines of self-transformation, than an ideology. Nhat Hahn and others would claim that being peaceful in the core of one’s being, and, therefore, peaceful in words, deeds, and demeanor, is much more effective than advocating peace—often in a fairly aggressive manner. Other leaders of the movement claim that there may be some practical limits to total nonviolence, depending on the kind of adversaries one faces or whether one is actually the leader of a government. Aung San Suu Kyi, the elected leader of Burma who has not been able to assume her position, says that she would try to build a more honorable army that would be loved by the people. She also says that sometimes having to resort to skillful use of weapons and violence goes with the territory if one is a politician (p. 191).

King begins her chapter on justice and reconciliation with the observation that Engaged Buddhists are much less likely to use justice language than human rights language. King points out that Buddhism does assume that, ultimately, justice prevails. Its teachings on karma claim that one will eventually reap the results of harm done to others and that actions done in the present will have results, even though those results may happen slowly. What Buddhists find incomprehensible is the nurturing of feelings of victimhood, the one-sided analyses of the causes of conflict, and the so-called “righteous” anger that frequently accompany the many conflict-ridden calls for justice in the contemporary world. Engaged Buddhists are much more likely to seek to remove the causes of conflict without blaming either side as being solely responsible for conflict, without heavy-handed judgmentalism of anyone, and without calls for revenge. Simply put, much justice language is simply too dualistic and adversarial to accord with Buddhist sensibilities. “Victim” and “perpetrator” are interconnected, and, under different circumstances, either could play the other role. According to King, Engaged Buddhists find the reconciliation paradigm much more palatable than the justice paradigm. According to King, in the reconciliation paradigm, the emphasis is on truth and acknowledgement of wrongdoing, rather than retribution. Hearing the voices of those who have suffered and providing

them with safety in the present and future is much more important than punishing the perpetrators, insofar as these two groups of people can be separated.

In her concluding chapter, King discusses the contributions the Engaged Buddhist movement has already made to global ethical thought and to the practice of social activism along with the issues about which she thinks Engaged Buddhists need to do further reflection. Concerning issues that require further thought, King first suggests that, although all Engaged Buddhists strongly advocate internal, personal change as important to furthering a good society, more thinking about the role of institutions and how to change them is also required. More thinking about balancing the needs of the individual and society would also be helpful, she claims, noting that the hyper-individualism of some Western societies need not be blamed on human rights language. Given that Engaged Buddhists are concerned about establishing societies that promote human well-being, King claims that Engaged Buddhists need to think more about what kind of criminal justice system such a society would have. Finally, King has many suggestions for how Engaged Buddhists might further their thinking on violence and nonviolence, all based on the fact that the traditional Buddhist personal ethic of nonviolence does not easily translate one for one into a social ethic. Among the most provocative is her suggestion that, if Buddhists are to hold state power in states that have armies, Buddhists may need to work out a just war theory. She ends by suggesting that Engaged Buddhists need to think much more, and much more carefully, about power. Lack of concern with the reality of power has been the most critical missing element in Engaged Buddhist thinking, she claims.

This is an important book. It is thoroughly researched, well written, and well organized. It will prove to be an invaluable resource for many students, scholars, researchers, classes, and libraries, to say nothing of practicing Buddhists who are Engaged Buddhists or want to learn more about Engaged Buddhism.

There is, however, one important flaw in this book. One would never know from reading this book that Buddhists and the societies in which Buddhists live have any gender problems. King does include the thinking of some prominent women Engaged Buddhists in her analysis, but gender inequities are never mentioned as something Engaged Buddhists think about or should think about. One could reply that Asian Engaged Buddhists do not include gender in the range of issues and problems about which they comment and, therefore, a book focusing on Asian Engaged Buddhism should not include any discussion of gender issues. However, King concerns herself not only with the strengths and achievements of the Engaged Buddhist movement, but also with its lacks and inadequacies. I would claim that Asian Engaged Buddhism's failure to acknowledge gender inequities and think seriously about solving them is at least as big a problem as its lack of thinking about power, the limits of nonviolence, or criminal justice. Some might claim that concern with gender issues is a Western imposition, foreign to authentic Buddhism. But that claim is as inaccurate as the claim that Engaged Buddhism itself is a Western, foreign imposition. It would be very strange for anyone to claim that Engaged Buddhism, minus concern with gen-

der, is authentically Buddhist, but concern with gender inequities is not authentically Buddhist.

King often notes that the main goal of Engaged Buddhism is to alleviate suffering. Certainly gender inequities cause as much suffering as economic and political injustice or violence. Gender inequities demonstrate a lack of human rights. Every concern and issue with which Engaged Buddhists deal is laced through with gender implications and gender inequities. Yet one would never know that from King's analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Engaged Buddhism. Why is it that those so concerned with peace, nonviolence, human rights, and reconciliation so often forget that gender inequities compound and intensify every other social problem and that these problems cannot be solved without direct attention to gender equity. Surely we Engaged Buddhists and critics of Engaged Buddhism can do better!

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HOOKED! BUDDHIST WRITINGS ON GREED, DESIRE, AND THE URGE TO CONSUME. *Edited by Stephanie Kaza*. Boston: Shambhala, 2005. 271 pp.

SUBVERTING GREED: RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON THE GLOBAL ECONOMY. *Edited by Paul F. Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002. 193 pp.

The Buddha's second noble truth diagnoses the cause of suffering as desire, understood as a mental state of greed or clinging attachment that in turn leads to grasping. The mind that wants to find lasting satisfaction by grasping at objects of desire, the Buddha said, is doomed to dissatisfaction because the very nature of conditioned existence frustrates permanent pleasure. The monkey-mind keeps clinging desperately to the banana in the cage even as that clinging itself traps the hand that grasps. To let go, to escape suffering through an insight into the structural nature of the cage, the fruit, and the grasping hand, seems beyond the monkey's abilities until, chastened by the seemingly endless lack of satisfaction and wishing to emerge into a state of freedom, the monkey enters the path and trains his mind to recognize the true causes of his frustration.

The teachings of the Buddha have been understood, for the past 2,500 years, as a therapy of desire. The analysis of suffering and its causes in the confused and clinging minds of ordinary sentient beings, and the prescription of a path of training to uproot those causes and thereby free the mind from suffering, have been presented as a perennial psychospiritual system of training responding to