

Adaptation and Developments in Western Buddhism: Socially Engaged Buddhism in the UK, by Phil Henry. 2013. Bloomsbury. 288pp. Hb. £58.50, ISBN-13: 9781472512550. Also available as an e-book, £64.99

Reviewed by Graham Dixon, MA Buddhist Studies student, University of South Wales, Graham.Dixon@students.southwales.ac.uk

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While Bell (1991) and Bluck (2006) have described the broad perspective of British Buddhism, in this volume, Henry has furnished this field with its equivalent of microeconomics. The term ‘micro’ seems curiously appropriate, since the activity described in the volume involves only a few thousand individuals (p.4), a small proportion of the total UK Buddhist population. Based around detailed studies of five Buddhist groups, the sample sizes for Henry’s detailed qualitative work reflects a good proportion of the groups’ membership. The granularity of this area becomes even further pronounced, since the organisations studied differ between themselves in their attitude to ‘engaged Buddhism’ – for some it is their *raison d’être*, for others it emerges as a secondary outcome of their practice. Employing the term ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ within the title will raise the hackles of some, who will be relieved to note that the second sentence of the Preface acknowledges it as a ‘contested phenomenon’ (p.2). By accepting the term ‘engaged’, effectively one is required to ponder what ‘disengaged’ Buddhism would look like (p.26). If one accepts the Weberian model, which superficially identifies the Buddhist saṅgha solely with renunciants, then a certain detachment, even possibly alienation becomes axiomatic. However, this standpoint fails to recognize the lay-monastic symbiosis which has characterised Buddhism from its inception, or the fact that most Buddhists have lived over the past millennia in a pre-globalised environment, lacking both the knowledge of world issues and almost certainly the agency to effect constructive transformation. Is it reasonable to regard these all as effectively disengaged? While UK Buddhists might have recognised that there was more to the tradition than meditation, this did not mark the creation of any *yāna* innovation (p.26), but arguably it was merely catching up with their Asian counterparts, at least those who see engagement as a defining quality of all Buddhism (p.44).

The dichotomy between engaged and non-engaged may arise from the usage and direct translation of the French word, *engagé*, first employed in this context by Thich Nhat Hahn (p.123). Despite Henry’s attribution of the notion of

struggle to this term, the French word can simply mean ‘committed’, whereas in English it may — depending on interpretation — assume more pronounced overtones of political action. If our interpretation inclines more towards commitment, then one might more effectively regard the phrase as denoting a commitment to teachings which already existed, seeking to act on them, rather than striking out to invent some *navayāna*. Indeed, early texts, not referenced in the present volume, would imply that the same broadly-based concerns, both humanitarian and ecological, stretch back to nascent phase of Buddhism, for instance, the expression of relief that trees and were not damaged (D I 141) and the prohibitions on weapons manufacture and slavery (A III 208). One assumption remains unchallenged in this volume, namely that Buddhist engagement is broadly aligned with the political left; without pursuing this in detail, it is worth noting that the same *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, as well as promoting decent wages, also suggests that entrepreneurs should receive seed funding (D I 135). While this excursus has arguably strayed from the topic, it would seem vital, even before defining ‘engaged Buddhism’, to explore whether such an engagement presupposes a partial view of the tradition, fashioned to align with the origins of engaged Buddhism in the world of incipient green movements and nuclear disarmament (p.91). Indeed, as Henry remarks, the Western movement grew from the longing for peace and social justice associated with the Vietnam War, concerns subsequently reinforced at the time of 9/11 (p.246).

Henry’s methodology is laudable for its breadth and multi-dimensionality. Not only does he provide an extensive and detailed literature review, but his five case studies combine documentary research with close personal observation of individual groupings, and evidence of wider interaction, for instance, with customers of Triratna¹ right-livelihood businesses (p.186). Inevitably, one is aware that one is not comparing like with like, in that, for example, Triratna and The Amida Trust provide the locus for ongoing commitment and a complete spiritual package, as emergent new-lineages, whereas the Network of Engaged Buddhists is more a utopian lobby group, whose early alignment with the Green Party is still evident in its language (p.104). Henry also shows interesting evidence of multiple membership of different groups (p.92), with some double-counting in the quantitative research. Despite its aspirations, the sector may emerge as fragmented and fractious, often depending on pioneering, charismatic leadership; thus, the Amida Trust emerged from, and now critiques the Community of Interbeing (p.134), while itself spawning the Tariki Trust (pp.57–58). Henry poses the question of whether such movements attract people primarily motivated by engendering social change, who just happen to be affiliated to Buddhist groups, rather than there being any intrinsic common thread in Buddhist teaching to give rise to this phenomenon. His research tends to support this view, since aside from the Bodhisattva ideal expressed in Mahāyāna tradition, the belief systems and emphasises of the groups surveyed prove highly divergent. The range embraces the Amida Trust, with its Pure Land embrace of other-power (*tariki*) thinking (p.61, 67), the Hua-yen impetus derived from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Rokpa Trust’s identification with Chenrezig. Some organisations have produced their own statutes, emphasising altruistic elements of

1. As the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order is now known.

Buddhist teaching. And while some have pursued global causes, Triratna emphasises right livelihood within the community, originally linked with communal living (p.157), while the Community of Interbeing applies mindfulness to every action, 'Being Peace' (p.133). Henry's study of Lothlorien (<http://www.lothlorien.tc>) provides an interesting model of a community for people with mental health issues, branded in a non-Buddhist manner (p.200), and complimenting Rokpa Trust's work with homeless people in Glasgow. It is worth observing that such charitable activity is not dissimilar to the regular work of the Thai village *wat*.

Further potential work in this field could examine a control group of Buddhists who would not naturally self-identify as 'engaged', and whether their attitudes differ vastly from those who are declaredly 'engaged'. In the UK context, one would be surveying recent immigrant communities, whose initial preoccupations may well centre on their own ethnic group, rather than wider societal engagement, so this might prove too demanding, and a more effective comparison might well emerge from studying those Buddhists still resident in their original countries, for instance, those prompted to action by writers such as Sivaraksa. Indeed, it would also have been useful to understand the extent to which those involved with engaged Buddhist activities have attitudes shared by the general UK population, especially given that over 90% of engaged participants identify as white European (p.235); some comparative UK demographic material on marital status and income would also have been welcome, in helping to triangulate Henry's extensive material. For all sorts of reasons, caution is necessary before judging who is 'engaged' or not. However valuable the volume, some reservations remain about promoting the terminology, which may feed the engaged-disengaged dichotomy, with unfortunate connotations of convert superiority, at least when employed in the developed world.

Bibliography

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