Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
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The twentieth century has seen the birth of a global socially and politically active form of Buddhism that emphasises Buddhism’s engagement with society. Engaged Buddhism is a non-centralised movement that emerged in response to multiple crises in modern Asia. It has been described as a modern form of Buddhism, influenced by modern, social, economic, psychological, and political forms of analysis of Western origin.

Engaged Buddhism is, in a certain sense, a result of the great tension modern Buddhists have felt between theoretical and idealised concepts, and the way these concepts have been used. Buddhism has been portrayed as otherworldly and unconcerned with the welfare of the people – a one-sided account that does not acknowledge the fact that Buddhist institutions at all times have been important actors in society. Buddhism has always been engaged, and monks and nuns have been involved with lay people as teachers, doctors, counsellors, advisers etc. However, the roles of monks and nuns have shifted over centuries and in different contexts. Governments have taken over many of the social activities that were traditionally the responsibility of temples and monks, including education, health care, social work, community support and development.

Socially engaged Buddhism

The term ‘engaged Buddhism’ was coined by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1950s to reveal the potential within Buddhism for social activism. It was used to describe those who promoted peace and social activism as well as environmental awareness (see Queen and King 1996). The expanded term, ‘socially engaged Buddhism,’ emerged during the 1980s and has been applied to a growing worldwide social movement, which seeks to adapt Buddhist principles and practices to contemporary social issues (ibid). Today, ‘engaged Buddhism’ covers many different activities, including social work, poverty-alleviation, ecol-
ogy and development programmes, political activism and human rights agitation. Socially engaged Buddhism also includes Buddhists’ important roles in situations of crisis and disaster. The common unifying component for people applying the label to their activities is that they perceive themselves as manifesting Buddhist principles in concrete activities, aimed to benefit people other than themselves, and that they especially seek to adapt Buddhist principles and practices to contemporary social issues. Apart from Thich Nhat Hanh, some important figures include the Dalai Lama from Tibet, Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar, the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and the Thai social reformer Sulak Sivaraksa (Sulak Sivaraksa 1988; 1992).

Southeast Asia
For centuries, Buddhist temples have been centres of community activities and social engagement, and lay people have turned to the monks for support and advice. In many Southeast Asian contexts, new and modern forms of Buddhist practice and beliefs, grounded in the ancient form of Buddhism, continue to emerge. Beginning in the early 1970s, a handful of monks set up independent rural development projects, based on their interpretations of Buddhist teachings. They provided a sharp critique of the capitalism promoted by the government, fearing the effects of growing consumerism and the dependence of farmers on outside markets (see Darlington 1998). Since the 1980s, monks who are engaged in social activities have become increasingly involved in the creation of rural development projects, such as village credit unions and cooperatives, rice and buffalo banks, local handicraft production and marketing, as well as self-reliant and integrated agricultural programmes. Monks have also initiated projects specifically aimed at ecological conservation. The projects initiated by independent development monks are predominantly grassroots, small-scale activities.

Gender and socially engaged Buddhism
Despite the fact that gender equality is one of the foremost aims of the engaged Buddhist movement, there is little mention of leading socially
engaged women (Romberg 2002). However, many Buddhist nuns are socially engaged and possess great commitment to their work.

There is no single Buddhist approach to gender issues. The historical Buddha founded an order for women, wherein it was possible for women to receive Buddhist ordination. Every person, irrespective of caste and sex, was welcome to join the order. This was not a social reform to overcome existing inequalities, but rather a decision based on the insight that both women and men could reach the ultimate Buddhist goal, nibbana. As a consequence, both men and women should be given access to the ordained state, leave their lay life, and have the privilege of practicing Buddhism full time. Over the centuries the female ordination lineage has survived in the Mahayana tradition (practised mostly in East Asia) but not in the Theravada tradition (practised in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka). Women who aspire to become ordained in the Theravada tradition usually have to struggle with various difficulties. Not being fully accepted in the ordained role affects nuns’ religious standing and their possibilities to fulfil their monastic social role in relation to laity.

In recent decades, official forms of Buddhism, in countries like Thailand, have become less important for legitimising the state. In line with this, lay people have begun to ascribe educated, morally pure and socially engaged nuns religious legitimacy by recognising their religious leadership, treating them as religious leaders (see Falk 2007).

Concluding remarks

Engaged Buddhism can sometimes be seen as controversial simply because it challenges tradition by working in innovative ways. Social engagement may threaten the Buddhist ascetic vows of both monks and nuns, because of the lay character of the social activities, thereby undermining the religious authority of ordained persons. By extension, traditional interpreters of Buddhism fear that any erosion of the vital boundary between lay and religious realms will degrade the latter. The engaged Buddhists balance their roles as transmitters of traditions and values, transformers of tradition, and negotiators of tradition. But, as Sally King states: “The engaged Buddhist world is, finally, a globalized world” (King 2009, p 12).
References


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