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Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved!(?) Made in the U. S. A. of Asian Materials

Thomas Freeman Yarnall

Columbia University

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Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved!(?)

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Thomas Freeman Yarnall¹

Introduction²

In recent decades a movement of “engaged Buddhists” has begun to sweep the globe. This movement is comprised of a wide range of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Inspired by Buddhist values, they are united by a common drive to lessen the suffering of the world,

¹ Religion Department, Columbia University. Email: ty37@columbia.edu.

² A note on the format of quoted material: to assist the reader in navigating through the many quoted passages in this essay, I have frequently added underlining (and occasionally **bolding**) to key phrases (all *italics* are in the originals). After reading a given passage completely the first time, the reader may choose to focus on the emphasized text when referring *back* to a passage to more quickly locate a particular quote or to more readily recall the salient points of the passage.

A note on the short path through this essay: acknowledging that this essay is significantly longer than others submitted to this *JBE* conference, I make the following suggestion to the reader pressed for time. Read the Introduction, then skim or skip the two Overview sections (about one-quarter of this essay). Read the “Summary of the Modernists’ Views” at the end of the “Overview of the Modernists” section. Then read “Methodological Issues” which develops some important theoretical and methodological tools; this can also be read quickly. Finally, focus on “Analysis of the Modernists’ Arguments” and “Conclusions” (the latter half of this essay) which contain my main observations and suggestions.

in particular by “engaging” (as opposed to renouncing) the various social, political, economic, etc. institutions, structures, and systems in society. Such engagement can take many different forms (for example, voting, lobbying, peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and so forth), but it is always aimed at actively challenging and changing those institutions, etc. that are perceived as perpetuating suffering through various forms of oppression, injustice, and the like.

The term “engaged Buddhism” appears originally to have been coined by Thich Nhat Hanh in 1963, and the expanded term, “socially engaged Buddhism,” emerged during the 1980s.⁽¹⁾ However, apart from the usage of these relatively new labels, scholars are divided as to when, where, and how a politically or socially “engaged” Buddhism actually first began.

One group of scholars maintains that Buddhists have never accepted a dualistic split between “spiritual” and “social” domains. To engage in the spiritual life necessarily includes (though it cannot be reduced to) social engagement. Thus, for them, since the time of Śākyamuni, the Buddhadharma has *always* had a more-or-less fully articulated socio-political dimension in addition to its (*supposedly* “other-worldly”) spiritual/soteriological dimension. Modern forms of Buddhism (“engaged Buddhism” or otherwise) are essentially contiguous with traditional forms in spite of any superficially apparent differences. Due to this emphasis upon continuity with Buddhism’s traditional past, I will refer to members of this group as **traditionists**.⁽²⁾

A second group takes a very different approach and arrives at a decidedly different conclusion. While this group admits that there have been doctrines and practices with socio-political relevance *latent* in Buddhism since its inception, it insists that these “latencies” have always remained relatively “untapped,” that they have not been (or often *could* not have been) fully realized until Buddhism encountered various West-

ern elements unique to the modern era. Modern “engaged Buddhism” may share some essential features with traditional forms of Buddhism, but it also contains enough substantive differences to warrant calling it a relatively “new” form of Buddhism unique to the modern era.⁽³⁾ Thus, due to their emphasis upon discontinuity with the past, I will refer to members of this group as **modernists**.⁽⁴⁾

In addition, most members of these groups have tacitly considered their own position to be relatively natural or self-evident, and thus (until the last couple of years) neither group has taken the other’s position very seriously—or at least they have given this impression by spending a minimum amount of time discounting the other group’s position.⁽⁵⁾

Traditionists have charged that modernists simply do not understand the “essence” or “spirit” of Buddhism and that such modernists have thus been predisposed to miss the social theories and practices of Buddhists throughout the ages. Modernists, on the other hand, have dismissed traditionists as methodologically naïve and historically “reconstructive,” insisting that traditionists peer unwittingly through a modern lens at ancient/traditional teachings.

As I have examined the burgeoning writings from these two groups, I have become increasingly interested in the question of why these groups take the positions that they do (both have some good arguments, and neither presents a completely self-evident position). What motivates these authors? Who are their intended audiences? Do the different scholars in these groups claim to *represent* these engaged movements, to be spokespersons ordained to provide a theoretical/historical basis for the activities of engaged Buddhists “on the ground”? Or do these authors seem to want to maintain a stance of scholarly objectivity, merely *describing* these movements to others? In either case, how might traditional Asian Buddhists respond to these scholarly opinions? And

how might different self-styled “engaged Buddhists” *themselves* respond to these opinions? (Or is it even possible to separate the practitioners of this movement from the theoreticians who would shape their very understanding of who they are and what they are doing?) Thus, this present examination of the phenomenon of “socially engaged Buddhism” represents such a *meta*-level investigation (and ultimately a philosophical/methodological critique) of the “society” of scholars who themselves claim to represent (or describe) this social “movement.”

In particular, and in spite of their claims to methodological superiority, I have been continually struck by how ideologically motivated the modernists persistently seem to be. Much of what they write seems natural when read quickly and uncritically, but upon closer analysis, this group of authors often appears almost obsessed with demonstrating, for example, what they perceive to be the newness of Buddhism’s socially engaged dimension. The demonstration of this “newness” (and the corresponding emphasis on its previous “latency”) seems to be not an observation, but a *necessity*. Indeed, in reviewing the relatively short history of modernist writings on engaged Buddhism, it has often seemed that earlier vague descriptions of what it meant to be socially engaged were fine-tuned and developed over time in tacit response to emerging (traditionist) claims that Buddhism historically *had* been engaged. As traditionists have presented evidence of past Buddhist activities that met the modernists’ criteria for “engagement,” it seems that modernists have been driven to modify their criteria precisely in order to continue to construe socially engaged Buddhism as something new.

It is important to underscore at the outset that in this present study I will not be primarily engaged with assessing these authors’ (historical) truth claims (though to do so is clearly an important desideratum): it is simply beyond the scope of this study to research thoroughly and present the variety of “historical evidence” that would have to be

amassed in order to address (or refute) the many shifting modernist definitions of what it means to be socially engaged. Instead, the present essay will attempt to address some of the theoretical and methodological issues mentioned above, particularly as they regard the majority modernists. Nor will I be arguing (at this meta-level) that the modernists' insistence on discontinuity with the past is *entirely* wrong (one can, with good reason, easily choose to emphasize *either* continuities or discontinuities with the past). Rather, I will be striving to accomplish the following two limited objectives. First, I hope to demonstrate that the discontinuity that the modernists emphasize is just that, an *emphasis*—it is less an observation than it is an ideologically motivated construction. Second, I hope to reveal some of these unarticulated ideological motives that underlie this modernist choice of emphasis, and to call into question the value of this choice.

This present study was originally completed in 1997. As of that time there was relatively little discussion of these meta-level issues; as mentioned above, modernists and traditionists simply ignored or dismissed each other's views (while—*significantly*—often practicing some form of engaged Buddhism side by side). In the short time since 1997, the field of “engaged Buddhist studies” has developed a fair amount, and I have tried to update this essay accordingly to reflect some of these developments. As we shall see in the section on Christopher Queen near the end of this essay, one significant development has been the identification of the continuity/discontinuity issue (the “newness” question) as an important question in its own right. Indeed, the call for papers for this 2000 *JBE* conference was included the following invitation: “Papers dealing with . . . the question of whether social engagement is a modern innovation or inherent in the tradition, are also encouraged.” Nor should this “newness” question be considered merely an “academic” question—as Kenneth Kraft observes after an examination of the merits and demerits of stressing either continuity or discontinuity: “The process of articu-

lating a field is not only an avenue to understanding; it can also be a type of engagement” (2000: 506).

However, in spite of these promising developments, the legacy of the views and attitudes that predominated in this field prior to the early to mid-1990s still has a great deal of momentum, and the ideological commitments, paradigms, and biases prior to this time have their own inertia. Thus, I believe that many of the observations and critiques below—focussed as they are on pre-1997 writings—may be still relevant and useful to today’s dialogue. Again, in the later section on Queen, et al., I will review and critique some of the more recent developments in engaged Buddhist studies.

To accomplish the objectives mentioned above (to show that discontinuity is only one possible emphasis and to suggest some of the ideological motivations that may underlie such an emphasis) will require a close examination of many textual passages published by these authors. We will first look at a few passages representative of the traditionalists, followed by a few from the modernists. This will provide us with enough raw material to begin to observe some of the patterns of thought characteristic of these two groups. Because engaged Buddhist authors themselves tend to be relatively short on methodology, I will next bring in some methodological strategies and observations from some Buddhist scholars writing on topics other than engaged Buddhism. Armed with these tools, we will then examine in greater detail further passages representative of the modernists’ views, biases, presuppositions, agendas, and so forth. We will be focusing our critique on the modernists because it is they who claim the methodological higher ground, even though (I hope to show) they are no less ideologically driven than are the traditionalists whom they claim are so naïve. In particular, I will argue that the modernists’ views may be seen to stem from a subtle form of neocolonial, neo-Orientalist bias. By the end of this essay, I hope to have synthe-

sized some methodological approaches that may have the potential to bear more fruitful conclusions concerning the status of Buddhist social teaching and practice.

Overview of the Traditionists

Traditionist engaged Buddhist scholars are comprised of some scholars from historically Buddhist cultures as well as a few from Western cultures. Representatives of the former include Thich Nhat Hanh, Sivaraksa, Rahula, Ven. Khemadhammo, Kato Shonin, and H. H. the Dalai Lama. Representatives of the latter include Patricia Hunt-Perry, Lyn Fine, Paula Green, Joanna Macy, Stephen Batchelor, Bernard Glassman Rōshi, and Robert Thurman, among others.

The essence of Buddhism

As mentioned above, traditionists maintain that the very “essence” or “spirit” of Buddhism involves a commitment to social engagement. Thus, they discern a continuity between modern forms of Buddhism (including so-called engaged Buddhism) and the Buddhisms of the past. Since Buddhists have always been socially engaged, a “socially engaged Buddhism” is nothing new. Indeed, even Thich Nhat Hanh, who is himself credited with coining the very term “engaged Buddhism,” does not seem to consider the engaged aspect of Buddhism to be anything new—as Kenneth Kraft reveals:

At times [Nhat Hanh] . . . even dismisses the term he coined as a misnomer: “Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. If you practice Buddhism in your family, in society, it is engaged Buddhism.” (1992: 18)(6)

And in a contribution to *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (ed. Queen, 2000) entitled “All Buddhism is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing,”⁽⁷⁾ Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine write:

The fundamental premise of this chapter is that, for Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing, peacemaking and socially engaged Buddhism encompass all aspects of life. . . . The basic tenets of engaged Buddhism in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh that we have identified include: (1) “Buddhism is already engaged. If it is not, it is not Buddhism.”⁽⁸⁾(2000: 35-36)

Elsewhere, Nhat Hanh himself clearly indicates that engagement (here a nonviolent struggle or action) is a natural impulse (that, by implication, could not be anything new or unique to the modern era):

The essence of nonviolence is love. Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally. (1996: 57) You cannot prefabricate techniques of nonviolent action and put them into a book for people to use. That would be naive. If you are alert and creative, you will know what to do and what not to do. The basic requisite is that you have the essence, the substance of nonviolence and compassion in yourself. Then everything you do will be in the direction of nonviolence. (1996: 62)

The Thai “reformer” Sivaraksa (Buddhadasa’s protégé) echoes this contention about the nature or essence of Buddhism:

Religion means deep commitment, and personal transformation. To be of help we must become more selfless and less selfish. To do this, we have to take more and more

moral responsibility in society. This is the essence of religion, from ancient times right up to the present. (1988: 12)

If “moral responsibility in society” has been the very “essence” of Buddhism “from ancient times right up to the present,” then it goes without saying that social engagement could be nothing new in Buddhism—that “good” Buddhists, at least, have always been socially engaged.

In an interview with Christopher Queen, Bernie Glassman Rōshi gives us a Zen echo to Nhat Hanh and Sivaraksa’s sentiments. Glassman asks rhetorically, “How did [the Buddha] benefit mankind by sitting in meditation?” He answers his own question:

This is a problem with the term ‘engaged Buddhism’ in a broad sense. . . . Anything one is doing to make themselves whole in their own life, or realizing the Way, or becoming enlightened—whatever term you would use—these are all involved in service, because if we realize the oneness of life, then each person is serving every other person and is reducing suffering. (Glassman, as quoted by Queen, 2000: 104)

And later in the same interview he comments:

I still feel—maybe it’s wrong—that if you keep on practicing, even in the cave, there is no way of not working on social issues, only the method might be different. . . . Social action is established now [in Buddhism in America]. It was always amazing to me how people could think it wasn’t an element of Buddhism, but I don’t hear that anymore. (Glassman, as quoted by Queen, 2000: 122)(9)

Paula Green reports on Kato Shonin, instrumental in developing Nichidatsu Fujii’s *Nipponzan Myohoji* order of *Nichiren* Buddhism in America:

In reflecting on Buddhism and social engagement, Kato Shonin believes that since the Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma on this earth, this earth is where we obtain his teachings and reach enlightenment. . . . If individuals practice the *Lotus Sutra* correctly, Kato Shonin says, “life itself is engagement and we do not need to separate into engaged and not-engaged Buddhism.[...]” Every moment of life is engagement; every moment of life is Buddhist. (2000: 153-154)

Stephen Batchelor—well-trained as a Buddhist monk in both the Tibetan and Korean traditions—also invokes an “engaged essence” in Buddhism in a personal communication to Sandra Bell in 1997:

Leaving aside language of engagement—or its opposite—Buddhist practice, in essence, is one in which a person tries to seek and balance . . . wisdom . . . with compassion. . . . Traditionally these have been seen as the two wings of a bird. . . . [A] tension between insight and understanding on the one hand and a compassionate response to the world on the other . . . is a classic tension. If one starts from there the whole notion of making an issue out of engagement becomes superfluous. (Batchelor, as quoted by Bell, 2000: 413)

Historically ancient origins

Most (if not all) traditionists make arguments similar to the above in their writings.⁽¹⁰⁾ If the very essence of Buddhism includes social responsibility and engagement, then that essence must be clearly evidenced *throughout* Buddhism’s history. The great Sinhalese scholar Wal-

pola Rahula wrote a whole book (*The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*) defending this very point. Christopher Queen tells us:

“Buddhism is based on service to others,” wrote Walpola Rahula . . . in 1946. . . . Rahula . . . argued on historical grounds that political and social engagement was the “heritage of the bhikkhu” and the essence of Buddhism. (1996: 14)

In an anthology dedicated to socially engaged Buddhism, *The Path of Compassion* (ed. Eppsteiner, 1988), Joanna Macy reveals her own surprise at discovering that traditional Sri Lankan monks found an “engaged Buddhism” to be nothing new:

Some fellow scholars of Buddhism, whom I had consulted, considered Sarvodaya’s(11) reinterpretation of doctrine—such as in its version of the four noble truths—to be a new-fangled adulteration of Buddhism, lacking doctrinal respectability. To present release from suffering in terms of irrigation, literacy, and marketing cooperatives appears to them to trivialize the Dharma. When I asked very learned Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka what they thought of this recasting of the four noble truths, I did so with the expectation that they, too, would see it as a corruption of the purity of the Buddha’s teachings. Instead, almost invariably, they seemed surprised that a Buddhist would ask such a question—and gave an answer that was like a slight rap on the knuckles: “But it is the same teaching, don’t you see? Whether you put it on the psycho-spiritual plane or on the socio-economic plane, there is suffering and there is cessation of suffering.” (1988: 179)

In a contribution to another “engaged” anthology, *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence* (ed. Kraft, 1992), Robert Thurman expresses the opinion that Buddhist social activism began with Śākyamuni himself:

[Certain scholars] . . . are overlooking the nonviolent strategy and social policy instituted by Shakyamuni Buddha. [...] Buddhist activism began when the Buddha decided, “No, I will not run a kingdom. Instead, I’m going to start a Sangha, a monastic army.” (1992a: 84-85)

He further explicitly states:

Shakyamuni’s original strategy for conquering violence through non-violence was intended to operate not only on an individual level but also on the scale of an entire society. If we reconsider the history of Buddhism from this perspective, we see that the creation of a monastic order was a precisely planned nonviolent movement. (1992a: 86)

And finally, in *The Path of Compassion*, Thurman unequivocally states:

The primary Buddhist position on social action is one of total activism, an unswerving commitment to complete self-transformation and complete world-transformation. This activism becomes fully explicit in the Universal Vehicle (*Mahayana*). . . . But it is also compellingly implicit in the Individual Vehicle (*Hinayana*) in both the Buddha’s actions and in his teachings. . . . Thus, it is squarely in the center of all Buddhist traditions to bring basic principles to bear on actual contemporary problems to develop ethical, even political, guidelines for action. (1988b: 120)

In the conclusion to this essay he argues that “individualistic transcendentalism[,] . . . pacifism[,] . . . educational universalism[,] . . . and socialistic sharing of wealth . . . encompass mainstream Buddhist social practice, as counseled by [those at least as far back as] Nagarjuna” (142).

Disengagement as a Western misperception

In “The Social Teachings of the Buddha” (excerpted from *What the Buddha Taught*), Rahula wrote:

Buddhism does not consider material welfare as an end in itself: it is only a means to an end—a higher and nobler end. But it is a means which is indispensable, indispensable in achieving a higher purpose for human happiness.

The Buddha did not take life out of the context of its social and economic background; he looked at it as a whole, in all its social, economic, and political aspects. His teachings on ethical, spiritual, and philosophical problems are fairly well known. But little is known, particularly in the West, about his teaching on social, economic, and political matters. Yet there are numerous discourses dealing with these scattered throughout the ancient Buddhist texts. (1988: 104)

Sivaraksa not only agrees that Westerners have been relatively ignorant of Buddhism’s social dimension, but he further maintains that if Buddhism has appeared disengaged to Westerners, this appearance itself has in fact been due to Western influences:

Many people, particularly in the West, think that Buddhism is only for deep meditation and personal transfor-

mation, that it has nothing to do with society. This is not true. Particularly in South and Southeast Asia, for many centuries Buddhism has been a great strength for society. . . . But things have changed, due mainly to colonialism, materialism, and [W]estern education. (1988: 12)

Some Westerners want to become Buddhist monks only to escape from the world of turmoil, to benefit only themselves. My own experience over the last 30 years clearly indicates that Buddhism in the West has been practiced by many who did not want to get involved with society. (1988: 15)

Joanna Macy echoes Sivaraksa's and Rahula's contention that a *disengaged* Buddhism is a Western construction:

Early Western scholars of Buddhism, beginning with Max Weber, have perceived Buddhism as “other-worldly” and without specific formulations of social ethics. They understood the release from this world as Buddhism's goal. Yet the Pali scriptures abound in passages where the Buddha deals explicitly with social ethics, and many more cases where the social implications are certainly obvious. (1988: 173)

Indeed, it is not only “[e]arly Western scholars of Buddhism” such as Max Weber who have construed Buddhism as “‘other-worldly’ and without specific formulations of social ethics,” for as Christopher Queen contends in his 1996 anthology:

Today, after eighty years of new research, many specialists are inclined to agree with Weber that, in its essence,

primitive Buddhism was not based on service to others,
but on the quest for individual enlightenment. (1996: 17)

In a footnote to this claim, Queen cites “Weber, Kitagawa, Bardwell Smith, and others” as being among these “many specialists” supposedly in this (modernist) Weberian lineage who share a “negative assessment of Buddhism’s contribution to social and political thought.” However (ironically), in a 1999 review of Queen’s 1996 book, Bardwell Smith himself objects to “[Queen’s] contention that scholarly discussions of Buddhism have typically characterized this tradition as one of ‘personal liberation’ to the subordination, if not the neglect, of any social message,” and he particularly objects to being associated with any such (modernist) scholars:

As is accurately indicated in the other essays (including Queen’s own chapter on Ambedkar), these two thrusts [personal and social] in Buddhist teachings and practice were never intended to be separated, however much they may be distinguished. Ironically, though I am cited as among those who provide this negative assessment, I agree fully with what Queen and the others are saying about the connection between personal and social liberation. . . . If some interpreters of Buddhism, as cited by Queen, separate these goals, this has never been my position. (1999: 501)

From this we can see that the “disengaged” label is not only misapplied (according to traditionists) to traditional Buddhism by certain (namely modernist) Western Buddhologists, but that it can also be misapplied to other Western Buddhologists themselves! (We can likewise watch out for misapplications of the modernist “engaged” label.)

Overview of the Modernists

Modernist engaged Buddhist scholars are comprised of a few scholars from historically Buddhist cultures and what would appear to be the vast majority of scholars from Western cultures. Some Modernists include Cynthia Eller, Nelson Foster, Richard Gombrich, Ken Jones, Joseph Kitagawa, Kenneth Kraft, Christopher Queen, Aitken Rōshi, English-born Sangharakshita, Gary Snyder, Judith Simmer-Brown, and Max Weber, among others.

Traditional Buddhism has not been socially engaged—Only latent implications

Modernists make either the strong assertion that historically Buddhism (and especially early Buddhism) has *not* been socially interested at all or the somewhat moderated assertion that it has been only indirectly or latently so interested. Joseph Kitagawa makes the stronger claim in “Buddhism and Social Change: An Historical Perspective” when he writes:

[In early Buddhism] neither the monastics nor the laity seemed to have given much thought one way or the other to the norms and structures of the social or political order, which to them had no immediate religious significance. (1980: 89)

[T]he kingship and the state . . . had no religious significance to the early Buddhist. (1980: 91)

And Kitagawa’s assessment of Buddhist social engagement in East Asia is not much better:

Chinese Buddhism contributed very little in the way of guiding principles to the Chinese society and nation. . . .

Similar observations may be made regarding the influence of Chinese Buddhism on the socio-political order in general. (1980: 97)

Likewise, Ken Jones states that “present-day interest in Buddhist activism has little warrant in scripture, history and tradition” (1989: 207). Such activism is historically unwarranted, he claims, because Buddhist philosophers have in fact never been interested in the social realm. To back up this contention, he quotes Gary Snyder [from *The Path of Compassion*, 1988: 82]:

Historically, Buddhist philosophers have failed to analyse out the degree to which ignorance and suffering are caused or encouraged by social factors, considering fear-and-desire to be given facts of the human condition. Consequently the major concern of Buddhist philosophy is epistemology and ‘psychology’ with no attention paid to historical or sociological problems. (Snyder, as quoted by Jones, 1989: 207-208)

Nelson Foster, interestingly, seems to be willing to admit that early (Pāli) Buddhism may have been socially involved (or at least “aware”), but he claims that the East Asian Buddhism that he studies was not: “[I]t is clear from the Pali texts ... that early Buddhism was aware of itself as a force for social good. . . . As Buddhism moved into China, however, its social orientation changed quickly and thoroughly” (1988: 49). Foster then describes this quick and thorough East Asian “change,” also using Gary Snyder as an authority:

Gary Snyder has probably gone to the heart of the matter in observing that the Chinese world view (and later the Japanese) precluded a significant social role for Buddhism. . . . Chinese society effectively bottled up the social im-

pulse in Buddhism and thereby set the direction of Zen.
(1988: 50)

It is perhaps more common for modernist scholars to make the slightly moderated claim that there may be discernible social implications *latent* in Buddhist teachings. For example, in the introductory essay to the anthology *The Path of Compassion*, Kenneth Kraft writes:

When . . . [the contributors to this volume] examine Buddhism's 2,500-year-old heritage, these authors find that the principles and even some of the techniques of an engaged Buddhism have been **latent** in the tradition since the time of its founder. (1988: xii-xiii)(12)

And in *Inner Peace, World Peace*, Cynthia Eller states her own opinion, backed by Jones and Foster:

[A] “socially engaged” nonviolence—prompted by Buddhism’s encounter with the Christian demand for social relevance—is . . . difficult to uncover. The elements of a socially engaged nonviolence are **latent** in the Buddhist tradition, but an overall concept of social engagement is not at the forefront, and advocates of modern Buddhist nonviolence are frank about admitting this. As Ken Jones laments, “Buddhism has **no explicit** body of social and political theory comparable to its psychology or metaphysics.” Or as Nelson Foster comments, “It is remarkable that Zen **lacks a clear tradition** of social action. One searches in vain for a body of teaching equivalent to the ‘social gospel’ of Christianity.” (1992: 102)

Jones himself, who at times adopts the stronger negative position, refers in the following passages to social activism as being an “extension” or an

“amplification” of what is (he argues elsewhere in the same book) only latent in Buddhist teachings:

Buddhist social activism—‘Engaged Buddhism’—is . . . seen . . . simply as the logical extension of the traditional teachings of morality and compassion to twentieth-century conditions. (1989: 21)

A socially engaged Buddhism needs no other rationale than that of being an amplification of traditional Buddhist morality, a social ethic brought forth by the needs and potentialities of present-day society. (1989: 194)

As all of the above passages indicate, the modernists’ views indeed seem to reflect a resurgence of Weberian thought. In support of his contention that “after eighty years of new research, many specialists are inclined to agree with Weber” (*cf.* p. 9), Queen quotes another one of these “specialists,” Richard Gombrich (apparently a stronger example than Bardwell Smith), who takes the strongest possible position:

[Buddha’s] concern was to reform individuals and help them to leave society forever, not to reform the world. . . . He never preached against social inequality, only declared its irrelevance to salvation. (Gombrich, as quoted by Queen, 1996: 17)

The modern world faces unprecedented socio-political problems

Another factor that modernists like to stress is how “unique” or “different” our modern circumstances and problems are. For example, in “To Enter the Marketplace,” Nelson Foster laments:

The ancient teachers did not live in a world as ruined and miserable and precarious as ours. We cannot know how they would have responded had they felt the urgency of the atomic age. (1988: 51)

Likewise, in “Speaking Truth to Power: The Buddhist Peace Fellowship,” Judith Simmer-Brown quotes BPF cofounder Aitken Rōshi as saying:

The Buddha did not live in a time like ours, when dangerous competition between nations threatens to blow up the world. He was not faced with the probability of biological holocaust. . . . I wonder what he would say today. (Aitken Rōshi, as quoted by Simmer-Brown, 2000: 81)([13](#))

In an excellent special issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1997: 65, no. 2) dedicated to *Articles on the Theme of “Religious Responses to Problems of Population, Consumption, and Degradation of the Environment,”* Rita Gross writes:

[T]he key question is what values and practices would convince people to consume and reproduce less when they have the technological ability to consume and reproduce more. The world’s religions have not previously faced this situation, which explains why ecological ethics have not been in the forefront of religious thinking in any tradition. (1997: 335)

And in the introduction to his 1992 anthology, Kenneth Kraft writes:

In cases such as the treatment of animals in scientific research, classic Buddhist tenets are being applied to situations that differ greatly from the contexts in which those tenets were originally conceived. The Buddhist creed of nonviolence that once functioned as a personal moral

code for monks in ancient India is now expected to provide guidelines for dealing with complex social and political dilemmas. Though such leaps may seem dubious from certain scholarly or religious standpoints, they are earnestly being attempted nonetheless. Graphic reminders of the discrepancies between ancient and modern worldviews are furnished by the traditional stories cited in these pages. (1992: 6)

Modern Western socio-political theory presents unique and unprecedented solutions—It must not be “read back” into Buddhism—“Historical reconstruction” must be avoided

Modernists consider the unique problems of the modern world to have spawned some unique solutions. For example, in the same 1992 introduction Kraft first cautiously writes:

An essayist in the *New Yorker* magazine recently observed that nonviolence “ranks as one of the few great modern discoveries.” At first, this remark may appear shortsighted: Jainism and Buddhism have stressed nonviolence for millennia, and the Sermon on the Mount was not preached last Sunday.

But he then continues, highlighting the significance of the modern (mostly Western) contributions in this area:

Yet the point is well taken. The twentieth century has witnessed Gandhi[,] . . . Martin Luther King[,] . . . and the nonviolent reversals of . . . Communist party power[s]. . . . Though we tend to associate the concept of nonviolence with ancient Asian thought, some of the most notable in-

stances of nonviolent political action have occurred in the West during this century. [...]

Gene Sharp argues in his essay that the political potential of this “modern” discovery has yet to be fully appreciated. (1992: 7)

When traditionists counter that many such “modern solutions” are in fact evident in ancient Buddhist teachings, modernists simply dismiss such traditionist contentions as methodologically naïve and historically “reconstructive.” These modernists tend to be well aware of the scriptural “evidence” that the traditionists cite (Nāgārjuna’s *Jewel Garland*; Aśoka’s edicts; the *Cakkavati*-, *Kūṭadanta*- and *Sigālovāda-suttas*, and so forth), but they claim that too much has been read back into such sources. For example, in *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism*,⁽¹⁴⁾ Ken Jones levels the “reconstructionist” critique at what I have been calling the traditionists (what he here calls “modernists”):

We believe that it is unscholarly to transfer the scriptural social teaching uncritically and without careful qualification to modern societies, or to proclaim that the Buddha was a democrat and an internationalist. (1989: 66)

[I]t is not legitimate to find instant scriptural and historical authority for contemporary secular ideas and ideologies (like democracy or Marxism) by *reading them back* into the evidence from scripture and history, whilst ignoring both the spiritual significance of that evidence and/or its culture-bound meaning. This is a common device of . . . reductive modernism⁽¹⁵⁾(1989: 197-98)

Concerned to make Buddhism manifestly relevant to the

social and political requirements of the post-colonial era, these [reductive] modernists tend to read the scriptures in terms of certain dominant contemporary ideas, as if they were originally a programme for social reform; their over-arching spiritual and existential context and significance is lost beneath a burgeoning humanistic rationalism. Meanings are read into them which are at best arguable and at worst extravagant and tendentious. (1989: 237)

Likewise, in his introduction to the recent anthology *Engaged Buddhism* (1996: 20), Christopher Queen levels a similar charge at what he discerns to be two types of “reconstructionists.” Thus, following good Buddhist style, having first convincingly presented his *pūrvapakṣa* (the opponent’s view—primarily Rahula’s), he then presents a lengthy argument in which he attempts to refute this view by formulating his own definition of “social engagement” in such a way that he can admonish us to reject the “two extremes of historical reconstruction.” These (traditionist) extremes are (1) “the extreme of a primitive Buddhist counterculture bent on social reform,” as exemplified, presumably, by those such as Thurman, and (2) “the extreme of a sangha directing social change from its position within the power elite,” as exemplified by Rahula.

While Queen focuses the bulk of his critique on his second extreme, Kenneth Kraft takes on (at least implicitly) what Queen has identified as the first extreme, here with reference to the essay by Thurman (1988b) cited above (p. 8):

According to Robert Thurman, certain Mahayana texts reveal the outlines of a society that is “individualistic, transcendentalist, pacifist, universalist, and socialist.” Carried to an extreme, such interpretations envision an ideal Buddhism too far removed from its actual historical development. But the thrust of the argument is constructive:

to show that the Buddhist tradition contains **untapped** resources for skillful social action and peacemaking, accessible to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. (1992: 13)

Here, of course, the implication is that Thurman *has* carried his interpretation to an idealistic, ahistorical extreme (he has “read back,” in Jones’s terms)—for, as we saw above, he certainly does not maintain that the Buddhist tradition contains merely “**untapped** resources for skillful social action.”

Modern Western socio-political theory can be used to activate Buddhism’s latent potential to create a new amalgam: Western/Buddhist social engagement

Having thus dismissed traditionists’ views as naïve and reconstructionist, and having emphasized the unprecedented uniqueness of our contemporary problems, modernists finally stress the uniqueness and “modern-ness” (and “Western-ness”) of their solution, “engaged Buddhism.” So, with regard to this “nascent movement” (1988: xii), Kraft beams: “Qualities that were inhibited in pre-modern Asian settings . . . can now be actualized through Buddhism’s exposure to the West, where ethical sensitivity, social activism, and egalitarianism are emphasized” (1988: xiii). (16) Nelson Foster reflects and magnifies this confident beaming, producing an image of a Western Zen permeated with an excited anticipation of what could be:

Fortunately, prajña itself does not die, and as long as za-zen and realization are taught, an opportunity exists to renew the tradition we inherited. Indeed, as Zen moves west again, it enters a relatively open environment that may allow the sangha to live out its politics to a greater extent than ever before. With external constraints amounting to little more than the loose demands of

neighborly courtesy and local ordinances, American Zen seems free to develop according to the lights of prajña. [...] Already American sanghas can be seen shattering some of the strictures that have bound Zen in Asia. (1988: 51-52)

In fact, Foster does not merely think that such a development *might* occur—rather, he considers the Western “environment” to be so optimal that the “organic development of Western Zen” is “inevitable.” (1988: 56).

In “The Impact of Christianity on Buddhist Nonviolence in the West,” Cynthia Eller writes in a similar vein:

Buddhism in the West is in constant interaction with the Judeo-Christian tradition—if only because most of its practitioners were raised in homes and/or a culture dominated by these religions. . . . When the search for a genuinely Buddhist nonviolence is filtered through the latent demands of predominantly Christian conscience, what emerges is a new Buddhism and a new Buddhist ethics, no less valid than the many new Buddhisms that have been produced in the 2,500 years of the Dharma’s movement eastward around the globe. (1992: 91)

Likewise, Robert Aitken Rōshi traced the roots of contemporary engaged Buddhism to the Judeo-Christian West when in 1984 he wrote, “We do not find Buddhist social movements developing until the late nineteenth century, under the influence of Christianity and Western ideas generally.”⁽¹⁷⁾ Queen is even more specific about the origins of this modern East-West blend. He maintains that it is only “once we have rejected two extremes of historical reconstruction” (*cf.* above, p. 14) that “we recognize that the shape and style of contemporary engaged Buddhism does

not appear in Buddhist history until about the year 1880” (1996: 20). In particular, he states:

It is only in the late nineteenth-century revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka—and particularly in . . . Olcott . . . and . . . Dharmapala—that we first recognize the spirit and substance of the religious activism we call “socially engaged Buddhism.” And it is only in this context that we first meet the missing ingredient. . . . This ingredient is the influence of European and American religious and political thought (and perhaps equally important, western methods of institutional development and public communication) on the evolution of modern Buddhism. (1996: 20)

Thus he concludes that in fact such an engaged Buddhism is necessarily an “amalgam of Eastern and Western elements” (1996: 31). (We will be returning to these arguments in the section on Queen, et al., and in the conclusion.)

Summary of the modernists’ views

The above views and methodologies tend to be commonly shared (to varying degrees) among all modernists. These modernist positions may be summarized as follows:

(1) Traditional Buddhism Has Not Been Socially Engaged—Only Latent Implications

Traditional (Asian) forms of Buddhism have emphasized the “spiritual” concerns of individual liberation from the world; they may have had *latent* social teachings (particularly in Mahāyāna), but these have always taken a back seat to soteriological concerns. Social teachings have rarely (if ever) been fully articulated or actualized in these traditional societies.

(Aśoka is frequently cited as *the one* main exception to this—but the importance of his example is minimized, as we shall see).

(2) The Modern World Faces Unprecedented Socio-Political Problems

In addition, the problems facing the modern world (social, political, economic, ecological, military, medical, and so forth) are unique to this time; the Buddhisms embedded in traditional societies have never had to face such intricate, complex, and interrelated problems.

(3) Modern Western Socio-political Theory Presents Unique And Unprecedented Analyses and Solutions—It Must Not Be “Read Back” Into Buddhism—“Historical Reconstruction” Must Be Avoided

Unlike traditional Asian Buddhist societies, modern (nineteenth- and twentieth century) Western societies *have* developed a sophisticated understanding of the systemic and institutional forms and causes of suffering. This understanding has given rise to unique social and political theories and practices relating to human rights, democracy, civil disobedience, and so forth. These insights have developed due to historical circumstances unique to the modern era (especially in the West), and we must not “read back” such theories into traditional Buddhism where they are in fact lacking or at best only indirectly implied.

(4) Traditional Buddhism Is Therefore Not An Adequate Model For Engagement

Therefore, given (1), (2), and (3), although we may draw spiritual inspiration from traditional forms of Buddhism, such forms (as they stand) can never serve as an adequate model for social engagement in the modern world.

(5) Modern Western Socio-Political Theory Can Be Used to Activate Buddhism’s Latent Potential to Create a New Amalgam: Western/Buddhist Engagement

Nevertheless, modern Western social and political theories and practices may benefit from some of Buddhism's spirit and inspiration (and vice versa). Therefore, modern Western insights and traditional Eastern Buddhist insights should be brought to bear on each other in order to bring about a new, revitalized form of Buddhism (and social theory) that is more "relevant" to the problems of the modern world. Such a blending of the best of West and East should be embraced, not feared—it may be our only hope. The nascent engaged Buddhist movement may well be just the amalgam we now need.

Methodological Issues

Before we undertake our detailed critique of certain modernists' views, we must first develop some methodological tools and vocabulary. As mentioned above, we will borrow some insights from discussions taking place outside of the engaged Buddhist dialogue. In particular, we will examine two essays from *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (1996) that address some methodological concerns that can be very usefully applied to our study of socially engaged Buddhism. This will enable us to begin to explore the possibility that these modernists' views might in fact be the heirs to an entrenched neocolonial, neo-Orientalist bias among Buddhologists (and Western scholars in general). Finally, we will end this methodological section with some brief observations concerning Westerners' construction of their own identity.

Orientalist emphases and isolates—Constructed dualities

The first pertinent essay is the introduction by editor Donald Lopez, Jr. In this overview essay, Lopez makes the following relevant observations about the emphasis and focus in the early European study of Buddhism:

[M]uch of the representation of Buddhism to the west, both by western scholars and Asian apologists, has centered on philosophical doctrines. . . . Buddhism has typically been studied as a thing apart from the rest of the intellectual and cultural history of India (or China or Japan). (1996: 8)

[T]he Buddhism that largely concerned European scholars was an historical projection derived exclusively from manuscripts and blockprints, texts devoted largely to a “philosophy,” which had been produced and had circulated among a small circle of monastic elites. With rare exception, there was little interest in the ways in which such texts were understood by the Buddhists of Asia, less interest in the ways in which such texts were put to use in the service of various ritual functions. (1996: 7)

In other words, according to this critique, early European Buddhologists who saw Buddhism as a “philosophy” (as opposed to, for example, a “religion”) unwittingly projected their form of philosophical Buddhism by means of the “historical” lenses and filters that they employed. In particular, as the above passages show, they accomplished their historical reconstruction by:

- (1) prejudicing *texts* over other types of historical evidence;
- (2) prejudicing a specific, narrow spectrum of texts over other types of texts;
- (3) prejudicing the past (fixed texts) over the present (living oral interpretations) by disregarding contemporary Asian Buddhists’ own understandings of their texts (let alone their overall tradition)(18); and

(4) prejudicing the philosophical uses of those texts by disregarding any of their non-philosophical (for example, ritual) uses.

Thus, the early European Orientalists can be criticized for having constructed Buddhism as a “pure philosophy” through their having studied it as “a thing apart from the rest of the intellectual and cultural history of [Asia].” Or more accurately perhaps, they should be criticized not for having adopted a philosophical focus that ignored, for example, the “ritual” uses of Buddhist texts, but for having constructed a dubious, dualistic “philosophical/ritual” split in the first place.⁽¹⁹⁾ According to such a critique, one can charge that the Orientalists first created such a dualistic philosophical/ritual split, then isolated the philosophical side of this split as “pure, classical Buddhism” (having dismissed any ritual elements as later, degenerate, superstitious folk accretions), and finally identified medieval and modern Asian Buddhists as having corrupted the “pure essence” of their own tradition precisely by mixing these philosophical and ritual dimensions. Through such dualistic constructions and strategies, the Orientalists thus inappropriately wrested from Asian Buddhists the authority to interpret their own tradition.⁽²⁰⁾

Now, if we substitute “socio-political activities” for “ritual functions” in the above discussion, we can derive a critique that I will argue is as appropriate to contemporary modernist engaged Buddhists as it was to early European Orientalists generations ago. For example, if we make such substitutions in Lopez’s final sentence above, we get:

With rare exception, among modernist engaged Buddhists there has been little interest in the ways in which texts have been understood by the contemporary Buddhists of Asia, less interest in the ways in which such texts have been put to use in the service of socio-political activities.

In other words, I believe it can be argued that modernist engaged Buddhists who see Buddhism as having been historically “disengaged” may have unwittingly projected their form of “disengaged” Buddhism by means of the “historical” lenses and filters that they have employed. In such a case, paralleling the early European Orientalists, they can be criticized for having constructed Buddhism as socially disengaged through their having studied it as “a thing apart from the rest of the intellectual and cultural [and socio-political] history of [Asia].” Or, again more accurately perhaps, they should be criticized not for having critiqued Buddhism’s soteriological drive—assumed to be directed at other-worldly concerns, and thus socially disengaged—but rather for having constructed a dubious, dualistic “soteriological (disengaged)/social (engaged)” split in the first place.(21) In particular, modernists might be said to have created such a split when they charge that living traditionist Asian Buddhists (Rahula, Sivaraksa, Macy’s Sri Lankan monks, H. H. The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and so forth)—who claim that their texts (and practices) have always had direct social significance, utility, and impact—are naïvely reconstructing their own history, and when they conclude that these traditionists are to be dismissed as having “read” contemporary ideas “into” the past and as having over-idealized the “not-so-engaged legacy” of their tradition.(22) I would thus caution that the modernists themselves may have constructed a disengaged history for Buddhism in order to appropriate for themselves the title of inventor of engaged Buddhism. Such a modernist appropriation of interpretive power would indeed be reminiscent of the Orientalists generations ago, and such a neo-Orientalist bias must be seen to be ironic, of course, given that it is the modernists who routinely accuse the traditionists of historical reconstruction.

The unavowed colonial stance: Recognition, appropriation, and distancing

The other pertinent essay from *Curators of the Buddha* is “Oriental Wisdom and the Cure of Souls: Jung and the Indian East” by Luis O. Gómez. In this essay, Gómez brings into sharp focus many observations regarding the biases evident in Carl G. Jung’s theories and writings. Though Gómez’s essay accords appropriate respect to Jung for making many valuable contributions to psychology and for engendering a powerful interest in “the East,” it nevertheless lays bare many of Jung’s Orientalist biases and unacknowledged neocolonial agenda. In particular, Gómez clearly demonstrates how Jung himself misread Asian texts in such a way as to construct an Eastern “Other” to serve as a foil to an (equally constructed) Western “Self.” Thus, Jung wrote of the “Eastern mind” (with its “psychic aspect” and its tendency toward an “inordinate amount of abstraction”) as *opposed* to the “Western mind” (with its penchant for “scrupulously accurate observation”) (1996: 208), and he constructed many of his psychological theories on the basis of such manufactured polar dichotomies.

Many of Gómez’s observations regarding Jung will also be of immense value and relevance to our present study. Lopez summarizes several of these important observations in his introduction:

Gómez’s essay examines how Jung created his own colonial economy during his repeated ventures into translations of Asian texts. He judged the raw materials of Asian religion to be valuable, but unusable and even dangerous to the European in their unrefined form. He therefore removed them from their cultural and historical contexts and then manufactured theories from them for Europeans, to be used to remedy deficiencies in their own souls. . . . In his writings he also exported Asian symbols (such as the mandala) back to Asia, attempting to explain (in the

sense of leveling) to Asians the true nature of their own symbols and psyches. . . . The healing power of Asia can only heal when mediated through Jung's theories, with Jung serving as the intermediary between East and West, both as diagnostician and healer. (1996: 17)

This is a powerful critique. As above, we can rework this latter paragraph to address our present issue as follows:

Modernists create their own neo-colonial economy during their repeated ventures into translations of Buddhist texts. They judge the raw materials of Buddhism to be valuable, but unusable and even dangerous (or irrelevant) to the modern Westerner in their unrefined form. They therefore (subtly) remove them from their cultural and historical contexts and then manufacture theories from them for modern Westerners (especially 'engaged Buddhists'), to be used to remedy deficiencies in their own identities and socio-political circumstances. . . . In their writings they also export Buddhist symbols and 'history' . . . back to Asia, attempting to explain (in the sense of leveling) to Asian Buddhists the true nature (or a more pertinent use) of their own symbols . . . and socio-political history. . . . The socially transformative power potentially *latent* in Asian Buddhism can only transform society when activated by and mediated through the Western modernists' socio-political theories, with the Western modernist serving as the intermediary between East and West, both as strategist and social activist.

Gómez summarizes the methodological observations implicit throughout his own essay when he explicitly draws out what he calls the "Orientalist bias and the unavowed colonial stance." This involves "the three move-

ments of recognition, appropriation, and distancing.” This concise but potent threefold analysis will be of the greatest use to us in our study. In Gómez’s own words:

We should ask . . . what defines the Orientalist bias, and the unavowed colonial stance, in Jung’s writings on Asia. . . . This stance is clearly outlined in the three movements of recognition, appropriation, and distancing. The European maintains his control over Asia first by conceding authority to the alien culture, then by assuming that authority for himself, and last by asserting the difference that separates him from the other. (1996: 229)

We can now discern these three movements in the above reworked passage concerning the modernist engaged Buddhists:

(1) **Recognition:** Modernists . . . judge the raw materials of Buddhism to be valuable.

(2) **Appropriation:** They therefore (subtly) remove them from their cultural and historical contexts and then manufacture theories from them for modern Westerners (especially “engaged Buddhists”), to be used to remedy deficiencies in their own identities and socio-political circumstances. . . . In their writings they also export Buddhist symbols and “history” . . . back to Asia, attempting to explain (in the sense of leveling) to Asian Buddhists the true nature (or a more pertinent use) of their own symbols . . . and socio-political history.

(3) **Distancing:** The socially transformative power potentially *latent* in Asian Buddhism can only transform society when mediated through the Western modernists’ socio-political theories, with the Western modernist serving as the intermediary between East and West, both as strategist and social activist.

Thus, the typical Orientalist moves are: (1) **Recognition**: to hail the alien tradition as (at least *potentially*) valuable; (2) **Appropriation**: to mine one's sources (texts, "native informants," and so forth)⁽²³⁾ for sufficient information to feel as though one has learned enough about the tradition that one can speak authoritatively *for* the tradition; and (3) **Distancing**: to claim that, due to one's position as "other," and due to one's learning, one has in fact earned a *privileged* (more "objective") perspective on the alien tradition, and that one is thus uniquely positioned to critique and explain this tradition. Distancing will also usually involve the further claims that, due to having been illumined by the "other," one has a unique insight into one's own tradition, and that one is thus uniquely disposed to be the authoritative intermediary between the two traditions.

The Orientalists' moves and claims may not at first seem to be so unreasonable. After all, who other than one trained in both traditions might validly claim to be an authoritative spokesperson or intermediary? Indeed, I would suggest, one making such a claim *may* be relatively justified in doing so. The key to what would make it a problematical claim—an Orientalist claim, that is—would seem to lie in Gomez's initial "recognition" phase. As I would elaborate it, the recognition phase involves more than just an acknowledgment that the "other" tradition is valuable: it also *necessarily* involves a *construction* of the "other" tradition that is supposedly being merely "recognized" in the first place. Moreover, for this phase to qualify as truly Orientalist, and for the next two phases to ensue, this constructive process must remain relatively unconscious (thereby masking various self-identity agendas).

Furthermore, assuming that the constructive process underlying the recognition phase *does* remain unconscious, we can note that the appropriation and distancing phases will be interrelated in a particular way. Precisely *because* the Orientalist appropriates the authoritative

voice from an alien position (the self-position constructed in the recognition phase, in fact), he will be unlikely to use that voice to speak as an insider or apologist for the tradition (to do so would be to have “gone native,” to have rejected the self-identity initially constructed in the recognition phase). Rather, he will want to consciously distance himself from the tradition (at least somewhat) by assuming the voice of a critic (if even a sympathetic one). The more he appropriates the power to speak for the tradition, the more he will tend to distance himself from it; and the more he distances himself, the more authoritative power he will tend to appropriate. Thus, the Orientalist’s “recognition” (self-other construction) creates the initial context for an appropriation that will inevitably result in a distancing; this distancing will further solidify the original dual self-other construction, which will in turn lead to greater appropriation, and so on.

*Modern Western assumptions: New is improved—“Ours” is better than “theirs”—
Actions speak louder than words*

It would seem that it is an integral part of the self-description and identity of many contemporary Westerners (especially *Americans*) to be new, innovative, original, forward-looking, ground-breaking, paradigm-shifting, and so forth. We see ourselves as competitive innovators. Anything that we do not invent ourselves we can certainly improve upon—if we get it from them, we can make a newer version that will necessarily be better than theirs. We are certain that to be new is to be improved. In addition, we generally describe ourselves as active or engaged (we make things happen, we get the job done), and even as proactive (we have the freedom and foresight to keep a step ahead of what will need to be done next). For some strange reason—I will leave it to others to trace the historical (or karmic) roots—this is just who we tell ourselves we are; it is our identity.

Given this, it should come as no surprise that many Westerners should automatically construct their “Other”—in our present case, Asians, and especially Buddhists—as ancient, traditional, ever looking toward the past, conservative, and so forth. In addition, such uncritical Westerners will likewise generally describe “them” as passive or responsive. If such Westerners are inclined to be disillusioned with (or simply critical of) their own Western tradition, then such constructions will take on a positive, exotic spin: Asian Buddhists are the keepers of an ancient, timeless wisdom, and are passive in the sense of being non-violent, etc. On the other hand, if they are inclined to identify with their own Western tradition (as most are), then such constructions will take on a negative, “third-world” spin: Asian Buddhists are stuck with outmoded models and theories and are passive in the sense of being disengaged and ineffectual. This latter attitude is related to what Thurman has called “temporal chauvinism:”

Americans, and modern people in general, are often afflicted with what I call temporal chauvinism—the assumption that anything devised or conceived before 1960 is primitive and useless. . . . [W]e might be the ones who get hit by the big [nuclear] bang. Thus we should do a great thing and figure out how to transmute the world into a state of nonviolence. It is assumed that no one in the past has tackled this problem with any degree of success. As for Buddhist monks wandering around in poor Third World countries, the usual reaction is: “Never mind them, their countries are in such bad shape they couldn’t possibly have thought of anything.” (1992a: 83)

If the above observations are valid, then in order for most of us Westerners to accept and use (“practice”) Buddhism, we must appropriate it as ours, and to do that we must *necessarily* improve upon it. To do

this we can either (1) fully develop some previously underdeveloped, key component of Buddhism; (2) add some new, key component to Buddhism; or (3) both. For the modernist engaged Buddhists, of course, this key component is “active engagement” itself—one of our “own” identity formations, after all. For this project to succeed—that is, for “our” Western Buddhism to be termed “engaged Buddhism”—then any claim that Buddhism has been engaged in the past must immediately be refuted. If it appears to some contemporary readers that the words enshrined in various ancient Buddhist texts have social ramifications, modernists must contend either that these texts were not understood this way by traditional Asian Buddhists, or, to the extent to which they were so understood, that those Buddhists could not (or simply historically did not) act accordingly. The active engagement evident now among Buddhists must be proven to be the new (or at least the fully developed) contribution that we have made. Our contemporary engaged actions must be shown to speak louder than their mere ancient, scriptural words.

Analysis of the Modernists’ Arguments

We are finally ready to begin our analysis and deconstruction of the modernists’ arguments in some detail. Toward this end we will first examine the writings of Kitagawa and Jones as representative examples of earlier (1980s) modernist tendencies. (It should be recalled [introduction above, p. 4] that these earlier views have had an enduring influence into the present.) In particular, we will seek to reveal the different dualities that each of these authors unwittingly constructs, on the basis of which each can recognize something potentially positive in Buddhism, appropriate the authority to explain it, and finally distance himself from it (and place himself above it). Thus, we will see that Kitagawa assumes (that is, constructs) it to be natural that early Buddhists perceived both a

“religious” and a “non-religious” domain, and that they were, of course, only interested in the former. Likewise, we will see that Jones makes a very sharp distinction between “transcendent, spiritual” truths and “social, secular” realities, and that he portrays Buddhism as being properly interested only in the former. Thus, in each case we will be reminded of the spiritual/social split typical of Orientalists discussed above (*cf.* p. 19), and in each case we will see how these authors engage in the threefold movement of recognition, appropriation, and distancing. Finally, we will turn our attention to a detailed analysis of some of the more recent, nuanced developments in engaged Buddhist theory, focussing on the contributions made by Christopher Queen in his two edited anthologies (1996, 2000).

Joseph Kitagawa—Buddhism and Social Change

We can begin by recalling that modernists generally insist that “early” Buddhists in particular (including Śākyamuni himself) were completely socially disinterested (*cf.* p. 10). Kitagawa acknowledges that, “As to the actual relation of Buddhism to the Indian society during the early days of Buddhism, there is no agreement among scholars” (true enough). His own opinion, however, is decidedly clear:

[C]ontrary to the popular notion that the Buddha was a crusading social reformer, fighting for the cause of common man against the establishment of his time, there is no evidence that he attempted, directly at any rate, to change society. He seems to have accepted the various forms of socio-political order known to him. . . . It was taken for granted by him that the transformation of ‘society’, which significantly included all living beings, would

come only as a by-product of the religious transformation of individual beings in this world (*loka*). (1980: 87)

Though the tone here is descriptive, this is clearly quite interpretive (constructive),⁽²⁴⁾ for, as we saw before, it can just as easily be argued that the Buddha's abdication of his socio-political duties as a *kṣatriya* crown-prince, as well as his establishment of a major social institution (the monastic order) that deliberately ignored India's primary socio-political ordering schema (the caste system), do *not* indicate that he "accepted the various forms of socio-political order known to him."

Kitagawa, like most modernists, points to King Aśoka as perhaps the first truly (at least partially) engaged Buddhist. Kitagawa tells us that "in retrospect" (that is, from our privileged vantage point), we can discern that "Aśhoka found two levels of meaning in Buddhism" (90). The first of these levels involves the usual "religious" or soteriological meanings of the Three Jewels. "On another level," Kitagawa adds,

Aśoka found in the Buddhist teaching an ethical, social and cultural guiding principle, i.e., Dharma, which is applicable both to religious and non-religious domains, as well as to all men, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. (1980: 90)

As is often the case with such statements, this sounds innocuous enough until it is scrutinized more carefully. Was Aśoka *really* the first to find an "ethical, social and cultural guiding principle" in the *Dharma*? (Should we join Kitagawa in calling this "the Aśokan turn"?) And if we can discern this "in retrospect," are we to infer that Aśoka himself was not fully aware of his own "discovery"? If he was the first, are we to infer that, strangely, Śākyamuni Buddha himself did not understand (or for some reason did not act on) the social implications of his own *Dharma*? Furthermore, were not Śākyamuni's wandering missionary *bhikkhus* ex-

pected to give spiritual advice and guidance to the laity, and might not this have likely included “ethical, social and cultural guiding principles”? Finally, and most significantly, were there *really* two distinct “domains” for the early Buddhists, one “religious” and one “non-religious”? One could perhaps imagine that certain early Buddhists might have used some such categories heuristically, but was there really a domain, a sphere of activity, a physical place in which actions (*karma*) had no soteriological significance for them?

In a manner similar to the Orientalists’ construction of a philosophy/ritual split, Kitagawa has here constructed a dualistic split between a religious and a socio-political sphere, a split that may well have seemed unnatural (or even unacceptable) to the subjects for whom he is presuming to speak. Nevertheless, once such a split has been created, it presents a gap that must be bridged. Kitagawa hails Aśoka as the first to attempt such a feat:

[T]he novelty of Aśoka’s contribution to the history of Buddhism was his attempt to locate religious meaning in the social and political institutions of this world, so that the kingship and the state, which had no religious significance to the early Buddhist, came to be regarded as the instruments ‘to protect according to the Dharma.’ (1980: 91)

Now it is indeed true that Aśoka may have been the first Buddhist king to have been in a position to *implement* the idea that the institutions of kingship and of the state should be used as instruments “to protect according to the Dharma,” but Kitagawa engages in sheer speculation when he asserts that Aśoka was the first to *have* the very idea. Moreover, he is quick to appropriate the voices of all Buddhists prior to Aśoka when he asserts that such institutions “had no religious significance to the early Buddhist.”

Kitagawa seems further disappointed that the abstract, disengaged, religious sphere of *Dharma* that he has constructed in contrast to the “real” socio-political world was never really bridged with any “middle principles” by any Buddhists after Aśoka either:

We can also observe that while Buddhism had lofty universal principles (*Dharma*) as well as moral codes for individual life, it made little effort in developing what might be called ‘middle principles’ to mediate between universal principles and the empirical socio-political and economic situations in any given society. In the main, Buddhism depended primarily on the idealised notion of the Buddhist king, based on the memory of king Ashoka, as the most feasible link between the religious and non-religious spheres of life. (1980: 100)

An idealized “memory of King Ashoka” was all that later Buddhists would have to depend on. Aśoka’s valiant attempt to bridge the gap (that he, Kitagawa, himself created) was not only the first such attempt but also essentially the last (and hence, *only*) successful attempt in the succeeding two millennia of Buddhism’s history throughout Asia:

Aśoka’s way of dealing with the two levels of reality provided the only tangible norm for the relation of Buddhism to the socio-political order that was acceptable to many Buddhists ...

—that is, of course,

... until the modern period. (1980: 92)

Ken Jones—The Social Face of Buddhism

In 1989 Ken Jones published *The Social Face of Buddhism*, one of the earliest monographs on engaged Buddhism. This is one of the richest, most nuanced studies on this topic, filled with many useful insights and discussions. Nonetheless, if we first look at what he says Buddhism is *not* (or should not be) so that we can then better appreciate what he thinks it is (or should be), we will, in this way, be able to see how his own categories force him, too, into an extreme Orientalist-style dualism.

Jones is strongly critical of certain attitudes and practices of modern engaged Buddhists. Though I will be arguing shortly that Jones himself constructs and appropriates Buddhism for his own unspoken (modernist) aims, here (ironically) we see Jones making the accusation that it is Western Buddhists who engage in improper appropriation:

Buddhism in the West is part of the personal cultural equipment of quite a lot of people who value it as a system of ideas and orientation, and this is an important fact in any discussion of Buddhist activism. . . . It is, however, something that has been appropriated and used, rather than something that has profoundly engaged the personality as in the case of the dedicated practitioner. The flavour is different. (1989: 134)

In particular, such Westerners have “appropriated and used” Buddhism in a way that reduces it to a mere socio-political tool. Hence, Jones hears these reductionists “talking in terms of personal change being necessary [merely] to facilitate fundamental social change, as if spirituality were no more than the handmaiden of truly profound and human social revolution” (1989: 124).

Later on Jones identifies such objectionable reduction and appropriation as the process of “secularization,” noting that

[w]hat is being contested is the secularization of both scriptural meaning and engaged spirituality by annexing both to contemporary social categories and perspectives confined within superficial and secular consciousness. (1989: 198)

And finally, in the following passage, Jones defines “secularization” and identifies it with what he calls “reductive modernism”:

Secularization is here the process by which spirituality is denied in a culture as well as the stripping down of formal, exoteric religion in society. As we saw . . . secularization also inverts and reduces spirituality to being a handmaiden and auxiliary in projects for social change, in psychotherapy and in other areas wherein a lower level of consciousness and a secular perspective prevail. . . . **‘Reductive modernism’** is the term used here for that movement in religion which in effect secularizes religion from within. (1989: 128-129)

So far, this argument seems valid. It does seem that the processes of secularization and the movement of reductive modernism that are aptly described by Jones do indeed occur (we will return to this in the section on Queen, et al., below). And I have no doubt that many Westerners are, to some degree, guilty of such appropriative excesses. However, we can recall from our overview above (p. 10) that when Jones speaks in terms of “the present-day interest in Buddhist activism,” he seems to imply that all modern Buddhist activists must be naïvely engaging in such secular appropriation:

[T]he present-day interest in Buddhist activism has little warranty in scripture, history[,] and tradition and is in ef-

fect a covert form of twentieth-century secularization grafted onto the traditional Dharma. (1989: 207)

Such universal condemnations would seem to insinuate that *any* present-day Buddhist activist who sees *any* signs of social engagement in Buddhism's history is mistakenly "reading back" her own "secular" agenda (and at times, at least, whether intentionally or not, it does seem like Jones maintains such a strong stance—*cf.* above, p. 14). In any event, as we now turn to look at how Jones *himself* describes true spirituality or Buddhism (his constructed "Other"), we will see why his constructs might force him to reject the views of the *vast majority* of Buddhist activists.

To begin with, Jones divides religion into an "esoteric" and an "exoteric" form as follows:

The so-called esoteric part of religion is its gnostic or spiritual part. This comprises a diagnosis of the human disease and systems of psycho-physical training whereby individuals can realize their True Nature. . . . The exoteric part of religion comprises dogmas, moral codes, institutions, and other means for readily communicating, manifesting and sustaining religion in society. These will include some kind of economic base, charitable and educational activities, the affirmations of public worship and ritual and the exercise of political influence. (1989: 130)

Two initial points should be noted here. First, what he calls exoteric religion is *not* the same as what he criticizes as secularized religion. These two are entirely unrelated, and he is not interested in critiquing the exoteric part of religion. Second, he clearly states that the *exoteric* part of religion (to the extent to which he may think that it constitutes religion at all) already *does* include socially and politically engaged elements.

Next, he associates *true* Buddhism with the esoteric, gnostic, spiritual element of religion. Thus, he frequently makes reference to the “primary,” “existential,” “perennial,” or “epistemological” nature of Buddhism. In the following passage, he contrasts the approach of reductive modernism with that of “a Buddhist interpretation” (which he describes as being a “spiritual and root-existential” one), and he then defines the Buddhist approach as “*transcendental* modernism” —

‘Modern Buddhism’ can be modern in two opposed senses. It can either be the contemporary culture’s interpretation of Buddhism, and this inevitably tends to reduce Buddhism to a rational humanism (reductive modernism). Or else it can be a Buddhist interpretation of the contemporary culture, which gives us a spiritual and root-existential understanding of that culture (**transcendental modernism**). (1989: 271)

Here we clearly see that the secular/spiritual dichotomy that Jones had earlier constructed forces him to adopt the strong stance that members of contemporary culture will “inevitably” engage in reductive modernism.

Now if, as we saw in Jones’s definition just above, an esoteric religion such as Buddhism must concern itself with *individual, spiritual* soteriology (a “training whereby *individuals* can realize their *True Nature*”), then Jones’s project will have to be: to determine how such a religion could develop a socially engaged element without succumbing to secular reductive modernism. Jones raises this methodological issue when discussing the subject of the *validation* for Buddhist activism, which raises the question: “On what basis, on what foundation, is Buddhist social analysis, and the activism derived from it, to be grounded?” Jones contrasts his method with “*the other method*” (that of the reductive modernists, of course):

My method of validation can be characterized by terms such as **primary, existential, perennial, epistemological**. It contrasts with the other method of validating Buddhist social analysis and justifying social activism, which is secondary, exegetical, culture-bound and contingent in character, relying on specific scriptural evidence and historic Buddhist practice to give direct and prescriptive guidance. (1989: 196-197)

The way in which Jones uses the labels “primary” and “secondary” here is very revealing. Most postmodern, critical thinkers, ever insistent on highlighting the contextuality of everything, would certainly insist on reversing these labels (as would I). “Specific scriptural evidence and historic Buddhist practice” should be considered the primary source (the raw data, so to speak) *on the basis of which* various secondary “existential” or “epistemological” interpretations can be formulated. For Jones to think that his methodology is “perennial” and not “exegetical” is naïve in the extreme, as even any *premodern* Buddhist hermeneutist would attest. But of course, his adoption of the label “primary” is necessary if he is to appropriate the authority to speak for the Buddhist tradition, and his adoption of labels such as “existential,” “epistemological,” and “perennial” are necessary if he is to construct an historically disengaged Buddhism from which he can distance (exalt) his own, innovative engaged hybrid.

When discussing Lopez and Gómez above, we saw how the Orientalists of the colonial and post-colonial period created a philosophy/ritual split in order to appropriate Buddhism as a pure philosophy. Jones makes a similar observation when he notes that post-colonial Buddhist intellectuals created a religion/politics split, this time in order to appropriate a politically engaged legacy for Buddhism:

[As illustrated by H. Bechert and Demieville,] Western cultural **colonialism** was challenged by those [Asian Buddhists] who had already unbeknowningly succumbed to it, but who professed to find in the Buddhist scriptures and traditions such secular Western ideals as scientific rationalism and state socialism. These could then be claimed as having been all along a part of the Eastern cultural heritage. (1989: 273)

Certainly such examples of false consciousness(25) or inappropriate “reading back” did occur, and were perhaps even rampant. And certainly the following also occurred:

In the **heady post-colonial period**, Buddhist intellectuals were concerned to present the Dharma as a national, humanistic, democratic, and even socialist ideology for today. . . . Buddhism was . . . claimed to be no less rational, scientific[,] and ‘modern’ (and therefore relevant) than either the technological capitalism or the Marxian scientific socialism which challenged it. (1989: 235)

However, I should not want to assume that *all* such claims were necessarily examples of naïve appropriation fostered by false consciousness. Many legitimate, sober comparisons were no doubt drawn as well. But Jones will not be so generous; he states a little further on:

This kind of reductive modernism in my view overemphasizes and misinterprets the significance of the social teachings of the Pali canon. . . . Concerned to make Buddhism manifestly relevant to the social and political requirements of the post-colonial era, these [reductive] modernists tend to read the scriptures in terms of certain dominant contemporary ideas, as if they were originally a

programme for social reform; their over-arching spiritual and existential context and significance is lost beneath a burgeoning humanistic rationalism. Meanings are read into them which are at best arguable and at worst extravagant and tendentious. (1989: 237)

Jones here confidently criticizes these Buddhists for reading their own scriptures “as if they were originally a programme for social reform,” as if he, Jones, can authoritatively say that they were not. Furthermore, he proceeds to tell them what the true significance of their scriptures is, a significance that is to be recovered from what Jones discerns to be their “over-arching spiritual and existential context”—a significance and context that he says the Buddhists have “lost.” It seems that, in the heady postmodern period (obsessed with revealing ever more context and eschewing dubious comparisons), Orientalism is alive and well.

Thus, in a manner similar to Jung, Jones constructs an Asian “Other” that is essentially the opposite of (and complimentary to) his Western “Self”-image. For Jones, Buddhism becomes primarily an enlightened spiritual tradition that has always been relatively disinterested in social and political issues. We stand to learn much from its spiritual wisdom, but its socio-political disinterest must be considered naïve or even dangerous in today’s modern world. Conversely for Jones, we in “the West” have developed a strong socio-political awareness and tradition, though we have done so for the most part in isolation from our own spiritual traditions. Buddhists stand to learn much from our socio-political wisdom, but our modern spiritual nihilism must be considered naïve or even dangerous in today’s modern world. Having set up this Self/Other (socio-political/spiritual) dichotomy, Jones perceives that we now have a unique and unprecedented opportunity to attempt to forge a union of these two great traditions:([26](#))

The traditional Buddhist picture of personal delusion karmically sustained over many lifetimes must now be supplemented and seen also as a social process sustained through successive historical cultures. Society in the Buddha's time lacked the kind of dynamism and complexity that might have stimulated such awareness. This only came into existence in the West in comparatively recent times, with the emergence of the social sciences. (1989: 37-38)

However, he regularly implies that recent attempts on the part of both Buddhists and Western activists sympathetic to Buddhism seem inevitably to have resulted in some form of reductive modernism, that “secularized shell of public Buddhism” (1989: 275) that combines, not the best, but elements of the worst of each tradition.

Jones suggests that the “transcendental modernism” developed in his book provides the elusive formula needed to effectively combine the best of both. In the following remarkable passage, Jones (1) **recognizes** the (essence of) *Dharma* as (beneficial) “light”; (2) **appropriates** the authority to (a) reveal this light from behind its thick, cultural “encrustations,” (b) determine (presumably) what is and what is not an “archaic,” “misleading,” or “obsolescent” encrustation, and (c) speak “both for many dedicated Buddhists and for the great mass of socially concerned people”; and (3) **distances** his transcendental modernism from Buddhism’s currently encrusted state:

[T]o explain the modern world in the light of Dharma, various cultural encrustations of time may need to be gently scraped off. Archaic and misleading modes of presentation, obsolescent institutions, and extrinsic secondary beliefs may have so dimmed the light that only the most sensitive and dedicated can still read by it. When the light

has become feeble and the encrustations thick, then the whole apparatus may become *widely* understandable only in secular terms. And this makes of it something altogether different. It is the task of transcendental modernism to prevent this happening and, with humility and sensitivity, to help keep open access by all to the essential Dharma. Writing this book is an exercise of this kind, in a world in which Buddhism as a spirituality at present lacks direct social significance, both for many dedicated Buddhists and for the great mass of socially concerned people. (1989: 271-272)

Overall, I am generally quite sympathetic to Jones's warnings about the contemporary tendency toward secular "reductive modernism." The problem (and it is a big one) with his otherwise insightful observations is that he far overextends his critique: just about everybody who describes Buddhism as having had a history of social engagement seems to be accused of being a reductive modernist. This critique is enabled by his elaboration of what he considers the essence of Buddhism to be—a perennial set of truths intended to address the "existential" (but not the socio-political) sufferings of beings. For Jones, it is only now, in the modern era, that we have developed the mature perspective (and the urgent need) to bring out the socio-political implications latent in the Buddha's perennial teachings. However, unfortunately, everyone who has tried to do this has gone too far, inadvertently reducing Buddhism to a hollowed-out shell of secular, localized, socio-political ideologies, thereby losing Buddhism's original, transcendental, perennial essence. Jones seems to find only himself to be uniquely qualified to speak for what an "engaged Buddhism" could and should be. It should be evident that in all of these respects, and in spite of his otherwise excellent contributions, Jones is clearly a classic example of what I have herein described as a modernist.

Christopher Queen, et al.—*Engaged Buddhism in Asia* (1996) and *the West* (2000)

As I suggested in the introduction, in the last couple of years “engaged Buddhist studies” has begun to show the mature signs of a great deal more critical self-reflection. One such sign has been the conscious identification of the “newness” issue as one needing serious study and debate. For example, in his preface to the anthology *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996), editor Christopher Queen identifies this issue as “the central question” that he will explore in his introduction:

The central question examined in the introduction concerns whether the activist impulse of contemporary Asian Buddhism is historically new—a series of responses to uniquely modern conditions and historical forces—or whether there exist substantive precedents for such engagement with social and political concerns in Buddhist history. (1996: xi)

The essay to which this preface alludes is entitled “Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism.” This title itself is appropriately exploratory in tone; as we have already seen previously, the central thesis that Queen develops therein (as well as the conclusion that he reaches) is decidedly modernist. Four years later, the title of his introductory essay for the anthology *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (2000) asserts his modernist thesis up front: “Introduction: A New Buddhism.”

Indeed, Queen can perhaps be credited with making this newness question an issue in its own right. Other writers (both in Queen’s anthologies and elsewhere) have certainly stressed either continuity or discontinuity in their elaborations of engaged Buddhism, but they have generally done so in passing—it has not been their main topic. What I will attempt to show in this section is that Queen has analyzed and then de-

defined both of the terms “engaged” and “Buddhism” in such a way as to not only (1) foreground the newness issue as a central issue; but also so as to (2) favor the conclusion that engaged Buddhism is new. In brief, he has defined “engagement” as relating to “this-worldly” concerns, especially institutional and systemic causes and forms of suffering, and he has characterized “traditional” Buddhism as other-worldly (following Weber). I will examine each of these in turn. Firstly, I will argue that his narrowing and specifying of the term “engagement,” although extremely interesting, valuable, and useful, may go so far as to make engaged Buddhism susceptible to Jones’s criticism regarding secular reductive modernism. (Moreover, in the conclusion I will suggest some reasons why his insistence that “engagement”—as he defines it—is *necessarily* recent and Western may be unfounded or at least counterproductive.) Secondly, I will argue that his characterizations of traditional Buddhism as otherworldly (which he routinely makes in passing, perhaps influenced by his greater familiarization with Theravādin forms of Buddhism)⁽²⁷⁾ are entirely incompatible with most forms of Buddhism (especially Mahāyāna), both doctrinally as well as historically.

What is engagement?

Prior to the mid-1990s, *most* (but not all) scholars were fairly vague about the two or three terms involved in the label “[socially] engaged Buddhism.” Although certain authors were occasionally more precise in their definitions, the range of definitions varied so greatly between authors that the possibility of meaningful dialogue was often obscured. As we have seen, this vagueness enabled both modernists and traditionalists alike to indulge in either mutual myopia or in quick, dismissive, polemical rhetoric. In *The Social Face of Buddhism*, Ken Jones offered a description sufficiently broad (and vague) that most would have probably accepted it:

By “social action” we mean the many different kinds of action intended to benefit human kind. These range from simple, individual acts of charity, teaching and training, organized kinds of service, “Right Livelihood” in and outside the helping professions, and through various kinds of community development as well as to political activity in working for a better society. (1989: 65)

However, later in the same book, Jones refracts this single, broad “range” of meanings into three distinct types of socially engaged Buddhism:

- (1) ALTERNATIVE SOCIETAL MODELS (for example, monastic and quasi-monastic communities) and particularly “right livelihood”
- (2) SOCIAL HELPING, SERVICE AND WELFARE, both in employment and voluntarily
- (3) RADICAL ACTIVISM (directed to fundamental institutional and social changes, culminating in societal metamorphosis). (1989: 216)

This spectrum spans from what he later calls a “soft end” to a “hard end.” In a personal communication to Sandra Bell, Jones explains this “taxonomy”:

At the soft end are individuals and organizations who see Engaged Buddhism as ranging from being kind to your neighbors to promoting a society based on the principles of the Dharma. The hard enders do not deny the irrefutable logic of this, but claim that it robs Engaged Buddhism of a sufficiently clear definition. . . . Hard enders believe governments and other institutions should be included in

the active concerns of Buddhist morality. (Jones, as quoted by Bell, 2000: 405)

Citing this same passage from Jones, Queen (2000: 8-10) also implicitly bemoans the past vagueness of definition (the “robbing of sufficient clarity”) and offers his own parallel spectrum from “mindfulness-based” to “service-based” engagement. Just as Jones (ahead of his time) clearly identified with the “hard end”—at 1989: 222 he notes that the main subject of his book has been the third type, “radical activism”—Queen clearly identifies the “service-based” end as his primary subject (it is, after all, the form of engaged Buddhism that he feels he can argue is “new”).

Although neither Jones nor Queen originated it, Queen has probably been the most vocal and articulate advocate of this narrower, more specific definition of “engagement,” as well as the most aggressive proponent of its “newness.” As he describes it in his 1996 introduction:

It is this new awareness of the social and institutional dimensions of suffering and the liberation from suffering that has contributed to the rise of contemporary Buddhist liberation movements. (1996: 10)

Although he was quite clear and consistent about this definition in that first book, he emphasizes and develops this theme much more in his 2000 anthology:

The essence of the new outlook is a recognition of (1) the inalienable value of the human person, whatever his or her level of achievement or standing in the community, (2) the social and collective nature of experience, shaped in particular by cultural and political institutions that have the power to promote good or evil, fulfillment or suffering, progress or decline, and (3) the necessity of collective action to address the systemic causes of suffering

and promote social advancement in the world. (2000: 3)(28)

Other engaged Buddhists have also recently sought to identify with this type of narrower definition of engagement.(29) These refinements are indeed extremely valuable and useful, and they have considerably advanced the discussions of issues central to the concerns of all engaged Buddhists. But exactly how new are such definitions? As such definitions draw on and are expressed in terms of recent Western (critical, Marxist) theories of political economy, social analysis, and so forth, modernist engaged Buddhists who adopt such language certainly insist that they are new. But could one trace *similar* developments in social theory in Buddhist discourse prior to the modern era, and if so, might other (traditionist) engaged Buddhists be justified in emphasizing more continuity? I will explore one useful (perhaps conciliatory) approach to the question of determining the criteria for similarity versus newness (continuity/discontinuity) in the concluding section on Ruegg's methodological observations.

The real issue before us presently is to clarify how Queen specifies and then applies such narrower definitions. In particular, how this-worldly must such an engaged approach be? More importantly, what does "this-worldly" itself mean and entail? What, if anything, does it exclude? In the following section we will see that Queen is able to magnify the perceived disjunction between traditional Buddhism and engaged Buddhism precisely by exaggerating both the other-worldliness (and individual orientation) of the former as well as the this-worldliness (and social/collective orientation) of the latter. When taken to an extreme, this drive to emphasize radical disjunction misrepresents both sides and runs the serious risk of disjointing the two halves of "engaged Buddhism" itself: traditional Buddhists are made out to be so other-worldly that they are not engaged, while engaged Buddhists are made out to be

so this-worldly that (I will argue) they come dangerously close to not being Buddhists.

What is Buddhism? What is liberation?

While Queen never ventures a definition of Buddhism (a daunting task for anyone, to be sure), his frequent, passing characterizations of various types of Buddhists are quite revealing. Two examples from his earlier anthology will suffice:

The social engagement of Buddhist liberationists may indeed be seen as a rejection of the other-worldly asceticism of the traditional monk and the routinized devotionism and merit-making of the lay masses. (1996: 30)

[N]ineteenth-century Asian-Americans (Chinese and Japanese immigrants) were occupied in the ritual observance of their imported faiths. (1996: 30)

These passages present a surprisingly stereotypical, negative caricature of Buddhists. Among the traditional Buddhists, the ordained are disconnected “other-worldly ascetics,” and the lay are a naïve and mechanistic “mass” engaged in “routinized devotion.” The East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist immigrants seem dull and hapless, “occupied” as they are with “observing” the “rituals” dictated by their blindly accepted “faiths.” In just a few words, Queen, like Jung, constructs the quintessentially passive Eastern “Other”—one that opposes, of course, a conversely active and assertive Western “Self,” namely,

the mainstream Protestant Buddhist sympathizers and adherents who forged the conception of an activist, socially engaged Buddhism. (1996: 31)

These cultural and religious reifications are continued in his 2000 anthology:

For Buddhists and practitioners of the other world faiths, it is no longer possible to measure the quality of human life primarily in terms of an individual's observance of traditional rites, such as meditation, prayer, or temple ritual; or belief in dogmas such as "the law of karma," "buddha-nature," "the will of God," or "the Tao." (2000: 1)

Here it seems fair to ask—sticking to the Buddhist case—has it ever been possible to measure the quality of life *primarily* in terms of the "observance" of "rites" or the "belief" in "dogmas"? As with the earlier example, the verbs "to observe" and "to believe" suggest very passive behavior, and "rites" and "dogmas" are again terms for very rigid, routinized things to which practitioners automatically adhere. Are we really to believe that this is how Buddhists have always made this measurement (until now, now that unique modern circumstances have dictated that "it is no longer possible")?

We must equally question the implication in the above passage that Buddhists measure the quality of life exclusively in terms of an *individual's* actions and beliefs. This implication is made explicit in the following passage (here with respect to the ultimate quality of life, liberation):

[I]t is no longer possible to see the individual as the sole "unit" of liberation or salvation ...—... the prime beneficiary of self-cultivation—separate from the complex of roles and relationships that make up his or her life-world. (2000: 3)

Again we must ask, has this ever been possible? Would not any Individual Vehicle practitioner well educated in the basic teachings on selfless-

ness and interdependence have found it impossible to see the “individual” as a separate “unit” of anything? Certainly any Universal Vehicle practitioner well educated in Central Way philosophy (*Madhyamaka*) would have understood that insofar as individual selves may be said to exist, they exist not as separate units, but precisely as “complex[es] of roles and relationships”; that is, they exist conventionally, as dependent designations, as relationalities. Moreover, Universal Vehicle treatises never assert or imply that an individual self could be the “prime beneficiary” of liberation. Rather, “liberation” (which in the Universal Vehicle context necessarily entails full “enlightenment” or Buddhahood)(30) involves the full development of both a Buddha’s Truth Body as well as a Buddha’s Form Body, which provide, respectively, the complete fulfillment of both “one’s own benefit” (*sva-artha, rang don*) and “others’ benefit” (*para-artha, gzhan don*).

Indeed, whether in the ethical, philosophical, or socio-political sphere, it often seems that the “new” and modern innovations that Queen discerns as distinguishing engaged Buddhism from traditional Buddhism are little more than a reformulation of the classical differences distinguishing Universal Vehicle Buddhism from Individual Vehicle Buddhism.(31) For example, in the ethical sphere he states, “Now it is necessary to consider the effects of personal and social actions on others,” qualifying this in the philosophical sphere by saying, “The others’ affected by these [personal and social] actions must be understood not only as unit selves, but as significant collectivities: families, neighbors, . . . international populations[,] . . . and ecosystems” (2000: 3). These sound like traditional Universal Vehicle concerns and insights. Also in the philosophical sphere he states:

We may conclude that a profound change in Buddhist soteriology—from a highly personal and other-worldly notion of liberation to a

social, economic, this-worldly liberation—distinguishes the Buddhist movements in our study. (1996: 10)

Again, it can be argued that this is precisely the “profound change” that occurred between the Individual Vehicle and Universal Vehicle articulations of liberation (we will explore this more in the next section). Finally, in the socio-political sphere he speaks of “the democratization, if not the transformation, of spiritual practices—for example, meditation and ritual initiations as now appropriated by lay practitioners” (1996: 11). Again, this is what historically occurred with Universal Vehicle (especially *Vajra Vehicle*) Buddhism in India and Tibet.

For now, suffice it to say that Queen understands traditional Buddhism (without reference to Vehicle) to be concerned with such “a highly personal and other-worldly notion of liberation,” and he considers modern engaged Buddhism, by contrast, to be revolutionary in its focus on liberating beings from “concrete” and “worldly” conditions. He shows that such a worldly focus has characterized Christian liberation theology, and he argues that “the worldly perspective of [Christian] liberation theologies . . . is fully consistent with the Buddhist liberation movements” (1996: 5).⁽³²⁾ This perspective is, he maintains, what defines a liberation movement as such:

It is, finally, their **focus** upon the relief of concrete economic, social, political, and environmental ills that qualifies these [Buddhist] movements as “liberation movements.” (1996: x-xi)

Moreover, in the engaged Buddhism of contemporary Asia:

the liberation sought has been called a “mundane awakening” (*laukodaya*), which includes individuals, villages, nations, and ultimately all people (*sarvodaya*), and which fo-

cuses on objectives that may be achieved and recognized in this lifetime, in this world. (1996: 9)

What remains to be explored here is just what this “this-worldly focus” entails. Whether or not it is truly new (as Queen insists it is), does Queen consider this focus on a “worldly liberation” to be (a) a secondary but important supportive complement to more “traditional” elaborations of liberation; (b) the new primary focus and goal; or (c) the new exclusive goal of self-proclaimed engaged Buddhists. Leaving aside the newness question, (a) would seem perfectly acceptable. On the other hand, (c) would seem unacceptably non-Buddhist.⁽³³⁾ The remaining option, (b), presents somewhat of a gray area—how primary is “worldly liberation” presented to be? There would seem to be a spectrum of possibilities here. As the primacy of the status of “worldly liberation” is emphasized ever more, the status (or relevance) of “traditional” elaborations of liberation—whether or not it is justified to characterize them as “other-worldly”—becomes ever more remote, representing more of an “unrealistic” goal; this moves (b) dangerously close to (c), opening it to Jones’s critique regarding secular reductive modernism. It is this gray option (b) that Queen clearly discerns as characteristic of engaged Buddhism:

We have noted that the most distinctive shift of thinking in socially engaged Buddhism is from a transmudane (*lokuttara*) to a mundane (*lokiya*) definition of liberation. (1996: 11)

Accompanying this shift is a **de-emphasis** on the stages of transmudane liberation . . . and a new **focus** on the causes, varieties, and remedies of worldly suffering and oppression. (1996: 11)

Finally, in the following passage Queen indeed pushes (b) precariously close to (c):

The traditional conceptions of karma and rebirth, the veneration of the bhikkhu sangha, and the focus on ignorance and psychological attachment to account for suffering in the world (the second Noble Truth) have taken second place to the application of highly rationalized reflections on the institutional and political manifestations of greed, hatred, and delusion, and on new organizational strategies for addressing war and injustice, poverty and intolerance, and the prospects for “outer” as well as “inner” peace in the world. (1996: 10)

* * * * *

Returning now to the ethical sphere, Queen discerns three “distinctive styles” of traditional Buddhist ethics, discipline, virtue, and altruism, and he then proposes that “engagement” itself be adopted as the term for a fourth, new style of Buddhist ethics, that characteristic of engaged Buddhism (2000: 11-17). He then rightly surmises: “The reader may be wondering at this point how a final style of Buddhist ethics could improve upon the altruism of the Mahayana” (2000: 15). His explanation and defense of this newness is as follows:

It would be wrong to argue that the first three styles of Buddhist morality are not productive of a more peaceful and prosperous society, as well as happier individuals. But one may wonder, in light of the widespread conditions of human misery in our world today, whether rule-based morality, mental cultivation, individualized good works, and generalized vows to save all beings will be enough to prevent the spread of political tyranny, economic injustice, and environmental degradation in the era to come. Such a question itself reflects a critical shift in thought and practice that distinguishes Buddhist leaders and

communities today from their predecessors in traditional Asian societies. (2000: 16)

In this passage Queen adopts one of the modernist strategies we discussed above, emphasizing that the modern (and future) context is something historically unique and unprecedented. More troubling, however, is his characterization of Mahāyāna altruism as “generalized vows to save all beings.” Once again, through an extremely reductive (mis)portrayal of a passive Eastern “Other,” room is made for the activist Western “Self” and its new ethic of engagement. For we can note that “generalized vows to save all beings” represent only one side—the first step—of Mahāyāna altruism (*bodhicitta*), what is called “aspirational bodhicitta” (*pranidhi-bodhicitta*, *smon pa'i byang sems*). The other essential side—the follow-through, the heart of daily practice—is what is precisely called “engaged bodhicitta” (*prasthāna-bodhicitta*, *'jug pa'i byang sems*).⁽³⁴⁾ Nevertheless, Queen describes his proposed fourth ethic of engagement as radically new and different:

As the fourth style of Buddhist ethics, engaged Buddhism is **radically different** from the Mahayana path of altruism because it is directed to the creation of new social institutions and social relationships. (2000: 17)

Regarding this radical newness, he acknowledges that “there are indeed harbingers of socially engaged practice in the annals of Buddhist history” such as (of course) Aśoka in India and some others in China, but he contends that “these are exceptions to the practices of individual discipline, virtue, and altruism advocated in the tradition” (2000: 17).

* * * * *

Having **recognized** (constructed) that in all three spheres (ethical, philosophical, and socio-political) traditional and engaged forms of Buddhism occupy opposite ends of an (equally constructed) transcendent-worldly

spectrum, Queen then **distances** his newly **appropriated** world-engaged Buddhism as far as possible, taking it to its logical (modernist) conclusion: he boldly proposes that “engaged Buddhism be thought of as a fourth yana” (2000: 24). He suggests several terms for the “New Vehicle” (*Navayāna*, following *Ambedkar*) of the “new Buddhism,” including “Earth Vehicle” (*Terrayāna*, following Kraft, 2000), and “World Vehicle” or “Global Vehicle” (*Lokayāna*)(2000: 23)(35) On page one of his “Introduction: A New Buddhism,” he alerts us that:

Inasmuch as . . . concepts [of human rights, distributive justice, and social progress] have had few parallels in the classical formulations of . . . Hinayana[,]... Mahayana[,] ...and . . . Vajrayana[,] I shall argue that the general pattern of belief and practice that has come to be called “engaged Buddhism” is unprecedented, and thus tantamount to a new chapter[,] . . . a new paradigm[,] . . . a “new vehicle.” (2000: 1-2)

Later, when he actually makes this argument, he says:

This [New Vehicle] Buddhism is endowed with many, if not all, of the themes and techniques from the past. . . . But it is also endowed with a sensitivity to social injustice, institutional evil, and political oppression as sources of human suffering, that has not been central to Buddhist analysis in the past. (2000: 25)

Now others such as Joanna Macy (cited in Kaza, 2000: 160) and Franz-Johannes Litsch (2000: 423) have suggested that engaged Buddhism should be considered a “new turning of the wheel of Dharma,” so Queen is certainly not alone in wanting to appropriate traditional Buddhist hermeneutical schemas to give the highest possible status to what he sees as a truly revolutionary new development in Buddhism. In fact,

none of these contemporary Western Buddhists are alone, for Asian Buddhists throughout history have repeatedly made such controversial attempts at redefinition and reclassification—the very attempt to define a “New Vehicle” or a “new turning of the wheel of Dharma” is itself nothing new.⁽³⁶⁾ A substantial body of literature exists regarding such controversies,⁽³⁷⁾ so it would seem most sensible for engaged Buddhists wanting to make such claims to consult this material for precedents. On the other hand, since making such radical claims is often more of a political act than a hermeneutical one, perhaps it behooves such attempts to keep this material in the shadows.

Universal Vehicle “liberation”

We will now look more closely at Universal Vehicle elaborations of “the world” and of “liberation (from the world)” to determine whether or not the more worldly dimensions of engagement are as new as they are claimed to be.

Exactly how this-worldly is the Universal Vehicle notion of liberation? Let us clarify the premise and the question. Charles Prebish suggests that Nhat Hanh’s notion of engagement was influenced by French postwar existentialist concepts of engagement (*l’engagement, engagé*), particularly by Sartre’s notion that (in Prebish’s words) “to be ‘engaged’ is to actualize one’s freedom by . . . acknowledging one’s inescapable involvement in the world” (1998: 273). To restate the question: Does Universal Vehicle theory admit “one’s *inescapable* involvement in the world?” If so—if one *cannot* escape—then what could “liberation” possibly mean? These are in fact *classical* Universal Vehicle themes.

The answer to these questions depends, of course, on a subtle analysis of what is meant (or even could be meant) by “this world” and by “liberation.” Ever since Nāgārjuna, Universal Vehicle proponents

have relentlessly critiqued the naïve notion that liberation (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*) is (or logically even could be) another realm, a “goal” to reach somehow dualistically apart from this world (*loka*, *saṃsāra*). As Nāgārjuna says in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (XXV: 19-20):

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence and nirvana.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvana and cyclic existence.
Whatever is the limit of nirvana,
That is the limit of cyclic existence.
There is not even the slightest difference between them,
Or even the subtlest thing. (trans. Garfield, 1995: 75)

Garfield himself comments on these verses:

To be in samsara is to see things as they appear to deluded consciousness and to interact with them accordingly. To be in nirvana, then, is to see those things as they are—as merely empty, dependent, impermanent, and nonsubstantial, but not to be somewhere else, seeing something else. (1995: 332)

The nonduality (*advaya*, *gnyis med*) of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* has been one of the central themes explored and developed throughout all of Universal Vehicle literature (*Prajñapāramitā-sūtras*, *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, *Madhyamaka śāstric* literature, etc.). It is very important to stress that in these treatises, the “nonduality” of any two things is clearly distinguished from their “unity.” Characterizations of the unity, monism, or oneness of two things invariably conflate or reduce one of those things to the other. Thurman (following Tsong Khapa’s interpretation of Nāgārjuna) has discussed these dangers at length. Coining the terms “**monistic absolutist**”

and “**existential relativist**” for two possible extreme interpretations, Thurman says:

The former hold the message of the central way to be that *samsara* is *Nirvana*. The latter hold it to be that *Nirvana* is *samsara*. (1989: 150)

He then acknowledges that “[e]ither of these positions may be partially correct,” that “[e]ach has its own evidence, arguments, and advantages,” and he cites numerous Indian, Tibetan, and Western interpreters who may be said to fall into these two camps. (We might add that Queen, et al., would seem to fall into the existential relativist camp.) But then, after a lengthy defense of the merits of each of these views, he tells us that “Tsong Khapa insists that these would-be Dialecticist Centrists, or interpreters of the school, are in fact the chief antagonists (*purvapaksin*) of the school!” (155). After an equally lengthy discourse on Tsong Khapa’s refutation of these two extreme positions and on his Centrist solution, Thurman concludes by citing the verse above by Nāgārjuna (XXV, 19) and then emphasizing the half-truths present in each of those two extreme positions:

The absolutist is correct; there is an overriding soteric aim. There is a Nirvana, a supreme bliss. But salvation is not “mystic,” a “leap into the void” having discarded reason, and Nirvana is not a place outside the world; it is a situation that includes the world within its bliss. Samsara cannot be distinguished from it. It is in Nirvana that samsara is embraced completely. . . . **But the relativist is also correct.** “Perfection” is always correlated with “imperfection”; there is no escape from inevitable relativity. Nirvana . . . is just here now, and the full experiential acceptance of that is liberation, which is not a going elsewhere. But truly being “here” is not an abandonment of

the Absolute, a capitulation to the mysteriousness of meaninglessness, a relative meaninglessness. It is rather an Absolute being here, a triumphal commitment to sensible duality. For part of relativity is the ideal of the Absolute. (1989: 159)

If Thurman and Tsong Khapa are correct, then from the Universal Vehicle perspective, liberation has always entailed *both* a transcendent, transmundane, “other-worldly” (*lokottara*) aspect and *equally* an immanent, mundane, “this-worldly” (*lokiya*) aspect. Both aspects exist together, nondually, without either aspect collapsing into the other.

Bringing this lofty philosophical discussion on the nature of liberation back down to Buddhist liberation movements “on the ground” (so to speak), José Cabezón tells us in Queen’s own anthology:

[T]he Buddhist social philosophy emerging out of the Tibetan liberation movement is not envisioned as a radical rethinking of traditional Buddhist philosophy. Although suggesting a new reading of Buddhist texts, a new hermeneutical lens, it does not do so at the expense of the traditional understanding of Buddhist scripture. . . . [I]t stresses continuity with the tradition rather than rupture. . . . In the Tibetan case it is not that the traditional goals of Buddhism (e.g., *nirvana*, the universal emancipation of all beings, and so on) are discarded in favor of action in the world. Instead, the two goals, worldly and supramundane, are seen as reinforcing each other. (1996: 311)

Moreover—and of great relevance to our discussion on Queen’s possible sources and influences—in a footnote to this passage Cabezón contrasts this nondual Mahāyāna approach with a more dualistic Theravādin one (as developed, for example, in the earlier writings of Bardwell Smith):

This [Tibetan Buddhist social theory] is in marked contrast to the theory of the development of a Buddhist social ethic that assumes the kammatic/nibbannic distinction, in which social action belongs in the kammatic, that is, “secular,” realm, and is therefore related primarily to the goal of higher rebirth, as opposed to the nibbannic aspect of the religion whose goal is emancipation from all rebirth. In the Tibetan setting, and **perhaps more generally in Mahayana Buddhism, the case can convincingly be made that such a distinction is unwarranted.** Social action is as much the cause of *nirvana* as monastic discipline is; and vice versa, typically “nibbannic” [*sic*] practices such as wisdom and compassion are as relevant to properly acting within the world as is the concept of *karma*. (1996: 317, note 57)

Thus, we may now *hazard* a guess at a possible genealogy of modernist engaged Buddhist views. A Buddhist with a more dualistic background (perhaps Theravādin) *may* be predisposed to misunderstand (or to miss altogether) certain key nondual elements within the Mahāyāna traditions. Initially missing the specific “worldly” implications within various Mahāyāna doctrines (implications well-known and even explicit within the Mahāyāna tradition itself), such a Buddhist, upon glimpsing such implications, might think that they were radically new (which, for him, they would be). However, without fully appreciating the Mahāyāna view (of emptiness, relativity, and nonduality), he would certainly be prone to misunderstanding the subtleties of the implications that he now no longer *completely* missed. He would then most likely fall to one extreme or another, and “existential relativism” (which overemphasizes the reality of *saṃsāra* [“the world”]) would be the most likely option for a post-modern global citizen (whether Asian or Western). A Buddhism founded by such a Buddhist would thus tend to de-emphasize transcendence and

to (over)emphasize a type of world-engagement that was perceived to be unprecedented and new. The result is modernist engaged Buddhism.

Conclusions

It is well known that in the history of Buddhist studies in the West, there have been numerous evolutions in understanding. Thus, for a long time Pāli (Theravāda) Buddhism was seen to be the “pure, original” form of Buddhism of which Mahāyāna Buddhism was a “later, degenerate” form. Discontinuity was stressed because Mahāyāna was seen to be a radically separate form of Buddhism “made up” by ingenious and deceitful Indians half a millennium after the “historical Buddha.” Eventually, however, this clear-cut picture was eroded as more and more continuities were discerned and as a more nuanced understanding emerged of how Buddhists themselves variously understood Buddhism (or *buddhavacana*) throughout their own histories. Similar evolutions in scholarly thinking have developed with respect to Indian tantric Buddhism (originally seen as a complete degeneration, now often respected as continuous with “mainstream” Mahāyāna Buddhism), and with respect to Tibetan Buddhism in general (originally seen as degenerate “Lamaism,” now seen as unique, but nonetheless continuous with Indian forms of Buddhism). The present essay has merely sought to suggest that a similar evolution in common scholarly awareness has yet to occur with respect to the possible continuities between modern forms of engaged Buddhism and Buddhism’s past.

Nor do I wish to overemphasize such possible continuities. I do not wish to have left the impression that all of the modernists’ conclusions are wrong. Many of their interpretations may turn out to be plausible given further research and dialogue (and I believe that *much* more of both are needed). I have, rather, tried herein to demonstrate that

many modernists have arrived at their conclusions far too hastily, that they may have only “discovered” what were in fact tacit *foregone* conclusions.

The Queen challenge

As I see it, the modernists have put out an articulate, healthy challenge to the community of Buddhist scholars. As Queen put it in 1996:

[F]ew contemporary scholars have successfully challenged the conventional wisdom that, until recent times, Buddhism focussed on personal liberation, not on social transformation. (1996: 41)

And more recently in 2000:

In lieu of a concerted argument that engagement, as we have defined it, has co-evolved with the ethics of discipline, virtue, and altruism in Buddhist history, however, one must conclude . . . that it is the product of dialogue with the West over the past one hundred years or so. (2000: p. 30, n. 34)

In this present essay I have tried to problematize many of the suppositions in such formulations: Whose “conventional wisdom” are we talking about? What is meant by “personal liberation” and “social transformation,” and what is the relationship between them? Must we accept “engagement as you have defined it”? Must we accept your four types of ethics?

But these methodological questions notwithstanding, the basic challenge is still there, and it is a good one. Though we must always continue to ask such questions, it is time to begin digging into the “data.”

Interested scholars (both traditionists as well as open-minded modernists) should now revisit the history of premodern Buddhist Asia with the express purpose of discovering examples of engagement as defined (more or less) by Queen and/or other modernists. For this analysis to be “concerted,” it must be undertaken by a variety of scholars specializing in a variety of disciplines (including, but not limited to, Buddhist Studies) spanning vast temporal, cultural, and geographical domains. Scholars will want to reinvestigate theories and arguments found in Buddhist texts, but they must also examine less traditional textual sources including political and legal documents, census reports, and economic surveys, as well as non-textual sources included in the archaeological record, and so forth. In addition, it will be necessary to consult non-Buddhist (e.g., Hindu or Muslim) accounts as well as nonindigenous accounts (for example, Chinese accounts of India). If after such a concerted effort sufficient evidence is *not* found, then the modernists’ contentions regarding the discontinuity between modern “engaged” Buddhism and premodern “traditional” (“disengaged”) Buddhism must be conceded. (The question of how such a new Buddhism should be related to traditional forms [perhaps a new vehicle]—including what it means to call it “Buddhism”—however, will remain). But if sufficient evidence is found, then a well-documented, “concerted argument” can be formulated in favor of traditionists’ insistence on continuity.

“Gimme Distance”

I have proposed that many Westerners do not seem to be able (or willing) to assimilate Buddhism organically and that Buddhism’s many and varied seeds cannot be allowed to simply take root on our soil. We must tinker with those foreign seeds, genetically re-engineer them, and clone and graft them to make our own hybrid, indigenous forms. If they are made “new” in this way, it seems that we assume they will necessarily be

improved. Of course, if we did allow for a more organic transfer, they would still become uniquely ours (I certainly do not subscribe to the perennialist notion that Buddhism is a set of eternal, unchanging principles that are transferred intact throughout the centuries from country to country). A variety of Buddhisms would still adapt and become uniquely American (for example) for the simple fact that they would be growing in American soil, in the diversity of American climates, nourished by American nutrients, and so forth. But for some reason, this is not enough for us—it seems we *must* make Buddhism over in our own image. In short, having recognized (constructed) something in Buddhism that we want, we must appropriate it and then distance ourselves from its original (Asian) sources.

Due to the force of this strong inclination, modern Western engaged Buddhists are being told (and are telling themselves) that they can have their seeds and eat them too: they can have their Buddhism and not call it “Buddhism”(38)—or, in the terms of the present essay, they can appropriate their Buddhism and distance themselves too. Thus, as Kraft declared in one of his earlier essays:

Nor is any conversion to Buddhism required. The ideas and practices offered here are assumed to be effective whether or not a Buddhist label is attached to them. (1988: xv)

Kraft is, of course, correct about this, but I wonder if modernist engaged Buddhists, with their zeal for newness, are not too eager to throw off the “Buddhist label” (and any possible continuities that may have been associated with it). Much is lost in this process. The entire past is lost in this process.

Continuity or discontinuity? Ruegg on the use of “source-alien terminology”

We saw that many modernists are quick to emphasize the differences between the “simpler” times of the Buddha and our own, more “complex” times and that modernists use such differences to assert, for example, that “it is unscholarly to . . . proclaim that the Buddha was a democrat and an internationalist” (Jones, 1989: 66). Likewise, many (not all) of the papers submitted to the first *JBE* online conference argued that the concept of “human rights” is a uniquely modern, Western innovation.

However, in an essay entitled “Some Reflections on the Place of Philosophy in the Study of Buddhism,” David Ruegg offers some very useful methodological observations that suggest an alternative to such a rigid prohibition of “source-alien terminology.” He writes:

[H]owever much a philosophical insight or truth transcends, in se, any particular epoch or place, in its expression a philosophy is perforce conditioned historically and culturally.

But when saying that it is historically and culturally conditioned, I most certainly do not mean to relativize it or to espouse reductionism—quite the contrary in fact. The often facile opposition relativism vs. universalism has indeed all too often failed to take due account of the fact that what is relative in so far as it is conditioned in its linguistic or cultural expression may, nonetheless, in the final analysis have a very genuine claim to universality in terms of the human, and hence of the humanities. It seems that this holds true as much when we postulate some “Western” or “Eastern” philosophy of this or that period as when we consider what is now termed human

rights, which by definition must transcend specific cultures in time and place. (1995: 155)

Thus, it may well be valid to say that the Buddha did espouse “democracy,” “internationalism” or “human rights,” regardless of the fact that what he espoused may not have been exactly “the same as” what we now mean by those terms. But for that matter, one cannot say that all people in different times and places throughout the modern era have used those terms in exactly (or sometimes even approximately) “the same” way. A similar observation could be made about the use of the term “engagement” in general. (39)

Ruegg then makes some very useful and relevant comments about K. L. Pike’s “emic” and “etic” approaches to source studies(40) that further draw out the implications for the use of “source-alien terminology.” First, he explains that an “emic” approach involves studying a tradition systemically and structurally, by “making use of their own intellectual and cultural categories and seeking as it were to ‘think along’ with these traditions.” By contrast, an “etic” approach involves the intentional use of one’s own interpretive strategies and categories for the purpose of “generalizing and comparative” analysis (1995: 157).(41) He then observes that

[t]he distinction between the “emic” and “etic” approaches . . . is no doubt parallel to the distinction drawn between the use of author-familiar as opposed to author-alien terminologies for the purposes of comparison and exposition. But . . . it may still be possible to employ author-alien terminologies even within an approach that is committed to “emic” analysis and understanding. For example, in explaining the Buddhist theory of spiritual classes or “lineages” (*gotra*) to the extent that it is based on a biological metaphor, one might evoke the idea of a (spir-

itual) “gene” . . . Of course, . . . the modern biological term “gene” . . . [is] alien to our Indian and Tibetan sources, in which no lexeme is to be found with precisely the meaning of . . . [this] modern word. . . . Yet it seems possible to invoke, *mutatis mutandis*, the ideas expressed by . . . [this] new term . . . when seeking to explicate the . . . [theory] in question. In other words, author-alien (or source-alien) terminology could very well be compatible with an “emic” approach to understanding, and it does not necessarily bring with it an exclusive commitment to the “etic” approach. (Conversely, it would in principle be possible to employ source-familiar terminology and still misconstrue and misrepresent a doctrine, thus infringing the requirement of an “emic” approach.) Furthermore, . . . the use of source-familiar terminology need not stand in the way of proceeding from “emic” to “etic” approaches. (1995: 158-159)

Likewise, if evidence is obtained that warrants it, it should be entirely possible to describe traditional Buddhists as “engaged,” as “internationalists,” and so on. Moreover, I would strengthen Ruegg’s parenthetical statement that “it would in principle be possible to employ source-familiar terminology and still misconstrue and misrepresent a doctrine, thus infringing the requirement of an ‘emic’ approach” by saying that “*it is in practice quite common to employ source-familiar terminology and still misconstrue and misrepresent a doctrine...*”—for that is exactly what I have suggested many modernists do when they insist that historically, Buddhism has always been disengaged.

And finally, Ruegg suggests that the careful application of an “emic” approach can help us to avoid the type of subtle (often unconscious) “neo-colonialism” that we have discussed at length herein:

Structural and systemic analysis is in a position to allow due weight to the historical as well as to the descriptive, that is, it may be diachronic as well as synchronic. Here the observation might be ventured that careful “emic” analysis can provide as good a foundation as any for generalizing and comparative study, one that will not superimpose from the outside extraneous modes of thinking and interpretive grids in a way that sometimes proves to be scarcely distinguishable from a more or less subtle form of neo-colonialism. (1995: 157)

Choices, choices

One can choose to stress the continuities between the beliefs and practices of contemporary Buddhists and those of the past, or one can choose to stress the discontinuities. If such choices are not made consciously and carefully, then they are always made unconsciously. Either way, they usually represent more of an ideological or political disposition (or move) than an historical “observation.” While we may agree with Queen that, in principle, “to stress the discontinuity of engaged Buddhism with its classical and medieval predecessors . . . is not to *discredit* its authority” (1996: 31), it nevertheless seems that for Queen (and other modernists), “to stress the discontinuity” (to recognize, then distance) is often to *appropriate* its authority.

On the other hand, if some modernists do consciously and carefully choose to emphasize discontinuities with the past, then certainly other contemporary Buddhists need not be threatened by what those modernists may construe as their new “innovations.” Buddhism has always been adaptive and fluid—as Thurman has stated, Buddhism has a “*tradition of originality*” (1989: 8). It is traditional to *be* original in Bud-

dhism. Hence, the traditionists can relax in the face of the modernists' "adaptations."

But equally importantly (and almost never noted, from what I have seen) is the fact that modernist Buddhists need not be threatened when traditionists consciously and carefully choose to emphasize continuities with the past. Buddhism has had a much longer and more diverse history than modernists typically acknowledge; many of our "contemporary" problems (and solutions) may not be so new. The modernists' rhetoric of newness seduces us into prematurely abandoning the rich mine of the Buddhist tradition and cheats us out of many jeweled resources from which we could have greatly profited. Again, Thurman's comments make this very simple point:

The Buddhist monastic way of life that has been carried down through history in various Asian countries contains a great deal of knowledge concerning the ways that minds and societies work. Without it, we cannot expect to have a Buddhism that stands up to the militarism of the age in which we live. (1992a: 89)

Even the possibility of the total destruction of our habitat or of "life as we know it" can be seen to be not quite as "new" or "modern" as we are continually told to believe. Although it is true that the various technologies of destruction (nuclear, chemical, mass environmental pollution and exploitation, and so forth) are truly new and unprecedented, we should not underemphasize the very real threats and realities that many pre-modern civilizations have endured, including the total annihilation of *their* "entire world" (their entire society, culture, and habitat—life as they knew it) by other means (invading hordes of armies, etc.). There is much that we *still* stand to learn from this rich human history. Our situation may be unique, but it is no more unique than anyone else's in the past. Hence, if modernist engaged Buddhists are truly concerned with trans-

forming the world in which we all live, they might do well to relax and let go of their need to appropriate, own, and reinvent Buddhism from the ground up.

What would be most productive for those of us interested in the socio-spiritual welfare of living beings (both as individuals and as societies) is greater patience, a renewed readiness to respect and dialogue with one another (including “the natives”), more sophisticated methodological approaches, and a much keener self-awareness of the reasons and the agenda motivating our many enterprises.

Notes

1. Cf. Kraft, 1992: 18; Queen, 1996: 34, note 6; and Prebish, 1998: 273. [Return to text](#)
2. Of course, the very term “tradition” (or “the Buddhist tradition”) itself emphasizes continuity with the past. [Return to text](#)
3. Modernists are often vague about the exact timeframe for their espoused “modern-ness.” When they do specify it, they generally refer to “the past one hundred years or so” (Queen, 2000: 30, note 34; and Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover*, 1984: 164, cited in Queen, 2000: 17). Queen offers the most specific dates when he suggests that engaged Buddhism emerged after 1880 or 1881 (1996: 20), or even only after the 1940s (1996: 18-19). [Return to text](#)
4. Note that I will be using the terms “traditionist” and “modernist” to designate *only* the views just described. These terms of course carry other connotations, none of which are to be inferred herein. I will thus be employing these somewhat awkward, inadequate labels only for lack of a better set of terms. [Return to text](#)
5. As I will mention shortly, this mutual myopia has been rectified somewhat since 1997, as demonstrated, for example, by some of the essays in Queen (2000). Earlier exceptions to this observation would include Jones (1988) and some of the authors in Queen (1996). [Return to text](#)
6. Here Kraft is citing a comment that Nhat Hanh made in *BPF Newsletter* 11:2 (Summer, 1989), 22. [Return to text](#)

7. It is worth noting that in his introduction to this anthology (p. 7), modernist editor Christopher Queen refers to this title as “provocative.” [Return to text](#)
8. Here the authors are citing Nhat Hanh’s own words in *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993). [Return to text](#)
9. It should be noted that Glassman himself does not *just* “practice in the cave” to “realize the Way” and so forth. As Queen’s interview essay reveals, Glassman is quite “active” and directly “engaged” in many social arenas. And as Queen himself notes in his introduction to the anthology, “*Service-based engaged Buddhism* is my term for the results-oriented practice of teachers like Bernie Glassman and many of the Buddhist environmentalists, prison chaplains, and peace activists profiled in this book” (2000: 10). However, it can also be noted that when Glassman is asked, “Can a meditator on a retreat in a cave be an engaged Buddhist,” Queen (the quintessential modernist) states that he is “confounded” by Glassman’s affirmative answer (2000: 10). Queen concludes (we can surmise that he finds this paradoxical), “With Glassman Roshi, the continuum from mindfulness-based to service-based engaged Buddhism becomes a full circle” (2000: 11). [Return to text](#)
10. H. H. The Dalai Lama XIV and Thich Nhat Hanh are perhaps the most well-known examples. [Return to text](#)
11. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya movement was begun by A. T. Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka in 1958. For more on this “engaged” movement, *cf.* Macy, 1988: 174 *ff.*, and the essay by George D. Bond entitled “A. T. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka” (chapter four in Queen 1996). [Return to text](#)
12. This generalization is somewhat strange because this anthology contains essays by several outspoken traditionists. [Return to text](#)
13. In her preface to this passage, Simmer-Brown herself states that the “BPF . . . analyzes . . . especially suffering caused by social, economic, and political structures,” then unabashedly concludes that “[t]his analysis goes beyond the Buddha’s.” [Return to text](#)
14. This is one of the earliest book-length studies of “engaged Buddhism,” and though it is largely modernist in tone, it is perhaps one of the most sophisticated and well-balanced works on this topic. We will be returning to his arguments extensively below. [Return to text](#)
15. We will be discussing Jones’s notion of “reductive modernism” below. [Return to text](#)
16. It is significant to note that this 1988 essay, as bold (or extreme) as it may sound, has had an important and enduring history of its own in publications on engaged Buddhism. It was selected for inclusion and reprinted essentially unchanged in the

1996 *Engaged Buddhist Reader* (pp. 64–69), and the very passage cited here was also quoted by Queen in the culminating paragraph of his introduction to his 1996 *Engaged Buddhism*. [Return to text](#)

17. Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 164, as cited by Queen in Queen, 2000: 17. [Return to text](#)
18. Indeed, earlier in his essay Lopez quotes an article published by Hodgson in 1828 that clearly shows “the ambivalence of trust and suspicion of the native that would come to characterize the study of Buddhism in the west.” (3) [Return to text](#)
19. On the untenability of a theory/practice split, cf. Catherine Bell’s *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. [Return to text](#)
20. It should be noted that modern Buddhologists have widely (if not universally) deconstructed and discredited at least *this particular* Orientalist formulation (real Buddhism equals pure philosophy). [Return to text](#)
21. Such a dubious split parallels the *nirvāṇa/saṃsāra* split clearly refuted by Nāgārjuna, among others. It must be admitted that such a naïve, dualistic split certainly was maintained by certain “early Buddhists” (the ones who Nāgārjuna was claiming to refute), but it must equally be admitted that there were probably “early Buddhists” who did *not* accept such a split (the ones who Nāgārjuna would have been claiming to side with—for Nāgārjuna himself did not claim to be an innovator, but rather claimed to be speaking *within* and *for* the Buddhist tradition). [Return to text](#)
22. Modernists might “expect” that scholars from historically Buddhist countries would naïvely misconstrue their own history in this way, but they would also probably “expect” that Western scholars such as Thurman or Macy “should know better.” [Return to text](#)
23. Note that to refer to “my sources,” “my texts,” “my native informants,” and so forth is already to engage in a subtle act of appropriation. [Return to text](#)
24. Cf. Tuck (1990: 10–11) on the significance of a descriptive tone that sounds as if something has been discovered or observed, rather than interpreted or constructed. [Return to text](#)
25. I am here using “false consciousness” in the most generic sense, as nicely defined in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (ed. Robert Audi, Cambridge (1996): 262): “lack of clear awareness of the source and significance of one’s beliefs and attitudes concerning society, religion, or values.” [Return to text](#)
26. A similar East-West dichotomy (and the need for a similar synthesis) is espoused by Eller in 1992:

Some . . . thinkers suggest that . . . “social gospel” or “social and political theory” is precisely what the West (or Christianity) has to offer to

Buddhism. Through a melding of these two traditions, they believe, a more complete philosophy of life and the world will come to light. Gary Snyder takes this position when he says, “The mercy of the west has been social revolution; the mercy of the east has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both.” (1992: 102)

Here *both* “West” and “East” are construed as having had (presumably always) intrinsically “incomplete philosophies,” each waiting to find the other to “complete” itself. This stereotypical portrayal seems again motivated by the kind of neo-colonial, “appropriative” disposition that we have been discussing: East and West may be said to complete each other, but the final synthetic hybrid is accomplished by Western practitioners, defined in Western terms, used in a Western way, on Western soil (primarily), and so forth. [Return to text](#)

27. Queen says of himself, “As one trained in the Theravada practice lineage that produced American Dharma teachers Jack Kornfield, ... [etc.], I imagine myself as a ‘hinayanist.’” (2000: 31, note 52) [Return to text](#)
28. It is impossible for me to see how Queen could consider (1) to be part of a “new” outlook. However, as the main topics of our discussion here are really (2) and (3), we shall leave the issue of (1) aside. [Return to text](#)
29. Thus, Jones and Queen are certainly not the only engaged Buddhists to have recently sought to associate engaged Buddhism specifically with the challenging of the *institutionalized* and *structural* forms of suffering. For example, as Simmer-Brown tells us, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), active since 1978, has recently “engaged in a ‘future process’ designed to refine strategies concerning institutional and ‘structural dukkha’ (suffering), its sources, and the actions and realizations that might lead to its relief” (2000: 78). Simmer-Brown then cites a 1997 BPF document that states:

We feel our particular responsibility is to address structural and social forms of suffering, oppression, and violence. These are not abstractions—war, racism, sexism, economic oppression, denial of human rights and social justice, and so many other ills cause great fear and suffering for all beings.

And she concludes:

In this analysis, BPF is expressing the core of its most current theoretical contribution to engaged Buddhism in America: that meditation practice and training the mind directly relate to diminishing our personal suffering, but that practitioners will not have fully addressed the suffering of the world if they do not address the social, economic,

and political structures that legitimize violence and suffering. (2000:

80) [Return to text](#)

30. This is a common Universal Vehicle contention. See, for example, Tsong Khapa's fifteenth-century Tibetan discussion of this in *Tantra in Tibet* in the section entitled "All the Divisions [of scriptures, paths, or vehicles] Are Ultimately Branches of the Process of Fullest Enlightenment" (pp. 101-104). Therein he argues that everything that the Buddha taught is necessarily something that leads to Buddhahood, even if certain paths (for example, Individual Vehicle paths) are determined to have incomplete methods and are thus only a *part* of the process leading to Buddhahood. [Return to text](#)
31. Again, this is perhaps due in part to his greater familiarization with Theravādin forms of Buddhism (see note 27 above). [Return to text](#)
32. In the same anthology, José Cabezón discusses Christian liberation theology at great length, characterizing it in much the same way as Queen. However, Cabezón comes to a decidedly different conclusion about its consistency with Buddhist liberation movements (Cabezón, 1996: 311). [Return to text](#)
33. This should be fairly obvious. There are many *sūtras* in which the Buddha declares that everything he teaches is solely for liberating beings. See also note 30 above. [Return to text](#)
34. There are countless Mahāyāna treatises that discuss these two sides of *bodhicitta*. See for example Shantideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, I: 15-16; verse 19 of Atisha's *Bodhipatha-pradīpa*; and so forth. [Return to text](#)
35. *Lokayāna* might perhaps better be translated as "Worldly Vehicle" to parallel the adjectival form "Global" and to suggest the focus on "worldly" (*lokiya*) liberation, which he asserts to be characteristic of liberation movements. [Return to text](#)
36. Another example that comes to mind was the attempt by Dol-po-pa (1292-1361) to legitimize his controversial *gzhan stong* interpretation of emptiness by invoking the language of "Councils" in one of his key texts on the subject (*The Great Calculation of the Doctrine, Which Has the Significance of a Fourth Council*). See Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dol po and His Fourth Council of the Buddhist Doctrine*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington (Seattle), 1996. [Return to text](#)
37. In an excellent essay entitled "Tibetan Hermeneutics and the yana Controversy," Nathan Katz demonstrates with abundant scriptural citations and penetrating analysis that "[e]xamples of this yana discourse could extend almost indefinitely, as virtually all Mahayana sutras have something to say on the subject." (Katz, 1983: 113). See also the extended discussions in *Tantra in Tibet* on this very subject (especially the discussions surrounding pp. 48, 55, 60, 92, 100-104). Therein, H. H. The

Dalai Lama and Tsong Khapa argue that a difference in vehicles must be posited with respect to a difference in either wisdom or means (or effect/cause, or fruit/means). This analytical perspective is then used to elucidate why Hinayāna and Mahāyāna are different *yānas*, why Perfection and Mantra Vehicles are different *yānas* (within the Mahāyāna), but why, for example, Cittamātra and Madhyamaka are not different *yānas*, or why other partial sub-paths within a given *yāna* are not considered separate *yānas*, or why different paths and teachings geared toward different levels of disciples are not considered different *yānas*, and so on. [Return to text](#)

38. An attitude often revealed in the rhetoric of pop Zen, or as suggested by the title of Stephen Batchelor’s recent book, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. [Return to text](#)
39. Ruegg’s elucidation and application of the notion of “family resemblance” or of “topos” to such discussions is also extremely illuminating here. See his *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective* (1989), pp. 2, 5, 13, 109, 123-124, and so forth. Therein he notes that (p. 2):

[t]he notion of family resemblance was made use of in philosophy by L. Wittgenstein.... [I]n a polythetic arrangement or chain no single feature is essential, or sufficient, for membership in the classification in which all the individual do *not* share one single characteristic feature. . . . [W]hen we consider Buddhism in its various traditions in India, China and in Tibet . . . the question may even arise as to whether the name ‘Buddhism’ denotes one single entity rather than a classification embracing (more or less polythetically) a very large number of strands held together by family resemblances. [Return to text](#)

40. See Ducrot, Oswald and Tzvetan Todorov (trans. Catherine Porter), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language* (Johns Hopkins U. Press: Baltimore, 1994), p. 36 for further explanation of these terms and an extensive bibliography. [Return to text](#)
41. These “emic” and “etic” approaches may be seen to be related to the useful distinction that Wayne Proudfoot makes in *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) between “description” and “explanation,” respectively. [Return to text](#)

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