

New Perspectives on Buddhist Modernism

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THE SPECIAL SECTION of this issue of *Pacific World* began as a session at the Buddhism in the West program unit of the American Academy of Religion. Formed in late 2006, the Buddhism in the West Consultation is designed to provide a forum for new studies on Buddhism outside Asia, which often end up as orphans: the West is not a traditional concern of Buddhist studies, and Buddhism is not always seen as important within North American or European religious history. Yet Buddhism is undeniably a rapidly growing phenomenon outside of Asia. The encounter of “East and West” has implications for both the evolution of Buddhism and the future of Western culture, which increasingly includes not only actual Buddhist populations but also measurable impact from Buddhist influences in pop culture, medicine, psychology, and other areas.

The first session of the consultation was held at the 2007 AAR annual meeting in San Diego. The topic of discussion was “New Perspectives on Buddhism Modernism in the West.” “Modern Buddhism” is a term increasingly used to describe and analyze certain developments within Buddhism since approximately the mid-nineteenth century. It was an apt initial topic for the Buddhism in West unit because while the creators and proponents of modern Buddhism have not always been Westerners, they have all operated in the period of significant contact with the West, and Western influence—sometimes positive, sometimes imperialistic—is one important stimulus for the rise of modern Buddhism.

Modern Buddhism is described in slightly different ways by different scholars, but in general it is ably characterized in the following description taken from Donald Lopez Jr.’s *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, which presents selections from major figures in the movement:

Modern Buddhism shares many of the characteristics of other projects of modernity, including the identification of the present as a standpoint from which to reflect upon previous periods in history and to identify their deficiencies in relation to the present. Modern Buddhism rejects many of the ritual and magical elements of previous forms of Buddhism, it stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual over the community. Yet...modern Buddhism does not see itself as the culmination of a long process of evolution, but rather as a return to the origin, to the Buddhism of the Buddha himself.... For modern Buddhists, the Buddha knew long ago what Europe would only discover much later. Yet what we regard as Buddhism today, especially the common portrayal of the Buddhism of the Buddha, is in fact a creation of modern Buddhism. Its widespread acceptance, both in the West and in much of Asia, is testimony to the influence of [its] thinkers.¹

These attitudes are often portrayed as emerging from changing social situations originating in or provoked by the West, especially in relation to the industrial revolution and colonialism, and as Lopez notes, the Buddhist developments parallel similar phenomena in other religions and movements affected by modernism. Steven Heine and Charles Prebish summarize some of the most important influences as “intellectual trends such as scientism and rationalism; changes in lifestyle such as secularization and an increasing dependence on technology; the rise of ideologies that present alternative or rival standpoints to traditional religion ranging from Marxism to psychotherapy, as well as the influx of syncretic and new religious movements; and the effect of ethical crises raised by medical and environmental concerns.”²

Modern Buddhism, then, is a hybrid product of both Buddhist Asia and the West. It occurs in both Asia and the West, and exists alongside others forms of Buddhism, including groups that are less interested in reform or even harbor explicitly anti-modern viewpoints. From some perspectives it operates almost as a separate, self-sufficient form of Buddhism that partially transcends traditional sectarian or geographic boundaries.

In the following four papers, all taken from the 2007 AAR session, several scholars tackle modern Buddhism from a variety of approaches. In the first article, Wakoh Shannon Hickey discusses the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) on several of the most important early disseminators of Buddhism in the West. Because Swedenborg died well before Buddhism came to the West, and does not appear to have

been directly influenced by Buddhism, his role in Buddhism's modern history may come as a surprise. However, as Hickey demonstrates, a number of key figures combined Swedenborgianism with Buddhism in their approach to religion, at times allowing elements of the Swedish mystic's philosophy to enter into the stream of modern Buddhism that developed in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North America.

In the second article, David McMahan traces the fascinating transformation of dependent co-arising into interdependence in modern Buddhist discourse. Under the influence of Transcendentalism, environmentalism, and related intellectual/spiritual movements, discussion of this key Buddhist concept has shifted considerably. Whereas dependent co-arising was related to negative valuation of the self and world (since all things are transient and unsatisfying), the rise of interdependence as the main terminology indicates a reformulation that is world-affirming and wonder-producing. McMahan expands on this discussion in his recent book, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

Richard Payne, in the third article, presents a critique of the role that Traditionalism has played in the depiction of Buddhism in the modern era. Traditionalism combines the concept of a single, universal, esoteric insight or religious truth with opposition to modernism. Yet Traditionalism is itself a product of the modern world, not a genuine recapture of the pre-modern, and it actively uses traditionalizing language in innovative ways that speak to contemporary concerns and attitudes. Though it is not the main subject of Payne's essay, it is worth noting that many people manage to simultaneously combine elements of modernism *and* Traditionalism in their understandings or approaches to Buddhism, especially in the West. Thus Traditionalism comes to be a strategy by which some contemporary Buddhists or Buddhist sympathizers assimilate Buddhism to meet their modern circumstances, even as they assert their adherence to unmodified *buddhadharma*.

In the fourth essay, Natalie Quli examines how the *jhāna* meditation stages and techniques have been approached by various figures important to Theravāda Buddhism in the West. Because these teachers are often portrayed as modern Buddhists opposed to traditional understandings of cosmology and supernormal consciousness, hostility to *jhāna* meditation is normally assumed on their part. But in fact, Quli shows how attraction to the Buddha's use of *jhāna* in his teachings

allows more traditional viewpoints to be partially affirmed by some of these Theravāda teachers, while others labor to make them more symbolic or psychological in interpretation. She asserts, therefore, the need to pay attention to how modernism within Buddhism displays multiple facets.

Richard Jaffe of Duke University provided a response to the papers at the session, and his helpful comments have informed the revisions that went into these final versions. Together these essays help to further chart the complexities (and especially the genealogies) of modern Buddhism in the West.

NOTES

1. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), ix–x.
2. Steven Heine and Charles S. Prebish, eds., *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.