

Introduction: Alternate Buddhist Modernities

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Increased transnational communication and movement of people have globalized the notion of religion (Beyer 2006; Picard 2017). There have always been movements of people and ideas, for example along the Silk Road; however, the acceleration of these movements has been acknowledged through a differentiation between “thin” and “thick” globalization (e.g., Vásquez and Marquardt 2003). The process occurred over time, through European exploration, trade, and imperialism, but some scholars note that the peak was reached at the beginning of the twentieth century, before the First World War, when, “the extensive reach of global networks [was] matched by their high intensity, high velocity, and high impact propensity across all the domains and facets of social life from the economic to the cultural” (Held et al., 1999: 21). The formulation of the concept of “world religions,” and the expansion of the list beyond Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and the miscellaneous category of Paganism to include other traditions by the early twentieth century (Masuzawa 2005), had effects on traditions around the world. Asian reformers, ranging from Anagarika Dharmapala to Taixu, Western converts, such as Colonel Olcott and Christmas Humphreys, and scholars, including Thomas William Rhys Davids and Max Müller, restructured Buddhism to reflect the specifications of the dynamic, emerging category of world religion.

A strong current within the increasingly global Buddhist discourses from the late 1800s was the desire among a variety of proponents to modernize Buddhism. In broad strokes, the desire was to make Buddhism into a world religion, which meant, on the one hand, separating Buddhism from other traditions, and more importantly from elements that were viewed as non-Buddhist cultural accretions or superstitious elements. On the other hand, there was a need to identify and accentuate elements of commonality of the various national and sectarian traditions that had been identified as “Buddhist.” At the same time, there was an imperative—due to the dual pressures of Christian

missionization and European colonial hegemony—to assert Buddhism as a fully modern religion that was relevant to the contemporary world, and equal (or superior) to Christianity in its compatibility with science. Reform movements sprung up throughout Buddhist Asia with the goal of bringing about these changes. The processes outlined here started in the late nineteenth century, with the World’s Parliament of Religions of 1893 being a defining moment, and continued throughout the twentieth century, engaging with the main themes of these modernizing discourses.

The dominant discourse in the globalizing forms of Buddhism reflected a modernist understanding, valuing rationalism and individualism, and advocating for increased lay involvement and for Buddhism and Buddhist monastics to be more involved in society. The ideas of “modernity” and “modernism,” however, are notoriously nebulous, and scholars have long recognized that there are, in fact, multiple modernities (e.g., Eisenstadt 2002). “Modernity,” however, is not only an academic label, but it has been heavily imbued with symbolic value because of its association with hegemonic discourses of Western exceptionalism. Unsurprisingly, tropes of modernism were taken up, interpreted, and adapted to local circumstances, and then exported in the “glocalization” processes described by Roland Robertson (1995). More than that, “modernity” was (and continues to be) actively employed by Asians who recognized the rhetorical force of the tropes of modernity and sought to use them to strengthen their own positions and identities. The three essays in this collection illustrate the various ways that “modernity” has been employed. The responses to, and employments of, modernity have been more diverse and creative than has typically been acknowledged.

The academic study of modern or contemporary Buddhism, the youngest sibling in the Buddhist Studies family, has continued to be active and productive in the early twenty-first century, establishing itself as a distinct sub-discipline. Although there were many earlier works, which in hindsight are seen as contributing to the formation of the field, Martin Baumann’s 2001 study identified the theoretical issues involved in creating a field devoted to the study of what he called “global Buddhism.” Then Donald S. Lopez’s 2002 work, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, explicitly discussed modern Buddhism as a new sect, a new school of Buddhism. In this book, he tracked the formation of a Buddhism that rejected the ritual and magical elements that were integral to the way that Buddhism has arguably been practiced since the beginning,¹ and stressed rationality and consistency with science (Lopez 2002: ix-x). His book brought together core texts by a number of reformers whose biographies and ideas dating back 150 years intersected with each other to help create a form of Buddhism that was identified not by its place in a *yana*, but by its modernity.

David McMahan’s 2008 monograph *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* was especially influential in carefully analyzing, illustrating, and contextualizing characteristics and origins of Buddhist modernism across a range of spheres, themes, actors, and adaptations to dominant modern discourses. *Inter alia*, he pointed out that western Romanticism had a formative impact on reformulations of Buddhism, that for many in the West, Buddhist modernism was viewed as an attempt to answer the Romantic quest for a form of spirituality to counter scientific materialism

¹ Seen, for example, in the cult of relics (Fogelin 2014; Milligan 2019).

(McMahan 2008: 76-87). Observing this encounter between traditional Buddhism and Western thought, many authors have completed studies of the rise of Buddhism within Western culture with titles like *The American Encounter with Buddhism* (Tweed 1992), *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Prebish and Tanaka 1998) and *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Prebish 1999). Not only academics, but adherents who took modern Buddhism as their religion, also published studies from the practitioner's point of view (Fields 1981, Rapaport 1998, Coleman 2001). The burgeoning research today on modern Buddhism includes studies of historical origins, formative discourses, key characteristics, and pioneering figures.² Other scholarly contributions provide in-depth studies of many of the most famous reformers within and beyond Asia, including different interactions among influential figures from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) (e.g., Blackburn 2010, Prothero 2010), Japan (e.g., Snodgrass 2003, Krämer 2015), Europe (e.g., Baumann 2002), North America (e.g., Gleig 2019, Mitchell 2016), China (e.g., Pittman 2001), Southeast Asia (e.g., DeVido 2009), and increasingly throughout the expanding Buddhist world. This scholarship has, in a relatively short time, increased understanding of many of modern Buddhism's developments and reforms. Of course, it has not been exhaustive nor without its own blind spots.

The very term "modern" (and its binary complement and opposite "traditional") upon which the sub-field of modern Buddhism has been constructed has become problematic. Modernization, it turns out, is not a simple, straightforward, linear process. In each instance where Buddhist modernization has occurred, the reception of Western ideas was always modified by the Asian historical context in which Asian agents screened the incoming western influences, and selected and adapted those that fit their own agendas. For example, in 1872, the new government of Meiji Japan sent envoys to the United States and the countries of Europe to learn the best practices of the Western countries deliberately intending to adopt them into Japan. In the Constitution of 1889, it defined a system of government centered on the Japanese emperor who was declared to be a kami, a divinity. This dramatic example "emperor worship," illustrates well that Western influence is subject to Asian agents' agendas. Thus, authors like McMahan speak of modernity in the plural, "multiple modernities," matching the multiple indigenous contexts in which modern Asian Buddhisms have developed (McMahon 2015). This observation is consistent with the scholarship on globalization. As Robertson (1995) and Arjun Appadurai (1996) demonstrated, globalization is not a homogenizing process. Instead, as ideas are communicated to nodes around the world, they change to fit in with the locality, and these changed ideas are sometimes then propelled out to be globalized.³

Buddhist Studies has been somewhat behind other disciplines in recognizing multiple modernities. Also, modernism has mostly tended to be viewed as fairly uniformly exhibiting

² For examples of origins see App (2012), Snodgrass (2003; 2009). For formative discourses see Bhushan, Garfield and Zablocki (2009), Gleig (2019), Harding (2008), McMahan (2008), Lopez (2008). For key characteristics see Batchelor (2015), Cohen (2006), Lopez (2002), McMahan (2012). For pioneering figures see Braun (2009), Lopez (2002), Pittman (2001), Prothero (2010). For dominant practices and permutations see Wilson (2014). For prominent nodes and modes of modern Buddhism see Bluck (2006), Jaffe (2019), Mitchell (2016), Mitchell and Quli (2015), Numrich (2008), and Rocha (2006).

³ See also Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's *Multiple Modernities* (2002), which makes the same point.

characteristics such as individualism, democratic tendencies, and a focus on enlightenment usually achieved through meditation. While these aspects certainly play an important role for a number of Buddhist movements, they are not fully representative of the ways that Buddhism has “become modern.” As Scott Mitchell and Natalie Quli (2015: 201) and Mitchell (2016) argued, modernity, particularly as it relates to Buddhism, is more complex and less uniform than early studies seemed to assume. Ann Gleig in her 2019 book *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* moved even further to argue that contemporary Buddhism cannot be contained by the paradigm of Buddhist modernism and displays characteristics more associated with the postmodern, postcolonial, and postsecular. Although centered on ethnographic case studies of meditation-based American convert communities in recent decades, her theoretical implications further problematized traditional-modern binaries with wider application for contemporary Buddhism.

This special edition does not fully displace the concept of modernity in favor of the postmodern, but instead is titled “Alternate Buddhist Modernities” in recognition of the complexity, multiplicity, and even contrariness of various Buddhist modernities from the late nineteenth century up to our own time. The following articles provide Buddhist case studies which expand on works that are showing how there are, and have been for 150 years, multiple Buddhist modernities, even beyond the scientific and romantic versions of modernity that McMahan explored (2008: 57-59). McMahan recognized that there are other hybridities, and that Buddhist modernism can take many different forms as it develops in multiple cultural contexts. Cristina Rocha demonstrated this in her 2006 book, *Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity*, and simultaneously expanded the scope of scholarly analysis of multiple Buddhist hybridities and modernities by bringing attention to several underrepresented cultural contexts—including South America and Catholic and Afro-Brazilian religion. The examples in this special edition continue the work of adding to the broader picture by filling in some of the missing parts of the modern Buddhist map.

The following articles also illustrated that the dominant hegemonic⁴ modernist constructions of Buddhism that were secular in nature, focusing on meditation as a technology of the mind that could bring about (and was principally employed towards) enlightenment, were not accepted whole. Modernist structures have been selectively used and even consciously exploited as strategies to adapt to the new global context of Buddhism. The modernization of Buddhism arises in conjunction with its globalization; therefore, the particular ways that modernization has taken place in specific groups and locations cannot be properly understood without taking into account the global discourses on Buddhism and modernity. The following three essays interrogate the modern-traditional binary, and supplement existing scholarship on modern forms of Buddhism worldwide. They transgress the boundaries of more typical depictions of modern Buddhist characteristics, groups, and reforms.

There are a few common characteristics associated with a modern-traditional binary for Buddhism. At first glance, “modern Buddhism” seems to be the opposite of “traditional Buddhism.”

⁴ It can be said to be hegemonic for the way it was tied with Orientalist scholarship, reinforcing western colonialism in Asia. It constructed “traditional” Buddhism in Asia as mired in superstition and warped by non-Buddhist cultural accretions, in need of being rescued by the west through scholarships that would uncover the pristine original thought and teachings of the historical Buddha.

In many cases, the binary is used to privilege the modern. In this view, modern Buddhism is new and contemporary, where traditional Buddhism is old and ancient. Modern Buddhism is also “this-worldly” and consistent with science, where traditional Buddhism is populated with “other-worldly” superstitions, spirits, and beliefs, such as reincarnation. Modern Buddhism is often institutionally organized differently with greater emphasis on lay and female leadership and less differentiation than traditional Buddhism between lay vs. monastic practices, status, vows, or production of merit. Traditional Buddhism comes with “cultural baggage” whereas modern Buddhism is free of ethnic identification. We see how the Orientalist construction, while dismantled in the academy since the critiques by Edward Said (1978) and subsequent scholars, is nonetheless taken on and perpetuated in various ways by Buddhist groups in Asia and in the West. In Christopher Emory-Moore’s article in this special issue, the New Kadampa Tradition’s self-identification as modern Buddhism comes with the attendant claim that it is not Tibetan Buddhism. In this image, “modern” is framed as forward looking and open to change, whereas “tradition” is backward looking and resistant to change.

Of course, academic accounts typically strive to avoid bias favoring one side of this binary and include more nuanced discussions of the shifting forms of modern Buddhism and limitations of typologies and models. Even though such stark binaries are challenged by examples on the ground where complex cross-cultural influences shape a wide variety of forms that do not neatly conform to each of these categories, the binary often persists in popular conceptions. But this value judgment silently assumes that traditional Asian Buddhism corrupted originally pure Buddhism. More recent scholarship has been more attentive to Asian agency in the modernization of Buddhism (e.g., Darlington 2009; Harding 2008; Harding, Hori, and Soucy 2010, 2014, 2020; Krämer 2015; Mitchell and Quli 2015; Jaffe 2019; Snodgrass 2003), and all three articles here extend that trend with understudied examples. These three especially valuable counterexamples also push against, and even redefine, the boundaries of this traditional-modern binary.

Directing attention to exceptions, complexity and hybridity is valuable in expanding our knowledge of alternate modern forms, even though some aspects of this diversity have been partially addressed by existing scholarship on modern Buddhism. For example, McMahan acknowledges re-invention of traditional aspects of Buddhism within modern forms. In the introduction to his seminal 2008 work, he follows a description of modern characteristics with a disclaimer that at times traditional components have been reinvented rather than eliminated. After noting the perceived need of modernizers of Buddhism to transform, reform, and purge the tradition “of mythological elements” and “superstitious’ cultural accretions,” he writes:

Thus the Buddhism that has become visible in the West and among urban, educated populations in Asia involves fewer rituals, deemphasizes the miracles and supernatural events depicted in Buddhist literature, disposes of or reinterprets image worship, and stresses compatibility with scientific, humanistic, and democratic ideals. At the same time, these recent reforms of Buddhism have not simply dispensed with all traditional elements in an effort to accommodate to a changing world but have re-invented them. (2008: 5-6)

The cases presented in the following three articles illustrate understudied forms with various modes and combinations of re-invented traditional elements. These diverse modern responses and reformulations pointedly embrace ritual, devotion, and some related characteristics to which Buddhist modernism is often defined in opposition.

The first of the three cases focuses on Buddhism in Sri Lanka beginning with innovations in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This setting is typical for conversations of modern Buddhist reformulations, but Soorakkulame Pematatana shifts the focus away from the usual protagonists, such as Anagārika Dharmapāla, Col. Henry S. Olcott, and the conceptual model of “Protestant Buddhism” that emerged there in response to Christian missionary influence and various modern pressures. Instead, Pematatana demonstrates that Buddhist modern reform included more conservative and traditional elements promoting Buddhist devotional rituals. This activity too was a modern response and made use of modern technologies, such as the printing press, for widespread dissemination of ritual manuals. His archival work and analysis are a useful corrective to balance out the scholarly narrative that has been more focused on one sort of elite, modernist reformers, at the expense of more conservative voices who were also creating new formulations of traditional practices and responding to modern pressures and opportunities in their own ways. Also, whereas modernist reforms are often cast as rational and anti-ritual (and to an extent anti-devotional), Pematatana’s case study restores the centrality of ritual practice to some modern reforms. Pematatana’s article rebalances the overreliance on one dominant modernist narrative and contributes a useful contrast by bringing to light the publications that promoted ritual devotional practice.

The next two articles move even further in confounding the modern-traditional binary. First, Christopher Emory-Moore provides an example of a modern-traditional hybrid Western Buddhist organization with modernist packaging, promotion, and self-identification in a somewhat surprising combination with Tibetan roots and more traditional doctrinal positions. Emory-Moore shows in his analysis of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) that an organization (1) can claim to be modern while actually teaching a very conservative traditional form of Buddhism, and (2) can be modern in institution (election of leaders, gender neutrality, no discrimination against laypeople, use of modern technology) while traditional in dharma (ritualistic, emphasis on faith, belief in reincarnation). This hybridity challenges several common categories. Its name and the training of its founder, the Tibetan Gelukpa monk Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, suggest we have an example of Tibetan Buddhism to complement the Sri Lankan Buddhism of Pematatana’s article and the Japanese Buddhism in the last article by Casey Collins. However, Emory-Moore emphasizes that NKT does not only self-identify as modern Buddhism, consistent with Geshe Kelsang Gyatso’s 2011 book *Modern Buddhism*, but also that this group legally registered itself in 1992 as “an independent Western Buddhist tradition...not Tibetan Buddhism but Western Buddhism.” The unification of characteristics more typically on opposite sides of the traditional-modern binary makes this NKT study an ideal case for this special issue as it represents an alternative modernity that embraces traditional doctrine and ritual.

Finally, the last article challenges the traditional-modern binary even more fundamentally, and in the process introduces a useful conceptualization of Buddhist Contramodernism illustrated by

a Japanese “new religion” with Shingon roots. Casey Collins examines Shinnyo-en, a Buddhist movement created in the last 90 years, and argues that the modern/traditional binary is itself inadequate to properly analyze how Shinnyo-en successfully embodies a modern Buddhism, but one in which the founding modern reformers are the central objects of devotional worship, miraculous power, and even ultimate salvation. Folk belief and this-worldly benefit freely mix with modern institutional structures and invocations of the authenticating traditional roots from the founder’s Shingon training and lineage in that Japanese form of Vajrayana Buddhism. Here, too, the founders were well aware of the earlier Japanese modernist reforms in the Meiji Era, but they rejected the efficacy of those forms that more closely aligned with the modern position in the usual traditional-modern binary. This new religion was self-consciously constructed as an alternative modernism, a Buddhist contramodernism.

All three authors pick up on understudied groups and activities that are typically at the margins of discussions focused on modern Buddhist forms. All three emphasize traditional ritual practice rather than minimizing it as inconsistent with modernity. Pematatana demonstrates that technology, such as the printing press, was used to promote traditional ritual and devotional practice even though it is often depicted as naturally aligning with the modern side of the misleading binary. Emory-Moore shows that a Buddhist organization could combine modern institution with traditional dharma. Collins coins a new concept, the “contramodern,” to show that the fusion of modern and traditional penetrates further than institutional form and dharma teaching right into the core ritualized experience.

All three articles complicate ideas of Buddhist modernism in helpful ways. Traditional practices and modern packaging combine self-conscious articulations of Buddhist identity and practice that is most suitable to modernity even while rooted in traditional ideas of authority. These alternate, hybrid, and contramodern cases, to borrow the term that Collins introduces in his Shinnyo-en case study from Japan, address a wider range of “modern” religious responses and institutional forms that invoke, produce, and reinvent “traditional” modes of ritual, devotion, and authority. These illustrative Buddhist case studies from South, Central and East Asia (as well as the “West” given NKT’s explicit self-identification as Western) are constructed as modern even though they pointedly and unapologetically participate in forms that are usually characterized as antithetical to Buddhist modernism. The result is a fuller picture of modern Buddhism, adding to a growing body of work that is illustrating that the modernization of Buddhism is not a process of homogenization, but is a complicated process of hybridization, involving multiple flows, and discourses that is resulting in a proliferation of versions of Buddhisms adapted to contemporary global contexts.

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