

Introduction: The New “Defenders”: Youthful Articulations of Buddhism in a Contemporary Age

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In recent years, contemporary scholarship on Buddhism has focused on processes of religious change and adaptation with a number of frameworks advanced to account for the social and cultural forces reshaping the Buddhist landscape. However, the contributions and perspectives of young people and youthful “allies” have been largely overlooked in extant theorizations of Buddhism. This is a curious omission, given that young people are often at the forefront of social and cultural change, and the youth phase in itself represents a period of growth, development and maturation. This special issue addresses this gap in the literature. It explores how young people’s encounters, engagements, re-interpretations and adaptations of Buddhist teachings, beliefs, practices, cultures and traditions have contributed to the development of Buddhism globally. Additionally, it considers how young people’s development as Buddhist practitioners-in-the-making offers scholars of Buddhism a unique window into understanding religious change as it is being negotiated by the next generation of Buddhist practitioners. Just as youth studies scholars recognize the increasingly fragmented, uncertain and non-linear trajectories of many young people from childhood to adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Wilson and Wyn 1987), the articles in this special issue draw attention to the social and cultural forces that may challenge, restrict or curtail opportunities for young Buddhist practitioners to transform Buddhism in a range of contexts. In particular, high levels of immigration and the rise of “no-religion” require young people to regularly consider the interplay of religious and secular forces in contexts of increasing cultural and religious diversity. Young people are also required to carefully negotiate their Buddhist engagements in contexts where broader political tensions shape religious expression in public and private life, such as when religion is entwined with nationalism. These dynamics are evident in the religious lives of Buddhist youth, who are negotiating new forms of Buddhism in ways that speak to their engagement with contemporary social justice concerns, transnational mobilities, and digital technology.

A number of priorities informed the call for papers. First, the transnational nature of the editorial team—one of us working and researching on Buddhism in Australia (Lam), one working in the United States but researching Buddhism in Thailand (Schedneck), and another working in India and Denmark but researching Buddhism in Ladakh, India (Williams-Oerberg)—has attuned us to the



diversity of approaches to studying Buddhism and the need to consider developments occurring beyond the Global North, where extant theorizations of Buddhism have focused.¹ Second, the issue includes contributions that are both contemporary and historical. The contemporary contributions look more obviously at how Buddhism is currently perceived, practiced and transformed by young people, while the historical contributions draw attention to the ways young Buddhists have contributed, often in under-recognized ways, to the maintenance and transmission of Buddhism during periods of intense social upheaval. Duncan Williams' (2019) recognition of Japanese Buddhist youth interned during WWII serves as an important example of a recent re-historicization of Buddhism in America, in which he highlights young Japanese Buddhists' efforts to "keep Buddhism alive" during one of the darkest moments of history. In featuring articles focusing on different time periods, this special issue recognizes that Buddhist movements have lengthy histories, as demonstrated by McMahan and Braun (2018), who have drawn attention to the role of Asian Buddhist reformers in modernizing Buddhism long before the Western mindfulness movement. Third, this special issue includes contributions exploring both how Buddhism is re-interpreted by young people, and how young Buddhist practitioners themselves are being transformed by social networks, institutions, material resources, and local and global forces. The articles in this special issue represent a range of disciplinary perspectives, including sociology, anthropology, history and media studies, promoting interdisciplinary dialogue and reflection. They offer new perspectives on how young people are changing Buddhism, and how young Buddhist practitioners' religious trajectories are being transformed by social and cultural forces.

Research on Buddhism and youth internationally

Theories of Buddhism relating to modernity, globalization, post-modernity, post-secularism and post-colonialism offer scholars of Buddhism considerable scope for explicating the contours of change in relation to Buddhism. Theories of "Buddhist modernism" or "modern Buddhism" are widely established in Buddhist studies scholarship. According to this body of work, Buddhism has undergone significant transformation as a result of its encounter with the discourses of modernity, incorporating science, rationalism, Romanticism and psychologization. This has purportedly led to the transnational development of a demythologized, privatized and rationalized Buddhism, which can be observed in the increasing emphasis on individualism, meditation, equality, social reform, linear progress and cosmopolitanism (Bechert 1966; Lopez 2002; McMahan 2008). Alongside the Buddhist modernism thesis, a lively critique has emerged, with Buddhist studies scholars positing the existence of "multiple Buddhist modernities," "global" Buddhism, "ultramodern Buddhism," as well as "post-secular," "post-colonial" and "post-modern" Buddhisms. Following Eisenstadt (2000), Buddhist modernities are said to be "multiple" because there is a variety of traditions and cultures (beyond the West) out of which Buddhist modernities have developed (Mitchell and Quli 2015).

¹ See for example Baumann & Prebish (2002) on Buddhism in the West; Gleig (2019), McMahan (2008) and Mitchell & Quli (2015) on Buddhism in North America; Halafoff, Garrod and Gobey (2018) on Buddhism in Australia; and Thanissaro (2014) on Buddhism in Britain.

Relatedly, post-colonial accounts of Buddhism have explored the consequences of imperialism, colonialism and Orientalism on non-Western Buddhist communities and scholarship on Buddhism in the West. Such accounts have contributed to the de-centering of so-called universal, Enlightenment discourses and scientific rationalism associated with modernity and the Western experience (Berkwitz 2006; Lopez 1995). Buddhism is also said to be “ultramodern” in that it transcends “either/or” dualisms between the global and local, traditional and modern, lay people and Sangha, and scholars and practitioners, is underpinned by a critical reflexivity, and furthers “the unfinished project of modernity” (Halafoff, Garrod and Gobey 2018). Post-secular accounts of Buddhism seek to break down a different binary—that of the sacred and the secular—pointing to how Buddhist teachings and practices retain their significance for individuals in an increasingly secular public sphere. This may be seen for example in young Australian Buddhist practitioners’ experiences of contributing to civic and political action in ways that are informed by religious principles (Harris and Lam 2019), and in teen Buddhists’ efforts to retain parents’ Buddhist beliefs and practices while fitting in with non-Buddhist peers in the secular UK context (Thanissaro 2014).

In addition to the approaches outlined above, “post-modern” accounts of Buddhism consider what, if anything, might come “after” Buddhist modernism in a chronological sense. Martin Baumann (2001:4), for example, asks “what might qualify as a distinctive characteristic, shaping Buddhism in the period after modernity, that is, in post-modernity?” For Baumann, the term “global” is less ambiguous than “postmodern,” and better captures the multi-/poly-centric nature of Buddhism and its global spread to infinitesimal local contexts (Baumann and Prebish 2002: 7). David McMahan (2008) poses the same question in the final chapter of his seminal text, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. According to McMahan, contemporary Buddhism is increasingly characterized by a high level of splintering, hybridity, appropriation, global diffusion and radical retraditionalization/detraditionalization of Buddhism. He suggests that these characteristics are indicative of emerging tensions or challenges to Buddhist modernism, raising questions about “which genre of globalized postmodern Buddhism” will “ultimately be most influential” (2008: 244, 265) More recently, Ann Gleig (2019) has developed a comprehensive account of the contours of Buddhism in North America, which she argues must be understood by considering what comes after modernity. She suggests that a three-pronged “postmodern,” “postcolonial” and “post-secular” framework may more usefully account for developments in Buddhism in North America, which include a movement beyond scientific and universal meta-narratives, the valuing of difference, diversity and hybridity, and a rejection of liberal individualism.

This special issue does not attempt to settle these debates, nor does it endorse a particular theoretical perspective. It agrees that Buddhism is in a state of intense flux, even upheaval, and that theories relating to modernity, globalization, post-modernity, post-secularism and post-colonialism offer scholars of Buddhism considerable scope for explicating the contours of change in relation to Buddhism. Strikingly, however, the contributions and perspectives of young people have been largely

absent from theoretical developments in such scholarship.² Issues of intergenerational transmission have been salient in research on Buddhist youth, as they have been in research of minority religious youth more broadly (Kuusisto 2010). Indeed, many studies on Buddhist youth have focused on the transmission of Buddhism from parents and religious institutions to young people raised in Asian or mixed-race Buddhist families (Beyer and Ramji 2014; Han 2017, 2019; McLellan 2008; Thanissaro 2014). Young people represent the future, and issues of intergenerational transmission are of concern to Buddhist organizations, temples, and projects especially when religion is seen to be in need of revival, renewal and expansion (Kurien 2005). According to Pew Research, the percentage of Buddhists worldwide is projected to decrease over the next few decades, from 7 percent in 2015 to 5 percent in 2060 (Starr 2019). Much of this decrease has been attributed to low fertility rates among Buddhists compared to adherents of other religions (Skirbekk, Stonawski, Fukuda, Spoorenberg, Hackett and Muttarak 2015). The projected decline of Buddhist adherents worldwide has sparked concern among the elder generations of Buddhists, who are already seeing lower levels of Buddhist engagement among young people (see contributions by Schedneck and Williams-Oerberg, this volume). Issues of secularism (Bruce 2011), a perceived clash between “host” and immigrant cultures (Vassenden and Andersson 2010), language barriers (Amarasingam 2008) and peer pressure are among the key concerns of elder generations (McLellan 2008). According to Thanissaro, these influences are evident in the religiosity of teenage Buddhists from Asian Buddhist families, who adopt a “convert” style of Buddhism that eschews monasticism, devotions, ethical precepts, and the “worldly benefits of Buddhism and its social activities.”

However, recent scholarship also shows that Buddhist youth are not simply the “recipients” of Buddhism from their parents (Han 2017; Lam 2018; McLellan 2008; Williams-Oerberg 2017). While young people’s religious trajectories are often shaped by that of their parents’, they also play a central role in religious change, including restructuring Buddhist communities and institutions, reinterpreting teachings and practices to meet contemporary concerns, and motivating new strategies for spreading Buddhism (Crockett and Voas 2006; Page and Yip 2017). Research in the United States (Han 2019, 2021), Britain (Page and Yip 2017), India (Williams-Oerberg 2017) and Australia (Lam 2018) demonstrates that young Buddhist practitioners are actively re-defining the contours of lived Buddhism and contributing to social change in ways that warrant a focus on young people as central agents and not simply as targets for (adult) intervention. Meanwhile in Canada, Martel-Reny and Beyer (2013) observe that there is a lack of inclination from parents to “pass on Buddhism to children,” and that most of the “ethno-cultural” participants in their study of young adult Buddhists actively constructed their own form of Buddhism from their own research, inclinations and experiences. Beyer (2013: 11) points out that contemporary young adults are “individually responsible for and capable of building their own, personal relation to religion,” drawing attention to the multiple sources from which individuals might learn about religion, from their family to the Internet.

² Gleig (2019) addresses the role generational differences are playing in two chapters—one on Buddhist Geeks and one on Generation X Buddhist teachers—in *American Dharma*.

The theme of individualization is further highlighted in Page and Yip’s (2017) research on young British Buddhists, who predominantly classify their ethnic origin as “White.” Page and Yip (2017: 103) observe that detraditionalization, including the decline of religious institutions, has meant that individuals are now responsible for negotiating their own life trajectories amidst a climate of “risks and costs, as well as opportunities.” For the relatively privileged middle-classed participants in their research, the negotiation of a Buddhist identity involved considerable creativity, resourcefulness and pragmatism, with young people actively drawing from multiple sources (2017: 144). Religiosity, however, is far from a narcissistic or self-absorbed affair, with spirituality significantly informing young Buddhists’ social and political activities (2017: 151). These findings are echoed in Lam’s (2018) research on young adult Australian Buddhist practitioners from both Asian and non-Asian backgrounds, whose engagements with Buddhism are simultaneously individual and social, following the adage: “Be the change you wish to see.” Negotiations of religious belonging and identity can also be strongly racialized, with multiculturalism, and transnational flows between the two regions exacerbating perceived differences between Australia and Buddhism as an “Asian” religion (Lam 2019; Rocha and Barker 2011). The role of transnational flows in mediating religion is further highlighted in Williams-Oerberg’s (2017) research on young Ladakhi Buddhists in India, with technology a key enabler of religious mobilities for this cohort. Similarly, Drissel’s (2008) research on Tibetan Buddhist youth shows how they utilize the Internet and other information technologies to engage in cross-border political activism and strengthen a collective Tibetan Buddhist identity.

The research outlined above suggests that scholarship on Buddhist youth is coalescing along several distinct themes. Consistent with youth studies scholarship, the research shows that while young people are increasingly navigating individualized religious trajectories that differ to those of their parents, their lives remain strongly patterned by structural inequalities, for example in relation to race, ethnicity, class and geographical context (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). We see detraditionalization and the post-secular entwining of the “religious” and the “secular” in young people’s engagement with Buddhism, with religion negotiated in response to the demands of education and employment, and their immersion in the domains of consumption, leisure, sexuality and the digital (Smith et al. 2011). However, due to the methodological nationalism informing much of the research, we know little about the ways young people’s contextualized religious engagements may be reflective of, or indeed constitutive of broader trends in the globalization and modernization of Buddhism. While Buddhist studies scholarship has stressed the plural, hybrid and multivalent nature of Buddhist modernities (McMahan 2012; Mitchell and Quli 2015; Rocha 2012), and more recently, the “post-modern” fragmentation and skepticism towards modernist discourses (Gleig 2019), young people’s increasingly digital and globally-networked lives, and their greater propensity towards cosmopolitan and global conceptions of citizenship (Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018; Skrbis, Woodward and Bean 2013) invite fresh questions about the wider applicability of existing studies. Additionally, while it is evident that young Buddhist practitioners are required to negotiate increasingly diverse religious socializing influences, little is known about the ways parents, religious institutions and social structures are changing in response to new and emerging articulations of

Buddhism among young people, and how the youth phase itself might generate additional insights into the development of Buddhism in the contemporary era.

Contributions to this special issue

This special issue on Buddhism and Youth is intended as a starting point for understanding the complexities of Buddhist youth engagement, and what this research might contribute to extant theorizations of Buddhism. Featuring articles from authors working in diverse geographical contexts, it seeks to further understandings about the nature of youth-inspired religious change, across the globe. A range of topics are addressed, including: religious discrimination, the role of new media technologies in shaping Buddhist youth religiosity, adaptations of Buddhist texts, new strategies to attract young people to Buddhism, theoretical and conceptual developments related to modernity, connections between past and present, intergenerational changes and continuities, the globalization of Buddhism, the development of cosmopolitan dispositions, “East” and “West” cultural exchanges, the role of religion in youth transitions, the intersection of religion, race, class and sexuality, and Buddhism and ethno-nationalism. The articles investigate how Buddhist youth negotiate the complexities of both place-based and globally circulating currents of Buddhism, and the cultural norms and power structures operating in and beyond Britain, Burma/Myanmar, Ceylon/Sri Lanka, Japan, India, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam.

Our intention is to not only highlight the central role played by young people in processes of religious change, but also to generate a greater awareness of variations in institutional support available for young people to re-articulate Buddhism to address social and cultural concerns. In Thailand, Brooke Schedneck shows how institutional structures remain integral to processes of religious socialization despite perceptions of religious decline in Buddhist-majority Thailand. Also focusing on the perceived threat of religious decline in Thailand, Rachelle Scott explores how Dhammakaya youth initiatives have established a popular vehicle for support and recruitment. Economic and political forces exert more of a mediating effect in market-socialist Vietnam, where young Buddhist practitioners collaborate with monastics to rearticulate and transform Buddhism to meet the needs of contemporary youth from a range of class backgrounds via social media, digital media, vernacular language, and transnational religious exchange (Nguyen, this volume).

The centrality of youth is prominent in Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg’s work. She investigates how Ladakhi Buddhist youth are at the forefront of Buddhist modernization and revival. As Justin Stein shows, these processes of modernization and revival are not only youth-centric; they are also transnational in scope and have deep historical roots. Funie Hsu also draws a link between the historical and the contemporary, emphasizing the role of young Japanese and Asian Buddhists in challenging orientalist tropes of Buddhism during the WWII Japanese incarceration period and present-day intolerance and racial exclusion of Asian and Black communities in American Buddhism. The privileging of Whiteness is further emphasized by Sarah-Jane Page and Andrew Yip, who contend that both race and social class enable young White British Buddhists to successfully enact liberal approaches to gender and sexuality that simultaneously consolidated their identities as Buddhists, despite Buddhism being a minority religion in Britain. However, while young, middle-class White

convert Buddhist practitioners in Britain are able to enact a form of Buddhism that is compatible with their racial and class backgrounds, there is little, if any indication that their perspectives and practices of religion are endorsed by parents and religious institutions (Page and Yip, this volume). This does not necessarily mean that British Buddhist youth are heard less frequently by elders and religious institutions, compared to young Buddhists in Thailand and Vietnam. Although monastics in Thailand may be altering the content and form of religious messaging to better attract and retain the interest of Thai youth, it is unclear whether, and to what extent young people may be shaping these messages, and whether the imperatives of Thai religious institutions (pertaining to ethno-religious nation building, for example) adequately reflect the priorities of contemporary Thai youth from a range of class backgrounds. In contexts where religious institutions may be significantly more powerful and better resourced (with financial support from parents, community groups and state actors) than young people, it is vital to find new ways to listen out for, and hear, the voices of young people.

What do these findings suggest in relation to Buddhist modernization/postmodernization/globalization and other theses of religious change? Some preliminary observations can be made. Traditional elements remain prominent in youthful rearticulations of religiosity, with religious elites retaining power and influence, particularly in Buddhist majority countries, and using modern forms of media to convey largely unchanged religious values and teachings in Thailand, Ceylon and Burma. However, more youth-centered, individualized and collaborative negotiations of Buddhism can be witnessed in other contexts such as America, Britain, India and Vietnam, where Buddhism is taking new forms that de-emphasize traditional rituals, dogma and “superstitious” elements. Globally circulating religious teachings, digital technologies and cosmopolitan outlooks inform youthful negotiations of religiosity, however the way these are negotiated take on a local flavor.³ It may be more apt, at this stage, to consider youthful developments in Buddhism in terms of hybridity, splintering and multi-directionality, as suggested by “postmodern” accounts of Buddhism. Both sacred and secular forces also collide in the worlds of Buddhist youth globally, and young people and religious institutions continue to find ways to resist colonialism and racial and religious exclusion now and in the past, lending support to “post-secular” and “post-colonial” theories of Buddhism.

Both now and in the past, young people, parents, and religious and other institutions and authorities have been preoccupied with the challenge of transforming and transmitting religion to the younger generation. Whether historically or in the present day, it appears that young people are prominent “defenders” and “innovators” of Buddhism in the face of racism, waning interest in religion, and social and political upheaval. But young people are not alone in their efforts to re-fashion Buddhism to meet contemporary concerns, either working with allied individuals and institutions, or being on the receiving end of “youthful” religious messaging from powerful religious elites, particularly in Buddhist majority countries. This volume demonstrates that young people and youthful “allies” are central to understanding the nature of changes to religious messaging and

³ See Baumann and Prebish (2002) and Rocha (2006) for further discussions about the local transformation of “global” Buddhism.

practice in the contemporary Buddhist landscape, and processes of revitalization, modernization and transformation, both in historical and contemporary contexts.

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