

## Book Review

*Journal of Global Buddhism 5 (2004): 15 - 18*



*A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West.* Edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002, xli + 266 pages, ISBN: 0-8070-1243-2 (paperback), US \$16.00.

Reviewed by

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ISSN 1527-6457

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*D*uring its millennia-long spread across Asia, Buddhism has changed and brought forward new variations to interpret the Buddha's enlightenment. Culturally adapted forms have been shaped, such as Thai, Tibetan, Chinese or Japanese Buddhism. As the compiler of this anthology, Donald S. Lopez Jr. holds that another variation needs to be added to this list of Buddhisms: that of "Modern Buddhism" (p. xxxix). And, just as other "Buddhist sects" (i.e., culturally bounded forms of Buddhist lineage, practice, and doctrine), modern Buddhism has its own canon of sacred scriptures. In fact, as the author — and even more strongly, the book's title *A Modern Buddhist Bible* — claims, it is this anthology of "essential readings from East and West" that provides that very canon of sacred texts. Are we seeing a scholar of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies not only construct a new Buddhist sect, but also act as its scribe and as the definer of its canon?

The *Buddhist Bible* consists of two main parts: in a lengthy and well-informed introduction, Lopez sketches characteristics of this new sect called "Modern Buddhism." The book's main part provides brief portraits of thirty-one central

figures of modern Buddhism and selections from their works. The introduction argues that the beginning of modern Buddhism can be marked with the famous debate at Panadure (in what was then Ceylon) in 1873. Other Buddhologists, such as Richard Gombrich, have opted for the inception of "Protestant" or revival Buddhism in 1881, the year Henry Steel Olcott published his famous *Buddhist Catechism* and Thomas Rhys Davids founded the Pali Text Society (Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, 1988: 186). The dating, however, is of secondary importance as the change of Buddhist content and form is decisive and does give valid grounds to speak of a new variation of Buddhism. It is in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that modern, Protestant or reform Buddhism takes shape in many Asian countries. Lopez is strong in detailing these various, country-based developments and in pointing out the specific characteristics that emerge in each. Amongst other things, modern Buddhism is marked by its rejection of the ritualistic elements of traditional Buddhism, a stress on equality over hierarchy, an emphasis of the universal over the local, and praise of the individual over the community. At the inception of modern Buddhism, its reformers and spokespersons presented Buddhism in a de-contextualized form, as a philosophy and religion of reason, alleged to be in full accordance with modern science. In the late twentieth century, for the first time in Buddhist history, so-called "Buddhism" (the English language term!) is perceived and interpreted as a coherent religion: a "world religion" on par with its main rival and challenger, Christianity. In a perfect Protestant tone, revival or modern Buddhism presents itself as having a glorified founder, untainted by tradition; a body of sacred texts as its authority; and a defined set of clear doctrines.

Lopez narrates the history of modern Buddhism in South Asia, China, Japan and Tibet, pointing to other characteristics: those of the involvement of women and lay persons, as well as social engagement, both for the advancement of the needy as well as the nation state (whether colonized or imperialistic). Further, Lopez asserts that the focus on experience and the practice of meditation developed to form core elements of modern Buddhism in comparison with preceding Buddhist forms. Where it was previously the prerogative of a highly limited cadre (monks only), now the practice of meditation is taught to monks and nuns as well as laymen and laywomen alike: "In modern Buddhism, however, meditation is a

practice recommended for all, with the goal of enlightenment moved from the distant future to the immediate present" (p. xxxviii). On the basis of these criteria, Lopez argues we may rightly speak of a new Buddhist sect, that of Modern Buddhism.

The book's main section, the anthology of pioneers and proponents of Modern Buddhism, starts with Madame Blavatsky, followed by Sir Edwin Arnold, composer of the famous poem *The Light of Asia* (1879). Olcott and excerpts from his *Buddhist Catechism* are next, followed by many important (and a few lesser known) figures, such as Anagarika Dharmapala, D. T. Suzuki, T'ai Hsu, Mahasi Sayadaw, Buddhadasa, Alan Watts, and the Dalai Lama. Lopez is to be praised for having selected these intriguing glimpses from the huge corpus of writing by the selected thirty-one figures. Though it is not easy to find any of main modern Buddhist figures missing from Lopez's enumeration, I did regret the omission of Nyanatiloka, ordained in 1903 and a leading Theravada monk and Pali translator, as well as his comparably renowned disciple, Nyanaponika. Also Ananda Metteya and Christmas Humphreys, paramount in designing Modern Buddhism in Great Britain in the early twentieth century, and Paul Dahlke and Georg Grimm (likewise central for German speaking areas after 1920) might have deserved inclusion.

Though Lopez's introduction and compilation are of much interest, I wonder why the book reverts to Christian terminology in its main title. Of course in doing so, Lopez puts his anthology in line with earlier normative works such as Paul Carus' *The Gospel of the Buddha* (1894) and Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* (1938), but there is more to this choice.

As a first-generation religious pioneer, Goddard assembled his *Buddhist Bible* to introduce general Buddhist concepts (though mainly on a Mahayana textual basis). Lopez's *Modern Buddhist Bible* now compiles the so-called sacred texts of major protagonists of the new sect called Modern Buddhism, figures such as Goddard, himself. In this way the scholar has become the scribe and systematizer of heterogeneous and varied interpretations of reform, revival, or modern Buddhism. Lopez not only arranges diverse figures and varied understandings of Buddhist doctrine and practice according to his criteria (the emphasis of Modern

Buddhism on meditation, texts, and lay involvement), he in fact seems determined to begin the process of canon compilation. As the Christian Bible was compiled of different texts and stories several decades after its protagonists acted, lived, and died, so the *Modern Buddhist Bible* compiles protagonists and texts to form the rudiments of a canon, a canon with Lopez as its first redactor. As stories of canon-building show, compilers normally were faithful followers and strongly engaged in the still-young religious tradition, a qualification that does not necessarily apply to Lopez as historian and observer.

Lopez's project seems to require both insider and outsider perspectives on modern Buddhism. That is a heavy responsibility for a scholar or a practitioner, or both. I find this genuinely noteworthy, validating a prediction made earlier by Charles S. Prebish (*Luminous Passage*, 1999: 199) that some of today's American "scholar-practitioners" might take on the role of the traditional "scholar-monk" to guide followers. Forming a canon surely qualifies as such guidance. On the other hand, perhaps the whole story of the title is much simpler, having been chosen simply to increase sales.

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