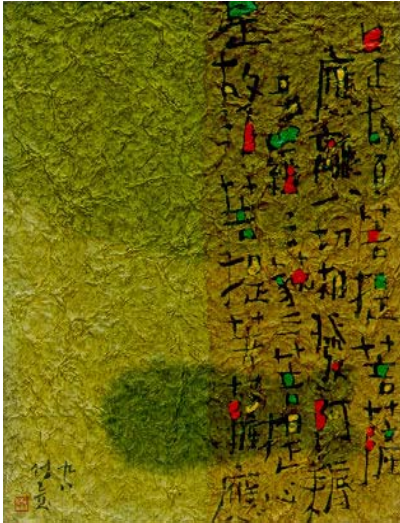


Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 10 (2009): 76 - 84



The Making of Buddhist Modernism. By David L. McMahan. London: Oxford University Press, 2008, 320 pages, ISBN13: 9780195183276 (hardback), \$29.95

Reviewed by Brooke Schedneck

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Since its emergence, the literature on Buddhism and modernity has been a disparate and not wholly coherent genre. Some scholars address the encounter of Buddhism with western modernity in specific areas of the Buddhist world such as Don Pittman's *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, Ingrid Jordt's *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, and Anne Hansen's *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia*. Other works concern Buddhism's recent emergence in Western countries including Cristina Rocha's *Zen in Brazil*, Paul Numrich's *Old Wisdom in the New World*, and Michelle Spuler's *Developments in Australian Buddhism*. Theoretical works on the interaction between Buddhism and modernity, however, have been less frequent. Donald Lopez has been the most prominent, writing on the phenomenon of 'modern Buddhism' cross-culturally, which he explicates most clearly in the "Introduction" to his anthology of modern Buddhist writers, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*. Collectively these attempts at understanding modern Buddhism in specific regions can only appreciate some of the depth and genealogies of Buddhist modernism. There is much more work to be done towards an understanding of the meaning and construction of Buddhist modernism.

David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* goes a long way toward filling this gap. In part because of this earlier scholarship on Buddhist countries and minority communities in non-Buddhist areas, McMahan is able to look more broadly at the encounter of Buddhism and modernity. He broadens the analysis of this encounter both spatially, as he looks at Western and Asian Buddhist contexts, and temporally, as he pays attention to the pre-encounter that established how Buddhism was received in the West and the result of the encounter today. McMahan takes the reader on a journey going back in time to understand contexts for how Buddhism was received in the West and how Buddhist concepts adapted to Western categories. The book underscores the idea that in the encounter with new cultural contexts a religious tradition becomes a hybrid that must recreate itself in terms of the prevalent discourses of a society. McMahan treats this hybridity in a complex way, demonstrating that a tradition doesn't simply conform to new contexts but engages in a process of reconfiguration and negotiation.

Of course, it is impossible to tell the whole story of all Buddhist encounters with modernity. McMahan selects moments, places, and people who were most instrumental and influential in this story. This book is a significant departure from McMahan's last book in 2002, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism*, in which he argues by looking through classic Buddhist texts, that the visual is the central metaphor of Buddhist thought and practice. But similar themes of thinking broadly and comparatively are seen in both works. In his more recent articles concerning Buddhist modernism in *The Journal of Global Buddhism* and *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, we see the shaping of McMahan's thinking that led to the unique and creative work of this latest effort.

The Making of Buddhist Modernism is written and organized in an accessible and readable way. The reader understands modern representations of Buddhism through scenes from the college classroom and portraits of modern and traditional Buddhists. McMahan includes three introductory chapters that cover the scope of the book, giving us an introduction to the factors, cultural contexts, and discourses contributing to Buddhist modernism. In these chapters the novice reader is given the background necessary to understand the more specific, later chapters. For the advanced reader, the categories and frames of analysis he imposes are creative and helpful ways to think about this amorphous phenomenon and term "Buddhist modernism." Thus he does not present much new information here, but packages his subject in a clear, easy-to-follow narrative. He argues that Buddhist modernism is a result of a reinterpretation created by interactions between Western modernity and Asian Buddhists. This theme is carried throughout the book, though the main site of these developments that he follows is North America. He describes North America as an ideal starting point due to the predominance of English language sources in conveying the ideas of Buddhist modernism. As well, the continent has been the locus of recent attempts to reconceive Buddhism. Yet it is clear that North America is not the main subject here, rather it is Buddhist modernity itself.

Chapters four, five, and six probe more closely into the connections between Buddhism and Western modernity by identifying the tradition's relationship with three dominant "discourses of modernity," in the nineteenth century: scientific rationalism, Romanticism, and Western monotheism (although the first two are dealt with in lengthier sections). McMahan attempts to show how Buddhists were able to both harmonize with and

critique these discourses. He envisions a two step process in which Buddhists first had to demonstrate they were worthy of participation in modern discourses, and then prove they had something to contribute. Chapter four discusses figures such as Henry Steel Olcott, Paul Carus, and Anagarika Dharmapala. McMahan shows their different perceptions of Buddhism's relationship with science and modernity and how they were all part, in their own way, of the creation of one aspect of Buddhist modernism. Chapter five investigates Buddhism's relationship with Romanticism. McMahan outlines ideas of thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, and movements like American Transcendentalism, to show themes from which Buddhists drew. McMahan also attempts to demonstrate how Buddhists added to and shaped the conversation with those influenced by Romanticism as well. The focus here is specifically on Zen Buddhism and D.T. Suzuki's role in reshaping Zen's ritual and ethical contexts to engage Romanticist concepts such as creativity and spontaneity. Chapter six illustrates another site of hybridity with a genealogy of the term "interdependence." The doctrine's development is traced from the early Pali literature describing a "chain of causes and effects binding beings to rebirth in a world of suffering," to today's "interdependence," which "implies a sacred matrix of mutual communality and coparticipation" (p. 172). Through offering a history of the interpretations of this concept, McMahan paints a picture of Buddhist modernism as a whole.

Chapters seven and eight look further at moments of Buddhist modernism through case studies of meditation and mindfulness. In these chapters, McMahan narrates the creation of the current hybrid notions of these terms and demonstrates the unique cultural contexts in which they emerged. Chapter seven depicts how meditation has become disembedded from traditional worlds of

Buddhism and has entered a new realm of psychology and neuroscience. Through this disembedding, meditation is no longer under the sole authority of the Buddhist tradition. Here McMahan uses Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* to describe modernity's "subjective turn" toward self-reflexivity and the interior life. McMahan finds these ideas of subjectivity and individualism important sites where we can comprehend the joining of meditation and modernity. Chapter eight describes specifically how mindfulness meditation fit into a new space created in modernity. McMahan identifies this new space as "world-affirmation" and finds evidence for it in modern literature. He uses texts such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday* to show an emerging discourse that affirms the extraordinariness of ordinary life. Using Thich Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist thinkers, McMahan attempts to demonstrate how Buddhist mindfulness was reformulated to cohere with these ideas. The dialogue of mindfulness practice began to slant more toward a celebration of the world rather than a disciplined attitude toward life.

In the conclusion McMahan identifies a number of continuums useful for thinking about the disparate phenomena playing out in Buddhist modernism and the possible future of Buddhism in modernity. He addresses the polarity between privatized spirituality and social engagement, as well as the spectrum between accommodation and challenge to modernity. He describes an uncertain future wherein, if Buddhism accommodates too much, it will fade into New Age spirituality. Yet McMahan believes the tradition has resources to offer new perspectives on modernity. The most interesting category he creates is a "global folk Buddhism." This describes popular Buddhism, which appeals to the affluent and is bound up with media and globalization. Like the well-known category of local folk Buddhism

seen throughout Asia, the global kind also does not have a sophisticated understanding of the tradition xxx it is meant to be soothing and comforting, not radically transformative. It is a keen, indeed cutting, observation to connect local folk Buddhists who mix spirit and amulet cults with the practice of Buddhism with global folk Buddhists who mix cults of consumerism and commodification with theirs. McMahan realizes that not all forms of transplanted Buddhism need to be conservative but, just as in Asian countries, Buddhism can accommodate to popular culture to reach a large population.

McMahan advises that a mix of the accommodation of global folk Buddhism and the more serious traditional monasticism and socially engaged Buddhism has the greatest viability for the future of Buddhist modernism. He holds up as model institutions John Daido Looi Roshi's Zen Mountain Monastery and Soka Gakkai USA for their adaptations to American culture and discourses of modernity while still maintaining elements of the traditional. The Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are also seen to intermingle complex Buddhist teachings with New Age-like spirituality. McMahan's most important question for the future of Buddhist modernism is: "What particular combinations of features on the continuum will produce new formations that compellingly address the needs of contemporary individuals and societies?" (p. 265).

In order to accomplish the work of this broadly ranging book, McMahan has read widely across Buddhist modernist writing from both Asian and Western Buddhist teachers. He also picks out exemplary works from Western philosophy, theology, and social theory to demonstrate the contexts and categories to which Buddhists have adapted. Discourse analysis is used to

investigate the adaptations and reinterpretations that have occurred across cultural contexts. McMahan's approach is not to critique Buddhist modernism as falsehood, nor to be nostalgic for more traditional forms of Buddhism. Instead he finds that, in many cases, the hybridity of modern Buddhism has created a productive dialogue. He is not concerned with arguing for authenticity or inauthenticity, yet he addresses this question throughout the book as he realizes the importance of this issue for practitioners as new forms of modern Buddhism emerge.

McMahan's attention to contributions by both Western and Asian Buddhists in the creation of Buddhist modernism is commendable. It can be difficult to make these connections between people and across time. McMahan admits that it is hard to tell whether some authors read about or were even aware of the cultural influences they drew from. Yet he makes a compelling argument that Buddhism resonated with North American cultural contexts and discourses of modernity. Some may argue that these connections McMahan makes, especially between world-affirmation in modern literature and mindfulness meditation, are far-fetched. However, I believe his careful qualifying arguments allow for such creative thinking. He is writing about cultural assumptions, spaces, and predispositions xxx all of these are difficult to capture, but McMahan has done a compelling job in doing just this.

Despite McMahan's careful scholarship, I will offer two critiques of his analysis. One of the many sub-arguments he makes is that Buddhism contributes to and challenges modernity just as much as it accommodates to it. While this sounds plausible, it is difficult to provide evidence for this equality. Indeed, while reading this book, one gets the sense that Buddhists are constantly accommodating to Western modernity, rather than challenging it. McMahan

argues that Buddhism contributes to modernity by critiquing its projects of capitalism and consumerism; but it is difficult to say whether this is a true challenge to modernity or another way of appropriating it in order to cohere with the Romanticist critique of modernity's ills. More qualifying of this distinction or evidence of Buddhism's challenges and contributions to modernity would have been helpful.

My second critique concerns secularism and modern Buddhism. McMahan's work, like much of the literature on modern Buddhism does not engage the category of the secular. McMahan uses Charles Taylor's scholarship to frame his discussion of modernity, but does not address how the possibility of new choices created through secularism and religious pluralism has affected the reception of Buddhism in North America. He relies on this one author to discuss the shift from premodern to modern worldviews but does not incorporate Taylor's discussion of secularism. The literature on secularism would have been helpful in discussing meditation as disembodied and detraditionalized, and its use for therapeutic healing techniques.

The Making of Buddhist Modernism will be helpful to scholars of Buddhist studies as well as those interested in the modern period and religious change. The most significant contribution made here is locating the Western frameworks in which Buddhism was able to fit and tracing the genealogies of hybrid concepts that arise as a result of this interaction. No other book on the phenomenon of modern Buddhism has done this in such a systematic way. Because of McMahan's accessible prose, this book could be used in advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars concerning contemporary Buddhism. This book will be a staple for any reading list concerning Buddhist modernism as it clearly structures and identifies

the main themes, actors, concepts, and categories of this phenomenon. Through the breadth of this work, scholars will have a common base to talk about this phenomenon and be able to create more nuanced studies of the effects of modernity and Buddhism. McMahan thus brings the discussion of Buddhism and modernity further into a truly "global" Buddhism.