

Doing Good: Local and Global Understandings of Buddhism in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement

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In this paper, I present Hong Kong Buddhism as a construct of modernity, particularly and paradoxically in its emphasis on tradition. 'Modern Buddhism' shapes how Buddhists in Hong Kong reflect on their religion and their being in the world. The latter is seen in how Hong Kong Buddhists responded to the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Although the Umbrella Movement was in essence a political movement seeking universal suffrage, it indirectly highlighted the importance of religion in the everyday lives of Hong Kong middle-class residents. While some Buddhists went to the protest sites, others stayed at home to meditate, and many decided to disengage from the protests altogether. While differing in terms of civic engagement, there is significant similarity in these narratives regarding the perception of how to act as 'good' Buddhists.

Keywords: Hong Kong; modern Buddhism; Umbrella Movement; lived religion; ethnography; anthropology of religion

From 28 September to mid-December 2014, everyday life in the city of Hong Kong was under the spell of the so-called Umbrella Movement: large-scale protests initiated by the Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism (a pro-democracy student activist group), and the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement. The protests were a result of increasing tensions between the political systems of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the People's Republic of China. Even though the protests were primarily political in nature, they laid bare more than just political dissatisfactions.

In this article, I examine the 2014 Umbrella Movement as well as the spiritual and activist engagements of Hong Kong Buddhists in the uprising. I do this by highlighting the differing civic engagements of my research interlocutors with the movement. By focusing on the Umbrella Movement and the narratives of these individuals (who chose to either join the protests or not) we can begin to understand how their religion informs their approach to political participation. For these Hong Kong Buddhists, their approach was less an issue of the relationship between religion and

politics and more one concerning future salvation and the personal responsibility to act as ‘good’ Buddhists.

As observed in the central research concern of this special issue of *Global Buddhism*, Buddhism is often understood to be a rather static, doctrinal religion, detached from violence, politics, or other aspects of ‘secular’ life. It is the aim of this issue’s editors to bring nuance to this picture by showing how Buddhism is very much a part of everyday life and its social, political, and economic processes. Perhaps the best place in which this can be seen is in urban centres: places which, at first glance, might seem fully secularized until more closely examined (cf. Van der Veer 2015). In this article I attempt to answer the question of what can be learned regarding Buddhism, a persistent presence which can seem somewhat enigmatic from the outside, when relating the religion to political engagements in the Asian urban context of Hong Kong. A key question is whether political engagement is (or can be) part of Buddhism, or whether Buddhism is more appropriately practised as a symbolic response to social pressures and circumstances. To answer this question, I analyse narratives of Hong Kong Buddhists who identify themselves as Theravāda Buddhists. As I will show, the Buddhism lived by these interlocutors is a construct of modernity, particularly in its emphasis on tradition. The emphasis on tradition is thus not opposed to modernity: instead, the claim to go back to the ‘true’, ‘original’ tradition of Buddhism is a very specific, consciously modern, and predominantly middle-class claim.

My interlocutors’ need for discovering and practicing the original Buddhist tradition makes Theravāda Buddhism an apparent choice. Theravāda Buddhism – literally the ‘Doctrine of the Elders’ (Gombrich 2006) – is stereotypically portrayed as the “religion of the book” (Crosby 2014), the ‘book’ being the Pāli Canon. The canon is the only surviving Buddhist canon written in the classical language of ancient India and is as such often regarded as the earliest written form of Buddhism, thus best representing the words of the Buddha (Crosby 2014; Seeger 2007). Of course, other Buddhist schools also claim to represent the original teachings of the Buddha, even though their doctrines differ from those of Theravāda Buddhism. For example, explaining the Mahāyāna Buddhist claim for tradition, Olav Hammer and James Lewis (2007) show how followers and monks of this Buddhist school argue that Buddhist truths have been deliberately withheld by the Buddha until the time was ripe for them to be revealed. Earlier texts only reveal partial truths; Mahāyāna texts are more complete and thus closer to the original words of the Buddha. According to Vajrayāna Buddhists, some Buddhist truths are still hidden, in lakes, streams, rocks, snakes, deities, or in people who are not yet born. These teachings, which have the same power as the original words of the Buddha, will come to the surface when the time is right (Van der Velde, 2016). These Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna claims to tradition are, however, not of essence to my informants; they clearly described to me their perception of Theravāda Buddhism as the only Buddhist school representing the true Buddhist tradition, thus being the ‘real’ Buddhism.

In exploring the question of how Buddhism and political participation intersect, I take an anthropological approach. Anthropological inquiry emerges first and foremost from an ethnographic perspective rather than from a theoretical or doctrinal one. It aims to answer questions from an emic perspective, or the perspective of the researched participants. Consequently, anthropologists of

religion regard religious systems of meaning-making primarily as *lived practices*. This informs research by placing the emphasis not necessarily on the beliefs and practices that religious believers *should* hold and be observing according to doctrine or theologies, but rather on the practices they actually perform and, primarily, the beliefs and notions they actually hold (McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005; Swearer 2010). These will not necessarily follow the particular doctrine prescribed by Buddhist leaders or texts but are historically and culturally contextualized. Because all religion is lived, it is fluid and creative; by extension, it is often adjustable to particular socio-economic and political circumstances.

To emphasize the relevance of anthropology in studying ‘bad’ or (as I will do) ‘good’ Buddhism, I begin this chapter with an ethnographic account of Hong Kong Buddhists engaging in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Only after having presented the narratives of my interlocutors will these stories be analysed. Here, I will examine what living and practicing their faith as ‘good’ Buddhists means to believers themselves – both in the meaning of what is ‘correct’ (i.e., according to Buddhist tradition) and in the meaning of ‘doing good’ (for their own and others’ salvation). In doing this, I turn the emphasis from a critique on ‘bad Buddhism’ to an ethnographic emphasis on what constitutes ‘good’ Buddhism. I will argue that the question of whether Buddhism is ‘bad’ or not is not one that can only be understood analytically by using normative concepts such as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ versus ‘good’ or ‘right.’ Instead, it is a question that needs to be answered contextually and by practitioners themselves. It is my conviction that it is the task of anthropologists and other social scientists to try to understand these working conceptualizations and to treat them with the same respect as we would ‘proper’ or ‘correct’ Buddhism (i.e., Buddhist practices according to doctrine).

The insights presented in this chapter are based on ethnographic fieldwork research conducted in Hong Kong between 2012 and 2014. During this period, I met and spoke to approximately 40 Buddhists, both members of the clergy and laity. Almost all interviews were held in English, or in Cantonese with a translator. I met interlocutors through Buddhist centres and organizations, such as the Buddhistdoor organization, situated at Wang Fat Ching She temple (Tsuen Wan), the Chi Lin Nunnery, and the Hong Kong University Buddhist Studies program. In addition, I gathered insights from clergy at different centres, such as the Kadampa Meditation Centre and a Korean Zen meditation centre, both situated in Causeway Bay. What my Buddhist interlocutors have in common is a personal attraction to what I analyse to be a ‘modern Buddhism’, characterized by a wish to recover the original Buddhist tradition as a reaction to “the dominant problems and questions of modernity” (McMahan 2008: 5). Some of my informants identify themselves as Theravāda Buddhists, and all of them express an attraction to what can be analysed as ‘engaged Buddhism’. In this article, I will indicate how this ‘modern’ take on Buddhism makes possible the relation between living a life as a ‘good Buddhist’ and political engagement.

Buddhism in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has a diverse and flourishing religious landscape, one in which religious symbols are manifold and tangible. On the Mass Transit Railway (MTR), the rapid railway system in Hong Kong, and on buses one will see individuals wearing images of Buddhist deities or Christian crosses around

their necks. There are religious bookstores in every neighbourhood, and Catholic congregations (mainly Filipino) celebrate Mass in public parks on Sundays. Falun Gong proponents and opponents demonstrate next to each other in busy tourist areas. Religious buildings form a remarkable part of the built environment of the city, and incense and lights are burned for popular deities on footpaths, on corners of roads, in residential and commercial buildings, and in restaurants and shops. Religion is a topic of conversation that can be held at any time and place, in busy cafés or while walking on the street. Being religious in Hong Kong is nothing to be embarrassed or secretive about. Moreover, as will be shown later, religion in the city is intrinsically linked to the socio-economic and political processes happening there.

In Hong Kong, the largest religions in terms of adherents are Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Official government documents estimate the numbers of Buddhists and Taoists to be one million each (Stoker 2013: 344–345). However, official membership numbers of these religions cannot be given as they do not have an official counting of lay adherents as, for example, Christianity or Islam do.

Under the influence of various global factors, Hong Kong Buddhism has transformed into a representation of Buddhist organizations from all over the world, with links to all three major Buddhist schools. These organizations are present in the heart of Hong Kong's urban centres. More often than not they occupy humble apartments or office spaces in residential or commercial buildings (Westendorp 2017b). The activities offered by these organizations reflect the diversity of contemporary Hong Kong Buddhism: there are centres that specialise in *kōan*, meditation, sutra chanting, and funeral rituals, to name only a few. Most of these activities are offered free of charge, making Buddhism highly accessible. In addition, Buddhism in Hong Kong is no longer primarily influenced by the way Buddhism is practised in mainland China. Instead, it has become (especially since the mid-20th century) increasingly influenced by Buddhism as practiced in other Asian and, to a lesser degree, Western countries (see also Mak 2012 and 2016, one of the few scholars writing on Theravāda Buddhism in Hong Kong in the English language).

This, however, does not suggest that all Buddhist organizations are equally popular. Some Buddhist schools attract more followers than others. In contemporary Hong Kong, as in virtually all Chinese contexts, Mahāyāna Buddhism is the most popular form of Buddhism practiced; Theravāda Buddhism is the least popular. This unevenness can also be seen on a more institutionalized level. In Hong Kong today, official Buddhist leadership is exercised by the Hong Kong Buddhist Association. Founded in 1945, the Association is “an umbrella body based on individual, voluntary membership rather than temple or sect affiliation” (Nedilsky, 2009: 217). Its members tend to be primarily of the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism. However, as membership of the Association is voluntary, and most Buddhist organizations in Hong Kong prefer to operate autonomously, few of them are connected to it (including most of the Buddhist organizations I researched).

Although Theravāda Buddhism is the least popular stream of Buddhism practiced in Hong Kong overall, it has been gaining popularity among a younger generation of Hong Kong Buddhists (Yeung & Chow 2010). It has also become the most popular form of Buddhism among the Hong Kong middle class. For members of this middle class, Theravāda Buddhism has become a key element in the

expression their middle-class identity (Westendorp 2017a). Consequently, this Theravāda Buddhism has almost become a distinctly 'Hong Kong Buddhism' (Mak 2012), as I will indicate below.

As the Umbrella Movement was particularly attended by a younger, middle-class audience as well, Theravāda Buddhists are an interesting group to discuss in this paper. The Hong Kong middle class is a very diverse group. My interlocutors were teachers, nurses, journalists, IT developers, retired salesmen, yoga instructors, bank employees, fashion designers, secretaries, social service workers, head-hunters, and a retired government official. Some of the people I interviewed owned their own property, mostly in areas far from the Central Business District (e.g., Tsuen Wan, Sham Tseng, Heng Fa Chuen, and Sha Tin). Others lived alone or – if still single – with either or both of their parents in private or government-subsidized rental apartments. Their incomes ranged from a mere HKD 10,000 per month to HKD 150,000 (approx. US \$1,250–20,000). For most of my informants, their working hours extended far beyond 40 hours per week.

Despite this diversity, members of the younger generation have a few characteristics in common. They have all finished their tertiary education, most in Hong Kong but some of them abroad. As self-proclaimed members of the middle class, they differentiate themselves from the upper class, who they see as affluent people living in apartments in the Mid-Levels (Hong Kong Island) or close by. They also tend to differentiate themselves from people they see as belonging to the lower ranks of Hong Kong's population, those who live in areas such as Sham Shui Po (Kowloon), or areas deep in the New Territories (e.g., Yuen Long). Additionally, they show the aspiration of being part of a hardworking and professional class, and of being able to identify as 'Hongkongers' instead of 'Chinese.' And finally, they have the means, resources, and education to engage in Buddhist studies and practices.

Hong Kong Umbrella Movement

On 15 December 2014 Hong Kong police removed protestors and their camps from Causeway Bay, one of the more affluent neighbourhoods in Hong Kong and one of the last sites that remained occupied by Umbrella Movement protestors. In the days prior, camps at Mong Kok and Admiralty had already been cleared. These clearances signalled the end of the 2014 Umbrella Movement: largescale pro-democracy protests, mostly attended by young white- and blue-collar middle-class residents of Hong Kong, which lasted for 79 days marked by occupations, protests, peaceful talks, arrests, urban instabilities, small-scale creative endeavours, hunger strikes, and much more. The primary goals of the Umbrella Movement were twofold: to encourage Beijing to grant universal suffrage to the residents of Hong Kong in the 2017 Chief Executive election, as promised in Article 45 of the Hong Kong Basic Law, and the resignation of Leung Chun-ying as Chief Executive of Hong Kong. Regardless of the protestors' efforts, these goals were not met. Instead, what the Umbrella Movement left behind in December 2014 was a city more politically and socially polarized than it had been before.

At the time my Buddhist interlocutors, like all citizens in Hong Kong, saw themselves confronted with the question of how to respond: to engage with the protests, either actively or passively, or to ignore them? Many found out soon enough that ignoring the protests would not be possible due to their magnitude. This then led to the question of *how* to engage with the protests, and

how to engage with them in a manner that would reflect their identities as ‘good’ Buddhists. These questions were answered in a variety of ways. Here, I will highlight three different responses from research informants who identify themselves as Theravāda Buddhists, each indicating a different way in which these questions were answered.

Teresa, a Buddhist in her late 30s, opted not to join the Umbrella Movement. Her reasoning was that when it comes to fulfilling one’s aspirations of the reduction of suffering or reaching enlightenment, personal effort will be more effective than political involvement. She argued: “Buddhist teaching is about how to be mindful and achieve physical, psychological and mental peace by evaluating our thinking process”. According to Theresa, becoming mindful will eventually lead to a change in the environment.

By contrast, Francis, a Buddhist in his mid-40s, engaged more actively in the Umbrella Movement and was guided by spiritual engagement, especially via social media platforms. He used his Facebook account to share articles and commentaries on the protests which he felt were written by people who held mild opinions or expressed their feelings as opinion rather than presenting them as “reports” or “the facts”. He argued: “As a Buddhist, we are told to be aware of how we use our words: we should try not to spread any information we are not sure about, in order to avoid others being influenced by our words. [...] We can voice our own opinion but should not be spreading uncertain information.” By using Facebook as a medium, Francis expressed his engagement with the protests in a manner which he saw justified by Buddhist doctrine. He believed his engagement could lead to the elimination of societal obstacles (often called ‘defilements’) derived from the three poisons of desire, hatred, and ignorance. Although Francis did not attempt to directly abolish these, he steadfastly avoided spreading information that might feed these root causes of evil.

Lastly, Adam actively went to the occupied areas to show support. Adam indicated: “I hope the philosophy of Buddhism can be applied in Hong Kong. The world would be a lot lovelier”. It was Adam’s intention to engage with the protests, hoping to help create this ‘better world’. At the same time, however, Adam believed Hong Kong Buddhist leaders themselves should not join in the protests. He explained rhetorically: “What did the Buddha do 2,600 years ago, when his kingdom was overtaken by other rulers? He didn’t say they should fight; he didn’t do anything. And what about Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama? They don’t fight. When Thich Nhat Hanh was expelled from his country, he didn’t fight his way back in.” Interestingly, by emphasizing the links between the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and these iconic struggles fought in other countries during different times, the Umbrella Movement took on an extra dimension for Adam, one that reached beyond the specific context of Hong Kong. I will reflect on this later in this paper.

Besides these individual responses, Buddhist presence in the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement remained mostly invisible. This was to be expected: politically speaking, there was almost no presence of Buddhist voices in Hong Kong, neither in public debates nor in protests, apart from the inclusion of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association in the Colloquium of Six Religious Leaders. The Hong Kong Buddhist way of engaging with political and social problems in the city seems to be to look inside and retreat, and primarily to offer social services to Hong Kong residents (Barua & Basilio 2009). As such, during the protests it was lay Buddhists who brought Buddhist symbols to the streets,

built makeshift shrines at the protest sites, and gathered in occupied areas. Only a handful of Buddhist monks volunteered as first-aid workers or wrote articles to express their concern about the protests. These efforts were minimal compared to the other religious presence, most notably of Christian leaders. Moreover, in early October 2014, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association released an official statement which advocated “that Buddhists and students at Buddhist schools should avoid the protest locations and nearby areas (and likewise exhort their friends and children to do so)” (Buddhistdoor 2014).

Consequently, for my Buddhist interlocutors, their personal decision of whether to join the protests or not was not greatly determined by the example set by Buddhist organizations and their leaders – probably because the latter were distinguished by their absence. For example, after I asked him if he thought that Buddhist leaders in Hong Kong could have done more, Adam responded that they should have promoted “COMPASSION! COMPASSION! COMPASSION!” The editors of the non-sectarian internet organization Buddhistdoor remarked similarly. In an editorial, they wrote: “In Hong Kong, the question is whether Buddhists could have had more of a presence in the streets – not to support a particular side, but to bridge the physical and ideological divide between opposing parties. ... Maybe Buddhist temples and charities could have set up tents and booths where protesters and police alike could enjoy refreshments for free. When the scuffles and brawls broke out, perhaps Buddhists could have been present to physically protect belligerents from one another, without worrying how others might react to their mediation. Another powerful statement might have been to hold a meditation ‘flash mob’” (Buddhistdoor 2014).

Analysing the responses

What can we learn from these small vignettes of ethnographic data? Firstly, they highlight a particular *personal* understanding of what it means to act and live as ‘good’ Buddhist, which I will elaborate on in the next section. Secondly, they highlight how Teresa, Francis, and Adam relate their different notions of ‘good’ Buddhism to larger frameworks which extend beyond Hong Kong. This becomes especially prominent when analysing the soteriological ideas expressed in their narratives.

Ideas of salvation feature prominently in most religions, including Buddhism. They are the central doctrines of religions, stated in authoritative documents, such as describing ideas of Nirvāna which can be accessed through the eradication of suffering. These soteriological ideas are reflected in the religious notions of my interlocutors as well: through living a spiritual life and sanctifying one’s actions in the here and now (thus living and acting as ‘good’ Buddhists), my interlocutors aspire to attain salvation in the (near) future.

According to Rachel McCleary (2007: 51), who considers the effects of religious participation and beliefs on economic growth, “Salvation is a spiritual goal that may or may not be attained through human effort. If people believe in the possibility of salvation through their own efforts, it makes sense that they are likely to perform the actions that contribute to attaining such an end. Therefore, religious beliefs have implications for behaviour, such as work effort, saving, and charity”. This quote highlights the links between the notions of accountability and aspirations towards salvation. While McCleary explores this link by emphasizing economic behaviour, the same analysis

can be applied to civically engaged behaviour performed by my interlocutors in response to the Umbrella Movement. By emphasizing salvation, the Umbrella Movement provided a way for these Buddhists to relate their situation to similar ones in different places and times, thereby giving the Umbrella Movement a larger temporal and spatial dimension than it might appear to have at first glance.

Nearly one month after the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement started, the editors of *Buddhistdoor* posed the following question in their weekly editorial: “Can Buddhists be socially engaged while remaining ideologically and emotionally unattached?” In their article, the editors attempted to discuss how Hong Kong Buddhists might respond to the protests in a Buddhist manner, especially considering the absence of visible Buddhist leadership in the streets. In posing this question in their editorial, the editors referred to the modern Buddhist movement of ‘engaged Buddhism.’

As Jessica Main and Rongdao Lai (2013) indicate, ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ needs to primarily be taken as analytical concept to understand the emergence of a specific Buddhist ideal amongst a wide variety of Buddhist leaders and teachers since the early 20th century. According to them, “one of its central features is the rejection of the historical and ideological aspects of secularization, which relegate authentic religion to a position distant from political power” (Main and Lai 2013: 4), meaning that social action is not an end in itself, but a means to reach liberation. This is also seen reflected in my informants’ narratives: it is not the acting upon the Umbrella Movement that brings liberation, but the ways in which correct engagement potentially leads to enlightenment.

In many countries in Asia today, Buddhist organizations and leaders of different Buddhist schools adhere to some of the underlying values that many engaged Buddhists express. Even though “socially and politically engaged Buddhism continues to grow and diversify in Asia and the West, [and] continues to challenge conventional assumptions about the nature and direction of Buddhism” (Queen 2003: 1), at the same time it is “too diverse to be considered a single movement, and still too new to have developed a theoretical framework for Buddhism’s engagement with contemporary issues” (Cho 2000: 78). ‘Engaged Buddhism’ is an academic category that alludes to the teachings and aspirations of particular Buddhist teachers in Asian and non-Asian countries, of all different Buddhist streams. Through advocating particular teachings and practices, engaged Buddhist leaders seek to achieve “a stable order and a just society, seen as *necessary or prior conditions* for the discovery of genuine freedom (or awakening) by each person” (Queen 2003: 20, original emphasis). According to this definition, a just society is seen as a prerequisite for aspirations to salvation. This can be achieved through offering social services and being politically active. Hence, social justice is seen as requirement for enlightenment, and the latter cannot be achieved without the former.

Consciously or unconsciously, my Buddhist interlocutors relate to discussions concerning engaged Buddhism in important ways. Most of them express a wish to reduce suffering (both individual suffering and the suffering in society), to attain happiness in the “here and now” (reflected in Thich Nhat Hahn’s famous quote: “happiness is here and now”), and to eventually reach enlightenment. Echoing their emphasis on personal accountability (see next section), salvation is an

aspiration that must be reached individually. However, opinions differ as to how this should be done – whether through focusing on individual salvation, or by attempting to reduce suffering in society.

For example, Theresa opted not to join the protests as she believed that a focus on becoming mindful would lead to a change in the environment. In effect, Teresa was saying that “when one’s mind becomes purified, society will also be purified” (Cho 2000: 77). Frances expressed his engagement digitally, hoping to eliminate the three poisonous obstacles. By doing this, he related spiritual engagement to activist engagement, and connected his actions to engaged Buddhist ideals. Lastly, Adam expressed his wish for being engaged not only with himself but with society. Interestingly, however, he *did* join the occupation. For him, it is important to always try to find the middle path. Both physically fighting and non-engagement are reflections of choosing sides. For Adam choosing the middle path, that is, not becoming attached to an opinion or side in the debate, is an important condition of his aspiration towards salvation. In response to my questions, he mentioned other Buddhist leaders of various Buddhist schools – the Buddha himself, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama – who, in his eyes, expressed similar paths of engagement.

Comparable personal decisions were made by other Buddhists as well. Emily, a Buddhist in her mid-30s, explicitly placed her response to the Umbrella Movement in the broader context of Buddhist teachings concerning struggles over social justice. In doing so, she was implicitly relating the Umbrella Movement to the ideals of engaged Buddhism. Initially Emily supported the movement, especially in the first days immediately after the police violence had taken place. On Sunday, 28 September, she tried to go out into the streets at night but could not reach further than Admiralty station. During the weeks that followed, her attitude changed as a result of the increasing violence occurring in the streets. In mid-October, she indicated via WhatsApp that she wanted to take a break from the restless environment and protests. She said: “We need to learn how to manifest democracy in a peaceful way”. I asked her if staying away from the protests was not an act too passive in the struggle for universal suffrage. “Not really,” she answered, “Buddhist noble silence is the most powerful [method]. Think about Thich Nhat Hanh and his sangha: how did they react to the Vietnamese Government?”. Similar to Adam, by emphasizing the links between the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and iconic struggles fought in other countries during different times, the movement took on an extra dimension; it became a way of aspiring to societal salvation that reached beyond the specific context of Hong Kong, and consequently personal salvation.

‘Good’ Buddhism

In responding to the protests, my interlocutors thus acted according to what they perceived to be ‘good’ Buddhism. As I will indicate in this section, this ‘good’ Buddhism is a modern construct emphasizing tradition and personal accountability. By holding onto ‘tradition’ (a word very often used by my interlocutors themselves) and by being personally accountable, my interlocutors see themselves acting as ‘good’ Buddhists.

In the introduction to this paper, I described Hong Kong Buddhism as a “construct of modernity, particularly in its emphasis on tradition”. What I mean is that, by their own assessment and in their own words, my interlocutors practise Buddhism in the way they believe it was intended

by the Buddha over 2,000 years ago. They listen to Dharma instruction from teachers they believe represent the ‘real’ Buddhist teachings; they join meditation practices that are ‘traditional’ at their core; and they read commentaries and bibliographies of Buddhist teachers that present Buddhism in an intellectual, ‘objective’ manner. Additionally, they continuously use the word “traditional” to describe their own religion, meaning that it represents the original teachings of the Buddha.

As such, my informants can be characterized as ‘modern Buddhists’. In this modern form of Buddhism, various aspects of the religion are demythologized, psychologized, and rationalized, making it better adjusted to a ‘modern’ or contemporary lifestyle and sensibility (McMahan 2008; Lopez, Jr. 2002).

A good example of this was given to me by David, a Buddhist in his late 50s who has been teaching at Chi Lin Nunnery for almost fifteen years. Concurrently, he teaches Buddhist meditation and Theravāda Buddhism. David explained to me that the main doctrine of Buddhism revolves around the belief in the Four Noble Truths. According to David, having correct and objective knowledge of suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation is all one needs to become enlightened. For him, these Four Noble Truths represent the original dogmas of the Buddhist tradition as taught by the Buddha Śākyamuni.

Even though the Four Noble Truths may be regarded as the original doctrine of the Buddhist tradition, the discovery of and clear emphasis on these truths has primarily been the result of a modern trend in Buddhism (Gombrich 2006: 53–60). This trend is the result of a non-sectarian Buddhist Revival Movement that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in different Asian countries. The aim of this movement was to show the relevance of Buddhism in modern life, and its compatibility with Western science. Some scholars (e.g., Gombrich 2006; Lopez, Jr. 2002) situate the genesis of this “new kind of Buddhism” in modern-day Sri Lanka. However, it was never contained to merely one country, region or even Buddhist school.¹ For example, during the same time that modern Buddhism developed in Ceylon, a similar movement took place in Mainland China in the late 19th century. There, Buddhism was denounced by Christian missionaries as heretical and by Chinese intellectuals, who were influenced by ideas of scholars such as Karl Marx, as impeding modernisation. In response, Buddhist monastic schools were established, in which Buddhist classics were taught and monastics trained. These monastics later became leaders of the Buddhist Revival Movement in China. Examples are the Buddhist layman Yang Wenhui, who stressed the need for Buddhist rationalism, and Taixu, who emphasised personal Buddhist liberation in the here and now and the need for Buddhist social activism (Lopez, Jr. 2002).

The early 20th century Buddhist Revival Movement was mainly a response of Buddhist monastics in different Asian countries to challenges posed to Buddhism by colonialism, missionary Christianity, and the disestablishment of the sangha and loss of power of Buddhist institutions in colonised countries (Baumann 2002; McMahan 2012). Instigators of a Buddhist Revival Movement aimed to compete with Western missionaries coming to Asian countries and with Western religious

¹ According to Donald Lopez, Jr. (2002), modern Buddhism did not influence Tibetan Buddhism, as Tibet was never colonised. However, contemporary Tibetan Buddhist leaders, such as the Dalai Lama, do profess modern Buddhism.

scholars by seeking to claim legitimacy for Buddhism by characterising it as one of the great ‘world religions’ (Soucy 2013). They developed a new kind of Buddhism (Gombrich 2006; Obeyesekere 1970), reminiscent of Protestant movements during the Reformation (hence the often-used label ‘Protestant Buddhism’ (Obeyesekere 1970)).²

Prominent in the evolution of the “new kind of Buddhism” (Gombrich 2006: 172) is the emphasis on the recovery of a ‘pure’ form of the Buddhist tradition. Following Western claims that the Buddhist tradition had declined into nothing but superstition and idolatry, modern Buddhists began to actively criticise ideas of Buddhism that were considered ‘traditional’ but not part of the ‘tradition’. Elements of Western philosophy, scientific thought, Protestantism, romanticism, and psychology were adopted to reform these traditional Buddhist doctrines, practices, and institutions (McMahan 2012).

Interestingly, the modern attempt to redefine Buddhism is thus not regarded “as the culmination of a long process of evolution, but rather as a return to the original, to the Buddhism of the Buddha himself” (Lopez, Jr. 2002: ix). Instead, it is a rediscovery of the Buddhist tradition, by evaluating this tradition in modern times. Modernists thus “claim to be going back to the true, original tradition. Modernist movement often do not set out to establish something new but on the contrary may claim to be casting off the new and reviving the old” (McMahan 2008: 27).

This modernising trend can clearly be seen in the narratives of my Theravāda Buddhist informants. Their claim that Theravāda Buddhism best represents the original words of the Buddha echoes the modernist claim that Buddhism needs to ‘cast off the new’ and ‘revive the old’. Crucial to acknowledge here is that this ‘reviving’ of the Buddhist tradition is conditioned by modern language, social forms, practices, and worldviews (McMahan 2008). The Buddhist tradition is evaluated and critically reflected upon by my informants from their modern, middle class perspectives. As such, their ideas of the Buddhist tradition (that, according to them, is best represented by Theravāda Buddhism) can thus be said to have been invented, much like – in the classical article by Hugh Trevor-Roper (1983) – the Scottish Highland national tradition was invented only in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (see also Cusack 2010; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Regardless of its modern reinvention, for my informants, the Buddhist tradition is the sum of “static resources that [they] understand as authentic and regard as authoritative” (Satlow 2012: 133). At the heart of this is a perception of the continuity of the Buddhist tradition, and of the relevance of this tradition in the present.

Consequently, my informants’ descriptions of ‘good’ Buddhism highlights a specific modern and middle-class version of the religion, in which the modern notion of the Buddhist ‘tradition’ takes precedent. The meaning of the term ‘tradition’ needs clarification, as my informants’ reference to the concept differs in two ways from its common usage in academic writings. First, in these writings ‘tradition’ often refers to systems which are inherited from forebears; the literal translation of the Latin word for tradition is ‘something handed over’ (Graburn 2001). This is a sense of religious

² Gananath Obeyesekere’s (1970) term ‘Protestant Buddhism’ conveys two meanings: “first, that this new form of Buddhism began as a protest against Christian missions; and, second, that it mirrored Protestant Christianity in structure and content” (Prothero 1995: 281).

systems being handed down from one generation to the next, for instance through monastic lineages. As such, the term implies the possibility of plurality. For instance, Buddhist scholar Donald Lopez, Jr. writes of “various Buddhist traditions”, meaning Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Buddhist schools. In contrast to this, my informants’ use of the term assumes a ‘Tradition’, with a capital letter: a singular, supposedly stable, original teaching (i.e., *the* Buddhist Tradition) that needs to be recovered in its original form. This can be seen as expressed by William, a Buddhist in his early 40s:

I think in order to practice Buddhism well, one needs to understand the fundamental teachings of the Buddha and the history of Buddhism. If you understand the origins, you exactly know how Buddhism began, who the Buddha was, what he did and why, and what his teachings are. If you look at Mahāyāna and Tibetan Buddhism, you see that elements are added to it later. Thus they are different than the origins.

The original Buddhist ‘tradition’ is thus described as being uninfluenced by cultural and ‘traditional’ influences. ‘Traditional’ in this case (equal to the plural word ‘traditions’) refers to that which is handed down through generations and has thus been removed from the original. That which is ‘traditional’ is therefore not necessarily part of what they see as the Buddhist ‘tradition’.

Second, in academic writings ‘tradition’ often contradicts ‘modernity’. Early Enlightenment thinkers regarded ‘tradition’ as being in opposition to the rational, empirical pursuit of true modern knowledge. Later Romantics were more positive: for them, ‘tradition’ equated to the essence of the authentic (Bauman 2001). Regardless of these differences in evaluations, tradition was viewed as being opposite to modernity. In contrast, my informants’ attempt to recover the original Buddhist tradition can be regarded a type of modernist intervention. The emphasis on tradition is thus not opposed to modernity: instead, the claim to go back to the true, original tradition of Buddhism is a very specific, consciously modern, and predominantly middle-class claim. In this, modernity does not contradict tradition, but rather embraces it.

This ‘good’ and ‘modern’ Buddhism in Hong Kong has a few characteristics. Most notable in my informants’ narratives are their descriptions of Buddhism as an individually practiced religion, along with their strong individual commitments to that religion. The emphasis on individual choice and responsibility is, I suggest, in the Hong Kong context a typical middle-class interpretation of religion, as it stresses a person’s accountability in relation to individual aspirations. In this, personal experience becomes central. Commenting on ‘Reformist Buddhism’ in contemporary Singapore, Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng (2009) concludes that members of a new generation of local Chinese Buddhists in the city “are not only interested in the functional aspects of religion, but rather are intent on seeking solutions to their individualized religious needs and personalized spiritual fulfilment. As with other modern religious trends, they see their religious needs as *personal*, no longer tied to religious needs of their families or community” (ibid., p. 6, my emphasis). The same can be applied to my Hong Kong Buddhist interlocutors.

Most of my informants regard Buddhism as a religion which must be practiced individually. Each person alone is thought to be held accountable for their own actions and to have their own agency to influence life and karma. In Buddhism, accountability is closely related to the notion of

karma. A popular understanding of karma is that “each deed has its consequences, either in this life or a future one; good and evil deeds will eventually come back to you” (Palmer 2011: 94). Various Buddhist schools have different understandings of how karmic merits can be gained, if and how they can be transferred to others, and when karma will take effect (Van der Velde 2016). In Theravāda Buddhism, karma is the sum of merit created by an individual in their present and past lives. In order to secure a good rebirth, preferably in the human world, one has the ability to create positive merit. Karma is thus created by and for oneself (Cassaniti 2012), through one’s own agency. It follows from this that every individual is to be held accountable for their own karma and, by extension, for what happens to him or her.

Positive karma can be accumulated through practice. For my Buddhist informants, one of the most important practices is meditation. The practice of meditation is linked directly with the life of the Buddha, who is said to have reached enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi tree. When meditating, my informants feel they are relating to the original Buddhist tradition. Under modern Buddhist influence, meditation has become laicized and encompasses “all forms of focused concentration, mindfulness, prayer, chanting, and other ritual activities that are performed as means of cultivating one’s heart and mind or expressing one’s faith” (Wallace 2002: 36). Such meditation practices are believed to lead to a better state of mind; this improvement will be reflected in one’s actions, reducing suffering. This better state of mind will imbue believers with a deep understanding of how, according to Buddhism, ‘things really are’ – a significant insight that needs to be gained in order to attain enlightenment.

The stress on personal accountability of my Buddhist interlocutors not only has its effects on their religious life; it also shapes their ideas about how they can actively control and change the world around them. Here the relationship between societal and personal salvation, that is central in modern Buddhism, most clearly comes to the fore. According to the Buddhist beliefs of my interlocutors, the environment is a reflection of a person’s inner self and state of mind. By changing oneself, one changes the world. Following from this is a second Buddhist perspective: the impermanence of the world. Because the world is a reflection of the sadness and happiness within an individual, at the same time it is impermanent and fluid. David, the Buddhist teacher at the Chi Lin Nunnery, described life as being “like a river that comes and goes.” This idea of impermanence affects how Buddhists perceive the world around them and their position in that world. It is important to remember here that a change in the world is believed to be not merely a perception of change, but actual change itself. It follows from this that each individual can be held accountable for the condition of the world. As I will discuss in the conclusion, it is exactly this empowering agency (expressed in sayings such as “Be the change you want to see in the world”, or in the words of one of my informants: “It is a transformation of one’s ideas on life, and thus life itself”) that features prominently in how my Buddhist interlocutors view issues in contemporary Hong Kong society.

Conclusion

Analysing these (and other) narratives brings me to two interesting conclusions regarding Buddhism in modern-day Hong Kong. Firstly, in their decision to either actively join the Umbrella Protests or

not, my Hong Kong Buddhist interlocutors did not necessarily follow the directions of local Buddhist leaders and teachers — primarily because these leaders were remarkably silent on the subject. As mentioned, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association merely released a statement in late-September, writing “that Buddhists and students at Buddhist schools should avoid the protest locations and nearby areas”, without elaborating much further. Other Buddhist teachers tried not to touch the topic at all. While this is an interesting fact for further investigation in itself, what interests me in the light of this article is that my informants reflected on the protests from their Buddhist orientations individually, without consulting their direct teachers; their opinions were individually generated and they based their actions on modern global Buddhist teachings and movements.

Their narratives thus show that my informants’ perceptions of what should take priority within their faith, and how to act as a ‘good’ Buddhist, are mostly based on personal considerations. They choose their own trajectories. Consequently, their ideas are not necessarily the same as defined by religious doctrines, institutions, and leaders, but are historically, culturally and personally contextualized. As a result, my interlocutors all expressed different answers to the question of how to engage with the protests, even though their motivations were all based on the same religion. This indicates the diversity of modern Buddhism, and more specifically, the plurality of the religion.

Secondly, the narratives presented in this paper attest that the Umbrella Movement was not merely a local movement sparked by context-specific political factors. Rather, the narratives surrounding the Umbrella Movement were related to larger temporal religious movements taking place in different times and regions, indicating the global nature of my interlocutors’ religion. For them, these larger temporal movements were initiated by renowned engaged Buddhist leaders of various Buddhist schools; for example, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. Consequently, the Umbrella Movement became ‘de-territorialized’, extending beyond the spatial boundaries of Hong Kong and beyond the temporal dimension of the movement.

Taking these two insights together, I argue that Hong Kong Buddhists display a ‘modern, global Buddhism’ that is both local and transnational, both universal and particular, and both modern and traditional in nature. Regardless of the seeming diversity displayed in the narratives of my interlocutors, there was at the same time a significant similarity in the narratives regarding the importance my interlocutors placed on acting as ‘good’ Buddhists. For them, ‘good’ Buddhism entails taking personal responsibility in the ways you lead your life and being responsible to live Buddhism in a way that coincides with its ‘tradition’. ‘Bad’ Buddhists are consequently regarded as people who do not follow the traditional ways of practising Buddhism, and who merely follow Buddhist leaders without taking personal responsibility. What ‘tradition’ entails in this definition is a question that is answered by each modern individual themselves.

As argued at the start of this article, I believe that this kind of ‘modern, global Buddhism’ and the ways in which this religion is lived in different contexts deserves further anthropological investigation. Through this we can come to understand that normative statements that display some parts of Buddhism as ‘bad’ (either in the sense of ‘incorrect’ according to doctrines, or as having negative outcomes) do not make sense when viewing the religion as *lived practice*. Approaching

Buddhism from an emic perspective ensures a focus on its fluidity and contextuality; it helps us to understand that, as etic concepts, the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ hold no to little heuristic value.

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