





Discussions and Critical Notes

Buddhism and Modernity: 4th International Vajrayāna Conference

An Analytical Conference Report

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This article provides an analytical report on the fourth International Vajrayāna Conference themed ‘Buddhism and Modernity’, which was organised by the Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies in collaboration with Bhutan’s Central Monastic Body.

Keywords: Bhutan; Vajrayāna Buddhism; Buddhism and Modernity

B UDDHISM has its provenance in the radically changing socio-political environment of the historical Buddha, and, since then, it has been confronted with great changes. It has both been influenced by these changes and been the impetus of change. One of the reasons why Buddhism has endured and flourished is its adaptability to diverse socio-cultural, linguistic, and political systems and milieus (see Staal 1986 on Buddhist fluidity in Theravada traditions; see Mayer 2014 on innovation and adaptability in the Tibetan tradition). The current era of modernity has been characterized by increasing technological uptake and innovation on the one hand, and the spread of neoliberal socio-economic order on the other.

The often disorienting pace and nature of changes have produced varied responses, from outright rejection of religion and tradition to their reappropriation, reinterpretation and reformulation (Shinohara 1981). More commonly, the institution and practices of modernity which Latour (1993) called ‘constitution,’ are characterized by hybridity that invariably do not respect conceptual apparatus. Confronted with modern expediences, it has adopted and incorporated modern scientific outlook and semantics, the most famous of which has been called ‘Buddhist modernism’ or ‘Protestant Buddhism’ in the Sri Lankan context, where Buddhist reformers promoted puritan adherence to doctrine and education, with a focus on ‘this-worldly ascetism’ and a code of ethics for lay people, while trying to undermine ritualism and superstition (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). However, in other instances, Buddhist figures have not only refurbished and reinvigorated ancient and innovative ritual traditions to suit distinctly modern and urbanized needs and aspirations (see Yu 2020 on the preponderance of Tibetan Buddhist ritualized activities in contemporary China), but also created entirely new forms of Buddhist devotional practices (see Chia 2020 on ‘Buddhist rock’ bands in Indonesia).





Figure 1: A Bhutanese Vajrayāna inaugural ceremony being performed by Dasha Dr. Karma Ura. Photo: Dorji Phuntsho

Considering the entanglements between Buddhism and modernity, the *Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies*, a modern research thinktank, has been collaborating with the *Central Monastic Body* of the world's last Vajrayāna kingdom, to organize a conference series, the fourth of which was organized from 1-4 October 2022, in the Centre's recently built contemporary office building (Zhichenkhar) that incorporated traditional Buddhist aesthetics, spatiality, and functionality. Despite the disruptions of Covid pandemic, the conference themed 'Buddhism and Modernity' attracted great global enthusiasm with more than 200 foreign participants from 31 countries attending in person. The second author of this report is the lead coordinator of the conference while the first author coordinated, in 2012, the first international Buddhist conference to be held in Bhutan. The conference series has been conceived and convened by Dasha Dr. Karma Ura, the Bhutanese polymath, with a global standing in diverse areas like Buddhist arts, economics, and public policy.

Consistent with the organizers' objectives to promote innovation in doctrinal, ritual, pedagogical, and social practices, the conference series invites leading Buddhist masters and practitioners known to give suitable teachings through a dialogical approach with modern scholars representing all Buddhist nationalities and traditions. The conference's growing popularity in the global Buddhist landscape has been affirmed by the support it has received from one of the biggest global Buddhist networks, the *International Buddhist Confederation* (IBC) based in India. The IBC's Secretary General, Venerable Dr. Dhammapiya, distinguished people who engaged with Buddhism between what he called the 'talking Buddhists' (scholars) and the 'practicing Buddhists' (Buddhist monks and laity). This report will now highlight some of the key presentations by both scholars and practitioners, and how they contributed in three interrelated principal thematic areas towards analysing some of the key aspects of the change and continuity in modern Buddhism and/or Buddhism's encounter with the new modernity.

Modernity and Innovation in Buddhist Practices

Through focus on their respective lineage practices, three major Vajrayāna masters highlighted how Buddhism has incorporated dynamic doctrinal and pedagogical innovations. Kalu Rinpoche, a modern master, talked about how his esoteric lineage ‘Six Yogas of Niguma’, unlike Tummo (the auxiliary practices of Niguma Yoga), can be and has been taught openly without prerequisite empowerments. His conference talk thus represented a new era in the transmission of Vajrayāna Buddhism in which a once ‘secret’ practice is made available to a larger audience by an experienced lineage holder as a support for advanced tantric disciplines.



Figure 2: A practice session conducted by Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche. Photo: Dorji Phuntsho

As Buddhism encounters modern, transcultural, and transnational audiences, another master that has emerged as a leader in integrating scientific understanding of mind-body dynamics in contemporary Vajrayāna Buddhism through active collaborations with educators and academics has been Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche. Based on his extensive experience of *tsalung* (channels and winds) *trulchor* (magical movement), Dolpo Tulku’s conference talk focused on explaining the basis for his integration of select *pranayama* (breath extension) and *hatha* (forceful physical) Yoga techniques when instructing contemporary Buddhist practitioners in both monastic and non-monastic settings.

Another progressive master, Shar Khentrul Jamphel Lodrö Rinpoche, explained that the traditional texts were written in ancient times. He said that “Modern people trying to practice them often get stuck in rituals, dogmas and other such details, or believe that the higher paths are too hard”. Thus, Khentrul Rinpoche clarified “the essence of the ‘Desire path’ in simple terms so that everyone can adopt this easy and natural way of liberation in practicing Vajrayāna in the modern world”.

One of the greatest challenges the modern age has thrown up has been the ongoing Covid pandemic. Dr Nashalla G. Nyinda, a Western practitioner of Tibetan medicine talked about crucial aspects of how Tibetan physicians clarified concepts of interdependence as expressed within the human form and modern diseases. She said:

During the worldwide crisis of Covid-19, *menpa* (Tibetan physician) communities worldwide responded to, assessed, and treated an entirely new disease through instructions laid down in centuries' old Buddhist scripture. Trusting the foundations of relative or gross nature's expressions, just as the Medicine Buddha taught, helped tackle the interplay between phenomena and theory in the various stages and multiple variants during the emergence of an unconventional disease ravaging humanity.

Unsurprisingly, for members of the public who attended each day of the conference in their hundreds, receiving modernistic interpretation of their ancient practices from these respected practitioners was the main attraction.

Adaptation of Modern Technology

Emerging modern technology, sometimes called 'affordances,' have presented new challenges and opportunities. In her conference paper, Nitasha Kaul (University of Westminster) developed an argument about the urgent need to consider the complex and ever more relevant intersections of Buddhism and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Set against the contemporary backdrop of declining democracies and exacerbating inequalities, she puts forward some ways in which we might conceptualize the intersections of Buddhism and AI. She urged that "focusing on the Buddhism and AI intersections gives us better insight into how cognition, consciousness, consent, conscience, and compassion are central in thinking on AI technology."

Responding to such calls for integration of AI into Buddhist propagation, a Japanese research team led by Associate Professor Seiji Kumagai (Kyoto University) and Toshikazu Furuya (Teraverse Co., Ltd.) has launched the development of the "Tera-verse," a Buddhist virtual world that combines Buddhism and Metaverse technology. In his paper, Kumagai informed that "as a first step toward the establishment of the *Tera-verse*, the team has developed 'Tera-Platform AR Ver 1.0,' a platform that allows users to summon an avatar of 'BuddhaBot,' a Buddhist chatbot AI (invented by Kumagai, Furuya et. al.), in real space and directly interact with the BuddhaBot, using the latest technologies such as AR (augmented reality) and AI".

While AI has the potential for futuristic application of age-old Buddhist traditions and doctrines, everyday digital medias are equally influential in their outreach among Buddhist communities. Bhutanese communication scholar, Dorji Wangchuk (University of Macau) talked about how the affordances of social media are contextualized to address time/space dilemmas (chronotopes) and then to integrate local traditions, languages, social settings, and ritual practices. In particular, he argued that his "ethnographic study found that in both the online and offline religious practices, Bhutanese come together around the local deities, while also co-creating a sacred chronotope and a sense of common purpose, imagined community, and national unity".

However, the creation of digital contents, and their uptake by users are hardly a straightforward process. Based on fieldwork among archival staffs of the National Library and Archives of Bhutan (NLAB), Tierney Brown's (New York University and Hunter College) paper questioned what kind of an object is a text. She said:

The NLAB staffs confront the illusive simplicity of textual transmission on a daily basis. The opening of their new exhibit on text production points to the artisanal and even ecological knowledge involved in reproducing texts as a cultural treasure unto itself. This tradition is not static, and the library has been hard at work preserving and converting their texts for a digital age.



Figure 3: Prof. Dr. Klaus-Dieter Mathes, one of the distinguished participating scholars. Photo: Dorji Phuntsho

She further argued that “while digital libraries promise accessibility and legibility that exceed their paper predecessors; power outages, technical challenges, and the potential of data corruption make it clear that the means of cultural transmission is no less material than it was before”.

Despite challenges, evolving technology presents exciting opportunities for both professionals and practitioners of Buddhism. Ann Shaftel, a Buddhist art conservator, asserted that technology is not the enemy of traditional Buddhist forms and that it conveys iconographic information from texts. She argued:

Digital creations and re-creations of traditional paintings can be distributed in a way that is appropriate according to the teacher. Practitioners learn complex visualization through digital representation. From a conservation point of view, advances in digital technology can be utilized to reveal iconographic details that were considered lost from Vajrayāna texts and portrayed in art, while we strive to preserve the original texts and paintings for future generations.

Given that technology is one of the key features of modernity, as well as its driving force, the adaptation of technology by the Buddhist community and its accompanying pitfalls generated intense interests among the participants with a range of views represented both against and for more rapid incorporation of technology in everyday, as well as more formalized institutional Buddhist practices.

Buddhism and the West

Modernity and the West can sometimes be uncritically seen and experienced as synonymous. This is because it is Buddhism’s encounter with the West which made it not only imperative for Buddhism to examine its core principles and practices in a new light, but also made it necessary to develop inter-cultural and linguistic spaces, vocabularies, and processes for engaging with the West. Michele Gwynn Loew & Robert A. F. Thurman’s conference paper discussed one of the most popular interfaces between Buddhism and the West, or Buddhism in the West. They asserted that:

Sharing yogas such as *nejang* (Tibetan Healing Yoga), which originated in India with Kalachakra, has profound public health benefits and is a gateway to directly experiencing lasting happiness and blissfulness. There are 36 million active yogis in the USA and only three million Buddhists, so, we have an opportunity to share this science broadly for the benefit of all as an evolution of Vajrayāna.



Figure 4: Lecture by Tshogki Lopen Rinpoche, one of the five senior masters of Bhutan's State Monastic Body. Photo: Dorji Phuntsho

Beyond the domains of psychology and discursive practices, Buddhism also had social influences in the West. Imma Ramos-Taggart's paper explored how South-Asian female mystics were co-opted by the New Age movement in the West from the 20th century and how South-Asian artists are reimagining those same mystics in progressive and emancipatory ways by amplifying their voices. The paper drew on a collaboration between the presenter (curator of the South Asia collections at the British Museum) and *Dasho Dr. Karma Ura* (Bhutanese artist and scholar) creating a series of drawings chronicling the life of the medieval Tibetan female mystic Yeshe Tsogyal.

However, Buddhist institutional practices have become entangled with global geopolitics in the political arena. Dibyesh Anand's (University of Westminster) paper identified tensions between what he called "sacrality and temporality when it comes to reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism within the wider contexts of China-Tibet, China-India and China-West relations". It also analyzed "the (im)possibility of reconciling traditional fluid ideas (such as reincarnation) with modern secularist ideas and practices of politics and international relations."

Buddhism is a religion with uncommon doctrinal and institutional fluidity. This has been a major reason for its successful diffusion across diverse spatial and temporal settings. Hence, the international Vajrayāna Buddhist conference series held in Bhutan aimed at discursively providing a platform for Buddhist scholars

and practitioners to co-create new fields for the study and promotion of Vajrayāna Buddhism across diverse cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries, circumstances and aspirations.

The conference series has grown significantly since its humble beginning in Bhutan where Buddhism continues to shape the people's experience and impressions of modernity. It is this fascination which makes scholars and practitioners alike gravitate towards the country and its innovative conference format. This setup enables them to engage in dialogue on issues of common interest, which also provides young local scholars, like the present co-authors, the chance to remain rooted in the country's ancient Buddhist heritage while seeking new pathways of engaging with modernity and its promising means of practicing and studying Buddhism. For the co-authors, it was also an opportunity to build new resources, and network with not just practitioners and scholars, but also funding bodies like the IBC.

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