



Book Review

Buddhismi multipli: identità, credenze e pratiche del buddhismo in Italia

By Giuseppe Giordan, Stefania Palmisano, and PierLuigi Zoccatelli (eds.) (2025). Milano: Mondadori Università, 275p, print edition € 25.00, digital edition € 18.99.

Reviewed by Tiziano Bielli 

Department for the Study of Religions, University of Lucerne

MORE than two decades have passed since Giangiorgio Pasqualotto (2002) noted a certain delay in Italian academic studies on Buddhism. Despite the success of Buddhist practice in Italy, a scarcity of research aimed at investigating Buddhism from a socio-anthropological perspective has long characterised the field. Although there has been an increase in academic interest in the practice of Buddhism and in its spread in Italian society in recent years, this volume makes a key contribution to filling a gap that is now difficult to justify. This is especially true in view of the two agreements that the Italian state has signed, on the basis of Article 8 of the Constitution, with the two main Italian Buddhist organisations.

Buddhismi multipli: identità, credenze e pratiche del buddhismo in Italia (Multiple Buddhisms: Identities, Beliefs, and Practices of Buddhism in Italy) is dedicated to PierLuigi Zoccatelli, who contributed greatly to the knowledge of Buddhism in Italy and who sadly passed away prematurely. Here, we should at least mention his study on the *Shinnyo-en* community in Milan, a Center for Study on New Religions (CESNUR, Turin) publication edited by him and dedicated to *Sōka Gakkai* (Zoccatelli 2020). Above all, we must note the accurate information provided on Italian Buddhist centres and organisations in the CESNUR *Encyclopaedia of Religions in Italy*, which he edited in collaboration with Massimo Introvigne (Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2024).

The research project that led to the publication of the volume under review has some undoubtedly interesting and distinctive features. In fact, it was the first academic study on the Italian Buddhist Union (henceforth, the IBU) and was promoted and funded by the organisation itself—in collaboration with the Universities of Padua and Turin—thanks to the work of a group of researchers coordinated by the volume editors. The research project's original title “Buddhism in Italy: A Study of the Italian Buddhist Union” could perhaps have led to Buddhism in Italy being identified in its entirety with the IBU, neglecting other equally important organisations. Even the title chosen for the published volume does not make it entirely clear that the actual subject of the research is Buddhism as represented by the IBU, and not Buddhism in Italy as a whole. This is a very important issue; some empirical data used in the book itself show that even within Buddhist organisations there is an intense debate regarding how Buddhism should develop in Italy, who should represent it, and how it should relate to Italian institutions and society. It is no coincidence that the two main Italian Buddhist organisations have consciously chosen to follow two parallel but separate paths aimed at reaching an institutional agreement with the state.



Further, the volume's title alludes to the vexed issue of the plurality of forms and practices of Buddhism which—rather than being a peculiarity of Italy—seems to characterise Buddhism as a whole, to the extent that the most daring have suggested using the term in the plural. In this regard, it is worth recalling the words of Giorgio Renato Franci:

The great variety of historical developments of the Buddhadharma could perhaps justify the use of the plural “Buddhisms,” but it is preferable to use expressions such as “currents, schools of Buddhism,” which respect both its inexhaustible fertility and the indestructible thread that links the various developments to their origins. (Franci 2004: 11, translation by the reviewer)

To this we can add what Pasqualotto emphasized, suggesting the term “Buddhism” is

a very approximate transposition of the term Buddhadharma, which instead indicates [...] the “Doctrine of the Buddha” or, better, the “Teachings of the Buddha.” Whereas “Buddhism” should more properly be used to refer to the very broad field of thoughts and meditative experiences, texts and commentaries that have developed and accumulated since the Buddhadharma. (Pasqualotto 2008: 15, translation by the reviewer)

When using the plural form, we must therefore bear in mind the conventionality and generality of the category “Buddhism,” which was coined by Western scholars and is foreign to Asian languages.

Turning now to the contents of the volume, the three editors' introduction deals primarily with the trajectory of the perception of Buddhism in Italy in recent decades. Initially, it was a minority and exotic phenomenon, but over time it has become increasingly relevant in public debate and Italian society. The editors briefly touch on the question of what category Buddhism should belong to—religion, philosophy, or set of practices. They also highlight the mixed nature of their research, both qualitative and quantitative, with more than 300 in-depth interviews and 500 questionnaires. Finally, they outline three main research questions relating to the identity of Buddhists belonging to the IBU (socio-demographic characteristics, views on life, and motivations for approaching Buddhism), how non-Buddhists in Italy perceive Buddhism, and the perceptions of Buddhists who do not belong to the IBU.

The volume is a collaborative work, as members of the research team contributed to one or more chapters. The first chapter was written by Marco Guglielmi, Matteo Di Placido, and Marco Castagnetto, and briefly examines the numerous philological, historical-philosophical, cultural, post-colonial, and socio-anthropological studies relating to Buddhism in Western countries. The chapter is useful in exploring the multiplicity of disciplinary approaches that have dealt with Buddhism in the West. However, the chapter does not mention the research conducted by Maria Immacolata Maciotti in the early 1990s on Italian *Sōka Gakkai*, which led to the publication of a special issue of the journal *La Critica Sociologica* (Maciotti 1994) and a monograph (Maciotti 1996). A reference to this study could have compensated, at least partially, for the lack of significant insights into the organisation that appears to be the most consistent Buddhist tradition in Italy in quantitative terms. In this regard, in the second chapter, Zoccatelli provides welcome and accurate data on the Buddhist presence in Italy, referring to different organisations, traditions, and schools.

In the third chapter, Martina Mignardi analyses the main features of the IBU centres using the methodology of studies on national congregations. She examines the centres' social engagement and positions on current issues such as homosexuality and gender equality, with the author defining the progressive approach of most centres as a rarity within the Italian socio-religious landscape. However, it should be remembered that the IBU, as Italian *Sōka Gakkai* itself, is mainly made up of Italian practitioners. It would therefore be useful to

compare the data Mignardi presents with those relating to ethnic Buddhist communities from Sri Lanka or China, prevalent in the Italian context, in order to identify any differences.

In the fourth chapter, Olga Breskaya and Stefano Sbalchiero present quantitative data from 515 structured questionnaires on the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, their perceptions of Buddhism, previous religious and non-religious identities, motivations, and methods of participation in the centres' activities. In their conclusions, the authors summarize the chapter by describing some characteristics of their respondents, such as high education, good economic status, and a centre-left political position. In addition, more than half of the respondents have been practicing Buddhism for more than ten years and the majority of them began this experience through personal research. 50 percent associate Buddhism with a philosophy of life, while less than 20 percent consider it a religion. Before beginning to practice Buddhism, half of the respondents were Catholic, while four out of ten did not belong to any religion. Finally, the transition to Buddhism is generally not perceived as a conversion.

In the fifth chapter, Matteo Di Placido investigates the findings of 137 structured interviews with members and visitors of fifteen Buddhist centres affiliated with the IBU in relation to representations of Buddhism, its position in Italian society, and the practices, identities, and biographical trajectories of practitioners. In order to properly understand the analysis of the symbiotic relationship between body and spiritual care, as well as the porous boundaries between practice in the strict sense and everyday life, we would have required an appropriate reference to the concept of non-duality, which is so relevant in *Mahāyāna* traditions. The chapter also presents a preliminary typology of five different ideal-typical profiles of Italian Buddhists: 1) committed and active; 2) committed, but not always active; 3) Buddhist by tradition and/or culture; 4) selective or critical; and 5) New Buddhists.

In the sixth chapter, Di Placido and Marco Guglielmi examine the perceptions of Buddhism amongst non-Buddhist Italians, based on what was expressed in structured interviews—including with privileged witnesses such as journalists and other professionals. Among the topics covered are the role of popular culture in the representation of Buddhism, the dialogue between the latter and the medical-therapeutic and secular worlds, and the role of the IBU in the processes of dissemination and popularization of Buddhism in Italy. Finally, the authors identify four types of Buddhism connected to specific imaginaries, often interrelated and overlapping: 1) strictly religious Buddhism with strong ties to Eastern tradition; 2) fashionable Buddhism that rides the wave of popularization of widespread practices such as yoga or mindfulness, which does not require a true conversion and integrates well into the lives of many; 3) strictly spiritual Buddhism, unconnected to dogma and impositions, in line with contemporary spirituality; and 4) therapeutic Buddhism, which aims to restore physical, mental, and/or spiritual well-being.

Marco Castagnetto focuses the seventh chapter on the centres and peripheries of Buddhism, turning his gaze to centres that are not affiliated with the IBU for various reasons. Relevant in this context are the off-the-record comments that the author takes into consideration, thus allowing the readers to overcome, at least in part, the more institutional perspective expressed by some Buddhist leaders. The author cites the “normative assumption of contemporary Western moral values” by the term “engaged Buddhism” (165), referring to the studies of Paul Fuller and Ann Gleig. In this context, it would have been helpful to mention the extensive and intense debate that Fuller's (2021) volume has sparked with prominent contributions by Donna Lynn Brown, Sallie B. King and Christopher S. Queen.

In the last chapter, Guglielmi maps Buddhists not affiliated with the IBU and centres of ethnic Buddhism, starting from an online search of websites on a regional basis. Among the four largest Buddhist organisations, the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai (henceforth, IBISG) is said to have “hundreds of meeting places

in members' homes" (198). According to data provided by the IBISG in a recent study that has not yet been published, approximately 4,200 *zadankai* (discussion meetings) are held each month in private homes in Italy, with the participation of about 40,000 members. These figures seem to greatly increase the relevance of the organisation, which has approximately 96,700 members. A comparison of the characteristics and practices of the two main Italian Buddhist organisations would have been of great interest. In comparing the number of the IBISG cultural centres with that of other Buddhist traditions, consideration should be given to the fact that centres perform different functions depending on the Buddhist tradition in question.

In the volume's conclusion, the editors summarise the salient points of the work, supporting the thesis contained in the title, *Multiple Buddhisms*, and stating that the multiplicity of Italian Buddhism is the result of both factors endogenous to Buddhism—notably its history and doctrines—and exogenous factors connected to broader trends in society. The authors effectively capture the flexibility of Buddhism and rightly state that “the rich practical and discursive heritage of Buddhism seems to respond in a surprising way to the search for meaning in the present time, inherent in the religious landscape of ‘multiple modernities’ ” (209, translation by the reviewer). The editors also note the full normalisation of Buddhist practice in Italian society, making being Buddhist one of the many options available for constructing one's religious identity, and highlight how Buddhism is useful for “imagining, living and reproducing social models alternative to those dominant in the post-modern Western framework” (217, translation by the reviewer). Such an identity cannot therefore be reduced to a mere “complex of systems to cushion the backlash of imposed performative models,” but must be considered above all as “a laboratory where more satisfying existential and social hypotheses can be developed” (217, translation by the reviewer). What emerges here is a certain tension between the processes of institutionalisation of Buddhism in Italy and more radical tendencies aimed at conceiving Buddhist practice as a tool for challenging not only the inner, but even the outer status quo.

Regarding the volume as a whole, the fact that the research design was defined in agreement with the funding organisation, namely the IBU, should prompt careful reflection on the role of religious organisations in financing academic research. The fact that in Italy—a country characterised by long-standing and serious problems in funding university research—a religious organization which has an institutional agreement with the state can contribute to supporting academic research indeed appears positive. However, we ought to consider the implications of this contribution. In fact, a specific religious organisation is being given the opportunity to shape, at least in part, the agenda of the Italian academia, also helping to establish research priorities.

This volume is a compelling mosaic composed of numerous tiles, capable of capturing and interpreting the changing complexity and multiplicity of Buddhism in Italy through the appropriate choice of adopting an equally multifaceted research approach, characterised by a mixed methodology. The volume will undoubtedly be of great use to students, scholars and anyone who wishes to deepen their knowledge of Buddhism in Italy. The lively voices of the research participants emerge appropriately from the volume through rich and carefully analysed excerpts. In addition to filling the gap mentioned by Pasqualotto at the beginning of this review, the volume paves the way for future research on Buddhism in Italy, suggesting countless avenues that could lead to equally important research projects in the increasingly rich panorama of Buddhist studies in Italy and the West.

References

- Franci, Giorgio Renato. 2004. *Il Buddhismo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Fuller, Paul. 2021. *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*. Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350129108>.
- Introvigne, Massimo, and PierLuigi Zoccatelli, eds. 2024. “Le Religioni in Italia.” *Edizione*. <https://cesnur.com>. Accessed 27.11.2025.

- Macioti, Maria Immacolata. 1994. "Una Ricerca Sul Movimento Della Soka Gakkai Italiana." *La Critica Sociologica* 111-112: 164-69.
- Macioti, Maria Immacolata. 1996. "Il Buddha Che è in Noi." In *Germogli Del Sutra Del Loto*. Roma: Edizioni Seam.
- Pasqualotto, Giangiorgio. 2002. "Aspetti e Problemi Del Buddhismo in Italia." *Dharma* 10: 52-58.
- Pasqualotto, Giangiorgio. 2008. *Dieci Lezioni Sul Buddhismo*. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Zoccatelli, PierLuigi. 2020. *Studiare La Soka Gakkai. Cinque Testi*. CESNUR.