

Unmasking Buddhism

Bernard Faure

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Introduction

The Indian: "What do you want! He has the prejudices of his country, of his party and his own prejudices."

The Japanese: "Oh! See, too many prejudices."

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*

Unlike Islam, which has suffered a lot of bad press in recent times, Buddhism is seen in a rather more favorable light in Western society today. However, this has not always been the case, as is reflected by Orientalist discourse from the nineteenth century. Western missionaries and colonizers often lumped Islam and Buddhism together and considered them to be the cause of social, economic, political, and spiritual degeneration in the colonized societies. The current high regard in which Buddhism is held is a sign of real progress since that era, when it was met solely with fear or disdain, although this change in attitude remains tinged with ideas of Orientalism.

Today, the media have moved on from their vision of Buddhism as a fashion trend followed by a few intellectuals and now emphasize the sociological importance of this development in Western

countries. Despite this trend reversal, what do we actually know about Buddhism? While our knowledge has certainly progressed considerably since the nineteenth century, it is nevertheless often constrained by certain ingrained ideas which restrict the range of issues addressed and questions asked.

The average person on the street is often confronted with certain very specific forms of Buddhism which are presented as if they represent the norm. These include, most notably, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Theravāda (or the “Way of the Elders”). Tibetan Buddhism, while strongly influenced by the Indian tradition of the “Great Vehicle” (Mahāyāna), is the result of a specific development, a mixture of Tantrism and scholasticism. The Zen tradition, which appeared during the sixth century in China (under the name of Chan), assumed its current form in medieval Japan. Despite its significance, Zen is merely a branch of the “Great Vehicle” such as it developed principally in China and Japan. The other schools of East Asian Mahāyāna are virtually unheard of in Europe and the United States. Theravāda has become the most dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos) and is simply a modernized version of one of the many schools of ancient Buddhism; indeed, it is the only one to have survived.

Despite all of these different forms, for most Westerners the word “Buddhism” evokes primarily Tibetan Buddhism. This version of Buddhism, which is very specific despite making universal claims, is featured on every page of successful books such as *The Monk and the Philosopher*, which features a dialogue between the “philosopher” Jean-François Revel and his son, the “monk” Matthieu Ricard, a disciple of the Dalai Lama. The book provides a handy catalogue of received ideas, which are accurate to a greater or lesser extent, yet also reflects a certain level of orthodoxy that should be examined closely, even if it means playing devil’s advocate (or rather Māra’s advocate, the Buddhist equivalent). Let’s start by exploring some landmarks in time.

Before questioning received ideas about Buddhism, it should be remembered that they often include a significant dose of truth. Furthermore, when these ideas are held by a great many people, they end up becoming truth or at least orthodoxy (literally meaning correct opinion). In Buddhism, these ideas form part of what is known as the conventional truth – as opposed to the ultimate truth. This notion of Two Truths, conventional and ultimate, favors the latter, yet this does not detract from the value of the received opinion: a half-truth still has some truth-claim. Even if they do not go far enough, half-truths are a means of accessing the ultimate truth.

When it comes to the question of who can speak in the name of Buddhism, it is tempting to reply that, obviously, Buddhists can. However, it is less easy to determine who, in fact, Buddhists are. In the absence of criteria accepted by all, it could be said that a Buddhist is someone who declares himself or herself to be one.

While historians and sociologists usually refrain from adopting a stance on the content of the Buddhist doctrine, they are heavily involved in describing the development of this doctrine and the communities that profess to follow it as objectively as possible. From their point of view, there is no Buddhism; strictly speaking, there are only Buddhists. Or, put another way, Buddhism is not an essence in itself, it is something Buddhists do.

However, we quickly come across another stumbling block: in the US, for example, the beliefs and practices of recent – and usually Caucasian – converts differ greatly from those of Buddhists of Asian origins. When one Buddhist declares something in the name of Buddhism and another Buddhist declares the exact opposite, who are we to believe? In this case, historians restrict themselves to analyzing the many available sources and practices with the aim of including rather than excluding.

Sometimes, received ideas about Buddhism are not supported by tradition. These ideas often imply and reinforce each other. The majority are derived from a fundamental bias, which is also an act of faith: the belief in a “pure” Buddhism, devoid of any

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“superstition,” which was miraculously transmitted through various cultures over the centuries to reach the modern Western world. In fact, this Buddhism is a relatively recent invention, the result of a series of reforms in various Asian countries and of increased contact with the West. It has developed in response to colonization, the requirement to modernize, and the influence of Protestantism.

In one sense, these ideas adopted and retained by Buddhists as part of their tradition are part of the Buddhist experience. They also enable us to adopt an initial approach that can be modified as we explore the practices further and develop our understanding – we have to start somewhere after all.

Some of these ideas are simply incorrect while the majority are partially correct but have been overly simplified, thus weakening the Buddhist tradition. They tend to take what was essentially one of many aspects of the doctrine and regard it as a dogma and impose orthodoxy by falsely assuming that certain ideas form part of the long-standing Buddhist tradition. By calling such ideas into question, the complexity and richness of the Buddhist tradition can perhaps be restored, at least in part.

Part I

Buddhism in History

— “Buddhism is both one and many” —

Many received ideas about Buddhism stem from a refusal to take the diversity of Buddhism as a living tradition seriously. Of course, all books which seek to popularize the subject are careful to state that Buddhism is both “one and many,” but they nevertheless go on to reduce this multiplicity to one fundamental unity by concentrating on so-called “primitive Buddhism.” Some such books jump directly from this “pure” Buddhism, i.e., that of the Buddha himself (as we imagine him), to Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, and Theravāda as if they are all directly derived from this original form. Unable to do justice to the rich diversity of Buddhisms which have evolved through the influence of the various host cultures, they focus upon a few of the simple ideas to which Buddhists of all denominations are supposed to adhere.

The Buddhist doctrine first developed in northern India towards the fifth century BCE and gradually spread its way across the rest of the subcontinent during the third century BCE following the conversion of King Ashoka, founder of the first Indian empire. During the same period, a schism occurred between the disciples of the Buddha that eventually led to a separation into the two main schools – the “Great Vehicle” (Mahāyāna) and the “Lesser Vehicle” (Hīnayāna). The name “Lesser Vehicle” was given to the more conservative of the schools by its critics and rivals of the “Great Vehicle.” It later became Theravāda. The distinction between these two “vehicles” is not always as rigid as we are led to believe. Some also distinguish a third school of Buddhism, known as the “Diamond Vehicle” (Vajrayāna), which is also referred to as or esoteric Buddhism or Tantrism (after the name of its canonic texts, the Tantras).

Without King Ashoka, Buddhism may well have remained a minority religion rather like Jainism, with which it shares certain common features. Legend has it that Ashoka ordered the construction

of 84,000 *stūpas* throughout India – and indeed beyond, given that some have been found in China – where relics of the Buddha could be deposited. Whatever the case, this model of the Buddhist sovereign embodied by Ashoka had a lasting influence upon the relationship between Buddhism and the state in all Asian cultures.

The spread of Buddhism in India led to a proliferation of schools (or “groups,” the *nikāya*), which is the reason why this form of early Buddhism is sometimes known as Nikāya Buddhism. However, this expression restricts Buddhism to doctrinal aspects and in doing so fails to take account of the popular religion which does not always stem directly from Nikāya Buddhism.

The factors that contributed to the diversification of Buddhism in India in the centuries following the Buddha’s death include the settling of the monks and the great distances between the centers of Buddhism. As the wealth of the monasteries grew, monks and nuns were able to live a more comfortable existence. Their tendency to specialize often led to a polarization between the ascetics, who practiced their religion in the relative solitude of the forests and the village, and city-based monks, who devoted their time to teaching or studying in the great monasteries. These different approaches to doctrine, ritual, and discipline became ever more established with each new religious council.

It was on the occasion of the third council that the first schism occurred between the group of the “Elders” (Pāli: Thera, Sanskrit: Sthavira), partisans of a strict interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings, and the majority – the so-called “Great Assembly” (Mahāsāṅghika) – which tried to adapt this teaching by relying on its spirit rather than on its letter. This schism paved the way to a new form of Buddhism, which named itself Mahāyāna, as opposed to the earlier form of Buddhism which, as we have seen, was referred to as Hīnayāna. The term “vehicle” here means “a way of going towards salvation.”

The origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism continues to be the subject of much debate. Some have claimed that it stems from the lay-people reacting against the elitism of the monks and the opulence

of the monasteries. Others point to the emergence of new forms of religious practice such as the worshiping of *stūpas* and relics, the worship of Scriptures, and, more generally, devotion to the Buddha. Some scholars have described Mahāyāna as a “fringe sectarian movement” trying to gain economic support. In fact, Mahāyāna seems to be an essentially monastic phenomenon and somewhat militant in nature. It could even be described as military in certain cases, if we are to believe the *Mahāparinirvāna Sutra*: “If a layperson observes the five precepts but does not bear arms to protect the monks, he does not deserve to go by the name of mahāyānist.”

Despite its polemic declarations, Mahāyāna complemented rather than excluded Hīnayāna: it considers salvation to be accessible to all, for example, and is more broadly accessible than Hīnayāna – which advocates the strict observance of an ascetic lifestyle.

While the reform of Mahāyāna may have introduced certain lax attitudes, it also developed the more ascetic tendencies of Buddhism, focusing on virtues such as compassion, wisdom, and the use of skillful means (*upāya*) to salvation. On a soteriological level, Awakening (*bodhi*) overrode the previous ideal of *nirvāna*. Where the conception of the Buddha was concerned, relative historicism was transformed into radical docetism and the Buddha, who had become purely “metaphysical,” was multiplied. The Buddha’s human form was now little more than a white lie intended to gradually guide people towards the truth. On a practical level, the emphasis was placed upon devotion to various buddhas (Amitābha, Akshobhya, Baishajyaguru, Mahāvairocana) and bodhisattvas (Avalokiteshvara, Mañjushrī, Samantabhadra) as well as upon penitence and the transfer of merits.

Mahāyāna thought really took off with the tradition of the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), as expressed in the sutras of the same name. The first of these texts dates from the beginning of the Common Era. They vary in length from one extreme (100,000 verses) to another (the *Hridaya* [Heart] *Sutra*) of around one page.