

UNMASKING BUDDHISM

BERNARD FAURE

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To Adèle

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Bernard Faure

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19
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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 “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 *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*: “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 *nirvāṇa*. 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, Mahāvairochana) and bodhisattvas (Avalokiteshvara, Mañjuśrī, 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.

Mahāyāna began to spread throughout central Asia and China around the start of the Common Era and then spread subsequently throughout Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Hīnayāna (a term we are using here for want of a better one and which we do not intend to have any pejorative connotations whatsoever) was initially transmitted to Sri Lanka during the reign of Ashoka and then, from the tenth century CE, spread throughout Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia). It lives on today in the form of Theravāda, which has become the dominant form of Buddhism in the countries cited above.

Between the fifth and the seventh centuries CE, a third movement, known as Tantric or esoteric Buddhism, arose. For some scholars, it is a radically new form of Buddhism, a new “Vehicle,” known as the “Diamond Vehicle” (Vajrayāna), but in fact it simply adopts many Mahāyāna conceptions, while taking them to their extreme.

As in Mahāyāna, the identity between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* (the cycle of life and death) constitutes the basis for Tantric doctrine and practice. Based on this notion, all verbal, physical, and mental acts become acts of the primordial Buddha. Tantric rituals place a great deal of emphasis on symbols of all kinds: invocations (mantra, *dharāṇī*), hand gestures (*mudrā*) and geometric drawings (*mandala*). This predominance of ritual is one of the features that distinguishes Tantric Buddhism most clearly from previous forms of Buddhism.

This trend spread outside India during the eighth to ninth centuries in Tibet, China, and Japan, as well as in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia). It failed to survive in the latter countries but was predominant in Tibet and Japan for many centuries. Even today, it remains the official religion of the small Himalayan state of Bhutan. While it has been heavily indebted to Indian Mahāyāna tradition, Tibetan Buddhism is the result of a specific development, a mix of Tantrism and scholasticism.

Theravāda, the dominant form in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, is a modern form of Hīnayāna or Nikāya Buddhism. While it is clearly more conservative than Mahāyāna, it has also considerably evolved in the course of centuries, and cannot be considered to be more representative of “authentic” or “primitive” Buddhism. This tradition developed in Sri Lanka between the third century BCE and the fifth century CE. From here, it spread to Myanmar in the tenth century and then to Thailand and other Indianized states of the Indo-China peninsula (with the exception of Vietnam, which was influenced by Chinese culture) between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Theravāda therefore served as a culture and religion common to the Indianized countries of Asia, in large part owing to the use of Pāli as a lingua franca. In all of these countries, the “historic” Buddha formed the main object of

worship, although this worship was often closely interlinked with other local forms of worship. It should not be forgotten that Theravāda has not always been as “pure” and free from mystical and esoteric elements as we are often led to believe. There was, and still is, a “tantric Theravāda” that is strongly influenced by esoteric speculation.

Thus, in spite of all the talk about “pure” Buddhism, it is clear that Buddhism has constantly evolved, influenced as it was by the eras, places, and cultures which adopted it. It is both anchored in history through its secular roots and living in the world around us today.

“The Buddha is only a man who — achieved Awakening”

In India, the Buddha is a historical person.

Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, 1827

Without the “historical” Buddha, Buddhism wouldn’t exist. This may seem like stating the obvious, but is it really? If the Buddha hadn’t existed, perhaps he would have been invented anyway. This is undoubtedly what happened, regardless of whether or not he did actually exist. In any case, the historicity of the Buddha is hardly ever questioned today, even though we continue to question the historical basis of various events that happened during his long lifetime.

It is certainly easy to accept the notion that the legend of the Buddha is simply derived from an embellished image of a historical person. Pāli texts in particular seem to be based on certain historical facts and the Vinaya monastic codes contain clear attempts to present Buddha as an eminently pragmatic individual. Supporters of this historicist interpretation rightly stress that it is easier to “mythologize” a biography than to “demythologize” a legend.

So what do we actually know about the Buddha? It is fair to say that he was born, he lived, and he died. The rest remains lost in the mists of myth and legend: his immaculate conception his miraculous birth, and so on. The fact that some of these elements are also said to have occurred during the life of the founder of Jainism, Mahāvīra (another allegedly “historical” character), indicates that a degree of caution must be exercised.

Historians have focused on the circumstances surrounding the death of the Buddha in particular. They emphasize one detail which they claim could not have been invented: he is said to have died as a result of eating contaminated pork. It is nothing short of a scandal that such a pre-eminent figure should have spent his last moments crippled by terrible diarrhea as a result of eating meat. Buddhists, now proud of their vegetarianism, have subsequently been keen to reinterpret this tale by swapping the pork for a vegetarian dish. Historians, on the other hand, have sought to establish some kind of historical anchor point for the story and have argued, with a certain degree of sense, that this tale does not seem to be the result of hagiography – which usually seeks to embellish the life of saints.

Siddharta Gautama, the future Buddha, is said to have been born during the fifth century BCE as the son of a king of northern India. His conception and birth were allegedly immaculate. His mother, Queen Māya, dreamt that a white elephant pierced the side of her body; the next morning, she found herself to be pregnant. Nine months later, she gave birth to a child in a grove in Lumbini. The child immediately began to sing a “song of victory,” declaring “I alone am the honored one above earth and under heaven.” To prove this, he took seven steps in each of the four directions, a lotus flower blossoming with each step he took.

The auspicious nature of the Buddha’s birth seems to be contradicted by the death of his mother, seven days later.