



PERSPECTIVES OF NEO BUDDHISM IN INDIA

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After acting as a foil to Christianity until the end of the nineteenth century, Buddhism has now become a cure-all for the evils of the West. What were perceived as vices in the past are now seen to be virtues. It may be that the Western attraction to Buddhism represents a surge in the popularity of spirituality rather than a return to religion, with Buddhist spirituality offering a credible response to the anxieties of the modern world. It is this idealized and purely “spiritual” form of Buddhism which I refer to as “Neo-Buddhism” to distinguish it from the various forms of Buddhism whose tradition has been maintained, albeit with some difficulty, in Asia. Neo-Buddhism has tended to become a sort of impersonal flavorless and odorless spirituality, a kind of Buddhism à la carte. The preoccupation with spiritual interiority is merely another form of the desire for fulfillment which characterizes the individual in contemporary society. This is somewhat of a paradox, given that the Buddhist doctrine in principle denies the very notion of the self. It is this Neo-Buddhist modernism that the media endeavor to describe when they show us the Dalai Lama in conversation with the president of the United States, or when they report on his stance on humanitarian issues or his dialogue with religious and scientific leaders of all persuasions. This movement towards modernism is also affecting Buddhists in Asia, with virtually every temple in Japan now having its own website. It is this same “Neo-Buddhism” that “Neo-Christianity” comes up against during “religious dialogues” which sometimes lead to “Zen Masses,” having little to do with either Zen or Christianity. This is what happens when you put too much water in your holy wine or tea. It is often said that it is the ideas of Buddhism which may fill a void in the West rather than the actual culture of Buddhism. But can these ideas really be so easily separated from the Buddhist culture? Such a separation is essential if the “essence” of Buddhism is universal – which remains to be seen. However, surely the ideas of Buddhism lose their vitality when taken out of their cultural context, instead being transformed into a simple philosophy – while the practice of Buddhism becomes a kind of sport, likened to judo or aikido? If we go one step further, being a Buddhist monk means undergoing an ordination process which, at first glance, seems to relate more to Buddhist culture than to ideas. In fact, in certain Buddhist schools at least, the process involves a ritual affiliation with the spiritual lineage of the Buddha. However, this Buddhist notion of spiritual affiliation appears a long way removed from the vision of Buddhism commonly held in the West, despite being dominant in Tibet and Japan for centuries. This is why transmission from master to disciple continues to play such an important part in Buddhism, particularly in Zen, which is defined by its direct transmission from mind to mind in the form of face-to-face encounter. Through such transmission, the disciple ritually becomes a master, i.e. a buddha. Various recent studies have shown that Asians who have recently immigrated into Europe and the United States, while emphasizing their cultural differences, tend to universalize their Buddhism, making it compatible with their Western values by focusing on its modernity, rationality, and

spirituality. This voluntary acculturation seems to be motivated, in part, by a desire to succeed in the world of capitalism, and involves the abandonment of certain devotional and magical practices. The “ethnic” Buddhism they brought with them is deemed to be too devout and ritualistic; in a word, too “Catholic” to arouse interest. The many Buddhist communities which have sprung up everywhere tend to emphasize the practice of contemplation. This reflects a preoccupation with an “authentic” Buddhism which may only ever have existed in the Western imagination. This infatuation with one of the great “Oriental” religions conceals a great many “Orientalist” prejudices. The tendency to emphasize the aesthetic and “spiritual” aspects of Buddhism and to focus exclusively upon superior or internal realities prevents certain followers from appreciating the profound vitality of Buddhism and the wide range of problems it faces. A full understanding of this Buddhism and its recognition as an intellectual, religious, and spiritual resource can only be achieved through knowledge of its history and of the non-Western societies in which it developed and, in many cases, continues to prosper. Only by adopting a critical and well-informed approach can we avoid the drift towards the Neo-Buddhism, or even “Neo-Tantrism,” which seems to be conquering the minds (and bodies) of many Western followers in the wake of the New Age trend. Nowadays, Tantric initiation has been digitized thanks to the correlative powers of the internet. The metaphor of the microcosm has become a reality, and action at a distance is no longer the result of magic, or at least is no longer perceived as such. What should we make of the newly emerging forms of spirituality where the trigger is no longer the mind but rather the click of a mouse? If we stick to the notion of real presence as produced by ritual, the rampant digitization of today’s world appears to bring only a semblance of presence and, as a result, is ineffective. Yet if we admit that the effect of Tantric ritual is essentially imaginary and psychological and does not involve any real communication with the invisible world, we can appreciate that the creation of the internet perhaps represents the concretization of Indra’s net, the interpenetration of all things that is so important to the Mahāyāna tradition, perhaps bringing us closer to the comprehension of Tantric mystery. Everyone must make up their own mind. There are certainly a great many cases where fraudulent intention can easily be detected on the internet. One such example is the site known as Tantra.com for “a total understanding of Extatic Sex and Sacred Relationships.” This is little more than a soft porn or “sexual self-help” site where visitors can purchase works such as those by author Nick Douglas – “Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy” and “Spiritual Sex.” There is one point which should not be overlooked: chakras, mandalas, and deities are not symbols in the ordinary sense of the word. They are perceived to be more real than external reality, and followers firmly believe in them. Yet they also recognize their intrinsic emptiness. This explains the modern-day error of interpreting them “symbolically” without really believing in them and without recognizing their concrete “reality.” It is essential to let oneself be “taken in” by them for their magic to work and for the rituals to be effective. Yet within a Western cultural context it is undoubtedly impossible to believe in them completely. Furthermore, in an age where “cults” and their dubious gurus are rife, abusing the credulity of disciples who are deprived of their bearings, such an approach is not without its risks. Understanding such symbolism therefore requires a sufficiently in-depth grasp of its historical and real-life context. This is the error made by the New Age movement which claims to



adapt Tantrism to the modern world yet fails to take account of the underlying context of beliefs which renders Tantrism effective. This is not meant as a rejection of all forms of Neo-Buddhism. However, the question remains as to why this spirituality still claims to represent Buddhism when it is perhaps instead a relatively moderate form of New Age spirituality. On the other hand, what reason is there to refuse the title of Buddhist to anyone who claims to represent Buddhism? Given that I have no authority to do so, I shall content myself with simply asking the question.

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