

Religion essays - buddhism in the west



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There are multitudinous challenges faced by the contemporary Buddhist, not the least of which includes the fact that he is *contemporary* in the first place. For, the contemporary world is overcome by numerous characteristics, which are altogether incommensurate with Buddhism.

The world of today, insofar as it has been industrialized and further digitized, is one of runaway technology, sound bites, and ubiquitously sought-after shortcuts to everything. The meditative and contemplative nature of Buddhism is rather at odds with the fast-paced West. However, it could not be said that this is the only, nor even the primary, challenge to contemporary Buddhism. There is also a strong sense of its minority nature in the West.

TWO UNFORTUNATE OUTCOMES OF THE FAST-PACED WORLD

The Anti-Contemplative Nature of the Fast-Paced World

The traditions of contemplation/meditation in Buddhism are very basic to the religion itself. When meditation occurs, contemplation seems to go along with it. Meditation is that instrument which allows a Buddhist to withdraw from the ceaseless stream of relentless memories, daydreams, fears, and fantasies, (Jeffery Paine, *Re-Enchantment*, 132). In other words, meditation takes one out of those events and things (such as memories) which are inextricably bound up in the world of suffering (i. e., of *dukkha*). But, upon this withdrawal from the world, one is able to engage in a type of contemplation, which can be conceived as the ability to perceive things *as they are in themselves*. That is, there is a distinction between reality as it is

(which an enlightened person can see) and reality as it seems to us (which is how those who are still in the endless cycle of rebirth, known as *samsara*, see things). It is the very goal of Buddhism to see things as they are. This is precisely in what enlightenment of a Buddha consists. The seeing of the whole of reality as it is is the very moment of enlightenment, the very moment of attaining Buddhahood. Therefore, the fast-paced world being not at all amenable to the slow nature of meditation/contemplation shows its inability to mesh with Buddhism.

The Necessity of Samsara in a Fast-Paced World

In his concluding thoughts on *Buddhism in the West*, religion scholar Roger Corles takes note of the intrinsically samsaric nature of a fast-paced world. The industrialized and digitized world is one of addiction. This is one thing that characterizes it most truly. People especially in these types of countries are addicted to all manner of things sought to provide a quick fix – a way out of the misery of *samsara*. Whether the addiction is toward greed for money, toward lust, drugs, alcohol, or even to psychotherapy, it makes no fundamental difference. In an important way, one should see that Buddhism itself teaches that staying in *samsara* is like being in an addiction. Corles states, For Buddhism, it is *samsara* itself that is the basic drug, and addiction to *samsara* is the basic addiction, (*Vision of Buddhism*, 81-2). Inasmuch as the contemporary world is overrun by various addictions to all manner of things which merely help one cope with the reality of the harshness of *samsara*, to that extent it remains at odds with the fundamental goal of Buddhism, which is release from all addition-release from *samsara* itself.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH A MINORITY POSITION IN THE WEST

Trying to Advance or Defend Buddhism in the Theistic West

There could be no used denying or downplaying the overall theistic nature of the West. Whereas Zoroastrianism is a theistic religion of the East, which seems not to have had a very lasting effect (R. C. Zaehner, *Encyclopedia of the World's Religions*, 200), contrariwise, there have been three great theistic religions of the West, and they have all thrived. The most basic of the three, Judaism, has thrived amidst enormous difficulties (e. g., by being, like Zoroastrianism, in its origin a *national* religion). It has not thrived in the sense of vast numbers of converts throughout the ages. Rather, it has *endured* through the ages and its own several dispersions from the land originally inhabited by the people, and today it has tens of millions of adherents throughout the world. Christianity, especially the ancient Christianity of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, has thrived in all manner of ways, including vast amounts of converts ever since its very modest beginnings. Today it remains the largest religion of the world and has a strong foothold in both West *and* East. Moreover, a distinctive characteristic of historic Christianity is its own self-understanding as the completion or fulfillment of Judaism. Islam, being the last of the three great theistic religions, has mirrored much of Christianity's success in terms of size and growth through the centuries, even though it has no such self-understanding. Though its *Western* influence has not been quite as strong as that of the overall Judeo-Christian underpinnings of many Western European and North/South American countries, it nevertheless has become today a religion

that gives a further bolstering effect to the already strong sense of theism in the West.

Since we are using this term theism so much, it might prove useful to give a working definition of it. Two American scholars in a general critique of all things pantheistic (including Zen Buddhism) offer in their glossary the following as a definition of theism: belief in one infinite, eternal, and personal God who as Creator is distinct from but rules over creation; distinct from *atheism*, *deism*, *pantheism*, and *polytheism*, (*Apologetics in the New Age*, 242). It is true that all three major theistic religions of the West would equally assent to this definition as a working one with regard to their respective religions. That is, it is adequate as a definition of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Buddhism, by stark contrast, could not at all be said to be theistic. In Buddhism, there is no belief in one, infinite, and personal God who exists, with reference to everything outside of himself, as Creator of it all. Buddhism would probably be best described as either strictly atheistic, pantheistic, or perhaps provisionally polytheistic. Finite *gods*, known as *devas* and *asuras*, are said to exist in various branches of Buddhism (Roger Corless, *Vision of Buddhism*, 142), hence its provisionally polytheistic nature. However, it seems that these days, given that the atheism of the West is nearly always linked in with the scientific materialism of it, one could see how in this situation, a Buddhist would distance himself from atheism.

The New Age Stigma in America

Alan Watts, Marilyn Ferguson, and Harvey Cox have each, though in very different ways, been indicating that ever since at least the 1960's the West

has been turning toward the East. However, since many of those who first were the largest advocates of such a recent turning Eastward were of quite varying faiths themselves and/or were progressives in their understanding of the development of religion, all the great faiths of the ancient East somehow were combined with the contemporary thoughts of these popularizers of Eastern thought and what was born was the New Age. Various media advocates of Eastern thought (e. g., George Lucas of Star Wars and George Harrison of the Beatles) also helped to usher in the New Age movement by lending popular support to it and a widespread familiarity with it.

The problem for Buddhism in this cultural climate is to distinguish itself from New Age as an overarching umbrella under which it goes. Buddhism faces the acute challenge of distancing itself from that which first brought it recently and *en masse* to the West. Buddhism in America, for example, has no intrinsic core, and it is thus reliant on falling into one or another foreign tradition of Buddhism in order for Buddhists to find expressions of their practice. This, perhaps, only tends to obscure in the public's mind just what is Buddhism. There are so many variations of American Buddhism imported from so many Eastern countries that the tendency is to simplify them all and place them under an Eastern or New Age heading, just to roughly categorize them. Buddhism thus has a dual challenge in many countries in the West in which it is still relatively new. It has to define itself relative to the culture in which it finds itself, and it further has to distinguish itself from any generically Eastern religious system.

Reincarnation: a Hard Sell to Some

Related to the Western propensity to simplify things is the doctrine of continuation in samsara, as either reincarnation or rebirth. First, a brief note on the common Western view of the soul is in order. Two corollaries of theism (which again, is firmly entrenched in the West) are the ideas that every human person has a substantial soul *and* there is a permanent afterlife awaiting every substantial soul, whether an afterlife for the good (e. g., Heaven) or one for the evil (e. g., Hell). Within such a framework, therefore, reincarnation (which is the re-birth of an individual soul) does not sit well. In fact, like Buddhism's inherent non-theism, there is an incommensurability here too. There can be no resolution between the theistic idea of one life to live and the Buddhist/Hinduistic idea of everlasting lives to live. As Scheck and Gorgens note, It is important for every Western novice to remember this fundamental difference: The West has always sought eternal life, the Buddhist East, the end of the cycle of rebirths, (*Buddhism*, 183).

The Idea that a Person Does Not Have a Substantial Soul

Relatedly, to suggest that reincarnation occurs is to have an idea of a substantial soul incarnating over and over. At least, this is the view in Hinduism, which Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) inherits. However, it seems that the Buddha advocated a slightly different doctrine, perhaps better phrased as rebirth than reincarnation. In rebirth, it is true that births of the same persons are occurring repeatedly over time. However, whereas reincarnation presupposes the idea of a substantial soul which is incarnated repeatedly, rebirth does not necessarily presuppose the idea of a substantial soul. In fact, it is likely true that Buddhism sees the idea of a substantial and individual soul a belief which is inherently samsaric. That is, to think myself

as a separated individual, apart from the whole and basic nature of reality, is to believe something which is an illusion. However, the idea that one *is* truly an individual person is an extremely strong Western belief, whether the Westerner who holds the belief is committed to one theistic tradition or not.

Concluding Thoughts

Buddhism of today is faced by many and daunting challenges, and several have been explored in this paper. Its minority status is certainly something that contributes to the challenges, but it also helps to foster a misperception of its identity with other religious traditions or umbrellas under which Eastern thought goes (e. g., New Age). Its challenges do not only consist in this, however. We have also explored the inherently opposed characteristics of much of the affluent world, whether Western or not. Those countries that are industrialized and digitized have many quick fixes for the masses to provide them with all manner of temporary relief from the suffering of samsara. The irony for the Buddhist to explain is that these various devices thought to bring relief are the very things keeping the ones participating in them within the bonds of samsara itself.

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