

A Study of Contemporaneity history of Buddhism and Buddhist Religion

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly the most prominent figure of Buddhism in the contemporary world is His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, Tenzin Gyatso, who received a Nobel Prize in 1989, for His message of peace. Following the China invasion of Tibet, in 1959 the Dalai Lama had to search political asylum in India. Despite the difficult conditions that Tibet is passing through, the country never stopped struggling to keep alive its religious and cultural identity, defined as "Tibetan Buddhism". His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet made Dharamsala, in Himachal Pradesh, India, an important center of Tibetan culture and Buddhism knowledge. His presence, along with more than one million Tibetans who received Indian asylum, helped at creating awareness and reviving the Buddhist tradition in its country of birth. His books helped to make the Buddhist vision and knowledge known throughout the world. We welcomed articles on classical textual analysis, Buddhist doctrine, archaeology, as well as analyzing contemporary Buddhist communities. The volume's guest editors are interested in enhancing the advances and research results in the field of Buddhist studies and Buddhism, worldwide. Acknowledging the interdisciplinary and international nature, inherent to the contemporary Buddhist studies, we intended to facilitate the exchanges of ideas between different disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, social and cultural anthropology, ethnology, history, archeology, art history, religious studies, literary, textual and philological studies etc.

1. Introduction

The story and history of Buddhism, followed nowadays by more than five hundred million persons all over the world, starts about 2500 years ago, in India. Nowadays, Buddhism is understood rather as a non-religion, a lifephilosophy, intellectual in nature but easy to follow, considered to not be limited by time, space, race, culture. Researchers still hesitate to give precise details regarding Gautama Buddha's life, yet it is generally accepted that he lived, spread his knowledge and founded a monastic order during the reign of Bimbisara, ruler of the Magadhan Empire (VI-V C. B.C.E.) (Rawlinson, 1950, Muller, 2001). The Buddha, "The Enlightened One", is also called Śākyamuni, "The Sage of the Śākya people", born into the Gautama clan, Siddhārtha being his name before he left home to embrace a religious life. The founder of what is today called Buddhism, from his first discourse, at the Deer-park near Benares, spoke in a simple manner about the principles to be followed when adhering "the Noble Eightfold Path", and "the Four Noble Truths" (see for example Rhys Davis, 1894), addressed to every sentient being. A huge body of canonical scriptures defines Buddhism since its early times, the first ones being preserved and transmitted in the form of Tripiṭaka, meaning "The Three Baskets", in the Pāli language, which included the Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidamma (see Nakamura, 1987, 1999). Siddhārtha Gautama is credited to have brought a message of compassion, morality and equality, as he revolted against the oppressive social laws and condemned the caste system, being considered a strong opponent of the Indian caste, and an upholder of equality among people in society (Ambedkar, 1957).

Buddhism flourished and spread in India for about one millennium, a period time that is seen as a time when "the great

thinkers, great mystics, great sages [...], by their uncommon intellect, and supreme wisdom made a great impression upon the thought of people; the sculptors and artists and Buddhism hewed great cave temples and stupas which are to this day among the great achievement of humankind" (Sankrityayan, 1973: 328-349 apud Ahir, 2013: ix). In its long history, Buddhism became the national religion of India during King Aśoka, reaching its zenith during the reign of Harsavardhana (606-647 C.E.), the last "Buddhist Emperor". Different researchers have defined the historical phases of the evolution of Buddhism in India as: consolidation, systematic propagation, becoming a popular religion, struggling and maintaining, massacre and regression, followed by a period of apparently disappearance (see Naik, 2006). A renaissance and revival of Buddhism is agreed to have started in India as early as 1891, with the intention of restoring the sacred Buddhist shrines, as well as with the discovery of numerous relics on the Indian territory, or the return of the relics kept abroad. After 1947, "the Buddhist revival movement came to be associated with nationalism and ancient Indian culture" (ibid: 9). In 1956, to mark 2500 years of Buddhist Era commenced on the day of the Mahaparinirvana celebrated worldwide, in India a Buddha Jayanti Celebrations Committee has been appointed; the same year, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar adhered to Buddhism, along with half a million followers. While a significant increase in the Buddhist population in India took place since then, Buddhism in India is still far from having the power of a living religion (Ahir, 2011: 201). Starting with 1950, India Archeological Survey also started systematic archeological works and restoration of Buddhist heritage, the Buddhist sites being nowadays among the most important travel and tourism destinations, nationally

and internationally. India is now represented as “The Land of Buddha”, in the Ministry of Tourism promotion campaigns.

2. Contemporaneity history of Buddhism

In the context of all Indian religions, Buddhism occupies a unique place, firstly for addressing and accepting people of all strata of society, but also populations like the Indo-Greeks and Indo-Scythians, who settled in India at the time, and secondly, for its propagation in countries from like Ceylon, Burma, Tibet, Nepal, Sri Lanka, China, etc. Thus, it has conquered in time, due to its simple and clear teachings equally addressed to everybody, a great part of Asia. Along with the spread of the religion, there were introduced in those countries the Buddhist art and architecture, language and literature and above all, translations of the Buddhist scriptures, and the subsidiary literature in the languages of the countries where the religion made its home (Rama, 1999: 77). With the propagation of Buddhism, and its becoming a pan-Asian institution (Jackson, Makransky, 2013: 5), “the words of Buddhist theologians were preserved, transported from country to country, and translated from one language to another. They became in this way a kind of currency within elite circles in the Buddhist world” (id: 6). As Richard Gombrich argues, Buddhism, wherever practiced in Asia, although seen sometimes as syncretic, it is rather defined as accretive, meaning it can coexist with other religious systems (in the case of Theravada Buddhism, see Gombrich, 1971, 2009: 49); this being in agreement with L. Dumont who wrote that in early India Buddhism was “an individual religion based upon choice [...] added to the religion of the group” (Dumont, 1960: 46). Undoubtedly the most prominent figure of Buddhism in the contemporary world is His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, Tenzin Gyatso, who received a Nobel Prize in 1989, for His message of peace. Following the China invasion of Tibet, in 1959 the Dalai Lama had to search political asylum in India. Despite the difficult conditions that Tibet is passing through, the country never stopped struggling to keep alive its religious and cultural identity, defined as “Tibetan Buddhism”. His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet made Dharamsala, in Himachal Pradesh, India, an important center of Tibetan culture and Buddhism knowledge. His presence, along with more than one million Tibetans who received Indian asylum, helped at creating awareness and reviving the Buddhist tradition in its country of birth. His books helped to make the Buddhist vision and knowledge known throughout the world.

Despite the long history of Buddhism, Buddhist Studies are considered still a young academic discipline, seen rather as a heterogeneous field of study, drawing on classically accepted disciplines, such as philology, history, archeology, philosophy, etc. It is thus multidisciplinary, due first of all to its object of study and to the international composition of the scholars engaged in this field of research (Ruegg, 1962, 1992; Foulk, 1993). J. W. DeJong, in 1974, was making a history of Buddhist Studies in Europe and U.S.A. (DeJong, 1974: 55-106). Before him, Ernst Windisch (Strasbourg, 1917, Berlin, 1920, Leipzig, 1921), Henri de Lubac (Paris, 1952), G.R. Welton (Chicago, 1968) tried to systematize the history of such studies. J. W. DeJong defines the “early period” of Buddhism being made known in Europe as early as in Megasthenes’ work, following Clement of Alexandria (200 C.E.) and Hieronymus (± 347 – 419 C.E.) who mentions the birth of

Buddha (cf. Dihle, Dihle, 1964, 1965; Foucher, 1949). However, the Western world became aware of Buddhism with Marco Polo’s thirteenth century account on Buddhism in his Description of the World (Divisamentdou Monde). Only starting with the 19th Century, the Indian sources on Buddhism in Sanskrit and Pāli were studied. There are to mention the pioneering researches of Eugène Burnouf (Burnouf and Lassen, 1826), who remarks Simon de la Loubère as the first to mention Pāli (Windisch, 1917, 1920, 1921: 125; Lubac, 1952: 99) and also who stressed the fact that Indian Buddhism had to be studied on the basis of Sanskrit texts from Nepal and the Pāli texts from Ceylon (Introduction a l’histoire du Bouddhismeindien, Paris, 1844). There are to mention the works of Isak Jakob Schmidt (1832, 1837), Alexander Csoma de Körös (1836-1839), Philippe Édouard Foucault (1847-1848), etc. Starting with 1800, the knowledge of Buddhism in the West increased, yet 1877 marks a turning point in Buddhist studies: many Pāli texts are edited, as well as Buddhist Sanskrit texts. In 1881 Max Müller published the Sanskrit text of the Vajracchedikā, one of the most important texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism; in 1882-1897 Émile Senart published the Mahāvastu, having the merit to explain the myth of Buddha as a product of India and its religious concepts, based upon Vedic and Brahmanical literature. There are to mention Kern, Senart, La Vallée Poussin, Hermann Beckh, who stressed the importance of yoga in Buddhism. The publications, as well as the archeological discoveries, helped a new generation of scholars to enlarge the perspective on Buddhism studies: Serge d’Oldenberg, Sylvain Levi, Th. Stcherbatsky, F. W. Thomas, Louis de La Vallée Poussin, followed by their disciples and students (DeJong, 1974).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Buddhism and its institutions went through major changes, “if Asian Buddhist theology prior to modern era was confined primarily to the monasteries, today it has become decentralized, issuing not only from the wats and vihāras, but also from university departments and lay oriented practice centers” (Jackson, Makransky, 2000: 7). Modern Buddhism developed from an exclusively Asian tradition to a global one, as since the nineteenth century more and more “Westerners” started to study its doctrines and to live its practices, arriving to have a word to say in the evolution and definition of contemporary Buddhism (ibid: 8). Nowadays, as Ralph Flores critically points out, Buddhism has been “sucked into a whirlpool of global economics, New Age therapies, and neo-Buddhism. This situation is manifested in glossy magazines and newsletters supported by advertisements for meditational supplies” (Flores, 2008: 2), alongside with other Asian traditions, like yoga. What would be the use of understanding the Buddhist tradition, for Europe and Europeans? The answers are yet to be found. Seeing from the East to the West, as Lokesh Chandra writes, “The European perceptions of eurocentrism and the general theory of civilizations are both structuring of a mind that has seen phenomenal advances during the last millennium. The Western mind is seeking room to move meaningfully in a pluralistic universe, while it is rooted in the meaning and being of its own thinking and understanding. It does not seek either a revaluation or a trans-valuation of its bodhicitta (bodaishin) in the rich structures of consciousness of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism or Shintoism. [...] We have to discover freedom to acknowledge variousness. [...] So concepts like

“cultural commonality” and “universalism” are counterproductive rather than creative. Buddhism has accepted and respected differences, the beauty of many forms, the eternity of various values” (Chandra, 2003: xxvii). This special issue of the International Review of Social Research addressed scholars from a wide range of disciplines connected to Buddhist academic research and Buddhism. The articles we selected cover an extended spectrum of research topics, including Buddhist history and histories, Buddhism in India and Asia, Buddhism and archaeology, Buddhist rituals and practices, Buddhism cultural origins and cultural transformations, Buddhism, identity and social change, Buddhist heritage, Buddhist sites and tourism. We welcomed articles on classical textual analysis, Buddhist doctrine, archaeology, as well as analyzing contemporary Buddhist communities. The volume’s guest editors are interested in enhancing the advances and research results in the field of Buddhist studies and Buddhism, worldwide. Acknowledging the interdisciplinary and international nature, inherent to the contemporary Buddhist studies, we intended to facilitate the exchanges of ideas between different disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, social and cultural anthropology, ethnology, history, archeology, art history, religious studies, literary, textual and philological studies etc. We considered also the observations of José Ignacio Cabezón, for an emphasis on cultural contextualization (see Nash et. al., 1966), as well as on cross-cultural analysis or feminist studies (see also Gross, 1993, Klein, 1995), or to a critique of colonialism, neocolonialism (Cabezón, 1995: 264).

Based on his lifelong archeological investigations, Sunil Kumar Patnaik makes a presentation of *The Buddhist Monuments in South-Eastern India: A Study of Forms and Patronage*, with a focus on the Buddhist heritage of the State of Odisha. Different Buddhist monuments have been discovered, built from the third century BCE to the sixth seventh century CE. The author argues that the Buddhist remains discovered through archaeological investigations help to reconstruct the past of the region and of India (Chakrabarti, 2006: 315). Buddhist establishments have been built in the post-Asokan period in this region, particularly at Lalitgiri, Langudi, Radhanagar, Dhauli, Jaugarh and Aragarh. The paper emphasizes that from the earliest period of Indian historical setting, Buddhist monuments played a major role for growth of religion, trade, art and architecture in the Indian Sub-continent.

3. Buddhism and its impact on cultural developments

Many practices inherited from Buddhism contributed to develop some popular practices in the region. It was not only the rites and rituals that were influenced by Buddhism but the influences are noticeable in the philosophicspeculation, art, architecture, language and literature, i.e. all the strata of sociocultural life of the region. The late tantric form of Buddhism associating with the indigenous belief and practices helped to the coalescence and emergence of a new religo-cultural trend. All the three major sectarian branches of Hinduism; namely, Saktism, Saivism and Vaisnavism are influenced by Mahayana form of Buddhism. Late Buddhist practices contributed to the development of some crypto-Buddhist practices namely, Dharma cult, Manasa and Ai etc.

Some unique features of Kamarupavaisnavism like Satra, Namghar and the Saran, which are not found in other parts of

India, are influenced by Buddhist ideas. Sahajiya Buddhism adopted the doctrine of complete surrender to guru (preceptor). The same spirit of „Guruvada” (stress laid to the devotion to Guru) found expression in later development of religious school led by Sankardeva in successive period. The Tantrika tradition which was indispensable part of Assamese life was considerably influenced by Buddhist tantricism. Tantric Buddhism exerted considerable influences in the tradition of healings. Some customs of Tibetan form of Buddhism (Lamaism) influenced the cultural life of south Kamarup and Darrang district of Assam. Bhor-Taal (large Cymbals) which has been an essential component of the indigenous music paraphernalia of Assam initially came from Tibet (Bhortal, Bhota-Tala). The maskbearing dance, which is associated with Tibetan Lamaistic tradition, found expression in the traditional art form in Kamarupa that is known as Kamrupi-Dhuliya. Similar with the custom of preserving butter in the granary at Math, (monastery) there is granary of oil in Barpetasatra. Besides, Buddhism also influenced the philosophical development in Assam. The most important deity of the region, i.e. Kamakhya reflects the philosophy of Buddhist Tantricism.

The Caryapadas composed by Sahajiya Buddhist Siddha have their deep influence on the growth and development of language and literature in Assam. Many morphological and phonological features of the Carapadas have an unbroken continuity into the Assamese language. The Caryapadas, exerted a great influence on the pre- Vaisnava and Vaisnava writings, particularly in Ankiyanats and Bargeets of SrimantaSankardeva and Madhavadeva. Vajrayanist used various motifs and symbols that have been found in Assam. Some myths, which occupy indispensable part of Assamese tradition such as Madan- Kamadeva and the origin of the name of Kamarupaseem developed out of Buddhist tradition. The myth of the origin of the sacred center at Nilachala and Kamakhya that relates to the story of Sati’s body and limbs is also connected with Buddhist tradition. Buddhist was the first religious group in the region that adapted with local practices, which were later absorbed in neo Brahmanical trends.

4. Conclusion

The socio-cultural and trade contacts and geographical location of Assam led an easy access of Buddhist to the land. Early Kamarupa rulers maintained the cultural relationship with Nepal, Kashmir, China and other parts of India where Buddhism had its considerable presence. The geographical location of the area made Assam as an area of interaction of people of different ethnological and religious traits. These practices were performed secretly till the period of Varmanas. Buddhist tantricism became well established with the ascendancy of Salastambha. Inspired by the royal association of Buddhism, Kamarupa emerged as one of the mostimportant Vajrayana centers among the four centers that developed in India during the seventh century AD. This period and after the tantric or Vajrayana form of Buddhism developed in other parts of India mostly under the patronage of Pala rule of Bengal. Tibet also gradually became the center of tantric Buddhism popularly known as Lamaism. Gradually the non-intuitional Sahajiya Siddhas from different parts namely: Orissa, Bengal and Assam, Nepal, Tibet and even China developed a common bond of religious affinity. Accordingly, this form of Buddhism developed in a wide cultural zone. Buddhist Tantricism got its

wide appeal among some of the professional castes in Assam. Sahajiya Siddha who strictly attached to Guruvada developed a separate institution parallel to the royal institution that patronized Varnasrama. In subsequent periods Buddhism failed to maintain its popularity with the same pace. Buddhism of its later aspect i.e. Tantricism was going side by side with the development of pre- Puranic and Puranic Hinduism in Kamarupa. Gradual development of sectarian divisions within Buddhism and the development of Puranic cults brought Buddhist practices nearer to the greater tradition of

Hinduism. The research intends to provide alternative solutions for the management of Borobudur temple that pay attention to its sustainability, as well as to its not only heritage tourism characteristic, but also the spiritual and religious features that defines a Temple Balaram Tripathy investigates the Buddhist remains of Boudh district, in Odisha, India, in a historical perspective. The archeological evidences in sites like Boudh, Syamsundarpur, Pragalpur, are enriched with accounts regarding nowadays traditions of the local communities in the region.

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