

Post-modernism and the rise of Buddhism in the West

By David Burnett

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Today it seems surprising that only 150 years ago there was almost no knowledge of Buddhist religion in Europe. European travellers and especially Jesuit missionaries to Tibet, China and Japan made record of an obscure cult of the “false god” called “Bod”.¹ Europe was in the throws of the industrial revolution based upon modernism and a confidence in human potential as a result of technological achievements. The Europeans continued to extend their influence across the world, and information was gathered about the history and customs of its varied peoples.

The Western Discovery of Buddhism

Wilkins translation of the Gita into English 1784, and Anquetil's translation of the Upanishads in 1786 occasioned the enthusiasm for Indian wisdom. Texts were eagerly collected and sent back from India to London and Paris for translation and study. Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) coined the term “Oriental Renaissance” for this discovery of the Asian world with its religions and philosophical traditions.

The Buddhist tradition, however, initially remained unknown in this enthusiasm for things Indian, and today it is difficult to appreciate the suddenness with which Buddhism arrived in Europe. In 1835, Cardinal Wiseman gave a series of lectures in Rome on the relation between science and religion. Although he mentioned Brahmanism and Taoism, he never mentioned Buddhism. Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852), the Paris philologist, in 1844 presented an analytical survey of Buddhist material, and in so doing imposed a rational order on the collection of material. Burnouf's *Introduction a l'histoire du Buddhisme indien* provided the foundation for the European concept of Buddhism, and suddenly there was a boom in the translation and study of Buddhist texts throughout the universities in Europe.² By 1853, the French writer Felix Neve described Buddhism as “the only moral adversary that Western civilisation will find in the Orient”.³

It was in 1879 that Edwin Arnold, who had been teaching in India, published a poem based upon the life of Sakyamuni Buddha called “The Light of Asia”.

Ah! Blessed Lord! Oh, High Deliverer!
 Forgive this feeble script, which doth thee wrong,
 Measuring with little wit thy lofty love.
 Ah! Lover! Brother! Guide! Lamp of the Law!
 I take my refuge in thy name and thee!
 I take my refuge in the Law of Good!

¹ Wessels, C. *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia 1603-1721* (Motilal Banarsidass: New Dehli, 1992).

² Burnouf, E. *L'Introduction a l'histoire du buddhisme indien* (Imprimerie Royale: Paris, 1844).

³ Batchelor, S. *The Awakening of the West* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994), p. 243.

I take my refuge in thy Order! OM!
 The Dew is on the Lotus! - Rise, Great Sun!
 And lift my leaf and mix me with the wave.
Om Mani padme hum, the Sunrise comes!
 The Dewdrop slips into the shining Sea!

With these words, Edwin Arnold concluded his blank verse of the life of the Buddha, and it quickly became one of the most popular long poems of Victorian England. First published in 1879, it went through at least a hundred editions in England and the USA, and was translated into numerous other languages. Arnold achieved fame, a knighthood, and encouraged the Victorian fascination with the romance of the orient. The exotic character of the distant East and past wove together in the mystery of the Buddha. From being “out there” in the Orient, Buddhism became an object of study and awe in the West. The Buddha seemed to dominate the Orient as a massive figure proclaiming a message of logic and ethic in contrast to what the Europeans considered the barbarous religions of India.

During this period Europeans had a divided perspective of Asia. On the one hand, Europeans considered themselves as superior to other societies, which they often considered savage and primitive. On the other hand, the exotic quality of other societies, and especially the great civilisations of Asia, fascinated many Europeans. Merely to walk through the ruins of the ancient capital of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka illustrates the scale and grandeur of a society that was Buddhist. Even so, the image of decay provided a justification for the Christian missionary enterprise, but at the same time it retained the ideal of a pure “Buddhism”.

This distinction reflected a similar contrast within Western thought in the nineteenth century. On the one hand was the domination of a philosophy that exalted secularism, positivism and materialism. It is what today is described as “Modernity”. On the other hand, there was a continuing lesser tradition that was interested in para-normal phenomena and spiritism that was feed by the Romantic tradition. Important figures within this Romantic movement were Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott who were founders of the *Theosophical Society* with the aim to “investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man”. Their interest in Buddhism resulted from the interaction between Methodist missionaries and Buddhist monks in Ceylon.

The Theosophical Society and the awakening of Buddhism

In 1824 the first Pali grammar was published in Colombo by the Wesleyan missionary Benjamin Clough as a means of understanding the Buddhists of Ceylon. At this time Protestant missionaries were seeking to proclaim their message by travelling about the island preaching in the villages. Initially they were warmly welcomed by the monks and even offer accommodation in the monasteries. The missionaries continued to challenge the monks to a religious debate, and were annoyed by the lack of any response. However, the arrival of the printing press by the Methodists in 1815 provided an important technical change with the production of much anti-Buddhist literature. The manager of the Wesleyan Press wrote in 1831, “At present it is by means of the press our main attacks must be made upon this wretched system... We must direct our efforts to pull down this stronghold of Satan.”⁴

⁴ Quoted in Gombrich, R. *Theravada Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1994), p 179

In contrast, the Buddhists did not react to the attack, and even co-operated with the missionaries. The Methodist missionary Spence Hardy wrote in 1850, "It is almost impossible to move them, even to wrath." but some fifteen years later he was delighted to note that the pernicious vice of tolerance was on the wane".⁵ The attitude of the Buddhist monks was certainly changing.

In 1862, Migettuwattee Guananda Thero (1823-1890) the leading monk in Colombo founded *The Religious Society for Giving Increase to the Teaching of the Omniscient One*.⁶ The society began producing tracts, and finally accepted the Christian challenge to public debate. At most of the encounters Guananda took a major part on the Buddhist side. The most important debate in which he took part was held at Panadura, south of Colombo in 1873. David de Silva, the leader of the Methodist mission of that time, was his principal opponent, and the debate lasted two days.⁷ On the first day the audience was estimated at 5,000, but on the second day it had increased to 10,000. The Buddhists were fiercely partisan, and they were convinced that the Buddhist monks had achieved a great victory. The missionaries realised that they had misjudged the situation, and issued no further challenge. The whole debate was reported in the national newspaper, and eventually an English edition appeared in book form. It was this book that was to reach the American Colonel Henry Steel Olcott who decided to visit Sri Lanka with Madam Blavatski.

As a result of the assumed weakening of Christianity in the West, the Theosophists were seeking ancient religious traditions. For Olcott and Blavatsky Buddhism seemed a noble alternative, and on 25 May 1880, they both formerly accepted the five Buddhist lay precepts before a company of monks in a temple at Galle, a coastal town near Colombo, in Ceylon. By doing this they effectively became the first European and the first American to publicly adopt Buddhism. Olcott wrote of that day in his diary, "there was mighty shout to make one's nerves tingle".⁸ This was an enormous boost for the Buddhists in Ceylon, and Olcott went on to champion the revitalisation of Buddhism on the Island. He even designed the Buddhist flag that is so widely used in Sri Lanka today.

Gordon Douglas was the first known European to be ordained as a Buddhist monk. He was ordained as Asoka at the Jayasekerarama monastery, Colombo in 1899, but he had little influence on Western thinking as he died soon after in 1905. Alan Bennett McGregor (1872-1923), however, was a former member of the Golden Dawn occultist association, entered a Burmese monastery in 1901 and took the name Ananda Metteyya. He returned to Britain in 1907 and formed a small Buddhist society that was supported by the Theosophical Society including the influential Christmas Humphreys. A year later a small group of Buddhist missionaries came from Sri Lanka and settled in Britain. In 1926, Humphreys with others formed the *Buddhist Lodge of the Theosophical Society*. Humphreys himself wrote many books on Buddhism some of which became standard texts on the subject and were used in British schools and Universities.

⁵ *Ibid.* p 180.

⁶ In English it was called the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism" in imitation of the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel" (SPG).

⁷ Peebles, J. M. *The Great Debate: Buddhism and Christianity face to Face* (Colombo: Don Hema Udawattage, 1994).

⁸ Fields, R. *How the Swans came to the Lake* (London, 1986), p. 97.

During the period 1880-1920, the adoption of Buddhism was dominated by ethical and intellectual interest in the Theravada tradition. These early Buddhists stressed particular advantages in Buddhism in comparison to the disadvantages of Christianity that they had personally discarded. In opposition to Christianity, Buddhism emphasised knowledge based on one's own experience. Redemption by God's grace was set in opposition to personal responsibility and moral conduct within Buddhist teaching. Most of these early converts had come into contact with Buddhism through the Theosophical Society or associated groups.

The Second World War marked a halt to Buddhist activities within Europe. In London the Maha Bodhi Society closed down shortly after the outbreak of war, and in 1940 the Buddhist Lodge lost most of its literature as a result of a German bomb. In May 1943, the Lodge became the *Buddhist Society* and its magazine was called *The Middle Way*. The Buddhist Society was a major influence in the emergence of Buddhism in Britain. The Society does not adhere to any particular school of Buddhism, but tries to give an impartial introduction to the fundamental tenets common to all schools.

The Re-emergence of Buddhism

Opinions may differ just when the Modern age suddenly confronted its own deepest assumptions and found itself compelled to admit that it didn't believe them any more. Donald Cupitt suggests that 1968 may be one of the best candidates as it was the year of the student protests in Paris, Prague, Chicago and the London.⁹ The 1960s was certainly a time of transition, and it was also a time when Western societies were increasing influence by eastern religion and philosophy. Major paradigm shifts however usually occur slowly taking generations rather than years. Even today Western society remains a mixture of both modernity and post-modernity.

Olcott and Blavatsky as founders of the Theosophical Society had a marked influence in the counter-culture movement of the 1960s with the emergence of Buddhism and the amorphous set of beliefs which have come to be known as "the New Age". Denise Cush has concluded that "there is a close entangled and ambiguous relationship between British Buddhism and the new Age" which "can be traced back to the common ancestor in Theosophy".¹⁰ This entanglement has led to a popular identification of Buddhism as part of the New Age, and this has been encouraged by the fact that many New Age people consider that Buddhism supports their views. Although there was an initial closeness deriving from counter-culture trends, by the 1970s the two separated to establish their own identities.¹¹

Zen caught the imagination of many young people in the USA and Europe during the 1950s, in the so-called "beatnik" generation. The book *The Practice of Zen and Motor Cycle Maintenance* gained cult status. More serious practitioners of Buddhism criticised the superficial presentation of the religious tradition to the wider public. In the pre-war period, it was the better-educated elite who were attracted to Buddhism, but now Zen and meditation generally began to open the tradition to a wider class of university educated young people. They are often business professionals, academics, those in the caring professions, as well as students.

⁹ Cupit, D. *Mysticism after Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 1.

¹⁰ Cush, D. "British Buddhism and the New Age", *Journal of Contemporary religion* 11 (1996), p.p. 195-208.

¹¹ Vishvapani, "Buddhism and the New Age", *Western Buddhist Review* Vol. 1 (1999)

After the popularisation of Zen during the late 1960s and 1970s, another wave of interest came to the West with the flight of the Dalai Lama from Tibet in 1959. With the Dalai Lama journeyed many leading teachers who settled in Nepal and northern India. The Dalai Lama made his home in Dharamsala, which quickly became the centre of Tibetan religion and culture. The cooler mountains of the region attracted many Western “hippies” of the period, and it is then that they came into contact with the colourful art and rituals of Tibetan Buddhism. A desire for peace and love was common as was the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations so clear in their recent memory. These Westerners felt a real empathy with the displaced Tibetan people, and a respect for their fundamental belief in the use of non-violent methods to solve their problems.

The issue of Tibetan oppression has not avoided the attention of Hollywood and two films have recorded the life of the Dalai Lama. The first to be released was *Seven Years in Tibet*, and tells the story of Heinrich Harrer, a mountaineer and Nazi party member who encounters his own sense of enlightenment after becoming the tutor of the young Dalai Lama in Tibet in the 1940s. The other film is *Kundun*, directed by Martin Scorsese. This epic tells the remarkable story of the Dalai Lama from his point of view, from his recognition as the reincarnated Buddha of compassion at age two until he escapes to India at twenty-four. Hollywood's interest in Buddhism extends beyond these films. In 1997, the karate-kicking action star Steven Seagal was recognised by the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism as the reincarnation of a fifteenth century lama. Other Buddhist practitioners include Richard Gere, Tina Turner, Harrison Ford (whose wife Melissa Mathison wrote the script of *Kundun*), Oliver Stone, and Herbie Hancock.

The Indian government was not oblivious to the presence of these Westerners, and in the early 1980s decided to tighten its tourist policy. Along with requiring Western visitors to have visas for the first time, the government staged local clean-up operations in all areas where Westerners were known to live. Dharamsala was no exception, and by 1985 the majority of those Westerners who had lived for over ten years were sent back home. They returned home with a natural desire to share what they had learned from Tibetan Buddhism.

The Gelug tradition, headed by the 14th Dalai Lama, has established study and practice centres in Switzerland and Germany, and by 1990 had more than 50 centres. Following his first visit to the West in 1973 the Dalai Lama has made many visits and has inspired his Western followers. The Kagyu tradition also has been very successful as will be discussed in chapter 4 which looks at *Kagyü Samye Ling* centre in Scotland. The Kagyu head, the 16th Gyalwa Karapa (1923-1981) made his first visit to Europe and North America in 1975, and more than 50 centres are claimed to have been founded by him throughout Europe. A division has recently occurred with a disagreement between the Dalai Lama and the Geshe Kelsang with the formation of the New Kadampa tradition, which has since shown rapid growth in Britain.

Martin Baumann has presented the most recent overview of Buddhism in the West.¹² See accompanying table.

Post-modernity and Buddhism

¹² Baumann, M. "The Dharma Has Come West: A Survey of Recent Studies and Sources", *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (1997), p.p. 198.

How has the rise of Buddhism in the West related to the emergence of post-modernity? The concept of "post-modernism" grew out of discussions in the fields of art, literature and philosophy and argued for a radically different style of thought. Philosophically the term is associated with the work of such French thinkers as Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Amidst the puzzling discussion on the nature of postmodernity James Beckford has provided a succinct characterisation of postmodernity that is useful in the discussion of Buddhism:¹³

- "1 A refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the sole or exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge.
- 2 A willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunctions and eclecticism.
- 3 A celebration of spontaneity, fragmentation, superficiality, irony and playfulness.
- 4 A willingness to abandon the search for over-arching or triumphalist myths, narratives or frameworks of knowledge."

Point 1: Buddhism refutes The positivistic understanding of the world with its teaching of *anatta* (non-soul). Not only is the world perceived as an elaborate illusion, but the eternal reality of the soul is a similarly described as illusion. Postmodernism questions the reality of an external ultimate truth. Truth is not based on scientific rationality but upon meditation-based and experiential tradition.

Point 2: As Beckford's second point states there is a willingness to combine symbols from (previously) disparate systems. Instead of authoritative narratives of truth, "truth" is seen in terms of "what works for me". An individual is therefore free to follow any tradition, and Buddhism therefore is one possible option for post-modern Western society.

Point 3: In a post-modern world one is free to be spontaneous. A person may play with Buddhism, Paganism or Taoism, or even Christianity. One person follows one tradition whilst another follows their own particular choice. For many it seems the more exotic the better! Perhaps this is why Buddhism has become "trendy" in many quarters. I have come across Western Buddhists whose partners are practising Christians. When I have asked what their Christian partner thinks of them being Buddhist they merely respond that they consider this as a personal issue.

Point 4: People no longer feel obliged to heed the traditional boundaries of religious authorities, but are encouraged to exercise their autonomy to draw on what has diffused through the culture. Diversity is not only tolerated, but expected. In contrast, Christians are condemned because they hold to just one tradition as "Truth". The claim that one tradition should be adhered to because it, and it alone is valid, is now unacceptable. Although both Buddhism and New Age have a common origin there are differences.

First, Buddhist concern with Truth is fundamentally at odds with the eclecticism and relativism of the New Age. Right understanding is the starting point of the Eight-fold path to enlightenment. Thus, a Buddhist cannot agree that all religions are essentially expressions of

¹³ Beckford, J. "Religion, Modernity and Post-Modernity", in Wilson, B. R. (ed.), *Religion: Contemporary Issues* (London: Bellew, 1992), p. 19.

the same inner reality. Second, Buddhists have been proud of their historical traditions stretching back centuries, which they contrast, with the mixture of ideas found within New Age.

Point 4 expresses the post-modern willingness to abandon an over-arching meta-narrative, yet an individual cannot live with a total absence of any such framework of understanding. One can tolerate other people have different ideas, but an individual must have their personal "myth to live by" even if it is only for the short term. Buddhist traditions provide well thought out narratives that give a sense of rationality and assurance not found in the New Age movement. Buddhism therefore provides an exotic alternative philosophy to Secular materialism and the exclusive teaching of Christianity.

All major religions, including Buddhism, contain a basic tension between tradition and orthodoxy and adaptation and contextualisation. Exotic eastern religious traditions cannot be merely imported unchanged into the post-modern West without some process of accommodation to the particular needs of Western people.

Accommodation of Buddhism to the Western

Some Western Buddhists see their purpose and their duty to preserve and sustain the traditions and the practices just as the founder of their tradition handed them down. Other people have found it important to try and adapt Buddhist practice to new cultures, and find skilful means of presenting the ancient teaching in forms that are relevant. Two different forms of Buddhist groups can therefore be found among Western Buddhists in Britain today. First, those groups patterned on Asian Buddhist traditions, and propagate Buddhism in a particular eastern cultural context. Second those who are seeking to express Buddhism into a form that is relevant to the contemporary urban world.

Ancient Asian Traditions

Often it has been the exotic quality of these ancient Buddhist traditions that have woven their particular fascination. However, these Asian traditions have all to some extent had to accommodate themselves to the West. Sometimes the accommodation has been begrudging, but in other cases it has been seen as the way of making Buddhism relevant and meaningful for industrial society. Each one has had to change to some extent in making their expression of Buddhism relevant in The West.

The Theravada tradition is the most conservative and seeks to retain the Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah, but it has had to make changes in order to adjust to the colder climate of northern Europe. The British monks have adopted the use of a jacket that has been designed to wear under their robes. Celibacy is still carefully maintained, and marked social boundaries are maintained. A more radical change however is the institution of an order of nuns, which is unknown in Sri Lanka and Thailand. Kornfield in his study of American Buddhism comments that feminisation is the most important change that is going on within the Sangha.¹⁴ Perhaps we are beginning to see this development within British Theravada tradition.

The Zen tradition of the Serene Reflection Meditation has similarly sought to retain its Asian heritage following much of the Japanese tradition such as the distinctive robes and methods of

¹⁴ Kornfield, J. "Is Buddhism Changing North America" in *Buddhist America: Centres, Retreats, Practices* (ed.) Don Moreale, (Santa Fe: John Muir Publications, 1988) p.p. xi-xxviii.

meditation. Even so, various modifications have been made such as the shifting of the festival celebrating the Buddha's enlightenment from the 8th to the 25th December. These changes have not only been for the benefit of Western followers; some have been counter to this trend. For example in Japan monks are able to marry, whilst those with Serene Reflection Meditation remain celibate.

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso has sought to express the ancient Gelukpa School of Tibetan Buddhism into English, so that Western people may be able to understand the teaching without the obstacle of having to learn Tibetan. In his prodigious writings he has tried to express Buddhist terms in English, so that his followers can appreciate the ancient teaching. It is not surprising that these movements who have deliberately sought to contextualise themselves to the West have been subject to criticism by more conservative schools of Buddhism.

New Western Tradition

In contrast, the Friends of the World Buddhist Order (FWBO) founded by Sangharakshita made their aim to translate Buddhism into the Western urban scene. To do this the FWBO has abandoned ancient Asian traditions, and formulated a new tradition that draws upon elements of several. This was the first Buddhist tradition to be founded in Britain and although basically Mahayana in outlook, the movement stresses the basic unity of all forms of Buddhism rather than the collection of oriental customs that have grown up around it. The WBO itself is a new way of taking Buddhist practice seriously providing ordination that does not necessarily involve adopting the traditional life-style of a monk or nun. It sees itself as a practical form of Buddhism suited to the Western world.

Western culture, as it stands as a whole, is quite incompatible with Buddhism and there can be no question of our seeking to express Buddhism in terms of that culture. It is a question, rather, of Western Buddhism finding expression in a *new* Western culture, a culture which would in its own way, on its own level, help people to develop, if not spiritually then at least psychologically. In creating that culture we would of course keep the best elements of the traditional Western culture, but a lot would have to go.¹⁵

The special emphasis that is placed on the "Going for refuge" and the observance of the ethical precepts represent in Sangharakshita's words "a return to and renewed emphasis upon the basics of Buddhism".¹⁶ The FWBO calls its interpretation of Buddhism "interdenominational Buddhism".

Cultural accommodation is not new in the history of Buddhism. It has happened many times during the history of the expanding influence of Buddhism. This was one of the main reasons why an Indian Buddhism eventually became accepted into China, and became one of the "Three Religions" (Confucianism, Taoism & Buddhism) of the Empire. Similarly when Buddhism moved into Japan it eventually adopted its own character and distinctive teaching. Now Buddhism is adapting to Western society. There is one major difference with the current situation, and that is Western culture has taken on a global quality that is pluralist and is based upon rapid communication. For this reason Buddhism in Britain has links with associated groups around the world, and their message can be presented on the Internet for all to see. Buddhism has the potential to greatly affect the global world that is emerging.

¹⁵ Sangharakshita, *New Currents in Western Buddhism* (Glasgow: Windhorse, 1990), p. 66.

¹⁶ Sangharakshita, *The History of my Going for refuge* (Glasgow: Windhorse, 1988), p.p. 115.

The Attraction of Buddhism to the Post-modern world

Today most Western Buddhists have made a decision as adults to follow the Buddhist tradition, and very few come from Buddhist families as with Asian Buddhists. As such Western Buddhists have shown not only a discontent with the secular materialism of the Western world, but also dissatisfaction with the traditional religious option of Christianity. Their decision to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha has usually been made in their early adult period of 15-30 years. As with Christianity this is the period when most people make a decision for a personal commitment. Any answer is certainly not simple, but it is a question of great importance for a society that used to be overtly Christian. Answers will vary from individual to individual, but some common trends can be identified.

Personal need

Although people come to Buddhism by various routes most start with a basic spiritual quest. When talking to Allan he told me that he had started to seek when a young man at University where he asked the question "What is life all about?" He rejected Christianity as being "boring and hypocritical, and people did not address the important questions of life." His life was transformed when travelling the world he spent six months in north India with the Tibetan community and was impressed with how their whole life was Dharma.

When talking to one monk of the Tibetan tradition he said that he became a monk after a serious illness. I asked him why he thought that this was the case. He said, "It takes something quite major to shake one out materialism, and that is why many who come have had emotional or physical problems". He had thrown himself into Tibetan Buddhism right from the beginning, and accepted the devotional aspects without much thought. This was probably because his British father had also been a monks for a few years when he was a young man. He admitted that a few people do manage to become Buddhists without having faced problems and an emotional crisis, but they are few. They have managed to come by way of the intellect, but that is a hard path and it takes a lot of time.

The experience of some illness or emotional crisis is not unusual when speaking to a person who has made a deep religious commitment. Especially within a secular society when things are going well people easily discount any notions of religion, but when they are failing to cope then it is often a time when individuals are open to new ideas. This tends to be true in Christianity as well as in Buddhism, and many members of churches in The West would confess that it was as a result of such an experience that they made a commitment to Jesus Christ. It used to be that Christianity was the only recognised alternative, and the choice was whether the person made a "full commitment" such as joining a monastic order or making an evangelistic commitment.

Intellectual Appeal

Buddhism is often spoken of by Buddhists as being the most logical of religions. It is certainly true that the Philosophy analysis proposed by Sakyamuni Buddha in the sixth century BC is both elegant and consistent. The Victorian scholars when they began to translate the Pali Tripitaka were surprised by the rationality of the teaching. These early Indian philosophies were based upon a monistic assumption a single cosmic reality. The consequence of this assumption is that the human spirit (*atman*) is eternal, and undergoes innumerable rebirths in various forms. The nature of these rebirths is the result of the Law of Karma. This law and the associated assumptions are considered by many Buddhist to provide a valid explanation for the wide

variety of conditions individuals may experience. "Why are some born in favourable conditions and other destitute?" One Buddhist asked me before giving an answer himself, "The Law of Karma provides the answer to all the inequalities of life."

Buddhist philosophy certainly exhibits an appealing logic, but many ideas are radically different from those assumed by either the Christian or Secular worldview. However, it is probably this totally different approach to understanding reality that provides the appeal for Buddhism. Further with the Theravada and Zen traditions especially, Buddhism focuses the way out of the human predicament as something that can be achieved by one's own endeavours. These traditions do not depend on some deity, but upon one's own dedication to achieve enlightenment.

Meditation

Another way by which people become interested in Buddhism is through meditation. This may initially be a means of gaining peace in the midst of a busy and stressful life. An important quality of the various centres is that they should be peaceful, and provide opportunities for quiet meditation. The introductory levels of meditation such as through reading a book or attending a short course led naturally on to offers of learning deeper levels of meditation. These frequently require a person to seek the guidance of a skilled teacher in the practice of meditation. The novelty of allowing one's mind to gently meditate is a great appeal to many in a hectic world. In contrast the Meditation of the Tibetan Buddhists involves two different elements: visualisation and devotion. Rather than letting thoughts pass, here divine beings are visualised in a complex realm of symbols and archetypes.

Devotion

Devotion is rarely an initial appeal mentioned by Western Buddhist, and tends to be something that only develops later. In the more contemplative traditions such as Zen there is little devotion, but in the Mahayana tradition including that of Tibet there often develops considerable devotion.

Speaking to one Buddhist about her devotions she admitted that initially she found devotion strange until she was asked to help with the making of the statues. Through making these statues of the Buddha and bodhisattvas she developed a great openness to devotion and now prays to the beings that the statues represent and may even embody. She is now quite happy to do *puja* in the temple.

Martin Baumann concisely sums up the observations of many writers in considering the question of the appeal of Buddhism for Westerners.

Evidently, Buddhism in the West serves both romantics and rationalists by providing a religious home. Rationalists stress the cognitive, scientific and anti-ritualistic aspects of Buddhism. Romantics, especially the adherents of Tibetan traditions, emphasise the devotional, spiritual and mystical elements of Buddhism.¹⁷

The Western disappointment with Buddhism

¹⁷ Baumann, M. "Creating a European Path to Nirvana: Historical and Contemporary developments of Buddhism in Europe" *J. Contemporary Rel.* (1995) 10 [1] 62.

Buddhism in the West has not always been a success story. Although Buddhist groups do attract good numbers, people do not always continue. Many of those who have lived in a monastery or Buddhist centre for some time are aware of the many other people who come for a few months and then leave. One layman who had been associated with a centre for over 10 years said to me that some come in with great enthusiasm and are quickly burned out. He was a gardener, so it was appropriate that he went on to use a gardening illustration. They are like a green wood fire that is difficult to light. Some people want to douse it with petrol, but it merely flares up and quickly dies away. It is better to arrange the sticks carefully and allow it to burn slowly.

The Dalai Lama has made similar comments:

I have met Westerners who at the beginning were very enthusiastic about the practice, but after a few years have completely forgotten it, and there is no trace of what they had practised one time. This is because at the beginning they expected too much.

Few Buddhists actually go on to take refuge and become monks or nuns, but those who do often have further issues to face. Initially people feel excited about the teaching, and the novelty of the rituals. However, with time the novelty ends, and the fixed routine of the centre can become tedious. Individuals also have to face up to their own nature. The needs they experienced before making a decision to become ordained are still there even though they have been covered for a time. As one monk said to me, "People find it hard when they have to face their own dharma, so they leave!"

When the centre has a strong sense of corporate identity and mutual support then people are more likely to continue as ordained. However, when monks and nuns are asked to establish new centres even when there are supportive lay people, many struggle. The responsibility of teaching and seeking to apply teaching to the daily life of Buddhists is a continual stress, as is the practical problems of building up a centre and coping with financial issues. It is not surprising then that many take off their robes and return to their former way of life. Although movements like the NKT has seen a rapid growth in the number of centres they have in UK they continue to face the demand of the new centres for ordained teachers. It is easy to start new centres, but with time there is a continuing demand to replace monks or nuns in older centres. This is the same problem faced by Christian denominations in seeing adequate numbers called and trained for ministry. Perhaps this is the reason for the plateauing in the number of NKT centres.

As I have pointed out Western Buddhist converted to Buddhism as adults, and in general their children are still young. How will Western Buddhist deal with the questions of the second generation? Will these children, or their children experience the growing nominality that has characterised Christianity in the West? Buddhism in the West is here to stay, and initially will remain peripheral to mainstream society, even as the number of people calling themselves Buddhists grows.

Lessons for Christians in the Post-modern World

Christians have much to learn from the growth of Buddhism in the West.

The first lesson is that Buddhism is no longer an exotic religion of Asia, it has taken root in the West and is growing in various manifestations. It is becoming part of the pluralistic society of the post-modern West.

Second, Western Buddhism illustrates that within the general secular culture there is still a spiritual hunger. Many people are willing to meditate and chant, and find meaning in these activities. In times of emotional and physical crisis many realise the emptiness of a purely materialistic way of life. "There must be more to life", is a cry that has often been made by those who are now following the Buddhist way. The question that Christians must ask themselves is why their religion is failing to provide an obvious answer to this question.

Third, Christians must be able to engage with and discuss issues with Buddhists. Most Western Christians have little knowledge of Buddhism, and are quickly lost in any philosophical debate. They need to appreciate the strengths of Buddhism, but they must also be able to see its weaknesses.

Fourth, Christians also must have a clear understanding of their own beliefs, and to be able to present them in a relevant way. The great question that the Buddha sought to answer was that of the cause of suffering. After two and a half millennia this is still a question that is asked around the world. With all the progress of human technology, why is there so much suffering in the world? Christians must have an answer that draws together the Biblical teaching of a God who is both loving and sovereign. Buddhism does raise new questions as far as Christians are concerned, but it also reawakens old questions that have been relevant throughout human history. The Church must have the confidence that the Bible does provide meaningful answers.

Fifth, it is notable that daily ritual does not necessarily discourage people from religious practice. There is a strong desire for new forms of spirituality. People do not merely want cerebral religion, they want to satisfy their spiritual quest. Perhaps Christians should seek to discover their own rich heritage of Christian mysticism.

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Appendix 1: Buddhist and Buddhist groups in the mid-1990s (Baumann)

Country	Buddhist (sum)	Euro/Am. Buddhists	Centres	Population	Percentage Buddhists
USA	3-4 mill.	800,000	500-800	261 mill.	1.6
Australia	140,000	14,000	150	18 mill.	0.8
South Africa	5,000	2,500	40	42 mill.	0.01
UK	180,000	50,000	300	58 mill.	0.01
France	650,000	150,000	130	58 mill.	1.15
Germany	150,000	40,000	400	81 mill.	0.2
Italy	75,000	50,000	30	57 mill.	0.1
Switzerland	20-25,000	?	80	7 mill.	0.3
Netherlands	20,000	5,000	40	15 mill.	0.1
Denmark	8,000	5,000	32	5 mill.	0.16
Austria	13,000	5,000	25	8 mill.	0.16
Hungary	6,500	6,000	12	10 mill.	0.07
Czech Republic	2,100	2,00	15	10 mill.	0.02
Poland	4,500	4,000	15	38 mill.	0.01
Russia	1 mill.	40,000	100	149 mill.	0.7