

The Buddha, the Dharma and Me: The Rise of the Individual in Modern Buddhism. Representations and Inventions (1/2)

Panel Chair: John Harding | Monday, August 24, 9-11 a.m.

Since the mid-19th century Buddhism has been reshaped as a result of its encounter with Western imperialism, Christian missionaries, and the globalization of Enlightenment ideas such as the development of the idea of “religions”. Among the effects of this encounter, Buddhism has been rephrased as a religion of the individual with a primacy placed on experience, (e.g. D.T. Suzuki). The accompanying secularization of Buddhism casts it as a practice or spirituality compatible with other religions. Claims elevate this invention of the Buddhist tradition as more faithful to the Buddha’s intent, accompanied by an imperative to untangle Buddhism from superstitious “folk practices/beliefs”. The World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893 showcased Buddhism as scientific, and therefore uniquely modern. This panels will address the question of how the re-phrasing of Buddhism as a religion of the individual has transformed the tradition and how it is being globalized.

Donald Lopez

The Two Buddhas of 1844

In November 1839, Eugène Burnouf, holder of the chair of Sanskrit at the Collège de France, completed his translation of the Lotus Sutra. He had the translation printed but did not have it published, because, as he wrote, “I would like to give an introduction to this bizarre work.” This would become *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, the most influential work on Buddhism of the nineteenth century. In 1843, he published in a journal a translation of one chapter of the sutra, the famous “Medicinal Herbs” chapter. Burnouf’s piece was translated into English and published by Thoreau in *The Dial: A Magazine of Literature, Philosophy, and Religion* in January 1844, opening with Burnouf’s description of the Buddha. Yet the Buddha described by Burnouf sounded very different from the Buddha of the Lotus Sutra. This paper will explore the dissonance.

Victor Sōgen Hori

Authentic Buddhism: Personal Experience vs. Academic Objectivity

From the mid-1800s on, it was widely agreed in the Western world that Buddhism as practiced in Asian countries was a degeneration. Scholars like Rhys Davids and Max Müller assumed the Buddhism that they found in Pāli texts was authentic Buddhism and declared all of Mahāyāna Buddhism decadent. In the twentieth century, D.T. Suzuki expounded the primacy of personal experience: only one who had personally experienced satori or awakening knew what authentic Buddhism was. Contemporary scholars now consider D.T. Suzuki’s invoking of personal experience to be an ideological ploy. It allows insiders, the practitioners of Zen Buddhism, to defend themselves from outsiders, the academic scholars who critique Buddhism from an objective point of view. This paper asks what is the criterion of authentic Buddhism for scholars who claim to assess Buddhism from the stance of academic objectivity. It finds that “authentic Buddhism” is itself an ideologically defined term.

Shin’ichi Yoshinaga

How the “Experience” was Experienced: The Debate over “Religious Experience” during Meiji 20s

In the latter half of Meiji 20s (1892-1896), there appeared some heated discussions among young Buddhist intellectuals about religious matters on periodicals. Furukawa Rōsen, one of the leading young Buddhists (Bukkyō seinen) published an essay “Kaigi jidai ni ireri” (Entering the age of doubt) in 1894. He admitted the critical research of Buddhism as a necessary step of its development, which meant the birth of the individual independent of the sect and the loss of faith. A year before that, Kitamura Tōkoku, a literary critic, published a monumental essay “Naibu seimei ron” (Theory on the inner life), in which he stressed the importance of the inner experience as the ethical guide. Though Kitamura was a Christian, both of them relied on the inner experience for conquering the doubt. This paper will deal with the discussion about “experience” and its relationship to the selfhood of modern Japan.

Micah Auerback

The Buddha in Torment on the Prewar Japanese Stage

Beginning early in the twentieth century, the Buddha appeared in modern Japanese writings for the theater, many of which were actually staged. These works included the opera *Śākyamuni* (1912); its adaptation for the popular musical theater (1920); *Śākyamuni in Despair on the Earth* (1922), by a reformist Buddhist cleric; *Śākyamuni in Anguish* (1922), by the scholar of Indian Buddhism Teijima Fumikura; *The Light of the Four Oceans* (1935), by the silent-film star Hayakawa Sesshū; and *Tathāgata Śākyamuni* (1936), by onetime expatriate Okina Kyūin. These dramas projected onto the figure of the Buddha new interests in religious faith and individual commitment, so characteristic of “modern Buddhism” across Asia. No longer a wonderworker or even a great philosopher, the human image of the suffering Buddha, as developed in this body of art for the stage, remains in circulation to this day.

The Buddha, the Dharma and Me: The Rise of the Individual in Modern Buddhism. Secularism and Superstition (2/2)

Panel Chair: Victor Sōgen Hori | Monday, August 24, 3:30-5:30 p.m.

Since the mid-19th century Buddhism has been reshaped as a result of its encounter with Western imperialism, Christian missionaries, and the globalization of Enlightenment ideas such as the development of the idea of “religions”. Among the effects of this encounter, Buddhism has been rephrased as a religion of the individual with a primacy placed on experience, (e.g. D.T. Suzuki). The accompanying secularization of Buddhism casts it as a practice or spirituality compatible with other religions. Claims elevate this invention of the Buddhist tradition as more faithful to the Buddha’s intent, accompanied by an imperative to untangle Buddhism from superstitious “folk practices/beliefs”. The World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893 showcased Buddhism as scientific, and therefore uniquely modern. This panels will address the question of how the re-phrasing of Buddhism as a religion of the individual has transformed the tradition and how it is being globalized.

John S. Harding

Meiji Individualism: Modern Means and Ambivalent Aims

Meiji Buddhists’ strategies and representations of their tradition are illustrative of a broader intensification in the connections between the modern, the global, and the individual. This paper builds on Raphaël Liogier’s innovative theories of “individuo-globalism” and religion as well as David McMahan’s insights about secularism and spirituality as related modes that offer modern universals in opposition to pre-modern superstitions. Meiji case studies reveal individualistic, modern ways Buddhism was defended, promoted, and represented by a diverse cast shaped by shared influences. Meiji appeals, both to secular science and to spirituality, frame Buddhism as a live option for modern times unencumbered by superstition. However, an exploration of individual cases—Buddhists who traveled the world and figures, including Kiyozawa Manshi, who were shaped by global discourses while remaining in Japan—reveal tensions and oscillations. Some appeals to science, philosophy, and spirituality posited all embracing universals; others fueled religious polemics.

Jessica L. Main

Which One of You is Socially Engaged? Imagining Rational Buddhist Institutions and Volunteer Buddhists in Prewar Japan

A socially engaged Buddhist is a specific kind of modern Buddhist individual. Yet, the socially engaged “mode” exists in tension with other trends in Buddhist modernism, namely the trend towards a privatized spirituality which, in some iterations, is “thoroughly accommodated to the consumerist, materialist, capitalist culture” (McMahan 2009, 253). Buddhist social workers (*shakai jigyōsha*) and “Society Departments” (*Shakaika*) from Interwar Japan (1918-1939), articulated a modern Buddhist individual that rejected private spirituality and accommodation to the status quo. Examining the publications of these early socially engaged Buddhists and administrative units, we see that the ideal individual favors a vocation of social work and volunteers to perform this work as a “generic” Buddhist, recognizing no difference in moral value between the sympathizer, lay follower, or priest. Moreover, this individual acts in the secular sphere in order to benefit society as a whole, and prefers scientific activities and institutions while denouncing superstitious ritual.

Alexander Soucy

Buddhism for Youth: Zen and the Modern Individual in Vietnam

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, interest in Zen has drastically increased in Vietnam. This re-invented Zen places a strong emphasis on individual experience and a secularised practice, mirroring many of the understandings of Zen that were developed by Japanese reformers and were popularised in the West by figures like D.T. Suzuki. Vietnamese proponents in the 1960s, like Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Thiên Ân, then re-introduced it to the West as traditional Vietnamese Zen. This new Zen is now attracting followers in Vietnam from constituencies that had previously shown no interest in Buddhism. In particular, young people are starting to practice Zen because they see it as distinct from the devotionalism of their grandmothers. This paper will trace the roots of this new movement and examine the role that the modern pairing of Zen and the individual has had in attracting young people to Buddhism in contemporary Hanoi.

André van der Braak

Buddhism and Individualization: Charles Taylor and Buddhism in the West

In his work, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes a steadily increasing emphasis on a religion of personal commitment and devotion, over against forms centered on collective ritual. The three developments in contemporary religion that he describes (universalization, individualization and psychologization) have also influenced the Western engagement with Buddhism in the twentieth and twenty-first century. This paper will argue that the reception of Buddhism in the West has been subjected to what Taylor calls “cross pressures within the immanent frame”. Western-style Buddhism has become a participant in the three-cornered battle that Taylor describes between exclusive humanists, anti-humanists, and believers in transcendence, leading to the tendencies of excarnation and therapeutization of religion, and a neglect of ordinary life. This paper analyzes this process, and investigates to what extent a more inclusive Buddhist spirituality is also possible that could counterbalance these trends.