Buddhism in the Modern World

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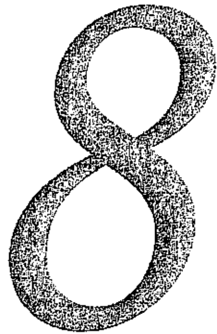

Buddhist Modernism

David L. McMahan

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Introduction

The popular image in the West of Buddhism is of a religion or philosophy of life that emphasizes meditation, relaxation, exploration of the mind, and compassion. According to this image, it doesn't have strict rules, is undogmatic, non-ritualistic, encourages creativity and freedom of thought, is compatible with a modern scientific world view, and is itself more an inner science or 'spirituality' than a religion. It is democratic and espouses social and political freedoms, human rights, and environmental activism. If, however, Western seekers of Buddhism go to a typical Buddhist temple, monastery, or pilgrimage site in Asia, they are often surprised to see that the practice of Buddhism for most Buddhists entails many rituals, bowing before buddha images, and belief in mythical cosmology, magic, heavens and hells, and a plethora of unseen beings – buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, protector spirits, ghosts, and demons who respond to prayers, invocations, and offerings.

So how do we account for this apparent discrepancy? It would be easy to simply say that the Buddhism they learned in the West is just a misrepresentation that has nothing to do with 'real' Buddhism. But many Asian Buddhists – particularly the more educated, cosmopolitan, and affluent – also subscribe to the description above. While this articulation of Buddhism is not an adequate representation of the vast variety of Buddhisms in Asia as they have been practiced throughout many centuries, it does describe a new transnational genre of Buddhism that scholars have called 'Buddhist modernism.' This genre, I would suggest, is neither representative of the various forms of Buddhism that have been practiced in Asian for millennia, nor just a Western fantasy, but rather a hybrid religious and cultural form that combines selected elements of Buddhism with the major Western discourses and practices of modernity. Buddhist modernism, then, refers to the various forms of Buddhism that have been significantly shaped by an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity, such as the European Enlightenment, scientific rationalism, Romanticism and its successors, Protestantism, psychology, and modern social and political thought. Although influenced by the West, it is not simply 'Western Buddhism,' but rather a global network of movements created by both Asians and Westerners that is not the exclusive product of one geographic or cultural setting.

Uniquely modern features of Buddhist modernism that scholars have pointed out include the attempt to reinterpret or demythologize traditional cosmology in order to align the Buddhist world view with the modern scientific one; the de-emphasis on ritual, priesthood, and hierarchy; and a this-worldly bent that sometimes includes an activist element stressing social work and political involvement, as well as a philosophy of democracy and social egalitarianism. Some interpret such features as an example of Protestant influence on Buddhism and see modernist forms as a kind of 'Protestant Buddhism' (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). This influence also includes an interpretation of 'true Buddhism' to be found in texts rather than, for example,

in rituals or social practices, and tends to see things like spirit worship and fortune-telling as degenerate or superstitious. It also includes the 'individual's seeking his or her ultimate goal without intermediaries,' as well as 'spiritual egalitarianism,' individual responsibility, and self-scrutiny (ibid.: 216). The importance placed on the *saṅgha* (the community of monastics)[1] is diminished as the laity become more important. According to Donald Lopez, Buddhist modernism (or as he calls it, Modern Buddhism) 'stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual above the community' (Lopez 2002: ix). It also interprets the Buddha's original message as compatible with modern conceptions of 'reason, empiricism, science, universalism, individualism, tolerance, freedom and the rejection of religious orthodoxy' (ibid.: x). Buddhist modernism has much more active and visible roles for women than its predecessors, and its social location has often been among the educated middle class. Lopez sees it as a kind of transnational Buddhist sect, 'an international Buddhism that transcends cultural and national boundaries, creating ... a cosmopolitan network of intellectuals, writing most often in English' (ibid.: xxxix). This 'sect' is rooted neither in geography nor in traditional schools but is the modern aspect of a variety of Buddhist schools in different locations. Moreover, it has its own cosmopolitan lineage and canonical 'scriptures,' mainly the works of popular and semi-scholarly authors including figures from the formative years of modern Buddhism such as Soen Shaku, Anagarika Dharmapāla, Dwight Goddard, D. T. Suzuki, and Alexandra David-Neel, as well as more recent figures such as Shunryu Suzuki, Sangharakshita, Alan Watts, Thích Nhât Hanh, Chögyam Trungpa, and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

The Colonial period

The first moves in the 'modernization' of Buddhism were made, somewhat inadvertently, by Western Orientalist scholars in the nineteenth century. While many Western observers of Buddhism were repelled by what they claimed were its idolatrousness, superstition, and pessimism, some – particularly the translators and interpreters of early Buddhist texts such as Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) – began to portray Buddhism as a rational, psychological, and ethical philosophy of life. They saw the essentials of Buddhism as residing in its classical texts, from which they selected the writings on philosophy, ethics, and meditation as central, while ignoring the living traditions of Buddhism as peripheral and corrupted. Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau, while limited in their understanding of Buddhism, also gave Buddhism a positive hearing in the West and praised it in their writings.

The first actual Buddhists to begin developing a distinctively modern reinterpretation of their tradition, however, were Asian reformers. Indeed Buddhist modernism began in a context not of mutual curiosity, cultural exchange, and open-

minded ecumenical dialogue, but of competition, crisis, and colonialism. If there is a single time and location of the origin of Buddhist modernism among Asian Buddhists, it is quite possibly Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in the nineteenth century, then a colony of Britain. Many of the unfavorable representations of Buddhism by Westerners at this time came from colonists who reported back to Europe on the beliefs and practices of Sinhala Buddhists (the ethnic majority in Ceylon/Sri Lanka). They often portrayed the Sinhalese as indolent, lazy, childlike, and lower on the evolutionary ladder than the supposedly enlightened Europeans. According to many European accounts, their religion was superstitious, nihilistic, incomprehensible, and in need of supplanting by evangelizing Christians. With colonial rule and its attendant missionary activity, therefore, Buddhism faced a crisis of legitimacy, having lost prestige and considerable economic and political power. It was largely in response to this challenge, not only of representation but also of real subjugation, that Sinhalese reformers began to rethink their own tradition. Revivalists – foremost among them Anagarika Dharmapāla (1864–1933) – began to reconstruct Buddhism along the lines of the more sympathetic Western Orientalist interpretation: as a rational, ethical philosophy in harmony with modern scientific knowledge and Victorian social mores.

One of the prominent and persistent assertions of Buddhist modernism is that Buddhism is more compatible with a modern, scientific world view than other religions, an assertion that goes back to the revitalization movements in Sri Lanka. Dharmapāla not only claimed that Buddhism was compatible with modern science but also suggested that the Buddha himself was a kind of scientist who internally discerned 'natural laws,' 'causality,' and evolution. This was an incisive polemic, considering that Christianity had been dealt serious blows by the implications of Darwin's theory of evolution, as well as modern theories of geology and biology. Notions of scientific causality, moreover, called into question literalist accounts of biblical creation, of a personal God who intervenes in the causal systems of nature, of angels, heaven and hell, miracles, and rising from the dead, all of which were under fire by an increasingly powerful scientific discourse. Indeed many in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were going through a period of profound religious doubt – dubbed by historians the 'Victorian Crisis of Faith' – in part due to the challenges of science and modern forms of knowledge.

Dharmapāla had no hesitation in exploiting this crisis to the advantage of his own tradition. Buddhism, he asserted, was a 'scientific religion containing the highest individualistic altruistic ethics' (Dharmapāla 1965: 25, 27), while the evangelical Christianity imposed on his country was 'political camouflage' whose motives were 'politics, trade and imperial expansion' and whose weapons were 'the Bible, barrels of whiskey and bullets' (ibid.: 439). He had full confidence in the viability of Buddhism over Christianity in the age of science:

> With the spread of scientific knowledge, Christianity with its unscientific doctrines of creator, hell, soul, atonement, will be quite forgotten. With the expansion of knowledge Europeans may come to know more of evolution, of the laws of causation, of the changing nature of all phenomena, of the divisibility of matter, of the progressive nature of the animal and human consciousness, then will Buddhism meet with a sympathetic reception.
>
> (*ibid.*: 465).

In addition to his emphasis on the compatibility of Buddhism and science, he also portrayed it as a religion perfectly suited to other challenges of the modern age, combating the Western representations of Buddhism as nihilistic, pessimistic, passive, ritualistic, and superstitious and promoting Buddhism as activist, optimistic, and ethical. He largely adopted the textualist reconstruction of his tradition offered by Orientalist scholars, proffering a rational Buddhism centered on the individual and his or her own salvation, as well as altruistic social service. He implicitly agreed with the Orientalists that the living Buddhism of his day was in a state of corruption and degeneration, and he was critical of many practices of his own people that could be interpreted as superstitious or ritualistic. In place of them, he attempted to codify a version of Victorian morals and decorum in the style of Buddhist monastic codes of behavior in order to reform the everyday behavior of the peasants (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 212–15).

Westerners sympathetic to Buddhism during this period were also instrumental in developing the foundations of Buddhist modernism. Many members of the Theosophical Society, an organization dedicated to uncovering the supposed esoteric truths hidden within all religions, were keenly interested in Buddhism. Theosophy grew out of the spiritualist movement, which attempted to investigate supernatural phenomena, contact the dead by use of mediums, and bridge the chasm between the human and spirit worlds. They considered this a fundamentally scientific endeavor – albeit an 'occult science' – using empirical research and rational arguments to prove auras, extrasensory perception, and the like. One of its most visible members, Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), was likely the first American to 'officially' convert to Buddhism. He also was very influential in promoting a view of Buddhism as scientific, rational, and ethical rather than superstitious, idolatrous, and backward. He formed the Buddhist Theosophical Society and joined forces for a time with Dharmapāla in an effort to promote and reform Buddhism in Ceylon and attempt to create a global Buddhist network.

By the early twentieth century, the image of Buddhism as a rational, empirical, ethical way of life free of ritual, dogmatism, and unscientific beliefs and cosmologies had become widespread. Western apologists such as Paul Carus boldly claimed that Buddhism is 'a religion which recognizes no other revelation except the truth that can

be proved by science' (Carus 1897: 114). The early Buddhist sympathizer C. T. Strauss likewise claimed that 'genuine Buddhism' is 'the reverse of mystical, rejects miracles, is founded on reality, and refuses to speculate about the absolute and other so-called first causes' (Strauss 1922: 105). Moreover, he asserted that it deems prayers, rituals, and ceremonies as 'not only useless but a hindrance to spiritual advancement' (ibid.: 53–4). On this interpretation, the Dharma of the Buddha was utterly distinct from the rituals, celebrations, image veneration, and attempts to control spirits common in the popular Buddhism that Westerners often found in lands they colonized.

D. T. Suzuki and Zen

Japan was another historical starting point for Buddhist modernism, especially modernist forms of Zen. Under the Meiji government, established in 1867, Buddhism was criticized as a corrupt and superstitious foreign religion that hampered Japan's scientific and technological advancement, as well as its national cohesion. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, several intellectuals began an attempt to revitalize Buddhism, purging it of what they considered corrupt cultural and institutional accretions and returning it to the original vitality of the Buddha's teachings. The movement they began, which drew heavily on Zen literature as well as Western philosophy, was known as 'New Buddhism,' or *shin bukkyō*. Proponents of the movement saw it not only as a response to government persecution of Buddhism but also as a way of promoting uniquely Japanese religion and national power in a transnational context fraught with economic and military competition. One influential philosopher sympathetic to this reformist Buddhism summarized the role he hoped Buddhism would play on the world stage in the early twentieth century:

> Everyone knows that we must look to the West to supply models not only for all kinds of commodities and utensils, but also for models of government, law, the military system, education, the physical sciences and technology. However, there is one thing that Japan can transmit to foreign countries and win fame: that thing is Buddhism
>
> *(quoted in Snodgrass 2003: 131)*

Among the most globally influential writers influenced by the New Buddhism movement was Daisetz Teitarō (D. T.) Suzuki, who vigorously promoted a modernized articulation of Zen Buddhism highly influential in the West. Drawing from ideas of religious experience found in the work of William James, Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō, and writers of the Romantic, Idealist, and Transcendentalist movements, Suzuki wrote that Zen in its essence was an *experience* that

Figure 8.1 D. T. Suzuki

transcended the particularities of any religion. Not only was the liberating experience of *satori* the essence of Zen, it was the essence of all religion, though found in its purest form in Zen. Suzuki therefore de-emphasized not only Zen's intimate connection to the history of Buddhism but presented everything except the 'Zen experience' as peripheral. This emphasis on the authority of personal intuitive experience over tradition, ritual, and social life would become a prominent feature of some versions of Buddhist modernism.

In framing his presentation of Zen to Western readers, Suzuki articulated some of the difficult themes of Zen in the vocabulary of Idealist, Romantic, and Transcendentalist thinkers of the nineteenth century. He stressed, for example, the unification of the duality of subject and object in a transpersonal Absolute, a universal spirit or ultimate reality, using the language of German Idealists like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Scheller. He also drew upon the Romantic conception of nature as an all-pervasive spirit that can be accessed by individual probing into the deep interior of the mind, as against the mechanistic Enlightenment view of the natural world as a giant machine. He also aligned the spirit of Zen with Romanticism's notion of spontaneity and the transcendence of rational, calculative thinking. The 'irrationality' of Zen *koans* indicated a pure experience beyond conceptualization, emanating from a radical intuitive grasp of the oneness of the human being and nature. They, like the Romantics' view of poetry, spring from the direct experience of this intuitive apprehension of nature within. Suzuki also considered this intuitive grasp of reality the fount of art and creativity, positing a special relationship between Zen and the arts. The direct encounter with reality that Zen affords, and its associated spontaneity, constitute the source of creativity in all forms of art, as well as the everyday activities of life. This is where, according to Suzuki, 'all arts merge into Zen' (Suzuki 1959: 94). Intellectual reflection, calculation, anticipation, and a whole host of cognitive activities are set up in opposition to the intuitive, spontaneous, and creative act arising from a trained and nimble mind. For Suzuki, the great artist is nearly divine in his ability to tap into the mysterious depths of unconscious creative energy and bring it forth into the world.

Suzuki also promoted one of the common – if overly simplistic – tropes of Buddhist modernism: that the 'East' was intuitive, aesthetic, and spiritual, while the 'West' was technological, rational, and material. Such a dichotomy had been used previously by Orientalists, missionaries, and colonizers of Asia, for whom this characterization of the East signaled inferiority to the West. Suzuki accepted the basic East/West characterization but reversed the valuation, presenting the trans-rational, intuitive Zen practitioner as the superior of the rational, technological being of the modern West. He thus enfolded Zen into a pre-existing tension between two broad discourses in the West: between Enlightenment rationalism and scientific naturalism on the one hand, and Romanticism and Transcendentalism on the other.

We can see here glimmerings of how Buddhism and Zen came to be intimately associated with avant-garde art and experimental, improvisatory music and theater, and with the mid twentieth-century counter-culture in America. Indeed, this formulation of spontaneity and creativity explains in part why some counter-cultural artists, musicians and writers, such as some of the Beat poets, saw Buddhist practice as essential to their art. It also helps us understand why they often felt under little obligation to embrace traditional Buddhist morality since, following Suzuki, they believed that spontaneous activity in tune with nature transcended 'conventional morality.' Another broader result of Suzuki's formulation is that, particularly in the West, Buddhism – and meditation in particular – is conceived as something uniquely connected to creativity. Influential Buddhists in the West, such as Lama Govinda (1898–1985) and Sangharakshita (1925–) for example, have articulated similarly romantic-inspired explications of Buddhist art as flowing forth from the 'super-rational plane' (Sangharakshita 1973: 111–12). Avant-garde artists were directly influenced by Suzuki, for example John Cage (1912–92), who asserted that the purpose of art, poetry, and music was 'to sober and quiet the mind so that it is in accord with what happens' (Baas 2004: 166).

In framing Zen in these unprecedented terms, Suzuki called upon the tradition to speak to the concerns of the day and infused Zen into tensions between the rationalistic, scientific orientation predominant in modern Western culture and its counter-balancing force, Romanticism. Thus while many articulations of Buddhist modernism, as we have seen above, attempt to align Buddhism with scientific rationalism, there is also a strong strain of critique of the rational, scientific approach, and this critique parallels that of the Romantic vein in Western thought. This ambivalence toward science is also evident at the site of another intersection of Buddhism and Western modernity: the meeting of Buddhism and psychology.

Buddhist Modernism and Psychology

The interface of Buddhism and Western psychology has been one of the most prevalent frameworks of modern interpretation, especially in the West. Even the earliest revitalizers of Buddhism, such as Dharmapāla, and the early translators of its texts, such as Rhys-Davids, emphasized the psychological elements of Buddhism. Those who have drawn parallels between Buddhism and Western psychology have highlighted the sophisticated discussions of the mind and its functions in many canonical Buddhist texts and have explicitly connected them with various Western psychological schools of thought. This began in earnest in the mid twentieth century, when Western authors began to draw parallels between Buddhism and the psychoanalytic schools of psychology. The treatment of Buddhism as a psychology granted it considerable legitimacy in the West. Until the mid twentieth century,

for example, Tibetan Buddhism, with its large pantheon of deities, had often been presented in the West as degenerate polytheism and idolatry. Carl Jung provided another way to understand these figures. Jung interpreted them as expressions of universal psychological archetypes, i.e. facets of the collective unconscious shared by all human beings, indicating the primal structure of the human mind. 'The world of the gods and spirits is truly "nothing but" the collective unconscious inside me' (Jung 1960: liii). This reading has been especially compelling in the West, having been taken up by a number of scholars and becoming nearly the normative interpretation among popular writers, though few scholars still adhere to it. The twin traditions of scientific rationalism and Judaic and Christian prohibitions of idolatry made exorcizing the gods and demons from the world of atoms and molecules and confining them to the psyche necessary before Tibetan Buddhism could become a live option for Westerners.

This kind of reinterpretation is what some scholars have called 'demythologization,' the attempt to extract – or more accurately, to reconstruct – meanings viable within the context of modern world views from teachings embedded in ancient world views. Another example of the demythologization and psychologization of Buddhism is the interpretation of the realms of rebirth as psychological realities. Buddhist doctrine lays out six major realms into which beings may be reborn: those of humans, deities, hungry ghosts, animals, hell dwellers, and demigods. These have for centuries been taken as ontological orders of being into which all forms of life that have not achieved nirvana are born and reborn. Chögyam Trungpa, one of the most influential and westernized of Tibetan Buddhist teachers in North America, described these realms as 'predominantly emotional attitudes towards ourselves and our surroundings – reinforced by conceptualizations and rationalizations' (Trungpa 1976: 24). The realm of the deities, for example, was the human feeling of pride and self-absorption, the human realm represented passion, and the hell realm equated to 'hatred and paranoia.' While connecting the six realms with specific emotions or states of mind to be overcome has solid grounding in Buddhist textual traditions – beings are reborn in realms that provide karmic consequences of their actions of mind, body, and speech – the presentation of their significance as *primarily* or even exclusively psychological is uniquely modern. Such re-interpretation of cosmological-cum-ethical teachings is characteristic of the transformations of certain strains of Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a part of a process of demythologization, one of the primary mechanisms in the modernization, revitalization, and re-invention of Buddhism and one of the ways that psychology has been important to modernist interpretations of Buddhism.

Another influential psychological interpretation of Buddhism is that Buddhist meditation, like psychoanalysis, opens up the unconscious to consciousness and in doing so frees the individual from destructive habits and repressed contents of mind. Psychologist Erich Fromm asserted that Zen meditation functions to make the unconscious conscious, not in the manner of psychoanalysis, which only seeks

to recover sectors of the unconscious that are the basis of symptoms, but rather in aiming for the 'full recovery of the unconscious' (Suzuki, Fromm and De Martino 1960: 139). While Freud believed that the best that psychoanalysis can do is make people somewhat less neurotic by revealing the unconscious bases for particular symptoms, Fromm saw Zen as pushing past the symptomatic treatment of neurosis toward the clearing away of all unconscious conditioning, allowing the emergence of the truly free individual. Under the influence of Jung and Fromm, the articulation of meditation in terms of analytic psychology has become a staple of popular Buddhist literature in the West. For instance, Douglas Burns, in his book *Buddhist Meditation and Depth Psychology*, identifies the traditional Buddhist mental defilements (*kleṣas*) with repressed emotions, and insight (*vipassanā*) with their de-repression:

> In its psychiatric usage insight means gaining awareness of those feelings, motives, and values which have previously been unconscious. Repressed feelings of guilt, fear, lust, and hatred may lurk in the hidden recesses of our minds and unconsciously shape our lives until such time as they are brought into awareness. And unless they are brought into awareness, we cannot effectively deal with them.
> *(Burns 1994)*

Similarly, contemporary psychiatrist Mark Epstein sees 'non-judgmental awareness' in meditation as akin to free-association techniques used by psychotherapists. Epstein concludes that Freud 'apparently taught himself without knowing that this was precisely the attentional stance that Buddhist meditators had been invoking for millennia' (Epstein 1995: 114). Following these and similar reflections, a great deal of contemporary Buddhist literature comes to see meditation and psychoanalysis as two species of essentially the same activity, the former being a more radical and thoroughgoing version of the latter. These mid twentieth-century intertwinings of Buddhism and psychology have paved the way to a contemporary abundance of literature bringing Buddhism into psychological theory and therapeutic practice.

Meditation and Modernity

Modernist interpretations of Buddhism, since their inception, have emphasized the centrality of meditation. Meditation has always been considered essential to enlightenment, but historically only a minority of Buddhists have undertaken it in any serious way. In most Buddhist cultures, meditation is considered the province of monastics specializing in the practice, who often live in forest hermitages or caves. Other monks, for example those specializing in scholarship or ritual, generally have not meditated, and among the laity the practice has been even more rare.

Modernist revitalization movements, however, reinvigorated the practice of meditation and, more radically, encouraged widespread lay practice. Meditation centers – neither monasteries nor traditional temples – catering to lay people began springing up in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia in the mid twentieth century and now are plentiful around the globe. Today throughout Asia as well as the West, many lay Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers – not to mention Christians, Jews, Hindus, and secular people – practice various forms of Buddhist meditation and mindfulness techniques. While the practices of most Buddhists throughout the world still consist primarily of following its ethical precepts and performing rituals for gaining karmic merit, a growing number of educated, middle-class men and women now consider meditation essential to their practice of Buddhism. Contemporary Dharma teachers routinely invite people of all backgrounds to practice meditation and mindfulness for a wide variety of reasons, including increasing awareness, compassion, and peace of mind, and even enhancing their practice of other faiths. Meanwhile the practice has overflowed the boundaries of Buddhism itself and has been adopted by psychotherapists, medical doctors, and health club workers, as well as Christians and Jews. For monks specializing in meditation this practice is a means to overcome the cycle of rebirth or become a buddha, but this democratized and secularized meditation among the wider population may have many different functions, including stress reduction, attempting to attain a 'peak experience,' managing pain associated with an illness, overcoming psychological trauma, working more efficiently, or developing compassion in order to improve relationships with one's family and coworkers.

Some distinctively modern Buddhist movements occupy a sort of borderland between traditional Buddhist institutions and free-form spiritualities. The Insight Meditation or *vipassanā* movement, for example, emerged from the Theravāda traditions of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and Sri Lanka, but has become largely independent of institutional affiliation with monasteries and their structures of authority. In this movement, meditation is offered without most of the ritual, liturgical, and merit-making elements integral to Theravāda Buddhism. Americans such as Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg, who studied with Burmese and other Southeast Asian teachers, have made *vipassanā* especially popular in North America. The American *vipassanā* movement is largely independent of ties to Asian institutions, and there is no national body that certifies teachers, making the movement, as scholar and *vipassanā* teacher Gil Fronsdal puts it: 'inherently open, amorphous, and arbitrarily defined' (Fronsdal 1998: 165). This elevation of the role of meditation over merit-making, chanting, ritual, and devotion, however, is again not a simply a Western product. One of the most important founders of the modern *vipassanā* movement, the Burmese monk Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904–82), like many modern meditation teachers, focused

almost exclusively on the practice of meditation and the goal of awakening, de-emphasizing ritual and monasticism.

Meditation and the 'science of mind'

The centrality of meditation and the affiliations with psychology have paved the way to a recent reinvigoration of attempts to understand Buddhism, or at least Buddhist meditation, as either something akin to a science or something to be studied by science. Practitioners and sympathetic scholars have often made claims about the kinship of meditation and the scientific method. The German-born Theravāda monk Nyanaponika Thera (born Siegmund Feniger, 1901–94) in 1954 wrote of Buddhist meditation as a 'science of mind,' and presented the method of 'bare attention' as essentially the same as that of the scientist: 'unprejudiced receptivity' to things, reduction of the subjective element in judgment, and 'deferring judgment until a careful examination of the facts has been made.' This, he claimed, is the 'genuine spirit of the research worker,' though Buddhist meditation goes beyond 'explanation of facts' and a 'theoretical *knowledge* of the mind' to an attempt to shape the mind itself (Nyanaponika 1954: 42).

Contemporary *vipassanā* meditation teacher S. N. Goenka often refers to insight meditation as a scientific method of investigating consciousness and claims that the Buddha was not the founder of a 'religion' but an interior explorer who discovered truths about the mind that anticipate truths only recently discovered by scientists and psychologists in the West (Goenka 2007). Both science and Buddhism, according to this approach, are empirical means to establishing truths in their respective realms of investigation. Similarly, B. Alan Wallace asserts: 'Buddhist insights into the nature of the mind and consciousness are presented as genuine discoveries in the scientific sense of the term: they can be replicated by any competent researcher with sufficient prior training' (Wallace 2003: 8–9). Like scientific experiments, such discoveries derive from 'firsthand experience,' and the discoverers' claims 'are subject to peer review by their fellow contemplatives, who may debate the merits or defects of the reported findings' (ibid.: 9).

While these claims, and more generally the attempt to ally Buddhism and science, have met with skepticism in some quarters – from scientists, scholars of religion, and Buddhists themselves – there has been an explosion of scientific research on meditation in recent decades that, while not necessarily claiming meditation is itself scientific, sees it as something to be productively studied *by* scientists. These studies have employed some of the most advanced technology to study the effects of meditation on the brain and central nervous system. Recent research, for example, has assessed the effects of meditation on attention, perceptual sensitivity, anxiety, regulation of emotional states, neurophysiological responses to stressful stimuli,

immune system functioning, central nervous system activity, and specific neurological structures. Neuroscientists have used meditation to explore the possibilities of neuroplasticity – the ability of the brain to generate new cell and neural connections that change emotions, behavior, and perceptions – and to study attention and the processing of sensory information. Researchers at Harvard medical school have also asserted that meditation can increase immune function, help reverse heart disease, and reduce chronic pain. One study suggests that meditation can decrease depression and anxiety, and suppress the overproduction of stress hormones. Various kinds of Buddhist meditation also appear to be linked with brain activity in areas associated with feelings of happiness and well-being and diminishing of very negative emotions like hatred and anger.

It is unclear what the full implications of this contemporary conversation between Buddhism and science will have on the tradition. Certainly it increases Buddhism's cultural cachet among an educated global elite. Some, however, worry that an over-emphasis on scientific 'verification' of Buddhist techniques and insights could reduce the rich variety of practices and beliefs to those that fit a model of modern ideas of happiness, stress relief, and mental health. Others have voiced the more general concern that Buddhism is more than a scientific technique for happiness, but also includes social, ethical, and philosophical orientations that are generally neglected in the enthusiasm to make Buddhism fit with science, and meditation fit with modern psychological and physiological models of health (Lopez 2008, Verhoeven 2001; McMahan 2008).

Buddhist Modernism and Modernisms

There are many other examples that point to particular interpretations of Buddhism arising from the encounter of various Buddhist traditions with Western modernity. Certainly the phenomenon of Engaged Buddhism, a global movement that began in the 1960s during the Vietnam War and has grown considerably in recent decades, is one. It includes social and political activism oriented towards relieving suffering not just on a personal level but also on a wide, systemic scale, and adopts the language of modern social and political theory – of human rights, egalitarianism, individual freedoms, democracy – as well as techniques of nonviolent resistance and peaceful protest rooted in the modern era. There is also a global discourse among a great variety of Buddhists about ecological issues, which adapts concepts of interdependence and compassion for all sentient beings to contemporary environmental problems.

All of these developments are hybridized forms of Buddhism that have elements of Western modernity infused into them. But they should not simply be understood as mere accommodations to the West; as we have seen, some of these developments have selectively adopted certain modern Western ideas and practices as tools

to critique dominant features of modernity, for instance Western imperialism and materialism. In some cases, Buddhists have acquiesced considerably to the conditions and terms of Western modernity, but in others they have used elements of it for distinctively Buddhist ends. Moreover, though we have outlined certain key characteristics of Buddhist modernism – emphasis on rationality, ethics, meditation, science, creativity, activism, and increased participation by women and laity – we should not suppose that all Buddhist modernism looks alike. These themes are often adopted in unique ways particular to specific communities or schools of Buddhism, and some may take up certain of these tendencies but not others. Thus modernist forms of Buddhism in Sri Lanka look different from those of Tibetan communities in New York or India. Just as modernity itself is multiple, according to some theorists, with different cultures selectively appropriating, transforming, and localizing the conceptual, material, and political resources of modernity, so too the ways that Buddhists adopt various modern ideas, practices, and technologies may vary depending on a host of contingent factors.

For example, their relationships to the nations in which they reside and the role the state plays in determining legitimacy and shaping religion have had considerable impact on the shape of certain forms of Buddhism. The modernist Buddhisms that are developing in China in the wake of a relaxation of state prohibition of religion, for instance, reflect distinctively Chinese modes of modernity. They are much more managed and shaped by state involvement and have less rhetoric of individualism than Western Buddhist modernism. How ethnicity is construed may have a substantial influence on how any particular community of Buddhists adopts and adapts selected elements of modernity. The Chinese press, for example, tends to construct 'Chinese Buddhism' along rationalist lines similar to those we have discussed, while depicting Tibetan Buddhism as part of 'folk' culture. Such categorization in a place where the state has a strong managerial role in the conduct of religion has real consequences on the ground.

Other examples of modernist forms of Buddhism unique to particular places include, for example, rather ethnocentric nationalist iterations of Buddhism in Sri Lanka based on (re)creating a Sinhala Buddhist nation. In contrast to the more cosmopolitan Buddhist modernisms, this Buddhism fiercely critiques globalization and international forces as corrupting and emphasizes 'tradition.' Yet it also draws on previous attempts to interpret Buddhism as scientific in spirit and makes ample use of technology to propagate its ideas.

All of this suggests that we should be cautious about defining Buddhist modernism too narrowly or about positing a fixed distinction between modernity and 'tradition.' Like modern societies, modern Buddhisms are multiple and complex, and may have family resemblances without necessarily sharing any particular defining features.

Summary

- In the modern period, forms of Buddhism have emerged that combine traditional Buddhist teachings and practices with ideas, social forms, and cultural practices rooted in Western modernity.
- Buddhist modernism originated in the colonial period as various reform movements arose to counter threats from imperial power and missionaries.
- One facet of these movements involved the reinterpretation of Buddhism as a 'rational religion' compatible with modern science. Anagarika Dharmapāla was a pivotal figure in introducing this theme.
- Other forms of Buddhist modernism have emphasized personal experience, intuition, and art. D. T. Suzuki was especially influential in interpreting Buddhism along these lines.
- Especially in the West, Buddhist modernism has often involved interpretation of Buddhism in terms of Western psychology.
- Buddhist meditation has become more widespread and available not only to Buddhist laity but also to non-Buddhists.
- The latest trend in Buddhist modernism is the explosion of scientific research on meditation.
- Buddhist modernism cannot be considered just one well-defined thing; rather, it takes on different forms according to the different 'modernities' in various societies.

Discussion questions

- What is the difference between Buddhism that happens to exist in the modern world and Buddhist modernism?
- What are the distinctive features of Buddhist modernism, and how do they draw upon particular discourses of modernity?
- What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of making connections between science and Buddhism?
- What would a critique of Buddhist modernism look like? Imagine this from (1) a scholar's perspective and (2) a Buddhist perspective.

Further reading

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Note

1 I use the term monastics to refer both to monks and nuns. More recently, the term *saṅgha* has expanded to include lay practitioners and even informal meditation groups.