

## **How Buddhism was invented**

For most of us today, there are only two kinds of Buddhism: Mine and Yours. “My Buddhism” is the only right one, and “Your Buddhism” is always wrong. That’s why there are so many Buddhist denominations, sects, groups, and cults. Even the word “Buddhism” is a recent invention, its appearance first noted in 1801 (spelt as “Boudhism”) by the Oxford English Dictionary.<sup>1</sup>

When practising Buddhists say or hear the word “Buddhism,” they would probably think of the Buddha’s teaching. However, it is difficult for us -- unless we can read another’s mind -- to know what the other speaker really means when he says “Buddhism,” “Buddhist,” or “Buddha.” Probably, the speaker himself is uncertain of the real meaning of the words.

In such a situation, the meanings of the words we use are often private: we are simply talking to or hearing ourselves. Ironically, as long as we do not probe further into what people mean when they use such B-words, we should be able to get along quite well, especially when we go to the same building, listen to the same speakers, or look at the same materials on Buddhism. For most of us, then, it is sufficient to be “Buddhist” without bothering too much about what Buddhism really is.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Buddhism today is everything to everyone. As such, we may pride ourselves (if we are Buddhist, whatever this may mean) in the fact that Buddhism is, as such, the most global religion (or whatever we might like to call it). If we know very little about something, we are much less likely to quarrel about it!

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism was very narrowly defined, especially when not many people had heard of it, much less know what it really is (unlike today). We could even rightly say that how most of us generally see Buddhism today is rooted in or at least influenced by developments in the Parliament of the World’s Religions (1893) in Chicago, USA, held as part of the Columbian exposition.<sup>3</sup>

The Parliament of the World’s Religions was the first time in the West when representatives of religions from around the world met. This understandably had a strong impact on the reception of Buddhism in America. Thomas Tweed, in his study of Buddhism in America in the period 1844-1912, notes that “with the possible exception of the publication of Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, no single event had more impact than the World’s Parliament of Religions [sic] of 1893.”<sup>4</sup>

But what kind of influence was this? The Columbian exposition was a perfect opportunity for the USA, as well as for Japan, to showcase themselves to the world as modern nations. For the Japanese, presenting Japan as a civilized modern nation with an ancient culture – partly centred on Japanese Buddhism – would facilitate their recognition from the West, so that they could renegotiate unfair treaties imposed upon Japan by Western powers. At the same time, success abroad would further strengthen Buddhism in Japan, where it was struggling to recover from persecutions it suffered in the Meiji period.<sup>5</sup>

The main strategy the Japanese delegates used at the Parliament was to **present Japanese Buddhism as the “original” and “authentic” Buddhism**, that is, the Mahayana. To this end, they aggressively used polemical strategies to discredit the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, and mainland SE Asia – that is, Theravada – as being **Hinayana**, the “inferior vehicle.”<sup>6</sup> As part of their publicity strategy, they distributed thousands of copies of *Outline of the Mahayana as Taught by the Buddha* (1893) by S Kuroda, specially translated

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Joinville, “On the religion and manners of the people of Ceylon,” *Asiatic Researches* 7, 1801:400.

<sup>2</sup> Further see “Be Buddhist, not a Buddhist,” R342 2014: [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> This was held to commemorate 400 years of Christopher Columbus “discovery” of the New World in 1492.

<sup>4</sup> T A Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism 18-44-1912*, Chapel Hill: Univ of Carolina Press, 1992:31.

<sup>5</sup> See eg **Monasticism, sex and marriage**, SD 66.13 (3): [link](#).

<sup>6</sup> For a summary and references, see Analayo, “The Hīnayāna fallacy,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 6, 2014:16-20: <http://www.ocbs.org/ojs/index.php/jocbs/article/view/72> (subscription).

into English and subtitled “Carefully Examined by the Scholars of the Tendai, Shingon, Rinzai, Soto and Shin Sects... For Circulation Among the Members of the Parliament of Religions...”<sup>7</sup>

Representatives from the various Japanese sects spoke before the Parliament, highlighting the “fact” that Southern Buddhism was Hinayana, and that Japanese Buddhism was Mahayana, “the most powerful Buddhist tradition.” The Jodo Shinshu speaker recommended that his audience studied *The History of Japanese Buddhist Sects* by Professor Bunyiu Nanjo, accredited by the fact that he was an Oxford student under renowned Orientalist, Max Muller.

The Rinzai representative Soyen Shaku befriended the publisher and self-declared monist theologian Paul Carus,<sup>8</sup> who a year later published his influential work, *Gospel of Buddha* (1894), modelled on the Christian New Testament, and a classic for certain Japanese sects and “Protestant Buddhism.” This is a term used by scholars to describe a modernist Buddhism that grew in “protest” of Christian aggression and evangelism, but which was in turn deeply influenced by it.<sup>9</sup>

Through Soyen Shaku, his lay Zen disciple, D T Suzuki (1870-1966), visited the US to stay with Carus. In his *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (1907), Suzuki, a prolific writer, continued the evangelizing began by his countrymen at the 1893 Parliament. He presented the Mahayana as a teaching originating from the historical Buddha himself, and criticized the Western perception of Hinayana Buddhism as the only genuine teaching of the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> Up to the end of the last century, Suzuki alone could be said to be most influential in molding the North American and West European view of Buddhism.

Suzuki’s Buddhism was a triumphalist vision of Japanese Zen as being superior to every other teaching there was. Although much of Suzuki’s writings on Zen derived from Romanticism and Transcendentalism, he seldom gave them any credit. He knew the right people of his time – Aldous Huxley, Robert Blyth, Dwight Goddard, Erich Fromm, Carl Jung and Thomas Merton -- through whom his vision of Zen was widely spread through North America, western Europe and much of English-speaking Asia.<sup>11</sup>

Suzuki’s Japan-centric vision of Zen, presented in English and in western terms, appealed to the elite and the leisurely, for whom Buddhism was more of social hobnobbing and high-pitches than personal practice. The Japanese Buddhist sects, struggling for their very survival and social relevance, zealously presented Buddhism as a nationalist agenda. In fact, in post-war Japan, Buddhism contributed to the modernization of Japan and making her a world power.

Persecuted and secularized during the Meiji administration,<sup>12</sup> the temple-based Japanese Buddhists struggled to make themselves relevant in the eyes of the nation. So nationalistic were they (or perhaps out of desperation), that both the Soto Zen and Rinzai Zen sects even promoted the concept of “soldier-Zen” in their greater war efforts and the colonizing of “Greater Asia” during World War 2 – “so grievous-

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<sup>7</sup> Despite the Dalai Lama’s openness to all Buddhists, as a rule, followers of Tibetan Buddhism, esp local followers, even today tend to scorn, often violently, the Theravada, regarding it as Hīnayāna, the “inferior” vehicle.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Carus (1852-1919), after the Parliament became a strong sympathizer of Buddhist ideas, but stopped short of committing himself to Buddhism. On his own, he ceaselessly promoted his rationalist “Religion of Science,” declaring himself to be “an atheist who loves God.” See M Verhoeven, “Americanizing the Buddha: Paul Carus and the transformation of Asian thought,” in C Prebish & K Tanaka (eds), *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> A helpful study on this is David L McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford Univ Press, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> For references, see Analayo op cit 2014:21-23.

<sup>11</sup> See McMahan op cit 2008: ch 5.

<sup>12</sup> See **Monasticism, sex and marriage**, SD 66.13 (3): [link](#).

ly [they] violated Buddhism’s fundamental tenets that the school was no longer an authentic expression of the *Buddhadharma*,” lamented Brian Daizen Victoria.<sup>13</sup> What lessons do we learn from all this?

The crowd is easily drawn, like moths to the flame of promises and power, and religion is often used by gurus and groups to draw the masses. We must diligently avoid being seduced by a Google Buddhism, where it is trivialized and peddled like instant noodles and quick fixes for deep-rooted issues, forsaking vital human effort for a respectable fee. Buddhism then becomes merely a hustle for worldly enterprise and political agenda, doling out momentary pleasures, imaginative claims of power, or hopes of respite, but, in reality, insidiously prolonging violence and suffering.

Often such gurus, zealots and entrepreneurs themselves do not even know what really is driving them – their own past and tendencies – until it is too late.<sup>14</sup> Our task, then, when we teach Dharma, is not to draw a crowd, nor tap a market, nor entertain others, but to educate and inspire others. It can be darkest where the light is brightest. We should, by all means, get out of the guru’s dark shadow, and stay in the safety and joy of the true Dharma light.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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<sup>13</sup> B D Victoria, “A Buddhological critique of ‘Soldier-Zen’ in Wartime Japan,” in (edd) M Jerryson & M Juergensmeyer, *Buddhist Warfare*, Oxford Univ Press, 2010:105-130 (ch 5). See also B D Victoria, *Zen at War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2006; M S Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claw of the Buddha: Monastic warriors and sohei in Japanese history*, Univ of Hawaii Press, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> See **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17: [link](#).