

Global Buddhism

Buddhism is today a global religion, thanks to technology (especially printing, IT and the Internet), an openness to education, and its missionary spirit. A very vital aspect of this global Buddhism is a dynamic presence and meeting of eastern Buddhism and western Buddhism, especially the phenomenal growth of western Buddhism today. The two are of course often closely interwoven, as they are an integral part of global Buddhism.

The globalization of Buddhism can be seen as the two interlinked threads of development, namely, modernization and westernization. Modernization is effectively the rise of “Buddhisms” as Buddhist individuals or groups undergo religious changes, planned and unplanned, to keep up with challenges and changes, or to effect and sustain their presence and growth.

We shall here focus our reflection on the interaction between eastern Buddhism and western Buddhism. An interaction arises through seeing differences and a desire to learn from them. This interaction is further healthily encouraged by their common vision of the Buddha Dharma.

The main source of these differences is that while eastern Buddhism tends to be more steeped in spiritual insight, western Buddhism tends to be advantaged with social maturity. One interesting characteristic prevails throughout eastern religious history, that is, the co-existence, even to this day, of a number of religions in the same community or country, even where there is a dominant religion.

Although social and political unrest often storm such societies, the grassroots generally live and let live. Such religions are, as a rule, harmonious, when they are not used or violated by the powerful and the eccentric. This persistence of harmonious co-existence in the east is what nurtures numerous profound contemplative traditions, such as those we often see in Buddhism.

History is often a record of how humans inflict suffering upon one another, with interludes of peace and prosperity. So it is with religions. In eastern history, however, we tend to see less overlapping of religion and politics (except perhaps in some forms of Islam) than in western history. In other words, when the pre-modern generals, kings and emperors went to war or decided to expand their territories, it was only rarely that they did so for the sake of religion: they did so more for the sake of power and territory.

Only in western history, we see crusades, religious wars and campaigns to assert the presence and power of a particular religion, that is, Christianity. Such spirited and organized belligerence can only occur with the overlapping of politics and religion. As a rule, the western potentates and rulers were Christian (or at least nominal ones), and were defenders of the faith.

In terms of social history, such a centralized kingdom or empire (when there was peace) allowed the growth of wealth, knowledge, technology and greater power. With a common religion unifying pre-colonial Europe, whose royal families were often

united through marriages, they could then divert their attention to conquer other nations for God, glory and gold; hence, colonialism.

If we stand back and look at our histories, we can say that while the religious climate of eastern history (with less overlapping between politics and religion) tends to favour religions of personal transformation, western history, on the other hand, is marked by the morganatic marriage between politics and religion, that necessitates some level of social maturity, needed to hold an empire together, along with its colonies.

The sun may have set over the western empires, and wars today are more economic in nature than political, but the west now faces a new kind of invasion: that of eastern religions, such as Buddhism. In fact, the invasion is so complete now, we can say that the natives have completely befriended Buddhism to the extent of westernizing it.

Buddhisms, eastern and western, can greatly benefit by learning from one another. Eastern Buddhism badly needs to infuse itself with social maturity, that is, we must be willing and able to see ourselves as a “local” community living and working as Buddhists, and to have the courage to dextrously address both internal problems and external issues with wisdom and compassion.

Western Buddhism, marred by technology-centred materialism, spiritual fuzziness, and religious scandals, can further mature itself by imbibing the eastern contemplative tradition. They need to turn away from exotic and externalized Buddhisms, and move towards Buddha-like inner spirituality. A global Buddhism that has the hallmarks of spiritual insight and social maturity will make this world a very much better place.

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