

# Buddhism and Modernity

Jay L Garfield  
Smith College  
University of Melbourne  
Central University of Tibetan Studies

## **1. Introduction: Authenticity and Impermanence**

Those of us who are involved as teachers, scholars or practitioners with Buddhism in the West are—whether we wish to be or not—involved in a complex process of interaction between two cultures. Just as in the West Socrates urged that the most important task set for us in life is to know ourselves in the Buddhist tradition we are admonished to know the nature of our own minds as the key to awakening. In every Buddhist tradition, to know the nature of the self and its objects is the fundamental prerequisite to cutting off the root of cyclic existence.

So even though it might seem like a kind of mundane and secular phenomenon, trying to understand the history and the sociology of the transmission of Buddhism to the West, understanding it is necessary for understanding ourselves, just because we are so intimately involved with it, and understanding ourselves is necessary for liberation. This is just one more instance of the need to pay attention to mundane, secular phenomena around us, even if our primary interests are soteriological. Of course for those whose primary interest is the understanding of the contemporary Buddhist world for its own sake, it is plain that the engagement of Buddhism with modernity is an issue of concern. We should be alert as we examine this engagement to the inevitable transformations Buddhism will work on modern culture, as well as to the inevitable transformations that modernity will work on Buddhism. As we consider the transformations of modern culture in which the importation of Buddhism will issue, we should be aware of this as a missionary process, in which the West is largely a patient, not an agent. As we consider the ways in which Buddhism will inevitably modernize, we should be wary of the rhetoric of authenticity that can cloak a reactionary defensiveness among practitioners that can threaten the relevance of the Buddhadharma to the modern world.

Buddhism has been from the very beginning a missionary religion. Though this is a commonplace for anyone who has been involved in Buddhist Studies, it is something of which Western Buddhists aren't always explicitly aware when they first encounter Buddhadharma. Missionaries went out from Sanchi to spread Buddhism throughout India; Missionaries went out as well to Sri Lanka, to China, to Indonesia, and of course eventually to Tibet, Korea and Japan, and Buddhism has spread through Asia not by

accident, not by magic, not by sheer dint of the attractiveness or manifest truth of the Buddhadharmā, but through deliberate missionary activity.

In every one of these transmissions within Asia Buddhism has transformed the cultures that it has invaded. Equally importantly, in every one of these transmissions Buddhism itself has been transformed by the cultures that have adopted it. When we examine Buddhism's entry into China we see that Chinese society, Chinese philosophy, including the philosophical systems of Daoism and Confucianism, become deeply inflected by Buddhist ideas. We see the growth of Buddhist monasteries altering aspects of the economic and social organizations of China and we see the debates between Buddhists and Daoists and Confucians as developing the Daoist and Confucian tradition in ways other than they would have developed without this dialogue. When Buddhism was imported in Tibet Tibetan society was transformed beyond recognition from its pre-Buddhist nature to its Buddhist nature.

As I indicated above, this transformative process is a two-way street, and it is instructive to examine the way Buddhism itself was articulated and developed in China and to compare it with the way it was articulated and developed in Tibet. The schools of Buddhism that developed in China—the Hua Yen tradition, the Chan tradition, the Tian Tai tradition—look very different textually, doctrinally, and in the forms of practice they involve, from those that are developed in Tibet. The Indic scholasticism, as well as the emphasis on tantra we find in Tibet are largely absent from China. The emphasis on sūtra, the syncretism among Indian traditions, and the composition of apocryphal sūtras we find in China are absent in Tibet. Meditational practices are very different, and while vināya codes are distinct, actual monastic life looks quite different in Tibet and China. Given the topic of this chapter, there is no need to go into this in detail here. The issues are well-known.

Buddhist practitioners and scholars in almost every tradition valorize lineage and each valorizes the preservation of the “authentic” Buddhist tradition over the centuries. But it is also a central tenet of all Buddhist doctrine that nothing gets preserved unchanged and pure even from moment to moment, so that rhetoric of authenticity demands critique. Sometimes, that is, what appears to be heresy is in fact the most authentic and orthodox path. My own thoughts about what happens when Buddhism moves into the West are grounded in the conviction that the transmission of Buddhism to the West is in one sense completely continuous with what has happened throughout the history of Buddhism: the entry of Buddhism into diverse cultures, resulting in the transformation of those cultures and of Buddhism itself.

When we look from the West, for instance, at the multiple lineages of Buddhism in Asia, no serious scholar asks the narrow, parochial question, “Which lineage is the authentic Buddhism?” To do so would mark one as a narrow sectarian. One hopes as well that practitioners do not think this way. Rather, to the extent that we are interested in comparing traditions, we want to ask ourselves how and why Buddhism

developed so productively in all of these different directions. This multiplicity of lines of development, and the continuity of growth is a sign of the *vitality* of the Buddhist tradition, not of its *weakness*. We don't expect that a whole tree is going to look just like the roots; we hope that on each branch flowers are going to develop; and we don't see the diversity of form, whether in a living organism or in a society as a sign of ill health, but as a sign of good health.

I emphasize all of this—even though much of it is commonplace—only because very often in the context of discussions of Buddhism and the modern world, when one mentions the ways Buddhism transforms Western culture, people are happy to see this transformation and to see a kind of improvement in Western culture, but then when they see respects in which Buddhist practice or Buddhist ideas themselves develop or evolve or transform in interaction with Western culture, they become afraid and they recoil in orthodox horror: the Buddhadharma is no longer authentic! It's no longer pure! It's no longer real Buddhism! Something happened to it! It is that reaction that I really want to put aside, because transformation and development in response to engagement with new cultural contexts and new sets of ideas has been happening to Buddhism from the moment the Buddha touched the Earth at Bodhgaya. Buddhism has been transforming because all compounded things are impermanent and Buddhism is a compounded phenomenon.

## 2. Historical comparisons

Let us return to the difference between the transmission of Buddhism to China and the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet. This comparison will provide us with a useful way of understanding some of the interesting features of the transmission of Buddhism to the West, and will help us to see both what is continuous with the history of transmission within Asia, and what is subtly different. I will necessarily be guilty of a bit of caricature and overstatement but the caricatures will be useful.

Here is a big difference between the two transmissions: when Buddhism came to, Tibet Buddhism came to a country that had no written language, very little political unity, a religious tradition that was only really practiced by a tiny minority, and no written philosophical tradition. So, while it would be an exaggeration to say that Tibet was a *tabula rasa* for Buddhism, it wouldn't be *too much* of an exaggeration. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama sometimes puts it, “When we Tibetans decided that we needed a civilization, we decided we needed three things: We needed a religion, we needed clothes and we needed food. We looked at China; they had the best food so we took that. We looked at Mongolia; they had the best clothes, we took those; and we looked South to India; they had the best religion, so we took that.”

Tibet deliberately adopted a high-medieval version of Indian Buddhism, and in particular the Tradition developed in Nālandā University, and deliberately set itself about the task of replicating that very tradition and perpetuating and preserving it, creating the strangest museum culture that the world has ever seen—a culture developed to preserving a moment in 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century Indian culture forever, including its monastic structure, university curriculum, schools of doctrine, as well as traditions of medicine, poetry, etc... Tibet did a remarkably good job of this, and for that the world—not just the Buddhist world, and certainly not just the Tibetan Buddhist world—owes Tibet an enormous debt of gratitude. Without this preservation, with a remarkable, though to be sure not perfect, degree of fidelity, much of Indian learning and culture would have been lost, including most of Mahāyāna Buddhist culture.

In China the situation was very different. When Buddhism came to China, China was already a very old civilization, with a written language, a tradition of high culture, a well-organized government and educational system, and two well-established philosophical and religious traditions—the Confucian and Daoist Traditions—sophisticated literature, poetry, art. Buddhism came to this sophisticated culture from outside through missionaries. When Buddhism arrived, most literate and sophisticated people in China thought that Buddhism was weird, crazy, possibly dangerous to the social and political order and at least *barbarian*. And from the perspective of Chinese culture, one would have to say that they were right on all counts.

For this reason, the penetration of Buddhism into China was slow and deliberate. Buddhism was first adopted by what we might call the middle-class, an educated elite who were attracted to the unusual language and were interested in the philology, in the texts, and gradually developed an interest in Buddhist doctrine and practice. Of course Buddhism penetrated China very thoroughly over time, but it was a gradual and partial penetration: China never became entirely Buddhist. Buddhism always lived alongside the Confucian and Daoist traditions and while it proliferated in a number of different schools, none of these became politically dominant forces or majority religious traditions.

Moreover, because of the slow penetration of Buddhism into China, whereas when Buddhism came to Tibet an entire canon along with its history and doxography were delivered as a unit from India (give or take a bit) when Buddhism came to China, it came in drips and drabs, with an unsystematic selection of texts delivered, and the complete Indian tradition never entirely transplanted. The lacunae in the textual tradition are often as important in understanding the history of Chinese Buddhism as are the texts transmitted and composed in China itself.

There is a further difference that it is important to note: when Buddhism came to Tibet the Tibetan language was basically reconfigured and reinvented in order to translate Sanskrit, and became a highly Sanskritised language as a vehicle for translation, simply because there was no philosophical vocabulary

in Tibetan when Buddhism arrived. When Buddhism came to Tibet, the decision to translate the Buddhist canon into Tibetan was the decision to create a regimented system of translation, through which the classical Tibetan language came into existence as a vehicle expressly designed to translate Sanskrit. Translations were accomplished by teams of eminent scholars responsible to an imperial translation committee that ensured both the quality and the homogeneity in style and technique of translations.

When Buddhism came to China, on the other hand, classical Chinese was a highly developed and very subtle philosophical language with an extraordinary vocabulary for expressing philosophical ideas and a rich set of metaphors, arguments and concepts in common currency. When Buddhism came to China, anyone who wanted to translate could pick up a Sanskrit text and translate in his own way, using whatever vocabulary and textual approaches he saw fit. Most used the philosophical language of Daoism and Confucianism to render technical terms in Buddhist Sanskrit. The combination of multiple translators, a pre-existing philosophical vocabulary or set of vocabularies that more apparently than really overlapped Sanskrit vocabulary in semantic range, the haphazard order in which texts arrived in China, the lacunae in the literature that did eventually arrive and the lack of any central control over the translation process led to the creation of Chinese Buddhist translations that often differ dramatically from one another, and that deploy language that encodes philosophical meanings very different from those encoded by Indian Buddhism.

Now I find this contrast instructive, because when we think about the nature of the transmission of Buddhism to the West and we look for past models on the basis of which to understand it, the model is not Tibet. As Buddhism has come to the West it has arrived in a culture that is already literate, that already has political institutions and religious institutions and sophisticated philosophy and art and literature and ideas. It has come unsystematically, in dribs and drabs, with large textual lacunae remaining. No imperial translation mandate has been created. And Buddhism comes as a strange new import. Some people find it weird, some people find it dangerous, and some people even find it barbarian! We should imagine ourselves as in the very state that China was in when Buddhism first came to China.

And so for that reason, just as in China we find the development of a number of very different Buddhist systems of translation, systems of practice, systems of philosophy, each of them inflected by antecedent Chinese ideas, we should expect as we see Buddhism develop in the West that it will penetrate slowly, that it will penetrate in many diverse forms with many different translational ideas, inflected in very important ways by different ideas from the West. And just as Buddhism is alive and well and thriving in China, Korea and Japan, because it draws nourishment not only from its Indian roots but also from its East Asian rain and soil, it's going to be alive and well in the West for years to come because it

draws nourishment not only from its Indian roots but from the rain and fertility of Western ideas, and that needs to be a cause for celebration, not for anxiety, as we go forward.

### 3. Modern Differences

Now, similarities are one thing, but there is also a distinctive feature of the transmission of Buddhism to the West, one that has no real antecedent in Asian transmissions. In Asia, while Buddhism was transmitted *from* India *to* other cultures, there was very little or no back-influence from those cultures on Indian Buddhism or, for that matter, any such back-influence anywhere along the chain of transmission. China did not affect Indian Buddhism, Japan did not affect Chinese Buddhism or Korean Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism did not have effects back on Indian, and so forth: the transmission of Buddhism in Asia was very much a one-way street. But when we examine the transmission of Buddhism to the West, things look very different because this transmission occurs in the context of globalization and in the context of significant Asian diasporas in the West; and as a consequence, one of the very important distinctive phenomena that we see as Buddhism encounters modernity through the medium of the transmission to the West is the reflection of Western ideas and Western Buddhisms back into Asia.

There is a second major difference between the transmissions of Buddhism within Asia and the transmission of Buddhism to the West, because in Asia we typically saw the transmission of a single lineage or a single tradition from one place to another at a time. Nālandā went to Tibet, the Chan tradition comes to central China, the Tian Tai tradition into South China, the Theravāda Tradition into Sri Lanka and into Thailand. But when we look at the transmission into the West, we see simultaneous transmissions of Theravāda Traditions, of Tian Tai traditions, of Zen Traditions, of multiple Tibetan lineages all coming in at once, often to the same places! Because of their co-presence we see practitioners picking up not a single tradition or a single lineage, but a long list of practices and ideas and texts from different lineages; we also see Buddhist scholarship and the evolution of doctrine informed not by single textual or oral transmission lineages, but rather by the integration of ideas deriving from multiple lineages, coming to us in multiple languages. This multiple simultaneous transmission will have a profound effect on the shape of Western Buddhism and on the shape of Asian Buddhism as a consequence.

The complexity was evident right at the very beginning of the transmission of Buddhism to the West, as Western Orientalists, spiritual seekers, historians and philologists encountered Asia. But this encounter, beginning at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, also introduces a third distinctive feature of Buddhism's modern avatar: as Buddhism has moved to the West, Buddhism was, and continues to be, associated in an almost paradoxical way with the idea of *modernism*. The founding moment of all of this—this is again a bit of a caricature—is that strange American Henry Steele Olcott's arrival in Sri Lanka and “discovering”

that the Buddhism that he found in Sri Lanka was the most modern, most “secular “religion possible. Olcott noticed that Buddhism is atheistic; that it emphasizes the use of reason; that it encourages textual study; and he saw here the embodiment of all of the Enlightenment ideals he saw as incompatible with the religions of the West.

One might expect that Olcott would then simply return America to champion Buddhism. And of course he does. But before doing so, he does what every Buddhist teacher must do: he finds a disciple. And the disciple he finds is Anagarika Dharmapala. Olcott convinces the young Anagarika Dharmapala (a) that Buddhism is the true religion of the modern world and that he shouldn't become a Christian, and (b) that it's his mission to bring modernity *through* Buddhism into Asia. So Anagarika Dharmapala sets out both to modernize Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka and Asia and to modernize Asia through the propagation of Buddhism.

The discovery that Buddhism isn't ancient but modern, the inflection of Buddhism by modernity in Asia, begins at exactly the same time that Buddhism gets transmitted to the West. This representation of Buddhism as modern, and more recently as *science*, as *ecocentric*, as concerned with *human rights*, and even as *feminist* has been a constant trope in the development of Buddhism in the West, and, as a consequence, in modern Asia. This coequality of Western Buddhism and Western-inflected Asian Buddhism gives rise to a history of Asian Buddhism adopting Western ideas in the course of its confrontation with modernity, and the West adopting Buddhist ideas at the same time—and this is the deep tension that runs through Buddhism today—it is represented in Asia, and in the West; in the Dharma Centre and in the academy at the same time as ancient wisdom passed down through an infallible lineage, and completely modern and critical. This tension animates modern Buddhism.

Of course I am painting with a very broad brush, and to fill in the detail would require discussion of each of the many transmissions of Buddhism to the West and that is well beyond the scope of this chapter; but the big picture is still valuable, because this transmission of Buddhism to the West and this concomitant transmission of the West and of Western ideas into Buddhist cultures has been accelerated in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by the phenomenon of globalization and by the Diaspora of Asian Buddhist communities in the West, and understanding that big picture is central to understanding the state of Buddhism today.

#### 4. The Modern Western Inflection of Buddhism

Let us now review some of the important ways in which Western ideas have inflected Buddhism not only in the West, but also in Asian cultures, and in ways that they continue to do so. I urge that we think of this not as the pollution of a stainless transmission, but rather as the kind of development and flourishing of Buddhism that has made Buddhism a vital tradition over the past two-and-a-half millennia. This will not be an exhaustive survey, but should do enough to indicate the lay of the land.

Let us consider the socially-engaged-Buddhist movement which arose initially in South East Asia through the work with people like but not only Thich Nhat Hanh but also Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa. This tradition is a very new tradition, and it is a tradition of Buddhist organizations engaged in social service; in the development of schools, of hospitals, of social welfare agencies, of hospice care and so forth. This is a feature of Buddhist activity that many of us in the West take to be a natural outgrowth of teachings of compassion that have been present in the Buddhist teachings from the time of the Buddha. But this apparent truism raises a difficult question: if socially engaged Buddhism, or eco-Buddhism, is a natural outgrowth of the teachings of compassion why did it take a little over 2000 years to these things to happen?

This is a complicated question, with a complicated answer, but the real explanation of the recent emergence of these movements has less to do with any historical necessity internal to the Buddhist tradition than it has to do with the fact that the leaders of these modern movements interacted with Christian and Catholic missionaries as well as secular activists attracted to Buddhism. The Christian example showed that a religious organization could indeed be involved in mundane social welfare activities, and the Buddhist activists brought these issues to the fore within Buddhist communities, drawing from Western secular movements. It was hence an inflection of Buddhism by Western secular and religious traditions that brought about the socially-engaged-Buddhist movement. This is not a bad thing, either for the West or for Buddhism. But it is an example of how modernity has transformed Buddhism, and, many would argue, for the better.

Eco-Buddhism is another pertinent example. Consider Thailand where the institution of the ordination of trees has been introduced as a way of protecting forests, followed by the ordination of waterways and other natural phenomena. This is ordination in a metaphorical sense of course; but the idea that Buddhism is of direct ecological import—an idea encouraged and defended even by HH the Dalai Lama and HH the Karmapa, as a natural outgrowth of the doctrine of interdependence and the cultivation of compassion—is to be taken literally. But if we ask where this ecological teaching is promulgated within the classical Buddhist tradition, we will come up empty. It is not present in any Pāli suttas, or in any Mahāyāna sūtras, or in any classical Indian or Chinese śāstras. Instead, it comes from the Western ecology movement; it

was from the Transcendentalists, and from the Greens. And so this is another way in which Buddhism has been enriched and inflected by Western ideas, and once again, this is not a bad thing.

Institutionally, feminism has done wonderful things for Buddhism. The drive for the restoration of the full ordination lineage for nuns in the Theravāda and in the Tibetan traditions through the Chinese lineage did not come initially from Asian Buddhists; this came from Sakyadhita, this came from the work of Western nuns who brought Western feminism into Buddhism and created the impetus for full ordination. To be sure, the lineage and active fully ordained nuns was already prominent in Taiwan. But the extension to the broader community of women religious was a very much a product of Western modernism, as, we might point out, was the very pan-Buddhist consciousness that was required to transmit that lineage from China back to Thailand and Sri Lanka whence it came, and to the Tibetan diaspora community in its curiously European face. So again this is a way in which Buddhism has learned from modernity ideas; feminism is a modern idea; it's not a traditionally Asian, or a Buddhist, idea.

There is another kind of intra-Buddhist phenomenon that derives from the Western transmission that is less appreciated but nonetheless interesting, and takes us back to that early Buddhist modernist Henry Steele Olcott. Perhaps the strangest thing that Henry Steele Olcott did was first, to decide that Buddhism needed a flag, and then to design one. Now, of course, that Buddhist flag is ubiquitous in Asian Buddhist events and locales. I find it amusing to ask random Asian Buddhists about the origins of the flag. I am usually told sincerely that it dates from the time of the Buddha, or at least from the time of Aśoka. Few acknowledge that it was designed by an American military officer. Why is this important? Olcott's idea was that if you had a flag you had unity, and Olcott was worried that there was so much difference between Japanese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism that this threatened the very unity of the one religion that was truly modern. If only they had the same flag, he reasoned, people would know that Buddhism was a unitary phenomenon.

While the flag may not have succeeded in homogenizing the Buddhadharmā, the transmission to the West that Olcott's enthusiasm helped stimulate, as well as the pan-Asianism that his disciple Anagarika Dharmapala's mission to India helped to galvanize have moved us in that direction. If we attend to the Buddhist world in Asia now, one of the consequences of the multiple simultaneous transmission of Buddhist traditions to the *West* is that in the West Zen practitioners started talking to Tibetan Lamas who started talking to Goenka meditators who also started talking to Korean Zen practitioners. Sometimes a few Theravāda monks join the conversation, and all of a sudden sitting around a table in a Dharma centre or university in Sydney, Hamburg, Chicago are people in red robes, grey robes, yellow robes and brown robes all talking about ideas together. Then back in India, we find Tibetans going on Goenka retreats or sitting in Zen meditation. In Japan, we see Tibetan Lamas giving Mahamudra instruction in Zendo. In

New Mexico, a Westerner and a Tibetan might be found teaching together in a Japanese Zendo. And finally, we find in Sarnath, a Vināya conference drawing together monks and nuns from all Buddhist traditions for the first time since the great councils, and event that would have been impossible without the mediation of Western modernity. So the interaction of Buddhists in the West, who in Asia might have said “I am a practitioner of this lineage, your practice is not actually Buddhism,” leads to Buddhists around the world saying instead, “See that flag? We all rally behind the same flag. So, whatever superficial differences divide us, we all follow the same Buddhadharmā.”

This, I believe, is the most profound effect of the transmission of Buddhism to the West and of its absorption of modern ideas, including the ideas of progressivity and pluralism. Buddhists in different traditions are learning from each other. The insights that are available in the Tibetan tradition are often valuable to practitioners and scholars of the Zen tradition; insights from the Zen tradition are often equally valuable to practitioners and scholars in the Tibetan tradition. For centuries, great scholarship and practice have been present in every one of these lineages. But for too long, these lineages have been hermetically sealed from one another. This is the legacy the rhetoric of authenticity. It has been the reflection of Buddhism through the West in the context of modern globalization that has broken down those walls to the benefit of all of those concerned.

This interaction has been driven by a variety of forces, including immigration, exile, missionary activity, but also the institution of modern Buddhist scholarship—both Western and Asian—usually in the context of universities and colleges, but sometimes in the context of independent Dharma centres. Academic Buddhist Studies has had significant reflective influence on Buddhist practice because modern scholars to approach material differently from the way people in many traditional Buddhist cultures approach study. For one thing, modern scholars tend to focus on a kind of philological and historical completeness. We like to read a lot of different texts, and we like to read primary texts as well as commentaries. We work to excavate texts; we edit them; we read them; we translate and compare texts from different traditions, extant in different languages.

By contrast many of the traditionally Asian centers of Buddhist learning have fairly rigid, narrow historical curricula where very often students study primarily secondary literature, monastic textbooks or commentaries and not root texts. Even when they do study root texts, they often study only one or two root texts in a tradition. And when they study commentaries, tend not to study rival commentaries from other schools, but only the commentary of their own school. So for instance if you were to be studying Madhyamaka in most monastic colleges in Tibet or in Indian Tibet, you would not read *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. You might in an advanced course memorize Madhyamakāvātāra but you would only seriously study it through a single commentary within your tradition, or, more likely, through a

textbook or digest. You certainly would not even read commentaries even from other Tibetan traditions, let alone those composed in languages other than Tibetan.

If, on the other hand, you were to study Madhyamaka in most modern colleges or universities you would begin by reading *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*; you would read several other texts by Nāgārjuna; you would read you would read several Indian commentaries by those and then you would compare several Tibetan commentaries, and perhaps a Chinese commentary or two because that would be regarded as the right way to study the texts. As more and more traditional scholars and practitioners are educated in, or come to teach in, modern universities, this approach to textual study and to conceptualizing the structure of the Buddhist canon as a complex, conflicted, trans-cultural, progressive, multilingual canon infuses the world of Buddhist practice in its more traditional centres.

As a further consequence, strange things begin to appear on the bookshelves of traditional scholars and of students in traditional Buddhist centres of practice and learning. If you enter student hostels at the Central University of Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, for instance, you will find not only Sanskrit and Tibetan editions of texts, but also translations by Jeffrey Hopkins, Bob Thurman, or Don Lopez sitting on students' desks. When students are supposed be studying a particular text in Tibetan these Tibetan students are very often reading English translations and English commentaries, in part because they find the English much more accessible than the classical Tibetan, but for the most part because they find the modern scholarly approach to these texts by translators and editors who bring these texts into a larger context, more illuminating than that of the classical scholars who are often providing little more than word glosses. As a consequence, modern readings, often inflected by Western philosophical ideas, are now moving back into Asia as students who are studying these modern texts, learn Buddhism in in a modern register.

And this phenomenon of course is also opening Buddhist scholars' eyes to the presence of a sophisticated Western philosophical tradition that underlies a lot of these translations that they are reading. As a consequence we see Tibetan, Japanese, Chinese Buddhist scholars beginning to turn to the study of Western philosophy as a second way in to the ideas of Buddhist philosophy sometimes as a *pūrvapakṣa*, as an opponent to be refuted, but sometimes as a different way of putting some of the same points. And so, just as in China we saw Buddhism inflected by Daoism and Confucianism, in the West and in Asia we are going to see Buddhism inflected by the history of Western philosophy, the philosophical tradition that undergirds modernity.

Henry Steele Olcott's modernism of course is still alive and well; and we see that in the very rich and ongoing engagement with Buddhism and the sciences, in particular of course theoretical physics and neuroscience and cognitive science, which have been of enormous interest to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and to many other Buddhist scholars; and Buddhism as a reservoir of techniques has been of great

interest for instance to people in theory of pain reduction, stress reduction and so forth. Programs such as *Mind and Life*, *Science for Monks*, the *Tenzin Gyatso Scholars Program* and others are integrating Buddhism with modern science either through research or through curriculum development. These programs are motivated by the conviction that Buddhism and science are naturally in harmony; that they share the same basic outlook, the same empirical concern, and that their results will converge. While some might say that this convergence is inevitable because Buddhism always was a science, others see the convergence as inevitable because of the recent embrace of science by Buddhism, an embrace that has, perhaps surprisingly, been eagerly reciprocated.

The fecund interaction between Buddhism and science reflects and reinforces Buddhist modernism. That the techniques and analyses of Buddhism turn out to be of interest to scientists burnishes Buddhism's modernist credentials. But the genuine openness of Buddhist scholars and practitioners to developments in physics and psychology exemplifies Buddhist modernity and demonstrates that this is a tradition that is open to empirical science and to reason. In this interaction not only does Buddhism contribute to Western science but Western science contributes to Buddhism as well. When HH the Dalai Lama teaches about emptiness, for instance, very often he'll mention quantum mechanics. When he talks about the nature of mind he'll very often mention phenomena in consciousness studies or in neuroscience. These ideas and examples come straight out of the modern laboratory in yet another instance of the inflection of Buddhism by modernity

### **5. The Problem of Authenticity in Modernity**

It is a deep intellectual reflex of participants in an ancient intellectual or religious tradition to take one's task as the inheritor of that tradition to be to preserve pristine and unaltered that which has been handed to us by our forebears and teachers. And so when we see transformation or change in a tradition, insiders instinctively think of degeneration, and the cant of the degeneration of the Dharma has always been part of Buddhist rhetoric. From a Buddhist point of view history is often conceived as degeneration from an omniscient teacher through more and more fallible human beings, with the Dharma gradually attenuating on the way to disappearance. That vision is central to Buddhism's self-conception.

In a Western context, however, we think the other way around about history. We conceive of history as progress from a primitive to a more enlightened view. Kant, in his discussion of the *Aufklärung*, for instance, was talking about human progress as an emergence from, not a sinking into, darkness. Now those are two very different understandings of history. From a modern perspective, even in the Buddhist tradition we see *progress*, even if that progress is not acknowledged within the tradition. A Western scholar sees increasing sophistication of Buddhist philosophical thought, productive proliferation of readings, and improvements in social institutions and practice.

As Buddhism engages more deeply with modernity, we can expect this modernist conception of Buddhism to replace the self-conception in terms of decline. But that will take time and effort, because for now the Buddhist tradition is a deeply progressive tradition that is beset by anxiety about that very progress. The typical Buddhist commentary begins by saying: “I’m not saying anything new. All I’m doing is repeating what’s been said before.” Of course if that were true, nobody would read the commentary. If it really had all been said before, there would be no reason to waste a palm leaf. But the traditions are each full of this self-deprecation of originality. On the other hand, we find not surprisingly—a vindication of the modern perspective—that those whose work is valued most within any Buddhist tradition are, and always have been, the most theoretically innovative and creative teachers and scholars. Those to whose texts we and those we read return in the Indian tradition are read and re-read precisely because while they build on what went before, they innovate, despite their protestations to the contrary.

So innovation and progress is nothing new, nothing especially modern, in the history of Buddhism, only its acknowledgment. But this also means that when we note, as I have been noting, the panoply of changes wrought in the Buddhist tradition in the West and in Asia as a result of Buddhism’s interaction with modernity, we should not react in horror, and worry that Buddhism is no longer authentic, that it’s been *changed*. To react that way is to forget both what Buddhism is about, and to forget its most fundamental teachings. Buddhism is fundamentally about solving a problem, and the problem is suffering. It’s fundamentally about a diagnosis of the cause of that problem, and the cause of that problem is attraction and aversion grounded in confusion. Buddhist practice is grounded in the conviction that the elimination of that confusion can solve the problem, and that the Buddha outlined a path to that solution. None of that has been abandoned in Buddhism’s engagement with modernity, just as none of this was abandoned in any of the countless transformations of Buddhist doctrine and practice between the time of the Buddha and the modern era; none of that core commitment has been fundamentally transformed, even though its articulation has been and continues to be transformed in countless ways.

And in the *Dhammacakkapavattanasutta* the very first teaching that Shakyamuni Buddha gave upon gaining awakening... Shakyamuni Buddha said, “I teach you a path by the middle. It is not a path of annihilation, and it is not a path of permanence.” If anything is central to Buddhism it is that statement. The path of annihilation in the case of the personal continuum is the extreme view according to which that continuum is cut; that there is no identity and no continuity between successive stages of the individual. The path of permanence is the extreme view according to which there is something that persists unchanged through transformation, a self that is the basis of that transformation. The Path of the Middle is

the path that says that even though the continuum is constantly changing the continuation is never terminated.

So it is with respect to the continuum of Buddhist teachings, Buddhist transmissions and Buddhist practices. In the Buddhist tradition we have a continuum of teaching and practice that is constantly changing and never cut. We do not have to be bothered by the fact that there is nothing permanent that persists through that change, so long as the continuum continues to develop and to provide a path to the alleviation of suffering. Nothing could be more Buddhist than impermanence.