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# Introduction to Against Harmony: Radical Buddhism in Thought and Practice

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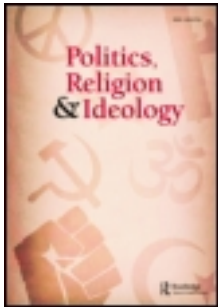
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### Introduction

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## Introduction

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But indeed most politicians, even the most ardent reformers and modernizers, have felt the imperative need to ally themselves with the revival of Buddhism and to declare their political aims as being consistent with Buddhism.

– Stanley Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 521

We have to understand what being a revolutionary meant at particular times and in particular places and why there were revolutionaries of that particular sort there and then.

– John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 12

### Buddhism and State Hegemony

Of all traditional Buddhist teachings, perhaps the best known is the emphasis on the so-called Middle Way (Sk. *madhyamā-pratipad*) or path of moderation between extremes. Indeed, moderation and its cognates – balance, harmony, equanimity and so on – have often from a doctrinal perspective and in public perception (especially in the West) been taken as the fundamental basis of living a life in line with the Buddhadharmā. Is it possible to transfer this avoidance of extreme and radical positions to Buddhism's link with the political sphere; i.e., its (non-)potential to fuel critique, resistance and opposition? Due to the tremendous heterogeneity of Buddhism(s) and its varying constellations with politics across cultures and historical periods, this question may seem far too simplistic. However, what one can attest is that Buddhism's spread and propagation as a 'world religion' was often dependent on cooperation with – and patronage by – powerful rulers. Comparable to other expansive world religions that aligned themselves with politics and developed

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religiously underpinned conceptions of rule, Buddhist institutions and individuals alike have tended towards political quietism for much of Asian Buddhist history. Max Weber's characterizations of Buddhism as 'a specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion, more precisely a religious "technology" of wandering and of intellectually-schooled mendicant monks' has been heavily criticized, but resonates with the idea of political quietism.<sup>1</sup> Although these images of Buddhism have no doubt contributed to the stereotypical image of the 'peaceful' monk (iconically represented today by the ever-smiling 14th Dalai Lama), a strong case can be made that throughout the history of Buddhism we witness, by and large, an acceptance – if not promotion – of the status quo of whatever political regime happens to be in power. Indeed, Suzuki Daisetsu (aka D.T. Suzuki, 1870–1966), whose work is largely responsible for the transmission of Buddhism to the West in the postwar period, once remarked that Zen, at least, can find a home in *any* political regime, be it democratic, socialist, or fascist.<sup>2</sup>

From a general, comparative perspective Shmuel Eisenstadt attests that Theravāda Buddhism, at least, 'had a much more positive orientation towards the political arena than Hinduism did. Political activity was not seen just as secondary to ritual and religious activity; it was defined as a reflection or representation of basic cosmic conceptions'.<sup>3</sup> Early Buddhism introduced a new relationship between politics and religion. By embedding its teachings into statecraft, Buddhism was able to give ideological support to concepts of rule and therefore often sustained the hegemony of ruling elites. This positive orientation to rule and statecraft is grounded in the constitutive narratives of Buddhist kingship. The ideological blueprint for Buddhist statecraft and its basic cosmic conceptions is the Mauryan king Aśoka (304–232 BCE), who ruled over large parts of India around 250 BCE and is said to have fervently promoted Buddhism. In this model of statecraft, the ruler was considered a 'wheel-turning-king' or 'universal monarch' (Sk. *cakravartin*; Pa. *cakkavatti*) or righteous ruler (Sk. *dharmarāja*; Pa. *dharmaraja*) standing at the apex of social organization. In early Buddhism (and partially throughout the history of Theravāda Buddhism), we witness the evolution of an ideology of Buddhist kingship that intertwines monastic order, polity and the population. The king as Cakravartin or Dharmarāja sustains his (ideally righteous and dhammic) rule with the support of the *sangha*, and this in turn is supposed to constitute proper moral conduct among subjects. John Strong, departing from his analysis of the *Aśokāvadāna* (The Legend of King Aśoka), remarks that 'throughout Buddhist Asia, the figure of Asoka has played a major role in concretizing conceptions of kingship and general attitudes towards rulers and government'.<sup>4</sup>

We find further textual legitimation of Buddhism's hegemonic tendencies in two narratives that have served as enduring references to this conception of kingship. Both in the story of King Mahasammata (described in the Buddhist 'story of creation', the *Aggañña Sutta*) and that of the Cakravartin (*Cakkavatti Sihanāda-Sutta*), the world slips from the condition of social harmony and equal distribution of property into increasing chaos

<sup>1</sup>Max Weber, *The Religions of India*, ed. and trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), p. 227. For an evaluation and critique of Weber's view of Buddhism, see David Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Shmuel Eisenstadt, 'A Short Comparative Excursion on the (Theravāda) Buddhist Civilizational Format and Historical Experience' in Shmuel Eisenstadt (ed) *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 324. For a discussion of the prevailing relationship between Brahmin and king in ancient India, see Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup>John Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 39.

and lawlessness.<sup>5</sup> Kingship so to say evolves as a social contract; i.e., the righteous rule of a king is supposed to ensure stability, prosperity and the spreading of the Buddhist *dhamma*. The sociopolitical landscape in which Buddhism evolved was also supportive of political centralization, alliances with rulers and social stratification. Richard Gombrich notes that ‘Buddhism presents itself as the product of the time of urban development, of urban kingship and the city nobles’ and proposes ‘that the Buddha’s message appealed especially to town-dwellers and the new social classes’.<sup>6</sup>

Although early Mahāyāna texts such as the *Prajñāparāmitā*, *Avataṃsaka*, *Sukhāvāṭī* and *Vimalakīrti* sutras, composed roughly 500 years after the death of Buddha in India and West Asia, tend to bypass discussion of social and political matters in favor of new and to varying degrees doctrinally iconoclastic reinterpretations of ‘traditional’ Buddhist doctrine, as Mahāyāna Buddhism entered East Asia – and China, in particular – it eventually (and fortuitously, at least in terms of guaranteeing survival in a vastly different socio-religious context) fused with hegemonic – broadly ‘Confucian’ – norms regarding social and political authority.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, texts were compiled in Chinese that explicitly adopted Chinese values of loyalty, harmony and filial piety into a Buddhist framework (e.g., the seventh-century *Sutra on the Profound Kindness of Parents*; Ch. *Fu mu en zhong jing*).

However, the best example of a ‘politicized’ text within East Asia is the text that has had more impact on East Asian Buddhists than any other: the *Lotus Sutra* (Sk. *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka sūtra*; Ch. *Miaofa lianhua jing*; Jp. *Myōhō renge kyō*). At the time of the emergence of the Mahāyāna, if not even earlier, it was common for Buddhists to appeal to certain texts, artifacts, or rituals for their protective – i.e., thaumaturgical, or ‘magical’ – capacities. Several of the Mahāyāna sutras, but particularly the *Lotus Sutra*, due to its grandiose claims to authority, were invoked as talismans for protecting the realm. The debates and disputes surrounding the acceptance of Buddhism on the part of the Japanese imperial court in the mid-sixth century CE were based entirely on whether or not these imported teachings and artifacts could help protect and preserve the ‘realm’; i.e., the power and status of the still-emerging imperial court. One of the earliest commentaries is attributed to Shōtoku Taishi (573–621), the sixth-century regent and so-called father of Japanese Buddhism. From the early medieval period, monasteries were constructed throughout the nation with the express purpose of reciting the *Lotus Sutra*, which had become established as one of several ‘nation-protecting sutras’ (Jp. *chingo kokka kyō*).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Stanley Tambiah, ‘King Mahasammata: The First King in the Buddhist Story of Creation, and his Persisting Relevance’, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 20:2 (1989), pp. 227–234.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 50, 55.

<sup>7</sup>See the work of Alan Cole for an excellent overview and analysis of the polemical and rhetorical moves made by the authors of the central Mahāyāna texts, especially *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); and the work of Bernard Faure for a critical analysis of structures and discourses of power in East Asian Chan/Zen Buddhism; e.g., *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>For more on the political implications and use of the *Lotus Sutra*, see Jacqueline Stone, ‘When Disobedience is Filial and Resistance is Loyal: The *Lotus Sutra* and Social Obligations in Medieval Nichiren Tradition’ in Gene Reeves (ed) *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sutra* (Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing, 2002), pp. 261–281; Jacqueline Stone, ‘Realizing this World as the Buddha Land’ in S.F. Teiser and J.I. Stone (eds) *Readings of the Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 209–236; James Mark Shields, ‘Political Interpretations of the *Lotus Sutra*’ in Steven M. Emmanuel (ed) *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 512–523.

Although this model of Buddhist support for the state was of course subject to huge variation over time due to Buddhism's multiple localizations as a world religion, the legacy of this socio-political alliance of Buddhism with hegemonic rule continues up to the present. Obviously, most rulers were and are a far cry from the Aśokan ideal. Indeed, this alliance has on occasion taken on violent and militaristic forms that sustain the rule of regimes that are in power in Buddhist countries.<sup>9</sup> Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer propose that we find in the history of Buddhism a 'widespread propensity among states to adopt Buddhism as official religion and for Buddhism to provide the rationalization for the state's sanctioned use of violence'.<sup>10</sup> Congruently, over the past several decades Asian Buddhists from Japan to Sri Lanka have been taken to task for complicity with oppressive political regimes.<sup>11</sup> Sri Lanka and Thailand, in particular, have been analyzed as cases where a kind of 'Buddhist fundamentalism' has evolved among more orthodox elements of the monastic order (*sangha*).<sup>12</sup> While much of the critique of 'Buddhist nationalism' and 'fundamentalism' has emerged from Western scholarship, some of it is 'homegrown' – for example, the Critical Buddhist (*hihan bukkyō*) movement in Japan.<sup>13</sup>

### Radicalism and Revolution in Buddhist History

However, the wholesale branding of Buddhism as a regime- and hegemony-sustaining religion is obviously too much of a generalization. As with other world religions, Buddhism also has its 'radical' and 'revolutionary' side(s). Throughout Buddhist history, heterodox individuals and movements have fueled opposition and resistance to power holders and regimes. From a *longue durée* perspective on Buddhist history, one can attest that over the centuries Buddhist ideas, figures, and cults have inspired (mainly peasant) rebellions and, on occasion, outright resistance to both political and religious authority. Perhaps the best examples can be drawn from the various forms of chiliastic and millennial uprisings centered on the cult of Maitreya (Ch. Mile; Jp. Miroku), the messianic Buddha of the future whose return will bring a new, golden age.<sup>14</sup> Despite all disparities relating to

<sup>9</sup>See Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke, *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2013), in which violence and militarism are linked to various forms of (often nationalistic) Buddhism.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Buddhist Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 9. Both *Buddhism and Violence* and *Buddhist Warfare* are indicators for a more critical understanding of Buddhism, which Bernard Faure has pleaded for on a more general level; see his *Unmasking Buddhism* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (London: Weatherhill, 1997); Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge, 2002), Mahinda Deegalle (ed) *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>12</sup>Bartholomeusz applies the term 'fundamentalism' with caution to some Sri Lankan Buddhists; see Tessa Bartholomeusz and Chandra de Silva (eds) *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998). In Thailand and Burma there are also fundamentalist movements, although these are more focused on a critique of modernity and capitalist economics; e.g., Santi Asoke Buddhists in Thailand. See Charles Keyes, 'Buddhist Economics and Buddhist Fundamentalism in Thailand and Burma' in Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (eds) *Fundamentalism and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies and Militance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 367–410.

<sup>13</sup>For an overview and analysis of Critical Buddhism, see James Mark Shields, *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought* (London: Ashgate, 2011). Of course, the global flow of knowledge, reactions to colonialism and the rationalizing influences of modernity make it hard to clearly distinguish 'home-grown' critical Buddhist movements from 'Western' ones. For the Theravāda case and its transformation through the colonial encounter see, for example, Elisabeth Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth-century Sri Lanka* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>14</sup>For an overview of Maitreya and his various interpretations in Buddhist traditions, see Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (eds) *Maitreya: The Future Buddha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).



sectarian divisions and localization of Buddhism in various geographical areas in different historical periods, Thomas DuBois suggests that ‘millenarian thought and devotion to Maitreya have appeared in almost every manifestation of the Buddhist tradition’.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the narratives, rituals, and ideas and practices surrounding the worship of Maitreya in the Buddhist world are exemplary for a comparative understanding of the radical and revolutionary potential of Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> Buddhism’s conception of time, and its widespread discourse on and prophecies of the decline of the Dharma and the world itself through the ages can be identified as another cultural matrix that – in specific contexts – can contribute to the evolvment of radical movements.<sup>17</sup>

As noted above, in medieval and early modern China various rebellions were fueled by a belief in the coming of a new era, and there is also ample historic documentation about the importance of the Maitreya-inspired revolts in the Theravāda tradition, notably in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.<sup>18</sup> Japan, as well, had its share of Buddhist-inspired unrest, including the *ikkō-ikki* uprisings of the Muromachi period, during which peasant farmers, monks and some nobles banded together to fight against samurai rule, under the inspiration of Amida Buddha and the teachings of the Shin sect. Many of these millennial rebellions were guided by charismatic leaders and by utopian ideas of equality, the coming of prosperity, just distribution of property and moral perfection. Thomas DuBois even suggests that Buddhist millenarianism ‘is a branch of utopianism’.<sup>19</sup> In his sociology of knowledge reading of utopianism (also extendable to millenarianism), Karl Mannheim proposes a distinction between ideology and utopia, in which ideology is perpetuated by dominant groups while utopia is largely linked to the oppressed and their efforts to counter the dominant ideology.<sup>20</sup>

Besides the millennial potentials of Buddhism, there is a second political-religious constellation that at times was essential for the development of Buddhism’s radical, ‘oppositional’ side, namely the tension inherent in the model of Buddhist kingship mentioned

<sup>15</sup>Thomas DuBois, ‘Maitreya’ in Robert Buswell (ed) *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), p. 538.

<sup>16</sup>See Patrice Ladwig’s essay in this collection for general reflections on the revolutionary potentials of Buddhism in the context of millennial movements.

<sup>17</sup>For an analysis of the frameworks of Buddhist historical thought in relation to the discourse of decline in early Indian, East Asian and Tibetan Buddhism, see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Susan Naquin, *Shantung Rebellion: The Wang Lung Uprising of 1774* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). For Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia, see, e.g., Charles F. Keyes, ‘Millenialism, Theravāda Buddhism and Thai society’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 36: 2 (February 1977), pp. 283–302. John Marston provides an interesting picture of movements with millennial characteristics in Cambodia: ‘Clay into Stone: A Modern-Day Tāpas’ in John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (eds) *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004). Also see Ashley Thompson, ‘The Future of Cambodia’s Past: A Messianic Middle-Cambodian Royal Cult’ in the same volume. Ian Baird has recently reanalyzed the millennial revolts in southern Laos and provides a good overview of the field: ‘Millenarian Movements in Southern Laos and Northeastern Siam (Thailand) at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Reconsidering the Involvement of the Champassak Royal House’, *South East Asia Research*, 21:2 (2013), pp. 257–279. In the context of contemporary Laos, Patrice Ladwig looks at the repression, absence and desire for Buddhist (millennial) charisma: ‘Haunting the State: Rumors, Spectral Apparitions and the Longing for Buddhist Charisma in Laos’, *Asian Studies Review*, 37:4 (2013), pp. 509–526. For Burma and the famous Saya-San rebellion, see Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King: History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup>Thomas DuBois, ‘Millenarianism and Millenarian Movements’, in Buswell, op. cit., p. 539.

<sup>20</sup>Mannheim defines utopia as a state of mind and elaborates: ‘A state of mind is utopian when (a) it is incongruous with the immediate situation and (b) when passed onto actions, tend to shatter the order of things’. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 341. Shattering the order of things can lend itself to radicalism and revolt.

above. In early Buddhism and Theravāda Buddhism we find not only cooperation between monarch and *sangha* (the ‘two wheels of the *dhamma*’), but also tension. The *sangha* was dependent on the patronage of Buddhist kings, but monks’ asceticism and moral purity – from which kings draw their power – can also be a means of critique. Steven Collins states that in relation to Pali Buddhism: ‘it is easy to find texts from all periods which take a critical view of kingship. Kings are paired with thieves, along with natural forces such as fire and water, as phenomena which can bring danger and ruin’.<sup>21</sup> However, as in the case of millennialism, what at first sight might seem radical may also be driven by a more conservative or ‘restorative’ ideology that aims at a return to an older (often idealized) social and religious order, as depicted in the *Aggañña Sutta* and *Cakkavatti Sihanāda-Sutta*. Many of the modern revolts in Southeast Asia were aiming at the reconstitution of traditional patterns of Buddhist rule disrupted by colonialism and/or rapid modernization. Causes for radicalism and rebellion vary considerably, as do their theoretical interpretations. Explanations range from theories of relative deprivation and growing economic inequalities to theories that embed the development of radicalism and revolt in a broader cultural perspective that extends beyond the economic and political realms.<sup>22</sup>

However, premodern forms of radicalism – whether inspired by latent Buddhist millennialism or emerging from its imbedded critique of Buddhist kingship – rarely had a lasting impact. Despite the fact that many of these rebellious movements indeed destabilized and changed the political order through active resistance and utopian aspirations, they rarely survived the death of their charismatic leaders. In the long run they were not able to question the political order in itself. Indeed, many if most of the Buddhist protest movements in the premodern period led by prophetic and charismatic leaders can be classified as mere outbursts of radicalism and revolt. This is grounded in the nature of charisma. As Max Weber suggested in his classical analysis of charisma as a form of power, charisma is inherently unstable, ephemeral and bound to a specific person. At some point millennial and restorative movements lose their dynamics and undergo a certain rationalization and routinization (*G. Veralltäglicung*), especially with the death or change of leaders. They fall back into more bureaucratic and institutionalized, and less radical forms of religious and social organization.<sup>23</sup> These forms of radicalism, rebellion and utopian aspirations can be understood as the emergence of potentialities, as a horizon where new possibilities become *temporarily* visible.

Charles Keyes therefore proposes that ‘millennialism as a religion is invariably a transitory phenomenon’, and that for the case of Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhism ‘despite the fundamental tension between monarchs and monks in the premodern period, the Asokan model for Buddhist polities was not fundamentally challenged until the expansion of colonial power from the late eighteenth century on’.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 423.

<sup>22</sup>For example, in *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), Ted Gurr links rebellion and revolution to the experience of frustrated expectations. Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965) interprets political violence in revolutionary and radical movements from a psychological perspective, as a way of healing the wounds of colonialism.

<sup>23</sup>See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, trans. Guenther Ross and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 296–297. For more nuanced and ethnographically grounded approaches, see Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China* (London: Psychology Press, 2001); Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 319 ff.

<sup>24</sup>Charles F. Keyes, ‘Millennialism’, p. 302; Charles F. Keyes, ‘Buddhism Confronts the State’ in John Whalen-Bridge and Pattana Kitiarsa (eds) *Buddhism, Modernity and the State in Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 21.



## Modern Buddhist Radicalism and Buddhist Socialism

Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we witness the emergence of more concerted and ideologically grounded forms of political radicalism in Asia. Trying to achieve social change beyond temporary rebellion and resistance, Marxist-inspired movements so-to-say set out to ‘professionalize’ the rebellious potentials of peasants and develop theories about revolutions and long-lasting social change.<sup>25</sup> Whereas millennial rebellions were understood as mere temporary outbursts, Marxist theory defined revolution as a rapid, but long-lasting fundamental transformation of the state and social structure with the aim of instituting these new power relations on a continuous basis.<sup>26</sup>

Given how deeply embedded are Buddhist traditions in various cultures and nations throughout Asia, it comes as no surprise that Buddhists, too, were directly affected by Marxist and related ideas. And yet, taking into account that the public interaction between communism and religion has usually been perceived (with justification) as being marked by mutual antagonism, the other side of this interaction – namely the voluntary, intentional and at times synergetic interaction of Buddhism and various forms of Marxism – has often been overlooked.<sup>27</sup> The meeting of political, oppositional activism and Buddhism was in many cases rooted in the colonial context and other political situations marked by strong power imbalances, economic inequality and hegemony. Buddhist Asia’s confrontation with colonialism often involved an attack on, and a restructuring of the traditional alliance between, secular rulers and Buddhism. These developments forced religious leaders and institutions to react to modernizing pressure, to discourses of Western ‘rational’ superiority or sheer oppression through forces of external or internal colonialism.<sup>28</sup> Resistance to colonialism in some cases brought out the radical side of Buddhism, partially inspired by independence movements leaning towards communism and socialism.

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<sup>25</sup>There is obviously a large spectrum of approaches to revolution. For an overview of revolution and its differences from rebellion or mere resistance see, for example, John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); James DeFronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Bülent Diken’s *Revolt, Revolution, Critique: The Paradox of Society* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011) advances a philosophically inspired view.

<sup>26</sup>See the analysis of rebels and social bandits in Eric Hobsbaw, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1959).

<sup>27</sup>There is rich documentation about the oppression of Buddhism through various communist movements. See, for example, Ian Harris, *Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks Under Pol Pot* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2012); Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972). At the theoretical level, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his semi-autobiographical *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), argues that both Buddhism and Marxism aim for ‘liberation’ and, as a result, have no obvious conflict. Far from being a teaching of resignation, he insists: ‘This great religion of not-knowingness . . . bears witness, rather, to our natural gifts, raising us to the point at which we discover truth in the guise of the mutual exclusiveness of being and knowing. And, by a further audacity, it has achieved something that, elsewhere, only Marxism has brought off: it has reconciled the problem of metaphysics with the problem of human behaviour.’ In short, Lévi-Strauss sees within Buddhism a potential ‘missing link’ in the chain between the quest for individual contentment and the drive for social justice. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), pp. 395–396. These somewhat offhand comments struck a chord with Jacques Derrida, who comments on them, critically, in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978), pp. 120, 138. Bill Martin takes up this exchange in *Ethical Marxism* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008).

<sup>28</sup>For recent studies of Buddhism under colonialism see, e.g., Ann Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Anne Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860–1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007). Donald S. Lopez, Jr. has described the impact of the colonial situation on the study of Buddhism itself in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Even today – in an age where most people consider socialism and related ideologies anachronistic relics of the past – we witness invocations of Marxism among leading Buddhists. In 2008 the 14th Dalai Lama, speaking at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, explained: ‘I am a Marxist monk, a Buddhist Marxist. I belong to the Marxist camp, because unlike capitalism, Marxism is more ethical’.<sup>29</sup> Although the face value of such off-the-cuff statements should be questioned, it is interesting to note that in the twentieth century, particularly between the 1950s and 1970s, one finds efforts to merge Buddhism with socialist ideas and practices in practically every country with a significant proportion of Buddhists. In Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Sri Lanka, various forms of Buddhist socialism were promoted, especially in the postcolonial phase. In Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, Tibet, India and other places, monks and intellectuals looked for potential connection points between Buddhism, Marxism, anarchism, and so on in order to promote anti-colonial or social reform movements.<sup>30</sup> Almost 50 years before the Dalai Lama confessed that he belongs to the ‘Marxist camp’, Burma’s Prime Minister U Nu (1907–1995) launched a public campaign to transform Burmese society through the introduction of what he labeled ‘Buddhist Socialism’. Of course, Buddhism is not an exceptional case, as other forms of modern experiments in religious socialism clearly show.<sup>31</sup>

Buddhism and socialist movements encountered one another – one could say – in a short window of historical opportunity. This may be grounded in the fact that many members of the elite that were to rule after the end of colonialism came in direct contact with progressive ideas their educational years. A good example is Burma, where people like soon-to-be prime minister U Nu and the intellectual Thein Maung became acquainted with socialism and communism while studying in Rangoon and in the United Kingdom. U Nu translated parts of Marx’s *Das Kapital* into Burmese and Thein Maung became a member of Clemens Dutt’s ‘Communist League against Imperialism’ in London. Similarly, many Sri Lankan students who went to study in the United Kingdom were heavily influenced by Harold Laski’s lectures on Marx and later became influential figures in post-independence Sri Lanka.<sup>32</sup> However, this does not mean that

<sup>29</sup>More Politics: The Dalai Lama as Marxist Monk’, *Tricycle*, 24 January 2008, <http://www.tricycle.com/p/s65>. This is only one of a few statements in which the Dalai Lama reveals his sympathies for Marxist theory.

<sup>30</sup>Some studies that analyze the connection of Marxism (and related radical ideologies) and Buddhism will be discussed later in this essay. See in this volume the contributions of Chanju Mun on Korea, Hans-Bernd Zöllner on Buddhadasa’s Buddhist Socialism in Thailand, Justin Ritzinger on the reformist monk Taixu in China, and James Shields on the roots of radicalism among progressive monks in early twentieth-century Japan. For Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhism, also see Walter Skrobaneck, *Buddhistische Politik in Thailand mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des heterodoxen Messianismus* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1976) and Norodom Sihanouk, *Notre socialisme bouddhique* (Phnom Penh: Le Ministère de l’Information, 1965). For East Asian Buddhism see, e.g., Vladimir Thikhonov, ‘Han Yongun’s Buddhist Socialism in the 1920s’, *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture*, 6 (2006), pp. 207–228; Xue Yu, ‘Buddhist Contribution to the Socialist Transformation of Buddhism in China: Activities of Ven. Juzan during 1949–1953’, *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 10 (2010), pp. 217–254; Don Alvin (2001), *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001). Other studies not discussed here will soon be published in a volume edited by Patrice Ladwig entitled *Buddhist Socialisms in Asia: An Historical Perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup>The best example of this is the emergence of Christian (largely Roman Catholic) Liberation Theology in Latin America during the 1950s and 1960s. See Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and the Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Jim Bissett focuses on the evolution of these ideas in smaller communities, in *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999). For Islam see the now somewhat dated, but still substantial, work of Maxime Rodinson, *Marxisme et monde musulman* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1972).

<sup>32</sup>See Trevor Ling’s analysis of the meeting of Marxism and Buddhism in various Asian countries and with reference to the Burmese and Sri Lankan case: *Buddha, Marx and God: Some Aspects of Religion in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979), pp. 89 ff.

most of them completely abandoned their traditional education and Buddhist beliefs, but tried rather to merge them with what they had learnt (directly or indirectly) from and in the countries of the colonizers. As Tambiah rightly notes in the quote at the beginning of this essay, even the most ardent reformers felt the need to embed their modernizing agendas into Buddhist thought. Various forms of leftist thought here became part of a transnational knowledge exchange and movements against colonialism localized through a Buddhist lens, feeding hopes of a better future and independence from colonialism.

In some cases, the convergence of Buddhist protest movements, nationalism and anti-colonialism was more or less coincidental, anchored in the shared history of (neo-)colonialism. Just to give one example: the Buddhist protest movement against the Southern Vietnamese Diem Regime (with numerous self-immolations of monks) was most likely not connected to the Northern Vietnamese communist movement that tried to foster stronger resistance to ‘American colonialism’. And yet, the picture of Thich Quang Duc’s public self-immolation on a road in Saigon on 11 June 1963 became part of a global stream of images and served as excellent propaganda for the Indochinese Communist movement.<sup>33</sup>

Besides the incidental meetings of Buddhism and Marxism, one must also take into account that many of these evolving radical political movements instrumentalized Buddhism in order to win public support. The display of a propagandistic, Buddhist-inspired rhetoric initially enabled them to reach the masses with a familiar vocabulary, but later – after the seizure of power – they frequently discriminated against Buddhism as an ‘opium of the people’. Hannah Arendt’s dictum that the ‘most radical revolutionary will become a conservative on the day after the revolution’ resulted in some extreme cases in devastation of monasteries and mass killings. Despite the fact that in the early phase of communism some, for example, some Buryat and Mongolian Buddhist Lamas, actually supported the communist movement,<sup>34</sup> mass killings took place under Stalin a few years later.<sup>35</sup> Although the story of the Buddhism’s role in the Cold War largely remains to be written, one can attest that after World War II, Buddhism was often used as a political resource.<sup>36</sup> In particular, the ‘the propagandistic value of the Buddhist communities in the USSR’ was recognized for external relations with, for example, Southeast Asia.<sup>37</sup> Despite the fact that the success and failure of these radical and revolutionary movements varied considerably, and that elaborate theoretical and practical efforts remained more the exception than the rule, the impact of communist movements on Buddhism in terms of radicalization and polarization (beyond propaganda and discrimination) cannot be ignored. These cases provide a multitude of interesting questions that can shed light on Buddhism’s radical and revolutionary potential.

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<sup>33</sup>Recently, self-immolation as a radical Buddhist practice has regained attention in the context of Tibetan resistance against Chinese political repression. On Vietnamese self-immolations and their political significance, see Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Recent self-immolations in Tibet are excellently analyzed by Carole McGranahan and Ralph Litzinger (eds), *Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet*, Special Issue of Cultural Anthropology, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/93-self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>, 2012, accessed 12 January 2014.

<sup>34</sup>Emanuel Sarkisyanz, ‘Communism and Lamaist Utopianism in Central Asia’, *The Review of Politics*, 20:4 (1958), pp. 623–633.

<sup>35</sup>With over 100,000 monks in the 1920s, the Mongolian Buddhist *sangha* had virtually disappeared by 1940. See Michael Jerryson, *Mongolian Buddhism: The Rise and Fall of the Sangha* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2007), p. 90.

<sup>36</sup>One notable exception to the lack of scholarship on the topic is the unpublished doctoral thesis of Eugene Ford, *Cold War Monks: An International History of Buddhism, Politics and Regionalism in Thailand and Southeast Asia, 1941–1976* (Yale University, 2012).

<sup>37</sup>Ling, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

How can we conceptualize this meeting of radical, leftist politics and Buddhism? The postcolonial moment in Southeast Asia and other Buddhist regions of Asia fostered hopes and aspirations for a merging of ‘tradition’ with ‘modernity’, often aiming at indigenizing modernity beyond the mere imitation of colonial powers. Although these movements were often using a rhetoric and vocabulary derived from ‘Western’ ideologies such as nationalism(s) and communism, a model of cultural transmission that assumes that the ‘West’ as the origin of these ideas and depicts Asian Buddhists as passive recipients is no longer adequate to understand these processes – indeed, in some ways this ironically perpetuates the very orientalist assumptions this model is ostensibly trying to combat. In this volume of essays our contributors reflect on the creative appropriations, deflections, localizations and reinterpretations of various progressive and radical ideologies. Instead of searching for the origins of these ideas in the West, the emphasis has to be on the ‘autonomous histories’ within which these movements were embedded.<sup>38</sup> This takes us beyond simplistic dichotomies of East and West, tradition and modernity, and towards an emphasis on historiography, localization and the application of emic viewpoints to the multiplicity of visions of modernity, or what Shmuel Eisenstadt has called ‘multiple modernities’.<sup>39</sup> This is also taken into account by David McLellan, who starts his overview of the history of Asian communism with the very general premise that ‘Marxism had to come to terms with indigenous cultural values’, but then goes on to cite the Burmese socialist U Ba She, who in 1951 stated that Marxism and Buddhism are not merely similar, but ‘in fact they are the same in concept’.<sup>40</sup>

The seeming dependency of these Buddhist movement on Western ideologies might be one of the reasons why this undercurrent of Buddhism’s engagement with ‘progressive’ and radical politics has until lately largely been ignored in both Western and Asian mainstream scholarship. While the subfield of Buddhism and politics has over the years produced a body of important works, the focus has often been on the general configuration of Buddhism and politics, rather than on the potentially radical aspects of this relationship.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, although several works in the past few decades have dealt with the politics of Asian Buddhism, many of these have focused on specific cases of Buddhist individuals and institutions that have supported conservative political regimes.<sup>42</sup> While various publications on contemporary Engaged Buddhism serve to highlight the issue of ‘progressive’, socially engaged Buddhism, they rarely stray beyond the mainstream, liberal forms to

<sup>38</sup>The concept of autonomous history was first developed in John Smail’s article, ‘On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia’, *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 2:2 (1961), pp. 72–102. This approach takes seriously non-Eurocentric historiography (and not only history), indigenous concepts and internal dynamics. See Maitri Aung-Thwin, ‘Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 39:2 (2008), pp. 297–317 for an excellent review of these historical approaches and their relevance for understanding millennial movements in Southeast Asia.

<sup>39</sup>The concept of multiple modernities rejects the assumption that global modernity is derived from the West as a single source and that it follows a universal pattern. The concept is therefore also a critique of the classical, Western-focused theory of modernization and should also be transferred to the global circulation of ideas associated with various forms of Marxist-inspired thought. See Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, 2 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

<sup>40</sup>David McLellan, ‘Asian Communism’ in Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy (eds) *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 267.

<sup>41</sup>For a good general overview, see Ian Harris’s excellent volume *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007). Especially in relation to Theravāda Buddhism there have been a few landmark studies on the general relation of Buddhism and politics, such as Bardwell Smith (ed), *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Publications, 1978) and Gananath Obeyesekere, Frank Reynolds and Bardwell Smith, *The Two Wheels of the Dhamma: Essays on the Theravāda Tradition in India and Ceylon* (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972).

<sup>42</sup>See for example Jerryson and Juergensmeyer, op. cit.

which these movements tend.<sup>43</sup> The notion of ‘Buddhist modernism’ is certainly useful in many contexts and has been used rather cautiously and reflexively by some of its propagators, but we feel that the radical movements discussed so far and the case studies contained in this volume deserve a somewhat broader space.<sup>44</sup>

In terms of works that deal specifically with forms of Buddhist socialism and radical Buddhist praxis, there are a few older studies that went beyond the academic mainstream of their time and were already trying to grasp the impact of radical political ideologies such as socialism on Buddhism. Ernst Benz’s *Buddhism or Communism: Which holds the Future of Asia?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965) is somewhat superficial, but gives a good overview of the impact of Marxism and Maoism on Buddhism, as does Trevor Ling’s *Buddha, Marx, and God*, noted above. The most significant work is Emanuel Sarkisyanz’s *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965). Sarkisyanz’s work is of particular importance here. Written during a time when Buddhism was often conceived as a religion incompatible with socialism and even with modernity, the work used the specific case of Burma under U Nu to show how radical political ideologies such as socialism could be connected to Buddhist teachings and concepts of rule in a post-colonial Cold War context. Rebellion, resistance and aspiration for radical social reform were not only pragmatic copies of ‘Western’ ideas with some Buddhist surface paint, but according to Sarkisyanz were built on emic concepts: ‘Thus U Nu’s Buddhist socialism appears against the background of Burma’s intellectual history not as purely pragmatic adaptation to postwar political requirements but as a modernized expression of ideas deep rooted in Burma’s Buddhist heritage of the Asokan tradition’.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, Sarkisyanz’s research also extended this theme to Central Asia. Due to his proficiency in Russian, he was able to reconstruct the reception and transformation of communist ideas among the Buryats during the early phase of communism (i.e., the 1920s). Here, he found a strong association of the belief in the return of King Gesar and the coming of a Buddhist utopia, which by some Buryat Lamas was equated with the emergence of a classless communist society.<sup>46</sup> At that time, most Western commentators probably classified these indigenous understandings of socialism and communism as superstition or as a product of insufficient education. In both of Sarkisyanz’s studies, the dichotomy between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ – or more specifically, between premodern forms of political engagement and modern political ideologies such as Marxism – is far more flexible and permeable than often imagined. Only by taking these emic views and Buddhist appropriations of leftist ideologies seriously can we hope to understand what radical and revolutionary Buddhism meant at specific times in particular places. While on one level the message of the quote by John Dunn cited at the beginning of this essay (‘to understand

<sup>43</sup>See the work of Christopher Queen and Sallie King (eds), *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>44</sup>See David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). McMahan points to important topics such as demythologization, scientific rationalization, and so on, that are also of relevance for the movements we discuss here. Buddhism’s encounter with radical movements also provoked questioning into many of its basic assumptions; see, for example, MacMahan’s reference to the Taiwanese monk Taixu (pp. 75 ff.). However, the radical political aspects of Buddhism are somewhat peripheral to this otherwise important book.

<sup>45</sup>Manuel [sic] Sarkisyanz, ‘On the Place of U Nu’s Buddhist Socialism in Burma’s History of Ideas’, *Studies on Asia, Series I*, 2 (1961), p. 59.

<sup>46</sup>Emanuel Sarkisyanz, ‘Communism and Lamaist Utopianism in Central Asia’, *The Review of Politics*, 20:4 (1958), pp. 623–633. See also his earlier work, where central Asian Buddhist messianic thought is shown to have the capacity to resonate with tsarist and communist influence. Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus des Orients: Sendungsbewusstsein und politischer Chiliasmus des Ostens* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1955).



what being a revolutionary meant . . . ') is obvious, here it takes on a somewhat deeper meaning.

### Radical Reinterpretations

Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969), the French explorer of Tibet who managed to enter Lhasa in 1924, was also an eyewitness of the political transformations that were happening in Asia. Similar to Sarkisyanz's analysis of the relation of Buddhist utopia and the coming of communism in Central Asia, David-Néel observed a certain congruence between ideas of Buddhist utopia exemplified in the promised return of King Gesar and communist ideas of the revolution. In 1953 she asked: 'Would the idea of taking advantage of those remarkable messianic dreams that haunt Tibetan minds not occur to the leaders of Red China, now that they have installed themselves among them? Perhaps it has already occurred to them'.<sup>47</sup> Richard Shek, writing on millennialism in East Asia, seems to confirm David-Néel's suspicion almost 50 years later: 'In a certain sense, twentieth century Chinese revolutionaries, including the Communists, operated much in the same mode as earlier millenarian sectarians in their attempt to change the world'.<sup>48</sup>

How can we grasp such congruencies? How do ideas that were formed hundreds of years ago in texts, oral history and ritual practice get transformed in the stream of history in order to serve radical and revolutionary ideas and practices in modern Buddhism? We have already referred to the concept of 'autonomous histories' and the significance of emic perspectives. In short, one must take into account how Buddhists themselves have tried to reconstruct specific aspects of Buddhism (mainly from textual sources) in order to legitimize their radical and revolutionary aspirations. The efforts to connect these 'modern' Buddhist movements to 'traditional' Buddhist teachings, or even to the words and actions of the Buddha himself, is a crucial interpretative process that in the context of this volume is treated less as an issue of historical accuracy than as a way of establishing new frameworks of interpretation and hermeneutics.<sup>49</sup> That these novel readings are based on selective and often historically disputable arguments from the perspective of the 'scientific study' of religion might make it easy to dismiss such efforts as 'invented traditions', the product of overheated imaginations or even willful distortions.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, however, they enabled Buddhists to comment upon social developments, aspire for social change and promote forms of radical Buddhism in order to thereby actualize Buddhism as a living and politically relevant tradition.

How, then, was the convergence of Buddhist teachings, radicalism, revolutionary aspirations and Marxist ideology achieved? Can we identify recurrent themes or features that emerged in these discussions at different times and in different places? We can only allude here to a few points. A comprehensive history of 'radical Buddhism' might conceivably begin with the early *sangha* – whose ideas, values and activities were formed in a

<sup>47</sup>Alexandra David-Néel, *Le vieux Tibet face à la Chine nouvelle* (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 24.

<sup>48</sup>Richard Shek, 'Millenarianism: Chinese Millennial Movements' in Lindsay Jones (ed) *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, p. 6041).

<sup>49</sup>For more on Buddhist hermeneutics and textual exegesis see Robert Thurman, 'Buddhist Hermeneutics', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 46:1 (1978), pp. 19–39, and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Hermeneutics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992). Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), places hermeneutics in a larger discussion about Christianity and Buddhism.

<sup>50</sup>Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Although a useful notion, it can also be seductive to interpret the process of cultural innovation and adaptation as mere 'invention'.



period of intense social transformation in the light of the social and religious orthodoxies of classical India. Some of these movements presented the Buddha himself as a kind of revolutionary, opposing the caste system and promoting social justice. Other readings use Buddhist visions of utopia and the cult of Maitreya in order to equate this with the coming of a communist utopia and a Buddhist welfare state. Then we have movements that present the *sangha* as an Ur-communist community with democratic assemblies based on the equal distribution of property.<sup>51</sup>

Let us refer to some examples of these creative actualizations of Buddhist traditions in the context of radical and revolutionary ideas in modern Buddhism. The work of the D.C. Vijayavardhana gives us a good example how Buddhism was connected to left-wing ideologies. His 700-page work *The Revolt in the Temple*, published to coincide with celebrations of 2500 years of Buddhism in 1956, aims at integrating communism, Buddhism and Sri Lankan nationalism. Vijayavardhana first invokes Hegelian dialectics and states that: 'the thesis of traditional Buddhism and the anti-thesis of Marxian communism is incomplete. [ . . . ] We have reached a stage where synthesis is necessary'.<sup>52</sup> Many of his arguments for this synthesis refer to early Buddhism, its forms of monastic organization and its property rights as an example of a communist community:

The early sangha, as established by the Buddha, comprised real Communists whose precept and practice have virtually disappeared from the earth. They were a classless community every member of which was equal (*sama samaja*). They individually owned no property, all possessions being held by the community. [ . . . ] Here, as far as it was humanly possible, was realized the true Communist ideal of a classless equalitarian and non-attached society.<sup>53</sup>

Another popular argument used by Buddhists to point to the convergence of Buddhism, socialism and radical social reform is the alleged opposition of the Buddha to the caste system. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's (1891–1956) socialist-inspired interpretation of Buddhism in 1950s India, and its attraction for converts who wanted to escape the caste system, is largely based on this proposition.<sup>54</sup> The Buddha is here frequently depicted as a radical revolutionary, opposed the Brahmanic mainstream.<sup>55</sup> This has also evolved in many other contexts: during a conversation Patrice Ladwig held with an aging Lao 'revolutionary' Buddhist monk in 2008, the same point was brought up. During the 'liberation struggle against American oppression' in the 1960s and 1970s, the monks aligned with the Lao communist

<sup>51</sup>For a critical textual analysis of assemblies in the Pali canon, and the question of whether the early monastic community can be understood as an ideal society, see Collins, op. cit., pp. 436 ff. In relation to property rights, there are many cases in which the monastic order was also in the possession of large lands acquired through donations; see, e.g., Gombrich, op. cit., pp. 161 ff. Michael Aung-Thwin, 'The Role of Sasana Reform in Burmese History: Economic Dimensions of Religious Purification', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 38:4 (1979), even speaks of monastic landlordism (pp. 671–688). The work of Gregory Schopen on early Indian Buddhism has shown that Buddhism and business were much more closely associated than Western orientalist and native revitalizers have tended to believe; see, e.g., his *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

<sup>52</sup>D. C. Vijayavardhana, *The Revolt in the Temple* (Colombo: Sinha Publications, 1956), p. 603.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., pp. 596–597.

<sup>54</sup>On Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism and his efforts to merge it with radical anti-caste politics and socialism see, e.g., Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (eds), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>55</sup>See Aakash S. Rathore, 'What can Buddha Teach a Marxist?' in Bhalchandra Mugekar and Aakash S. Rathore (eds) *Buddhism and the Contemporary World: An Ambedkarian Perspective* (New Delhi: Bookwell, 2007). pp. 97–106.

forces argued that the Buddha's rejection of the caste system should be understood as an attack on feudal society and the oppressive class system. The monk also referred to the Buddha's biography: a story of a rich man who renounces wealth and power and confronts himself with the suffering of the world. Suffering (*dukkha*) was here interpreted in Marxian terms as the suffering of the oppressed, lower-caste people; or when transposed to modern times, the working class or peasants.<sup>56</sup> This argument has either traveled very far, or perhaps it is simply very suggestive and aligns well with modern interpretations of the radical and revolutionary potentials of Buddhism. No doubt the anti-brahmanical tone one often finds in early Buddhist texts inspired this interpretation. Richard Gombrich partially sustains this argument historically and states 'that by the time of the Buddha, there was already a whole milieu of renouncers, a kind of counter-culture with which Brahmanical ideology was struggling to come to terms'.<sup>57</sup> However, although Buddhism did have opposing views to Brahmanism, the statement that early Buddhism actively rejected the caste system and promoted an egalitarian society has been heavily criticized.<sup>58</sup>

In other interpretations we find even stronger arguments that depict the Buddha as a political radical, or even an earlier incarnation of Marx, Lenin and other leftist ideologists. Sarkisyanz, for example, states 'that Buddha was a predecessor of Lenin was a frequent claim of Soviet Buryat modernist Lamaism and even of some Buryat Communists in the 1920s'.<sup>59</sup> Here, Marxism is embedded into the cosmology of reincarnation and into a historical continuum that is marked by numerous appearances of different *bodhisattvas* through the ages.

Moving to Japan, whose largely 'self-imposed' process of rapid modernization after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 resulted in some of the first serious attempts to conjoin Buddhism with progressive and radical political praxis.<sup>60</sup> The most significant early examples of 'radical Buddhism' in Japan were Shin sect priest Takagi Kenmyō (1864–1914) and Sōtō Zen priest Uchiyama Gudō (1874–1911), both of whom were arrested in 1910 on trumped-up charges of plotting to assassinate the Emperor in what is known as the High Treason Incident (Gudō was among the dozen leftists executed in 1911).<sup>61</sup> Beyond its tragic conclusion, Gudō's case is instructive for his preference for an 'anarchistic' interpretation of (Zen) Buddhism, which highlights the power and responsibilities of the individual (via 'direct action') to transform structures that perpetuate suffering. By the 1920s, anarchism had given way to Marxism as the dominant trend within the Japanese left, and Buddhist socialism found a new locus in the life and work of figures such as Seno'o Girō (1889–1961), the Nichiren Buddhist layman whose Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism joined forces with secular socialist and labor parties to form a 'common front' dedicated to the destruction of the capitalist system. Made up of young scholars and social activists who were critical of capitalism, internationalist in outlook, and committed to a pan-sectarian and humanist form of Buddhism that would work for social justice and

<sup>56</sup>For more details on this exegesis of Buddhism through Lao revolutionary monks see Patrice Ladwig, 'Prediger der Revolution: Der buddhistische Klerus und seine Verbindungen zur Kommunistischen Bewegung in Laos (1957–1975)', *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung*, 15 (2009), pp. 181–197.

<sup>57</sup>Gombrich, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>58</sup>See, e.g., Yuvraj Krishan, 'Buddhism and the Caste System', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 9:1 (1986), pp. 71–84. Despite academic criticism, the point that Buddhism was opposed to the caste system has become a standard argument used by (even non-radical) modern Buddhists to point to their religion's 'progressive' character.

<sup>59</sup>Sarkisyanz, 'Communism and Lamaist Utopianism', op. cit., p. 632.

<sup>60</sup>For more on Buddhist socialism in the Japanese context, particularly the period 1868–1945, see James Mark Shields, 'Carrying Buddha into the Streets: Buddhist Socialist Thought in Modern Japan', in Gereon Kopf (ed) *Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy* (New York: Springer, forthcoming).

<sup>61</sup>See Shields's contribution to this volume: 'Zen and the Art of Treason: Radical Buddhist Priests of Late Meiji Japan'.

world peace, the League's quasi-Christian motto was 'carry the Buddha on your backs and go out into the streets and villages'. Established in Tokyo in April 1931, Seno'o's Youth League would survive for five years before being crushed in the widespread crackdown against leftist activists in 1936.<sup>62</sup>

However, Buddhists proposing such views were also aware of the fact that not all aspects of radical ideologies were compatible with their reinterpretation of Buddhism. There is already significant diversity in the thought and practice of, for example, Japanese Buddhist socialists themselves – not to mention 'progressive' Buddhists working from other national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Though we can only superficially deal with this fact here, let us stay with the example of D.C. Vijayavardhana and Sri Lanka. We see that despite the flexible frameworks of reinterpretation there were also limits in the construction of convergence between Buddhist teachings and Marxist ideology. Vijayavardhana primarily attacks Marxism's materialist conception of history and its Soviet version. He counters this argument, for example, with Buddhist teachings referring to the illusionary and always changing nature of reality and materiality.<sup>63</sup> In Burma, U Nu also distanced himself from some of the more materialist notions of Marxism and declared that despite the importance of Marxism, the Buddha's wisdom was to be considered superior to communist ideology.<sup>64</sup> And in the case just mentioned above, Seno'o Girō – and indeed, virtually all Japanese Buddhist socialists – expressed criticism of 'materialism' (or at least, 'vulgar materialism') that they saw within secular Marxist and communist movements. According to Seno'o, Buddhism helps to 'humanize' secular materialism – without becoming an 'opiate' in the process.

As mentioned above, discussions on the historical accuracy of these understandings are important, but here we want to emphasize the relevance of these novel readings of Buddhism in the light of its encounter with projects of radical social change. In order to understand the religious underpinnings of some of these radical and revolutionary movements in Buddhist Asia, we think it is crucial to take these reinterpretations of Buddhist traditions seriously. To dismiss them as neo-Buddhist fantasies far away from 'proper' Buddhism, or as so much 'flotsam' produced in the process of secularization does not help us to understand the transposition of these teachings. Moreover, what one the one hand might look like distorted and worldly images of Buddhism may, upon a second look, expose deeply embedded religious features of only seemingly secular political movements; or, in other words, the *political theology* of such movements.<sup>65</sup> The transformations of some streams of Buddhism into radical and revolutionary movements can only – as argued above –

<sup>62</sup>For more on Seno'o and the Youth League, see James Mark Shields, 'A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution: The Radical Buddhism of Seno'o Girō (1889–1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 39:2 (2012), pp. 333–351.

<sup>63</sup>Vijayavardhana, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

<sup>64</sup>For U Nu's Marxist education see Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford: Stanford, 1963). For his later critique of Marxism see Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 169.

<sup>65</sup>Political theology in relation to monotheistic religions has gained popularity in recent years. Going back to Carl Schmitt's dictum that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts', theories associated with this term try to uncover the religious foundations of seemingly secular political movements. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 68. Jan Assmann gives a wider definition and understands political theology as the 'ever changing relationships between political community and religious order, between power and salvation'. Jan Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil: Politische Theologie in Ägypten, Israel und Europa* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2000). See also Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (eds), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

be understood when their *meaningfulness* for Buddhist believers, practitioners and radical and revolutionary reformers are taken into account.

This brings us to a problem in the attempt to analyze the phenomenon of ‘Buddhist socialism’, whether in Japan or elsewhere: the very definition of the word ‘socialism’. In ways akin to the term ‘Buddhism’, socialism can mean different things to different people in different contexts and situations, especially when trying to move beyond a Eurocentric perspective. Also like Buddhism, the term is frequently employed by advocates, critics, and scholars alike as though it had an accepted definition upon which all agree. This is clearly not so. Even in the West, socialism, again, like Buddhism or any major religion, has experienced a century and a half of ‘sectarian’ schism, much of it acrimonious. Thus we have seen the rise (and fall) of communism, Marxism, anarchism, syndicalism, Bolshevism, Menshevism, Leninism, Maoism, and various forms of ‘social democracy’ – to name only the most prominent cases. The situation becomes even more complicated when these movements and their ideologies (along with their disputes and schisms) cut across cultural and linguistic divides.

One way to avoid getting bogged down with the issue of determining the precise meaning of ‘socialist’ is to employ alternative terms – ‘radical’ or ‘revolutionary’ – and understand Buddhist socialism as one subgenre of this more general category. For the purposes of this issue we define ‘radical’ as comprising any position that is: (1) politically engaged; and (2) in opposition to the hegemonic socio-political and/or economic ideology (or ideologies) of a given period. Thus, a ‘radical Buddhist’ is anyone engaged in the explicit or implicit use of Buddhist doctrines or principles to foment resistance to the state and/or the socio-political and/or economic status quo. When we follow the word’s etymology (from Latin *radix*: ‘root’) as well as the standard Oxford English Dictionary definition of radical as ‘forming an inherent or fundamental part of the nature of someone or something’ and as ‘advocating or based on thorough or complete political or social reform’, we also see a connection to revolution, defined as a ‘rapid, fundamental transformation of the state and social structure’.<sup>66</sup>

Again, this does not mean that these ‘radical’ Buddhists necessarily hold views that we would call ‘progressive’; the views and activities of radical Buddhists may fall all over the political spectrum, though they tend towards the extremes, for obvious reasons. In this sense, radicalism is ‘a relationship term not a content term. It describes not any particular set of aspirations and aversions, but a distance between what exists and what is desired, and the way in which proposed changes are justified’.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, one of the benefits of the terms ‘radical Buddhism’ and ‘revolutionary Buddhism’ is that it is context dependent, and thus frees us from having to make normative claims about the legitimacy or authenticity of these theories and practices in relation to standards of Marxism, socialism, anarchism, fascism, left, right and so on.

## Overview

This special issue came into being through the merging of two panels at the conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies held in Jinshan, Taiwan in June 2011: one

<sup>66</sup>Richard Stahler-Sholk, ‘Revolution’ in Nils Smelser and Paul Baltes (eds) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2001), pp. 13, 299; also see John Foran (ed), *Theorizing Revolutions* (London: Routledge, 1997), and Dunn, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup>Robert Barker, ‘Radicalism’ in Smelser and Bates, op. cit., pp. 12, 724. The term ‘radicalism’ and its shifting connotations through history (including after the events of 9/11) is analyzed by Paul McLaughlin in *Radicalism: A Philosophical Study* (London: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 7–40.

on Buddhist Socialisms (Ladwig) and one on Buddhist Radicalism (Shields). As some participants could not make it to the panels, we decided to merge them, which turned out to create interesting perspectives on the convergence of variants of socialist, revolutionary engagement and radical Buddhism. This volume explores six distinct cases of radical and revolutionary Buddhism, providing a comparative overview of the diverse interactions of different types of Buddhism and various forms of political radicalism and movements and thinkers with revolutionary agendas.

As an outcome of that joint panel, this volume focuses on the emergence and development of Buddhist radicalism in the modern period, particularly over the past 130 years. Contributors focus on Buddhist radicalism as a general phenomenon, but some of them specifically explore movements that were inspired by socialist ideologies in the broadest sense and therefore conceptualize these as examples of specific cases of radicalism with revolutionary aims. By examining the individuals (monks, scholars, and laypeople) and movements (both inside and outside the *sangha*) responsible for the creation and promotion of radical Buddhism, this volume deals with an area of Buddhist modernism that has hitherto been neglected in research. The contributions also examine the various ways in which the Buddhadharma and radical ideas were conceptualized as an integral part of the emergence of Asian ‘modernity’, both in response to and in resistance to Western imperialism and the forces of incipient globalization. By focusing on specific non-Western conceptions of modernity, the volume allows for a decentering of notions of a ‘universal’ (or purely Western) modernity.

Finally, as noted above, by understanding Buddhist socialist movements as ‘radical’, this volume allows for a broader conception of Buddhist resistance, and puts into question the definition of terms such as ‘socialist’, ‘anarchist’ and ‘communist’ when used in a non-Western and specifically Asian Buddhist context. Covering examples from Theravāda Buddhism (Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos) as well as various regions of Mahāyāna Buddhism (China, Korea and Japan), the volume explores the heterogeneity of these movements, while also highlighting the continuities that mark the connections and conjunctures between Buddhism and radical political theories and practice. While mainly historical in its outlook, the essays approach the relevant topics and materials from a variety of innovative perspectives, exemplifying a broad range of academic viewpoints and methods: historical, philosophical, anthropological, textual and cultural. Many questions are raised, and many left unanswered; but that is the nature of what we believe is a new and exciting sub-field within Buddhist Studies. We thank the editors of *Politics, Religion and Ideology* for working with us to make this special issue possible.

### Notes on Contributors

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