

# Buddhism in the Modern World

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*Buddhism in the Modern World* explores the challenges faced by Buddhism today, the distinctive forms that it has taken and the individuals and movements that have shaped it. Part One discusses the modern history of Buddhism in different geographical regions, from Southeast Asia to North America. Part Two examines key themes including globalization, gender issues, and the ways in which Buddhism has confronted modernity, science, popular culture and national politics. Each chapter is written by a distinguished scholar in the field and includes photographs, summaries, discussion points and suggestions for further reading. The book provides a lively and up-to-date overview that will be indispensable for both students and scholars of Buddhism.

**David L. McMahan** is Professor of Religious Studies at Franklin & Marshall College, USA. He is the author of *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford, 2008) and *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Routledge, 2002).

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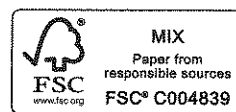
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# 6

## Modernist Interpretations of Buddhism in Europe

Martin Baumann

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In the early 1960s, a characteristic debate about the nature of Buddhism took place in Germany. Felix Knobeloch, founding member of the Buddhist Society Berlin, emphatically argued for a 'German Buddhism' as a religion grounded in reason, science, and rational insight in particular. A German Buddhism would solely rest on the 'purged canon' of Pāli texts, freed from later mythological insertions (Knobeloch 1960: 21, translation by MB). The *Majjhima-Nikāya* (middle-length treatise) in the translation by Berlin Buddhist Dr Kurt Schmidt would constitute the 'bible of German Buddhism' and reveal afresh the 'original teaching' of the Buddha (ibid.: 20, 19). 'As the Koran is the fundament of Islam, the bible the one for Jews and Christians, in a similar way German Buddhists must rely on a firm basis, and this is the purged [Pāli] canon,' Knobeloch argued (ibid.: 21). This self-convinced attitude based on an exclusively cognitive and rational approach to the understanding of Buddhist ideas and practices had dominated the self-conception of most Buddhists in Germany since the late nineteenth century.

In the wake of the incipient pluralization of Buddhism in Germany and generally in Europe since the 1950s, such an approach also constituted a demonstration of authority and defense. It did not remain unanswered, however. Lionel Stützer, member of the newly established Tibetan order Ārya Maitreya Mandala, referred to other characteristics of a German Buddhism: 'There are: contentiousness, assertiveness, hairsplitting, manner of know-all, but also diligence, studiousness, and seriousness. Each of the great and meritorious German interpreters of the Buddha word purported to present the "right" reading of the teaching,' as Stützer stated (1960: 44, translation by MB). Stützer warned against claiming to represent exclusively the 'original' Buddha teaching and opted to complement the understanding of Buddhism in Germany by references to Mahāyāna ritual, practice and insight. The prevailing rational and intellectual approach would benefit from meditative, intuitive, and ritualistic elements as taught in Mahāyāna and Tibetan traditions (Stützer 1948).

This minor though telling debate, echoing previous debates between German pioneer Buddhists, points to various central issues of Buddhist modernism. Knobeloch, aspiring to speak for the majority of Buddhists in Germany, was a lay person, not a monk. Also, Stützer was a lay Buddhist, as ordination in the order Ārya Maitreya Mandala did not assume monkhood (see Govinda 1986). Knobeloch emphasized rational, reason-based and demythologized aspects of Buddhism and underscored its full alliance with the natural sciences. He highlighted study and intellectual interpretation of scriptures and stressed the foundation of religion in texts. Still more, both disputants opted to re-connect in an essentializing way to the 'original Buddhism' and 'the words of the Buddha himself.' They distanced themselves from intermediate Buddhist tradition and developments and valued their own form of Buddhism as supreme and appropriate to their time. Also, modern aspects were displayed in public debates by way of written articles in journals and pamphlets.

This chapter will provide a sketch of the receiving and adopting of Buddhist ideas and practices from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first century in Europe. Chronologically organized, it will work out modernist ideas, imaginings, and interpretations of scholars and Buddhists in the modern period. While looking toward the East, most nevertheless remained deeply steeped in the European history of ideas and religions with, on the one hand, an emphasis on rationality, science, and demythologization, and on the other hand a romantic idealization of nature, art, and self-cultivation. Both orientations and predilections reshaped the figure of the Buddha and Buddhism to these underlying ideas and projections.

This chapter will provide the main facts of the history of Buddhism in Europe. However, the aim here is not a descriptive reconstruction of the historic developments, as this has been done in more detail elsewhere (Bechert 1984; Batchelor 1994; Baumann 1995, 2001, 2002). Rather, the contribution argues that the adaptation of Asian ideas and practices and their selective interpretation were strongly rooted in Protestant concepts, the Enlightenment, orientalism, and romanticism. As the adoption of Buddhist ideas and practices by modern Buddhists around 1900 and since the 1960s illustrates, re-interpretations and innovations creating a 'western Buddhism' typically employed the determination of a so-called original or essential Buddhism – hermeneutically shaped by pervasive concepts of the European history of ideas.

### **Initial Perceptions and European Lenses**

The initial reception of Buddhism in Europe was strongly marked by a selection of interests in ethics, philosophy, rationality, and a critique of European culture. Promoters were Western intellectuals and writers, as Asian immigrants of Buddhist background did not arrive until the late twentieth century.

Since the seventeenth century, reports of travelers and Jesuit missionaries and first translations of Indian scriptures by British officers provided an incipient and fragmentary image about Buddhist customs and concepts. As texts and descriptions of Indian religions became known in literate and academic circles in the late eighteenth century, enthusiasm for the East gained momentum. In particular, the Romantic movement with its rejection of the pre-eminence of rationalism and emphasis on poetry, art, and nature discovered the Asian world and its religious and philosophical traditions. German Sanskritist Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) coined the term 'Oriental Renaissance' for the movement in 1803, highlighting like many fellow romantics the longing for a genuine spirituality in India. Sanskrit texts would enable a reconnecting to a pure and unpolluted religiousness, supposedly lost in a Europe dominated by decadent Christian churches (Schwab 1950; Halbfass 1988; Batchelor 1994: 250–4).

Until the 1840s, European intellectuals did not understand Buddhism as a religious tradition of its own. Rather, they conceived Buddhist ideas as forming part of the beliefs of the 'Hindoos.' Typically modern, an academic study delineated the boundaries and differences between Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In 1844, French philologist Eugène Burnouf (1801–52) presented in his *L'Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien* the first scientific survey of Buddhist history and doctrines. He imposed a rational order on ideas hitherto perceived as unrelated, thus creating the 'prototype of the European concept of Buddhism,' as Stephen Batchelor argued (1994: 239). Subsequently, a boom of translations, studies and portrayals paved the way for an enhanced knowledge of and interest in Buddha as a historical person and in his doctrines. In particular, the philosophical writings of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) stirred up an intellectual interest in Buddhist ideas and ethics among artists, academics and writers. His one-sided understanding of Buddhism as basically a teaching of pessimism coined the image of Buddhism as a nihilist philosophy until long into the twentieth century.

During the days of initial reception, Buddhism was not exported from abroad by Asian people and representatives. On the contrary, it was imported from within by European orientalist, philosophers, and academics. Importantly, they molded and presented Buddhism according to their specific interests, either as a utopian panacea for Europe's attributed spiritual decline or, as with Schopenhauer, as a confirmation of his philosophical views. Characteristically Protestant in attitude, European writers and academics treated Buddhism essentially as a textual object, being rooted in scriptures and interpreted from written texts. Buddhism as actually lived in Asia was of no interest (Almond 1988).

Due to the dominant nineteenth-century Protestant discourse about religion in Western Europe, religion was conceived of as text-based, private, personally experienced, and acted out by the mature individual. This understanding defined the image of the typically modern religion and religious virtuosi. In the same way, it ostracized religious intermediaries, institutional tradition, hierarchy, and external authority (Matthes 2000; Behloul 2010). Early European Buddhists adopted and formed Buddhism along these discursive guidelines.

### Portrayals of the Buddha

In the nineteenth century, France, England and Germany had been the countries foremost in studying and textualizing Buddhism in Europe. The early portrayals of Buddhism and the Buddha engendered a growing interest among writers and intellectuals as well as critics and defenders of Christianity. In 1860, French statesman Jules Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire published *Le Bouddha et sa religion*. The account developed into one of the most popular works on Buddhism of the time. Like the

clergymen, he intended to discredit Buddhism and to establish the superiority of Christianity. A few decades later, with first Buddhist converts vehemently defending Buddhist ideals, the debate grew into a polemic and aggressive clash.

Up until the 1870s, scholars relied mainly on accidentally collected Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, be they Nepalese, Tibetan or Chinese manuscripts. Based in part on these, the American Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and the flamboyant Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. Blavatsky argued for a pre-historic Buddhism as the primeval religion of India and of all religions. As the first Buddhist-influenced organization in the West, it marked an increasing interest in Asian religions in the USA and Europe (Fields 1981: 83–118). Olcott's widely received *Buddhist Catechism* (1881) supported an idiosyncratic theosophical image of the Buddha, Dharma and the *saṅgha* and attempted to establish a correlation between Buddhism and science (McMahan 2008 99). Numerous branches of the Theosophical Society come into being, amongst others the London Lodge in 1878, the Lodge Germania in 1884, and a lodge in Austria in 1894. Obviously, in early twentieth-century Germany and England, Buddhists and Theosophists closely cooperated and supported each other.

The Theosophist advocacy for Eastern spirituality was paralleled by Sir Edwin Arnold's romantic poem *The Light of Asia* (1879, based on the Lalitavistara. His portrayal of the Buddha as a 'noble hero and reformer' and the teaching saturated by 'the immortality of a boundless love, an indestructible element of faith in final good, and the proudest assertion ever made of human freedom' (Arnold 1879: preface) appealed to the Victorian tastes and romantic longings of the time (Batchelor 1994: 261). The book aroused a strong interest among bourgeois, educated members of the upper and middle classes in Europe and the USA. 'The sale of the book exceeded a million copies in Europe and America, its circulation being wider than that of any other book on Buddhism,' as William Peiris noted a century later (Peiris 1973: xxiv).

These portrayals of the Buddha as a noble, ethical teacher coincided with a decisive shift towards the texts of the Pāli canon around 1880. British scholar and former official to Ceylon, Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) established the Pāli Text Society in 1881. Together with his wife Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids (1857–1942) he studied, translated and published Buddhist texts preserved in the Pāli language. 'Both presented Buddhism as an ethical psychology, deemphasizing ritual and religious elements ... and were among the first to refer to Buddhism as a "science of mind",' as David McMahan argued in reconstructing the main lines of modern interpretations of Buddhism (McMahan 2008: 52).

Along similar lines, German Indologist Hermann Oldenberg (1854–1920) with his Pāli based study, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order* (1881, English translation 1882), strongly contributed to establishing the Buddha as a historic figure and to popularizing

Buddhism more than any other study of the time in the German-speaking area. He held that the Pāli canon represented the authentic, original and pure Buddhist teachings, devoid of mythologies, interpretations, and accretions of later tradition.

With characteristic Protestant emphasis on the written text, the Rhys Davidses, Oldenberg and others developed the approach that considered the Pāli canon to be the authoritative access to the word of the Buddha. The shift from Tibetan, Chinese, and Nepalese sources towards the study of Pāli texts reinforced a demythologizing and anti-ritual attitude and mirrored the prominent evolutionist attempt to track down the Buddhism that was most ancient and unpolluted. With a typically anti-Catholic attitude, later developments of tradition and organization were held as priestly corruptions and distortions.<sup>1</sup> The scholars bypassed established Buddhist traditions and interpretations and ignored Buddhism as lived and practiced in South Asia. Interest was oriented toward ethical, philosophical, and scientific concepts which proved well fitting to the discursive pattern of a 'true' modern religion. This glorifying rational and purged construction of the Buddha and Buddhism was adopted by Buddhist reformers such as Dharmapāla in South Asia and established global flows of images and interpretation of 'true' Buddhism.

#### Buddhist scholar-practitioners at the fin-de-siècle

This predominant Protestant modernist pattern imprinted the adoption of Buddhist teaching among most pioneer converts in Europe at the turn of the century. Scholars such as Indologist Karl Eugen Neumann (1865–1915) and Dr Karl Seidenstücker (1876–1936) exclusively focused on the translation of Pāli treatises and rational aspects of the Buddha word. They had become self-converted followers of the teachings by their strenuous occupation with translating the texts. Neumann's translation not only intended to render Buddhist stories and teachings into German, but also to transform the passages in poetic language in order to appeal to the urban bourgeois audience of the late nineteenth century. Later Buddhist translators such as Paul Dahlke strongly criticized Neumann's rendering as free and fanciful. Karl Seidenstücker, founder of Europe's first Buddhist society in 1903 in Leipzig, reversed his Protestant upbringing as a son of a pastor to become an outspoken critic of state Protestantism and papist Catholicism. In his opinion, Christianity was dogmatic, authoritarian, and faith-based, and a principal cause of the decline of values and morals in Europe. In contrast, Buddhism was non-violent, a religion of reason and insight, based on empirical evidence and autonomous ethics, emphasizing personal responsibility. As such, 'Buddhism is the religion of the future,' as Seidenstücker emphatically ended his polemic treatise *Buddha and Christ: A Buddhist Apologetic* (1903 in German). The protest against Christianity was simultaneously combined with a process of religious emancipation from it.

The rational interpretations typically mirrored ideals and values of the urbanized middle class from which the majority of early Buddhists in Europe came. These bourgeois values accentuated personal responsibility, moral conduct, reason, and individuality. It was in these academic and learned circles that the values and ideals of European humanism and enlightenment were regarded highly, and appreciated in a romantic attitude. In this milieu, Buddhism served to retain these vanishing values, bestowing on them religious sanctification.

Two approaches to interpreting Buddhism that differed from the predominant rational and anti-ritualistic reading came to the fore, however. Instead of merely reading the texts and dwelling on scholarly abstractions, young men began taking the teachings and Theravāda Buddhist ideals to heart and went to South Asia for monastic ordination. Recent research has found, for example, that the Irish Laurence O'Rourke became a novice and years later a monk (Pāli: *bhikkhu*). Ordained as U Dhammaloka in the mid 1890s in colonial Burma, he appears to be the first western man to have taken the Buddhist robe (Cox 2009; Turner, Cox and Bocking 2010). In 1899, British Gordon Douglas was ordained as Aśoka in Colombo, Sri Lanka. More famous than these first two Westerners, the Scottish former Golden Dawn occultist Allan Bennett (1872–1923) was ordained a monk under the name Ananda Metteyya in 1902 in Burma.<sup>2</sup> Being in touch with 'eminent Buddhists in England, America and Germany,' in 1903 he founded the 'International Buddhist Society, to be known as the Buddhāsana Samagama – at first in these countries of the East, and later extending it to the West' (Metteyya, quoted in Humphrey 1968: 3). The foundation provides evidence of the well-established international exchange among early western Buddhists as well as for the aim to work for the collaboration of Buddhists globally. In 1907, some 25 Londoners assembled and founded the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland as an official branch of the international society. The objectives of the society were the spreading of knowledge of Buddhism and the study of Pāli. It comprised scholars (e.g. T. Rhys Davids), practicing Buddhists, and educated men and women, as well as leading Theosophists (ibid.: 5). In fact, unlike on the continent, Buddhist activities in Britain often consisted of a close cooperation of Theosophists and Buddhists until the mid twentieth century. Tellingly, long-time leading Buddhist Christmas Humphreys (1901–83) refers to his Theosophical conviction and his admiration for Blavatsky's beliefs (Humphreys 1968: 18).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in 1924 he and befriended Theosophists founded the Buddhist Centre of the Theosophical Society. A year later the members inaugurated a shrine room for meditation and started to publish a monthly bulletin (Cousins 1994).

These incipient endeavors sought to add practical dimensions of Buddhism to the translating, reading and rational interpretation of Pāli texts. At times, they were mingled with strong Theosophical convictions and romantic yearning for reconnecting to an 'ancient wisdom-religion'. In fact, many at those times did not

distinguish between Theosophy and Buddhism and quite a few became Buddhists by way of a Theosophical impulse.

A second approach to move onwards from intellectual reasoning and scholarly abstractions to lived and practiced Buddhism was taken with the attempt to establish monasteries for Theravāda monks in Europe. The first attempt was undertaken by Nyānatiloka, who was a former German violinist, Anton W. F. Gueth (1878–1957) and an ordained Theravāda monk in 1904 in Burma. Not long after his ordination, Nyānatiloka and other German Buddhists started plans for a monastery in Germany or Switzerland (Seidenstücker 1907). However, prominent figures such as the above-mentioned Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire and a number of Christian theologians strongly criticized Buddhism as 'devastating nihilism' and 'wretched pessimism' (Falke 1903: 70; Römer 1910: 162). In Germany the Emperor Wilhelm II had likewise publicly declared his disapproval of Buddhism in the 1890s.<sup>4</sup>

Nyānatiloka, therefore, went to the more liberal south Switzerland, where on Monte Verità, near Ascona, there was already an international alternative community of anarchists, vegetarians, socialists, early feminists, and other culture-critical people. During the winter of 1909–10, the 32-year-old monk lived in an Alpine shepherd's chalet, dressed in a traditional Theravāda monk's robe and scanty sandals. He suffered from the snow and the 'unspeakable cold,' as he narrated in his autobiographical notes (quoted in Hecker 1995: 29). After a brief excursion to North Africa he was invited to Lausanne to stay in the 'Caritas-Viharo' owned by the wealthy industrialist Bergier. It was there that a Buddhist ordination was conducted for the first time in European history, when in October 1910 the 23-year-old German Bartel Bauer became a novice. As donations for the planned European *vihāra* remained meager, Nyānatiloka left for Ceylon, where he founded the famous Island Hermitage on the island of Polgasduva in 1911. This island, purchased by Bergier and presented to Nyānatiloka, became an important venue for Western monks (Carrithers 1983: 26–45; Hecker 1995; Baumann 2000: 154–5).

The idea of founding a monastery had been influenced by the Theravāda model in South Asia as well as the life-reform movement with its back-to-nature orientation, vegetarianism, and agrarian projects. The fin-de-siècle produced multiple ideas and experiments to lay foundations for a 'third way' between capitalism and communism. Weary of the city and modern life, anarchists, socialists, artists, teachers, and others put their ideas into practice to reform decadent European society. In fields such as education, diet, natural healing, dress, nudism, sexuality, liberation of women, cooperative, community life, arts and culture, religion and spirituality, alternative and at times bizarre cultural forms came into being (Krebs and Reulecke 1998). Many of these attempts related back to ideas of romanticism and its idealization of nature as against society, simplicity, renunciation, solitude, and heroism.

The Monte Verità community, founded in 1900, was only one of many such projects,

though well known and frequently visited by reformist urban individuals (Szeemann 1980; Landmann 2009). Nyānatiloka and other Buddhists sharing romantic ideals strongly sympathized with the view of a decaying European society and life-reform as a means for healing. Nyānatiloka reports in his autobiography that he studied Schopenhauer at length in his teens and started to live the asceticism valorized in Schopenhauer's philosophy:

From about my seventeenth year I renounced alcohol and smoking, which I recognized as being harmful to body, mind, and morals.... from about the beginning of 1899, I became a vegetarian based on ethical grounds. After a lecture in the vegetarian restaurant 'Ceres' given by the famous theosophical speaker Edwin Boehme, I became an enthusiastic follower of Buddhism, more by feeling than through intellectual understanding

(translated by Carrithers 1983: 33).

Nyānatiloka's way to become a Buddhist was paradigmatic for many Buddhists of the time: He grew up in a bourgeois urban family, received a good education, read Schopenhauer, and got into contact with life-reform ideas and spiritual searchers such as Theosophists in his late teens. For many such seekers and culture-critics of the fin-de-siècle, it was popular to find guidelines for an ethically based life in the pre-modern history of Europe and the emerging history of non-European religions (Linse 1983; Kippenberg 2002). In line with the romantic Oriental renaissance, many hoped to find the unpolluted and original religion in India. Thus, romantic Buddhists earnestly hoped to bring about a regeneration of European values through the ethics and teaching of the Buddha. Assisted by Buddhism, portrayed as the oldest and wisest religion of mankind (the Theosophical version), European culture would step out of the darkness and world-weariness of the fin-de-siècle and resume its former grandeur and glory. The glorification of India and Buddhist teaching served as a means for a critique of contemporary society and morals as well as an impulse for reform. Here, the strands of romantic and rational Buddhists met and the protagonists emphatically worked to spread the universal remedy.

### **Permanent homes for Buddhism in the West**

After the devastating experience of the First World War, Buddhists emphasized the need for practicing the teachings. Although some small circles continued to aesthetically play with Buddhist ideas, in contrast newly founded 'parishes' emphasized religious practices such as worship, spiritual exercises, and devotional acts. The teachings were considered to be important not only for the mind and intellect, but also to the whole person. In 1921, Georg Grimm (1868–1945), a former Catholic judge, together with Karl Seidenstücker



initiated the 'Buddhist Parish for Germany' in Munich. The parish saw itself expressly as a religious community of lay Buddhists. Its members had resorted to the Three Jewels, i.e. to the Buddha, Dharma and *sangha*, and followed the five ethical precepts. Lectures held by Grimm were attended by about 500 to, occasionally, 1000 listeners.

In Berlin, Dr Paul Dahlke (1865–1928), a homeopathic doctor and Buddhist since 1900, made plans to establish a place for Buddhism. In 1924, some 14 years after Nyānatiloka's attempt for a *vihāra*, Dahlke and a few close followers founded the Buddhist House. In his inauguration speech Dahlke emphasized, 'the aim and intention of the house is ... to create a local focal point, a permanent home for Buddhism in the West' (Dahlke 1925a: 86). There, in the 'secure place of outer and inner purity' (Dahlke 1925b: 8), the tireless Dahlke put his ideals of renunciation, purification, and self-cultivation into practice. His view of Buddhism as a 'teaching of reality' culminated in his adopting an ascetic and virtually monastic way of life. Similar to Nyānatiloka, Dahlke praised the same attitudes and ideals, originating from the German romantic ideas of loneliness, self-cultivation, and moral heroism (see in detail, Baumann 2006).

In Britain, the Buddhist-Theosophical society continued to constitute the focal point of Buddhists and Buddhist Theosophists. On a brief visit to England in 1925, Ceylonese reformer Anagārika Dharmapāla expressed his vision to establish a permanent *vihāra* with a preaching hall, library, and residential quarters for monks (Humphreys 1968: 23). A year later, a British branch of Dharmapāla's international Mahā Bodhi Society was founded and in 1928 the monastery came into being with three resident *bhikkhus* in London. It was the first time that Asian Theravāda monks stayed for a significant period outside of Asia and lived according to the *vinaya* (monastic rules) in a European country. Though they were applauded on their arrival, leading Buddhist Christmas Humphreys pointed out that the monks needed to present 'the principle of Buddhism in a form acceptable to the Western mind' (Humphreys 1968: 31). Such a view and advice expressed by a lay person to *bhikkhus* would have been unthinkable in Ceylon and considered rude and unseemly. However, it illustrates the strong self-confidence of western Buddhists and their intention to reshape Buddhism according to the social needs of a modernizing society and its emphasis on an individualized and autonomous lifestyle (in particular in the bourgeois middle classes).

Only a few Buddhist activities occurred in European countries other than Germany and Great Britain until the mid twentieth century. Buddhist activities relied almost exclusively on one charismatic person who was able to attract people to his or her vision. In France, Grace Constant Lounsbury (1876–1964), a wealthy, American-born woman, founded the society 'Les amis du Bouddhisme' in 1929. The Paris-based group remained small, but succeeded in publishing its own journal, *La Pensée bouddhique*. In Switzerland, Max Ladner (1889–1963) inspired some Buddhist activities during the 1940s and 1950s; about 12 or 15 people met once a month in his private house. The

Zurich-based group published the Buddhist journal *Die Einsicht*. With its demise in 1961, the group ended as well. Although there had been a few scattered individual Buddhists in Austria, Hungary, and Italy (the famous Giuseppe Tucci, for example), no further Buddhist organizations came into being until the late 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

In general, from the 1880s to the late 1940s, the teachings and texts of the Pāli canon and the Theravāda monk as the ideal and model had dominated the European adoption of Buddhism. Philosophical, ethical and cognitive interests stood out clearly. The norm of a Buddhist in Europe was conceived of as a rational, detached person, who intellectually purifies himself (seldom herself) from the root defilements of ignorance, hatred, and lustfulness. Also, the idea of Buddhism as the oldest ethical teaching of mankind brought romantic seekers to embrace Buddhism. Rationalist and romantic Buddhists alike praised the Buddha and his teaching as a means to heal European culture from its moral decline – both at the fin-de-siècle and after the First World War.

Buddhism around 1900 and in the 1920s clearly formed an international movement with mutual visits, exchanges of letters, and reports on Buddhism in other regions of the world. This strengthened the endeavors of the numerically small groups and engendered a consciousness of a coherent movement of pioneer Buddhists. Quite a few European Buddhists had visited South Asia, whereas famous Asian modernist Buddhists such as Anagārika Dharmapāla and Daisetz T. Suzuki came for speaking tours to Europe. These mutual exchanges and contacts underscored the transnational characteristic of an increasingly global Buddhism. Even more, the supposedly rigid boundaries set up between 'Europe' and 'the East' or 'the Orient' (Said 1978) were being questioned with the idealistic adoption of Orient-Asian ideas, concepts, and ritual practices. Therefore, quite a number of the early Buddhists acted and thought beyond national categories.

#### Plurality and immigration<sup>6</sup>

This trend toward situating oneself and one's particular Buddhist group in a larger international context become even more apparent after the Second World War. The war had brought an end to most Buddhist activities in Europe. However, not long after the war, Buddhists started to reconstruct former Theravāda groups or founded new ones. The agony of the war led many people to look out for non-Christian, alternative life orientations. Buddhist lectures were well attended and Buddhist books and journals well received. From the 1950s onwards, new Buddhist traditions were brought to Europe. Japanese Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land Teachings) came to Britain (1952) and Germany (1956). Zen Buddhism became known through the writings of Daisetz T. Suzuki and Eugen Herrigel. Before Zen became popular in Europe, Nichiren Buddhism traveled with Japanese businessmen and students to Britain, France, Italy,

Germany, and elsewhere. Two decades later, a multitude of local Sōka Gakkai groups existed, with European convert members far outnumbering the Japanese members. Until the mid 1990s the Sōka Gakkai had been exclusive and formed no bonds or forms of cooperation with other Buddhist traditions. In the early twenty-first century the globally disseminated Buddhist organization appears to be one of the numerically strongest Buddhist groups in Europe (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994; Dobbelaere 1998; Hourmant 1999; Bluck 2006).

Importantly, and in contrast to the early phase of adoption, from the 1960s on a multitude of new groups, societies, and institutions were founded in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden. Buddhism spread more and more widely as attractive books and translations became readily available. Simultaneously, Asian teachers started visiting the incipient groups, lecturing and conducting courses on a regular basis (Yamamoto 1967).

The 1960s also brought about a considerable change in the way that members and interested people wanted to experience Buddhism both spiritually and physically. Meditation became very popular. Courses in Zen and *vipassanā* meditation were booked up well in advance. Zen seminars took place in increasing numbers, with teachers coming from Japan to guide the newly-formed Zen groups. In addition, increasing numbers of young Europeans had started to travel to India or Burma in search of 'Indian spirituality' and religious guidance. The romantic yearning for wholeness and originality was sought – again – in the East. In similar tone, ideas and ideals for a change and renewal of society were brought forward.

After the Zen boom of the 1960s and 1970s, a fascination for Tibetan Buddhism and its teachers started. Tibetan teachers (*lamas*) had first come to England, France and Switzerland in the late 1960s and had established centers. From the mid-1970s on, however, as further high-ranking lamas conducted preaching tours in Europe, Tibetan Buddhism took off. Many members of the protest movements and the counterculture of the late 1960s became fascinated by Tibetan Buddhist rituals, symbols, and the lives of the *lamas*, whom they considered inspirational, sensitive and endowed with charisma. Many hoped that Tibetan Buddhism would re-enchant what they considered a coldly rational society (Bitter 1988). In addition, the captivating appearances of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama inspired the Western followers. Since his first journey to Europe in 1973, the Dalai Lama has repeatedly visited centers all over Europe (and globally). For many, the Gelugpa monk is a living symbol and embodiment of deep spirituality, social engagement and altruism. Within only two decades, converts to Tibetan Buddhism founded a multitude of centers and groups, at times outnumbering all other Buddhist traditions in establishing centers.

This rapid increase, accompanied by an expansion of the already existing institutions, led to a considerable rise in the number of Buddhist groups and centers. In Britain, for example, the number of groups and centers quintupled in 20 years,



Figure 6.1 Wat Buddhapadipa – the first Buddhist temple in the United Kingdom, established by the London Buddhist Temple Foundation with the objective of creating a center for the dissemination of theoretical and practical Buddhist teachings in Europe

from 74 to some 400 (1979–2000, Buddhist Society 1979ff). In Germany, interest in Buddhism resulted in an exponential increase from around 40 groups in 1975 to more than 500 meditation circles, groups, centers and societies in 1999 (Baumann 2001: 19). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, numbers of Buddhist groups and centers continued to grow, though at a much slower rate. Processes of consolidation and establishment predominated, though new teachers and organizations still arrived from Korea, the USA and other countries.

Comparable explosive growth rates occurred in other European countries as well, such as Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France, The Netherlands, and Denmark. Also, Eastern European countries witnessed a growing interest in Buddhism following the political changes since 1989. In particular, Tibetan and Zen groups have been founded in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and western parts of the Russian Federation. Visits by European and North American Buddhist teachers, as well as a longing for spiritual alternatives to the established Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, brought about a steady growth of Buddhism in eastern Europe.

In addition to the strand of Western convert Buddhists, since the 1960s considerable numbers of Buddhists from Asian countries have come to Western Europe. In France in particular, many refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have immigrated. Paris has become the central place for Southeast Asian Buddhist migrants (Choron-Baix 1986; Kalab 1994). Vietnamese Buddhists in France succeeded in building a huge pagoda near Paris, following the impressive pagoda built earlier by Vietnamese Buddhists in Hannover (Germany). Also, in Great Britain, the Netherlands and other western European nation-states, refugees, migrants, and businessmen from Asian countries have found asylum or work. In the process of settling down, they founded religious and cultural institutions to preserve their religious-cultural identity and heritage. By visiting pagodas and temples, performing customary acts of devotional worship, and jointly celebrating Buddhist festivals, the Asian Buddhists regain an 'esprit de clocher' (Choron-Baix 1991: 22), a home away from home. More often than not, most Asian migrant communities have turned out to be markedly conservative, presenting a stable and familiar environment for their members in the socio-culturally foreign, often discriminatory, environment. Changes are inevitable, however, as the second and third generations grow up and aim to combine their religious-cultural heritage with Western ideas, aspirations, and ideals. Role models are changing, hierarchies are shifting, and calls are heard for modernizing rituals and performing them in European languages.

In general, during the second half of the twentieth century, two characteristics stand out: Buddhism was no longer dominated by a single main tradition, as had been the case in Europe with Theravāda Buddhism. Rather, since the 1950s, Buddhist teachers of various traditions arrived from Asia to win converts and to found centers.

A plurality of Buddhist traditions emerged, substantially supplemented by immigrant Buddhists. Secondly, the shift from intellectual interest to practical application deepened and spread through increased interest in meditation.

### Westernization and indigenization

The past century saw a tremendous change in the presence and constitution of Buddhism in Europe. However, one aspect has remained the same. As with the early Buddhists, many Buddhists from the 1950s on worked to mold, reshape and indigenize Buddhist teaching and practices to the needs of the autonomous individual and the conditions of a western society. Broadly, we may differentiate four main types of Buddhist outside of Asia:

- (1) first-generation immigrants continuing their culturally embedded Buddhism in a rather conservative manner;
- (2) convert Buddhists practicing Buddhism as closely as possible to the Asian model;
- (3) second-generation immigrants adapting and changing established roles, hierarchies, and practices;
- (4) convert Buddhists consciously reforming and reinventing Buddhist teachings and practices to align them with Western conditions.

Certainly, many sub-forms may be found in the by now very wide spectrum of Buddhists and Buddhisms in Europe. The remainder of this chapter will point to a few selected contemporary interpretations of type 4, i.e., Buddhists vigorously championing the modernization and indigenization of Buddhist ideas, practices, and world-views. Already in the 1930s, German-born Lama Govinda (Ernst Lothar Hoffmann, 1898–1985) argued for a new Buddhist order with the aim of viewing the 2500 years of Buddhist history as a coherent developmental process. Govinda gave the order the name of Ārya Maitreya Mandala (AMM, still extant, and to a large extent based on the core teachings and practices of Tibetan Vajrayāna), and he strongly favored a comprehensive understanding of the various Buddhist traditions and schools. According to him, in the West with the coming together of the different Buddhist traditions, 'we have the great chance for a new start today' (Govinda 1986: 25). The unprecedented access to all forms of Buddhism would enable modern Buddhists to crystallize 'the essential of all schools of Buddhism' (ibid.: 44). Govinda accentuated the value of intuition and the need for 'a profound change of the human personality by way of a heroic commitment of all psychic energies [Sanskrit: *vīrya*]' (ibid.: 36). Govinda shared a romantic longing and appeal for personal change with Nyānatiloka and Dahlke. Indeed, Govinda often referred to German Romantic Novalis and polymath Goethe and underscored the importance of art as true expressions of interior states (cf. McMahan 2008: 135–6).



Figure 6.2 Lama Govinda (center) at the Kasardevi Ashram, Almora (1966)

Though the order never did grow into a large and influential organization, Govinda's books, such as *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (1960, German 1956) and *The Way of the White Clouds* (1966), made him famous in spiritual and neo-romantic circles. Thus, he continued the idealization of Tibet by Blavatsky and others and paved the way for the later idealization of Tibetan Buddhism among Western converts.

With a different emphasis and more success than the AMM (in terms of spread and numbers), the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) programmatically works for a Buddhism fitting Western conditions. It was founded by the British-born

Sangharakshita (Dennis Lingwood, 1925–) in 1967 in London as a response to the dominant intellectual reception of Buddhism. Sangharakshita held that 'the FWBO is ... a Western spiritual movement, a Western spiritual phenomenon. It seeks to practice Buddhism under the conditions of modern Western civilization, which is a secularized and industrialized civilization' (Sangharakshita 1990: 54). Basic to the FWBO is its reference to 'the spirit of the Original teaching' (Sangharakshita 1987: 97). The organization deliberately ignores extant Buddhist traditions and does not align itself with any extant Asian school. Sangharakshita considers himself a translator who communicates the 'spirit' of the Buddha and Buddhist teachings to western people. In addition, western art and literature – such as that of Blake, Goethe, and Nietzsche – are introduced as so-called bridges to an understanding of the Dharma (Vessantara 1988: 9). In a way similar to Govinda, Sangharakshita refers back to romantics and art to stretch the mind 'further than the limits of its own rationality into the "distance beyond" of Beauty' (Sangharakshita 1986: 34). This presentation of Buddhism, coupled with its strong emphasis on the three-fold refuge, community, and integration of Buddhism into daily life, developed into a global organization. As the spread of the movement is not limited to so-called Western civilizations, Sangharakshita renamed the organization the Buddhist Order Triratna (Three-fold Refuge) in 2010. The old name 'Western' would no longer fit.

Whereas these and other contemporary Buddhist organizations stress aspects of romanticism, other groups and Buddhist proponents emphasize a rational and non-religious approach as a means for indigenization. For more than a decade, one of its most outspoken representatives of an agnostic and demythologized Buddhism is Stephen Batchelor (1953–). A former fully ordained Tibetan monk, the British writer, Dharma teacher and scholar advocates stripping Buddhism of such beliefs as *karma* and reincarnation. His best-seller *Buddhism without Beliefs* (1997) retells Buddhist history as a story of decline. According to Batchelor, interpreters turned the Buddha's succinct account of awakening into 'mystical experience' and 'truth' (Batchelor 1997: 1). 'At precisely this juncture, Buddhism becomes a religion. A Buddhist is someone who believes these four propositions.... The four ennobling truths become principal dogmas of the belief system known as "Buddhism"' (ibid.: 2). Batchelor distinguishes between 'Buddhism' – in his view a corruption of Buddha's awakening experience – and 'dharma practice' which needs to be acted out (ibid.: 3). The book emphasizes action and practice, avoids technical Buddhist vocabulary and presents the Dharma as an accessible way for everyone here and now. Thus, his exposition meets the tenor of the times, presenting the Dharma as therapeutic, radical, and agnostic. Interestingly, Batchelor's reading of the supposed original experience of the Buddha having become corrupted and 'controlled by an elite body of priests' (ibid.: 16) again takes up a line of argument which was already proposed by English Deists in the seventeenth century and antique philosophers in the fourth century CE in relation to

Christianity. The development of religion is a history of decline at the hands of self-serving priests.

### Conclusion

Many more approaches for an indigenization of Buddhism to Western settings have emerged during past decades of the adoption of Buddhism beyond Asia (Prebish and Baumann 2002). A characteristic feature of most modern Buddhist interpretations is their lack of reference to historic tradition(s). Rather, new approaches were legitimated by reference to the supposed 'original' word and experience of the Buddha. In a typical reformist attitude, modern Buddhist proponents advocate a return to the essentials of Buddhism. They self-consciously differentiate between cultural accretions and Buddhism's essential core. These core elements are often considered timeless, universal, pure, and 'original' teaching of the Buddha. Such a reading of Buddhist history and developments often entails suspicion and criticism of all of those elements not considered part of this essential core. As liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) had demonstrated already in 1903, such an interpretation carries hermeneutic problems, however. At that time, Protestant theologians debated the 'essence of Christianity' and its relation to the history of tradition. Troeltsch systematized the arguments and underscored that every essential determination is at the same time a shaping of the essence ('Wesenbestimmung ist Wesensgestaltung,' Troeltsch 1922 [1903]: 431).

Troeltsch demonstrated that a determination of the 'essentials' is actually the construction of an ideal. It provides a criterion for evaluating the progression of a tradition and its deviation from the 'essentials' (ibid.: 407). Early and contemporary modernist Buddhists acted in exactly this way: They eschewed orienting themselves with any particular Buddhist tradition or school and constructed idealized representations of the spirit of the original teaching (Sangharakshita), Dharma practice (Batchelor), Buddha as noble hero (Arnold), Buddhism as religion of reason (Seidenstücker), Buddhism as renunciation and self-cultivation (Nyānatiloka, Dahlke), and others. While they saw these ideals as representing the essence of Buddhism, these representations were constructed out of their own modern concerns and deeply rooted in their own historical and cultural contexts. These new interpretations were most often based on a romantic or a rational-scientific re-reading and reconstruction of the meaning and intention of Buddhist teaching. Early and contemporary Buddhist modernists have seen Buddhism as a means of renewal, a solution to the perceived state of crisis and the decadence of the times. While Buddhists sharing a romantic attitude proclaimed the value of personal self-cultivation, moral heroism, and re-enchantment, Buddhists with a rational inclination emphasized aspects of science, reason, and autonomous ethics. Modern Buddhists adopted new concepts and terms,

the underlying grammar of which more often than not was based on the European history of ideas.

### Summary

- Buddhist ideas were introduced to Europe from the late eighteenth century, emphasizing philosophical and ethical ideas but neglecting, however, any religious practice and ritual.
- Early Buddhists in Europe around 1900 exclusively relied on the teachings of the Pāli canon and accentuated rational aspects of the Buddha word. They held that the Pāli treatises represented the authentic, original, and pure Buddhist teachings, devoid of mythologies and cultural accretions.
- The practice of Buddhist teaching first started with young Europeans becoming Theravāda monks around 1900 and with the founding of Buddhist parishes in the 1920s. During that period, there were only few adherents to Buddhism but they had many contacts to other culture-critical movements.
- The pluralization of Buddhism in Europe started in the 1950s, bringing various traditions from Japan and Tibet. Since the 1980s, a sharp increase in interest and numbers of groups was observable, spreading Buddhism in all middle-class segments of European countries. In addition, the arrival of immigrants from Asian countries substantially broadened the numerical basis of Buddhism in most countries.
- The adaptation of Buddhist ideas and practices and their selective interpretation by modern Buddhists were strongly rooted in Protestant concepts, the Enlightenment, orientalism, and romanticism.
- While modern Buddhists sharing a romantic attitude proclaimed the value of personal self-cultivation, moral heroism, and re-enchantment, modern Buddhists with a rational inclination emphasized aspects of science, reason, and autonomous ethics. Whatever their inclination, they shaped Buddhism in accordance with pervasive concepts of the European history of ideas.

### Discussion questions

- Discuss how European romanticism was used as a template for interpreting Buddhism in Europe.
- Discuss how the scientific-rationalist line of thought was used to interpret Buddhism in Europe.
- Is it possible to determine the 'essence' of a religion without interjecting elements of one's own culture and presuppositions?

- Why do you think so many European Buddhists were interested in getting back to the 'original teachings' of the Buddha and saw much that came later as a decline or degradation of these teachings?

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## Notes

- 1 Typically Victorian and anti-Catholic, Edwin Arnold asserted: 'The extravagances which disfigure the record and practice of Buddhism are to be referred to that inevitable degradation which priesthoods always inflict upon great ideas committed to their charge. The power and sublimity of Gautama's original doctrines should be estimated by their influence, not by their interpreters; nor by that innocent but lazy and ceremonious church which has arisen on the foundations of the Buddhistic Brotherhood or "Sangha"' (Arnold 1879: preface).
- 2 As for his early involvement in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and serving as 'first magical mentor' of Aleister Crowley, see the website of the order, [www.golden-dawn.com/eu/displaycontent.aspx?pageid=153-biography-allan-bennett](http://www.golden-dawn.com/eu/displaycontent.aspx?pageid=153-biography-allan-bennett). The chronicle by Humphreys does not mention this connection; see the portrayal of Bennett by Humphreys (1968: 2–11).
- 3 Humphreys declared that 'I am yet unshaken in my view that the Theosophy of H. P. Blavatsky is an expression of an Ancient Wisdom-Religion which antedates all known religions, and that Buddhism is the noblest and least-defiled of the many branches of the undying parent tree' (1968: 18).
- 4 In the mid 1890s the German Emperor Wilhelm II personally signed a picture with the legend: 'Völker Europas, wahret eure heiligsten Güter' ('People of Europe, defend your holiest possessions'). The huge picture depicts allegorical figures of the civilized nations of Europe ready for battle with the onrushing legions of the Anti-Christ who, shrouded in dark clouds and the smoke of burning cities, take the shape of the Buddha. See the picture in the anniversary volume for Wilhelm II in Büxenstein (1898: 144).
- 5 For reasons of space, the article will leave out developments in Russia and former Yugoslavia; see Poppe (1956) and Batchelor (1994: 283–302). For the Buddhist temple in Belgrade, opened by Russian Kalmyk Buddhists, see Pekic (2000).
- 6 Adopted from Baumann (2002: 91–3).