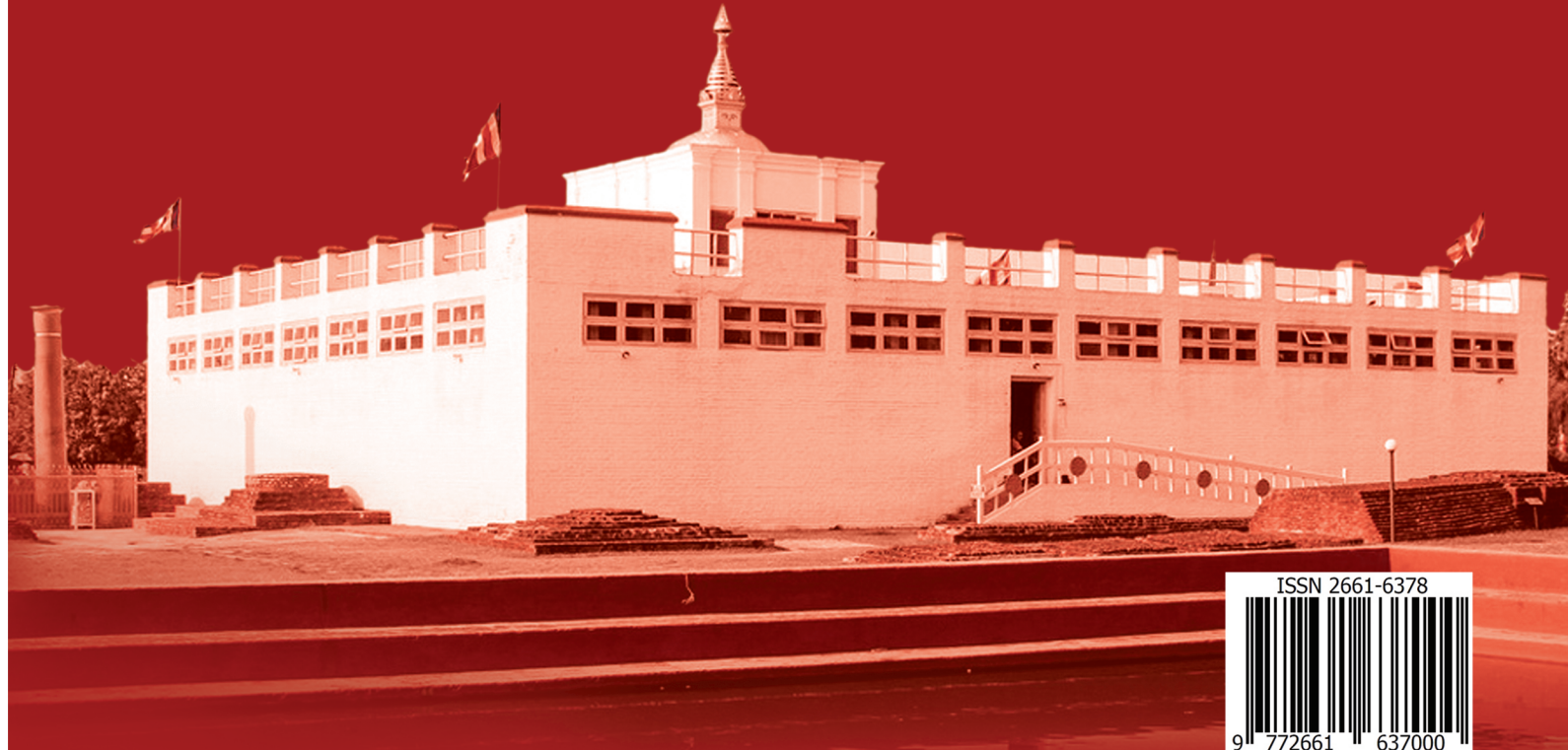




INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
DIVERSITY IN ASIAN
NATURAL PHILOSOPHY



LUMBINI BUDDHIST UNIVERSITY
in collaboration with
BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY



VOL. 1

DECEMBER 2018



LUMBINI BUDDHIST UNIVERSITY
in collaboration with
BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY



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BUDDHISM AS A CULTURE OF LIFE

-Tilak Ram Acharya

Abstract

With the glance of Westerners, portraying the contemporary Buddhism, specifically from Tibetan culture and tradition, this study presents Buddhism from a 'living culture' perspective arguing that the principle which links Buddhism across space and time is the concern with 'lived experiences.' This perspective highlights the origins of Buddhism in the Buddha's experience, and serves to unify ordinary and enlightened experiences as kinds of 'lived experiences.' As a result, the 'quality of living culture' of the teachings is understood in terms of the interrelationship of doctrine and practice; and expressed in relation to the subjectivity of practitioners in space and time. It is argued that this perspective challenges a number of current Western perspectives in the study of Buddhism which can be described as over-determining Buddhism as a heterogeneous and non-Western product; while concomitantly emphasising 'borders' between the ancient and contemporary, text and praxis, and culture, tradition and innovation. Particularly in the West, 'culture' is seen in diametric opposition to innovation; I argue that this view of tradition is foreign to the living tradition context. Rather, Buddhism engages with and through human experience, which by its nature is always contemporary. 'Living tradition' is thus that which maintains the transformative power of Buddhism; concluding that this living culture perspective is itself the foundation for Buddhism without limits.

Introduction

This study of 'Buddhism as a culture of life' begins from the reflections as a Buddhist practitioner for twenty years within the Tibetan culture and tradition. I have learnt that Buddhism is primarily a 'practical endeavour' concerned with understanding experience and transforming experience through that understanding. On the one hand, I have wrestled with what presents as dense philosophy to do with questions of causality, ontology and epistemology (to apply those terms), and on the other hand or indeed simultaneously, I have seen how in fact these enquiries are concerned with aspects of our lived experience as human beings. I have come to appreciate these two dimensions – philosophy and application – as not separate endeavors but both referenced directly through and to, our own human experience. Further, not only have I found Buddhism directly applicable to lived experience but it also presents to me both firm roots in its traditional past and relevance to my own contemporary experience. In the ways I have experienced Buddhism, I have found no contradiction or tension within this. I have seen how this has challenged not only my own, but also more generally held views about Buddhism when conceived from the perspective of being a 'religious tradition' which of course, remains a contentious

categorization of the teachings of the Buddha (Samdhong Rinpoche, 1998, public talk).

Reflecting on these experiences as representative of how many Westerners are engaging with Buddhism through ‘traditional’ teachers, especially from the Tibetan traditions, this paper considers how Buddhism presents in the contemporary Western context as a ‘living culture.’ This perspective serves to highlight not only the very nature of what Buddhism is and where it comes from, but also challenges a number of Western perceptions about Buddhism, Buddhists and traditions.

I present the living culture perspective as one where ‘lived experience’ is understood as the *singularity* within Buddhism which unifies doctrine and practice in space and time through the subjectivity of living practitioners. I borrow the concept of singularity from Wolfreys (2004) who utilizes it in relation to Derrida’s thesis on deconstruction as a means to both highlight the intent and unify his body of work. The singularity of a tradition or body of work is understood to be the ‘sustained and abiding concern’ which all writings, concepts and methods ‘bear witness to’ and demonstrate ‘responsibility toward’ (Wolfreys, 2004: 25). Applied to the living tradition of Buddhism, I suggest that ‘lived experience’ is the singularity which all within the tradition ‘Buddhism’ both bears witness to and demonstrate responsibility toward. As a result, lived experience as the ‘sustained and abiding concern’ within Buddhism, is that which then functions as the singularity to unify it *in* space and time and *across* space and time. Consequently, the singularity of lived experience ‘unifies’ Enlightened and ordinary experiences as kinds of human experiences.

Thus the singularity of lived experience highlights the living quality of the teachings; since they arise in human experience they are necessarily *experienced* by practitioners in space and time. As a consequence it can be said that within a living culture perspective, the ‘mind of the practitioner’ functions for the continuity of the ‘culture and tradition,’ wherein the ‘living’ component is reflected in the subjectivity of practitioners, conditioned by space and time. It can be then argued that by necessity, Buddhism is always contemporary. This living culture perspective is presented as a contrast to a number of dominant Western perspectives which can be described as weighted towards emphasising Buddhism as a non-Western product, a heterogeneous entity and as a ‘culture’ in diametric opposition to innovation. It is suggested that the living culture perspective is helpful to pave the way for ‘Buddhism without borders’ demonstrating in fact that Buddhism challenges many ‘borders’ imposed on it

by these Western perceptions: for example, borders between text and praxis, tradition and innovation, ancient and contemporary. My hope is that the living culture perspective is in fact, an assertion of what Buddhism is, what its purpose is, and how to understand its doctrine; and as a consequence, more clearly articulate its universal application within the contemporary world.

It is from this position of ‘singularity’ that I self-consciously employ the generic term Buddhism; not to simplify the plurality which is Buddhism as I am cognizant that it is often necessary to specify Buddhism in relation to a particular tradition, place or period. I rely on the teachings and presentations of contemporary teachers, although not exclusively Tibetan, to bring this perspective to life.

Buddhism in the West as a ‘Living Culture’

Buddhism is now without doubt, ‘on Western ground’ (Aronson, 2004). It is increasingly both popular and popularized; some of its concepts even entering everyday Western parlance, for example *karma*. It also continues to present as an exotic Other, an object of abstruse Western scholarship, the religious practice of ethnic migrants, the religious choice for an increasing number of Westerners, a psychological therapy, and ‘modernized’ – or more rightly, a Westernized spiritual endeavor (Prebish & Baumann, 2002; Droit, 1997/2003). In fact categorising the ways Westerners and their Asian counterparts living in the West engage with Buddhism has itself become a disputed academic enterprise (Baumann, 2002; Tweed, 2002; Williams & Queen, 1999).

Within this contemporary Western context it is evident that many diasporic ‘cultural and traditional’ Buddhist teachers are cognizant of presenting Buddhism in a way both relevant and sensitive to contemporary Western needs while introducing the traditional or essential teachings and practices to Westerners. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, for example, has been described as being ‘extremely concerned about how to present dharma without distorting or diluting it, yet in a way that would be relevant to the modern world’ (Fremantle in Midal, 2005: 266). Such a perspective can be described in the service of establishing ‘a Buddhism which is totally familiar with the modern world yet, at the same time, not completely divorced from its traditional roots’ (Traleg Kyabgon, 2003a: 47). Traleg Kyabgon, for example, has called this a ‘Neo-Orthodoxy.’ At the same time, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been said to affirm in the context of Western Brain Sciences that, ‘if elements of Buddhist doctrine ... are compellingly refuted by new empirical evidence or cogent

reasoning, then those Buddhist tenets must be abandoned' (Wallace, 1999: 158). Fundamentally, Buddhists themselves agree that Buddhism changes 'without losing its essential elements' (Traleg Kyabgon, 2004: 22).

This view forms the basis of the living culture perspective in which Buddhism can be described as a system on the one hand that is neither dogmatically contested nor on the other hand, somehow relativistically benign. These two aspects living and tradition serve in fact to support a balanced Middle Way view, within which the notion of 'culture or tradition' is understood to reflect both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and the subsequent perpetuation of such a content of beliefs and practices deemed fundamental or essential in the identification of both 'Buddhism' and a 'Buddhist.' However, the counterpoint 'living' in this context goes beyond signifying the debate and controversy existing within the tradition of Buddhism and its engagement with outside cultural, philosophical and religious traditions. From a 'living tradition' perspective, the living quality of the teachings highlights their arising from human experience thus resulting in the contingency and plasticity of form in terms of expression, example and performance of beliefs and practices within the context of human subjectivity in space and time. That is, since Buddhism is derived from human experience, it is necessarily subject to human *beingness*. For indeed for it to be otherwise would be contrary to the fundamentals not only of its beliefs (here the argument is often one of impermanence), but contrary in fact, to what it is.

Thus the living culture perspective challenges the view that 'traditional' Buddhist teachers are primarily writing and teaching in ways which reflect the contemporary Western context because 'of their willingness to reach beyond the historical horizons of the texts and the boundaries of their own cultures,' as Cabezón (2000) suggests when referring to for example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama (p. 30). This view I suggest over-determines Buddhism as a 'non-Western cultural product' at the expense of the foundation for what we call Buddhism: human experience. In contrast, a living tradition perspective understands that many traditional teachers like His Holiness the Dalai Lama are writing and teaching responsive to the context in which Buddhism and they themselves are in because of what Buddhism is, and concomitantly, as can be said, where it exists.

Buddhism in Mind

Buddhism from the perspective of Buddhism can be understood to 'exist' in minds which perceive and conceptualize it; minds which are conditioned

concomitantly by the functions and processes of the mental factors and by the socio-historical context within which minds in persons are situated. I have explored elsewhere a Buddhist mind and mental factors reading of Buddhism coming into Western consciousness in the nineteenth-century (Gregory, 2012).

From the living culture perspective Buddhism in space and time is a general category; within which Buddhism in the contemporary Western context is only so as an instance or particular; as it is in all other contexts in which it has taken root. As an instance, the contemporary Western context finds Buddhism simply in relation to ‘contemporary subjective experience in the context of modern life’ (Olson, 1995: 27). This experience can be characterized in the broad brushstrokes of consumerism, secularism, individualism, skepticism, and rationalism through which contemporary Western minds tend in their intending upon Buddhism. Highlighted here is the necessary mutuality or interdependency of ‘Buddhism’ and human beings; even suggesting a ‘borderless’ relationship since Buddhism arises from human experience.

The singularity of Buddhism and The Buddha as a human being

When considered in relation to the teachings, scripture, doctrine, or *Dharma*, Buddhism presents in diverse forms demonstrating distinctive ‘character and influence’; on the one hand some teachings deal with the *Dharma* on an abstract, philosophical or even theological level, and on the other hand, others deal with the *Dharma* in ‘more practical, spiritual and inspirational ways’ (Traleg Kyabgon, 2003b: 36). Within the Western context, it has become almost a truism to say that, of course, there is not just ‘one’ Buddhism but Buddhisms distinguished and distinguishable in terms of geography, historical time and/or doctrine resulting in the conceptualization of Buddhism as primarily a ‘multi-faceted entity.’ Western Buddhist studies have historically divided the study of Buddhism in these ways, and continue to contest the classifications (Cabezón, 1995). However, from a living culture perspective, it could be argued that plurality has become over-determined in our contemporary conceptualization of Buddhism at the expense of ‘lived experience’ as the singular concern across the ‘diversity’ of Buddhism.

This notion of the ‘singularity’ in a body of work or tradition finds resonance within the field of comparative religion where Scharfstein (1988) suggests ‘unity’ within a and self-reference. Continuity is the ‘relationship that makes everything subsequent in the tradition lead back to the same beginnings in time, place, or attitude.’ Self-reference ‘is the quality that makes any isolated statement or philosophy difficult to understand without setting it in the

contextual web that determines what is internal to the tradition and what is external to it' (pp. 5-6). Thus from a living culture perspective, the 'singularity' of human experience functions as both the continuity and self-reference in Buddhism. Further, with human experience as the 'data' which forms the content of Buddhism it is linked to both the 'inside' and 'outside' of the tradition through living practitioners who themselves are always 'contemporary.'

This perspective of the singularity of Buddhism proceeds from and gives primacy to Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, whom we know as the Buddha, as a human being. The Buddha did not claim to be to be a god or 'incarnation of some higher being,' or indeed an 'intermediary between some higher reality and human beings' (Traleg Kyabgon, 2001: 2). He was a human being within the context of his own time and place, his own station within that, and who on the basis of his own experiences set out to find ways to help bring about stable and substantial happiness in a human life. His singular interest was directed to that which was useful and beneficial to such endeavors. His teachings are the result of such a quest and record the discovery of the 'natural truths' he found in relation to his own experiences (Payutto, 1995). In this way 'Buddhism' is a culture established by a category of revelation 'sourced' in human experience (Samdhong Rinpoche, 2006: 34).

Moreover, the Buddha 'gave many teachings and provided a multitude of different approaches' responsive to the fact it is human beings who differ in their 'levels of spiritual development, their capacities, mentalities, and attitudes' (Ringu Tulku, 2005: 15); again reiterating the 'living quality' of Buddhism. The origin of Buddhism in the Buddha's experience as a human being serves to establish 'Buddhism' as in fact available to anyone, who given the right circumstances and with the right effort, can 'find out' for themselves. In this way, the teachings function as tools to be utilized; where most fundamentally it can be said what makes Buddhism *Buddhism* is the fact that its doctrine is practice. That is, we 'cannot separate Buddhist doctrine from Buddhist meditative experiences, simply because the doctrine is the path to enlightenment' (Traleg Kyabgon, 2003b: 33-34).

Lived experience is without borders

This process describes the intimate relationship or indeed, collapsing of doctrine and practice in which 'we ourselves are the practice' (Ringu Tulku, 2005: 15). As a result, from a living culture perspective, Buddhism must encompass the totality of human experience. That is, in relation to content so to speak, Buddhism can neither contain hypothesis or partial truths; it presents the

whole ‘truth’ of human experience encompassing both what is and what could be, in relation to human experiencing. Buddhism can be understood to then both detail and distinguish the ‘lived experiences’ of human beings in relation to the ‘reality of the unenlightened individual’ and the ‘reality of the enlightened individual’ (Samdhong Rinpoche, 1998, public talk); where ‘reality’ is here understood as ‘the world given in such experiences’ through mind as Dreyfus & Thompson highlight (2007: 93).

Therefore, the notion of lived experience creates an inclusive category in which both unenlightened, delusory or ‘ordinary’ experiences - characterized by suffering, greedy, angry, jealous, arrogant, hateful, ignorant, self-cherishing ones; and non-deluded or Enlightened experiences - wisdom based (non-dual, non-conceptual) - are categories (minds) of experiences understood as ‘available’ to human beings. Thus from within the living tradition perspective, ordinary and Enlightened experiences can be described as ‘unified’ in relation to being kinds of experiences of human beings. Enlightenment is thus distinguished and distinguishable from our ‘ordinary’ experiences, representing the capacity for human beings to free themselves from suffering and to have clarity as to the nature of their condition. As a result, in Buddhism ‘experience’ can be understood in a wider sense since it entails not only knowing what we already know or have experienced but also coming to ‘know’ and experience ourselves in ways we do not as yet know and which we can aspire to know – enlightened experiences (Newland, 1999: 15).

Thus the notion of singularity can be further detailed: within the apparent plurality of Buddhism distinguished by geography, tradition, author or concept, is reflected the ‘singularity’ of seeking to understand and detail lived experience, now understood to encompass both ‘ordinary’ and ‘Enlightened’ presentations. ‘Bearing witness to’ and ‘holding responsibility towards’ the singular concern with lived experience create an inclusive category to understand our human condition which serves to both ‘ground’ the experiential nature of ‘spirituality’ in our condition and widens the domain to include both those experiences we know and those we do not as yet know. In fact, this notion of ‘experience’ acts as an all-encompassing term incorporating the phenomena of our subjective world as human beings in which experience, knowledge, mind, reality, truth, are all but one in the same.

Minds in relationship: The basis for the culture

Importantly, within Buddhism the context which both supports and directs the practitioner’s ‘experience’ is the teacher-student relationship; this is

particularly emphasized in the Tibetan system which I will not elaborate here in relation to its particulars. However, the teacher-student relationship provides the fundamental basis to understand Buddhism as *a culture*; in the sense it is not merely a ‘long perpetuated custom’ (Samdhong Rinpoche, 2006: 36). The teacher-student relationship is the form through which the *Dharma* has been practiced by many since the Buddha in which the teachings are transmitted ‘by means of an unbroken lineage from person to person’ (Samdhong Rinpoche, 2006: 36).

However, from a living culture perspective it is understood, as Chögyam Trungpa (2005) suggests, ‘each person in the lineage of teachers develops a self-understanding which adds to the culture. The process is like handing down a recipe for bread. In each generation, the bread is exactly like the original bread, but possibly more flavourful because of the added experience of the bakers involved in the handing down. Thus as has been outlined, because Buddhism is derived from human experience, the notion of ‘culture’ here presents as more ‘elastic’ or malleable than may be usually appreciated from a Western perspective.

The notion of tradition and culture

This notion of lineage as understood from a living tradition and culture perspective sits somewhat at odds with dominant Western views which since the time of the Enlightenment, have seen ‘tradition’ become a descriptive for ‘habits or beliefs inconvenient to virtually any innovation’ (Williams, 1983: 320). Thus within the West, *the traditional* has served as the meaning opposite of modern, where tradition has come to signify ‘belonging to a previous historical era’ (Bruner, 2005: 90). Someone who *values* tradition is seen as conservative and out-of-touch. The continuation or adherence to tradition has been associated with ideas of custom, duty and respect. Traditions are often seen to be held on to merely for their own sake. Furthermore, the notion of tradition sits in relation to modern in a series of oppositions within a basic ‘past to present/future dynamic’: oppositions which include, for example, closed vs. open, fate vs. choice, external vs. internal, certainty vs. uncertainty, virtues vs. preferences, and control vs. freedom (Heelas, 1996: 3).

However, from the living culture perspective, since in the context of space and time, they are ‘sourced’ in human experience and transmitted from person to person, the teachings are understood to be ‘always up to date’ (Chögyam Trungpa, 1987: 17). Thus the teachings sit outside of this Western tradition/modern opposition; as Chögyam Trungpa (1987) goes on to say,

Buddhism is “not ‘ancient wisdom,’ an old legend. The teachings are not passed along as information, handed down as a grandfather tells traditional folk tales to his grandchildren” (p.17). Buddhism is ‘real experience’ and thus it remains ‘verifiable through common sense and self-knowledge’ of individuals (Samdhong Rinpoche, 2006: 36).

Conclusion

Within the phenomena of Buddhism as a living culture perspective serves to highlight the living quality of Buddhism concluding that it is ‘applicable to every age, to every person’ (Chögyam Trungpa, 1987: 17). Furthermore, in contrast to often dominant Western perceptions, a living tradition perspective counters over-determining the borders between the ancient and contemporary, text and praxis, tradition and innovation. When referenced to the singularity of ‘lived experience,’ Buddhism is without borders, either temporal or geographic. By necessity, it engages with and through our contemporary world; reflecting that by its nature, Buddhism is ‘alive’ to each of us in our experience in the here and now.

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