

Book Review – The New Buddhism, The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition

The Spring/Summer 2016 issue of *Buddhism Today* promises to transmit authentic Buddhism and to “expound joy and humanism” to people in the West. Classical humanism is a Western concept, and these statements imply that Western Buddhism is notably different from its Asian older brothers. James William Coleman, in his book *The New Buddhism, The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* strives to explain these differences. Coleman, a Professor of Sociology at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo and a practicing Buddhist, brings academic credentials, research, and personal experience to this intriguing book.

Professor Coleman begins with a brief overview of Western Buddhism, including a couple of vignettes about modern Buddhist practice in America. He summarizes a few key tenets, the instability of identity (and everything else) in modern society, and how Buddhist thought is well positioned to provide this stability. The author then briefly notes the struggles that Buddhism has faced in the West – power, money, and sex – which are, to no one’s surprise, the same struggles that every other religion and organization combats.

Chapter 2, the Asian roots of Buddhism, begins with at least one mistake. Coleman affirms that Buddhism is the world’s oldest universal religion since the Buddha came 500 years before Christ, 1100 years before Mohammad, and since Judaism, Shintoism, and Hinduism appeal primarily to one ethnicity. His position on “universal religions” is debatable, but the Hebrew heritage of Christianity is clear. Christianity therefore actually began around 2000 BC, tying it with Hinduism as the world’s oldest major religion. Coleman’s discussion of the life and teachings of the Buddha is conventional, not deviating from orthodoxy. Buddhism grew largely due to royal patronage, and King Asoka Maurya of Magadha was the greatest early patron.¹ The author emphasized the rise of the Mahayana and the Tantric traditions (especially in China, Tibet, and Japan) over the Theravadan tradition, presumably because the former are more prominent today in Western Buddhism.

Coleman then summarizes the coming of Buddhism to the West, especially America, in the 19th century and its explosive growth during the tumultuous 1960s and 70s. Japanese Zen arrived first, especially attracting the beatniks and hippies of liberal bastions like San Francisco and New York. With the Tibetan diaspora in the aftermath of the Chinese invasion of Tibet (1950), Tibetan Buddhism rolled ashore. Vipassana Buddhism, the closest to the Theravadan variety, came last. These branches communicate little with one another in Asia but have cross pollinated in America to produce new branches and even non-aligned Buddhist practitioners. In the West, all Buddhist branches have absorbed a strong secular component, as evidenced by the *Buddhism Today* article noted above.

The author’s discussion of the actual practice and beliefs of each branch was interesting and useful. Zen is austere, difficult, ritualistic, and hierarchical, but each teacher and student can develop their own approach. Vajrayana (Tibetan) is colorful and exotic, but expects that students will worship their teacher as a higher being.² Vipassana is more egalitarian and focuses more on meditation than on ritual. Nonsectarian Buddhist groups in the West are often completely informal and may not have any teacher at all. The common ground between these groups is the quest for enlightenment and liberation.

Western Buddhism in the 1980s and 1990s went through painful struggles. Teachers had sex with students, with one teacher infecting a student with AIDs, leaders grabbed for power, and some instructors were alcoholics. Resentment over leaders with luxurious lifestyles festered. In many cases, Asian priorities on authority and male dominance conflicted with Western beliefs in egalitarianism, particularly on women’s rights. Meditation centers tried to decrease the dominance of teachers with codes of ethics, boards of directors, and diluting the influence of each individual instructor by using more teachers – with limited success.

¹ James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism, The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, 2001, 35

² James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism, The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, 2001, 105

Coleman does not claim to be objective in his writings, and he is true to his claim. Chapter 6 asks the question “why Buddhism”, and begins with an abortive attempt to define “Buddhist”. Instead, he describes “circles of involvement”, ranging from members of the wider society who are influenced by cultural Buddhism to teachers who devote their lives to Buddhism. Coleman’s research, though it does not seem to be scientific, is interesting. Using surveys and focus groups, he identifies characteristics of the American Buddhist community (sangha), including the following: female 58%, white 90%, Democratic 60% (Republican 2.6%), advanced degrees (51%), used psychedelic drugs (62%), and generally Baby Boomers. In the survey, 16% of Buddhists were of Jewish heritage, but Jews only comprise 1% of the US population. 42% of Buddhists came from a Protestant Christian background, but Protestant Christians account for 56% of the total population. Thus Jews are overrepresented in Buddhism and Protestants are underrepresented.

People choose Buddhism for many different reasons. The author feels that the capitalist/materialist mindset has largely replaced cultural Christianity in the US and that a spiritual vacuum results. Buddhism is new and sexy in the eyes of many, compared to Christianity. Coleman argues that the tenets of Buddhism better align with a secular scientific worldview than those of Christianity. It may be true that Buddhism aligns with a “secular scientific world view” better than Christianity does, but it is not true that Buddhism aligns with a “scientific world view” better than Christianity. After all, modern science grew out of a European Christian world view, not a Buddhist Asian one.

Buddhists seem to be more interested in individual enlightenment than in community. He concludes this section with Buddhism’s objection to the lie “It’s me, it’s me, I’m it, I’m the center of the universe. I come first. I hold it all together. The bottom line is me.”³ Coleman seems to think that these statements are part of “Western society’s deepest cultural assumptions about the nature of the reality.”⁴ In this he is deeply, even tragically mistaken. Every other religion, including Buddhism, is about what we do as humans. Christianity is about God; who He is and what He has done for us.

Coleman concludes by forecasting a bright future for Buddhism in America. He is not effusive, but is optimistic that Buddhism will reshape the West into a better civilization. *The New Buddhism, The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* is an interesting and useful book for students of world religions, missionaries, and pastors trying to reach Buddhists for Christ.

Questions

1. What is it about Western Buddhism that appeals to materialistic, consumptive Western culture?
2. How has this author demonstrated his misunderstanding of Christianity? What percentage of other Buddhists have similar misperceptions? How do we address them?
3. What ideas and actions does Christianity have that can bridge the gap of understanding between Buddhists and Christians?

³ James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism, The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, 2001, 215

⁴ James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism, The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, 2001, 226