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FROM PESSIMISM TO COLONIAL REFLEXIVE BUDDHISM: SCHOPENHAUER, THE ORIENTALIST CONSTRUCTION OF BUDDHISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN THE MODERN WORLD

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

The nineteenth-century European encounter with Buddhism gave rise to a paradoxical intellectual development. A religious tradition concerned with the diagnosis and cessation of suffering was frequently depicted as a pessimistic, world-denying philosophy, and this representation in turn influenced the ways in which Buddhism was interpreted, defended and reformed, both in Europe and in Asia. This article explores Arthur Schopenhauer's relationship to Buddhist thought in relation to the colonial production of Buddhism as an object of European philosophical knowledge. It argues that Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy offered a sympathetic interpretive framework in which Buddhist teachings on suffering, desire and renunciation could be interpreted as confirming a European philosophical account of the fundamentally unsatisfactory nature of existence. But the argument does not pretend that the Western image of Buddhism is only Schopenhauer's doing, nor does it assume that premodern Asian Buddhism had one, historically fixed form. Instead, it situates his interpretation within a broader process that encompasses Orientalist scholarship, colonial institutions, translation, missionary critique, and Asian Buddhist reform movements. Particular emphasis is placed on the difference between dukkha as a diagnosis of conditioned existence and pessimism as a general philosophical judgement about life. Drawing upon scholarship on the British discovery of Buddhism and the rise of Buddhist modernism, the article provides the notion of Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism to explain the way in which colonial-era representations were taken up, challenged and translated into new forms of Buddhist identity and practice. The article concludes with the argument that modern Buddhism can be neither understood as a passive product of European orientalism nor as a pristine survival of ancient tradition. It is better understood as a transnational formation that is historically layered, in which Asian Buddhist agency confronted colonial structures of knowledge to reconfigure Buddhism in the East and the West.

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Introduction

The modern Western view of Buddhism was shaped by a complex combination of European philosophy, philological scholarship, colonial administration, Christian missionary criticism and the work of Asian Buddhist intellectuals (Harris, 2023; Lopez, 1995; McMahan, 2008). In the nineteenth century, European scholars increasingly called Buddhism a separate religion and philosophy, locating its scriptures, reconstructing its history, translating its doctrines, and talking about its relationship to Christianity and modern philosophy. Philip C. Almond's The British Discovery of Buddhism demonstrates how this encounter reflected Victorian intellectual and religious concerns as well as European interpretations of Asian traditions (Almond, 1988). Arthur Schopenhauer occupied a peculiar place in the intellectual atmosphere. His philosophical pessimism, his critique of desire and his account of suffering seemed to parallel Buddhist doctrines of dukkha, attachment and renunciation. Thus, Buddhism appeared to some European intellectuals as a tradition that seemed to confirm philosophical conclusions already underway in European thought. However, there is a need to distinguish between the diverse body of historically situated religions that make up Buddhism and the manner in which that body was reconstructed through nineteenth-century European philosophical categories. European interpreters encountered Buddhism through translations, missionary reports, academic typologies, and curated images of religious practice (Lopez, 1995; Lopez, 2016; McMahan, 2008). Their representations were thus shaped by the conceptual frameworks through which Asian traditions were made intelligible to European audiences. The trouble was not merely that European scholars misunderstood Buddhism. The more fundamental problem was that their interpretations could be validated

and disseminated internationally, shaping the way in which Asian Buddhists themselves responded to colonial modernity. Sometimes Buddhist thinkers rejected European images of their religion. Sometimes they used European ideas about rationality, science textual authority , and individual religious experience to show that Buddhism was intellectually respectable . This transformation is best understood within the framework of David L. McMahan's The Making of Buddhist Modernism. Representations of Buddhism in the modern era, McMahan argues, have been created through cross-cultural interactions, not through the unbroken continuation of an ancient tradition. These interactions resulted in a form of Buddhism that selectively emphasised certain doctrines and practices, while reinterpreting others (McMahan, 2008). This article offers three related arguments. First, Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism provided the interpretative framework for presenting Buddhism as a doctrine of world-denial. Second, the colonial-era textual scholarship and uneven relations of intellectual authority helped to stabilise certain images of Buddhism, sometimes marginalising the practical, devotional, ritual, ethical, and communal dimensions of Asian Buddhist life. Third, Asian Buddhist responses to these representations led to new religious formations that in turn influenced Asian and Western Buddhism. The article introduces the term Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism to refer to this historical process. The term refers to a form of Buddhist self-understanding that is produced when representations of Buddhism developed in colonial and Orientalist contexts are subsequently taken up by Buddhist communities and contested or transformed by them. The central claim is that Schopenhauer did not invent the pessimistic image of Western Buddhism, and that colonialism did not simply determine the evolution of contemporary Buddhist practice. Instead, his interpretation was part of a larger process in which Buddhism was turned into a philosophical object in Europe and a contested resource in Asian struggles over religious identity, colonial authority, and modernity.

Schopenhauer and the European Reception of Buddhist Pessimism

Schopenhauer's philosophy starts with the proposition that the world, in its most profound metaphysical dimension, is Will (Atwell, 1995; Janaway, 2022; Schopenhauer, 1969). In The World as Will and Representation, he describes the world of experience as representation, and explains its reality in terms of the concept of a Will that is forever striving (Schopenhauer, 1969). This Will does not equate to the conscious intention of the individual. It is a reference to a basic, blind striving that is present in all human and natural existence. Fulfilling one desire does not remove the basic pattern of striving; it frequently leads either to another desire or to boredom. Schopenhauer thus regards suffering as an essential element of life. His theory of salvation is a change in the relation of the individual to the Will. Aesthetic contemplation can offer a temporary suspension of ordinary willing, while compassion and ascetic renunciation can offer deeper possibilities for overcoming egoistic striving. Hence Schopenhauer's pessimism is not simply the statement that life is full of much suffering. It is a metaphysical and ethical argument about the nature of existence, and the possibility of liberation from its compulsions. The apparent similarities between Schopenhauer's philosophy and Buddhism were especially important since Schopenhauer had engaged with Indian thought, including Buddhist texts. Yet his knowledge of Buddhism was derived through the scholarly and translated texts available in early nineteenth-century Europe. Stephen Cross's study of Schopenhauer's Indian sources is based on his exposure to Buddhist ideas through ethnographic lectures, published reports, and works on Asian religious traditions, including Chinese and Mongolian Buddhism (Cross, 2013). This historical mediation is important in that Schopenhauer did not experience a uniform representation of Buddhist life in Asia. He worked with material produced by other observers, translators and scholars, all of whom approached Buddhism from specific linguistic, cultural and intellectual positions. Schopenhauer's philosophy is similar enough to Buddhist teaching to make a comparison legitimate, but not so similar as to be identical. Both concern suffering, desire, attachment, and sorts of liberation that call for a transformation of ordinary human motivation. But the stories of these things are quite different. Schopenhauer's metaphysics of Will is not merely a re-statement of Buddhist analyses of dependent origination, impermanence and non-self. But Buddhist traditions have a variety of philosophical accounts of consciousness, causation, rebirth, ethical action and liberation that cannot be collapsed into Schopenhauer's metaphysical system (Gethin, 1998; Skorupski, 2016; Williams, 2009). This distinction is particularly important when one considers dukkha. In early Buddhist teachings, dukkha is linked to the instability and unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence. It is manifest suffering, but its meaning extends beyond that to the inability of impermanent phenomena to provide lasting satisfaction when taken as permanent sources of security. The First Noble Truth is not an isolated declaration that life is meaningless. It is part of a fourfold structure: identifying suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to that cessation. Diagnosis is not possible without the possibility of transformation. By contrast, Schopenhauer's philosophy provides an account of the Will and its manifestations, including an account of suffering. Even where his conclusions are similar to Buddhist doctrines, the explanatory structures are not the same. The historical problem at hand, then, is not that Schopenhauer invented Buddhism. That, given a philosophical interpretation informed by his own metaphysical commitments, some Buddhist teachings could be made to seem to bear out a total pessimistic outlook. This reading, as it circulated in a European audience, helped to make Buddhism understandable in terms of categories already familiar in European philosophy. The problem of interpretation is the translation of dukkha. The term is often translated as "suffering," but depending on context may also be translated as unsatisfactoriness, stress, distress, or the instability of conditioned existence. These meanings should not be assumed as interchangeable in all contexts. Still, they help to suggest why dukkha cannot be adequately understood as a simple statement that all aspects of life are uniformly miserable. Suffering is considered within the framework of the Four Noble Truths, in terms of its causes and the possibility of its cessation. Craving , attachment and ignorance keep the wheel of dissatisfaction turning. Buddhist practice aims to transform it through ethical discipline , mental cultivation and wisdom. This structure is distinct from an undifferentiated pessimism in which the fact of suffering is employed to demonstrate the ultimate futility of life. The Buddhist diagnosis is soteriological, i.e., liberation-oriented (Gethin, 1998; Rahula, 1974; Williams, 2009).

Buddhist traditions have never been just about philosophical reflection on suffering. Buddhist life in various Asian cultures has encompassed monastic discipline, household devotion, merit-making, ritual, pilgrimage, festivals, teaching, funerary practices, meditation, and communal ethical obligations. The relative importance of these activities has varied historically and geographically. It would thus be misleading to claim that nineteenth-century textual Buddhism was simply false, while Asian practice was an entirely separate, authentic Buddhism. Textual traditions and lived practice have always been in interaction. It is more arguable that some European representations privileged some dimensions of Buddhism over others. Schopenhauer's reading thus becomes a case of selective philosophical translation of historical relevance. The Buddhist teachings on suffering and renunciation could be employed in a European argument about the fundamental painfulness of existence, and the teachings on the path to liberation were given meaning by Schopenhauer's own philosophical framework. The process is a paradigm for a broader mechanism in the history of ideas: ideas make sense across cultures by being translated, but they are also re-ordered in their meanings by translation. The diagnostic function of the doctrine, interpreted mainly as evidence of pessimism, can thus become obscured. Then the Four Noble Truths are in danger of being read as if the first truth was the whole worldview of Buddhism, rather than the starting point of a practical and philosophical investigation. This is not implied by the translation of dukkha as suffering, nor does every European interpretation have to be pessimistic. The problem, rather, arises when the term is cut loose from the doctrinal structure in which it functions and is made to confirm an extraneous philosophical thesis. Schopenhauer must be seen as an influential interpretive figure in a wider European reception of Buddhism, rather than the sole originator of the pessimistic image.

Buddhism, Colonial Knowledge and Its Making

During the nineteenth century European scholarship increasingly came to see Buddhism in the light of the spectacles of philology, comparative religion, historical reconstruction and the classification of religious doctrines (Franklin, 2012; King, 1999; Almond, 1988). These methods produced significant knowledge, including the retrieval and translation of texts unavailable to many European readers. But the authority of textual scholarship could also create an imbalance between written doctrine and the lived experience of religion. A scholar who works mainly with canonical texts in translation might identify a particular account of Buddhist philosophy as the essence of Buddhism. Practices that did not fit the account could be described as later additions, popular superstition, or a departure from the original teaching. This tendency was strengthened by European intellectual debates about religion, science, rationality and Christianity. The ancient philosophy of reason in Buddhism can be praised, while Buddhism itself can be condemned as atheistic, nihilistic, or incapable of supporting an affirmative social life. Victorian representations of Buddhism, Almond's historical study demonstrates, were influenced by the concerns of the society that created them. European accounts were not only descriptions of Asian religious traditions, but also reflections of contemporary debates about the relationship between Christianity, religious authority, morality and modern knowledge (Almond, 1988). The result was a tension between Buddhism as a living body of traditions and Buddhism as an intellectual object re-constructed for the European audiences.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (Said, 1978) provides a more general framework for understanding how representations of Asian societies can be embedded in unequal structures of knowledge and power. Used in a thoughtful way within the framework of Buddhist studies, this approach points to who had the power to define Buddhism, which sources were considered authoritative, and how European systems of classification influenced the reception of Asian traditions. The point is not that all European scholars were motivated by a conscious desire to dominate Asian religion. Neither should the historical value of translation, philology or comparative scholarship be denied. Instead, the argument is that scholarly representations are constructed in colonial contexts where European institutions often had a disproportionate ability to publish, classify, circulate, and legitimate knowledge. Under these circumstances the distinction between philosophical Buddhism and popular Buddhism could be stratified. Sometimes a supposedly rational, textual and philosophical Buddhism was praised as the authentic religion, whereas devotional and ritual practices were taken as signs of degeneration. And these classifications mattered, because they had implications for the terms on which Buddhism could achieve intellectual credibility in Europe. They also gave categories that Asian reformers could accept, modify, or reject in response to colonial criticism. Modern Buddhism cannot be explained by colonialism alone. Internal doctrinal disputes, changing educational establishments, print culture, political transformations and long-standing exchanges among Asian societies also resulted in Buddhist intellectual and reform movements. Neither did Buddhist practice in Asia exist as a homogeneous reality immune to change prior to European colonialism. Asian Buddhist communities had a long history of adapting to changing social, political, and intellectual circumstances (Gornall, 2020; Schober, 2009; Subrahmanyan, 2019). It must, therefore, avoid replacing one simplistic history with another. Buddhism was not a pure essence later corrupted by the West, and not just an invention of European Orientalists.

The Asian Buddhist Agency and the Transformation of Religious Practice

The example of colonial Sri Lanka is especially significant in terms of the influence of European representations and colonial power on Asian Buddhist reform without the erasure of Asian agency. Henry Steel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala were important actors in these developments, but their roles and intellectual commitments were not exactly the same. Their activities facilitated the international circulation of Buddhist ideas and the redefinition of Buddhist identity in the face of colonial modernity. Studies on the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka have documented the interactions between monks, lay activists, colonial institutions and western participants in these transformations (Hongsaton, 2017). This history complicates the claim that European Orientalism merely imposed a new Buddhism on passive Asian communities. Sri Lankan Buddhists actively appropriated modern forms of education, print communication, public debate and organisational life to defend and reform their

religious traditions. Simultaneously the need to demonstrate the compatibility of Buddhism with rationality, science and ethical modernity led to selective presentations of Buddhist doctrine. Some reformist accounts might give more prominence to meditation, moral discipline and philosophical argument than to ritual, cosmology and devotional practice. The resulting transformation was not purely European nor independent of European influence. The problems of the Buddhist reformers were constructed by the conditions of colonialism, but the Asian actors had agency in how they responded to these problems (Blackburn, 2010; Kahandagamage, 2023; McMahan, 2004). It was a process of negotiation. Gananath Obeyesekere's notion of "Protestant Buddhism" has been applied to examine aspects of Sri Lankan Buddhist reform that have to do with the interplay of Buddhism, Protestant Christianity, colonial power, and modern modes of religious organisation (Blackburn, 2010; Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). This idea emphasises the selective appropriation of some modern religious ideals: the significance of lay participation, the individual religious understanding, and the public defence of the doctrine (Kemper, 2011). This is a useful term because it shows how a movement against colonial religious dominance could also contain elements of the intellectual environment that it fought. Reform was not merely a matter of rejecting the influence of the West; it was also a matter of adapting the available forms of argument and organisation to new circumstances. McMahan's conception of Buddhist modernism offers a wider frame for exploring comparable shifts in Asia and the West. In this story, modern Buddhism came into being by the meeting of Buddhist traditions and modern ideas about science, rationality, individual experience, meditation and religion itself (McMahan, 2008).

This framework is critical to the argument here. It suggests that the modern image of Buddhism cannot be explained simply as a European distortion of an Asian religion which is otherwise the same. European readings were incorporated within the historical context in which Asian Buddhists reinterpreted their own traditions. But it would be wrong to assume that all reform movements represented the same things, or that Asian Buddhist communities abandoned ritual and devotional life. Contemporary Buddhist movements are diverse, and traditional customs often coexist with more modern understandings. The central historical claim is therefore one of transformation, not of replacement.

Proposed Concept of Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism

The discussion above suggests that the discourses of Orientalism and Buddhist modernism can be extended through the introduction of Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism (CRB). Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism is the study of historically specific forms of Buddhist interpretation and practice that develop when representations of Buddhism generated in colonial and Orientalist contexts are taken up as objects for Buddhist self-understanding, resistance, reinterpretation, and institutional transformation. Also, Western expectations about rationality, meditation, and the philosophical nature of Buddhism can influence the way Asian Buddhists present their traditions, just as Asian reformulations of Buddhism can influence Western understandings in turn. The idea thus designates a process rather than a fixed school of doctrine. While the idea put forward here has some overlap with Buddhist modernism, its analytical focus is different. Buddhist modernism is a well-established academic category for the study of hybrid forms of Buddhism that arose through encounters with modernity. McMahan's (2008) work shows that these formations are complex exchanges between Buddhist traditions and modern intellectual currents. Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism is more specifically concerned with the recursive process by which representations produced externally become part of the conditions under which Buddhist traditions are subsequently interpreted and practiced. Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism is not presented as a successor to Buddhist modernism, nor is its presence taken for granted on the basis of the presence of the latter. Its value is to show, through historical evidence, that some representations were circulated by identifiable actors and institutions, and then had an impact on specific Buddhist interpretations or practices.

Schopenhauer's contribution to this process has to be understood as indirect and historically placed. His philosophy made a particular interpretation of Buddhist suffering and renunciation intelligible to European audiences(App, 2020; Cross, 2013). Such an interpretation was part of a wider intellectual climate in which Buddhism was increasingly presented as a rational, philosophical or world-renouncing tradition. But to draw a direct causal line between Schopenhauer and a specific Asian Buddhist reform movement would demand evidence of transmission, reception, and influence (Nelson, 2022). But similarities between Schopenhauer's thought and later Buddhist reformulations do not in themselves demonstrate causality. A more plausible argument is that Schopenhauer was a participant in the production of an intellectual image of Buddhism that circulated alongside other European representations. Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism offers an approach to investigate whether and how such representations were later taken up in Buddhist self-representation.

The concept also opens up for the analysis of contemporary Western Buddhism. Some contemporary Buddhist communities emphasise, to a greater degree, meditation, psychology and individual experience and to a lesser degree, cosmology, ritual or institutional religious authority. Such configurations can be analysed as results of historical selection and reinterpretation, but their specific origins must be established empirically and not assumed. Likewise, modern Asian Buddhist movements may frame Buddhism as scientific, rational, philosophical or nationally unique in response to inherited colonial classifications and modern political conditions. In both instances, the concept draws attention to the historical interplay between representations and practices. This is not to say that all modern Buddhists have the same worldview or that contemporary Buddhist practice is simply the result of colonial influence.

Discussion: The Conflict between Authentic Buddhism and Western Misrepresentations

A major difficulty with arguments about Orientalism is the temptation to set up an authentic Asian Buddhism against a distorted Western Buddhism. This contrast suggests real problems of colonial representation, but it also risks a simplified account of

Buddhist history. There has never been a single universal Buddhist practice that all Asian societies have followed. Buddhist traditions have varied in their philosophical commitments, ritual practices, institutional arrangements, devotional cultures, and conceptions of liberation (Gethin, 1998; Heine & Prebish, 2003; Williams, 2009). They also have been shaped by centuries of internal debate and cross-cultural exchange. Thus the assertion that nineteenth-century European scholars only encountered texts, while Asian Buddhists had the authentic practice of Buddhism, needs to be qualified. Text, ritual, oral tradition, meditation, ethical discipline, and institutions have long been intertwined. Even if European textual scholarship had been selective or colonial informed, it still could have produced valuable knowledge. What is at issue is not the distinction between texts and authentic practice as mutually exclusive domains. It is between certain representations of Buddhism and the various historical realities those representations attempted to represent. The same goes for Schopenhauer's reading. Philosophically his interpretation may have been fertile, and may have indicated real similarities between his own thinking and the teachings of Buddhism (Cross, 2013; Magee, 1997). But its philosophical coherence does not mean that it is an accurate account of the whole Buddhist tradition. The contemporary Buddhist obsession with rationality or meditation should not be dismissed out of hand as inauthentic. In this context, Asian Buddhist agency has often been exercised in ways that are re-interpretive of their traditions, and such re-interpretations may take on a life of their own as meaningful forms of Buddhist life. The key question, then, is how historical authority is constructed: what interpretations become universalized, what practices are marginalised, whose accounts of Buddhism become dominant in particular contexts. Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism allows us to ask these questions without assuming that Asian traditions were static or that European representations controlled their later development. The argument has three consequences for Buddhist studies.

First, however, the history of Buddhist philosophy should be considered in relation to the history of translation and reception. Philosophical comparisons of Schopenhauer and Buddhism cannot be fully understood without considering the materials through which Buddhist teachings became available to Schopenhauer. Second, the study of Buddhist practice must take into account the interaction between textual interpretation and lived religion. The elevation of certain doctrines as the core of Buddhism may obscure the diversity of religious practice, but the reverse claim that practice is necessarily more authentic than textual reflection is equally problematic. Third, the modern Buddhist identity should be analysed as a historical formation. The presentation of Buddhism in contemporary Asia and the West may reflect the accumulated exchanges between Asian traditions, European scholarship, colonial institutions, and modern social conditions. These implications suggest a more historically sensitive comparative approach, where Buddhism is not reduced to a European philosophical construction, nor treated as an unchanging essence outside of history.

Conclusions

The article has argued that Schopenhauer’s pessimistic reading of Buddhism was part of a broader nineteenth-century European engagement in which Buddhist teachings were selectively translated into the categories of Western philosophy. His emphasis on suffering, desire and renunciation made Buddhist ideas seem to fit with a metaphysical view of existence as fundamentally unsatisfactory. But the resemblance between Schopenhauer's philosophy and Buddhist teaching is not to be confused with their identity. The Buddhist concept of dukkha is fundamental to a diagnosis of conditioned existence. But that diagnosis is embedded in a larger framework that includes the causes of suffering, its cessation, and the path to liberation. The tendency to read dukkha primarily as a sign of pessimism can obscure the soteriological structure of Buddhist thought and the variety of practices by which Buddhist communities have understood liberation. The article has also shown how European representations of Buddhism emerged in a wider colonial context. Buddhism was produced as an object of European knowledge through the joint work of philological scholarship, missionary critique, and philosophical interpretation. Such representations may privilege textual, rational or philosophical dimensions while marginalising other aspects of Asian Buddhist life.

However Asian Buddhists were not passive consumers of colonial representations. The Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka is a case study in how Buddhist intellectuals and reformers confronted colonial modernity through selective appropriation, resistance, and transformation of institutions. These processes brought about the formation of modern Buddhist formations that later impacted on religious identity and practice in Asia and the West. To study this reciprocal process, the article proposed the concept of Colonial-Reflexive Buddhism. The term refers to the historical process through which colonial-era representations become resources for, and objects of, resistance in later Buddhist self-understanding. It builds on the existing scholarship on Buddhist modernism by focusing specifically on the relationship between representation, agency and religious transformation. This idea should be understood as a hypothesis for further historical research and not as a category or a claim that colonialism explains all kinds of modern Buddhism. Its analytical value lies in tracing the specific pathways of influence between texts, institutions, intellectuals and religious communities. In the end, the modern history of Buddhism cannot be adequately characterised either as the survival of an untouched Asian tradition or as the imposition of a European invention. It is a history of translation, of unequal intellectual authority, of selective appropriation, and of religious agency. Schopenhauer's importance lies not in his having been the sole founder of Western Buddhism, but in showing how Buddhist doctrines were given new meanings when viewed through the lens of European philosophical preoccupations. These meanings were then incorporated into a larger historical framework, in which Buddhism itself was reinterpreted and transformed. The study of this process allows to overcome the opposition between authentic Buddhism and its Western distortion. Rather, it poses a more difficult question: how have historically situated representations of Buddhism shaped the conditions under which Buddhists, scholars, and practitioners imagine what Buddhism is?

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