

East Asian Buddhism: Changing Landscape

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The idea of a regional Buddhism that can be called “East Asian” is a new development in our academic communities. Previously, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Buddhism were seen as distinct categories and the Buddhist tradition was divided by these languages and cultural boundaries. If there was a common thread to be found among the three it was the idea that both Japanese and Korean Buddhism had their roots from China. The concept of a pan-regional identification of Buddhism has arisen at a time when globalization is a very real factor in the life of these nation states; cross border economic developments have erased many of the limitations of barriers; communication of information has fashioned new communities of connected individuals; international interest in Buddhism has created an environment for collaborations; exclusive reliance on single scholarly disciplines is giving way to trans-discipline and multi-discipline approaches that favor wider context in studies; conferences, forums, seminars, attracting Buddhist leaders from every different national groups for dialogue, have grown in size and importance. This conference is an excellent example of the innovations that are making an impact of how people view Buddhism. The pan-Buddhist features, the commonalities of widely separate schools, are now being emphasized. In this environment, the idea of “East Asian” Buddhism is but an example of the developments that are shaping contemporary understanding.

Accepting the reality of studying Buddhism in wider contexts, creates in its wake a number of questions about our previous assumptions. What comprises the geo-spatial region to be called “East Asia”? It is most certainly not just the nation states of Japan, North and South Korea, and China. The list of nations must be expanded to include Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Dividing the national groupings in East and Southeast Asia raises the issues of how such a division is to be made and where are the boundaries. For “East Asian” Buddhism, Vietnam must be included, where the census indicates that a growing percentage of the population now follow the religion. Taiwan should also be a major focus of attention. There, Buddhism has emerged from a marginal place where it was not easily distinguished from popular and local practices. Today, Taiwanese Buddhism has become the religion of the middle class and is dominant in the urban centers, no longer a rural village practice. In the Philippines where the Christian population is by far the dominant one, Buddhist practice has a major place in the life of the Chinese heritage community. There is even a new Buddhist university near Manila.

Another aspect of “East Asian” Buddhism that needs consideration is not limited to these national boundaries. It has expanded far and wide. We find enclaves of the sociocultural practices in major cities of the U.S. and Canada, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, South Africa, Europe and South America. Much of this world-wide spread of “East Asian” Buddhism has been the activity that originates from Taiwan, especially from the work of Master Hsing Yun and Fo Guang Shan. We can also see that wherever there are immigrants from places where Buddhism has had a long history, there is an impetus to set up ways and means of practicing the faith in the foreign environment. In the 20th century, Jodo Shinshu of Japan was a pioneer in this spread through immigration with the oldest temples and organizational

structure in the U.S. Canada and Brazil. To a lesser degree Korean Buddhist groups have formed in Europe, the U.S. and Canada. Within the last decade numerous Vietnamese centers have emerged in France and North America. Developments in China have not yet resulted in notable missionary activity outside the country and yet it is probably true that there are more Chinese practicing some form of Buddhism than can be found in the populace of the rest of the world.

“East Asian” Buddhism is now a global movement and it is necessary for scholars to begin the analysis of the import of this dissemination. Only studying the data within the region is no longer a sufficient strategy. Scholars need to follow the expansion and give full recognition to the scope beyond the established limits used for our previous histories.

Understanding “East Asian” Buddhism is a crucial matter for our time. We are aware that the Buddhists in this region far out-number followers in the rest of the world. This is not to downplay the importance of Theravada Buddhism and its dominance in South and Southeast Asia or the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in Central Asia, I am just reminding you of the larger numbers in “East Asia”. For a time, following the publication of English language volumes, European and Americans were most often discussing Zen. This was the introduction for many to the nature of at least one of the practices found in “East Asia”. In this literary introduction, Zen was seen as the whole of Buddhism with nothing omitted or ignored. It was, however, a distortion of the complexity and variations found in the region. We still have not brought the full description of the multiplicity of “East Asian” Buddhism to the international audience. For many, Zen stands as their only example of the regional tradition. It often comes as a shock for them to

hear that Zen is a small movement and its place in literature is far stronger than in its numbers. In recent years, another voice has been heard from Vietnam. Thich Nhat Hanh has captured the interest of a large following. His teaching of Mindfulness meditation, partly drawn from Theravada, is now being employed by industrial firms for their employees, in schools for students from elementary level onward, for medical situations to help with healing and stress management. However popular both Zen and Mindfulness practices have been, neither provides the full range of activities and rituals to be found in “East Asian” Buddhism. A more representative presentation of this largest group of Buddhists is found in the hundreds of centers throughout the world established from Taiwan by Master Hsing Yun. In them the Chinese immigrants find the familiar rituals and they respond with support and attention. Across the world, the immigrant communities dominate Buddhism. The “conversion” of so called “Westerners” has resulted in a fraction of the size of the immigrant groups.

What is the nature of this “East Asian” Buddhism?

It is closely tied to Confucian values of filial piety, ethical behavior, community over individual, generosity. The practices are not limited to the temple or monastery they include “lifestyle” associated with the whole spectrum of Confucian, Daoist, and other aspects of behavior from “East Asia”.

It is a particular form of Mahayana as a syncretic tradition of multiple levels of social structure. For example, in Korea, shamanic practice stands alongside Buddhism and the two interconnect in some crucial ways. Japan adds Shinto and kami veneration to the mix. China has a pantheon of deities that find a place on the altar and in proximity to the monastic activities. A

wealth of local practices such as geomancy and Yin/Yang run through the “lifestyle” structure of Buddhism. “East Asian” Buddhism is never far from the spirits specific to the local place. Some of these “lifestyle” practices do not easily find an audience in the international arena, but remain of central concern in the homelands of Buddhism.

I wish to congratulate the organizers of the conference for bringing our attention to the study of “East Asian” regional Buddhism. It is a much needed exploration and meetings such as this provide the innovations for future study.

