

## PHILOSOPHICAL AND CULTURAL TRENDS OF BUDDHISM IN THE WEST: THERAVĀDA, MAHĀYĀNA, VAJRAYĀNA

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### Summary

The article examines the cultural and philosophical trends of the main branches of Buddhism that spread in the 20th century in the West: Theravāda (Vipassana Movement), Mahāyāna (Zen) and Vajrayāna (Tibetan Schools). The influence of external (colonial policy of Western countries) and internal (request for modernization) factors in the environment of traditional schools, caused a need for the formation of a new paradigm in the teachings of the Buddha. Buddhist modernism is at the same time an attempt to protect and preserve the heritage, and also to reach a wider world audience with the most powerful ideas.

I analyzed in the article some examples how modern trends develop throughout the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st centuries in the context of the dialogue between the West and Buddhism. The formation of a new agency and subjectivity of Buddhists depends to a large extent on the ability to transform, interpret and propose one's own vision of the future of man, society, and the world in general. There are good signs that Buddhist trends are actually very powerful and influential.

The trends contain certain ideas and tendencies to which I pay considerable attention in the research: psychologization of teaching, emphasis on meditative practices, multi-disciplinary dialogue with science, urbanization, emancipation, social, environmental, legal activism, ecumenism, digitalization, etc.

**Key words:** Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy, trend, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna.

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### 1. General features of the spread of Buddhism in the West

Historically, Buddhism has shown adaptability in different cultural regions. Buddha's teachings usually interact in a balanced way with local traditions, beliefs, and worldviews. This, in turn, changes Buddhism in its formal and conceptual expressions.

In Buddhist Studies it is common to classify this great philosophical religion according to three major branches: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna (*Gethin, 1998: 253–276*). Each of them has its own long history, internal discussions and fundamental ideas that determine their uniqueness. Each of these branches has a whole constellation of schools, influential teachers, which contributes to the diversity of Buddhist teachings.

In the 19th and 20th centuries. there was a «rediscovery» of Buddhism in the West. At first it was mainly an Orientalist project of expansion and construction of the Other, but later the agency of Buddhism became increasingly stronger, thanks to translations, the diaspora, and the opportunity to meet living bearers of various traditions. Under not very favorable circumstances, colonial policies and the danger of losing local cultural identity, Buddhism managed to adapt to the challenges of the global era in different ways. During the first half of the 20th century the acquaintance of the West with Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and spiritual teachings

has developed significantly, and nowadays we have a number of certain cultural, religious, and scientific trends, which owe precisely to the Buddhist roots or active dialogue with the West. The phenomenon of Buddhist modernism also appears, which largely determines the nature of the trends in Buddhism that my research is devoted to.

## 2. The Phenomenon of Buddhist Modernism

When we talk about modern Buddhism, it is important to take a closer look at the phenomenon of modernism in this ancient tradition. A number of works (*McMahan, 2008; Braun, 2016; Gleig, 2019*) are devoted to this topic. Buddhist modernism is defined as a modern trend in various directions and schools of this religion, which aim to adapt teachings to the challenges of modernity. It is mainly about the interpretation of traditional doctrines, as well as about the emphasis on meditation, the «psychological» and «scientific» nature of Buddhism. Over time, these ideas of modernism formed the basis of trends that spread in the West, because they used rhetoric that was understandable to the appropriate audience. In the process of modernization, attention was shifted from the «supernatural» doctrines of the Buddha's teachings, from mythological plots and soteriology to the secular dimensions of human life. This made Buddhism in the eyes of Western intellectuals a kind of scientific religion for a secular age.

A feature of modernism is an attempt to adapt Buddhist teachings to modern circumstances, in which the agenda of Western culture prevailed: rationalism, science, secularization, democracy, individualism, etc. It is precisely these features that Buddhism has woven into its own teaching in different ways: in the schools of Myanmar and Sri Lanka, modernism influenced the formation of a new national identity and the democratization of the Buddha's teachings.

In Japanese Zen a philosophical reform was added to the teachings. The least influenced by modernism were the Tibetan schools, which became involved in the dialogue with the West only in the second half of the 20th century after the occupation of Tibet by communist China and the emergence of a significant diaspora abroad. It is important that the modernization of Buddhist schools and directions happened agentically, and the trends that emerged in the process embody their authentic identities in a global world where it is increasingly difficult to preserve religious and cultural core while interacting with other cultures.

## 3. Definition of trends in Buddhism

Buddhist modernism contributed to the formation of certain trends, which most vividly represented changes, modernization of worldview ideas for the West and a global audience. In my research, I define a trend as a set of influential ideas that can determine global or local cultural processes, the nature of assimilation and production of new meanings/values. For example, there are trends in Cultural Studies (*Roose, 2015; Pashkevych, 2023*); trends in philosophy can be tentatively called existentialism, analytical philosophy, phenomenology, post-modernism. There are trends in philosophy of science (*Gonzalez, 2022*), history of philosophy (*Oizerman, 2018*), logics (*Baaz, 2018*), psychology, etc.

The Theravāda trend was formed quite early thanks to the efforts of Anagārika Dharmapāla and the activists of the Vipassana movement, but its history has different stages. The orientalist project initiated by Rhys Davids promoted sympathy to Buddhism among intellectuals and skeptics for Christianity, and distorted the general perception of different schools. In the

20th century, the trend developed significantly thanks to Lady Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, U Ba Khin, Goenka and Western teachers (Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, etc.). The institutions and organizations they created plays nowadays a significant role.

The Mahayāna trend is mainly represented by Zen Buddhism, which was popularized by Soen Shaku, Daisetsu Suzuki, Alan Watts, Shunryu Suzuki and their students. Representatives of the Kyoto school of philosophy contributed to the modernization of this trend, who reformed Buddhism to compete with Western philosophical systems. Zen Buddhism became one of the powerful images of this religion for the Western audience and thanks to its popularity among the subcultural movements of the 1950s and 1970s.

Vajrayana also created its own trend of Buddhism, which was formed thanks to the efforts of the Dalai Lama XIV (Mind and Life Institute), as well as a whole constellation of outstanding thinkers open to dialogue with the West. Chogyam Trungpa, the founder of Naropa University, was one of such famous figures.

Each of these trends contains important ideas that are actively developing in the context of intercultural dialogue. These ideas include, in particular:

- secularization;
- social engagement (activism);
- emancipation of women and gender equality;
- environmental issues;
- digitization of Buddhist teaching;
- close interaction with science;
- restoration and adaptation of meditation practices;
- ecumenism;
- urbanization;
- psychologization of teaching.

Modern Buddhism in the West is characterized by the ideas of social, political, environmental, and feminist activism. In all three mentioned trends, you can find examples of how teachers and followers join the struggle for human rights, social equality, peace, dialogue, etc. This is quite a significant challenge for traditional forms of Buddhism that have adapted to conservative local environments with stable political regimes. In the global, modern conditions, Buddhists demonstrate the growth of political activity, which becomes an opportunity for empirical verification of the values of the Buddha's teachings. There are also quite active attempts to reform attitudes towards nature, the environment, education, law, and the nature of capitalist relations. At the Mind and Life Institute there are actively implemented courses on ethical leadership, with the aim of eventually changing the world for the better. Individual teachers join various social initiatives to support people with disabilities, orphans, prisoners, veterans, etc.

Digitalization, i.e. the active use of information technologies, social networks, traditional and modern media to attract the audience, is also characteristic of modern trends in Buddhism in the West. Openness is a fairly common feature of most organizations, educational platforms, and individual meditation centers. This trend harmoniously interacts with the urban landscape and the orientation of modernized trends of Buddhism to the urban environment. Life in the city is more active, and the need for spiritual, ethical, philosophical answers grows against the background of human alienation and loneliness.

Interaction with science is especially important for trends in Buddhism. New disciplines have been formed thanks to the evidence base collected by neuroscientists. Contemplative science (*Dorjee, 2016*) and Contemplative Studies (*Komjathy, 2017*) are the results of the dialogue between science and Buddhism. In the first, more attention is paid to the influence of meditation

practices on human health and brain, and in the second – to the application of meditative practices in Artes Liberales. The idea of openness of modernized Buddhism to dialogue with science in this case is the driving force of progress in many related fields: neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, religious studies, ethics, anthropology, etc.

Another legacy of the 20th century in Buddhist trends is psychologization. In particular, it is about the application of meditative practices and ideas of Buddhist philosophy as methods of therapy (*Kabat-Zinn, 2011*). The tendency to see Buddhist teaching as an alternative and ancient form of psychology also dates back to the first attempts to define Buddhism in general. The emergence of secular therapeutic programs based on Buddhist teachings and meditation, the active use of this legacy in psychoanalysis (*Safran, 2003*), CBT (*Tirch et al, 2016*), and other (*Kashdan&Ciarrochi, 2013*), is evidence of significant practical potential.

To conclude a brief overview of the main trends, we should mention the ecumenical trend. All three trends in this matter show a tendency towards constant interfaith interaction and exchange. Various institutional sites have been created for this purpose, the most famous of which is the Mind and Life Institute. Despite all the diversity and historical fate, schools and branches of Buddhism in the global dimension find an opportunity to establish contacts, to support each other. This was demonstrated by the situation with the global pandemic in 2020–2021 (*Fowler, 2021*), as well as in the context of global warming, the aggravation of political crises, and the geopolitical confrontation between China and the United States. Although Buddhism continues to seek opportunities to create a global integrated Buddhist agency, the process itself has been initiated (*Laliberte, 2018*).

#### 4. Conclusions

The ability to adapt to different circumstances and environments is a necessity of any living organism. Religions are a certain form of living organisms that exist because of people united by common ideas, views and practices. Buddhism began to spread actively in the West in the 20th and 21st centuries, and its spread was accompanied by the creation of peculiar trends, which were at the same time a reaction to the demand of modernity, and an attempt to preserve authenticity, to give it a new breath.

The trends that arise in branches of Buddhism have different emphases on those ideas that generally emerged under the influence of global processes. The practice of meditation, the psychological component of teachings, social activism, democratization, individualism, the influence of urbanization, intertwine with science – this is an incomplete list of those ideas that form the fluid and dynamic structures of trends. Thanks to these ideas, the perception of Buddhism in the world was formed as a religion that is prone to a healthy reaction to secularization, modernization and is a certain model of interaction with the scientific environment.

In addition to the actual Buddhist area, that is, networks of people who consider themselves Buddhists of various schools, trends allow Buddhism to reach a wider audience of people who have no intention of converting to the religion. Secular programs in psychology, medicine and education are forms of further development of Buddhist trends, where less and less of traditional elements remain and the boundary of Buddhism is increasingly blurred. This is one of the challenges currently facing Buddhist thinkers, teachers and researchers of related topics: it is the living process of transformation that will ultimately demonstrate whether this philosophical religion is able to maintain its own identity while constantly expanding the ways of applying its own concepts.

The further development of trends in secular environments is a new phenomenon and extremely interesting. In my opinion, the modernization of Buddhism leads rather to the formation of a new type of Buddhism that experiments with the boundary of «tradition-innovation», but at the same time adheres to the main intention of the founder: to help a person understand his own nature, using various methods, including meditation.

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