
Reviewed by

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The series under review was founded by Prof. Detlef Kantowsky (Dept.
of Sociology, University of Konstanz, Germany) in 1990. Until now,
thirteen volumes of this series have been published; the fourteenth
is in preparation. Generally speaking, it is evident that almost all of the
volumes contain highly valuable materials and documents on the develop-
ment of Buddhism in Germany to the present time. The heterogeneous char-
acter of the series as a whole, however, makes it necessary to consider and
classify the contributions in detail.

If, as in many publications on (not only) contemporary Buddhism, the
authors themselves are declared Buddhists, the critical reader has to decide
in every single case whether he or she should take the actual book as a
scientific study on contemporary Buddhism or as an expression of con-
temporary Buddhism itself.

The title, Buddhistischer Modernismus (“Buddhist modernism,” a term
introduced by Heinz Bechert in his Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft,
vols. 1, Frankfurt 1966, and originally used for the Buddhist renewal move-
ment in Asian Theravādan countries) is extended here over all efforts of a
modern interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine (see vol. 4 of the series, new
ed. 1994, 238f.; on the other hand, the limitation to the German context is
not indicated in the title). As the title of a series, the term “Buddhist mod-
ernism” would admit Buddhist treatises as well as “buddhological” stud-
ies. The subtitle “Forschungsberichte” (“Research Reports”), however, sug-
gests only the latter. In spite of that, we find both types among the contribu-
tions to the series.

To begin with the buddhological studies, the first work to mention is
the two-volume “bio-bibliographical manual” Lebensbilder deutscher
Buddhisten (Life Portraits of German Buddhists, vol. 1: The Founders;
vol. 2: The Successors) compiled by Hellmuth Hecker (vol. 1 of the series,
ed. in two volumes: vol. 14, forthcoming, spring 1997). In vol. 1 we find
short biographical sketches and photographs of ten German Buddhists—
all born during the second half of the nineteenth century—who played im-
portant roles in introducing, interpreting, and propagating Buddhism in
Germany, and extensive bibliographies for each of them (including sec-
ondary literature). Vol. 2 of this manual provides similar material (with
more emphasis on the biographies) on one hundred and seventy Buddhists
who continued the endeavor of the “founders.” As in vol. 1, only late Ger-
man Buddhists are dealt with. Both volumes constitute an excellent survey
of the beginnings of and developments within Buddhist circles in Germany,
illustrating especially the motives for “conversion.” They also contain ma-
terials relevant to sociological questions (Hecker himself gives suggestions
for further investigation: of women and Jews among the converts, birth
places, academic and literary activities of the converts, and the like).

In this frame of providing bio-bibliographical material on German
Buddhists, six other volumes of the series can be integrated. The volume
on the occasion of the ninetieth birthday of the Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera
(nicht derselbe und nicht ein anderer [Not the Same and Not Another], ed.
D. Kantowsky, 1991, vol. 3 of the series) contains—besides bio-bibli-
ographical data—interviews with Nyanaponika, selected short essays (partly
unpublished before), fifteen photographs and facsimiles of letters, diplo-
mas, newspaper announcements, articles, and so on.

The life of Nyanaponika’s teacher, Nyanatiloka, is described in the
volume Der erste deutsche Bhikkhu (The First German Bhikkhu, ed. H.
Hecker, 1995, vol. 10 of the series), of which the first part constitutes
Nyanatiloka’s autobiography describing the years 1878–1926 (published
here for the first time), supplied with notes. The second part traces the years
up to his death (in 1957), and includes statements by his pupils, the visi-
tors’ book of his “island hermitage” in Sri Lanka, and several other docu-
ments. In the third part we find pictures and facsimiles of letters, passports,
and articles.

Collected material about one late German Buddhist is also to be found
in the volume Der Weg der weissen Wolken (The Way of the White Clouds,
ed. D. Kantowsky, 1996, vol. 12 of the series), in which texts, pictures, and
other documents of the life of Lama Anagarika Govinda, the founder of the
Arya Maitreya Mandala, are published. In this volume, emphasis lies on
the re-publication of early articles written by Govinda but photographs and
facsimiles of documents are included as well. As particular a supplement,
we find the print of a colored picture of a “holy green lake” in Sikkim,
painted by Govinda himself.

A similar collection was edited by Martin Baumann concerning Helmut
Klar (1995, vol. 11 of the series), one of the few influential Buddhists in
Germany of the older generation who is still alive. Klar’s position and (self)-
critical view on the development of German Buddhism is documented in a
life portrait, re-published articles, statements of Buddhist companions, and
in an interview with M. Baumann. A bibliography and several other docu-
ments complete this volume.

Personal reflections of a German Buddhist at the end of the nineteenth
century are documented in the edition of diary notes of Karl Eugen Neumann
(Fluechtige Skizzen und Notizen [Brief Sketches and Notes], ed. D.
Kantowsky, 1994, vol. 9 of the series). In these notes, Neumann, whose
translations of Pali texts into German are as celebrated as they are conten-
tious, shows his personal impressions of a journey through Ceylon and
India in the summer of 1894. Surprisingly, the second part of his notes that deal mostly with grammatical questions, are given only in facsimile, i.e., were not transcribed by the editor, whose interest obviously does not lie on philological issues. Indological readers interested in translation discussions should find this unfortunate. Nevertheless, this volume—supplemented by a short biography and a bibliography—gives another insight into the life and mind of an influential German Buddhist.

Finally, the volume Wegzeichen (Course Signs, ed. D. Kantowsky, 1991, vol. 4 of the series; 2nd enlarged ed. in cooperation with Ina Roesing, Ulm 1994) should be mentioned among the biographical collections. Here interviews with ten German Buddhists are published: a group consisting of men and women, members of the Buddhist order, and “laypeople” from all three Buddhist traditions, working in different fields of propating and realizing the Buddhist path. For the second edition, the editor himself was interviewed by Ina Roesing, and a supplement containing a short essay on Buddhist modernism was added. This volume gives a representative impression of personal motives and opinions about topics as Buddhist practice, the spread of Buddhism in the West, dialogue with Christianity etc. of eminent and influential German Buddhists as well as an impression of the variety of Buddhist activities in Germany today.

Each of the above-mentioned volumes is presented, clearly arranged, and properly worked out (perhaps except the little drop of bitterness in vol. 9) and contains partly unique material that can be exceedingly helpful for any study of Buddhism in Germany.

Maybe not appropriately placed in this series on Buddhist modernism, but nonetheless valuable is the guide through translations of the Dhammapada compiled by H. Hecker (1993, vol. 7 of the series). He lists twelve translations into German, seventy into English, eighteen into other European languages (incl. Latin), seventy-three translations into eleven Indian (incl. Sanskrit) and forty-three into ten other Asian languages (incl. Arabic) with bibliographical data. The supplement contains a list of citations in other canonical texts, facsimiles of the title pages of the German translations and—as an example of the variety of translations—all twelve German translations of two selected verses.

Two volumes of the series which deal with Abhidhamma doctrines (Abhidhamma im Ueberblick, [Survey of Abhidhamma] by Mirko Fryba, 1990, vol. 2 of the series) and with “death” in the Buddhist doctrine (Wege zur Todlosigkeit, [Ways to Deathlessness], by Alfred Weil, 1993, vol. 8 of the series) can be classified as expressions of modern Buddhism. The former tries to give an introduction to the way of thinking of Abhidhamma, the latter collects statements on “death” in the Buddhist canonical texts, based
on translations. These two volumes are definitely not “research reports” on Buddhist modernism but can be considered as contemporary Buddhist forms of interpreting Buddhist texts. Examined as such, they can be used as a primary source for the research in contemporary Buddhism.

A particular case, finally, is vol. 6 of the series, a second enlarged edition of collected papers and interviews of the general editor, D. Kantowsky (Von Suedasien lernen [Learning from South Asia], 1992, 1st ed. Frankfurt/New York 1985). Though Kantowsky declares himself a Buddhist (see the interview in vol. 4 of the series, 2nd ed.), this volume cannot even be seen exclusively as primary source for the study of contemporary Buddhism, since the papers are only to some extent connected with Buddhist topics; academic articles on several sociological questions are to be found here as well.

The positive tone concerning Buddhism throughout the whole series may be appreciated. In further investigations, however, the critical scholar has to pay attention to this point.

Apart from the reservations made above, the series as a whole provides valuable detailed information about various aspects of the beginnings, the development and the present state of Buddhism in Germany. It can not only be used as a comprehensive source for the study of “German Buddhism” (e.g., as material supplement to Martin Baumann’s Deutsche Buddhisten [German Buddhists], 2nd ed., Marburg 1995), by eliminating the inconsistencies it can also be considered as a model for collecting material of Western Buddhism in other countries (e.g., in America, where such data are still missing—as Charles Prebish pointed out in his article “Ethics and Integration in American Buddhism,” JBE 2 [1995]: 125–39).