



Detlef Kantowsky. *Buddhisten in Indien heute: Beschreibungen, Bilder und Dokumente*. Konstanz: Forschungsprojekt “Buddhistischer Modernismus,” Forschungsberichte 16, 1999, ix + 216 pages, ISBN 3–930959–13-5, DM 25,– (paperback).

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In contemporary Indian society, Buddhists constitute a relatively small religious minority. Even so, this minority consists of a variety of traditions, movements, and organizations, some of which cooperate to a certain extent while others try to draw a clear dividing line between their own group and other Buddhist unions.

For the study under review (*Buddhists in India today: Descriptions, Pictures, and Documents*) Detlef Kantowsky — an expert on Buddhist associations in India, now a retired professor of sociology at the University of Konstanz in Germany — selects three movements that have had most significant impact on the development of contemporary Indian Buddhism (as “main actors of Buddhism in India,” p. vii): (1) the Buddhist revival movement of Sri Lanka, from which the Maha Bodhi Society emerged, founded in 1891 by Anagarika Dharmapala; (2) the movement triggered by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in 1956, when hundreds of thousands of “untouchables” followed his example in converting to Buddhism; (3) the Vipassana International Academy of Igatpuri that was founded in 1976 by S. N. Goenka, who has made the Vipassana meditation practice the focal point of his interpretation of Buddhism.

In the preface (pp. v–ix), the author clearly states what items were not considered in the study: the specific connection and interdependence of the

Neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra with the Dalit movement; the presence of Buddhists from other Asian countries in India (for example, the Tamang from Nepal, the Tibetans in exile, and the inhabitants and visitors of the various temples in Bodh Gaya); the situation of the Buddhist revival movement in South India (Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka); and specific sociological questions like the integration of a protest movement between political recognition and social discrimination.

The book starts with a review of the literature on Buddhists in India today (pp. 1–34) reprinted from the Festschrift Heinz Bechert (*Bauddhavidyasudhakarāh*, eds. P. Kieffer-Puelz, J.-U. Hartmann, Swisttal-Odendorf: Indica-et-Tibetica Verlag, 1997; cf. P. Fluegel's remarks in his review in *JBE* 5, 1998). In this report, Kantowsky collects and presents secondary sources on the subject, focusing on the so-called Neo-Buddhists, a group embracing about ninety percent of the Indian Buddhists and following the specific interpretation of Buddhist doctrines developed by Ambedkar. A few observations concerning patterns of behavior may be mentioned here. On the level of commerce, Neo-Buddhists — most of whom come from the traditionally “untouchable” Mahar caste — try to refuse the discriminating, “impure” duties of their caste and seek for alternative occupations. Although they avoid contact with castes of “impure” professions, they are still recognized and discriminated against as former Mahars (p. 26). On the level of commensality, Neo-Buddhists have changed their eating and drinking habits publicly according to Buddhist precepts, and celebrate their own festive days (for example, the birthday of the Buddha and of Ambedkar). Notwithstanding these attempts to shake off their “untouchable” status, in most cases they are still regarded as “Mahar-Buddhists” of “impure” origin (p. 27). On the connubial level, it can be observed that the traditional endogamic rules of marriage continue to be in use among Neo-Buddhists while the wedding ceremony has distinct Buddhist features and is performed by a bhikkhu or learned layman (p. 27). Kantowsky concludes the chapter by suggesting that nowadays the term “Neo-Buddhist” is used in India as a label for a new caste which is not defined by specific professions but has nevertheless kept its underprivileged status (p. 28).

After this informative literature review — which is supplemented by an examination of the most recent contributions to the subject (pp. 35–39) — Kantowsky gives an outline of the three movements mentioned above. He briefly describes the corporations that are linked up with them: the Maha Bodhi Society (MBS; pp. 41–62), the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana (TBMSG; pp. 118–134), the All India Bhikkhu Sangha (AIBS; pp. 135–178), and the Vipassana International Academy (VIA; pp.

179–203). Apart from the historical outline, what seems most interesting is the author's assessment of the present situation. To select a few instances: We learn from his work that the MBS has been sponsored in the recent past mainly by donations from Japan and that its representatives still have deep reservations against the Ambedkar movement, since Ambedkar's "headstrong reinterpretation of Dhamma is not accepted by them" (p. 50). The TBMSG, known as the Indian wing of the "Friends of the Western Buddhist Order" (FWBO), has now trained more than 180 "Dhammacharis/charinis" that represent "a new type of Buddhist missionary, which is oriented by the western experiences of the FWBO" (p. 131). Even so, these Dhammacharis are still struggling with the problems caused by their own Indian background. While the TBMSG is closely linked to the Ambedkar movement, the AIBS was initially dominated by Barua and Cakma Buddhists from Bengal and Assam. This association, that presents itself as a representative for all Indian bhikkhus, consists nowadays almost entirely of Neo-Buddhists from Maharashtra (p. 139). Finally, the VIA and its founder, S. N. Goenka, avoid the label "Buddhist," since "Dharma is not Hindu nor Buddhist nor Sikh, Muslim nor Jain; Dharma is purity of heart, peace, happiness, serenity" (Goenka, cited p. 186). Its courses are taken almost exclusively by Hindus, Jains, Christians and Buddhists from the West (p. 187). Neo-Buddhists are explicitly displeased with this alleged "Hindu dominated" kind of Buddhism — not least because of the VIA's friendly relations with the MBS (p. 184).

Closely connected with the Buddhist movements are the places regarded as central or "sacred" sites. Kantowsky examines the present situation of Bodh Gaya (pp. 63–92) and concludes that Indian Buddhists are almost absent in this "central place of Buddhism" (p. 73). Instead of travelling to the far distant Bodh Gaya, Neo-Buddhists visit their own "central place" (p. 93) in Maharashtra, that is, Nagpur, where Ambedkar's conversion took place in 1956. According to Kantowsky, Nagpur is the centre of the new religious identity of the Neo-Buddhists, the place where their "new birth" as successors of Ambedkar has begun (pp. 93–107). Goenka's movement has its central place in Igatpuri, northeast of Bombay, where the VIA is settled (pp. 179–187). Within the area of the golden pagoda on the Dhammagiri ("hill of Dhamma") very popular courses on Vipassana meditation are held.

As the title of the study indicates, the descriptions have been supplemented by several photographs (for instance, of Dharmapala, Ambedkar, and Goenka) and documents which provide the reader with valuable materials, many of which concern most recent developments. Apart from such items as the facsimile of one of Dharmapala's letters dated 1925 (pp. 51–

54) or the founding resolution of the AIBS (1971; pp. 152–157), one finds an official statement published by the Indian government concerning Ambedkar's social activities (1993; pp. 108–117), announcements for and minutes of AIBS annual meetings (1997/1998; pp. 163–178), an essay by Goenka on the occasion of forty years of his “new life” (pp. 189–195), and a few remarkable minor sources (for example, the copy of an AIBS identity card, or the “Code of Discipline for Vipassana Meditation” of the VIA, pp. 160–162 and 196–201).

To sum up, this study provides manifold material and illuminating observations on the subject matter. Since detailed data are presented, it is no treatise for beginners but can nevertheless be used as a survey of the present situation of the Buddhist circles dealt with. Unfortunately, the two bibliographies within the book were not unified. Although the criteria for the selection of the material are not always obvious, the study is apt to inspire further studies on the subject. For instance, it would be most interesting to explore thoroughly the religious motivations behind the tensions indicated here between Neo-Buddhists and the MBS as well as the VIA. For an examination of such questions, Kantowsky's collection of material can serve as a suitable starting point. Unlike others, this study fits perfectly in the series on “Buddhist modernism” (compare my review in *JBE* 4, 1997), and one hopes it will inspire German scholars to undertake other detailed studies on Buddhism in contemporary India.