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Prolegomenon to Thinking about Buddhist Politics

André Laliberté¹

Unbeknownst to those who do not pay attention to the religious dimension of politics, there exist important political parties dedicated to the advancement of a Buddhist perspective on public policy. Such groups are comparable to the Christian Democrat political parties that promote theologically based policies.² Examples of political parties with a Buddhist identity include the Komeito (Party of Clean Politics) in Japan,³ the Palang Dharma (Power of Dharma) Party in Thailand,⁴ the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party) in Sri Lanka,⁵ and the Cambodian National Sustaining Party.⁶ These organizations have expressed a wide variety of

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² The Christian Democrats International has changed its identity in 2001, as Centrist Democrat International <<http://www.idc-cdi.com/>> because member parties wanted to attract people of faiths other than Christianity. The Christian Democrat Association of America, which cover all the parties in South and North America, maintains its Christian identity: <<http://www.odca.org.mx/>>

³ The party has reformed in 1998 and is now known as the Shin Komeito (New Komeito): <<https://www.komei.or.jp/>> .

⁴ The party dissolved in 2007.

⁵ At the time of writing, the Party's website, at <<http://www.jathikahelaurumaya.com/>>, was still in construction.

⁶ The link to the party has ceased to function.

views, but they all claim to articulate a Buddhist perspective in their respective countries. It remains difficult, however, to identify any common feature that we could qualify as inherently Buddhist, especially if we were to look for a shared point-of-view that found its expression on the international stage. It would be even more difficult if we were to look beyond the narrow realm of political parties to include lay Buddhist associations, such as the Soka Gakkai in Japan, or the Dhammakaya in Thailand. Such groups try to influence politics outside the realm of formal institutions through social service activities. In other words, is it possible to distinguish a Buddhist perspective in contemporary politics emerging from such diversity?

This special issue of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* seeks to explore this topic with articles that shed light on the politics of Buddhists both in majority contexts, and in situations where Buddhists form a religious minority. Whatever their status in the population where they live, many Buddhists are interacting with their coreligionists to make their voices heard in their respective societies and on the international stage. Moreover, governments look to religious authorities to legitimize their power, as the Thai military regime does, through the association of the sangha with the monarchy, or they expect Buddhist clerics to promote their image in diplomatic relations, as we can see in the case of Chinese and Indian authorities. Although to non-Asian and non-specialists Buddhists may not represent a factor in strategic calculations—the way that Christian and Muslim institutions do for a wide range of issues—many Asian governments and Buddhist institutions see things differently.

What is Distinctive about a Buddhist Perspective on Politics?

A good way to start thinking about a Buddhist perspective on politics is to consider the views of Amartya Sen, the world-renowned philosopher and

economist, who is credited as one of the founders of the United Nation's Human Development's Index, and who was appointed in 2013 as Chancellor for a world heritage institution, Nālandā University.⁷ Located in India's Bihar state, that institution was one of the most ancient centers of higher learning in the world, and from the fifth to the ninth century a major center of Buddhist scholarship and knowledge, before its destruction in the twelfth century. The oldest university in the world, it was already six hundred years old when the oldest University in Europe, the University of Bologna, was founded. Nālandā was a truly international institution, having welcomed within its walls eminent scholars from every part of Asia.⁸

On February 10, 2011, as head of the Nālandā University Mentor group, Sen gave an address at Santiniketan, West Bengal, in which he discussed the relevance of Buddhism in contemporary politics. In his lecture to honor the memory of Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, an eminent scholar of Buddhism and India's ancient history, Sen focused on four aspects of the Buddha's thought that are significant for him and that, he believes, matter especially for the contemporary world:

1. The importance of enlightenment, communication, and public reasoning;
2. The significance of human values for decent governance and public politics;
3. The need to go beyond the contractarian modes of political and moral reasoning, championed by the "social contract" tradition, and much used in contemporary political and moral theory; and

⁷ Sen resigned in 2015 because of disagreements with the BJP government.

⁸ The preparatory meeting to the first Global Buddhist Congregation included the promotion of that University's revival.

4. The need for a global rather than a parochial way of understanding the demands of fairness and justice. (“Contemporary” 18)

On the idea of communication and public reasoning, Sen refers to a “historically rich tradition of communication and interactive public reasoning,” but he does not delve into details and may be guilty of anachronism (“Contemporary” 21). The interactive public reasoning he refers to mirrors the democratic ethos of his native Republic of India, but it is hard to see such tradition of communication in ancient monarchies, colonies, and independent republics, where rulers received sanction from Buddhist authorities in order to naturalize their exercise of power in ways similar to what we have seen in other societies influenced by Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism. Even today, the military junta of Thailand, and the soft authoritarian regimes of Hun Sen in Cambodia, who all claim a Buddhist legitimacy, hardly stand out as examples of communication and public reasoning. Perhaps the Soka Gakkai could come close to representing these values, but in this case, it is the contested status of this association, rejected by some other Japanese Buddhists as “too extreme” or “too political,” that is an issue.

Sen’s argument about the centrality of human values for decent governance, which he sees in Buddha’s thought, resonates for him with many of the problems faced by governments today, who believe they are unable to implement sound policies without coercion. His point is that:

The attempt at implementation through values rather than through punitive actions has practical relevance A variety of social controls that are needed today, from those aimed at generating environment-friendly lifestyles to those aimed at the cultivation of peace and security in the relations between different people, can be helped a great

deal by social education and public discussion. (Sen, “Contemporary” 23)

This second point does not differ much from the values expressed by the social gospel tradition of the Protestant churches involved in the civil rights movement in the United States, or to move closer to countries where Buddhists matter politically, to the actions and thinking of the Catholic Church in South Korea and the Philippines, when their respective episcopates opposed military regimes. The point is not to deny the possibility that a Buddhist perspective could cultivate a better political ethos, but simply that it is not clear in what ways it is distinct from other religious perspectives.

In relation to the third element of a Buddhist perspective he discussed, *viz.*, the need to go beyond the abstract approach favored in Western liberal philosophy, Sen made reference to a central concept outlined in his book *The Idea of Justice*. In this book, he illustrated his approach, which he terms “social realism,” with the behavior of Aśoka (304–232 BCE), the emperor who adopted Buddhism and contributed to its expansion in the Indian sub-continent (Sen, *Justice* 75–76). In his lecture, he quoted a famous statement made by the Buddha about the role of duties and responsibility in the realization of justice, in which he made an analogy with the relation between a mother and a child. The mother provides care to her child not because she is expecting a reward in a relation between equals, but simply out of a realization that in the asymmetrical relation of power with her child, she has the possibility to do things that will make a difference for the child that the child itself cannot do (Sen, “Contemporary” 24). For Sen, this example demonstrates that justice can best be achieved by paying attention to, and comparing, existing societies, and real institutions and behavior, rather than acting in accordance with the rigid thinking produced by abstract reasoning. This critique of liberal contractarian theory, for all its merit, is not very different from the social

doctrine of the Catholic Church, which has sought to oppose both liberalism and socialism because of their abstract character.

Finally, with respect to the fourth dimension of Buddhist thinking that could be relevant to contemporary politics, Sen drew inspiration from Nālandā University's own achievement as a center of knowledge diffusion, open to people coming from a wide variety of horizons. As he wrote: "What particularly distinguishes Buddhism, it can be argued, is its focus on advancing intellectual connections, which stems from Buddha's own focus on enlightenment as a central feature of human flourishing" (Sen, "Contemporary" 25). One issue that remains unclear, however, is to what extent Sen assumes that enlightenment entails a rational, intellectual pursuit. This approach differs from a Buddhist understanding of the concept of enlightenment. Moreover, Sen's argument has merit only if one wants to buy into the overly simplistic narrative that the advancement of knowledge in the West has emerged from the radical severing of all connections between higher education and Christian churches. It also glosses over the fact that we can make similar claims about Islam and Hinduism, whose religious institutions have at various points of history supported the production and dissemination of knowledge. The point is not to deny the merit of Sen's argument that Buddhism is relevant to the modern world, but simply that we cannot draw from that a perspective that is distinctive of the ones promoted by other religions.

Moreover, Sen's speech about aspects of the Buddha's thought that could benefit humanity has left open an important question: what would be the channels through which that vision could be implemented? His social realist perspective would lead us to look at the actual realizations of Buddhists in the societies where most of them live and where they are in sufficient numbers to have the opportunity to sway or influence their government to implement policies that put into practice Buddhist principles. Looking at these achievements, or the incomplete and partial attempts to

put Buddhist ethics into action, because of the huge variety of national conditions, is likely to reveal that there are many Buddhist perspectives. What it means to be a Buddhist varies across nations, and even within them. This diversity within the religion mirrors that of the other major faiths, as anyone familiar with the schism and sectarian disputes within Christendom and Islam is aware. This diversity, however, should not lead us to abandon any attempt to understand what different political views informed by aspects of Buddhism can mean for the contemporary world.

Buddhism is certainly relevant to world affairs today, as the popularity of spiritual leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nath Hanh in the West attests. Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, albeit not as well-known in the West, are nevertheless major public figures in their own countries. The fact that the governments in their land of birth bitterly contest their religious authority on the ground that they are “seditious” or “separatist” only attests further to their political relevance. Other Buddhist leaders besides them, such as Chin Kong, Cheng Yan, and Hsing Yun in the Chinese world, and Daisaku Ikeda in Japan, are not contested by their governments, but they nonetheless exert a moral influence that can have deep political implications because their statements on morality and proper behavior, as well as their philanthropic activities, makes them major social actors. Moreover, through the use of mass media, such religious leaders can reach followers all over the world.

Although these spiritual leaders have expressed their views on a wide variety of issues of relevance to contemporary affairs, the remedies they propose vary and even contrast with each other. Hence, there is a world of difference between the activist inclinations of the Buddhist leaders loosely identified with the trend of “engaged Buddhism” such as Sulak Sivaraksa and the Dalai Lama (King), on the one hand, and those of “humanistic Buddhism” to whom most Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhists re-

late. Whereas the former advocate an active involvement to address systemic issues of social justice, the latter promote individual acts of charity and moral cultivation. In these conditions, it should not surprise us that there exists no canonical Buddhist perspective on politics and public affair that would be universally respected by all adherents to that tradition. Many voices speak to articulate and interpret the Buddha's views for the resolution of contemporary problems, but there is no consensus, and very little of this reflection engages with the political realities that Buddhists the world over must cope with, whether it is in issues such as public health, social security, inter-ethnic relations, sustainable development, and the preservation of the global commons for the next generations.

Of those who have written on the importance of Buddhism in the contemporary world, most have looked at politics from a religious perspective. They see the importance of self-cultivation, correct practice and thinking, and spreading Buddhist education, as ways to reach enlightenment, or create a Pure Land on Earth.⁹ Looking at issues such as the environmental crisis the world faces, they emphasize solutions based on the reform of individual, for example, by emphasizing the importance of mindfulness. Most of the Buddhist opinion makers writing about the problems faced by contemporary society and the most widely read among them, such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh in the West, or Hsing Yun and Chin Kung in the Chinese world, are religious leaders, and naturally their writings reflect this. They focus on individual good intentions, and few among them have engaged directly with the world of politics, which is based on collective action. As I will make clear below, among the few Buddhists who did think in explicitly political terms, most think within their national framework, and they rarely address international problems, unless the latter is directed against their own nations.

⁹ The list of writings by Buddhist Masters using this approach is too long, and it would not do justice to anyone to selectively quote just a few.

McLeod's anthology *Mindful Politics* offers one example of the diversity of Buddhist perspectives on politics. This collection presents the different prescriptions offered by eminent Buddhist personalities from the Dalai Lama to Jerry Brown, as they use Buddhism as an inspiration for a different form of politics. This anthology usefully structures the relevance of Buddhism to contemporary politics in three broad themes: views, practice, and action; and each of these themes are the object of short essays. The essays on "Buddhist views" present to their readers themes such as universal responsibility (the Dalai Lama), mindful politics (Johnson), oneness of all beings (Thich Nath Hanh), to name a few. Essays on "practice" discuss antidotes to escalation (Chödrön), the dissolving of enmity (Jones), breaking the cycle of revenge (Brakya), and community healing (Thanissaro). Finally, chapters on "actions" cover a wide range of topics that are more prescriptive than descriptive and provide recommendation on applying Buddhist principles to think differently in fields such as economics (Thinley), or on how to address the pressing problems of conflict (Gimian) and racism (Ferguson). These are worthy essays, and some of the writers, such as Jerry Brown, even ended up in the unique position of being able to put their ideals into practice. Most of these short texts, however, are more call to action than in-depth analyses.

Another scholar representative of the idea that Buddhism could positively contribute to contemporary affairs is David Loy. He has tried to anchor the ethical, spiritual, and religious perspective of Buddhism within a scientific worldview. In his book *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, he tries to apply fundamental Buddhist concepts to urgent issues of contemporary society. He proposes to mobilize the concept of non-duality to the problem of good and evil to take us away from the destructive path of what he sees as the New Holy War waged by Western countries (Loy, *Awakening* 103 ff.). Turning his attention to domestic issues, he also sees in Buddhism an inspiration in the efforts to reform hardened criminals (Loy 121 ff.). Finally, he also espouses the popular view that Buddhism

can help us rethink the relationship between technology and nature (Loy 157 ff.). In his book *Money, Sex, War, Karma* (2008), Loy goes further and, grounding his reflections on the Buddhist concept of karma and the Buddhist perspective on the nature of the self, he sees the origins of many contemporary social problems in the delusions prevalent in our culture, and proposes to address them by following a radical path to change inspired by Buddhism. Loy's project is ambitious and covers a wide range of issues. Although he offers a critique of the West, he ends up expressing an essentially Western perspective. As contributors to this issue will demonstrate empirically, many of the issues that most Buddhists live through in their societies differ from those discussed by Loy.

Not all Buddhists, however, embrace the positive views of the scholars assembled by McLeod, the social optimism seen in Loy's scientific Buddhism, or the progressive promises of "engaged Buddhism." Ian Harris's discussion of the importance of nationalism in Buddhist revivalism, for example, points to another, and at times violent, side of Buddhist political participation in newly democratizing societies (Harris 2012). Brian Victoria has documented the jingoistic attitudes of some important factions of Japanese Buddhism. Harris's focus on nationalism and ethnic identity, as well as Victoria's attention to wartime Buddhism, highlight some of the sources of disagreement among Buddhists today. Together they raise uncomfortable questions about the meaning and value of Buddhist political participation in societies divided by narratives of fear that stoke inter-ethnic and inter-religious hatred. The hardline approach used by the Burman monk Ashin Wirathu, who stigmatizes his country's Muslims as "parasites" (Mahtani 2013), and his Sri Lankan colleague Galagoda Atte Gnanasara, whose group, the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddha's Power Force), vilifies Muslim compatriots (Scobey-Thal 2014), contrasts with the peaceful and moderate "middle way" approach used by the Dalai Lama to deal with China.

On issues like human rights, the relevance of Buddhism would appear so obvious as to be trivial. The Buddhist concept of compassion and the precept forbidding the killing of sentient beings would seem a solid foundation for a categorical opposition to capital punishment and more generally the opposition to torture, and other inhumane and degrading treatments. Discussions elsewhere about compassionate killings, however, have shown that some Buddhist thinkers have not hesitated to justify the resort to violence in the name of broader interests, such as the survival of the community (Thikonov and Brekke 2012). The discussion so far has generally presented the views of people who promote a vision of Buddhism that happens to coincide with the concerns of people whose views can be qualified as progressive and liberal. However, as the mention of Wirathu and Bodu Bala Sena above has shown, among those who call for the promotion of a Buddhist perspective in politics there are some whose views are very different from what we could call liberal and progressive perspectives.

Finally, moving to the issue of a specifically Buddhist perspective on international politics, recent scholarship has also moved away from the realm of individual behavior and politics at the national level to that of international affairs and asks what a Buddhist perspective on global politics can mean (Chavez-Segura 2011). One could assume from the interpretation of Buddhist doctrines that an international perspective on Buddhism would promote pacifism. This is certainly the case with the Soka Gakkai International and the political organization it supports in Japan, the Shin Komeito. In 2013, the leader of the party, Natsuo Yamaguchi, acted in accordance with the pacifist beliefs of his organization and visited leaders in China to mend ties and try to diminish tensions between the two countries (Xinhua 2013). However, the pacifist posture of Buddhism cannot be taken for granted: in a stunning reversal, in July 2015 the Shin Komeito abandoned its traditional opposition to constitutional revisions and supported the changes proposed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. For

the first time since 1945, these changes give Japan the right to send troops abroad in combat missions.

Perhaps the best way to understand what a Buddhist perspective on contemporary politics entails would be an examination of the inner thinking within the Sangha, as expressed by the reflections of monastic and lay scholars of Buddhism during international conferences. A cursory look at the 16th annual congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies convened in Taipei, however, reveals that few Buddhists care about current affairs. Among the five hundred conference papers given on a wide range of subjects barely 1.5 % addressed topics that could be construed as a Buddhist perspective on politics. Among these interventions: a panel dedicated to “Teaching about Socially Engaged Buddhism”; one on “Korean Buddhism and Environmental Politics”; and two sessions dedicated to the theme of “Radical Buddhism and Buddhist Socialism in Thought and Practice.” To these sessions, we can add three others that reveal Buddhist perspectives on important policy issues: clinical Buddhist studies on hospice palliative care; the treatment of social minorities; and, under the title “Religion, Ideology, and Utopia,” Buddhism in the public sphere of India (IABS 2011). Most of the presenters of these panels are sympathetic observers of Buddhism, providing nuanced observation about the actions and ideas of lay people and monastics. Very few monastics presented their perspective on political issues.

Buddhist Politics, Diplomacy, and Gender Relations

The *Journal on Buddhist Ethics* is naturally another window to explore the content of a Buddhist perspective on politics. The topics that are the object of the articles published in that journal cover an impressive variety of issues, and what follows, taken from recent issues, gives an idea of the

wide range of contemporary problems addressed from a Buddhist perspective. Soraj Hongladarom has made the case that compassion can reinforce the regime of intellectual property (Hongladarom 2014); Martin Kovan has analyzed the meaning of Tibetan monks, nuns, and lay people self-immolation in China (Kovan 2014); Edwin Ng has explored the ethical and political implications of using Buddhist mindfulness training (Ng 2014); and Masahide Tsujimura has assessed the use of the traditional Tibetan concept of *chos srid zung 'brel* (union of *dharma* and polity) by the Dalai Lama in his effort to carry on democratic reforms in Tibet (Tsujimura 2014). The papers in this special issue represent a welcome addition to the existing contributions, looking at a large number of societies where Buddhism represents a major religious, cultural, social, and, in the end, political force. The authors of the contributions presented below are grateful for their inclusion in this issue.

The issue of the international relevance of Buddhism constitutes the concern of the contributions by Laliberté and Mitra. Laliberté looks at it from the perspective of global politics, while Mitra examines the issue in the context of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The essays by Mitra, Terrone, and Huang look at situations where Buddhists represent a minority where they live. In the case study of Bangladeshi Buddhists examined by Mitra and the Buddhist association described by Huang, this minority status does not represent a major problem if Buddhists also identify as members of the ethnic majority. When religious practice serves as a marker of a distinct national identity, as Terrone's examination of Tibet shows, the situation is more complex. How Buddhists treat other minorities, ethnic and religious ones, is becoming an important issue that deserves more attention. The way Buddhist majorities treat religious dissidence or doctrinal difference may enhance, or hamper, the attempts by Buddhist monastic and lay leaders to speak out with authority on international forums against discriminations in all form. Litalien's contribution addresses this issue indirectly by looking at

the ways in which the Buddhist establishment of Thailand treats women as a minority.

Can Buddhists offer to the international community an original perspective on the broad issues of war and peace, the global commons, and social justice? Can they express a different voice to tackle more specific and complex issues like the shift to a greener economy, the legal recognition of the work of care, tolerance of sexual minorities, the right to die with dignity and the abolition of capital punishment? André Laliberté looks at the many attempts to create a transnational Buddhist organization that could make the voice of the monastic community and lay devotees heard on the international stage, but he does not find a common Buddhist perspective emerging. He first recalls earlier attempts made during the Cold War and then he documents recent actions by Indian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Chinese government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), to enlist the support of different national organizations. Finally, he analyses the impact of great power rivalries, anti-colonial nationalism, and the geopolitical ambitions of India and China on preventing the creation of a universally recognized, international Buddhist association. The diversity within the world of Buddhism, in the end, recalls that within Christianity and Islam. The widespread dissemination of non-state Buddhist associations all over the world has expanded the reach of that religion outside Asia but has only reinforced this variety of Buddhist perspectives. The diversity within Buddhism may prevent them from reaching unanimity on many important issues, but it does not mean that they should be ignored. Laliberté concludes that precisely because Buddhist organizations weigh so much in the domestic and foreign policies of most Asian countries, it will help better understand the politics in the region to pay attention to Buddhism as a factor.

One such example of the significance of Buddhism to regional politics is offered by Deba Mitra Barua, who presents us with a detailed historical account of the Barua Buddhists living in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. Representing less than one percent of a population that is overwhelmingly Muslim, they do not face persecution but they live not far from the Arakan state of Burma, a country that is overwhelmingly Buddhist and where the Muslim minority of that state suffers persecution. Mitra adds to his careful parsing of the historical evidence of Buddhists' existence in Bengal ethnographic observations about their life in the city of Chittagong, as well as the evidence of appeals to their coreligionists abroad in the capital of Bangladesh. This sets the stage for his discussion on the politics of relic exchanges between the governments of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He argues that there are three actors involved in what he calls the politics of religious minorities in Bangladesh on the international stage, and each sees a tangible benefit from its performance. This diplomatic activity serves to enhance the legitimacy of the Sri Lankan government, which rests in part on its Buddhist identity; the Bangladeshi government promotes these exchanges as a way to demonstrate its good faith in protecting minorities and therefore meet one condition imposed by international aid agencies; and, crucially, the Buddhist minority in Bangladesh can lessen its sense of vulnerability from this diplomatic exchange in a context wherein Bangladesh society faces the pressure of an increasingly strident Islamic fundamentalism. Diplomacy has contributed to the improvement of Buddhist minorities' welfare in Bangladesh in part because its government believed that it served its interests. "Buddhist diplomacy" between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh represents a rare case of success, however.

With respect to Tibetan Buddhism, the intersection between religion and diplomacy can work the other way around: when monks and lay people from area populated by ethnic Tibetan Buddhists have drawn attention to the plight of their community's culture in a most dramatic way

via self-immolation, these actions have complicated considerably China's efforts to develop its own version of soft power. Antonio Terrone's article starts with the observation that the practice of self-immolation has received doctrinal justification in scriptures since the beginning. It is also deeply rooted in an ancient Buddhist practice of self-sacrifice, not only for religious reasons, but also more "mundane" objectives, such as reestablishing social order and preventing calamities such as war and natural disaster. Terrone's carefully worded argument is that taking one's own life represents a form of political violence, meant to draw attention to an extreme situation of social and political malaise. He thus interprets the recent wave of self-immolation by young Tibetan Buddhist monks and lay teenagers as: "rational political and communicative responses to perceived injustice through violent self-sacrifice." But because this is a form of self-inflicted political violence, he stresses, which does not inflict harm on others, it has nothing in common with the violent actions promoted by Buddhist extreme nationalist factions in Sri Lanka and Burma, despite the label of "terrorism" inaccurately foisted by the Chinese government on the people who make this ultimate form of self-sacrifice. Terrone concludes his essay with a plea to better understand the sources of the despair that have led people to commit such dramatic actions.

The case of Tibet raises the question of the religion's survival in an authoritarian society that is governed by a political party that has long considered religion as an expression of alienation. However, it also overshadows the lesser known story of Buddhist practice among the majority of those who adhere to that religion in China. Not being an ethnic minority—in contrast to Chinese Muslims, also known as Hui—Chinese Buddhists are not concentrated in a territory and they do not recognize the uncontested authority of a central spiritual figure based in a foreign country—the way Catholics do—and therefore they are not seen by the government as a challenge to its legitimacy. The case study presented by Huang

Weishan, of a Buddhist association from Taiwan active in Shanghai, represents an example of accommodation on the part of the Chinese Communist Party with what she calls “socially engaged Buddhism.” The Tzu Chi Foundation, one of the largest Buddhist lay associations in Taiwan, has grown on the island during the period of martial law because of its apolitical stance, which is another way to say a discrete acceptance of the existing political order. There is little doubt that this attitude has helped the Tzu Chi Foundation establish liaison centers in China, despite the vicissitudes of relations between China and Taiwan. This situation, however, highlights the limited possibilities for Buddhist politics to develop in China, in the current context, besides the approval of the political status quo expressed by the official associations.

The articles by Mitra, Terrone, and Huang all discuss different aspects of Buddhist politics in contexts where they are a minority. In those cases, adherents of that religion are aware that they must take into account the concerns, beliefs, expectation, and interests of fellow citizens who, in their majority, may subscribe to a very different, if not entirely incompatible, worldview. In the few countries where Buddhists represent a majority of the population, it is worth pondering how the religious majority treats minorities. There are many aspects to this question that are worth exploring, such as: the treatment of, non-Buddhist religious minorities, to religious dissidents within the Buddhist community, or to minorities defined by gender, class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Especially important is the view shared by most Buddhists on the role of women in society, who represent a majority of the population, in strictly demographic terms, but experience almost universally a situation similar to that of minorities: under-representation in the political sphere and in the economy, and a marginalization, if not outright discrimination, in the religious sphere.

Women are separate and unequal in most world religions. Most often, they cannot become religious leaders; religious scriptures often assign them a subordinate position in society, on the ground of some essentialist idea about difference between genders. Buddhism appears on the surface to be different and more open to the ideal of gender equality. In Taiwan, women have achieved positions of leadership within the religious establishment, as evidenced by the case of the Tzu Chi Foundation, which is headed by its founder, a nun who is often seen by the government as the “Mother Teresa of Taiwan” because of the philanthropic activities undertaken by the organization she inspires. However, the historical and contemporary realities of women’s existence in societies where Buddhist ethics prevail tell a different story. In his contribution into this issue, Manuel Litalien looks at the issue in the context of Thai Buddhism, where women are deprived of the right to be ordained as nuns and to exert influence within the sangha. It is rather sobering that if the connection he makes between the democratic movement and the empowerment of women within Buddhist institutions holds true, the future of women in Buddhism looks grim indeed considering the turn to authoritarian politics in the Thai Kingdom over the last few years.

Conclusion

This special issue is the first of two that looks at how Buddhist ethics can relate to politics in countries where most Buddhists live, and where their religious beliefs represent a major component of the public discourse. That is to say that references to Buddhist ethical concepts such as the “righteous king” and “karmic retribution” make sense for the population, whether they are Buddhists or not. Even in countries such as China, India, and Indonesia, where Buddhists are minorities, the religious vocabulary borrowed from that religion makes sense to most people, who consider

Buddhism to be part of their cultural heritage and historical narrative. Another aspect of Buddhism that should interest us is that it shares with Christianity and Islam the capacity to transcend cultural and linguistic differences. People who identify with distinctive historical narratives have incorporated Buddhism as part of their national identities. As a result of this diversity, Buddhists have developed a wide variety of perspectives. While this plurality of views can be a positive because it suggests an inherent ability to adapt to different contexts and times, it also suggest the challenge of speaking about a specifically Buddhist political ethics. Nevertheless, we hope these articles will start a conversation about the relevance of Buddhism in contemporary politics.

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