



Frédéric Lenoir. *La rencontre du bouddhisme et de l'Occident.* Paris: Fayard, 1999, 393 pages, ISBN: 2-213-60103-8 (paper): 135 ff.

Le bouddhisme en France. Paris: Fayard, 1999, 447 pages, ISBN: 2-213-60528-9 (paper): 140 ff.

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Despite the considerable appeal of Buddhism among the French and the massive settlement of Zen and Tibetan traditions in France since the late 1960s, very little French scholarly research has been done in France on Buddhism in the West. This fact is surprising when we consider the pioneering works of Henri de Lubac (1952), which initiated historical-textual methodology in the study of the Westward spread of Buddhism. However, with the exception of publications by Buddhist sympathizers or supporters and sporadic visits of journalists to French Buddhists groups, scholars showed little interest in the spread of Buddhism in France between the 1950s and the 1990s.

In the early 1990s, a new generation of researchers emerged who skillfully combined historical-textual investigation with fieldwork. Nevertheless, few books on Buddhism in France were available in the late 1990s.¹ The two volumes published by Frédéric Lenoir (his doctoral thesis in sociology) are offered to remedy the “penury” of French scholarly surveys. In the first volume, Lenoir attempts to trace the history of the Western representations of Buddhism; in the second, he offers the results of a sociological survey, conducted by the author, of French adherents to Buddhism.

Lenoir’s aim is very ambitious. On the one hand, he claims to have produced the very first historical outline of the encounter between Buddhism and the West. The reader, therefore, comes to this work with very high ex-

pectations of an innovative approach. On the other hand, Lenoir proposes to solve two major problems encountered in the study of adherence to Buddhism in the West: the issues related to census taking, and the question of the nature of adherence to Buddhism. He recommends a method for “counting” the Buddhist practitioners or adherents, and a set of theoretical tools to measure adherence to Buddhism (both commonly used in the current sociology of religions). Here too, the reader’s expectations are high, given that these two points are problematic and are currently debated by other researchers around the world.

In the first volume, *La rencontre du bouddhisme et de l’Occident* (*The Encounter of Buddhism and the West*), a reader familiar with the historical accounts of the Western discovery and interpretations of Buddhism will not find very original information or theoretical statements. The book offers a lengthy description of the filtering of Buddhist themes and practices into the West from antiquity to modern times. The author draws a fivefold history of Western conceptions of Buddhism: (1) the “beginnings of imaginary” notions of Buddhism from antiquity to the Renaissance, which covers in few pages the long period of Greek and Indian early contacts, medieval travelers in Asia, and finally, the early missionaries’ fantasy of Tibet; (2) the “intellectual discovery of Buddhism” from 1715 to 1875, including the Oriental Renaissance and the early nineteenth-century European philosophers’ conceptions of Buddhism; (3) “esoteric and modernist Buddhism” from 1875 to 1960, which encompasses the influence of Romanticism, the theosophical influences on esoteric interpretation of Buddhism, “Buddhist modernism” which is considered as a solely Western production, the “fantasy” of Tibet, and the developments of scholarly networks that have translated and popularized Buddhist themes; (4) the “new disciples” from 1960 to 1990, introducing the counterculture movement, and the arrival of Zen and Tibetan masters in the West; and (5) the “Buddhist humanism” from 1989 to the twenty-first century, a final chapter in which the author exposes his own conceptions of the future of Buddhism (p. 331ff): he announces a “spiritual revolution” and the “triumph” of Buddhism as a “modern wisdom” in a post-secular Western world that has rediscovered its “inner East” (*Orient intérieur*).

Despite the author’s efforts to draw a complete and objective survey of the history of Buddhism in the West, many points call for discussion. First, the historical periodization is strangely unbalanced: the first period covers more than two millennia, the second and third approximately one century. The fourth covers only three decades, and the last one depicts the current situation, and even predicts the future of Buddhism in the West. Other attempts to draw the historical phases of the Westward path of Buddhism provide a more balanced and coherent progression—for instance, Batchelor’s

volume *The Awakening of the West*.² The titles of the chapters also shift from ideological to historical and finally social facets of the Westward movement of Buddhism, although the aim of the author was clearly declared as a study of representations of Buddhism only (p. 18 and 19). Yet, Lenoir seems to waver between a historical and an ideological framework.

In addition, despite the reuse of De Lubac's title (published almost fifty years before) for his own volume, Lenoir does not even mention it as a major source, as Batchelor did in the introductory lines of his volume.³ A second criticism must be made about the quoted references: Despite the presence of English-speaking authors in the bibliography (and sometimes quoted in notes), they are often subjected to a very inappropriate theoretical critique. This is the case for Donald Lopez, for instance, whose book *Prisoners of Shangri-la*⁴ is criticized for a coercive and traditional conception of the myth of Shangri-la. (Lenoir states that "[i]n my opinion, the myth *per se* turns out to be dangerous when people do believe in it integrally and with no distance. This is not the case for French followers I have met: they believe *more or less* in *Shambhala*, just as other people believe in their horoscope" [p. 345]. In fact, Lopez's conception of "myth" has little to do with the anthropological meaning of the term, but is related to the Western construction of an idyllic and imaginary Tibet. Thus, the criticism appears somewhat out of place.

As suggested in the introductory chapter, in which Lenoir quotes the historian Arnold Toynbee,⁵ the book's aim is to demonstrate that the spread of Buddhism in the West is mainly an idealistic affair: first of all because the author focuses on the intellectual processes of reception of Buddhism (and here overstates the influence of Buddhist ideas and minimizes the factor of transmission, missing from his analysis), and secondly because he promotes an idealized conception of Buddhism, which he describes as an ethical and philosophical system freed from the "cultural concretions" and from the burden of tradition and rituals. The interest of this first volume thus lies in an unexpected dimension: the unveiling of a postmodern theoretical framework that is currently prominent in the French sociology of religions. Postmodern philosophy and sociology have both insisted on the decline of tradition, the intellectual and social distance from religion, and the emergence of individualistic and consumerist ideologies and behavior in postindustrial Western societies. According to Lenoir, the rooting of Buddhism in the West is the consequence of the Westerners' fascination with ancient Asian traditions that have been transfigured by the Western imagination and reshaped as simple objects of spiritual consumption. Moreover, Westerners' engagement in Buddhist practices is examined only from a Western perspective and results exclusively from individually determined conditions (such as travels to Asia and spiritual paths). The Asian masters' efforts to spread, settle, and preserve

the Buddha's teachings are barely mentioned, and they represent, according to Lenoir, minor aspects of the appeal of Buddhism. The author neglects the foundation of communities and the transplantation of religious models of ritual and training, topics that are almost entirely absent from the book.

Thus, Buddhism turns out to be a "modern" spirituality rather than an Asian religion, possessing the characteristics of modern ideologies (humanism, free will, and individualism). This position is quite contradictory with the historical study, because the author devotes most of his energy to a depiction of how Buddhism was constructed through Western imagination and later adopted as a religious practice (a few pages). Many of a reader's questions remain unanswered. Does Buddhism appear to be a pure Western abstraction and a response to the hopes and fears of the West, which could be acceptable to modern thinking? Moreover, what exactly appeals to Westerners—Buddhism or the image of Buddhism that they construct? Are these modern features intrinsic to Buddhism, are they assigned by Westerners, or do they result from the settlement of Buddhism in the West? Therefore, what, precisely, do French "Buddhists" adopt—intellectual conceptions of Buddhism or religious practices? Some of them are involved in a practical Buddhism performed in a community context, whether it is traditional or modern, as demonstrated by other French researchers. Although focusing on the appeal of Buddhism on the Westerners' side, Lenoir does not pay much attention to the ways in which Buddhist traditions and movements have settled in the West.

A final but problematic point must be raised: the ambiguous position of the author in this first book. Lenoir indeed criticizes Stephen Batchelor's books for a lack of objectivity because the author is a practitioner (p. 14, note). Although Lenoir claims to be neutral and objective, he betrays his own enthusiasm when he asserts that "the encounter of Buddhism and the West, once the misunderstanding is clarified, can draw the face of a new planetary civilization established on the reconciliation of the typical features of the East and the West" (p. 23, my own translation).

Lenoir's second volume is more interesting. Although entitled *Le bouddhisme en France (Buddhism in France)*, this volume does not provide information about the history and processes of the settlement of Buddhism in France; nor does it portray the various traditions that have been established there. This study is situated in the framework of sociology, and consequently focuses upon the motivations for converting to Buddhism rather than upon the issues of transposition, religious, and cultural continuity within Buddhist communities in France, whether they are attended by "Asian" or "White" devotees. Because Lenoir chooses to focus on converts and careers in Buddhism, the book should have been entitled "Buddhists in France." The em-

phasis is indeed upon converts only, and consequently Asian migrants are entirely missing from this study. Such a standpoint is still common in French sociology, just as it was in Western Buddhist Studies before the 1990s.

In order to study French adherence to Buddhism, the author favors a quantitative method (questionnaires) and appends a few interviews. In the first chapter, Lenoir attempts to count the Buddhists in France. He recognizes the difficulty of establishing criteria of adherence. The author refers to the example of the recent transformations within Roman Catholicism by which religious identities are indeed subjected to a “dislocation” as well as a disjunction between believing and belonging in modern times. According to Lenoir, adherence to Buddhism seems to be the perfect illustration of this process. Consequently, neither denominational claims nor beliefs can serve as tools for the study of conversion to Buddhism. Thus, he argues that the only criterion appropriate for a study of the Westerners’ adherence to Buddhism is their “involvement” (p. 32). The author does not explain, however, what this “involvement” implies (Is it intellectual or practical? Personal or collective? In meditation or in rituals?), yet he draws a threefold typology: “sympathizers,” “associates” (*les Proches*, whom Lenoir loosely defines as having a certain degree of proximity to Buddhism) and “practitioners.” On this basis, he estimates the numbers for the respective populations: “sympathizers” are as many as five million, “associates” represent between 100,000 and 150,000 individuals, and “practitioners” are only 12,000. What is innovative about this typology and these estimations? A few years before, Bruno Etienne and Raphael Liogier sketched a very similar typology⁶ that has obviously inspired the author even if he does not avow it. As for the statistics, whereas Lenoir argues that it is crucial in a scientific study to count the “Buddhists” with precision (p. 24), the numbers he provides still remain rather imprecise estimations, extracted from opinion polls or approximations recorded in Buddhist organizations (pp. 81–91).

Other criticisms that were formulated by Eric Rommeluère in a recent article⁷ are related to the issue of representation of Buddhist movements and to the pertinence of the generalization made in this study. Three major criticisms addressed to Lenoir by Rommeluère can be noted in this review. First, the Sooka Gakkai (SG) has been eliminated from the study because the Japanese movement has been implicated in the anti-sect controversy in France. According to Lenoir, the SG movement must be disqualified because the French Buddhist Union did not accept it as a member of the national umbrella organization: Thus, almost 10,000 members of a Buddhist organization have been deliberately ignored in the census. The author has also selected a non-representative collection of Buddhist centers to conduct his inquiry: a handful of Tibetan monasteries (mainly *Kagyū*-oriented) and of Zen

associations (AZI), excluding *vipassanā* groups, Tibetan *Sakya*- and *Gelug*-based communities, and above all, other Zen associations like Thich Nhat Hanh's movement. Moreover, the inquiry was conducted in large communities, yet the majority of Buddhist centers in France are small groups and places of worship (none of them are featured in this "exhaustive" study). As for the "representation" of the sample population of converts, the questionnaire was sent to 4,000 persons, 900 of whom responded. This is indeed a high rate of response, but the author should have considered the issue of the representation of the sample with regard to other statistical tools and data, as Hammond and Machacek⁸ did, before asserting that "the results are valid for the whole population" (p. 190).

The second chapter exposes the sociological profile of practitioners (mainly Zen- and Tibetan-oriented) and portrays a number of French Buddhists' careers, established from a few dozen interviews. Many scenarios are offered, ranging from rejection to the rediscovery of one's original religion, and from part-time practice to full membership. Based on this information, the author portrays a series of careers and modes of integration into Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. The author combines a number of topics in the questionnaire and in the interviews. Nevertheless, most of them are related to the issue of the previous denomination and the relationships with native religion. The author attempts repeatedly to explain the appeal for Buddhism as it relates to the failures of Christianity. A short examination of the questions brings to light the author's preconceived models: on the one hand, a disregard for one's native religion; and, on the other hand, an appealing spiritual option. Consequently, Buddhism turns out to be the opposite model of Christianity. Lenoir recurses to oppositions between theism and atheism, social coercion and individual emancipation, obsolescence and modernity, blind faith and critical reflexivity—which, although demonstrated by other authors as Western ideological constructions, are here considered as proper respective characteristics of Judeo-Christian traditions and Buddhism.

In the third chapter, "Between Tradition and Modernity" (pp. 295–351), the author asserts that Buddhism is a "modern tradition" that is "without any god or dogma," which symbolizes the accurate response to the modern crisis of Western countries. Buddhism thus achieves reconciliation between tradition and modernity, community and individualism, rational and magical thought, technological and "psychological" modernity. Surprisingly, the author stresses, on the one hand, the typical individual-oriented "experiences" of Westerners' paths into Buddhism—a spiritual option in a "religious supermarket"—and on the other hand, he maintains that the adherence to Buddhism is similar to a church-style membership (the category of "*Cathos-Kagyū*," p. 344). Yet again, the conclusion ("Towards a French Buddhism,"

pp. 361–381) shows contradictions comparable to those encountered in the preceding chapters' demonstration, insofar as Buddhism is said to be a factor of religious "reconstruction" (p. 355, i.e., the re-emergence of community forms of religious behavior in a fragmented individualistic modern society) and is at the same time presumed to be "diluted" in the so-called "modern individualism" (pp. 385ff).

In my opinion, it is quite difficult to express an opinion on Lenoir's two books. The first volume represents indeed an acceptable general survey of Buddhism in the West, despite the apparent one-sidedness and the attempts of the author to conform to a Western, idealized conception of Buddhism. The second volume provides information that is more original and is thus more likely to be of interest to the reader. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep in mind the theoretical and methodological context in which the inquiry was conducted. Likewise, equivocal statements unfortunately weaken the purpose of the author. For instance, Frédéric Lenoir seemingly does not feel uncomfortable with the obvious differences observed between the first volume, in which Buddhism is presented as the perfect model for a future "humanistic" and secular spirituality in the West, and the second book, in which Buddhism is seen as a simple substitute for a declining Christianity that did not succeed in responding to social and ideological changes in modern societies. The two models proposed by the author to account for the appeal of Buddhism—which we could characterize as an appeal "by excess" (first book) or "by default" (second book)—coexist in his work and point to an unresolved reflection on this issue. The two arguments should have been brought together in a single and complete demonstration.

Despite the success of these books among a general readership and even among some sociologists in France, they are subjected to very vigorous criticisms, especially by converts and practitioners. In conclusion, I recommend these books, but I would advise the reader to approach the issue of Buddhism in the West in a more critical framework. The fact is that we need to bring to light the way modern and postmodern ideologies shape, at present, the study of Western Buddhism, as the Western colonialist ideologies did in the past, as exemplified in *Curators of the Buddha*, edited by D. Lopez.⁹

Endnotes

1. Dennis Gira's final chapter of his *Comprendre le bouddhisme* [*Understanding Buddhism*] (Paris, Le Centurion, 1989); Bruno Etienne and Raphaël Liogier, *Etre bouddhiste en France* [*Being a Buddhist in France*] (Paris, Nathan, 1997); Pierre Le Quéau, *La tentation bouddhiste* [*The Appeal of Buddhism*] (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998); and my own book: Lionel Obadia, *Bouddhisme et Occident. La diffusion du bouddhisme tibétain en France* [*Buddhism and the West: The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in France*]

(Paris: L'harmattan, 1999). (The titles are of my own translation.)

2. Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (London: Aquarian, Harper Collins and Berkeley, Cal.: Parallax Press, 1994).

3. "I am going to tell the story of an encounter between two cultures. It is a story that has never been fully told before," "In September 1991, I chanced upon the obituary in *Le Monde* of the only person to have written this story . . . : Cardinal Henri de Lubac" in Stephen Batchelor, op. cit. p. xi and p. xiii.

4. Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

5. "The encounter of Buddhism and the West represents the more significant event of the 20th century" (personal translation), F. Lenoir, p. 8.

6. *Etre bouddhiste en France* [*Being a Buddhist in France*], in which the authors formulated a genuine category: the *Nouveaux proches du bouddhisme* (persons newly associated to Buddhism), op. cit., p. 102.

7. Eric Rommeluère, "Le bouddhisme en France: Une lecture critique de Frédéric Lenoir." *Recherches sociologiques*, 2000/3, pp. 103–119.

8. Philip Hammond and David Machacek, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

9. Donald S. Lopez, ed. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (London, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1995).