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Is Buddhism Individualistic?

The Trouble with a Term

Donna Lynn Brown ¹

Abstract

Western scholars have been calling expressions of Buddhism “individualistic”—or denying the charge—since the 1800s. This article argues that “individualism” and related terms are sometimes problematic when applied to Buddhism. Because they are associated with Western modernity, they contribute to hegemonic discourses about Asia and Buddhism, skew representations, and reinforce stereotypes. Because their referents have been many and varied—including escaping caste and family, asociality, lay practice, and racism—their use leads to imprecision, confusion, and lack of comparability among analyses. And because they have moral connotations, they can blend observation with valuation and polemic. The article examines selected scholarly works that maintain or deny that

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Buddhism is individualistic, highlights problems associated with the term, and concludes that, in many cases, more precise and less value-laden descriptors should be found.

Introduction

Is Buddhism individualistic? The question, if taken literally, is meaningless: there are many Buddhisms and many ways to understand individualism. Nevertheless, Western scholars have applied “individualism” and related terms to expressions of Buddhism for almost two centuries. Yet, because individualism is associated with Western modernity, ascribing it to Buddhism can contribute to hegemonic discourses. Additionally, individualism is sometimes perceived as an archetype of the West, just as collectivism is of Asia. Using archetypes in analyses skews representations, elides subtleties, and reinforces stereotypes. In addition, in Buddhist contexts, the referents of “individualism” have not been static. They have included, *inter alia*, freedom from social/familial bonds, freedom to ordain, lay practice, choosing one’s own religion, lack of institutional structure, self-discipline, solitude, self-reliance, asociality, taking responsibility for one’s own future, inner experience, masculine values, social disengagement, racism, sexual freedom, self-expression, and authenticity. This kaleidoscope of referents leads to imprecision, confusion, and lack of comparability among analyses. Further, individualism has moral connotations, such that its use can blend observation with valuation. Calling a given form of Buddhism individualistic, or denying it is individualistic, may sound scientific, but can be part of an ideologically driven narrative.

The use of multivalent terms like “individualism” in scholarly work is not necessarily negative; such terms can prompt productive debates. Nevertheless, this article problematizes the term for causing con-

fusion as well as for being potentially hegemonic, stereotypical, or polemical. It does so in part because those using it seldom define it, and the resulting lack of clarity has generally gone unchallenged. It also does so because, unlike some other multivalent terms, “individualism” is easily avoided. Instead of employing it, scholars could state its intended referent—asociality, solitary meditation, or any other factor they seek to describe—a straightforward way to enhance precision and avert confusion. Still, as discussed below, the use of the term is not uniformly problematic. Some scholars, for example, define it when they use it and apply it in ways that are wholly anodyne. The purpose of the article is thus not to propose a complete end to its use, but—in the context of its complicated history vis-à-vis Buddhism—to raise awareness of its disadvantages and to suggest finding more precise descriptors to the extent feasible. To show why, the article examines selected scholarly works that maintain or deny that Buddhism is individualistic—sometimes as a slight, sometimes as a compliment. “Is Buddhism Individualistic?” is thus a rhetorical question only, meant to prompt investigation of a troublesome term.

Understanding Individualism

There is no single definition of “individualism.” The word first appeared in France in the 1820s as *individualisme*, signifying selfishness at the expense of society, the opposite of *fraternité* (Lukes 7; Swart 80). Germany adopted the term in the 1840s; there, it often represented uniqueness, creativity, and self-realization, and its opposite became oppression by society. In the US, “individualism” came, in the nineteenth century, to refer to developing oneself morally, intellectually, and economically through self-reliance and effort. Its opposite was socialism (Lukes 17–18, 26–29). England connected “individualism” to freedom, self-reliance, and self-cultivation as opposed to socialism or societal oppression (Swart 87;

Lukes 35; Hadley 67). These usages all describe individuals being ontologically prior to groups and choosing how they relate to groups, the social subordinated to the individual.

A related term is “religious individualism.” Theologian Ernst Troeltsch portrayed it in 1912 as spirituality “independent of man or of a priesthood,” although he allowed for reliance on God. In the 1970s, sociologist Steven Lukes noted that the term had come to mean relying only on oneself, not on intermediaries or divinities, to unfold one’s spiritual destiny (Troeltsch 470; Lukes 94). It is the latter meaning that is relevant in Buddhist contexts.

Varying concepts of the individual underlie individualism. In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment concepts of the self-reliant individual arose, centered on the idea of a rational ego. In the nineteenth century, Romantic ideas of the authentic individual appeared, in touch with emotion, and, deeming society oppressive, demanding expression in untraditional ways. Extending this concept today is what could be called “the unbound individual”—whose identity is queer, trans, or otherwise marginalized, and who contests discourses of biology as well as culture and tradition. Individualism that evokes the first concept can be called “rational individualism”; the latter two, “expressive individualism.”² Less standard usages of “individualism” also arise, in works discussed below, as the opposite of social engagement and as a symbol of Western modernity in contrast to postmodernity. Defining individualism as the opposite of social engagement or postmodernity can generate inconsistencies be-

² Sociologist Robert Bellah and his co-authors, in the 1985 *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, call the individualism based on the first concept “utilitarian individualism,” and the second, and by extension, third, “expressive individualism” (333-335). An early distinction between the two concepts was made in 1917 by German sociologist Georg Simmel, who called the first “quantitative individualism” and the second “qualitative individualism” (81).

cause these movements or trends can accommodate attitudes or conduct other definitions term “individualism.”

The following discussion breaks the application of concepts of individualism to Buddhism into phases. Although each phase is associated, more or less, with a time period, the periods overlap; ultimately, each phase represents a way of using “individualism” rather than a historical period.

Before Individualism

Nirvāṇa annihilates individuality, asserts Eugène Burnouf in his 1844 *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien* (529). Max Müller too writes that Buddhism teaches the obliteration of individuality and personality (Tweed 14).³ Other nineteenth-century scholars reinforce this picture (Almond 102-107). How then did some come to depict Buddhism as individualistic? It started with a shift in focus from metaphysics to ethics.⁴

³ Müller made several comments of this nature in his writings.

⁴ Metaphysical arguments about Buddhism vis-à-vis individualism reappear from time to time. For example, mid-century scholars Edward Conze and Christmas Humphreys disagree on metaphysical grounds with D. T. Suzuki's portrayal of Buddhism as expressive individualism (Conze 13-14, 28, 79, 101; Humphreys 76, 128, 208). More recent examples include:

- a. Trevor Ling, in his 1974 *The Buddha: Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon*, claims that traditional Buddhist ways of life counter individualism metaphysically by dissolving the illusion of the ego and replacing it with a social consciousness, and ethically by building community (*The Buddha: The Social* 121, 134, 145);
- b. Taitetsu Unno comments in an article published in 2000 that Buddhist ideas of interconnectedness and interdependence can address Western “excessive individualism” (401-403);

Phase 1: Aligning Buddhism with Western Modernity

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Victorian/post-Victorian period, some Western scholars constructed Buddhism as an ethical system through which individuals gained freedom from religious and social constraints and chose their own paths to self-cultivation (Almond 72-74, 82, 111-116; Hallisey, “Roads” 45). This image aligned Buddhism with Protestantism and European Enlightenment values, including individualism.

Among such scholars, what appears to be the earliest claim in print that Buddhism is individualistic was published in 1844 by America’s first university Chair of Sanskrit, Edward E. Salisbury. Salisbury does not use the word “individualism;” it was almost unknown then. However, he attributes individualistic qualities to Buddhism. He defines the shift from Brahmanism to Buddhism as a shift away from limiting individuals by caste and toward recognizing their equality, in that not just certain people, but everyone, is given the chance to “reach the higher attainments.”

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- c. Matthieu Ricard claims in a 2018 blog called “Buddhism and Individualism” that Buddhism’s deconstruction of the ego and its goal of unconditional compassion mean that Buddhism is not individualistic;
 - d. Amod Lele notes in a 2020 blog that the idea of Buddhism as expressive individualism, aiming at authenticity, is hard to reconcile with Buddhist metaphysics (“Eudaimonist”);
 - e. Sallie B. King writes that *anātman* does not mean that the individual is nonexistent or unimportant. Society and persons, she asserts, are both empty and interdependent, and neither has authority over the other—thus Buddhism is neither individualistic nor not individualistic (“Human” 297-298); and
 - f. Robert Thurman claims that Buddhism features “indomitable individualism” because it teaches that persons are the product solely of their own karma; this metaphysical claim leads to ethical individualism because people are fully responsible for their own futures and thus cannot merely follow outer authorities (“Human” 108-110).

Buddhism, in his eyes, frees people from Brahmanism's constraints and makes them self-reliant individuals. It also separates them from "pantheistic absorption" in deities and allows them to regain powers of self-improvement suppressed by Brahmanism. Salisbury ignores metaphysics as he dismisses the idea that *nirvāṇa* destroys individuality as "inane" (55-56). A "devout Congregationalist," he lauds Buddhism for its parallels with Protestantism (Tweed xxxi). In his eyes, the Reformation freed Europeans from superstition and priest-dependence to pursue self-reliant spiritualities; Buddhism did the same for Asia. Between the 1840s and 1880s, other scholars also discussed Buddhism's parallels with Protestantism and support for the individual (Almond 71-74).

T. W. Rhys Davids followed this trend, writing, in 1881, that Buddhism proclaims "a salvation which each man could gain for himself, and by himself, in this world, during this life, without the least reference to God, or gods" (29). He adds that *nirvāṇa* found "within a man" is achieved through "self-culture and self-control" (31). These are attributions of religious individualism; he contrasts it with Brahmanical social control and collective practice. In fact, he knew that Buddhist texts and practice included communal ritual, but set this knowledge aside to portray Buddhism as individualistic (Hallisey, "Roads" 44-45).

Hermann Oldenberg presents the same view in a book published in German in 1881 and English in 1882, writing that in old religions, like Judaism and Hinduism, worship is determined by family, clan, and nation. In Buddhism and Christianity, it is "the will of the individual" that drives belief and practice. He adds that Buddhism, by cutting social constraints, enables people to become individuals (4). Like Rhys Davids, he constructs Buddhism as religious individualism.

Two women scholars also attributed individualism to Buddhism. Individualism was a positive value for feminists in Victorian and post-Victorian Britain, and individualist discourses swirled around first-wave

feminist circles (Clarke 8). British feminist magazines promoted individualism, by which they meant freeing women from strict maternal and social roles to achieve personal aims (8-11, 72-73).⁵

C. A. F. Rhys David's feminist perspective informed her view of Buddhism (Neal 16). In her words, original Buddhism was religious individualism, "everyman walking as self-guided by inner 'dhamma'" (*The Patna* 30, 32). She depicts it as offering the kind of individualism many women in her day sought: freedom from social constraints, support for individuality, and equal opportunity to develop along self-chosen paths. In her commentary on her 1909 translation of the *Therīgāthā*, she writes that women ordain in order to be free of domestic and social constraints. They gain liberty, "the status of an individual," by abandoning social and domestic bonds (*Psalms*, Chapter II).

Writing in 1930, I. B. Horner also suggests that Buddhism is individualistic in that it frees individuals from social constraints. She writes that Buddhism makes women individuals and, by offering them choice, is sensitive to varying individualities. Historically, she contends, it gave women respect, liberty, independence, rights, equality, and opportunities for self-development (xxiv, 1-2, 82, 262). She praises the *Therīgāthā* for showing that women can pursue their aims, express their personalities, and cultivate their powers (162-163). Yet when she conceives of individualism as selfishness, she writes of one *Therīgāthā* composer, "her claim is not comprehension of the Dhamma for herself . . . but for all

⁵ For example, a 1912 editorial in the British feminist magazine *The New Freewoman* promoted freeing women from "the merely physical," citing "individuality . . . as a primal soul-necessity" (Clarke 72-73). C.A.F. Rhys Davids would likely have been familiar with *The Freewoman* (published 1911-1912), and its successors *The New Freewoman* (1913) and *The Egoist* (1914-1919), all of which promoted individualism (8-11). The name change to *The Egoist* was a conscious attempt to mark the magazine as "an organ of . . . the individualist principle in every department of life" (quoted in Clarke 130).

women. Her note is not individualism, atomistic and selfish, but altruistic co-operation . . ." (164). Horner thus commends Buddhism for having positive forms of individualism and lacking negative forms. Both women call Buddhism "individualistic" because they perceive that it offers what they want for women in their own society, the chance to be self-defining individuals. Their analyses reflect the concerns of their own day (C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Preface* xvi).

These and other scholars constructed, as Philip Almond has documented, a "classical" Buddhism of which individualism was one aspect. This "imagined vision" offered paths to self-cultivation that such scholars portrayed as exemplars for their own society (Hallisey, "Roads" 45; Lopez, *Curators* 6-7). Yet it skewed representations of Buddhism, mingling its creators' values with selected Asian material to create a narrative that suited their priorities.

Today, some scholars still construct a universal, ideal Buddhism, a "spiritual individualism" supportive of the self-reliant and, now, authentic individual.⁶ Robert Thurman, in a 1996 article, calls Buddhism, including monastic Buddhism, "individualism" because it places individuals above society, values their uniqueness, and frees them from the social matrix ("Human" 94). So does Alexander Wynne in his 2015 *Buddhism: An Introduction*. Describing individualism as personal responsibility, freedom of conscience, freedom from authorities, and the self-reliant

⁶ These scholars may have interacted with the ideas of those who discussed religions of the "axial age," such as Karl Jaspers, Robert Bellah, and Charles Taylor. Each of these alludes to ways that the individual gained greater freedom from the social matrix during the axial period (see Bellah, "What is Axial" 70-76, 83). C. Taylor, for example, writes that the religions of the axial age, including Buddhism, were forms of religious individualism, at least for members of the élite who escaped social embeddedness by practicing them (151-155). Robert Thurman cites Jaspers when he describes the Buddha as an "axial age" figure ("Human" 95).

pursuit of salvation, he enthuses that *Vinaya* “institutionalized the Buddha’s spiritual individualism” (266). He finds that “an important factor in the spread of the Buddhism to the West has been the appeal of this individualistic ethos” which gives converts a spirituality suited to their “atomized” outlook (265–268). Like the Victorians, Wynne constructs an “imagined vision” of Buddhism, hegemonic in obscuring Asian realities and also in presenting Western spiritual concerns as unvarying.⁷

It is ironic that were we to ask who created the Buddhist individualism that Thurman and Wynne celebrate, the answer would not be the Buddha or his chroniclers, but scholars like Salisbury, the Rhys Davids, Oldenberg, and Horner.

Phase 2: Differentiating Buddhism from Western Modernity

In time, the narrative changed as scholars criticized Buddhism for being unlike, rather than like, Christian or Western culture. An early proponent of this approach was Louis de La Vallée-Poussin in his 1917 *The Way to Nirvāṇa*. Like others before him, he finds no individualism in Buddhist metaphysics (80–81). However, when discussing conduct, he calls Buddhism “individualistic,” and asserts that its ascetic teachings “do not care for one’s neighbour or for the dead. They are unsocial and often antisocial: they deprecate . . . marriage.” Although he acknowledg-

⁷ Thurman and Wynne contradict Trevor Ling (discussed below) with respect to ancient India. Ling presents the society surrounding early Buddhists as individualistic and the monastic community as not individualistic; Thurman and Wynne claim the opposite (Ling, *Buddha, Marx* 152; Thurman, “Human” 97–99, 104; Wynne 265–266). Paradoxically, if the term “individualism” were avoided, these scholars would likely agree on most features of monastic and lay society at the time. The apparent disagreement is an example of the confusion engendered by different definitions of “individualism.”

es monastic communities, he claims they are not as essential to practice as asociality and disengagement; Buddhism teaches a selfish salvation of dubious veracity in lieu of connection and mutual aid (4). La Vallée-Poussin emphasizes the difference between what he perceives as Buddhist individualism and Christian sociality.⁸

Max Weber, around the same time, also contrasts Buddhism's purported individualism unfavorably with Western culture, although his comparator is Western individualism, not Western sociality. Weber's *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* famously depicts Buddhism as individualistic in metaphysics as well as ethics. The book was published in German in 1916, but its impact grew after it appeared in English in 1958. For Weber, individualism is a double-edged sword. Positive "occidental" individualism, meaning a culture that encourages people to cultivate and express self-reliance, rationality, and authenticity, and leads to actions that advance society in material ways (275). It underpins the West's dynamism and is what Buddhist societies lack. They display the opposite: negative individualism, meaning asociality and disengagement.

On metaphysics, Weber writes that, because Buddhism posits no soul, it can only describe individuality—a sense of personhood and agency—as illusion; meditation is meant to overcome it (205, 207, 210–212, 214). Crafting an active self is fruitless when the goal is to empty oneself of it (342). This teaching (as he presents it) discourages the construction

⁸ David Seyfort Rugg discusses Catholic influence on La Vallée-Poussin, who was more an agnostic than a Catholic, but whose thinking may have incorporated Catholic elements (19 fn. 14).

of Western-style individuals who would invigorate economic and social life.⁹ Buddhism thus lacks positive individualism.

It does, however, feature negative individualism. Weber presents Buddhism as religious individualism, saying, “salvation is the absolutely personal performance of the self-reliant individual” (206, 213). Seeking salvation is the only way people can become individuals. Lay people, constrained by caste even when Buddhists, cannot do so; Weber denies a claim made by other scholars that Buddhism frees individuals from caste (123, 147, 206, 211–213, 226). Yet when they ordain, nothing progressive happens either because the Buddhist path is an asocial withdrawal from the world that shuns good deeds, cares not for the neighbor, and chases personal bliss (206, 208, 213). And Mahāyāna world-friendliness, Weber asserts, is only an add-on to a view of “the complete senselessness of life” that upholds earlier Buddhism’s social disengagement (209–210, 217).¹⁰

⁹ Weber suggests that the Western pastime of forging and expressing a unique personality—becoming an individual with agency—is founded on the valorization of a self that acts in the world, a valorization that arises from the Christian belief that lay people’s everyday deeds are salvific (e.g., 342–343).

¹⁰ One factor that may lie behind Weber’s view of Buddhism as individualistic, meaning disengaged, is the work of D. T. Suzuki—ironically since, overall, Suzuki did not present Buddhism as disengaged. Weber references the first book Suzuki published in English, the 1907 *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*. The book is a defense of the Mahāyāna that contains a polemic against the Hīnayāna, contrasting Bodhisattvas’ exertions on behalf of others with the apparent self-absorption of *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. Suzuki claims the latter two do nothing for the common good, and Weber may have adopted this idea (Suzuki, *Outlines* 278–280). Melford Spiro, who later also refers to this book, places this portrayal of Hīnayāna selfishness in its partisan context, but he nonetheless assesses it as “the logical consequence of Buddhist teachings” and adopts it as a fair picture of Buddhism (61).

Weber thus finds that Buddhism's metaphysics excludes individualism, while its ethics includes it—both in ways that foster staid, passive, and other-worldly individuals and stagnant societies. By contrast, he finds Protestantism metaphysically individualistic in its belief in a soul, and ethically individualistic in its self-reliant salvation-seeking in everyday life—both promoting capitalist industrialization. These ideas contribute to his explanation of differences in the development of Europe and Asia.¹¹

Weber's ideas about Buddhism's socially sterile individualism echoed through the work of other scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. Anthropologist Louis Dumont's 1970 *Religion, Politics and History in India* and later essays reiterate and reinforce them. Like Weber, Dumont is concerned with why East and West developed differently, and finds the answer in the difference between productive and unproductive individualism. In India, he asserts, given a conformist society, people only become individuals through religious renunciation. However, living outside the world, renunciants do not act productively within it like Western individuals (44–46, 59). Regarding Buddhist metaphysics, Dumont diverges from Weber in calling liberation a discovery of the self, not the annihilation of it or a seeing through the illusion of it (*Essays* 25). However, when liberated, renunciants do not use their new-found individuality productively, but are discomfited by it, and seek to extinguish or transcend it. As a result, the individualism offered by Buddhist practice fails to foster material progress—a Weberian conclusion (*Religion* 45).

¹¹ Weaknesses in Weber's account include that he forces multiple Buddhist teachings, practices, and societies into one mold. He also assumes that texts accurately represent actual motivations, practices, and ways of life. The data he relies on are relatively narrow, partly due to the early period in which he wrote and his lack of knowledge of Asian languages. As a result, he overstates Buddhist otherworldliness. He was also apparently unaware that the Pāli canon contains many mentions of society and politics (See, for example, Stanley Tambiah's comments on Weber [47–49, 402]).

Weber is much cited by another anthropologist, Melford Spiro, who wrote *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* in the early 1960s, but published it in 1970 (e.g., 427–431). Another work from the same period also reflects Weber, the 1964 *In the Hope of Nibbana: The Ethics of Theravada Buddhism*, by comparative religion scholar Winston King.¹² Both authors divide Buddhist practice into Nibbānic and kammatic, an idea that follows Weber, although the terminology is not his (214–218). Both portray Buddhist practice as religious individualism (e.g., W. King 6, 93–96; Spiro 60–63, 124, 428). Both present Buddhist ethics as individualistic, by which they mean socially disengaged. However, they diverge from Weber in that he frames engagement in terms of fostering capitalism; they have social reform in mind.

On metaphysics, W. King, like Weber, contends that the quest for salvation produces individuals. Nibbānic practitioners, he writes, are individualistic i.e., asocial, and a society in which many pursue *nibbāna*, even if they do not reach it, lacks “mutuality and fellowship.” However, achieving no-self is “supra-individualistic”: the person is absorbed into a “supra-personal consciousness.” And although they lose their individuality, those who attain *nibbāna* do not become social. They are extinguished. Spiro hesitates to affirm this view as Buddhism’s teaching, but confirms it is widespread in Burma. Both agree that Nibbānic practice separates individuals from the world. Akin to Weber, they conclude it produces only socially sterile individualism (W. King 93–96, Spiro 56–60, 65, 285–288, 290, 427).

¹² W. King does not cite Weber. He may not have been aware of Weber’s book, which came out in English in 1958, but he uses no major work on Buddhism by etic scholars in any case, relying on emic scholars and teachers (the better known being Walpola Rahu-la and English monk Sangharakshita). His one etic source appears to be the 1896 *Buddhism in Translations* by Henry Clarke Warren. If he knew of Weber’s ideas, it may have been through Spiro.

W. King and Spiro, however, suggest Weber erred in saying Buddhism's individualism blocks capitalist development. Kammatic practice, they say, encourages wealth accumulation (W. King 154; Spiro 431, 454–455). What Buddhism impedes, in their eyes, is social reform. It discourages an array of progressive activities: disputing, altering, or overthrowing the moral or social order; engaging in social services; identifying or extinguishing injustice or exploitation; ending class distinctions; blaming the wealthy for inequality or attacking their prestige; redistributing land; or helping the poor in material ways (W. King 127, 163–168, 177, 180–181, 183–184, 222–223; Spiro 61, 285–290, 440–447, 464). And it recommends addressing suffering at the individual rather than social level, practicing detachment over love, and performing only non-material acts to help oneself and others, with a focus on personal morality, spiritual progress, radiation of virtue by the holy, and other spiritual approaches (W. King 123–124, 127, 149, 164, 167, 177, 181, 183–184; Spiro 285–290). These constraints and recommendations emphasize the individual and non-material over the social and material, constituting a negative individualism that prevents Buddhism from supporting reform.

La Vallée-Poussin, Weber, and their successors thus used individualism to present Buddhism as the opposite of Western modes of thought—Christian, capitalist, or socialist—a story that fit a broader colonial/neo-colonial narrative. Describing the structure of this narrative, Christian Wedemeyer writes, “The prejudices of colonial dominance tended to dictate a synchronic narrative structure for histories of the natives. That is, indigenous culture was generally cast as the inverse of the . . . civilization of the European colonizers” (227). And describing the contents of the narrative, Donald Lopez writes that it was, “a colonial discourse that the West was more advanced than the East because Europeans were extroverted, active, and curious about the external world, while Asians were introverted, passive, and obsessed with the mystical” (*A Modern* xxxiv). “Individualism” became a tool to construct a narrative

of West and East as opposites. Western scholars soon discarded this narrative and returned to aligning Buddhism with the West. However, times had changed, and they now aligned it not with the values of the late Victorian age, but with those of the 1960s and beyond.

Phase 3: Aligning Buddhism with Western Progressivism

Western scholars of Buddhism did not debate Weber's view that its teachings were individualistic in a way that blocked capitalist development, and thus needed an infusion of Western-style positive individualism. Instead, they claimed its teachings were not individualistic at all because they supported social reform.¹³ Why this approach? In the post-colonial, Vietnam war-influenced, and at times pro-Marxist 1960s and 1970s, capitalism had lost appeal. Additionally, Buddhist social engagement was increasing, and emic scholars and teachers, voices hard to ignore, had begun to claim that Buddhism had always been, actually or latently, socially engaged.¹⁴ At the same time, two shifts had taken place in the West. The first was in the valuation of individualism by those interested in Buddhism. In the 1950s, Beats embraced individualism as freedom, non-conformism, and authenticity (Miller 3, 98). Popularizer D. T. Suzuki emphasized Buddhism's support for this type of individualism; Beats further spread his views (Watts xii, 142-146; Metcalf 499-500; McMahan, *The Making* 141-143; Seager, *American* 110). But as the 1960s progressed, counterculturalists increasingly blamed social, economic,

¹³ According to sociologist Detlef Kantowsky, in India Weber's ideas about the social sterility of Indian religions were debated in the 1960s and 1970s with respect to India's capitalist potential (141). Western debates were more concerned with social reform or socialism.

¹⁴ Thomas Yarnall discusses this history in a 2003 article, "Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved? Made in the USA of Asian Materials."

and environmental problems on individualism, which gained negative connotations (Miller 98, 99). Buddhism's popularity among this cohort created pressure to harmonize its image with their activist, anti-individualistic views. A second cultural shift had taken place during the twentieth century in the West as well: the view that religion ought to be prophetic, not private, and ought to help others in material ways, spread more widely.

Trevor Ling, a scholar of comparative religions influenced by the prophetic ideal, made an early attack on Buddhism's Weberian image.¹⁵ In his 1966 *Buddha, Marx, and God*, Ling claims that the reputed asociality of early Buddhism refers to an eremitic lifestyle in which few actually engaged; Buddhists early on realized the value of community (49-58). He points to Burma to show how lay-monastic contact transmits "ethical and spiritual values" through society, making monasticism socially responsible. In his eyes, Burma illustrates that Buddhism "is not necessarily insular or individualistic in form, or socially ineffective" (51-52, 57-58). He also cites philosopher Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, who argues that monasticism constitutes a democratic, communist society in which all are equal—a model of non-individualism (223-224).

Ling's 1974 book, *The Buddha: Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon*,¹⁶ also contradicts Weber. Ling claims that traditional Buddhist ways of life make collective goals as important as personal transformation (145). Ling portrays the culture surrounding early Buddhists as increas-

¹⁵ Another scholar who early on disagreed with Weber was sociologist Robert Bellah, in a 1965 book on the subject of religion and modernization. Buddhism is not the book's focus, but he addresses Weber's work and takes the position that Buddhism is not so other-worldly that it does not allow for activities promoting social reform. In his eyes, it is individualistic in being less collective than the surrounding society, but not socially disengaged or sterile (*Epilogue* 179-182, 191).

¹⁶ Later republished as *The Buddha: The Social-Revolutionary Potential of Buddhism*.

ingly individualistic, and Buddhists countering this trend to create a non-individualistic society, first metaphysically, by replacing the illusion of the individual ego with a social consciousness, and second, ethically, by building community (121, 134, 145). Ling claims that scholars who depict Buddhism as individualistic misinterpret teachings, taking them out of their social, economic, and political context (114). He reinterprets them as activist—in keeping with his own interest in showing Buddhism to be concerned with this world.

Other scholars were influenced less by prophetic values than by countercultural ones. Donald Swearer's 1970 work, *Buddhism in Transition*, discusses the developing relationship between Buddhism and modernity in Southeast Asia, and, in particular, steps Buddhists there were taking toward social change (e.g., 62–71). Swearer follows Weber, W. King, and Spiro in calling premodern Buddhism individualistic, meaning socially disengaged. However, he argues that social engagement is latent in *mettā*¹⁷ (70). Swearer thus synthesizes Buddhism with activism by attributing its past individualism to divergence from its own teachings. Modern Buddhists, he claims, refocus on *mettā* and are not individualistic (66–70). *Mettā* became the gateway for others as well to challenge Buddhism's individualistic image.

Richard Gombrich, in his 1971 *Buddhist Precept and Practice*, like Weber, portrays Buddhist teachings, but not necessarily practice, as religious individualism (58, 59, 88, 96). However, he criticizes Weber, saying he “mixed up what the texts say and how people actually behaved” and overstated detachment compared to *mettā*. The argument is akin to Swearer's, but Gombrich asserts that altruistic activity has always been common for monastics and lay people, not merely latent. In Gombrich's

¹⁷ Usually translated as “loving-kindness”; some translate it as “love” (e.g., Aronson 1).

eyes, Buddhist divergence from *mettā* is mainly in the Western imagination (292, 312, 373–379).

Harvey Aronson, in his 1980 *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism*, also disputes depictions of Buddhism as individualistic, meaning socially disengaged, particularly the depictions of W. King and Spiro, and their “widespread currency and acceptance” (2). His book explicates Pāli teachings on *mahāmaitri*, *mahākaruna*, *mettā*, and *anukampā*¹⁸ and substantiates a social motivation in Pāli texts, backing up Swearer and Gombrich.¹⁹ Reviewers generally agreed that Aronson succeeded in showing that the role of *upekkhā*²⁰ is overstated by scholars like Weber, W. King, and Spiro, and the roles of *mettā* and *anukampā* understated (Cabezón, “Love” 103–105; Hallisey, “Love” 860; McDermott 126).

Damien Keown built on Aronson in his influential 1992 *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, called a landmark work on Buddhist ethics (Powers and Prebish xvi). Keown cited Aronson as having demonstrated that Buddhist ethics were motivated by sympathy and love and not by the self-centered goal of accumulating merit (73–76). Aronson’s work gave Keown the basis to part ways with earlier scholars who had portrayed Buddhist ethics as based on karmic calculation and, therefore, self-interest. For W. King, for example, any emotion, including *mettā*, was tainted by attachment and thus not the basis for ethics or liberation.²¹ That meant *nibbāna* required avoiding social engagement, one reason W. King pre-

¹⁸ Great love, great compassion, love or loving-kindness, and sympathy.

¹⁹ Aronson mentions Swearer’s work but not Gombrich’s (Aronson vii). Reviewers indicated that Aronson’s book had flaws, but it had an impact nonetheless.

²⁰ Equanimity. Equanimity is associated by Weber, W. King, and Spiro with detachment from others and society (Aronson 78–79).

²¹ It could be asked how W. King then understands the *brahmavihāras*, which include developing love. He places them among lay people’s practices, which he does not portray as leading to nibbana (138–158).

sented Buddhism as individualistic (25–26, 101–103, 158–160). Keown’s explanation of Buddhist ethics gave social engagement a place. Aronson was cited by others as well, and the elevation of *mettā*’s profile undermined Buddhism’s individualistic image. So did the bodhisattva ideal as the Mahāyāna gained Western attention. Mahāyāna scholar Robert Thurman, for example, in articles published in 1979, 1981, 1983, and 1996, emphasized that Buddhism’s individualism did not prevent it from being social and engaged (“Human” 94, 112; “Guidelines” 16–18). In this way, Western scholars, alongside Asian and emic scholars and teachers, disseminated an image of Buddhism as activist that supported the growing engaged Buddhism movement.

Thus did some Western scholars push aside the narrative of Buddhism’s negative individualism, not by claiming it had positive forms of individualism, nor by highlighting its collective practices, but by depicting it as engaged. The new discourse was more inclusive of Asian scholars, texts, and practices than were earlier Western discourses, and contributed to international conversations on Buddhist social engagement.²² Some Western observers and Buddhists now take for granted that Buddhism is not individualistic because it is intrinsically socially engaged, although not all: emic scholar Mathieu Ricard felt compelled, in a 2018 blog called “Buddhism and Individualism,” to defend Buddhism from charges of being “individualistic and indifferent to the needs of others and the world,” and Amod Lele noted in 2019 that canonical teachings do not necessarily prescribe social engagement (“Disengaged” 255–268). Nevertheless, work on Buddhism that contrasted individualism with social engagement faded away, at least for a time, and individualism gained new usages in Buddhist Studies.

²²Aronson was even criticized for using Asian sources too much (Bareau 435–436).

Phase 4: Distinguishing Modern from Premodern

When scholars turned their attention to Buddhist modernism, they did not use individualism to distinguish Buddhism from, or liken it to, other religions or cultures.²³ Instead, they used it to make a distinction within Buddhism between modern and premodern.²⁴

The term “Buddhist modernism” was established by Heinz Bechert in his 1966 *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus* and subsequent articles (McMahan, *The Making* 6–7). Individualism is not part of Bechert’s analysis of Buddhist modernism. The feature he describes that several other scholars call “individualistic” is lay meditation (“Buddhistic” 256; “Buddhist Revival” 276–277).²⁵ Whether lay meditation signifies individualism can be debated; it is not always solitary nor does it disembed people from societal structures. Nevertheless, it forms part of a shift from social, hierarchical monasticism to individually-chosen practice free of institutional authority.

²³ Robert Bellah’s influential ideas on individualism, which appear in a 1965 work on modernity and individualism in Asia (*Epilogue*), a 1970 work called *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*, and his 1985 *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, likely had an impact on analyses of Buddhist modernism. His work portrayed individualism as a core aspect of modern religion. J. L. Taylor, for example, cites Bellah’s 1965 work when discussing religious reform movements in Asia (153). Donald Swearer also cites J. L. Taylor and Bellah on individualism in his 1995 *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (195, 202, 200). Rita Gross and David McMahan, among others, also cite Bellah (Gross 150; McMahan, *The Making* 190).

²⁴ The claim that ancient Buddhism was individualistic is a separate issue. It relies on differentiating premodern Buddhism from an ancient Buddhism reconstructed from texts.

²⁵ Bechert does not call Asian Buddhist modernism “individualistic,” but in a 1984 article, he uses the term to describe American Buddhism at the time, referring to a lack of strong and pan-sectarian institutional structures (“Buddhist Revival” 282–283). It is an unusual usage of the term, although it draws on the idea of individualism as self-reliance.

Richard Gombrich, in his 1988 *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, addresses individualism in Asian Buddhism. He depicts premodern practice as religious individualism because karma makes everyone responsible for their own future; salvation arises from individual effort (73–80). However, he notes that monastic and communal practice are the norm; individualism in premodernity suggests personal responsibility only, not solitude or self-reliance (73–75). When he calls modern Asian Buddhists “individualistic,” he means that lay practice supersedes monastic practice (172–173, 192). A 1988 work he co-authored with Gananath Obeyesekere adds religious internalization to lay practice: outer acts coming to matter less than inner experience (216). Overall, Gombrich finds karmic individualism in all Buddhism, but asserts that the latter factors make Buddhist modernism more individualistic than premodern Buddhism. The additional individualism comes from contact with the West (*Theravāda* 171–195).

Another early mention of Asian Buddhist modernism’s individualism occurs in a 1990 article by anthropologist J. L. Taylor, who describes as “individualistic” new, modernized forms of Buddhism popular in Thailand (153). He is referring to lay meditation, free of clerical authority and institutions, undertaken by a rising urban middle class (135, 137, 138, 141). He does not attribute individualism to Western influence, portraying it as arising out of Thai social conditions. Charles Hallisey, in a 1995 article, seconds the view of individualism in modern Thai Buddhism as “only coincident with the arrival of Westerners in Thailand,” writing that it developed as Thai Buddhism changed for indigenous reasons (“Roads” 47–48).

Robert Sharf, in a 1995 article, labels Asian Buddhist modernism “individualism” because of lay practice that offers inner experience. The value Buddhist modernists place on such experience shifts attention and authority away from the collective (252, 257–258, 267). This value, he as-

serts, is not rooted in the Asian past, but in ideas spread by twentieth-century Western-affected popularizers: Suzuki, Conze, and Asian teachers responding to colonialism and modernization (229–233, 248–254, 257–259). Sharf thus uses “individualism” to label only new features; it separates premodern from modern Buddhism and originally-Asian ideas from Western-influenced ideas. He adds that the new features make Buddhist modernism inauthentic (268–270). The term “individualism” thus stokes his critique of modern Buddhism.

Among these initial scholars of Buddhist modernism, there is broad agreement that lay meditation constitutes individualism, but disagreement about whether its origins are Asian or Western.

Donald Lopez published an important overview of Buddhist modernism, Asian and Western, in 2002. He writes that it shifts emphasis from monastic communities to individuals, “stresses equality over hierarchy,” and “often exalts the individual above the community” (*A Modern* ix, xxxvii). Buddhist modernists, he notes, claim roots in ancient Buddhism, which they depict as individualistic (ix–x), an image drawn from Victorian scholars. Like others, Lopez associates individualism primarily with lay meditation. That Asian and Western Buddhists share lay meditation may be what allows him to imply that their Buddhist modernisms are similar, a view that overlooks East-West differences in other factors commonly connected to individualism, such as the construction of the individual and family and the significance of collective practices (xi, xxxi). This portrayal allows Lopez to make the debatable claim that Buddhist modernism is, in the main, one phenomenon with “characteristics widely accepted around the world” (x, xxxix).

By contrast, in the 2008 *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* and elsewhere, David McMahan stresses Buddhist modernism’s multiplicity—perhaps in part because he equates individualism with authenticity, a largely Western idea (*The Making* 6, 190–192; “Buddhist Modernism” 173;

“Buddhism and Multiple” 183–184). McMahan emphasizes East-West difference, writing that Asian Buddhist modernisms “have less rhetoric of individualism” than Western ones (“Buddhist Modernism” 173). For him, individualism is not lay practice but the idea that meditation frees individuals from a societally-shaped superego that suppresses inner freedom and authenticity, and helps them uncover a “deep inner self”—a Romantic and psychological understanding of Buddhism spread by Suzuki and others (*The Making* 190–197).

McMahan writes that individualism in Buddhist modernism comes from the West (*The Making* 7, 191). Given his definition, this conclusion is not surprising. McMahan is referencing the authentic individual and expressive individualism; perhaps Sharf is as well. However, J. L. Taylor, Hallisey, Gombrich, and Lopez reference the self-reliant individual and rational individualism. That they arrive at differing views on the origins and similarity of Asian and Western Buddhist modernism may be in part due to these differing understandings of individualism. Calling different features of Buddhist modernism by one name, “individualism,” fosters confusion.

Some scholars label only Western Buddhist modernism “individualistic,” at times using the concept to distinguish Western from Asian. Martin Baumann, in a 1997 article on German Buddhism, deems it religious individualism, noting how an Asian product was reshaped to suit German culture. To him, “individualism” means accepting personal responsibility, valuing inner experience, emphasizing individuality, and de-emphasizing community and priests. He suggests these factors are entirely German (283, 284, 287). In the 2002 edited volume, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, B. Alan Wallace also describes Western Buddhist modernism as individualistic, referencing lay practice and reduced roles for clerics; he attributes these features to Western modernity (46). Richard Seager does the same regarding lay practice in his 1999

Buddhism in America (245). Attributing factors called “individualistic,” like lay meditation and prioritization of mystical experience, solely to Western culture may derive from drawing on archetypes of Western individualism and Asian collectivism that suggest everything labeled “individualistic” comes from the West. Yet Asian cultures also have resources for individual freedom and agency, such as ascetic, solitary, and self-chosen spiritual paths and concepts of individuality, selfhood, and agency that empower individuals to negotiate collectivities, as Asian scholars sometimes underline.²⁶

Scholars of Buddhist modernism do not generally contrast individualism with social engagement. They describe it as both individualistic and engaged—often as compared to premodern Buddhism, which they present as neither (e.g., Lopez, *A Modern* xxxiii; McMahan, *The Making* 250–254; Bechert, “Buddhistic Modernism” 256; Bechert, “Buddhist Revival” 276; Gombrich, *Theravāda* 194–195). Nor do they generally contend that Buddhist modernists are individualistic in the sense of engaging little in collective or social activity. Perhaps in part due to the multivalency of the term, Ann Gleig, in her 2019 *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity*, asserts that individualism as asociality characterizes Western Buddhist modernists, and she bases the claim on work by Charles Prebish, James Coleman, and Wendy Cadge (38–43). Their work, however, does not offer much support for the claim. Prebish does not say that Buddhist modernists do not value community; Gleig appears to take comments related to formally joining groups out of context (38; Prebish 55). Coleman asserts that the “social roots” of American Buddhism are found more in struggles to build identity than to build relationship. Gleig interprets this to mean that American Buddhists are asocial, but that does not seem to be Coleman’s intent (41; Coleman 21–22). Gleig claims

²⁶ Paramasivam and Nair-Venugopal, for example, make this point in a 2012 article that discusses Western stereotyping of India as collectivist (Paramasivam 159–162).

that Cadge finds networks of relationship in modernist groups that “counterbalance . . . the individualism” (43). But Cadge’s ethnographic work, referenced in both the 2008 book Gleig cites and a 2007 article, does not reveal asociality; Cadge states that meditation has made group members, initially interested in solitary meditation, connected and social; they display “awareness of and responsibility to the group,” collective activities, and participation in engaged Buddhism organizations (Cadge, “Reflections” 201–204; *Heartwood* 146–148, 192–193). McMahan, whom Gleig does not quote in this context, hints at potential for asociality when he describes Western perceptions of meditation as “individual spiritual exploration,” “private,” and “individualist”; but this section of his work is not ethnographic and he does not discuss actual behavior (*The Making* 190–196). When he relies on interviewees and ethnographies to construct a composite portrait of someone he calls illustrative of “highly modernized” Buddhist practice in the West, he describes her as being part of a “group of meditators” that is “a valuable source of friendship and support,” suggesting he perceives modernist Buddhists to be social (27, 28, 37, 38). Asociality thus remains unevidenced and contested. Nevertheless, other scholars discussed below also sometimes suggest that modern or Western Buddhists are individualistic in the sense of being asocial.

The least problematic use of “individualism” in Buddhist Studies is likely to differentiate not Western from Asian, but modern from premodern, Buddhism. This usage references the connection to modernity of rational and expressive individualism. Even here, individualism needs defining, as differences among Lopez, McMahan, and Gleig show. One example of this relatively unproblematic usage is found in José Cabezón’s 2017 *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, where individualism is connected to sexual conduct. Cabezón states that premodern Buddhisms are not generally individualistic because their practices are communal and they have doctrines and ethical principles applicable to everyone.

Institutions, teachings, and rules outweigh choice, self-reliance, and self-expression—including regarding sex. Modern Buddhisms tend to individualism: they downplay hierarchy, emphasize freedom, make adherence to doctrines and ethical norms voluntary, stress “inner experience born from meditation rather than communal and ritual life,” and seldom constrain sexual expression (4-5). Cabezón is unambiguous about what he means by “individualism” and steers clear of evaluation and stereotypes.

This example shows that some of the pitfalls of the term “individualism” can be avoided. However, consensus even on the premodern-modern division is lacking: most scholars call modern Western Buddhism “individualistic” even though they have different referents in mind; but not everyone makes this claim about modern Asian Buddhism. As for premodern Buddhism, most scholars deem it not individualistic, but Weber, Swearer, Thurman, and Wynne disagree, as does Rita Gross (discussed below). Hence, avoiding the term still seems best. Erik Braun, in his 2013 *The Birth of Insight*, discusses modern Buddhism without it. He does not call lay practice “individualistic”; he contrasts Asian-American and Euro-American Buddhists without labeling one group “individualistic”; and he portrays Westerners meditating for “self-cultivation and personal flourishing” and “mystical experience” without terming people or practices “individualistic”—demonstrating that the term is not needed (97, 99, 100, 163-164, 167-168).

Phase 5: Distinguishing Identity Groups

A new pattern emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, in which scholars ascribed individualism to certain groups of Buddhists in the West.

Wendy Cadge, discussed above, compares American Theravāda groups of European and Asian ancestry in a 2007 article and a 2008 book,

apparently responding to archetypes of individualism and collectivism. Her ethnographic results defy these archetypes. She finds that the two groups' community activities may look different, but that looks deceive. Euro-American Buddhists have plentiful social ties within and outside their Buddhist group, are socially engaged, and are not more individualistic, in the sense of asocial, than their Asian-American counterparts ("Reflections" 201-204; *Heartwood* 146-147, 193). That is because, Cadge writes, the Euro-Americans she studied began by prioritizing solitary meditation, but grew more community-oriented and activist as they continued to practice (193). However, they remain individualistic in the sense of taking individual freedom for granted ("Reflections" 203-204).

Other scholars reinforce archetypes. Kenneth Tanaka, in a 2007 article that also draws on ethnographic data, contrasts Euro-American with Asian-American Buddhists. He defines individualism as a preference for solitude and personal experience over institutional belonging and collective practice ("The Individual" 15-116, 124). He finds that members of an ethnic-Asian Buddhist group conduct more of their spiritual activities communally than Euro-American Buddhists surveyed by Coleman in the 1990s (122-123). The latter do more at home, valuing personal experience more and institutional allegiance less, although they also attend many group activities (123-125). He implies rather than states his conclusion that Asian-American Buddhists are not individualistic and Euro-Americans are (125-126). Elsewhere, he comments that Euro-Americans' individualism is negative but not entirely so as it includes "serious engagement to make sense of a foreign religion . . . not accepting the teachings blindly" ("Epilogue" 295). Again, he identifies only those for whom Buddhism is "a foreign religion" as individualistic.

Tanaka, notably, defines "individualism" based on factors not necessarily core to it. His data show that people of all ethnicities choose activities based on personal preference: they have authority and free-

dom, factors fundamental to individualism by most definitions (“The Individual” 120–121, 125). Although Tanaka could show commonalities as well as differences, he uses the concept of individualism to imply categorical difference and evaluate practices and practitioners (125–126).

Joseph Cheah, in the 2011 *Race and Religion in American Buddhism*, also relies on archetypes of individualism and collectivism, contrasting Euro-American Buddhist modernism, which he describes as “individualism,” with “the East’s proclivity toward a greater collectivity” (54, 70). He defines as “individualistic” practices done outside institutions, collectivities, and externally-imposed discipline, i.e., featuring individual authority and asociality (54). Individualistic meditation, he writes, suits white practitioners, yet may preserve systems of racial hegemony (49, 70–72, 78–79). However, his reliance on archetypes leads to inconsistencies; the book’s comments on Asian-American assimilation suggest commonalities in some features generally called “individualistic” between ethnic categories, as well as evolution and variety within them (e.g., 80, 91–92).

Scott Mitchell, in his 2016 *Buddhism in America*, also adheres to archetypes, presenting Euro-American Buddhists as individualistic and Asian-American as not, even when they have been American for generations. He attributes individualism to modern Euro-American culture, and calls it an aspect of convert Buddhist modernism only. He describes it as opting for individual choice regarding what practices, disciplines, or teachings to implement, in contrast to following authorities, and does not distinguish among groups within each ethnic category, although some in each are surely more “traditional” than others (201, 236). Differentiating groups by level of individual compared to hierarchical authority and assuming they split cleanly by ethnicity in this regard may result in inconsistencies; they likely do not.

The way Tanaka, Cheah, and Mitchell use archetypes implies that Euro-Americans are individualistic; Asian-Americans collectivist. However, data these scholars present suggest that the two groups of Buddhists share some features commonly called “individualistic.” The work of others such as Paul Numrich and Joseph Tamney, who discuss individualistic aspects of Asian-American Buddhism, also point to shared features (Numrich 146-147; Tamney 229). And Cadge’s work suggests that the two groups have comparable levels of sociality. All this suggests that individualism is a potentially misleading basis for distinguishing ethnic groups.

Feminist scholars also utilize the notion of individualism. Rita Gross writes in her 1993 *Buddhism After Patriarchy* that masculine values are “individualistic” and feminine ones “communitarian” (265). She criticizes premodern and modern Buddhist texts and practice for glorifying solitary practice and downplaying the “comfort and support” of community in favor of “individualistic self-reliance” (260-261). Her view that premodern Buddhism is individualistic differs from that of Lopez and others, but recalls Weber. In the West, she writes, Buddhism’s own individualism is aggravated by an “alienated, masculinist, and individualistic culture” which predisposes Westerners to accept portrayals of practice as solitary and then to separate individuals from “the sangha as matrix of psychological support”—a situation she seeks to reform (264-265). Thus, Gross uses “individualism” to distinguish, not premodern or Asian from modern or Western Buddhism, but existing asocial Buddhisms from future community-oriented ones.

Anne Klein’s book from the same era, the 1995 *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, defines “individualism” to include asociality, self-reliance, and authenticity. She associates it with masculinity and male-driven Western Buddhism. Tibetans (her comparator) construct the self, she writes, in less self-contained ways than Westerners, yet retain “personal

autonomy and forcefulness”—a version of authenticity (10, 29–32, 40–43). For Western women Buddhists, she advocates certain Tibetan practices to help with self-construction in ways that overcome lack of connection—negative individualism—yet support authenticity—positive individualism (4–14, 56–57, 196–197). Klein thus makes a threefold distinction: Tibetan Buddhism among Tibetans does not construct the individual as self-reliant, yet accommodates authenticity; it has positive but not negative individualism. Western Buddhism encourages authenticity but overdoes self-reliance and asociality. Future Western Buddhisms can learn from Tibet and meet women’s needs by increasing support and sociality but maintaining authenticity. Klein goes beyond Gross by acknowledging that Western Buddhists, including women, value some aspects of individualism.

Some scholars have thus posited that Buddhists in the West of particular identities are more individualistic than those of other identities. The claim that Euro-Americans are more self-reliant and anti-institutional than Asian-Americans is undermined by some of the data available, leaving it an area of contestation. The claim that Euro-Americans are more asocial can be questioned given that few scholars ascribe asociality to Western or modernist forms of Buddhism and little supporting data exist. Cadge’s ethnography undermines the claim of asociality, whereas Tanaka’s may support it, although the data he cites actually show significant sociality among Euro-Americans. Perceptions of asociality may come from particular scholars’ experience with asocial or unsupportive groups, stereotypes traceable to Weber, and/or ideas about solitary meditation popular early in Buddhism’s spread to the West—ideas that have been superseded, perhaps partially in response to feminist work like that of Gross and Klein. Overall, to be sustained, attributions of individualism or asociality based on identity require additional ethnographic data.

Phase 6: Distinguishing Postmodern from Modern

Scholars like McMahan, Klein, and Cadge, who accept that Western Buddhists value some aspects of individualism, do not portray them opposing an individualistic social order. Sallie B. King, in a 2012 article, takes a different tack. Social engagement on the part of globally-influential Asian Buddhist leaders, she writes, challenges “the excessive individualism of Western society” (“Socially” 210). S. King, speaking from a critical standpoint that can be called postmodern, voices a new use for “individualism,” symbolizing Western modernity, negatively valued. A work that exemplifies this approach is Gleig’s 2019 *American Dharma*, which describes the emergence of postmodern approaches to Buddhism among American converts. Individualism is one basis on which Gleig differentiates postmodern from modern Buddhists.

For Gleig, Buddhist modernists are “highly individualistic,” meaning asocial and not engaged in activism that challenges the social order, and their individualism is associated with “racism, classism, and neo-liberalism” (277-279, 286). They manifest individualism by privileging the “inner experience of the individual meditator” over collective practice, community-building, and inclusiveness; ignoring the “sociocultural dimensions of that individual self and the collective suffering of racial injustice”; and not doing “diversity and inclusion work” (4, 38, 173, 175, 277, 279). She acknowledges their social engagement, but indicates it does not overcome their individualism because it is not “racial inclusion and justice work” or community-oriented “external mindfulness” (22, 32, 38, 175, 278-279).

Gleig contrasts Buddhist modernism’s “general individualism” with traditional Buddhism’s community orientation, as well as with postmodern Buddhism’s “beloved community” (175, 4). Postmodern Buddhists make, she argues, a “collective turn” toward group activities as well as a “critical turn” toward engaging with race and identity (e.g.,

249–263, 277–279). Their absence of individualism manifests as reducing focus on meditation, emphasizing collective practices, and engaging in diversity/ justice activism (170, 173, 175, 198, 278–279). In Gleig’s estimation, they replace Buddhist modernism’s individualism with social, inclusive, and engaged practices.

Gleig’s distinctions have a purpose. She connects postmodern to premodern Buddhists by way of collective practices to suggest that the former are retraditionalizing (4–5). And she constructs a break between Buddhist modernists and postmodernists by claiming that Buddhist modernists embody an asocial, inadequately-engaged individualism that postmodernists leave behind (277–279).

Nevertheless, using individualism to separate modern from postmodern Buddhists poses problems. Few scholars who call Buddhist modernism “individualistic” cite an absence of collective activities or social engagement; it is not clear these elements are absent. The features they call “individualistic,” such as lay meditation and quests for authenticity, are shared by Buddhists whom Gleig calls postmodern. Gleig herself suggests that Buddhist modernists are asocial, but, as discussed above, on weak grounds. If individualism means asociality and disengagement, there is little scholarship showing that either modernist or postmodernist Buddhists are individualistic.

However, by common definitions, both categories of Buddhists are individualistic. Gleig’s postmodern Buddhists display, in her study, their rational and expressive individualism: they may reject self-reliance, but they retain individual freedom and authority over practices and conduct. They also support the expression of authentic and unbound individualities. Even their collectivism may be individualistic—so writes Jørn Borup in a 2020 article. Borup contends that the “groupism” of postmodern Buddhists may reflect “a new postmodern version of individualism” because the so-called authentic self has final authority over

which groups and activities to join (237–238). Gleig’s data seem to reveal, among those she calls “postmodern,” the chosen-ness of groups and their lack of authority over individuals, supporting Borup’s point.

Postmodern thought does portray groups—not individuals, like modern thought—as society’s primary unit; this distinction lies behind Gleig’s use of “individualism” to separate postmodern from modern. Nevertheless, differences between her modern and postmodern Buddhists relate to individualism mainly in that those she terms “postmodern” challenge a social order they label “individualistic.” This stance, however, does not stop them from embodying characteristics that common definitions call “individualistic.” That postmodern Buddhists share such characteristics with modern Buddhists—characteristics less evident among premodern Buddhists—casts doubt on any suggestion that postmodern Buddhists either abandon individualism or meaningfully re-traditionalize.

If postmodern Buddhists are individualistic, are they still postmodern? Using individualism to symbolize modernity, in contrast to postmodernity, engenders paradox. This does not mean Gleig is mistaken in positing a postmodern turn among some American Buddhists. It demonstrates, rather, that the word “individualism” works poorly for her purpose, a reason to select more precise terms.

Conclusion

Individualism has been employed in several ways in scholarship on Buddhism. In Victorian and post-Victorian times, individualism, deemed positive, helped construct an image of Buddhism aligned with Protestantism, Western modernity, and first-wave feminism. Later, attributions of negative forms of individualism, the opposite of positive West-

ern forms, created an image of Buddhism as socially sterile. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars who conceived of individualism as negative denied Buddhism was individualistic, asserting instead that it was socially engaged. A decade or two later, others, viewing individualism more neutrally, gave it a new use: distinguishing modern from premodern Buddhists. A few scholars then addressed individualistic ways they perceived that particular identity groups in the West practiced Buddhism. Today, individualism has yet another role: it symbolizes Western modernity and, not entirely successfully, is used to distinguish postmodern from modern Buddhists.

This history is problematic. The concept of individualism has helped scholars construct narratives which impose Western assumptions and concerns on Asia and Buddhism, skew representations, make overly categorical claims, spread stereotypes, muddy comparisons, obscure information, imply that some expressions of Buddhism are inauthentic or inferior, and blend observation with polemic. Throughout this history, the term's multiple referents, associations, and uses have also sometimes simply created confusion.

Even today, the term "individualism" causes trouble. Contemporary scholars who deem it wholly negative, use it as an archetype, or use it to symbolize Western modernity are led into overlooking what data show: that most of today's Buddhists in the West, whatever their identity or form of practice, value some aspects of rational and expressive individualism, including individual freedom, authority, self-expression, and authenticity, even if they reject solitary practice or neo-liberal beliefs; they also value community and social engagement; and, no matter how they are categorized, within each category they evince variety and change. Breaking individualism into its components, acknowledging that few Buddhists view all of them as either positive or negative, and doing

ethnographic work on attitudes and behaviors called “individualistic” represent ways forward.

What is more useful to say: Some Buddhists hold community events more frequently than others, or some are less individualistic? Some Buddhists emphasize meditation more than others, or some are more individualistic? Too often, the term is troublesome. Reasons to select more precise and less value-laden terms are legion. Is Buddhism individualistic? Let’s rephrase the question.

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