



Critique on Western Buddhist Perceptions of Monasticism

Schedneck, Brooke. "Western Buddhist Perceptions of Monasticism." *Buddhist Studies Review*. (2009): 227-244.

*Reviewed by Gihani de Silva
Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka*

This article "Western Buddhist Perceptions of Monasticism" was written by an American scholar Brooke Schedneck in 2009. It focuses on the contemporary encounters between Western cultures and the Buddhist tradition of monasticism. The author begins the article with an illustration of the facts about diverse perspectives regarding monasticism in the West. She directs her attention to the manner in which traditional Buddhist monasticism is consciously reformed and reinvented in many ways that align with Western conditions by stating diverse perceptions. The text makes an important contribution in bringing to the fore the voices on Buddhist monasticism in the West. Though numerous studies generally look at Western Buddhism, particular attention has not been paid to Buddhist monasticism in the West.

Western Buddhists vigorously championing the modernization and indigenization of Buddhist ideas, practice and world views. Initiating her ideas based on the above premise, she focuses primarily on the present state of Buddhism in the West. Encounters between Buddhism and the West date back to the late eighteenth century; laying more emphasis on philosophical and ethical dimensions rather than religious practices and rituals. This new encounter reconstructed Buddhism as an authentic entity. Thus, more detailed synthesizing of literature on the historical evolution of Western Buddhism would have enhanced the quality of this article. However, by stressing on Almond (1998) and Tweed's (1992) works, she

demonstrates the manner in which British and American encounters with Buddhism was made a less alien space by placing the tradition into familiar categories. Thus, the assimilation of Buddhism is on par with selective cultural values of these countries. However, the present quest of the study shows how different Western adaptation and appropriation of Buddhism is today. Contemporary Buddhist memoirs, blog websites, interviews and Dharma talks and selected Anthropological works have made use of, to investigate Western Buddhists' diverse attitudes towards the Buddhist monastic institution. However, neither a visible or exact account of the number of sources nor a deep content analysis was done. Perhaps this is because, the study looks at diverse perspectives on a very broad topic. Nevertheless, methodologically, all these online forums give firsthand experience, as there is no account of studies done on perceptions of monasticism in the West.

Brooke Schedneck appears to argue that Buddhist monasticism was never the ideal due to its inability to meet conditions in these most Western countries. There is an ambivalence of incorporating monasticism into this new form of Buddhism. The 'laicization' is such an emerging counter trend, which is opposed to renouncing the world. Western Buddhists are keen to create their own versions of the teaching that is seen as more compatible with Western sensibilities. Diverse views towards monasticism was categorized as follows in the article,

“critical views: monasticism for being ‘selfish’, ‘Isolated’, and basically serving little purpose for the world; positive attitudes: monasticism as unequivocally valuable-conservative responses argue for the intrinsic value of monasticism for the individual and society; reformist attitudes: purifying Buddhist monasticism by removing unnecessary cultural construction of Asian model of monasticism, covers plurality form of Western Buddhism.”¹⁰

It is evident from the reading that her portrayals prove Western Buddhists are not only adapting the religion to their cultural needs, but consciously reforming and reinventing Buddhism in many ways which align with Western conditions that exist without the traditional cultural constraints of Asian countries. Boundaries are being broken down as Western Buddhists, motivated by common needs, explore the whole Buddhist tradition. Although, there is a plurality of monastic schools, there is a fusion of these. Even the author does not lay emphasis on any particular Buddhist school. According to diverse attitudes demonstrated in the article as a whole, Western Buddhists take what they need, not what they

¹⁰Schedneck, Brooke. "Western Buddhist Perceptions of Monasticism." *Buddhist Studies Review* (2009): 230.

are given. Interestingly, Western Buddhists eschewed orienting themselves with any particular Buddhist tradition. They consciously construct an idealized representation even on monasticism.

"While they saw these ideals as representing the essence of Buddhism, these representations were constructed out of their own modern concerns and deeply rooted in their own historical and cultural context. These new interpretations were most often based on a romantic or rational-scientific re-reading and reconstruction of the meaning and intention of Buddhist teaching."¹¹

This kind of in-depth justification of the above trend is hardly found in this article. A discerning reader will question the underline background of motivations towards modern, rational, romanticize notion of Western Buddhist perceptions towards monasticism.

"The West" as an area of study is itself somewhat contested.¹² There is a broad scholarship on whether the West is dominated by European and American culture or do we need to extend this category to other parts of the world (Australia and Oceania). Though the author does not discuss this matter, it becomes crucial, as Western Buddhists talk about modernization and the universality of Buddhism. If Western Buddhists are clearly attempting to create a global modern Buddhism, they can no longer limit themselves into the category of 'West'. It should be a Transnational or global type of Buddhism. But there are some problems of recognizing it thus, as the 'West' carries its socio-cultural baggage while doing so (rational, scientific, secular, modern). According to the Orientalist's way of thinking, if there is a burning desire to represent 'the other' including the whole globe, there should be possibilities of decontextualize from romanticized fantasies of imposing the power on others, which is entertained.

Here it is interesting to see that, though generally monasticism is not the ideal for West, in the putative debate of female ordination, they take the modernized or universalized standpoints. The most critical responses for monasticism are represented through male voices, while conservative and reformist altitudes are mainly female in the article. On the one hand, monasticism (male) is decreasing (due to laicization). On the other hand, female monasticism is glorified and coheres with reformist responses. While, the male norm in the Buddhist monasticism does not fit into Western cultures, they never tolerate gender

¹¹ Baumann, Martin. "Modernist Interpretations of Buddhism in Europe." In *Buddhism in the Modern World*, edited by David L. McMahan (Abingdon, UK: Oxford, 2012): 130.

¹²Mitchell, Scott A. 2010. "Buddhism in the West (North America and Europe)" Accessed on 2017.10.15. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0176.xml>.

inequalities in female monasticism and reconstruct it through modernized values. It is interesting to see that, this happens the other way round in most Eastern parts of the world, where female ordination has died out or has never been established.

The author puts forward two main arguments for female higher ordination among Western Buddhists.

"The first is that a move to gender equality will help modernize the tradition, and thus increase its appeal in the West. The second is that this will turn help modernizing Buddhism in Asia, and thus help Buddhism to sustain itself there in the context of universal influences of modernization."¹³

On the one hand, it is true that, Western Buddhists have worked as a powerful force in re-establishing the rights of female ordination. Though this article hardly talks about Asian Buddhist critiques, I believe it is not just the Western Buddhists who are seen as imposing their own view of authority to the Buddhist tradition as demonstrated by Hiroko Kawanami (2007): tension between International nuns and local nuns in Burma (It is indeed one important factor). The phenomenon of re-establishing *bhikkhunī*-hood is far more complex than expected. There are numerous repercussions of this intermediation. Though female higherordinations is continuously taking place in a country like Sri Lanka, identity troubles (hierarchy, colors of the robe, shifting identities among Buddhist nuns etc.), troubles related to social class (local feminist elites support *bhikkhunīs* vs *dasasilmātās* including SMJM), troubles of *nikāya* (in line with caste among *bhikkhunīs*) are visible.¹⁴ Therefore, though the author has her own limitations of the study, there are numerous outcomes of this homogeneous notion of equality that has resulted in establishment of the *bhikkhunī* order. On the other hand, how can we neglect the contribution made by East-Asian countries on the re-establishment of *bhikkhunī* order in Theravāda tradition. This has not received much consideration.

"Even though it is interesting that, the views (*dasasilmātās*) demonstrated the assumption that, advocates for *bhikkhunī* ordination are giving into the pressures of 'Western' feminists. Therefore, they hardly identify the high profile of Asian feminist involvement in revival of *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka."¹⁵

¹³Schedneck, Brooke. "Western Buddhist Perceptions of Monasticism." *Buddhist Studies Review*.(2009): 237.

¹⁴ For reference to this see Gihani de Silva. "The *Bhikkhunī* Revival Debate and Identity Problems: An Ethnographic Inquiry." *Journal of Oxford Center for Buddhist Studies* (2016): 52-70 and Gihani de Silva. "Critics on Feminist Influence for the New *Bhikkhunī* Revival Debate in Sri Lanka: Ethnographical Review." *Sabaragamuwa University Journal*, vol 1 2016.

¹⁵ De Silva. "Critics on Feminist Influence for the New *Bhikkhunī* Revival Debate in Sri Lanka".

Finally, the author concludes the article by mentioning that Western Buddhism (perception of Western Buddhists) is a global tradition- not bound by the perceived cultural particulars of Asian Buddhist countries. This perception would be over-generalized because, one of the determining factors regarding this depends on how Buddhism is perceived in other parts of the world. In this sense, Buddhism can even be assumed as an alternative source of entity that challenges the West.

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