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Review of *A Modern Buddhist Bible:
Essential Readings from East and West*

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A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West Edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003. xli + 266 pages. Paperback. ISBN 0807012432.

During the course of my fieldwork at Ekoji Buddhist Sangha, an unusual temple in Richmond, Virginia, which serves as a gathering place for Buddhists from several different lineages, I have often pondered the similarities and differences between the various groups. Crowded under a single roof one finds a Vipassana group, a Zen group, a Tibetan group, a Pure Land group, and a non-sectarian sitting meditation group. There is also a prison outreach program and an A.A.-style group for meditators, in addition to a chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship that Ekoji has helped spawn in Richmond. At first glance, these different groups would seem to represent completely separate sects with differing origins and divergent purposes. But another point of view, that advanced by Donald Lopez in his *Modern Buddhist Bible*, might well see all of these groups as belonging to a single phenomenon: modern Buddhism.

The “modern referred to here does not simply mean current or contemporary there are many forms of Buddhism presently being practiced that do not fit Lopez’s criteria. Rather, “modern Buddhism is a catch-all term that refers to a form of self-consciously revolutionary Buddhism. The roots of this new Buddhism lie in the nineteenth and twentieth century ferment produced by the collision of Buddhist Asia and the industrializing West. In his introduction, Lopez explains that:

Modern Buddhism shares many of the characteristics of other projects of modernity, including the identification of the present as a standpoint from which to reflect on previous periods in history and to identify their deficiencies in relation to the present. Modern Buddhism rejects many of the ritual and magical elements of previous forms of Buddhism, it stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual over the community. Yet, as will be clear in what follows,

modern Buddhism does not see itself as a culmination of a long process of evolution, but rather as a return to the origin, to the Buddhism of the Buddha himself. There is certainly criticism of the past, but that critique is directed not at the most distant Buddhism but at the most recent. Modern Buddhism seeks to distance itself from those forms of Buddhism that immediately precede it, that are even contemporary with it. It is ancient Buddhism, and especially the enlightenment of the Buddha 2,500 years ago, that is seen as the most modern, as the most compatible with the ideals of the European Enlightenment that occurred so many centuries ago, ideals embodied in such concepts as reason, empiricism, science, universalism, individualism, tolerance, freedom, and the rejection of religious orthodoxy (pp. ix-x).

In some ways modern Buddhism overlaps and expands on what Gananath Obeyesekere has labeled “Protestant Buddhism” and James William Coleman denotes as “New Buddhism.” It is indeed new, and draws unconsciously or not aspects of Protestant Christianity and the anti-colonial struggle against Western European powers. But whereas Protestant Buddhism tends to focus mainly on transformed Asian Buddhisms, and Coleman’s New Buddhism is solely concerned with Buddhism in the West, the concept of modern Buddhism embraces both sides of the equation. In his short introduction Lopez displays a sophisticated understanding of the tangled dependent co-origination of modern Buddhism, a production that springs from the work of Asian scholar-monks, nineteenth-century Theosophists, anti-colonialists, Western spiritual seekers, meditation advocates, academic investigators, and criticism by aggressive Christian missionaries.

A Modern Buddhist Bible divides neatly into two sections of rather unequal length: a thirty-five-page introduction to the material, and a roughly 250-page offering of selections from the writings of thirty-one different authors whom Lopez sees as important expositors of this modern Buddhism. Selected writers include Helena Blavatsky, Anagarika Dharmapala, D.T. Suzuki, Tai Hsu, B. R. Ambedkar, Philip Kapleau, Alan Watts, Sangharakshita, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Chogyam Trungpa. A truly comprehensive overview would include many thinkers left out of *A Modern Buddhist Bible* such as Christmas Humphreys, Hsing Yun, Yasutani Hakuun, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, and King Mongkut but Lopez notes this shortcoming himself, and in fact many more figures beyond those excerpted are touched upon in his introduction to the material.

Despite the omissions, Lopez provides an excellent window into the writ-

ings of many of the colorful characters who molded modern Buddhism. Some of the selections are noticeably tinged by naiveté and ignorance about Buddhism, particularly those of the earliest writers. Some cannot tell Buddhism apart from Hinduism or Daoism; others are largely unaware of the differences between various types of Buddhism. Far from removing the prejudices and un-Buddhist accretions of history from the pure dharma, many modern Buddhists appear to layer on their own presumptions about religion (frequently tainted by a sort of Protestant queasiness toward monastics, ritual, imagery, and popular religion) and draw as much (consciously or not) from Christianity, psychotherapy, Enlightenment rationalism, Western individualism, and progressive democratic politics as from Buddhism itself. Many of these trends can be clearly seen in one of Lopez's excerpts from Henry Steel Olcott's "Buddhist Catechism":

187. Q. What striking contrasts are there between Buddhism and what may be properly called 'religions'?

A. Among others, these: It teaches the highest goodness without a creating God; a continuity of life without adhering to the superstitious and selfish doctrine of an eternal, metaphysical soul-substance that goes out of the body; a happiness without an objective heaven; a method of salvation without a vicarious Saviour; redemption by oneself as the Redeemer, and without rites, prayers, penances, priests or intercessory saints; and a summum bonum, i.e. Nirvana, attainable in this life and in this world by leading a pure, unselfish life of wisdom and compassion to all beings.

190. Q. Does popular Buddhism contain nothing but what is true and in accord with science?

A. Like every other religion that has existed many centuries, it certainly now contains untruth mingled with truth; even gold is found mixed with dross. The poetical imagination, the zeal, or the lingering superstition of Buddhist devotees have, in various ages and in various lands, caused the noble principles of the Buddhas moral doctrines to be coupled more or less with what might be removed to advantage. (p. 19)

Of course, the modern assessment of what is essential and what is unnecessary is entirely conditioned by the concerns of this age as well. The result is a new Buddhism that is as different from the original Buddhism of the fifth century B.C.E. as any of the traditional Buddhisms these innovators decry.

At the same time, there is an undeniable appeal to these Buddhist pioneers, caught in a rush to modernity with far reaching effects that have been felt in all the world's religions. Grappling with the new scientific disciplines, colonial power relations, competing epistemological assumptions, and the political disestablishment of Buddhism, the thinkers Lopez has assembled all responded with courage and imagination. In the process, they not only rejuvenated Buddhism in various parts of Asia, but helped to spread it abroad to Western countries that Buddhism had never reached before. Many of the most popular and well-known forms of Buddhism in the West today are the direct descendants of this modern Buddhism. The interesting result is that what are essentially Buddhist New Religious Movements have often been taken in the West for the mainstream, rather than the fringe, and "what we regard as Buddhism today, especially the common portrayal of the Buddhism of the Buddha, is in fact a creation of modern Buddhism" (p. x).

Perhaps the greatest strength of this volume lies not in the thirty-one selections that Lopez has compiled, but in his introduction to the material. At less than forty pages in length, Lopez's introduction deftly describes the origins and development of modern Buddhism, and discusses some of the implications that this unconventional approach has had for the encounter of Buddhism and the West. This section is especially useful for university level teachers of Buddhism, and deserves a place on any syllabus that covers Buddhism in the modern period and/or the West. It is probably the richest and most thorough essay, of its size, published on the subject.

Ultimately Lopez concludes that, "It is perhaps best to consider modern Buddhism not as a universal religion beyond sectarian borders, but as itself a Buddhist sect. There is Thai Buddhism, there is Tibetan Buddhism, there is Korean Buddhism, and there is Modern Buddhism. . . Like other Buddhist sects, modern Buddhism has its own lineage, its own doctrines, its own practices. . . And like other Buddhist sects, modern Buddhism has its own canon of sacred scriptures" (p. xxxix). In his selection of excerpts from that canon, framed by his illuminating introductory remarks, Lopez has produced a work that should prove useful to anyone interested in this latest turning of the dharma wheel.