

The Reinterpretation of Chinese Buddhism

By HOLMES WELCH

CHINA was the second country in the Buddhist world to have a Communist government. The first was Mongolia. But Mongolia was isolated both geographically and by its form of Buddhism (shared only with Tibet). Chinese Buddhists, on the other hand, had been building closer ties with their brethren in South-East Asia for more than half a century. Their form of Buddhism was less remote from South-East Asian forms and they felt the same need as South-East Asians to fit Buddhism into a national revival.

China became, therefore, the first Communist country that could, perhaps, serve the Buddhist world as a model. Today it represents one possible solution to the problem of *aggiornamento*—a problem faced by Buddhists no less than by Christians, who realise that their religion, if it is to remain a living force, must be made pertinent to the times. I do not mean that *many* South-East Asian Buddhists look to China as a model. Only a very few do, but they are an active, voluble, growing few.

What has happened to Buddhism in China is, therefore, of more than local importance. The concrete changes in the lives of monks and laymen were discussed in this journal several years ago (issue No. 6). The ideological changes remain to be explored. They fall into two categories: reinterpretation of history and reinterpretation of doctrine.

The essence of the former has been to explain the development of Buddhism in terms of dialectical materialism. We read, for example, in the principal Peking Buddhist journal that Buddhism spread in India because the middle and lower classes wanted to break the Brahmins' monopoly of power—"Landlords and merchants wished to get rid of the caste system, which obstructed the development of irrigation and of domestic and foreign trade: and so they used Buddhism as a weapon against the Brahmins."¹

A materialistic explanation is also given for the rise of Buddhist sects in China. The Ch'an sect is said to have won the patronage of Empress Wu Tse-t'ien during the T'ang Dynasty because she was trying to raise the status of the commoners who supported her and she considered that

¹ *Hsien-tai Fo-hsiieh (Modern Buddhism)*, January 1960; March 1960.

Ch'an (Zen) was egalitarian. On the other hand, the Hua-yen sect, with its assertions that the world was illusory and all was one, gave the ruling classes an opiate which they used to anaesthetise the suffering populace—to convince them that their sufferings were illusory and that “oppressors and oppressed, peasants and landlords, royalty and subjects were all mutually indispensable knots in the network of relations of the universe.”²

To explain the pursuit of Nirvana in such external terms may show a certain over-confidence in materialism as a tool of analysis, but the same sort of over-confidence has been displayed towards the Hundred Schools of classical Chinese philosophy. Where the Communists have treated Buddhism differently, perhaps, from the Hundred Schools is in the degree to which they have considered it necessary first to reinterpret the doctrine, and then to make it applicable to their own programmes of remoulding and socialist construction. I do not know of a case in which the authority of Confucius or Lao Tzu has been used to justify, let us say, the Five Year Plan, but the Buddha's sayings have been so used.

In their treatment of the Buddhist community, the Chinese Communists have sometimes introduced innovations quite frankly as innovations. In 1952, for example, monks and nuns in Ningpo organised classes in dancing, singing and opera, and celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party by putting on a play.³ The monastic rules forbid monks and nuns even to see a play, let alone to take part in one. But there was no Communist attempt to find an historical justification for this breach of the rules. No ancient texts were dragged out and tortured until they agreed. In fact people in the audience were reported to have said: “There are really lots of new things in the new society. One even finds monks and nuns singing opera.” The reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine has not been so frank. Like many innovations in Chinese intellectual history, it has been disguised as tradition. Let us look at some examples.

THE NEW BUDDIST MATERIALISM

One basic element in the Buddhist tradition is withdrawal from the world in order to seek enlightenment through meditation and other religious exercises. Such exercises are hampered by family responsibilities and the necessity of earning a livelihood—hence the development of monasteries. Withdrawal is never thought of as permanent, but

² See Hou Wai-lu, *Chung-kuo Szu-hsiang T'ung-shih (General History of Chinese Thought)* (Peking: 1959), pp. 4, 149–155, 262–263; and Che-hsüeh Yen-chiu (*Philosophical Studies*), No. 1, 1961. Professor Kenneth Ch'en discussed this at the Ditchley conference on Chinese Communist Historiography in a paper to be published by *The China Quarterly*.

³ *Modern Buddhism*, February 1952.

as a preparation for returning to the world and teaching others how to reach the same goals, that is, enlightenment, or rebirth in the Western Paradise, or release from birth and death.

Buddhist leaders in Communist China have reinterpreted these goals and denied that withdrawal from the world is a useful method of reaching them. The new view is best expressed, perhaps, by Reverend Chü-tsan in an article entitled "A Brief Discussion of the Future of Buddhism," published in Peking, in April 1952. Rev. Chü-tsan was then a member of the National Committee of the CPPCC and the editor-in-chief of *Modern Buddhism*, in which the article appeared. He became Deputy Secretary General of the Chinese Buddhist Association when it was founded the next year. Since he was and is one of the two chief spokesmen of the official line on Buddhism in China, his words have special force:

To treat labour as a religious practice—this is something that ordinary Buddhists cannot accept. But let us ask them: what is the real goal of meditation, of reciting Buddha's name, and of other religious practices? If the goal is the purification of deeds, words and thoughts, then how long does one have to carry on these practices before he can attain purity and when he has attained it, what comes next? Furthermore, if his goal is complete enlightenment, or release from birth and death, or rebirth in the Western Paradise, then what is this complete enlightenment? After he has been released from birth and death, what does he do then? After he has been reborn in the Western Paradise and looked with his own eyes upon Avalokitesvara, Mahastamaprapta, and Amitabha, then what? Unless these questions can be answered, religious practices can be carried on for a hundred thousand kalpas and they will be a waste of time. Let me tell you this: enlightenment and apprehension do not lie somewhere far off. Only if you are willing to die can you be released from birth and death. Rebirth in the Western Paradise is for the sake of reforming this human world in the East. Purification of deeds, words and thoughts must be pursued in the midst of action, trouble and worry. It is to be sought here and now. There is no need to look elsewhere. In short, it is pernicious to talk about religious practices in isolation from everything in the concrete side of life, from carrying wood and drawing water, from all our acts and gestures. To talk about religious practices isolated from the masses of living creatures is like catching the wind and grasping at shadows. For decades now Buddhist circles have been doing this and that practice, and they have not yet practised up anybody [with talent]. Otherwise Buddhism would not have fallen into its present shattered state. If we look at the Pen-yüan section of the Tripitaka, we will see from the conduct of the Buddha Shakyamuni the extraordinary resoluteness with which he faced hardships in his ministry. Thus we can know that absolutely no one becomes a buddha while enjoying leisure in an ivory tower. Becoming a buddha in an ivory tower of leisure and contentment—this is just another pastime and opiate of landlords, bureaucrats,

and petit bourgeois when they are surfeited with wine and food. It has nothing at all to do with Buddhism.⁴

What this means when applied has been spelled out in other issues of *Modern Buddhism*. For example, release from the cycle of birth and death is to be sought through collectivisation. "According to the Buddha's rule, when people become monks and nuns they lead a collective life. Not only is there no private property, but there is no thought for oneself. To take thought for oneself is to keep hold of the ego. If this hold is not broken, there will be something to be born and die."⁵ A similar thought is that "with the system of private ownership eliminated, the roots of the three poisons—greed, anger and stupidity, which are centred on personal advantage—are also eliminated."⁶

As to the Western Paradise or Pure Land, in which most Chinese Buddhists hope to be reborn, it is being constructed right here on earth by the Communist Party. The idea of the Western Paradise on earth is not a new one. Some Buddhists have long believed that when a person becomes enlightened the drab objects of everyday life are transformed into the glittering jewels described in the Pure Land sutras, simply because his mental outlook has changed. The Communist interpretation is more materialistic:

From now on, under the leadership of the People's Government . . . since all the people will be producers—either directly through physical labour or indirectly through mental labour—food, clothing, housing and transportation will be no problem. Everyone will cherish peace and treasure freedom. From now on there will be no wars, no disasters. From now on all the sufferings of human life will be eliminated forever. Does not this mean transforming our world into a peaceful, happy, free and beautiful Pure Land? . . . The Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra says: "If you want to get the Pure Land, you must make your mind pure. Once the mind is pure, then the land becomes pure of its own accord." This tells us that if we want to turn our land into the Pure Land, the first step is for the masses of the people to purify their minds. The way to purify their minds is through remoulding (*kai-tsao*), self-renewal (*tzu-hsin*), and straightening out of thoughts (*kai-t'ung ssu-hsiang*) . . . Fellow Buddhists, rise up with your hearts set on the Western Paradise here in the world.⁷

Some Buddhists abroad have expressed the fear that "purifying the mind" might mean "brain washing." The Chinese have replied with ridicule. Only last year an eminent Chinese monk told an English Buddhist:

⁴ *Modern Buddhism*, April 1952.

⁵ *Modern Buddhism*, June 1951.

⁶ *Modern Buddhism*, January 1959.

⁷ *Modern Buddhism*, June 1951; compare with *Modern Buddhism*, May 1959, *Modern Buddhism*, July 1955.

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The Buddha taught us with special emphasis to "purify one's own mind" and to progress with unslacked energy. We do not understand why one who professes to be a follower of the Buddha should be so terrified by the term "remoulding" and joins in the clamour against it as "brainwashing." In fact, if dirt is found in one's thought (just as it is on one's body), what harm would it do to advise him to have a wash? . . . After all the question is with regard to what things are to be washed off. . . . The things that we advise people to wash off are: concern for individual interests at the expense of the collective interests; concern for immediate interests at the expense of long term interests—in other words, lack of patriotism, disdainfulness towards the masses and the like thoughts, that are concrete manifestations of greed, hatred and stupidity.⁸

"Disdainfulness towards the masses" means, of course, disdainfulness towards those who embody the will of the masses, that is, the Communist Party. "Lack of patriotism" has an even wider meaning. A citizen is only patriotic if he participates in any and all the programmes of the People's Government. But then why not participate in programmes that will secure the Western Paradise on earth? As Chao P'u-ch'u, the General Secretary of the Chinese Buddhist Association, said in 1955, "the first Five Year Plan is the initial blueprint for the Western Paradise here on earth," and the President of the same Association echoed the thought by saying that when the plan was carried out, the Western Paradise on earth would be virtually realised.⁹

What Buddhists, like other citizens, are expected to contribute to the Five Year Plan is productive labour. Accordingly, productive labour is called "nothing other than carrying out the bodhisattva vows," because "the highest form of bodhisattva conduct is to benefit all living creatures."¹⁰ (Thirty-four vows are formally taken by monks and laymen who resolve to follow the path of the bodhisattva, that is, of the buddha-to-be. They include the usual prohibitions on killing, alcohol and so on, as well as minor points of etiquette like failing to bow to other Buddhists, but they do not include any vow to engage in productive labour.)

Another textual sanction is Pai-chang's rule for monks: "when you do not work, you shall not eat."¹¹ The Communists interpret this to mean that during the T'ang dynasty monks did a full day's work in the fields like the peasants around them and that, therefore, the Government is right in insisting that the monks do the same now. (What Pai-chang actually advocated was not full-time manual labour, but the kind of chores that monks in large monasteries have always done; cleaning

⁸ *World Buddhism* (Ceylon), March 1964.

⁹ *Modern Buddhism*, August 1955.

¹⁰ *Modern Buddhism*, November 1959.

¹¹ e.g., *Modern Buddhism*, May 1951; April 1953.

and sweeping, helping out in the kitchen, in the vegetable garden, and in the construction of buildings, but seldom, if ever, cultivating staple crops like rice or wheat. The latter were usually left to hired help or tenant farmers. Otherwise the monks could not have performed the five to fifteen hours a day of meditation and other religious exercises that the monastic rules prescribe.)

A third textual sanction for productive labour is a quotation attributed to the Buddha: "amass wealth as if it were the dharma." This means, according to a monk from Chekiang, that Buddhists should increase production, practise austerity, and buy National Construction Bonds.¹² Buying National Construction Bonds has also been compared to practising the four virtues and the six *paramitas* of a bodhisattva and carrying out Samantabhadra's vow to beautify the land and benefit all living creatures.¹³ Perhaps the high point in such comparisons came when Chao P'u-ch'u compared a speech of Chou En-lai to passages in the Lotus Sutra and the Avatamsaka Sutra. These sutras, according to Chao, stated that the bodhisattva must always be at the service of living creatures and by the same token be dependent on living creatures for his own spiritual development. He quotes a statement from the Avatamsaka Sutra that "no bodhisattva can attain the supreme enlightenment without living creatures." The implication is clearly that enlightenment cannot be won in isolation from the toiling masses.¹⁴ Similarly in 1958 an editorial pointed out that the Buddhist principle of "doing no evil" was exemplified by wiping out the system of exploitation; the principle of "doing good to others" was exemplified by socialist construction; and the principle of "purifying one's own mind" was exemplified by the suppression of selfish thoughts of private gain.¹⁵

THE NEW COMPASSION

The greatest difficulty for the Buddhist in China who has wished to participate in the government's programmes has been that so many of them—the Korean war, for example—have required that he break the Buddha's first commandment, which forbids taking the life of any sentient creature. To make things easier for the patriotic Buddhist this commandment, too, has been reinterpreted. Its new meaning is that Buddhists should not avoid killing bad people, but only avoid killing good people. Killing bad people—like American imperialists—is good.

¹² *Modern Buddhism*, February 1954.

¹³ *Modern Buddhism*, March 1954. The six *paramitas* are: charity, morality, patience, meditation, vigour and wisdom. Samantabhadra (P'u-hsien) is the bodhisattva of wise compassion.

¹⁴ *Modern Buddhism*, January 1955.

¹⁵ *Modern Buddhism*, January 1955.

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This has been made clear in statement after statement by Buddhist leaders over the past fourteen years. Here, for example, is the argument used to explain away the doubts of some young monks who were being encouraged to join the militia: "Buddhist compassion is not without guiding principles. One has to be compassionate to good people, but if one is also compassionate to bad people, it will indirectly help evil people to do bad things. Therefore, Buddhism has the ancient precept: 'To kill evil people is a good resolve!'"¹⁶ No textual reference is given for this "ancient precept."

During the campaign to oppose America and aid Korea, a monk told a group of his brethren in Nanchang that:

We Buddhists must unite as quickly as possible with other religions and completely support the Chinese Volunteer Army and the Korean People's Army. The best thing is to be able to join the army directly and to learn the spirit in which Shakyamuni, as the embodiment of pity and guide to buddhahood, killed robbers to save the people and suffered hardships in behalf of all living beings. To wipe out the American imperialist demons that are breaking world peace is, according to Buddhist doctrine, not only blameless, but actually has merit.¹⁷

Killing counter-revolutionaries is considered no less meritorious than killing imperialists. For example, in 1951, when a so-called "bandit" sought refuge in a small nunnery, the nuns urged him to surrender himself and, at the same time, discreetly sent word to the militia. When the militia arrived and surrounded the building, he made a dash for the river in the hope to get across it and escape, but he was shot dead. As *Modern Buddhism* commented approvingly:

This shows that not only had the nuns firmly taken the people's side and sworn to destroy the enemies of the people, but also that they understood the spirit of Buddhist compassion, namely that "to kill a bad person and save many good persons, gives rise to great merit," and is the highest compassionate principle.¹⁸

Compassion is indeed a very tricky business for Buddhists in China today. Not only is it wrong to be compassionate to bad people, but it is also wrong for bad people to be compassionate to anybody at all, because that might make them appear less bad. There was an amusing episode in 1951, before the editors of *Modern Buddhism* had reached a high level of political awareness. In their February issue they printed the suggestion that Buddhist landowners should "with a glad heart take all their land and tools and wholeheartedly give them to the People's Government for distribution to the peasants, thus giving the peasants their wish and gaining great merit." By the end of the year the editors had

¹⁶ *Modern Buddhism*, April 1953.

¹⁷ *Modern Buddhism*, April 1951.

¹⁸ *Modern Buddhism*, July 1953.

realised their error and advised readers that the suggestion had been a bad one because it "blurred class consciousness in the class struggle. The essence of land reform is for the peasant class to wage a revolutionary struggle against the class of feudal landowners. It is not a question of the landowners offering charity to the peasants."¹⁹ The Buddha, of course, opposed class distinctions, or distinctions of any kind, and preached charity by all creatures towards all creatures.

The Mahayana Buddhist withdraws from the world not only to avoid involvement in such distinctions, but also because he considers that the world is empty or illusory. According to one Mahayana school, nothing is permanent or solid. According to another, everything in it is a mere projection of the mind. If that is the case, why bother to reform it? Such a view challenges materialism at its very foundations and the Communists have responded sharply. Their response has been all the sharper, perhaps, because the Dharmalaksana School, which holds that the world is a mental projection, has won the largest following among the Chinese intellectuals over the past half century. One of the leaders of this school is Lü Ch'eng, a disciple of Ou-yang Ching-wu. Some people consider him to be the most eminent lay Buddhist scholar in China today. In 1955 a Buddhist journal in Shanghai was being suppressed for spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda. When Lü Ch'eng's turn came to stand up and be counted, he said that the editors of the offending journal had deceived people into:

taking the path of passivity, pessimism, and escape from reality, in the belief that this was Buddhism. . . . They portrayed the real world as full of suffering, as empty and changeable, as a dream, a play, as if it were non-existent and worthless, as if worldly things and Buddhism were thousands of miles apart. This is pure nonsense! When was Buddhist doctrine ever like this?²⁰

What an extraordinary passage! Lü Ch'eng knew perfectly well that Buddhist doctrine had always been like this and to pretend that it had not was rewriting the history of Buddhist thought on a scale that leaves one open-mouthed. Of course, no one was taken in by this whistling in the dark, valiant as it was. In 1960 the President of the Chinese Buddhist Association said that most Buddhists "have discarded their tolerant, transcendental, negative attitude of rejecting the world, *which has been handed down from the past*, and they have been stirred . . . into a 'positive attitude of entering the world' so that they have a completely new mentality."²¹

¹⁹ *Modern Buddhism*, December 1951.

²⁰ *Modern Buddhism*, September 1955.

²¹ *Jen-min Jih-pao (People's Daily)*, April 15, 1960 (italics mine).

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WHY THE SPECIAL TREATMENT

Since 1958 the non-Marxist minority parties in China have been permitted to exist for one main purpose: to teach their members how to follow the leadership of the Communist Party and to educate them in Marxism. In the case of the Buddhists, there has been a difference: the Marxism in which they have been educated has been presented partly in Buddhist dress. This does not mean that the Chinese Communists find the dress attractive. As one of them recently stated:

We cannot hang the label of Marxist principles under the name of Confucius or any other ancient figure. . . . It is likely to lead people to the road of worshipping the ancients blindly. . . . To moderate the ideologies of the ancients and to say that there is almost no difference between them and Marxism and that they are something which transcends classes and time will result not in inheriting valuable things of ancient times, but inevitably in affixing a proletarian label to the thought of the exploiting class.²²

Chinese, like Russian, Communists are critical of efforts to "polish up" Buddhism as something which is not in contradiction with Communism. "Anything of this nature is doomed to failure."²³ They are unalterably opposed to ideological compromise with Buddhism or any other religion. We read in *Nationalities Unity*: "To think that religious belief and Communism are not contradictory . . . is obviously completely mistaken. . . . The religious world view is reactionary, anti-scientific, anti-socialist, and anti-communist. . . . In a socialist society it is now as before completely contrary to Communist thinking."²⁴ Generally speaking they have been content to write the history of ideas "straight," pointing out which ideas were progressive for their time, but being careful to emphasise that what was progressive then may be reactionary now.

Why then have they allowed Buddhists to find sanction in Buddhist texts for what is stated much more explicitly in the works of Lenin and Mao? Why are Buddhist writers allowed to do what is supposed to be forbidden—that is, "to modernise the ideologies of the ancients" and to "polish up" Buddhism for use in a socialist country—so that the *Sukhavativyuha* has become, so to speak, background reading for the text of the Five Year Plan? I cannot offer any wholly satisfactory explanation. No other body of traditional doctrine has received this doubtful compliment.

One reason is, I think, that Buddhism is the only traditional doctrine that still appeals to a large number of Chinese. The Republican period saw an impressive revival of Buddhist devotion and practice, whereas the

²² *Hsin Chieh-she (New Construction)*, January 1963.

²³ *Science and Religion*, June 1960.

²⁴ *Min-tsu T'uan-chieh (Nationalities Unity)*, March 6, 1959.

other main Chinese religions, Confucianism and Taoism, lost ground. They had nothing comparable to the burgeoning Buddhist movement, with its newly founded schools, publishing houses, and lay Buddhist societies. The Communists, therefore, considered the Buddhists an important group to mobilise—important enough, at any rate, to give them their own national association, their own journal (*Modern Buddhism*), and a role to play in almost every mass movement. The people put in charge of these efforts were religious progressives, who had a sense of identity as Buddhists, but whose political and social ideals left them dissatisfied with Buddhism as it was. They wanted to change it as much as might be necessary to make it respectable in the world they lived in, even if this meant changing it to the point where it was no longer Buddhism: no matter, they thought, it could still be *called* Buddhism.

The reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine, then, was largely voluntary; but it was stimulated by the socialisation of China and permitted by the Communist Party (which might, of course, have forbidden it) because the continued existence of Buddhism could be used as evidence of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religious *belief* (freedom of religious *activity* is not guaranteed). Furthermore, Party leaders were, if anything, more nationalistic than the Nationalists and Buddhism has contributed to Chinese culture. Finally, and most important of all, Buddhism provides a useful tool for the political penetration of South-East Asia.

For years, more and more Asian Buddhists have been pondering the problem of modernisation referred to at the beginning of this article. There are all shades of opinion, but in general, a conservative majority believes that doctrines and monastic rules do not need to be reinterpreted for Buddhism to play a positive role, whereas a progressive minority, like their counterparts in China, would like to discard many ideas and practices which in their view block the pursuit of national wealth and power. The conservative majority has few illusions about the state of Buddhism in China and other Marxist countries, whereas the progressive minority—which is growing—is torn between loyalty to their Buddhist culture and the belief that only Marxism can bring about quick industrialisation. It is partly for their benefit that Communist leadership allows Buddhists in China to wear a fetching new kind of Marxist dress. Some parts of this attire, like the new doctrine of killing for compassion, have been worn only as an undergarment (few foreign Buddhists can read Chinese), but other parts have been worn for all to see, as, for instance, the view that monks should do productive labour and take part in politics. The idea has been spread that not only is Buddhism flourishing in China, but that it can serve as a model for modernisation elsewhere.

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Nonetheless, from the Chinese Communist point of view, the reinterpretation of Buddhism is a temporary expedient, to be cautiously permitted and discarded as soon as possible. The history of Buddhist thought is not being rewritten for the permanent record or for the general reader. To the general reader in China (though not in South-East Asia) the reactionary nature of all religions, including Buddhism, was pointed out with increased frequency in 1963-64 and it was reiterated that the Chinese government intends to eliminate all religious activity as soon as possible, not by administrative *fiat*, but by eliminating its causes. Thus the government has a systematic policy of showing two faces, one to the people at home, the other to Buddhists abroad.

The most interesting question, however, is whether its own citizens do not have two faces as well. To what extent is the new brand of Buddhism in Marxist dress proving as useful to genuine Buddhists as to genuine Marxists, enabling Buddhism to survive in some form, where it would otherwise be liquidated in any form? Could it be that even progressives like Rev. Chü-tsan have in their innermost hearts become less progressive as the years have shown them what progress leads to? These are questions that cannot be answered, but should be asked. When reading quotations like those given earlier in this article, Buddhists may feel not only disgust at the perversion of noble doctrines, but also compassion for those who have no choice but to pretend approval.