

FEATURE:
TRANSMISSION AND LEGITIMATION IN
BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Introduction: Selecting the Past and
Transmitting the Truth

MICHAEL PYE

THE PRESENT ISSUE of *The Eastern Buddhist* carries a number of articles which in various ways relate to the special theme of “transmission and legitimation in Buddhist traditions.”

The religion which has come to be known as “Buddhism” is like a huge river with many substreams and distributaries. The representatives of various schools and divisions usually treat each other with great respect. At the same time, eager and sometimes passionate debate among Buddhists has frequently been known. Differences and divergences from a particular line of teaching that claims authority have been deplored and the use of terms equivalent to “heresy” has not been unknown. Occasionally there have even been violent encounters. In modern times, the claim to be “Buddhist” has sometimes been asserted by leaders of new religions who are mainly teaching something very different but like to use such a respectable label. But who is to decide what is authentic? Who is to decide which forms of teaching are reliable? Who is to decide which presentations of Buddhism most clearly and faithfully reflect the original message of “the Buddha,” if indeed that can be identified at all after all the variations which have been proclaimed in his name?

Though this whole subject may seem irksome in some quarters, especially where there is a simple, almost fundamentalist acceptance of the authority of a great leader or a single sutra, it will no doubt continue to be a matter for reflection on the part of others, whether Buddhist or not. What we may often observe in the case of religions other than Buddhism is that the apparently

unambiguous choice of one authority actually masks deep conflicts. In the case of Islam, for example, although it is believed that there is but one sacred book, with an unaltered and unalterable Arabic text, and just one final messenger who completes the sequence of the many prophets who preceded him, what we observe is that the Sunni and Shiite factions are deeply divided from each other and are currently engaged in bitter warfare. This is reminiscent of the various wars of religion which were waged in Europe as a result of the polarization of the Catholic and Reformed (Protestant) traditions and the ways in which these were caught up in the political power struggles relating to the emergence of modern states. Yet it should not be simplistically thought, or taught, that such conflicts are the result of the effects of "monotheism," as if this alone leads to the exclusion of others and hostility towards them. The Japanese religion Shintō, clearly polytheistic, has been used as a powerful engine for the political self-assertion of a single nation over others. In the case of Buddhism it is also too simplistic to say that this is a pacific religion which could never get involved in physical or military conflicts. However, the question of the use, or misuse, of "religion" as a political weapon is not precisely the present subject. It is simply another example of how the question as to what is authentic in any particular case gets thrown up again and again.

If the convenient term "Buddhism" is sometimes regarded with slight concern, this is because there are so many different views about what "Buddhism" might be. There seems to be a legitimate question about how we know whether a particular individual, group, school, or denomination is indeed Buddhist. The simple answer, notably proposed by anthropologists, is that if someone says they are "Buddhist" then they are Buddhist. Yet this answer is too simple, because sometimes such a claim is made for presentational purposes, for example by a new religion, even though it has little substance. Such examples cannot be overlooked. Even for observers, therefore, caution is required when thinking about the question of "Buddhist" identity, which does not go away and cannot simply be shrugged off. For Buddhists themselves, the matter is more complex. In spite of a broad consensus of toleration between existent Buddhist groups, it is not uncommon to come across cases where teachings are considered to diverge significantly, either from "what the Buddha taught" (an orthodoxy) or from a particular, carefully developed line of interpretation which has produced spiritual fruit and stood the test of time (an orthopraxy).

For example, devotion to or reliance on Amida Buddha is widespread across East Asia, so that we may speak in a very general way about "Pure

Land Buddhism,” and yet it was developed in a particular way by Hōnen Shōnin 法然上人 (1133–1212) in Japan. His disciples struck out in various religious directions; among them, Shinran Shōnin 親鸞聖人 (1173–1262) was particularly influential in inaugurating the Shin Buddhist interpretation of the *nenbutsu* 念仏. But this in turn was contested in some respects, and as a consequence the *Tannishō* 歎異鈔 was written as an expression of regret over the appearance of divergences. Similarly, the followers of Nichiren Shōnin 日蓮聖人 (1222–1282) contested among themselves the true lines of interpretation and consequently produced sub-denominations of various kinds. Apart from seeking to hold fast to the insights of their own preferred teachers, these forms of Buddhism also claimed to be representing the full meaning of the Dharma. At the same time, it is notable that Pure Land Buddhism, Shin Buddhism, and the Buddhism of the Lotus tradition have all been regarded by outsiders, including other Buddhists, as deviations from the main outline of Mahayana Buddhism. Here we must recall that the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism to begin with has been viewed with suspicion by modern proponents of the Theravada School. On the other hand, the early Mahayanists expressed themselves dialectically, and at first quite polemically, to bring out what they claimed was the real meaning of the teaching of the Buddha himself, of which others had lost sight.

Thus, questions have frequently arisen within the overall Buddhist tradition about the discernment of true teaching or authentic practice. External, non-partisan observers can scarcely avoid remarking the variety of Buddhist traditions although, in recent years at least, they usually try to avoid normative interventions regarding what may or may not be regarded as “authentic” Buddhism. Yet Buddhist actors themselves can hardly avoid adopting normative positions within the field, despite protestations of non-discrimination or at least of the toleration of otherness.

There are many ways in which claims to a normative, authentic presentation of Dhamma/Dharma have been mounted or legitimized. Most of these ways turn on the attitude adopted towards the process of “transmission” for, if one seeks to present something as “the teaching of the Buddha” or, if emphasizing practice, “the way of the Buddha,” then the question will arise as to how this particular presentation is legitimized. Is reliable transmission effected with the help of words, or rather without words? Is it made possible by the acceptance of the authority of a previous teacher, or is it acceptable for a gifted new leader to reach back through selected texts to a prior, essential version of the Dhamma/Dharma? Among all the Buddhist texts, how can it be decided which ones may be regarded as pre-eminent?

Can it be assumed that all the texts which are “accepted” in terms of the criteria proposed in the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* were or are authentic transmissions, thus creating what was much later called a “canon”? How can there be any such thing in Buddhism as an “apocryphal” text (on this tricky concept see further below)? Was it helpful to arrange the texts in a kind of hierarchy, as in the *panjiao* 判教 systems of early Chinese and Korean Buddhism? Or did it already make more sense, many centuries ago, to rely on a series of valid monastic ordinations and an authoritative transmission of “precepts” from country to country? Or was it better to go on a journey from Korea or Japan to China, or from China to India, in search of the true Dharma or its best possible forms of expression? What were the motivations and expectations of such specialised pilgrims in search of the real thing? And as their perception of the Dharma became clearer, was it conducive to good order in Buddhist life to propose a lineage of reception as a guarantee of authenticity, one which could even be referred to metaphorically as a “blood-line” (Jp. *kechimyaku* 血脉)? This is a common feature of several Buddhist traditions, but we must always remember that such a process, though appearing to be cumulative, can only take place retrospectively when contestation is involved. Not who *are* the patriarchs, but who can be *claimed* as belonging to the relevant, determinative chain of patriarchs? Such is the underlying question.

In recent years it has become more widely evident than ever before that religious authorities are themselves invented, constructed and defended by their followers. On the one hand, those with simple faith might regard that which is received as deriving straightforwardly from a powerful revelatory source, without asking any further about how such a source came to be established. Thoughtful believers however will have long noticed that it is above all later authorities who set up earlier ones. It is they who, looking back into the tradition, take decisions about which masters, which texts, which practices, which symbols or which rules should now be viewed as determinative. To use a phrase which has now become widely recognized, the tradition is “invented.”¹ This allows those with a predilection for post-modernism to emphasize the constructive agency of those who seek to position themselves anew through a clever use of traditional themes. But such a perception by no means depends on post-modernist thought. On the contrary, it was distinctly argued by the early modern thinker Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746) that the variety of denominational positions within the Buddhist stream can be explained precisely by the

¹ Cf. the well known work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

fact that individuals often sought to supersede with a distinct profile their predecessors, or to supersede them. He named this procedure *kajō* 加上 which literally means “adding” and “upping” and implies going one better than predecessors. Tominaga applied this concept, rather scornfully, to the competing genealogies constructed in the Zen schools, as in chapter 20 of his remarkably precocious writing, the *Shutsujōkōgo* 出定後語 (literal meaning: “Words after Emerging from Meditation”).²

Very often, as we know, new authorities which emerge within a particular religion claim that they are presenting the key part of the tradition, its heart or essence, and that they are presenting it more accurately, more precisely, or more effectively. It is therefore not surprising that the term “essence,” or in German *Wesen*, has not infrequently been used in this connection. Suzuki Daisetsu used it, for example, in the title of his essay *The Essence of Buddhism*.³ The influence of the German usage on English and other languages has been considerable. It should be noted that the term *Wesen* was used in the nineteenth century and thereafter both for “the essence of religion” (Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Schleiermacher) and for “the essence of Christianity” (Adolf von Harnack, Alfred Loisy, Ernst Troeltsch), and of course these two questions, or searches, should not be confused. We are concerned here however with Buddhism, and it is interesting to see how the widely referenced work by Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*⁴ both transports the concept from German and applies it to the Buddhist tradition. However, this is not just a German or European way of thinking. Highly relevant concepts in East Asian Buddhism include “the great meaning” (*dayi* 大意, Jp. *daii*) as used in the *Platform Sutra* of Huineng 慧能 (638–713), and the *daigo* 醍醐 familiar from the name of the Shingon temple Daigoji in Kyoto, which means the ghee, or the gist. We even find the expression “the ghee of the ghee” which can be compared to the English expression “quintessence.”

Nowadays historians of religion often prefer to avoid such terms in case they are themselves suspected of having some kind of normative agenda up their sleeve. So is it still appropriate to use the term “essence” in this connection at all? This depends on who is using it. For historians of religion it may prove to be a trap, for they are supposed to avoid making normative

² Tominaga 1990.

³ Suzuki 1948. Another example is Fujimoto Keimei’s *Shin Buddhism’s Essence: The Tannisho* (1993). In fact this title illustrates the persistent attraction of this term for later generations, since the original title of this publication some sixty years earlier in 1932 did not contain it at all, having been simply *The Tannisho; A Religion Beyond Good and Evil*.

⁴ Conze 1951, and later editions.

judgments. On the other hand, the authorities speaking on behalf of a religious community or denomination *are* speaking normatively. Unlike the mere historian on the sidelines, they are speaking with authority. It is their very real function to tell their followers what the tradition is about, what the key points are, what in their judgment the essence really is.⁵

A feature of such discussions in the field of Buddhist Studies is the modern use by scholars of the term “apocryphal,” a term that has become widespread, but can in fact be quite misleading. In other cultural contexts it has usually been employed to refer to writings which are fictitiously ascribed to an esteemed author, as in the phrase “apocryphal gospels,” which are piously but unrealistically attributed to apostles. This usually implies that, by contrast, the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament really were written by those to whom they are ascribed, although in fact such ascriptions are also of tentative value only. By analogy, Buddhist sutras, with their famous opening phrase “Thus I have heard,” are presented as having emanated directly from the mouth of the Buddha himself, while somehow suggesting that if this is manifestly not so, these texts would count as inauthentic. Since the Buddha did not speak Chinese, any sutras extant only in that language are therefore suspected of being “apocryphal.” Consequently, in Buddhist studies the word has sometimes come to mean simply “not of Indian origin.” The weakness of any such categorisation is that the sutras in Indian languages themselves cannot simply be presumed to have emanated in Pāli and in Sanskrit, as the texts which they now are, from the mouth of the Buddha. To pose this problem directly as a challenging question: which Indian sutras are themselves not apocryphal? There is a presumed priority for early Indian Buddhism, which is of course not without some justice. Thus there is a historical sequence, but the use of the word “apocryphal” can easily be twisted into, or hide, a dogmatic assumption about the antiquity or authority of Indian texts which is itself without historical foundation. This is an example of how a normative concept can creep into historical work in a manner which fails to do justice to the real features of the tradition.⁶

Returning to our main theme, what we have before us therefore is a number of questions about the nature of religious authority, the relationships between origins and later developments, and the consistency of trans-

⁵ An early comparative study of these matters may be found in Pye and Morgan 1973.

⁶ This is not the place to enter into a full discussion of this problem, which has been approached recently by Buswell (1990), Nattier (1992), and others.

mission. Such questions arise in the case of Buddhism just as much as in any other religion. How do the representatives of various standpoints within the tradition as a whole deal with these questions? Is it somehow possible to identify the main characteristics of a particular religious tradition? How is “authority” perceived? How is consistency assessed? How is a reliable transmission assured? In the present issue of *The Eastern Buddhist* we present several case studies that address such questions as they arise in the field of Buddhist studies. It is in no sense a comprehensive survey, for in a field so complex that could scarcely be achieved. However we believe that in their diversity the articles included in this issue illustrate some of these matters rather well. They explore a number of the options which have been adopted as Buddhists have come to terms with the strains and stresses of transmission.

We begin with an article by Max Deeg entitled “Chinese Buddhists in Search of Authenticity in the Dharma,” which shows us how Buddhist travelers to India sought reliable threads of transmission. Being “in search of authenticity,” their journeys may certainly be thought of as pilgrimages, even though the routes were newly forged. Deeg shows us how this process created a sense of certainty among Chinese Buddhists which enabled them to claim a new authenticity of their own.

Early Japanese Buddhists had a formidable task in the search for an authentic transmission of the Dharma, and indeed of the *vinaya*. There was scarcely any question of direct transmission from India to that easternmost country which lay beyond China and Korea. Given various intermediaries, there was inevitably tension and competition among all who sought and claimed the true transmission. In his article “The Eastward Flow of Buddhism and its Waterspouts, Springs, and Countercurrents: Ordinations and Precepts,” Paul Groner guides us through these stormy seas, centering his analysis on the Tendai 天台 story, but also looking far beyond it to the transmissions of our own times.

We follow these central themes with two fascinating accounts of quite different modes of transmission in the context of Zen and Shingon Buddhism respectively. For the concept of Dharma transmission in Zen Buddhism, well known for its genealogies, we are very fortunate to have an account of the work of Yamakawa Aki of the Kyoto National Museum. For many years she has been researching the carefully preserved robes of the Zen masters of the temple Tōfukuji 東福寺 in Kyoto. What emerges in her article “Five Dharma Transmission Robes at the Zen Temple Tōfukuji” is a technically impressive picture of the great care with which the transmission

of Zen has been documented in fabric and carefully preserved in the form of authoritative objects. In the field of Shingon, on the other hand, another special mechanism has been at work, namely the authority of oracular pronouncement. This form seems to allow for revelatory interjections which are nevertheless bound into a coherent legitimizing Buddhist culture. Elizabeth Tinsley's fascinating and immensely detailed study "Indirect Transmission in Shingon Buddhism: Notes on the Henmyōin Oracle" provides insight into a chain of thought and practice whose dynamics are for the most part not easily visible.

We then turn to the way in which authoritative transmission came to be articulated, retrospectively, in Shin Buddhism. Michael Conway explores very sensitively how each link in this chain was selected and built up. The process had already begun in the thought of the Chinese promoters of faith in Amida Buddha, was continued by Genshin 源信 (942–1017) and Hōnen in Japan, and then found its fullest expression in the thought of Shinran. The latter gave it a popular literary form in his *Kōsō wasan* 高僧和讃 (Hymns on the Patriarchs) as well as in the more widely used *Shōshinge* 正信偈 (Hymn on True Awakening). Here, therefore, we see a third way in which tradition has been invented in Buddhism. Those familiar with temple arrangements in Japan will be aware that the seven patriarchs or "high monks" (*kōsō*) are regularly presented to one side of a central figure of Amida Nyorai 阿彌陀如来, usually being depicted on a hanging scroll, and thus providing a devotional focus for this particular configuration of the tradition.

Following these alternative approaches in Zen, Shingon and Shin Buddhism, we turn our attention back to the role of the *vinaya* in determining the identity of Buddhism. Failing doctrinal consensus, it may seem that the obvious place to look for consistency in Buddhist transmission is in the *vinaya*; this view was certainly maintained by King Mongkut of Thailand when he sought to reform Buddhism in his country in the nineteenth century. As is well known, he required new, but valid ordinations, and arranged for these to take place on a new ordination platform floating on water so that they would not fall under the jurisdiction of existing institutions. In Japan, the introduction of the *vinaya* by the famous Chinese monk Jianzhen 鑑真 (Jp. Ganjin) is a relatively uncomplicated piece of Buddhist history. Here however we have two contributions on the role of the *vinaya* in the establishment of Korean Buddhism, which was, and still is perceived in various contestable ways.

In the first instance we read in the article by Richard D. McBride about the contestation of *vinaya* transmission in the early period of Korean Buddhism. Three distinct narratives are analysed, each centering on a different

monastic figure who was claimed to have distinct access to valid tradition. One of these, Tanshi 曇始 (fl. ca. 376–450), was a Chinese missionary to Korea; the second was the Korean Chajang 慈藏 (d. between 650 and 655) who received the *vinaya* from Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) in China; a third was the chronologically prior Korean monk Kyōmik 謙益 (fl. 526) who was said to have gone to India himself to claim an authentic tradition from beyond China. The analysis is complicated by the wish of some modern Korean scholars to establish a connection with tradition that is both independent of China and more ancient than that of Japan. The problem is revisited in the modern era by Ja-rang Lee, who writes on the wrangles over the substance of the *Four-part Vinaya* in the Chogye 曹溪 denomination during recent decades. At first the *Four-part Vinaya* was adduced to reconstitute a celibate and vegetarian sangha, overturning regulations imposed under colonial Japanese rule. Next came an attempt to adapt the *vinaya* by means of a number of specific rules and regulations which took some account of what had become customary in modern life. However, since these regulations followed the direction of secular law and secular morality, the result was a considerable relaxation of the rules. With their ordained persons found to be gambling and drinking, the Chogye order fell into some disrepute. A reaction therefore set in which sought to get closer to the original *vinaya* with the help of new regulations called the “Pure Rules,” but even these show a tendency to follow worldly norms; for example those who have been monks for longer are allowed to use larger cars. The question remains contested therefore as to whether, and if so how, the early *Four-part Vinaya* can be re-applied in modern times to secure continuity with the past.

In sum, the underlying themes addressed in these various papers emerge in remarkably different ways at different times, and in the context of quite varied symbolic worlds. Within Japan alone, there is more diversity within the various broad schools than is often noticed; this applies very evidently to Zen traditions in ways that go significantly beyond the specific example we have been able to include in this issue. Moreover, diverse and competing chains of authority are also retrospectively created in the rather numerous Lotus traditions driven by the thought of Nichiren. While it might be imagined that such diversity could lead to indifference and a lack of interest in claims to authenticity and authority, this does not in fact usually seem to be the case. “Buddhism” wants to be “Buddhism” even while the authority of particular claims and accentuations within the presumed parameters of that “Buddhism” is usually carefully guarded and asserted. This in turn justifies the promotion and the further development of particular narratives within the Buddhist family.

REFERENCES

- Buswell, Robert E., ed. 1990. *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Conze, Edward. 1951. *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pye, Michael, and Robert Morgan, ed. 1973. *The Cardinal Meaning. Essays in Comparative Hermeneutics: Buddhism and Christianity*. Religion and Reason 6. The Hague: Mouton.
- Fujimoto, Keimei. 1993. *Shin Buddhism's Essence: The Tannisho*. Los Angeles: Memorial Publication Ad Hoc Committee.
- Fujimoto, Keimei. 1932. *The Tannisho: A Religion Beyond Good and Evil*. Kyoto: Honpa Hongwanji Kyōikubu.
- Nattier, Jan. 1992. "The Heart Sūtra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15, no. 2, pp. 153–223.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro. 1948. *The Essence of Buddhism*. Kyoto: Hōzōkan.
- Tominaga, Nakamoto. 1990. *Emerging from Meditation*. Translated and introduced by Michael Pye. London: Duckworth.