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The “Humanization” of Buddhism: Aspects of Western Adaptations of Buddhism

NOTTO R. THELLE

Abstract

The paper is concerned with the tendency among some Western intellectuals to weaken the traditional religious elements of Buddhism and to define it as a sort of humanism without religious implications. It is inevitable that Buddhism—or any religion—goes through processes of transformation and reinterpretation when it is transmitted to new cultures and contexts. The article describes some of the characteristic Western ways of receiving Eastern religious traditions and the inevitable transformations that take place. One option is to weaken or even cut the religious roots of traditional Buddhism, redefining it as a humanistic life stance, religiously uncommitted, or even secular in character. The paper raises the question whether some of the original spiritual energy may be lost if the traditional religious practices and commitments are drained off.

This paper is concerned with one aspect of Buddhist penetration in the West, particularly among Western intellectuals: the tendency to weaken the traditional religious elements of Buddhism—including worship, chanting, rituals, offerings, prayers, visual images, belief in

supernatural beings, monasticism, etc—and rather to define Buddhism as a life stance without religious implications. There are, of course, many Westerners who wholeheartedly affirm the “religious” elements of Buddhism. My concern is what happens when that aspect disappears and Buddhism is one-sidedly regarded as a meditative technique aiming at spiritual or emotional growth, or merely understood as philosophical vision that opens new perspectives on such challenges as ecology, politics, social and economic justice, or reconciliation.

I do not negate that meditation may be defined as the very Buddhist way, or that it may be adequately understood as a philosophy. I just want to raise the question whether Buddhism will be able to maintain its spiritual energy if all or most of the traditional religious elements are radically weakened or deleted.

I will first deal with the general tendency of Westerners to pick elements of Eastern religious and philosophical traditions in order to adapt them to their own needs, and the inherent changes that inevitably follow such adaptations. Then I will see how this applies to the reception of Buddhism in the West.

I realize, of course, that transformations are inevitable and take place in all intercultural communication. I also accept that everyone is free to choose those elements of religious and philosophical traditions that appeal to them—we all do. Even though Westerners may be initially attracted to the specific cultural and religious forms that Buddhism has developed in various Eastern contexts, it is almost inconceivable that they in the long run will be able to identify with the variety of cultural or “ethnic” forms of Buddhism that are practiced in the East, be it Singhalese, Thai, Vietnamese, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, or other forms of Buddhism. The same may apply to new generations of immigrants who will be inevitably socialized into Western modes of modernity and post-modernity. So Buddhism will inevitably go through radical changes in its integration in the West. There are already many types of *navayana*, new “vehicles” of Buddhism resulting from its encounter with Western traditions.¹ There are even Christian types of Buddhist practice,² and there will be more.

¹ As far as I know, Christmas Humphreys was the first to coin the concept of Navayana (the new vehicle) as a term for a modern Western branch of Buddhism corresponding to Mahayana and Hinayana (Theravada). In his book, *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England (1906–1967)* (London: Buddhist Society, 1968), he describes Navayana as a Buddhism that grows “happily alongside, and even blend with the best of Western science, psychology and social science, and thus affect the ever-changing field of Western thought.” George Boeree argues that it should be

My particular interest in this case is to ask to what degree Buddhism can rid itself of the inherited religious elements and become a humanistic—even secular or non-religious—Buddhism without cutting its roots and without losing some of the power and strength that come from a more traditional religious practice and commitment. A related question is whether or not a practice that has eliminated the inherited religious elements should be called Buddhism any more—and whether or not that is an interesting question.

“RELIGION” AND “HUMANISM”

I realize that I run into problems before I get started, because both “religion/religious” and “humanism/humanistic” are tricky concepts that may change meaning and value according to the person using them and the context in which they are used.

I grew up with the concept of Christian humanism, expressing the idea that Christianity at its best is also a sound humanism. One of the giants in Scandinavian culture, the Danish poet and priest N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), summarized his vision in the words, “first a human being, then a Christian.” A wider interpretation would be that a sound religious faith is only possible where there is true humanity. Truly religious ideas and commitments deal with the deepest human concerns, such as the question of being and nothingness, life and death, suffering and nihility, the meaning of life, the purpose and destiny of humanity, responsibility, ultimate reality, and the question of transcendence. From this point of view one might argue that even secular philosophies concerned with such existential issues are dealing with concerns that are somehow religious in character, even when they are totally uninterested in such “religious” elements as devotion, faith, worship, or prayer.

possible to accept the fundamental ideas of Buddhism, without accepting “certain other ideas usually associated with Buddhism.” See George Boeree, “Navayana Buddhism,” May 1, 2002, <http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/navayana.html>.

² I am, for example, referring to the numerous groups of Christians who integrate Buddhist meditation in their own spiritual practice without adhering to Buddhist teachings.

When I use the term “humanism” in this paper, however, I use it in a more popular way, as an expression of a secular humanism that tends to regard religion and religious practices with scepticism. In such a case, a humanistic stance is somehow indifferent or even opposed to a religious view of life. I am not happy with such a definition of humanism, but in this case it may serve its purposes.

I am aware that Chinese Buddhists—and many other Buddhists in the East—are concerned to present a humanistic Buddhism as “Buddhism for the Human World” or “Buddhism for Human Life,” closely related to the search for an “engaged Buddhism.”³ In its concern with human life and society, it tends to deemphasize some of the other-worldliness of traditional Buddhism, being concerned about the issues of the world rather than leaving the world behind; caring for the living and benefiting others rather than caring for the dead and for one’s own salvation. In this way traditional Mahayana ideals are mobilized for a modern Buddhism that is directed towards involvement in the social and political spheres of life.⁴ Such a humanistic Buddhism maintains its roots in Mahayana teaching and practice and does not necessarily avoid “religious” expressions, as it is clearly evinced in the humanistic Buddhism practiced in Fo Guang Shan 佛光山 and similar movements in Taiwan. This is obviously somewhat different from some of the trends in Western Buddhism that I sketch in this paper.

Allow me to add a small parenthesis here: In the long run, one might wonder whether the emphasis on the practical and social concerns in “humanistic Buddhism” might sap some of the strength that comes from Buddhism’s basic detachment from society and the demands of the world. Throughout most of its history Buddhism has tended to submit to the demands of secular authorities rather than keeping a

³ In Chinese, *Renjian Fojiao* 人間佛教, sometimes *Rensheng Fojiao* 人生佛教. The Chinese Buddhist reformer Taixu 太虛 was an early advocate of a humanistic Buddhism, and his ideas were further developed by his disciples, Yin Shun 印順, Hsing Yun 星雲 and others. See Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001); Holmes Welch, *The Buddhist Revival in China* (Cambridge, MA: University of California Press, 1968). For the development of engaged Buddhism, see Chris Queen and Sallie King, ed., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (New York: Albany State University Press, 1996).

⁴ “Humanistic Buddhism must focus more on issues of the world rather than on how to leave the world behind on caring for the living rather than for the dead on benefiting others rather than benefiting oneself and on universal salvation rather than cultivation for oneself only,” quoted from “Humanistic Buddhist Beliefs,” January 27, 2009, *Wisdom Quarterly: American Buddhist Journal*, <http://wisdomquarterly.blogspot.com/2009/01/humanistic-buddhist-beliefs.html>.

critical distance. With its emphasis on serving society and worldly concerns humanistic Buddhism may, under certain circumstances, be reduced to become a useful tool for the political authorities.

Let me exemplify by referring to the development in Japan in the decades before and after 1900, when Buddhism (along with other religions) was mobilized for political purposes, turning its attention towards serving the society, serving the nation, supporting the political authorities, even the army and the patriotic spirit. Japanese Buddhism was already assimilated into the social establishment of the country, but in the political process of creating a nationalistic spirit Buddhism was mobilized and presented itself as a patriotic Buddhism, even criticizing Christianity for being unpatriotic with its universal spirit. It was, in fact, Christians who had to remind them that Buddhism also stood for universal ideas, and should not be limited by national boundaries or political authorities. The almost total lack of Buddhist criticism of the Japanese military expansion leading up to the Pacific War is well documented.⁵ Such examples from Japan clearly show that if Buddhism, in its effort to serve the society, loses its critical distance to society and becomes a subservient supporter of political authorities, it may lose its soul.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE EAST

The Western "reception" of the East is an extremely complicated history, but one common feature is obvious: One tends to find the East for which one is looking.⁶ The Jesuits found in Confucianism a primordial monotheism which corresponded to their own conceptions of God. The Romantics and the Idealist philosophers in early nineteenth century Europe found in Hinduism a monistic philosophy which corresponded to their own ideas of the unity of the world spirit and the human spirit; and a similar tendency may be observed among the American Tran-

⁵ I have analyzed such tendencies in my book, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854–1899* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987). See also James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, ed., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994); Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997).

⁶ The classical study of such "Orientalism" is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

scendentalists. The early pioneers of Buddhist studies in Europe found in Buddhism an atheistic, rational, and moral philosophy that corresponded to their search for an alternative to doctrinal Christianity. Western “textbook Buddhism” has ever since tended to be built on their construction of Buddhism, where the traditional religious elements have been deemphasized or even deleted.⁷

The modern waves of interest in the East evince a whole range of approaches, from superficial fascination with popular aspects of Eastern ways to serious attempts to accept and identify with one specific religious tradition in its totality.

SUPERFICIAL FASCINATION WITH THE EAST

The first approach is certainly the most common, even among intellectuals, and one might easily ignore it for its superficiality, its lack of endurance, and its tendency to shift attention to whatever pops up as the most recent fad. As a phenomenon, however, it may be more significant and make more impact than often realized. The superficial attraction to Eastern ways may seem to involve a religious interest, but in many cases it is just a picturesque addition to a secular lifestyle that is not supposed to be changed by the Eastern touch.

The most common expression of this impulse from the East is perhaps yoga, in recent years to some extent diversified or replaced by Chinese *taiji* 太極 and *qigong* 氣功. They belong in a holistic religious understanding which presupposes both insight and discipline—mental, moral, and physical—and aim at a life-changing process. In the West, however, yoga and Eastern meditative disciplines have largely become

⁷ For a general analysis of such Western interpretations of the East, see E. L. Allen, *Christianity among the Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960); J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asia and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997); Jean W. Sedlar, *India and the Greek World: A Study in the Transmission of Culture* (Tottowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980). For a more specific analysis of attempts to modernize Buddhism according to Western ideals, see Richard F. Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Ulrich Everding, ed., *Buddhism and Christianity: Interactions between East and West* (Colombo: The Goethe-Institut, 1995). A general presentation of Buddhist-Christian relations is found in Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of Their Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NJ: Orbis, 2001).

techniques for experiencing physical and mental well-being. They demand some discipline, but few practitioners think of the mental and moral purification which is originally expected. People are happy to improve their concentration and mental balance, but life basically continues in the old way, with the addition of some new elements to the old totality. In this way Eastern disciplines aiming at the transformation of the mind become just technologies for adding some new aspects to people’s well-being. There is nothing wrong in this, but it does say something about our relationship to the East. We borrow what we need and turn it into something else.

Similar things apply to the superficial adoption of Buddhism. My friends in The Eastern Buddhist Society in Kyoto liked to joke that they sometimes received letters addressed to “The Instant Buddhist.” An amusing typing error, perhaps, but they saw it as an expression of a Western tendency to believe that Buddhism could be prepared and consumed quickly and efficiently, like instant coffee and fast food—a kind of Zen Light or McBuddha. They had had their fill of backpacking tourists who had turned a few pages of books about Buddhism and then wanted to enjoy a little meditation in one of Kyoto’s many monasteries before continuing on their journey. One abbot indignantly related how he got rid of these romantics: “I give them a meditation cushion and tell them to come back again after they have meditated at home for six months.” They seldom came back.

“Zen” has entered our Western languages as a catchphrase for all that people dream of finding in the East: spontaneity, intuitive experience, a playful art of living. And Zen sells. Shops and book-café are given the name “Zen.” Some books have become bestsellers, such as Eugen Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery*⁸ and Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.⁹ The former represents an aesthetic romanticizing which is remote from the normal reality of Zen; the latter is right in the heart of reality, but people do not quite understand what it has to do with Zen. If there is some Zen there, it is perhaps simply a kind of metaphysics of ordinary things—to live in the moment, to be directly present in what is happening, in a relationship to things, to a motorcycle and tools, to life and the landscape.

⁸ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

⁹ Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New Jersey, NY: William Morrow, 1974).

More than a hundred other books have been published with similar titles: *Zen and the Art of . . .* Some are in fact good descriptions of spirituality and existential wisdom, with Zen as their perspective. Most of them, however, describe realities which are far from Zen, such as careers and management, a happy sex life and authorship, how to make money, and how to achieve a sense of bodily well-being—and much else besides.

In recent years, a new type of literature has come onto the market, which has become shorthand for minimalism in art, architecture, interior design, and occasionally an eye-catcher for gardening and preparing food. Many of these books are beautiful, and some are even well written. But mostly they are just pompous and pretentious rhetoric about minimalism, aesthetics and a spirituality of feel-good, with plenty of stereotypical descriptions of contrasts between the East and the West. According to one such book, Western decoration comes from the shallow, beautifying part of our minds which arrogantly attempts to improve nature or to compete with it, whereas Zen seeks the essence of things, each thing having its own dignity.¹⁰ The simplicity and minimalism in Zen (if we absolutely must use such expressions) were the result of the monks' and nuns' lives in poverty, often supported by gifts from poor people who themselves lived from hand to mouth. And underneath everything lay a down-to-earth and humble gratitude. Zen means letting go of things in order to let go of one's own ego at the same time. The modern Zen-inspired interior designs, gardens and meals have lost contact with the deep religious concern of Zen, and are rather self-centred manifestations of Western over-choice and wealth.

I willingly admit that even superficial attraction to Buddhism and other Eastern ways may lead to much deeper commitment. For some it leads to conversion and total dedication to Buddhist meditation and spiritual disciplines; for others it may even lead to a deepening of their Christian or Jewish faith. For most people, however, the superficial attraction to the East hardly affects their rather secular lifestyle, only adds some picturesque details. One's mind is not changed by decorating the living room with Buddhist statues, burning incense, or even attending meditation, and books about *yinyang* 陰陽 and *fengshui* 風水 and minimalist interior decoration are neither Daoism nor Zen.

¹⁰ Ou Baholyodhin, *Living With Zen*, quoted from the Norwegian edition, *Zen, interior, hage, mat* [Zen: Interior, Garden, Food] (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2001), 83.

SERIOUS INVOLVEMENT WITH BUDDHISM AS A WAY

I have already referred to early students of Buddhism—many of whom were associated with British Theosophy—who wanted to promote Buddhism as a rational philosophy with a lofty morality formed almost on Puritan or Victorian lines. They regarded Buddhism as an attractive alternative to dogmatic Christianity, and hence wanted to “cleanse” Buddhism of popular religion, belief in spirits, magical ideas, and pagan superstitions. Their reform zeal inspired movements both in Sri Lanka and Japan, and to some extent China, but their rejection of inherited beliefs made them unpopular in the religious establishments. Maybe the reason is just the conservatism of religious leaders who felt threatened by the new ideas of reformers. Perhaps they also realized that something would be lost if Buddhism were reduced to a rational philosophy and a moral discipline.¹¹

Such modern reconstructions of Buddhism did not only leave the impression that Buddhism is a rational moral philosophy without supernatural elements, but created an impression that Mahayana—with its innumerable Bodhisattvas and divinities, ancestor worship and “superstitious” practices—was a perversion of the original pure teaching of the Buddha. Such misunderstandings are mostly gone now, but the notion that Buddhism is a non-religious philosophy or mental practice is still widespread, primarily among Western intellectuals.¹²

Meanwhile Buddhism has, in fact, been firmly rooted as a religious way in the West. Or rather, a whole range of Buddhist ways have been established: Theravada schools, Tibetans traditions, Chan/Son/Zen schools, Pure Land, and a great multitude of Buddhist reform movements or Buddhist “new religions,” in addition to centres with non-sectarian bases. Many Westerners have been thoroughly trained by masters in the East, and innumerable travellers have been marked by

¹¹ For references in the Japanese press to Olcott’s activities in Japan, see my *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan*, 71, 110.

¹² For a recent example of a reductionist agnostic scepticism, see Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997). Many books on Buddhism in the West would have chapters about similar tendencies; see, for example, Davil L. McMahan, “Repackaging Zen for the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

months or years of strenuous practice. Many of these transmit faithfully the Buddhist ideas and practices as they received them, taking refuge in the three treasures, chanting sutras in Chinese, Korean or Japanese, using bells and gongs, prostrating in front of Buddha images, chanting the mantras, or invoking the name of the Buddha, and even using traditional Eastern clothing.

At the same time there are or will be—almost inevitably—changes in the Western reception of Buddhism. For how long will it be meaningful to chant sutras in Eastern languages? To what extent is Buddhism dependent on the sayings of Chinese and Japanese masters? How important is it to be well versed in the cultures that nurtured the specific Buddhist traditions? The Christian encounter with non-Western cultures led to processes of indigenization or contextualization of Christianity, with the result that one has African, Latin-American, or Asian forms of Christianity. In a similar way there are already, and will be, processes of contextualization of Buddhism that produce Western forms of Buddhism.

I will not and cannot describe such developments in detail, and will limit myself to mention a few examples of what one might call Buddhist adaptations to secular trends in Western humanism.

The most characteristic Norwegian example of transformation of meditation from Eastern to Western modes is what happened with the Transcendental Meditation (TM) of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Maharishi's meditation was presented as a non-sectarian practice acceptable to people of all faiths, but was thoroughly dominated by Hindu ideas and rituals, including worship of the yogi.¹³ Reacting to the "Hinduized" meditation, a group of Norwegian practitioners under the leadership of psychologist Are Holen broke away from Maharishi and established a meditative practice on neutral grounds, called Acem Meditation. The experiences from TM were reinterpreted in psychological terms, all Hindu practices were removed, and the mantra was replaced by a so-called "method sound" (*metodelyd*), which is described as "a neutral focus point in one's mind." When Acem is presented publicly, there is no reference to religion at all—even though some of it seems rather close to Buddhist mindfulness—and the results of meditation are described as relaxation and stress reduction,

¹³ Peter Russell, *The TM Technique: An Introduction to Transcendental Meditation and the Teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).

self-awareness and personal growth in an existential sense.¹⁴ The last expression opens for deeper processes that might also be described in religious terms, but the movement obviously avoids all references to religion. Religious commitment is not expected—one may be Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, secular humanist, or atheist.

I have been involved in developing textbooks and educational material on religion for Norwegian schools, often in close cooperation with Buddhist friends. I have from time to time observed a sort of mental reservation against traditional religious expressions in Buddhist legends and stories. Instead of accepting the obvious mythological character of stories telling about gods who appear with divine messages, my friends prefer to write that "a so-called god" appeared, or write "a god" in quotation marks. It may seem insignificant, but I see it as a blunt expression of the embarrassment many Western intellectuals have when it comes to traditional religious rhetoric even in legends and mythological narratives.

One important aspect of Western interest in Buddhism is the expectation that it is a resource for new approaches to social ethics, environment issues, and even politics and economics. Even though Buddhists have traditionally been reluctant to transform Buddhist insight to concrete strategies for moral action and social involvement, there is no doubt that Buddhism has a potential for radical reflection on such issues. Some of the pioneers of "deep ecology," such as the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss and some of his colleagues, often refer to Buddhism as an important resource.¹⁵ Peace research pioneer Johan Galtung, also from Norway, is even more enthusiastic about the potential of Buddhism and refers to himself as a Buddhist.¹⁶ My impression is, nevertheless, that Buddhism in these cases is primarily a philosophy or a theoretical framework for ethical reflection, without meditative practice or dedication to the three treasures.

Another conspicuous influence of Buddhism in recent years is the increasing preoccupation with "mindfulness," in alternative spirituality generally and particularly in medical and psychotherapeutic contexts.

¹⁴ For further information, see Are Holen and Halvor Eifring, *Acem Meditation: An Introductory Companion* (Oslo: Acem Publishing, 2007); see also the website of Acem Meditation, <http://www.acem.com>.

¹⁵ See, for example, "Interview with Arne Naess," in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, ed. Bill Duvall and George Sessions (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985).

¹⁶ Johan Galtung, *Buddhism: A Quest for Unity and Peace* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988).

The Buddhist roots of mindfulness are obvious, being the seventh of the classical Eightfold Path. And many who are adopting various types of mindfulness training in medicine or therapy have been trained in Buddhist meditation and are committed to Buddhism as a religious way as well. At the same time there are many who prefer to avoid the connection with Buddhist psychology, and even disconnect mindfulness from meditative practice, transforming it to a mental training with no association with religion at all.

Some would also argue that mindfulness is just a new concept, or another name for what therapists have been practicing with their clients all the time. The Buddhist influence has just added some new techniques and enhanced the awareness of mindfulness as a healing factor. Rather than promoting the healing process, they assume a too close identification with Buddhism might prevent patients from becoming positively engaged in mindfulness training.

A final example of Western tendency to remove Buddhism from its traditional roots may be observed in some Buddhist centres in the United States, where I have been told that they not only stop reciting Buddhist chants or scriptures, but also stop burning incense, remove Buddhist altars and statues and replace them with other symbols, like stones, flowers, or pieces of art. From one point—even from a Buddhist perspective—that is perhaps acceptable. One might argue that awakening is not an exclusively Buddhist thing, and that it does not, in principle, depend upon the Buddha, but is a liberating spiritual experience that may happen anywhere. Buddha was just a teacher, not a divine figure to be worshiped. As an awakened human being, he was actually regarded as superior to the gods. In new Western contexts, one might argue, there is no cogent reason for copying Buddhist traditions or other Eastern practices.

IS SOMETHING LOST IN “HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM”?

I have described tendencies in the Western assimilation of Buddhism and Eastern ways that tend to weaken or even cut the religious root of traditional Buddhism. Buddhism is in this way transformed and established as one element in a humanistic life stance, religiously uncommitted, or even secular in character. In the long run, one may even for-

get or ignore that the central ideas and experiences originally came from Buddhism.

My point is not to evaluate such tendencies: Are they acceptable or advisable? Do they vitalize Buddhism? Can they still be regarded as Buddhism? In some cases the process seems inevitable, whether or not one is in favour of such developments.

But I still want to keep my initial question in mind: Will Buddhism be able to maintain its spiritual energy if all or most of the traditional religious elements are radically weakened or deleted? Throughout its history Buddhism has been nurtured by monastic communities and lay people who have committed themselves to the Eightfold Path. As a philosophy and mental discipline it has been nurtured by a whole range of “religious” practices, such as worship and rituals, chanting, prayer, offerings, ascetic practices, fasting, total dedication to masters, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and supernatural beings from whom one expects help, in addition to all sorts of folk religious ideas and practices. The list can easily be elaborated. If the aspect of “faith,” or the commitment and self-dedication involved in “taking refuge” is radically weakened, some of the energy that is characteristic of “religion” or of “being religious” might be drained off. I have no clear answer, but would like to invite others to reflect upon the question.