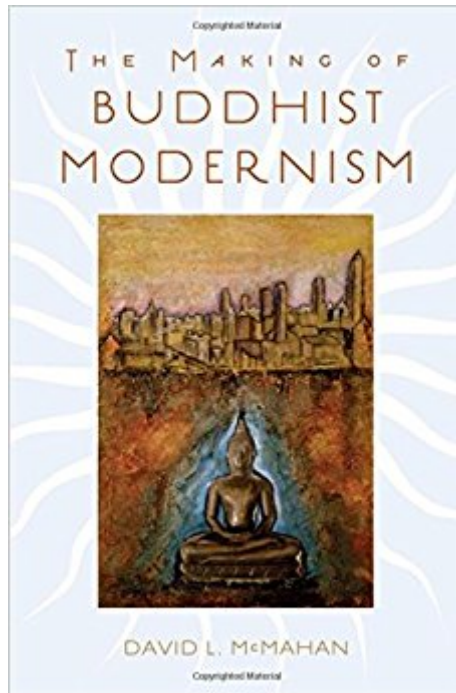




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The Making Of Buddhist Modernism



Synopsis

A great deal of Buddhist literature and scholarly writing about Buddhism of the past 150 years reflects, and indeed constructs, a historically unique modern Buddhism, even while purporting to represent ancient tradition, timeless teaching, or the "essentials" of Buddhism. This literature, Asian as well as Western, weaves together the strands of different traditions to create a novel hybrid that brings Buddhism into alignment with many of the ideologies and sensibilities of the post-Enlightenment West. In this book, David McMahan charts the development of this "Buddhist modernism." McMahan examines and analyzes a wide range of popular and scholarly writings produced by Buddhists around the globe. He focuses on ideological and imaginative encounters between Buddhism and modernity, for example in the realms of science, mythology, literature, art, psychology, and religious pluralism. He shows how certain themes cut across cultural and geographical contexts, and how this form of Buddhism has been created by multiple agents in a variety of times and places. His position is critical but empathetic: while he presents Buddhist modernism as a construction of numerous parties with varying interests, he does not reduce it to a mistake, a misrepresentation, or fabrication. Rather, he presents it as a complex historical process constituted by a variety of responses -- sometimes trivial, often profound -- to some of the most important concerns of the modern era.

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Customer Reviews

"With David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, the study of modern Buddhism has reached a new level of maturity. This sweeping and sophisticated analysis of the ways in which

westerners and Asians alike have constructed new forms of Buddhism under the pressures of modernity is thoroughly disillusioning, in the best sense of the word. McMahan shows that much of what has been written and said about Buddhism in the modern era only can be understood against the background of dominant western discourses. Trenchant but fair, erudite yet lucid, this book should be required reading for any serious student of Buddhism, and will be appreciated as well by those interested in intellectual history, cultural studies, or, simply, the inquiry into modernity."

--Roger R. Jackson, Stephen R. Lewis, Jr. Professor of Religion and the Liberal Arts, Carleton College"David McMahan offers readers a theoretically sophisticated analysis of the development of new modes of thought and discourse in the Buddhist religion since the latter part of the nineteenth century. Grounded in a sound understanding of premodern Buddhist ideas, this work effectively unravels the complex ways in which 'Buddhism' has been adapted to fit the theoretical commitments and tacit understandings of people living in the modern world." --Stephen C. Berkwitz, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Missouri State University"This is an exceptionally well-written and imaginative piece of scholarship. David McMahan treats in great depth many different facets of Buddhist modernism including art and creativity, meditation and monastic ideals, and science. The writing is clear, straightforward and to the point, and reflects an excellent understanding of how Buddhism fits into the larger scheme of modern religiosity and the development of modern society more generally." --Steven Heine, author of *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow: Will the Real Zen Buddhism Please Stand Up?*

David L. McMahan is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism* and of articles on both Buddhism in South Asia and Buddhism and modernity.

If you reach a point where you consider becoming member of a dharma center, and especially if you recognize you are interested in taking vows, I strongly recommend this book, even if it is hard going at first. Taking vows is a deep commitment, if not for this life time, perhaps for many lifetimes. You deserve to know if what you understand as Buddhadharma is actually not a "pure" product but actually a result of a great deal of cultural sifting, emphasizing of some features of Asian Buddhism while ignoring, distorting or devaluing other features, and that even our ability to read about Buddhism is an option that has only become possible very recently, and exposes us to a narrow and atypical segment of "Buddhism". I took jukai vows in Soto Zen Buddhism after 8 years of what I thought had been thorough study and a many sesshin (meditation) retreats. The night before jukai

ceremony, I suddenly felt terror stricken, wondering whether to call it off. In the years that followed, I felt a gutfeeling of unsettled torment. I wish this book had been available to me and that I had read it beforehand. What I realize today is that I really lacked sufficient awareness of the philosophical and religious background that I grew up in; I am now doing some remedial education for myself while re-assessing my commitment to the Westernized interpretation of Buddhism I took vows in. One part of the vow is, "Delusions are boundless; I vow to end them" -- part of living this vow is to continue educating oneself about the context in which the various Buddhist dharma have arrived in the West and are affected by the West. Check this book and also the various reviews of it in the different websites; it is time well spent.

Enjoyable, but heavy going. In contrast to many of the books out there elucidating Buddhist practice and philosophy, this book delves into how Buddhist ideas have entered Western culture. If you like your readings to contain sentences peppered with terms like 'detraditionalization' and 'hybridity', then this is the book for you. I particularly enjoyed the part early on where David describes 5 different archetypes of people who are into Buddhism, but all of them in completely different ways, and some of them almost irreconcilably so, illuminating the current confusion and identity-seeking that goes on for modern people who consider themselves Buddhist, or who are interested to learn from the ideas Buddhism espouses without living under a label. Finally, this book is not for the casual seeker of knowledge about Buddhism, but instead for someone well-versed in the subject and the scene, who is looking for some context around the debates and difficulties apparent around the field of modern Buddhism.

I read this book for a class and for me, it was a thoroughly enjoyable read. He is not making judgments so much as presenting the ways that Buddhism has been shaped by its geographical contexts since its conception. Towards the beginning he does give quite a few profiles of what Buddhism looks like from one place to the next and doesn't frame any one as more "pure" or more "true" to what Buddhism is. Instead, he goes on to really illuminate the processes in which Buddhism has been shaped by our modern contexts whether it be a response to a fear of nihilism, the authority of scientific rationalism on religion in the West, Protestant movements and other conditions. In any case, I would definitely recommend this as a read for anyone who is already familiar with Buddhism or interested in the conversation of Buddhism in the modern world.

Only part way through this book, but I already love it! It places Buddhism in a complete cultural

context which has needed to be done for quite a while. I almost said "needed to be done in the West," but we are in fact, perhaps the first culture that can see Buddhism in its entirety, in all its varied forms. I think from a scholarly and historical perspective, the information is very interesting. For practitioners or people who work in interfaith settings, understanding the Big Picture about what traditional Buddhism contains is *crucial* to being able to interact with this Great religion of the world in an authentic way. My only challenge, thus far, is that it seems that some of the work by traditional Nyingmapas and Cha'n/Zen Buddhists which involves contemplation which is very "modernist" in nature does not seem to have been taken into account.

This book should be essential reading for anyone currently involved with the practice of Buddhism in America. The author does a superb job of explaining the connection between our heritage of the philosophies of the Enlightenment and Romanticism and Buddhism. The book cleared up for me the odd blending of modern science and neo-romantic (new-age) ideas espoused by many American Buddhist teachers. It also clearly explicates the differences between many Asian practices of Buddhism and the modern emphasis on or perhaps even over emphasis on meditation. I am a Buddhist and I highly recommend this thoughtful, erudite exposition by David McMahan.

A superior discussion of all the threads of thought, Asian and Euro-American, that construct the fabric of modern American Buddhism. Brilliant and a must read.

I liked this book and found it very informative. The argument is clear and well argued. That said, it's somewhat repetitious. It seems too long and windy for a general audience book, but insufficiently original for an academic book. I resorted to skimming, especially in the last three chapters.

This is an extremely well written and thoughtful book that describes the many influences on the broadly held views of Buddhism in the west. Very enlightening.

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