



The Allure of Fundamentalisms in East Asian Buddhism and Its Scholarship

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I. Introduction

One recurring pattern found in many religious fields is that of fundamentalism. “Fundamentalism” is defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* as:

In general, a description of those who return to what they believe to be the fundamental truths and practices of a religion. It can thus be applied to this attitude in all religions (e.g. the resurgence of conservative Islam is sometimes called ‘Islamic fundamentalism’).¹

For the purposes of this paper, “fundamentalism” will be defined as the tendency of later inheritors of a religious tradition to attempt to purify their tradition by returning to an original “essence” of the religion or to its “fundamental” beliefs and practices. This tendency might also be termed “restorationism” (復古主義), though for convenience, this paper will use the term fundamentalism throughout. The term “fundamentalism” originated in the West with Protestant Christian groups in the late nineteenth century and afterwards which attempted to purify Christianity by basing their practice solely on their own interpretation of the Christian scriptures, but retroactively, the Protestant movement as a whole can be seen as a “fundamentalist” movement in the sense that they sought to purify the church from what they perceived as Catholic excesses by “returning” to the primacy of scripture, faith, etc. More recently, it is common for the popular press to depict Muslims who are members of terrorist groups or other anti-

¹ “Fundamentalism,” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. (Note that the dictionary warns that the term can be perceived as a pejorative. In this paper however no pejorative sense is intended.)

Western groups as “Islamic fundamentalists,” due to their intensely anti-modernist interpretation of the Qur’an. (For the purposes of this paper, the anti-modern critique of those groups is not considered to be a part of the definition of “fundamentalist.” However, the fact that fundamentalist groups are often fueled by popular discontent with larger societal trends or conditions will be considered later in this paper.)

While these Christian and Islamic fundamentalist groups are well known, less remarked upon is a kind of fundamentalism that is a recurrent presence in East Asian Buddhism. This paper will examine expressions of the fundamentalist tendency in Buddhism and suggest the reasons for their popularity. This paper will also examine the ways in which Buddhist scholarship is also prone to succumbing to a kind of fundamentalizing in its approach to understanding its subject matter and will explore the issue of whether this fundamentalist impulse has a positive or negative effect on scholarship. Finally, some recommendations will be made about how to approach Buddhist religious traditions in a manner that is respectful of their historical lineages, intellectual traditions, and religious practices, while at the same time capable of making a critical and honest assessments of their evolution and meanings.

II. Buddhist Expressions of Fundamentalism

There are many examples of sectarian fundamentalism in East Asian Buddhism. One clear one is that of Chan 禪 (C. *Chan*; J. *Zen*; K. *Seon*). The Chan sect initially thrived by challenging the purity of the so-called doctrinal schools of Buddhism. In contrast to other schools of East Asian Buddhism, Chan de-emphasized the importance of studying the sūtras, and in some cases, it positively denigrated their study. Instead, Chan promoted meditation and receiving a special mind-to-mind transmission as the only effective means of achieving enlightenment. That is, Chan promoted meditation as the fundamental tool for constructing a correct understanding of Buddhism, and it dismissed all other avenues of understanding as inferior to a direct meeting of the minds. In addition

to this, as time went on, it became necessary to reinforce the authority of then current Chan masters by appealing to their connection to earlier Chan masters. Of course, this connection itself was only authoritative insofar as the earlier Chan masters had access to an understanding of the fundamental nature of Buddhism that was superior to the rival doctrinal schools through own having received direct transmissions. Thus, as SHIM Jae-ryong describes,

Chinese hagiographers painstakingly wrote down and even concocted the “history of transmission records”, namely, a “history of mind-to-mind transmission” of the inconceivable enlightenment experience supposedly bequeathed from the Buddha Śākyamuni to his chief disciple Mahakasyapa, then from Mahakasyapa down through the 28 successive Patriarchs in India. But it should be recalled that a complete transmission lineage, as stated above including Bodhidharma to Hui-ko down to the sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng and so on, had been completed only very late in the 11th century Sung China. This was when the Chinese *Ch’an* sectarian movement was mature enough to claim its independence by completely dismissing the historical complexity of early *Ch’an* Buddhism in the previous five hundred years of development.²

Chan hagiographers were not always content to rest there either. In some cases, they even altered the story of Śākyamuni himself. For example, as Ho-ryeon JEON translates *Records of the Chan Gate Treasury* 禪門寶藏錄 (C. *Chanmen baozanglu*; J. *Zenmon hōzōroku*; K. *Seonmun bojangnok*), Śākyamuni Buddha was not perfectly enlightened until,

He met Master Jingwi and only then inherited the essence of the Seon Buddhism from the Master. This is considered as the ‘special transmission beyond the Sūtras.’³

This blatant distortion of the history of the Buddha shows that for Chan fundamentalists the direct mind-to-mind transmission of meditation is so important that even the historical Buddha could not have truly been enlightened unless he too received his enlightenment in this same way. Clearly then, the purpose of this process of fundamentalizing is to make the Chan interpretation of Buddhism normative and to marginalize and dismiss other aspects of Buddhism. In effect, Chan sectarians are willing to “rewrite history” and change our understanding of the past in order to make their own sect seem to be

² *Korean Buddhism: Tradition and Transformation*, pp. 219–220.

³ Translation “Interaction and Harmonization between Hwa-eom and Seon,” p. 77. Original *Seonmun bojangnok* 禪門寶藏錄 1, *Han-guk Bulgyo Jeonseo* 韓國佛教全書 6, p. 474a.

superior to all others. This is the most dangerous aspect of fundamentalism, since changing the past may cause us to lose important insights and erode the very foundations of the system of thought that we are examining.

Of course, this process of making one's own sect the only true bearer of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism is not unique to Chan. It can also be seen in other sects. For example, nearly every sect constructs a particular doctrinal classification system, *panjiao* 判教 (C. *panjiao*; J. *hankyō*), and places its own sect at the summit of its self-classification. As Chanju MUN explains,

Unlike some ecumenical *panjiao* systemizers, the sectarian *panjiao* scholars typically comment on the various texts based upon their sectarian perspectives in order to prove the superiority of their tradition over other traditions. Based upon the sectarian perspective, they develop an exegetical tradition to prove the superiority of their traditions...⁴

Thus, each side of the debate will radically reinterpret existing Buddhist texts in order to make their own sect seem superior. Again, the danger here is that by creating a new exegetical tradition from scratch, these new *panjiao* "rewrite history," so that the original interpretive context that surrounds each text is almost entirely lost as a new hermeneutic replaces it.

It is not only sectarians that can attempt to "fundamentalize" their tradition. Ecumenicists are also sometimes guilty of isolating aspects of the shared tradition in order to place a fundamental emphasis on a smaller part of an overall tradition. For example, Korean Buddhism is widely considered to be more "syncretist" than other East Asian Buddhist traditions (particular when compared to Buddhism in Japan), but even great Korean ecumenicists can sometimes exclusively emphasize a small part of the tradition. As KIM Yǒng-t'ae translates in "Master Hyujōng: His Thought and Dharma Lineage," Hyujeong, in spite of being revered by many members of the Korean Buddhist tradition today, wrote that

⁴ *Minjung (Liberation) Buddhism*, p. 10.

The intention of meditation and the transmission beyond the texts, is too profound and wise to be understood by those who study (only doctrine).⁵

The Dharma having no name cannot be attained through words and having no characteristic cannot be mastered by the (discursive) mind.⁶

Thus, although the teaching of Hyujeong became central to the combination of the Meditation and Doctrinal schools of Korea, he nevertheless, holds the view that the Meditation school is the most fundamental and the Doctrinal school is subordinate to it in spite of the historical fact that the Meditation school is newer than the Doctrinal school. Of course, the fact that the Meditation school is newer does not mean that it is inferior either, but it does place the burden of proof on those who would isolate meditation as the fundamental teaching of the Buddha.

Similarly, the supposed “syncretism” of Korean Buddhism itself is sometimes isolated as the fundamental ideal of all Buddhism. However, as Shim points out, “syncretism” is too broad a label to justifiably be called the essence of Korean Buddhism, and it is mostly employed by Korean nationalists, like the early twentieth century scholar CH’OE Nam-sŏn (pen name Yuktang), in order to defend Korea against Japanese colonialism by exaggerating Korean uniqueness.

[T]he syncretic nature of Korean Buddhism was virtually invented by the pen of Yuktang either out of his ignorance lacking scholarly justification or for the sake of the emotional appeal he was going to utilize to uplift the deadly laden heart of Korean people at that time of Japanese colonialization.

[...]

During the Japanese colonial period and after the liberation of Korea right up to this time of contemporary ideological warfare, everyone has felt the need to stick together as one nation and one people. After such a long period of war and hardship, there has been naturally a disdain for societal discord. During such times, the vague characterization of Korean Buddhism as “syncretic” and/or harmonious/conciliatory was bound to have an enormous emotional appeal.⁷

If we understand syncretism to mean the general open-minded nature of religious people, there would be no reason to say that it is a peculiar feature of Korean Buddhism.⁸

5. “Master Hyujŏng,” p. 170.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

7. *Korean Buddhism: Tradition and Transformation*, p. 178.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Thus, even the anti-fundamentalist tendency to syncretize multiple religious traditions can become a fundamentalist quest for the restoration of lost (in this case national) purity under certain circumstances. As ever, the problem is that in doing so, the past is distorted into an unrealistic idealization of what came before.

III. Possible reasons for the recurrence of fundamentalist movements

There are several possible reasons for both the recurrence of the pattern of fundamentalism and its popularity. Perhaps one of the most important reasons that fundamentalism recurs is that it causes the power in a particular society to be redistributed, so that, for example, in Chan tradition, the most important people in society are not the court nobles who have passed the Confucian entrance examinations for civil service, but the dharma masters who have a direct lineage back to Bodhidharma and Śākyamuni. Similarly, in Pure Land Buddhism, it is not those who have mastered the complex doctrines of Buddhism or those who have spent many hours in meditation who are most to be revered, but rather it is those who have called upon Amitābha with a pure and reverent faith. Since these new systems of belief change the power structure in society in a way that is favorable for their founders, it is only natural that religious leaders will be attracted to the propagation of radically new fundamentalist doctrines.

Of course, it would be impossible for their new doctrines to gain a foothold in society without popular support, and it would be difficult to gain popular support without some way to show the legitimacy of the new system. Thus, it is very important for those who are promulgating a new doctrine to be able to point to something outside of themselves in order to lend legitimacy and authority to their revolutionary views. For Chan masters, this is the dharma lineage from which they have descended. As mentioned above, later Chan masters emphasized that the authority conferred by mind-to-mind transmission is greater (more fundamental) than can be achieved through mere study of the sūtras, and they constructed dharma lineages to show that their authenticity derives

from Śākyamuni himself. Likewise, in Pure Land Buddhism, proponents pointed to the authority of the original vows of Amitābha as a fundamental symbol of their doctrine's authenticity and the fundamentality of their practice of venerating Amitābha's name. In the Nichiren sect, it is the authority of the *Lotus Sūtra* that shows the authority of a particular group of practitioners. Similar explanations of the way that authority is inherited from the past can be given for all fundamentalisms. In each of them, there is some aspect of history that must be brought to the fore and reintroduced as the essence of the religion which has been covered over by deleterious social and religious developments after its initial introduction. Thus, members of fundamentalist movements feel it is appropriate to isolate one aspect out of their religious tradition and emphasize it as the one most important (fundamental) aspect of that tradition in order to reacquire the lost authority it possesses.

Another reason for the recurrence of fundamentalism is that when the social or political conditions in society change, it is also necessary for the broader religious beliefs of society to change in order to adapt to meet those changes. For example, in the Joseon dynasty of Korea, after Neo-Confucianism became the dominant ideology of the court, it was no longer possible for Buddhist doctrinal schools to support themselves financially or for the monasteries to resist the increasingly strict rules about the kinds of land that they were able to hold or where monks were permitted to travel. Under these circumstances, it is only natural that in the situation that emerged there would need to be a consolidation of Buddhist groups and the principles behind this consolidation would have to allow for the new conditions, called by KIM Yǒng-t'ae "the era of the 'mountain monk.'"⁹ Similarly, as we saw above, current Korean Buddhists and Buddhism scholars sometimes overemphasize the "syncretism" of Korean Buddhism in order to promote unity in Korea after a century of colonization, war, and rapid social change. Thus, under

⁹. "Master Hyujǒng," p. 163.

conditions of social upheaval, it is natural for religious leaders to promulgate certain aspects of their tradition as the fundamental elements which will allow members of their faith to weather the current period of instability.

Even in societies which are relatively stable, it is natural for any group of elites, once their grip on the power structure is ossified, to become corrupt. When this happens, the people will naturally be disgusted with those in power and seek new avenues for society. When a fundamentalist group arises that can support its own authority by pointing to the perceived fundamental nature of the religion, then it will attract support from people who want an end to political corruption and think that this new group will be less likely to become similarly corrupt because of its closer connection to the source of authentic authority.

The reasons that fundamentalisms become popular with the masses as a whole are related to those for which they arise in the first place, but slightly distinct. One is that it is easier to master a tradition after it has been radically decontextualized. Ordinarily, the doctrines of a particular tradition are very dense and difficult to master. For example, the Taishō canon consists of over five thousand individual works. It would be difficult if not impossible for a single individual to master all of these texts within one lifetime. A fundamentalist has two advantages when dealing with such a broad canon. The first is that it allows both the leaders and the followers in a particular tradition to narrow their focus down to certain texts or practices which are the most important out of the whole tradition. The second is that the single most important teaching can be used to create a single hermeneutic principle from which to interpret the rest of the canon. This makes it much easier to produce a coherent interpretation of the many texts, since all of the texts can then be seen as leading to the same foreordained conclusion even before the text is studied in depths. It also makes the completion of lacuna in texts and the resolution of contradictions easier. In all such cases, the missing information supports the new principle that is held by the fundamentalist group to be the core teaching of the religion,

and the contradictory statements in the canon are only different presentations of the core teaching with other aspects being brought to the fore for whatever practical, soteriological reasons.

Fundamentalist faiths also tend to be not only easier to understand but easier to put into practice. There are two ways that this can occur. The more obvious way to make a new religious sect easier to practice is to loosen the existing rules and prohibitions. For example, when Jōdo Shinshū was a new religion, it was able to gain adherents, since its priests could marry and eat meat. However, it is also possible for a new religion to simplify itself by adding stricter blanket restrictions. So, for example, it is easier to understand the command to spend all of one's time meditating or chanting than to understand a command that one should practice multiple forms of cultivating simultaneously in moderation.

As can be seen above, fundamentalism is attractive both from the perspective of its leaders and its adherents, since by simplifying the religion to its essentials, it is possible to aim for the overturning of negative trends or situations in society and to institute a new system with a more democratic appeal for all practitioners.

IV. Tendency of scholars to make the same assumptions

While it is easy for scholars to condemn past fundamentalist movements for overlooking important aspects of their own traditions, it is important that we scholars recognize the many structural forces within our enterprise that push us toward a kind of fundamentalism in our own scholarly research and inquiry. While it is easy to criticize early sectarian scholars like D.T. Suzuki for a one-sided portrayal of Buddhism in which their own sect is emphasized to the exclusion of others, even good and diligent scholarly work can be undergirded by a kind of fundamentalism.

One key factor in the fundamentalization of Buddhology is the fact that as scholars, we need to be able to focus on research on something external to our own opinions, and

naturally enough we come to focus on the texts considered important by a particular sect. Frank Reynolds in “Coming of Age: Buddhist Studies in the United States from 1972 to 1997” summarizes the situation in contemporary Buddhist studies:

The traditional paradigm is quite familiar in Buddhist circles. It is a paradigm that places a strong emphasis on the study of texts and the intention of the presumed author; on the search for origins; on the primacy of the South Asian Sanskrit/Pāli traditions; on the central importance of doctrines and scholastic systems; and on special attentiveness to the voices of monastic and social elites. Methodologically this traditional paradigm privileges a language-centered philological approach, gives little attention to historical context and usage of texts, and emphasizes the production of authoritative critical editions and translations, and tends towards a positivistic view of historical methods and historical facts.¹⁰

Thus, according to the traditional methodology we must deconstruct and reconstruct texts philologically in order to produce interpretations of the groups using those texts. However, in doing so, we may make one of several fundamentalizing mistakes. One such mistake is that we either over- or underemphasize the Pāli canon. As Minoru KIYOTA explains in “Modern Japanese Buddhology: Its History and Problematics,”

Actually, modern Buddhology—whether Western, Indian, or Japanese—has not completely severed itself from sectarian dogma. For example, some Therāvada scholars still presuppose that the Pāli canon represents the oldest recording of Buddhism, a notion which philologists have now completely repudiated. [...] On the other hand, Mahāyāna scholars generally presuppose Mahāyāna superiority over Hināyana...¹¹

The reason that this kind of scholarship comes about is the existence of another kind of fundamentalizing error: the tendency towards ahistoricity in Buddhology. This means that scholars fail to understand that texts are produced by certain cultures at certain times to fulfill certain roles, and that overtime the role that a text plays can radically shift as new societies adopt these texts and old societies change. Kiyota characterizes the tendency towards ahistoricity in Japanese Buddhology like so:

Though there are great merits in such a type of scholarship, such scholarship is not interpretive in the sense that it does not place the thought representative of the text or texts being examined within the historical evolution of Buddhist thought, describe that thought as a response to the

¹⁰. “Coming of Age,” p. 462.

¹¹. “Modern Japanese Buddhology: Its History and Problematics,” pp. 29–30.

historical need of a particular period of time, or indicate the relevance of that thought to the problems faced by the modern man.¹²

Though Kiyota acknowledges the advantages of this kind of scholarship as well, we must note that it represents a distortion of history that is common to other fundamentalisms in that it removes texts from their position in history in order to analyze them detached from any particular background.

Another fundamentalizing mistake is that we often ignore the fact that Buddhist sects are not only philosophical circles in which texts were produced and discussed. They are also active religions with particular religious practices and rituals. By focusing exclusively on the textual dimension of a religious group, we impair our ability to understand the context of belief and practice that gives meaning to the texts that we examine. Worse, we exclude in important ways parts of a religious traditions that are not put into writing. Thus, scholarship embraces the belief that texts are the fundamental aspect of a religion, and that other aspects such as rituals are merely peripheral to the intellectual heritage of the religion. Among other problems this creates, this harms our ability to study certain fundamentalist groups, since not all fundamentalisms are centered around texts and some are in fact opposed to texts. While Protestant Christian fundamentalism makes the text of the Bible the center of its revolutionary critique, early forms of fundamentalist Chan were explicit about their rejection of Buddhist texts in favor of meditational practice. Yet, scholars choose to hamper themselves by only attempting to understand those Chan groups from the viewpoint of the texts that they wrote in opposition to the use of texts!

Another factor in the fundamentalization of scholarship is that when focusing on texts, scholars attempt to discern the intentions of the original “author” of the text. There are two assumptions being made here. The first is that the text can be attributed to a single author or at least to one small, coherent school of thought that exists within a

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

particular, narrow stretch time. The second is that understanding this original author's intention is the key to understanding the text itself, and hence to understanding the religion itself. Both assumptions can be false and lead to the view that origin of the religion expresses its fundamental character and that later expressions of that religion are inherently inferior to it. As José Cabezón puts it in "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory,"

Do we have in these various enterprises the preservation and presentation of the various authors' original intentions? The question is not so easily answered. As the narrator of one of Guenther Grass's recent books says, there is a fine line between restoration and forgery.¹³

To the extent that Buddhology crosses that line, it moves away from scholarship and toward fundamentalism. While most texts are traditionally attributed to a single author, it is often a mistake to accept this attribution at face value. Scholarship has repeatedly shown that other cultures had very different attitudes towards the manner in which attribution for a text was to be ascribed. If nothing else, it is difficult to believe that the large number of sutras ascribed to the historical Buddha can all be attributed to his immediate successors. Therefore, later Buddhists must have felt that it was permissible to misascribe certain texts in the case that they felt sufficient religious motivation, etc. for doing so. Furthermore, unlike Christianity generally, Buddhism does not always consider its origins to be an inerrant deposit of faith. While there are many sects of Buddhism which consider the time after the original Buddha to be a period of decline, this does not mean that all later Buddhist activity is to be considered intrinsically inferior and discounted. Basic to Mahāyāna Buddhism is the idea that some texts attributed to the Buddha are not the complete doctrine but only an expedient means of preparing people to later receive the true doctrine. Furthermore, in certain sects, it is presumed that the enlightenment of the sect's leaders or their close contact with the Buddhas gives these leaders the authority to speak in the Buddha's name. Hence, priority cannot always be given to the historic-

¹³. "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory," p. 260.

ally oldest documents. Rather, we must understand the hermeneutics employed within particular communities. Moreover, in interpreting historical documents, it is invaluable to be able to call upon the resource of currently existing religious communities in order to reconstruct the context that exists behind a text. It is only by contextualizing our particular work within the framework of the lived experiences of particular community that we can understand what parts of the tradition were truly meaningful—not to some imagined “original author” but to the interpretive community as a whole in which it was written and to practitioners today who employ it.

Unfortunately, doing so can be quite difficult, since Buddhism today tends to be deeply divided between practitioners and scholars as A.C. Muller points out in “Zen Buddhism and Western Scholarship: Will the Twain Ever Meet?” As Muller observes,

We have on one hand a religious tradition that has, due to a combination of its own rhetorical choices and various historical turns, become largely bereft of the ongoing production of significant scholarship concerning its own history and doctrine (leaving aside for the moment the case of Korea). This is juxtaposed with an academic scholarly tradition, generated from its own radically different historical roots that has a historical-philological orientation that ends up being almost completely disconnected from the concerns of the practitioner within the tradition, be she/he a monastic or lay adherent.¹⁴

Reynolds shows us the structural factors which reinforce this division in American Buddhology by explaining that a ruling by the United States Supreme Court

came broadly to be understood as one in which a fundamental distinction was made between teaching *of* religion (which was confessional in character and therefore prohibited in any state supported school because it violated the prohibition against the government establishing religion), and teaching *about* religion (which was allowed in state supported institutions and acceptable in private schools that sought to maintain their secular identity). Armed with an understanding of this problematic but important distinction between the teaching *of* religion and the teaching *about* religion, the discipline of religious studies developed very rapidly.¹⁵

Hence, because of structural factors in the United States, religious studies is understood as being “better” when practitioners are the object of study rather than mutual participants in a study. The danger is that if the scholarship of Buddhism is completely

¹⁴. “Zen Buddhism and Western Scholarship.”

¹⁵. “Coming of Age,” p. 459.

uninformed by personal lived practice, scholars will be unable to differentiate between the various aspects of the tradition, and will come instead to attempt to fundamentalize whatever part of the tradition attracts their focus (typically obscure inter-sectarian debates found in the texts). Under these same circumstances, practitioners, for their part, are deprived of the greater self-understanding that comes from rigorous scholarship. Both sides damaged by this relationship.

Of course, merely having more involvement from practitioners in scholarship is not helpful in and of itself either. Practitioners who bring too strong of a commitment to their own sect to their research can damage their inquiry with a fundamentalizing bias that sees their own sect as “the” inheritor of true Buddhist tradition, and other sects as mere impostors. In Japan for example the problem is partially reversed compared to America, as Chanju MUN explains in *The History of Doctrinal Classification in Chinese Buddhism*:

There are several major Buddhist sects in Japan. These can be grouped under the Lotus sects, the Pure Land sects, the Zen sects, the Tantric sects, and so on. For instance, if some scholar is affiliated with a school of the Sōtō Zen sect, i.e., Komazawa University, he is basically supposed to see various topics, including doctrinal classifications, from his Sōtō sectarian position. [...] Likewise, the Buddhist scholars of other sectarian education institutions are heavily exposed to the sectarian orientation in Buddhist Studies.¹⁶

Thus, those scholars in Japan who are practitioners have too narrow of a view and only study their own tradition to the exclusion of others. (On the other hand, those Japanese Buddhologists who are not practitioners affiliated with a sectarian university tend to study Indian Buddhism to the exclusion of East Asian Buddhism.) Therefore, we can say that merely involving practitioners in scholarship is not sufficient to remove fundamentalism from the field of scholarship. Besides, as Muller notes in his article on the dearth of involvement from practitioners in Western studies, excellent scholarship can also be done by non-practitioners. To be truly valuable, scholars must bring both a collection of their own personal experiences and an unwavering commitment to the truth of their

¹⁶ *The History of Doctrinal Classification in Chinese Buddhism*, p. xxvi.

subject. (That is to say, even strong soteriological imperatives must be suspended within the realm of scholarship in favor of a commitment to academic honesty.)

The most basic problem for scholars according to Cabezón is that in their drive to understand “Buddhism” they may impose unity where there is none.

Is not *Buddhism* our common concern, and does this fact not give the field its coherence? This is nominally true, but Buddhism is itself an artificial construct who apparent unity and solidity begins to crumble almost immediately upon analysis. Is Buddhism text-based doctrine or behavior-based praxis? Is it what the clergy does or what lay people do? What was done then or what is done now? What happens in Tibet or in Japan? Of course, it is all of these things, but that is tantamount to admitting the multivalent character of our subject matter. To say we all work in Buddhism is not to point the finger at similarity but at difference.¹⁷

Thus, we see that it is very difficult for scholars to resist the siren song of fundamentalism. It is in the very nature of rigorous scholarship to focus on small details, particularly those within a textual tradition, and use them as the basis for an in-depth examination, but it is crucial that as scholars we resist the impulse to declare the trees (or worse just one particular tree!) more fundamental than the forest. We must recognize the existence of a great diversity in what constitutes “Buddhism” and what constitutes the study of Buddhism, even if our own particular focus is quite narrow. In his article, Cabezón presents two stereotypical camps of contemporary scholars of Buddhism: the positivists and the interpretivists. Members of the first camp “conceive of texts—whether linguistic (written or oral), or cultural (behavioral, artistic, etc.)—as the beginning and end of the scholarly enterprise,” and maintains that the role of the scholar is “to reconstruct the original text (there is *only one* best reconstruction): to restore it and to contextualize it historically to the point where the author’s original intention can be gleaned.”¹⁸ On the other hand, interpretivist camp believes that texts “are the starting points for further reflection,” and that a “scholar’s signature must appear not only on the title page, but throughout the entire work through the manifest exposition of his or her

¹⁷. “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory,” p. 241.

¹⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

subjectivity.”¹⁹ In both camps there is a certain degree to which what is outside its purview is excluded as not essential to Buddhist scholarship. The positivists do not consider understanding and extending the impact of Buddhist ideas on the world to be an area in which rigorous study is possible, and the interpretivists do not consider attempting to uncover the history of texts to be a worthwhile use of time. Both camps attempt to “purify” our understanding of Buddhism. The positivists do so by causing us to “return” to an original understanding of the texts, and the interpretivists do so by causing their personal interpretations of Buddhism to be put to bear on the world. At their worst, the positivist camp enshrines the genetic fallacy, while the interpretivist camp detaches itself from any mooring of academic rigor. There is a sense in which both are attempting to define (or redefine) the fundamental nature of Buddhism, and while neither camp is necessarily wrong to do so, in this sense they are both inherently susceptible to forming their own fundamentalisms.

V. Evaluation of the desirability of fundamentalism

Of course, we should not presume to summarily reject all philological scholasticism or speculative interpretations on the grounds that they are necessarily “fundamentalist” and thus “bad.” First of all, not all philology is fundamentalist, nor is it always fundamentalist to try to promulgate a new subjective understanding of Buddhism. It is only fundamentalist when one attempts to isolate the particular parts of a tradition that one is studying as a scholar as being the only important parts of the tradition. Second of all, being fundamentalist is not necessarily bad. It is only bad if it interferes with the quality of the scholarship otherwise produced by distorting the history of the tradition under consideration. Thus, we must examine which elements of fundamentalism are most damaging to scholastic inquiry and which elements of fundamentalism are tolerable and perhaps even commendable.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 249–250.

Perhaps the greatest danger posed by fundamentalism is that it rewrites history and in doing so strips away context. As Muller writes about Wonhyo in “Wōnhyo’s Doctrine of the Two Hindrances (Ijangŭi 二障義),” the value of his work is that

he explains how the various Buddhist positions that are often seen as containing contradictions, such as those of Buddha-nature, Tathāgata-garbha, self, no-self, dharmas, no-dharmas, emptiness, existence—can all be based either on viable contexts or on misunderstandings. Therefore, it is always necessary to understand the context in which a particular theory is being posited before judgements are made regarding its correctness.²⁰

Within a correct historical context, the ways in which various doctrines are meant to relate to each other can be worked out, but when removed from their historical context or when their historical context is changed through fabrications or omissions, the doctrines can seem contradictory or muddled. The danger of fundamentalism is that by focusing on what it takes to be the fundamental aspects of Buddhism, it removes the context in which the various other aspects of Buddhism have evolved, creating a confusing or misleading interpretation.

According to Muller in “Zen Buddhism and Western Scholarship,” the difficulty for Western and Japanese Buddhist studies so far is that the discipline emerged methodologically on the basis of work done in the search for the “historical Jesus” in Christian studies, and thus took “as its main approach, the attempted definition of textual and sectarian lineages through philology, and the historically precise search for the real, historical Buddha.”²¹ However, this approach was not well-suited to Buddhist studies:

In the development of this approach, it was tacitly understood that scholars doing research would deal only with attempts at a historical reconstruction of the development of schools of Buddhism going from the time of Śākyamuni to the middle ages or so, with the agenda of defining an historical “essence” of Buddhism. There would be no delving into, or touching upon issues related to the activities, practices, beliefs, or problems of contemporary Buddhism, either in Japan, or the rest of Asia. As Shimoda puts it, during this period of the development of Buddhist studies in secularized postwar Japan, a “mutual tacit agreement” was made between the research scholars and schools of Japanese Buddhism, that their activities would be “hermetically sealed” from each other.²²

²⁰. “Wōnhyo’s Doctrine of the Two Hindrances (Ijangŭi 二障義).”

²¹. “Zen Buddhism and Western Scholarship.”

²². *Ibid.*

Thus, it was only natural that a deep divide grew between scholars and practitioners, to the detriment of both. From this point, the non-involvement of scholars in practice led to the further effect that since few scholars were Buddhists themselves, it was accepted tacitly that the majority of Buddhist claims about the nature of enlightenment, religious experience, etc. are false:

The basic assumption that underlies such suspicious discourse, is that the experience of enlightenment itself is nothing more than a delusory phantasm—nonetheless maintained as part of the tradition's "rhetoric." If the basic assumption is being made at the outset that there is no experience such as enlightenment that is actually attainable by people, how can any other conclusion be drawn?²³

Thus, the hermeneutic method of these non-practicing philologists towards Buddhism is biased in such a way that it is not possible for scholars to recognize and respect the self-understanding of practitioners. Without a kind of basic respect for the self-understanding of a community, it is only natural that the pursuit of the truth about Buddhism will be hampered for scholars and practitioners due to a lack of mutual understanding.

Another deleterious effect of fundamentalism is that it promotes the assumption that the simple essence of the religion must be prior to any elaborate or ornate practices must be accretions that detract from the purity of the original doctrine. For example, as noted before, many scholars still often operate with the assumption that the Pāli canon is the oldest because it is the "simplest," in spite of the fact that philologists have shown that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, it is quite frequently the case that an idea originates in an overly-complex, baroque form and it is only later that a simplified "essence" is distilled out of the idea. This pattern can be seen many times throughout history. For example, roman numerals are more complicated than arabic numerals; medieval orthography was more complex than modern sans-serif fonts and used many complex ligatures; the first skyscrapers had ornate decorations, whereas later modernist skyscrapers are stark and bare; the first commercial video game (*Space War*)

²³ *Ibid.*

was highly elaborate and followed by a highly simplified sequel (*Pong*); etc.; etc. The belief that what is simple must precede what it is complex is often wrong and can lead to dangerous misapprehensions.

However, none of this is to suggest that all fundamentalisms, whether scholastic or religious, are necessarily misguided. To adopt a dogmatically anti-fundamentalist stance is merely to place opposition to fundamentalism in the position of the fundamental doctrine of one's own view. Having a more balanced view is preferable. For example, in the religious realm, it is frequently quite a positive feature of fundamentalisms that they challenge the existing power structure to justify its ability to wield authority. Furthermore, by concentrating attention on the perceived essence of a religion, fundamentalisms are capable of causing beneficial effects on the practice of the religion. Sometimes the ornate features of a religion really are superfluous and stultifying. In these situations, it is helpful to have a counterforce that argues for the adapting of the tradition to match changing trends in society. At their best, fundamentalist movements can be a means of democratizing access to the authority of a tradition that levels the imbalance of power between leaders and laity.

One example of the positive potential of fundamentalism is the Critical Buddhism of MATSUMOTO Shirō and HAKAMAYA Noriaki. On the one hand, these scholars are clearly fundamentalists, since they have published articles with titles like "The Doctrine of *Tathāgata-garbha* Is Not Buddhist." If the meaning of fundamentalism is a desire to return to earlier doctrines, then the position of Matsumoto and Hakamaya is clearly fundamentalist, since they believe that the direction of East Asian Buddhism for the last thousand years has been away from the "true" Buddhism that they are able to restore. They derogatorily call any form of Buddhism which posits a substantial basis for causation as "*dhātu-vāda*," since they believe that it departs from what they consider to be the fundamental essence of Buddhism. On the other hand, the Critical Buddhists use

their position to challenge historic injustices perpetuated by Buddhists. As Paul Swanson explains in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*,

An important part of Matsumoto's argument is that the teaching of *dhātu-vāda* gives the false appearance of teaching of "equality"—after all, it claims that all things are based on a single, universal, eternal reality. In practice it leads to discrimination, since if one assumes a single basis and underlying reality for all things—that good and evil, strong and weak, rich and poor, right and wrong, are fundamentally "the same"—there is no need or incentive to correct any injustice or right any wrong or challenge the status quo. In practice, then, *dhātu-vāda* supports and fosters discrimination and injustice.²⁴

This illustrates one of the most positive characteristics of fundamentalism. By asking people to return to the roots of a religious practice, it is sometimes possible to question the ways in which existing religious practice has allowed itself to be compromised negatively in its involvement with the world. So, for example, Japanese Buddhism condoned and promulgated what Matsumoto calls "Japanism" or "a philosophy of death" in their interactions with the Japanese state.²⁵ The overturning of the power structure inherent in fundamentalism can be a highly positive, even democratic force when it is tied to the enfranchisement of marginal groups.

In addition, in the realm of scholarship, a certain degree of textual fundamentalism is not only permissible, but inescapable, due to the nature of scholastic inquiry. Since the scholar is attempting to create an honest assessment of the scope and development of a tradition and its self-understanding, it is fitting that scholars focus on written documents as an extraordinarily versatile resource for studying the past. Written documents preserve the history of a tradition in a way that is uniquely valuable, though of course it cannot be an exclusive means of research.

The solution to balancing the positive and negative aspects of fundamentalism is to examine the fruit that its application bears. Within the field of Buddhism, the primary goal must be the soteriological aim of enlightenment, both individual and universal.

²⁴ *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Thus, from the perspective of Buddhism, fundamentalisms should be judged by whether they advance or hinder the progress of this goal. Within the field of scholarship, the primary goal must be an understanding of the truth. Thus, from the perspective of scholarship, fundamentalist tendencies may be embraced when they assist that goal, but must be rejected when they interfere with its pursuit. Up until the present, scholarship has been too often shackled by its fundamentalist tendencies. Accordingly, moving forward, it is important for scholars to be keenly aware of the need to create a proper balance in their own work between the fundamentalization of the text inherent in scholarship and the communication with active practitioners necessary for a well rounded understanding of a religious community, while at the same time ensuring that they do not fall on the other side into promoting an idiosyncratic vision of what Buddhism “should be” that departs entirely from the historical reality of how it has evolved.

VI. Recommendations

Several recommendations can be made on the basis of the foregoing investigation. The first set of injunctions is negative. First, don't look for doctrinal “purity” or the “essential nature” of Buddhism. Trying to identify the single most essential aspect of Buddhism is bound to fall away from the principle of following the middle way and lead to one sided extremes. Second, don't presume that the simpler or less complex version of Buddhism is necessarily older and thus more authentic. It is quite often the case that simplification only comes later when what is essential to a doctrine is identified. Third, don't accept blindly claims that a certain group possesses religious authority, even those made by scholars. These claims can come in a variety of forms. Some might claim that they are the sole preservers of the original doctrine, or that they alone are able to identify the fundamental teaching of the original faith. In many cases, these claims are only made in order to establish a new set of credentials for the individuals making the claim in question. All opinions should be considered impartially rather than saying that anyone

group is capable of speaking for the entire tradition of Buddhism. This does not mean that scholars cannot adjudicate between claims, only that in doing so, they must be very careful to examine the ways in which certain claims are used to support or undermine the existing power structure of their social context.

This report also leads to several positive instructions. The first and most important is to do look at context. It is always important to understand the context and background in which a text or practice originated if one wishes to understand that item of inquiry on its own terms. Attempting to isolate things from their context produces a distorted picture and must be avoided. Second, do look at the lived experience of practitioners. Dividing the academic world from the world of actual practitioners is damaging to both worlds, since members of each are left with only a partial view of the greater historical and contemporary whole. However, at the same time, practitioners cannot allow their sectarian perspectives to result in the distortion of history. Finally, do judge everything on the basis of its ultimate result. For Buddhist practitioners, this means that everything must be judged on the basis of its ability to promote the cessation of suffering. For scholars, this means that everything must be judged on the basis of its ability to promote a robust and honest account of the full dimensionality of the area of inquiry. These are the two aims which truly are fundamental to their fields. Only by keeping them in mind will we be able to escape excessive fundamentalism in other areas and create an increasingly complete understanding of all sides and perspectives.

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