

Navayana – A reformation of Buddhism

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Buddhism traditionally has three variants: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The oldest one is Theravada, which is an orthodox tradition practiced in South Asia, later Mahayana developed as lay-follower tradition, mainly in East Asia. However, in times of globalization, Buddhism is confronted with new issues and also found its way to the West, as well as to political spheres. As George Boeree states: “Many of us, easterners and westerners, have been profoundly influenced by our study of Buddhism, and yet do not find ourselves attached to any one particular sect or interpretation of Buddhism. Further, many of us, especially westerners, find the fundamental ideas of Buddhism deeply meaningful, but cannot, without being dishonest with ourselves, accept certain other ideas usually associated with Buddhism” (Boeree, 2002). In recent years, new branches such as Secular Buddhism or Engaged Buddhism have found its way into philosophical and practical main streams. The need to reform Buddhism arose out of the fact that Buddhism gained attraction for non-conformity and non-dogmatism, something which religion in the West seemingly could not give Westerners, just to find out that Buddhism has the same matters. As Timo Schmitz points out: “Many people want to find the way to Buddhism because they are against any doctrines. Therefore, one can study the Theravada teachings, which leads to a disadvantage in the eyes of many Westerners since it focusses on monk communities. Other people are fascinated by Vajrayana, but since it has a very organized structure, concerning hierarchy and practice, one will probably see the Vajrayana tradition to be a religiously-organized branch, which in the Western view can be seen as dogmatic again. Then we can practise Mahayana, and we are quickly confused with cosmological questions” (Schmitz, 2015). As a result, many Westerners did not copy Buddhism as practiced in Asia. People in the West mainly reject cosmology and Buddhist deities, but focus on the core teaching to reach enlightenment which resulted in the founding of Atheist Buddhism, since “Buddha himself rejected metaphysical speculation and did not talk about gods” (Schmitz, 2015/ 2017). Secular Buddhism tries to fight for a separation of state and church, especially in Christian dominated countries and emphasizes on the equality of all religions. Left Buddhism is a phenomena of Modernity, as most Buddhist countries are at the same time also Communist countries and Buddhism and Communism had to be put into harmony.

A special form of it is Libertarian Buddhism which “stresses individual freedom and the choice for everyone to improve and develop oneself according to one’s need. Anarchism and Buddhism suit each other well, especially Zen-Buddhism as the latter is close to Taoism” (Schmitz 2015/2017).

However, all these forms cannot be subsumed under the traditional three forms of Buddhism and therefore a new school of Buddhism was suggested: Navayana – the new vehicle. Chung stated that “A new Buddhism does not mean that a completely new ideological system should be created, or that the established form should be radically changed. If we apply Buddhist Truth to our lives and sincerely practice and study its applicability, this in itself is a new form of Buddhism. In this regard, the emergence of Navayāna Buddhism is necessary” (Chung, 2003). The tricky thing however is that though this new umbrella term came into being, no one really considers himself as a “Navayarin” (Van der Velde, without year). Even further, publications about Navayana remain rare and scattered. There is no real formalization of the teaching, though more and more publications try to formalize it. But as self-identification lacks and as the teachings vary strongly, there is not *the* “Navayana teaching”.

Some people call the Buddhist teaching by Ambedkar and the therein following Dalit movement as Navayana (see Hancock, 2004). However, the Dalit movement is just one part of Navayana and stands in opposition with the modern usage of the term. Thus, while Navayana was a term coined in India in the 1950s, it was re coined in the new millennia, and now the 1950s Navayana is actually just one direction within Navayana. Anyways, the conflict within the terms might be no surprise, since Navayana is still in developing and therefore, we are witnesses of a new reformed way of Buddhism that has many faces (cp. Schmitz, 2015). As such, Navayana is a way to adopt Buddhism to the 21st century and address the needs of global Buddhist adherents, who do not identify themselves within the three traditionally established doctrines. Buddhism is not a static, but fluid, religion. After Vajrayana developed at about 1,000 years ago and split off Mahayana, now we can see a new split in the Buddhist landscape of teachings. The reformation that is fueled by lay Buddhism is very necessary, as it shows the distrust in established bodies (Chung, 2003). Therefore, Navayana goes back to the independence of the Buddhist teaching outside of any strict additions, commentaries or societal backgrounds and leads a new era with many chances.

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