

A conference convened by the
Centre d'études interdisciplinaires sur le bouddhisme (CEIB)

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Salle 100, Centre de colloques, Campus Condorcet, Aubervilliers – June 17, 2022

9:15

Welcome and opening words

Panel 1: Defining Conversion

9:30

Hélène de Brux (Université Paris sciences et lettres / Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich)

Buddhist conversion in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya: between soteriological path and religious rivalry

10:30

Adam Yuet Chau (Cambridge University)

When 'Buddhists' Convert to 'Buddhism': Conversion and Confessionalisation in Contemporary Chinese Communities

11:45

Lionel Obadia (Université Lyon 2)

Conversion to Buddhism in the Western context: challenges, tricks, dead-ends of a contested concept

12:45

Discussion

Panel 2: Politics of Conversion

14:15

Johannes Beltz (Museum Rietberg Zurich, Switzerland)

Conversion to Buddhism: Exploring discursive and ritual practices in contemporary India

15:15

Michael Edwards (Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge)

Real Change: Converting Politics in Myanmar

16:30

Neena Mahadev (Yale-NUS College, Singapore)

Currents and Counter-currents of Conversion: Buddhist modernism and charismatic Christian ecstaticism in inter-Asian perspective

17:30

Discussion

Conversion in Buddhist contexts: some avenues for exploration

The notion of conversion has figured perhaps most prominently in scholarship on Christianity and Islam. It has been an occasion for anthropologists and others to reflect for instance on the possibility of radical life changes (Robbins 2007). The notion of conversion is by no means absent in studies of Buddhist contexts. The approaches have been very diverse in terms of disciplines, questions asked, and conceptualizations of conversion.

Historical accounts of the spread of Buddhism across Asia have made use of the notion in a somewhat specific sense, focusing on entire peoples' or sociopolitical elites' conversion to Buddhism, based notably on textual historical narratives (e.g., Zürcher 2007 [1972], Kapstein 2000) more than individual accounts of conversion. The more recent spread of Buddhism to the West and across the world has led to more ethnographically informed studies that have complicated the notion of conversion, by typologizing processes of religious diffusion and establishment in new lands as well as looking at shades of religious adhesion (e.g., Obadia 2007, Hickey 2010). Within Asia itself, where religious plurality is widespread, typologizing "conversion" and reflecting on the limits of the concept have also been explored, for instance with regard to the evolving forms of conversion in the history of Nepal — including conversion from Newar tantric Buddhism to newly-imported modernist Theravāda Buddhism (Gellner 2005, Letizia 2007). The notion of "internal conversion" is used in some of these or other Buddhist contexts. Exploring varieties of "conversion" in a wider sense may include the process of formally "taking refuge" and becoming a serious practitioner, as we see in Chinese contexts (e.g., Chau *forthcoming*). The mass conversion to (Ambedkarite or Navayāna) Buddhism by Indian Dalit groups (e.g., Beltz 2005) has also been a major, striking 20th century example of (here socio-politically motivated) conversion. Buddhist societies also stand out markedly as places where, on the whole, global missionizing efforts of Christian groups (Pentecostals, etc.) have been somewhat less successful than elsewhere. Some studies (e.g., Edwards 2018, Mahadev 2018) have examined these frontlines of tense religious plurality, rivalry, nationalist anti-conversion reactions, etc. Finally, echoing somewhat these historical and ethnographic studies but exploring also specific themes (the "conversion" of alien gods and demons, etc.) one finds the study of Buddhist iconography and narratives on what could be called "conversion" in canonical sources (Zin 2006, de Brux *in progress*).

The aim of this one-day conference is to bring into hopefully fruitful interdisciplinary and comparative discussion analyses of these various forms of what we call "conversion" in these diverse Buddhist contexts.

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Abstracts

Johannes Beltz (Museum Rietberg Zurich, Switzerland)

Conversion to Buddhism: Exploring discursive and ritual practices in contemporary India

My presentation focusses on the Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra, India. In 1956 under the guidance of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar several millions of people quitted Hinduism and became Buddhists almost overnight. I attempt to explore the reasons that caused this radical change and its results.

The most significant changes concern individual and collective identities: Above all, conversion signifies a new and radical expression of self-esteem, which is completed by new ritual practices. I'll demonstrate why today, 60 years after the conversion took place, some of these changes are still visible, while others are less or not.

Finally, I'll try to explain why religious conversion is seen today as an act of liberation and revolt by certain people while others resent it as a threat to the national unity and integrity of India. In the end, the notion of conversion is fluid and evokes rather paradoxical and constantly changing meanings – not a sudden and radical life change.

Hélène de Brux (Université Paris sciences et lettres / Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich)

Buddhist conversion in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya: between soteriological path and religious rivalry

Few studies have addressed the notion of conversion in early Buddhist literature and no overall assessment of the question has ever really been undertaken. In this presentation, I will endeavour to provide such an assessment on the basis of the narrative literature of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya* (MSV). We will see that these materials depict a twofold perspective of conversion. On one hand, as a primary religious text delivering rules of the monastic community, the MSV offers a rather doctrinal and idealised vision of conversion, in line with the soteriological goal of the Buddha: guiding one to and on the Buddhist path to liberation. On the other hand, by reading between the lines of this oftentimes stereotyped literature, a second dimension of conversion emerges, relating to religiopolitical concerns, namely the rivalry with other religious groups and the general competition for their subsistence in the society. This presentation will therefore address how these aspects of conversion manifest in the narratives of the MSV.

Adam Yuet Chau (Cambridge University)

When 'Buddhists' Convert to 'Buddhism': Conversion and Confessionalisation in Contemporary Chinese Communities

In recent decades, Buddhism has seen impressive growth in both mainland China and Taiwan. My paper examines some of the trends in this development, which include confessionalisation, congregationalisation, denominationalisation and conglomeratisation. In particular, I wish to highlight the role of 'seeking refuge in the three Jewels' (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha) (*guiyi sanbao*), when practising lay Buddhists 'convert' to particular branches or schools of Buddhist teachings. This is only one of four kinds of religious conversion that I wish to explore. And what does it entail when someone converts from an 'efficacy-based religiosity' to a 'path-based religiosity'?

Michael Edwards (Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge)

Real Change: Converting Politics in Myanmar

"Real change": This was the National League for Democracy's pitch to voters in Myanmar's landmark 2015 election, an event symbolising the formal end of military rule. A vote for the party was a vote for a radical break from the past—or so the slogan implied in a familiar rhetorical move. At the same time, the offer

of “real change” was at the heart of local Pentecostal efforts to evangelise to Buddhists: the familiar promise that Jesus would fundamentally transform their lives. Entering a tentatively more open public sphere, these believers shared the gospel in the hope of sparking a fire of revival in a largely Buddhist nation. Attending ethnographically to their efforts with Buddhists on Yangon’s peri-urban periphery, this paper tracks the work of “real change” across a range of interpenetrating scales—from conversations between Pentecostals and Buddhists in people’s homes, to discourses about the democratic “transition” that was ostensibly “saving” the nation—focusing on the formulation’s ability to generate a combination of anticipation and scepticism. Doing so points to how ethnographic attention to the discourses and practices of religious conversion can offer insight into the work of the real in the political life of Myanmar and elsewhere.

Neena Mahadev (Yale-NUS College, Singapore)

Currents and Counter-currents of Conversion: Buddhist modernism and charismatic Christian ecstaticism in inter-Asian perspective

This paper examines and compares two kinds of conversion in contemporary Buddhist contexts. Through ethnographically situated inter-Asian movements between Singapore and Sri Lanka, I first will examine the turn to Pali Buddhism among ethnic-Chinese Singaporeans. Over the past few decades, this modernist revival of Buddhism has involved disciplined Dhamma-learning from English-speaking Theravadin monks, mainly of Sri Lankan origin, resulting in “refuge-taking” conversions. This modernist Buddhist revival in Singapore resonates with the nationalistic revival of Buddhism among ethnic-Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. In recent years, the Sinhala Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka is a movement galvanized in its opposition to conversions to Pentecostal Christianity. Since the turn of the millennium in Sri Lanka, Sinhala Buddhist nationalists and revivalists agitated for a legislative ban against “unethical” conversions to Christianity. Thus, secondly, I focus on the conversions to newly-arriving waves of evangelical and pentecostalist forms of Christianity within Asia. In Sri Lanka, would-be converts to Christianity commonly express feeling blocked by nationalistic anti-conversion politics in their own country. But Sri Lankan women who migrate to Singapore for work find pastoral Pentecostal Christian networks that allow them to bring their attraction to Christianity to fruition, within Sinhala and English-medium Pentecostal fellowships in Little India (Singapore). Analyzing these contrapuntal movements of apostasy and conversion—as well as religious attraction and religious revulsion—I examine religious modernism, and offer a critique of what the staid drives towards religious modernization might miss in terms of the experiential desires of ordinary religious practitioners.

Lionel Obadia (Université Lyon 2)

Conversion to Buddhism in the Western context: challenges, tricks, dead-ends of a contested concept

Buddhism surfaced in Western countries two centuries ago, and among the many aspects of the Westward path of the Eastern tradition, the appeal of Buddhism to Westerners and the effective and practical commitment to Buddhist asceticism are undoubtedly at the forefront of the agenda of research. Yet, paradoxically the categories of “converts” or “conversion” are significantly employed by scholars but in parallel subjected to harsh criticisms. The main reproaches addressed to these terms can be summarized as follows: (1) the very notion of “conversion” is of Western-monotheistic origin and does not fit with Buddhist ways to connect to the Dharma teachings and practices and (2) Western adherents align their commitment to Buddhism on the new hypermodern models of religious behaviour (bricolage, consumerism, hybridization). The aim of this paper is to recapture the issue of conversion to Buddhism in the context of Western societies, and, on the grounds of the comparison of different case studies, to demonstrate that, despite understandable criticisms, conversion is still a concept “good to think with” in Western Buddhism. Moreover, the various ways to commit to Buddhism allow scholars to question the models of conversion, mainly framed after the Christian experience in Western highly modern countries.