Buddhist Revivalist Movements
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Comparing Zen Buddhism and the Thai Forest Movement
This story begins 2500 years ago in Northeast India in the foothills of the Himalayas. Here were the original forest monks of the Buddha’s newly founded sangha. Here also is the origin of the doctrines and practices that would metamorphose and travel eastward to become Ch’an Buddhism, better known in the West under its Japanese name Zen. A more proximate starting point is several decades ago in the foothills of the Berkshires in Northwestern Connecticut. Here in a retreat that attracted Buddhists from different denominations; participants practiced a meditation that claimed to point directly at the essence of mind. We listened to talks from a cross section of Buddhist traditions. In this ecumenical space grounded in practice, a message that perhaps had been intuited by many of us was clearly enunciated. Each day, different dharma teaching was invited to speak. Among them was a monk of the Thai Forest Tradition, a disciple of the famed Ajahn Chah. What he told us to his delight and wonderment was that hearing the teachings on the nature of mind and the practices that accompanied them was like listening to his Thai teacher. He assured us that no monk had come over the mountains north of Thailand and descended to his forest wat or monastery. The practice/wisdom of his Thai wat was homegrown.

I had been handed a _genjo koan_, a puzzle from everyday life. How could schools of different cultures, history, geography, and most significantly of different philosophies evidence such similarities? Of course, there is always the romantic, universalist argument that all is one and all teachings are really the same, and all roads lead home. Yet, such a gloss was not a satisfying answer to my koan.
At the time, I had little knowledge of the Thai Forest Tradition other than a respect for the clean lines of Theravada thought and training. The majority of my practice had been Zen, but more recently, I had begun engaging a Tibetan teaching which had an affinity with Zen. Trips to Nepal for retreats and trekking also brought me to stopovers in Thailand. Stopovers led to an extended relocation and the opportunity for considerable contact with Thai Buddhism and especially the Forest Tradition.

A Comparative Study

The question that had been framed was, of course, inherently comparative. Yet like any question that is held it evolved. The evolved question demanded a closer investigation and in turn spawned additional and more pointed queries. What remained was the comparative framework that required going beyond a single ethnography. The more specific questions that arose and will be addressed in this study ask in what ways the two schools, Ch’an/Zen and the Forest Tradition, are similar (and different). What characteristics of these movements seem to generate or underpin their affinities? What factors engender comparable styles, practices, and even doctrines in groups that have had no direct communication over the centuries? As their affinities cannot be deduced by their designations as Theravada or Mahayana, what categories may be effective in isolating and explaining the characteristics of the mountain sect, Ch’an/Zen, and the forest sect?

Obviously, a comparative strategy entails a cognitive posture that can be questioned. To compare means, to some extent, to de-contextualize. The reference point is no longer the unique socio-historical setting but is the other case. The settings of Ch’an/Zen and the Forest schools remain relevant but as points of distinction or resemblance to one another. The study of both these sects has been advanced in recent years by delving deeper into their cultural milieu. Stanley Tambiah in his examination of the monks of Northeast Thailand speaks of “total culture” (1976). The archeology of Ch’an has unearthed unexpected dimensions of the self-proclaimed meditation sect (Faure 2003). A comparative investigation seems to move in the opposite direction. Rather than greater contextualizing and historical specifying, a comparison identifies general outline and lifts to some extent each phenomenon out of its cultural context.

A comparative approach permits inquiries that would be ignored if one is restricted to a strongly contextualized case study. First, it is important to
acknowledge that all knowledge is comparative. To imagine a reference-less description is to conjure a near useless and unintelligible communication. With comparison factors at play can be perceived and conceptualized that otherwise might go unnoticed. Analytical categories and typologies can be developed that offer more than intricate description. De-contextualization has its risks but also its rewards.

A corollary to the comparative stance and one that we will return to is the limits of approaching these sects through the denominational and formal doctrinal labels: Theravada and Mahayana. If we take these labels as primary, why even search out affinities? Why compare apples and oranges? What our approach suggests is that categories like Theravada/Mahayana and Thai/Chinese may at times occlude more than they reveal.

A story told by Jack Kornfield is relevant. The Karmapa, the head of one of the main Tibetan schools, was invited to speak at a meditation center during his American tour. Translation was provided for a Thai monk who accompanied Jack. Midway through the talk, he exclaimed, “He’s a Buddhist!” Sometimes, we need to listen past the alien tongue and look past the exotic garment to recognize mutuality. This study will seek to do just that.

Chiang Mai, Thailand  Alan Robert Lopez
Buddhism tells us that all arisings are connected to a web of causes and conditions. This book is no exception. Acknowledgment of those who constitute the web that brought this work into existence is called for. Conditions are both distant and proximate. Acknowledgment of near support must begin with Dr. Brooke Schedneck whose invitation to present on this theme resulted in a paper, now a chapter. That a paper became a book is due to the interest and opportunity offered by Palgrave Macmillan. Their continued guidance during the course of the writing deserves thanks.

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Giving and receiving are ubiquitous. A Zen Master called this “giving life to life.” My deepest gratitude goes to those who have been willing to share their life with mine: to my daughter, Jasmine, who kept joy alive during the dry and difficult moments; to my wife, Noi, whose unstinting efforts kept our domestic life on course during my solitary labors; to my friends in the Thursday men’s circle for providing me a forum for my frustrations and for reminding me what it’s all about; and to my long-distance comrades via computer calls who reminded me that physical distance need not reduce empathy or affection.

And finally to my parents, Bob and Wanda, who for all their struggles and human limitations manage to transmit to me a confidence in my endeavors.

Alan Robert Lopez
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