

# BUDDHISM

AND

# POLITICS

in twentieth-century asia



Edited by Ian Harris

**BUDDHISM AND POLITICS IN  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY ASIA**

*This page intentionally left blank*

**BUDDHISM AND POLITICS IN  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY ASIA**

EDITED BY  
**IAN HARRIS**

CONTINUUM  
London and New York

Continuum

The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London, SE1 7NX  
370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY10017-6550

First published 1999

© 1999 Ian Harris and the contributors

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means or process, without the prior permission in writing of the copyright holders or their agents. Except for reproduction in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, photocopying of whole or part of this publication without the prior written permission of the copyright holders or their agents in single or multiple copies whether for gain or not is illegal and expressly forbidden. Please direct all enquiries concerning copyright to the publishers.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 85567 598 6 HB, 0 8264 5178 0 PB

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Buddhism and politics in twentieth-century Asia / edited by Ian Harris.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-85567-598-6, 0-8264-5178-0

1. Buddhism and politics—Asia—History—20th century. 2. Asia—Politics and government—20th century. I. Harris, Ian Charles.

BQ270.B83 1999

294.3'377' 0950904—dc21

98-43860

CIP

Typeset by York House Typographic Ltd, London

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Cromwell Press Ltd, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

## CONTENTS

List of Contributors	vi
Preface	vii
1 Buddhism and Politics in Asia: The Textual and Historical Roots <i>Ian Harris</i>	1
2 The Legacy of Tradition and Authority: Buddhism and the Nation in Myanmar <i>Bruce Matthews</i>	26
3 Buddhism <i>in Extremis</i> : The Case of Cambodia <i>Ian Harris</i>	54
4 Politics and Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharashtra <i>Timothy Fitzgerald</i>	79
5 Japanese Nationalism and the Universal <i>Dharma</i> <i>Hiroko Kawanami</i>	105
6 Buddhism and Secular Power in Twentieth-Century Korea <i>Henrik H. Sørensen</i>	127
7 Laos: From Buddhist Kingdom to Marxist State <i>Martin Stuart-Fox</i>	153
8 First Among Equals: Buddhism and the Sri Lankan State <i>Tessa Bartholomeusz</i>	173
9 Centre and Periphery: Buddhism and Politics in Modern Thailand <i>Donald K. Swearer</i>	194
10 Renewal and Resistance: Tibetan Buddhism in the Modern Era <i>Ronald D. Schwartz</i>	229
11 The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam <i>Thiên Đô</i>	254
Index	285

## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

TESSA BARTHOLOMEUSZ Associate Professor of Religion at Florida State University.

TIMOTHY FITZGERALD Associate Professor at Aichi Gakuin University, Japan.

IAN HARRIS Reader in Religious Studies at the University College of St Martin, Lancaster.

HIROKO KAWANAMI Lecturer in Buddhist Studies at the Department of Religious Studies, Lancaster University.

BRUCE MATTHEWS C.B. Lumsden Professor of Comparative Religion at Acadia University, Nova Scotia.

RONALD D. SCHWARTZ Professor of Sociology at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada.

HENRIK H. SØRENSEN Senior Researcher in the Ethnographical Collection at the National Museum in Copenhagen.

DONALD K. SWEARER Charles and Harriet Cox McDowell Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania.

MARTIN STUART-FOX Professor and Head of History at the University of Queensland.

THIÊN DÔ Member of staff of the SEA Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore.

## PREFACE

The idea that religion and politics are mutually exclusive categories, the one oriented in an other-worldly direction and the other concerned with practical matters of social organization, has become commonplace. This separation is assumed by many Buddhists today, some claiming that the mixing of the *dharma* with politics is a corruption of the Buddha's original message. However, the Buddha's teaching clearly possesses a political dimension for, without adequate political support, the monastic order would not have flourished and Buddhism would never have emerged as a historical phenomenon influenced by, and on occasions influencing, patterns of political power in the societies in which it was located. Any presentation of Buddhism as a tradition that focuses on its quietistic, meditation-oriented dimension alone will necessarily be one-sided. The uproar in Sri Lanka around November 1993 surrounding the publication of *Buddhism Betrayed?* by the Harvard-based Tamil scholar Stanley Tambiah is a case in point. The book, issued by the University of Chicago Press, a highly regarded academic publishing house not given to the dissemination of tendentious tracts, investigates the Buddhist contribution to the rise of militant Sinhalese nationalism in the modern period. Since publication it has become the focus of a high-profile campaign, led by prominent monks and Buddhist laypersons, to have it banned on the grounds that it is an insult to Buddhism and to the monastic order, even though most of the issues raised in the work have been generally accepted by the academic community for a considerable period. Indeed, in a partial parallel to the Rushdie affair, the book has become difficult to obtain in Sri Lanka and many of its critics have never properly examined its contents. Here, then, is a recent and eloquent demonstration of the fact that Buddhism and politics may never be entirely separated.

This volume began life as an attempt to update Jerrold Schechter's *The New Face of Buddha: The Fusion of Religion and Politics in Contemporary Buddhism* (1967). This pioneering work on the interaction between Buddhism and politics in selected countries of Asia is still of great interest. However, it had begun to look erabound, particularly given its strong focus on the situation in Vietnam in the 1960s and its thesis that Buddhist political engagement was an entirely novel response to the recent historical situation. It is also the work of a journalist rather than a scholar with a sound grounding in the study of both Buddhism and the history of Asian cultures. In this light it became clear that it would be better to write an entirely new book taking a rather different approach. However, one problem today is that scholarship on Asian Buddhist culture has developed a good deal since Schechter's time, making it difficult for one author to do justice to the entire Asian Buddhist region. The approach here has been to assign individual countries to authors with a specific expertise in the field, with myself acting as overall editor. All the countries of Asia in which Buddhism

is a significant presence are covered, with the exception of China and Mongolia. This omission is explained in two ways. In the first place, the prevailing political culture in both countries has prevented Buddhism from flourishing to any great extent in the period to which this study is dedicated. Secondly, and as a partial consequence of this, it has proved difficult to find suitably qualified scholars to write with authority on Buddhism under communism. To make good these inadequacies I have included a general discussion of the modern history of Buddhism in communist Mongolia and China in the introductory chapter, 'Buddhism and Politics in Asia: The Textual and Historical Roots', which begins by examining the evidence for political thinking in the early Buddhist textual tradition, particularly the way in which pre-existing Indian notions of kingship were remodelled to bring them into line with Buddhist ethical norms. The paradigmatic rule of Asoka Maurya (third century BCE) and his modification of the canonical position on the respective relations of the Buddhist order (*saṅgha*) and the state are also considered, as are the various attempts to reproduce this political arrangement throughout Buddhist Asia. Alternative models of socio-political organisation are also justified by the Buddhist tradition, and these are explored in theory and in practice. The chapter concludes by providing a historical introduction to the transformation of canonical and classical Buddhist political norms in the period immediately prior to the emergence of the modern epoch. As such, it sets the scene for the following chapters.

In the first country-specific contribution, 'The Legacy of Tradition and Authority: Buddhism and the Nation in Myanmar', Bruce Matthews considers the history of Buddhist *saṅgha* organizations and activism in Burmese colonial and post-colonial history. Particular emphasis is placed on the U Nu *khit* (era) and efforts to make Buddhism the state religion, which became one of the factors behind the Ne Win takeover thirty-five years ago. Since then, however, the military regime has often resorted to Buddhism in defence of its ideology, and has regularly sought religious legitimation of its rule. The monastic order has been clearly divided over the matter of support for the regime and many monks have been compromised by allowing themselves to be bought off with gifts and privileges. Others have fled to Thailand while many soldier on quietly in Burma, waiting for an opportunity to become involved in the inevitable political upheaval and sea change in the nation's spiritual and moral destiny. To this end, monastic organizations with an activist agenda have been quietly re-established although, since many have their own traditionalist agenda and claims for a role in the nation's future, they do not all support the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi.

My 'Buddhism *in Extremis*: The Case of Cambodia' examines the manner in which Khmer Buddhism has been forced to adapt itself to a wide range of external influences throughout the modern period. Just as Cambodia was breaking free from oscillating Thai and Vietnamese overlordships in the middle of the nineteenth century the French arrived on the scene and effectively isolated the Khmer *saṅgha* from the rest of the Theravāda Buddhist world. The

French were particularly hostile to a new Thai-inspired monastic grouping. However, despite considerable initial reluctance, the colonial authorities did promote the expansion and modernization of Buddhist education and scholarship. However, in the wake of an unsuccessful attempt to modernize many aspects of Khmer life, Buddhist monks led the first large-scale protest against French rule, and after the country gained independence King Sihanouk experimented with a version of Buddhist socialism. These experiments failed and, in their aftermath, a set of tragic, short-lived and futile regimes tore the country apart. Buddhism reached its nadir during the Khmer Rouge period. Since the Vietnamese invasion of 1979 the *sangha* has very gradually reasserted itself as the only trustworthy nationwide organization capable of healing the populace after the traumas of the recent past. Restrictions on Buddhist practice have slowly lifted and exposure to external influences is accelerating. The impact of some foreign NGOs, who regard Buddhism as the only effective non-government national network, has led to a recent rise in Buddhist social and environmental activism and certain high-profile Buddhist peace activists are now tolerated by the authorities.

India is the land of Buddhism's origin, yet the religion had virtually disappeared from the subcontinent by the end of the fourteenth century. There has been some resurgence in modern times, and active Buddhist communities may be identified in Ladakh, Bengal, Maharashtra and among Tibetan refugee groups. Timothy Fitzgerald's 'Politics and Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharashtra' addresses the third area in this list. Most Ambedkar Buddhists belong to one large and politically important untouchable caste who were previously called Mahar and who have 'converted' to Buddhism from Hinduism since 1956. Members of this caste are located in both urban and rural areas and the author's analysis of the movement is based on the ethnography of three representative groups within the larger configuration: urban intellectuals, village peasants and temple-based monks or 'dhammacharis'. The chapter also includes a brief biography of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (himself an untouchable, first Law Minister of independent India and the founder of the movement), along with a summary of his political and soteriological goals and his interpretation of Buddhist values and concepts.

In 'Japanese Nationalism and the Universal *Dharma*' Hiroko Kawanami shows how Buddhism has been patronized by the Japanese state and has played a major role as a legitimator of political power throughout much of its history. Buddhism was replaced as the effective state religion by State Shintō in 1872, when an ideologically constructed myth of the Emperor as direct descendant of the Sun Goddess was elaborated. However, the feudal legacy of Japanese Buddhism continued to express itself in the conservative and authoritarian nature of the Buddhist priestly class, and in the hierarchical structure of temple organizations and their support for political power well into the present century. Moreover, Buddhist organizations actively supported and served the military regime during the 1930s when right-wing fascists held power. There were meagre attempts in the same period by liberal Buddhists to initiate a