



"Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Societies"

International Conference University of Hamburg, 20-22 June 2018

The growing religious and cultural pluralization of European societies means that we are neighbors to both an increasing number of Buddhist immigrants and of 'Western' converts. Buddhist Studies is the fastest growing sub-discipline of religious studies in the World. Germany, for the past two centuries, has been a leader in Buddhist studies, therefore one would expect that any German institute of world religions would have strength in Buddhist case. Surprisingly, different from Islamic, Alevist and Jewish theology, so far no course on Buddhist—or Hinduist—"theology" has been established at *any* European university.

In Europe not only are Buddhists engaged in the teachings, philosophies and practices of Buddhism to enrich their way of life—Buddhist influence on Western culture is strong in arts and social action, in environmentalism, psychotherapy and pedagogics, and has even found its way into colloquial language and many people's everyday lives. Meditation, and mindfulness exercises help them develop greater calm and mental stability. This is the field where we find the main intersection with Buddhism so far, i.e., in the neuro sciences and psychology relating to mindfulness and meditation which are increasingly applied in the secular field.

In the West, Buddhism is often understood as a kind of philosophy and lifestyle, but actually it is an immensely diverse system of beliefs and practices, which under the impact of global social changes and the latest findings in science and technology, finds itself confronted with great challenges: On the one hand it is met with great interest, on the other hand it is undergoing vast internal changes which prohibit simplistic stereotypes and anachronistic definitions.

In Europe Buddhism is confronted with a very different, Judeo-Christian-based culture as well as with the values of European enlightenment and human rights. Therefore the transfer as a religion needs an adaption to already existing values which can only take place through a process decisively supported by dialogue. Interreligious dialogue or dialogical theology has not only proven to be an important element for a deeper understanding of one's own religion, it also enables to learn from each other at eye level.

Against this background the Academy of World Religions and the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Hamburg have jointly invited 20 top scholars and representatives of the three mainstream traditions of Buddhism, i.e., Theravāda, East Asian (including Zen), and Tibetan Buddhism, to discuss, for three days, questions such as: Does Buddhism matter today? Can the teaching and practice of Buddhism enrich the world today? If so, what would this contribution look like? Where and to what degree can

and must Buddhism adapt to its new context? What is considered to be the core teaching or practice that cannot be subject to revision or adaptation?

Which are the sociological and intercultural aspects that have to be considered in the process of establishing Buddhism in a new non-Asian context? Which elements of Buddhism already exist, perhaps differently “dressed”, in our Western heritage? And what is really new or very different in Buddhism and therefore deserves our special attention? What have experts taken from their long-term engagement with Buddhism? What are they perhaps missing?

In the long-term—as is the case with Islamic and Alevistic theology— the Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg is planning to offer an interdisciplinary course on Buddhism and Dialogue. Which competencies/skills should be acquired by the students attending such a course, and how do we get there methodically?

Of special interest is, in how far Buddhism can give impulses within the following areas:

- Social Cohesion – Ethics and Meditation: Aggression and Fear, Violence and Peace
- Social Justice and Social Engagement
- Philosophy and Applied Ethics
- Mindfulness, Psychotherapy/Pedagogics, Pastoral Care, Medical Application (secular field)
- Interreligious Dialogue, especially with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also with Alevism and the manifold strands of Hinduism

To ensure a successful academic outcome of the conference, the first two and a half days will be dedicated mainly to listening to the presentations followed by an intensive exchange with the speakers, faculty and respondents. On the third day from 14:00 to 18:00 first results will be summarized and discussed with the interested expert audience (among them practising Buddhists and teachers of Buddhism) as well as university students. Language: English; German translation if required.

The entire conference will be documented, and plans call for an anthology to be published of the papers presented along with a summary of the results of the discussions.