

Reexamining Buddhist conceptions of religious choice: a revisionist view in support of Buddhist cultural formations

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The term 'Buddhism' has been used to convey the concept of an individual elective choice and 'Buddhism' has also been used to convey the concept of a community identity. These two meanings of the word Buddhism are fundamentally different. When Buddhism is used as term to describe an individual elective choice, that kind of individual has a radically different notion of what it means to be a person and what it means to hold a religion than someone who uses the term Buddhism (or *Buddha-sasana*) to describe a shared community identity. This paper will examine how Buddhism is used in these two different ways, taking the issues of elective choice in the United States of America and community identity in Sri Lanka as examples. Discrepancies between notions of the community and notions of the individual in Sri Lanka and America dictate that a low-level abstract concept identifier like Buddhism must be qualified before it can be used as a term in either instance.

American Buddhism is presented as being part of an individualistic, secularist post modern society, whereas Sri Lankan Buddhism is seen as being part of a communal, *sasana* society on the cusp of modernity. Theoretical underpinnings for this viewpoint come with clear reference to Dumont, and the critical discussion surveys sociological, philosophical, and anthropological viewpoints on the notions of person, community, religion, and Buddhism(s). By viewing Buddhism as a rhetorical configuration (a semiotic nexus for the shared traditions by which the liminal is given meaning), we can easily recognize how Buddhism not only signifies the Pali canon, the *Jātaka* stories, the *Mahāvamsa*; *bana* preaching, the ritual practice of *dasa-sil* and *pirit* ceremonies; Buddhism also means national Sri Lankan identity. The difference between Buddhism as an elective choice and Buddhism as a shared community/ethnic/caste/ national identity is based not on different versions of the religion, but on different notions of what constitutes an individual self and what constitutes a community. In the United States, with a tradition of secular humanism and freedom of conscience, Buddhism, like all religions, is perceived as a matter of individual elective choice. When pristine Buddhism is viewed as a 'religion' in America it conjures and then projects this vision upon a culture with a radically different sense of who is the self and who are the others.

When one locates this fundamental difference in the varying conceptions of who is the self and who are the others, one jettisons a universalistic outlook in favor of a bifurcated one, the distinction being made on the basis of who is an insider and who is an outsider. One of the major institutionalizations of the *paribhājaka* role in Indian society occurred in the form of Buddhism. If we may be allowed to typify Buddhism as the institutionalization of this *paribhājaka* ideal, then we can see that having the outsider ritualized guarantees that the insider will have a clear delineation of where society begins and where society ends. In contrast, American individuals are all inherently out-worldly, presenting a commodified consciousness which elevates individuals as potentially in charge of making discrete decisions with regard to consumption; this will-to-private property is thought to supersede any claim made by shared group values.

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