

REFLECTIONS FOR BUDDHIST GEOGRAPHY

VITOR VIEIRA VASCONCELOS

Universidade Federal do ABC | Brasil

vitor.v.v@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

Buddhism,
Geography,
Eastern
Philosophy,
Geographical
Thought,
Epistemology.

ABSTRACT:

The expanding contact between western and eastern cultures is helping certain academic disciplines (such as geography) that are based on western philosophies to have a deeper dialogue with eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism. This paper focuses on the Buddhist principles of the Theravada school and their similarities and differences with western doctrines in the academic field of geography. The principles discussed include the following: (1) detachment as a way to escape from suffering; (2) the causal chain (karma) as a world conception in which there is no place for free will; (3) the doctrine of no-self; (4) integrated practice, reflection and compassion in Buddhist ethics; and (5) the nonexclusive and non-proselytizing nature of Buddhism. This discussion opens the way for new developments in the manner in which geography interprets the world and helps people in their lives.

REFLEXÕES PARA UMA GEOGRAFIA BUDISTA

RESUMO:

O contato crescente entre culturas ocidentais e orientais está contribuindo para que algumas disciplinas acadêmicas (tais como a Geografia) baseadas em correntes filosóficas ocidentais tenham um contato mais profundo com filosofias orientais, como o Budismo. Alguns princípios budistas da escola Theravada são discutidos neste artigo, em relação a suas similaridades e diferenças com o pensamento geográfico. Os princípios discutidos são: (1) desapego como um caminho para escapar do sofrimento; (2) encadeamento causal (karma) como uma concepção do mundo onde não há lugar para a livre vontade; (3) doutrina da inexistência de um "eu"; (4) integração entre prática, reflexão e compaixão na ética budista; (5) natureza não exclusiva e não proselitista do Budismo. As discussões apresentadas abrem caminho para novos desenvolvimentos na maneira com que a Geografia interpreta o mundo e auxilia as pessoas em suas vidas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Budismo, Geografia,
Filosofia Oriental,
Pensamento
Geográfico,
Epistemologia.

REFLEXIONES PARA UNA GEOGRAFÍA BUDISTA

PALABRAS

CLAVE:
Budismo,
Geografía,
Filosofía Oriental,
Pensamiento
Geográfico,
Epistemología.

RESUMEN:

El creciente contacto entre las culturas occidentales y orientales está ayudando a que algunas disciplinas académicas (como la Geografía) basadas en las corrientes filosóficas occidentales entren en contacto más profundo con las filosofías orientales, como el budismo. Algunos principios budistas de la escuela Theravada se discuten en este artículo, en relación con sus similitudes y diferencias con el pensamiento geográfico. Los principios discutidos son: (1) el desapego como una forma de escapar del sufrimiento; (2) el encadenamiento causal (karma) como una concepción del mundo donde no hay lugar para el libre albedrío; (3) la doctrina de la inexistencia de un "yo"; (4) integración de la práctica, la reflexión y la compasión en la ética budista; (5) la naturaleza no exclusiva y no proselitista del budismo. Las discusiones presentadas abren el camino a nuevos desarrollos en la forma en que Geografía interpreta el mundo y ayuda a las personas en sus vidas.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist religion and philosophy emerged between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE in northeastern India, featuring principles that distinguished it from the contemporaneous hegemonic Brahmanism religion (ZIMMER, 1953). In more recent centuries, as contact and familiarity between western and eastern societies has grown, many westerners have found Buddhism to be a new way of interpreting and living in this world.

Geography was consolidated as a formal academic discipline in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was established on a foundation of western philosophies, including positivism, neo-positivism, Marxism, phenomenology and existentialism, among others. Among the main themes of geography are the relationships between humans and nature and between humans and other humans in interstitial space.

Similarly, Buddhism addresses relationships among humans and also the human relationship with nature, but Buddhist approaches to these subjects differ from those of western philosophical systems. This paper presents considerations on the differences between Buddhism and some of the principles of western philosophical systems that are important to contemporary geography. These differences may provide new ways to address traditional problems in geography and assist in the historical development of this discipline.

In the second half of the twentieth century, many Asian universities began teaching geography in countries in which Buddhists were a significant part of the population, such as Japan, China, and Thailand, to name a few. Meanwhile, many westerners who were adopting Buddhism as a reference were also studying courses in geography at various schools and universities. Thus, many individuals have begun to identify themselves as both Buddhists and geographers as long as they have learned, practiced and/or taught from both reference sources. The consequences and fruitfulness of combining these frameworks of knowledge may have passed unnoticed or with little reflection thus far. However, there is clear social relevance in this dialogue because there are between 488 million (PEW RESEARCH, 2012) and 1.6 billion (SNYDER, 2010)¹ Buddhists in the world, including approximately 6 million (PEW RESEARCH, 2012) to 11 million (SNYDER, 2010) living in western countries.

This text will focus on the Buddhist philosophy taught in the Theravada (small vehicle) school, which is the orthodox Buddhist lineage and relies mainly on the direct interpretation of ancient Buddhist texts; it will not address the Mahayana (great vehicle) school or the many lineages of Buddhism that have been influenced by other religions in Asia throughout its history. Even with respect to the Theravada school, this text will be restricted to the doctrine adopted by the monks and will not address those popular rituals and beliefs practiced by the lay population that attends Theravada temples. This choice is made to begin with those principles that remain closer to the original core of Buddhist doctrine, although future research may expand this scope.

¹ The number of Buddhists in China and India is a controversial issue, as discussed by Snyder (2010).

DISCUSSION

Some Buddhist Principles

This text mainly discusses the following Buddhist principles, as presented in the reference work of Rahula (1974):

- The world is dynamic, and attachment to things causes suffering because these things change. Detachment is the path to a peaceful life.
- Everything follows a cause and effect chain (karma), and there is no place for free will in this context.
- There is no self, ego or soul, and we are merely ever-changing physical and mental arrangements.
- Ethical conduct is a way to help humans attain peaceful lives and develop more coherent worldviews simultaneously. Ethical guidelines help the mind become calmer and more optimistic through the practice of compassion, awareness, discipline, cultivation of wisdom and shunning of violence.

Buddhism is a non-exclusive and non-proselytizing religion/philosophy. A person may gradually incorporate Buddhist principles without having to promptly deny his/her previous religious or philosophical background.

Geography and the Attachment to Place

In humanistic geography, the emotional connection of people to the places in which they live is a core research theme. These studies frequently show how beautifully an individual or collective culture can intertwine with places and how these connections become important to people.

Following the same approach, many geographers study how people suffer when they lose access to or control of their homelands. In political and social geography, this process is termed deterritorialization (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1972); in many studies, the geographer assumes the role of denouncing the suffering of the dispossessed people while supporting their fight to recover their lost territories, i.e., their reterritorialization.

Since the Industrial Revolution, human society has gradually increased the power and speed with which it can transform the Earth's environment. Large mining and agricultural undertakings completely alter vast rural areas, while more and more people move to the cities (particularly to metropolises). Even within cities, the transformation of urban spaces has become progressively more frequent. Berman (1983) succeeded in reinterpreting the quotation "All that is solid melts into the air" from Marx; Engels (1848) to conceive of how the spirit of modernity engenders an accelerating cycle of destroying and rebuilding places and human values.

Whereas many geographers defend people's right to be emotionally attached to places, Buddhism seems to offer a different approach. If people were less attached to places, they would suffer much less when facing changes in their environments or even when they are compelled to move to another place. In our contemporary world in which

changes are broader and more rapid every day, this Buddhist attitude might help people better cope with their lives.

Humanistic Geography, the Self and Free Will

In humanistic geography, which is grounded largely in phenomenology and particularly on the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the idea of self as the source of consciousness is a core tenet. For Sartre, existence (of the self) even precedes essence (of perceived things in the world) (SARTRE, 1946). Reconciling the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and no-soul with these philosophical doctrines is challenging. Just as Medidhammaporn (1988) draws analogies between Husserl's notion of consciousness and the idea of the Brahmicatman (self), so might Buddhist criticisms of Brahmanism –defending the doctrine of no-atman – be applied to phenomenology. Nevertheless, some authors (LEE, 2008; GOKHALE, 2013) have attempted to reconcile Sartrean existentialism with Theravada Buddhism through Sartre's proposition that consciousness is non-being and that the self, therefore, is ultimately an empty construction (SARTRE, 1943). The Buddhist approach, as noted by Hoffman (1980) and Giles (1993), is, somewhat surprisingly, much closer to the view of self from David Hume, who conceptualized human beings as ever-changing bundles of perceptions that are subject to causal patterns (HUME, 1739).

For Buddhism, the attachment to this illusory self is the origin of egoism, of the fear of death and also of the fanatic will that drives self-protection and self-preservation. In a broader cycle, this egoism can trigger other feelings –including hatred, ill-will, conceit, and pride – and has even led to war all over the world (RAHULA, 1974, p. 51).

In existentialist geography, mainly based in Sartre's philosophy, original freedom is the basis of individuality. Moreover, individuals are “condemned to be free,” and they are nothing more than what they choose to be (SARTRE, 1946). However, in Buddhist doctrine, everything – the physical and the mental – is conditioned, relative and interdependent. Therefore, each physical and mental state has a conditioned genesis (karma) and is dependent on everything else in the world. Thus, the mere idea of “free will” cannot arise or be sustained in Buddhist thought (RAHULA, 1974, p. 54), and, it is thus difficult to reconcile Sartre's existentialism within the Buddhist paradigm.

Understanding the conditioned genesis of mental and physical processes is one of the main ways of gathering awareness and wisdom in Buddhist doctrine. In this context, much of the experimental academic research regarding causes of individual and social behavior in psychology and other human sciences (including geography), in addition to other useful causal studies in the biological and physical sciences, contributes valuable knowledge for assisting people in setting more coherent strategies for their lives. In a social context, managers and politicians might use this causal knowledge to underpin wiser decision making to decrease people's suffering. This useful causal knowledge also encompasses environmental knowledge, which is studied in depth in geography. Ilangakoon (2014), Girish (2014) and Thong (2014) offered

interesting reflections regarding how Buddhism can consistently be integrated with current environmental thought.

Intertwining practice, knowledge and ethics in geography

In Buddhism, wisdom comes through study and practice together in everyday life, and the Noble Eightfold Path, as written in the Pali Buddhist scripture *Nagara Sutta* (The City - SN 12.65 PTS: S ii 104 CDB i 601), thus comprises right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. In daily practice, compassion (also referred as universal love) is also tied to discipline and reflection (RAHULA, 1974, p. 46), as expressed in the Pali Buddhist scriptures of the *Metta Sutta* in the *Suttanipata* (I.8). These teachings explain why Buddhist monks dedicate themselves to meditation practice and to strict compliance with codes of conduct instead of merely studying Buddhist texts.

Unlike with more conventional sciences, the process of becoming a geographer is frequently identified as a conjunction of attitude, practice and reflection. This triple amalgam, throughout history, forms what Brunhes (1910) referred to as the Geographic Spirit. As Carl Sauer expressed in his text "The Education of a Geographer" (SAUER, 1956), these geographic attitudes may come from personal life, as in the desire since childhood to explore new places, love maps and guiding people through places. For a person to become a professional geographer, this attitude must be developed through the experience of fieldwork and also by studying the works of earlier geographers, which results in a special way of perceiving forms and connections in landscapes. Marxist and cultural geographers have stressed how geographers must immerse themselves in the social contexts and places upon which they reflect and act. In addition to learning to "see", "feel" and "act" in space, geographers must also develop the skill to represent spaces on maps, drawings and schematic diagrams, using techniques that merge artistic ability with the requirement of correspondence with the reality being portrayed.

In this context, both geography and Buddhism have the appeal of joining practice, reflection and ethical values, which also leads to the possibility of integrating these two sources of reference within an individual's personal experience. A Buddhist geography would aim to help people and other living beings to suffer less by incorporating positive attitudes toward life and also by increasing awareness about themselves and their world.

This experience might even extend beyond individual lives to overlap with social and political geography. Hughes (1987) and Jnawali (2007) posited that Buddhism might contribute to seeking peace in a global geopolitical context. These contributions are based mainly on the advice to government rulers in Buddhist texts about being primarily good moral role models for other people by avoiding violence, lies and corruption (RAHULA, 1974, p. 85), such as is described in the Pali Buddhist text *Dasa Raja Dhamma* (The Ten Royal Virtues) of the *Jataka* collection (I, 160, 599; II, 400; III, 274, 320; V, 119, 378).

FINAL THOUGHTS–BUDDHIST GEOGRAPHY AS A NONEXCLUSIVE APPROACH

According to the Pali Buddhist text *AriyapariyesanaSutta* (The Noble Search), when Buddha attained enlightenment (which also indicates when he understood the entirety of his doctrine), he realized that this doctrine would be difficult for most people to understand because they were overpowered by passion and would not be possessed of the calmness of mind to think deeply on his teachings. Out of concern for this problem, Buddha would have developed different approaches for speaking with the different types of people he met such that he might teach what each person would find helpful while avoiding other lessons that might be overly complex, disturbing or harmful for that person (RAHULA, 1974, p. 52). In this manner, Buddhism has spread throughout Asia as people have reflected on Buddhist principles and understood them as coherent and worthwhile; thus, people were able to incorporate these principles into their lives to a greater or lesser extent.

Similarly, Buddhism may have some influence on geographic theories to the extent that it proves to be coherent for geographic studies and for the lives of the individuals who undertake these studies. As a geographer intertwines reflection and practical life, he/she might gradually incorporate some Buddhist principles into other aspects of his/her personal life and might find that it becomes easier to integrate these principles into the practice of being a geographer.

Moreover, in addition to applying Buddhist principles to the practice of geography, the Buddhist approach might also bring useful insights into strategies for communicating the results of this practice. Throughout the history of Buddhism, the Buddhist doctrine was transmitted mainly to the extent that people recognized Buddhists as good examples and then sought advice for their lives. Under these circumstances, as explained in the Pali Buddhist texts *PañhaSutta* (Questions - AN 4.42, PTS: A ii 46) and in *KathavatthuSutta* (Topics for Discussion, AN 3.67, PTS: A i 197) from the *AngutaraNikaya*, the fourth division of the *SuttaPitaka* compilation, Buddha would have instructed the monks to use four basic strategies, depending on their evaluation of how their advice might be useful for each person: (1) direct response; (2) analysis of the reasons underlying the demand for advice; (3) counter-questions that would stimulate the person to reflect; and (4) finally, remaining silent. Although the context faced by the geographer is different from that faced by a monk, such communication strategies might be effectively adapted to various circumstances, such as classroom teaching, conferences, internet texts (blogs, discussion forums, social networks, online education), and conversations with geographers and other people in everyday life.

Geography throughout the twentieth century has faced a succession of paradigms, or schools of thought (traditional, quantitative, Marxist, and humanistic, among others), with harsh debates and oppositional groups within academia. In the past two decades, despite the echoes of these old quarrels, an interdisciplinary and inter-paradigmatic approach has received more and more recognition and been accorded greater value by the geographic community, which has unveiled broader potential for geographic studies while introducing open-minded geographers to new

approaches. A Buddhist geography could then add interesting new possibilities to this spectrum.

REFERENCES

BERMAN, M. *All that is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Verso. 1983.

BRUNHES, J. *La géographie humaine. Essai de classification positive. Principes et exemples*. Paris: Félix Alcan. 1910. 844p.

DELEUZE, G.; GUATTARI, F. *L'Anti-Œdipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit. 1972.

GILES, J. The no-self theory: Hume, Buddhism, and personal identity. *Philosophy East and West*, 43(2): 175-200. 1993.

GIRISH, I. Compatibility of Buddhist principles and Ecology. In: *Buddhist Perspective towards Achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals*. 11th United Nations Day of Vesak in Vietnam. 7-11 May, 2014. Annals..., Vol. 2. Buddhist Contribution to Global Warming and Environmental Protection. Vietnam: United Nations, 139-157. 2014.

HOFFMAN, Y. *The Idea of Self East and West: A Comparison between Buddhist Philosophy and the Philosophy of David Hume*. Calcutta: Firma KLM. 1980. 152p.

HUGUES, J. World Buddhism and the Peace Movement. *Bulletin of Peace Proposals* 18(3) Tokyo: United Nations University and Norwegian University Press, 18(3): 449-468. 1987.

HUME, D. *A treatise of human nature*. New York: Courier Dover Publications. [1739] (2012 ed.).

ILANGAKOON, S. Buddhist Religious Ecological Concepts. In: *Buddhist Perspective towards Achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals*. 11th United Nations Day of Vesak in Vietnam. 7-11 May, 2014. Annals..., Vol. 2. Buddhist Contribution to Global Warming and Environmental Protection. Vietnam: United Nations. 2014. p. 99-107.

JNAWALI, D. Buddhism and global Peace: Perspectives on Cultural Geography. *The Third Pole: Journal of Geography Education*, 5, 28-36. 2007.

PEW RESEARCH. *The Global Religious Landscape*. 2012. Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>. Access in 23/06/2014.

MARX, K.; ENGELS, F. *The communist manifesto*. Karl Marx. 1948.

MEDIDHAMMAPORN, P. (*Prayoon Mererk*): *Sartre's Existentialism and Early Buddhism*. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation. 1988. 213 p.

RAHULA, W. *What the Buddha Taught*. 2nd ed. New York: Grove Press. 1974. 151p.

SARTRE, J.P. *L'etre et le néant : Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. – Paris: Gallimard. 1943.

SARTRE, J.P. *L'existentialisme est un Humanisme*, Paris: Éditions Nagel. 1946. (1996 ed., Gallimard).

SAUER, C. O. The Education of a Geographer. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 46: 287-299. 1956.

SNYDER, D. N. *Buddhists around the World*. 2010. Available at: http://www.thedhamma.com/buddhists_in_the_world.htm. Detailed raw data at: http://www.dhammadwiki.com/index.php?title=Buddhists_in_the_world. Access in 23/6/2014.

THONG, T. H. Buddhism with Sustainable Development Objectives of Environment Protection. Translated by Bhikkhuni Thich Huong Nhu. In: *Buddhist Perspective towards Achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals*. 11th United Nations Day of Vesak in Vietnam. 7-11 May, 2014. *Annals...*, Vol. 2. Buddhist Contribution to Global Warming and Environmental Protection. Vietnam: United Nations, 295-307. 2014.

ZIMMER, H. *Philosophies of India*. London: Routledge & Keagan Paul. 1953. 724p.

Recebido em: 04/08/2016

Aprovado para publicação em: 21/12/2017