

Rebranding the Buddhist Faith:

Reformist Buddhism and Piety in Contemporary Singapore

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Introduction

It was a Sunday morning at a religious organization in Singapore. A young teenage boy, perhaps 15 or 16 years of age, was happily singing and clapping his hands. He seemed to have been enjoying himself very much. The worship leader then led the congregation into a word of prayer. The boy, together with other members of the congregation, put their hands together and prayed for love and compassion to fill the world.

This scene could be set in almost any Christian church, but the fact that it occurred in June 2007 in a Buddhist organization in Singapore might be surprising for many people since contemporary discourses on the practice of Buddhism in Singapore have continued to be presented in its “traditional” sense by representing the spiritual realities of “traditional Buddhists” through promulgation of ritualistic piety and reverence in their quotidian religious rituals and practices including prayer chants using prayer beads and wooden fish,

as well as their regular participation in funeral rituals. However, Buddhism in the country has undergone constant organizational, structural and spiritual transformation, particularly over the past two decades. More attention is therefore needed to understand this brand of “New Buddhism” in Singapore.

This article attempts to illuminate the rise of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore, and its quest to rebrand the faith in the island-state through advocating Buddhist ideology as the key emphasis by its practitioners rather than ritual. It argues that Reformist Buddhists, unlike Traditional Buddhists, are concerned with the active reflexive engagement, rather than the established dramatization of piety and acquiescence to the elemental tenets of the religion is institutionalized. The goal for supporters of Reformist Buddhism therefore is material practicality instead of ritualistic enchantment of the religion. Instances of these pronouncements of practicality are evident in their rational valuation of scriptural tenets, which answer contemporary needs,

and the pre-occupation with principally serving worldly needs by promoting interactions among members and providing care and assistance to the less fortunate, for reasons which will be explained below. A study of the increasing influence of Reformist Buddhism illustrates the complex intra-faith relationships amongst the Buddhists in Singapore, and suggests how this brand of “New Buddhism” can potentially polarize the practice of Buddhism in the country.

This study has three sections. First, it presents a concise historical background of Buddhism in Singapore and the transition towards Reformist Buddhism over the recent decades to provide the background for this study. Next, based on Kuah Khun Eng’s seminal study on Reformist Buddhism in Singapore, we critically examine the concept of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore and highlight some of its characteristics pertaining to religious piety. Finally, this article presents and discusses the findings collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with 50 lay Buddhists in Singapore.

Background: From “Traditional” to “Reformist” Buddhism in Singapore

After the British established Singapore as a trading port in 1819, multitudes of migrants from China flooded the island in search of business and employment opportunities, bringing their religious beliefs and practices along with them. Most of these early migrants adopted and practiced Chinese syncretic religions consisting of Buddhist, Confucianist and Taoist elements (*Sanjiao Heyi* 三教合一) (Shi 1997: 30-56; Ong 2005: 31-33). These influences can all be seen in temples where they worshipped the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, Confucius, and the various Taoist deities (Ong 2005: 31-32). Examples of such temples include the Thian Hock Keng 天福宫, Hong San See 凤山寺, and Wak Hai Cheng Temple 粤海清庙.

Due to the growth of the Chinese population in Singapore, the migrant community in Singapore needed Chinese monks to cater to their spiritual needs. Ong points out that the earliest record of the presence of a Buddhist monk from China in Singapore was found on an 1836 wooden tablet in Hang Sun Teng 恒山亭, a Chinese temple constructed in 1828 (2005: 35). These monks were mainly concerned with chanting and per-

forming rituals (*jingchan fashi* 经忏法事) such as funeral rites, and were not active in propagating the Dharma.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, several prominent Buddhist monks from China, such as Venerable Hui Quan 会泉 and Venerable Tai Xu 太虚, came to Singapore while on pilgrimages to India, or at the request of the Chinese community who invited some of the eminent monks to Singapore to deliver Dharma talks, and even requested them to remain and become abbots or spiritual advisors of the local temples (Ong 2005: 36).

To meet the needs of the growing number of Buddhists in Singapore, monasteries were established as places of worship and residences for the migrant monks. With the support of the local Chinese community, Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery 莲山双林寺, the earliest Chinese Buddhist monastery in Singapore, was constructed in 1898. Kong Meng San Phor Khar See 光明山普觉寺, the largest monastery in Singapore, was founded by Venerable Zhuandao 转道 in 1920 (Shi 1997: 150-153). The Chinese Buddhist Association (*Zhonghua Fo jiao Hui* 中华佛教会) was started in 1927 with the encouragement and support of Venerable Tai Xu. The association became the first Buddhist association in Singapore that provided education and social services to the lay Buddhist community. It thus laid the “foundation for the emergence of associational Buddhism” (Chia 2006: 36).

“Traditional Buddhism”

Vivienne Wee, in her 1976 study, points out that despite about 50 percent of the Singaporean population declare themselves as “Buddhists” and use a single religious label, they “do not in fact share a unitary religion” (1997: 130). She suggests that “‘Buddhist’ systems as practiced in Singapore must therefore be considered in the larger context of Chinese religious behavior” (Wee 1997: 131). For this reason, a significant number of Singaporean “Buddhists” believe that the word “Buddhism” actually refers to the Chinese syncretic religions mentioned above (1997: 131). Therefore, it was not surprising that these “Buddhists” engaged in “non-Buddhist” practices such as burning of joss-papers, drawing divine lots, fortune telling, and

spirit mediumship. To some of these “Buddhists,” “Buddhist” belief simply means:

As long as I do good deeds and do not harm others, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and gods will protect my family and me. When I need any help, I will just go to them and they will help me by answering my prayers (Chia 2007b).

In Singapore, “Traditional Buddhism” as a religious phenomenon, however, cannot simply be essentialized and regarded as a syncretic Chinese religion. Rather, Wee (1997: 132) maintains that “Singapore ‘Buddhism’ can only be understood in a dialectic framework: it is on the one hand ‘Buddhism’ as Canonical Buddhism and on the other hand ‘Buddhism’ as Chinese Religion.” From as early as the Chinese migration to Singapore in the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century, up to Wee’s research published in the mid-1970s, “Traditional Buddhism” in Singapore had very much been an all-inclusive religion, embracing both Canonical Buddhist teachings and Chinese syncretic religious practices. It is therefore a very problematic term as it can mean different things to different people. But typically, a “Traditional Buddhist,” as we have defined, has some or all of the following features: worships any deities or saints be it from Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism; does not take refuge in the Triple Gems; receives very little or no education on the correct understanding of Canonical Buddhist teachings; and takes part in “non-Buddhistic” practices.

In Traditional Buddhism, it is the ritual that takes the center stage in the religious beliefs and practices; in Reformist Buddhism, it is the “Buddhist ideology” that is the key emphasis of the Reformist Buddhists. Therefore, Reformist Buddhism adopts “various scriptural tenets from the different Buddhist traditions to answer contemporary need” (Kuah 2003: 217). The primary focus of Reformist Buddhism is not on the “attainment of enlightenment,” but rather more concerned with “this-worldly needs,” and argues that “near salvation can be attained in this world and in one’s lifetime.” For this reason, Reformist Buddhism regards the various spiritual and socio-welfare activities as a path to achieve “this-worldly salvation.” Hence, it is a “scriptural religion as well as a social religion, and provides time and space for members to interact in a religiously and socially intimate way” (Kuah 2003: 217).

Towards a Reformist Buddhism

In recent years, a changing socio-political and socio-economic environment in Singapore has forced Buddhism to change and cater to the modern needs of the believers, the society, and the state. Kuah Khun Eng, in her Ph.D. dissertation entitled “Protestant Buddhism in Singapore: Religious Modernization from a Longer Perspective” (1988) first applied the concept of “Reformist Buddhism” to the study of Buddhism in the Singapore context. Her dissertation was later published as a book entitled *State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore* (2003). Kuah () examines the “the process of ‘Buddhisation’ of Chinese religious syncretism and a movement towards Reformist Buddhism within the Chinese community where 65% of the Buddhists now regard themselves as Reformist Buddhists” (2003: 1). She contends that “the agents responsible for transforming the religious landscape of the Singapore Chinese include the Singapore state, the Buddhist Sangha and the Reformist Buddhist within the community” (Kuah 2003: 1). While each group modernizes Buddhism according to its own agenda, they have all worked towards a common goal of promoting Reformist Buddhism as a modern religion in Singapore (Kuah 2003: 217).

Kuah (2003) points out that the activities of the Reformist Buddhists can be categorized into the religious and the main secular spheres. Within the religious domain, there are six main types of activities, namely: “propagating Buddhist scriptural knowledge to the public, encouraging general participation, nurturing a group of committed Reformist Buddhists, performing missionary work and engaging in subtle proselytization, putting faith into real life practice and action, and legitimizing Vesak Day as a public holiday” (Kuah 2003: 233). Within the secular domain, “Reformist Buddhists support numerous socio-cultural and welfare activities” (Kuah 2003: 233). This includes direct involvement in secular charity and welfare work, and providing manpower for the various social welfare organizations.

Methodology

While a more in-depth contemplation of the key fundamentals of Reformist Buddhism may be useful in illustrating the “reformation” of Buddhist piety in Sin-

gapore, the mere ideological and conceptual examination of its significance would not be sufficient to showcase the contemporary realities of the management of Buddhist piety amongst believers in the island-state. It is therefore crucial to uncover the potential impact of the influence of Reformist Buddhism on the practice of Buddhism through the accounts of the lay Buddhists themselves. The understanding gained from the intellectual discussion with these believers would offer an opportunity to also determine how the intra-faith relationships amongst Buddhists have evolved and been potentially transformed. With the above set of goals in mind, qualitative research is chosen to fulfill the objectives of this research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty lay Buddhists in Singapore with the intent to uncover the principles and practices of Reformist Buddhism and the general opinions of these believers in contemporary Singapore. Our initial informants were known contacts while subsequent informants were solicited through snowball sampling from the referrals of these initial contacts. Attempts were also made to ensure that there is a relatively equal distribution in the ages of our core respondents with 40% of the informants (n=20) being teenagers and young adults (ages 15-30), 36% (n=18) being working adults and middle aged respondents (ages 31-54) and 24% (n=12) of the informants being older adults (ages 55 and above). An equal number of male and female informants were solicited from each age group for the in-depth interviews. Twenty-two (44%) of the informants identify themselves as Traditional Buddhists and have overtly expressed the desire to envision their brand of Buddhism according to traditional tenets of the faith such as a fervent belief in the importance of “karma,” regular involvement in Buddhist rituals, and active demonstration of “ritualistic piety.” Sixteen (32%) of the respondents have identified themselves as Reformist Buddhists and have mentioned that “this-worldly” religious achievements such as promoting spiritual interactions among members and providing social assistance to the less fortunate, practical uses of the religion and constant reflection of the viability of the religion in addressing contemporary material needs are a key focus in their practice. Finally, twelve (24%) of the informants have overtly expressed that they are “neutral” Buddhists with no preference for either “brands” of Buddhism and have revealed that they are willing to accept certain

fundamentals from each form of Buddhism.

Principles and Practices of Reformist Buddhism

The Reformist Buddhists regard religious activities, such as going to the temples and associations to attend Dharma talks and carry out social welfare activities, more important than merely chanting the Buddhist scriptures. The notion of piety for these Reformist Buddhists is thus reflected and deliberated through interactive engagement with spiritual leaders in these institutions rather than through the independent recitation of the written coverage of religious devotion and piety articulated mostly through Buddhist texts and literature. There is a desire for most of the Reformist Buddhists to both attain confirmation on a particular principle of the Buddhist scripture with fellow discussants in these religious organizations or to reflect on the plausibility of the continuous adherence to a particular principle in the contemporary world. The contemplation of piety for the Reformist Buddhists is thus achieved through both the direct interchange of the significance of each religious principle with other believers and the contemporary update of the religious tenets:

I go to my Buddhist organization every Sunday for our weekly Sunday class. My Dharma friends and I often seek to debate on issues pertaining to our faith and understand how other believers adhere to the religious code. By being aware of how other believers interpret and follow each religious principle, it is helpful for us be aware of how the religion is practiced. Therefore, we discuss about it in an organized setting. It is way better than merely reading the texts and scriptures and envisioning that the practice and interpretation of each tenet is still unchanged from what is written (Weiwien, Reformist Buddhist).

The main preoccupation for Reformist Buddhists is for the religion to take on a more pro-active role in the face of social changes. This form of activism is often described as “Buddhism for the younger generation” and is viewed as a relatively contemporary practice promoted by informants predominantly in the 15-30 age category. They have argued that in order to understand the intricate teachings of their religion, they have to be more pro-active in carrying out concrete practical

actions to essentially practice what they preach, and also to attend religious activities and events other than what has been traditionally prescribed in the religious calendar. The principles of Reformist Buddhism are revealed by this informant:

I think the main thing is to constantly carry out activities to showcase that you have carried out things that you believed and have internalized in the Buddhist scriptures. While some of the Traditional Buddhists just read the importance of central tenets such as metta (loving-kindness) and being compassion, they do not regularly participate in activities like we do such as organizing recycling outings and visiting old folks' homes (Jian Ming, Reformist Buddhist).

The majority of those who have identified themselves as Traditional Buddhists have opined that they do engage in activities to “activate” and “perform” what is introduced as the central principles in the Buddhist scriptures. On one hand, they have voluntarily conducted classes to present the fundamentals of the religion to welfare centers and participated in activities such as the “Vegetarian-awareness” programs to highlight their Buddhist’s beliefs. On the other hand, they have admitted that their actions and activities are less-coordinated and organized compared to the Reformist Buddhists. Many Traditional Buddhists have also espoused that there is a potential for Reformist Buddhists to alter the practice of Buddhism in Singapore from an essentially independent and private practice to one which is mostly co-coordinated and managed with constant interactions with other pro-active believers. This is illustrated through the account of this informant:

While most of the Traditionalists engaged in religious activities and exercises which are non-routine and on an ad-hoc basis, the Reformist Buddhists are more organized in that they are constantly managing and initiating activities on a more regularized basis. This may influence the rest of the Buddhists in being more active in negotiating with their counterparts to partake in these religious activities (Jialing, Traditional Buddhist).

Another form of departure in the principles and practices of Reformist Buddhists from Traditional Buddhists is in the conception of elemental Buddhist’s morality and ethics such as the precept of non-killing. The Traditional and ‘neutral’ Buddhists have mostly interpreted this precept as prohibiting the killing of

living forms, such as animals and humans, and have deemed the Reformists’ adherence as overly dramatic and even an over-interpretation of the fundamental religious teachings and principles. The Reformist Buddhists, on the other hand, have seemingly taken a step further in their adoption of this precept as they apply this tenet to food consumption and advocate a strict vegetarian diet. According to one informant:

Unlike Traditional Buddhists who are only vegetarians on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month, we do not think that such practice is based on a correct understanding of the Buddha-dharma. Instead, all Buddhists should try to become vegetarians, if possible, in order to discourage and prevent the killing of animals (Liven, Reformist Buddhist).

Reformist Buddhists work towards removing misconceptions of the religion largely by clearing up the public’s confusion with it as an associated form of Taoism and by dispelling myths of it being linked to enchanted and non-rational practices as depicted by the mass media. The Reformist Buddhist informants have articulated that they have often looked through newspapers reports and online articles and forums on their religion. They have either been active in correcting any perceived mistakes on online forums, and by reinstating their forms of piety in meetings with religious leaders of other faiths in the event that their objectives have been mismanaged:

We are very aware and conscious of how our religion has been misrepresented in the media, such as inaccuracies in the depiction of our religion when dramas are depicting Buddhists using animal offerings in certain religious events (thus associating us with Taoists) and certain newspapers and online forums showing that bogus monks have been actively seeking donations in the public. We will actively request the producers of the TV shows or the website manager to review their content accordingly (Jimmy, Reformist Buddhist).

Reformist Buddhists have been increasingly pro-active in promoting their religion by working with Buddhist organizations in Singapore and abroad, and have also been facilitating activities with the Singapore Buddhist Federation. Many of these informants, who have identified themselves as Reformist Buddhists, have also opined that they have been involved in the activities of associated international Buddhist organizations such as the Buddha’s Light International Asso-

ciation 国际佛光会, Dharma Drum Mountain 法鼓山 and Tzu Chi Foundation 佛教慈济慈善事业基金会 in Singapore. The Tzu Chi Foundation, for instance, has been viewed as a rising star by these informants for advancing the awareness and consciousness of the Buddhist faiths to Singaporeans through its participation in popular locally organized events such as the annual World Book Fair, by providing social welfare and medical services, and through the creation of a Jing Si Book and Café, which besides offering books and drinks, aims to provide its guest with “some quiet, meditative moments in the midst of a bustling city such as Singapore” (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation [Singapore Branch] 2007).

More importantly, certain Reformist Buddhists have also explicated their dissatisfaction with the lack of good publicity by Traditional Buddhists. They are also unhappy coming second to other faiths, in particular the Christian faith, in recruiting new members and believers:

The main quest for us Reformist Buddhists is to generate greater awareness of our religion by participating in charity events broadcasted in the media and introducing more engaging and fun activities to attract the younger generation of potential believers. It always seems like there is nothing being done as of now to transform Buddhism from its old-fashioned and traditional tag-on as compared to other faiths such as Christianity where its believers are given rock concerts and pop stars like Sun Ho to enjoy (Jamie, Reformist Buddhist).

Buddhist music and songs are no longer confined to the traditional Buddhist chanting, or the hitting of the gongs and wooden fish. Just recently, Venerable Sik Kwang Sheng, the abbot of the Kong Meng San Phor Khar See Monastery, launched a Buddhist album entitled “Buddha Smiles” and even held a concert to celebrate the Vesak Day (KMSPKS, 2007). An increasing number of Buddhist organizations, such as the Panna Youth Centre 正信佛教青年会, have started to adopt Buddhist praise and worship services. Buddhist worship songs such as “Buddhist Doxology” and “Homage to Buddha,” written by Wayfarer, a well-known Malaysian Buddhist band, are sung during their worship session (See Appendix for the song lyrics).

Opinions on Reformist Buddhism

The primary concerns of the informants who identify themselves as Reformist Buddhist are not only on the attainment of enlightenment, but also place an emphasis on worldly needs. Buddhist activism for societal welfare could be cultivated through the debates and communication of elemental Buddhist values, formatted for the needs of contemporary society. Most Reformist Buddhists have pointed out that the socio-cultural and welfare aspects of society must be emphasized in addition to being conscious of the basic spiritual principles of their religious doctrines:

Most of the Traditional Buddhists are concerned with the philosophical and spiritual elements of Buddhism, such as which elements are regarded as auspicious, which signs are regarded as good or favorable, and which religious rituals are suitable for which occasions. All these are fine but instead of being so spiritually occupied, they also need to reflect on using the religion to debate and contemplate on contemporary issues such as achieving social welfare and justice (Queenie, Reformist Buddhist).

While the Reformist Buddhists hope that this new theme of looking outward to contemporary issues may help rebrand the religion from its existing conception and misconception by the general public, the Traditional Buddhists have admitted to having some reservations with the preoccupation of these activities and regard them as an attempt to secularize the religion while forgoing more time attuning oneself with the central fundamentals of piety and religious principles. In fact, many of them neither appear supportive nor have very positive opinions on the Reformist Buddhists. They even question the Reformist Buddhists’ pro-active stance in presenting the religion as a more interesting and exciting religion which may potentially lead to certain elements of the religion being overshadowed or neglected in the quest for rebranding:

I think making the religion more attractive is good but I’m worry that it would lead to a form of secularizing now common among the Christian churches in Singapore. It may appear that the task is to attract attention instead of devoting more time to the private study of the religion (James, Traditional Buddhist).

I do not even know what these young people are up to. On one hand, they seem very devout Buddhists wanting to contribute to the religion. On the other

hand, it seems that they want to change and reform everything. If they think they are so good, then let them go ahead. (Weian, Traditional Buddhist)

I think there is little need to strive for more activities and large-scale participation with other religious organizations in such a dramatic manner. The main focus is still on the quest for the individual self to attain enlightenment and achieve good karma (Weijia, a 'neutral' Buddhist).

The principles and practices espoused by the Reformist Buddhists need to be examined in light of the reactions from the other Buddhists in Singapore. Traditional, and even neutral Buddhists, have rejected this pro-active and practical stance in favor of a return to the more traditional principles of Buddhism. This is especially the case of Buddhism's primary focus of cultivating oneself through religious precepts.

In addition, there are negative reactions towards the Reformist Buddhism's rejection of monkhood as being the sole fundamental path to salvation, adding instead an emphasis on spiritual and socio-welfare activities to attain this-worldly salvation. Certain Traditional Buddhists have indicated that they are very apprehensive towards the Reformist's non-exclusive labeling of the time-honored and sacred practice of monkhood as a quintessential element of personal salvation and a fundamental sign of religious piety:

I think the majority of us are still relatively traditional in the sense that we still perceive going through the sacred rites of monkhood and participating in the teachings of the monastery and its accompanying rituals as the definitive form of piety. I wonder why the Reformists Buddhists are not so firm in claiming these sacred acts as the ultimate form of religious devotion (Jialing, Traditional Buddhist).

The lack of encouragement to practice monkhood rites and the incessant pronouncements by Reformist Buddhism to care for the less-privileged individuals in society has also been deemed as an affront to Traditional Buddhists in Singapore as many have hinted at the Traditional Buddhists' detachment or hitherto lack of concern with contemporary problems. The manner in which the Reformist Buddhists have attempted to de-mark themselves as a pro-active group tasked to help the needy has also been evaluated by Traditional and 'neutral' Buddhists as a sign of the Reformists' construction of a distinct line of delineation from the

other Buddhists in contemporary Singapore:

It seems that by tagging themselves as Reformist Buddhists, they can in a sense demark themselves as very active believers who are presumably more influential and more attuned with the times and the practical concerns of the people as compared to other less reformatory Buddhists (Michelle, Traditional Buddhist).

Conclusion

This article seeks to examine the rise of Reformist Buddhism in contemporary Singapore and its quest to rebrand the faith through the advocacy of Buddhist ideology as the key emphasis by its practitioners. It uncovers the principles and practices of Reformist Buddhism and the general opinions on these believers in Singapore. Reformist Buddhists are primarily concerned with the active reflexive engagement of how the hitherto established display of piety and acquiescence to the elemental tenets of the religion is institutionalized. They have rather different views and perspectives from the Traditional Buddhists. Hence, the Buddhists in Singapore are certainly not a monolithic group. By examining the complexities surrounding the rise of Reformist Buddhism and the issues concerning the renegotiation of piety in the Buddhist faith, it surfaces the complex intra-faith relationships amongst the Buddhists in Singapore.

Appendix

Buddhist Doxology

P. Carus

Bright shineth the sun in his splendor by day,
And bright the moon radiance by night;
Bright shineth the hero in battle array,
And the sage in his thought shineth bright.
But by day and by night none so glorious and bright
As Lord Buddha, the Source of all Spiritual Light;
But by day and by night none so glorious and bright
As Lord Buddha, the Source of all Spiritual Light.

Source: Wee n.d.: 2

Homage to Buddha

Victor Wee

Far over the distant lands,
We our voices raise,
To our gentle Teacher,
Hymns of joy and praise.

Let Thy holy abode,
Now with joy resounds,
Glory to Gotama,
Who Nibbana found.

Chorus:
Each child shall offer,
Heart devotions true,
Promising forever,
Righteous deeds to do.

Here before His images,
Blossoms rare we place,
Emblems true of beauty,
Purity and grace.

Source: Wee n.d.: 15

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