

Idols of the Marketplace

Sir Francis Bacon (the philosopher not the artist) spoke of the deep-seated limitations of the human mind as idols¹. An idol was a false god which was set up and worshipped in place of truth. There were idols of the Tribe, idols of the Den (or Cave), idols of the Market Place, and idols of the Theatre. Numerous enough in Bacon's own day, such idols are even more numerous in ours. This is particularly true of the idols of the Market Place, or those words and phrases which corrupt and muddle our thinking.

In recent years three particularly monstrous idols of the Market Place have been set up on the other side of the Atlantic, and now Western Buddhists are being invited to fall down and worship them. If one does not do so one is in danger of being branded as unprogressive and reactionary and even as un-Buddhist. The three new idols are Democratization, Feminization, and Integration.

Representative democracy is probably the best form of government humanity has succeeded in devising, despite its evident shortcomings in certain respects. The democratization of Buddhism is quite another matter. Buddhism is a spiritual teaching. It is a teaching about a path – a path leading from Samsara to Nirvana, from the mundane to the transcendental. That path consists of a number of successive stages, and those who tread that path – the True followers of the Buddha – occupy positions on one or another of those stages, either a higher one or a lower one. Thus there is a hierarchy of stages, or experiences, and a hierarchy of persons. This hierarchy is a *spiritual* hierarchy, and is not to be confused with the purely ecclesiastical hierarchy of (largely self-styled) Holinesses and Eminences and their appointees, even though in the person of certain exceptional individuals the two may occasionally coincide. A Buddhism that was democratized to the extent of refusing to recognize the existence of a spiritual hierarchy would not be Buddhism at all, for it would have abandoned the principle of the path with its successive stages, and have ceased, therefore, really to practise the Dharma.

Feminization means, in effect, refashioning the Buddha in the image of that darling of the women's pages the so-called New Man, with his much-advertised vulnerability, his touching efforts to domesticate himself, and his pathetic emotional dependence on women – and hence refashioning Buddhism accordingly. It means creating a 'nice' Buddhism, an inoffensive, unchallenging teaching in which there would be no place for initiative, boldness, daring, courage, adventurousness, and enterprise, or for any of the more typically masculine qualities and virtues. It would be a Buddhism for eunuchs, not men, and probably would not appeal to the majority of women either. The feminization of Buddhism follows from its democratization. Since women (it is argued) form fifty percent of the Buddhist community they ought to have an equal share in determining the general character of the religion. It also follows from the demonization of the masculine and the (alleged) necessity of its redemption by the feminine consciousness.

Integration means the integration of Buddhism into the world, or the practice of the Path to liberation without withdrawing from worldly life. In practice this amounts, only too often, to trying to develop spiritually without giving up one's affluent North American or West European life-style. Such integration is also spoken of in terms of the creation of a lay

¹ Francis Bacon (1561–1626) was an English philosopher and statesman. For Bacon's conception of idols, see Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings*, Liberal Arts Press, New York 1960.

Buddhism as distinct from the predominantly monastic Buddhism of the East. What is really wanted is a Buddhism that is neither lay nor monastic in the traditional sense, but which is firmly based on the centrality for the Buddhist life of the act of Going for Refuge, supported by the observance of the fundamental ethical precepts. The integration that is needed is not the integration of Buddhism into the world, but of the world into Buddhism.

Rather than falling down and worshipping the monstrous idols of Democratization, Feminization, and Integration as we have been invited to do, let us take to them the hammer of Right View and reduce them and all other idols of the Market Place to a heap of rubble, however fashionable for the moment they may happen be.

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