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THE PHENOMENON OF BUDDHIST POSTMODERNISM: ADAPTATION OF THE TRADITIONAL TO GLOBAL CONDITIONS

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Abstract. The author explores the phenomenon of Buddhist postmodernism due to the adaptation of traditional Buddhist teachings, ideas, and practices to modern global conditions. The article analyzes the key ideas of modernism and postmodernism, which form a specific coordinate system and create an intellectual background for Buddhist transformations. Special attention is paid to the concepts of postmodern philosophers who critically assess blind faith in progress, economic innovations, and political institutions. Postmodernism, in turn, is considered a critical paradigm that influences the rethinking of Buddhism in a globalized world.

The article analyzes new interpretations of Buddhism emerging under the influence of postmodern ideas: deconstruction of traditional doctrines, emphasis on subjectivity, intercultural dialogue, and integration of modern scientific knowledge. Finally, examples of these changes in Western Buddhism are given, particularly in popular meditation practices and ethical approaches. The article offers a theoretical framework for understanding Buddhist postmodernism as a multidimensional phenomenon.

Key words: postmodernism, Buddhist postmodernism, intercultural dialogue, Buddhist Geeks, engaged Buddhism, Zen.

Introduction. The second half of the twentieth century was the period when crises exacerbated by catastrophic world wars began manifesting themselves in various spheres. Philosophy and the humanitarian sphere, in general, became one of the key spaces of ideas, where various thinkers tried to find new principles of ethics, a new worldview in which we could lay down safeguards against future horrors.

Modernism as a civilizational paradigm became the object of criticism of postmodernism, whose representatives realized the need to renew the value foundation on which cultures could exist in the conditions of globalization. It was about changing the game's essential rules and the coordinate system, which would allow for the return of more freedom, equality, and justice to a person and contribute to the disclosure of his creative potential. These new rules, often presented in the form of recommendations or even ironic statements by individual philosophers, were supposed to serve as a guideline for further development and form a more adaptive approach to modern challenges and global changes.

Changes in the system of civilizational coordinates also affected religious organizations, worldviews, and intercultural dialogue. As a network of various schools, institutions, and communities, Buddhism is under the influence of postmodern trends, which provide new opportunities for rethinking its foundations.

In the article, I outline «Buddhist postmodernism». First, I will outline the general features of modernism and postmodernism as worldviews, explain their interdependence, highlight the general features of Buddhism's adaptation to the new conditions of the XX-XXI centuries, and finally provide examples that can be conditionally characterized as «Buddhist postmodernism».

The research context. Defining postmodernism within the framework of scientific research is not an easy task due to the lack of a single, agreed-upon approach. However, the phenomenon of postmodernism becomes more precise in its interaction with what is being criticized, that is, with mod-

ernism. In this text, I consider modernism not in a historical context (as the period from the XIV-XV century to the first half of the XX century) but as a cultural and civilizational paradigm that, according to Michel Foucault, determined historical movement, progress, and culture for several centuries.

Postmodernism, in turn, is a critique of modernism, its «shadow», which reflects, evaluates and ironizes the legacy of the previous era. It is also a paradigm that seeks to rethink the West's civilizational foundations, reveal modernism's weaknesses, and propose an alternative coordinate system for the future.

However, the question arises about the subjectivity of postmodernism as a project. Many thinkers and critics whose works are considered manifestos of a new era often did not identify with this movement. This may be due to a key feature of postmodernism – the critique of identity itself.

Let us briefly define both phenomena in order to outline better the context in which new trends in Buddhism are taking shape. In turn, this definition will help to see more clearly the changes Western Buddhism is undergoing under the influence of postmodernism and its intellectual atmosphere.

Studying modernism, sociologist Anthony Giddens highlights several key features of this civilizational attitude:

- 1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human interventions;
- 2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy;
- 3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy (Giddens, 1998: 94).

An essential feature of modernism is that humanity focuses attention and efforts not on the present or the past but develops various projects for the future. Modernism pushes a person to inhabit the future thanks to science, technology, capitalism, mass production, etc. The pre-modern world experiences scientific disenchantment (Gerth & Mills, 1948) and demythologizing, which forms a fixed belief in the ability of reason to fully comprehend all the laws of being. In turn, modernism creates its mega-mythology of progress, which, in political ideologies, has acquired different shades depending on the means by which they sought to achieve the dream of future prosperity. Man and his worldview also undergo drastic changes: traditional ideas are supplanted by faith in scientific and technological progress, creating the basis for the further symbiosis of man-technology, in which the determining function is performed by reason (which is the myth of the Enlightenment), and the rest only help reason to carry the light of Prometheus.

Motivating a rational change of the future, the modern attitude influenced changes in most spheres of human life:

- science and technology determined material reality and provided dynamics of progress;
- individualism is increasing, which gives a person more personal freedom and opportunities for realization. At the same time, a modern person becomes alienated from society's traditional ties, lonelier, isolated;
- living space is rapidly urbanizing and industrializing. The centers of creative energies of humanity are becoming cities, where utilitarianism, functionalism, pragmatism, and the desire for sustainable productivity prevail;
- in the religious sphere, active secularization and demythologizing of doctrines took place;
- in the sphere of art, new media, genres, and means of expression (photography and video) increasingly gained a voice;
- the everyday life of a person was closely intertwined with the mass production of goods, industrial changes, and the scale of construction;
- the political sphere became increasingly massive, and the spectrum of ideologies allowed to represent all possible ideas about the status of a person, a nation, and ways to realize an ideal future. I want to note that all key concepts were also understood differently in different ideologies. For

example, freedom, justice, equality, the right to realize one's dreams, and national projects acquired opposite incarnations in different ideologies.

Actually, history has shown in many examples that a modern person who is oriented towards progress but forgets about the present, ethical values, and humanity (which he is ready to sacrifice for the sake of progress) turns into a monster, a brilliant monster, a tyrant capable of large-scale crimes. The First and Second World Wars, genocides of various groups on national, religious, and political grounds, the Holocaust and the Holodomor, and the terrors of the «red regimes» in different countries of the world showed another side of modernism and its attitude. The achievements of Reason, technology, and scientific inventions can be used for the effective mass destruction of «enemies» who were previously deprived of the status of «people». Instead of the aristocratic elite, clerics, a new elite of magnates, bankers, nomenclature, and bureaucracy came to power.

In the post-war period of the XX century, many philosophers joined the criticism of modernism. Among the authors who are considered postmodern, it is worth mentioning Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1995), Jean Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984), Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, Guattari & Foucault, 2009), Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1994), Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 2002), Richard Rorty (Rorty, Williams & Bromwich, 2017), Paul Feyerabend (Feyerabend & Hacking, 2010), etc. Each of these authors criticized the metanarratives of modernity, which include objectivity, rationalism, historical progress, and identity. The methods of combating these ideas of modernism were intellectual sabotage, irony, and play, which manifested themselves in different ways, depending on the author's discourse. The attention of postmodernists was also focused on showing the artificiality of the binary pairs on which the worldview of the modern era was formed: objectivity-subjectivity, reason-affects, progress-decadence, city-village, identity-hybridity, church-state, religion-science, modernity-tradition, etc. In this picture, there is always an ideal and a consequential opposite. Actually, postmodernists amplified the voice of opposites with their rhetoric, and then it remained only to observe the consequences to which this led. As a result of these experiments and intellectual jokes, a radical rethinking of the foundations occurred in various fields. For example, in the philosophy of science, new theories appeared regarding the formation of the nature of knowledge and progress; in the social sciences, interest in the mutual influence of the individual and the group deepened; in religious studies, there was a turn to religious phenomena and movements that did not fit into the previous picture. The metanarratives of modernity largely determined the worldview for several centuries and also justified colonialism, assimilation, military intervention, etc.

A considerable price had to be paid for the modernist ideal of world progress. In addition to large-scale wars, destruction, and genocides, we also inherited environmental disasters, global warming, and the strengthening of authoritarian regimes. In fact, modern humanity has faced challenges, the solution of which depends on whether the world will continue to exist. As for postmodernism and its further fate, its nature does not include any special structure on which an alternative to modernism can be built. This movement cancels itself when applied to metanarratives, absorbing into the corresponding existing institutions and pictures of the world.

Postmodernism and Buddhism. As a sprawling network of different, similar discourses, Buddhism has also been influenced by new ideas of postmodernism. These ideas have been used both to criticize «orientalism» in relation to Buddhist traditions and to reflect on trends that have emerged in the process of translation to the West (I write about these trends and their characteristics above in the book). Buddhist thinkers and activists also join global processes, particularly by adopting post-modern intellectual tools.

For example, Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Theravada monk known in the West and a translator of canonical texts into English, believes that Buddhism is integrated into Western history and has been influenced by all significant narratives. In his lecture on the postmodern model of Buddhism (Bodhi, 2010), he mentions the premodern era, its change by modernism, and its subsequent displacement into the crit-

ical stage of postmodernism. Although modernism has given humanity many useful things, including individual identity and freedom from religious dogma, it has left the same person alone with the challenges of time, isolated and alienated from all previous connections.

Modernism also reduced a person to specific characteristics that meet the era's demands but, at the same time, ignored all other consequential characteristics or aspects – for example, emotions, empathy, community, etc. Thanks to postmodern criticism, an important participatory turn occurs when the community regains its role as an agent of change, and the individual finds a scenario of non-egoistic behavior. For Buddhism, this is expressed in a return to important themes of cultivating compassion for living beings and including a person in a broader picture of the world, where a person does not have a central position, but everything exists in interdependent interaction. One of the responses to the modern world crisis in Buddhism is its involvement, that is, a socially active movement, the purpose of which is to fight for human rights, ecology, freedom, etc. There is an active exchange of ideas between Buddhism and postmodernism in philosophy. For example, Harold Coward explores Derrida's deconstruction in the context of Indian philosophy (Coward, 1990), Newman Grass analyzes the postmodern philosophy of religion in Buddhism and the West (Glass, 1995), Ann Gleig traces the evolution of hippie ideas into postmodern narratives of postmodern Buddhism (Gleig, 2014), and Takao Hagiwara compares Derrida's views with Zen Buddhism (Hagiwara, 2014). Also interesting in the context of the dialogue between Buddhism and postmodernism are the works of Dan Lee (2016), Anna Lutkajtis (2019), David McMahan (2008), Donovan Muir (n.d.), Carl Olson (2000), John Pickering (1995), Gina Park (2010), Simon Smith (1997), etc. It is important to understand that this dialogue is interdisciplinary, which in itself is the result of postmodern criticism: the theoretical discourse of Buddhism is formed, interpreted, and voiced by both Buddhists, representing different positions on their own tradition and researchers. The previous modern assumption that scientists know Buddhism better than its bearers has ceased to work. In contrast, there is an actual attempt to understand Buddhism as a living network of alternative, original religion.

Another response of modern Buddhism is the emergence of various institutions that seek to spread their own vision of the future, where ethical leadership, meditation programs for cultivating compassion, and initiatives to help socially vulnerable groups are of great importance. Attempts to criticize the pretentiousness of science (Wallace, 2000), «cognitive imperialism» (Roth, 2008), secularism (Bodhi, 2015), etc. are gaining increasing importance. In other words, modern Buddhism is quite actively and successfully adapting to global conditions, responding to the demands of postmodernism and applying self-reflection and self-criticism in various intellectual environments. The emergence of the Internet also catalyzed significant changes in Buddhism in the postmodern era, as well as the development of information technologies, which significantly expanded the possibilities of communication between environments, schools, and Buddhist countries. This was facilitated by the emergence of the phenomenon of cyber-sangha (Prebish, 2004), as well as the cartography of Buddhism through social networks as a huge, widespread, living reality of communities trying to find a value foundation in the modern world.

Buddhist postmodernism. In addition to the general influence of postmodern ideas on engaged Buddhism, comparative studies, and the enrichment of Buddhist philosophy, there are also specific phenomena that scholars define as Buddhist postmodernism. These phenomena illustrate hybridization, the lack of clear boundaries between identities or denominations, the use of information technology, and an emphasis on horizontal connections. I offer a few examples for consideration.

In a thorough study of contemporary Buddhism in the United States, Dr. Ann Gleig (2019) draws attention to a community that may be an example of Buddhist postmodernism. This is the «Buddhist Geeks Project» and its subsidiary project, «Meditate.io», which have existed since 2007. The creators of these initiatives were Vince Horn and Ryan Oelke, representatives of the millennial generation who seek to combine Buddhism (meditation and philosophy) with modern information technologies. They

also view Buddhism as a program in which «code» can and should be improved. They created a series of podcasts to which they invited various teachers, scientists, programmers, and other interested people. Subsequently, they organized several conferences to prepare the ground for the development of developments in the format of a platform for teaching postmodern Buddhist meditation. A feature of the approach is that in the phrase «Buddhist meditation», there was less and less of Buddhism itself because, for the supporters of this initiative, neither traditional teachings nor texts have special significance.

Vince Horn defines «Buddha Geeks» as a modern koan (Gleig, 2014: 179), an unanswered question that should break specific patterns of thinking. In his opinion, the modern generation should take responsibility for the project of Buddhism of the future in symbiosis with technology. Interestingly, both founders of the project were students of Naropa University, which is also a vivid example of a non-denominational, interdisciplinary approach to Buddhist teachings. To a certain extent, this educational institution as an intellectual environment can be defined as postmodern Buddhism, genetically derived from Vajrayana, Tibetan Buddhism, thanks to its founder, Chögyam Trungpa. At this university, the idea for the “Buddhist Geeks” project was born.

Podcast recordings can serve as an audio archive of conversations with famous people. For example, Emma Seppala (scientific director of The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education), James Hughes (Buddhist transhumanist), Daniel Ingram (self-proclaimed arahant, author of a meditation technique), Stephen Batchelor (secular Buddhist), David Loy (Buddhist eco-activist) participated in the conversations. As of June 2024, there were more than 450 issues (Buddhist Geeks on Apple Podcasts, 2024), which became a kind of manifesto of «geeks».

Ann Gleig highlights several main themes that are key to the project and its ideologists:

1) «Much of Buddhist Geeks was devoted to celebrating how technology and social media were being used to both aid traditional Buddhist practices and enable the emergence of radically innovative forms of Buddhism». (Gleig, 2019: 188).

2) «...the advancement of an integrative and world-affirming approach to Buddhism in which all aspects of contemporary daily life – technology, business, relationships, social justice, and creativity – were legitimated as potential sites for awakening» (Gleig, 2019: 189).

3) «...the advancement of a pragmatic and experiential approach to Buddhism that utilizes whatever teachings and practices are helpful to end suffering. This type of orientation is commonly referred to as “DIY Buddhism» (Gleig, 2019: 189).

4) «...a disruption of traditional Buddhist forms of hierarchy and authority and an emphasis on the democratization of practice. This democratization occurred on multiple levels, from the recasting of enlightenment as a natural human developmental capacity to the emergence of more collective and participatory models of Buddhist communities» (Gleig, 2019: 190).

5) «...a pluralistic and nonsectarian approach to exploring not only multiple Buddhist lineages and traditions, but also other contemplative traditions and systems and discourses of knowledge» (Gleig, 2019: 191).

In line with these themes, it is natural to see secular, transhumanist, posthumanist, and posttraditional Buddhists participating in conferences, seeking opportunities to voice their own positions. This kind of polyphony complements Buddhism with postmodern perspectives.

The subsidiary project «Meditate.io» is an attempt to go beyond the confessional framework to offer a set of tools, instructions, and «spiritual technologies» to modern people. The project also aims to launch the next generation in the mindfulness movement, which is mainly associated with the «boomer generation» (Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Jon Kabat-Zinn, etc.). The terminology is also changing: there are many more analogies with coding, information engineering, and awakening technology. Metaphors of the information age prevail over Buddhist terminology in the geek lexicon. Interestingly, criticizing the previous generation for artificial stereotypes about Buddhism, geeks also

claim to create universal maps of meditation and consciousness. This universalism has all the signs of perennialism, which is already familiar to the 20th century but is armed with a belief in the power of information technology. Buddhist geeks emphasize the participatory, lace-like nature of the practice. Instead of focusing on the individual, on one's qualities, it is worth refocusing attention on social practices, a shared vision, and a community-creating meditative culture (Gleig, 2019: 198).

Paradoxically and in the spirit of postmodernism, Buddhist geeks do not reject modernism altogether. The myth of the scientific nature of Buddhist teachings, which was born thanks to Buddhist modernism, although it is actively criticized, continues to develop in the context of the Internet, code, software, and video games (McGonigal, 2011). Although the previous generation could not understand the limitations of modernism, the geeks want to claim the role of those who «can correctly» combine Buddhist teachings with modernity. This generation can find the Buddhist singularity (Wiegand, 2010).

They also borrow from Buddhist modernism with an emphasis on meditative experience. Daniel Ingram's pragmatism (Ingram, 2018) is reinforced by the thesis that the previous generation did not pay enough attention to personal experience (Gleig, 2019: 203). One should take more initiative in «collecting» and «disassembling» meditative practices and Buddhist teachings (Rinzler, 2012): here, too, we observe the metaphors of information technology. Not forgetting the dangers of excessive commercialization of meditative practices and the transformation of mindfulness into McM mindfulness, Buddhist geeks aim to radically change the situation, maximally de-democratizing it (making it accessible to everyone) and hybridizing it (further decontextualizing it from Buddhism and combining it with other «spiritual practices»).

Thus, «Buddha Geeks» is a rather paradoxical phenomenon of Buddhist postmodernism, combining elements of modernism (dialogue with science and technology, meditative experience, etc.) and postmodernism (anti-hierarchy, participatory, hybridization, overcoming Buddhist identity). They remain open to dialogue and involve other «alternative» models of Buddhism (secular, transhumanist, post-traditional Buddhists). Through the mediation of famous teachers, they also maintain certain connections with traditional denominations of Buddhism, as well as an emphasis on the need to give a voice to the Buddhist diaspora. In the spirit of postmodernism, they criticize the discourse of the «white Western Buddhist» as a vestige of the colonial era. For example, in a speech on Buddhist postmodernism, Carl Gregg mentions being inspired by Chenxing Han's book (Han, 2021), where the author argues why Buddhism in the West needs to engage diasporic Buddhism.

In addition to the «Buddha Geeks», examples of Buddhist postmodernism can be found in the Theravada of Thailand (Taylor, 2021) and in Zen Buddhism in the United States. A striking case is Tony Packer's community, which broke away from Philip Kapleau's organization and created its educational project, which severed ties with traditional identity (McMahan, 2008: 245). Furthermore, of course, the initiatives of the very baroque Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa, who founded Naropa University (McMahan, 2008) outside of traditional Buddhist ties, transmitting his views on education as a special place for spiritual transformation to the next generation of students and teachers.

Conclusions. Buddhist postmodernism is a reminder that the era's general features affect the community's internal processes, changes, and transformations. Buddhism is a network of diverse communities and environments that contains different forms of interpretation of key doctrines or practices. In such conditions, the emergence of «Buddha Geeks», post-Zen communities, or the blurring of confessional frameworks with other worldview systems is an entirely natural phenomenon, a sign of the spirit of the times.

Currently, we can observe how the legacy of the dialogue between Buddhism and the West is being rethought and critically evaluated. Thanks to the intellectual tools of postmodern philosophers, Buddhists have an interesting opportunity to experiment with their own identity, meditative practices, and, in general, with a vision of the future. In these conditions, the importance of personal, alternative

interpretations of Buddhist philosophy is growing, which is not always easily perceived in a traditional environment.

Ultimately, Buddhism is a network of different communities that belong to a large number of schools, trends, and cultures. Buddhism's natural ability to adapt, to change, and yet retain its own ideological identity is most vividly expressed in the phenomenon of Buddhist postmodernism. This phenomenon is another reminder that Buddhism is about living people who find themselves in different situations, contexts, and life stories that motivate them to join this dynamic movement. In addition to mastering the fundamental principles of the teachings, they also add their personality and touch to the texts or artifacts that emerge from intellectual experiments.

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