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A Report on “The Dharma and the Dime” from Washington DC

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On Wednesday, November 29 in Washington DC at the 116th Annual American Anthropological Association (AAA) a group of scholars convened on a panel titled *The Dharma and the Dime: Ethics and Economics in the Anthropology of Buddhism*. Reviewed by the Society for the Anthropology of Religion, the panel was organized and chaired by Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg (Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Copenhagen) and Christoph Brumann (Professor and Head of Research Group, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology).

The central aim of the panel attended to the anthropology of Buddhism and how rich ethnographic studies have done much to bring the entanglements of Buddhist economics, entrepreneurialism, and social engagement to the fore. The panel highlighted these entanglements as well as the complexities and ambiguities of Buddhist economic life, including the challenge of supporting monastic and lay communities in an ethical yet economically viable manner.

Presentations were given by Alexander Horstmann (Associate Professor, Tallinn University), Jason WM Ellsworth (PhD Candidate, Dalhousie University), Kristina Jonutytė (PhD Candidate, Max Planck Insti-

tute for Social Anthropology), Beata Switek (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology), Hannah Klepeis (PhD Candidate, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology). Acting as Discussant, Stephen Covell (Chair, Western Michigan University) provided feedback, thoughts, and questions to drive a lively discussion which continued into the evening after the panel.

Noted by some of the presenters, the legacy of Max Weber’s writings on Buddhism lingers today, leading to the common perception of Buddhists as “economy-less”—as somehow apart from economic as well as political and social engagements in their pursuit of “salvation” and spiritual development. This understanding, promoted by early text-based scholars of Buddhism and Orientalists, leads to the assumption that Asian Buddhists engaging with the economic, social, and political spheres are following a somewhat degraded and inauthentic form of Buddhism. Associating Buddhism with asceticism and anti-materialism is a dominant trope in these Orientalist discourses that at times also postulate a moral, spiritual East that might possibly rescue an immoral, materialistic West.

Material and economic engagement has, however, been a central aspect of Buddhist life since at least the fifth century BCE. In contrast to the “non-economic spirituality” postulated by Weber, scholars have argued that the spread of the monetary economy accompanying the shift to an agrarian society and urbanization in India not only created the circumstances for the growth of Buddhism but was also the primary motivation for Siddhartha Gautama’s rejection of entrenched social hierarchies. Flows of cash and resources have played a central role in the support of Buddhist communities and the construction of magnificent monasteries which feed and house so-called “mendicant” monks.

Alexander Horstmann’s paper *The Prosperous Ascetic: Branding and Imaging the Buddhist Saint (Krupa) in the Mekong Region*, focused on the

borderland region of Thailand, Myanmar, China and Laos, where a new generation of Buddhist saints are in the center of revitalizing Theravada Buddhism through what he termed “charismatic capitalism.” Branding themselves as Buddhist Saviour-Kings, Bodhisattva, and Monument Builders, thousands of devotees from the region as well as from the Metropolis attend the birthday ceremonies of these saints. During these ceremonies, the saintliness is sanctified by the Kruba’s, or saint’s, alleged redistribution of the acquired wealth to Buddhist monks, novices, and Buddhist monuments. Horstmann focused on the sophisticated strategies and aspirations within the reproduction of sainthood, charisma, and influence. Drawing upon Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2001) perspective on “millennial capitalism,” the paper explored the deep ties, exchanges, activities and transactions of these Buddhist Saints with their diverse faith communities, which include: other influential monks, wealthy urban business and political elite, the Bangkok middle class as well as impoverished highland communities.

Throughout the paper Horstmann examined how Buddhism is positioned to mobilize money and labour for the extensive temple building projects that contribute to the saint’s fame and reputation. The talk also explored the use of performance, and social media (e.g. Facebook) in the making of a charismatic monk and sacred leader. Particular attention was given to the imaging, presentation, and visibility of the Buddhist saint’s image as an icon of sacred leadership and Buddhist revitalization.

Jason WM Ellsworth’s paper *Balancing Value and Values: Buddhist Social Economic Enterprises on Prince Edward Island* asked the question whether or how Buddhists grapple with balancing values (ethics) with value (economics), when the Buddhists have commercial practices that are needed to sustain a community. Ellsworth more specifically asked what sits in the balance when socially active Buddhist movements act as

counter-political projects, yet remain entwined in the current mainstream corporate economy.

Ellsworth’s fieldwork and research focused on a global movement of Buddhist Taiwanese NGOs connected to Bliss & Wisdom (also known as Fu Chi) into Canada since 2007 as an engaged and socially active Buddhist community with a number of non-profit and for-profit social economic enterprises. With new affiliated organizations on PEI (such as the Great Enlightenment Buddhist Institute Society, Great Wisdom Buddhist Institute, and the Moonlight International Foundation) the local and global model inspired by the female lay leader Master Zhen Ru has created a transnational movement of lay-run social enterprises and organizations that include grocery stores, corporate organic agricultural businesses, organic certification programs, non-profit food programs, animal sanctuaries, and vegetarian restaurants. Concluding, Ellsworth modified the opening question, using anthropologist David Graeber’s work on theories of value, asking instead how scholars address the questions of value (economic) and values (ethical/moral).

Kristina Jonutyte presented a paper titled *Work, Migration and Loans: Consultations with Lamas in Post-socialist Ulan-Ude*. Jonutyte’s work examined how locals of Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia (Russian Federation), bemoaned an economic crisis, but did not perceive it as something out of the ordinary. Instead, many saw it as a continuation of the grim socio-economic situation since the 1990s, coupled with a milieu of distrust and despair not unusual in provincial Russia. As Buddhist practices and institutions have resurged in post-Soviet Buryatia, many laypeople turn to Buddhist specialists for ritual help and advice in the setting of private consultations in temples and lama offices. These often revolve around topics such as work-related migration, bank loans and job hunting, and lamas do not shy away from such matters but strive to advise the laity.

Jonutyte discussed how consultations are one of several lay strategies for managing socio-economic challenges. Using examples of consultations with lamas related to economic matters, it was argued that the Buddhist sangha not just “conjures hope” (building off of Lindquist 2005) in difficult situations, but also provides practical advice and help – a far cry from the salvation-oriented and detached Buddhism as seen by Max Weber.

Beata Switek’s *Buddhist Business Plan: Chance Encounters and Economic Sustainability of Japanese Buddhist Temples* looked at how a typical Buddhist temple in Japan is run by an abbot, who, in legal terms, is also its managing director. The priest, usually a man, is the main person to attend to religious practices and to assure the temple’s economic viability. Assisted by his wife and/or other family members, the abbot needs to make sure that the income he generates is sufficient to support the temple, its activities, and his family. In this sense, Japanese temples are akin to small or medium family businesses and as such they need to make sure that what they offer attracts enough interest and money. However, due to demographic and social changes, these are not easy to garner and many temples have already been forced to close down.

Switek notes, as priests are looking to rekindle their relationship with people through various enterprises, rather than purposefully seeking out profit-making opportunities, some of them rely on chance encounters to shape their temple business. The approach stems from the Pure Land Buddhism’s doctrinal belief in the “power of the other” as the cornerstone of one’s life trajectory. Such recasting of economic activities as mere acceptance of what comes one’s way allows for the activities in the market to be seen as essentially religious. Switek gave examples including a marketing school for abbots and operational nitty-gritty of two Tokyo temples, and examined the possibilities and limitations of the

chance-based temple economies both in terms of ethical reasoning as well as economic sustainability.

Hannah Klepeis’s *Capitalizing upon Ritual: Marketization and Transformations of Buddhist Practices in Shangrila* discussed the interrelations between economic development and (household) rituals amongst Tibetan Buddhists in Shangrila, Southwest China. The rapid growth of the tourism industry over the past two decades has substantially altered the social and economic structure of the region. Along with secular markers of social status commonly found across China, such as large houses, expensive cars and fashionable clothing, Tibetan lay people in Shangrila often talk of rituals as markers of economic status. Large rituals and high remunerations of the participating monks are also criticized regularly as they highlight the unequal distribution of wealth. Klepeis considered how such criticism is not confined to the lavish behaviour of laity itself, but also extends to the local monks who are considered to acquiesce to, if not encourage, this transformation of ritual practice into a highly monetised form from which they economically profit.

Through an analysis of the transformations that have taken place within Shangrila’s ritual marketplace, Klepeis drew out the broader implications of China’s economic liberalism upon relations between monastics and laity, as well as ritual practices in a Tibetan Buddhist community.

Discussant Stephen Covell succinctly tied the papers together via their similar themes and theoretical aspects. This prompted a good discussion and questions. Particularly, attendees brought forth questions on the value and values paradigm.

With the growing interest in meditation and mindfulness, Buddhism is now a ubiquitous presence in the global marketplace, with Buddhist goods and services produced and exchanged, gifted, bought and

sold. As noted by some of the speakers this has transformed the role of Buddhists in contemporary society, especially regarding new forms of entrepreneurialism and creative modes for maintaining Buddhist institutions, such as the establishment of non-profit organizations to promote community development and ethical engagement.

The papers addressed aspects related to economic engagement and possible ethical ambiguities. They furthermore highlight how Buddhists across the world cannot help engaging with a market economy not just to pay the bills but also to secure the survival and spread of Buddhism in the future. How Buddhist organizations, temples, monks, nuns and believers negotiate ethical and economic demands from an increasingly engaged lay community illustrates the complexities of contemporary religious life in a global market economy. From Buddhist saints enacting a form of “charismatic capitalism” to temple priests facing intense criticism for engaging with capitalism, the relation of Buddhism and business proves to be a complex affair.