Unmasking Buddhism - Bernard Faure (Quotations)

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This book talks about misconceptions in Westerns minds about Buddhism. Section titles are simply examples of slogans travelling in typical mind who follows this religion from the mainstream media.

I was aware about some of these but the extent the author presents, I wasn't aware of. It's a short, nice and engaging read.

Quotations ##########

From their point of view, there is no Buddhism; strictly speaking, there are only Buddhists. Or, put another way, Buddhism is not an essence in itself, it is something Buddhists do. (p. 10)

[Buddhism] gradually spread its way across the rest of the subcontinent during the third century BCE following the conversion of King Ashoka, founder of the first Indian empire. (p. 13)

Some also distinguish a third school of Buddhism, known as the "Diamond Vehicle" (Vajrayana), which is also referred to as or esoteric Buddhism or Tantrism (after the name of its canonic texts, the Tantras (p. 13)

It could even be described as military in certain cases, if we are to believe the Mahāparinirvāna Sutra: "If a layperson observes the five precepts but does not bear arms to protect the monks, he does not deserve to go by the name of mahāyānist." (p. 15)

On a soteriological level, Awakening (bodhi) overrode the previous ideal of nirvāna. Where the conception of the Buddha was concerned, relative historicism was transformed into radical docetism and the Buddha, who had become purely "metaphysical," was multiplied (p. 15)

Tantric rituals place a great deal of emphasis on symbols of all kinds: invocations (mantra, dharānī), hand gestures (mudrā) and geometric drawings (mandala) (p. 16)

They emphasize one detail which they claim could not have been invented: he is said to have died as a result of eating contaminated pork. (p. 18)

At the age of 16, Prince Siddharta married Yashodharā and they had a child, Rāhula (the name means "Obstacle" and speaks volumes about Siddharta's paternal feelings) (p. 19)

Contact with or proximity to these relics was said to have magical efficacy increasing the chances of happiness in this world and of salvation in the other world (p. 21)

There is also mention of the future buddha, Maitreya, who it is said will appear in several millions of years, although his "biography" remains somewhat vague (p. 21)

The weak-spirited (which refers to the followers of Hīnayāna) will, he says, continue to believe in the conventional truth of the biography of the Buddha, whereas his most advanced disciples will know the ultimate truth – the transcendent nature of the Buddha (p. 22)

The question is certainly of little consequence for traditional Buddhists, who see the life of the Buddha, above all, as a model and an ideal to be followed (p. 23)

By "forgetting" Chinese Buddhism as it did, "Buddhology" and Sinology have become heirs to a Chinese tradition (essentially Confucian) which considers this doctrine to be a "barbaric" religion (p. 29)

[I]t has become increasingly evident that Buddhism is not – and probably never was – the harmonious doctrine its advocates would have us believe (p. 30)

In the Hīnayāna tradition, nirvāna was defined as the extinction of all desires, a pure absence (p. 30)

The Mahāyāna tradition, however, went further, triggering a mental revolution: the indefinable nirvāna is now defined according to four terms: permanence, bliss, subjectivity, and purity (p. 30)

"When your mind is pure, the world becomes a Pure Land." (p. 31)

For [Hegel] the Buddhist nirvāna is simply nothingness, "which Buddhists make the principle of everything, the final goal and the ultimate end of everything." He therefore considered it completely natural that the Buddha should be represented adopting a "thinking posture" in which "feet and hands are intertwined with a toe entering the mouth." This is the perfect expression of a "withdrawal into oneself, sucking on oneself (p. 31)

Schopenhauer's views, in The World as Will and Representation, are similar to those of Hegel on this point when he writes: "Defining Nirwana [sic] as nothingness amounts to saying that samsāra does not contain a single element which could serve to define or construct Nirwana." Nietzsche, on the other hand, sees in Buddhism a "nostalgia for nothingness", an "asthenia of the will" and states that "tragedy must save us from Buddhism." The nihilist theory rests on two fallacies: one is an error regarding the goal, namely nirvāna, the transcendental nature of which falls beyond any possible formulation yet has been interpreted as simple inexistence or annihilation; the other is an error relating to the dialectical method of the Mādhyamika which proceeds according to negation, but does not stop at negation, and which dismisses all notions, even that of emptiness. This simply means that we

cannot say anything about ultimate reality; it does not mean that reality does not exist beyond or outside of what we can say. According to Roger-Pol Droit, this misunderstanding, which lasted throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, is symptomatic of the evils of Western society; it reveals in particular the fears of Western philosophers when faced with the specter of nihilism. This extended beyond a simple yet regrettable inability to understand a doctrine too different from our own; it also represented an actual political strategy, an active form of resistance against the radical evils which appeared to be threatening Western society. The European conscience projected its own fears onto Buddhism. (p. 32)

The logical or epistomological arguments put forward by Buddhist scholars are certainly no less valid than those proposed by their Western colleagues. However, they always fall within a particular framework which is that of Buddhist deliverance rather than that of universal reason. (p. 34)

Numerous texts state that there are two kinds of obstacle to Awakening – passion and knowledge. All empirical knowledge, being conditioned, bears the stamp of illusion. (p. 35)

[A]pophatic or negative approach sees Awakening as inconceivable, inexpressible, and unreachable. It can only be approached through a dialectical double negation (neither this nor that) or, ultimately, through silence. (p. 36)

Just as a man who suffers with flatulence is given beans to eat, so that wind may overcome wind in the way of a homoeopathic cure, so existence is purified by existence in the countering of discursive thought by its own kind (p. 37)

Can Awakening be obtained through being?" – "No." – "Through non-being?" – "No." – "Through being and non-being?" – "No." "Through neither being nor non-being?" – "No." – "So how can we grasp its meaning?" "Nothing can be grasped; this is what we call obtaining Awakening." The ninth-century master Linji Yixuan, founder of the Linji (Japanese: Rinzai) sect that went on to become one

of the two largest schools in Japanese Zen, described knowledge as a “cataract on the eye” and its objects as “flowers in the sky,” that is, ophthalmological illusions. He provides his own version of the tetralemma, describing the relationship between the knowing subject and the object as follows: “At times one takes away the person but does not take away the environment. At times one takes away the environment but does not take away the person. At times one takes away both the person and the environment. At times one takes away neither the person nor the environment.” When a disciple asks him to elaborate on this first point, he responds with a cryptic poem: “Warm sun shines forth, spreading the earth with brocade. The little child’s hair hangs down, white as silk thread.” He does the same for the other propositions. While his replies are subject to doctrinal hermeneutics, this change in register radically modifies the “philosophical” value of Nāgārjuna’s tetralemma by allocating an oracle-like nature to the language (p. 38)

Émile Durkheim in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912), Buddhism is indeed a religion in terms of being a “system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred which produces social behaviors and unites all the individuals who adhere to it within the same community. (p. 39)

[A]rhat practices only for himself, to reach nirvāna as quickly as possible, while the bodhisattva, in his great compassion, aspires to become a buddha only to guide all other beings towards Awakening, and refuses salvation if it is only individual. (p. 40)

These bodhisattvas have the power to manifest themselves in any form (divine, human, or animal) to help those in need. They appear even among the damned in hell or take an animal form to help animals (p. 41)

[F]or the vast majority of Buddhists in Asia, this notion of Awakening is too often used as a convenient alibi to disguise the fact that the real practice seeks first and foremost to obtain worldly benefits, whether material (such as prosperity) or symbolic (such as prestige (p. 42)

Laypeople primarily seek to obtain tangible benefits such as happiness, prestige, or wealth, or to obtain slightly less tangible benefits immediately: the salvation of a loved one in the afterlife, for example. Awakening remains the confessed goal of clerics although, in practice, most monastic communities are also seeking material prosperity or renown in this world and greater recognition in the next (p. 42)

In certain schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Awakening is no longer a goal in itself; it is more a question of achieving balance between Awakening and skillful means. After all, the Vimalakīrti Sutra states that wisdom without expedients is no better than expedients without wisdom. (p. 43)

As one Zen master puts it: "Awakening that is aware of itself is Awakening in a dream." (p. 44)

It was not the expectation of Awakening that convinced Chinese, Tibetan, and Japanese leaders to convert to Buddhism but rather the protection Buddhism appeared to offer them against evils of all kinds, both individual and collective (epidemics, invasions, etc.) (p. 44)

[B]irth is suffering, old age is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, contact with something one does not like is suffering, separation from something one does like is … (p. 45)

[T]hat of the damned (the Buddhist hells), of the animals, of the hungry ghosts, of the asura (a kind of Titan), of humans, and of the devas (celestial beings). It is always a human, in the end, who is reborn in an infernal, animal, or celestial state, (p. 47)

It is primarily this second schema that influenced the ulterior development of Buddhism, notably in China and in Japan, by allowing the emergence of a mythological description of the afterlife (with hells and paradises) (p. 47)

Nāgārjuna claims to prove the unrealistic nature of karmic retribution, transmigration (samsāra), suffering, and deliverance. He does not consider the Four Truths to be noble truths but rather insufficient half-truths that must be transcended through his dialectical method. Yet they remain indispensable as a preliminary approach, just like the conventional truth is indispensable to reach the ultimate truth (p. 48)

[N]on-dualist thought of Mahāyāna Buddhism denies any duality between samsāra and nirvāna or between passion and Awakening. (p. 49)

Every action is perceived as a cause that brings about an effect: the effect will follow on irreversibly from the cause. It is, however, the intention that determines the act. Each one of us is responsible for his or her own actions and each current action is itself determined by a long series of past acts (p. 50)

Early Buddhism focuses on the moral value of the action and rejects ritualism and the worshiping of gods. (p. 51)

[W]hat is it that transmigrates if the self is simply an illusory series of states of consciousness which disappear into death? (p. 52)

Where Chinese Buddhism is concerned, the conception of the other world underwent a significant development with the theory of the Ten Kings of Hell and in particular the court of King Yama, where the deceased are judged based on their past actions and have to undergo a kind of purgatory before they can be reborn (p. 53)

In Japan, for example, it has been used to justify social discrimination against certain groups of individuals previously known as eta ("impure") and nowadays referred to as burakumin ("hamlet people") (p. 54)

[T]he concept of self has to retain a slight element of reality if the notion of karmic retribution is to be retained, upon which the Buddhist moral doctrine is based. (p. 57)

Thus, when the third Dalai Lama died – the first to have been given the title of Mongol leader Altan Khan – his reincarnation, the fourth Dalai Lama, was discovered in Mongolia in the body of a child who, by some happy coincidence, turned out to be the great grandson of Altan Khan (p. 59)

[N]o reincarnated lama has yet been found among Afro-Americans or Latinos, let alone among the communist Chinese. (p. 59)

[I]t was the notion of reincarnation which enabled the Gelugpa school to seize the main monasteries of the other schools and allowed their leader, the fifth Dalai Lama, to become a sort of divine king of Tibet with the benediction of the Mongols (p. 60)

[D]uring the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, four Dalai Lamas died before ascending the throne, some in mysterious circumstances. Fortunately, this state of affairs ended with the thirteenth Dalai Lama. (p. 60)

The present Dalai Lama's declaration that he would not be reincarnated is perhaps best interpreted within this context. (p. 61)

As noted by the French scholar André Bareau: “As the sons of India, the Buddha and his disciples shared all the ideas of their compatriots … on the existence of numerous gods and spirits populating heaven and earth” (Le Bouddhisme indien, 1966). (p. 63)

The Dalai Lama himself has declared that he makes all his important decisions based on oracles delivered by his own personal soothsayer during trances whereby the latter is possessed by one of these fearsome deities of Tibetan Buddhism. (p. 64)

According to orthodoxy, even if Buddhism does recognize the existence of native gods, they differ from the Buddha and the Buddhist saints in that they are subject to the law of cause and effect. Their divine status is the result of good karma and is only temporary. They may acquire superhuman powers for a time but they are in no way completely free and all-powerful beings, as is believed by Hindus for example. They are also at a disadvantage compared to humans as they are so busy enjoying a life of divine bliss, which they believe to be eternal, that they become neglectful of karmic reality and forget to practice the Buddhist law which could save them. Furthermore, in Mahāyāna, the gods eventually lost (at least in theory) what little reality and independence they still had: they become simple projections of the human mind, illusions caused by our karma, or abstract entities created by our mind. They are also often perceived to be local and culturally determined manifestations of the various buddhas and bodhisattvas. In practice, however, most Buddhists still believe in them without question. In general, the further a god climbs in the celestial hierarchy, the fewer direct links he has with humans. Of course, there are significant exceptions to this such as certain great bodhisattvas who are both perfect and near. However, because the lesser gods are subject to the law of causality, like us, they prove to be more accessible: they benefit from rituals carried out for them. (p. 65)

The seven steps taken by the Buddha as a child just after his birth to take possession of the universe are for example reminiscent of the three steps taken by one of Vishnu’s avatars to conquer the Triple World. (p. 66)

Mahāyāna scriptures such as the Lotus Sutra depict him as an eternal, allknowing, and transcendent being whose human vulnerability is simply a pious stratagem. (p. 66)

[I]n Hindu mythology the Buddha is reduced to being a simple avatar of Vishnu who appeared only to trick the heretics (meaning Buddhists) and lead them to ruin. (p. 68)

Buddhism could be described as a polytheistic religion in the sense that it recognizes the relative existence of numerous gods who act as mediators or even saviors, becoming objects of worship. However, given that the ultimate reality is that of the Buddha, Buddhism could also be described as monotheistic. Finally, given that this Buddha is not a god in the Western sense of the term and is considered to be either the first to have understood this ultimate reality (according to early Buddhism) or another name for this ultimate reality (according to Mahāyāna), Buddhism could also, at a pinch, be described as atheistic (p. 69)

People do not bow down before statues of the buddhas and other gods all their life long without seeing them as something more than just symbols or allegories. (p. 71)

[P]rostration before the Buddha is a respectful homage, not to a god but to he who incarnates the ultimate wisdom." (p. 72)

[D]enial of the collective and ritual dimensions of Buddhism shows that an idealized Buddhism can obscure the most obvious sociological realities. (p. 73)

The reinterpretation of Buddhism as "spirituality" is particularly striking in the case of Zen. In Zen and the Birds of Appetite, the Catholic monk Thomas Merton writes: "To define Zen in terms of a religious system or structure is in fact to destroy it – or rather to miss it completely." (p. 74)

The idea has also established itself in popular culture thanks to the influence of various media such as the famous comic strip Tintin in Tibet – so much so that, for some Western intellectuals, any Tibetan nomad becomes a living buddha. (p. 76)

He has even gone so far as to declare that, if he returned to power, he would make Tibet a demilitarized zone, a sort of ecological and spiritual reserve for mankind. It is for all of these reasons that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the same year the Berlin Wall came down. Through him (Tibetan) Buddhism has been perceived as a sort of spiritual humanism specially adapted to the new ethical problems raised by the "humanitarian" crisis and by modern scientific progress. In fact, these are more the values of an alterglobalist counter-culture than of traditional Buddhism. (p. 77)

Furthermore, when we talk of Tibetan religion, we tend to overlook the other great religious tradition of Tibet, the Bön tradition. Actually, the current Bön tradition, which claims to date back to the pre-Buddhist "nameless religion" of Tibet, seems to have formed relatively late, around the eleventh century, and has apparently been strongly influenced by Buddhism (p. 77)

[P]rinciple of non-violence relating to the ultimate truth finds its limits in the world of conventional truth. At the start of the Iraq war, for example, the Dalai Lama stated: "In principle, any resort to violence is wrong. With regard to the Afghanistan and Iraq cases, only history will tell. At this moment, Afghanistan may be showing some positive results, but it is still not very stable. With Iraq, it is too early to say." (p. 78)

Speaking before the war, he said: "If one's motivation is sincere and positive but the circumstances require harsh behavior, essentially one is practicing non-violence" and "No matter what the case may be, I feel that a compassionate concern for the benefit of others – not simply for oneself – is the sole justification for the use of force." But who are these "others" in this case: allies or enemies? At any rate, he seems not to assign any great importance to the principle in the light of political reality. Yet he did stick to the principle in the case of Tibet. Truth on one side of the Pyrenees (or the Himalayas) and error on the other perhaps? There may well be tactical reasons why he would opt to sit on the

fence in this way, and in other contexts he clearly expressed his sympathy for Iraqis and his dismay at the loss of life. Still, in a situation of this kind, any form of neutrality between good and evil seems to be impossible – and the Middle Way itself appears somewhat suspect. As many have pointed out, not speaking out against this war from the outset boils down to political alignment with the United States. What would the Dalai Lama say to a religious leader asking for his opinion on the Chinese occupation of Tibet and repression of the Tibetan monks – "Wait a few years"? Given the place the Dalai Lama holds in the world's imagination as an emblem of peace, it is disappointing that he would not condemn preemptive war outright (p. 79)

The fourth is the highest form and represents a kind of "active" meditation that consists of meditating during everyday activities. Manual labor, for example, is an important form of meditation in Zen, a trait which differentiates this school from other schools of Buddhism (p. 81)

Linji Yixuan, attacked the contemplative trend in no uncertain terms: "There are a bunch of blind baldheads who, having stuffed themselves with rice, sit doing Chan-style meditation practice, trying to arrest the flow of thoughts and stop them from arising, hating clamor, demanding silence – but these aren't Buddhist ways! (p. 81)

Linji went on to conclude: "In my view, the Dharma of the buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down" (The Record of Lin-chi, translated by Ruth Fuller Sasaki) (p. 82)

[F]ounder of the Sōtō sect, Dōgen, transformed the practice of zazen (which he referred to as shikan taza or "sitting only") into a sort of absolute that has come a long way from Indian dhyāna. It is no longer about introspection, but is instead a kind of ritual imitation of the emblematic posture of the buddhas (p. 82)

Suzuki logically concluded that Zen is neither a philosophy nor a religion but is quite simply "the spirit of all religion or philosophy." (p. 83)

The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, saw this notion of oceanic feeling as a form of primary narcissism. Suzuki, on the other hand, has had a significant impact upon the psychoanalytical reinterpretation of Zen by translating "no-mind" or "no-thought" (wuxin in Chinese, mushin in Japanese) – the aim of Zen meditation – as "Unconscious." (p. 83)

Among the "Zen arts," Suzuki attaches great importance to archery. In 1953, in his preface to another questionable classic, Zen in the Art of Archery by Eugen Herrigel, Suzuki praises "this marvellous little book by a German philosopher," probably unaware of Herrigel's earlier sympathies for Nazism (p. 84)

He claims that Devadatta's primary sin was to advocate a more rigorous approach to religious practice, and in particular the strict observance of vegetarianism (p. 91)

If a bodhisattva thinks that living beings exist, he is no longer a bodhisattva (p. 93)

Mahayāna Buddhism – which is defined by its emphasis on ethics – tries to avoid this contradiction through the somewhat paradoxical notion of "compassionate murder," (p. 94)

[B]odhisattva can kill a criminal without incurring retribution if the criminal is about to either kill others or injure a Buddhist, or if he acts through compassion for the criminal if the latter is about to create a karma for himself that will take him to hell (p. 94)

The question of implementing an intermediate solution – controlling rather than killing the bandit – does not even seem to arise. (p. 95)

"If the world had been spared the violent intrusions of the fanatic armies of Islam, it is likely that they [i.e. the two religions, Christianity and Buddhism] could have shared the world in peace." Alfred Foucher, The Life of the Buddha (p. 96)

According to the Abhidharmakosha shāstra for example: "As all soldiers are working towards the same goal, all are as guilty as the one among them who kills. In fact … all are mutually inciting one another – if not in voice, then because they have come together to kill … Even if forced into joining the army, they are guilty unless they make the following resolution: even to save my life, I will not kill a living being." (p. 97)

The person who kills with full knowledge of the facts kills no one, since he has realized that all is but illusion, himself as well as the other person. The idea, moreover, is not exclusive to Buddhism, since it can be found in a classic Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita (p. 99)

This pacifism may be little more than a necessity turned into a virtue. Certainly it has not always been this way. The real Tibet has never been a Shangri-la (p. 100)

When once asked why he chose non-violence to resolve the Tibetan problem, the Dalai Lama burst out laughing, saying: "Six million Tibetans. One billion Chinese!" But can we at least say that there are no holy wars, or at least no just wars, in Buddhism? The concept of a "just war" is fundamentally Christian and cannot be automatically applied to other religions. It is nevertheless useful to discuss some of the elements which are common to Christianity and other religions (p. 100)

[T]he uncleanliness of menstruation and childbirth meant that women were condemned to a special kind of hell known as the Blood Pool Hell (p. 105)

Homosexuality has long been widespread in Japanese Buddhism, and it even came to constitute a "way" in the same way as poetry, tea ceremony, and flower-arranging: "the Way of Ephebes" (shōdō) (p. 106)

Traditional Japanese monasteries were home to a class of boys known as chigo who served as objects of sexual distraction. These novices were unshaven and had long plaits; they wore makeup like young girls (white powder on their faces, stylized eyebrows, and red lips). They played an important part in the monastery's artistic events and in banquets held for the nobility and the shoguns. (p. 106)

"It is true that their fights were often about favorite boys, but what else can be expected in a community of only men and boys?" In stating that salvation is accessible to all living beings and that everyone harbors a spark of Awakening, Buddhism asserts that everyone is equal, in theory. However, cultural deviations and practices have come to greatly undermine this proposition. (p. 106)

Buddhism is based on the notion of the primacy of consciousness while science sees consciousness as a mere by-product (of evolution and the neurological structure of the brain) (p. 108)

It is rather like Pascal's famous sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. An infinite number of worlds coexist in this universe, as infinite, we are told, as the sands of the Ganges (p. 112)

Buddhist thaumaturges are endowed with six powers: (1) the power to pass through objects, to fly, to tame wild animals and to transform themselves however they wish; (2) the divine eye which enables them to see the death and rebirth of all beings; (3) the divine ear which enables them to hear all the sounds of the universe; (4) the ability to read the minds of others; (5) the memory of their own past lives as well as those of others; and above all (6) knowledge of the destruction of all defilements, in other words, the end of ignorance which marks the achieving of buddhahood (p. 119)

Ritual formulas such as the Japanese Namu Amidabutsu, initially aimed at ensuring the rebirth of the deceased into the Pure Land, are also said to prevent revenge by any animals or humans killed (p. 120)

Monks were permitted to eat meat, so long as they were not aware of any animal being killed especially for them (p. 122)

Japanese Buddhism developed the notion that all beings, vegetables included, have a buddha nature and are therefore fundamentally identical (p. 124)

During World War II, Japanese Buddhists supported the war effort without reservation, assisting imperial mysticism with their rhetoric (p. 126)

During wars which have brought two Buddhist countries into conflict (such as the Mongols of Kublai Khan and the Japanese during the thirteenth century) Buddhists have shown no hesitation in siding with their nation, despite their claims of “internationalism.” (p. 129)

[T]his case of an “ordinary” monk shows, monks are men first and foremost, and the monastic community is in fact subject to the same tensions as the rest of society, despite setting the moral bar that bit higher (p. 137)

According to the laws of the Buddha, laicism is not part of religion. The members of the sangha are the only living representatives of Buddhism (p. 138)

Neo-Buddhism has tended to become a sort of impersonal flavorless and odorless spirituality, a kind of Buddhism à la carte (p. 142)

It is this same “Neo-Buddhism” that “Neo-Christianity” comes up against during “religious dialogues” which sometimes lead to “Zen Masses,” having little to do with either Zen or Christianity. This is what happens when you put too much water in your holy wine or tea (p. 143)

[T]he question remains as to why this spirituality still claims to represent Buddhism when it is perhaps instead a relatively moderate form of New Age spirituality. On the other hand, what reason is there to refuse the title of Buddhist to anyone who claims to represent Buddhism (p. 145)