Prompt: Please reflect on the idea of a “normative Buddhism” and it’s relationship to the socio-cultural contexts in which it is lived.  Discuss some of the ways this relationship has been interpreted by modern scholars and the benefits and pitfalls of using such classificatory frames.

**Buddhism as a Whole**

A religion has many aspects to it. A religion has its written texts and all the interpretations of that written text. A religion has customs and traditions different from the texts. Buddhism is no different. There is normative Buddhism and affective Buddhism. They are two aspects whose symbiotic relationship causes Buddhism to prosper.

Spiro is one of many people that has tried to quantify normative Buddhism. Normative Buddhism, also know as cognitive Buddhism, is the written texts that comprise Buddhism. Spiro tries to summarize cognitive Buddhism into six major concepts: materialism, atheism, pessimism, nihilism, egoism, and world-renunciation (Spiro 1982). According to Spiro, normative Buddhism can further be broken up into nibbanic and apotropaic Buddhism (Spiro 1982). Although Spiro’s normative Buddhism proposes a straightforward and simple definition of Buddhism, it is not without some major flaws. By disregarding the socio-cultural contexts within normative Buddhism, Buddhism as a whole is misrepresented.

A complete picture of Buddhism is formed when combining affective Buddhism with normative Buddhism. Affective Buddhism, also known as lived Buddhism, consists of the rituals formed from the scriptures and the interpretation of the scriptures. Part of lived Buddhism includes monks taking on roles not mentioned in normative Buddhism, such as the Sangha burying dead laymen (Gombrich 1984). Other such customs include chanting pirit texts to improve a person’s life (Carrithers 1984). Although these customs are not directly mentioned in the texts of Buddhism, they are important in maintaining a functional relationship between the laymen and monks. This relationship gives laymen a reason to support the monks, allowing monks to focus on meditation and reaching Nirvana, which propagates Buddhism.

Buddhism is able to thrive because of its normative part and its affective part working together. The cognitive part gives Buddhism a rigid base that keeps the religion strict and consistent. It is something physical that followers can point to and say, “This is the reason for Buddhism.” The affective part enables Buddhism to adapt in the modern world. Lived Buddhism ultimately stems from affective Buddhism, and eventually helps define affective Buddhism. Similarly, affective Buddhism helps define lived Buddhism. This cycle is key for Buddhism’s survival through troubled times and its success in a variety of cultures.

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