

“Buddhism and Nationalism in Asia”

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How should we understand the relationship between Buddhism and nationalism? While they are both social phenomena that create and foster communities of belonging, they would seem to have little to do with one another. This is particularly the case if one focuses on the views of insiders. Buddhism is, to many people, a universal truth. It is the teachings of the Buddha which are understood to be perfect in and of themselves and are thought to be applicable to all people, regardless of where they are and when they are living. Nationalism, on the other hand is an ideology that is marked not by universality, but by specificity. A specific group of people (or collection of peoples) is tied to a particular location, often through specific moments of history. Moreover, Buddhism and nationalism foster belonging in different ways: Buddhism fosters belonging in relation to the teachings of the Buddha which apply to everyone; nationalism fosters belonging to the land, the people and perhaps the state. In other words, these two different kinds of social phenomenon would seem to be at odds with one another, and there are not a small number of aspects of society which seem to indicate their differences. For example, within the Theravada Buddhist world, many people will say that it does not matter where a person is from, if they have ordained as a monk or a novice, then respect should be paid to them regardless of their origin.

At the same time, however, there is significant countervailing evidence, suggesting that Buddhism and nationalism have become deeply entangled with one another in the last several centuries. Buddhist monastics are citizens of specific countries and while they are capable of moving easily across borders for educational and pilgrimage reasons, their education usually takes place in a context shaped as much by governance by a specific state as it is by the teachings of the Buddha. Moreover, many Buddhist monks and nuns over the years have felt love for their country as much as, or at the same time as, their love for the teachings of the Buddha. While some might argue that this is a corruption of Buddhism by national identity, I would argue that religions have always been shaped by the polities that they are a part of. This is perhaps particularly the case with Buddhism, a religion where governance has always been performed not by a translocal authority (such as the Catholic church), but by local communities and states (as enforcers of the *vinaya*).

In this lecture, I will examine the relationship of Buddhism and nationalism, within an eye to the ways that they constitute one another. In addition to discussing what nationalism is, and the role of religion within nationalism more broadly, I will examine two cases, Buddhist support for the war effort in China and Japan during the second world war, and also the experiences of Dai monks from Sipsongpannā in Thailand.