Response

Is Buddhism like a tomato?
Thoughts about the transplantation of Buddhism to Germany: A response to Martin Baumann

EVA K. NEUMAIER-DARGYAY

Martin Baumann presented an insightful analysis of the adaptation processes manifest in the transplantation of Buddhism from its Asian homelands to Germany in his article, "The transplantation of Buddhism to Germany: Processive modes and strategies of adaptation" (1994). As a process of acculturation, the imported religion as well as the socio-cultural environment of the host country affect each other mutually. Baumann limits his study to those traditions in which the representatives of the new religion actively participate in its dissemination, a phenomenon which Baumann calls missionary impulses. Ethnic Buddhist traditions transplanted to Germany as a result of immigration receive only marginal mentioning as Baumann sees in them neither any missionary dynamics nor a readiness for adaptation and change. He observes that some religions, such as Mahayana Buddhism, are more flexible when they encounter foreign cultures and therefore adapt more readily, whereas other religions, such as Theravada Buddhism, are more rigid and attempt to preserve a state that is perceived as "original". In wrestling with the dilemma which the term "Buddhism" represents (its a-historicity, negation of diversity, etc.), Baumann provides most welcome data about the diversity and size of individual Buddhist communities in Germany. Altogether, he assumes, that there are about 60,000 Buddhists living in Germany of whom approximately one third are Germans while the rest is made up of ethnic immigrants.

Baumann distinguishes four phases in the process of adaptation and various strategies which permit first adaptation and later enable a fully fledged acculturation. The first phase is the contact between the propagators of imported religion and members of the host culture. He acknowledges that in this phase ethnic missionaries play a major role. One may ask whether this observation does not undermine the distinction between ethnic and non-ethnic religious traditions. The second phase is marked by confrontation and conflict. New converts to the import religion confront, often in an adversary mode, the religious thinking and institutions of the host country. It is followed by a phase
dominated by ambiguity and adaptation; the foreign religion is appropriated by being explained and understood through borrowing jargon and symbols from the religious systems of the host culture. The next phase is marked by a re-orientation – Baumann uses the term “recoupment” instead – in which the foreign religion consolidates its efforts for adaptation by restoring some of its “original” identity. The last phase permits the rise of innovative developments which attempt to bridge the gap between the import religion and its host culture.

To facilitate a successful transplantation of a religion from its homeland to a host culture various strategies are employed. Baumann mentions the importance of these: translations of the sacred and canonical texts from their original language into the medium of the host country; regression to an idealized “original” form of Buddhism; reinterpretation of texts so that they accord with the general perceptions and ideas of the host culture; and toleration of traits in the host culture which are in conflict with the imported religion. Full acculturation occurs with the assimilation and absorption of foreign ideas, metaphors, and symbols into the system of the import religion.

Baumann’s methodology is based on social-science models developed by Michael Pye, John W. Berry, and Steven Kaplan (Baumann 1994: 38 n. 5). These models try to capture the various phases visible in the process of adaptation. Thus, they are based on empirical observations that focus on changes in the interaction between import religion and host culture. The entities which constitute the major players in this observation, i.e., the host culture, the import religion, and the people identifying themselves with them, are taken as solid units. In my response to Baumann’s illuminating article, I shall try to raise questions targeting these tacit assumptions that are implicit in his methodology. In other words, I attempt to challenge Baumann’s discussion of the transplantation of Buddhism to Germany by searching for inconsistencies and fissures in the primary concepts of his article. I attempt to call into question assumptions about ethnicity (that of the host culture and that of the import religion), boundaries, and the idea of transplantation as a suitable paradigm for the process examined by Baumann. My response should in no way be understood as an attempt to diminish the merit of Baumann’s article, which I highly appreciate. In contrast, my response provides an “other reading” of the same material, an alternative way of seeing things. It will not undermine the insights presented by Baumann; it will, hopefully, complement them.

1. Transplantation and contact

The term “transplantation” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “plant in another place, remove and establish in another place.” This definition