

## BTE Vienna 2016. Buddhist Inspiration in our Age of Crisis

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The Dark Night, renunciation and emptiness. Deep Doubt and deep Confidence

### **Three dimensions of refuge and confidence, *sraddhah***

I will discuss the experience of deep doubt and confidence in the context of refuge in the three jewels according to the Tibetan model of the three dimensions of refuge: outer, inner and secret. They relate to three dimensions of confidence or trust, *sraddhah*: confidence in others, in oneself and unshakeable confidence or confidence beyond words and symbols.

### **Pre-modern and modern confidence, seen from a European perspective**

In pre-modern times, before the age of enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), the majority of the people had a more or less unconscious confidence in collective cultural and religious values, in authorities, such as parents, teachers, elders and the political structure. The third dimension of confidence, self-confidence, played a minor role, except for spiritual, cultural and political heroes and heroines.

From the age of enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) onwards a few people developed more confidence in their own abilities to change society for the better, and these people became the leading cultural and to some extent of political power. They criticized the belief in traditional collective cultural values and in traditional authorities. The main emphasis for this small intellectual elite was put on the individual. Their ideal was the **autonomous personality**, who could give laws, *nomos*, to himself (mainly) and herself (more and more). This ideal of an autonomous personality is still the core of western culture, at least for the cultural and political elite.

### **Today: Postmodern crises. Ideologies and the ideal of the autonomous personality**

This ideal is running into a deep crisis because economic and cultural changes happen so fast, that hardly anyone can keep track. Cultural and economic globalization and postmodern dissolution of values go hand in hand. What to do? A growing number of people in the political and spiritual world seem to suggest a *salto mortale* (!!!) into the past: e.g. nationalistic politics and fundamentalistic Christians. Their idea is: Let's go back to the good old times, where we had a true religion and a good state and a solid culture. This problem is multiplied by the growing and unpleasant insight that the majority of the people, even in Europe and other western countries live culturally in pre-modern times. They may use modern and postmodern technology and cherish some advantages of cultural and technical globalization, but are unwilling and unable to deal with the complexity of our time. If we don't take this into account, we run in heavy political and social problems, and in spiritual ones, too.

In terms of the three dimensions of confidence, many people have lost confidence in all three dimensions: they don't believe in God anymore or in other words, they have little trust in the dominant spiritual and cultural values and in traditional authorities and are hardly able to trust themselves. In this context their wish to go back to the good old times is understandable, even if not possible: be it the post-war golden times of economic prosperity, strong Christian values, an illusory homogeneous national state or true and real communism – or even true early Buddhism etc. Ideologies and utopian ideas about a paradise in this world or another can console and support us for some time, but in the end, they are just a lullaby for babies, and we are no more babies but adults who need to take over responsibility for our life.

### **Ideologies, traditional Buddhism and the three dimensions of confidence**

Where does Western Buddhism stand in this context? My assumption is that quite some Buddhist groups and centers suggest two things: forget about the deep spiritual aspects of Buddhism and use some methods to become "fit for life in modern times", we could call this flatland Buddhism.

Others suggest to stick to or go back to pre-modern confidence in traditional teachings and methods, lineages and masters as the solution to modern confusion. This might be possible for those people who live culturally in pre-modern times. Because there are many such people, it is good and valuable that there are established Christian

churches and communities and – traditional Buddhist groups and centers. These people can live, like pre-modern people, with some confidence in the truth of their lineage, in some masters and in themselves.

### **The three dimensions of confidence today: shaking self-confidence...**

Myself and many people I know, we suffered in the seventies from the loss of confidence: in life, little confidence in others and in ourselves. What to do? A step backwards to pre-modern deep confidence in Buddhist tradition and teachers, with limited confidence in myself, is for me and many others not possible. Fortunately my main teacher, the late Lama Thubten Yeshe from Kopan Monastery in Nepal never stressed naïve confidence in tradition and in himself as the teacher. He loved the critical attitude of his western hippie students and again and again said: I can teach you what I learned in Tibet, and you have to find out, what works for you in Western culture. For me, Lama Yeshe was a modern man, he lived culturally after the age of enlightenment and did not recommend pre-modern confidence in the Buddhist tradition.

### **The dark night, renunciation and emptiness, doubt and confidence**

Now, what to do? Where is a path for confused Western people? How can modern and postmodern people find deep unshakeable confidence in life, on the basis of relative and limited confidence in others and in oneself?

According to my experience this needs the experience of the dark night of the soul and the mind. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic, San Juan de la Cruz, St. John of the Cross, a student, colleague and friend of Teresa de Avila, describes this process in a very modern, compelling and poetic way. *La noche oscura*, the dark night, is a metaphor for great doubt, radical doubt in all concepts symbols and ideas. Maybe the Chinese Ch'an is a expression of an intuitive understanding of this process, and can give us some methods to support it. Maybe. But it needs to be related to our cultural crisis.

Back to San Juan. He said: Much is said and written about the dark night of the *soul*, where you realize that pleasant feeling, based on sense perception, emotions or clever and sublime thoughts, on culturally or spiritually sublime experiences, are wonderful but not lasting and not liberating. For me this meant 40 years ago: Even Rilke and Bach are not enough. This insight is called *renunciation* in Buddhism or more precisely: Renunciation is a consequence of this insight in the fleeting nature of experiences, however wonderful they may be. And he continued: And hardly anything is said and even less written about the dark night of the *mind*, because it shakes pre-modern naïve confidence in traditional values, teachings and methods. Both insights are talked about in Buddhism as the three marks of existence: insight into the unsatisfactoriness, impermanence and uncontrollability of all experiences. Together with insight into nirvana or deep confidence beyond words, these are the four seals that qualify teachings as being Buddhist.

My conclusion about deep confidence in modern times is such: We need a deep crisis of our confidence in *ourselves*: We cannot understand everything, as our mind and reason have limits. And we need a deep crisis of our confidence in *others*: No other person and nothing outside, no lineage, teaching or method can give us deep unshakeable confidence. And only when we – supported by strong practice and teachers and even more, good colleagues who know such experiences – go through this dark night of the *soul*, *renunciation*, and of the mind, one could call it insight into *emptiness* of all concepts, will we find an *unshakeable confidence*, that is not depended on pleasant feelings and clever and sublime theories. This is what Tibetan Buddhism calls *unshakeable* or *secret refuge*.

I wish us all the courage and the necessary network of colleagues and teachers to recognize these dark nights and to live through them without ending up in deep despair, nihilism, cynicism, anger and depression.

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### *Literature*

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S. Wetzel, Vertrauen. Finden, was uns wirklich trägt. Scorpio. 2015 (über die drei Arten des Vertrauens)