

Research Article



***Branding Buddha – Mediatized and
Commodified Buddhism as Cultural Narrative***

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Buddhism in the West has reached beyond the enclosures of monastic buildings and meditation centers, meeting the masses at the market, in films, books, magazines and ads, often portrayed as anything but religion. This article investigates relations between media, popular culture and religion and analyses representations of Buddhism in Danish mass media, relating it to opinion surveys, statistics and developments of Danish Buddhist groups. It discusses the mediatization, entertainmentization, commodification and popularization of Buddhism and concludes that such representations serve as cultural narratives, regenerating and transforming both the culture and the religion.

Keywords: Buddhism in the West, popular culture, mediatization, entertainment, Denmark

Buddha is cool and chic in the West, and as a popular brand has moved from temple to market. Buddhism has been transformed from an intellectual capital and practice path for the elite to an easily approachable mindset for the masses in which consumerism, commodification and mediatization are part of the neo-liberal market where spirituality is for sale. As the back cover of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism* (Gach 2009) says, "Enlightenment has never been easier." But consumers with no direct relations to Buddhism are also targets and manufacturers of popular Buddhist narratives. Advertisements featuring Buddha and monks sell everything from alcohol to clothes, often with recognizable symbols and stories. The Dalai Lama has appeared in advertisements for Mercedes Benz and Microsoft, and Hollywood films and an abundance of book titles featuring Zen, Tantra, Buddha, or mindfulness have helped domesticate the religion. Buddhism has become part of American cinema (Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff 2014), and the Tibet effect, the Dalai Lama effect, and the Hollywood effect are important catalysts for global pop-cultural Buddhism. The media have used such popular narratives, helping to maintain stereotypes of Asia and Asians (Iwamura 2011, 161). The statements that "Americans have gone gaga over Buddhism" (Prothero, quoted in Moore 2008: 236) and that Buddhism "is without question a 'meme' of great resonance in contemporary United

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States popular and consumer culture” (Shields 2015: 403) could also be applied to most Western countries today.

The aim of this article is to analyze such popularization, entertainmentization and mediatization of Buddhism not as deviant misunderstandings in a neo-liberal consumer market, but as cultural phenomena with their own rationale in a broader perspective. Rather than seeing ‘content’ (teaching, practice, institution) as the only prime mover, such developments are understood here as framing conditions and transmission technologies in the overall transformation and adaptation processes of the religion. After an initial discussion of the role of media and popular culture in relation to religion, Denmark will be used as a case to illustrate a diversity of fields in which Buddhism has spread. Such cultural manifestations of Buddhism will be explored by both qualitatively and quantitatively analyzing Danish news media, books, magazines and visual media before discussing theoretical implications related concretely to Buddhism’s transformation in the West and more generally to the interrelations between popular culture and religion.

Mediatization and entertainmentization of religion

Mass media and popular culture are important sources of (non-elitist) culture and religion, and “the way that religion is produced, represented and understood in late modernity is fundamentally a function of the media age” (Hoover 2001: 610), not least since “the media stand at the center of contemporary processes of meaning-making and cultural valuation” (ibid., 614). So the fact that there has been a ‘media turn’ in the study of religion (Engelke 2010) is not surprising. Hjarvard (2008) distinguishes between three types of mediatized religion, the latter two of which will be the focus of this article: 1) religious media (religious organizations’ own narratives presented in the public domain), 2) journalism on religion (representations of religion in primarily new media by journalists), and 3) ‘banal religion’ (representations of religion in the cultural public sphere). Banal religion typically has no explicit or intentional religious meaning as such, but nevertheless “provide a continuous backdrop of imagery that reminds audiences of the presence of supernatural phenomena” (Hjarvard 2012: 35). Rather than using it as a pejorative term, he finds that it is a “primary and fundamental form of religion that tends to emerge in almost all human societies” (ibid: 36), and perhaps therefore also “may travel more easily below the radar of conscious thinking” (ibid.). In that sense, ‘banal religion’ is the mediatized parallel to ‘folk religion’ or ‘culture religion’ understood as the non-doctrinal beliefs and practices held by people referring to more or less unconsciously held cultural narratives. As such, it is also closely related to the market beyond the spheres of the specialists.

The marketization of religion is thus often related to mediatization. Although today’s technological advances and globalization have speeded up processes of dissemination, religion has always been part of commodified realities. The transmission and transculturation of Buddhism in Asia is a key illustration of how the master narratives of ascetic and salvific monasticism were supplemented by transactions of folk magic, money, material culture, religious shopping and entertainment. Entertainment is itself a

“culture-shaping force” (Taylor 2008: 20), and what could be termed the ‘entertainmentization of religion’ is an aspect of relevance not least in a contemporary consumer society, where “subjectivity is to be produced rather than given by traditional social structures, and goods are a prime means for this creation” (Gauthier, Woodhead and Martikainen 2013: 10). One way of subjectivization in a supply-demand market society involves marketing techniques being “increasingly oriented toward brand image management and lifestyle advertising”, associating products with “immaterial qualities such as attitude, values, feelings, and meanings” (ibid: 10-11). Advertising is itself an important medium which has “gained even more power with the decline of traditional institutions that once bestowed more meaning into our lives” (Marmor-Lavie, Stout and Lee 2009: 18). It is thus highly probable that “we are going to see more and more spiritual themes in advertising” (Cohen, quoted in ibid: 2). A shift in advertisements from products to ideas, identities, lifestyles and performance has also meant a change in which “the product goes from being a signifier to signified, thus acquiring meaning” and “the consumer is an ‘active receiver’ who assigns meaning to advertisements, receiving at the same time their meaning” (Grad 2014, 145). Mass media, popular culture, entertainment and advertisements are, in the terminology of Clifford Geertz (1973: 93), *models of* and *models for* social reality in being gateways to understanding this reality as well as catalysts and generators in creating it. Such media have the ability “to be both shapers of culture and products of the same culture” (Hoover 2006: 8). Mediatization and commodification are thus not to be understood as one-way violators of passive readers and consumers. Individuals digest readings and products in an inter-relational fashion, helping to construe new narratives in a hermeneutical, cultural circle. Understanding mediatized and commodified religion is thus also a gateway to understanding important aspects of religion as such.

Media representations of Buddhism and Buddhists “can reveal much about how Buddhism is transmitted into traditionally non-Buddhist culture” (Mitchell 2012: 62) since “the mediascape, which produces and conveys images, information, and ideas throughout the world, has an especially prominent role” in constructing such images of Buddhism (Rocha 2006: 130). However, also in countries which have ‘gone gaga over Buddhism’, it is still remarkable that “studies of representations of Buddhists and Buddhism in the mass media are few and far between” (Mitchell 2012, 62). Although there are hints and suggestions from scholars of religion, the same is basically true of Scandinavia too: there has been no systematic investigation of Buddhism in mass media, mainly because the majority of scholarly work on religion is focused on the majority religion (Christianity) and the majority migrant religion (Islam).¹ Although almost 80% of the Danish population are members of the National Lutheran Church, Denmark is often portrayed (and portrays itself) as a highly secular country containing few people who believe and participate in religion. Representations of Buddhism in media and popular culture might thus be different in Denmark than in the USA and other non-Scandinavian countries, making Denmark a good case for the purpose of comparison.

¹ For instance, the special issue on religion and media in the Nordic countries in *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* (2013, 1: 26) illustrates this. Religion is almost exclusively focused on Christianity and Islam, with only sparse references to other religions.

Buddhism in Denmark: members, practitioners, sympathizers

While Buddhism in the West is said to be booming, this is neither equally true for all countries nor necessarily measurable by traditional membership mappings. Statistics and results from ten years of mapping Buddhism in Denmark² only show an increase of members because of methodological changes in the way such statistics are produced and demographic increases (through immigration, regeneration and family reunion) primarily involving Vietnamese and Thai immigrants and descendants (Borup 2016a). Nominal Buddhists still make up less than 0.5% of the population, and the relatively large number of convert Buddhist groups are characterized by the fact that they have few members. This naturally points to the presence of methodological challenges when measuring religious demography in general. Membership is mainly a category of religious identification suitable for monotheistic religions and religion in modernity; postmodern, individualized, hybrid and more-or-less spirituality easily slip under the radar of digital either-or markers. For instance, many practitioners of Vipassanā or Zen, so-called secular Buddhists, or people who are deeply inspired by Buddhism as ‘a way of life’ or as ‘a spiritual path’ would not necessarily call themselves Buddhists. What Coleman says about the USA also applies to many (primarily convert) Buddhists in Scandinavia, who regard labels as too limiting to encapsulate their true Buddhist identity. In other words, there are probably more people practicing Buddhism than people who identify themselves as Buddhists (Coleman 2012). Perhaps discrepancies between membership parameters and alternative ways of being somewhat engaged with Buddhism are particularly common among the plethora of more-or-less engaged believers, practitioners, sympathizers and postmodern individuals within the continuously expanding spectrum of Buddhism in the West. In Denmark there are also more-or-less Buddhists who “believe without belonging, belong without believing, practice without believing or belonging or simply somehow identify as Buddhists without believing, belonging or practicing” (Borup 2016a: 91). It also seems plausible to assume an elective affinity between those who identify themselves as “spiritual, but not religious”, those with no religious affiliation (the group answering ‘no religion’), and people who in some ways are related to or have sympathy with Buddhism. As Leamaster (2012: 151) says about the USA: “convert Buddhism may be attractive to people who desire a religious or spiritual identity but are not interested in conventional religion or group-level participation”, which perhaps is also why “nonsectarian Buddhism is on the rise among convert Buddhists” (ibid: 152). It may be attractive in Denmark, too, but this has not yet been reflected in statistics. Non-membership based, Buddhist-derived (or ascribed) beliefs (e.g. karma, rebirth, spiritual development), values (e.g. interdependence, equanimity, peace) and practices (primarily meditation) in Denmark as well as generally in the West have undoubtedly been on the rise for the last three decades. The broad fields of ‘spirituality’ and new age are generally inspired by Eastern (and Buddhist) sources, and a few influential leaders (such as Jes Bertelsen) have (Tibetan) Buddhist teachers. In recent years mindfulness has gained significant popularity. However, acknowledging the Buddhist origin, none of the 83 providers of

² Data (in Danish) is available on the Center for Contemporary Religion’s homepage (<http://samtidsreligion.au.dk/religion-i-danmark/>), analyses of which also appear in English (Borup 2008; Borup 2016a).

mindfulness in Aarhus identified their service as “Buddhist” (Gottfredsen 2014), and in another survey from 2015 only three percent referred to Buddhism on their homepages (Borup 2016b). It seems that “Buddhist” and “Buddhism” cannot be used as identity emblems and institutional markers for more than a small minority of Danes. This, however, is only partially related to a more general *cultural* appropriation of Buddhism.

Images of Buddhism

While the number of nominal Buddhists is still relatively low in Denmark, Danes’ appreciation of Buddhism is high. Christianity, which, after all, is the absolute majority religion, ranks highest in a survey conducted by a newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, when asked which of the five world religions to be most ‘important to humankind’.³ Buddhism, however, followed just below, and among the 18-55 year-old, urban citizens and well-educated left-wingers, Buddhism was even appreciated more than Christianity. An earlier survey by another newspaper, Kristeligt Dagblad, showed that almost a third of the respondents found religious traditions from the East to be ‘interesting’ (Højsgaard 2001: 142), and in another survey, only 17% of the respondents thought that foreign Christian and Buddhist missionaries from other countries should not be allowed to missionize (whereas almost a third thought that foreign imams should not be allowed to).⁴ Among the providers of products and services at a *Body Mind Spirit* fair in Aarhus in 2014, Buddhism was the religion which most people felt attracted to, although only 14% defined themselves as Buddhists.⁵

Such positive evaluations of Buddhism are found in other Scandinavian countries as well. A Swedish university survey showed that respondents ranked Buddhism second after Christianity, and summing up his own interviews, David Thurffjell concluded that “Buddhism is a religion that few Swedes wholeheartedly belong to, but many sympathize or partly identify with” (Thurffjell 2015: 160). In a Norwegian survey of religious content in popular culture, “Buddhist symbols, narratives, and artifacts were relatively well represented in films, commercial ads and interior decorating artifacts”, much more so than for instance Islamic ones, probably because Buddhism is “regarded as ‘the familiar and wise other’ and a real alternative in other parts of the Norwegian public sphere” (Lied 2012: 185). Such positive images are equally present in the US, where one-third of the respondents regarded Buddhists as nice (Tweed 2008) and the “overall influence of Buddhism in the United States has [...] increased considerably in recent decades” (Wuthnow and Cadge 2004: 378).⁶ The positive image of Buddhism in Denmark has made

³Jyllands-Posten 27 March 2013:

<http://jyllands-posten.dk/indland/ECE5284946/Buddha+%C3%A5nder+Jesus+i+nakken+/>

⁴Jyllands-Posten 25th March 2015

<http://www.jyllands-posten.dk/protected/premium/indland/ECE7580490/Danskerne-afviser-et-forbud-mod-udenlandske-imamer/>.

⁵ The survey was part of a course on spirituality in the fall of 2014, during which students interviewed and handed out survey questionnaires to all providers at the spirituality fair.

⁶ According to Cadge and Wuthnow (2004), 55% of Americans have had some contact with Buddhists or Buddhism, 37% were favorable in their overall opinion of American Buddhists, and more than half of the respondents associate words such as “tolerant” or “peace loving” with

some Christians respond by acknowledging that many Christians are inspired by Buddhism. Both Zen and mindfulness have been used as inspirational practices in some Christian churches, and a Christian minister has even introduced a Christian version of mindfulness, called 'Christfulness'. A Danish survey showing that the Dalai Lama ranked highest as a religious role model led one bishop to conclude that it would be beneficial for the church to have similar role models.⁷ In a newspaper feature article a few years ago, one former Danish bishop from the Lutheran church voiced his worries about Buddhism being the real threat (rather than Islam) to Christianity, since its influence is much more general and invisible.⁸ A Christian writer, who is the former secretary-general of the Danish Bible Society and presently head of history and religion at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), also wrote negatively about Buddhism's invisible mission in describing a famous performer's shows (and selling of DVDs) as "a piece of modern Buddhist agitation" (Højsgaard 2011: 28). Both Christians and atheists have criticized the introduction of (Buddhist-influenced) mindfulness in schools, questioning what they see as religious missionizing. Such arguments could have been pursued further if referring to the incorporation of Zen Buddhist meditation in martial arts classes or the inclusion of mindfulness in the new political party *Alternativet's* manifesto, to the fact that Soka Gakkai attracts several artists and actors, and to the fact that president of Soka Gakkai International, Ikeda Daisaku, holds an honorary doctorate at University of Southern Denmark.

But how and to what extent are such positive images (which are regarded as threatening by some Christians) reflected in the mass media and public space? Examples of these images in news media, magazines, books, films, ads and commercials (being part of what Hjarvard calls 'journalism on religion' and 'banal religion') will be shown before discussing the significance of such representations in a broader perspective.

Buddha cool, Buddhist chic and branding Buddha: representations of Buddhism in news media, books, magazines and visual media

"Eastern religions received very little press coverage until they began attracting the children of well-to-do whites", wrote Harvey Cox back in 1978 about Buddhism in America (Cox 1978: 124-125); and although non-Abrahamic religions are generally still little researched in media analyses, Scott Mitchell could conclude 25 years later that "the media is generally favorable toward Buddhism" (Mitchell 2012, 62).

Buddhism. In particular young people, those with a college education (and those reared by college-educated parents), and those who have traveled have more contact with Buddhism. The low number of self-identified Buddhists combined with the widespread positive exposure Buddhism seems to enjoy in the United States led Thomas Tweed to rightly ask "Why are Buddhists so nice?" in his comparison of US media representations of Buddhists and Muslims (Tweed, 2008).

⁷ <http://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kirke-tro/dalai-lama-topper-som-religi%C3%B8st-forbillede>
While 10% of the respondents ranked Dalai Lama highest, four out of five respondents did not have any religious role models at all.

⁸ <http://www.religion.dk/synspunkt/buddhismen-truer-kristendommen-mere-end-islam>

Coverage of non-Christian and non-Islamic religions in news media is also very sparse in Denmark. Buddhism is typically mentioned in articles about conflict areas (e.g. Buddhists suppressing Muslims in Myanmar or Sri Lanka), sometimes with a journalistic angle wondering how a peaceful religion is involved in violence. In 2015 there were 17 headlines in Danish national newspapers containing the word 'Buddha', 'Buddhist' or 'Buddhism', a number which varied between 15 and 50 between 2000 and 2015, the total being 447. In the same period there were 13,169 (1,248 in 2015 alone) headlines including 'Islam' or 'Muslim'. While Islam and Muslim were mentioned in 14,740 articles in 2015, Buddhism was mentioned 718 times, most of which were references in passing (e.g. mentioning Buddhism among other religions, Buddhism as a major religion in Asia, or the fact that Richard Gere is a Buddhist).⁹ Half of the articles also contained the word 'religion' and a tenth of them 'spirituality', but generally with only very little focus on Buddhism as a lived religion. The Dalai Lama was mentioned in 254 articles, including 49 times in the headlines. The majority of the articles were related to his visit in Copenhagen early in the year, and as Dalai Lama is also a visually recognizable person, several newspapers had his picture on the front cover during this visit. While 'karma' is mentioned in 151 articles (19 of which also mentioned Buddhism) and 'Tantra' in 32 articles (five of which also mentioned Buddhism), mindfulness was mentioned in 310 articles (compared to 67 articles in 2010 and six articles in 2005). Only 19 of these 310 articles also mentioned Buddhism, suggesting that the two concepts were not seen as related. The Danish lama Ole Nydahl is mentioned occasionally, and representatives from his group are sometimes used as spokespersons for Buddhism in Denmark. While this is still the case in local newspapers, where other local Buddhist groups are occasionally mentioned when they have major celebrations or arrange events, Nydahl's name only appeared in two small articles in the national newspapers. Less than ten times within the last ten years, Buddhist groups with an Asian origin (mainly Vietnamese and Thai) have been portrayed in the national newspapers. In 2015 only two articles described immigrant Buddhists in Denmark¹⁰, with Buddhism only being mentioned as a general frame of cultural reference.¹¹ An analysis of articles in three major national newspapers throughout a year (between 2011 and 2013) found 86 articles about Buddhism, most of which were neutral or positive and only 14% negative, mainly related to the conflict in Myanmar.¹² In comparison, a previous analysis of Danish national newspapers (Christensen 2006) showed that a third of the articles on Islam were negative, presenting

⁹ From 2000 to 2015 the number of references to Buddhism was relatively constant between 630 and 900, with the highest in 2007 (1,044) and the lowest in 2014 (548).

¹⁰ In several interviews with Danish news media throughout the last ten years I have pointed out the importance of immigrant Buddhist groups, but journalists have very rarely been interested in this topic. The few articles that actually did focus on immigrant Buddhists were inspired by my own academic publications – or written by myself. Although not part of this survey, it seems that local and regional newspapers more often do describe immigrant Buddhists, typically to illustrate the 'good story' underlining 'positive integration'.

¹¹ The Danish *Infomedia* database with text from Danish newspapers was used to count and analyze content in 13 national newspapers throughout 2015. Search criteria were filtered so that 'Buddha', 'Buddhism', 'Buddhist', 'Tantra', 'Tantric' etc. as well as references with two words (e.g. buddh* and mindful*) were included.

¹² Ane K. Mikkelsen, student paper 2013.

the religion as a threat. While ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ were part of 3,856 radio and TV features in 2015, Buddhism was only mentioned in 13 such features, two of which were on television (one feature from Nepal, the other about Dalai Lama visiting Denmark). The overall positive tone of the 21 TV and 32 radio features related to the Dalai Lama shows that his iconic personality is well suited to the electronic media as well.

Health, wellness, inner strength, self-development and spirituality are topics which are often covered in popular weekly and monthly Danish magazines. Buddhism as a religion is hardly ever mentioned, and even when this happens it is related to neither Asian Buddhism nor immigrant Buddhists in Denmark. “Cool happiness to all” and “Buddha is cool” were the headings of two such typical articles, focusing on convert and jet set Buddhists. Indirect references to Buddhist ideas, practices or symbols are, however, often part of the stories illustrating spirituality, wellness, health or coolness, and especially mindfulness, yoga and Tantra are to be found in such articles. Concepts such as ‘karma’, ‘Zen’ and ‘Buddhism’ or decorative Buddha figures often appear in such magazines, typically in the health, the living and the travel sections, signaling inner and outer beauty or exotic style from the East.¹³

Scholarly books on Buddhism can be found in libraries¹⁴ but not in most bookshops, where Buddhism as a religion is typically found under travel literature. In bookshops, Buddhism-related books are to be found under the category ‘Body and Mind’ alongside books about popular psychology, new age, spirituality, and healthy living. This is also where some of the 33 books in Danish written on or by Dalai Lama are placed. Some of these, like *Kunsten at leve lykkeligt* (*The Art of Happiness* by Howard Cutler), have been printed several times and can even be found in supermarkets. In the ‘Body and Mind’ section one also finds books on Tibet and the ‘Zen and the Art of’ genre. 60 titles containing the word ‘Zen’ have been published in Danish either as translations from English books or written by Danish authors. Apart from the old classics (Suzuki, Watts, Herrigel) and a few on Zen Buddhism, most are within the domain of therapy, psychology, management, gardening or general wellbeing. ‘Zen’ is often used as an adjective signaling authenticity and style, not unlike Cristina Rocha’s description of Zen in Brazilian media associated with “happiness, peace, tranquility, well-being, simplicity,

¹³ An investigation of ads with reference to Eastern spirituality in the largest weekly women’s magazine (*Alt for Damerne*) throughout 2014 showed yoga to be the topic most often described (81 articles), with meditation (most often mindfulness) described in 14 articles. (The report was produced by student Karen Petry Groth in the spring of 2015). In other lifestyle magazines yoga also tops the list of Eastern-derived practices, followed by mindfulness and more seldom Buddha/Buddhism. For instance, in *Psykologi* in the period 2014-2015 (eight issues in total), there were 54 articles mentioning yoga, 48 mentioning mindfulness, and 17 mentioning Buddhism. In the women’s magazines *Femina* and *Q*, in 2015 the corresponding figures were 92/48/9 and 21/16/1, and in the health magazines *I Form* and *Helse* in 2015 the figures were 68/23/1 and 4/6/1. In the new age magazine *Nyt Aspekt*, there were in 12 magazines from 2013 to 2015 two articles on Buddhism, three reviews on Buddhist books, and eight times where Buddhist figures were used as icons or advertisements.

¹⁴ The statistics and titles of the books mentioned below were found through Aarhus University Library’s search engine, filtering language and number of impressions.

harmony, and meditation on the one hand and modern, fashionable, and trendy on the other” (Rocha 2006: 131).¹⁵ In recent years books containing ‘mindfulness’ in their title seem to have taken over the parts of the ‘Zen and the art of’ domain. While some of the 140 Danish books about mindful or mindfulness (60% of which were published from 2012 to 2015) are academic, the majority are related to spiritual self-development and (secular) wellbeing, often written as guidebooks on how to live more ‘mindfully’ in different aspects of daily life.¹⁶ Only one is about classical Buddhist mindfulness, and some integrate Buddhism as part of a broader historical or philosophical perspective, but the majority mentions Buddhism either only in passing or not at all.

‘Banal religion’ is represented on television mainly related to spiritual, paranormal and supernatural phenomena, and while Danish television has shown some such programs, Buddhism has not been part of them. The movies from Hollywood especially in the 1990s about Tibet did of course reach the Danish audience, and the ‘Hollywood effect’ has undoubtedly had its impact on Danes’ romanticized images of Tibetan Buddhism. Besides Buddhist groups’ own broadcasts with very limited outreach beyond group affiliations, over the years only very few Danish documentaries focusing on Buddhism have been made, and only a few movies indirectly refer to Buddhism. An example of the latter is the comedian Anders Matthesen, whose own Buddhist interests are clearly expressed in the movie *Sorte Kugler* (2009), and another is Hella Joof’s *Sover Dolly på Ryggen?* (2012) where a person, whom the main character falls in love with, is deselected because he is too perfect, healthy and correct, characteristics represented visually by large Buddha posters in his living room. Buddha figures are also used decoratively in other TV series to underline an atmosphere of coziness, creativity, purity and spirituality. The Buddha image has the same function at *Body, Mind, Spirit* fairs (where Buddhist groups are not represented), and as a marketing symbol for companies and products. The Indian or Chinese ‘Happy Buddha’ has been used to sell everything from mobile phones to coffee and furniture, and in Thai wellness salons Buddha’s tranquil posture combines exotic images of the East with the domesticated wellness of the West. ‘Zen’, ‘Tantra’ and ‘Nirvana’ are names of Danish body lotions and massage oils, and some years ago the shopping center Magasin had an ad selling “all you can do without (according to Zen, Buddha and all that)”. ‘Zen’ is the name of ‘the most exclusive nightclub in Copenhagen’ (as it presents itself), a place which is classier and caters more self-consciously to the jet set than the nearby Buddha Bar. Commercials with laughing monks have been used to sell schnapps and holidays abroad (“Holidays you don’t want to leave”); and in large stores such as Ikea, Buddha figures and posters are sold for decoration. At Halloween, Buddha images have even been seen lined up outside a store next to carved pumpkins (Figure 1). The clothing company Hummel has branded itself with references to Buddhism in products and images for many years. The fact that the owner is a Buddhist himself and has written books about “Company Karma” (co-authored with a professor of

¹⁵ Some typical titles are (in English translation): “Zen and the Art of Business Management”, “Zen and the Art of Sourdough Maintenance”, “Zen and the Art of Studying”, “Zen for Mothers”, and “Zen Inspirations”.

¹⁶ Some typical titles are (in English translation): “24 Breaks: Presence and Mindfulness in Daily Life”, “Inner Growth – with Meditation and Mindfulness”, “Mindfulness with Tai Chi”, “Mindfulness and Meditation in Life and Work”, and “Mindful Birth”.

management and containing interviews with company managers) and mindfulness (written with a popular instructor) did not, however, prevent this successful brand from being adjusted when trade with China threatened the harmony between ideals and business. In particular, Buddha in meditation posture is often used as a symbol, probably because it generally sells well and is the most commonly used religious image in advertising (Moore 2005). The Dalai Lama has also been used on a poster from a railway company to encourage collective kindness (with the text “Be good and friendly, when it is possible. It is always possible”), and some years ago the newspaper Jyllands-Posten used the image of a smiling Dalai Lama on skis in front of the Himalayas with the background text illustrating the ideology and editorial philosophy of the newspaper: “Life is easier, if you don’t voice your opinion”. Buddha, Buddhism and its representations are simply good brands (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Buddha and pumpkins for Halloween. Photo: J. Borup.



Figure 2: Dalai Lama branding newspaper. ©Jyllands Posten. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3: Buddha branding futons. Reproduced with permission.

Conclusion and perspective

In general, Danes appreciate Buddhism. But Buddhism as a religion is not booming in Denmark. It is mainly regenerated by descendants of immigrants and refugees, and the many small ‘convert Buddhist’ groups maintain a steady level of membership. In the news media, Buddhism as a religion is mainly described as part of the local political field in Asia. Buddhism in Denmark is very seldom described as a religion, and when this happens it is mainly related to individual converts or visits by the Dalai Lama. General portrayals are, however, mainly positive, especially when compared to other religions such as Islam and when indirectly referred to in articles about ‘spirituality’, mindfulness or travel. Apart from a focus on the Dalai Lama, non-religious Buddhism is generally represented positively in books and magazines. This is reflected especially in visual media representations such as films, commercials and ads, where the Buddha is used as a marketing symbol for ideas and products. Though Denmark (and Scandinavia) is generally more secular than the US, it seems that the same positive images belong to a cultural narrative about Buddhism which is shared to some extent by both Scandinavia and the US, although in Denmark Buddhism is more often *not* considered a religion.

But why is this so, and what does this mean? There might be good reasons to argue for Buddhism’s robust ‘content’. The plethora of teachings, practices and institutions historically have shown to be easily adoptable and transformable, also in Western and secular contexts. But the ritual and doctrinal sides of religions are never isolated in their dissemination and evolution. Cultural narratives are not created in a vacuum.

Contemporary spiritualization and psychologization are also based on collectively shared narratives and structural frames. The historical perspective of Buddhist modernity and engagement with the West since the late 19th century in particular has been thoroughly documented and analyzed in previous scholarly literature, and its importance should not be underestimated. While this early encounter was mainly engaged in the West by an elite segment of 'fine culture', it also paved the way for the later and contemporary popular culture of the masses. Consumers of media and popular culture are thus engaged with already circulating scripts, master narratives and collectively shared webs of meaning. Such containers of stories, ideas and metaphors are products of circular transformations between East and West, tradition and modernity. But they are also part of contemporary popular culture and media, reflecting and themselves regenerating cultural narratives to the extent that "orientalized stereotypes begin to take on their own reality and justify their own truths" (Iwamura 2011: 8). The 'Hollywood effect' and the general mediatization of Buddhism mainly produce positive images of Buddhism, upholding a 'positive orientalism', although selectively domesticated with a clear focus on spiritual meditation Buddhism rather than immigrant Buddhism. In a comparative semiotic hierarchy, Buddhism is thus the good and nice religion as opposed to Islam (and to a lesser extent Christianity), being narrated by chains of association with spirituality, individualism, authenticity and harmony. With living icons such as the Dalai Lama to vitalize such narratives, *the medium is the message* also underlies the attribution of *coolness* to Buddhism symbolism. As *cool* is "destined to become the dominant ethic among the younger generations of the whole developed world" (Taylor 2008: 153), Buddhism as a soft power brand with high levels of symbolic and cultural power seems, as the analysis above suggests, simply to be good to think with.

While Buddhists and scholars can discuss the extent to which such representations distort or play with 'authentic' Buddhism, their cultural and social significance are equally debatable. Is this superficial and commodified Buddhism mainly an expression of the interest of neo-liberal market in 'selling spirituality'? Is popularization the other side of secularization with its thinning of content and tradition? It may be a paradoxical sign of secularization that there seems to be both more popular and "high media attention to religious issues in the public realm, and a slow, but steady decline of interest in organized religion at the individual and private level" (Hjarvard 2012: 22). The 'banalization' and 'entertainmentization' of 'feel-good Buddhism' is in a sense parallel to the 'scientification' and psychologization of Buddhism, where parts of ideas and practices (e.g. mindfulness) are picked, transformed and used instrumentally, ending up as constitutive by-products. While it is difficult to argue that such popular Buddhist narratives are illustrative examples of post-secular re-enchantment, they do reflect broader cultural narratives in which the story of Buddha and Buddhism has significance and impact. This is not reflected in membership statistics in Denmark (and Scandinavia); but in opinion surveys and mass media representations, the latter continuously also finding new means of communicating (religious) ideas, values and narratives, regenerating at least *a kind of Buddhism*. Denmark is probably not the only country in which Buddhism has a relatively *low level of institutional affiliation* but a *high level of religious brand value*.

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