



Cristina Rocha, *Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2006. 256 pp. Hardcover, \$37.00. ISBN-10 0-8248-2976-X; ISBN-13 978-0-8248-2976-6.

CRISTINA ROCHA is a Brazilian researcher engaged in the study of the Buddhism of Brazil. She swapped Brazil for Australia a number of years ago and is now associated with the University of Western Sydney, where in 2003 she finished her PhD thesis on “Zen in Brazil,” which has finally been published as the book reviewed here. As the subtitle “The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity” already indicates, “*Zen in Brazil*” is designed as “a study of how the discourse of modernity has historically influenced a sector of Brazilian society... to adopt Zen as a sign of the ‘modern’” (3). According to the author, due to the particular socio-historic and cultural conditions under which Buddhism has found its way into the host society, the topic demands a specific approach, since “the adoption of Buddhism in Catholic countries... should be differentiated from its adoption in Protestant nations” (7).

Corresponding to these heuristic concerns, *Zen in Brazil* is sub-organized into three thematic blocks. The first block, composed of the first two chapters, gives an overview of the circumstances under which Japanese Buddhism first emerged and further developed in Brazil. The first chapter offers a summary of the economic and political elements that constituted the process of Japanese immigration to Brazil. It highlights the dynamics of the establishment of Japanese religious institutions, including Busshinji temple in Sao Paulo that both historically, and under the influence of the Kyoto school and its interpretation of Zen as a universally valid religious practice, has played a key role in the process of divulgating Zen in Brazil. The second

* A review of this book by the same author appeared previously in the *Journal of Global Buddhism* (<http://www.globalbuddhism.org/>)

chapter focuses on the counterpart of the twofold adoption process, that is, the pre-conditions on the side of the “receiver.” Among the aspects discussed are the dynamics that contributed to a shift from a negative to a positive image of Japan in Brazil. In some cases, echoing the Japan-friendly tone in the works of European writers and the *japonaiserie* from the nineteenth century onwards, this led to an erudite appreciation of Japanese culture. This tendency was later fostered by the growing popularity of haiku poetry among Brazilian authors, the impact of the books of Hermann Hesse, Alan Watts, and other European and North American writers and, to a lesser degree and more indirectly, by the interest in Western Esotericism, particularly Theosophy. The quantitative outcome of these trends in terms of Brazilians who actually began to practice zazen was, however, restricted to a small group of intellectuals.

Chapters three and four discuss the manifestations, national and global socio-historical, and religious circumstances in the establishment and evolution of Buddhism in general, and of Zen in particular. This is in a country whose common label as “the world’s largest Catholic nation” is misleading since it neglects the multi-ethnic dynamics and the predisposition towards religious syncretism. Due to “this complex, plural, and porous religious universe” characteristic to Brazil, it is not surprising for Rocha “that Zen Buddhism found a place in the country” (95). This is especially clear when one takes into consideration the constant decline of official Catholicism during the last few decades, and the growing autonomy of religious subjects such as the individual’s increasing responsibility for “his/her own combination of picking, choosing, mixing, hybridizing, and creolizing from different religious traditions according to his/her needs in his/her ‘spiritual journey’” (120). According to the author, one of the factors that transforms a diffuse religious openness into a concrete Zen practice is the favorable public image of Buddhism created by movies, magazine and newspapers articles that attribute “values such as nonviolence, inner peace, compassion, equality, justice, love, happiness and harmony” to Buddhism (152). However, as far as the more specific circle of Buddhist protagonists is concerned, “the diffusion of Zen Buddhism in Brazil can be seen as a part of a ‘faculty club culture’” (150) whose “members” do not necessarily appreciate the growing accessibility of Buddhism. For them, Zen is primarily an expression of a lifestyle and a fashion linked to the upper class that can serve as a symbolic marker of its distinguished position and privileged status within Brazilian society.

The fifth chapter discusses the adequacy and heuristic utility of common concepts such as the dichotomization of ethnic and convert Buddhism as two relatively distinct currents. It also looks at the threefold distinction between an “elite,” a “missionary,” and an “immigrant” type of Buddhism, or the binary discrimination between “traditionalist” and “modernist” Buddhists within Western Buddhism. According to Rocha, none of the above characterizations work for Brazil since its internal “interactions, hybridizations, and creolizations...make the boundaries between the two congregations very porous” (153). The author calls attention to the religious continuum that contains not only different generations of Japanese-Brazilians but also non-Japanese Brazilian sympathizers or practitioners of Zen. Among those of

Japanese descent one finds highly “Brazilianized” members of immigrant families who associate themselves both with Catholicism and traditional Japanese Religions, including Buddhism. Among the causes for this simultaneity, Rocha calls attention to the traditional Japanese multi-religious attitude, the religious elasticity typical of Brazilian culture, and the importance of significant biographical moments and day-to-day problems of the practitioners that have shaped their individual religiosity.

The strength of Rocha’s publication lies in the density and profundity of the description of a religious sub-field generally neglected by Brazilian and non-Brazilian researchers. At the same time, the results of the author’s field studies are presented in a well-organized manner and easily accessible language. In many respects the contents of the book are more comprehensive than the title suggests, since a great deal of the information presented, including many examples quoted by the author, refers to Brazilian Buddhism in general or to other segments of Japanese Buddhism, in particular to Shin Buddhism (see, for example, 164 and 176).

In a few cases, however, it seems that the author’s passion for details and her narrative style reflect not only her familiarity with the research, but also an empathic proximity with the consulted subjects and their views, and this has led her to jump to conclusions. This is especially true when Rocha repeatedly speaks of a Zen “boom.” While the expression is adequate if it is used to indicate “a rise in popularity” which is paradigmatically expressed by positive media reports on the topic (chapter 4), the term is misleading if it is understood “as a period of time of rapid increase.” The inadequacy of the latter is already indicated by the authors own reference (95) to the surprisingly small number of 245,871 self-identified Buddhists (approx. 0.15 percent of the Brazilian population) published by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) as part of the preliminary results of the last National Census carried out in 2000. The recalculated figure in the *final* IBGE-report is even lower (214,873). In addition, compared to the 236,408 Buddhists counted by the penultimate census in 1991 (and despite an increase of about 15 percent in the population in the 1990s) there has been a striking statistical decline in the Buddhist sector in only nine years. Although a tool such as the National Census does not allow direct conclusions about the numeric evolution of Brazilian Zen Buddhism in particular, one can assume that (with the exception of Soka Gakkai) the negative statistical trend has affected the whole spectrum of Buddhism in Brazil.

The tacit conviction that the Zen “boom” is not restricted to a wave of positive press reports has further consequences for the authors contextualization of Zen in the wider scope of the Brazilian religious landscape. According to Rocha, the foregoing propagation of karma and reincarnation of Kardecism and Umbanda, and even the presence of eastern entities such as the figure known as “The Buddha” in the symbolic universe of Umbanda, have made a sizeable contribution to the acceptance of Buddhism in Brazil (96). Seen from the perspective of rational choice theory, however, the presence of Buddhist symbols in the so-called “mediumistic-spectrum” can be interpreted in exactly the opposite way, that is, not as a promoting element but as an *obstacle* for Buddhism to prosper in Brazil. As Rodney Stark’s “cultural-

continuity” hypotheses puts it, alternative religions are more likely to succeed when their teachings and practices are in tune with society’s dominant religious tradition. Seen from this angle, Kardecism in particular, with its combination of Christian theology, cosmology and ethics, plus elements of Eastern traditions such as karma and rebirth, serves as a perfect “filter” for Brazilians. This is because for those who are still committed to Catholicism, but unsatisfied with the linear time conception and the soteriology of official Catholicism, it does not deprive them of their Christian identity. While a conversion to Buddhism would demand the price of alienation of the dominant religious heritage, Kardecism provides—at least to a certain extent—similar but “less expensive” solutions by far.

Another critical aspect has to do with the author’s analysis of the adoption of Zen in Brazil as a function of the “quest for cosmopolitan modernity.” Unfortunately, the reader misses the clarification of what exactly the concept of “modernity” means in the given context, and in what concrete sense Zen is capable of fulfilling the “quest for cosmopolitan modernity.” Furthermore, Rocha’s plan to discuss the adoption of Zen in Brazil in terms of the process of “creolization” is not satisfactorily fulfilled. The conclusion from which one would expect a summary of the results of the relevant discussion is disproportionately short (193–98) and does not add much to the author’s earlier affirmation (19) that there is a considerable amount of “creativity, agency, and innovation” within the Zen Buddhist sector in Brazil. The question remains open, however, to what extent the corresponding dynamic reveals something that is uniquely Brazilian in comparison to any other Western country to which Zen was “exported.”

The above comments do not diminish the author’s laudable (and, almost throughout her entire book, successful) efforts to shed light on a largely unknown sector of the complex and highly heterogenic religious field in Brazil. What prevails as a general impression after a critical reading is that Rocha’s publication is an important, illuminating, and stimulating monograph that is highly recommended to anyone interested in Western Buddhism in general and Zen in Brazil in particular.

Frank Usarski
Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo, Brazil