



"Buddhist Worlds: the development of Buddhist understandings of the world"

Peter Friedlander - Asian Studies, La Trobe University

This paper looks at the development of Buddhist conceptions of the world. I propose that there have been four broad phases in the expansion of the Buddhist understandings of the relationship between the known world and the universe. The earliest phase is found in Pali Canon texts and depicts North India as the known world situated within a universe conceived of in terms of in early Indian cosmological speculations. The next phase coincides with the expansion of Buddhist known world to include South East Asia and the North West of India. In this there is both an expansion of the known world and the new cosmological theories about the universe are incorporated from the cultures in which Buddhism was developing. The third phase I argue can be seen from the accounts by Chinese Pilgrims and how they construct their notions of the world as a known 'Asian Buddhist world' within East Asian theories of the universe. The interaction between these existing Buddhist conceptions of the world and the 19th and 20th century discovery of Buddhism by Western countries has led I argue to a fourth, distinctive, phase in Buddhist understandings of the world. Buddhist understandings of the world have now incorporated modern cosmological theories and there is no longer a distinction between Buddhist understandings of the known world and the universe. I argue that this development of understandings of the world is important as the earlier models provide a paradigm which influences how contemporary Buddhists see their tradition as a global tradition.