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Travelling to the Inner Self: Tourism, Buddhism and Sustainability in the Alpine Area

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This paper examines the interdependencies of tourism, Buddhism and sustainability combining in-depth-interviews with Buddhism experts and non-participant observation in a mixed-method approach. The area under investigation is the Alpine region of Austria, Germany and Switzerland, since it is home to Asian and Western forms of Buddhism tourism alike. Results show that Buddhism tourism as a value-based activity on the one hand is not commercial, but since demand is rising, on the other hand tendencies towards more commercial forms can be observed. As a modest form of activity Buddhism tourism does not shape the landscape of the Alpine area and by its nature it incorporates sustainability.

Key Words: tourism, Buddhism, sustainability, Alpine area, spiritual tourism

Introduction

Tourism, Buddhism and sustainability are connected with each other in many ways: tourism and Buddhism: both mean travelling. Whereas tourism requires moving the body through space to reach a destination, Buddhism offers a journey to the inner self (Smith & Kelly, 2006) without the need to move at all. However, Buddhist practitioners also travel like tourists in order to participate in retreats or workshops at specific locations as a special form of spiritual tourism. Both Buddhism and tourism are linked to sustainability since sustainable behaviour is inherent in the Dharma (Buddha's teachings), and tourism must turn more and more towards sustainable alternatives in the face of climate change. Thus, sustainability forms a natural link between Buddhism and tourism, since both incorporate it in their core concept.

Buddhism, which originated in modern-day Nepal and northern India where the historical Buddha practiced and achieved enlightenment, is neither the dominant religion in Nepal or India (Nyaupane, 2009; Winter & Becker, 2004). Buddhism however spread from there to other Asian countries, where it became the dominant religion. It also made its way to Western countries in the 19th century and became part of the religious diversity there, and it has continued to grow in popularity, variety and significance since then (Baumann, 2021).

Buddhist temples and centres have also found a home in mountainous areas similar to the landscape of the religion's

origins, and this paper focusses on the interdependencies of tourism, Buddhism and sustainability in the Alpine region of Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Switzerland, the main focus of this study, is home to many forms of Buddhism, including the Tibetan Buddhism of Tibetan refugees, Thai Buddhism of the Thai migrant community, and many variations of Western practitioners' Buddhism imported from Asia (SBU, 2021). Since the area under investigation comprises Asian and western forms of Buddhism tourism, it was chosen for this study. Tourism, Buddhism and sustainability have more in common than is initially evident, but dividing lines can also be identified. This paper intends to clarify these interdependencies.

Literature Review

Spiritual Tourism

The concepts of *spiritual tourism* and *religious tourism* differ: whereas 'religious' in general refers to an organised institution, 'spiritual' connotes a personal experience of the divine or sacred not necessarily aligned with a particular religious tradition. Consequently, according to Olsen and Timothy (2006), religious tourism tends to be more integrated in religious structures, whereas spiritual tourism does not. Tourism inspired by Buddhism is part of the vast field of religious tourism, but also in a broader sense of spiritual tourism. Both of these forms are defined by the main motivation to travel – either for religious (Rinschede, 1992; McKelvie, 2005) or spiritual purposes (Norman, 2014; Sommer, 2012). Whether Buddhism is

a religion or more of a spiritual concept is still open to debate: on the one hand Buddhism does not worship a god, which most religions do (Han, 2002); on the other hand, it became a people's religion in many countries, where Buddha was sometimes misunderstood as a god (Kalf, n.d.). In this paper, Buddhist tourism is viewed as a form of spiritual tourism, since spirituality represents the broader concept.

In addition to spiritual tourism, there is a form of tourism that is predominantly heritage tourism, in which the tourist visits spiritual monuments more out of an interest in historic buildings than as a pilgrim or believer (Shepherd, 2018). Thus, the level of visitors' interest in faith, architecture or cultural heritage may differ at a spiritual site (Bond *et al.*, 2015) - the same place may be interpreted by the devotee as sacred, yet the tourist sees it only in terms of aesthetics (Aulet & Vidal, 2018). This also raises the question of whether a pilgrim is basically the same as a tourist or whether they belong to a different category. Ö'kan (2013) writes that, historically, a pilgrim is in structural terms just a specific type of tourist. Timothy and Olsen (2006) present variations of a tourist-pilgrim continuum that spans from the *secular tourist* to the *pious pilgrim*. This was expanded by Pechlaner *et al.* (2012) to include additional travel motives. These motives were earlier identified by Cohen (1992) as a decisive difference between tourists and pilgrims: pilgrims travel *to* their socio-cultural centre, whereas tourists travel *away* from it. Adding this spatial perspective, Cohen (1992) and Wichasin (2009) describe mixed travel motives that lead to hybrid forms along the tourist-pilgrim continuum, such as the *pilgrim-tourist*, the *tourist-pilgrim*, or the *traveller-tourist*. Ö'kan (2013) analyses pilgrims and tourists in terms of convergence and divergence and, based on the applied approach, comes to the conclusion that the lines in this regard are blurred. This is similar to the work of Küblböck (2013), who writes that the two spheres of tourism and spirituality may encounter, confront or blend together, and Olsen (2010:850) who considers the *pilgrim-tourism dichotomy* outdated and individual religious tourism identities as 'dynamic, fluid, [...] negotiable and changing depending on people's circumstances'.

A special derivative of spiritual tourism is *mindful tourism*, a type of travel which focuses on healing, e.g. in order to restore wellness or well-being (either based on Hedonia or Eudaimonia (Rahmani *et al.*, 2018) after a personal crisis. This is especially popular among western

tourists in Asia (Choe & O'Reagan, 2020). In mindful tourism, the spiritual tourist seeks some kind of personal or social *transformation* during their journey (Di Giovine & Choe, 2019). Thibeault (2018) refrains from using the term spiritual tourist at all, arguing that both spheres have a reciprocal relationship, and neither subjects itself completely to the other. In fact, he argues, they may even reinforce each other.

Buddhism Tourism

There are many forms of tourism based on a Buddhist motivation, including visiting Buddhist temples and monasteries, participating in Buddhist retreats, pilgrimages, and festivals, or simply staying in a Buddhism-themed hotel or eating Buddhist temple food (Son & Xu, 2013). This type of tourism is predominantly offered in Asian countries like Japan, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, China, Thailand, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and South Korea (Stausberg & Auckland, 2018; Chun, Roh & Spralls, 2017; de Silva, 2016; Agrawal *et al.*, 2010; Hung & Wang, 2015), but also increasingly in Western countries (Choe & McNally, 2013; Thibeault 2018). Most of these journeys involve visiting pre-existing locations, but Buddhist communities sometimes even repopulate formerly abandoned mountain villages, such as in Bordo, Italy, where they integrate a sustainable form of tourism into their way of living (Cooperativa Bordo, 2020; Gilli & Ferrari, 2017).

Thibeault (2018) coined the terms *Buddhascape* to describe the space where Buddhist tourism takes place. Given the fact that many countries have at least a Buddhist minority, it can be assumed that the Buddhascape nowadays has a global reach with many Buddhist destinations at the Buddhism-tourism interface, like Dharamsala or Bodhgaya in India (Thibeault, 2018). Thibeault (2018) observed the dual phenomena of the *Buddhification* of tourism and the *touristification* of Buddhism: tourists justify their travel by embedding it into Buddhism practices, while rejecting being simply an ordinary tourist, and Buddhist institutions seek to expand their outreach by addressing tourists. The touristification of Buddhism, according to Geary (2002), offers another untapped potential: the global popularity of Buddhism could encourage Buddhist centres to attract tourists as *enlightenment destinations*. However, Buddhist sites must strike a balance between business and spirituality, as Buddhism itself is the key attraction of the destination (Hung *et al.*, 2017) and involves the participation

of the local community to support the site and the complementary businesses (Wimalaratana, 2014). If the combination of Buddhism and tourism leans too far towards commodifying the spiritual essence, the perceived authenticity may get lost for tourists (Porananond, 2015) and affect their Buddhism tourism experience in a negative way (Levi & Kocher, 2012). Another negative example of the heavy commercialisation of Buddhism is the sale of mass-produced Buddha statues in Asian souvenir shops (Trupp, 2018) or even in Western DIY stores. Refraining from commercialising Buddhism may be difficult to achieve for poorer countries like Myanmar which depend heavily on Buddhism tourism (Philip & Mercer, 1999).

In terms of tourist demand, hybrid mixtures with a specific focus on tourism, spirituality or a combination of both can be observed (Küblböck, 2013). One focus is meditation, a key element of Buddhist practice that for some practitioners - whether spiritual or not – fulfils the criteria of leisure, since meditation can lead to stress reduction or being able to better regulate emotions, which is comparable to the effects of leisure (Choe *et al.*, 2014). Mindful tourists (see above) seeking spiritual or simply physical healing often like to do this in a Buddhist setting, e.g. a temple, mainly for the atmosphere, not for Buddhism as such (Choe & O'Reagan, 2020). However, when tourists and monks encounter one another at Buddhist sites, it is not always peaceful: sometimes tourists do not dress or behave appropriately according to the sanctity of the place, which can lead to conflict (Suntikul, 2008). Even Buddhist practitioners can create disturbances if they perform rituals incorrectly (Wong, 2011). Therefore, it might make sense to separate serious spiritual devotees from pure tourists sharing space at the same Buddhism site (Levi & Kocher, 2012). However, Wong *et al.* (2013) found that from the hosts' perspective, that is the nuns and monks at a Buddhist site, everybody is welcome. According to their Buddhist mindset, they are all just visitors, and tourism serves as a vehicle to inform more people about Buddhism. The nature of the respective Buddhist centre – whether they take a more inward or outward orientation - explains the centre's relationship to tourism: the more inward the orientation, the less the interest in tourism and vice versa (Gilli & Ferrari, 2017).

Buddhism and Sustainability

Sustainability can generally be considered inherent to Buddhism, since it is in line with Buddhist values (Schroeder, 2015) and expressed via a Buddhist ecological ethic that has always been a part of the teachings, even though it has changed over time (Swearer, 2006). The natural interdependency of Buddhism and sustainability has been addressed recently in works by the Dalai Lama (2020) and Folkers and Paech (2020). In his *Climate appeal to the world*, the Dalai Lama (2020) calls for compassion for the world and urges humans to balance business and ecology in order to prevent the destruction of the earth and to conserve nature. Folkers and Paech (2020), a Buddhist teacher and an Economist respectively, are very much in line with this thinking and therefore stress the importance of replacing greed with modesty. For these authors, this means living sufficiency, which in the end provides both material and immaterial freedom as part of a post-growth-economy. The Buddhist practice of ahimsa, not causing any harm to any living being, implies not eating meat, avoiding plastic, traveling by bicycle or bus, and saving resources (Nakamura, 2019). On a national level, there is also the Buddhist country of Bhutan, which even integrates sustainability into its state policy. Its Gross National Happiness (GNH) strategy - a *Beyond GDP* (Musikanski, 2015) policy - is Buddhism-based and favours sustainable measures – also practiced in the country's tourism industry (Schroeder, 2015).

Visitor management performed by nuns and monks at Buddhist sites to preserve the environment tends to be more soft, educational and reactive, assuming the visitor does not have bad intentions in the first place (Wong, 2011). On the other hand, the economic promises of tourism may lead to the decline of Buddhist values and a lack of focus on sustainability issues (Spoon, 2014).

The issues discussed in the literature review above led to the formulation of the following research questions that will be pursued in this study:

- What kind of tourism presently exists with regard to Buddhist institutions in the Alpine area?
- Does Buddhism shape the tourism landscape in the Alpine area?
- What are the interdependencies between Buddhist tourism and sustainable tourism?

Methodology

This study utilised a mixed method, combining in-depth-interviews with Buddhism experts and non-participant observation as a form of field research (Breidenstein, *et al.*, 2015). The author selected interviewees based on their expertise and affiliation to Buddhist institutions and also visited some of these institutions without taking part in Buddhist practices. To identify suitable interview partners the author consulted Swiss, German and Austrian Buddhism Associations, e. g. *Schweizerische Buddhistische Union*. The participants gave informed consent prior to the interviews, and the interviews were subsequently recorded. At the beginning of most of the interviews it was important to explain the term ‘tourist’, since Buddhist institutions do not consider their guests as Buddhist tourists in the first place. On reaching nineteen interviews, responses displayed saturation since many participant answers started to repeat. Therefore, the author considered the number of interviews as sufficient and did not pursue additional interviewees. All interviewees were anonymised. The author went through all the recordings and extracted core statements from the interviews that were relevant for answering the research questions. The same method was applied to the field notes of the non-participant observations. The regional focus of the study was on Switzerland, however some institutions located just across the border in Austria and Germany were also included. Switzerland is an appropriate country when it comes to the study of Buddhism tourism: firstly, it has a well-established and important tourism industry and secondly it is home to both, Asian and Western forms of Buddhism. A limitation of the study may be the non-transferability of the results to other regions in or outside Europe, because of the specific, unique setting of the area under investigation regarding its landscape and its mix of different forms of Buddhism.

Results

Buddhism and Tourism

The target group for Buddhist institutions in the Alpine Area are mainly women above the age of 40 with higher levels of education. This however does not mean that other age, gender or education groups do not travel to these destinations. On the contrary the respondents mentioned a broad mix of visitors. There was also a wide range of motivation among participants, with some individuals just giving Buddhism a try within the

‘supermarket of beliefs’ or looking for a quick fix after experiencing a personal crisis. Learning how to meditate was often a key motivation for newcomers to Buddhism. For westerners, Buddhism in general is attractive due to its logical, rational and empirical approach, tools for managing every-day life, and the experience of being part of a supportive community away from the ‘rat race’ (I1, I2, I4, I6, I7, I9-I14, I16, I17, I19)¹.

Some interviewees reported that occasionally, tourists without a Buddhist background, such as hikers or tourists interested in cultural heritage, would stop by for a look, which led some Buddhist institutions to start providing them with special offers, ranging from guided tours, walk-in seminars, restaurants, shops, or festivals open to the general public. This especially applies to Buddhist institutions that are visible from outside their property, where a passer-by might see a Zen garden, prayer flags, a sign, a Buddha figure, a stupa or even a temple. Many of the Buddhist institutions examined in this study are not visible as such from the outside since these institutions prefer to adapt to their surroundings and not really shape the space they are in. According to Buddhist values, they should act with non-dominance and discretion and, above all, try to blend in. Material representation is not important in Buddhism, and participants stressed that their goal was to become successfully integrated in a community (including plans for Buddhist cemeteries). This was accompanied by pragmatic discussions and explanations about their work with the local population.

One Buddhist institution explicitly rejected tourist groups that were interested in the golden Buddha they have on their grounds, since the sightseeing tourists would disturb the Buddhism tourists. Another institution, where the demand from non-Buddhist tourists became too high, needed to find a system to manage this new situation. A third one opted against building a temple that, as a material symbol of Buddhism, would attract too many tourists. Participants mentioned that the Swiss mountainous landscape fits perfectly to Buddhism, partly due to its similarity with other Buddhist regions, such as Bhutan or Tibet (I1-I19, LA-LF).

Most Buddhism tourism forms have characteristics that clearly differ from commercial tourism. This includes collective work like cleaning and cooking (carried out

¹ Throughout the results, I = interviewee (listed as I1 to I19) and L = non-participant observation location (listed as LA to LF).

as Buddhist practice, sometimes in silence) or shared accommodation to keep costs low and life in the Buddhist institution simple and non-profit, and to allow for inner, reflective work without distraction. However, demand is changing and now includes more requests for single rooms and child care, meaning more privacy and more service. Some Buddhist institutions are responding to this demand with a clear trend towards commercialisation, since Buddhism tourism is also becoming more interesting for corporate managers. Others are deliberately staying the way they are. Professionalisation may be necessary, sometimes simply because of the growing size of the Buddhist institution. The difference from other spiritual forms of tourism is that Buddhism tourism is free of doctrines, allows visitors to question everything, and has no gurus. On the other hand, the many similarities between institutions are also obvious, e.g. a retreat setting, simplicity, contemplation, collective work etc. (I1-I9, I11-I13, I17-I19).

Buddhism and Sustainability

The results of the interviews regarding the interdependencies of Buddhism and sustainability are in line with the findings in the literature: Buddhist behaviour includes tolerance, mindfulness, positive attitude of mind, benevolence, compassion, positive social relationships, not fuelling conflicts, saving resources, simplicity, vegetarian diet, peacefulness, not harming any living being (ahimsa). The focus is on the development of the inner self instead of acquiring wealth in the outside world. The natural consequence of this is a consumption behavioural pattern that is sustainable in its purest form and can be called *Eco-Dharma*. The holistic approach in Buddhism and its cause-and-effect concept goes hand in hand with the idea of sustainability (I1, I2, I6-I9, I11-I19).

Figure 1: Thai Temple in Gretzenbach, Switzerland



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25248007>

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study show that Buddhist institutions in the Alpine area have diversified and split into two groups: those taking a more conservative approach and those with a more market-oriented focus. Some institutions satisfy the demands of their guests by providing more single rooms or in general more services to their clientele, while others do just the opposite and refuse modifications, also in order not to attract too many people or the people that they feel do not fit. Apart from Buddhist institutions that cater primarily to Buddhism practicing guests, some Buddhist centres in the area under investigation also attract sightseeing tourists, such as e.g. the Thai temple in Gretzenbach, Switzerland. How such tourists are handled varies greatly – some institutions try to integrate them into their activities, some do not do anything specific for them, while others deliberately try to avoid them. The collective work done by service personal in hotels – such as cooking, cleaning - remains a decisive characteristic of Buddhism tourism. In summary, the distinction between sightseeing tourists and Buddhist guests (demand side) are just as blurred as the supply side. Although the typical Buddhist guest in a Buddhist institution tends to be older, female and with higher education, all types of hybrid forms exist among guests and tourists. Since the aging population in Europe will lead to a higher number of elderly people, the demand for Buddhism tourism as a spiritual search may rise further. Therefore, if this trend continues, the demand and the supply side will diversify even more with more and new forms of Buddhism tourism emerging.

That the idea of sustainability is so very much in line with Buddhism does not really come as a surprise. Thus, Buddhism tourism includes sustainability *per se* and again, is in line with the general sustainability trend, possibly leading to even more demand of this form of tourism. Future research may focus on Buddhism tourism in other parts of the world in their specific cultural setting or on a direct comparison of Buddhism and other forms of spiritual tourism. Another interesting aspect worth exploring may be the motivation of Westerners to turn to Buddhism and Buddhism tourism, since there are other spiritual offers, e.g. traditional Western Christian churches. The latter suffer a decline in members whereas Buddhism and Buddhism tourism are on the rise. Finding sound explanations for this trend could be an interesting new research topic.

In terms of the research questions raised in this study, the kind of tourism that exists in relation to Buddhist institutions in the Alpine area tends to be both conservative and modernising. The fact that different forms of Buddhism are present in the study area and that these forms meet the needs of different target groups of Buddhism guests serves as an explanation. Buddhism clearly does not shape the landscape of the Alpine area due to its modest and non-invasive approach. Since Buddhism does not need ostentatious symbols to represent itself, the impact in the landscape is minimal. Buddhism tourism and sustainable tourism are very much alike in the way that Buddhism tourism – due to the nature of Buddhism – automatically comes as a sustainable concept. Buddhism tourism can be considered a specific spiritual sub-form of sustainable tourism.

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List of interviews

(When quoted in the text, Interview 1, 2 etc. are abbreviated as I1, I2 etc.)

- Interview 1, May 20, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 2, May 27, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 3, June 01, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 4, June 08, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 5, June 09, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 6, June 09, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 7, June 09, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 8, June 16, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 9, June 17, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 10, June 17, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 11, June 21, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 12, June 21, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 13, June 22, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 14, June 22, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 15, June 08, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 16, May 25, 2016, Switzerland
 Interview 17, May 14, 2020, Germany
 Interview 18, May 28, 2020, Germany
 Interview 19, June 09, 2020, Germany

List of non-participant observation locations

(When quoted in the text, locations A, B etc. are abbreviated as LA, LB etc.)

- A) May 14, 2016, Locarno, Switzerland (Buddhist institution)
 B) June 06, 2016, Frastanz, Austria (Buddhist monastery)
 C) June 24, 2016, Amden, Switzerland (Buddhist institution)
 D) June 24, 2016, Gretzenbach, Switzerland (Buddhist temple)
 E) July 02, 2016, Rikon, Switzerland (Buddhist monastery)
 F) May 26, 2020, Radolfzell, Germany (Buddhist institution)