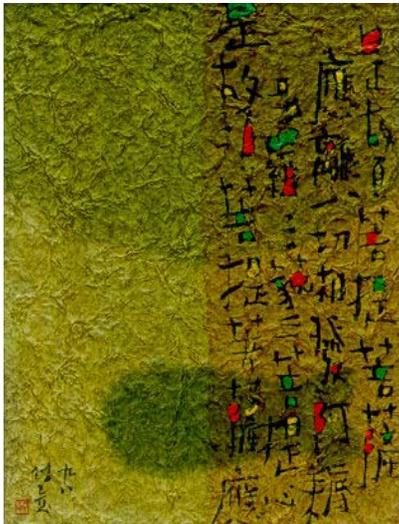


## Critical Note

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### Buddhism in Denmark

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## Critical Note

### Buddhism in Denmark

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There are about 20,000 Buddhists in Denmark. This number has been steadily increasing; just 30 years ago, this exotic religion from the East had only a few handfuls of practitioners. Asian immigrants and their descendants make up 80 per cent of Buddhists, while the remaining groups, primarily affiliated to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, are almost entirely of ethnic Danish origin. Though Buddhists comprise less than 0.5 per cent of the population, Buddhism's growing popularity may be seen in the way it is an inspiration for "sympathizers" and postmodern individualistic spirituality, a trendy brand for commercials, the object of good storytelling in the media, and well represented in the body and mind sections in the bookstores. Indeed, a bishop argued in a newspaper that Buddhism, not Islam, is the real threat to Christianity. This note will give a short overview of the history and demography of Buddhism in Denmark.(1)

#### **From intellectuals to practitioners and immigrants: a historical view**

Buddhologists and philologists paved the way for the coming of Buddhism to Denmark in the 19th century. Their literary works inspired both enlightenment thinkers and romantics to adopt thoughts from a distant, yet

seemingly recognizable, rational and spiritual tradition. The first Buddhist group, however, did not appear until 1921, when Doctor Christian F. Melbye (died 1953), founded the Buddhist Society in Denmark. Melbye was the Danish representative of two influential international Buddhist organisations, the Bund für Buddhistische Leben and the Mahabodhi Society, and personally communicated with Anagarika Dharmapala and D. T. Suzuki. He was an intellectual, and was concerned about transplanting what he acknowledged to be too exotic to most of his contemporary countrymen:

Buddhism on Danish soil — well, much could stir one's hope of it having good prospects. But as we see the moorland covered by heather in full bloom, we may also see Buddha's exalted thoughts spreading amongst a large number of people in the midst of our dry Danish spiritual soil (quoted in Borup 2007: 38; my translation).

It was symptomatic, however, that the handful of members of the Buddhist Society, apart from publishing a Buddhist journal (the articles of which were written by Melbye himself), never met to actually practice Buddhism before the Buddhist Society's eventual dissolution in 1950.

Such literary Buddhism was also common among many authors and intellectuals throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, being inspired by (mainly "Protestant" and rationalized interpretations of) Buddhist ideas. Intellectuals and sympathizers were also catalysts for a parallel phase, characterized by putting theory into practice. From the 1960s, individual adventurers actually went to Asia to explore the depths of the Eastern philosophies to which they had been introduced through earlier writings.

Some went to Japanese Zen monasteries. One of them, John Mortensen, later became the leader of Pine Hill Zendō and vice-abbot of the Dai Bosatsu Zendō in the USA, and eventually returned to his homeland to establish a Zen Buddhist monastery (Taikyōji) on a small island, ordaining the first monk in 2007. Despite its popular brand, Zen Buddhism, however, is still amongst the smallest schools of Buddhism in Denmark, with only seven groups and a total of no more than 100 affiliated people meeting periodically for Zen meditation (*zazen*). The other main school of Japanese origin, Sōka Gakkai Denmark, was established in 1983 by a Japanese, Masaaki Kamio, who went the other way round in his spiritual search, ending up finding and embracing his own roots. Today there are nearly 800 members and a similar estimated number of affiliated persons showing up for meetings and activities in the main center in Copenhagen (Nordic Culture Center) and its six main regions, and fifty four local groups.

The most lasting influence on the Buddhist practice scene in Denmark was triggered by Ole and Hannah Nydahl, backpacking in the spiritual East during their honeymoon to Nepal in 1968. As true hippies, they experimented with drugs, but later found that intensified practice and commitment to Tibetan lamas and Buddhist teachings were superior means of experiencing spiritual and existential depths. Despite (or because of) Nydahl's rather controversial personality (he loves fast motor-bikes, bungee-jumping and parachuting and has often talked negatively about Islam, Chinese politics, and even the Dalai Lama), he has in many ways been the icon of living Buddhism in Denmark. After he had been given the title of lama by the Sixteenth Karmapa of the Kagyu lineage, he established together with Hannah Nydahl (died 2007) the Buddhist Centre Copenhagen in 1972. The gates were opened for later Buddhists, and many of

those changing to other Buddhist traditions started their religious careers in the center, the success of which was later to be realized in three villas in the capital's embassy district, with 1,200 Danish and probably 10,000 affiliates related to the 600 centers worldwide being part of the international group called Diamond Way Buddhism. Despite some controversies splitting the Tibetan Buddhist community (see below), the Karma Kagyu school is still the largest Vajrayana school in Denmark, of which there are fifteen Tibetan Buddhist groups with around 3-4,000 affiliates, and around 2,500 having attended the Buddhist refuges run by lamas from these groups.

Very few ethnic Tibetans live in Denmark and, apparently, none of them — just like the ethnic Japanese and Chinese — are interested in (institutionalized) Buddhism. However, as it is the case in the rest of the Western world, the majority of Buddhists in Denmark are of (other) Asian origins. The arrival of the “boat people” from Vietnam in the late 1970s signaled a new phase of Buddhism, with immigration from an Asian context. Some were Catholics, some Buddhists and some not religious at all, but their presence produced a distinct cultural landscape. As they grew in number and family reunions were made possible, the Vietnamese started building their own temples and inviting monks from abroad as religious guides and ritual specialists. In 2008, nearly 13,000 people of Vietnamese origin lived in Denmark. Estimating the number of Buddhists to be 60-70 per cent, there are thus 7-9,000 who may attend two monastic communities and four smaller temples, all sharing four monks and one nun. Though also highly respected by the Vietnamese, Thich Nhat Hanh and his modern and universal Buddhism mostly caters to ethnic Danes, a small group of whom meet periodically to meditate and discuss his teaching.

Apart from two small Vipassana groups with practitioners of ethnic Danish origin, Theravada Buddhism in Denmark is primarily represented by Thais and Sri Lankans. Up to 90-95 per cent of the 7,700 Thais in the country are Buddhists, many of whom periodically visit the three Thai Buddhist temples: Watpa Copenhagen, Wat Thai Denmark Brahmavihara Buddhist Monastery and Wat Buddha Denmark — from the Thammayut, Mahanikaya and Dhammakaya schools, respectively. While the majority of the 10,300 residents of Sri Lankan origin are Tamil refugees and reunited families, an estimated 1,200 of these are Singhalese, with 900 being Buddhists, many of whom occasionally visit their Copenhagen Buddhist *Vihara*. Whereas the Vietnamese have come because of “push factors” (political reasons in their homeland sending them abroad), the main reason for the Thai and Singhalese Sri Lankan emigration has been the “pull factor” of settling in the new host country by marrying ethnic Danish men: whereas Vietnamese are evenly represented by both genders, Thai and Sri Lankan Buddhists are 60-70 per cent female.

### **Buddhist pluralism: sectarian and ethnic divides**

Several attempts have been made to integrate this plurality into an overall umbrella organization transcending ethnic and sectarian boundaries. In 1991, the Tibetan-born Lakha Lama established the trans-sectarian Buddhist umbrella organization Buddhist Forum, which since 1993 has been a member of the European Buddhist Union. In 2008, thirty two groups (a few of which are Swedish and Norwegian) are listed on the organization’s homepage ([www.buddhistisk-forum.dk](http://www.buddhistisk-forum.dk)), but only 200 individuals are actual paying members. The limited success of Buddhistisk Forum is partly explained by the fact that another one of Lakha Lama’s projects, Phendeling (being both the name of the group and the

temple), with 300 paying members and several activities, has taken over the role as an umbrella organization, catering to also non-Vajrayana groups.

Another reason is the institutional divides characterizing much of the living Buddhism. Ole Nydahl and his group Karma Kagyu Skolen today exclusively orient themselves to their own lineage and international religious environment, and are not related to any other Danish Buddhist groups, several of the leading figures of which are still reluctant to have anything to do with them. As is the case with Soka Gakkai, which many other Buddhists do not consider as “true Buddhists”, Karma Kagyu Skolen has previously not been invited to join the umbrella organizations Buddhistisk Forum and Phendeling. The reason for this split goes back to the so-called “Karmapa conflict” in the late 1980s, which started as a sectarian struggle and developed into transnational controversies of representation, *dharma* transmission and lama authenticity with repercussions for the whole convert Buddhist environment, in Denmark and abroad. When the Sixteenth Karmapa died and his new successor was to be identified, disagreement and even violent conflicts in the Himalayan region were transformed into localized conflicts regarding who would represent the true Karmapa and the Karma Kagyu lineage. Ole Nydahl was very active in promoting Trinle Thaye Dorje (born 1983) as opposed to Urgyen Trinle Dorje (born 1985), the latter being the candidate promoted by the majority of Tibetan Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama. The Karmapa conflict became a local Danish issue, and questions were raised concerning institutional affiliation and authority. Some questioned Nydahl’s qualities, others praised him as the only one having insight enough to choose the right side and courage enough not only to go against the Dalai Lama, but also to continue a Danish and Western tradition more

independent from Tibet.

The most significant diversity, however, is not primarily related to theological or sectarian schisms, but to ethnicity. The Vietnamese, Thai and Sri Lankan Buddhist communities have nothing in common, and only very occasionally mingle with the “convert Buddhists”. Language and culture are paramount identity factors in their temple religiosity. They live their religion, meet to socialize, eat their ethnic food, remember their past, enjoy themselves with laughter and entertainment with a cultural and national orientation, which outsiders undoubtedly find truly “authentic” and others find nostalgically “imagined” in the meeting with the host culture(s).

The majority of ethnic “cultural Buddhists” in Denmark are generally as active and conscious in their religious lives as most Danish “cultural Christians”. Whereas convert Buddhists have chosen their religious and spiritual identity and practice, and therefore have a higher rate of attendance, ethnic Buddhists have mainly brought their religion with them as “baggage” and part of their tradition. Only about 2 per cent of ethnic Buddhists regularly visit the temple, while 10-25 per cent attend religious festivals such as celebration of *wesak* and the rain retreat, cultural and national holidays or calendar rituals such as the Thai light festival *loy kratong*, the Vietnamese “Mother’s Day” (*vu lan*) or New Year (*tet*). Rites of passage focus on taking Buddhist refuges (no full monk’s ordination has yet been conducted in the country amongst the ethnic Buddhists), though only an estimated 60-70 per cent have done so, either in Denmark or in their countries of origin. Characteristically, only very few ethnic Buddhists have yet used the only Buddhist columbarium in Copenhagen, catering mainly for ethnic Danes from the Tibetan groups. Some are buried in

Christian cemeteries, others have their ashes sent to their homeland. Apart from the monks, very few meditate; many are not interested in institutional relations or doctrinal knowledge.

Rather than treating such behavior as “mere culture”, there is a point in also including such “soft religion” in a more inclusive category of religion. Ethnic Buddhism is also about bringing up children with the ideals of honoring ancestors and respecting the family in a highly individualistic Western country. To affirm the Buddhist precepts is also a key to affirming cultural and ethical codes of behaving well, of trying to — as many have expressed it — “live a good life”, and such an ideal can be achieved without necessarily going to the temple:

As Vietnamese and Buddhists we have three valuable things in our baggage: love, faith and hope. We love our families and are proud of being Vietnamese, proud of Vietnamese culture and heritage. We fully believe in life, and the love we have in our hearts helps us to cope with the new life and the difficult situations facing us. This gives us so much positive energy that we can look ahead for a new life with lots of challenges (quoted in Borup 2007, 73; my translation).

“Ethnicizing religion”, in which religion is practiced as an ethnic and cultural identity marker (e.g., when large photos of the royal family hang next to Buddha in Thai temples or when political events relating to the home country are celebrated at the temples), is structurally parallel to theologically Buddhicizing local cultural elements (for example, celebrating the birthday of Maitreya at the Vietnamese New Year or making the Thai New Year a Buddhist calendrical ritual), a practice also found in the convert Buddhist environment (for example, in celebrating Christmas or New Year at Buddhist

centers, or when using Danish in ritual practices). Even the small Dhammakaya group in Jutland, known in Thailand and internationally for re-introducing (or inventing) a spiritualized and meditation-based form of Buddhism, to a large extent embodies traditional Thai culture.

Whereas a few (especially young) Buddhists have voiced an interest in de-ethnicizing their religion, the process of spiritualizing and universalizing Buddhism is, however, most commonly found among convert Buddhists as an attitude of purifying and upholding it in a form that is more true and original than the apparently deviating “cultural” religiosity. The significant differences between ethnic and convert Buddhisms was expressed at a Vietnamese temple during the large Meitreyia “relic tour” in 2007: converts sat in lotus position with eyes meditatively closed during the séance, where the relics were placed in deep silence in the display cases. The very serious Italian lama had to hush the Vietnamese who were more interested in taking photos, gossiping and (to the regret of the Italian lama) filling up their plastic bottles with the blessed, holy water from the Buddha statue.

As has often been objected, there are both theoretical and empirical challenges in insisting on the relevance in using this two-fold typology of the “two Buddhisms”. One interesting aspect worthwhile studying is the apparent overlap and changes in developments. Clearly, the purely “Protestant” and intellectualized Buddhisms seem to be vanishing, giving space to a living and practiced Buddhism whose religious elements are often not significantly different from the religious immigrant and Asian Buddhism (for example, belief in miracles, magical rituals etc.). On the other hand, young generations of immigrant Buddhists learn about “doctrinal Buddhism” in schools and about the Dalai Lama, meditation and

“spiritual Buddhism” in the popular media. ‘It is cool to be a Buddhist’, as a young Vietnamese once explained me, signifying the symbolic capital deriving both from being part of a group of “model immigrants” and belonging to a tradition signaling spiritual quality in a postmodern society. Future contexts will probably change structural characteristics, and more research still needs to be done on many aspects of both Buddhisms in Denmark, but presently they still live and practice very much in “parallel congregations”, where it often seems that ethnic Buddhism is as exotic to convert Buddhists as convert Buddhism is to ethnic Buddhists.

#### Notes

1. A more detailed account of Buddhism in Denmark can be found in Borup 2005 and 2007.

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