

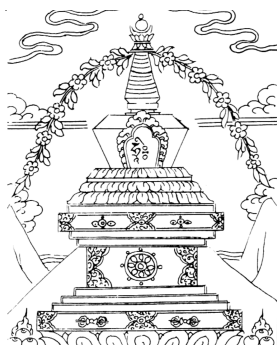
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*Being Creative with Tradition:
Rooting Theravāda Buddhism in Britain.*
By Sandra Bell



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**Being Creative With Tradition:
Rooting Theravāda Buddhism in Britain**

by

Sandra Bell

Department of Anthropology

University of Durham

sandra.bell@durham.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1970s, the founders of classical sociology began to be criticized for making naïve and crude assumptions about the distinction between the notion of tradition and the notion of modernity. Sociologists, such as Edward Shils and S. N. Eisenstadt, and historians, led by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, sought a deeper understanding of historical processes by asking questions about how social change effects particular clusters of associated ideas and practices and why some elements alter while others persist.

Eisenstadt, for example, wanted to challenge “a certain conception of tradition” that he identified as having “strong roots in the history of modern sociological analysis and its central concern about the distinctiveness of the modern social order.”¹ He cites DeToqueville, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber as major culprits. But Eisenstadt saves the full blame for Ferdinand Tönnies, whose typologies based on *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* led to the related typologies of “primitive, folk and urban societies” charted by the anthropologist Robert Redfield.² Together these ideas reinforced a false and misleading opposition between so-called modern and pre-modern societies.

It was this debate about the nature and function of tradition versus modernism that led Milton Singer (an associate of Redfield) to define “the cultural ideology of ‘traditionalism’ as one of the major instruments of modernization.”³ In his view, the nineteenth-century use of “traditional” as an adjective to describe societies or corporations that appear to be

characterized by continuity and immemorial custom is itself a product of social change and a feature of modern thought. Singer comes to these conclusions when dealing with the special case of social and cultural change in India. He describes modernization in India as a process “of incorporating innovations into the indigenous culture, while denying that it is a process which automatically transforms corresponding items in the ‘traditional culture’ into items of ‘modern culture.’”⁴ What Singer suggests here is the possibility that change may sometimes appear in the guise of persistence, and likewise persistence in the guise of change, as people manipulate and engineer prevailing views of the “new” and the “old” in order to serve current purposes.

This essay examines these ideas about how change might be got up as tradition and how timeworn practices might be experienced as novel. It does so in pursuit of an example that is the full converse of Singer’s material on the integration of foreign, usually Western, cultural practices into an Asian context. In what follows I will trace the reversal of those cross-cultural processes explored by Singer through an historical account of recent attempts to establish Theravāda Buddhism as an indigenous religion in Britain. The account also draws on ethnographic fieldwork that I carried out between 1986 and 1991. Most of the devotees and the monks who feature in it are Buddhist converts; only very few have been brought up by Buddhist parents. Buddhists of Asian origin do visit the monasteries to participate in a variety of activities, and they make significant donations in the form of money and other resources, as do Buddhists living in Asia (particularly people from Thailand). However, the monasteries under discussion here are not intended primarily as centers for Thai, Cambodian, or Sri Lankan expatriates, as is the case with a few other establishments in and around London.⁵

There are currently four related Theravāda monasteries in Britain that have evolved over the past two decades. The largest monastery, Amaravati, in rural Hertfordshire is specifically designed to cater for lay visitors. Cittaviveka, the monastery in Sussex, is intended for the training of monks, and the two smallest monasteries in Devon and Northumberland

serve widely dispersed local lay people. All the monasteries are situated in relatively isolated rural settings, more readily accessible by car than by public transport.

The Theravāda constituency in Britain is far-flung and covers scattered numbers of people who are often, though not necessarily, members of almost forty local groups throughout Britain for whom the monasteries act as a focal point. A newsletter is published four times a year from Amaravati and is sent free to 1,500 recipients. There are no formal terms of membership in the Theravāda Buddhist community, and therefore no official figures relating to the number of lay supporters. Many of the lay people are not personally known to one another, but their joint support for the monasteries through donations and attendance leads them to conceive of themselves, together with the monks and nuns, as a “community.” This sense of community and its Buddhist identity is woven around the existence of the British Forest *Sangha*, the order of monks who in this case are meditating monks linked through pupilliary succession to the recently deceased Thai meditation master and ascetic monk, Ajahn Chah. In Britain, the majority of the lay people are also meditators, and the monks are their leaders and models.

British Theravāda Buddhists frequently refer to their adopted religion as “*this tradition*,” especially when contrasting it with other forms of Buddhism. The venerability of the Theravāda is a matter of pride to the British Theravādins, and there is among them a strong tendency to represent Theravāda teachings as “traditional” and “timeless” wisdom suitable for a modern age that has lost its moral moorings.

My discussion of the absorption of Theravāda Buddhism into British society reverses the direction of cross-cultural borrowing cited by Singer. But it nevertheless supports his proposition that there are adaptive elements within culture that “make possible a kind of ‘cultural metabolism’ which ingests foreign cultural bodies, segregates them, breaks them down into usable forms and eventually builds them into indigenous ‘cultural protoplasm.’”⁶ The still relatively recent story of the transposition of Theravāda Buddhism to Britain suggests an instance where as a first

stage it has been important for cross-cultural borrowing to occur wholesale. For reasons that will be explored later, efforts to import the Theravāda monastic system in a partial manner did not succeed. The system eventually had to be swallowed whole, though rendered more palatable by specific innovations.

FROM MODERNITY TO TRADITION

The history of the transmission of Buddhism to Britain begins with the spread of British colonial and commercial interests to the Theravāda Buddhist regions of South and Southeast Asia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; here there is ample evidence for precisely the kind of adaptive elements that Singer cites in his material for the sub-continent. The details have been described and analyzed by a number of historians and anthropologists.⁷ I do not intend to reproduce an exhaustive survey of their findings. I am concerned mainly with pointing out that interactions between Theravāda Buddhism and aspects of Western culture evolved through mutual modification.

As a handy reference to this process, the term “export Buddhism” was coined by Winston King during the 1960s and received wide circulation as a shorthand explanation for the evolution of Theravāda doctrines and concepts during the latter half of the nineteenth century under the impact of European imperialism. King argues that attempts to equate Theravāda doctrines with Western rationalism, humanism, and science rendered Buddhist ideas more accessible and intellectually attractive to a growing indigenous middle class with a Western education, and hence to Westerners themselves.⁸ The sequence then is one of Theravāda tradition being scrutinized and reinterpreted through the lens of modernism as part of its reassertion in the indigenous setting, thus facilitating its transmission to Western Europe, the crucible of modernism.

The flaw in King’s argument is to place responsibility for the creation of “export Buddhism” too squarely on the shoulders of Western scholars and others who participated in channeling Buddhist teachings to Europe

and America, thereby overlooking the considerable contribution of indigenous Theravāda scholars, monks, and laymen, as well as important Indian scholars who participated in international Pāli studies. It was, for example, not unusual for members of the colonial service in Asia and European travelers to learn about Buddhism from local people, usually monks. Two famous collaborators were the Sri Lankan monk, Yatramulle, and T. W. Rhys-Davids, who worked for the colonial service. Yatramulle taught Pāli to Rhys-Davids, who later founded the Pāli Text Society in London in 1881. As a source of unimpeachable scholarship, the Society went on to provide institutional support for Buddhism in Britain, while Rhys-Davids became Britain's leading Buddhist scholar, translator, and author of widely read books on Buddhism.

Another example of Asians and Europeans creating a common cause out of issues relating to Buddhism concerns Edwin Arnold's founding of the Maha Bodhi Society in 1891 with the object of establishing a Buddhist college at the ancient Buddhist site of Buddha Gaya in India. Representatives of seven Buddhist countries were listed in the inaugural constitution,⁹ and the challenge was subsequently taken up energetically by the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader, Anagaarika Dhammapala. Edwin Arnold was feted in Europe and in Asia for his epic poem about the life of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, first published in 1879. The poem continued to be influential in introducing Western readers to the figure of the Buddha, and by 1970, there had been a total of sixty British editions and eighty American editions.¹⁰

Almond argues that *The Light of Asia* and other populist representations of Buddhism in Victorian Britain were constructed "by the West, in the West and primarily for the West," determined by "crucial socio-cultural aspects" of Victorian society, and circumscribed within the institutions and genres of Victorian middle class culture.¹¹ Almond's analysis is no doubt correct. I wish only to stress that Westerners were assisted and much encouraged by Asians. It is also important to realize that although the Victorians insisted on interpreting Buddhism in their own terms, their enthusiasm for the doctrines had an enlivening effect on Asian Buddhists.

Knowledge of the British discovery of Buddhism boosted the confidence of Sri Lankan Buddhists demoralized by the disestablishment of their religion and the often ferocious animosity of Christian missionaries.

Both factors, the collaboration and the renewal of confidence, argue against a picture of Asian Buddhists as a passive source from whom Buddhism was “borrowed” or even “plundered” by Westerners. A more accurate picture delineates a quite sophisticated pattern of interaction between intellectual elements of both the European and Asian cultural elites, resulting in Asian Buddhists reexamining their own religious texts in the light of European ideology. The nineteenth century was altogether a period of reformation throughout the Theravāda world. In Thailand—which became a client state of Great Britain, as opposed to a colony—reform began during the eighteenth century and continued to be led from the top by the monarch.¹² Despite the fact that Thailand escaped full colonization and retained the institution of sacred kingship, its religious reforms followed a similar direction to those which took place in Sri Lanka. Tambiah describes the reforms as “an accent on scripture (on practising the true unadulterated religion as revealed by close study of the canonical texts) combined with an activist impulse to carry the religion to the masses.”¹³ Both countries also saw a revival of monasteries for meditating ascetic forest monks¹⁴ and a developing interpretation among the growing middle classes that Buddhist teachings had a universal applicability similar to that claimed by Christianity. Notions about the universal applicability of Buddhism provided an important impetus for the transmission and reception of Buddhism in new cultural contexts, and the forest hermitages were eventually to provide training for Western monks who carried their newly acquired religion home.

MISSIONS TO THE WEST

The late nineteenth century saw a number of young Europeans take what was then the very unusual step of becoming Buddhist monks. Among them was Allan Bennett, a British scientist, who read Arnold’s *The Light*

of Asia and resolved to study Buddhism. He journeyed to Burma, where, after a period of study with Burmese teachers, he formulated a plan to lead a Buddhist mission to Britain. Believing that such a mission could succeed only if carried out by a member of the *Sangha*, the Theravāda Buddhist monastic order, he took ordination as a monk (in Pāli, *bhikkhu*) in Burma in 1902 and became known as Ananda Metteyya. While in Rangoon, he cooperated with Burmese Buddhists and British colonialists to found an international Buddhist society to be known as Buddhāsāna Samagama. Ananda Metteyya envisaged that his new organization would be established first in the Buddhist countries of Asia and later extend to Europe. The Secretary of the Rangoon Society was Dr. E. Rost, a member of the Indian Medical Service.

Back in London in 1907, Rost teamed up with his friend and fellow Buddhist, Col. J. R. Pain, an ex-soldier with service in Burma. On Bury Street, close to the British museum, they opened a Buddhist book shop where they were joined by R. J. Jackson. The trio organized lectures and meetings, but were best known for their missionary endeavors in the London parks where they emulated Christian missionary style, speaking from a portable platform that was painted bright orange and bore the logo “The Word of the Glorious Buddha is Sure and Everlasting.”¹⁵ The Bury Street enthusiasts decided to form a society to prepare for the coming of Ananda Metteyya to England, although for these purposes the evangelical style of the parks was muted to allow for potential supporters unprepared to be counted as full-blooded converts to Buddhism.

The mission, which included Ananda Metteyya’s two Burmese lay companions, arrived from Rangoon in April 1908 and six months later ended in failure with the return to Burma. The failure was due largely to problems attendant on Ananda Metteyya’s need to maintain the monk’s discipline, as laid out in the *Vinaya-piṭaka*. In the Theravāda countries of South and Southeast Asia, the behavior of monks and their relations with lay people comprise a set of cultural norms to which all members of society are introduced in childhood. Lack of familiarity with these things in Britain led to problems rooted in cultural dissonance. Those middle-

and upper-class late-Victorian Londoners who chose to support the activities of Ananda Metteyya were, despite Metteyya's British origins, faced with alien forms of behavior to which they had difficulty adapting. Christmas Humphreys records a catalog of problems that the lay supporters faced in attempting to house and feed Ananda Metteyya in accordance with the rules that he was obliged to follow as a monk.¹⁶

Ananda Metteyya's design for a British Theravāda Buddhist *Sangha* was not to be fulfilled for almost seventy years, though in the meantime there were other attempts by the persistent group of enthusiasts who continued to maintain that British Buddhism remained incomplete without monks and monasteries. Many of these people were members of the British Buddhist Society, which began as a Lodge of the Theosophical Society in 1924 and superseded Pain and Rost's original Buddhist Society when it was dissolved in 1926. Those members who supported the notion of a British *Sangha* were dissatisfied with the largely intellectual orientation of the Buddhist Society and had developed an interest in practicing meditation through the Society's small meditation circle, formed in 1930. In 1956, a group of these associates established the English Sangha Trust with the express aim of founding a monastery.

A main mover behind the formation of the Trust was the Englishman, William Purfurst, who became a monk in Thailand in 1954, taking the Pāli name of Kapilavaddho. A bequest enabled the Trust to purchase two adjacent properties in Hampstead, London. One was used as a *vihāra* (in Pāli, a dwelling used by monks) for Kapilavaddho, and the other was rented as private accommodation, thus providing the Trust with an income. Over the next few years, there was a series of incumbents at the *vihāra*, all individuals of which found great difficulty in keeping to the rules that restrict the sleeping and eating patterns of monks.

It is within the monastic community that the junior monk receives training in the refinements of the *Vinaya* from his seniors and where his practice is regulated according to monastic convention. The Hampstead monks were inexperienced and junior in terms of the length of time that they had spent as monks, and in Britain they had no teachers. Another

problem was that for the most part, the Hampstead *vihāra* was inhabited by one, or at most two, monks, and it was therefore not possible to perform the fortnightly recitation of the monastic rules and the accompanying confession of offences that form the ritual of *uposatha*, which requires a quorum of four monks.

John Holt describes the *uposatha* as “the essential expression of bhikkhu communal life and spirituality that defines the identity of the order.”¹⁷ The *uposatha* demonstrates the significance of what Shils calls “the perception of pastness.”¹⁸ It is the perception of pastness that mediates and connects ideas and events in the past to their acceptance or performance in the future. As far as the Theravāda *Sangha* is concerned, what matters is not simply the recurrence of the performance of prescribed and regular practices, but what Shils terms “the inter-temporal filiation” of beliefs or practices that accompanies it.¹⁹ Filiation requires transmission in the sense of “handing down,” but it entails receiving as well.

There is however a marked tendency for reception to be motivated by belief in the legitimacy of the authority of the recommender and for some of this legitimacy to be connected with the traditionality of the authority and of the rule which he sponsors or commands. There is something about the mode of the handing down of traditional beliefs and of receiving what is handed down which distinguishes traditional beliefs from other beliefs.²⁰

The distinctive mode with which traditional beliefs are handled depends on the participants’ collective “perception of pastness,” which, if successfully configured, transforms the routines of “dull repetition” into charismatic qualities. This is the kind of “institutional” charisma that Lindholm suggests can be “subsumed into tradition.”²¹ The *uposatha* provides a good illustration because it “ties the boundaried community to its ‘pristine past’, celebrates its contemporary successes and charisma, and makes possible the continuation of its mission in the future.”²²

In the case of the *uposatha*, the “perception of pastness” vitalizes the present by setting it in a context that can be traced back to the 2,500-year-old origins of the *Sangha*, whose “pristine past” and “present

charisma” are intimately related. To quote Shils again, “pastness” is significant “as the link to the charismatic source which becomes increasingly remote temporally. Its ‘pastness’ is then joined to its ‘charisma’ as grounds for the claims which are made for its acceptance and observation.”²³ In the example of the *uposatha*, which forms such a vital role in the *Sangha*’s constitution, these claims are extended beyond the rite itself to the “identity of the order” as a whole. Consequently, where there are too few monks to perform the *uposatha* recitation, there is no *Sangha*, merely one or two isolated members.

Such ritual isolation of the Hampstead *vihāra* during this period was further compounded by its not being incorporated into the institutionalized inclusiveness of a national ecclesiastical organization, as is the case in Asia. Also, as the preceptors who presided at the ordination of the Western monks were confined to Asia, they were unable to be active mentors, and another opportunity for transmission was lost.

In the absence of institutional supports for the incumbents of the Hampstead *vihāra*, there might have sufficed an ideological support, a theory of how new institutions could develop to enable Theravāda monks to flourish in a new cultural environment. But the lay supporters gave little or no attention to the problem, and with a few exceptions, they remained uninformed about the place that monastic routines hold in the training of meditating monks. The lay people came to the *vihāra* to practice mediation under the guidance of a teacher having the desired authenticity and bestowed by monastic robes. Most had little idea how to play their part in the dyadic relations of exchange that take place between lay people and monks in the Theravāda system as expressed through the practice of *dāna*, whereby lay people make regular ritual prestations to monks. The practice of *dāna* proclaims the monks’ mendicancy, stressing their otherworldly and hence superordinate status. *Dāna* also creates a ritual distance between the *Sangha* and the lay world that the monk has renounced. These beliefs and practices bind the lay people and the monks and in actuality reinstate the *Sangha* within the wider society, though the symbolic fiction that the monks, as renunciators, exist somehow outside

of society is necessarily maintained as axiomatic.

In Britain, no such symbolic contract between monks and lay people existed in the period under discussion, and nothing had emerged that might have replaced it. The sentimental attachment to the idea of an indigenous *Sangha* was sufficiently strong to sustain material support for the *vihāra*, but it was diffuse and devoid of ritual, and therefore, of collective expression.

The lay people may nevertheless have perceived of themselves as a category when counter-posed against their teacher, the monk, but at this stage such awareness did not suffice to form them into a strong community. Many of the lay people tended to be fairly prosperous members of London's individualistic middle-class intelligentsia. Later, during the mid-1960s, the *vihāra* attracted less prosperous and younger people who, under the influence of the somewhat ill-defined cultural movement of the era labeled "alternative," were drawn to Eastern religions and their derivatives. The younger people were not always popular with the old stagers, who for the most part were bred in the drawing room atmosphere of the Buddhist Society, and of course, the opposite was also true. These two types of visitors to the *vihāra* shared an interest in meditation, but they also held in common a highly individualized perspective that tended against association. In addition, the opportunity to effect and experience the regular ritual prestations of *dāna* that articulate the bond between lay people and monks and delineate the outline of a Theravādin social order were not present at the Hampstead *vihāra* at this point. There was no pressing need for lay people to take personal responsibility for the upkeep of the *vihāra* and its occupants, since the adjacent property was also owned by the English Sangha Trust who had a regular income from its rental. There were therefore no practical reasons to compel the laity toward the practice of *dāna*.

Another reason for the unwillingness to pursue the practice of *dāna* was a tendency among British Buddhists to reject the theory of religious merit (*puñña*). It is therefore not surprising that the ideology of *dāna* that rationalizes in symbolic terms the symbiosis between recipient and donor

was redundant. To paraphrase Singer, the “cultural metabolism” of the British Buddhist scene during the 1950s and 60s was unable to “ingest” the “foreign cultural body” represented by Buddhist monasticism. Indeed, people seemed barely able to conceptualize it. Consequently, commitment to the vision of an indigenous Theravāda *Sangha* subsided. In 1971, no monks were available to reside on the premises, whereupon there followed a lull in activities and the premises remained underutilized.

THE SOLUTION

In Theravāda Buddhism, the practice of meditation is particularly associated with a section of the *Sangha* known as *ārañṇavāsī*, the forest-dwelling monks, who are also associated with strict observance of the *Vinaya* discipline and additional ascetic practices known as *dhūtaṅga*, which are doctrinally optional.²⁴ In 1977, the English Sangha Trust made contact with a strand of what Tambiah refers to as “the forest-monk tradition”²⁵ in an area of Northeast Thailand where hermitage monasteries were enjoying a flourishing revival under the leadership of disciples of a modern Buddhist saint, Ajahn Mun (1870-1949). In 1977, one of the most renowned of these disciples, Ajahn Chah, visited the Hampstead *vihāra* with three of his own Western followers and fellow monks. Tambiah describes Ajahn Chah as having “orthodox, even ‘purist’ tendencies” and the style of his orthodoxy as “consonant with the prescriptions of the *Visuddhimagga*,” a commentarial text by the monk Buddhaghosa.²⁶ The *Visudhimagga* is concerned with doctrine, meditation, and the life of the monk and has, according to Gombrich, “been regarded as authoritative” ever since its composition in the fifth century B.C.E.²⁷

The Trust made contact with Ajahn Chah through the agency of Ven. Pañṇavaddho, formerly Peter Morgan, a Welshman who had become ordained as a monk in Thailand and subsequently spent five years as the resident monk at Hampstead between 1957 and 1962. For reasons outlined in the section above, Pañṇavaddho was unable to pursue further training in the monk’s discipline in Britain and so returned to Thailand to pursue

the ascetic life of a forest monk under the tutelage of another disciple of Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Maha Bōwa. Ajahn Maha Bōwa had visited Hampstead in 1974 and expressed doubts that meditating monks could be successfully transposed to “a country where people were ignorant of the monks’ discipline and the relationship between *Sangha* and laity.”²⁸ Three years later Ajahn Chah was less daunted, perhaps because he had already established a hermitage monastery for his Western disciples close to his own Wat Pah Pong, near the village of Bung Wai. From this perspective, it may have seemed just one more step to return some of them to found a branch monastery in Europe or America. Ajahn Chah had successfully established a number of branch monasteries in Ubon Province in Northeast Thailand, and his own disciples had also started their own teaching centers.²⁹ Tambiah views Ajahn Chah’s “extraordinary ‘institution building’” as an aspect of the duality inherent in the forest tradition, whereby the ascetic monk becomes an organizer and founder of monasteries. This happens because “dedication to the meditation path necessarily involves the teaching of the hard-won wisdom to others.”³⁰

Having never before left Thailand, Ajahn Chah was unfamiliar with an environment where Buddhists formed such a small proportion of the population as to be scarcely noticeable. His strategy was to remain undeterred by the fact that English people as a whole knew nothing about making *dāna* to monks and to set out to tutor those few lay people who claimed to be Theravādins. Ajahn Chah insisted that he and the other monks go out on an alms-round each day in order to maintain an association with the discipline and continuities of monastic life. Displaying the composed comportment prescribed for monks and carrying their alms bowls, they walked a fixed route around the streets of Hampstead and across the open heath. Predictably, they would return having received nothing but curious stares, but the practice enabled the newcomers to assert their status as mendicant monks among the lay followers whose interest was rekindled by the flurry of fresh activity at the *vihāra*. The ritual of the alms-round acted as a powerful lesson in the significance of mendicancy for maintaining the equilibrium between monks and lay people,

some of whom began to turn up with gifts of food at the time that the monks set out from the *vihāra*.

After several months, Ajahn Chah nominated the most senior of the Western monks, American-born Ajahn Sumedho, as the new abbot of the reconstituted *vihāra* and returned to Thailand, leaving strict instructions for the continuation of the alms-round. It was Ajahn Chah's authority, derived from his eminence in the world of Thai Buddhism and his special status within the forest monk tradition, that led the British supporters to accept the alms-round as an important daily ritual and to develop some degree of participation. Though the alms-round was, in the words of one of the participants, "apparently pointless"³¹ in terms of producing material support, the lay people came to interpret it as a demonstration of the monks' authenticity and of their common commitment to the monastic life. By all accounts that have been offered to me, the laity was impressed by the fact that the monks were prepared to venture forth every day in all types of weather wearing only thin cotton robes to walk single file carrying their alms bowls, receiving nothing but jibes or indifferent incomprehension from the majority of members of the public. The monks' tenacity was viewed as a sign of devotion and obedience to their revered teacher, enacting in concrete form the hierarchical pupil-master relationship that is central to the transmission of spiritual knowledge and the maintenance of institutional continuity.

In looking back at this period, lay people—including those who were not present at the time—speak of the monks' dignity and forbearance as they daily faced the kind of ridicule that had greeted Ananda Metteyya on the streets of London seventy years earlier. This time, however, the monks turned the tables and led the lay people to view such responses as something to be overcome by perseverance rather than retraction. The senior Western monk, Ajahn Sumedho, has consistently proclaimed that it is "good for people to see monks" because they represent an attempt to "live the holy life." In other words, monks are a reminder of the quest for moral purity. Even members of the public who have never encountered Buddhism in any form might, by this view, be moved to inquire and so

learn about the *Dhamma*. Furthermore, the monks too could benefit by “watching the mind,” that is, by receiving unwelcome attention as an opportunity for practicing equanimity under difficult circumstances.

The idea that it is “good for people to see monks” harks back to the story of the life of the Buddha, when the young Gotama was stirred from the ignorance and inertia of his indulgent and overprotected life by the sight of a sick man, an old man, and a corpse. The story continues with Gotama being inspired by the sight of a wandering ascetic to seek release from the human suffering represented by his previous encounters. Ajahn Chah’s prescription of the alms-round was thus a highly effective rhetorical device full of resonance for the small, but growing, circle of lay people who began to regroup around the monks. The message evoked in present time the “pastness” of the Theravāda system through its recollection of the Buddha, the founder of the *Sangha*, and of many subsequent generations of monks who had attempted to follow the path of mendicancy, as well as the lay people whose *dāna* had supported them. All this meant that in imagination, the British Buddhists were able to experience themselves as contemporary participants in a temporal flow of long duration, or in their own language as “heirs” to an “ancient tradition.”

Sometimes the word “*tradition*” itself was employed to trigger the necessary responses required to integrate the processes of persistence and change into a version of the present. Take, for example, the transcript of a talk by the senior Western monk—the American, Ajahn Sumedho—at the Hampstead *vihāra* in 1978. Suggesting that visitors to the monastery should on occasion bring candles, incense, and flowers “as an offering,” Ajahn Sumedho said, “This is a good *tradition*.” He then turned to the custom of bowing to the monks and to the image of the Buddha, noting that “this is another *tradition*.” And in relation to chanting, he exhorts, “Can you give yourself to a *tradition*, or are you going to say, ‘I’ll only go so far and then stop’?” The references to the word “*tradition*” in this particular context are complex, because while they stress the continuity of Theravāda practices over time, they also point to the newness of the phenomenon in Britain where devotees must learn the ways of Buddhism,

acknowledging their role as apprentices. The talk culminates in Ajahn Sumedho urging the lay people to understand how induction into the practices of gift-giving, bowing, and chanting leads to a state of awareness that “is always the present moment.” *Tradition* is here a means for creating a new way of life that depends on living in the present.

Conjuring with notions of past, present, and future is a recurrent feature of this period in the history of British Buddhism, so, for example, in Ajahn Chah’s absence, the alms-round became a reminder of his continued spiritual leadership made apparent in the obedient response of his monk disciples. They were admired by lay people for the serenity with which they persistently faced the same kind of ridicule and unwelcome attention that had beset Ananda Metteyya. However, instead of being regarded as an embarrassment, this kind of public exposure was now represented as a display of faith in the ancient practices of the Theravāda and indicative of the dignity and fortitude of monks. In addition, important events were soon to transpire that further validated lay perceptions of Ajahn Chah as a far-sighted and visionary teacher, and of the monks as his legitimate Western heirs.

During their regular journey across Hampstead Heath the monks met with a jogger who became interested in them. In 1978, the jogger, who wished to remain anonymous, offered to give the monks several acres of woodland that he had recently inherited at Chithurst, a village on the Sussex-Hampshire border. By coincidence, a large derelict property adjacent to the woodland, Chithurst House, was up for sale. The English Sangha Trust accepted the gift of the woodland on behalf of the monks and after much deliberation decided to sell the Hampstead property in order to purchase Chithurst House. The move to Chithurst meant that the monastic community—which had risen to four monks, together with eight men in training for ordination—would be dependent on *dāna*. Furthermore, the amount of work that was required to convert Chithurst House into a monastery provided lay people with an opportunity to become closely involved with the project; as a result, the number of active supporters increased. Thai people living in Britain, although few in number, began

to participate. Most significantly, money to finance the extensive renovations started to arrive from Thailand, and generous donations, particularly for the purposes of building projects, continued to flow into Britain from Thailand from this time onwards.

CONSOLIDATING AND EXTENDING TRADITION

The preservation of the alms-round, having survived the move to Chithurst, ran counterintuitive to the new cultural context where it meant nothing to most British people; but the conservative ethos that formed the background to its preservation ultimately served the incipient British *Sangha* well. This relationship between innovation and conservation—or to put it another way, between novelty and what stands for tradition—is imperative to any understanding of the transmission of Theravāda Buddhism to British society. The attempt to innovate within a notoriously conservative—and in that sense, deeply traditional—religious form such as the Theravāda system³² by transposing it to a novel cultural context where its minority was so small as to be almost invisible was likely to be a difficult project. British lay people wanted “real” monks, and it had become clear that “real” monks need to be part of a corporate body, the *Sangha*.

Once there were several monks well trained in *Vinaya* through their rigorous induction in Ajahn Chah’s hermitage monasteries, they were able to form the quorum necessary for vital corporate rituals such as the *uposatha*. This, together with the alms-round and the insistence on the maintenance of ritual distance between monks and lay people (marked by behavior such as lay people bowing to monks and making formal offerings of food and other items), facilitated a demarcation between monks and lay people that had not been possible in the *ad hoc* atmosphere of the earlier period, where there was often anyway only one monk among many lay people.

However, while conservatism can be seen as characteristic of British Buddhism, some considerable innovations have also taken place. The

most notable of these developments are the founding of a nuns' order and the institution of a new kind of postulancy in the form of the *anagārika*.

The women are known by the Pāli term *sīladhara* (upholder of virtue) but are most commonly referred to as nuns. The term of address used for nuns is "sister," though monks are never called "brother." The nuns do not live by the same *Vinaya* rules as the original Theravāda nuns' order—which vanished from Sri Lankan Buddhism in the tenth century and eventually declined throughout Southeast Asia³³—but by a set of rules elaborated from the Ten Precepts of the male *sāmaṇera* (novice) ordination and informed by the spirit of the *Vinaya*; hence their daily routines and general comportment parallel that of the monks in most respects.

Prior to the experiment in Britain, Theravāda Buddhist monasticism possessed only one rank of ordination prior to that of full ordination. Those who go through this form of ordination are usually young boys and are known as *samāṇera*. It is more usual for the *samāṇera* ordination (in Pāli, *pabbajjā*, or going forth) and the monks' ordination (in Pāli, *upasampadā*, or acceptance) to be carried out in combination so that they form one ceremony. Ajahn Chah's policy at his forest monasteries departed slightly from this norm in that he encouraged applicants for ordination to spend time at the monastery observing certain precepts in order to test their resolve. Temporary full ordination, often lasting only three months, is common in the majority of the Thai monasteries and functions as a rite of passage for young men into adulthood. Temporary ordination is also regarded as an aspect of a young man's moral and sentimental education and a source of religious merit for him and his family.³⁴ The forest monasteries are less inclined to accept such applicants, preferring to encourage those with a long term commitment. In Britain, temporary ordination does not take place, but there is instead a two year postulant ordination whereby the ordinand becomes known as an *anagārika* (homeless one) and which represents a fully institutionalized extension of Ajahn Chah's informal policy.

The *anagārika* generally commits himself to remain at the monastery for at least one year. At the end of the first year, he may choose to remain

for a second year, and after that, he has the choice either to leave the monastery or become a monk. In practical terms, the fact that the *anagārika* is allowed to store and cook food has perhaps done the most to allow numbers of monks to live and practice in Britain. The monks are prevented by their rule from keeping or storing food, and the problem of staffing the monastery kitchens daily with sufficient volunteer lay persons could well have proved an insurmountable obstacle. The food in the monastery larder is said to be stored by the *anagārikas* (in Britain, frequently used Pāli words are given a plural form by adding an “s” rather than applying the Pāli plural) who cook and offer it to the monks. The *anagārika* also functions as an intermediary between the monks and the laity, especially with regard to newcomers, by explaining the conventions of the monastery. The *anagārika* is permitted to handle money, including petty cash supplied by the monastery Trustees. Most of the services that can be supplied by the *anagārikas* are called upon in all three monasteries each day, and it is not difficult to calculate what might have happened if these responsibilities had been left entirely in the hands of lay people, as they were at the time of Ananda Metteyya, especially since the British monasteries are situated in relatively inaccessible rural locations.

The non-traditional forms described above were necessary prerequisites for the successful establishment of Theravāda monasticism in Britain. From the outset there was a large proportion of female lay supporters, almost all of whom were educated, independent, and unlikely to accept the idea that women had no place within the formal structures of the monastery, while the practical necessity of the *anagārika* has already been underlined. But it was also important that these innovations did not threaten the British *Sangha*’s authenticity by threatening its acceptance within the wider Theravāda world. Great care and diplomacy were exercised by the senior British monks to avoid this risk that was mitigated in Thailand by the British *Sangha*’s reputation for strict adherence to the *Vinaya* and their association with Ajahn Chah. Tambiah explains that in Thailand, the forest saints are able to employ flexibility and latitude because they possess personal authority.³⁵ Referring particularly to the example

of Ajahn Chah, Tambiah opines that the network of branch monasteries and subsidiary centers “can constitute, if systematically expanded, a formidable system of charismatic influence and presence that is so different from the established ecclesiastical system or the political authority with its patrimonial bureaucratic attitudes and weaknesses.”³⁶

In Britain, the monks are heirs to the charismatic authority of their forest lineage and to the accompanying attitude that extols the spirit over the letter of the *Vinaya* and its commentaries. The combination of charismatic authority—providing for flexibility and adaptability—plus strict adherence to the ultimate value of the *Vinaya* has been well matched to produce reliance and stability within the uneasy period of the *Sangha*’s initial assimilation into Western culture. Yet this combination has also permitted such major innovations as the nuns’ order, while determining the cautious manner in which innovation has been carried out.

CONCLUSION

Those innovations that have facilitated the transmission of Buddhism across cultural boundaries—such as the association of Buddhism with Western ideologies in the nineteenth century; the founding of the *sīladhara*; the consolidation of the *anagārika* role and the laity’s embracing of *dāna* minus the ideology of *puñña*³⁷—are played down, and some are not discussed much at all. Instead, the monks’ sermons and the articles that monks, nuns, and lay people write in monthly newsletters are inclined to evoke “pastness” rather than “newness.” Theravāda Buddhists in Britain locate themselves within an unbroken chain that links the British monks to the Buddha and his original *Sangha* through a narrative stream of interconnected events and characters that has a seamless appearance. The Theravāda Buddhists’ representation of themselves as situated within a tradition is reinforced through the pupillary lineage system. Thus Ajahn Sumedho is seen as the heir of Ajahn Chah, who was himself the heir of Ajahn Mun, and so on, back to the Buddha himself.

Though Buddhist monasteries remain, for the time being at least, a

novel form in British culture, their appeal is charged with references to antiquity and to tradition. Among the Buddhists, this outlook is largely due to a dependence on charismatic authority that resides within the institution of the Order itself. The charisma of the *Sangha* is, however, routinized in as much as it is joined to “pastness” through the fixed and conservative influence of the *Vinaya*. Nevertheless, the vitality that is inherent in systems dependent on charismatic authority have enabled the British *Sangha* to maintain a creative balance between new developments and the maintenance of orthopraxy. There appears to be a synthesis of charismatic and legal authority that, in the transitional stage between one cultural setting and another, equips the British *Sangha* with the potential for resilience and continuity without seriously impeding its ability to adjust to new conditions. As forest monks most markedly display these potentialities, they may prove to be the ideal transmitters of Theravāda Buddhism across cultures, particularly when they are Western forest monks making a return journey.

In pursuance of Singer’s organic metaphor of a kind of “cultural metabolism,” it could be said that the ingestion of the foreign cultural body represented by Theravāda monasticism is now complete in Britain. What remains to be revealed are the ways in which Theravāda Buddhism may become “broken down” and built into indigenous “cultural protoplasm.” It is unlikely that the British periphery will enforce dramatic departures from practices emanating from the center in Thailand, though the center is not itself stable as structural changes in Thai society associated with modernization and secularization proceed. For the short term at least, the enculturation of Theravāda Buddhism in Britain is likely to proceed through small readjustments rather than substantive change because of the overriding desire to remain firmly within the Theravādin fold. The cultural skills required for the continuing negotiation of this particular cross-cultural enterprise will reside in the ability of many persons to adapt, as Shils describes it, “without a sense that anything essential has been renounced.”³⁸

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