

Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 4 (2003): 54 - 61



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ISSN 1527-6457

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In the last years a variety of researchers, mainly from the disciplines of religious studies and the social sciences, have attempted to understand the growing effort to systematize the presence of Buddhism in a Western context. This research area is being constructed through the study of the diverse processes of adaptation to local contexts due to internal factors of Buddhist communities. In this sense, the work of Michelle Spuler is a significant contribution to the academic research about the Diamond Sangha and Australian Buddhism. In addition, Spuler's study aims to break the analytically constructed barrier various theories have set up between the Buddhism practiced by converts and by immigrants and their descendants.

This study in the renowned "Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism" series is well arranged in four chapters, with the addition of tables, appendices, an extensive bibliography and

an index. The first chapter, "Australian Buddhism in Context," starts with a portrait of Japanese Zen Buddhism and the Zen Diamond Sangha as a part of Buddhism in Australia and the West. This chapter offers quantitative information and a short resume of the current situation of Buddhism in the West, then a portrait of the history and contemporary situation of the Diamond Sangha in Australia. This Zen order, the focus of Spuler's study, was founded by the American Robert Aitken (1917-) in 1959 and separated in 1983 from the parent Zen school of Sanbo Kyodan, established in 1954.

Following the previous contextual information, chapter two, "Australian Buddhism in Transition," describes the results of the author's field study of the Australian Diamond Sangha. In addition, secondary sources are used to compare Spuler's findings and annotations with studies carried out in other Western countries. Spuler divides her presentation into three main themes: rituals, community and ideology. Regarding ritual and religious practice, she observes not only the influence of meditation techniques used in other Buddhist schools and New Age spirituality, but also creative innovations through connections with psychotherapy and mythology in a sesshin ("meditation retreat") dedicated only to women, in the inclusion of feminine values in chanting, and even in a "wilderness sesshin," consisting of hiking and camping in nature (p. 35-48). Due to the different role of the Zen community in the West in comparison with the Japanese environment, new rites of passage have developed. These especially aim for a higher integration of group practices with other aspects of members' lives, for example, a baby-naming ceremony.

In terms of the community's composition, Diamond Sangha groups are constituted basically of Anglo-Saxon, middle class professionals, many of them with university training (p. 53) and with previous participation in other religious groups (p. 50-51). In this context, although this aspect is not emphasized by Spuler, it is interesting to observe that many groups of converts in addition to the Diamond Sangha organize their community into students, senior students, assistant teachers and teachers, thereby valorizing the spiritual transmission of knowledge in the form of something like a spiritual academy. This shows an intellectualized ideal present among the Western members but widely ignored in Japan, despite the use of words as "*sensei*" and "*roshi*" (teacher, master).

Spuler informs us that the communities of the Diamond Sangha are financially maintained by donations and membership fees. According to her field work, the institution is organized in the form of an elected board and a spiritual leadership with spheres of action and decision that are often not clearly distinguishable. In her description of ideological expressions, one sees the strong influence of Western culture in the spheres of democratization, lay practice, the validation of women and social commitment within the communities. This is similar to other convert Zen groups observed in the USA (p. 82-96).

Though chapter two already takes initial steps, chapter three, "Models of Change," directly addresses the issue of religious change. As the main reasons for change, Spuler identifies the need for indigenization and the maintenance of tradition, important poles in the questions of how to make and who can

make necessary adaptations (p. 108-115). She develops her position by aligning her argued reasons with the poles of necessary adaptation and identity maintenance that occur in Buddhist groups similar to the Diamond Sangha. Spuler thus contextualizes the Diamond Sangha's adaptation process in Australia within a general perspective on the influence of host cultures (p. 115-119).

Next, Spuler presents academic perspectives on Buddhism in Western countries as different theories of change. These perspectives have come from three academic contexts: transplantation models, studies about new religious movements (NRMs), and research on ethnic communities. Perhaps because the main focus of Spuler's study is the adaptation of the Diamond Sangha in Australia, she describes in detail transplantation models, mainly the models developed by Michael Pye and Martin Baumann, leaving five pages for the bibliography on new religious movements and religion and migration theory (p. 128-132). In her conclusion to her last chapter, "Breaking Down the Boundaries," Spuler aims to break the supposed dichotomy between convert and ethnic Buddhism. Spuler claims that the "process of adaptation in convert and ethnic Buddhism is more similar than previously thought" (p. 134) because identity construction and change are important not only to NRMs and ethnic communities, but also for convert groups such as Diamond Sangha.

For a critical evaluation of this book, centered in similarity rather than difference, it is interesting to situate Spuler's efforts in the present state of research on the establishment of Buddhism in Western countries. At present, the reviewer

observes at least three factors that make it difficult to arrive at more definitive conclusions and generalization here. First, there is the transitoriness of many Buddhist adaptations, which seem more attempts than institutions. This is accompanied by the fragility of many groups, which often leads to redefinitions of their social roles. The innovative and ephemeral character of these adaptations shows that it is necessary to await more stability before we can really recognize the characteristics of Buddhism in Western countries. As Spuler indicates, quoting American Buddhologist Richard Seager, this factor must be considered as inherent in the present phase of Buddhist adaptation (p. 97). Even the interesting initial example presented in the book, where a *sesshin* exclusively for women is combined with therapeutic work with myths, remains only an activity performed in a particular year, something that will not necessarily be repeated (p. 137).

The present state of research leads to another difficulty this reviewer has with what Spuler throughout the book refers to as "Western Buddhism." So far as I observe the state of affairs, it is necessary to undertake more systematic comparisons and geographical studies to convincingly systematize a so-called "Western Buddhism." Is it one or many "Western Buddhisms," monolithic or heterogeneous? My reservation is based on the fact that the different histories of immigration in different regions, coupled with local factors, lead to different groups and different forms of Buddhism (for instance, Latin American Buddhism). As crucial studies of these groups have not been attempted or are still in process, any portrait of "Western Buddhism" often is really just a sketch. The Australian multicultural context may not imply a deep difference in

comparison with the USA and Canada (p. 115-119), partially because Protestantism is the dominant religious tradition in these countries where research on "Western Buddhism" is more advanced. Still, there are various countries that do not share this environment. Even the label "Australian Buddhism" which appears in the main title of Spuler's book and throughout, appears to lack justification, since the Buddhism resulting from Asian immigration to Australia is practically ignored in this study.

My reservation about such terms is more acute given the fact that the case study group, i.e., the Diamond Sangha in Australia, is possibly too small a sample to be representative of any so-called "Australian Buddhism" as a whole. These critical observations are reinforced by the numerical facts supplied by the book itself. As the 1996 census shows, more than 70% of the around 200,000 Australian Buddhists were born outside Asia, the majority in Vietnam. Only 19.7% of Australian Buddhists were born in Australia, and even here a quarter belong to the second generation of Asian immigrants (p. 16). Moreover, given the relative small number of participants at the six centers of the Diamond Sangha (approximately 230 practitioners according to Spuler, p. 19-22), it is important to ask whether the Diamond Sangha could represent the behavior of the Australian Buddhists or even converts in general, since little regarding other groups is described. Despite this reservation, Spuler's case study nevertheless provides interesting and fruitful hints about the processes of change and adaptation in a new and Western Buddhist organization, and surely reveals one more interesting piece of the mosaic of the Buddhism in Western countries.

A third difficulty with general assertions about Buddhism in Western countries is the existence of several analytical perspectives used to study the phenomenon. In this sense, Spuler's attempt to show the similarities between these theories is an important step for a more general perspective about religious change in the Buddhist communities. This view brings the heuristic value of a more unified view of the Buddhist phenomenon in the West and could be even more developed through a phenomenological approach. On the other hand, it is important to preserve the explanatory value of the individual theories, because they suppose some differences likely to be ignored by a more general approach. This is true not only when viewing the differences between ethnic and convert Buddhism, but also between a more intellectualized Buddhism (converts in the Zen groups) and a Buddhism with more emphasis in worldly results (as for example NRMs such as Soka Gakkai, Reiyukai or Agonshu). In fact, there are resemblances between all Buddhist communities in Western countries, but many of them are tautological in the sense that every religious group that changes social contexts can have adaptation phases and can be studied through theories of change. With two poles of reference, a local context and a foreign context, there always exist questions of identity also.

In sum, Spuler's study shows in detail the establishment processes of the Diamond Sangha in Australia, through a field research approach and the use of diverse studies of similar groups in other countries. With regard to theoretical studies about Buddhism in Western countries, I find that her greatest contribution is her summary of proposed transplantation theories and her convincing emphasis on change and identity.

With respect to her attempts at generalization about "Western Buddhism," as well as her attempt to break boundaries between different analytical perspectives, it appears to me there is still more comparative and theoretical work to be done, although this attempt already has some heuristic value.