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Book Review

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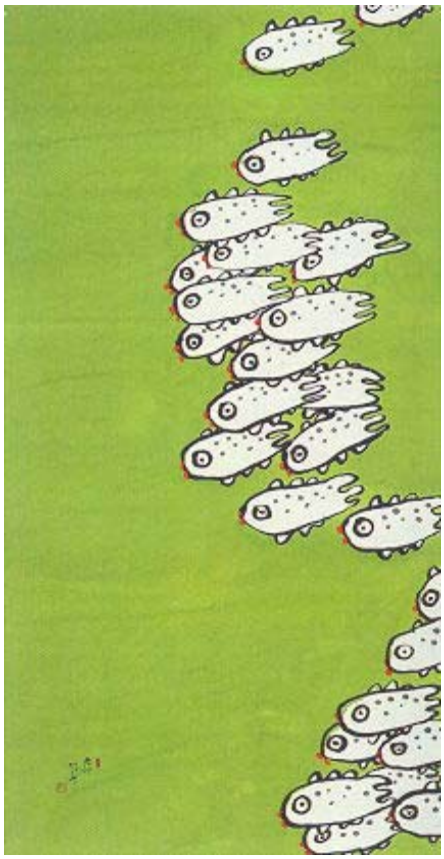

Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain: Transplantation, Development and Adaptation. By David N. Kay. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, xvi + 260 pages, ISBN 0-415-29765-6 (cloth), £70.

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The New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), which has its roots in the Tibetan Gelug Tradition, and the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (OBC), which is rooted in Japanese Sōtō Zen, were among the first wave of Tibetan and Zen Buddhist groups to become established in Britain, in the early 1970s. After three decades of growth and development, these groups currently represent the largest Tibetan and Zen Buddhist organizations in Britain. In 1997 there were between 2000 and 3000 members of the NKT, making it the third largest Buddhist organization in Britain, following the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) and the Sōka Gakkai International UK (SGI-UK). The OBC is the largest of the Zen Buddhist organizations, with an estimated size of approximately one thousand British practitioners. Although the two organizations are relatively small-sized, institutionally and numerically, the current fascination of British culture (as well as of Western cultures in general) with Buddhism, particularly in its Tibetan

and Zen Buddhist forms, is the reason why the exploration of this field is extremely important and desirable.

Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain provides, as the subtitle suggests, a detailed analysis of the transplantation, development, and adaptation of the NKT and OBC in Britain. In order to give a framework for analyzing these two organizations, part one of the book surveys the scholarly literature on British Buddhism, evaluates the key contributions, and organizes the results thematically. In particular, the widely accepted "Protestant Buddhism" thesis is subjected to critical discussion. To contextualize the NKT and the OBC in Britain, the contours of the broader British Buddhist environment and specifically Tibetan and Zen Buddhist context are mapped out.

According to Kay, there is a tendency in observers of Buddhism in the West to focus narrowly on the Western-convert appropriation and experience of Buddhist traditions, with the effect that important historical factors in the incoming traditions themselves are neglected. To avoid this tendency, part two examines the indigenous Tibetan context of the NKT before turning to NKT's development in the West. The author outlines the background and cross-cultural context of the NKT, in particular its relationship with the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). The founder of the NKT, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (b. 1931), was originally brought to Britain to teach at an FPMT center, but in 1991 he split from this organization in order to found the NKT. This schism, as well as the controversial debate on the guardian deity Dorje Shugden, NKT's critical attitude concerning the Dalai Lama, and its growing insularity, are examined in the context of traditional Gelug exclusivism. By situating the development and the self-perception of the NKT within its

appropriate context, the volume demonstrates the extent to which broader Asian contexts continue to exert a normative influence on Buddhist development in the West.

Drawing on Robert Lifton's definition of the "fundamentalist self," Kay's argument shows that, due to the NKT's homogenous organizational structure, its attempts to establish a uniformity of belief and practice within the organization, and an emphasis on following one tradition coupled with a critical attitude toward other traditions, the NKT fits into Lifton's category of "fundamentalism" (p. 110). Kay describes how struggles for control of NKT's institutional sites and NKT's repressed memory of its institutional conflicts both contribute to NKT's later "fundamentalist" identity. These sections provide an exiting account of recent European religious history and, at the same time, challenge the stereotypical image of unity and harmony within the Western Tibetan Buddhist community.

Part three of the book examines the historical and ideological development of the OBC within the context of the biography of its Western founder, Peggy Kennett (1924-1996), and her relationship with traditional Japanese Sōtō Zen Buddhism. Kennett was invited by Kōho Keidō Chisan (1879-1967), the chief abbot of Sōjiji, one of the two head temples of the Sōtō school in Japan, to become his disciple at Sōjiji. Kennett received dharma transmission from him, acted as a head priest of her own village temple in Mie prefecture in central Japan, and returned to Britain in 1972, where she formed the "British Zen Mission Society," later renamed the OBC. Kay provides a detailed analysis of the developments and innovations in Kennett's teaching of Zen Buddhism, including the phenomenology of her Zen experience, the appropriation of

Christian religious forms in adapting Zen Buddhism to the West, and the strategies she used in order to legitimate her teachings. Kay demonstrates that Kennett achieved the last through an emphasis on the authenticity of her own personal experience of the truth, through the authority of her position within the Sōtō lineage, and through recourse to the orthodox teachings of Dōgen and Keizan, the founders of the Sōtō school in Japan. Kay builds a convincing analysis of the strategies Kennett and the OBC have employed to bind practitioners to her teaching, showing how the development of that teaching has been a dialogical process integrating her ideas and the reinforcement they've received from her followers.

The book's final chapter provocatively addresses recent developments in the NKT and the OBC in the context of the relationship between Buddhism and British culture, the religious transplantation process, and the politics and patterns of cultural adaptation. Kay examines the notion that the conditions of modernity are reflected in contemporary Buddhist practice, concluding that the NKT actually represents a critical, even reactionary response to the mechanisms of modernity. Kay points out that the NKT's emphasis on one teaching and one practice represents, for many practitioners, a clear alternative to the pluralistic, uncertain and unpredictable nature of modern society (p. 220). Although this observation presents a convincing and challenging observation of a mechanism at work in Buddhist organizations in the West, I would hesitate to characterize, as Kay does, such organizations as "fundamentalist," due to the vague and, at the same time, extremely political implications of this term. However, Kay certainly succeeds in presenting the NKT as a contemporary

Buddhist movement which "simultaneously reflects and reacts against the conditions of modernity" (p. 222).

Concerning the OBC, relying on the work of Robert Sharf, Kay argues that the organization's emphasis on the spiritual experience of enlightenment/seeing the truth and Kennett's individualistic view of religious form reflect a modern reconstruction of Zen Buddhism as an essentially meditative tradition. At the same time, the author points out that, according to Bernard Faure, this mystical, demythologizing, and anti-ritual interpretation of modern Zen Buddhism is also deeply rooted in traditional precedents (p. 221). Kay concludes that the term "Protestant Buddhism" must be applied to the OBC only with caution, given the traditional Buddhist precedents he detects in Kennett's thought. I found this conclusion both provocative and debatable. The very daily practice at Zen Buddhist temples in Japan, both past and present, makes Zen priests carriers of the dharma, fields of merit for the laity. Embodying the dharma, these Zen priests serve the community in its demands for both this-worldly and other-worldly benefits. The social function of Japanese Zen Buddhist temples and priests is, in my opinion, fundamentally different from that of the OBC in Britain. (In fact, following Faure, that functioning is also different from Zen's rhetoric.) In modern Western, as well as modern Eastern, iterations of Buddhism, forms of practice become means for bringing about personal, private religious experiences, and this development might perhaps appropriately be termed Protestant Buddhism. This does describe the OBC, and the mere fact that the OBC continues to employ Zen's traditional anti-institutional rhetoric does not in itself require us to be terribly cautious in applying that adjective, "Protestant," to it. The larger task is

acknowledging and evaluating new forms of Buddhism, whether we find them in Asia or the West. Here it is necessary to distinguish OBC-like iterations of Zen Buddhism from their pre-modern precedents in Japan in order to avoid orientalizing in our description of non-Western religious traditions.

I found one aspect of the book less informative. Apart from the opening statement that the book is the end result of the author's doctoral research into contemporary forms of British Buddhism, we learn very little about the methods the author applied in the field. Statements from practitioners of both the NKT and the OBC, on which Kay builds his arguments, make it most likely that fieldwork was conducted, but one would have hoped for more information about the conditions, problems, and characteristics of this research. Voices of the members of these two organizations are heard throughout the study, but the reader wonders who they are and, more importantly, what made them join these Buddhist organizations — especially, in the case of NKT, one described by the author as "fundamentalist." Further, the question arises what the practitioners actually do after or before or in between reading about the teachings they seem to hold important enough to invest their time, energy, and money in. This question is especially pertinent in that, though Kay points that out the exotic sensuality of the rituals of Tibetan and Zen Buddhism contributes to their appeal in the West (p. 7), we actually learn very little about forms of practice in these two organizations, about the aesthetics of their meeting places, the sound of their ceremonies, or the smell of their rooms during their long periods of meditation.

Despite these limitations, Kay's work offers a wealth of information about the recent history of Buddhist organizations

in the West, particularly concerning the internal struggles and debates in Western Tibetan Buddhism. It draws challenging conclusions in approaching and evaluating Buddhist developments in the West that will, I hope, result in new and lively discussions among scholars of religions.