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How the Dharma Landed: Interpreting the Arrival of Buddhism in New Zealand

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How the Dharma Landed: Interpreting the Arrival of Buddhism in New Zealand

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Abstract

In this paper, I describe how Buddhism arrived in New Zealand, and offer a preliminary discussion about its emerging contours. I propose that the 1970s was a watershed decade, effectively delineating an early period (pre-1970s) and a contemporary period (post-1970s). I demonstrate that in the contemporary period a "two Buddhisms" model – "convert" and "ethnic" (Prebish; 1979, 1993) – helps frame an understanding of the emerging contours of Buddhism in New Zealand. I argue that in the contemporary period the fuel for the ongoing arrival, dissemination and growth of both "convert" and "ethnic" Buddhism in New Zealand is a continuing interplay of import and export dynamics: as Buddhism is "demanded", so it continues to be fetched or sent. Furthermore, while the two strands remain distinct, there are ambiguities, and it may be wiser to conclude, following Numrich (1996:64), that the Buddhism of "Asian immigrants" and the Buddhism of "New Zealand converts" is a more appropriate descriptor for the foreseeable future.

Introduction

Statistics New Zealand conducts a census every five years. On census day in 2001, there were 41,469 Buddhists: 30,579 of Asian ethnicities, and 10,890 of other ethnicities. (1) In 2006, 52,392 people declared themselves Buddhist, bringing Buddhists up to 1.26 percent of the New Zealand population. (2) Regrettably, Statistics New Zealand has yet to release ethnic cross-matching for the 2006 census.

How then can we account for the presence of Buddhism in New

Zealand? When and how did it arrive? What are the contours of Buddhism in New Zealand beginning to look like? I offer in this paper a lens through which we can begin to understand a history of Buddhism in New Zealand and the mechanism for its arrival. I suggest that the 1970s is a defining decade before which there are three rough contours worth noting: a Maori legend, the Chinese gold miners of the nineteenth century, and the Theosophical Society. In seeking to understand the mechanism for the arrival of Buddhism in the period after the 1970s, I borrow terminology from Jan Nattier's three fold model of the transmission of Buddhism – import (fetching), export (sending), and baggage (1998:189). I also identify two broad ethno-cultural categories of Buddhism that have developed in New Zealand, following Prebish (1979, 1993): that of "convert" Buddhism and "ethnic" Buddhism. I demonstrate that there is a unique interplay of sending and fetching mechanisms at work in both "convert" and "ethnic" Buddhisms: indeed, it is this sending-fetching interplay which continues to fuel the ongoing arrival of Buddhism in New Zealand.

In offering this interpretive lens, I am drawing on archival sources as well as qualitative research (formal and informal interviews, and participant observation) which I have undertaken as part of a PhD program at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. (3)

The Early Period (pre-1970s)

Maori mythology: Of feathered canoes flying from Tibet

Prior to the 1970s, Buddhist presence in New Zealand was disparate, ambiguous and has left little significant legacy. Three rough contours can be isolated: a northern Maori sub-tribe claims to have ancestry going back to Tibet, the Chinese gold miners (from 1865) in Otago province had cultural practices nuanced with Buddhism, and the Theosophical Society played host to meetings of Buddhist speakers and immigrants (from 1893).

Maori mythology: Of feathered canoes flying from Tibet

On 2 November 2002, TV3 aired a documentary entitled *Kiwi Buddha* about the discovery of a New Zealand-born Tibetan boy, Karma Kunsang, (4) believed to be the reincarnation of a Tibetan lama. In it, Walter Te Wharu Erstich, a Maori, noted:

this [boy-]monk is associated with one of our common ancestors of all the northern tribes ... There's a [sub-tribe] whose name is Te Waiariki. They say that the [canoe] that they came on was made out of feathers, and it came from Tibet. Basically what they're saying is that they flew here (Carey, 1999).

I seek only to give notice that this story exists. It is carved into Tamatea marae (meeting house and sacred ground) in Motuti, north Hokianga. It depicts two ancestors, Te Mawe and Rakaihautu, the former carved with wings. Below these two figures is the bow of a canoe with feather motifs. The roof beam extending up from the carving has a repeating painted motif of a Tibetan lama.

It is tempting to relegate the story to New Age fancies, as scholars have done in their critiques of publications like Barry Brailsford's *Song of Waitaha* (2003), which claims the existence of a pre-Maori confederation of peaceful races in New Zealand. Yet, a degree of historical possibility must be allowed in light of Ballantyne and Moloughney's introduction to their *Disputed Histories* (2006) where they note that:

[recently] we have witnessed a flowering of indigenous histories grounded in the particular perspectives of [sub-tribes and tribes]. These works are ... grounded in the primacy of [genealogies], attach great significance to oral narratives and trace the development of descent groups through the deeds of important ancestors ... Their methodological presuppositions, causative explanations and intended audience (members of the descent group itself) gives these works a very different look and feel from the mainstream of social history ... (2006:1213)

That Te Waiariki's story has been canonized in the carvings of Tamatea marae begs the question of how – and when – the story arrived at that status. We can assume that the legend serves a real purpose in Te Waiariki's self-understanding, for as Margaret Orbell observes, "when historical interpretations are abandoned, the marvelous events in these stories are no longer an embarrassment." (1974:6) Te Waiariki's arrival on "feathered canoes from Tibet" may well be metaphorical, emphasizing the speed of the canoes, or the fame of the canoes' captains. Alternatively it could signify a spiritual, rather than a literal journey. Similar stories

exist in other tribes: the ancestor who arrived on an albatross, the canoe that traveled along a rainbow, or ancestors who arrived riding whales, for example.

I put forward a tentative possibility as to why this legend has only now come into focus, following Ballantyne and Moloughney (2006:9-10). During the 1980s, historians began writing "history from below", embracing methodologies that would restore minorities to the historical record, and highlighting social inequalities. Questions of race relationships emerged, and Maori gained momentum in seeking to reclaim their cultural heritage. With the growing acceptance of the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), (5) and the Waitangi Tribunal's work on settling land claims, meant that "hidden histories" were given a degree of legitimacy. Thus the socio-political climate was conducive for Maori to correlate their stories to land-claims (indeed, genealogies and landforms are intimately related) because large land-claims were at stake as redress for alleged European colonial grievances. Thus the story of Te Waiariki has now found voice in that it is "most legitimate" in claiming an ancient genealogy.

While this explanation may address the emergence of Te Waiariki's story, the explanation for the unique "Tibetan-ness" of the story is embodied in the person of Dame Whina Cooper (1895-1994). (6) Dame Whina herself was Waiariki: her marae was Waipuna, at Panguru. Three Tibetan lamas and an Australian Buddhist nun visited Panguru in 1982, and Dame Whina recited the Waiariki stories to the group. She then made explicit to them what she understood to be the likely cultural connections. What motivated Dame Whina explicitly to link Te Patu nui-a-rua (for that is the homeland in the genealogies) with Tibet may never be known. With the Dame's active involvement in the Maori renaissance, it could have been anything from wanting legitimacy for land claims, to empathy for Tibetans due to a perceived similar plight at the hands of the Chinese.

Her alleged connections – derived from the stories told to her by her ancestors - have become common lore in Panguru, Motuti, and surrounds. In my interviews conducted in March 2007, hygiene rituals, death rituals, morphological similarities, and linguistic commonalities were put forward as evidence of the connection. The critical tie that was perceived to bind Te Waiariki to the Tibetans was the twinning of

Mount Maunga-taniwha ("Mountain of Demons") in north Hokianga, and the mythical Tibetan Mount Meeru. Thus the alleged connection has been placed firmly within a religio-mythical paradigm. Finding a New Zealand born Tibetan boy as a reincarnation of a Tibetan lama may well now anchor this as a legitimate religio-cultural aspect of New Zealand's history, and so legitimize Tibetan Buddhism as something genuinely belonging to New Zealand – perhaps a "deep" or "hidden" history -rather than a recent import. It is the Tibetans who initiated the original visit to Panguru in 1982: another group visited Tamatea marae in Motuti in 2002. Thus both Tibetans and "converts" to Tibetan Buddhism may well be seeking to legitimize Tibetan Buddhism as an ancient New Zealand religion, adding to the chic and mystique of the West's endearment to it.

Much ambiguity remains: seeking to work with pre-histories is fraught with speculation and ideology. A more scientific historiography of Buddhism in New Zealand, where there is archival evidence from archaeology and literature, is achievable from the mid 1860s, and it is this safer ground to which we now turn.

The 19th century Chinese gold miners

Chinese gold miners, mainly from Guangdong province, arrived in Otago province to work the gold fields from 1865. They were invited by the provincial government to pick over fields already worked well by European gold miners, the number of which had peaked at about 18,000 in 1864. The number of Chinese gold miners grew over the next decade and a half to a high of 5004 in the 1881 census (1 percent of the non-Maori population of New Zealand at the time), but then declined rapidly due to a poll tax instituted by the colonial government.

With respect to their religion, over twenty different deities have been identified. Peter Butler (1977) has collected quotes and observations of the Chinese religious beliefs and practices made by a variety of European colonists, and this collection suggests a predominantly Confucian worldview. Neville Ritchie, in his PhD thesis (1986), draws on both Peter Butler's work and the diaries of Presbyterian missionary Alexander Don (who evangelized amongst the Chinese gold miners) and concludes that the "Chinese miners did not subscribe to any particular religion, but most adhered to a complex mixture of beliefs and customs drawn from the three major religious doctrines in China: Confucianism,

Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as Animism and Spiritism"(Ritchie, 1986:66). This is confirmed by Steven Young, one of their descendents:

My impression is that our grandfathers were not very religious people but may have observed certain festivals related to their ancestors (or [while] in New Zealand, even their friends) who had passed away. This was in the form of "Bai san": setting up a temporary altar with food [and] tea ... and bowing three times. Usually not much more than that. It's almost a secular or Confucian practice (Personal correspondence, 2007).

Therefore, how Buddhist the Chinese gold miners were is open to debate. It is difficult to count Buddhists per se from this era, especially when early consolidated census reports nested Buddhism within the category of Confucianism, indicative perhaps that the dominant British culture – those who controlled the census process – perceived little difference between Confucianism and Buddhism. Moreover, from 1910, the Census and Statistics Act allowed people the freedom not to answer the question on religion. In 1926, when Buddhism first appeared as a distinct category on the census, there were 169 Buddhists, and 1194 Confucians, but a total of 3374 Chinese. Presumably they were describing themselves within other categories, or simply not responding to the question on religion.

An excavation of Lawrence Chinese camp (Otago) sheds some light on the Chinese gold miners' religious practice. Two joss-houses were known to have been at Lawrence: Naam-Shun Joss House built in 1869, and a second one built in 1900, later relocated to 12 Maryport St., Lawrence in 1947. The archaeologists working on the site define a josshouse as "a small community structure where ritual and religious activities take place" (Jacomb et al., 2006:262). A joss-house was not a temple, nor did it normally house monks or priests. Throughout Chinese-Asia, joss-houses have been places where a variety of indigenous deities were worshipped, along with saints and supernatural beings from Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and folktales. They were usually decorated with proverbs and sayings: two panels of characters from one of the joss-houses are extant, displayed at the Otago Settlers' Museum in Dunedin (Brosnahan, 2007).

These religious generalities – the broader Confucian worldview they

probably held to – are put in their context by James Ng who argues persuasively in his comprehensive four-volume socio-cultural history *Windows on a Chinese Past* (1993-1999), that the Chinese gold miners were sojourners and nothing more, there simply to extract the gold, then move on (Ng, 2001:4-6). Their social cohesion was pragmatic and nostalgic: prospectors clustered themselves in groups resembling their home village alliances. If Young's reflection regarding his grandfather is representative, then their religion offered life-stage rituals and little else, and the joss-house served as a location for performing these. The joss-houses may well have had a niche or two with a Buddha in them, but were not Buddhist temples as such. Ajahn Viradhammo concludes that the Chinese gold miners held to a "folk religion which had elements of Buddhist influence," (1990:34) and it may be wisest to let this conclusion suffice.

Whatever the mix actually was, Chinese religious practice was very different to the dominant Christianity of New Zealand. With their cultural and linguistic isolation, together with the transience of gold mining, the Chinese struggled to participate in British colonial culture, just as British immigrants struggled to accept and integrate them. After the gold mining was over, a small number stayed on, sponsoring their families to come from China. Their religion however remained a private family matter, behind closed doors, excluded from public discourse by cultural prejudice. The arrival of explicit Chinese forms of Buddhism had to wait until the mid-1980s with a new wave of Chinese immigrants.

Theosophy in New Zealand

Palmerston North, a university town of 70,000, has an active Lodge of the Theosophical Society. ([7](#)) Aroon Parshotam, a member and informal custodian, believes that Buddhism in New Zealand has strong roots in Theosophy and that the Society "was probably responsible for getting Buddhism going here" (Parshotam, 2005). Christopher Parr, writing in the Society's journal *Theosophy in New Zealand* in 2000, is more circumspect, acknowledging that even though theosophists did facilitate the arrival of a certain form of Buddhism, its influence, in the long term, was inconsequential.

Historically, Buddhism and Theosophy are entwined in the persons of Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Madame Helena Petrova Blavatsky. Rick Fields (1992:83-118) and others have demonstrated the influence

which Olcott and Blavatsky had in bringing Buddhism – or rather, their version of Buddhism -to America, and Europe. Olcott also toured Australia in 1891 lecturing on “Theosophy and Buddhism”. He co-founded the Australian Theosophical Society, the aim of which was “to disseminate Buddhist philosophy”. Paul Croucher notes that Olcott was “the first visiting lecturer to effectively popularize Buddhism, [finding] a receptive, highly respectable audience [in Australia].” (1989:9)

Did Olcott have similar influence in New Zealand when he toured for a few weeks in 1897? Parr observes that Buddhism’s reception in New Zealand at this time “was strongly colored by the Theosophical lenses which projected it here” (2000:11). According to Stephen Prothero, this “white Buddhism” that Olcott promoted “was not the tradition of the Buddhists but a ‘Buddhism’ of his own invention: a Buddhist lexicon informed by a Protestant grammar and spoken with a theosophical accent.” (1996:69) In other words, Buddhism, when promoted by Olcott, was not allowed to speak of or for itself: it was masked by Olcott’s unique interpretation of it.

Nevertheless, one could argue that Olcott’s version of Theosophy, as a “creolized Buddhism” (Prothero, 1996:7) has been a continuous Buddhist presence in New Zealand since the late 1800s. Perhaps it could be called “esoteric Buddhism” as some have suggested, due to Blavatsky’s early influence (Irwin, 2001:22). Theosophists themselves may take issue with this, understanding Theosophy to be broader and a synthesis of religion informed from various sources. However, Parr can find only scattered literary evidence of any enduring legacy of Olcott’s visit. Notes in the records of the Society’s journal, minutes and other literature indicate that the Society subsequently merely hosted talks on Buddhism by a variety of visiting speakers.

These visiting speakers addressed small but enthusiastic groups of European colonists, much like they had done in Australia and elsewhere. This dynamic still continues, after a fashion. For example, the Palmerston North Lodge hosted a four part lecture series on Buddhism in mid 2006 delivered by a Massey University lecturer. The audience numbered between twelve and forty two, the majority of whom were “white” New Zealanders. Although the Lodge president prefaced each lecture with an explanation of what Theosophy is, there was no explicit attempt to interpret or contextualize Buddhism or Theosophy with

respect to each other.

Thus the Society has served as only a venue to facilitate the meetings of various Buddhist groups. While acknowledging this, Parshotam concedes that these groups were likely primarily to have been immigrant groups:

... Today, not much would be remembered of the past ... except for the fact that we always let [Buddhist groups] use our hall ... It's very likely that our [Theosophical Society] members also come along [to Buddhist events] and participate ... But in the early days, it was probably more tied in with ethnicity; now there [are] big enough [Buddhist] ethnic groups – Thai and so on – they would just get together themselves. They don't need the Theosophical Society ... (Interview, 2005).

Even today, when the monks visit Palmerston North from Bodhinyanarama (a Monastery in the Thai forest tradition, near Wellington), they may meet their chiefly Asian adherents in the Lodge.

If, as Parshotam suggested, The Theosophical Society facilitated Buddhism's arrival in New Zealand, then it has only been as a venue for a periodic lecture on Buddhism, or a venue where early Buddhist immigrants found a sympathetic host for their meetings. Parr concludes that “it appears that Buddhism has never struck a powerful chord with Theosophists in New Zealand, and so Theosophy doesn't play as seminal a role in bringing the Buddha dharma to this country as in ... Australia” (2000:13). Neither it seems has the Theosophical Society managed to penetrate mainstream New Zealand society in a way that it could claim influence in the dissemination of Buddhism. The relationship of the Theosophical Society and Buddhism is more pragmatic than organic, at least as expressed at the Palmerston North Lodge.

Contemporary Buddhism: from the 1970s

It is clear that the three phenomena I have placed in the early era – that of the Te Waiariki story, the religious practices of Chinese gold miners and the hospitality of the Theosophical Society – are disparate, somewhat ambiguous, and effect little ongoing significance. A new, historically distinct, and explicit period of New Zealand's relationship

with Buddhism started to take shape in the 1960s, even if, as Robert Ellwood described it, New Zealand Buddhism was “a type of 1960s alternative spiritual group” (1993:214). At best, individuals were exploring Buddhism in informal home meetings, or experimenting with meditation techniques, or reading the Beat poets of America. Although some attempts were made to form a Buddhist Society as early as 1956 (Spuler, 2002:140), Buddhism had little significant institutional presence throughout the 1960s.

Perhaps the seminal modern event was the visit of Karma Tenzin Dorje Namgyal Rinpoche in 1973. Namgyal Rinpoche was a Canadian, trained in both Theravadin and Tibetan Kagyu traditions. He led a retreat on the shores of Lake Rotoiti, Rotorua. One participant remembers this fondly:

We [did] ... a three month, quite intensive retreat; twenty hours a day in meditation and discipline ... We rented summer cottages. I think it's probably true [that this was a real milestone event. It got Buddhism in New Zealand launched]. I was part of that group. It was great. It was hard work. It was crazy (Interview, 2006).

This event sketched some tentative contours: New Zealand's Buddhism would be sourced from places other than just Asia (in this case, Canada), would be led by teachers already schooled in "Western Buddhism"; it would be eclectic to some degree, and communal; it would have an explicit meditative impulse, and would be closely associated with the environment. In this sense, Buddhism would be more than a religion from Asia, limited to immigrant groups. Rather, it could be for converts. This initial event metamorphosed into the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre, located near Nelson. Tarchin Hearn, teacher at Wangapeka, continues to embody a momentum initiated by this first event. The center's website describes his teaching style and content as somewhat "modern" - to use Donald Lopez's category (2002:ix-x1) - where Hearn seeks to:

blend the insights and understandings of science and ecology with the teachings of Buddha Dharma. Though well trained in Buddhism, Tarchin's way of teaching is thoroughly non-sectarian and universal in nature. Bringing together a wonderful balance of humour and seriousness, eclectic experimentation and classical tradition ..." (2006b).

A second significant event happened two years later. In 1975, Tibetan lamas Thubten Yeshe and Thubten Zopa toured New Zealand. The establishment of the Dorje Chang Institute for Wisdom and Culture (DCI) followed in 1976. DCI is now located in Avondale, Auckland and has been the flagship of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), regarding itself to be "the oldest Tibetan Buddhist center in New Zealand" (2006a). FPMT has roots in the Tibetan Gelugpa lineage and has deliberately positioned itself for the West. Lamas Yeshe and Zopa attracted large numbers of westerners to their center in Kopan, near Kathmandu, throughout the 1970s and 1980s. It was these Westerners, including New Zealanders, who invited them back to their home countries to teach and establish centers.

To borrow a concept from Jan Nattier (1998:189), in some sense, both traditions were "imported": Wangapeka from Canada, and FPMT from Tibet/Nepal. Nattier argues that "imported" Buddhism is the domain of those in the middle-class who have leisure time and disposable income. This may well be a conclusion that is appropriate for New Zealand in the future, but for now I use this word only to give notice of a mechanism for arrival, rather than using it to describe a sociological group. The mechanism for importing Buddhism to New Zealand has been the cultural icon of the "O.E." – the overseas experience. While travelling, often through Asia (or more often now, through Western countries) young New Zealanders, out to discover and experience a wider world than their perceived remote Pacific homeland, first discover Buddhism while they "do their O.E." Because they generally travel cheaply, their discovery of Buddhism is not necessarily intentional, but rather coincidental. Ecie Hursthouse, founder of Amitabha Hospice (affiliated to DCI) has a representative story:

About thirty years ago, my husband and I were in Kathmandu ... and he ran into his ... old flatmates [from] Auckland. And they were going to do this course [at Kopan] and said 'why don't you come along?' ... It was twenty-eight days, residential, and [it] really changed our lives. We were impressed with the teacher because he was so unusual, so warm and friendly, and funny and compassionate, and the teachings were so logical and made sense. And we started to do the practices and over the years it just grew (Broadhurst and Moore, 2003).

Some of these travellers have stayed on with their new-found teacher, whether it be in Asia or the West, and made a formal commitment to Buddhism. In this way Tarchin Hearn was once a student of Namgyal Rinpoche in Canada. Similarly a resident monk, Ajahn Succino, at Bodhinyanarama (Wellington), discovered Buddhism in India, then trained in Thailand, and can lead puja in the Thai language. Similarly, as another example, the founders of the Thubtän Shädrub Dhargyey Ling (Dunedin) were locals who had studied in Dharamsala, North India with Lama Dhargyey. They then returned to Dunedin inviting Lama Dhargyey to come and teach at their new Dunedin center.

In response to similar invitations, some Buddhist teachers have been explicitly sent with a "missionary" agenda. This has resulted in "export" Buddhists, to borrow Nattier's term again. These are New Zealanders who have become Buddhists having had Buddhism "sold" to them through active proselytizing. For example, the two long serving lamas at the Karma Choeling Buddhist Monastery (Kaukapakapa), Lamas Samten and Shedrup, were sent to New Zealand by their lineage masters. Lama Samten describes this:

In 1981, His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa and His Eminence Beru Khyentse Rinpoche requested me to come to New Zealand. I have been here for more than seventeen years now ... I'm really not sure how much benefit there is in my being here but there must be at least some benefit, otherwise His Holiness would not have sent me ... (Gyatso, 2006).

Similarly in 2001, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, based in England, asked Kelsang Vajra – David Stewart, a New Zealander studying under him in England – to return to New Zealand and set up the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). Vajra is explicit and enthusiastic as to NKT's potential:

[NKT] has a great message, and we are motivated by compassion for all sentient beings, so we are going to start centres all over New Zealand. I think kiwis will respond to us because [NKT] is led by kiwis. We want to be kiwi. We don't want to be a transplant. We know how to solve people's problems. [We are going to] get rid of the bad karma in the nation. We want to [eventually] expand into the prisons (Interview, 2003).

Thus for a New Zealander now to "meet" Buddhism, he or she need not go to Asia. New Zealand sanghas are growing around this "export" phenomenon: Tibetan lamas, or ordained western Buddhists are sent to New Zealand, or alternatively, New Zealanders themselves, who have studied overseas in both Asian and Western countries are being ordained, returning and setting up new centers. Kelsang Vajra is a case in point. Sensei Amala Wrightson is another example. She returned to New Zealand in 2003 after a fourteen year absence in which she had done formal koan training, to be the teacher at the Auckland Zen Center. With the consequent proliferation of lineages, dharma centers, and sanghas throughout New Zealand - there are between forty and sixty, depending on how one counts them - a bewildering landscape of many contours is emerging. "Introduction to Buddhism" classes are now readily available to the New Zealand public.

Convert Buddhism

It would follow that there should be a growing presence of converts to Buddhism - those who have chosen to adopt Buddhist belief, practice, worldview and/or ritual out of conviction, rather than merely growing up with it in a Buddhist immigrant family. This term, first proposed by Charles Prebish in 1979, and taken up again in 1993, is juxtaposed with "ethnic" Buddhism as a category within the "two Buddhism" typology. "Ethnic" Buddhism is the collection of Buddhist traditions brought with immigrants. The usefulness of these categories for the New Zealand situation is that they are essentially cultural categories, and describe what actually exists. This does not mean that other typologies are not possible or useful, or that I have necessarily chosen an ultimate "best fit" typology for New Zealand. Like the concepts I have borrowed from Nattier, I offer them as conceptual hooks on which to hang some initial observations.

For example, while it is clearly evident that New Zealanders are becoming Buddhists, the word "convert" is problematic. For this paper I draw on twenty-one formal interviews with so-called "converts". Nineteen were pakeha New Zealanders (that is, ethnically Caucasian, or non-Maori), and two identified themselves as Maori. In the main I did not ask the interviewees if the word "convert" was an appropriate description, waiting to see if they themselves would volunteer the word. Sixteen did not volunteer the word, three talked about the use of the

word and declared it inappropriate to use, while two called themselves "converts" and believed it was an appropriate generic descriptor. All however alluded to - and some told me explicitly - a time when they were indeed, "not Buddhist". On the whole there was a perception that "conversion" implied a radical and immediate religious change, which had not been their experience. This I suggest is a linguistic echo from Christian vocabulary; indeed, all but one of my interviewees had had at least a Christian Sunday School experience. Their preference was for the word "embrace", and this was often coupled with domestic language such as "coming home to Buddhism", often articulating a long and circuitous "journey" into Buddhism.

Having identified as Buddhist however, ongoing affiliation may well be eclectic. Several of my interviewees volunteered that they were involved concurrently with more than one Buddhist tradition, or had consecutively embraced a handful of different Buddhist traditions. Six of my interviewees were comfortable with a spirituality that combined their Buddhist practice with Reiki, Paganism, Christianity, Self-help, New Age, or Spiritism. I am persuaded from my interviews that these have found a degree of comfort in multiple identities (Cornille, 2002:1-6), and that even though they may describe themselves as Buddhist, they do not perceive this mixed-identity "convert Buddhism" to be inherently unstable. Quite the contrary. The ability to hold beliefs and practices that may appear to be at odds with each is perceived to be normative and even desirable. This is similar to what takes place elsewhere in Western convert-Buddhism. Thomas Tweed (2002:28-29) rightly cautions against having too rigid a classification: there is every indication that convert-Buddhist identity in New Zealand will continue to become "multiple" or "hybrid" where many are grazing on the offerings of a consumer religion, while searching for meaning and moral support for their busy lives.

The interplay of demand (that is, import) religion and missionary (that is, export) religion is at work as a transmission mechanism. Indeed, I suggest that this very interplay is the fuel that feeds the ongoing arrival of Buddhist traditions in New Zealand. I have demonstrated thus far that those traditions which have been sent to New Zealand, were, on the whole, initially invited, due to a New Zealander "discovering" the tradition while traveling overseas. As the New Zealand sanghas mature, further teachers are invited (and thus sent), or sangha members are sent

overseas to train, and then return to New Zealand to establish new centers or teach in the center which sent them.

Thus a certain eclecticism is inevitable. There remains ambiguity around the word "convert" and discomfort which so-called converts have with the idea of an exclusive "conversion". "Conversion" is not restricted necessarily to a uniform cultural or ethnic phenomenon either. According to cross-matched data from the 2001 census, 1,000 Maori described themselves as Buddhist, and I would guess that once the ethnic cross-matching of the 2006 data is complete, this number will rise.

Ethnic Buddhism

This interplay of imported and exported Buddhism is not the exclusive domain of so-called "convert Buddhism", but is also at play amongst the Buddhist traditions brought by immigrants. Following the Immigration Policy Review of 1986, the Immigration Act (1987) broke from old paradigms of family and ethnic based immigration policies. In other words priority would not necessarily be given to British immigrants just because New Zealand had been a British colony. Sentimentality gave way to pragmatism, and the new act opened a much more skills and wealth based conduit. In addition, a humanitarian conduit – hosting refugees – became more explicit and generous. The Immigration Amendment Act (1991) adjusted and tightened some of these new policies, but essentially skills-based immigration policies were here to stay. In effect, New Zealand turned her face away from Europe and more towards Asia and the Pacific. Immigrants from many of the Asian Buddhist countries have consequently arrived in New Zealand: Cambodian, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Chinese, Thai, Sri Lankan, Hong Kongese, and more recently Korean. Borrowing a concept from Jan Nattier again, immigrants have brought various traditions of Buddhism with them "in their baggage".

Over the subsequent two decades, a settlement pattern has emerged: immigrants establish their families and develop social networks amongst their own ethnic group, and as these connections become stronger, each community builds its own culturally unique Buddhist temple. An invitation is then inevitably sent back to the homeland for a Buddhist monk to be sent to take up residency at the temple. The integration of these monks is not without its challenges, but in a sense their presence

legitimizes the temple. This legitimation adds to the growing momentum and profile of the temple complex, attracting further adherents, offering an immediate location of religious and cultural solace for further immigrants. A short survey through these groups will demonstrate this.

Cambodians in New Zealand numbered 4,986 by 2001, 75 percent (3,744) identifying with Buddhism. Yaran, one of their resident monks notes: “I came to New Zealand [because of] the Cambodian community. [They needed] a monk [for] their religion ... to represent them to the Buddha” (Broadhurst and Moore, 2003). The Auckland Khmer Buddhist Association opened Wat Khemara Phirataran in Takinini (Auckland) on 1 May 2003 serving a community “of approximately 3,000 people” (Cambodia, 2006).

One third (1,563) of the New Zealand Vietnamese community of 3,135 identifies with Buddhism. The Vietnamese have built their own temple – Giac Nhen in Otahuhu (Auckland) – and have brought monks out from Vietnam. Dao Nguyen arrived in 1998 but found the transition difficult: “In Vietnam we have [the] sangha community. But in New Zealand [there is] only one Vietnamese temple. We haven’t got [a] sangha community. It’s quite hard for us [monks] to live here” (Broadhurst and Moore, 2003).

The Thai community numbered 3,963 with 81 percent (3,216) identifying themselves as Buddhist in the 2001 census. They have their own temples in Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch. The Christchurch Thai community has brought out a monk, Pramattaha Sudchai, to lead Buddhist ritual. Anne Juasakun, one of the community, notes:

First we didn’t know whether we were going to have [a] temple [in Christchurch], then we talked about it, [and decided that it would be] good to have a temple. [Then] all the Thai community [could] come [together] and share all the food. We bring food every morning. We come here ... because our family is so happy to be here. The monks are so happy to talk to us, because not many people come in to give [them] food. I feel very sorry for the monks (Broadhurst and Moore, 2003).

The Sri Lankan community numbered 5,913 in 2001, with 40 percent

(2,379) considering themselves to be Buddhists. The community has commenced building its own center in Otahuhu (Auckland), which will “provide an extensive range of services in cultural, social, environmental and religious fronts”. There are three resident Sri Lankan monks at the center. The website exhibits a buoyant community: “The opening of Srilankaramaya [temple complex] filled the enormous void the migrant Sri Lankan Buddhist community has felt ever since their departure from motherland” (SriLanka, 2006).

The 2001 census had two categories for Chinese, that of “Chinese (no further definition)” and “Taiwanese Chinese”. Taiwanese numbered 3,555, of which 1,143 (32 percent) identified themselves as Buddhist. If “Chinese n.f.d” who declared themselves Buddhist (13,104) are added, then Tsi Ming (Greenlane, Auckland) and Fo Guang Shan (Botany Downs, Auckland) - two large temples in classic Chinese architecture - have the potential to cater for a constituency of up to 14,000 ethnically Chinese Buddhists. (8). These are New Zealand's "new" Chinese, as distinct from the descendents of the 19th century gold miners. Like other immigrant groups, Fo Guang Shan has Taiwanese monks in residence.

As a general pattern, it appears that immigrant groups build temples to serve as places for cultural solace, and they reinforce their religious identity by bringing out Buddhist monks from their homeland. Geoffrey Moore, who gathered oral histories of Vietnamese immigrants, makes this explicit, concluding that “the [Vietnamese] temple exists to provide an ‘extra-territorial space’ in which Vietnamese ways are sanctified and aspects of Western culture eschewed” (2004:62).

Conclusion

Within both "convert" and "ethnic" Buddhism - to make an economic process explicit - there is a supply and demand dynamic at work. To meet the demand, both New Zealanders and recent immigrants either request or fetch Buddhism (or "more" Buddhism) from Asia and elsewhere. Or alternatively, noting that there is a growing number of emigrants from an Asian country, a Buddhist tradition intentionally exports resources for the establishment of a temple in New Zealand. Thus Buddhism is intentionally supplied to New Zealand in response to the demand, embodied in monks from various Asian homelands and ordained New Zealanders who have studied and trained in a variety of Asian and Western contexts.

However, an economic model is constrained by the play of psychological, social and political contexts: ultimately, immigrants arrive according to the whim of whatever government is in power, and New Zealanders will embrace whatever Buddhist traditions they perceive will meet their social, psychological and spiritual needs, whether they be accessed from "down the road", on the other side of the globe, or even from the internet. While acknowledging that the "two Buddhism" typology does describe real socio-cultural contours, it may be wisest at this stage to let a simple bi-partite classification suffice, following Numrich (1996:64); that of the Buddhist traditions of "Asian immigrants" and those of "New Zealand converts". Further nuances are possible, indeed, even necessary. Cristina Rocha (2006), for example, has argued in her study of Zen Buddhism in Brazil that new explanatory models are needed which are country specific, demonstrating that a model of "creolized" Buddhism explains Brazil's unique religious complexities due to Japanese migrants now being in their fourth generation. What then for New Zealand?

To this end, I suggest that Buddhism in New Zealand may well weave unique cultural icons into its fabric. Appropriating the indigenous symbols of a culture is nothing new for the dissemination of a religious tradition, and Buddhist groups in the West are certainly doing this. However, by no means would a New Zealand Buddhism – a culturally integrated unique expression of Buddhism that is "ours" as distinct from say "American" Buddhism or "Chinese" Buddhism – be a logical necessity. New Zealand is part of the global interchange of ideas: the movements of people and the accessibility of electronic media will mitigate against any totally exclusive cultural expression of a New Zealand Buddhism.

Nevertheless, signs of an intentional iconic space for ecological and environmental themes have already been articulated. An early example was when Namgyal Rinpoche conducted his month long retreat on the shores of Lake Rotoiti in 1973. In New Zealand, at least four traditions have branded themselves with environmental or ecological icons: Sôka Gakkai with the Southern Cross constellation, the Mountains and Rivers Zen order and the Auckland Zen Center with the koru (unfurling fern frond), and New Kadampa with the silver fern and hibiscus. Fo Guang Shan is attempting something similar. In its attempt to "localize", it has intentionally used local stonework in its Buddha hall, and planted out

native flora in the main courtyard. Is this an attempt to root Buddhism symbolically in the very soil of New Zealand?

Branding however may only be cosmetic. I propose a richer organic adaptation is possible for Buddhism in New Zealand, through the metaphor of "land". Sally McAra has demonstrated this with her recently published case study on the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) centre – Sudarshanaloka – in the Tararua valley, near Thames (McAra, 2007). McAra gives notice that transformation into a unique New Zealand setting will inevitably raise issues of identity and meaning. By consciously employing narratives about the "mythic dimension", and by referencing themselves in relationship to the land, McAra argues that "in their use of both 'native' FWBO and 'alien' knowledge, [the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order] engage in a bricolage creation of a Buddhist environment and community. Through these practices, members are inventing a Buddhist 'sacred place' while creating themselves as a community." (McAra, 2002)

The potential for an organic relationship between a unique New Zealand Buddhism and the land is expressed enthusiastically by one FPMT practitioner – a "convert" - who believes that New Zealand per se is a good, even the ultimate place to practice Buddhism:

because it's quiet, it's clean, and it's peaceful ... [One of the Buddhist masters said] 'if the external environment is good, then meditation will happen just by itself'. And I think a lot of kiwis know this. They're all just natural meditators. They all just want to go to the beach ... to sit there and look at the water. They go to their little refuge [the bach]. It's like a whole nation of people with imprints to withdraw from busyness and relax. I think in New Zealand there's this real consciousness about how nature is restorative ... and even though people do insane things like killing [sentient] things, there is this peace, this serenity that [is here].

Indeed, this practitioner perceives New Zealand to be a Buddhist paradise:

The Pure Land of Tara is called the Land of Turquoise Leaves. New Zealand is unbelievably green. It is a fantastic place to meditate ... because there are not many people and

it's a very soft [landscape] ... [It is not like] Tibet where there are a lot of sharp rocks. New Zealand is probably the only country in the world where you can be a hobbit, and you can walk around bare foot. There are no snakes. There are no nettles. ... [When divining as to the appropriateness of purchasing the Avondale property for Dorje Chang Institute], Lama Zopa said 'oh, this is a piece of Sukarvarti, this is a piece of Amitabha's Pure Land fallen to earth' (Interview, 2006).

While optimistic, this worldview is not yet widely representative of those Buddhists whom I have interviewed. Others vary considerably as to the desirability of a "New Zealand Buddhism" (as opposed to an eclectic collection of Buddhist traditions in New Zealand) and, in spite of clear signs to the contrary, some caution whether Buddhism will actually ever be truly established in New Zealand in the short term. Buddhism has however – as I have demonstrated – clearly "set up home" in New Zealand, to use Martin Baumann's phrase (1997:204).

Even while speculating about the possible emerging contours of a New Zealand Buddhism, it would be unwise to ignore that the traditions in New Zealand are facing similar challenges faced by Buddhism in the West as a whole. Michele Spuler (2002) explicitly links the development of Buddhism in New Zealand with developments in Australia, noting similar periods. She suggests, however, that due to New Zealand's smaller population and greater geographical isolation, major trends in the development of Buddhism lag behind Australia by ten years (2002:141). Whether Buddhism in New Zealand proves to be linked to or influenced by Buddhism in Australia in the long term is yet to be seen. Significant issues of enculturation are already on the horizon, following general trends in Western Buddhism. Conflict resolution, as one example, has already caused some soul searching: the New Zealand High Court has had to rule regarding trusteeship of the Karma Choeling Buddhist Monastery in Kaukapakapa due to the Karmapa lineage arguments. As another example, sexual improprieties in the leadership of New Kadampa Buddhism in late 2006 caused fall-out amongst its sangha.

What further issues of adaptation will emerge, and how will Buddhist practitioners deal with these? Will an organic integration of iconic

environmental and ecological metaphors be a determinative indicator as to the successful evolution of a unique New Zealand Buddhism in which both converts and immigrants find meaning? To begin to understand this future, I have sought to frame the past, and have offered a chronology of Buddhism's arrival in New Zealand as an initial foundation from which further trajectories of research can be launched.

While giving notice that there are disparate and ambiguous beginnings in the early era, I have sought to frame New Zealand's increasingly diverse Buddhist landscape in the post-1970s contemporary era within the simple ethno-cultural categories of "Asian immigrants" and "New Zealand converts". This typology may prove to be temporary and historically confined. The arrival of these traditions has been fuelled, as I have demonstrated, by an import-export dynamic. All these traditions will continue to face issues of adaptation: ongoing research will, no doubt, offer further nuances and insights.

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(2006b) Wangapeka Educational Trust.

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Footnotes

1. Census figures in this paper have all been taken from <http://www.stats.govt.nz> unless otherwise noted. [Return to Text](#)
2. To gain some comparison, Australia's 2006 census revealed that Buddhists were 2.1% of the Australian population. See <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au> [Return to Text](#)
3. Interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2006 in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. [Return to Text](#)
4. Karma Kunsang is the son of Lama Shedrup of Karma Choeling Buddhist Monastery in Kaukapakapa. [Return to Text](#)
5. The Treaty of Waitangi is regarded by many as the founding document of New Zealand. It is a compact or covenant agreement between the British Crown and Maori tribes, signed at Waitangi, Bay of Islands, in 1840. The Treaty is neither constitution or statute law, but a three part broad statement of principles and promise within which both parties could work together to found a nation state, due largely to the pressing challenges faced in the mid 19th century. [Return to Text](#)
6. Dame Whina is noted for her major contributions to Maori political re-emergence from the 1970s due to her leadership in addressing Maori housing needs, land rights and other projects. Her highest public profile

was when she led the Maori Land March to Parliament in 1975, gathering thousands of marchers en route and 60,000 signatures on a memorial of rights to redress outstanding grievances due to colonization.[Return to Text](#)

7. I have chosen the Palmerston North Lodge for this section as it is one of four lodges (of a total of thirteen) in the country which has its own building, signifying a stable and sustainable membership over the years (sixty five in 2006). A total membership of 1000 is well spread around the country in lodges and study groups and national conference draws about eighty to it. While the national center of Theosophy is now in Auckland, the Palmerston North lodge nevertheless has historical and geographical proximity to the founding of Theosophy in New Zealand, which commenced in Woodville (near Palmerston North) and Wellington.[Return to Text](#)

8. This "14,000" is for the whole of the country. Statistics New Zealand was unable to isolate "Chinese Buddhists in Auckland" as a three-way delineator. A two-way delineation is possible: Auckland region is home for 65 percent of all Chinese in New Zealand (in 2001). [Return to Text](#)