



Special Focus: Flows and Counterflows of Buddhism ‘South of the West’: Australia, New Zealand, and Hawai‘i

Seeding Buddhism in New Zealand: Namgyal Rinpoche and the Lake Rotoiti Retreat, 1973

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One of the earliest Buddhist events to take place in New Zealand was a three-month retreat on the shores of Lake Rotoiti in 1973 led by a Canadian Buddhist teacher known as Namgyal Rinpoche. This article will provide a qualitative case study of the retreat in order to show how the practices and motivations of the group reveal and challenge assumptions made in some of the theoretical frameworks that scholars have used to interpret the spread of Dharma to the West. I propose that a set of horticultural metaphors introduced by Wakoh Shannon Hickey, along with my own additional category of “seeding,” best describe the mechanisms of transmission that brought Buddhism to New Zealand.

Keywords: New Zealand; lived religion; Pacific Buddhism; seeding; ngöndro; Vipassana; Namgyal Rinpoche

PART 1

IN the winter of 1973, a small village on the shores of a remote New Zealand lake experienced something quite extraordinary. For three months, a group of between fifty and eighty foreigners descended upon the town, hired out all available holiday homes, and spent their time in deep retreat under the auspices of an eccentric Canadian Buddhist teacher known as Namgyal Rinpoche. The group was of mixed age and ethnicity, some with young families. Most were busy completing the Tibetan *ngöndro*, or Foundation Work, which involved, among other things, performing 100,000 full body prostrations. Those who had finished the *ngöndro* were practicing a form of intensive Burmese *vipassana* meditation. After the retreat, most of the group left to continue travelling with their teacher, but a number of students remained and went on to found retreat centers and meditation groups that are still active and significant in the Pacific to this day, such as the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre in New Zealand, and the Origins Centre in Balingup, Western Australia. According to Hugh Kemp’s 2007 study, this was “perhaps the seminal modern event” of contact between New Zealand and modern Buddhism (Kemp 2007: 116). Under the rubric of Charles Prebish’s “ethnic/convert” Buddhist dichotomy, Kemp classified this group of practitioners as “converts,” and, borrowing Jan Nattier’s “import/export/baggage” categories, Kemp argued that the retreat was an example of an “import” religion (Kemp 2007: 117).

Scholars have commonly used these theoretical frameworks to understand the spread of Buddhism to the Pacific. For instance, a 2011 article by Sally McAra and Michelle Barker explained that “most Buddhism in New Zealand, whether for the convert, immigrant, or multi-ethnic communities, can be classed as ‘imported’ to a greater or lesser extent” (2012: 559). In a footnote, the authors write that Buddhist groups can also be categorised by the extent to which their practices tend towards traditional or modern approaches, referring to a framework established by Martin Baumann (2001). Through a chance encounter, I had met someone who had attended this retreat, and, because it was such an intriguing early instance of Buddhism in New Zealand,



I was compelled to conduct a case study detailing the event while some of its participants were still alive and in good health. In particular also because of its position as a “seminal modern event,” I thought the retreat would make a useful case to test and examine some of the theoretical frameworks scholars have used to classify modern Buddhist groups and to describe religious transmission in New Zealand.

In this article, I will argue that the case of Namgyal Rinpoche and his students reveals a number of assumptions within, and limitations of, these frameworks. In addition, I suggest that the mechanism through which this group brought Buddhism to New Zealand is best articulated by a set of horticultural metaphors that were first developed by Wakoh Shannon Hickey (2010) to explain the global spread of Buddhism. Finally, I propose adding a new category—“seeding”—to Hickey’s framework in order to accommodate a number of important features of Namgyal Rinpoche’s community that would not otherwise be visible.

Methodology

Although the retreat at Lake Rotoiti took place almost fifty years ago, I was able to locate nine of the original participants—six men and three women—who were willing to be interviewed between May and August of 2014. Participants were in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, and I conducted interviews in person, on Skype, and over email using qualitative interview methods outlined by Robert Weiss in *Learning from Strangers* (1994). These methods involve crafting fixed, open-ended questions, which allow for participants to respond in-depth, using their own words, phrases, and concepts. The interviews were conversational and semi-structured, and my questions were initially guided by the goal of gathering information relevant to the theoretical frameworks Kemp had used in his study. Before the interviews, I sent each participant the list of questions I would base our conversation on. These were:

1. What took place during the retreat, and what kind of contact did you have with local New Zealanders?
2. What were your motivations for coming to New Zealand?
3. What were Namgyal Rinpoche’s motivations for coming to New Zealand?

Each interview took at least an hour, and before inclusion in the study, each was fully transcribed and sent back to the interviewee for approval. The method had several advantages. By asking open-ended questions, I was able to develop a detailed, process-oriented understanding of the retreat, and I was able to integrate multiple perspectives that no single person could have observed. The method also had limitations. First, I was working with old memories, and most participants, now mostly in their seventies, stressed that their memories might not be reliable. Some, however, still had journals and notebooks written during the retreat, and referenced them during our interviews. These materials were later given to me for use in the study. Second, participants were practicing intensive meditation, and some may not have paid much attention to practical components of the retreat. One participant, who went on to become a meditation teacher himself, explained that his “perspective was incredibly constrained,” and that “I was really in full, full, full retreat. I was completely unaware of what was going on, and I didn’t really care.” Nevertheless, all of those I interviewed had clear recollections of the aspects of retreat I was most interested in: their motivations for coming to New Zealand and the types of practices they were doing.

Using a qualitative approach came with another type of limitation, which was first identified by researchers studying accounts of religious conversion. In 1978, James Beckford noted in a study of the Watchtower movement that Jehovah’s Witnesses’ accounts of their own conversions were “typically constructed according to a set of guidelines which reflect the Watchtower movement’s changing organizational rationale,” that is, the group had certain implicit rules, thematic structures, and degrees of “appropriateness” for individuals describing their own conversion experiences (Beckford 1978: 249). Such accounts, Beckford

argued, “cannot be taken as objective and unproblematic reports on experience,” and instead must be seen as “artfully accomplished constructions” reflecting the wider group’s evolving ideological rationale (249–250). Many subsequent studies have noted how conversion narratives involve reconstructing and reinterpreting life events prior to conversion, in accordance with the new “universe of discourse” in which the convert is engaged (Stark and Finke 2000: 122).

This phenomenon accounts for a number of similarities observed in the responses of participants in my study, especially considering that they had spent decades since the retreat involved with Buddhist practices and the teachings of Namgyal Rinpoche. However, in my interviews, I was not seeking to understand the participants’ internal, religious experiences, but rather the mechanisms of religious transmission; what happened, where, how, and why. These details, in my estimation, are somewhat more objective in that they are less likely to be influenced by the group’s “universe of discourse.” For this reason, I chose to treat each participant’s account as a largely reliable and valid record of past events, rather than as a “conversion narrative” conditioned and shaped through participation in the wider group.

Namgyal Rinpoche

Before discussing the retreat, it is necessary to provide a brief biography of Namgyal Rinpoche, since relatively little has been written about him within academia.¹ Karma Tenzin Dorje Namgyal Rinpoche was born Leslie George Dawson in Toronto, Canada in 1931. After finishing school, he attended Jarvis Baptist Seminary before moving to London, where he began to explore Western Mysticism, Theosophy, and Buddhism. In London, Dawson became involved with the London Buddhist Vihara, where he met the travelling Burmese monk Sayadaw U Thila Wanta. U Thila Wanta was a master of the Burmese Theravādin forest tradition, and had been travelling to Western countries as a pagoda-builder; he is reported to have built the first pagoda in the United States, in Allegany City, New York, in 1958 (Burmese Classic). After being accepted as a student, Dawson travelled to Bodh Gaya, the place of Buddha’s enlightenment, to meet with U Thila Wanta and receive the ordination vows of a novice monk, whereupon he was given the name Anandabodhi. From there, Anandabodhi travelled to Burma, where he began training under the guidance of U Thila Wanta and Mahasi Sayadaw (whose students later included key American Buddhist teachers such as Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Joseph Goldstein). After five years of practice, he was given the title of *ācārya* (teacher), and was invited to teach in England by the English Sangha Trust. After three years in England, Anandabodhi returned to Toronto, taking a job at a book-packing warehouse and teaching meditation in the evenings.

These lessons, which Anandabodhi taught in his apartment, attracted enough students that soon he could be supported in teaching full-time. After a year, students pooled funds together to establish the Dharma Centre of Canada in Kinmount, Ontario. A yearly routine quickly developed of teaching in Canada for eight months, and travelling with students for the rest. Most of the time, the group travelled on cargo ships, which were comparatively cheap and allowed ample time for meditation classes. In 1968, Anandabodhi took a group to Sikkim, where he and his students met His Holiness (H.H.) the 14th Dalai Lama and H.H. the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, respective heads of the Gelug and Karma Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism. During this trip, the Karmapa recognized Anandabodhi as a *tulku* (reincarnation) of a famous lama, Ju Mipham Namgyal Rinpoche (1846–1912). Ju Mipham Rinpoche, or “Mipham the Great,” had been a master of the Nyingma Lineage, known as a polymath and as “a towering figure of historical importance” (Duckworth 2011: vii). In 1970, the Karmapa fully ordained Anandabodhi in a ceremony at Rumtek Monastery, officially recognizing him as Karma Tenzin Dorje Namgyal Rinpoche.

¹ I have drawn information from biographies found on the following websites (accessed November 3, 2022): <http://www.dharmafellowship.org/biographies/historicalsaints/kyabje-namgyal.htm>; <http://www.wangapeka.org/teachers/ven-namgyal-rinpoche/>; and <http://www.bodhipublishing.org/contents/en-ca/d34.html>.

Namgyal Rinpoche spent the rest of his life travelling the world and teaching. He and his students established centres in North, Central, and South America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Japan. His teaching was an eclectic mix of Theravāda and Vajrayāna Buddhism, and also included elements from Christianity, Freemasonry, Western Mysticism, and a number of secular systems including Jungian theory, psychotherapy, and bioenergetics. On October 22, 2003, at the age of 72, Namgyal Rinpoche died peacefully after a retreat in Switzerland, exactly thirty years after conducting his very first meditation retreat, a retreat which took place on the shores of Lake Rotoiti, New Zealand.

PART 2

The Retreat

The first time Namgyal Rinpoche came to New Zealand was in 1971, during a ten-day visit with a dozen students (Hearn 2015). This served as a “brief reconnoiter for future visits,” and in 1972, he announced plans for an intensive meditation retreat on Lake Rotoiti for the next year. Most students arrived in the Port of Wellington in July of 1973, taking buses to Rotoiti and finding accommodation in holiday homes. The retreat was in the winter, which meant that the holiday town was vacant. One participant recalled that “no-one was there... it was so cold.” Many participants emphasised how uncomfortable the cold was; one remembered ice in the urinals, while another described the temperature as “like, zero.” Another participant stayed in a converted verandah with a large gap between the wall and the ceiling and cold air blowing in. When meditating, he would wrap himself in every blanket he could find, “like a mound of cloth, with a head sticking out the top, and a hat on.” Winter at Rotoiti provided exactly what was needed for deep retreat: vacant, furnished summer cottages, silence, and isolation.

Within Prebish and Numrich’s “two Buddhisms” framework, the group would fit squarely into the “non-Asian convert” category associated with the North American baby-boomer generation (Numrich 2003: 70). The nationalities of participants, for instance, included Canadian, American, English, Australian, South African, and several New Zealanders; “by and large,” according to one participant, “[the ethnicity of the group] was ‘Caucasian.’” Most of the students were quite young - one participant recalled that “[we] were predominantly in our 20s, then there’d be a good proportion in their thirties, and then the older ones... that got fewer and fewer apart. Some forties, some fifties, some sixties.” The gender split was relatively even, and the occupations of participants ranged across students, monks, and educated professionals such as doctors and architects. Estimates about the number of people on retreat varied somewhat between my interviewees, but most suggested between fifty and eighty participants, not including family members. One participant likened the group to Chaucer’s pilgrims; several others compared it to a caravan of gypsies.

Students were expected to arrange their own accommodation, food, transport, and enough money to last several months. One participant recalled that Namgyal Rinpoche would express frustration about the students who were not seriously committed to meditation, and he would intentionally make his teaching less accessible to them. The participants rented a cluster of holiday homes close to the lake, and organized themselves into groups of three or four which worked independently as “proper functioning houses.” Students would meditate and prostrate in complete silence; one participant explained that “I don’t actually recall precisely who was in the house with me, [because] there was no interaction. It was a convenience, in a sense, that you shared a house with four people.” After the retreat, Namgyal Rinpoche and the majority of his students left New Zealand, and the next meditation retreat was held in Peru.

None of the activities during retreat suggested a “missionary” or “evangelical” agenda. Students were not encouraged to talk about the retreat with outsiders, and to minimize outside contact, most households would place orders with local grocers for weekly food deliveries. When excursions out of the retreat did happen, they

were conducted in silence. Occasionally, Namgyal Rinpoche would take small groups to Lake Taupō, where they would “soak in hot pools...continuing in silence.” One participant, who found work in New Zealand several months before the retreat, “didn’t tell [his workmates] what we were doing, because it was not ‘public’[...] we were going to come and do this intense retreat, it wasn’t a thing for new people to be coming to.” However, people still heard about the retreat and joined in regardless. One of this participant’s workmates, for instance, sought out information about the retreat. According to the participant,

I didn’t tell him anything about where it was or anything like that...He had wandered around Rotorua asking any people that looked likely candidates. ‘Are you here for the retreat?’ [he asked], until he eventually found his way to one of those camps. He did the whole retreat, and eventually became a monk. He lives in America. It became his whole life.

The group’s practice involved both “traditional” elements, such as devotion and ritual, and “modernist” elements, such as meditation and seeking “rational understanding” of Buddhist concepts (Baumann 2001: 25–27). For instance, many students spent the retreat completing the *ngöndro*, or “Foundation Work.” The *ngöndro* is a traditional Tibetan practice, “normally required by a lama as the initial phase of Tantric training” (Samuel 2012: 81). For Namgyal Rinpoche’s students, this involved completing a series of 100,000 mantra recitations to Chenrezig, sounding a rosary 100,000 times for Vajrasattva, 100,000 mandala offerings, and, most gruelingly, 100,000 “Grand Prostrations.” As one participant explained,

The grand prostrations involved the descent from an upright stance to stretching the whole body out on the floor, from the total vertical to the total horizontal, whilst having a visualization in mind. They are strenuous. If you try it and you are not particularly fit, start with just ten. That’s enough to feel the result in your solar plexus the next day. But with practice you could work up to hundreds, even thousands in a day.

The *ngöndro* was seen as proof of serious intent and commitment to the Lama, and Namgyal Rinpoche required students to complete it before learning meditation. One participant estimated that she was able to do five sessions of 200 prostrations a day; another said that he completed them effortlessly. Either way, it was a physically intense practice. One participant explained that he would “do [the Grand Prostrations] for maybe an hour, and then just be bathed completely in sweat.” After experiencing a sharp pain in her chest, another participant’s housemate discovered she had broken her collarbone prostrating; this was viewed as good news, it meant she was allowed to go straight to meditation lessons.

Students who had completed the *ngöndro* were in “full retreat,” practicing silent *vipassana* meditation for up to twenty hours a day. Namgyal Rinpoche expected students to practice constantly, and interaction with others was kept to a minimum (“five minutes of chatter and you’d have wasted it all,” explained one participant). Compared to other retreats led by Namgyal Rinpoche in the 1970s, discipline at Lake Rotoiti was rigorously maintained. One participant recounted that “[Rotoiti] was one place where everybody cooled it. They didn’t do that crazy stuff – they actually did the meditation... In every other trip, people were being people, getting drunk, doing this, doing that.”

Students in full retreat would also receive teachings from Namgyal Rinpoche, who had rented a house in the centre of the area, on a wide range of topics. He held impromptu classes in the lounge every several days. These sessions involved “a lot of material.” Since all of the students had proven to be dedicated meditators, Namgyal Rinpoche shared his knowledge “probably more comprehensively than he had ever done before.” He included elements of Christian teachings, Western Esotericism, Tarot, and the Occult, as well as secular practices of psychotherapy, bioenergetics, and art therapy; virtually all participants stressed the broad, eclectic nature of his teaching.

This innovative blend of mystical and secular subjects, rooted in the North American counterculture of the 1960s, was characteristic of what would, in the years following, coalesce in the New Age movement. As Wouter Hanegraaff has shown, early manifestations of the “New Age” emerged in England in the 1960s from Western Esotericism, and had a “strong Theosophical and Anthroposophical flavour” centered on the belief in an incoming Age of Aquarius (Hanegraaff 1996: 97). Later, the movement would grow to incorporate elements from a diverse number of sources including American transcendentalism, Jungian psychology, Shamanism, and the Human Potential Movement. By the 1980s, this New Age milieu had “become conscious of itself ... as constituting a more or less unified” movement” (1996: 522). Key features of this movement emphasised the development of intuition and the “inner voice,” personal growth and healing through self-transformation and “alternative therapies,” and the quest to unite modern science with a holistic and spiritual worldview. According to Hanegraaff’s (1996: 12) definition, the movement properly emerged in the second half of the 1970s and developed in the 1980s. Namgyal Rinpoche’s teachings were certainly aligned with much of what influenced the New Age, but in 1973, they were somewhat ahead of their time.

The Participants’ Motivations

Of the three central questions I asked, this one received the most complex replies. Virtually none of the answers were clear-cut, and most of the interviewees had to start several years before the retreat to fully explain their motivations. On one level, the question was unanswerable: it presumes that our motivations are transparent to ourselves, so that we can account adequately for them when asked, but it is far from certain that this is so.

Each reply was unique, yet most emphasized the role of intuition in their decision-making. One participant who stayed in New Zealand said that he “just knew [New Zealand] was the right place. Just like when I saw Rinpoche, I knew that he was the right teacher.” Another student heard about Namgyal Rinpoche through a friend, and without having met him, sold all of his belongings (which consisted mostly of the equipment needed to start a mobile discotheque) and left to Morocco to find him. Another outlined an extraordinary series of events, which began with her having a vision of Namgyal Rinpoche (at this time he was in India, and she in Canada) commanding her to come to him. She ignored the vision, but a week later, a student of Namgyal Rinpoche that she barely knew tracked her down and implored her to go. Again, she resisted, but he had found a plane ticket for her—leaving in several days—and had bought it in advance. From there, she said, it was like “being caught in a jet stream: you find yourself doing it in spite of yourself, despite the best intentions to go in the opposite direction.”

Each of my participants’ replies also had another common theme: when asked why they came to New Zealand, each participant gave the reasons they followed Namgyal Rinpoche. The participants came to New Zealand because that was where he was teaching, and if he had picked another country, they would have followed him there. One participant framed it as such:

My decision-making process was a decision that I was going to travel with and study with Rinpoche... If he had said, ‘We’re going to New York City,’ I would have gone there. If he had said, ‘We’re going to Antarctica,’ I would have gone there. New Zealand was nothing to me, from that point of view.

In addition, many of the students appreciated that New Zealand had, at that time, conditions that were conducive to practicing Buddhism. One participant explained that it was “beautiful, quiet, affordable, [and] comfortable.” In 1973, “New Zealand was far from the hurly burly of mainstream global life,” which was ideal for those interested in retreat. Some described coming to the country as form of time-travel: as one Canadian

participant described, “we were from the seventies, but it looked like something from out of the fifties.” Another participant explained:

The whole of New Zealand was in retreat! You walk around in Wellington and decide you want something to eat after five o'clock in the afternoon and there is nothing there—this was paradise!

None of Namgyal Rinpoche's students came to New Zealand with the intention of spreading Buddhism to New Zealanders. As one participant explained, “we weren't interested in New Zealand at all, or bringing the Dharma anywhere... We had no idea of what we were doing, of bringing something somewhere.” Many of the students didn't even identify as Buddhist at the time, and were encouraged by Namgyal Rinpoche not to tell others about what they were doing. Ultimately, the participants' primary motivations were to study under Namgyal Rinpoche

The Motivations of Namgyal Rinpoche

While none of the participants had come to New Zealand intending to spread Buddhism, that may not have been the case for Namgyal Rinpoche. When speaking about his motivations for travelling to New Zealand, three answers came up consistently in the interviews. First, Namgyal Rinpoche believed that travel was good for his students, and he intentionally sought out places that would challenge them. Second, he had a great thirst for travel himself, which could be funded by students. As one participant explained, “his whole life he had a passion for exploring the planet...[and] we were partly his ticket for doing it.” Finally, several participants believed that Namgyal Rinpoche was motivated by spreading Buddhism, although not necessarily to new humans, but to the land itself.

Seven of the nine participants answered first and foremost that Namgyal Rinpoche's extensive travel was for the benefit of his students. This was based on his “perception that people were very much ‘stuck’ in their habitual life situations, and that one of the most direct and dramatic ways of illustrating that [was] to go into situations that are not your comfort zone.” Taking his students to culturally challenging places meant that Namgyal Rinpoche's teachings “were not falling on hard cement... they were falling on psyches that were already discombobulated.” Namgyal Rinpoche took an active approach in getting his students to do things they would find difficult. One participant told me how Rinpoche asked him to arrange dinner during a stay in the port of Jakarta in the early 1970s, in a district where “there were thugs and prostitutes everywhere, and I [had] no language.” As he explained, Namgyal Rinpoche believed that travel provided the opportunity:

to work on his students in a very methodical way. What he was interested in was waking us up, and developing us, ripening us... I absolutely had to confront a whole lot of things within myself just walking down the street and getting a meal and bringing it back again.

A second common answer was that Namgyal Rinpoche had an extraordinary thirst for adventure. Teaching students in foreign destinations “facilitated Rinpoche [in] doing something which he loved doing, and continued to do,” (after leaving Toronto in 1972, he never stopped travelling). One participant explained that “he liked to ride camels, he liked to ride elephants, he went scuba diving, he went under the water doing deep sea diving in the Red Sea... He just did all of that because he liked it!” This was certainly a motivating factor in coming to New Zealand. One participant explained that “he chose New Zealand, I think, because it was open, Western and unique. It was also safe, well developed, and affordable...the decision-making process involved the decisions of a traveller because Rinpoche travelled hugely and constantly.” This can also be seen in the fact that Namgyal Rinpoche chose an isolated tourist destination such as Lake Rotoiti, rather than somewhere more central or populated, to hold the retreat.

A third common answer amongst participants was that Namgyal Rinpoche's travel was part of his effort to spread his teachings around the world. However, rather than "winning" converts from new areas, the focus was on developing his own students into teachers who could stay on. For instance, one participant called him a "teacher of teachers." Once these teachers were sufficiently developed, he asked some of them to stay in certain places to teach. One of the participants, for instance, was asked to establish a centre near Christchurch after the retreat, and to begin teaching there. The same student later went on to find supporters and acquire the land that became the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre, before moving to Australia to develop the Origins Centre. Another was asked to settle as a teacher in New Zealand, several years after the Wangapeka Centre had been built, and once asked by Namgyal Rinpoche to begin teaching, "basically I'd be where he wasn't rather than where he was." Developing his own students was more important than picking up new students, and Namgyal Rinpoche requested that his students tell anyone who was interested in studying with him to "knock three times" (i.e., express interest in learning from him on three separate occasions, a notion taken from the Zen tradition) before the student could make an introduction.

In addition to teaching his students, some participants indicated that Namgyal Rinpoche's travel was intended to spread Buddhism to the land itself. For instance, one participant explained that the retreat was both "a skillful way to bring the people to the teaching, but also [a way of] marking the land with all of the Tibetan stuff." Other times, this spread was described on a "planetary" scale. Namgyal Rinpoche "believed in a planetary consciousness," and his travels were "a way of bringing purified consciousness to the rest of the planet...it was partly for the planet, as well as for the students." This kind of spreading also involved a large degree of spontaneity:

I don't think he knew where he was going in terms of 'place.' For example, we did a big trip in Peru, [which] happened because some guy showed up in a class in Assisi who was a Peruvian...If that guy had decided to have a cappuccino, and miss his bus, and didn't get to class, we might never have gone to Peru!

The notion of bringing Buddhism to new land was accompanied by the metaphor of "seeds" and "roots," which participants used to describe Namgyal Rinpoche, his teachings, and his students. One participant thought that Namgyal Rinpoche's reason for travelling was to "open up the world to the teachers he was cultivating, with the expectation that some of them would be dispersing themselves and returning to these locations." Another denied that the purpose of the trip was to bring Buddhist teachings to new people, but explained that "it was more like 'where is the most fruitful place in Buddhist terms, where is the most calm, wholesome place to seed', if you want." One participant, who stayed in New Zealand, said that "this early retreat [was] a beginning and a seeding." Despite very little interaction with people in New Zealand, many participants saw the retreat as deeply significant, both for the cultivation of Namgyal Rinpoche's students, and for the preparation of New Zealand's soil. One participant explained how Namgyal Rinpoche believed that "New Zealand was open to Dharma, and that it was going to take root there. Which it did, not just from him, but from the other teachers following that, the Tibetans, people from India." Indeed, according to Kemp, the "second significant event" of Buddhism's spread to New Zealand would happen two years later, when Tibetan lamas Thubten Yeshe and Thubten Zopa toured New Zealand and established the Dorje Chang Institute for Wisdom and Culture in Auckland (Kemp 2007: 117).

PART 3

I now examine the theoretical frameworks applied to this retreat and its participants in Kemp's earlier study in order to show why these frameworks do not sufficiently account for key characteristics and attributes of

Namgyal Rinpoche, his students, and their practices. Instead, I suggest several recent theoretical frameworks that are more relevant to the Lake Rotoiti retreat.

“Import/Export/Baggage”

In 1998, Nattier offered an alternative to the “two Buddhisms” dichotomy, developed by Charles Prebish and Paul Numrich, which divided American Buddhist practitioners into the categories of “Asian immigrants” and “American converts.” This framework, Nattier argued, was “clearly inadequate...primarily because it fails to account for the full spectrum of racial and ethnic diversity in Buddhist America” (1998: 190). Instead, she suggested a transmission-based framework that made use of economic metaphors. Nattier’s framework had three parts: “import,” “export,” and “baggage.” Import transmission is “demand-driven,” where the recipient seeks out Buddhism through travel, meeting someone from Asia, or reading foreign books. Export transmission, which Nattier calls “evangelical” or “missionary,” is when Buddhism gets “sold” by Buddhist missionaries, such as the Soka Gakkai. Finally, baggage or “ethnic” Buddhism was the term given to those who came to the West as immigrants, and “who [do] not (unlike the missionaries of evangelical Buddhism) travel for religious reasons” (1998: 190).

This framework has several underlying limitations. Borrowing economic metaphors carries with it the assumption of intent, namely that those who transmit a religion always intend to do so, and if it is not intentionally “bought” or “sold” by converts or missionaries, then it “reach[es] the new shores by way of migrating people who, after having settled, strive to maintain and preserve the tradition” (Baumann 2002: 200). In the Lake Rotoiti case, this is not so. The participants were neither “importing” nor “exporting” Buddhism, and yet the group was travelling for religious purposes. As discussed earlier, virtually all of the participants travelled to New Zealand because Namgyal Rinpoche was offering meditation teaching there, and Namgyal Rinpoche himself chose foreign destinations primarily for the benefit of his existing students. Establishing Buddhist centres in New Zealand may have been a by-product of the retreat, but it was certainly not the conscious intention of the retreatants at the time. The fact that the group stayed and flourished there suggests that the spread of religion to new areas, as one participant suggested, could be incidental, at least from the perspective of those bringing it.

Furthermore, the framework does not consider the metaphysical beliefs and worldviews of actual practitioners, as well as how they describe themselves. In Nattier’s taxonomy, the group would most likely be called a “missionary” group, because of their influence in the spread of Buddhism to New Zealand. However, the terms associated with “missionary” groups—“evangelical” and “proselytizing”—bring a raft of assumptions from the Christian tradition that are not present in this case. One such assumption is that the group was interested in “converting” the indigenous population. As mentioned previously, Namgyal Rinpoche eschewed publicity, he made his teachings intentionally inaccessible, and he encouraged his students not to tell others about the retreat. One participant explicitly rejected the term “missionary,” explaining that coming to New Zealand “[was not a] missionary thing... it was the opposite of Christianity or Islam, where you’re out to convert people.” Rather, students of Namgyal Rinpoche worked under a Buddhist set of assumptions - they “wanted to awaken out of the suffering of the world that [they were] in.” The focus was on themselves rather than on outsiders:

Our perception of practicing Dharma in those days was very ‘Hinayāna-ish,’ basically, if you were serious about Dharma you go into deep retreat... [It was not as if we thought] ‘Oh, we can come and spread the teaching and share with others.’ That’s a Mahāyāna Bodhisattva idea, of reaching out and uplifting others.

Finally, the terms “import” and “export” reveal an anthropocentric way of thinking, which obscures the possibility that practitioners may have other targets, in this case, the land itself. Many of the participants considered Namgyal Rinpoche’s arrival in New Zealand to be significant for the land, and for the planet as a whole. This focus on land has been noted by other scholars of Buddhism in the Pacific. Kemp observed that many Tibetan Buddhists in New Zealand shared an “ideology of ‘buddhifying the landscape,’ of materially, symbolically and ritually imposing Buddhism onto (and into) the landscape” (Kemp 2008: 237). Similarly, Sally McAra documented the controversy surrounding the construction of a stupa in Australia, which was found to block an ancient Aboriginal songline that ran through the area.² The crux of the issue was in determining who had “the authority to influence and interact with local spiritual forces in the land” (2007: 134). For Tibetan Buddhists, she explained, the propitiation of local deities is important aspect of practice. The notion of healing the land and planet as a whole, and on restoring relationships between foreign and indigenous spiritual entities, has also become a part of the wider New Age worldview, particularly in countries grappling with dark colonial histories. For instance, Cristina Rocha (2017) has documented the ways in which Australian and New Zealand followers of the Brazilian healer John of God arrange traditional Aboriginal and Māori “cleansing” rituals before inviting Brazilian healing entities to their shores.

This type of motive has little to do with the “conversion” of a local populace, and is often overlooked when focusing exclusively on human-to-human activity. This anthropocentric tendency in the social sciences has led to a recent non-human/multispecies/more-than-human turn (Grusin 2015; Halafoff 2017), in which the non-human world, and the environment more broadly, has become a renewed focus for scholars. For instance, Lily Kong has tracked the rise of interest in the geography of religion amongst social scientists, and the “spatiality of religious experience” (Kong 2010: 27). One particular dimension of this interest is a recognition of the significance of “unofficially sacred sites,” or sites of religious practice beyond churches, temples, and mosques - for example, museums, schools, media spaces, and “sacred groves.” In the case of the Lake Rotoiti retreat, it seems that simply practicing in a particular location was considered significant for the land on which the group practiced, although whether this notion came from Buddhism or from elsewhere was not clear from my interviews. Nevertheless, expanding our understanding of the group’s motivations to include the more-than-human world reveals another underlying limitation to the import/export/baggage framework, which implies a solely human-to-human form of exchange.

“Modernist/Traditional”

In 2001, Baumann rejected both the “two Buddhisms” and the “import/export/baggage” frameworks, and instead proposed “looking at the main strands of Buddhism outside of Asia along the analytical lines of traditionalist and modernist Buddhism” (2001: 29). Instead of paying attention to the individual person or the mode of transmission, Baumann argues that scholars should focus instead on the “religious concepts held, and practices followed” (2001: 25). By doing this, “a gulf between traditionalist versus modernist Buddhism” comes to the fore, with traditionalist Buddhism characterized by “devotion, ritual, and specific cosmological concepts” and modernist Buddhism characterized by “meditation, text reading, and rational understanding” (2001: 25–27).

Baumann illustrates this through the Western presence of Theravāda Buddhism. On the one hand, Baumann argues, there is a modernist Theravāda strand which places emphasis on the meditative practices of *vipassana*, *samatha*, and *satipaṭṭhāna*. Teachers of this strand (for instance, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Ruth

² The “Songlines” of the Aboriginal cultures of Australia consist of “a series of invisible, interconnected routes across the State, which mark significant sites for Indigenous peoples and map paths between such sites” (Higgins 2021). These routes are transmitted through song-cycles, and map both sacred spaces and resources. Songlines date back millennia and can be thousands of kilometers long: they play a fundamental role in Aboriginal spiritual life and the set of creation narratives known as the Dreamtime.

Denison) have typically been disciples of Burmese modernizers like U Ba Khin, Mahasi Sayadaw, and S.N. Goenka. On the other hand, traditionalist Theravāda Buddhism in the United States emphasizes the monk-lay hierarchy, acquiring merit, and taking part in ritualized chanting and *pujas*. Baumann admits that there may be a possible exception in the case of Western followers of traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices, like the *ngöndro* and liturgical *pujas* (2001: 28).

In the case of Namgyal Rinpoche, this dichotomy does not hold up. Clearly, Namgyal Rinpoche would fit into Baumann's category of a "modernist" teacher. Baumann's example of this type of Buddhism are the students of the reformed Theravada of Mahasi Sayadaw, whom Namgyal Rinpoche also studied with. The Lake Rotoiti retreat placed great emphasis on *vipassana* practice, but only once the students had completed what, in Baumann's terms, was a quintessential "traditionalist" exercise: the *ngöndro*. Namgyal Rinpoche was operating "authentically" from both of these distinct lineages, and the group at Rotoiti undertook both modernist and traditionalist practices side-by-side. The *ngöndro* practice that his students undertook, for instance, was almost identical to the one set out by the Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje (1556–1603) (Samuel 2012: 81–82). Baumann concludes his article by suggesting that an additional category of "global" Buddhism should be added to his taxonomy in order to capture the contemporary "transnational and transcontinental flow of Buddhist ideas and practices," but unfortunately, he does not sufficiently articulate the differences between his categories of "modern" and "global" Buddhism (2001: 5).³

One way of understanding the range and diversity of practices shown in this group would be to draw on the work of Meredith McGuire and the "lived religion" tradition within the sociology of religion (McGuire 2008). In *Lived Religion*, McGuire challenges scholars to reexamine their assumptions about real people's religious lives. "Rather than conceptualize individuals' religions as little versions of some institutional model," McGuire argues, we need to appreciate that individual practices "are the products of considerable human creativity, cultural improvisation, and construction from diverse elements, only some of which were inherited from the same tradition" (2008: 185). The scholarly assumption that an individual or group practices a single tradition has been based, uncritically, on inherited Protestant norms; we simply fail to question the image of religiosity made up of mutually exclusive and even antagonistic belief systems.

"Lived religion" poses a significant challenge to frameworks such as Baumann's. McGuire argues that "extensive religious blending [both contemporary and historical] is the norm, rather than the exception" (2008: 186). This is certainly the case with Namgyal Rinpoche, and has also been observed in other contemporary Buddhist lineages. In a survey of popular Western *jhāna* discourse for instance, Natalie Quli identifies a number of teachers who "offer a mishmash of modernist and traditional qualities," such as Ayya Khema, Shaila Catherine, Pa-Auk Sayādaw, and Ajahn Brahm (Quli 2008: 237). These teachers, Quli argues, can be considered ideal "modernists" in some regards, due to their emphasis on ideas such as the consonance between Buddhism and science, or the tendency to define Buddhism not as a religion but as a philosophy. On the other hand, these teachers believe in traditional Buddhist cosmologies and superhuman powers (such as levitation and telepathy), they emphasize rebirth and karma, and draw extensively on the historical Buddhist canon in their teachings, such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Satipatṭhāna-sutta*. While Quli does not use the term "lived religion," she provides a number of examples challenging the notion of a "traditional/modernist" dichotomy in a similar fashion to the blending of traditional and modern Buddhist elements by Namgyal Rinpoche and his students.

³ For a longer critique of Baumann's "Global Buddhism," see Gleig (2019: 285).

“Seeding”

In 2010, Hickey argued that any system describing Buddhism in the United States needed to account for change over time, that instead of “simplistic or static categories,” our frameworks should be process-oriented and developmental (Hickey 2010: 18). Drawing on an earlier framework developed by Baumann and Michael Pye (Baumann 1994), Hickey suggested a set of horticultural metaphors to delineate four major stages of group development that “refer to living systems which grow, adapt, move, cross pollinate, and change” (2010: 18). An “established” group is one that has endured for at least four generations; an “offshoot” group emerges from an established group, either through schism or by way of a gradual process; a “transplant” group is an established group that moves into a new environment; and a “new movement” is developed by someone “who is not ordained by an established group, but who develops and promotes a form of religion that may draw upon elements of an established tradition” (2010: 17). Hickey concludes by pointing to other process-oriented frameworks developed by scholars, including Thomas Tweed’s set of fluid metaphors (streams, flows, tributaries, and confluences), and Cristina Rocha’s use of hybridization and “creolization” (Tweed 2006; Rocha 2006).

When examining the case of the Lake Rotoiti retreat, none of Hickey’s four categories apply. Since Namgyal Rinpoche and his students had not been established for four generations, the group would not fit into the “established,” “offshoot,” or “transplant” categories. The group was probably closer to a “new movement” during the retreat phase, as they had developed “a form of religion that [drew upon] elements of an established tradition” such as the *ngöndro* and *vipassana* meditation. However, Hickey also classifies new movements as developed by people “not ordained by an established group,” and who have “never received monastic ordination” (2010: 17). This was clearly not the case with Namgyal Rinpoche, as he was officially ordained in multiple traditions, first in the Burmese Theravādin tradition as Anandabodhi, and later in the Tibetan tradition as Namgyal Rinpoche.

I propose adding a fifth category to Hickey’s horticultural toolkit: the “seed” stage of a religion. A “seeding” religious movement could include groups that come from “established” traditions through ordination, but which are small, transient, and independent. It would account for groups that the “transplant” category does not cover, groups that are not “established” over four generations, but who still move into new environments. Established plants, for instance, can send forth seeds that carry their genes to settle in new environments without having to be transplanted themselves. At the same time, “seeding” would cover new movement groups whose leaders had received monastic ordination and were officially recognized within a specific tradition in just the same way that a single independent seed can be traced back to a mother plant. “Seeding” might also help describe the group’s direction, size, and point of origin; the actual “seeds” themselves might be individuals within the group, the group itself, or even a set of teachings.

This category solves several problems established by the earlier taxonomies. First, “seeding” leaves the intention behind the spread ambiguous. There can either be a gardener consciously scattering the seed, but the seeds can also spread without any plan or self-conscious knowledge of having done so. As mentioned earlier, many students were like this. One said that the retreat “was like the little tiny beginning of a little tiny seed, we had no idea of what we were doing, of bringing something somewhere.” “Seeding” can be an automatic, unconscious process, it can even be entirely accidental. Further, seeding need not be anthropocentric, and can refer to the more-than-human processes of animals, plants, and natural forces. This dynamic was actually anticipated by Pye (from whom Baumann borrowed the transplant framework), who noted that we might need to forget the gardener, as “seeds are sometimes blown about by the wind or carried unwittingly by birds and animals” (Pye, cited in Baumann 1996: 368).

Second, the “seeding” process allows for the possibility of having one group carry the genetic (or memetic) material of several different traditions. Many plants can cross-pollinate naturally, creating new hybrids that express both parent’s traits, and even entirely new traits. Unlike Baumann’s “modernist/traditionalist” framework, “seeding” allows for a plurality of practices to be carried within the same group. The term “hybrid” adequately describes the eclectic practices of Namgyal Rinpoche and his students, and has already been employed widely in postcolonial and cultural theory (Young 1995). It has even been used in the field of Buddhist Studies. For instance, Cristina Rocha, in her study of Zen in Brazil, uses the term hybrid to describe the “meeting of two or more cultures, practices, and beliefs” (2006: 19).

Thirdly, the “seeding” category accounts for the beliefs and language of the practitioners involved in the transmission. “Seeding” is an emic term. As mentioned earlier, many of the participants used the language of seeds, roots, and plants to describe how their group spread. Participants variously used the words “seed” and “seeding” to refer to individuals, to retreats, and to teachings. For instance, several described the *ngöndro* foundation work and Wong Kur empowerments as being “seeded” inside them, flourishing later “into flowers [and] fruit trees.” Another used the term to describe a co-retreatant: “[He was] the first of the seedpods to blossom... He just blossomed so beautifully in New Zealand.” A third participant described the retreat itself as a seed - “those [retreats] were, like, the deep seed experiences, very intensive...to make sure there was a group who could really then spread out and could do what they were going to do.” As I described earlier, the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre in Nelson, New Zealand and the Origins Centre in Balingup, Australia were established by students who remained in New Zealand after the Rotoiti retreat. The centres themselves are seen by participants as “blossoms” of the retreat teachings. One provided me with a manuscript written by his friend during retreat, which proposed a “conceptual outline for a Dharma Community in New Zealand.”

In addition, “seeding” can encompass and account for the non-human and environmental dimensions of transmission mentioned earlier. While still metaphoric, the term neatly describes the way that participants considered their retreat significant for the literal soil of New Zealand. Seeds, of course, need soil to grow and flourish, and some types of seeds grow into plants that enrich the soil for future generations. One participant explained that one of Namgyal Rinpoche’s motivations was “putting his feet on as many parts of the planet as he could, as a way of bringing purified consciousness to the rest of the planet.... it was for the planet, as well as for the students.” The recognition of interconnectedness is a cornerstone of Buddhist thought and practice. If we expand our conceptual frameworks to include the more-than-human world, then our understanding of what motivated the Lake Rotoiti group is richer and more nuanced. This approach is aligned with McGuire’s theory of “lived religion,” instead of simply categorizing the group as a convert/export/modernist group, we see instead a complex and evolving collection of beliefs, practices, and motivations.

Finally, the term “seeding” has been used in recent scholarship to describe the transmission of Buddhism in another Western context. In *Seeding Buddhism with Multiculturalism* (Barua 2019), D. Mitra Barua examines the educational programs of two Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in the Toronto area, which are designed to transmit Buddhist practices and beliefs to second-generation Sri Lankan-Canadian Buddhists. In the study, there are clear similarities in how the group uses the terms “seeds” and “seeding.” Barua describes one young Buddhist teacher who, for instance, “perceives herself as a dhamma cultivator, who implants the seeds of dhamma (goodness) in the fertile hearts and minds of the young.” In a quote, the teacher explains that “teaching Buddhism is like growing a seed. What I try to do is if I can place a seed of Buddhism in their [the students’] hearts” (2019: 68). While Barua does not define his own use of the term “seeding,” he also uses it in a similar way to his participants. In the conclusion, for instance, he summarizes that “*Seeding Buddhism with Multiculturalism* demonstrates how dhamma seeds are prepared and presented to a young generation” (Barua 2019: 185). In

Barua's study, as in this one, "seeding" is both an emic term and a useful conceptual framework for scholarly analysis.

Conclusion

By examining the case of Namgyal Rinpoche and the Lake Rotoiti retreat, we can see that the frameworks Kemp and others have used to classify the group—as either "convert," "export," or "modernist"—were of limited utility. Studying Buddhism in New Zealand is often a case of "secondary flows," of Buddhism moving from the centre of the West to its peripheries, rather than from East to West. Therefore, despite their popularity amongst scholars, many of these frameworks obscure and miss important insights. Buddhism may be incidentally, rather than intentionally, spread; practitioners may be more motivated by bringing Buddhism to a new land, rather than to new humans; and those who spread it may be creatively working with practices from a range of different religious and secular traditions beyond Buddhism itself. This diversity of practice, as McGuire has argued, may actually be indicative of the norm, rather than an exception. This poses a challenge to the bi- and tripartite frameworks previously used to categorise Buddhist groups involved in bringing Dharma to the West.

As Hickey observed, any way of categorizing contemporary Buddhism needs to use a layered approach, rather than static typologies (2010: 19). The added category of "seeding" helps explain the process through which Namgyal Rinpoche and his students spread Buddhism to New Zealand, and it also accounts for the more-than-human dimension of the group's motivations. In addition, the term is already being used by both practitioners and scholars to describe the process of religious transmission. Because of the low number of participants on the retreat, the extent to which these findings are indicative of broader attitudes and values amongst New Zealand Buddhist communities remains to be seen. However, the notion of "seeding" may still bear fruit when examining the spread of Buddhism to other contexts, including further studies across the Pacific region.

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