



Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

Volume 5 1998: 304-309

Publication date: 26 June 1998

Buddhism in Bath: Adaptation and Authority. By Helen Waterhouse. Leeds: Monograph Series, Community Religions Project, University of Leeds, 1997. Pp. 251. ISBN 1-871363-05. 9.

Reviewed by

David Kay

*Doctoral Student and Part-time Lecturer
Department of Religious Studies and Social Ethics
University College of St Martin, Lancaster, United Kingdom
d.kay@ucsm.ac.uk*

© 1998 David Kay

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the editors. All enquiries to jbe-ed@psu.edu.

This book, a slightly edited version of the author's doctoral thesis, makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of contemporary Buddhism in Britain. Concepts that are central to understanding the development and shape of Buddhism in western contexts are examined in detail with a particular emphasis upon authority, adaptation, and the relationship between the two. Achieving a good balance of description and analysis throughout, the author grounds her core arguments within a solid basis of fieldwork. The text consists of seven chapters divided into three main parts comprising an introductory discussion, an extended ethnography, and a concluding analysis.

This publication also represents the first monograph specifically oriented towards Buddhism to emerge from the Community Religions Project (CRP) of the University of Leeds. The CRP is an initiative which has, since the mid-1970s, concentrated primarily upon the academic study of ethnic minority religions in Britain. Buddhism, however, has so far been treated mainly as a religion of British "converts" and, with the exception of the Vietnamese (briefly discussed in J. Law's *The Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Vietnamese Community in Britain* [Leeds: CRP, University of Leeds, 1991]), the study of Buddhism within ethnic minority communities (such as the Sinhalese, Burmese, Chinese, Korean, etc.) has not yet received any serious academic attention. While this study provides an excellent analysis of British Buddhists in Bath, its publication by the CRP thus highlights a comparative neglect of the Asian-immigrant experience.

In the first part of the study (Chapter 1) the author outlines her basic theory, objectives, and methodology, which presents a case study of British Buddhism within a specific location. Little attempt is made to generalize from the micro to the macro level; the data is presented rather as an indication of "the greater complexity of the whole population of British and western Buddhists" (p. 6). The author is critical of studies like Phillip Mellor's ("The Cultural Translation of Buddhism: Problems of Theory and Method Arising in the Study of Buddhism in England" [Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Manchester, 1989]) that overlook diversity by analysing Buddhist groups only at the public level. By exploring the attitudes of the "ordinary member" (p. 11), she reveals that the variety of British Buddhism is "much more than the variety of the organizations and their leaders" (p. 239).

While the author is reluctant to make broad generalizations, she does acknowledge areas in which Buddhism in Bath reflects broader patterns and trends. In particular, Mellor's "Protestant" characterisation of British Buddhism is "accepted to a large degree as axiomatic in the context of the present study" (p. 24). Though the author is sensitive to Mellor's methodological limitations (pp. 24-25), she is rather uncritical in her acceptance of his central

"Protestant Buddhism" thesis, the applicability of which to the present study is not entirely convincing. The author's suggestion that British Buddhism displays "broadly Protestant tendencies" (p. 240) is neither situated within a thorough survey of the available theoretical literature (no mention is made, for example, of the seminal work of Gananath Obeyeskere in "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon" [*Modern Ceylon Studies* 1 (1) 1970: 43-63]) nor is it grounded within the field work itself beyond a number of passing remarks concerning the laicised orientation of the groups. A scholarly account of British Buddhism that subjects the Protestant thesis to critical scrutiny is long overdue.

To contextualize the groups within her case study, the author considers the size and shape of British Buddhism in the 1990s, identifying significant trends and surveying the literature that focuses upon the adaptation process. The "spectrum" model that scholars invoke to describe adaptation is regarded as useful but limited in value because it oversimplifies the process: "Buddhist groups are multifaceted entities. Some elements may be substantially adapted within a group while others remain broadly traditional, in a complex mix" (p. 26). In light of the author's focus upon authority sources, it is surprising that a more detailed discussion of the treatment of this concept by others—such as Mellor, or Sandra Bell in "Buddhism in Britain: Adaptation and Development" (Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Durham, 1991)—is not provided in the literature review. Authority is examined as a "pervasive phenomenon in the history of religions" (p. 30) and its various forms (religious leaders, sacred writings, tradition, and personal experience) and functions (such as the legitimation of change and adaptation) are considered. A discussion of the nature of authority in the modern western world is also provided. From a postmodern perspective "all external authorities have been undermined" (p. 225) and any authority "is authoritative only in so far as the individual chooses that it should be so at any given time" (p. 225). The author's ensuing discussion of the impact of modernity upon the practice of Buddhism has a wider comparative value for the study of contemporary British religiosity.

In the second part of the work, the case study, the author presents a detailed phenomenological account of six Buddhist groups meeting in Bath. These include an ecumenical or eclectic group, two Theravāda groups (one following the Thai Forest tradition and the "modernized" group known as the House of Inner Tranquillity), a Soka Gakkai International (SGI) group, and two Tibetan groups (one within the New Kadampa Tradition and the other following the *Karma bKa'rgyud* tradition). Each chapter in the case study is structured around Smart's dimensional approach to the study of reli-

gious phenomenon. Descriptions of the groups' organization, symbols, doctrines, practices, experiences, and ethics are provided, and the author also includes sections on adaptation, authority and gender. The status and role of women in Buddhist practice is an enduring concern of this work, since gender is one of the areas subject to adaptation in western contexts. The author found, rather surprisingly, that the women of her study generally adopt a "complacent" attitude towards patriarchal Buddhist structures, do not see themselves as disadvantaged, "and are largely unaware of the feminist debates about the status of women within Buddhism that are taking place elsewhere" (p. 232).

The case study presents rich ethnographic data on Buddhism as practised in the locality of Bath. Since most collective British Buddhist practice takes place in local settings such as these the author has provided a valuable comparative resource. Also, in spite of the limitations of the case study method, the author's treatment of the SGI and NKT extends beyond their local manifestations to encompass the larger parent organisations of which they form a part. We are thus given an insight into the workings of two of the largest, centrally organized, and publicly visible movements operative upon the British Buddhist landscape today. Furthermore, as these organizations are examined most closely within a localized setting, a "human" face is provided that counter-balances the often negative and critical appraisals of these groups found elsewhere. While the image of the SGI as a materialistic and intolerant organisation has "a long pedigree within British attitudes to Nichiren Buddhism" (p. 97), for example, the SGI members of this study "are much more likely to chant for less tangible benefits" (p. 96) and always "express a respect for other religious paths" (p. 100). Similarly, a balanced picture of the NKT is provided that offsets the critiques that have emerged in the wake of the recent protector-deity controversy. The author's coverage of two Tibetan groups adds considerably to our understanding of contemporary British Buddhism since Tibetan Buddhist forms have been given little serious academic attention to date.

The author's theory of adaptation hinges around the nature of authority structures within Buddhist traditions. As Buddhism settles into its new western context, changes and adaptations must be legitimated through recourse to the contrasting authorities different schools call upon to authenticate religious practices. The author argues that this process can be observed both at the public or organizational level and also at the personal level of practice: "British people who wish to practise Buddhism reach compromise positions on the traditional authority structures which are offered, including the authority of experience" (p.39). This point is illustrated most clearly by the *Karma bKa'rgyud* group (Chapter 6) where, due to a dispute at the highest

levels of the lineage about the identity of the seventeenth *Karmapa* (the head of the school), the authorities acknowledged by individual group members have been challenged and tested. Although adaptations between Buddhist schools may be similar, resulting from their shared cultural influences, they are not identical because the authority structures called upon to authenticate their practices differ. An understanding of the authority structures underlying contrasting Buddhist schools is therefore "fundamental to an understanding of the ways in which Buddhism is adapting" (p. 1). The emphasis on the authority of continuous tradition within the Thai Forest Theravāda tradition (Chapter 2), for example, contrasts with the House of Inner Tranquillity's emphasis on charismatic authority (Chapter 3) and this leads to divergent attitudes concerning the adaptation of the *Vinaya* and the position of women.

Understanding authority structures "also helps to explain sectarian attitudes which exist among groups making contrasting claims to legitimacy" (p. 2). The author found that sectarian statements between the groups of her study often stemmed from divergent attitudes towards authority sources, and in particular disagreement over the role of "faith" within practice. She illustrates this by examining how contrasting attitudes of different group members towards the role of faith within Buddhist practice leads to sectarian statements, with Theravāda practitioners accusing NKT followers "of blindly following their teacher without a critical questioning attitude" (p. 236). Such disputation, it is argued, is informed by the postmodern emphasis on individual authority and personal experience which leads to "a distrust of faith claims among many western practitioners and a consequent distrust of groups which prioritize the cultivation of faith" (p. 36). This aspect of the work resonates with the findings of others who also see the conditions of modernity reflected in contemporary Buddhist practice. According to Bell, for example, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order has institutionalized the reflexivity of individual identity that is characteristic of post-traditional British society ("Change and Identity in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order" [*Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 17 (2) 1996: 87-107]).

In the final part of the work the author undertakes a comparative analysis of the field work to show how it supports her theory of authority, adaptation, and sectarianism. Modifying Weber's classical tripartite model of authority, she reviews the authority sources of each case study group, identifying four main categories—texts, lineage, exemplary teachers, and personal experience—and indicating how the focus of these differ between groups. While the locus of authority within the House of Inner Tranquillity is the charisma of its founder-leader, for example, in the SGI practice is authorized by the writings of Nichiren, and there is a combination of charismatic and

traditional elements within the NKT. The author concludes by restating her central thesis that "the diversity of Buddhist roots, and therefore of sources of authority, will ensure that adapted Buddhism and intergroup relationships will remain diverse" (p.240). Extrapolating from this, she suggests that "a wider study could not have suggested less diversity, only more, and that at present and for the foreseeable future, no one group or person can represent British Buddhism" (p. 240).

This well-researched and neatly structured account of Buddhist religiosity in the city of Bath supports a persuasive theory of transplantation and adaptation. It will be particularly helpful to scholars who, like the author, intend to conduct extensive research in the field. It is nevertheless accessible to both undergraduates and specialists, providing a valuable source of reference and comparison for the growing academic study of contemporary Buddhism.