

# Transplanting Buddhism:

An investigation into the spread of Buddhism,  
with reference to Buddhism in South Africa

by

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## SUMMARY

While it is an undeniable historical fact that Buddhism has spread far beyond India, adapting to local circumstances and spawning new variations in the process, the process by means of which it did so is obscure. Recent scholarship has shown that to impute a sense of "mission" to Buddhism is to employ a specifically Christian category which does not fit in well with Buddhism as it was understood by the originators of the Buddhist tradition. For this and related reasons, contemporary scholars of religion prefer to speak of the "transplantation" of Buddhism rather than of "mission".

This work builds on the theories of religious transplantation advanced by Michael Pye, Frank Whaling, Martin Baumann and others. It presents a theoretical perspective on the transplantation of Buddhism that is based on an understanding of Buddhism as consisting of three interrelated "traditions" ranging from the direct perception of reality as Buddhism understands and defines it, to participation in popular Buddhist ritual. The interaction between these three traditions gives rise to four chronologically distinct, but always interacting phases in the transplantation process.

The theoretical perspective is demonstrated with reference to Buddhist history in general and South African Buddhist history in particular, and by applying it to various problematic situations in contemporary Buddhism, such as the relation between Buddhism and "other" religions and the predominance of middle-class members (which in South Africa equates to white members) in contemporary western Buddhism.

## KEYWORDS

Buddhism; transplantation; great tradition; little tradition; meta-tradition; representation; relational positioning; respectability and establishment; re-enlightenment; South Africa.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Charles Roux

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## CHAPTER 1: BUDDHISM AND THE DYNAMICS OF RELIGION

South Africa is a country with many different religious traditions. African traditional religions maintain an important, if sometimes obscure, hold on the minds of millions of people. Christianity has sent down solid roots and has even given birth to new, original interpretations of its central message in the African Initiated Churches. Islam, Hinduism and Judaism have all made their influence felt and are securely settled within sizeable communities, although these are still largely defined by ethnicity. More recently, the so-called New Religious Movements, such as Scientology and the Hare Krishna movement, have entered the country, mostly from without, to add further colour to the South African religious mosaic.

This work deals with one of these "new" religions. In fact, it is a very old faith, dating back two-and-a-half millennia. But it is only recently that there have been practising Buddhists in South Africa, and only in the very last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it could be said to have struck firm roots in South African soil with the arrival of permanent teachers at Buddhist centres at Ixopo, Robertson and elsewhere. Buddhism is a "new" religion in South Africa, and how it relates to the other religions and South African society in general remains unclear.

It is also a small religion in quantitative terms. Official estimates of the number of Buddhists in the country are unreliable, but perhaps there are between five and ten thousand Buddhists, of varying degrees of commitment, in the country today. Still, the numbers do seem to have grown over the last two decades, and this leads us to consider what its prospects are, given its history, its paradigms and the people who are currently attracted to it. Is there any affinity between Buddhist thought and that of traditional African religion(s)? Can Buddhism, supposedly a religion of renunciation and other-worldliness, make a meaningful contribution to the religious mosaic of South African society? Is the appeal of Buddhism a mere happenstance in contemporary South Africa, to be noted and filed away for future reference, or is there an element in the interaction between Buddhism and South African society that leads to the adoption of Buddhism as a personal religion by certain South Africans and to the wider diffusion of Buddhist ideas in South African society? And if so, can we extrapolate from the present situation and state the prospects for South African Buddhism? In any situation where a new, unfamiliar religion, philosophy or ideology comes into contact with people of different persuasions, tension is bound to arise. The intention

is to explore the tension caused by Buddhism and its interaction with Africa. In so doing, we shall be viewing the past, present and, tentatively, the future of South African Buddhism.

This implies that we are looking at what in other religions, most notably Christianity, would be called "mission" or perhaps "dialogue". My primary intention, however, is not to create a "to-do" list for Buddhist "missionaries" or even a Buddhological reflection on the missionary enterprise (although that will feature in chapter 4 as a practical application of the broader theoretical perspective to be developed) but to create an understanding of South African Buddhism that will look backwards, based on Buddhist history, and look forwards, enquiring into the role of Buddhism in contemporary and future South African society. All this while maintaining a theoretical stance informed by Buddhist philosophical concepts.

Perhaps an analogy will explain this better: In this century, telescopes have enabled us to see far-off galaxies colliding with each other. Individual stars in these galaxies do not necessarily collide, but given time, the spiral shapes of the two galaxies disappear and a new structure emerges, with the ghostly structural remains of the two old ones visible only to the most knowledgeable astronomers. This is a visual metaphor for what happens when two civilisations and their ideas meet. Does anyone care much which stars were the first to be assimilated into the new galaxy? No, in the majesty of the greater process, such details are irrelevant. Likewise, in the meeting of collective minds that is intercultural and interreligious communication, the identities and activities of the pioneers rapidly become trivial details, mere footnotes to history. We marvel at the new giant galaxy: we marvel at the edifice of thought, belief and action of the new society. It is this fusion of two worlds of thought that interests me, that tantalises me with its enormity while simultaneously restricting my ability to deal with any more than one small aspect at a time. In this fusion, "mission" may be an aspect, but far from the whole story. So is "dialogue".

The analogy can be extended: Galaxies may seem to us to be vast conglomerations of matter, but closer examination shows them to be mostly empty space with only a star every few light-years, and vast clouds of interstellar dust that may *look* solid, but which would be counted as vacuum in any earthbound laboratory. Similarly, concepts like "Buddhism" and "Africa" seem at first glance to describe concrete social, geographical and historical entities, but as soon as we try to grasp them, their edges melt into other concepts.

Like all concepts, they are "empty" in a profoundly Buddhist sense: they have no intrinsic meaning apart from those we assign to them as a (hopefully) skilful means.<sup>1</sup>

Let us take "Africa" first. At first, it seems the easier of the two, since it refers to a discernible landmass, the warmest and second largest of the continents, a continent that since the construction of the Suez canal floats freely in the ocean. But "Africa" is also used to denote the people living on this landmass, and a philosophy, lifestyle and ethic purported to be shared by those people. Sometimes, it is restricted even further to mean only the people who can trace their ancestors to African soil before the colonial period; not to put too fine a point on it, black people. And then the restricted definition may again be expanded to include the "African diaspora": black people living in the Caribbean, the Americas and elsewhere. An ironic footnote to the apartheid era is that when white people calling themselves "Afrikaners" (i.e. "Africans") needed an English term to translate the signs reserving public amenities for "blankes" (whites), they often used the term "Europeans". This shows a certain split in the psyche of the Afrikaner, and more, it shows us the fluid boundaries of the term "Africa". Sometimes it includes European, Indian and Chinese settlers, sometimes it does not. Sometimes it includes the Arabic-speaking Muslim populations north of the Sahel (among whose ancestors were the Afer tribe who prompted their Roman conquerors to give the continent its name), and sometimes not.

"Buddhism" turns out to be an even vaguer term. A minimal definition would have to include the historical Buddha. Any religious or philosophical system that claims to draw on the Buddha's teachings might then be called Buddhism, as long as we conveniently forget the embarrassing fact that Buddhism is a western<sup>2</sup> term for which there is no exact equivalent in many oriental languages. Even so, we may ask whether the limits of "Buddhism" are reached when we have described its organisational, doctrinal, even "ecclesial" manifestations.

My understanding of Buddhism is of an interlocking threefold series of processes. The first two are the "little tradition" and "great tradition" found in any religion with a long

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1. Although this term will be used sparingly in this work, it is an integral part of much of Buddhist thinking. For a discussion of the term and its usage, the reader is referred to Michael Pye's seminal work (Pye 1978).
  2. Throughout this work, I have consciously refrained from capitalising "the west" and its derivations, because doing so gives a false impression that "the West" is a unified cultural bloc, whereas I regard it as a reified conceptualisation of a vast conglomerate of tendencies, many of them mutually contradictory. However, "Asian" and "European", etc, being derived from proper nouns, will be capitalised as usual, and direct quotations will not be altered in this respect.



history and a culture of learning and literacy. These terms were first put forward in 1956 by the anthropologist Robert Redfield, specifically in chapter 3 of his book "Peasant society and culture"<sup>3</sup> and have since been widely used<sup>4</sup> and equally widely criticised: as Bharati acerbically puts it: "what the missionary in a particular religion wants the less knowledgeable votaries to do, defines the "great tradition", and what he wants them to give up and to desist from in the future, defines the "little tradition".<sup>5</sup> Redfield's influence in Buddhist studies can be seen, for instance, in Melford Spiro's distinction between "nibbanic" and "kammatic" Buddhism in Burma.<sup>6</sup>

These terms will here be used in a slightly different sense than Redfield might have done. Their origin in 1956, we can clearly see from his book, was at a time when anthropology was going through a crisis. The "primitive societies" that had been the primary object of study of earlier generations of anthropologists like Malinowski were clearly disappearing under the onslaught of modernisation, and anthropology needed to look beyond those confines and find new areas to study. Redfield's delineation of "great" and "little" traditions (alternative terminology he considered using included "high and low culture", "folk and classic cultures", and "popular and learned traditions" and in fact he does occasionally use "hierarchical and lay cultures"),<sup>7</sup> Redfield, it can be argued, was attempting to legitimise the study of peasant culture as a viable field of study for anthropologists, and beyond that, looking forward to the possibility of studying small urban groups: when the anthropologist "... seeks his first experience and finds that really primitive people are nowadays far away and costly to reach, then, as Kroeber says, he takes the subway and studies a community of Boston Armenians".<sup>8</sup> Anthropology has survived this crisis, of course, even if the boundaries between it and certain branches of sociology and social psychology continue to blur. But a conceptual framework born out of that crisis may

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3. Redfield (1969:67-104).

4. For example, in Sinha's work on Hinduism, quoted in Singer (1972:46), in Singer's (1960) own work on Hinduism in Madras, Wax's (1968:228) work on religion and magic, and that of Yel (1993) on Islam and Redekop (1980) on the Mennonite tradition.

5. Bharati (1978:68).

6. Spiro (1971).

7. Redfield (1969:70).

8. Redfield (1969:11).

nevertheless be a useful tool in a different context, indeed in a different discipline, provided we recognise that the terms are not used in precisely the same way.

While Redfield quotes copiously from the history of religions in delineating the split between "little" and "great" tradition, he is in fact trying to create a conceptual structure that deals with culture generally and one closely allied to the concept of social stratification. Here, the terms will be used specifically in a religious studies sense, rather than the broader anthropological one. It will deal specifically with two specific ways in which Buddhism has been perceived and practised by different social groups, and that they can be seen as indicative of social stratification will be argued in chapter 6, not assumed from the outset. Both of these, and also the third way which will be delineated below, are "traditions" in the sense that they can be seen to have a history, that they have been in one sense or another passed down over the generations. They are certainly not incompatible or mutually unintelligible versions of Buddhism, and the interaction between them will be a major theme of this work.

The little tradition, then, is the Buddhism of popular piety, of parades, prayers to Buddhas and bodhisattvas and offerings of incense before statues. Its paradigmatic text is the *Jātakas*, the collection of stories about the Buddha's former lives.<sup>9</sup> It is by no means to be denigrated or despised, and many who belong properly to the other two traditions can gladly and joyfully participate in the rituals of the little tradition. Little-tradition Buddhism appeals to the heart, to the emotions. It is what makes it worthwhile for the average Buddhist to get up in the morning, ready to "make merit" and strive for a better rebirth.

The little tradition gets its impetus from "great-tradition" Buddhism, the Buddhism of scholarly disputes between learned monks, of the *Abhidhamma* and the *Lotus Sutra*. Here we find Buddhist doctrine, complicated teachings on the nature of the mind and the illusory reality that the mind experiences. It is the domain of the great systematisers of Buddhism, such as Buddhaghosa. It not only influences little-tradition Buddhism but is also influenced by it, for example when doctrinal sanction is sought for new inventions and lifestyles. Is a monk who is not permitted to carry "gold and silver" allowed to carry a bus pass in modern Bangkok? The pundits of the great tradition will deliberate and let us know. In the case of Buddhism, the great tradition is conceptually and historically prior to the little: even though

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9. Strictly speaking, all texts are part of the great tradition, of course, including the *Jātakas*. My intention in positing these as the "paradigmatic" texts of the little tradition is simply to indicate the level of discourse maintained by each tradition. The same holds true for the other traditions discussed later in this section.

some versions of the Buddhist canon holds that two laymen were accepted as Buddhists before there were any monks, Buddhism was nevertheless not a religion that arose from the experience of the masses, but one that found its origin in the creation of a monastic order dedicated to learning and self-transformation.

But Buddhism was a philosophy before it was a religion. Other religions may *have* or *use* a philosophy, but Buddhism *is* a philosophy, in the oldest and truest sense of the word as "love of wisdom". There are two paradigmatic moments in the Buddhist foundation myth: the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment and his subsequent decision to teach. The first exemplifies pure wisdom, a direct existential insight into the dilemma of sentient existence and a breaking of all psychic bonds; the ultimate "Aha-experience". The second is a willingness (we can no longer speak of desire) to share this insight with others. Insight and compassion: love of wisdom, yes, but also a wise love. On these two pillars stands the edifice of thought and practice we call Buddhism and the experience they represent is, in turn, conceptually and historically prior to the great tradition. But how could such an intensely personal experience be communicated to others? Only through the creation of verbal, artistic or gestural communicative approximations that are ordered in a more or less systematic structure- that is, through the creation of a great tradition.

Thus we can see throughout Buddhist history individuals and texts who use the tools of the great tradition to undercut that very tradition itself, to draw us back to the primal experience of unity-in-emptiness that stands at the genesis of the Buddhist adventure, expressed in its dual aspects of wisdom/compassion. In keeping with the existing terminology, let us refer to it as the "meta-tradition", for it is the tradition that defies tradition, that overturns traditional modes of thinking to point directly at the truth we already know. It is the Buddhism of the Heart Sutra and Nāgārjuna, of Milarepa and Dōgen, the iconoclastic, relentless Buddhism that exhorts us to kill the Buddha if we were to meet him on the road. Always few in number, meta-tradition Buddhists are Buddhism's direct link back to the Buddha's primal aha-experience. This third tradition is perhaps easier to observe in Mahāyāna Buddhism, but Theravāda, too, has known its meta-traditional figures, who advocated, in different ways, a return to the central insight of Buddhism. In recent times, for example, there has been the immensely influential figure of Ajahn Chah, who at one stage describes his attitude towards great tradition Buddhism:

These days many university graduates are coming to ordain. I try to stop them from spending their time reading books about Dhamma, because these

people are always reading books. They have so many opportunities for reading books, but opportunities for reading their own hearts are rare. So when they come to ordain for three months to ordain following the Thai custom, we try to get them to close their books and manuals. While they are ordained they have this splendid opportunity to read their own hearts.<sup>10</sup>

This is surely the meta-tradition expressed in its simplest and finest form. Elsewhere<sup>11</sup> Chah refines his approach towards the great tradition to, including it in a dialectic relationship with the development of insight. But always he emphasises the necessity to let go of our preferences and presuppositions, to undercut dogmatic certainties in the typical way of the meta-tradition.

We should not expect all meta-tradition pronouncements to sound identical, for the verbal equipment, the vocabulary used in each comes necessarily from the great tradition. Even less can we expect that various branches of the great tradition will accept meta-tradition figures who expressed themselves in terms of a different branch; the Theravāda accepting Nāgārjuna, for instance. Nevertheless, there appears to be a sort of unity among these figures, a common insistence on deconstructing all dogmas, including any they may appear to create themselves.

The meta-tradition in Buddhism should not simply be conflated with "enlightenment". Certainly one can concede that any enlightened being *could* contribute to the meta-tradition, given that the meta-tradition points towards enlightenment. What is unclear is how many of them actually do so. Certainly, if all of them have, the number of enlightened beings since the Buddha's time must be small indeed. Nor is it clear whether *full* enlightenment is a precondition for such participation, though one can say without fear of contradiction that at least some measure of insight would be required.

In principle, the meta-tradition undercuts, or, in contemporary terms, "deconstructs" everything that it encounters, big and little tradition alike, but it is limited by the ways in which this activity can be expressed. Meta-tradition Buddhism therefore has no direct link to the little tradition, for its insights can be mediated only indirectly through the approximations of the great tradition's textual endeavours, even if we must understand "textual" to include the oral tradition. Even in Zen, with its tradition of direct transmission

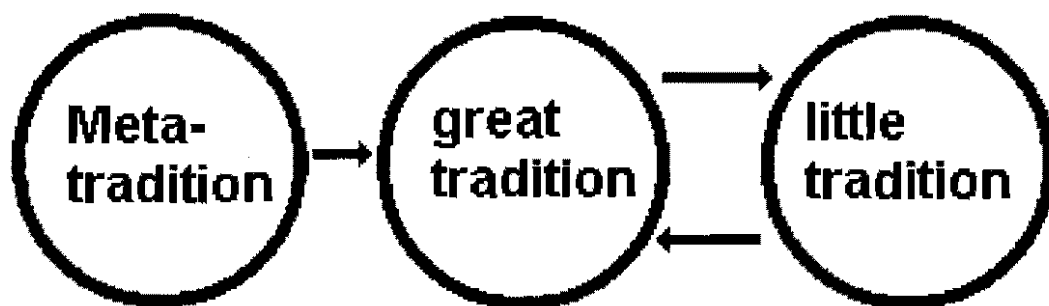
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10. Chah (1980:74).

11. Chah (1980:112).

from master to student, such transmission is necessarily mediated by the koan and the interview. Nor is the meta-tradition itself influenced by the great tradition. If it were, it would cease to be meta-tradition and become great tradition itself. But of necessity, when the meta-tradition tries to communicate, it has to cloak itself in the great tradition's terminology and immediately becomes a target for great-tradition exegesis and explication. The unenlightened can perceive the meta-tradition only through the lens provided by the great tradition.

Much of contemporary Buddhological scholarship, including this work itself, can be seen as a continuation of great tradition Buddhism. Even when an academic speaks of the meta-tradition, it is as a scholar rather than as a sage, an observer rather than a participant. Perhaps a word on the terminology would be apposite at this point: The terms "little tradition" and "great tradition", by now entrenched in Religious Studies, are a little misleading. The "little" tradition has far more adherents, in any religion that has such an internal split, than the "great" one. The meta-tradition has an even more rarified membership than the great tradition. But it is not membership figures that make a tradition "little" or "great", but the depth of abstraction towards which it aspires. These are primarily categories of thought, not of social organisation. Nor should we think of the traditions as arranged hierarchically, with the meta-tradition perched at the pinnacle of a pyramid, the little tradition forming its base, and the great tradition in between. They exist side by side, informing and influencing each other in the manner described above. Their relationship can be depicted graphically as follows:



For now, let us remain agnostic on the question whether other religions have a meta-tradition. They may well have (Meister Eckhart comes readily to mind in the case of Christianity), but more often than not, meta-tradition practitioners outside of Buddhism appear as marginal figures, even in physical danger for their beliefs. Meister Eckhart was summoned and put on trial for his views shortly before his death. Jakob Boehme was forced

to flee his native city of Görlitz. Giordano Bruno died at the stake. Such was not the fate of all western meta-tradition figures, but clearly, in their cases, deconstructing dogmas entailed a certain level of personal risk. As the meta-tradition in Buddhism should not simply be equated with "enlightenment", so should a possible western one not be equated with personal piety: according to this analysis, figures like St Theresa of Avila or St Bernard of Clairvaux should be seen primarily as great tradition figures. Even if they may have criticised the ecclesiastical establishment and customs of the day, their criticisms simply did not equal the metaphysical undercutting that we see in the case of Buddhism, or even those produced by the Christian meta-tradition mystics. Even in the tolerant Hindu religion, a seminal figure like Śāṅkara was suspected of being a crypto-Buddhist, i.e. a heretic. By comparison, Nāgārjuna, Milarepa and Dōgen are honoured by their respective great traditions as enlightened re-invigorators of the dharma. In our own time we can see a similar process in the figure of Bhikkhu Ajahn Chah. The uniqueness of Buddhism lies in its successful integration of the meta-tradition into a harmonious structure, in the way it has continually reintegrated its "heresies" back into its own great-tradition structures and from there into the little-tradition observances.<sup>12</sup> To translate such an activity into the structures of another religion would be quite difficult, and should be undertaken with much subtlety.

We should be careful not to absolutise the division of Buddhism into three traditions. Intermediate positions, hard-to-classify permutations and blends may be possible. But "entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity".<sup>13</sup> The threefold structure of little, great and meta-tradition describes a particular understanding of how Buddhism functions. This understanding, like all concepts, is "empty". It stands as a temporary placeholder which will, one hopes, have a measure of utility, of skilfulness, in the discussion that follows.

Naturally, this approach to the subject matter has its antecedents: it, too, relies on causes and conditions for its existence. An after-the-fact examination of this chapter revealed to just what an extent my own thinking on Buddhism and religion has been shaped by Krüger's pioneering work, as found, for example in his book *Along Edges*.<sup>14</sup> Krüger has produced a perspective on Buddhism that is neither purely secular or positivist in inspiration, nor falls into the trap of a neo-conservative "theological" approach, but one that

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12. I have made the same point in a different context in my article on Buddhism and myth (Clasquin 1993).

13. "Occam's razor", attributed to William of Ockham (1285?-1349?).

14. Krüger (1995).

takes Buddhism (or any religion) seriously from within a position that moves lightly between insider and outsider, between observation and appreciation.

What, then, does it mean when we say that "Buddhism has entered Africa"? It is that Buddhist ideas, from all three interacting traditions, have now begun to make an impact on the people of Africa. *All* the people of Africa, though to various degrees in different social and ethnic groups. As may be expected, we can find Buddhism among Asian immigrants. They brought Buddhism with them from their countries of origin and their Buddhism is comparatively unproblematic, barring the usual problems of practising a minority immigrant faith. The practice of Buddhism in the west by people of Asian descent is a field of research that seems to have become more popular only in the last few years.<sup>15</sup>

We also find Buddhism among middle-class whites, echoing developments in the western world, and a later chapter will consider why this group has become the most visible division of African Buddhists. Few black Africans have so far shown an interest in Buddhism, and a chapter will also be dedicated to finding similarities, if any such exist, between Buddhism and black African religion and philosophy.

What we find in (South) Africa, then, is a Buddhism that exists in a field of forces produced by three different cultures: Asia, Europe and Africa. Even ignoring the various strains existing within each of these, we can see a complex pattern of influences, of conditionality, acting together to produce a Buddhism as unique as any other, yet with a traceable lineage to the roots of Buddhism itself, the Buddha's experience under the bodhi tree two and a half millennia ago. Is this a Buddhism predominantly of the little, great, or meta-traditions? Or, to put differently, what combination of these is evolving in South Africa to meet a peculiarly African situation? Are impulses from Europe and Africa, and indeed impulses from non-Buddhist Asia, playing a role?

This analysis will mainly deal with the situation in South Africa, for purely practical reasons. Not only is South Africa probably the African country with the largest number of Buddhists, but the South African Buddhist scene is also the situation with which I am personally the most familiar.

Again for practical reasons, Theravāda Buddhist texts will be used as the main source of primary material. This does not imply that Theravāda Buddhism is accepted as the ultimately "true" or "original" form of Buddhism, nor does it mean that Theravāda teachings are regarded as being necessarily "true" for the purposes of this thesis. The original research

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15. Baumann (1997:378).

design called for three different schools and periods of Buddhist history to be investigated. However, the initial literature survey showed that this would result in the project becoming either unmanageably huge or unsatisfactorily superficial. Nevertheless, Mahāyāna texts and teachings will be quoted where appropriate, for the intention of this thesis is to produce a theoretical perspective that will be relevant to all schools of Buddhism.

The methodological approach used in this investigation will be neither a formal deductive, hypothesis-testing method, nor an inductive approach that tries to put together a theory from observed data. A continuous interplay between theory and observation, rather than a rigid adherence to a particular methodological paradigm, is more likely to lead to satisfactory results in a little-explored field such as this one. In more formal methodological terms, the approach employed in this thesis is consonant, if not always identical, with the "grounded theory" methodological approach in modern sociology, an approach developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their joint works on the dying process<sup>16</sup> and first described in their work *The discovery of grounded theory*.<sup>17</sup>

Given a sufficiently long view, *all* religions are syncretistic, therefore the word "syncretism" will be avoided. All religions have profited from or suffered under outside influences, gaining new perspectives as contact was made with believers from other tribes, societies or nations. Buddhism is no exception to this and this work does not postulate a pristine Buddhism against which the developing South African Buddhism may be measured (and no doubt found wanting). Nevertheless, it could be said that in this thesis an attempt is made to develop a theoretical perspective on religious syncretism, with special reference to Buddhism. The first task in such an attempt is to see what other such perspectives have been proposed, and this will be done in chapter 2, where we will consider some proposed models of what happens when Buddhism enters a new territory, consider their strengths and shortcomings, and propose a new model to be used as a theoretical framework in the rest of this work.

In chapter 3, we shall look at the expansionary history of Buddhism in Asia, the west and Africa, and South Africa in particular. In chapter 4, we shall consider the Buddhist view of "other" religions in the light of Buddhist theories of truth and value. Chapter 4 will also

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16. Glaser & Strauss (1965, 1968).

17. Glaser & Strauss (1968) This work remains essential reading for any researcher interested in using this method. My approach, however, is based more on the updated information in *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques* by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and on comments by Wester in his *Strategieën voor kwalitatief onderzoek* (1987)



consider Buddhist "mission" as a special case study, as a particular aspect and practical application of the broader theoretical perspective that will have been postulated in chapter 1 and developed further in chapter 4. Chapter 5 will consider more closely whether any similarities, any points of contact, exist between Buddhism and African thought and belief. Chapter 6 will consider socio-economic stratification as a factor indicating readiness to encounter and even accept Buddhist teachings. To conclude, chapter 7 will tie up these apparently disparate strands by presenting a strategic perspective on the future of Buddhism in South Africa, and some thoughts on the possibilities for Buddhism in the wider African context.

This thesis will therefore cover a wide field, and work with various kinds of data. Such an approach opens up many possibilities, but also poses certain dangers. The possibilities, indeed the strength of this approach is that the theoretical approach is, one trusts, supported by observations and findings from a wide range of disciplines and sub-disciplines. This strengthens the case for the theory; it shows that there are a number of instances in which it can be shown to be a valuable tool for understanding the phenomenon, in other words, that it is generally applicable. The danger is that each one of the sets of data will have been covered only superficially, without sufficient depth truly to show how the data relates to the theory, if at all. In the end, it is up to the reader to decide whether the positive aspects of this approach outweigh the negative in each particular case.

Despite the presence of such dangers, an even larger expansion of the set of data to be used might have been desirable. No specific fieldwork was carried out for this study; no new empirical data were produced, which might have been especially useful in section 3.5, which deals with Buddhism in South Africa. Here a personal note might be apposite: that section draws on my fifteen years of interaction with the South African Buddhist community both as participant and as scholar. This, naturally, runs the risk of producing a closed, parochial viewpoint, and to forestall this possibility, I visited the Netherlands in September 1999, where I spoke to both Dutch Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism, and joined in a variety of Buddhist activities there.

A thorough examination of South African Buddhism does exist; it is Darrel Wratten's doctoral thesis on the subject,<sup>18</sup> which combines painstaking archival research with personal observation, and section 3.5 will draw heavily on his work. To some extent, Wratten's work in this field pre-empts the need for a repetition of fundamentally the same research.

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18. Wratten (1995).

Nevertheless, an empirical study informed by the concepts developed in this thesis might well produce quite different results, and remains a distinct possibility for further research.

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Chapter contents:

2.1 T.W. Rhys Davids

2.2 Michael Pye

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2.7 Transplanting Buddhism and propagating enlightenment: a theoretical model

2.7.1 Map and territory, or models and reality

In this chapter, we shall consider proposals made by various scholars, theories that attempt to explain how Buddhism interacts with its religious, philosophical and/or ideological environment. It is by its very nature a selected group of authors and this list does not claim to be exhaustive: the authors quoted here are those that were found particularly helpful in formulating a further interpretative model. A corpus of literature also exists on the theoretically problematical concept of "Buddhist mission", and this corpus will be briefly described in chapter 4.

### 2.1 T.W. Rhys Davids

One early text was Rhys Davids's 1903 article *Buddhism as a living force*,<sup>19</sup> in which he describes certain factors that assisted early Buddhist expansion within northern India, these being the absence of physical, political, economic or linguistic barriers to intercultural intercommunication, the intellectual ferment brought about by the contact between Dravidian and Indo-European cultures, the absence of a rigid Brahmanic hierarchy that might otherwise have imposed orthodoxy and the conflict between the priestly and warrior castes at the time. Rhys Davids also points out internal factors that created an opportunity for Buddhism to flourish; that is, elements within Buddhism itself that made it possible for it to appeal to people's religious and philosophical sensibilities. These include the preaching

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19. Rhys Davids (1903).

of a morality based purely on acts of altruism rather than on offerings and sacrifices to the gods; the personal charisma of the Buddha and the early Buddhists' allegiance to him, which was, however, never allowed to develop into guru-worship; and a willingness on the part of the Buddha to preach the new teaching to persons of all castes who came to him as earnest enquirers. As we shall see in chapter 6, this did not mean that the early Buddhists comprised a representative cross-section of the Indian population: the inclusiveness of early Buddhism was a matter of principle rather than actuality. Nevertheless, the principle was enough to act as a counterpoint to Brahminical exclusivity. A very similar list of conditions allowing for the spread of early Buddhism is given and discussed at greater length by Nalinaksha Dutt, in chapters 1 and 2 of his 1930 book on early Indian Buddhist history.<sup>20</sup>

Rhys Davids points out that in our own time similar conditions are arising to those that enabled Buddhism to spread through ancient India: all barriers to intercultural communication except the economic (he wrote in 1903, long before the independence of Asian colonies and before the rise of the Asian "tiger economies") are falling away. Moreover, the contact between eastern and western thought is producing an intellectual upheaval in both western and eastern minds. Rhys Davids compares this to the situation in the Europe of the Reformation "when so many minds were familiar, at the same time, with medieval Christianity and with pagan ideas".<sup>21</sup> This process has advanced a long way since he wrote that passage, and while we cannot see the outcome of the process while we are still situated in the middle of it, we can appreciate, like him that perhaps it is not so strange that Buddhism should suddenly become an active player again among the world's religions.

Rhys Davids also used his conclusions to make some predictions for the future expansion of Buddhism that have in some cases turned out to be remarkably prescient. While in his 1881 Hibbert lectures he had maintained that there was not "the slightest danger of any European ever entering the Buddhist order",<sup>22</sup> by 1903 he writes that "Of its advance in other countries as a creed one may, without rash prophecy, anticipate that with the advance in mobility of the individual and the home, as well as of the tolerance of the national polity, Buddhism will have its groups of adherents in all countries".<sup>23</sup>

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20. Dutt (1930:1-44).

21. Rhys Davids (1903:484).

22. Quoted in Wratten (1995:28).

23. Rhys Davids (1903:485).

This is not to say that his article displays no weaknesses. He lightly glosses over the movement of Buddhism out of India into other societies (China, Tibet, etc.) without making it clear whether or not the same external and internal factors were present in those cases. In his prognosis, accordingly, he does not consider the difference between, on the one hand, Buddhism in ancient India partially replacing an ancestral faith (Brahmanism) that was already in decline, and in the end merging with a sister religion coming from the same stock (Hinduism), and, on the other hand, the modern situation, where Buddhism faces competition from a number of well-established, sophisticated and politically powerful religions (Christianity, Islam) and ideologies (scientism, Marxism). The external situations may be similar to those in ancient India, but there are many more belief systems on the "market" today. Moreover, Buddhism itself has changed and evolved, and some of the factors to which Rhys Davids ascribes its initial success are no longer stressed in some branches of Buddhism. Some branches of Zen Buddhism, for example, acknowledges the idea of rebirth, and then largely proceeds to ignore it in practice.

Despite such shortcomings, we must pay tribute to Rhys Davids for being among the first western scholars to attempt to show that for Buddhism to act as a participant in intercultural communication requires not merely the intrinsic beauty, truth or value of its teachings, but also the presence of certain external circumstances. This amounts almost to a Buddhist interpretation in terms of *paticcasammupāda* in its barest form: "When this is present, that appears, when this is absent, that does not appear". One could do worse than follow in the footsteps of this pioneer of Buddhology.

## 2.2 Michael Pye

After Rhys Davids, the topic of the spread of Buddhism seems to have been ignored for several decades. Even in a wider context, the question of how religions generally spread was rarely broached. This situation continued until 1969, when Michael Pye published a short article on *The transplantation of religions*<sup>24</sup> that can be seen as the starting point of the contemporary debate on the subject, at least in the sense that it introduced terms and concepts that still inform that debate today. He starts by stating that the "dynamics of religion" has always been a neglected aspect in the phenomenological study of religion. This, he feels, is because of the need to distinguish clearly between historical and

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24. Pye (1969).

phenomenological studies. If phenomenology was not to intrude on the historian's territory, then phenomenology had to concentrate on a static view of religions.<sup>25</sup> One may add that a similar process may have taken place on the historian's side: any comment on the internal dynamics of a religion that influenced the historical development of a religion might have been seen as a deviation from time-honoured academic traditions.

Today, thirty years later, the distinction between these two strands of religious studies is less distinct. A phenomenology of religion, using the term broadly, uninformed by historical data is seen as inadequate. So is a history of religion that confines itself to what happened without asking why and how. A work such as this thesis can hardly be classified under a strict interpretation of this old dichotomy. So perhaps the time has come for a study of the dynamics of religion to become a fully fledged part of the academic investigation into religion.

Pye continues with a rejection of the term "mission", since that term has too many overtones of a planned, conscious attempt to spread a religion—overtones garnered through centuries of use by Christian missionaries. His preferred term is "propagation", but since that term "has already been snapped up by the Vatican", he suggests that "transplantation", even though "if taken too literally, [it] suggests some kind of gardener rearranging his flowers and vegetables", is the best term to use, provided that we "[forget] the gardener and [allow] that seeds are sometimes blown about by the wind and carried unwittingly by animals and birds".<sup>26</sup> I shall follow his lead and use the term *transplantation* throughout this work, except in part of chapter 4, where we shall consciously (even self-consciously) consider the idea of "Buddhist mission".

Pye identifies three principal aspects and five sets of "differentia" in the transplantation of religions. He presents this in a somewhat confusing order (two differentia, three aspects, then three final differentia),<sup>27</sup> and below, they will be rearranged in a more conventional way. Although Pye postulates his ideas as a general theoretical perspective on the transplantation of all religions, the comments and examples excerpted below will be confined mainly to the case of Buddhist transplantation. The three principal aspects are:

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25. Pye (1969:234-235).

26. Pye (1969:236).

27. Pye (1969: 236-238).

- **Contact:** Pye states that this is "a very simple matter involving the setting up or presentation of means of communication, styles of activity etc ... These means bear some relation to the factors of the situation into which the situation is being transplanted, i.e. writings are translated or re-translated."<sup>28</sup> Others have differed from Pye on this point. As we shall see when we get to Baumann's assessment of this activity, translation is emphatically *not* a simple matter. It is an activity in which the translator needs to juggle concepts from two different cultures and try to approximate ideas from one culture to ideas in another. Even if the *content* is satisfactorily translated, this may leave us with just a dry, technical text devoid of feeling, of *context*. Robert Frost is reputed to have defined poetry as that which is lost in translation. Yet that "poetry" is precisely what gives a religious text its power to transform human lives. The translator's job is not merely to transpose words and grammatical structures from one language to another, but to write a new "poem" in the target language, using the same source material of ideas, with an equivalent ability to evoke feelings in the reader.
- **Ambiguity:** Pye prefers this term to the more common "accommodation". It "involves a degree of acceptance of factors prevailing in the situation into which the religion is entering ... [It] may appear as one symbol with two sets of associations, or simply in the unresolved coexistence of elements belonging to the transplanting tradition and to the situation which is being entered".<sup>29</sup> It is a stage (let us call it that, though Pye is unclear whether they follow each other chronologically) of indigenisation, a time when a creative fusion of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements can take place.
- **Recouplement:** After a while, there is the call to return to tradition. A search is made for the "essence" of the transplanted religion, raising questions of orthodoxy and heresy. The problem is that by now it may no longer be possible to disentangle the "original" religion from the changes that were made in the ambiguity stage. This is especially true if, as Whaling (see below) indicates, the religion did not arrive straight from the source, but passed through a "bridge community" on the way, a community which would have made adaptations of its own. Pye does not make it

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28. Pye (1969:237).

29. Pye (1969:237).

clear just *why* a recouplement phase occurs—like the other two aspects, it is a given derived from observation rather than theory.

As stated above, besides these three principal aspects, Pye also postulates five "differentia". They are:

- **Transplantation may be geographical or historical.** The first is self-explanatory and probably what most people would think of when the subject of transplanting a religion is discussed; the second refers to the fact that "a religion may find itself running on the spot to reassert itself to changing cultural circumstances".<sup>30</sup> This raises an important issue, similar to the distinction made in Christian missiology between "mission" and "evangelisation". The transplantation process is never finished unless the religion's host society becomes completely static. In every case of social change, religions must adapt or face eventual extinction. This does not necessarily imply liberalisation of religion: rejection of the social changes, even "fundamentalism", may be an even more successful strategy, at least in the short term. This is an extremely important insight, and one that will play a vital role in the theoretical model to be described below and used in the rest of this thesis.
- **The factors in the situation into which a religion is transplanted may themselves be religious or not.** This refers to the presence or absence of a strong rival religion in the society to which a religion is being transplanted. Even if there is one, non-religious (political, economic) factors may be more important in that particular situation. All this really tells us is that whatever ideology (using the term in a broad sense) is dominant in an area will be the most important rival, dialogue partner or source of ambiguity for an incoming religion.
- **The three aspects may appear chronologically in the order given above, but may also be relevant in another order.** Again, the ambiguity Pye introduces into his system with this statement makes its applicability problematical. The example he gives is of Nichiren, a case of chronological transplantation or "reform", which "... began with the extremely fluid and ambiguous state of Buddhism in Japan at the time, developed into a conscious attempt at recouplement by the seeking out and setting forth of what he took to be the orthodox essence of Buddhism, and finally

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30. Pye (1969: 236).



flowered into new symbols ... which in turn made contact with that and subsequent generations."<sup>31</sup> But it appears that Pye is here confusing two distinct processes. One is a recouplement stage within the ongoing process of the transplantation of Buddhism to Japan. The other is a sub-process of that transplantation: the transplantation or spread of Nichirenite Buddhism to a broad stratum of Japanese society. If Pye's theory is correct, then if we look at the latter as a distinct transplantation process in its own right, we would expect it to show the same three aspects as the broader movement, and every subsequent offshoot of the Nichirenite family of religions again to show the same three phases. Even if, as he states, the *daihonzon* was a new symbol, it remains to be seen how this is, as he implies, a type of ambiguity in the sense in which he defines that aspect. To do that, he would probably have to show how it derives from Shinto roots. Pye's three aspects contain a certain logical sequence of events that strongly imply a chronological order. Until contact has been made, there is nothing for ambiguity to work with. Until there is an ambiguous situation, there is nothing against which recouplement can react. In short, a chronological basis for any analysis of transplantation should not be discarded too lightly.

- **The three aspects may be more or less tightly linked with one another.** This refers to the "style" of different religious traditions and contains elements of both time (how soon after ambiguity recouplement begins—in Christianity, for example, this tends to be a very short period, according to Pye, "although this judgement depends partly on how one delineates Christianity as a historical phenomenon",<sup>32</sup> while Buddhism and Shinto, he maintains, allow for greater ambiguity) and severity (how much ambiguity a religion is willing to tolerate; e.g. Buddhism and Shinto allow far more than Christianity, while Manichaeism "allowed so much ambiguity that it was never able to recoup properly and died out altogether").<sup>33</sup> This differentium might be more useful if it were split into two, one dealing with time and the other with severity. As it stands, these two variables, while undoubtedly related, are uncomfortably intertwined.
- **Adherents of religions may themselves be conscious in varying degrees of the transplantation process.** Pye differentiates between three degrees of sophistication

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31. Pye (1969:238).

32. Pye (1969:238).

33. Pye (1969:238).

in the conscious furtherance of transplantation. The first of these is reliance on contact; second, the recognition that an ambiguous situation has arisen and that recoument has become necessary; and thirdly, a conscious acceptance of a certain amount of ambiguity "as the price of successful transplantation".<sup>34</sup> He does not expand on these and one would like to see him unpack the concept of "sophistication" that suddenly pops up at this point of his article.

Pye's work stands out as a pioneering effort to incorporate the dynamic aspect of religion, its advance and decline as a living force, into the discipline of phenomenology of religions. Although his categories are at times ill-defined and he does not resolve the issue of whether categories such as those he proposes are chronologically ordered, he has given us a vocabulary of religious transplantation, a set of conceptual tools with which to approach the subject. This is his lasting contribution to the topic.

### 2.3 Frank Whaling

In a 1981 article entitled *A comparative religious study of missionary transplantation in Buddhism, Christianity and Islam*,<sup>35</sup> Whaling examines different approaches to the study of the transplantation of religions and suggests some factors that need to be present if such a transplantation is to be successful. First he examines seven theological attitudes (taking the term "theological" in a broad sense to encompass more than just Christianity), ranging from "... the option of exclusivism ... one's own position is right and that of others is wrong" to the other extreme: "... the option of relativism ... all religious paths are equal paths to the same goal ..."<sup>36</sup> He states that while such a comparative theology of mission may be interesting in its own right, it is not what he is aiming at. He wishes to instigate "a comparative religious study of mission".<sup>37</sup> Although Whaling quotes Pye's article, he does not hesitate to use the word "mission". Perhaps the fact that his (Whaling's) article appeared in the journal *International Review of Mission* has something to do with this.

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34. Pye (1969:239).

35. Whaling (1981).

36. Whaling (1981:314, 316).

37. Whaling (1981:316).

Within religious studies, he also considers the approaches of phenomenologists such as Van der Leeuw, Kristensen and Eliade, of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and of Ninian Smart to be unsatisfactory. None of them really gives us a tool with which to investigate the ways in which various religions have moved from one society to another. At this point, one may ask whether Smith really should be mentioned in this context. One could see him as straddling the worlds of theology and religious studies, at home in both in a way that has become considerably more difficult since his time.

Whaling then proceeds to three cases of transplantation of religions: the spread of Buddhism from India to China, of Christianity through the Roman world, and of Islam through the Middle East. From his examination of these three historical events, he isolates the following factors:

- Ease of transport
- A bridge community or communities
- The weakness of empires that had formerly been strong
- A dynamic inner sense of mission
- Advance by either slow or rapid penetration
- Three stages of missionary progression through
  - contact
  - penetration
  - dominance
- The need for resolution of five factors:
  - cultural differences
  - linguistic differences
  - attitudes towards other religions
  - intellectual opposition
  - political opposition

While some of his factors seem straightforward enough, others are problematical. "Advance by either slow or rapid penetration" essentially tells us nothing at all except that advance has taken place: it does not really tell us *why* that advance was slow or rapid. In chapter 4, we shall see Jonathan Walters argue that early Buddhism did not have "a dynamic inner sense of mission". This is the kind of factor that needs to be taken into account when we consider "slow or rapid" penetration.

Even within the strictures of Whaling's three case studies, Chinese Buddhism never achieved quite the level of "dominance" that Christianity attained in Europe and Islam in the Middle East. The five factors in need of resolution partially overlap; for example, "political opposition" may be the direct result of "cultural differences".

Apart from inductively teasing out these factors from his three historical cases, Whaling does not continue his analysis. He warns that it would be illegitimate to extend his findings even to other cases of transplantation within the same three religions, for instance, the spread of Islam to Indonesia. It is clear that he regards this article as an exploratory work, a means of presenting some ideas for further discussion, and indeed he ends his article with a call for further research.

#### 2.4 Robert Montgomery

Montgomery, in a 1991 article entitled *The spread of religions and macrosocial relations*, uses Buddhism, Christianity and Islam to provide evidence for his theory that "macrosocial relations are crucial in the spread of religions", which means that "... there must be certain characteristics of religions (and quasi-religions) which allow and encourage them to spread."<sup>38</sup> but also that "there may be certain internal characteristics of societies that accept outside religions".<sup>39</sup> Montgomery briefly mentions the internal characteristics of religions that choose to spread their message:

... they must be universalistic in appeal so that members of any group may perceive the religions as relevant to them. It is assumed that the three religions, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, as well as Marxism, have universalistic characteristics. The characteristics of these religions have also accounted for their varying degrees of missionary efforts, a necessary, but not sufficient cause in the spread of religions.<sup>40</sup>

At this point, we start to see a pattern developing, and may raise an objection. Montgomery uses the same three religions as Whaling as his basis for comparison, and it

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38. Montgomery (1991:39).

39. Montgomery (1991:39).

40. Montgomery (1991:39).

is a pattern which we can see elsewhere. In Roger Schmidt's use of a common typology of religions as local, national or universal, for instance, Buddhism is classified as a "convert-oriented" universal religion specifically because it "has been able to extend its message and practice far beyond India, the land of Buddha's birth".<sup>41</sup> And of course Christianity and Islam are the other "universal" religions.

From the contemporary perspective, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are clearly the most widespread religions, the ones that have not only been transplanted to the largest numbers of different societies (both Judaism and the Baha'i Faith feature strongly in this category as well), but have also been adopted by large numbers of people in those societies (though in terms of sheer numbers alone, we should not ignore Hinduism). From this, it is assumed or (more rarely) argued that these three religious success stories are the "universal religions", that they and they alone contain some magic ingredient that enabled them to spread around the world.

But this is a historically short-sighted view. Zoroastrianism, today a historical remnant persisting mainly among the Parsees of Bombay, once was the state religion of the mighty Persian empire. In the Roman empire, Christianity's main rival was Mithraism, a martial cult of possibly of Iranian origin that spread rapidly throughout the empire.<sup>42</sup> Another, somewhat later, rival was Manichaeism, a gnostic offshoot of Christianity that at one time ranged from North Africa to Taiwan. In the nineteenth century, a religious movement called the Ghost Dance spread like wildfire among Native Americans, including among its adherents members of tribes that had been at war with each other for as long as anyone could remember. Hinduism was more expansionist once than it is today: the Khmer kingdom of Cambodia alternated between Hindu and Buddhist periods and a form of Hinduism is practised to this day on the island of Bali, in the Indonesian archipelago. Even

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41. Schmidt (1980: 59), cf. the more differentiated typology of Platvoet (1993: 30-31). In modern geopolitical terms, the Buddha was actually born in Lumbīni in Nepal, though this might still be seen as part of the Indian cultural sphere.

42. The origin of Mithraism is much disputed. Some authors point to the many Zoroastrian symbols it employed as evidence of an Iranian origin, while others show that the worship of a deity named Mithra in the Middle East predates Zoroastrianism by many centuries. See Obbink (1965), Ulansey (1989) and Cumont (1956).

Judaism has been known to expand its sphere of influence, as in the case of the Khazar Empire on the Black Sea, and it remains open to converts to this day.<sup>43</sup>

The three "universal" religions are unique not because they have spread, but only because they have survived in widespread forms to the present day. A thousand years from now, it may seem equally "natural" and "obvious" to scholars to compare, say, the Baha'i Faith, Mormonism and the UFO cult as the obvious paradigmatic candidates for comparison when they consider the transplantation of religions. As the Buddha pointed out, all is impermanent, and the religions that have such power and influence today may be shrunken remnants of their former selves tomorrow. Montgomery's inclusion of Marxism in the list is a refreshing addition. Sadly, apart from a brief mention on page 51, he does not elaborate.

If Montgomery is reticent about the intrinsic qualities that make religions transplantable, he does put forward an interesting theory about at least one external factor in the spread of religions. The key factor in his proposal is the fear of domination of one social group by another. This domination (he also uses the term "threat") may be conceived of culturally, politically, even militarily. He proposes that this factor plays an important role in determining whether or not a religion is accepted or rejected:

... if domination is perceived as coming from sources other than from the source of the new religion, then the new religion may be seen as a resource in establishing both group and individual identities that are important contributors to the maintenance of society. ... If, on the other hand, a group from which a new religion is being introduced is perceived as threatening the existence or the distinctive identity of the new society, then a condition encouraging resistance to the new religion is established.<sup>44</sup>

Montgomery then proceeds to illustrate his theory with reference to the spread of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. Below are quoted only a few examples from the part of his article dealing with Buddhism.

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43. While it would be redundant to provide full references for all these instances of religious expansion here, they are all well documented and can be found in standard works such as the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (Smith 1995)
44. Montgomery (1991:38-39).

Buddhism spread to Central Asia when it was accepted by the Kushans who had swept into the Indus Valley in the first century C.E. Buddhism did not spread to the Parthian Empire, which was threatened by the Buddhist Kushans, but was able to hold them off. ... Buddhism, having been deflected, turned from Central Asia eastwards and spread to China ... There were strong kingdoms in China at the time, and most of the time the Chinese were able to hold off the tribes (non-Buddhist at the time) to the north. They established relations with the Kushans, who were in the rear of their common enemy, the Hsiung-Nu people. ... Buddhism spread to Korea in the fourth century while Korea was still divided into three kingdoms ... who were more a threat to one another than any were threatened by China ... Grayson notes [that] "In the case of all three Korean states, acceptance of Buddhism was in part a political decision related to the general acceptance of Chinese civilisation". ... [In all these cases] the greatest threat to these societies was not the societies from which Buddhism came to them, but their immediate neighbours, or ... internal subgroups.<sup>45</sup>

Montgomery's analysis also has shortcomings. As he states, this analysis assumes a state of "other factors being equal", which they rarely are. His explanation of religious expansion and transplantation does not give us the full breadth of the process; he chooses instead to zero in on a single factor, as, of course, is his right. While trying hard not to fall into the trap of reductionism, he does present a very one-sided perspective. What we can learn from Montgomery is that the transplantation of Buddhism contains a geopolitical dimension. Whaling has already referred to this in passing, but Montgomery shows it in a far clearer light and draws attention to the complexities involved.

In chapter 6, a similar strategy will be used to show that an equally important factor is the levels of urbanisation, socio-economic living standards and literacy that the "receiving culture" has attained by the time it encounters Buddhism.

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45. Montgomery (1991:40-42).

## 2.5 Henry C. Finney

Finney's 1991 article *American Zen's "Japan connection"* arrives at our topic from a different, but equally specialised direction. In an article in which he is part sociological theorist, part practising Zen meditator, Finney describes at length a pilgrimage made in the company of his teacher, John Daido Looi Sensei, to the two main Soto Zen temples in Japan, at both of which Looi was ordained and accepted as an independent Zen teacher, empowered eventually to grant similar permission to teach to his own students.

Finney's main theoretical concern is to undermine the prevailing sociological understanding of western Zen Buddhism according to a "deviance" model and to show that there is a vast difference between recently-formed "cults" and religions with firm links to an Asian prehistory. None of this will surprise scholars of religion, and western Buddhists seem eager to distance themselves from the New Age phenomenon,<sup>46</sup> but Finney is writing for an audience of sociologists. Accordingly, he puts a heavy emphasis on the continuities between Japanese and American Zen, on the way in which American Zen teachers have had their abilities and experiences authenticated by Japanese authorities and, more generally, on the ways in which Japanese concepts of Zen monastic discipline, while changing and evolving, are maintained in at least some American Zen centres. He concludes:

... the culturally authentic institutional diffusion of Japanese Zen Buddhism to a large and growing number of Americans of nonoriental descent is now a social fact. The American Zen studied here has been *imported*, more-or-less intact, from another culture through a prolonged process of contact and diffusion. It has not sprung up *simply* (and certainly not *only*) as a result of a small group of marginal Americans' responses to personal strain.<sup>47</sup>

If the accepted sociological understanding of American Zen's position in the religious spectrum is erroneous, then what should it be? From his discussion of the history and current development of American Zen, and American Soto Zen in particular, he inductively derives a "culture diffusion model" comprised of six factors that he regards as being of cardinal importance in this case of successful transplantation of a religion (although he does

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46. Den Boer (1998).

47. Finney (1991:391), emphasis in original.



also call them "stages", they do not appear to have the same internal logical consistency, implying a chronological progression, as do the stages of Pye, and to some extent Whaling). They are as follows:

- a predisposition of the source culture (Japan) to export elements of its own culture
- pressure on the institutional agencies actually involved in exporting the culture pattern
- preparatory culture contacts
- the selective receptivity of the "receiving" (American) culture.
- the proclivity of certain people in the "receiving" culture to the new culture pattern
- strategies adopted by the institutions engaged in implanting the new cultural form

Finney's six strategies differ considerably in wording from the general pattern we have observed so far (and indeed, judging by the references used in his article, he was unaware of any of the aforementioned authors), but it can be seen that his suggestions do not differ in intent from the others. Since he is dealing with only the first few decades of a new transplantation of a form of Buddhism, one can regard his six factors as subdivisions of what both Pye and Whaling have termed "contact".

## 2.6 Martin Baumann

In his 1994 article *The transplantation of Buddhism to Germany: processive modes and strategies of adaptation*, Baumann presents a scheme that describes how Buddhism found a new home in Germany. Although he largely limits his analysis to this one instance, the scheme he presents can easily be seen as a general schematic of religious expansion, applicable to more cases than just German Buddhism.

First, he distinguishes between five "processive modes of transplantation", adapted from ideas previously put forward by Pye, Berry and Kaplan. These can be seen as wide-ranging processes that mark the gradual movement of a religious system into an area where it had previously not been known. In the following description, I shall quote Baumann's own words<sup>48</sup> extensively, shortened and paraphrased where required, and marked in italics, with

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48. Baumann (1994:39-50).

my own comments interspersed in normal type, and will also show how his scheme applies (or does not apply) to the South African situation.

- **Contact.** *This mode is marked by the arrival of the foreign religious tradition in the new culture. Teachings might be transferred by individuals, groups or impersonally by texts and scriptures. This is an important point, for it implies that a new religion is not always "brought" by missionaries, but may be "fetched" by people who first became interested in it from reading works about that religion. In time, the "missionaries" and first converts, often but not always foreign, appear to a varying extent in public. They propagate their conviction and give evidence for the existence of the newly arrived foreign religion. Important scriptures are translated and "missionary" activities begin. In footnote 7, Baumann expresses his unease with the use of the term "missionary", an issue which was addressed above in the section on Michael Pye and which will be raised again in chapter 4.*
- **Confrontation and conflict.** *This affects both the foreign religion and the host society. Protagonists of the new religion present the peculiarities of the new faith which contrast with existing religions. Simultaneously, they point to deficits of the host culture's religions and attempt to demonstrate the greater appropriateness of their religion. Such deficits are, of course, in the eye of the beholder. Certainly, in fifteen years of association with and study of South African Buddhists, I have never come across such a strategy. Private grumbles about particular manifestations of Christianity, perhaps, but never an official denouncement or public, unflattering description of it. Of course, this may simply reflect a local situation, one in which confrontation and conflict have not emerged (or have not been allowed to emerge) in the South African situation. More comparative work would seem to be called for.*
- **Ambiguity and adaptation.** *Misunderstandings and misinterpretations are unavoidable while transplanting a religion into a new sociocultural context. For members of the host culture it is only possible to interpret and understand symbols, rituals or ideas of the imported religious tradition on the basis of their own conceptions. The bearers of the foreign religion share similar problems of understanding with regard to the new culture and society. Unavoidable ambiguities arise, which may lead to a mutual influence and adoption of elements of the other culture. New members of the foreign religion may adopt customs from the culture in which that religion was originally embedded, but may structure their organisational*

*system in terms of the requirements of the host culture.* This can be seen in South African Buddhism, for example, in the system of committees, budgets and Annual General Meetings that seem to have been universally adopted by all medium-to-large groups. It can require very in-depth observation to detect that the real power centre in such a group does not lie in the formal organisational structure, but with the "teacher" and a few close associates, who may or may not serve on the committee. *Certain strains of ambiguity may even be sought out as the new religious community tries to blend in with the social surroundings.* An example of this is found in the struggle by leading South African Buddhists to attain state recognition as marriage officers and commissioners of oaths, a status that in apartheid South Africa was reserved for Christian ministers and Jewish rabbis. Only in recent years (post-1994) have a few succeeded, and some had to consent to register in the category of "eastern religion" (i.e. Hinduism) to do so. That this can be seen as a strain of ambiguity is clear when we consider that marriage is not considered a sacrament in Buddhism, that Buddhist monks traditionally take no part in wedding ceremonies. Only in recent decades has it become customary for monks to attend weddings in Sri Lanka—they do not *perform* the marriage, they just attend as honoured guests.

- ***Recouplement.*** *Also called reorientation, this step involves a critical examination of the ambiguities that have arisen. The criterion for reexamination is the religious tradition in the country from where the transplanted religion embarked. Stress is placed on retaining one's own identity within the flux of adaptation, sharpening borders with competing religions of the host society and asserting one's own distinctive profile and appearance. Recouplement is not bound solely to transplantation processes, but also occurs in forms of revival and reformation in changing cultural circumstances. Taken to extremes, we can see this as a "fundamentalist" stage. Naturally, recouplement need not go as far as this term suggests. A possible point of confusion, though a minor one, in Baumann's scheme shows up at this point when he speaks of "the country from where the transplanted religion embarked". The relationship between country of origin and the receiving country can be one-to-one, but need not be so. Zen, for instance, is found in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. In South Africa, a Cape Town Zen group attached to the Japanese (though partly Americanised) Rinzai tradition went through a recouplement phase in the early 1990s. Instead of becoming more Japanese, they turned towards a Korean school. This is still recouplement in a broader sense, of course—they did not turn towards, say,*

Mormonism. But it does show that Baumann's scheme may need to be modified on this point to allow a little more flexibility.

- ***Innovative self-development.*** *The last of the processive modes of transplantation has, as a central theme, the creation of newly grown forms and innovative interpretations. A religious invention or "new creation" maintains a critical tension with the tradition from which it developed. The "custodians" of tradition condemn the new development as "heresy", whereas the founders of the innovation protest against the "ossified tradition" and call for a return to the time of origin. Protagonists of religious innovation often found new organisations, such as orders or particular communities in which the devoted and committed are divided from the mass of ordinary adherents. South African Buddhism has not yet reached this stage to the point of founding new organisations. Of course, Buddhism in this country has not been around as long as it has in Britain or Germany, and this development may yet come to be. At a lower level, individuals debate these issues much as Baumann describes them.*

Baumann carefully points out<sup>49</sup> that these five processes should not be seen as occurring in a strict chronological order, and allows for the possibility that a given sub-tradition may not be interested in participating in any one of the five processes. Thus a given religious tradition may try to avoid "ambiguity and adaptation" by forming a closed subculture that mimics the social conditions of the originating culture as closely as possible (certain strains of western Theravāda monasticism come readily to mind). Or it may adapt in terms of externals such as organisational structure, but remain very conservative in its "thology", thus shunning "innovative self-development". Baumann's processive modes should rather be seen as possible fields of engagement between a society and a new religious tradition that enters it. In chronological terms, about all that can be said is that contact has to come first. And even this may be repeated if we take due note of religious subtraditions. In Baumann's example,<sup>50</sup> although Buddhism as a whole made contact with German society in the late nineteenth century, contact with the Zen and Tibetan Buddhist traditions did not occur until the 1960s.

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49. Baumann (1994:38-39).

50. Baumann (1994:40).

Nevertheless, there are some ambiguities in Baumann's system of processive modes. If we observe a German Buddhist criticising Christianity, is this part of "confrontation and conflict" or of "recoupment"? The first involves putting forward one's own beliefs even at the expense of others, while the second contains an element of "sharpening borders with competing religions of the host society". The same action can therefore be part of two different modes, and one's analysis needs to be quite precise before one can confidently assign an action to a mode. This suggests that the total *historical* (i.e. chronological) context of the new religion may be more important in working with Baumann's scheme than he is willing to allow. To give another example, a return to the roots, to the purity of the original teaching, however that may be conceived of, is mentioned in both "recoupment" and "innovative self-development". The context differs, but it is still not easy to assign a given action to a specific processive mode. If we do know the historical background of the group or individual being researched, however, it becomes much easier to discern which mode is active at any particular time.

Baumann then posits seven "strategies of adaptation",<sup>51</sup> based on prior proposals by Kaplan and Notz. Again, these should not be seen as chronologically ordered, "nor is it possible to assign certain strategies to definite modes of transplantation".<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere, however, he says that during the contact mode "strategies of adaptation such as translation and reduction are predominantly applied".<sup>53</sup> Similar observations are made elsewhere in the article. Apparently, while no *definitive* and *exclusive* assignment of strategies to processive modes can be made, we can nevertheless see that some strategies are more suitable to some modes than to others. This does not mean that we can create a "grid" of modes and strategies, since any strategy may potentially occur in any mode, to a greater or lesser degree. In addition, some of these strategies are not unique to the case of religious transplantation, but may also be seen in the general development of a religious tradition. The strategies are:

- *Translation. From the outset, the imported religion is faced with the problem of making itself comprehensible in the foreign context. Besides the difficulties of philological work, translations are directed at the mediation and communication of*

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51. Baumann (1994:50-57).

52. Baumann (1994:50).

53. Baumann (1994:38).

*the foreign religious world view within the new context. This is done by analogies and the adoption of concepts and terms of the host culture.* In South Africa, the Buddhist community is fortunate in being able to use the English-language translations produced in Britain and America. Above and beyond the language issue, South Africa also has at least partly an Anglo-Saxon heritage and few concepts in the existing English translations are likely to be completely foreign. However, few Afrikaans translations, indeed few books of any kind in Afrikaans that deal with Buddhism, have so far been produced,<sup>54</sup> and none at all in the Nguni, Sotho-Tswana and other African languages. The task of reconciling African and Buddhist ideas has not yet started. Perhaps the exploratory writings in chapter 5 of this thesis may serve as a starting point to such a debate.

- **Reduction.** *Adherents and "missionaries" of the foreign religion try to present the new teaching as comprehensively as possible. Ideas and teachings which are unacceptable to the host culture or need a lot of explanation are less emphasised and avoided. Teaching elements which have a resemblance within the foreign culture are stressed as helpful links to understanding.* [sic] Baumann's use of the term "foreign culture" in the second sentence above could be confusing. Following his train of thought, one assumes that what he means is that "existing teaching elements which resemble elements within the (host) culture to which Buddhism is being transplanted are stressed as helpful links to understanding". In contemporary South African Buddhism, as in other forms of the nascent western Buddhism that form its model, this strategy can be seen in a de-emphasising of teachings about rebirth and in an emphasising of the rational aspects of the dharma. A similar process can be seen at a certain stage of the development of Australian Buddhism.<sup>55</sup> Of course, a counter-movement ("recoupment") may occur, in which the "otherness" of Buddhism is stressed. To some, this otherness may in fact be its most attractive feature. In the broader history of western Buddhism, we can see a movement from Theravāda (and a very rationalist, intellectual interpretation even of that tradition) to the otherness of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. External factors such as the presence of Theravāda in British colonies may have contributed to this historical course of events, but one

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54. One important exception in this regard is Krüger's (1988) Afrikaans translation of and commentary on the *Mahā-satthipajjhāna Sutta*, and the same author's forthcoming translations of the *Sutta Nipāta* and *Dhammapāda*.

55. Croucher (1989:55-56).

can also see it also in terms of the west's readiness at a given stage to listen to certain teachings.

- **Reinterpretation.** *An adaptation process might emphasise certain reinterpretations and present particular teaching elements in a different light. This is done in order to present these elements in an actualised version and more in line with the capacities of understanding of the new recipients. The difference between this strategy and that of reduction is perhaps a little vague. In reduction, one quietly ignores certain elements of the teaching and stresses others. Is this not already "presenting particular teaching elements in a different light"?*
- **Toleration.** *Members of the imported religion will encounter various customs and attitudes current in the host culture which are in fundamental opposition to their own religious life. As the foreign religion remains a minority, it cannot help but to tolerate such customs. At the same time, the propagation of the new teaching is combined with the aim to change and abolish these customs. South African Buddhists may occasionally express a vague wish that "customs" such as meat-eating, the nuclear family, liberalism and Christianity (Baumann's examples) may be replaced by Buddhism and Buddhist insights and customs, but in my experience, a willingness to work and cooperate with other religions is a much clearer tendency, with no imperialistic undertones. Beyond the negatively phrased "toleration", Baumann's system does not seem to have a category for freely presenting elements of one's own tradition to the other: all his modes and strategies are presented in terms of what changes are made to the newly-arrived religion, i.e. Buddhism rather than to the established one, i.e. Christianity. Yet when a Zen teacher gives lessons in meditation to schoolchildren or Catholic monastics, as some in this country and elsewhere have been known to do, with never a hint that the audience should become Zen Buddhists, we see that there is different process at work. Such activity is a mirror-image of Baumann's "toleration". Perhaps one could call it "augmentation".*
- **Assimilation.** *For delimitation purposes, this strategy is restricted to those cases in which the foreign religion introduces elements of the host culture into its own rituals or meaning-system. Baumann largely restricts this strategy to linguistic and ritual accommodations to the prevailing culture. Above, an example of such an activity is mentioned in the struggle of South African Buddhists to become registered as marriage officers by the state. The starting point of the process of assimilation is its own cult and tradition. Assimilation comprises an "unavoidable compromise" which*

*the transplanted religion takes up for temporary and expedient use.* What starts out as "temporary and expedient" may, of course, end up as a permanent feature. Christianity may have introduced the Christmas festival as a temporary and expedient way of assimilating existing pagan feast days, but it is unlikely to be able to get rid of it now.

- **Absorption.** *This refers to a foreign feature not present in one's own religious tradition, which is then incorporated into one's tradition. In contrast to assimilation, the strategy of absorption takes its leave from an indigenous ritual or symbol, and develops Christian, Islamic or, in this case, Buddhist versions of it. Again, the difference between this strategy and the preceding one is perhaps too subtle. The main difference is that absorption refers clearly to a "foreign feature not present in one's own (Buddhist) religious tradition", while assimilation is more concerned with rephrasing existing (Buddhist) features into more familiar terms. Western Buddhists will have to make their peace eventually with the God-concept, in however abstract and rarefied a form. Indeed, much of the ongoing discussion in the journal *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* is clearly about this problem. Similarly, African Buddhists will have to search for ways to "absorb" the African attitude towards ancestors, a topic discussed in chapter 5.*
- **Acculturation.** *This involves the adoption of material and intellectual goods, either of objects, institutions, norms, attitudes or concepts. It is defined as the adoption of elements which are valued positively. The adoption of new forms or ideas is not treated as an unavoidable compromise (assimilation) or as a strategy of annexation (absorption) but as the positive and volitional acceptance of beneficial and "inspirational" elements. Perhaps the best example of this is the rise, in the last two decades or so, of an "engaged" Buddhism that incorporates social and ecological concern with traditional meditative practice. It could be argued that this new expression of Buddhist compassion was deeply influenced by parallel movements elsewhere in western society, particularly in Christian circles. This development has not yet made a major impact on South African Buddhism, except perhaps on the level of a few engaged Buddhist individuals.*

Like his processive modes, Baumann's strategies, while delineated clearly, can be hard to actualise. To know whether the adoption of a given cultural element by a foreign religion is assimilation, absorption or acculturation, we need to enquire into the feelings and



attitudes of the religion's adherents, with all the problems that this poses for fieldwork methodology. The categories are not mutually exclusive; they overlap and influence one another. This makes them more applicable to the fluid nature of social reality as we encounter it, but lessens their ease of use as a definitive classificatory scheme .

Also, his insistence that his processive modes and strategies, apart from "contact" should not be understood as a chronological process unravels under closer inspection. One can legitimately ask whether reduction, absorption, adaptation and assimilation can take place at all unless a certain amount of translation has been done first. After all, if one is going to make changes to the new religious tradition, one needs to have some idea *what* one is changing. This does not imply that translation can stop at that point, only that the processes are bound together in a complicated conditional web that has at least a temporal aspect to it. Once the whole process is under way, one could argue that there is an element of reinterpretation, even of reduction, in the translation process itself. Similarly, would recoument even be necessary if a period of ambiguity and adaptation had not occurred first?

Baumann's analysis, therefore, is concerned with a paradigm in which a "religion" is "transplanted" from one society to another and in which one can observe the changes that the "religion" is then forced to make .

But there is also a broader process that needs to be investigated, in which not only the "foreign religion", but also the "host society" and its existing religious structures are affected, and even how changes made in the "host society" may filter back to the original home of the "foreign religion". To use the case on which Baumann founds his theory, one can ask whether the presence of Buddhism has made any changes to German society at large (that is, whether Buddhist ideas have permeated German society beyond the ranks of official German Buddhists), and whether the existence of a German Buddhism has made any impact on the traditionally Buddhist mindset of Asian countries.

Moreover, Baumann's model addresses the "transplantation" only in terms of the great tradition (adjustments made to official doctrine in terms of language used, intelligibility, acceptability, etc.) and little tradition (adjustments to ritual, etc.) Does the meta-tradition of Buddhism have any role to play in this process? Is there a place in it for the perspective of radical interdependence, of emptiness?

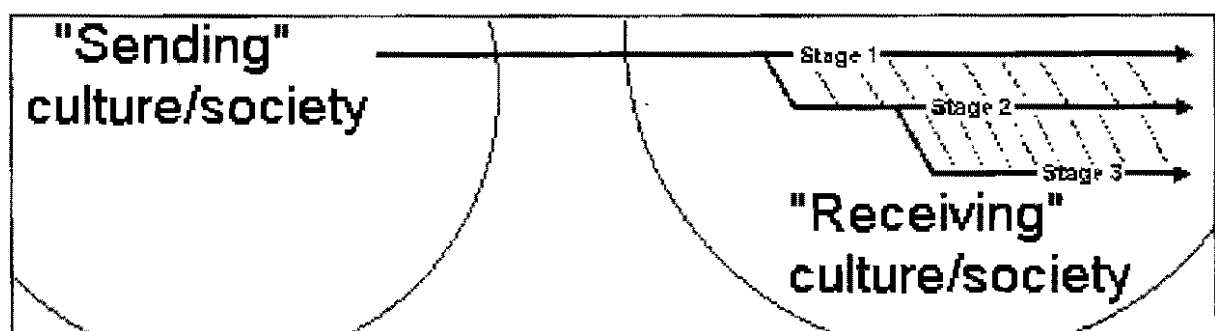
Despite such problems, however, Baumann has presented us, not with a rigid interpretative grid, but with a wide selection of tendencies and processes that occur during

the process of intercultural religious communication. His scheme has been deeply influential in the creation of the theoretical model to be presented in the next section.

## 2.7 Transplanting Buddhism and propagating enlightenment: a theoretical model

Among the authors we have considered above, we can see that Montgomery and Finney, while contributing valuable sociological insights, stand alone in their efforts to explain the spread of Buddhism. They focus on very specific factors and even more specific cases, and their works seem to have elicited little if any debate. Between Pye, Whaling and Baumann, however, we can see a clear developmental line of reasoning. Both Whaling and Baumann, in their different ways, build on the foundation laid by Pye (Baumann does not, however, quote Whaling). All three use broadly the same terminology, though sometimes with subtly different shades of meaning, and all three seek to explain the spread of Buddhism with reference to a historical, but not necessarily chronological set of social factors. The theoretical model or perspective to be presented below should be seen as being positioned squarely within this tradition, but differs from all of them in three respects.

Firstly, it views the transplantation of Buddhism as *conditionally chronological*. In line with the Buddhist conditionalist teaching of *paṭiccasammupāda* (When this is present, that appears, when this is absent, that does not appear), each of the stages outlined below follows logically, hence chrono-logically, on the previous one(s). This does not mean that the previous stage can then disappear, its job having been done. In terms of *paṭiccasammupāda*, that would imply the disappearance of the effect as well as the cause. Instead, while the precise *nature* of the preceding stage may change (say, from translating sutras to translating existing commentaries and producing new ones) the broad activity it represents must continue if it is to provide a base for later developments. If the earlier activity ceases, so, gradually, will the later ones built upon it. Thus, all stages of transplantation are ongoing processes, but we can nevertheless say that one follows upon and is conditioned by the other. This process can be illustrated graphically as follows:



where the solid slanted lines in the upper right of the diagram represent the initial "causation" of one stage by another, while the broken lines indicate the continuing influence that the former stages continue to exert upon the latter. There is also a continuous evolution within each of the stages.

At this stage, it could be asked if, by using the Buddhist teaching of conditionality, the discussion is not shifting into a "theological" mode, or, to phrase it differently, the boundaries between the "emic" and "etic" approaches are not being confused. This would be true if conditionality were employed from a strictly religious point of view, but not if, as the intention is here, it is used as a philosophical concept. While one must acknowledge that the boundaries between religion and philosophy are often blurred, especially, perhaps, when dealing with Buddhism, there nevertheless remain broad areas of distinctly religious and philosophical discourse. If care is taken to keep well within those blurred boundaries, a way remains open to speak of such concepts as conditionality, ultimacy, and perhaps even divinity, that is not "theological". At a time when scientists, including physicists, are seriously looking at eastern philosophical thought, even if with mixed results,<sup>56</sup> we can hardly pretend that no useful philosophical conceptual structures have emerged from Asia. True, such structures arose within a Hindu or Buddhist environment, but western philosophy, too, comes from a largely religious background. It is in this sense that the Buddhist concept of conditionality is used here.

Take Baumann's notion of "contact". This is more than communication between people of different cultures, it is also the beginning of a merging of cultural, historical and spiritual horizons which nevertheless each retain their identity after the merger. Physical contact with the "originating culture" might be lost without ill-effect, as China more than once lost contact with Buddhist India for various reasons, but if "contact" was lost with the original spiritual and philosophical impulse that brought Buddhism from the "originating" to the "receiving" culture, if the documents that first kindled a spark of interest in Buddhism are no longer obtainable, and most of all, if there are no longer people with some measure of enlightenment to keep the tradition truly alive, then Buddhism, according to its own conditionalist analysis of reality, is on the way to extinction. Thus "contact" of one sort or another needs to be continuously maintained, but we can still legitimately point to it as the initial stage from which all others sprang and from which they continue to draw their sustenance. The temporal interval between one stage and another may be a year or a

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56. See note 242.

millennium, depending on a variety of local conditions, and in the latter case, a society may *appear* to be stuck in one or another stage. Individuals within a society may vary similarly. One cannot, therefore, make a precise prediction when the next stage will make its appearance. But one can predict that no stage can be skipped, that each will appear in its correct place in the logical order which is to be outlined below.

Pye, Whaling and Baumann each attempt to explain the transplantation of Buddhism within a more general theoretical position that attempts to explain the spread or transplantation of religion generally, using Buddhism simply as an example. This is explicitly so in the cases of Pye and Whaling, although the latter warns against over-generalising his findings beyond his three case studies. It is less explicit in Baumann's work, but his scheme is itself adapted from Kaplan's work on African Christianity and can therefore be seen in the same light. The effect of this is that they admirably explain the spread of the great tradition, and to some extent that of the little tradition, but fail to investigate the role of the special genius of Buddhism, that is, the role of the meta-tradition. How does the radical view of reality as mutually interdependent, or, which is the same, as "empty", play a role in the transplantation of Buddhism? Is "recouplement" in Buddhism merely a process of going "back to the scriptures", an impulse such as can be observed in so many other religions? Or is it more essentially a return to the Ur-moment of the Buddha's enlightenment? In trying to treat Buddhism even-handedly as just another faith, just another example of the social phenomenon called "religion", Pye, Whaling and Baumann are forced to ignore what makes Buddhism unique: the fact that it, virtually alone among the world's religions, puts the radical, the iconoclastic, the nearly-nihilistic not somewhere on the periphery of religious philosophy—to be ignored if possible, persecuted if necessary—but builds it right into the very heart of its thought and practice. As we have seen above,<sup>57</sup> this aspect of Buddhism is most visible in the Mahāyāna, indeed in particular forms of Mahāyāna, but can be found in the Theravāda tradition as well.

But this aspect can be restored to a consideration of the transplantation of Buddhism: to show the special role played by the meta-tradition in the transplantation process, regardless of whether we consider the transplantation of Buddhism generally to a non-Buddhist society, or the transplantation of a particular kind of Buddhism from one Buddhist society to another. Naturally, this will mean that this model will not be directly transferable to a study of the transplantation of any other religion lacking this peculiarly Buddhist

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57. See p. 6

perspective on reality. However, the principle of taking the uniqueness of a religion seriously when considering its transplantation *can* be applied to other such studies. Let us not presume at this point to speculate on what the special genius of any other religion might be, but if this project is judged successful, it will surely give us an indication how we can study the transplantation of any religion in a way that is neither missiological nor reductionist. Dare we call it a middle way? It is a point to which we shall return in the conclusion to this thesis.

Not only Pye, Whaling and Baumann, but Finney and Montgomery too, describe transplantation as a one-way process, a movement of Buddhism from the "transplanting" to the "new" society. Is there not, perhaps, place for a consideration of feedback, of a counter-movement from the new to the old? To use a non-Buddhist example for the moment: North America received Christianity from Europe, developed from it new strains such as Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Today American evangelists from these and similar groups may be found transplanting these forms of Christianity back to Europe!

In the case of Buddhism, too, transplantation can be seen not as a linear progression, but as a complicated process in which diverse influences are exchanged between societies and cultures. An example of this is the retreat centre, which has overtaken the more traditional model of the monastery as the paradigmatic locus of spiritual activity in contemporary western Buddhism. It shows a gradual movement away from the pure monastic ideal towards a "part-time" monasticism. Kamenetz expresses this as follows:

It's interesting to observe in the nontraditional Western Buddhist community how its practitioners are grappling with the same problem Jews faced in coming to America: how to combine spiritual practice with daily life. Since most Buddhist practitioners hold jobs and many have families, the monastic model is not an option. Instead they have opted for a temporary monasticism in the form of weekend, weeklong and monthlong retreats to Buddhist meditation centres. They move in and out of the spiritual and material world, and the big question they are facing now is how to handle the transitions, how to move between the purity of a meditative life to the demands of the samsaric world.<sup>58</sup>

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58. Kamenetz (1994: 286-287):

Typically, the meditation centre or retreat centre is run by one or more accomplished lay meditators. Teachers, both lay and monastic, are invited to lead retreats on an ad hoc basis and lead a lifestyle for at least the duration of the retreat that approximates the milder forms of the monastic rule. At the Buddhist Retreat Centre near Ixopo, for instance, retreatants are expected to observe the five precepts: refraining from taking life, stealing, unskilful speech, sexual activity and intoxicating substances. Men and women are housed separately and the precepts are generally kept (though the occasional retreatant has been observed "going for a walk" with a surreptitious pack of cigarettes). At a Burmese-style retreat at the Fo Kuang Shan Temple in Bronkhorstspuit in February 1999, a further four traditional precepts were added.

Indeed, the retreat centre model of Buddhist practice has by now become so widely accepted that it is even being introduced to the tradition's Asian heartland, for example in Godwin Samararatna's centre in Nilambe, Sri Lanka. Similarly, Finney mentions how during a pilgrimage to Japan, a Japanese Zen teacher,

influenced by his long stay at Doshin-Ji (in America), ... plans to build an "American-style" zendo (in Japan) next year. It is ironic, perhaps, that a revitalised Buddhism in America is being carried back to influence the ancient, but weakened practice in Japan.<sup>59</sup>

In many, perhaps most, cases, such teachers have gained their position due to what Baumann<sup>60</sup> calls "... a process of authentication of Western teachers by the Buddhist mother tradition in Asia". Others seem just to have "grown" into the role over the years. While a few traditionalists may yet proclaim that the dharma will only be firmly planted when native monks are ordained on their native soil, it is clear to the contemporary observer that the retreat centre model with semi-monastic teachers has evolved as a more viable style of doing Buddhism than the monastery model, at least in the west, and at least for now. This does not necessarily imply that it will continue to be the case. In Britain, by and largest the western country with the oldest indigenous Buddhist community, a more traditional establishment of temples and monasteries has been ongoing for the last two to three decades, and it could be argued that the retreat centre is a transitional phase to a more conventional stage of

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59. Finney (1991:390).

60. Baumann (1996:356).

development, that is, as western Buddhism moves out of its initial stage of contact and investigation and into being part of the religious mainstream. Time will tell.

Western Buddhists cannot quite claim to have invented this model. Although this move towards the laicisation of Buddhism can be seen to have started with Asian Buddhist modernisers, most of them Burmese, like Mahāsi Sayadaw, U Ba Khin and Nyānaponika,<sup>61</sup> it is in western Buddhism that it has found its greatest appeal. It also has clear antecedents, for example, in the Uposatha day meetings of Theravada countries. In Mahāyāna countries too, laypeople may retire to monasteries for certain periods. What is new is that the retreat centre may or may not be connected to a monastery, and may or may not involve full-time monastics. The prevailing trend seems to be not to have such connections. One could also ask whether existing concepts of "retreat" among Catholics have not played a role in the formation and growing popularity of this way of practising Buddhism. We shall not pursue the question any further here; the point was merely to highlight the complicated, multi-factorial nature of the transplantation process.

Another example of Buddhism returning to its geographical and historical origins that is worth mentioning is the role played by Bhikshu Sangharakshita and his explicitly western FWBO organisation in re-introducing Buddhism to India, no longer a Buddhist country but still the paradigmatic homeland of all Buddhism. Leaving aside the controversy on how extensive that role has actually been, one can see that the kind of Buddhism the FWBO brings to India is inevitably a western one, and that this will affect the relationship towards the dominant Hindu religion that the new Indian Buddhism will have to adopt.

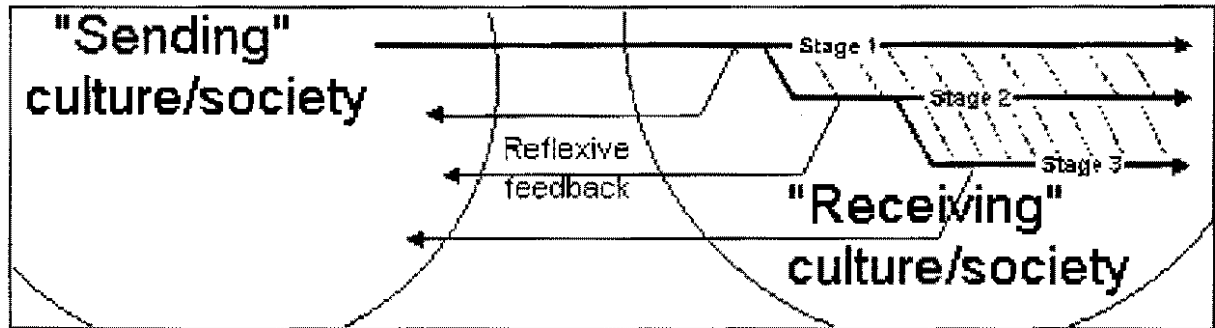
In practice, of course, a society that is "sending" Buddhism elsewhere is likely to have a long-well established Buddhist tradition of its own. It is probably deeply engaged in its own dialectic of establishment/re-enlightening (see below) and will resist changes initiated by newcomers to the Buddhist fold. Nevertheless, such things have happened and continue to happen, and will be pointed out where appropriate in this work.

Thus, transplantation can be a more complicated process than just a movement of religious beliefs and practices from one society to the next: it can be seen as a complicated series of moves and countermoves. We can therefore problematise the issue by including such a counter-process in our analysis of the transplantation of Buddhism. Let us call it "reflexive feedback" and examine how it functions in each of the stages to be delineated

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61. Baumann (1994:57,n. 52).

below. When we add such a process to the diagram we have encountered above, the result is as follows:



On a more subjective note, perhaps the difficulty we have encountered in actualising schemes such as those of Pye, Whaling and Baumann can be blamed partly on a tendency on their part to over-complicate their respective models, to posit too many different factors, stages and processes. Accordingly, the model to be developed below will consist of just four stages, but it will be shown how the analyses they (as well as Finney and Montgomery) have made apply within each of these.

The rest of this chapter will present the theoretical model without giving much in the way of examples or illustrations. Indeed, the rest of this thesis may be seen as an attempt to actualise this interpretative and theoretical model by focussing on specific aspects of it; the historical, the philosophical, the social and the activist. To illustrate excessively at this stage would be to pre-empt the discussion that will take place in the following chapters.

**Representation.** The first step in transplantation is that a representation of Buddhism needs to be created or selected to present to the non-Buddhist society. An existing form of Buddhism may be presented, or a complicated process of translation, reduction and reinterpretation (to use Baumann's terminology) may take place in which a new representation is gradually hammered out. These options are not mutually exclusive: one Buddhist organisation may present itself as a direct continuation of an existing tradition, while another may consciously create a new kind of Buddhism, as Mellor, for instance, has pointed out in his comparison of the English Sangha and the FWBO.<sup>62</sup> An intermediate position, partly traditionalist and partly innovative, is also possible, and informal observations suggest that this is in fact the most common strategy. To be successful, representation must find a vacant "niche" in the new society; it must fulfill a religious need

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62. Mellor (1991).



that was, before the transplantation, either not fulfilled at all or not satisfactorily fulfilled. Representations of Buddhism compete, not only with existing religions, but also with one another.

Regardless of which precise strategy is followed (and we should not let the terminology seduce us into thinking that this is necessarily a deliberate process), the important point is that the non-Buddhist society is presented with a specific representation of Buddhism, or even a range of competing representations, that will have a definite effect on the future development of Buddhism in the new society.

These developments may lead to reflexive feedback, for a new understanding of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha that emerges from the creation of a new representation may well find its way back to the originating culture. A contemporary example of this can be seen in the work of modern Buddhologists on the authenticity of Mahāyāna scriptures. It now takes a considerable intellectual effort to maintain that all of these texts were once uttered by the Buddha himself (the same is true of the Pāli texts, of course, though perhaps to a lesser extent), and I have heard Chinese Buddhists explain to novice monks that even if the Pure Land Sutras were not spoken by the Buddha in person, this does not necessarily invalidate their spiritual import. In other words, contemporary (western) textual and historical analysis is forcing people from a traditional Buddhist culture to reconsider their accepted representation of Buddhism.

There are both "push" and "pull" factors to be considered at the representation stage. Among the push factors are the kind of Buddhism practised in the society from which the transplantation occurs, the political conditions under which transplantation takes place (as pointed out by Montgomery), and so on. Pull factors include the kind of society into which Buddhism is being transplanted, and the particular individuals who first happen to become interested in it. (Although this is phrased here in the language of coincidence, it must be noted that such individuals might attribute this initial interest to karmic effects from previous lives, and such a belief may itself play a role in their development of a representation of Buddhism). In short, it is here that we find the stages described by Finney (see above). If a society which prizes a cool, rational approach to life is presented with a representation of Buddhism that emphasises loyalty to the teacher and devotion to deities, for example, Buddhism is likely to appeal only to an "irrational" counterculture. Croucher, for instance, describes a period in which Australian Buddhism was dominated by a few highly rationalist personalities, and in which Buddhism was seen in Australia as a kind of

oriental humanism, a philosophy devoid of feeling or devotional elements.<sup>63</sup> When new leading personalities emerged with a different approach, different types of Buddhism began to be practised in Australia.

Indeed, as language, society and individuals change, the representation of Buddhism will change with them. If Buddhism ever attains a position of dominance in the new society, one might think that there was no further need for representation. But that would be true only if language did not change and evolve, if society itself remained static, if individual Buddhists ceased to ask questions. In fact, translation of scriptures, to name but one aspect of representation, is a never-ending process, changing and evolving with the language of the host society and with new understandings of the inner workings of the original languages. No religion ever fits its host society so perfectly as to become truly invisible; if it did, one could question whether it still served a religious function at all. For religion, paradoxically enough, supplies people with both "roots" and "wings"; roots, in the sense that it helps them to survive in and accommodate to the social order; wings, in the sense that its very existence questions the ultimacy and hence the legitimacy of that order. Thus, representation is, indeed must be, an ongoing process, unlike "contact", a term which suggests a one-off chance encounter. The amount of representation in a transplantation process may vary over time, but can never cease completely. Indeed, representation continues even after the demise of a religion in a given society, if only in attenuated form, in the writings of historians and other cultural activities. In contemporary western society, for example, shadowy representations of Greek and Roman religion persist in the names of the planets and the spacecraft we use to explore them, and in the popularity of television shows such as *Hercules* and *Xena*.

The representation of Buddhism appears to be mainly a function of the great tradition. It is the scholar-monk, and in a modern context to some extent the academic Buddhologist, who decides what will be represented to the new society as "Buddhism" and what will not. The little tradition's role in representation is mainly reactive: it may decide to accept the representation, and hence accept "Buddhism", or it may decide to reject it. Indeed, as we shall see in the following chapters, at this stage in the history of Buddhism in a given area there is not yet much of a little tradition, for, historically speaking, great-tradition Buddhism has always been the first to enter a new society. In chapter 6, we shall

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63. Croucher (1989).

consider the reasons for this in terms of a socio-economically differentiated receptivity to Buddhist teachings.

***Relational positioning***—Since *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo religiosus*, a religion about to be transplanted will encounter pre-existing ideas and practices analogous to its own; in other words, other religions. What, if anything, should then be done about these? Within the spectrum of seven theological attitudes towards other religions identified by Whaling, which one should be adopted? Could there be intermediate positions, or even more extreme ones than those he mentions?

Buddhism has not escaped this problem. From the outset, Indian Buddhism was at variance with proto-Hindu and Jain strains of thought. In China, a *modus vivendi* with Confucianism and Taoism needed to be worked out. The emergent western Buddhism seeks to define its position vis-a-vis Christianity. And if an African Buddhism is ever to be, it will have to arise within the framework of an understanding of African traditions (see chapter 5).

By and large, relational positioning is a great-tradition affair, an attempt by religious philosophers to work out the apparent or real contradictions between two or more religions and either smooth them over or accentuate them. This attempt to relate religious traditions to each other can take many forms, and some of these are admirably described by Baumann (above) when he speaks of the strategies of Toleration, Assimilation, Absorption and Acculturation. But we should not lose sight of the fact that, seen from a broader perspective, all these strategies amount to the same thing. One can see "ambiguity and adaptation" and "recoupment" not as distinct stages or processes, but rather as sub-processes of the same attempt to place one's (transplanted) tradition in a stable relation towards other major forms of thought, belief and action. The same applies to Pye's factors of "ambiguity" and "recoupment". Likewise, this is where Whaling's "resolution of five factors" (cultural and linguistic differences, attitudes towards other religions, and intellectual and political opposition) takes place.

Of course, on the level of the little tradition, people of different religious faiths also come into contact, and they too need to work out a relationship. But in this case, the relationship generally only comes to public (and academic) attention when it boils over into violence. When last did one read a newspaper headline like "Christian and Buddhist live peaceably as neighbours for thirty years"? Only if the neighbours come to blows does relational positioning in the little tradition come to the fore. The study of this process

belongs more properly to the sociology of religion than to religious studies, and here we shall largely confine our investigation to studying the great tradition's contribution to relational positioning.

In Buddhism, the ideal at least is that the great tradition should base itself upon the meta-tradition. Indeed, this is where we start to see the first stage where the latter begins to make its presence felt. In asserting the emptiness of all phenomena, one can hardly exclude those phenomena we call "religions" (including, if one is truly consistent, Buddhism itself). In chapter 4, we shall explore the historical (great-tradition) Buddhist attitude towards other religions, and suggest ways in which these may be seen as based on a meta-tradition understanding of reality as not truly divisible into "self" and "other".

Relational positioning also goes beyond the usual understanding of "religious conflict" and/or "interreligious dialogue", for it is not only other religions that need to be related to, but also the prevailing social, political, economic and intellectual trends of the time. In taking a relational position towards these, policies of acquiescence, accommodation or outright opposition may be followed, just as is the case of relational positioning towards other religions.

Relational positioning can also create a reflexive feedback cycle. An example can be seen in Abe Masao's 1989 article *The impact of dialogue with Christianity on my self-understanding as a Buddhist*,<sup>64</sup> in which he states that dialogue with Christian theologians has led him to new insight into *śūnyatā* (emptiness), Buddhist ethics and the Buddhist understanding of history. Of course, he is just one person, and one cannot foresee to what extent his new understanding will spread through Japanese Buddhist society. Nevertheless, we can see that interreligious dialogue, which is one aspect of relational positioning, can potentially lead to a feedback into the originating culture.

Like representation, relational positioning is not a task that can ever be said to have reached a final destination. New non-Buddhist ideas will arise to challenge the Buddhist thinker, new interpretations of old non-Buddhist practices will be revived and need to be dealt with. But what one can say is that over time, in a given society, one can expect a general social consensus on the place of Buddhism in that society. A stable platform or plateau is reached in which relational positioning ceases to be the main concern. It gracefully slides into the background as an ongoing, but no longer central, activity. By now,

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64. Abe (1989).

Buddhism has become respectable. And this very respectability signals the beginning of the next stage.

***Respectability and establishment.*** We have now reached a stage where Buddhism has been at least partially transplanted. In the next step it gains social and cultural respectability in its new home, and to a greater or lesser extent becomes established within that society. Though Buddhists may not necessarily dominate the society numerically, we can see this as the stage Whaling refers to as "dominance".

This stage is the triumph (temporary, as we shall see) of great-tradition orthodoxy over meta-tradition radicalism. It is a peaceful, even placid period in which the main tasks of representation and relational positioning have been accomplished, leaving only minor adjustments to be made to deal with social and linguistic developments. Great-tradition Buddhism can now fully exert its influence over little-tradition ritualism as well, directing popular devotions into channels approved by orthodoxy. It is a time of temple-building and intensive scripture studies, of deep learning and a thorough ingraining of Buddhism in the social fabric, but not, perhaps, of great spiritual advancement in the Buddhist understanding of the word. The lack of innovation during this stage implies that little reflexive feedback is likely to occur.

Although it is a heavily loaded term, we may well be justified at this stage to talk about the reification of Buddhism. Buddhism has become a religion, a social category, an object, a "thing". But this is precisely the kind of essentialist thinking that Buddhist philosophy undercuts so radically. And it is in reaction to established Buddhism that the next stage of transplantation takes place.

***Re-enlightenment.*** At some stage, establishment reaches a point where it becomes abundantly clear, to those who will stop to consider, that in becoming dominant Buddhism has become a stale, status quo religion. No real development is taking place anymore. The little tradition has found some stability in its maintenance of time-honoured customs, and the great tradition is by now mired in long-standing debates on the minutiae of Buddhist doctrine.

Into this peaceful state of affairs bursts a new explosion of meta-tradition insight: a return to the radical anti-metaphysics of the Buddha. In Buddhist myth, legend and history, this is usually presented as the appearance of a single enlightened individual: we see the appearance of a Nāgārjuna, a Milarepa, a Bodhidharma or a Dōgen, all pointing the

Buddhist world back to the Ur-moment of the Buddha's enlightenment, to the experience of the utter interdependence, and hence the emptiness, of all phenomena. More recently, we can see the same process in the re-establishment of the Forest tradition of Thai Theravāda Buddhism by Ajahn Chah.

In our own time, when we have largely abandoned the "great man" understanding of history, we may ask whether one individual, even an enlightened one, could really have much of an effect unless social conditions were somehow ripe for the new/old message to be heard. However, it does not really affect the argument. Whether it is a single individual, a religious organisation or a more general and dispersed movement that initiates re-enlightenment. The crucial point is the way the meta-tradition reasserts its primacy.

If the re-enlightenment is successful, its effect may be seen as a reinvigoration of Buddhism. This may be through the foundation of new schools, or it may take a more diffuse shape. But the net effect is not to destroy the established great tradition, for even as the enlightened teacher speaks the message that will re-enlighten Buddhism, he or she has no choice but to use the set of concepts developed over generations by the great tradition. For example, Nāgārjuna expressed his understanding in terms of "emptiness" a term we encounter not only in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, but even in the Pāli Canon, though not, of course, with exactly the same shades of meaning. This is the double-bind in which meta-tradition Buddhism, of whatever sectarian denomination,<sup>65</sup> finds itself: it explicitly rejects textuality in favour of direct experience, but cannot do other than to express itself in textual terms. Even in Zen Buddhism, where textual transmission is radically and explicitly rejected in favour of, for example, expressive gestures, these very gestures acquire a textual quality of their own. They become part of a new variant of the great tradition: no longer are enlightened gestures and utterances made spontaneously; instead the "public records" (*koans*) of such gestures and utterances in the past are collected, studied and used to further the cause of enlightenment in new generations of students. In time, the great tradition will reassert itself, taking the teacher's words and analysing them in time-honoured fashion until the "poetry" in them is once again lost. And then another enlightened teacher arises ...

Thus, establishment and re-enlightening follow each other cyclically. Indeed, re-enlightenment is not merely a meta-tradition reaction against great-tradition reification, but actually *needs* establishment, even to the point of reification, to occur before there can be

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65. Including Theravāda Buddhism - see p.6

a new outburst of radical insight. Without great-tradition orthodoxy, the meta-tradition has no terminology with which to announce the advent of a new stage of transplantation. More fundamentally, until some degree of establishment has occurred, there is no *need* for re-enlightenment. Establishment serves re-enlightenment to some extent as a substratum, but more essentially as a foil for the renewed message of a *lived, experienced* (as opposed to read-about) enlightenment. If there was no reified, established tradition, the re-enlightenment process would have nothing against which to act.

This mutual dependence between the two processes gives us a Buddhism that is a subtle dialectical interplay between the forces of establishment and re-enlightenment. Seen synchronically, it comes across as a tension between meditation and scholarship, between the simultaneous desires to abandon the world and to increase the knowledge found within it. Seen diachronically, we see alternating periods of static orthodoxy and dynamic expressions of the enlightened spirit, as now the one force, then the other becomes dominant in a Buddhist society.<sup>66</sup> They should be seen as complementary rather than opposing forces. Both are needed to give Buddhism its unique character, and when a society has reached the stage where both can be seen at work in their complicated interplay, we may consider Buddhism in that society as mature and the transplantation as "finished" (though ongoing). The transplantation process therefore slides seamlessly into the general existence of a religious tradition in a given society. It is not a discrete phase with a clear beginning and end, though at times we may find it convenient to think of it in that way, but part of the ongoing interaction between a society and a religious tradition.

One could ask to what extent the term "re-enlightenment" is suitable for use as a scientific term. Is its "enlightenment" component perhaps not too entwined with Buddhism itself to be used as a tool for the study of Buddhism? The answer depends on one's views of science and language. The English word "enlightenment" predates the academic study of Buddhism in the western world, of course, and was first used in a Christian context, then to describe a particular period of rationalism in western history. In the twentieth century, however, it has become largely identified with the way it is used by Buddhists. Has it, then, become so entangled with Buddhist "theological" values that it can no longer be used as a scientific term?

The term "re-enlightenment" was chosen because it indicates the resurgence of the meta-tradition. A term like "revitalisation" would be ambiguous in this regard, since

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66. I have remarked on this oscillation in an earlier essay, in the context of the Buddhist attitude to myth (Clasquin 1993).

Buddhism might be revitalised in a number of ways; a resumption of official patronage, perhaps, or climatic changes that enable more people to live the monastic lifestyle. But such events and their results would be fluctuations within the general pattern of respectability and establishment. They do not indicate the radical nature of the Buddhist meta-tradition—its resolute undercutting of all certainties, even, paradoxically, of "enlightenment" itself.

The term "re-enlightenment", however, serves in this analysis as a mere placeholder, a convenient abbreviation for a much longer description of the process of meta-tradition insight reasserting itself in a situation where Buddhism has become accepted in a specific society. In the long run, scientific terminology is established by continuous usage in the community of scholars. Physicists speak of sub-atomic particles as having qualities of "charm" and "strangeness" with no indication that such qualities equate to what we might call charm or strangeness in human beings. Language, even scientific language, is at least partly arbitrary as far as the relationship between terms and concepts is concerned. What is important is the process itself, not the term used to describe it. This implies that another term may eventually be found that will be more acceptable to the academic temperament, if "re-enlightenment" is felt to have too many pre-existing connotations.

It will probably not have escaped the reader that the interplay between reification and re-enlightenment could as easily be used to describe, not merely the transplantation of Buddhism from one society to another, but the very founding of Buddhism itself. In this case, the Buddha himself serves as the "great man" who re-discovers (and the emphasis is on the *re*-discovery) the ultimate nature of reality. Nor is he the first, or even the last. "Prehistoric Buddhas" before him taught the same radical anti-metaphysic, and a future Buddha will re-establish the dharma after it has been established and reified by the great tradition (and increasingly ignored by the little) to the point where it might as well be said to have become extinct. Here Brahmanism (a reified prehistoric Buddhism) serves as the foil for the Buddha to launch his campaign of radical deconstruction, and it is Buddhism itself (a re-enlightened Brahmanism) which is then slowly reified as it becomes an established religion. The same pattern then takes place on a smaller scale, within Buddhism itself. This is to say that the transplantation and subsequent development of Buddhism follows a paradigmatic pattern closely modelled on Buddhist mythology .

Re-enlightenment is such a radical development in the transplantation of Buddhism that any form of reflexive feedback would strike us as a counter-transplantation, an effort to bring Buddhism from the newly revitalised area back to the originating culture(s), where Buddhism would presumably have become even more moribund than it had been in the



other culture before re-enlightenment. For the moment, this remains only a theoretical possibility, since no clear-cut examples can be found in Buddhist history. The only immediately apparent example is the return of Buddhism to India in the twentieth century, first by Ambedkar and then by Tibetan refugees, and both cases were anomalous results of particular political circumstances.

### *2.7.1 Map and territory, or models and reality*

Like all theoretical models, the one described above is a mental construction meant to explicate empirical reality. It is a map rather than the territory which the map depicts. It provides, not a rigid description of how things should be, but a (hopefully) useful way of understanding our observations. In this, the model and observed reality interact constantly: Our theoretical perspective mould what we allow ourselves to see, even as the observed data force us to reconsider the theory. In contrast to the metaphor of territory and map, there can be no realistic answer to the question "which came first, theory or observation?"

So too with this model. The theoretical perspective(s) contained in the model itself will force some data to the fore while allowing others to remain obscure. An example to illustrate this: like the models proposed by Pye, Whaling and Baumann from which it is descended, and mainly due to its origins in my personal interest in western Buddhism, the model presupposes a situation in which the *ideas* and *practices* of Buddhism travel from a predominantly Buddhist society to a non-Buddhist one. It is therefore largely silent on situations in which large numbers of people who are already Buddhists emigrate to a different country.

The movement of Tibetan refugees to India and other countries since 1950, for example, and how these people and their religious tradition adapt to living in a predominantly Hindu country, is not a situation that is accurately described by this theoretical model. We need to ask is just what is being transplanted. It may not be primarily Buddhism that is being transplanted to a non-Buddhist society, but Hinduism, and Indian culture generally, that is transplanted to a Buddhist culture, albeit one in exile. This (deliberately somewhat exaggerated) situation shows the problems that arise when one applies an inappropriate model to an observed situation. Baumann suggests that the concept of "diaspora" is most suitable for the construction of a theoretical framework to understand

such situations.<sup>67</sup> It is already widely in use in African studies, for example. The term "diaspora" has its own problems, of course—it is closely, perhaps too closely, tied to Jewish and Christian traditions and as Baumann points out, it is being used quite loosely in a number of academic contexts. Still, if, as argued above, "re-enlightenment" can serve as an academic term, there can be no reason why "diaspora" can not be similarly released from its historically restrictive usage, gain a suitably theoretically-laden definition and become part of scientific terminology.

There are obvious points of contact between "transplantation" and "diaspora"—a diasporic situation may serve as a representation of Buddhism from which transplantation can commence, as the diaspora of Tibetans has served to establish the Vajrayāna as one of the premier representations of Buddhism in the west—but while one can discern the possibility of a higher theoretical perspective that unites the two, it is nevertheless important at this stage of scientific investigation to keep them conceptually separate.

The next chapter will give an overview of Buddhist history in Asia, the west and South Africa, to show in more detail how this theoretical model can be applied to our understanding of the transplantation of Buddhism to various cultures. In this, one should be careful to avoid the extremes, either of applying the model regardless of the nuances of the situation, or of ignoring the model's own implications for our observations. A theoretical model is the academic's equivalent of "means": used well (skilfully), it can lead to new insights; used badly (unskilfully), it can distort the data as it insists on fitting them onto its Procrustean bed.

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67. Baumann (1997:384 ff.).

## CHAPTER 3: THE TRANSPLANTATION OF BUDDHISM—A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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The purpose of this chapter is to supply a general overview of Buddhist history, seen in the light of the theoretical model developed in the previous chapter. The intention is to show how the stages of representation, relational positioning, respectability and establishment, and re-enlightenment can be identified throughout Buddhist history, even in the recent transplantation of Buddhism to South Africa.

### **3.1 Early Buddhism**

For the first two centuries of its existence, Buddhism remained a purely Indian phenomenon: while individual monks may have attempted to spread the dharma to areas within the Indian subcontinent, and while Indian Buddhism was undergoing evolution internally, Buddhism did not spread to the non-Indian world. Of course "the Indian world" then, as now, was a complicated, diverse mosaic of cultural influences, ranging from Macedonian-Greek settlers in the northwest to Dravidian-speakers in the south. We may

speculate that different attempts at representation and relational positioning were made in this period, but there is little concrete information.

Nevertheless, if we look at the circumstances that, according to some accounts, led to the convening of the Second Council, at Vaiśālī (c.380 B.C.E), we can see that the points of dispute were not purely theological. It was not only a question, for example, whether Arhats could have seminal emissions in their sleep, which called their level of enlightenment into question, but also whether monks could handle gold and silver. The latter issue is clearly one of relational positioning: an attempt to make the monastic establishment relevant within the social conditions of the day. The Mahāsāṅghika sect, which can be roughly dated from this council, is often regarded as the precursor of Mahāyāna Buddhism, although this may well be simply for lack, to the best of our knowledge, of a rival claimant to that position.

The transplantation of Buddhism beyond India came only in the reign of the emperor Aśoka Maurya<sup>68</sup>, who completed his grandfather Chandragupta's unification of most of India, then repented of the violent effort this had taken and became the most ardent royal patron of Buddhism ever: "Missionaries went southwards to Sri Lanka; eastwards to Burma; northwards to the Himalayan regions; and westwards to Syria".<sup>69</sup> In chapter 4 we shall see that the use of the word "missionary" at this stage of Buddhist history may well be an unwarranted importation from western (especially Christian) usage, but we can accept that this was the stage when the international prestige of the Aśokan empire lent a lustre of acceptability to its newly adopted religion that made it easier to transplant it to neighbouring areas. One can also ask whether Aśoka's personal renunciation of violence was the only reason for the cessation of this imperial expansion. It may well be that his empire had reached its physical limits; any larger, and his realm could no longer be administrated with the available communications and technological infrastructure. Indeed, the Mauryan empire did not long survive his death, and apart from a near-hegemony under the Mogul emperors, India would not be united again until it came under British rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Aśoka's edicts, inscribed on rock faces and iron pillars, contain much evidence of relational positioning:

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68. Reigned ± 268-231 BCE. Historical, as opposed to legendary, information about this monarch is sadly limited: the Buddhist records and the lithic inscriptions that are our two main sources tend to contradict each other (Ch'en 1968: 111-112).

69. Krüger (1991:13).

Aśoka proclaimed that he honoured and made gifts to ascetics and householders of all sects. His aim, he said, was the growth of religious essence in all sects, which means not praising one's own and not disparaging others. He recommended that the different schools listen to and learn from one another.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, Buddhism was the sect which he personally supported, and his reign saw Indian Buddhism entering the stage of respectability and establishment. Monasteries were built in such profusion from this point onwards that the modern Indian province of Bihar derives its name from the term "vihāra" (monastery).

Considering the theme of this work, we might do well to look more closely at Aśoka's attempts to transplant Buddhism to the west. At the time, Syria was part of the Seleucid empire, one of the Hellenistic kingdoms that resulted from the breakup of Alexander the Great's conquests. After Alexander's death, Seleucus and Chandragupta Maurya arrived at a mutually acceptable diplomatic agreement, determined stable borders between their respective empires, exchanged ambassadors and organised the appropriate dynastic marriages. The Greeks were well known in Aśoka's India; in fact, they were called the *Yonas*, after the Greek region of Ionia<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, Greek colonies are thought to have existed in India as far back as the Buddha's time and one discourse uses the fluid boundary between masters and slaves in Greek society as an example to indicate that caste differences are not divinely ordained.<sup>72</sup> By Aśoka's time, therefore, some people of Greek descent lived in India, and it appears that at least some of these Greeks converted to Buddhism,<sup>73</sup> but Aśoka's efforts may also have extended to sending monks to the court of "the Seleucid ruler Antiochus II, Ptolemy of Egypt, Antigonas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene and Alexander of Epirus", and these monks may have become involved, if not in "missionary" activities, then at least in religious and philosophical debate. Scott mentions that while Aśoka's rock edicts triumphantly announce the empire's "successes" in transplanting Buddhism to the west, Greek sources are entirely silent on the subject, "and so such speculation as to possible

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70. Robinson & Robinson (1982:47).

71. Scott (1985a:132).

72. Batchelor (1994:3).

73. Scott (1985a:135) quotes from the *Mahāvamsa* a list of "missionaries" sent out by Moggaliputta Tissa, the emperor's personal religious adviser: "... and to Aparantaka (lit. 'Western Ends', an area in western India) the *Yona* named *Dhammarakkhita*" (emphasis added)

Buddhist influences remain at that level of speculation only".<sup>74</sup> It is true that, as Ch'en points out, "not one bit of information has been found in the Greek records concerning such missionary efforts from India."<sup>75</sup> But, as Ch'en also points out, the monks may have been part of the historically certain diplomatic missions and their primary functions may in fact have been to act as chaplains to diplomatic personnel, rather than as independent agents for the conversion of the Greeks. It is possible, therefore, that the more far-flung expeditions were in fact lone monks attached to diplomatic missions and that they were in some cases confused with the undoubted successes in Greek Bactria.<sup>76</sup> This was, moreover, not a case of the dharma following the flag in true colonialist style, for there is no evidence that Aśoka made any attempt to send such envoys in the earlier phase of his reign when his kingdom was expanding.

The westward expeditions were significant at least in respect of the influence they were to have on Buddhist art; it was in Gandhāra, one of the easternmost outpost of the Hellenistic civilisation, that the first ever artistic representations of the Buddha were produced.<sup>77</sup> These sculptures, modelled on the Greek divinity Apollo, were to influence the form of Buddha-rūpas throughout Asia. It was again in Gandhāra that the first artistic representations with a distinctly Mahāyāna theme were produced.<sup>78</sup> The use of figurative art in the representation of Buddhism was a revolutionary step that can be seen to influence Buddhism even today. Prior to this, the Buddha was never represented pictorially, his place being taken in Indian art by symbolic icons such as a footprint or a lotus blossom. The Buddha was the "thus-gone", too transcendent by far to represent graphically. Once this taboo had been broken, however, Buddhism became more like the other religious traditions of India. This change in representation was also a major factor in the process of relational positioning. It marked the way Buddhism changed from a philosophy to a religion, the way a tradition mainly concerned with meta-tradition mysticism and great-tradition erudition now embraced the need to nurture and expand the little tradition. No doubt the process had already been under way--the decision by an artist in Gandhāra to produce an artistic

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74. Scott (1985a:134).

75. Ch'en (1968:116).

76. Scott (1985a:134-136). Webb (1993) has noted that there was also some Buddhist influence in Persia.

77. Lamotte (1988:483-484).

78. Von Hinüber, quoted in Biernatzky (1991:54).

representation of the Buddha marks not the beginning of this process, far less its ending, but stands as a signpost along the way, alerting us to its existence.

However, the transplantation to Hellenistic Syria and lands even further westwards were not successful in the long run. It is uncertain whether Buddhist communities ever actually lived in Alexandria or other Mediterranean cities, and we have only a few scattered references from Greek writers and some of the early church fathers to attest to western awareness of Buddhism.<sup>79</sup> Buddhism was to be an Asian religion; not until the late nineteenth century was a European Buddhism to become a reality. This lack of success may well have been attributable, as Webb suggests, to "the formidable economic and ideological barrier of Persia"<sup>80</sup>. But we can also ask what kind of representation of Buddhism was involved. At the time, Buddhism was still largely an esoteric religion reserved for a monastic elite. Popular Buddhism was restricted to the performance of meritorious acts; even in Aśoka's famous rock and pillar edicts we see many references to charity and hospitality, but none to key Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble truths,<sup>81</sup> and tradition has it that he was allowed to hear a sermon on Buddhist doctrine only on his deathbed. Such a Buddhism would compete directly with the existing mystery cults of Hellenistic civilisation: there was no niche for it in the social structure of the west.

To the south and east of India, the form that would predominate was Theravāda<sup>82</sup> Buddhism, the form of Buddhism that still thrives there today<sup>83</sup>. To the north and northeast, Mahāyāna Buddhism that would prevail. This distinction can be and often is exaggerated. The better-educated Theravāda monks, at least, seem well aware of the thinking of their northern cousins, and vice versa. For example, Ajahn Chah, the revered Thai meditation teacher, at one stage refers to the Platform Sutra of Hui-Neng, the sixth patriarch of Zen

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79. Parrinder (1982:241-242) mentions such references by Jerome, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. The best-known of these are probably those made by Clement in his *Stromateis* 1.71 and 3.60 (Ferguson 1991:76, 293), although Clement seems unaware of the distinction between Buddhists and Jains.

80. Webb (1993:81), cf. Montgomery (1991:41).

81. Robinson & Robinson (1982:47).

82. Also known by the somewhat pejorative term "Hīnayāna".

83. A more comprehensive history of Theravada Buddhism than it is possible to supply here may be found in Lester (1973:ch. 4) or in Gombrich (1988).

Buddhism, as a "very profound teaching".<sup>84</sup> In the same vein one could mention Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, the Thai Buddhist philosopher, whose own thinking at first sight seems to have been influenced by Mahāyāna ideas, as can be seen in one of his essays entitled "Nibbāna exists in Saṃsāra"<sup>85</sup>, a phrase echoed by Ajahn Chah.<sup>86</sup> But perhaps the way they use these phrases is not so much an indication of Mahāyāna influence as an indication that both are speaking from a meta-tradition position.

Internet discussion forums, rather than published material, suggest that the study of Buddhism may well be on the brink of a paradigm shift away from the understanding of Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna as sociological entities analogous to Christian denominations (a vision which contemporary Buddhologists have largely inherited from Burnouf's nineteenth-century pioneering work *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*) and towards an understanding of these terms as denoting the level of an individual Buddhist's spiritual aspirations, a classification cutting across all "schools" of Buddhism. Such a paradigm shift would constitute a remarkable change in the contemporary representation of Buddhism and would have profound effects on relational positioning within Buddhism itself. However, in this work we shall use the terms in their conventional sense.

### 3.2 The spread of Theravāda Buddhism

The first, among the more successful and probably the best researched transplantations of Theravāda Buddhism was that from India to Sri Lanka. Legend has it that Aśoka sent his son (or younger brother), the monk Mahinda,<sup>87</sup> to the island in 240 BCE, where the dharma was rapidly accepted by the king and the Sinhalese population<sup>88</sup>. This is described in the extracanonical Pāli works *Mahāvamsa*, *Dīpavamsa* and *Samanta-pāsādikā*.<sup>89</sup> While most contemporary scholars accept that there was such a person as Mahinda, other details such as the legend that he flew from India to Sri Lanka are regarded as poetic embellish-

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84. Chah (1980:154).

85. Buddhādāsa (1989:41-45).

86. Chah (1980:96).

87. or *Mahendra*—see Saddhātissa (1991:323).

88. See Ling (1985:175-195).

89. See Gombrich (1988:140-141, 148 ff).



ments or misinterpretations of his sayings,<sup>90</sup> as are the myths about the historical Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.<sup>91</sup> We may also question whether Mahinda was really sent as a "missionary". Like the envoys to the west, his role may well have been primarily that of an ambassador. Again according to the legend, Mahinda was later followed by his sister, the nun Saṅghamitta, who planted a shoot from the sacred Bodhi tree. The tree she planted was later used to provide a shoot with which to replace the original tree at Bodh-Gāya beneath which the Buddha had once become enlightened.

It is at this point that we can refer back to Montgomery's observation on the relation between the acceptance of a new religion and the level of perceived "threat" from the originating society. The Aśokan empire had ceased its pattern of expansion and was therefore no longer a direct threat to the Sri Lankan kingdom. Sinhalese society was sufficiently similar to that of mainland India for a conventionally Indian representation of Buddhism to suffice, hence little new work needed to be done in the field of relational positioning.

It was in Sri Lanka that the Theravāda scriptures were first committed to writing in the first century BCE; until then, monks had been required to commit vast amounts of "text" to memory, just as much of African lore is still transmitted today. This oral/aural strand of the tradition has never entirely died out. Bodhesako reports that "At present ... there are in Burma alone four monks who have demonstrated their ability to recite not only the Vinaya and Sutta collections in their entirety ... but also the seven volumes of the Abhidhamma."<sup>92</sup> The oral tradition has remained important even among western Buddhists in the sense that "dharma talks" are expected to be delivered off the cuff, without recourse to a prepared written sermon. Of course, sermons may be written down, even published, after the event, but a teacher who is unable to talk extempore is unlikely to gain respect among Buddhists today.

One reason given for this process of transferring sacred text from mind to paper is that, in a difference of opinion during the first century C.E., a faction of Sri Lankan monks who favoured study were victorious over those who stressed the practice of meditation. Another possible reason was the decimation of the monastic ranks by epidemics, which made losing the sacred texts completely a real possibility. This new preoccupation with

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90. Dhammavisuddhi (1987).

91. Lester (1973:66-67).

92. Bodhesako (1984:32).

written texts also led to the production, in Sri Lanka during the fifth century C.E., of commentaries, translations and new compendiums of Buddhist doctrine by the South Indian scholars Buddhadatta and Buddhagosa<sup>93</sup>. We can see this as evidence that Sri Lankan Buddhism had entered the respectability and establishment phase.

Although the popularity of Buddhism waxed and waned during the island's history, especially during the period of colonisation by various western powers, when various forms of Christianity were introduced and propagated in different ways,<sup>94</sup> a great revival of Buddhism in the nineteenth century led to its current position as the leading religious tradition among the Sinhalese people. This revival was started by a "gifted young ... monk named Mohotivatte Gunananda, who was clever enough to study the Christian scriptures and the rationalist writings of the West critical of Christianity ... Emboldened by [his] success, he challenged the Christian missionaries to a debate on the relative merits of the two religions. The challenge was accepted and a series of debates were held in 1866, 1871 and 1873. ... These debates aroused intense interest among the Buddhists and to them their champion was the victor in the debates."<sup>95</sup>

However, as Gombrich<sup>96</sup> has pointed out, this revival of Buddhism has also led to profound changes within the very structure of Sri Lankan Buddhism itself, changes which reflect such strong influences from Protestant Christianity that it might well be called "Protestant Buddhism".<sup>97</sup> In other words, what we see here is a new increase in relational positioning made necessary by the introduction of a new religious element into the social matrix. According to Hoole,<sup>98</sup> the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka can also be said to have led,

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93. See Gombrich (1988:153-5).

94. Conze (1982:104) reports, for instance, that from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Buddhism was at such a low ebb in Sri Lanka that "monks had to be repeatedly imported from Burma and Siam"—see also Ch'en (1968:118). This involved the sending of royal Sri Lankan missions to Thailand and Burma to request the rulers of those countries to send bhikkhus. One such mission, in 1750 C.E., is described in more detail by Fernando (1959). In all fairness, it should be noted that the Sri Lankans had sent bhikkhus to these countries several times when their respective communities had been in trouble.

95. Ch'en (1968:118-119).

96. Gombrich (1988:ch. 7), cf. Mellor (1991:81).

97. Not to be confused with Mellor's use of the term for modern British Buddhism, although there do seem to be historical links between these two developments. The term itself was coined by Obeyesekere (1970).

98. See Hoole (1986).

if indirectly, to the Buddhist-Hindu civil war raging in that country. It is a debatable point: there are many other factors, such as language and culture, that may be said to have played a role there.

Simultaneously with the advent of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, that is, during the reign of Aśoka Maurya in India or shortly afterwards,<sup>99</sup> Theravāda Buddhism spread to Burma<sup>100</sup> and present-day Thailand, though in both countries it is only somewhat later that both archaeological and textual evidence show solid evidence that the religion had become firmly established.<sup>101</sup> In Burma, the first form of Buddhism seems to have been a form of Theravāda in the south of the country. In northern Burma, a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism with strong Tantric overtones was practised. Both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms of Burmese Buddhism lived side by side with Hinduism for many centuries, until the reign of king Anawrahtā<sup>102</sup> in the eleventh century C.E. ushered in a golden age for Theravāda Buddhism in that country. According to the traditional account, although Anawrahtā was king only of Upper (northern) Burma, he was converted to Theravāda by a southern Burmese monk named Shin Araham and wished to make Theravāda Buddhism the state religion of his country. The southern king refused to send him any sacred Theravāda texts, however, and this led to the invasion of southern Burma by the northerners.

The Thai people, who entered the area of present-day Thailand about 700 years ago from the Yunnan area of southern China, adopted the Theravāda form of Buddhism, which had been previously introduced by Burmese colonists.<sup>103</sup> It remains the state religion and the personal faith of 93 percent of that country's population to this day, although residual Hindu influences can be seen in the continuing popularity of the Hindu epic, the Rāmāyāna. In recent years, Thai Buddhism has started a *thammacarik* (missionary) strategy among non-Buddhist hill tribes within Thailand that has "emphasised exposing the uplanders to clerical behaviour, teaching them to pay respects to the Triple Gem of Buddhism ... and to 'make

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99. According to Anacker (1978:28), "the Taiiang Buddhist community of Thaton claims its origins with Aśoka's mission". But see Skilling (1997) and Anonymous (1997) for conflicting views that place the introduction of Buddhism to Burma at a much later date.

100. See Luce (1974:119) on the introduction of Buddhism in Burma, and cf. Saddhātissa (1991:328-329), Ch'en (1968:124) and Lester (1973:69-73). The older term (in English, at least) "Burma" will be used in this work in preference to the more recent "Myanmar".

101. Lester (1973:66).

102. Burmese for P. *Anuruddha* - see Gombrich (1988:138). Another possible spelling is *Anoratha*.

103. Ch'en (1968:128-129), cf. Lester (1973:73-74).

merit' for themselves and their ancestors by offering alms to the monks or encouraging the ordination of new monks and novices".<sup>104</sup> Few successes have been attained. According to Tapp, this effort has been

... a failure in real terms. From the first, it relied on a distinctly modernist interpretation of the self-abnegating philosophy of the Buddha, which had been co-opted in support of the Thai state since the turn of the century. So that primarily it was neither a genuine or a local Buddhism which was being offered to the ethnic minorities, but rather the legitimating, self-justifying ideology of a dominant ethnic group, offered to its 'inferiors' as the means of their salvation.<sup>105</sup>

This can be seen primarily as a failure of representation, in that what is being represented as constituting "Buddhism" is a sophisticated version of the religion well suited to the technically more advanced Thai culture in which it arose, but which does not take proper cognisance of the life-world of the hill tribes. There is apparently not even an attempt at relational positioning towards the traditional religions and customs of the region, which are described in condescending terms by monks engaged in this missionary activity. We must conclude that the primary, if hidden, purpose of such activity is not to convert the hill tribes into Buddhists, but to change them into Thais!

Theravāda also became established in Laos and Cambodia,<sup>106</sup> where Thai influence caused Theravāda gradually to supplant the earlier Mahāyāna dominance. Various forms of Hīnayāna Buddhism entered southern Vietnam in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but were later supplanted by Confucianism and the Ch'an form of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism. Theravāda Buddhism remains in existence in these countries today<sup>107</sup> despite recent

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104. Tapp (1986:70).

105. Tapp (1986:71).

106. Renamed *Kampuchea* during the rule of the Khmer Rouge, but nowadays generally called Cambodia again.

107. Although Chinese forms of Buddhism have largely supplanted the earlier Hīnayāna forms in Vietnam since the "conquest of Campā by the Annamites from the north" (Saddhātissa 1991:331). for more information on the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, see Thich (1975), Tan Phat (1981) and Cleary (1991).

Communist suppression, especially in Cambodia. In the latter country, Buddhism was pronounced the state religion after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in the late 1980s.<sup>108</sup>

In Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, Burma and Thailand today, Theravāda Buddhism is firmly entrenched in the respectability and establishment phase. In all of these countries it is, if not the state religion, at least the religion of a politically and economically dominant majority. While evidence of re-enlightenment activities can be seen in the lives of figures such as Ajahn Chah in Thailand and U Ba Khin in Burma, it is the reified establishment Buddhism that predominates. This is not to say that Buddhism in these countries does not suffer from internal conflicts: Tapp estimates that there are 3 000 monasteries in Thailand that are not registered with the Department of Religious Affairs,<sup>109</sup> and in Sri Lanka there are divisions within the Bhikkhu-sangha that derive from age-old distinctions of social prestige and historical derivation. But taken as a whole, Theravāda Buddhism in these countries is both respectable and established, and recent re-enlightenment activities have not been able to change the face of this established form of Buddhism. However, it should be noted that re-enlightenment figures such as Ajahn Chah have been instrumental in the ordainment of a number of monks of European extraction, and that both the English Sangha in centres such as Amaravati, north of London, and the far more radically westernised Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, can trace their origin to meditators trained by them. In other words, re-enlightenment in Thailand and Burma has led to various representations in the west. It remains to be seen how strong any reflexive feedback will be.

### 3.3 The spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism

Mahāyāna Buddhism may have had its antecedents in the earlier Mahāsāṅghika school, but in terms of our theoretical model it can be regarded as the result of a re-enlightenment stage that occurred within Indian Buddhism in the first few centuries C.E. Closely aligned with the emergence of a new set of scriptures, the *Prajñāpāramita* literature, it saw a new flowering of interest in the meta-tradition, in the possibility of actual attainment of enlightenment. When this was taken up by Buddhist thinkers such as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, the result was the establishment of the two main great-tradition philosophical schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.

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108. Religion in Communist Lands (1989).

109. Tapp (1986:81).

Not to be confused with "schools" of Buddhism in the sectarian sense, these were two broad philosophical streams of thought that sought to direct the seeker back to the direction of the Buddha's enlightenment. Simultaneously, the rise of the bodhisattva ideal and a change in the concept of "Buddhahood" led to a far wider scope for representation. In addition to the old representation of Buddhism as the preserve of a few world-renouncers who dedicated their lives to plumbing the depths of their minds and of reality itself (a perspective which was never quite lost), it also became possible to represent Buddhism in terms of religious devotion, ritual and home-based piety. Keeping these diverse tendencies in a state of creative tension has been the main task of Mahāyāna great-tradition thinkers ever since.

This diversity also gave Buddhism a far greater ability to transplant itself to other societies. Not only was there a greater range of possibilities from which to pick or create a representation of Buddhism, but relational positioning became vastly easier. For example, in conversation with a theist, one now had access not only to a "polytheistic" pantheon of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, but also to the concept of Buddha-nature which, with some philosophical effort, could be presented as analogous to a god-concept. One may speculate on how different world history might have been if the late Roman empire had access to Mahāyāna Buddhism as a religious option as well as to Christianity, Mithraism and the like. Would there now be stupas rather than churches and cathedrals all over Europe and the Americas? But of course, by this stage the road westward was firmly blocked, first by the Parthian and Sassanid empires, then by the Muslims.

Mahāyāna Buddhism developed in northern India and its first movement was not to the east, where its destiny would ultimately lie, but to the northwest.<sup>110</sup> From Gandhāra in northwest India Buddhism spread along pre-existing trade routes to the mountain ranges and vast steppes of central Asia. Archaeological remains have been found of great kingdoms, centred in oases and straddling the great trade routes of central Asia, that mingled Buddhist, Christian, Manichaean, Hellenistic, Persian and indigenous central Asian influences, and where many different languages were spoken, such as Sogdian, Khotanese and Kuchean. One kingdom of particular interest, just south of this area, was that of Menandros, a Graeco-Bactrian<sup>111</sup> king whose philosophical cross-examination of the Buddhist monk

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110. There was a roughly simultaneous movement to the south-east, i.e. Malaysia and Indonesia, but this will not be covered here.

111. Bactria - roughly speaking, the area today occupied by northern Afghanistan; this area was part of the Hellenistic world after the conquests of Alexander the Great. For a discussion of Menandros and his place in Buddhist history, see Batchelor (1994:12-24).

Nāgasena has survived in Pāli as the extra-canonical book, the *Milindapañhā*. Although both types of Buddhism established footholds in central Asia (we see little Mahāyāna influence in the *Milindapañhā*), it was the Mahāyāna that eventually prevailed. It must have been in this maelstrom of influences that Mahāyāna Buddhism finally stopped being a typically Indian world-renouncing faith and changed into an all-embracing religion that could accommodate both renunciation and affirmation as equally expressions of "emptiness". Sadly, little information on the process is available.

The importance of central Asia for Chinese Buddhism can be seen in the fact that Fa-tsang, one of the major figures in the Hua-yen school, was said to be of at least partial Sogdian ancestry.<sup>112</sup> Also, in Ch'eng Hui's introduction to the *Sutra of forty-two sections*, written during the Sung Dynasty, the Buddha is said to have been born "at Kapilavastu, in Central India". As Blofeld remarks, we would consider Kapilavastu to be in northern India. This may signify nothing more than geographical ignorance on the part of the Chinese author, or it may indicate that Central Asia was so important to Chinese Buddhists that it was seen as part of India itself.<sup>113</sup>

From the seventh century C.E. onwards, however, Islamic conquests made the survival of Buddhism in central Asia increasingly tenuous, and from the tenth century C.E. the linguistically Indo-European Buddhist cultures in the area were increasingly replaced by Turkic-speaking Islamic societies.

It was from central Asia that Buddhism reached China. The first identifiable reference to Buddhism in the Middle Kingdom dates from the first century C.E., although there may have been earlier contacts. However, it was not easy to exert a cultural and religious influence on a civilisation as sophisticated as that of the Chinese.<sup>114</sup> Not only was it necessary to find a representation of Buddhism that would not offend Chinese civilisation's view of itself as the Middle Kingdom, that is, the centre of the world, not only was it necessary to obscure the foreign origin of Buddhism by mythically conflating the Buddha with Lao-tse, but the relational positioning that needed to be done towards Taoism and Confucianism was the severest test yet of Buddhism's ability to adapt to new

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112. Liu (1979:2).

113. Blofeld (1977:8, esp. n.2) See also Whaling (1981:320).

114. See Than Phat (1981:ch.3) for a description of the subtle difficulties faced by Buddhism in adapting to Chinese culture and Jan (1966) for a description of known historical links between India and China. See also De Jong in Schopen (1979:77-101).

surroundings. It was not until a period of civil unrest in the fifth century C.E.<sup>115</sup> that Buddhism found its niche in Chinese society as a third religion alongside Taoism and Confucianism. The Chinese Buddhists eventually evolved sects and philosophical schools of their own and, despite periodic episodes of persecution, Chinese Buddhism was eventually no longer seen as a foreign importation. Even so, China never became a Buddhist country in quite the same sense as Sri Lanka or even Japan, always coexisting with Taoism, Confucianism and other religions. In terms of Baumann's strategies, Chinese Buddhism always needed to stress "toleration"; relational positioning was never quite able to slide into the background as it was able to do in other societies. Although Buddhism, along with other religions, was suppressed in recent decades under the reign of Mao Zedong, it appears to be experiencing a revival in contemporary China, though under strict government control. Despite its many vicissitudes, we can see that Buddhism in China is clearly in the stage of respectability and establishment. There have, however, also been cases of re-enlightenment in Chinese Buddhist history. Whether it came from outside, as with the mythical figure of Bodhidharma, or as an indigenous Chinese development, as with the establishment of Hua-yen Buddhism by Fa-tsang, Chinese Buddhism has experienced a number of impulses from the meta-tradition. These have reinvigorated it and renewed the dialectical interplay between re-enlightenment and respectability, thus keeping it a vital force in Chinese society.

A peculiarity of Chinese Buddhism is that such events were more likely to result in the founding of a new school of Buddhism than would have been the case in India. Which is not to say that *all* new schools of Buddhism can be traced to re-enlightenment: other factors such as geographical separation, personal disagreements and so on may well have played a greater part in this. But, to take just a few examples from each, whereas Nāgārjuna founded not a school in the sense of a sectarian division, but a school of thought of which adherents could be found in different monasteries, Fa-tsang started Hua-Yen both as a school of thought and as a separate sectarian entity within Buddhism as a whole. Similarly, in Japan, Dogen acted not only as a re-invigorator of Japanese Buddhism as a whole, but also as one of the prime movers in bringing sectarian Soto Zen to Japan. We can deduce from this that in East Asian society, the meta-tradition was more closely and immediately involved with the great tradition (to the extent that we can identify the great tradition with sectarian Buddhism) than in India. In India, the religious ideal remained that of the homeless wanderer, even into the much later Tantric stage of Buddhist development. In

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115. During the "period of disunity", generally thought to have lasted from 220 to 581 C.E.



China, however, monasticism, with all its connotations of scholarliness and orthodoxy, was not a second-best ideal, more practical than but spiritually inferior to the ideal of the homeless wanderer, but a primary focus of Buddhist activity.

Korea and Japan both received Buddhism from China and in some cases, we can find schools of Buddhism in these countries (for example, the Japanese Shingon school) that show us Chinese representations of Buddhism that have not survived to any great extent in China itself. Chinese representations of Buddhism also permeated the northern stretches of Vietnam.<sup>116</sup>

Korea was first introduced to Buddhism in the fourth century. It spread rapidly in that country, but official disapproval and a resurgence of Confucianism from 1392 C.E., and more particularly from the sixteenth century onwards, caused it to decline, until today only about one-sixth of the South Korean population are Buddhists.<sup>117</sup>

Japan first heard of Chinese Buddhism via Korean missionaries, later followed by direct contact with Chinese Buddhism. Although it spread slowly at first, it became well established and Japan remains a bastion of Buddhism to this day. Initial opposition from the indigenous Shinto religion was overcome and

In the ninth century this amalgamation [of Buddhism and Shinto] received the name Ryobu-Shinto ... a remarkable achievement not only for the reason that it effectively fused the two religions for the time being, but also because it fused them in such a way that 1000 years later it was quite easy to separate them again<sup>118</sup>.

This is surely one of the most remarkable instances of relational positioning in all of religious history. However, when Christianity reached Japan in the sixteenth century and its close association with Portuguese expansionism aroused the ire of the secular authorities, Buddhist orthodoxy was used as a pretext for the persecution of Christians and administration of the pogroms was handed to one of the old established Nāra sects.

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116. Tan Phat (1981:94-106), Thich (1975:ch.1).

117. Vigorous anti-religion campaigning and the general political situation in communist North Korea makes it impossible to determine whether or not Buddhism remains a force in that country.

118. Conze (1982:94).

Unlike China, Tibet did not receive Buddhism from central Asia, but from India itself from about 650 C.E. onwards,<sup>119</sup> and to some extent from the Chinese. The first representation of Buddhism received by Tibet consisted of the scholarly teachings of philosophical Mahāyāna, but the form of Buddhism that was eventually to flourish there was Tantric Buddhism, a new development that had originated in India. Only around the eighth century did Buddhism take firm root on the "roof of the world", where, despite suppression in the ninth century C.E., it revived<sup>120</sup> and has remained the dominant religion ever since. Indeed, Tibetan Buddhism more clearly fits our theoretical model more clearly than any other case: In the debate between Indian Tantric teacher and Chinese Ch'an adherents, ordered by king Srong-lde-Btsan, we can see conflicting representations of Buddhism, with one apparently the victor. Relational positioning was prominent in Tibet: as we shall see in more detail in a later chapter, pre-existing deities were recognised as "protectors of the dharma" and given due recognition in worship and ritual. Above all, we can see the complicated interplay between establishment and re-enlightenment. In Tibet, Buddhism moved from being the state religion to becoming the state itself. A highly centralised monastic bureaucracy administrated the country as a theocratic state. Yet all the monastic orders traced their descent from antinomian rebels, from hermits and miracle workers who rejected the monastic rules in favour of a determined individual search for liberation. Like no other Buddhist society, Tibet was able to contain the contradictory tendencies of re-enlightenment on the one hand, and respectability and establishment on the other, bringing forth both monastic administrators and inspired wandering teachers.

Communist suppression since the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1951 led to the flight of thousands of Tibetans to India, from where the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism have radiated out, especially to the western world.

Other areas that have been deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhism include Mongolia and the Himalayan regions of India such as Sikkim, Ladakh and Bhutan. According to some sources,<sup>121</sup> neighbouring Nepal and Kashmir, on the other hand, experienced Buddhist influence from the time of Aśoka, although Hinduism is now more prevalent in the

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**119.** Tucci (1980:ch.1), Krishna Murthy (1989:ch.2).

**120.** Tucci (1980:ch.2).

**121.** e.g. Hazra (1984:84). Other scholars tend towards a later date.

former.<sup>122</sup> Buddhism also suffered much in the latter from the invasion of Hunnish tribes in the sixth century C.E. Muslim rule after 1339 C.E. marked the beginning of the end for Kashmiri Buddhism.

Meanwhile, Buddhism was undergoing a major decline in India, the land of its birth. This process, which started in or soon after the seventh century and continued until the almost complete extinction of Buddhism in India by the twelfth,<sup>123</sup> was due to many complex causes, which continue to inspire debate among Buddhologists. Among the most significant of these causes are the absorption of Buddhist themes into a resurgent Hinduism and pressure from Islam, the adherents of which had invaded northern India, precisely the area where Buddhism was strongest.

In the twentieth century,<sup>124</sup> however, there was a modest revival of Indian Buddhism. The most spectacular of these was in 1956, when Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, leader of the Untouchables and one of the architects of the Indian constitution, renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism along with half a million of his followers, the main motive being to reject the Hindu caste system. This can be seen as a dramatic instance of reflexive feedback—of Buddhism, transformed in its new homes outside India, returning to its original home to exert an influence there. It is also sufficiently remarkable as an instance of feedback to consider it a new transplantation process in its own right. Ambedkar's unusual interpretation of Buddhist teachings fall squarely in the process of representation, and relational positioning towards Hinduism remains the main task of these ex-Untouchables. Indications are that they have not yet reached the stage of respectability and establishment.

### 3.4 The new expansion of Buddhism

Most consequential for our purposes is the fact that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,<sup>125</sup> Buddhism started to attract people from Europe and the former

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122. Nepal is the only country in the world to have declared Hinduism its national religion.

123. This date is somewhat arbitrary. Isolated pockets of Buddhism might have lingered on for some time, perhaps even for centuries.

124. And possibly already in the nineteenth century - see Rhys Davids (1903:481).

125. See Almond (1988), Wickremeratne (1982), Ketelaar (1991), Clausen (1975) and McRae (1991) for information on Buddhist studies and Buddhist practice in the nineteenth century.

European colonies in the Americas and Australasia.<sup>126</sup> This movement started modestly: in 1926, Addison could still write that Japanese Buddhist missionary work was almost entirely "concerned with the care of Japanese emigrants; the effort to reach Christians is slight and notably unsuccessful".<sup>127</sup> As time went on, however, Buddhist expansionary action became more self-assured and more successful. By 1965, Gray reported that

In Ceylon now, funds are solicited "for the spread of the gospel of Buddhism among the heathen of Europe". And Rangoon has a missionary training college, where Buddhist monks, among other things, learn English with a view to mission work here.<sup>128</sup>

Although, as we have seen above, there had been contacts with the west as early as the time of Aśoka,<sup>129</sup> it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that interest in Buddhism spread beyond the confines of a small academic circle,<sup>130</sup> and not until well into the twentieth that Buddhism was established as a living religion in western lands. Indeed, only by the middle of the twentieth century did the academic and popular media alike start to take notice of this new religious development.<sup>131</sup> Nor has this been a negligible

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126. The historical details of the growth of Buddhism in Europe, America and Australia can be found in the highly accessible works of Batchelor (1994) or Baumann (1995), Fields (1986, updated and revised third edition 1992) or Prebish and Tanaka (1999), and Croucher (1984), respectively. An annotated online bibliography on Buddhism in Europe is also available at <http://www.rewi.uni-hanover.de/for4.htm>.
127. Addison (1926:706).
128. Gray (1965:345).
129. See Scott's (1985a, 1985b, 1985c) series of articles on Buddhist "missionary" efforts to Greek-speaking lands, and the slightly later Christian and Manichaean responses to Buddhist ideas. See also Anacker (1978) on Buddhist expansionary efforts to the west and Webb (1993) on the early spread of Buddhism in western Asia.
130. Small but influential, since Buddhist ideas can be seen to have influenced, inter alia, Schopenhauer, Spengler, Eliot (Spae 1979:120) and, of course, Jung. Contemporary intellectual indebtedness to Buddhism can be seen in the work of Parfit, Cupitt and Smart (Collins 1987). See Wickremeratne (1982) for a biographical sketch of one of the earliest western Buddhists, an American named Charles Powell who was admitted as a lay Buddhist in 1890, and see McRae (1991) and Ketelaar (1991) for a discussion of Buddhist participation in the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. See also Tweed (1990) on the mid-nineteenth century American encounter with Buddhism. See also Batchelor (1994).
131. See Ladner (1958), Commonweal (1948), Gray (1965:343-347) and Newsweek (1955, 1963).

development: in 1988, Morreale<sup>132</sup> identified 480 Buddhist centres and/or groups in the United States. There are even cases of western Buddhist missionary influence in Asia in a reflexive feedback process. Finney mentions a Japanese Zen Monk who, after spending two years at an American Zen monastery, returned to Japan with the intention of building an "American-style" monastery there.<sup>133</sup> There is also the case of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), a largely UK-based organisation which has become active in promoting Buddhism among the Ambedkarian Buddhists of India.<sup>134</sup>

Baumann<sup>135</sup> provides the following estimates of the number of Buddhists in selected western countries, and notes how many of these are ethnically Asian:

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132. Quoted in Finney (1991:383). The updated 1998 version of Morreale's work now lists over a thousand centres and groups.
133. Finney (1991:390).
134. Ratnaprabha (1987:67), but cf. the criticism by Mellor (1991:87-88)
135. Baumann ([sa]:4). Although I quote from a pre-publication copy of this article, it reflects the situation in the late 1990s.

Country	Buddhists	Asian Buddhists	Total Population in millions	Percentage of Buddhists in total population
USA	4 million	3 million	264	1.5
Europe (west)	1.1 million	811 000	290	0.4
France	650 000	500 000	58	1.1
Great Britain	180 000	130 000	58	0.3
Germany	150 000	110 000	82	0.2
Netherlands	33 000	20 000	15	0.2
Italy	75 000	25 000	57	0.1
Switzerland	20 000	15 000	7	0.3
Denmark	8 000	3 000	5	0.16
Austria	13 000	8 000	8	0.16
Australia	200 000	170 000	18	1.1
South Africa	6 000	3 000	42	0.01
Eastern Europe	1 million (especially in Eastern Russia)			

**Table 3.1** Western Buddhism as percentages of total population

These figures are certainly rough estimates, gleaned and compiled from a variety of sources. It also excludes Latin America<sup>136</sup> and New Zealand and does not give a breakdown of what kinds of Buddhism we are dealing with. Moreover, Baumann rather uncritically includes South Africa in the list as a western (i.e. "First World" or developed) country, which conflicts with the present tendency among South Africans to identify more strongly with the Third World.

Nevertheless, Baumann's estimates give us an interesting starting point to consider the relative strength of Buddhism in non-Asian countries after little more than a century of Buddhist presence. If we accept Baumann's estimates, we can see that, leaving eastern Europe aside for the moment (although various Buddhist schools have become established in eastern Europe since the end of the Cold war, most of the one million Buddhists Baumann lists here would be Buryats, ethnically Mongol people forcibly resettled under Stalin and

**136.** There are few studies on Buddhism in Latin America. An exception is a specialised study by Clarke (1995).

therefore "culturally Buddhist", or Kalmuks),<sup>137</sup> in terms of the proportion of Buddhists to the total population, we can rank western countries as follows:

Country	Buddhists	Population in mil- lions	Percentage
USA	4 million	264	1.5
Australia	200 000	18	1.1
France	650 000	58	1.1
Great Britain	180 000	58	0.3
Switzerland	20 000	7	0.3
Netherlands	33 000	15	0.2
Germany	150 000	82	0.2
Denmark	8 000	5	0.16
Austria	13 000	8	0.16
Italy	75 000	57	0.1
South Africa	6 000	42	0.01

**Table 3.2** Western Buddhism ranked by percentage of total population

In this table the USA clearly leads, with 3 Buddhists out of every 200 Americans. Australia and France are closely behind, with one Buddhist out of every 100 Australian and French residents. In South Africa, by comparison, only one out of every ten thousand people is a Buddhist.

However, this chart still does not give us a clear picture of the development of western Buddhism: western countries with large Asian immigrant communities (often those with extensive colonial histories in Asia) may show a higher proportion of Buddhists compared to the general population, but this does not necessarily give us an idea of the influence of Buddhism among non-immigrants.

For example, Hinduism entered South Africa in 1860 with a group of indentured labourers aboard the SS *Truro*. This started a pattern of immigration that continued until the

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137. A reader of this manuscript has suggested that this figure shows "some confusion between Buriyats and Kalmuks" and "must be including Asiatic Russia in Europe". One could question Russia's inclusion in a list of *western* countries (and also South Africa's, of course). See Bräker (1983:36) for more on the number of Buddhists in the (then) Soviet Union.

turn of the century. Today, there are thousands of Hindus in South Africa and they lend a special texture to the South African religious scene. But nearly all of them are descendants of those early Indian immigrants. Hinduism in South Africa is an ethnically bounded religion. The same is not true of Buddhism. Thus, we need to differentiate between a religion that is transplanted along with a population of existing believers, and one that is transplanted into a different socio-cultural matrix. It will be recalled that our theoretical model deals primarily with the latter situation.

Not all forms of Buddhism arrived in the west at the same time. Theravāda was by and large the first, with the first monks arriving in Britain by the beginning of the twentieth century, with the arrival of the venerable Ananda Metteya, a British-born Theravāda monk, in 1908 generally regarded as the start of this process.<sup>138</sup> The principal reason for this is probably that two of the three main Theravāda countries were British colonies at the time. This made Theravāda Buddhism more accessible to British scholars. Other early Buddhist influences in Europe were the texts made available by mostly German Sanskritists and British Pāli scholars. Taken together, these form a representation of Buddhism that still seems to dominate the western mind: Buddhism as a calm, rational (though not rationalist) and essentially atheistic religion. With the arrival of Zen Buddhism, first from Japan with the lectures and books of D.T. Suzuki, later also from Korea, Vietnam and China, this popular perception of Buddhism was further reinforced. This representation is, of course, incomplete—it largely ignores the devotional and ritual aspects that dominate Asian little-tradition Buddhism in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna countries in favour of a selected reading of great-tradition Buddhism. Only with the arrival of various Tibetan schools, Nichiren and Pure Land groups and others since the 1960s has a more balanced range of representations been available to interested westerners.

Today, the Theravāda, Tibetan, Zen, Nichiren and Pure Land schools are the main forms of Buddhism outside of Asia.<sup>139</sup> All five are also present in South Africa, among South Africans of either European or Asian descent. There is also the slow development of an indigenous "western" Buddhism, as in the case of the Western Buddhist Order and its sister association, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), founded by Bhikṣhu

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138. Harris (1998).

139. See Martin Baumann's survey of recent (1997) sources on the online *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, available at <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/4/baum2.html>.



Sangharakshita in the late 1960s;<sup>140</sup> the indigenisation of Theravāda meditation by organisations like the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts;<sup>141</sup> and also a slower indigenisation process within the more mainline groups that maintain stronger institutional links to their Asian heartlands. In all of these developments, the main emphasis is on representation, that is, on presenting Buddhism as a functional and attractive religious alternative to westerners, but even more so on relational positioning, that is, on defining where Buddhism stands in relation to the dominant tendencies in western cultural life—Christianity and science, to name but two. Baumann suggests that among the main themes in the creation of a western Buddhism are "an emphasis on lay practice and participation, a critical evaluation of women's roles, the application of democratic and egalitarian principles, a close linkage to western psychological concepts, the conceptualisation of a socially engaged Buddhism and the creation of an ecumenical, nonsectarian tradition".<sup>142</sup> From our perspective all these activities can be regarded as relational positioning, and we shall examine his remarks again when we discuss South African Buddhism.

A strong tendency in this emerging western Buddhism is its structural similarity to the "Protestant Buddhism" that emerged in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth century. This affinity lies mainly in the fact that the strict dividing line between monks and laity became blurred in both the Sri Lankan "Protestant" Buddhism and the new western variety, and perhaps also in the fact that both have been influenced by (mainly Protestant) Christianity<sup>143</sup> and modern western philosophies. This is a contemporary instance of relational positioning, and indeed one of the major forms of interreligious dialogue today is between Christianity and Buddhism.

Western Buddhism is not yet in the respectability and establishment phase: while the representation stage can be said to be largely completed and may now be regarded as secondary, western Buddhists are still largely involved in the task of relational positioning, not only towards more established western religions, philosophies and ideologies, but also

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140. Ratnaprabha (1987); viz. Baumann's 1998 article on "Working in the right spirit: the application of Buddhist right livelihood in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order" in the online *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, available at <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/5/baum1.html>.

141. See Batchelor (1994:349).

142. Baumann ([sa]:4.)

143. cf. Mellor (1991).

towards other Buddhist schools. An example of this may be seen in Christmas Humphreys' dated but still influential book *Buddhism*, where he discusses the Pure Land tradition:

This is an easy, simple religion, for all the work is done for one. It was therefore immediately popular, and it may be better than no religion at all. But is it Buddhism?<sup>144</sup>

It can be argued that westward expansion has reinvigorated Buddhism. Reat, for example, points out that

The opening of the twentieth century found Buddhism scattered among traditional communities practising uncritically an age-old and in many cases enervated faith with little remaining consciousness of its global mission. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Buddhism stands confidently in its place as one of the universally acknowledged moral, intellectual and spiritual systems guiding all humanity into the third millennium of the common era.<sup>145</sup>

Although Reat does not make the point explicitly, it is clear from the context of this quotation (right at the end of his chapter on western Buddhism—indeed, as the closing paragraph of the entire book) that he regards the westward expansion of Buddhism to be one of the prime factors in this re-energising of contemporary Buddhism. It is a debatable point: reflexive feedback from western Buddhism back to Asia can be seen as early as 1891, when the Theosophist H.S. Olcott formulated fourteen "Fundamental Buddhist beliefs" and had them approved by representatives from various Buddhist countries. A similar process occurred again in 1945, when Christmas Humphreys, on behalf of the Buddhist Society, London, formulated "Twelve principles of Buddhism", and similarly obtained approval from traditional Buddhist societies.<sup>146</sup> But we cannot regard feedback as the primary factor in the contemporary resurgence of Buddhism described by Reat. The status of a religion is intimately tied up with the status of its host societies on the international stage: If Haiti ever became a major world power, one would expect Voodoo to gain in respectability. Even

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144. Humphreys (1981:165).

145. Reat (1994:293).

146. Humphreys (1981:71-76).

without western Buddhists, the rise of Japan as a major political, economic and at one stage military power might have been enough to produce the same effect. Similarly, the political independence of former British and french colonies in Asia might have been as great a factor in this growing self-confidence among Buddhists as the emergence of a western Buddhism.

What is clear, however, is that the relational positioning between Buddhism and western religious and philosophical ideas has served to create a reflexive feedback effect, bringing new aspects to traditional teachings. The Kyoto school is an authentic expression of Japanese Zen, but its members' interest in Nietzsche, Heidegger and other western philosophers has deepened their understanding of the Buddhist problematic by changing the kinds of question that can legitimately be asked. Similarly, the impact upon Asian Buddhism of western science and the philosophical basis on which it rests has yet to be determined. Most likely it will differ from science's impact on Christianity, but it would be surprising if there were none at all.<sup>147</sup>

### 3.5 Buddhism in South Africa<sup>148</sup>

Buddhism in South Africa is largely a late twentieth-century phenomenon. Nevertheless, it does have not only a history, but even a prehistory of sorts, both going back much further. Whether it will have a future will depend largely on its ability to find a position in relation to indigenous African thought. But that will be the topic of a later chapter. Let us examine the history and present state of South African Buddhism.

In an effort to avoid a parochial point of view and to see the position of South African Buddhism clearly as an expression of western Buddhism, I conducted field research in the Netherlands in September 1999. My findings will be noted in this section where appropriate, but for a fuller historical account of Dutch Buddhism, see Van Gemert, Van

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147. See Clasquin (1997) for some thoughts on this topic.

148. For this section, I am deeply indebted to the various authors who contributed to Clasquin & Krüger (1999), especially Darrel Wratten (1999), Hugh Laue (1999) and Louis van Loon (1999). Another invaluable source of information is Wratten's (1995) doctoral thesis on South African Buddhism. Beyond these formal sources, this section is based on my personal involvement with South African Buddhism since 1984 and on ongoing contacts with leading South African Buddhists. However, no specific field research was done for this thesis. See also p.12 f.

Ijken and Janssen.<sup>149</sup> In short, however, it can be said that the similarities between Buddhism in these two countries vastly outnumbered the differences. As in South Africa, Dutch Buddhism encompasses a variety of representations—a wider one, even, than in South Africa—and is deeply engaged in relational positioning. It is, however, closer to achieving a position of respectability and establishment, even to the point of recently attempting (unsuccessfully, so far) to establish a special-interest broadcasting society (*omroepvereniging*), and thus obtaining airtime on the state-controlled radio and television channels.<sup>150</sup> This effort continues, and once successful, it will symbolically signal the arrival of Buddhism as a "column" (*zuil*), if only a minor one, in the peculiarly Dutch social system of vertical stratification. It will announce that Dutch Buddhism has attained a significant degree of respectability and has entered the third stage of transplantation. As we shall see below, Dutch Buddhism is probably in advance of South African Buddhism in this respect.

### 3.5.1 Early representations

The story of South African Buddhism goes back to 1686. In that year, the Portuguese ship *Nossa Senhora dos Milagros* was shipwrecked on the west coast. Among the stranded passengers who had to make their way south to Cape Town were three Thai bhikkhus who had been sent to Europe as emissaries of the Siamese king, and their retinue of perhaps another half a dozen persons. For four months, they were quartered in the house of a free burgher until a passing ship enabled them to continue their journey.<sup>151</sup> This was the first representation of Buddhism ever in South Africa. In the restrictive religious circumstances then current at the Cape—the Dutch Reformed Church was established, Lutheranism grudgingly tolerated, and Catholicism, Islam and all other religions strictly prohibited—it is not surprising that the moment passed without leaving a trace. Even if it was possible under such circumstances to present a representation of Buddhism, relational positioning was simply not feasible in any terms other than those of implacable opposition. There may have been other Buddhists who landed at the Cape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but there are few records of them and they left little evidence of their stay. For

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149. Van Gemert (1990), Van Ijken (1997), Janssen (1994).

150. Personal communication: Prof. emeritus R.H.C Janssen (Leiden University), Oegstgeest, 10 September 1999; Prof. R Kloppenborg (Utrecht University), Utrecht, 15 September 1999.

151. Wratten (1995:32-35).

the citizens of the Cape colony during this period, the only information on Buddhism was from travel writings, often from wildly fanciful ones like those by Olfert Dapper and George Psalmanaazaar.

By the nineteenth century, however, continuing western explorations in, and commercial and political dealings with, Asia were producing far more reliable information on Buddhism, and one starts to see literature produced at the Cape that describes Buddhism more or less accurately. Accurate description, of course, does not imply unbiased evaluation of what is described. Thus, a curious debate raged at the Cape that tried to place the historical Buddha in Africa rather than India. This debate seems to have started with the English orientalist William Jones and was later echoed in the writings of Gutzlaff. Even when the theory was completely discredited in the rest of the world, a subliminal racism seems to have kept it alive in South Africa as late as the mid-twentieth century: "Delegates at a congress of the Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede in 1956 learned from the ethnologist J.P. Bruwer that 'The black Buddha of India originated in the physical image of the Negroid'".<sup>152</sup>

If the Buddha himself was not an African, then perhaps there had been Buddhists in Africa? In 1911 James McKay suggested that there were artistic similarities between Chinese paintings and the rock paintings of the San (Bushmen) and that the San must therefore be descended from a mixed Chinese/Egyptian people living in East Africa who would have been Buddhists!<sup>153</sup> We can surmise that these attempts to conflate African and Asian otherness, much of which was done by missionaries, served primarily to accentuate the uniqueness and importance of the Christian (and later, the Christian Nationalist) message. By confusing Buddhism with African traditions, the representation became a misrepresentation, one with negative connotations for those who would otherwise be most attracted to Buddhism, that is, the nominally Christian white middle class.<sup>154</sup>

Despite this, positive evaluations of Buddhism started to appear in South Africa by the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, mostly from Unitarian and Theosophical quarters. Both these new traditions were at the time far more widespread and numerically

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152. Wratten (1999:21). SABRA, the South African Bureau for Racial Affairs, was a government-aligned think tank during the apartheid era.

153. Wratten (1999:22).

154. This differentiated attractiveness of Buddhism will be explored in chapter 6.

strong in South Africa than their present position might indicate, but they were still a small, liberal corner of alternative religiosity.

Nevertheless, from the first countrywide census in 1911 onwards, Buddhists start to appear in the official records of the Union, later the Republic, of South Africa. These official statistics have long been regarded with suspicion by the Buddhist community here, mostly due to the persistent appearance in them of a few thousand black Buddhists whom no-one has ever been able to find "on the ground", as it were. It seems that statistical manipulation of data have skewed the picture fatally. Today, informal estimates of the number of Buddhists in South Africa vary from 6 000 to as many as 30 000.<sup>155</sup>

### 3.5.2 *Ethnic Buddhism*

The first South African Buddhists were from ethnic communities where Buddhism was an established religion. There had been a large Chinese community in the Cape from the eighteenth century onwards: "Out of a total of 1 417 seamen at the Cape of Good Hope in 1792, for example, there were almost as many Chinese sailors as there were Europeans".<sup>156</sup> But these were mostly a transient community, and left no trace of their religious practices behind. Lasting settlement of Chinese in South Africa did not commence until the early twentieth century. Among these Chinese settlers, conversion to Christianity was frequent and what Buddhist practice existed among them slowly faded away. Until 1992, when the Nan Hua temple near Bronkhorstspuit was established, there was no clearly-defined Chinese Buddhist presence in South Africa.

Another interesting development was the conversion to Buddhism of low-caste Hindus in Kwazulu-Natal province in the 1920s and 1930s—strictly speaking this is not an "ethnic" Buddhism, in the sense that these people's ancestors were not Buddhists, but one of the factors that caused them to adopt Buddhism as an alternative to Hinduism was that, unlike Christianity and Islam, it was at least of Indian origin. Calling it an "ethnic Buddhism" is therefore not too far off the mark.

This process started in 1917 with the establishment of the Overport Buddhist Sakya Society by Rajaram Dass. There may by that time already have been Buddhists among Indian immigrants—the 1911 census report show 394 Buddhists of Asian origin. However,

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155. Van Loon (1999:40); the lower estimate is my own.

156. Wratten (1995:179).

immigration from India was halted by the South African authorities around the time of the First World War, and the escalation of the Asian Buddhist presence to 12 487 ten years later<sup>157</sup> was not due to a sudden influx from the east, but to South African low-caste Hindus attempting to escape from their social position by rejecting the religious context in which that position was embedded. It was a transplantation fuelled almost entirely by relational positioning. This process ran parallel to the revival of Buddhism in India itself, but it is unclear if there were any links between the Ambedkarian transplantation of Buddhism and the South African equivalent. To some extent, the South African Indian Buddhist experience can even be said to antedate that of Ambedkarian Buddhism in India, and to be more directly related to a lesser known revival of Buddhism in South India somewhat earlier, in which Rajaram Dass' father had been a prominent figure. Thanks to the research done by Van Loon<sup>158</sup> in the late 1970s, we do know the kind of representation of Buddhism that survived among Indian Buddhists in and around Durban. It was not a transcendental faith: only 25 percent of those interviewed regarded nirvana as the goal of religious practice, while most gave pride of place to the improvement of one's quality of life. The low level of great-tradition involvement in this manifestation of Buddhism can be seen in the fact that out of all Van Loon's respondents, not one "could conceive of karma operating without an inner 'self' through which alone it could become motivated and effective".<sup>159</sup> Only much prompting by the interviewer produced an answer closer to Buddhist great-tradition orthodoxy. Thus, this was almost entirely a little-tradition Buddhism, created perhaps by some input from literature, but without real contact with the classical Buddhism of Asia.

From the height of its popularity in the 1920s and 1930s the Indian Buddhist community steadily declined. Many reasons have been suggested for this: The small numbers of the community led to intermarriage with Hindus; there never was any support forthcoming from Buddhist countries, many of which were themselves impoverished, under colonial rule, or inward-looking at the time, nor could the impoverished community import monks or scriptures at their own expense; and perhaps most significantly, the importance

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157. This figure from the 1921 census is highly suspect, especially considering that 1936 census found only 1 771 Asian Buddhists in the country. We can accept that there was some growth in the Indian Buddhist community, therefore, but not one as spectacular as suggested by the 1921 figures (Van Loon 1979:18).

158. The *locus classicus* of research into this community is Van Loon's (1979) unpublished research report, of which his subsequently published article (Van Loon, 1980) is a much abbreviated version. See also Wratten (1995:164-178).

159. Van Loon (1979:46).

of caste itself declined steadily in South African Hindu society, thus depriving the Indian Buddhists of their prime reason for adherence. As transplantations go, therefore, this one was not a success story.

This poses a challenge to our theoretical model: it raises questions of causality. If this was an unsuccessful transplantation, what needed to be different to make it a successful one? As suggested above, this instance of transplantation may have been "fuelled almost entirely by relational positioning" towards Hinduism. But over time, the prime cause of that positioning, a strict implementation of the caste system, largely disappeared. Thus, in accordance with the conditionalist philosophical basis on which the model is based (as described in chapter 1), the very need for Buddhism among the Indian population disappeared. This is not to say that such a one-to-one relationship is necessarily always the case: conceivably other factors might have arisen that might have kept South African Indian Buddhism going; after all, Ambedkarian Buddhism persists in India, where the caste system is also in decline. But the Indian Buddhist community in Kwazulu-Natal never achieved the kind of "critical mass" that might have enabled them to go on. Nor could they compensate for low numbers by having access to social and financial resources, as white South African Buddhists (who are overwhelmingly middle class) have today. Their low-caste origins meant that they had no such access. Even so, in South Africa today there are many religious organisations among poor people (the African Initiated Churches are perhaps the most obvious example) that continue to flourish. The question arises whether there was something within Buddhism itself that doomed this transplantation from the outset. Does this not show us that Buddhism depends on the great tradition, and ultimately on the meta-tradition, far more than other religions do? Can Buddhism survive without that movement towards self-transcendence, however dimly it may be perceived and however few may actually practice it within a given community? It is a question to which we shall return in chapter 6.

By the time Van Loon studied them in the late 1970s, there were only about 40 families left still calling themselves Buddhists. In many cases, even this represented a nominal allegiance to family tradition rather than actual practice. By that time, however, a new form of Buddhism was starting to emerge. It was found almost exclusively among the urbanised middle class, which, at that point in South Africa's history, meant that it was almost entirely restricted to white South Africans.



### 3.5.3 *The 1970s–Nonsectarian representation and the founding of Buddhist groups*

Little is known about the position of white South African Buddhists prior to about 1970. Most likely they were solitary practitioners, gaining some support from books and correspondence with institutions such as the Buddhist Society in London. Other may have found their spiritual homes within Theosophical lodges. It is known, however, that literary figures such as Olive Schreiner and C. Louis Leipoldt were, if not practising Buddhists, at least highly sympathetic to the Buddhist cause. Later in the twentieth century, the poet, painter and activist Breyten Breytenbach continued this tradition of artistic involvement in Buddhism by expressing his identity as a Zen Buddhist. Sheila Fugard is another prominent figure in this trend. Unlike Breytenbach, she has been actively involved with Buddhist organisations in the country. The name of actor Tobie Cronje should also be mentioned in this regard.

There seems to be, therefore, a small but significant interest in Buddhism in the South African artistic community. This could be a significant factor in the evolving representation of Buddhism in South Africa: it could liberate that representation from the restrictions of an intellectualised interpretation into a more expressive mode. The involvement of artists and performers seems to be a common trend in western Buddhism, most noticeably in the case of film actors and musicians who declare their involvement (Richard Gere is perhaps the best known example because he has extended his Buddhist beliefs into political activism on behalf of Tibetan exiles) but also in terms of the graphic arts—the Summer 1999 issue of *Kwartaalblad Boeddhisme* features articles on three western Buddhist artists<sup>160</sup>, one of whom paints in a western style but is inspired by Buddhist designs, while the others paint traditional Tibetan thangkas. The same issue also contains a critique of the singer Madonna's new-found spirituality, which contains elements of Buddhism:

Zoals gewoonlijk zweeft Madonna nomadisch tussen deze posities in: de maagd en de hoer hebben het veld geruimd voor de moeder en de mystica.

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**160.** Bakkes (1999a, 1999b), Van der Horst (1999).

Even nomadisch zwerft zij rond tussen katholicisme, kabbala, yoga en boeddhisme.<sup>161</sup>

At South African universities, too, there has been some interest in Buddhism from the academic perspective. While researching South African publications on Buddhism, I found twelve master's and doctoral dissertations dealing with Buddhism in one way or another. In terms of books, contributions to collective works and academic articles, South African academics are also well represented, considering that the country's universities have not a single academic department devoted exclusively to Buddhist studies.<sup>162</sup>

From about 1970 onwards, small Buddhist groups started to spring up in the main metropolitan centres of South Africa, each one generally associated with one or two leading founder members, who in many cases are still leading figures in the Buddhist community. Although many of these groups were in some way associated with the main streams encountered in western Buddhism, at this stage they tended to be open to practising Buddhists and sympathisers of all persuasions. Only by 1985 would sectarian divisions start to harden and official affiliation to overseas institutions start to play a more important role. Similar small groups have come into being since then and many have disappeared, eventually to be replaced by others.

The range of representations on offer to South Africans did not differ much from those available elsewhere in western Buddhism. Seen from the sectarian level, they included Theravāda, Tibetan Buddhism, Nichiren and Zen. But South Africa was lagging behind the west where the transplantation of Buddhism was concerned, and by this time a new western understanding of Buddhism was starting to emerge, based largely on a modern interpretation of Theravāda, but with large infusions from Zen and an outward-looking concern for social and environmental issues. Since then, especially under the influence of figures such as the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and the scholar/activist Joanna Macy, it has become known as "engaged Buddhism" and has become a major influence, especially in North American Buddhism. In South Africa, "engaged Buddhism" in this developed form has yet to make an impact. Individual South African Buddhists may involve themselves in social and environmental projects, but one can hardly speak of a movement. My discussions with

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161. "As usual, Madonna drifts between these positions: the virgin and whore have made way for the mother and mysticism. She drifts equally nomadically among Catholicism, Kabbalah, Yoga and Buddhism"—Smelik (1999:18).

162. Clasquin & Krüger (1999:125-130).

Dutch Buddhists and Buddhologists in September 1999 indicate that even in Europe this trend towards an "engaged Buddhism" is far more subdued than in North America.<sup>163</sup> If my observations there are representative for Europe generally, the trend towards an engaged Buddhism may be a reflection of a particular set of teachers who became popular in the Americas, or it may reflect specifically American social conditions.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, nondenominational Buddhism was in an earlier stage of development, best exemplified by the vipassana teachings of Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, and it was this kind of Buddhism that became one of the main forces in South African Buddhism. Although largely based on Theravāda teachings, it discarded most of the associated ritual and appurtenances. This became the basis for the typical South African Buddhist group of the early 1970s to the middle 1980s: No robes were worn, pre-meditation ritual, if there was any at all, was cut down to a bare minimum, and links with western science and philosophy, especially transpersonal psychology, were stressed. It was an attempt to create an entirely secular Buddhism based only on meditation, a relational positioning not towards Christianity, but towards liberal western culture. In these groups, it was almost impossible to tell if one was attending a nominally Tibetan, Zen or Theravāda meeting.

Even today, this is still the dominant representation of Buddhism one can find at the Buddhist Retreat Centre near Ixopo.<sup>164</sup> Set in the countryside of Kwazulu-Natal province, the BRC first started operating in 1979 and was formally inaugurated in 1980. Under the direction of Louis van Loon and initially that of his wife Molly, it has survived the political turmoil of South Africa's transition to democracy (the BRC is situated just south of Richmond, one of the most politically volatile areas in the country) to become the closest thing South African Buddhism has to a central point. Buddhists who started out there but who have since moved into more doctrinally delineated groups affectionately refer to it as the "kindergarten". Nominally Theravāda in orientation, the BRC has expanded its vision considerably since its founding and also presents retreats in which some meditative practice is combined with artistic expression, nature awareness and work on interpersonal relationships.

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**163.** Personal communication: Prof. emeritus R.H.C Janssen (Leiden University), Oegstgeest, 10 September 1999; Prof. R Kloppenborg (Utrecht University), Utrecht, 15 September 1999; Mr. H. van Willenswaard (International Network of Engaged Buddhists), Amsterdam, 30 September 1999.

**164.** See the Buddhist Retreat Centre's website at <http://www.websol.co.za/brc/brc.html> or at <http://users.lia.net/vanloon/>

Indeed, although Theravāda was one of the prime representations of Buddhism available in South Africa during the formative stages, and the BRC was visited by many Theravāda monks, it was only in 1997 that there was a formal establishment of "authentic" Theravāda on South African soil, with the establishment of a centre in Pietermaritzburg for the small Burmese community.<sup>165</sup> Although most of the resident monks there are involved only with the religious requirements of Burmese Buddhists, most of whom are medical specialists working in this country under contract to the provincial authorities, the Ven. Dhammarakkhita, who is of Australian origin, has made great progress in uniting the Buddhist communities in Kwazulu-Natal province.

Other "Theravāda" groups, including many local groups affiliated to the BRC, in fact support the westernised vipassana approach. Despite this, they see themselves as falling within the Theravāda tradition, broadly conceived, and will be regarded as such in subsequent discussion. This nonsectarian "Theravāda" (with liberal additions from other traditions, mostly Zen) remains a mainstay of South African Buddhism, reinforced by the regular visits of Godwin Samararatne, a Sri Lankan lay teacher.

### *3.5.4 The 1980s—a reverse in the direction of relational positioning*

In the late 1980's, South African Buddhist organisations entered a phase of what Baumann terms "recouplement". From a relational positioning towards liberal western culture, the emphasis changed to a positioning back towards the Asian homeland. Links with overseas organisations were established or strengthened, the ritual and monastic, or at least quasi-monastic, elements of Buddhist practice were reintroduced. The Dharma Centre in Somerset West, for example, had long been one of the "free-form" South African groups that had hosted teachers and adherents from various traditions since its inception in 1982. Although Heila Downey, one of the founders, was a student of Philip Kapleau Roshi, the centre had never become a formal subsidiary of the Zen Center in Rochester, NY. Around 1987, the group did slowly start to incorporate more specifically Zen-inspired ritual, based on that followed in Rochester, but it was kept to a minimum.

In 1989, however, the Dharma Centre became an integral part of the Kwan Um school, an international Korean Zen organisation headed by Zen master Seung Sahn. Within a year or two, robes had become, not compulsory, but an accepted part of practice;

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165. See the homepage of the Myanmar Buddhist Society of South Africa at <http://users.iafrica.com/m/mb/mbasa/home.htm>

prostrations and chanting increased in number and duration, and a semi-monastic discipline was more clearly implemented. Chants that were formerly performed in English were now done in Korean. Even meals became more "oriental" in character, with chopsticks replacing western eating utensils.

There are other Zen groups in the country, notably in Johannesburg, but the Dharma Centre, now headquartered in the town of Robertson, is clearly the leading Zen-based organisation in South Africa. The institutional support it receives from the Kwan Um organisation means that it is able to import teachers with relative ease. In their case, the change to a relational positioning back to traditional Asian sources has been a success. However, it should be noted that in a suburban subsidiary centre in Rondebosch, they have been forced by popular demand to re-institute, once a week, a meditation session shorn of all Zen ritual, much as things were before 1989. This, plus the continuing success of an independent though nominally Theravādin group in nearby Claremont, indicates that the demand for a less traditional representation of Buddhism survives.

A similar process has occurred among South Africa's Vajrayāna ("Tibetan") Buddhists. Both the Kagyudpa and Gelugpa schools are represented in the country. Of these, the Kagyudpa have had the longest presence, dating back to the founding of a Tibetan Friendship Group in 1969. Kagyu groups were established in most of the main cities for the next ten years, but at this early stage, they maintained close links with the Theravāda- and Zen-oriented organisations, and both membership and hosting of teachers were widely shared. Like those other groups, meditation rather than ritual was stressed as the main representation of Buddhism. By 1982, the organisation was strong enough to set up a meditation centre in the hamlet of Nieu Bethesda. At this stage it too was used to host teachers from other traditions, but by the mid-1980s, precedence was slowly being given to Tibetan, and particularly Kagyudpa, teachings. When Rob Nairn, one of the founding figures of Vajrayāna Buddhism in South Africa, left in 1988 to do a four-year retreat in Scotland, the centre slowly fell into disuse. It had always been a controversial place to put a meditation centre: unlike the BRC, it was not in the countryside but right in the middle of a very conservative community. When Nairn returned, the Nieu Bethesda centre was sold and the Kagyu establishment started to concentrate on strengthening its urban structures. While accurate figures are hard to come by, I would estimate that they make up between one third and one half of all white South African Buddhists, most of them in the main urban centres. The Kagyu establishment is mainly under the direction of Akong Rinpoche, is

directly linked to the Samye Ling temple in Scotland, and is regularly visited by Tibetan monks from that source.

In 1992, the Kagyu establishment was joined by a Johannesburg Gelugpa centre, under the direction of Geshe Damcho, who visits it regularly. The centre was established with considerable financial assistance from the Fo Kuan Shang school, which at the same time was starting to establish a massive temple complex (the Nan Hua temple) just outside Bronkhorstspuit.

The Fo Kuan Shang school occupies a strange position in South African Buddhism: in its *traditional* Chinese representation of Buddhism, it paradoxically presents to Africa the most *radical* representation yet. The temple complex serves two main purposes: it ministers to the needs of the Chinese Buddhist community in South Africa; and it has established the African Buddhist Seminary, where young African men can train to be Buddhist monks in the Fo Kuan Shang order. While the seminary is open to South Africans, it actively recruits novices in Tanzania, Congo and elsewhere. It is unique in South African Buddhism in that it was actively *brought* here in a missionary spirit. All other forms of Buddhism in the country, from the Indian Buddhists in Kwazulu-Natal to the Zen Buddhists of Robertson, *fetched* Buddhism from elsewhere: in all those cases, it was South Africans who established various representations of Buddhism in the country and embarked on the tasks of relational positioning and, eventually, respectability and establishment. Even if the relational positioning they did, and continue to do, was limited to the needs of the small circles of their respective memberships, they were in principle prepared to adapt teachings to local needs.

At the Nan Hua temple, however, the representation is uncompromisingly Chinese. Novices are required to learn the Chinese language, participate in Chinese rituals, practice Chinese martial arts and so on. Although the founder of the local temple, the Venerable Hui Li, has acknowledged that a relational positioning towards Africa will be required, he believes that this would best be done by Africans, and that the Chinese monks and nuns here would do best to teach what they know.<sup>166</sup> The reasoning may be sound, but in my work with the students over the last three years it has become clear that learning a new religion and a whole new culture at the same time may just be too much of a stumbling block. Van Loon has expressed his doubts about the long-term success of the project: "It is still too early to assess how successful this overtly missionary movement will eventually be in

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166. Hui Li (1999:59).

Africa, but evidence so far indicates that it seems altogether too grandiose, too culture-bound, and its articles of faith too foreign and difficult to integrate into a modern western or, for that matter, African cultural environment".<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, the Fo Kuan Shang school is to be commended for at least one thing: the vast majority of their students are black. This is the first real attempt to transplant Buddhism in South Africa beyond the boundaries of the white community, even if most of the students come from Tanzania, the Congo and other countries beyond the borders of South Africa.

This is not to say that there are no South African Buddhists at all except among whites and Indians, but their numbers are extremely small. The Kagyu Buddhists, in particular, have from time to time conferred with African traditional healers, and they report a number of black members in their Harare branch. In South Africa, however, the only group to have attracted significant numbers of black members has been the Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

In keeping with the international situation, the SGI has few ties with the rest of the South African Buddhist community, and little is known about them bar the information on their website<sup>168</sup> and what can be gleaned from Wratten's doctoral research. According to Wratten, the establishment of the SGI in South Africa can be traced to 1983. By 1994, there were about a hundred members divided among nine groups. This is quite a small showing compared, for example, to Ghana, where the movement claims over 50 000 adherents.<sup>169</sup>

### *3.5.5 The 1990's—first beginnings of respectability and establishment*

The 1990's saw a new development in South African Buddhism; the rise of permanent teachers. Until then, Buddhist organisations had depended on the services of itinerant instructors, some of them monastics, other lay teachers, augmented by the unofficial teaching efforts of leading members of the organisation. During this period, however, the BRC obtained the services of two Theravādin ex-monastics, Kittisāro and Thanissara, who committed themselves to spending at least six months of the year in Ixopo. At the Dharma Centre, Heila Downey was given the title Poep sa Nim (dharma teacher) and

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167. Van Loon (1999:39).

168. For the SGI South Africa website, see <http://www.pvas.co.za/sgi/sa.html> or <http://members.aol.com/abayaa/africa/letter.htm>

169. Wratten (1995:231-235).

was thereby allowed to teach as an official instructor of the Kwan Um school, empowered to conduct koan practice and certify her students' attainments (she has taught as far afield as Russia since then). Among the Tibetan Buddhists, there are officially no homegrown teachers yet, but Rob Nairn has occupied this position *de facto* ever since his return from a four-year retreat in Scotland, and Tibetan monks now visit South Africa more regularly and for longer periods than in the past. Added to this has been the arrival of Chinese monks at the Bronkhorstspuit temple and of Burmese bhikkhus at the monastery in Pietermaritzburg. Although we cannot say that Buddhism in South Africa has entered into the respectability and establishment phase yet, this is an important first step in that direction. Certainly Dutch Buddhism has advanced much further into this third phase of transplantation. During my field research in September 1999, for example, I visited an exhibition of Mongolian Buddhist art in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. One should not make too much of this: the Nieuwe Kerk, an Amsterdam landmark since construction was started in 1400, is no longer in use as a church (except, since 1814, for coronations) and the following exhibition was to be one of Islamic art. Nevertheless, it will be some time before we can expect to see Buddhist art exhibited in the Groote Kerk in Cape Town or the Moederkerk in Pretoria!

Informal observation suggests that, as elsewhere in western Buddhism, the South African form is characterised not only by a small number of committed Buddhists, but also by a much larger group of sympathisers, or what Tweed<sup>170</sup> calls "night-stand Buddhists" on the grounds that while they may not have any institutional affiliations, they may read books on Buddhism (which in his characterisation are kept on the nightstand, or bedside table) and practice some solitary meditation. Evidence of this can be seen in the modest, but persisting sales of J.S. Krüger's books on Buddhism, all of which are published and marketed in South Africa.<sup>171</sup>

Another important development in white South African Buddhism that has taken place in the last ten years or so is the increasing isolation of the Vajrayāna Buddhist establishment from the others. While the Zen and Theravāda (both traditional and modernist) organisations in South Africa have worked out a *modus vivendi* that allows each to maintain its organisational integrity while sharing teachers and venues, the Kagyudpa

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170. Tweed (1999).

171. Personal communication with Ms. P. Van der Walt, C.E.O. of Unisa Press, March 1999. The works in question are Krüger (1988, 1989, 1991, 1995) with a new volume on the *Sutta Nipāta* on the way.



and, to a lesser extent, the Gelugpa traditions of Vajrayāna Buddhism have increasingly abandoned the free and easy association of South African Buddhism as it was in the 1970s and early 1980s. This implies that, in terms of our theoretical model, the Theravāda and Zen establishments have been engaged in a relational positioning process towards each other in a way that allowed mutual rapprochement as fellow Buddhists, while the Vajrayāna engaged in relational positioning towards Buddhism generally, and ended up in something of a "recoupment" phase, to use Pye's and Baumann's terminology, *within* Buddhism. I have been informed that similar events have occurred in France recently.<sup>172</sup> Dutch Buddhism, in contrast, is more fragmented even than the South African variety, with little communication even between groups nominally belonging to the same type of Buddhism.<sup>173</sup> Although there is a nationwide Buddhist organisation for the whole of the Netherlands (still lacking in South Africa), called the Boeddhistiese Unie van Nederland, the kind of informal contact that exists among various Zen and Theravāda groups in South Africa seems to be much rarer in the Netherlands. It may well be that the increasing isolation of the Vajrayāna groups may be a harbinger of future developments in South African Buddhism.

This is not to say that there is animosity between the two camps or even between their leaders: a spokesman for the Kagyu school expresses it as follows:

(Akong) Rimpoche has often told us that we should examine the teachings and teacher and whatever tradition and then make some sort of commitment to practice those teachings in some depth ... Choose your mountain and then climb it ... Rimpoche's second admonition is to have respect for all other traditions and religions. However, he has seen that trying to mix traditions and practices at one centre does not work but only confuses—especially beginners. So only teachers approved by Rimpoche can teach at our centres—and the rest of us are only facilitators, not teachers.<sup>174</sup>

Nevertheless, the implication of this is that Vajrayāna Buddhists and those from the broad Theravāda/Zen group see less and less of each other, for South African Buddhism has

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172. Personal communication, Dr. L. Obadia (Charles De Gaulle University, Lille). Lausanne, 23 August 1999.

173. Personal communication, Mr. R. Sinnige (Zen onder de Dom), Utrecht, 18 September 1999.

174. Laue (1999:75).

not developed any kind of social activity outside the meditation session. Thus, without any conscious effort, a relational positioning is occurring *within* South African Buddhism, an "us" and "them" division that threatens in the long run to create two separate camps whose members are largely unaware of each other (as both are already largely unaware of the presence of the SGI). This, too, we can see as a first step towards respectability and establishment.

While this policy closes the door on joint practice, it does not necessarily prevent the various Buddhist groups from co-operating on an organisational level. To this end, it was decided at a conference in July 1998 to set up a steering committee that would look into the possibility of setting up a pan-Buddhist organisation for the whole country. Since the committee members live right across the country, discussion would be on an e-mail list. However, after some initial interest, enthusiasm for the project waned quickly among the committee members and the idea was quietly dropped. Perhaps the time was not yet right for the formation of such a body: it may well be that only a Buddhism thoroughly ensconced in the respectability and establishment phase is ready for such efforts.

### 3.5.6 *An assessment of South African Buddhism*

Martin Baumann has suggested that there are six main themes in the creation of a western Buddhism.<sup>175</sup> With Indian Buddhism in South Africa moribund, and the traditional Chinese representation at Bronkhorstspuit yet an experiment in a very early stage, it remains for us to see to what extent the Buddhism of South African whites falls into this general pattern:

- 1 *An emphasis on lay practice and participation.* Given that there are true monastics only in the Pietermaritzburg Burmese monastery and at the Bronkhorstspuit temple and its satellite centres, lay participation is clearly a key factor in South African Buddhism. Many leading figures do lead a semi-monastic lifestyle, but remain lay members who hold down full-time jobs in addition to doing the teaching and administration in their respective groups. South African Buddhism started out in the early 1970s as small groups of lay meditators, and it is precisely this presentation of Buddhism as primarily meditative that dominates the Buddhist scene here. The South

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175. Baumann ([sa]:4.)

African Buddhist scene in 1999 has two main loci: there is the meditation or retreat centre, often a permanent establishment out in the countryside, but sometimes an urban school or church property rented for the weekend; and there is the small group of lay meditators meeting in a prominent member's house for an evening meditation session. A third locus, of which I observed a number in the Netherlands, is not found in South Africa: this one might call the "storefront" centre, and consists of a small shop in the inner city, where books on Buddhism are for sale in the front section, while there is a space for meditation sessions in the back. The absence of this kind of Buddhist establishment in South Africa may be explained with reference to two factors: firstly, in this country the white middle-class people most likely to be attracted to Buddhism do not live in the inner city;<sup>176</sup> and, secondly, South African Buddhism has not yet advanced far enough into the respectability and establishment phase to make such a public announcement of its presence. Although it is not exactly dangerous to be a Buddhist in South Africa, and freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by the 1996 constitution, one finds South African Buddhists preferring to maintain a low-key approach in the face of almost overwhelming Christian dominance.

- 2 *A critical evaluation of women's roles.* There have been retreats, especially at the BRC, where the issue of women's roles was hotly debated, but more generally, one cannot say that this is a matter of primary concern to South African Buddhists. However, among the permanent teachers who emerged in the 1990s (as mentioned above), two are women, and there have been visiting female teachers such as Ayya Khema here in the past. South African society in almost all its ethnic and class-based subdivisions tends heavily towards patriarchy, and feminism outside Buddhist circles is still engaged in an ongoing struggle for the recognition of women's rights. It could be argued that Buddhist women, most of whom are white and middle-class, are in fact less oppressed by patriarchal structures than their sisters elsewhere in the country. But this does not negate the fact that a lot of introspection still needs to be done on this issue within South African Buddhist circles.

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176. By way of illustration, in Amsterdam one can find a Theravāda Buddhist centre above a pub and about two blocks away from the red-light district! The South African equivalent would perhaps be a centre on the edge of Hillbrow—a situation no-one familiar with South African demographics in 1999 would think very likely to occur.

- 3 *The application of democratic and egalitarian principles.* Although this aspect is less visible in South African Buddhism than some of the other aspects, it can be observed in the western-style system of committees that run most of the groups. In some cases, of course, this may disguise the real power relations within the group, where actual authority is exercised by a few founding members who may or may not serve on the committees. But the opportunity for ordinary members to make their voices heard does exist, perhaps a little more in the 1970's style "Theravāda" groups than in those that have gone through a relational positioning back to a more traditional style.
- 4 *A close linkage to western psychological concepts.* This too is evident, but it does need qualification. The western psychological concepts to which South African Buddhists relate well are by no means those of mainstream psychiatry, but rather unorthodox psychological trends such as transpersonal psychology. The author Ken Wilber seems to be a particular favourite. I suspect that the same may be true elsewhere in western Buddhism.
- 5 *The conceptualisation of a socially engaged Buddhism.* As we have seen, South African Buddhism lags behind western (especially North American) Buddhism in this regard. There are signs that more social and environmental concerns are emerging here, too: environmental retreats at the BRC and a planned AIDS hospice in Robertson are just two examples. But we cannot discern engaged Buddhism here as a trend distinct from the various Theravāda, Zen, Vajrayāna and other strains of Buddhist practice. Until quite recently, any efforts in the direction of social engagement would have gone into the struggle against apartheid, and while one cannot say that all Buddhists engaged in that struggle, a few certainly did. Indeed, it was in the context of the anti-apartheid movement that the South African establishment, in the form of the Supreme Court, was forced to acknowledge Buddhism as a religion when David Hartman claimed and eventually received conscientious objector status on the basis of his Buddhist beliefs.<sup>177</sup> This event marks a special point of Buddhist relational positioning towards the South African state at the time. Other young Buddhist men in the country did do military service, while

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177. For an account of the Hartman trial see Chairman, Board for Religious Objection (1984) and "Hartman vs Chairman, Board for Religious Objection and Others."(1987).

still others (the author included) quietly avoided it by going underground. After the Hartman case, however, not only was the South African state forced to acknowledge the presence of Buddhism in the country, but Buddhism itself had symbolically declared its opposition to apartheid. With such a momentous task in hand, it is perhaps understandable that other social concerns took a back seat in the development of South African Buddhism.

- 6 *The creation of an ecumenical, nonsectarian tradition.* As we have seen, this was one of the earliest accomplishments of South African Buddhism back in the 1970's, and while it persists in many groups, it has since been overtaken in many cases by a relational positioning back towards a more traditional style of Buddhist practice.

It should be clear from this that South African (white) Buddhism is a form of the emergent western Buddhism as defined by Baumann, not only in terms of its origins, but also in terms of its subsequent development. Local conditions may have retarded the development of some of the factors Baumann mentions and speeded up others, but the overall picture does not differ much from the general view of western Buddhism that he gives us.

There have even been some modest examples of relational feedback from South Africa to other western Buddhist centres. Since the emergence of a corps of permanent teachers, some of these people have been on teaching trips to other countries, mostly elsewhere in the west, but also to some ex-communist bloc countries. Although I have not personally attended such overseas retreats led by South African teachers, one can expect that insights derived from the South African Buddhist experience will play a part in them.

Where, then, does South African Buddhism fit into our theoretical model? Since it is a late development of western Buddhism, one which only took off in the 1970s, one would expect that it would be at the same developmental stage as its western parent (see page 76), or lagging slightly behind it. We would therefore expect it to be engaged in relational positioning and representation, but not yet in the respectability and establishment stage. And this is indeed what we find.

Representation remains still the major task facing South African Buddhists, for one can still encounter many people in this country whose knowledge of Buddhism is, at best, restricted to awareness, for example, that the poet and painter Breyten Breytenbach is a Zen Buddhist. South African Buddhism is still largely restricted to middle-class whites, and

representations of Buddhism have by and large been taken over from the main English-speaking western countries without much awareness of the problems this poses for the practice of Buddhism in an African context. Relational positioning is therefore done only towards Christianity, and to some extent towards western liberal culture. Few attempts have been made to initiate a relational positioning towards African Traditional Religion.

Explicitly westernised Buddhist movements like the FWBO are present in the country,<sup>178</sup> but have not yet influenced South African Buddhism to an appreciable extent. However, the slow westernisation of Buddhism can be seen elsewhere in South African Buddhist groups; in their organisational structures, in the sequence of events at their retreats, even in the kind of questions asked of visiting teachers, the issues that emerge are clearly western issues. An example: it has become customary for South African Buddhist groups to stress that the dharma is available freely to anyone who is interested, but nevertheless to charge a fee for each retreat. When pressed on this issue, they stress the difference between the (idealised) Orient and contemporary South African society: "In the east, people naturally put some money in the dana bowl, but here they'll probably think it is there to put the rubbish in".

South African Buddhism cannot be said to have reached the stage of respectability and establishment yet, much less that of re-enlightenment. It is precariously balanced between the need to adapt Buddhist teachings to local needs (currently the needs of the mainly white, middle-class people who practise Buddhism) and the desire to stick as closely as possible to various original Asian models. In other words, South African Buddhism is still largely engaged in relational positioning.

But this relational positioning is imperfectly contextualised: it concentrates on the needs and conceptual problems of the current South African Buddhist population, which is by and large white and middle class. Apart from the Indian, Burmese and Chinese "ethnic Buddhist" populations, what we find in this country is an overwhelmingly *western* Buddhism. This immediately raises the question: can there ever be a specifically *southern* (ie African) Buddhism?

Chapter 5 of this thesis will therefore largely concentrate on the presentation of Buddhism to Africa and on a tentative relational positioning towards African thought. Before this, however, we need to look at the position of Buddhism towards other religions

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178. Wratten (1995:235-236).

generally, taking full account of the Buddhist meta-tradition metaphysics of emptiness. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: BUDDHISM, OTHER RELIGIONS, "MISSION" AND TRANSPLANTATION

### Chapter contents:

#### 4.1 Buddhism

#### 4.2 "Other" religions

#### 4.3 "Mission" in Buddhism?

##### 4.3.1 Buddhist mission—a survey of literature

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##### 4.3.3 Mission as transplantation

#### 4.4 Transplantation

##### 4.4.1 Great tradition representation with significant meta-tradition inputs

##### 4.4.2 Great tradition representation with significant little tradition inputs

##### 4.4.3 Little tradition representation

#### 4.5 Summary: Buddhism, "other" religions and transplantation

**O**f the four stages in the transplantation and establishment of Buddhism to a new society, "relational positioning" is particularly relevant to the Buddhist attitude towards other religions. True, even at the representational stage one needs to take cognisance of the existence of other religious traditions, but once the new Buddhist community embarks on relational positioning, the question becomes of paramount importance.

But what is "the Buddhist attitude towards other religions"? Is there such a thing at all? After two and a half millennia of development and sect formation in diverse societies, can we even speak of a unified Buddhist view of non-Buddhist religions?

There are at least two ways to respond to this question. One can look at the history of Buddhism and try to determine whether it has any reasonably consistent *practice* regarding the existence of other religions. If we do, we can say with some confidence that such a practice relies on a consistent, if perhaps unspoken, view of other religions within Buddhism. Here we can ask questions such as: Has Buddhism attempted to supplant or eradicate religions that existed in a given area before Buddhism arrived on the scene (or, indeed, any that arrive afterwards)? Has it tried to co-exist with them, even to the point of



merging? Here analyses of interreligious attitudes such as the one by Whaling,<sup>179</sup> already mentioned in the previous chapter, become pertinent. Alongside the historical data, one may consider canonical announcements on the subject. Part of this chapter will be dedicated to this kind of undertaking, and further examples may be found in the following chapter.

But in such an attempt we would be looking only at the great tradition in Buddhism (and to a lesser extent the little tradition). If we were to discover a united Buddhist view of other religions, one could still ask on what it was based. That is, what is the *meta-tradition* impulse that gave rise to this view? This chapter will therefore also investigate how such a view or attitude could have arisen from the fundamental philosophical approach of the Buddhist meta-tradition. Here the basic question is whether, in the light of Buddhist teachings such as *paṭiccasamuppāda* and *śūnyāta*, one can really speak, in any ultimate sense, of Buddhism as a separate entity that can be set apart from other, broadly similar, entities, and compared with them, and develop an attitude, view or relation to them. In other words, is there a Buddhist theory of religion itself? As always, the meta-tradition itself is silent on this, its insights mediated of necessity by the great tradition. In this regard, the focus will be on some suggestions made by one of the leading exponents of great-tradition scholarship today, Abe Masao.

A religion's view of other religions will have practical consequences in the transplantation process. For example, can one speak of "Buddhist mission" at all and remain true to those central Buddhist views emanating from the meta-tradition? This is a question that will be raised in section 4.3.

#### 4.1 Buddhism

Historically, although great-tradition Buddhism has seen itself as the most complete truth and most efficient way of approaching the ultimate, it has generally tried to accommodate other religions as fully as possible: "The affirmation of the possible rightness of a variety of paths along which seeking might lead a person is a common Buddhist assertion. Most Buddhists would say that it is not impossible to become enlightened by following another religious path."<sup>180</sup> There is some textual evidence to support this viewpoint. In the *Cūlasīhanādasutta*, for example, the Buddha describes non-Buddhist

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179. Whaling (1981).

180. Morgan (1987:116).

views as belonging to the philosophical camps of either becoming or annihilation. Whichever religious teachers do not cling to either of these two schools of thought are described in terms that make it clear that they are equivalent to Buddhas.<sup>181</sup> In practice, we would not expect that too many other teachers would arrive independently at the same radical philosophical stance as the Buddha,<sup>182</sup> but the possibility is not explicitly excluded in this text, and of course there is in Buddhism a long tradition of prehistoric Buddhas, and of *pacekka-buddhas*, fully enlightened beings who refrain from teaching what they know to others. Thus, we cannot eliminate the possibility that other religious teachings may be on a par with the Buddha's.

This radical statement in the canonical writings of a so-called world religion gives us a first clue to the deeper meta-tradition. If any one thing can be said to typify Buddhism at this level, it is consistency. When it is stated that "all is impermanent" or "all dharma's are empty", this does not read "all except x ...". The human person and all his or her constituents are impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfactory (or "empty"). There is no immortal soul to grasp at, no everlasting deity to cling to. The meta-tradition applies this consistent approach even to its own great tradition: Theravāda orthodoxy, for example, is clear that there is one permanent "entity": *nibbāna*. How then, is a Theravādin meditation master like Ajahn Chah able to say unequivocally that "There's absolutely nothing that's permanent"?<sup>183</sup> To some extent, it is a question of rhetorical intent. This kind of statement emanates from the meta-traditional perspective; if he were asked to comment in a different context, it is quite possible that the Ajahn would have answered in terms of the great or even the little tradition.

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181. Horner (1976:85).

182. Compare the *Udumbarikā Sihanāda Suttanta* (Rhys Davids & Carpenter 1975:37), in which it is said: "Difficult is it, Nigrodha, for one of another view, of another persuasion, of another confession, without practice and without teaching, to understand that wherein I train my disciples, and which they, so trained as to win comfort, acknowledge to be their utmost support and the fundamental principle of righteousness." A seeming acceptance of the truth contained in other teachings may sometimes be a disguised rejection of them. We find a similar pattern in the *Cūḷasāropamasutta* (Horner 1976:245-253).

183. Chah (1980:126).

Then there are the three refuges to which every Buddhist turns at a little-tradition level, but in the great tradition these are already extensively deconstructed,<sup>184</sup> and in the meta-tradition perspective, there is only the refuge of no refuge at all. By the same token, if someone knows all that the Buddha knows, then he or she is by definition a Buddha, equal in stature to Śakyamūni. There can be no special pleading, no special status for any individual or entity. This is the radical consistency of meta-tradition Buddhism. Naturally, it did not go down as well in the great tradition, and even less in the little. We do not hear of miraculous events at the deaths of the arahants to the same extent as we do about the demise of the Buddha.

To this day, an open-ended stance towards the truth-claims of other religions can be found among Buddhists who maintain connections with the meta-tradition: In interviews with leading Japanese Buddhists conducted by a Catholic priest in 1967, for example, he asked his respondents whether they thought it was possible for a Christian to be enlightened:

Fujimoto Roshi: If one clings to the idea of Christianity and Buddhism, there won't be any true enlightenment. All these distinctions ... Religions are in the course of progress now. Christianity and Buddhism seem to be two different religions. And one may talk about enlightenment from this side or that. But after all, truth, fundamental truth, is just one. If one realises that point, there is real enlightenment. But if we talk about *Buddhist* enlightenment from the side of Christianity, or something like that, this kind of distinction won't lead one to enlightenment.<sup>185</sup>

Fujimoto Roshi: Father Graham asked whether it is possible for a Christian to attain enlightenment. I would say that it is. However, as long as Christians

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184. In great tradition Theravāda, the actual refuge is nibbāna. Bhikkhu Bodhi, for instance, writes of the dharma as a refuge that "as a means to an end it possesses instrumental value only, not ultimate value. Thus its status as a refuge is not ultimate" (Bodhi 1981:23). Nibbāna itself, he says, is the actual refuge which is taken when one ostensibly takes refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha.

185. Fujimoto Roshi, quoted in Graham (1968:97), emphasis in original.

are attached to *the* Christianity, as they have been, it is not possible. The same can be said for Buddhists.<sup>186</sup>

One may question just what the old roshi meant by "fundamental truth". The words suggest a fixed truth, a substantial truth. But meta-tradition Buddhism, most visibly in the Mahāyāna, revels in the contingency of an ever changing world, boldly declaring that in the final analysis there is no difference at all between nirvana and saṃsara other than the distinction we force upon them. The only absolute truth is that truth is empty, devoid of absoluteness. Perhaps the translation from the original Japanese produced more of a bias towards substantialism than he intended.

What is clear from this exchange is that he does not see Buddhism and Christianity as discrete entities, the truth-claims of one of which are to be preferred to those of the other. Instead, he sees enlightenment as an experience that may be attained by all who cease to cling to preconceived ideas, and that will be missed by all who do cling. Most significantly, he does not exclude Buddhists from this analysis. As Hsin Hsin Ming put it centuries ago in a poem still chanted regularly at Zen monasteries, "The great way is not difficult for those who do not pick and choose".<sup>187</sup>

Elsewhere in the canonical literature, in the *Upālisutta*, for example, we find specific injunctions that alms are to be given to all religious wanderers, not only to the followers of the Buddha. The general view seems to be that non-Buddhist religious practitioners are to be respected as genuine seekers after truth, even if misguided ones. Even if they do not have the whole truth, not everything they say is false. This gives us some idea of the representation of Buddhism (to the extent that we can speak of "Buddhism" as a social entity at the time) that was then current. In terms of Whaling's division of seven theological attitudes, it is the extreme one of "relativism", in which "all religions are equal paths to the same goal, the same *telos*, the same end."<sup>188</sup>

Indeed, Fujimoto Roshi goes even beyond such "relativism": for him, all religions do not lead to enlightenment; they are at best contingently related to it and may even act as impediments to its realisation. This is an important strain of thought in Buddhism—the Heart

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186. A letter by Fujimoto Roshi written after the interview, quoted in Graham (1968:104), emphasis in original.

187. Zen Center (1985:16).

188. Whaling (1981:316) emphasis in original.

Sutra even goes so far as to deconstruct such important great-tradition concepts as the four noble truths, the five skandhas and the concept of "attainment" itself, saying that all these disappear in the awareness of their essential emptiness. Again we see the ruthless consistency of Buddhist meta-tradition thought. If Buddhism itself turns out to be an impediment to insight, then it too should be rejected. As Fernando puts it "Buddhism does not need an apologetic to establish its reasonableness. It even invites its own rejection".<sup>189</sup> Or, in the words (by now almost cliché) of the famous Zen saying, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!"

One wonders to what extent this representation, fresh from the meta-tradition, was internalised by rank-and-file Buddhists of the time. For an alternative great-tradition approach, historically speaking probably more popular, sees Buddhism in terms of what Whaling calls "fulfilment"—a new, higher (perhaps the highest) development of religious thought.<sup>190</sup> Indeed, this attitude also arose among Buddhists, especially in China, where almost every school created elaborate charts detailing the relationships between the various schools of Buddhism and the major texts they studied, at times including also non-Buddhist traditions such as Śaivism in these pyramidal schemes. Such charts tended to assume a triangular shape, working their way up from the Buddha's teachings to the laity to what was perceived to be his final, ultimate teaching, as these were embodied in the different schools of Buddhism. Coincidentally, no doubt, the particular school to which the compiler belonged, and the particular text it specialised in, always ended up on top, as representing the pinnacle of the Buddha's teaching. In the history of religions, human nature always remains a factor to be kept in mind.

Nevertheless, an exclusivist understanding of religious truth and meaning has for the most part been foreign to Buddhism (with the possible exception of some Nichirenite movements). Buddhist attempts at relational positioning have by and large tended to inclusivism, whether it was of the "fulfilment" type or the more radical "relativism".

This attitude has coloured Buddhist history ever since. As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, wherever Buddhism went it picked up local ideas and customs and adopted these into its own systems of thought and ritual. Whaling contrasts Buddhism and

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189. Fernando (1979:91).

190. Whaling (1981:315).

Christianity in this respect when he says, "The Christians laid a premium on ... orthodoxy whereas .. Mahāyāna Buddhism (saw itself as) complementary with (other religions)".<sup>191</sup>

As a result, it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to speak of a "pure" Buddhism anywhere. Whichever kind of Buddhism we look at, we see traces of influences from the outside—from Hinduism in its own various stages of development, from local forms of animism, from the great Chinese philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism, and, if we are to believe a certain strain of British Buddhology, nowadays even from Protestant Christianity!<sup>192</sup> In the next chapter, we shall look at one possible way of doing this in the African context.

There is a philosophical assumption underlying such an effort: as in Huxley's "perennial philosophy", it is assumed that there is an underlying unity of Truth, harking back to the Rgvedic assertion that "Truth is one, but sages call it by different names".<sup>193</sup> But the Buddhist meta-tradition goes beyond even this. To paraphrase: "Truth is empty, but sages call it by different names anyway". To say "one" presupposes "many" and calls up the need to contrast one with the other, but the Buddhist understanding of "empty" does not presuppose "full". It *includes* fullness within itself. Without emptiness, no fullness. Without fullness, no emptiness. While on the conventional level we can distinguish the tea from the cup in which it is found, it is the emptiness inside the cup that defines the ceramic object as a cup, that defines an infusion of dried leaves in hot water as tea (i.e. a beverage). And, simultaneously, it is the act of pouring and drinking tea that defines the emptiness of that cup.

Of course in the great-tradition perspective, and certainly in that of the little tradition, Buddhists regard their tradition as embodying the most definitive truth: why else call oneself a Buddhist? In the meta-tradition, this hierarchical ordering of belief-systems falls away—the truth of emptiness, the truth that is no-truth, dissolves all distinctions between them. But even without radical insight into the essential emptiness of all truth-claims, this does not imply that everybody else is wrong. The point is not to negate other

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191. Whaling (1981:328).

192. See Mellor (1991), who shows how the adoption of a Buddhist identity by British people is less of a break with mainstream Protestant society than one might think—indeed, when British Buddhists do criticise Christianity, their target is usually Catholicism! (Mellor 1991:77). From this viewpoint, the Buddhist adoption of a partially Christian perspective can be seen in Baumann's terms as reinterpretation carried out in a processive mode of ambiguity and adaptation.

193. Rgveda 1.164.46.

people's insights, but to augment them. The historian Arnold Toynbee illustrated this point of view well when he imaginatively transplanted an English village to Japan:

Suppose ... that the place called Bromsgrove had happened to be in Japan instead of being in England. In England today, "Bromsgrove" is a mere place-name, and nothing more. Even the people who live there are not conscious of the word's etymology, and there is nothing in the present-day life of Bromsgrove to remind them of it. But, if Bromsgrove had happened to be in Japan, everything that is recorded in the name would still have been alive today. The grove would still be standing and still be holy in the present-day inhabitants' eyes. In the midst of the grove, the timber-built shrine of the local war-god Bron would still be intact, in exactly the same form as at the time of the arrival of a world religion fourteen hundred years ago. Pious hands would have replaced the timbers, one by one, as they rotted away. Of course, side by side with this primeval shrine, there would now be a medieval Christian church—or, to be more exact, a medieval Buddhist temple, if we are to imagine Bromsgrove being translated into a Japanese setting. The Buddhist missionary who first brought a world religion to Bromsgrove would never have dreamed of hewing down Bron's grove or overthrowing the local god's image (if such there had been). He would have told his converts that their ancestral god was really a manifestation of one of the minor figures of the Mahayanian Buddhist pantheon who had been sent on in advance to prepare the Buddha's way before him. The god of the ancient local shrine would have been given the official status of an honorary guardian of the younger local temple; and the priest of the shrine and the parson of the temple would be on excellent terms with each other ... Weddings would be celebrated at Bron's shrine and the fees would go to the priest; funerals would be celebrated at the temple and the fees would go to the parson. Paganism and Buddhism would be living happily side by side.<sup>194</sup>

This, indeed, has been one of Buddhism's greatest strengths: it has always seemed capable of incorporating indigenous beliefs in divine beings into its own system of belief

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194. Toynbee, in Tomlin (1978:269-270).

and practice.<sup>195</sup> One of the most telling examples of this was the indigenisation of Buddhism in Tibet, where pre-existing deities were adopted by the incoming Buddhist establishment and reinterpreted as protectors of the dharma. In mythological terms this was expressed as a great figure like Padmasambhava engaging in psychic battles with demons:

When Padmasambhava met the White Fairy of the Glaciers ... , a demonic lady who wished to destroy the foreign intruder, he drove her into a lake which he brought to boiling point through his magic power, boiled the flesh off her bones and plucked out one of her eyes, whereupon she finally sued for mercy and Padma assigned her the guardianship of some sacred books.<sup>196</sup> [But] it is of the highest importance that ... the national gods were not killed. Although Padma sometimes boiled them, he was not really allowed even to wound them, only to subdue them ... Even for the Buddhist it was true what an inhabitant of Sikkim once said of the national gods: "We had better not leave them out: they are very, very old".<sup>197</sup>

Today, in the Tibetan cultural area, some temple rituals recall and re-enact such mythical battles between the old faith and the new.<sup>198</sup> A similar process occurred in China:

The tolerance of the Chinese Buddhists and their preparedness to make adjustments to indigenous doctrines must have made them more acceptable. The Chinese deity of Heaven, for example, has a place of honour in certain

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195. Again, what Baumann might call assimilation, absorption or acculturation, depending on the precise details of each event, mainly within the processive mode of "ambiguity and adaptation".
196. Sierksma (1966: 112). Cf Bell (1968:37, quoting from the Pu-tön Rim-po-che, fol. 114): "By his occult magical powers he [subdued] spirits and demons and bound them under a solemn oath to abstain in future from doing harm to men or to Buddhism".
197. Sierksma (1966:113). See also Ortner (1989:211,n.11), Batchelor (1994:66). In terms of Baumann's scheme, this could be seen as primarily a case of absorption, insofar as these particular demons were unknown to Buddhists before they entered Tibet. There is also a measure of toleration present, except that "the aim to change and abolish these customs" (Baumann 1994:53) was never carried to completion. To the extent that these ex-demon protector deities themselves became the object of limited Buddhist veneration, we may even speak of acculturation.
198. Ortner (1989: 71-73). This differs from the Tibetan example above in that a greater measure of "toleration" was present.



Buddhist ceremonies; a bodhisattva was introduced as an incarnation of Confucius; Buddhist temples were built in accordance with the Chinese system of magical ideas, known as *feng shui*; Buddhists occasionally adopted Tao, the key term of philosophic Taoism, for the Buddhist dharma; and translations of phrases or passages were deleted or edited which might offend traditional Chinese susceptibilities, conditioned by concepts of Confucian morality.<sup>199</sup>

Thus, the process we see throughout Buddhist history is not a case of supplanting pre-existing beliefs, but of adding Buddhist views and insights to them where these will benefit the other (and, indirectly, Buddhism itself as well), and integrating them as well as they can be integrated. This must, of course, be supplemented with an equal willingness to admit weaknesses in one's own religious tradition and the strengths of the other, even if this means absorbing "foreign" elements into one's religious tradition.<sup>200</sup> This is true "interreligious dialogue", or even "multi-logue": a relentless search for the truth wherever that search may lead us.

In the process, some non-Buddhists may become Buddhists and some Buddhists may become non-Buddhists. From a narrow sectarian point of view, such "conversions" can be counted as profits or losses. But from a more comprehensive point of view, the radical search for truth and meaning can be seen as the primary driving force behind *all* religious, philosophical and metaphysical strivings. "Truth" and "meaning" are intertwined aspects of a greater gestalt. What one holds to be true thereby gains meaning, and what one finds meaningful is accordingly in some sense true. This truth need not necessarily be a literal truth verifiable by the strictest criteria of positivist science: if one finds meaning in the myth of, say, Santa Claus, the truth of this myth is not destroyed by the regrettable fact that reindeer cannot fly! Truth (and meaning) works on a variety of levels. The search for it (rather than the assertion of having found it already) is one of the fundamental impulses underlying the religious quest.

Certainly it, along with compassion, is a major driving force in Buddhism, for behind all the historical accretions, behind the rituals and organisations, behind the power struggles and self-aggrandisements that accompany all human endeavours, lies a singular search for

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199. Singhal (1984:89).

200. "Absorption", in terms of Baumann's seven strategies

truth. Insight, gnosis, jñāna, prajña, wisdom: whatever name we attach to it, the search for truth has always been the leitmotiv of Buddhism. If we knew the truth, we would be enlightened and all questioning would cease. Just at what level of enlightenment this occurs is a matter for conjecture and speculation, which in itself indicates that we have yet to arrive at that point. But when one does arrive there, the implication is that all theories, all "views" can then be discarded like a raft that has finished its task of moving one across the river, to use the famous Buddhist parable. To the enlightened being, even Buddhism itself is something to be discarded. Ideally, in great and little-tradition Buddhism, we should find some shadow of this radical self-relativisation. And indeed we do, not in a simplistic assertion that Buddhism itself is untrue, but in the lived experience of Buddhists who have established the *modus vivendi* with other religious traditions in their society so brilliantly encapsulated in Toynbee's description.

Similarly, in Christianity we are told that "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free".<sup>201</sup> From a Buddhist perspective, it could be said that the truth which most Christians understand this saying to point to is predefined in the Christian scriptures. It is a hard, substantialised, "full" truth lacking the essential ingredient of "emptiness". And equivalent critiques of the Buddhist understanding of truth could be made from the Christian side. This does not negate the central importance of the search for truth, for reality in the religious quest.

Labels such as "Buddhist" and "non-Buddhist" become trivial in such a grand pursuit. They describe starting points, not destinations. We all arrive at the debate from certain directions: we can do no other, for none of us is a *tabula rasa*. What we may emerge as at the end, or rather at different stages during the ceaseless process, may or may not still be described as "Buddhist" or "Christian". A third, new, label may appear. Or all labels may fall away in the silence of the absolute.

This process of multi-logue is as old as the human race and shows no signs of abating. All humans are involved in it in one way or another, whether knowingly or unwittingly, actively or passively. We cannot help ourselves. Even an outright rejection of the process contributes to its continuation, for to reject something, one must first acknowledge its existence, and this act of acknowledgment itself lends authenticity to that which is rejected. When we accept something from a "foreign" tradition, we change our self-understanding; when we reject or even exterminate it, we define ourselves in terms of the

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201. John 8:32.

other and, again, our self-image is altered. As long as people have different views on ultimate questions, this endless flux of shifting positions will continue.

Nevertheless, if we take a snapshot of the process, if we artificially freeze a moment in time and space in its course, we can identify in this spurious still-life certain dominant trends, some positions temporarily taken that derive largely from the ossified traditions of thought which we call religions and philosophies. And we can assign labels to them to help us navigate the complicated pathways of the process. For instance, we can see a large Christian contribution. We can see contributions from Platonists, Taoists, Marxists and all the other "-ists" that ever were or ever will be. And then there is the contribution which we conventionally call "Buddhist".

#### 4.2 "Other" religions

It is against this background that we can see Abe Masao's proposal for an integrated view of religions in his essay *A dynamic unity in religious pluralism: a proposal from the Buddhist point of view*.<sup>202</sup> In this essay, Abe develops a line of thinking that runs as a consistent thread through all his dialogic thought. He agrees with John Cobb's assertion that we should not seek common ground among the various religions' assertions of ultimacy, as this does not do justice to each of these assertions, though not, one suspects, in the sense in which Cobb originally meant it.

Abe rejects the idea of a "common denominator" or "ultimate unity" because to him it denotes a static reference point that fails to recognise the dynamic unity brought about by the "positionless position" of emptiness:

For, in the positionless position made possible by the realisation of "Emptiness" or the non-substantiality of everything, the relative is ultimate and the ultimate is relative. In other words, the relativity of various religions and the ultimacy of each religion are dynamically non-dual and identical. This dynamic position is possible only through the denial of a "common denominator" or "ultimate unity" in various spiritual traditions.<sup>203</sup>

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202. Abe (1995: 17-39), originally published in Hicks and Askari (1985:163-190).

203. Abe (1995:24).

Here, in the writings of one of the greatest of contemporary great-tradition Buddhist thinkers, we see the meta-tradition coming through strongly. To establish a sociological entity called "Buddhism" is well and good, but it is then a religion among others, with no privileged access to the one supposed ultimacy which all are supposed to reflect. But the dynamic co-dependence of all the traditions is itself indicative of the relative "space" in which they exist, of their utter lack of self-existence. What ultimately matters to Abe is not the distinct religions and their many and varied claims to final knowledge, although he takes each one seriously *within its context*, but the emptiness to which they all point (at least potentially).

Abe continues by making a proposal that amounts on one level to a Buddhist "theology of religions", but that on another level undercuts all religious thought, including that of the Buddhist environment from which it originates. He bases it on the Buddhist teaching of the *trikāya*, the three "bodies" of the Buddha. This is of course formally a Mahāyāna (especially Yogācāra) doctrine, but its origins can be found in Hīnayāna scriptures and commentaries too.<sup>204</sup> Abe describes the three bodies:

- *The dharmakāya* (truth-body), the Buddha seen as the dharma itself, as the manifestation of enlightenment, interdependence, emptiness, the all-that-is as a dynamic self-emptying field of open potentiality
- The *sambhogakāya*<sup>205</sup> (enjoyment body), or the mythological Buddha with all the 32 major and 80 minor marks of the superior being, the Buddha as depicted in most Buddhist art and all its iconography
- The *nirmāṇakāya*, the physical manifestation of Buddha-ness, of enlightenment, in a specific human (and occasionally non-human) form, what would be properly called a "body" by the non-Buddhist

Abe then applies the three-body theory to non-Buddhist religions by transposing three new terms onto it: "Lord", "God" and "Boundless Openness". The historical founders of religions, such as Jesus, Moses and, controversially, Mohammed as "Lord" (or "master"), that is, as *nirmāṇakāya*, are placed on a par with the historical Buddha. The category "God"

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204. Cf. Williams (1989:167-184).

205. A variety of spellings exist for this term, e.g. *sambhogyakāya* and *sambhogikakāya*. In this section I shall use the same spelling as Abe.

(i.e. sambhogakāya) he applies to the supreme deity as understood by the various religions, Buddhism included: "This refers to Yahweh, Allah, Ísvara (Śiva, Viṣṇu etc) Amida and so forth".<sup>206</sup> But underlying, overarching and (simultaneously) undercutting them all is the category of "Boundless Openness":

In the present proposal, ultimate reality for all religions is understood as formless, colourless, nameless, unlimited, impersonal "Openness" or "Emptiness", which stands for *dharmakāya*. As stated earlier, this Emptiness is not a static state of emptiness, but rather a dynamic activity constantly emptying everything, including itself. It is formless by negating every form, and yet, without remaining in formlessness, takes various forms freely by negating its own formlessness. This is the reason that "Formless Emptiness", or "Boundless Openness", is here regarded as the ultimate ground which dynamically reveals itself both in terms of personal "Gods" and in terms of "Lords" that are historical religious figures.<sup>207</sup>

The immediate reaction to Abe's proposal must be to ask whether he is not engaged in an imperialistic enterprise of assimilating all other religions to a specific Buddhist doctrine. By positing "emptiness" as the "ultimate ground" of all religions, is he not doing essentially the same thing that Panikkar does when the latter speaks of "the unknown Christ of Hinduism"? But here Abe is let down by the terms he is forced to use. Although he uses the word "ground", what he really proposes is not a ground or basis at all in any substantialist sense, but a common *groundlessness* of all religious traditions—the ground of no-ground, as he might have put it. It is precisely because of this groundlessness that they differ: if there really was a common ground, diversity would be a philosophical problem in need of explanation. It is also because of this groundlessness that, despite their differences, all are equally true. The Amidist Buddhist who believes in Amitābha as the "ultimate" saviour and the Christian who holds exactly the same belief about Christ are both correct, but both have progressed only to an understanding up to the level of "Lord". Yes, Abe's interpretative framework comes from a Buddhist milieu, but it could conceivably have come from elsewhere, and he quite openly gives his essay the subtitle *A proposal from the Buddhist*

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206. Abe (1995:32).

207. Abe (1995:32-33).

*point of view*. Significantly, Abe, speaking as a Buddhist great-tradition philosopher but as one with a clear insight into the meta-tradition, does not reserve a privileged place for Buddhism in his scheme. It is likely to offend as many Amidist and Nichirenite Buddhists as it does Christians and Muslims. And as likely to assist members of those religions with an insight into their own faiths' meta-traditions.

Indeed, it is at the other end of his proposal that Abe's proposal falls short, for his identification of Jesus, Moses, Gautama and so on with the *nirmāṇakāya* does not exhaust the scope of the three-body system. As there can be only one *dharmakāya* from which reality emanates, or, more precisely, as there can be no two Boundless Opennesses to manifest themselves in relatively concrete forms, it is not only the great religious teachers who are transformation bodies. If it were so, it would be necessary to explain the existence, transient and causally conditioned as this existence may be, of other sentient beings and indeed the planets on and the very universe in which they exist. To posit a separate originating principle for "Lords" and "non-Lords" is to introduce a dualism that negates the non-dualistic understanding of reality as "Boundless Openness" itself. Thus, we are *all nirmāṇakāyā*, made from the same stuff (or non-stuff) as these great teachers. Unfortunately, we do not realise this. As Williams puts it:

... the *dharmakāya* is ... not so much a personification of emptiness as that which is set forth or exemplified in the Buddha's very being. It is his true nature, the lesson of which he embodies. Since the *dharmakāya* is the true being of others as well (all are empty of inherent existence) so all, through having the *dharmakāya* within, as it were, can embody the *dharmakāya*—that is, all can become fully enlightened Buddhas.<sup>208</sup>

To be fair, the three-body doctrine was rarely pushed this far in the historical development of Buddhism: this kind of insight was usually expressed in terms of the universality of Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature (*tathāgathagārbha*). But all these Mahāyāna teachings are tightly interwoven, and one wonders why Abe stops short at this point. Perhaps the reason lies in the context of his essay, which deals with interreligious dialogue rather than Buddhism itself. To state plainly that all Buddhists are potentially equal to the Buddha is to imply that all Christians are potentially divine and equal to Jesus, or all

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208. Williams (1989:175).

Muslims potentially equal to Mohammed in prophethood, which may be a commonplace in the more mystical recesses of those religions, but would hardly be acceptable to mainstream Christianity or Islam. So let us regard Abe's reticence as a "skilful means" in the Buddhist contribution to interreligious dialogue.

On the positive side, we can observe for our present purposes that Abe's analysis is not only a theoretical (great-tradition) development of a Buddhist teaching into a pan-religious theory of interreligious relationships and dialogue, but that it admirably describes the popular (little-tradition) Buddhist attitude towards "other religions". We can now understand *why* Buddhists have by and large been able to co-exist with other religious traditions throughout Buddhist history. If Boundless Openness chooses to manifest itself on the "God" level as Amaterasu, or as Śiva, who are we to deny it, to close off its infinite potentiality? The same applies to the "Lord" level. Only if another religion threatens to close off Boundless Openness itself is there a real philosophical threat to Buddhism (never, of course, to Boundless Openness itself). But Taoism apart, most religions with which Buddhism has come into contact have had a weakly developed meta-tradition of their own, concentrating on the "God" and "Lord" levels instead of on "Boundless Openness". And Taoism proved to be compatible with Buddhism on this philosophical point, if not always on the sectarian level.

This has enabled Buddhists to rationalise these "foreign" deities down from their ultimacy in the other religion, down to the "God" level, perhaps. Given time and proximity, these might even become part of the Buddhist pantheon themselves, at least as far as the Buddhists were concerned. Of course, just how much of this one reveals to one's non-Buddhist neighbours depends on the context: to give a contemporary example, talking about "Boundless Openness" as superior to Yahweh and Christ at a charismatic revival meeting would hardly constitute skilful means! But this process does allow Buddhists, again in the contemporary setting, to make statements like, "We don't see Christ as the son of God, but we do honour him as a bodhisattva, a wise and compassionate teacher". Not wholly satisfactory to the non-Buddhist interlocutor, most likely, but enough to serve as a basis for co-existence.

### **4.3 "Mission" in Buddhism?**

But is there then any place in Buddhism for a more activist stance towards transplantation? In a word, can there be such a thing as Buddhist "mission"? Elsewhere, we

have seen that Buddhism is commonly grouped with Christianity and Islam in the somewhat artificial category of "universal religions". From this, it is an easy step to assume that it must therefore be a "missionary" religion in the same way as the other two are. But in the light of the role played in Buddhism by the meta-tradition, this becomes a highly questionable assumption. This section will explore the growth of the concept of "Buddhism mission", note the criticism that has been levelled against it, especially in the work of Jonathan Walters, and show how an understanding of Buddhism as a religio-philosophical complex consisting of three interacting "traditions" can be used to resolve this issue.

#### *4.3.1 Buddhist mission—a survey of literature*

The dynamics of Buddhist interaction with non-Buddhist societies has rarely been the subject of much scholarly attention. What there is, is normally subsumed under the topics "mission" and "dialogue". "Mission" seems to predominate. For example, in the *Dictionary of Buddhism*, we are told that:

In Buddhism, the missionary motive was implicit from [the] first, in the Buddhist gathering of a company of disciples. His discovery and teaching of the Dhamma, and his own refusal to enter immediately into Nibbāna, preferring rather to communicate his discovery to those who would listen, provides [the] starting point of Buddhist mission; the Dhamma has always been taken to have relevance for the whole of mankind. The truth is one; mankind is one. The instrument of mission has normally been the sangha or monastic community. The proclamation of the dhamma may therefore take place irrespective of local conditions. After an initial period of expansion, the mission of Buddhism stagnated; it has only been taken up again in [the] twentieth century, partly in response to Western and Christian challenges. The world mission of Buddhism is today acknowledged by virtually all groups<sup>209</sup>.

Much of the existing material on this subject is mainly concerned with the historical details of particular "missionary" efforts, whether in the distant past or in contemporary

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209. Brandon (1972:186-187).



society. One particularly popular topic in this genre concerns the missionary efforts of the emperor Aśoka, which are described in terms of his convening of the Third Council at Pāṭaliputra, his missions to various areas and the evidence of his rock edicts,<sup>210</sup> his specific missions to Greek-speaking peoples in the west,<sup>211</sup> and the details of his son Mahinda's missionary journey to Sri Lanka.<sup>212</sup> The entry of Buddhism into China has been another relatively popular field of investigation,<sup>213</sup> while books about the history of, say, Tibetan or Japanese Buddhism will generally have a section on the monks who first brought the dharma to that particular country. There are a few other scattered references to mission in articles such as Fernando's *Account of the Kandyan mission sent to Siam in 1750*<sup>214</sup> and Tapp's *Buddhism among the Hmong*<sup>215</sup>. As far as the contemporary situation is concerned, we may cite Gray, who simply describes the recent spread of Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism in Britain.<sup>216</sup> Contemporary western interest in Buddhism has also been reflected in the popular press.<sup>217</sup>

Historical contributions to this debate from within the Buddhist, as opposed to the Buddhological, world have tended to centre on the figure of Puṇṇa, one of the Buddha's monks who was renowned for his courage in bringing the dharma to tribes on the outskirts of Indian civilisation.<sup>218</sup>

There was some interest in Buddhist mission from a more theoretical perspective in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of this came from western

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210. Anacker (1978), Hazra (1984:84-93), Ch'en (1968:111-117).

211. Scott (1985a).

212. Dhammavisuddhi (1987). Cf. Smith's (1979, 1987) articles on religious assimilation in Sri Lanka, Day's (1988:33-37) work on "Buddhist cultural diffusion from mainland India into Southeast Asia" in this context, and also Ling (1985:175-195) for more information on the introduction and subsequent development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka..

213. E.g. Biernatzki (1991:47-67), De Jong in Schopen (1979:77- 99), Pachow (1980:213 ff.).

214. Fernando (1959).

215. Tapp (1986).

216. Gray (1965).

217. E.g. Newsweek (1955, 1963), Munnik (1991), Van Bart (1992), Donaldson (1996).

218. E.g. Saddhātissa (1991:79-81), Ishigami ([sa]:195-199). The original Pāli Canon reference is to the *Puṇṇovādasutta* (Majjhima Nikāya, sutta 145). The story also appears in the extra-canonical *Divyāvadāna* and *Avadānakalpalatā* (Saddhātissa 1991:79).

missionaries in Japan who were mostly interested in contrasting Buddhism unfavourably with Christianity;<sup>219</sup> others, such as Pfoundes's article *Why Buddhism?*<sup>220</sup> answer such charges from a perspective that is more sympathetic to Buddhism.

One seminal early text on the theory of Buddhist mission was Rhys Davids's *Buddhism as a living force*,<sup>221</sup> in which certain factors that assisted early Buddhist mission, such as the absence of physical, political or linguistic barriers to intercultural intercommunication, the intellectual ferment brought about by the contact between Dravidian and Indo-European cultures, the absence of a rigid Brahmanic hierarchy that might otherwise have imposed orthodoxy and the conflict between the priestly and warrior castes at the time.<sup>222</sup> The next theoretically informed reference to Buddhism as an expanding force was only in 1926, in an article that describes the way Japanese Pure Land Buddhism used social service as a missionary tool.<sup>223</sup> After this, apart from a description of how invading Japanese forces used Japanese forms of Buddhism as propaganda tools immediately before and during World War II,<sup>224</sup> the topic seems to have been largely neglected for most of the twentieth century.

Recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in the topic. Much of this has been in a comparative perspective: thus, Lily de Silva compares the Buddha and Christ as religious teachers, including the aspect of sending out missionaries to spread their respective teachings.<sup>225</sup> Peter Masefield uses the spread of early Buddhism and of the Unification

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219. E.g. Gordon (1896).

220. Pfoundes (1895).

221. T.W. Rhys Davids (1903).

222. See page 14 ff.

223. Addison (1926).

224. Wales (1943). This article was published during World War II and is not without its own propagandistic intent: for instance the author relates how, "by the twelfth century, Buddhism in its purely Japanese form had emerged. This is Zen Buddhism which disinterested students, in agreement with orthodox Mahāyānists, have described as a tissue of solemn nonsense, a defiance of common sense." (p. 429)

225. De Silva (1992:11).

Church in the twentieth century to show that there is a fundamental similarity between the ways in which new religions disseminate their teachings.<sup>226</sup>

Of the non-comparative theoretically-inclined studies, only a few, like Vajiragnana's article *Ehipassiko*,<sup>227</sup> have come from within the Buddhist community itself. While there is much debate within western Buddhist circles about the kind of Buddhism that should develop within western culture, little is said about how to convert more westerners to existing forms of Buddhism or, indeed, on how to have Buddhist influences permeate western culture in general.

There has also been an interest in the way Buddhism has moved into western society. Ratnaprabha, for example, describes the formation of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order as an example of this process,<sup>228</sup> while in the same volume, Morgan describes the methods of evangelisation followed by the Soka Gakkai organisation.<sup>229</sup> Holsten's article on Buddhism in Germany sets out that it is not "... concerned with either a chronicle or a record of Buddhism in Germany, but with the doctrine of the Buddha as it is presented to people in Germany and with the encounter between Christendom and the German Buddhists";<sup>230</sup> it therefore also falls into this class of literature.

Clausen's article on the subject is even more ambitious. He argues that Victorian academic and existential interest in Buddhism and the need for Christian missionaries to understand the thought-systems of the people they were trying to convert were among the chief causes not only of the appearance of a new academic discipline called Comparative Religion, the precursor of Religious Studies, but of the spirit of eclecticism and syncretism that has characterised the twentieth century.<sup>231</sup>

Sharf's article on "The Zen of Japanese nationalism" describes how the western world has come to accept an understanding, according to him an erroneous one, of Zen Buddhism

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226. Masefield (1985).

227. Vajiragnana (1991). cf. Buchner (1990).

228. Ratnaprabha (1987).

229. Morgan (1987).

230. Holsten (1959:409).

231. Clausen (1975).

as antirational and non-ritualistic.<sup>232</sup> There are also some tentative remarks about the particular qualities of Buddhism that facilitated its expansion into Asia in books by Carrithers<sup>233</sup> and Conze.<sup>234</sup>

Besides these English-language studies, there are also a few other articles on roughly the same range of subjects in German,<sup>235</sup> Swedish<sup>236</sup> and French.<sup>237</sup>

Beyond the restrictive bounds of "Buddhist mission", there is a considerable body of literature on the current interaction between Buddhism and other religions. Chief among these others is, of course, Christianity, and the well-respected journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies* is entirely devoted to this topic. To name all the important articles in this journal since its inception is, sadly, beyond the scope of this section, but the 1997 edition is of particular interest—it contains an entire section of papers concerned with both the Buddhist<sup>238</sup> and Christian<sup>239</sup> views of the relation between mission and dialogue.

Beside dialogue with Christians, there is also a developing discourse with Judaism. Buddhist-Jewish dialogue is explored and documented in works by Kamenetz, Heifetz and Teshima,<sup>240</sup> but can also be seen, for example, in the Dalai Lama's visit to Brandeis University in the USA during May 1998. One particular point of interest in this process is the comparison between the Jewish experience of diaspora and repression and the current exile status of Tibetans in India and repressions of Buddhism and Tibetan culture in China itself.

Given current geopolitical circumstances, relations between Buddhism and Islam can be expected to be rare, and so indeed they are. Strangely, however, there also seems to be little interaction between Buddhism and its sister religion Hinduism. Also, apart from

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232. Sharf (1993).

233. Carrithers (1983:79 ff.).

234. Conze (1982:61-62).

235. Benz (1958), Ladner (1958), Baer (1986). It should be noted that Baer's article is written in German, despite the English title.

236. Hultberg (1974), Gällmo (1982).

237. Hofinger (1962).

238. Kim (1997), Olendzki (1997), and Strauss (1997).

239. Burrows (1997), Cenker (1997) and Muck (1997).

240. Kamenetz (1994), Heifetz (1978), Teshima (1995).

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa's attempt to construct a "dhammic socialism",<sup>241</sup> we find few attempts by Buddhists and Buddhologists to make serious contact with the humanist and Marxist schools of thought, although something of the kind is evident in the continuing efforts to reconcile Buddhism and western science.<sup>242</sup>

#### 4.3.2 *Out with the old—Jonathan Walters' rethinking of Buddhist mission*

One work on Buddhist mission and interaction is of sufficient importance to warrant a section of its own : *Rethinking Buddhist missions* by Jonathan S Walters. In this dissertation Walters argues that

"Buddhist mission" was invented in and for the Protestant missionary-dominated nineteenth century Anglo-American world whose Protestant presuppositions produced a misunderstanding of pre-modern Buddhist literary and epigraphic relics which, close examination shows, are not the missiological treatises that Buddhologists have considered them to be; only by rejecting the Buddhological construct of Buddhism as a missionary religion can we nuance our historical understanding of these literary and epigraphic texts, which changed across time and space, employed various literary styles, and constituted developments in Buddhist thought about, among other things, an early stage in the Buddha's biography, the meaning and history of the monastic disciplinary code (Vinaya), the nature of Buddhist empire and the position of Sri Lankan kingdoms within it, the adjudication of sectarian rivalries, and the history and method of sermon-preaching (bana)".<sup>243</sup>

In my opinion, Walters has proven his case. After reading his work, there can be little doubt that to speak of Buddhism as a "missionary religion" is to project onto

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241. In Swearer (1989).

242. See Austin (1991), Balasubramaniam (1992), Bishop (1989), Capra (1983), Cheng (1986), Kahn (1985), Kalff (1983), Mansfield (1989), Nishitani (1965), Rasco (1991), Roccasalvo (1982) and Clasquin (1997).

243. Walters (1992:4-5).

Buddhism theoretical overlay derived from (mostly Protestant) Christianity. He has done well to make us aware of this problem.

Walters demonstrates this by approaching the material systematically and rigorously. In chapter 1 he describes the Christian ideal of the missionary as it developed from the late eighteenth century onwards. Next, he shows that the missionary discourse thus created was an important ideological basis for the nascent scholarly pursuit of History of Religions, and in chapter 3 he demonstrates how the notion of the missionary as the exemplar of the more advanced religions was applied to Buddhism without any real thought on the matter. In chapter 4, he uses his analysis to demolish a favourite myth of those who would label Buddhism a "missionary religion". This is the tale of the Buddha "sending forth" the sixty arahants, supposedly to preach to the world. In fact, says Walters, a careful reading of the various versions of the text reveals that the Buddha was not sending the bhikkhus forth, but was in fact dismissing them. Their enlightenment obtained, they were now free from his tutelage, free to live out their lives radiating compassion and wisdom on their own. Any conversions to Buddhism made in this way would be incidental side-effects, not the whole purpose of their wanderings.

There is more. In volume II of his dissertation, Walters turns his gaze upon another locus classicus of "Buddhist missiology", the supposed missionary journey of Mahinda, son of king Aśoka, to Sri Lanka. He shows that in this case, too, conflicting versions of texts, and subsequent reinterpretations of these texts by historians deeply influenced by the missionary history of their own Christian culture, have led us to believe too easily that this was indeed a "missionary" journey.

And yet two questions remain. Firstly, if Buddhism in its early days did not have some sort of expansionary (let us then not call it "missionary") impulse, how did it spread? For spread it did, beyond doubt. In his final chapter, Walters proposes a concept of "internationalism" to replace that of "mission". He promises to develop this further in a forthcoming work.

Secondly, what is the position of contemporary Buddhist "missionaries"? Walters acknowledges that "contemporary Buddhist missionaries do not constitute a primary focus in this dissertation, although [it] has radical implications for them and the scholarly perception of them".<sup>244</sup>

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244. Walters (1992:2-3, footnote 6).

Implicit in Walter's work is the search for an original, pure Buddhism, a Buddhism before the reinterpretations of mission-minded western scholars. But is that the only possible way to look at the subject? For one fundamental methodological question concerns the Buddhological approach to be employed. There are at least three ways of answering the question "What is Buddhism?", and each is associated with the names of certain seminal figures in the academic study of Buddhism. The first of these, known as the Anglo-German school and associated with T.W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, sees the earliest Buddhism as the most authentic. This is the approach that is implicit in the work of Walters. By discarding a concept, "mission", that originates in a very different context, he tries to reach back to the Ur-teaching, the pure Buddhism of the Buddha himself, or at least of his immediate disciples. This is ironic, considering the results he arrives at, because one could argue that a search for a "historical Buddha" carries too many overtones of the search for the "historical Jesus" to be entirely coincidental.<sup>245</sup> In other words, Walters's own methodological background may have more Christian theological influences than he might care to acknowledge. It also raises questions about the factual accuracy of extant literature, most of which was only committed to writing after a lengthy period of oral transmission.

The second, or "Russian" school of Theodore Stcherbatsky championed the theoretical stance which saw the essence of Buddhism as that which is shared by all its historical developments. The danger in this approach is that one may end up with a least-common-denominator type of Buddhism, one in which, on close inspection, very little is actually shared by all schools. Only by employing a very broad view of the subject matter can this approach yield us a meaning of the term "Buddhism" that includes all known schools.

Finally, the "Franco-Belgian" school, which was developed by Étienne Lamotte and Edward Conze, sees Buddhism as the sum of its entire development. Here we may ask, is it still possible to distinguish between "good" and "bad" Buddhism? Do we simply place the Dalai Lama and the founder of the Aum Shinrikyo sect on the same level? On the absolute level of truth, perhaps we can; but on the relative level, it is clear that distinctions need to be made. And it is on the relative level that most Buddhists live and where doctoral theses such as this one are written. The advantage of this approach is that within its paradigmatic boundaries it is legitimate to make theoretical pronouncements about Buddhism as a whole, including statements about Buddhist expansionary efforts. Within this school of thought,

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245. As is argued by Lai (1982).

it is not necessary to make constant attempts at either justifying oneself by referring to an "original" Buddhism which may itself not be much more than a hypothetical construct, certainly not to be identified with contemporary Theravāda. Nor is one required to show continually that the feature with which one is presently concerned is present in all of Buddhism, as is required in the "Russian" school.

But where there are three approaches, there is always a fourth, and a fifth, by combination and reinterpretation. Perhaps it is best to regard these three schools as general approaches or guidelines for the study of Buddhism, not as theoretical straitjackets, and to move lightly within this threefold framework, adopting the best elements of each as we go along. While one may accept one of the three as one's primary focus, there is no need to discard the other two. Thus, one can work mainly within the boundaries of the third approach, and accept Buddhism as the sum of its historical developments, yet see no need to abandon the rigorous analysis of texts demanded by the first, or the search for common factors advocated by the second. For the reality on the ground is that something written down a long time ago, closer to the time of the Buddha, carries more authority than something written last year. In this way one can see Buddhism as a functional whole, but not a seamless one.

Walters' mission, if one may be permitted to call it that, is to show that we err if we project the (Protestant) Christian idea of mission and the missionary onto early Buddhism. In this he succeeds. But if we were to draw his line of thought to its logical conclusion, we would have to jettison more than just the word "missionary". Monk, meditation, compassion ... all are western words with long western, and therefore Christian, backgrounds. The very word "Buddhism" carries a vast western ideological baggage. Walters does not hesitate to use these words, nor should he. In its long history, Buddhism has been examined, accepted or rejected, evaluated and reinterpreted by people whose background was Hindu or proto-Hindu, Taoist, Confucianist, Tibetan/Mongolian shamanic, Shinto and so on. In each case, both Buddhism and the other religion was subtly changed in practice and interpretation. It would be very strange indeed, therefore, if Buddhologists whose cultural background can still be described as Christian, were able to look at Buddhism without using the conceptual tools that are provided by that background. Above, we have encountered Mellor's contention that English Buddhism is in fact a kind of "Protestant Buddhism". Yet what else could it be? English Christianity, after all, is hardly identical with that of the Middle East in the first century C.E.



So, for better or for worse, whether or not Buddhism during and immediately after the Buddha's time had a missionary spirit, it certainly has one now. This may have been a gift, perhaps even a Greek gift, from Christianity, as Walters maintains. But it is there and we (Buddhists and academics alike) have to deal with it. In Bronkhorstspuit, just outside Pretoria, the Fo Kuan Shang school has established a Buddhist college for the express purpose of training young Africans to work as missionaries. The two permanent teachers at the Buddhist Retreat Centre in Ixopo spend as much as half the year travelling, teaching at centres throughout the world. Vajrayāna and Zen Buddhist centres around South Africa receive lamas and senseis every year, and their locally born teachers themselves now teach abroad. Unless we are to suppose that all these people preach only to the converted, what they are doing is clearly to spread the dharma, in other words, they are doing missionary work or at least something that looks so similar that the differences become negligible. Internationally, too there is a renewed interest in such activities among Buddhists, as is evidenced by the following Internet message:<sup>246</sup>

The First World Buddhist Propagation Conference held in April ended with the determination of continuing the Buddhist Missionary Work started by Anagarika Dharmapala in a planned manner during the 21st century. The conference, attended by nearly five thousand Buddhist leaders and delegates from more than 14 countries, was organised by the Maha Bodhi Society of India in association with the Nenbutsushu Buddhist Sect of Japan.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama was the chief guest of honour. Another distinguished guest was Ven. Mapalagama Wipulasara Maha Thera, President of the Maha Bodhi Society of India. Guest speakers included Mr. Mangala Moonasinghe, the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in India, the Ven. Dr. D. Rewatha Thera, General Secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society of India, and the Sangharajas of Thailand and Cambodia.

The following joint communiqué was signed at the end of the conference by His Holiness Dalai Lama and all of the other Buddhist Leaders present.

"We the participants of the First World Buddhist Propagation Conference, having met at Kyoto, on sixth and seventh April 1998 hereby jointly agree to the following:

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246. <http://www.buddhayaana.nl/bq-aug98.html#2b>

(1) That we will endeavour to maintain and upkeep the holy places associated with the life of the Sakyamuni Buddha so that future generations will enjoy the historical significance of these places. They are Lumbīni, Kapilavatthu, Buddha Gaya, Isipathana Migadaya (Sarnath), Sharavasti (Saheth Maheth), Rajgir, Sankasya and Kusinagara.

(2) We will endeavour to bring the sublime message of the Enlightened One to the hearts and minds of the people the world over, not with the intention to convert the followers of other religions, but to ensure the well-being of humanity. We will try to restore the glory of Buddhism in countries where it once flourished.

(3) We will endeavour to promote peace, harmony and understanding amongst the peoples of the world. This we hope to achieve through more effective Dhammaduta<sup>247</sup> activities.

(4) We will endeavour to promote the social and welfare of the peoples of the world and to protect the environment from further degradation.

(5) May we be the foundation of peace and happiness for all human beings for the rest of our lives.

We devote ourselves to spread Lord Buddha's teachings for the sake of all sentient beings as long as they are sufferings left in the world. May all people find Peace and Happiness."

Thus, we can say that if there were no Buddhist missionaries in the past, there certainly are now, and it is legitimate to enquire what it is they are doing and whether or not their activities are consonant with the Buddhist ethos. In this, we are able to use Buddhist texts not only as historical documents, but even more as meaning-laden myths that are able to inspire human beings to conquer their own frailties, to rise above the limitations of samsara ... or to convince their neighbours that there might be something to this strange Oriental cult which they call Buddhism. And myths are never static: they are reinterpreted with every telling. Including this one. Even the tale of the Buddha sending out the sixty

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247. Dhammaduta: "messenger of the dharma", missionary. Walters (1992:203-207) has pointed out that while this term's roots are indeed in Pāli, the word as a whole is of recent manufacture. The related term *dhammaduteyya* can be found in older texts (the *Madhuratthavilasini*, for instance), but Walters maintains that it should be understood to imply "preaching" (literally, "an errand of truth") rather than "mission".

arahants, while perhaps not originally intended as a missionary act, can be seen to serve such a purpose today.

To summarise: while Walters succeeds, and brilliantly, within his chosen paradigm, in showing that the notion of "mission" in Buddhism is an importation from Christianity, it is yet possible to reject his conclusion that the concept should therefore be discarded out of hand. The matter addressed here does not concern the doctrinal purity of Buddhist "missionary" effort. It is about something that is both more fundamental and more immediately relevant to the contemporary western, and particularly the South African, Buddhist experience. It attempts to see "Buddhist mission" as part of a far greater process of transplantation, and the concept of mission can be accommodated within a strategic perspective on that.

#### *4.3.3 Mission as transplantation*

What all the discussions of "Buddhist mission" mentioned above share is that they employ a view of Buddhism that takes account only of the great, and to some extent the little, traditions. Once we start thinking in terms of meta-tradition Buddhism, however, we see that a deliberate effort to spread Buddhism by means of "mission" is in fact contradictory. In "Boundless Openness" the division between "Buddhist" and "non-Buddhist" ceases to have any meaning. All such distinctions are collapsed into it, but simultaneously issue forth from it. What is important, then, is not to turn non-Buddhists into Buddhists, but rather to awaken realisation of this Boundless Openness.

Of course, no-one, with the possible exception of a paccakka-Buddha (the "silent Buddha" who gains enlightenment but does not teach) can live on the meta-tradition level full-time. As soon as one employs language to express one's understanding of Boundless Openness, one is engaging in a great-tradition activity. As soon as one attempts to integrate this understanding with daily life, one is working in terms of the little tradition. Nor could it be otherwise. As stated when these concepts were first introduced, the three traditions should not be seen as a hierarchical arrangement, with the meta-tradition being the most important and therefore placed on top. They exist side by side, informing and influencing one another. Take away the meta-tradition, and Buddhism would lose its special genius, its distinctive character. But take away the little tradition, and it would be a dry philosophy only. Ultimately, the fact that there is a little tradition is what makes it possible for meta-tradition Buddhism to continue. The great tradition is in the unenviable position of receiving

impulses from both sides; from the meta-tradition comes an insistence on silence and emptiness, and from the little tradition comes the demand for real-world benefits and colourful ceremonies. In transmitting meta-tradition insights to the little tradition, the great tradition is involved in a delicate dialectic between emptiness and fullness, between silence and noise, between withdrawal and engagement. This process is most obvious in a mature Buddhist society, where the interplay between the "respectability and enlightenment" and "re-enlightenment" phases results in precisely such a creative tension, but it exists at each stage of the transplantation process.

Thus, if someone from a predominantly Buddhist background wished to help people to "awaken to the realisation of Boundless Openness", as it was phrased above, he or she will have no other conceptual equipment (great-tradition) to use than Buddhist ones. From this we get the impression that when a Buddhist is creating a representation of Buddhism, he or she is engaging in "mission", or that when relational positioning is being conducted, this is "interreligious dialogue". From a purely great-tradition perspective, this may well be correct. But from the meta-tradition point of view, there is a vast difference. The point of Christian or Muslim mission is to turn unbelievers into Christians or Muslims. Thereupon, the summum bonum of either Christianity or Muslim is assured, barring backsliding. But to turn a non-Buddhist into a Buddhist does not mean that this person has gained any measure of enlightenment. Such a person might turn out to be only a little-tradition Buddhist, who participates in ceremonies but has no understanding of Boundless Openness. From the meta-tradition point of view, no real advantage has been gained, and it might have been better to have left the person where he or she was, worshipping the ancestral gods as before. This is because of the ruthless consistency of the meta-tradition: it does not give little-tradition Buddhism primacy over any other little tradition. We have seen how easily Abe was able to integrate the "Lords" and "Gods" of other religions into his worldview, once he had postulated "Boundless Openness" as the true source (and destination) of religio-philosophical awareness.

Only when a person is made aware, on a personal and existential level, of Boundless Openness can we speak of Buddhist mission. But that same awareness negates the particularity of Buddhism itself. Buddhism, it turns out, was just a device, a vocabulary used to point towards this greater goal of goallessness. An enlightened person is not a "Buddhist" in any but the most conventional sense. He or she may still use such labels, as we all must in any kind of communication, but does not conceive of sectarian, little-tradition Buddhism

as being the "truth". He or she is perhaps a Buddhist in terms of social and historical circumstances, but has transcended Buddhism and non-Buddhism alike.

In such a situation, what kind of behaviour can we expect to find when a representation of Buddhism is created and represented? Representation is a form of communication, be it verbal or non-verbal, and communication is the province of the great tradition. We would therefore expect to see the tension between meta- and little-tradition impulses reflected here. There would be a readiness to share information about Buddhism and the Buddhist lifestyle (from the little tradition), yet simultaneously a reluctance to perform the act of distortion that the spoken (and written) word inevitably wreaks on the meta-tradition. A reluctant eagerness, a passive approach to transplantation or "mission" would be the most likely outcome.

And this is precisely what we find when we look at the role of the teacher in the Buddhist world. A certain passivity on the teacher's part is commonly extolled in early Buddhist scriptures. In the *Gaṇakamoggallānasutta*,<sup>248</sup> we find the Buddha admitting that not all his monks make it to enlightenment. The reason for this is that a Buddha only shows the way and does not personally ensure the disciple's progress. Commenting on this trend in Buddhism, Stoesz remarks that "it is not the responsibility of the truth-finder to insure hearers' winning of the goal. All he does is point it out and give instructions and guidance to those wishing to have it. The winning of the goal is up to those who pursue it".<sup>249</sup>

It will be recalled how, in Buddhist mythology, the Buddha's initial reluctance to teach immediately after his enlightenment is a major theme in delineating both the difficulty of conveying the Buddhist message and the Buddha's compassion in making the attempt. This Ur-moment, commonly called "the decision to teach", can fairly be seen as the genesis of Buddhism. It is this, rather than the Buddha's enlightenment, that expanded Buddhism from one man's private experience to the historical and social phenomenon of Buddhism, that expanded the meta-tradition into a fully fledged religion with great and little traditions. No negative connotations should be averred to the use of the word "passive". Alternative (and less formal) equivalents might be "accepting", "non-pushy", "laid-back", and "reactive". The notion that "active" is good and "passive" is bad is a typically western concept, which most likely has precisely the kind of Christian "missionary" roots that Walter, for example, is keen to excise from the study of Buddhism.

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248. Horner (1977:52-57).

249. Stoesz (1978:147).

Following from this initial reluctance to teach, Buddhism seems from the outset to have displayed a certain passivity, an unwillingness to seek out new converts actively. In the *Brahmajālasutta*, for example, the Buddha prescribes to some monks how they should act when they hear his teaching being discussed:

Monks, if anyone should speak in disparagement of me, of the dhamma or of the sangha, you should not be angry, resentful or upset on that account ... [but] then you must explain what is incorrect as being incorrect, saying "That is incorrect, that is false, that is not our way, that is not found among us." But monks, if others should speak in praise of me, of the dhamma or of the sangha, you should not on that account be pleased, happy or elated. If others praise me, the dhamma or the sangha, you should acknowledge the truth of what is true, saying: "That is correct, that is right, that is our way, that is found among us".<sup>250</sup>

Although the above passage is quoted slightly out of context, it remains interesting that the disciples are expected to wait for the other to make the first move by making a statement about the Buddha, dharma or sangha. There is a reactive quality displayed here, an unwillingness to impose one's views on others.

This passive attitude of letting the seeker approach the teacher, rather than the other way round, has survived into contemporary Buddhism:

On the whole, the proselytisation of Buddhism (in Britain) has been deliberately low-key. If you ask people who have been Buddhist for ten or twenty years how they became Buddhists it is almost always through reading, seeing a notice about a meeting, a process of searching within the traditional Buddhist cultures or accidentally meeting someone or a combination of these. It has been a rather private and individual matter, usually initiated by the interest of the person herself whom it is often not misplaced to call a seeker.<sup>251</sup>

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250. Walshe (1987:68). The statement is also discussed in the *Milindapañhā* (Horner 1990:260).

251. Morgan (1987:1115-6).

Nor can we see this as a failure of a more assertive official campaign, for Buddhist leaders are equally reticent to market their beliefs to all and sundry. Kamenetz, for example, quotes the Dalai Lama on the subject:

"According to the Buddhist tradition", he began, "there is no sort of conversion or missionary work. It is not good to ask someone to follow a different faith. Yet because there are so many mental dispositions, one religion simply cannot serve, cannot satisfy all people. Religion knows no national boundary. For example, among Tibetans, the majority are Buddhist, but nobody says, 'Since you are Tibetan, you should be a Buddhist.' Likewise, among the millions and millions of westerners, a few find Buddhist teachings more suitable than Judaism or Christianity. So when someone comes to us to learn Tibetan Buddhism, then we consider it our responsibility to explain—that's our basic attitude".<sup>252</sup>

Batchelor also remarks on this aspect: "For Lama Govinda it was 'of no consequence' how many people joined the order. He saw the urge to proselytise as arising from a Nietzschean will to power and indicative of a 'weakening of the religious sense'".<sup>253</sup>

Of course, more assertive strains of Buddhism also exist, most notably the Nichirenite school of Soka Gakkai. Their expansionary efforts have been extensively documented, for example by Morgan, but are sufficiently atypical of Buddhism generally to be ignored for our purposes and, according to Morgan, in Britain even the Soka Gakkai has started to tone down its efforts and adopt a more passive approach.<sup>254</sup>

"Passivity" does not indicate a lack of confidence; indeed, it could be argued that it indicates such a supreme confidence in one's tradition that one feels no need to for aggressive "marketing". "When the student is ready, the teacher will come" is a popular saying in contemporary South African Buddhist circles. When Africa is ready to hear the Buddhist message, it will come looking for it. This may happen tomorrow, in a hundred years time, or never—*sabbe sankharā anicca*.

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252. Kamenetz (1994:227-8).

253. Batchelor (1994: 338)

254. Morgan (1987:120).

#### 4.4 Transplantation

We can now start to see the true significance of representation and its causal link to relational positioning. Again, to use a well-known Buddhist simile, any representation of Buddhism is itself "a finger pointing at the moon", not the moon itself. Indeed, even the moon, being a large piece of rock orbiting the earth, may seem to be too substantialist to evoke the true intentions of the meta-tradition. Metaphorically more satisfying, if poetically more clumsy, one could refer to representations of Buddhism as "fingers pointing to the empty space between earth and moon". The finger points, not to nowhere, but to the empty in-between reality that enables earth and moon to exist. There are several such pointing fingers, and the accuracy of their pointing will determine the course of relational positioning in the subsequent course of transplantation. A finger, again speaking metaphorically, skewed towards either earth or moon will produce a Buddhism that leads rapidly to the respectability and establishment phase, to a "reified" Buddhism of temples, monasteries and ecclesial hierarchies. A representation that acts as a finger pointing to the empty space in-between is one that sows the seeds of a future re-enlightenment.

But we should not see these as mutually exclusive categories. To extend our analogy even further, one cannot point to the moon without including all the empty space in between one's finger and the moon itself. And even if one points well away from the moon, one's finger will point to another celestial body, however unimaginably far away. Again we see how re-enlightenment and respectability/establishment are both present potentially, even at the early stage of representation—how being and non-being interact, feeding on and needing one another, the one never cancelling out nor totally transforming the other.

Although it was said in a previous chapter that we should not simplistically conflate the three (little, great and meta) traditions of Buddhism with the "three bodies of the Buddha", at this stage of the discussion some observations are in order. On the level of *aspiration* or *devotion*, we can see a clear pattern developing on the lines suggested by Abe. In the little tradition, devotion to the Buddha as "Lord" (*nirmāṇakāya*), as a divine person, is the rule, even if that devotion is formally directed to a figure like Amida, whom Abe places at the "God" level. To the little tradition, Amida is *real*, is the ultimate personal reality in which to place one's trust.

The great tradition concerns itself mainly with the "God" (*sambhogakāya*) level, but also needs to take cognisance of the needs of the little tradition, and consequently, of the Buddha as "Lord". Here Amida is both real and a personification of certain virtues, both



personal and impersonal. Even when a great-tradition thinker works with a relatively full awareness of the meta-tradition, as Abe does so admirably, the paradoxical act of producing words about that which is inexpressible reifies "Boundless Openness" into a word-bounded closure of awareness. Openness is closed, Emptiness is filled with concepts and views the minute we dare to describe them, but is not thereby diminished (or enlarged) in their dynamic essence. In the Kwan Um school, the expression "don't know" or "don't-know mind" is used to indicate a reluctance to perform such an act of closure. Of course, even this has its limitations, for Boundless Openness includes both knowing and not-knowing, and empties itself of both.

"Boundless Openness", or "emptiness", to revert to the more common Buddhist term, is the true concern of the meta-tradition. But a meta-tradition that refused to feed back information about itself into the great (and ultimately, the little) tradition would be a meta-tradition of the pratekya-Buddha, the "silent Buddha" who disappears into nirvana without teaching. It would be an "openness" that closed itself off, a contradiction. Compassion, the cardinal virtue of Buddhism as wisdom is its cardinal attainment, is just this: from the ultimate Openness emanates an openness towards others. This is how the meta-tradition insights are filtered, however imperfectly, into the great tradition and make their way in attenuated form into the little tradition of popular, sectarian Buddhism.

We must therefore ask which of the three traditions a representation represents, for this will have far-reaching effects on any future process of relational positioning. While we cannot reasonably expect to encounter a "pure" form of any of the three in any given representation, we can ask which features predominate in it.

Indeed, a pure meta-tradition representation is by definition impossible, for the meta-tradition itself is "beyond words and concepts" and must of necessity express itself through the great tradition. This leaves us with two possibilities: a predominantly little-tradition representation and one in which the great tradition predominates. But the great tradition itself is subject to influences from both sides and a representation dominated by it may exhibit trends from either one. Ignoring the possibility of a great-tradition representation with equal inputs from both the little- and meta-tradition as theoretically insignificant, this leaves us with the following four variants:

#### *4.4.1 Great-tradition representation with significant meta-tradition inputs*

Not much need be said about this kind of representation, for we have seen it in action above, in Abe's effort at relational positioning. This representation of Buddhism is likely to have the easiest passage into a new social environment. Its emphasis is on emptiness rather than on mythology, which in turn implies an emphasis on meditation rather than on devotion, ritual and generosity. It is a representation that leads to a kind of Buddhism that has little need for mass participation—it can go underground if necessary, for public ritual is not required. It does need access to scriptures and other writings (even in the case of Zen, which may in theory rely on a "transmission outside the scriptures", but in which the writings of, to take the South African case only, the books of Phillip Kapleau and Seung Sanh have become de facto canonical works) and access to qualified or otherwise recognised spiritual teachers.

In the South African situation, this has been one of the main types of representation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Buddhist Retreat Centre, the Dharma Centre and the two main Tibetan Buddhist groups all fall under this heading. In each of these groups, activities have been going on quietly, with no active attempts to convert people, but with positive outreach to explain Buddhist ideas to society at large where this was thought appropriate. Not all the "members" (or rather attendees) of these groups would call themselves Buddhists. Some continue to practise their original religion (mostly Christianity) in addition to practising Buddhist meditation. Significantly, all the forms of Buddhism practised at these centres were introduced not from their original areas of origin (Thailand, Tibet, Korea), but through intermediary Buddhist organisations in western countries, where Buddhism is only slightly older and more established than it is in South Africa. It was therefore not necessary for the founders of these groups to create new representations of Buddhism, as this had already been done in Europe and America and they could simply use the existing representations. The reverse side of this is that the Buddhism they have presented has appealed only to people whose demographic profiles mirrored those of existing western Buddhists: well-educated middle-class people, which, in the South African situation, meant mostly whites. Black South Africans have not really been affected by it.

#### 4.4.2 *Great-tradition representation with significant little-tradition inputs*

This form of Buddhism is predominantly one of monks and the community they serve. It has not completely severed its ties with the meta-tradition, and much scholarly work in this direction may in fact be undertaken, but the main focus is on temple ritual and the spiritual needs of the lay followers. It tends to be very culture-specific, and will probably have entered the new society mainly to cater for immigrants from an existing Buddhist society, normally a society in which Buddhism is well advanced into the respectability and establishment phase. As such, it will be "exotic" and may have difficulties in adapting to the new social and religious environment. The "diaspora" model<sup>255</sup> may be more suitable to investigate this situation than the "transplantation" model.

The prime example of this kind of representation in South Africa is the Fo Kuan Shang temple in Bronkhorstspuit. Here everything is Chinese. The temple complex itself has been designed and constructed to resemble a Chinese monastery. The food is Chinese, the Chinese language is universally spoken (and must be mastered by students at the associated college) and the rituals and ceremonies that are regularly presented here are uncompromisingly Chinese. Not that South Africans of non-Chinese extraction are unwelcome—indeed, the temple was set up with the explicit purpose of spreading Buddhism to Africa—but at the moment it serves primarily as a cultural and religious centre for Chinese South Africans and those who feel an affinity with Chinese culture. It is not surprising that at its founding it faced severe opposition, mainly from conservative Christian groups in the town. Meanwhile, while there were no known Buddhists in Bronkhorstspuit itself at the time, Buddhism had been quietly established at centres all over the country for at least two decades with little opposition.

The Burmese monastery in Pietermaritzburg can be seen as a halfway stage between this representation and the previous one. Originally set up to serve a small Burmese community, it started out as a strictly orthodox Theravāda establishment with Burmese monks only. Since the arrival of a young Australian-born monk, however, it has reached out to the wider Buddhist community in the province and is slowly becoming an integral part of the white South African Buddhist establishment. This in itself does not indicate greater involvement in the meta-tradition, of course. But it does indicate a willingness to go beyond

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255. Baumann (1997).

sectarian boundaries, a recognition of a greater common cause, and that kind of attitude is typical of great-tradition Buddhism with more of a meta-tradition background.

#### 4.4.3 *Non-institutionalised Buddhism*

Here we encounter a metaphysical openness towards Buddhism on the part of certain sectors of the population, rather than a sociologically definable group. In a strict sense, this might not in itself be called "Buddhism" at all, yet it plays its part in the process of representation. It is the larger cultural atmosphere within which Buddhists move, the neighbours and colleagues who acknowledge one's Buddhist convictions and practices and are mildly curious, the television audience who view an interview with the Dalai Lama, the liberal theologian who almost imperceptibly incorporates Buddhist viewpoints in his or her own understanding of Christian doctrines. It is not "Buddhism" in a strictly definable sense, but it serves as positive reinforcement for practising Buddhists of all kinds.

Above, we have seen Tweed<sup>256</sup> calling such people "night-stand Buddhists". It may be even more diffuse than that; indeed, it may amount to little more than a recognition that Buddhists are, by and large, normal human beings worthy of respect according to their individual demeanour.

This non-aligned, non-institutionalised "night-stand Buddhism" may well be the most pervasive form of Buddhism in the country today, though quantifying such a statement would be nearly impossible. Nor would it be easy to tell which of the three traditions inform this kind of Buddhism. However, it would be hard to see the meta-tradition playing a major role, so suffice it to say that various blends of great- and little tradition elements may be observed here.

#### 4.4.4 *Little-tradition representation*

It is doubtful, even aside from the "purity" issue in general, whether a *completely* little-tradition representation has ever existed, at least not in Buddhism. The nearest we find to this in Buddhist history is, of course, the establishment of the Pure Land and Nichiren sects in Japan and elsewhere. But even there we must keep in mind that the founding figures of these groups (e.g. Honen, Shinran and Nichiren) came from a background of long

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256. Tweed (1999).

monastic training. They may have rebelled against great-tradition orthodoxy, but they were quite aware of exactly what they were opposing. Nevertheless, the groups they founded can be seen as dominated by little-tradition involvement. Unsurprisingly, all three founders were seen by the authorities as troublesome and were repeatedly banished from the centres of power. While I am not sufficiently familiar with the contemporary Nichiren scene to comment on it, it is clear that, whatever its origins, Pure Land Buddhism has since recouped its great-tradition heritage and that its representatives can hold their own in debate with fellow Buddhists and people of other faiths.<sup>257</sup>

From our discussion, we have seen that the little tradition is concerned with personal devotion to a "Lord" (*nirmānakāya*). In the absence of great-tradition exegesis that relativises all "Lords" as emanations or illusory appearances of a "God", and in the further absence of the meta-tradition's further reduction of "Gods" to "Boundless Openness", one expects that if there is to be friction between Buddhism and other religions, or between different kinds of Buddhism, it will be here, where competing truth-claims can give rise to feelings of personal opposition and animosity.

Such friction need not be expressed violently, of course. In the only instance in South African history of a predominantly little-tradition Buddhism, that of the low-caste Hindus in Kwazulu-Natal who became Buddhists early in the twentieth century, it was expressed in the long, slow decline of this community in the face of an overwhelmingly Hindu environment. Today, the predominantly white Buddhist community of South Africa is not much larger in proportion to the total white population, but it shows no signs of such decline; indeed, while accurate figures are hard to come by, the general feeling is that this community is showing modest but steady growth.

It has been stated above that the access to material resources which the white middle-class Buddhists have is one of the reasons for this difference. We can now refine this suggestion. What these resources buy is not merely the physical reality of books, centres and visiting teachers. On a more abstract level, it buys *access to the great tradition*, and from there it allows these new Buddhist to participate, however haphazardly, in the ongoing unfolding of meta-tradition Buddhism.

There are one or two known cases of a white South African Buddhist repudiating Buddhism and turning to another religion, but this is rare. Informal observations suggest that

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257. For an example, see Graham's interview with the Rev. Kaneko of Higashi Hongan-ji, the Jodo Shinsu headquarters (Graham 1968:150-157). For more recent material, see the Bloom (e.g. 1990a, 1990b).

ex-Buddhists are more likely to turn to some form of agnosticism, and may continue to describe themselves as Buddhists long after they have stopped actively meditating with a group. They may practise in isolation, or they may find other, not conventionally religious, ways of growing spiritually.

This leads one to suggest that when Buddhism maintains a firm link with the meta-tradition, it does not compete directly in the religious "marketplace". It fills a need other than that filled by, say, Methodism or Krishna Consciousness. This goes beyond the typologies of "ways of being religious" produced by scholars such as Streng and Cannon.<sup>258</sup> It is not merely a thirst for religious knowledge, though words such as "truth" must necessarily be used in great-tradition commentary, but for the "Boundless Openness" that meta-tradition Buddhism offers, and which may well exist in other religions (as stated before, at this stage it is perhaps better to remain agnostic on the matter), but which is laid out in plain view only in Buddhism. This does not imply that all, or even a majority of, South African Buddhists are active meta-tradition practitioners: no doubt individuals may move between the traditions in the course of a day. But it is precisely the "Boundless Openness" that allows this to happen easily, with a minimum of cognitive dissonance.

Radical Buddhist (meta-tradition) thought undermines the distinction between religions to such an extent that matters of religious and denominational membership become meaningless. Sectarian (little-tradition) Buddhism, however, does compete in the "marketplace". It is a religion like any other, and its truth-claims can be accepted or rejected just like those of any of the others. The great tradition remains uneasily poised between the two, caught up in contradictory tendencies of respectability/establishment and re-enlightenment, now tending towards the meta-tradition, now towards the little.

#### **4.5 Summary: Buddhism, "other" religions and transplantation**

Of course, finer gradations could in theory be made, but categories such as "great-tradition representations with 25% meta-tradition and 33% little-tradition inputs" would blur the larger gestalt of the transplantation process and lead one to ask how this could be determined so precisely. What has emerged clearly from the discussion, however, is that the "accepting", "assimilating" or "peacefully co-existing" attitude towards other religions which is so often ascribed to Buddhism as a whole is in fact a direct influence from the

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258. Streng (1985), Cannon (1996).

meta-tradition. The further a representation of Buddhism departs from the meta-tradition, the more trouble it will have in its efforts at relational positioning. The meta-tradition is what makes Buddhism a "universal" religion; by undercutting all truth-claims, including those made by Buddhists, it is able to accept all truth-claims. All are equally true, because all, in the final analysis, are equally empty. It is when Buddhism becomes just one religion among the others, one set of truth-claims amidst the cacophony of competing theories, that it is bound to encounter opposition. John Cobb notes with wry humour the difficulty he faces as a Christian in dialogue with Buddhists who have a firm grasp (if it can be called that) of the meta-tradition:

The only alternative to acceptance of the Buddhist view of ... transcendence is to argue that Buddhists are simply wrong, that they have not understood Emptiness correctly, that when they do, they will see that there is sufficient otherness to warrant worship and prayer and even obedience. But this is a difficult position to defend, and it is utterly unconvincing to Buddhists. They have experienced Emptiness and what they have experienced is not describable as most Christians want to describe God. In the discussions with Christians Buddhists have been the teachers, and it has often seemed that they have little to learn at any fundamental level.<sup>259</sup>

Without this radical transcendence even of transcendence itself (echoed in the closing words of the Heart sutra, *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*, which translates loosely as "hail to the wisdom that is gone, gone, gone beyond, and beyond the beyond!"), the Buddhist attitude to other religions would be like two little children arguing that "my Buddha is better than your God". But in the meta-tradition, the other and I are equally empty, thus there is no *I* and there is no *other*. This is not to say that "all is one" in any simplistic way, and hence not to say that "all religions are equally true and valuable". It is to say that all come from the same Boundless Openness, and should therefore be respected as such. They nevertheless remain open to criticism on the relative level. Respect does not imply acceptance.

This is a crucial point to be kept in mind when we start our discussion, in the next chapter, of Buddhism and African thought. From the meta-tradition point of view, African

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259. Cobb, in Hick and Askari (1985:154-155).

thought, no more than Christianity or any other partner in dialogue, is not "other". There may be aspects of it which Buddhists cannot agree with in the great-tradition perspective, but the meta-tradition would turn the same searching gaze on Buddhism itself as it does on Africa.



## CHAPTER 5: BUDDHISM AND AFRICAN THOUGHT

### Chapter contents:

- 5.1 What is "African thought"?
- 5.2 Africa, Buddhism and the theistic worldview
- 5.3 African reincarnation
- 5.4 Ancestors and bodhisattvas
- 5.5 Respect for elders: an African filial piety?
- 5.6 Blowing out different candles
- 5.7 Enlightened one or super-ancestor?
- 5.8 Communalism and Ubuntu

**A**s Buddhism enters African soil, it encounters a number of competing ideologies and religions. Western secularism has not entered the African psyche beyond the ranks of a few urbanised intellectuals, but the indigenous philosophy and religion of Africa is still strong. Christianity and Islam, too, have made a number of converts on the continent, and both have been established here for so long, especially in North Africa, that they may well be regarded as indigenous religions in their own right.<sup>260</sup> Christianity and Buddhism have been engaged in dialogue for some years, though not much in the African context. There has been no comparable dialogue between Buddhism and Islam, But it should be noted that Islam in South Africa is still largely the religion of people with ancestral links to Muslim countries. That leaves us with indigenous African religious and philosophical thought. What kind of relational positioning can we expect to occur between Buddhism and African religious and philosophical thought in South Africa?

Apart from the seminal work by Krüger<sup>261</sup> on the connections between Buddhism, Christianity and San (Bushman) religion and the implications this holds for the methodology of Religious Studies and philosophy of religion generally, little attention seems to have been paid to the relations between Asia and Africa, and the suggestions advanced here will therefore be exploratory rather than definitive in nature. Nevertheless, it is necessary for us to consider how a Buddhist concept like *anatta* or *śūnyata* might be received in an African

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260. Mbiti (1969:229, 242).

261. Krüger (1995).

culture deeply influenced by very different metaphysical ideas. In the long run, to remain true to the concept of transplantation sketched above, one would also have to consider how Buddhism and Buddhists would react to such ideas, even how African ideas might eventually filter back to the Buddhist heartland in Asia. Is there something, not merely that Buddhism could give to Africa, but that Africa could give to Buddhism? My own expertise (not to mention my personal religious commitment) is in Buddhism rather than in Africa, and it is far easier for me to visualise an "African Buddhism" than a "Buddhist Africanism". Nevertheless, as indicated above, transplantation is a complex and unpredictable process of movements and counter-movements, and we should attempt to foresee all possible permutations of influences.

It will be clear from what was said in the previous chapter that this discussion will follow a theoretical approach that does not see the religions as monolithic structures in binary opposition to one another, that is based on the assumption that there is a universal, or perhaps rather homoversal, human need to find *truth* and create *meaning* in life. While one can see that from the perspective of Boundless Openness, this need does not necessarily equate to any ontological reality, and indeed in the Buddhist view the need is only fulfilled once it is allowed to subside, this does not lessen the reality of the need itself as the mainspring of religious activity. One of the many expressions of this meaning-finding and -creating activity is religion, and within the concept "religion" we can distinguish major streams of thought that we have labelled, for instance, "Buddhism" and "African religion".

These labels are useful to us in a number of ways: they clarify discourse in a way that "the meaning-finding and -creating activities of certain people in Africa and Asia" does not; they provide an instant historical and/or geographical referent to the discussion. But utility value does not necessarily equate to truth. Whether we look at the phenomenon of syncretism in the formation of religion or at the way in which religions are related to, even descended from, one another, it is clear that "the religions" exist mainly because we have decided to conceptualise them that way. There was a time when they did not exist. "Religion" as a factor of human consciousness is homoversal, but the "religions" are temporary manifestations of religion that vary with time, distance and social conditions. How have these two "religions", in various ways, attempted to satisfy the human search for meaning and are the solutions at which they arrived at all compatible? To complicate the picture even further, we have to keep in mind that a compatibility (or an incompatibility) at the little- and great-tradition levels might not be so at that of the meta-tradition.

It would simply be asking too much for us to hope to find explicit references to Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths or the five *skhandhas* in the thinking of African sages. The two protagonists in our tale have been isolated from each other for too long. Yet we may nevertheless hope that we can find points of similarities, African thought-patterns that do not diverge from the Buddhist ones so far as to make communication impossible. If we could find such potential points of contact, they could serve as indicators of which kinds of representation of Buddhism are likely to resonate within African society, and which are doomed forever to be imported exotica. The implications for relational positioning are clear; the former type of representation has the potential to lead to a relational positioning process that cross-fertilises both partners even to the point of reflexive feedback, while the latter type would tend to create a Buddhism that would appeal only to a members of a certain social niche.

### 5.1 What is "African thought"?

The first question, then, is to define what we mean by "African thought" and "African religion". The use made of African *religious* concepts by African *philosophers* makes it quite difficult to differentiate between these terms in a clear and consistent way. Let us therefore use "African thought" and "African philosophy" generically, and "African religion" to indicate cultic practices. Some scholars also prefer to speak of "African religions" in the plural, indicating the internal variety of beliefs and practices within Africa. Appiah, for example, argues that

Whatever Africans share, we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary. ... we do not even belong to a common race; and since this is so, unanimism is not entitled to ... its fundamental presupposition.<sup>262</sup>

While one sees Appiah's point, one could on the same basis argue the existence of a number of "Buddhisms". Some amount of generalisation is needed if we are to discuss such matters at all. Moreover, in keeping with the approach of this thesis so far, let us largely restrict our observations to the religious and philosophical views and practices of

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262. Appiah (1992:41).

indigenous Bantu-speaking people of Southern Africa (just as Appiah's book is largely based on his experience as both member and observer of the Akan-speaking group in West Africa). Thus, "Africa", unless stated otherwise, should be understood to mean primarily southern, and to some extent eastern, Africa. This should give us a more solid base to work from.

One source that will be used is John Mbiti's *African religions and philosophy*. It was surprising to find, on mentioning this to some colleagues who specialise in African studies, to encounter an almost visceral dislike for this work, typified by the following statement by Amuta:

Colonialist history of Africa of the sort associated with early Rowland Oliver and Eurocentric (primitivist) anthropology of the brand linked with Placide Tempels, Levy-Bruhl and Jack Goody has had only stock European prejudices to offer. Most scandalous perhaps, is the work of African professional religionists like Idowu and Mbiti whose sense of the divinity and the sacred is so steeped in Judeo-Christian mythology that it cannot but see a hierarchy of Christian angels in African ethnic pantheons!<sup>263</sup>

But what *do* the "African pantheons" then represent? Amuta's critique would be much stronger if his own book was not uncompromisingly written along Marxist lines: in his preface he states that "In place of Plato, Aristotle ...etc. the conceptual inspiration of this volume is derived from Marx, Engels, Plekhanov [and] Mao"<sup>264</sup> and elsewhere he puts forward a standard Marxist critique of religion: "As it were, people said, let there be gods and proceeded to create them!"<sup>265</sup> Not only does this unreflectively negate Marx's position as a *western* thinker, whose thought can be clearly traced through Hegel and Kant all the way back to Plato, but it raises the question of what interpretative frameworks are allowed or not allowed in the study of Africa, and why, or why not. If Mbiti's Christian background renders him unable to see Africa clearly, why is the same not true for Amuta's Marxism?

It is as if we were to declare that Christmas Humphreys' known adherence to Theosophical teachings render his many writings on Buddhism useless, rather than a prime source of knowledge about the British understanding of Buddhism in the early- to mid-

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263. Amuta (1989:36, cf. pp. 38-40).

264. Amuta (1989:viii).

265. Amuta (1989:39).

twentieth century. Instead, one notes that Humphreys' understanding of Buddhism was informed by Theosophy, speculates, perhaps, on how this might have influenced British Buddhism, and proceeds to use his material in an appropriate way.

Indeed, while Amuta accuses his opponents of positing an eternal, unchanging African essence as "the informing metaphysical bedrock of their postulations",<sup>266</sup> in rejecting Mbiti he rejects the idea that African religion might indeed have absorbed influences from Christianity over the last few centuries, and that a view of African religion informed by Christianity could in fact deliver valuable insights. It is he who insists on a pure, pristine Africa, as if such a thing could still exist after centuries of contact with the Christian and Muslim worlds. In his favour, one must note that he sees Africa as a plurality, but so, of course, is "the West" which he sees as a solid cultural bloc of bourgeois oppression.

As we shall see below, Mbiti is capable of recognising and noting the existence of a generally un-Christian belief such as reincarnation and "impersonal immortality" among Africans, so one could even question just how pervasive the Christian influence on his work is. Mbiti will therefore be used here as one of a number of sources, a source of wide-ranging and minutely observed data, and his understanding of what those data might mean as a starting point (certainly not a final destination!) on which to base this discussion.

There has been an ongoing debate among African writers and academics whether there is such a thing as an indigenous African philosophy. Two distinct camps have emerged:<sup>267</sup> the first looks towards the past, to traditional African society, religion and folk wisdom, and tries to draw out a coherent philosophy from this. Appiah, himself not an adherent to this train of thought, refers to this as "ethnophilosophy" and describes the process as follows:

No human being could think about action who did not have a concept of ... causation ... No one could have social norms without concepts at least something like *good, evil, right* and *wrong*. ... And even if there were a human culture where nothing like any of these concepts were present, it is hard to make sense of the idea of a culture that did not have *any* crucial organising concepts. ... There is, then, in every culture a folk-philosophy; and implicit in that folk-philosophy are all (or many) of the concepts that

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266. Amuta (1989:37).

267. Bodunrin (1985:xi).

academic philosophers have made central to their study ... Of course, there might not be in every society people who pursued a systematic critical conceptual inquiry; but at least in every culture there is work for a philosopher, should one come along, to do.<sup>268</sup>

The study of traditional proverbs is a key element in this attempt to create an indigenous African philosophy (or, in view of Appiah's insistence on the plurality of African societies, a set of such philosophies), since it is in proverbs that the pre-existent folk-wisdom is thought to be embodied. It is assumed, though not often demonstrated, that a similar process once lay at the roots of western philosophy.

A small, but highly visible, part of this group has a deep interest in Egyptology, attempting to show not only that there is a link between the beliefs and thoughts of ancient Egypt and those of contemporary African people, but also, and more controversially, that Egyptian (ie African) philosophy was directly responsible for creating Greek (ie western) philosophy. This effort came to public attention most recently with the 1987 publication of Bernal's *Black Athena*,<sup>269</sup> but has been ongoing at least since the appearance of Diop's work *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* in the 1950's.<sup>270</sup> Western scholars have not received the "Egyptianist" line of thought with much enthusiasm. As Mbiti puts it, "a balance between these extremes is (surely) more reasonable".<sup>271</sup>

We can see this "Egyptianist" development in African philosophy as a representation of African thought that has developed in reaction to the prevailing representation created mainly by western and western-trained anthropologists. This is not a reflection on either one's truth, but rather on their utility value. Analogous to the situation in religious transplantation, both are great-tradition explications of African religion and philosophy, and both attempt to place African traditions within a greater framework.

The other group of African thinkers rejects ethnophilosophy and is more interested in the future of African thought than in its past—it looks to an African philosophy that will assist in the modernisation of African society. Wiredu speaks for this group when he

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268. Appiah (1992:138).

269. Bernal (1987).

270. Diop (1959). Further examples of this train of thought can be found in Odele (1977), Kamalu (1990) and Carruthers (1995).

271. Mbiti (1969:7).

criticises the way African traditional thought has long been compared with that of western technocracy—he believes it would be more apposite to contrast it to the folk wisdom of Europe:

... the least that African philosophers and foreign well-wishers can do ... is to refrain, in this day and age, from serving up the usual congeries of unargued conceptions about gods, ghosts and witches in the name of *African philosophy*. ... The habit of talking of African philosophy as if all African philosophy is *traditional* carries the implication, probably not always intended, that Modern Africans have not been trying, or worse still, ought not to try, to philosophise in a manner that takes account of present day developments in human knowledge, logical, mathematical, scientific, literary etc. ... African nationalists in search of an African identity, Afro-Americans in search of their African roots and Western foreigners in search of exotic diversion—all demand an African philosophy that shall be fundamentally different from Western philosophy, even if it means the familiar witches' brew.<sup>272</sup>

A similar point is made by Sono (1994:6), who says:

The point ... is not to shout that (African thought) too has an epistemological locus and method, but rather to *demonstrate* (it) ... If it can be 'made explicit within the framework of its own rationality', then logic dictates that this order of rational discourse *be* demonstrated rather than merely asserted. We should cease shouting about African patrimony; we must recapture it by *demonstrating* its technologicality.<sup>273</sup>

On the same page, Sono warns that "African culture has to be made rational and analytical, otherwise we will still converse about ubuntu<sup>274</sup> even as we conduct blood-feuds among ourselves". Appiah and Hountondji may be seen as further proponents of this

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272. Wiredu (1977:176).

273. Sono (1994:6), emphasis in original.

274. This concept will be explored in section 5.8.

approach. They are by no means reluctant to use the conceptual tools of western philosophy where these prove to be useful to the task at hand, and one may speculate that they would similarly be prepared to use conceptual tools from an Asian philosophical tradition. To some extent, the same is necessarily true of the ethnophilosophers, so long as they communicate in colonial (that is, western) languages like English, French and Portuguese. Each of these can be said to have certain philosophical presuppositions built into them, and each therefore sets limits (European-set limits) to what can and cannot be said.

This division among African thinkers directly affect this thesis, for if we accept the arguments of modernists like Wiredu, then African thought, as commonly perceived and presented by the ethnophilosophers, would be more nearly comparable to little-tradition Buddhism than with the official (great-tradition) Buddhist teachings. Indeed, when below we consider items such as reincarnation and the veneration of ancestors we shall start from the little tradition, using this most visible manifestation of the Buddhist and African traditions as a starting point, but not, one hopes, losing sight of the great- and meta-traditional implications. While keeping this qualification in mind, let us see if we can find points of contact between Africa and Buddhism. What follows is not intended to be exhaustive—it is rather a collection of issues and trends in African religion that presented themselves as particularly salient, in the view of this reader, to the issue of Buddhist transplantation.

## 5.2 Africa, Buddhism and the theistic worldview

It is commonly stated that Africans are monotheists in essence. And it is certainly true that authors such as Mbiti have given us much anthropological and linguistic material on god-concepts among African peoples. But some scholars have questioned whether this is not really a case of reading the Christian monotheistic God-concept back into African thought.<sup>275</sup> Kamalu's explication of the African concept of God, for one, differs considerably from most western ones: he explains that African thought is monotheistic in its view of the Godhead, yet simultaneously "*symbolically polytheistic and pantheistic*".<sup>276</sup> In the light of the previous chapter, we can see here, perhaps, the African equivalent of a meta-tradition approach, of a jettisoning of all "views" before the ultimate "Boundless Openness".

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275. Masolo (1994:122), Sogolo (1993:58).

276. Kamalu (1990:40 ff).



But is Buddhism completely incompatible with the theistic world-view in any case? There is one case of a deep debate between Buddhist and theistic thinkers: it is the ongoing dialogue between Buddhists and Christians that is happening right now as Buddhism finds a new home in the western world. It is true that much of the conversation has been between the "left wings" of both Buddhism and Christianity. Whiteheadian process philosophers and theologians such as John Cobb, for instance, have been highly prominent in this process. I am not aware that any church has adopted process philosophy as its official doctrine. On the Buddhist side, matters are less idiosyncratic, due perhaps to the more fluid nature of Buddhist (esp. Mahāyāna) doctrine. Abe Masao and his predecessors in the Kyoto school may have been deeply interested in, even influenced by, their reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger. But their creative reinterpretations of Mahāyāna Buddhist views, especially when seen in a Zen context, are quite mainstream in nature. Yet it remains unclear whether this highly theoretical kind of dialogue has exerted much of an influence on the practices of rank-and-file Buddhists and Christians.

Confluence has also been happening at a more sectarian level. Christian (mostly Catholic) and Buddhist monastics have performed joint meditation retreats to study one another's methods. Even here in South Africa, Father Sepp Anthofer, a Catholic priest, has been conducting Zen meditation retreats at a Christian retreat centre near Hartebeespoort Dam. Western Buddhism has also discovered an interest in social and ecological upliftment (often called "engaged Buddhism") that formerly was conspicuous in its absence. It cannot be proven that this occurred as a direct result of interfaith dialogue with Christians, but the timing of this event suggests that this may well have been one of the factors involved.

All of this suggests that perhaps the experience of actually meeting with a person of another faith in an open, trusting atmosphere, or of reading another religion's texts without trying to "disprove" or disparage them, can transcend the supposed "core beliefs" of one's religious tradition. Whether or not a Buddhist believes in God, whether or not a Christian believes in karma; these considerations pale besides the discovery that the other, like oneself, is a fallible human being searching for truth and meaning. Why could the same not apply to Buddhism and African thought?

Indeed, digging deeper into African thought we do find tantalising snippets of information that suggest similarities rather than differences. Kamalu explains the African worldview as a "concert of opposites" between Being and Becoming, The Self and the External World, or Ethics and Moral Experience, and acknowledges that "It is an idea also

found in Asian philosophies, notably the Taoist principles of Yin and Yang".<sup>277</sup> In Buddhist terms, his explanation of the African worldview bears a striking resemblance to the Hua-yen teaching of the interaction of *li* and *shih*, or the Madhyamaka dialectic between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, simultaneously the same yet different. True, such items are few and far between, and it remains unclear to what extent they represent mainstream African thought. But the fact that such views do exist may be seen as a hopeful point of entry for Buddhist interaction with Africa.

### 5.3 African reincarnation

The concept of reincarnation or rebirth is not unknown in Africa, though it is far from universal, being reported in only a few African societies. Mbigi, speaking as a member of the Shona people, says "The concept of reincarnation is central to our religion. The author personally believes in it",<sup>278</sup> but a close examination of his writing shows that what he refers to as reincarnation is more like the appearance of an Avatar in Hinduism, that is, a superior spirit taking residence in a human body. Mbiti mentions that there are cases where it is believed that a person has reappeared in a new body, and the infant may even be given the name of the supposedly reborn person.<sup>279</sup> This kind of reincarnation is thought to occur chiefly within direct family lineages and there is no apparent reference to reincarnation into non-human bodies. In a striking parallel to Buddhist thinking on the subject, African thought does not posit an immortal soul that is reincarnated: "This is ... only a partial reincarnation, since not the entire person is reborn, but only certain of his characteristics or physical distinctions".<sup>280</sup> But the parallel is incomplete, for even if certain characteristics were to reappear in a new form, another part of the deceased person lives on in the spirit world, as an ancestor.

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277. Kamalu (1990:24-27, xi).

278. Mbigi (1997:49).

279. Mbiti (1969:164-5).

280. Mbiti (1969:85), cf. Wiredu (1992:143).

#### 5.4 Ancestors and bodhisattvas

The belief in ancestors, or the "living-dead", as Mbiti<sup>281</sup> calls them, is posited by writers on the topic as a cornerstone of traditional African thought. Details vary from one African society to another, but in general it can be said, following Mbiti's interpretation, that departed family members are thought to continue to exercise influence on their relatives as long as there is someone alive who remembers them by name. This is a stage of personal immortality. Once they are forgotten as individuals, they subside into an impersonal form of immortality as part of an amorphous ancestral line.<sup>282</sup> This shows a striking resemblance to the Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of the "three bodies of the Buddha", where "personal immortality" would correspond to the samboghyakāya, the glorified or enjoyment body, and "impersonal immortality" to the dharmakāya, that is, to suchness or boundless openness itself. However, as we shall see below, in Africa impersonal immortality is not generally seen as a desirable state. Displeased ancestors may inflict suffering on their descendants in an attempt to receive the further propitiation that will prolong their personal immortality.

Just as in the little tradition many Buddhists may be said to revere the dharmakāya, but direct actual worship and veneration to historical or mythical Buddhas and bodhisattvas, so do Africans revere God, but approach him mainly through the ancestors. And indeed, here we have another point of contact between the two traditions: like the African ancestors, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of Buddhism were once human beings like ourselves. Not in our direct line of physical descent, of course: the Buddhist emphasis on clerical celibacy would hardly make that feasible (though some reflection of the idea may be seen in the lineages of teachers that are regularly chanted in a variety of Buddhist environments). But the mere fact that these great figures were, at least on one level of understanding, once humans like ourselves puts them closer to the African ancestors than the ineffable deity of theistic religion. From a more philosophical perspective (that is, from the great tradition), of course, they can be seen as idealised personifications of desirable qualities (wisdom, compassion etc) or as glorious manifestations of suchness itself (a "top-down" rather than a "bottom-up" view), but on the level we are working at here, it seems more productive to adopt a little-tradition approach, to take the many legends and tales of bodhisattvas, their

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281. Mbiti (1969:85).

282. Mbiti (1969:163).

initial vows, and their subsequent spiritual development at face value to facilitate a comparison between them and African ancestors.

In the belief in ancestors, we also find one of the main African explanations of the issue from which Buddhism derives its very *raison d'être*: the question of suffering. While the ancestor is still in a state of personal immortality, the dead person is capable of communicating with and affecting the living. A displeased ancestor may send sickness, death and natural disasters to his living relatives. At first sight, this seems to be in conflict with the Buddhist diagnosis of suffering as being derived from selfish desire caused by ignorance. But let us not forget that the Buddhist universe has its own spirit-world, its own pantheons of gods and spirits and, indeed, in popular tradition its own place for ancestors, though perhaps not in as clearly defined a sense as in African societies. In eastern domestic shrines, pictures of grandparents are sited next to those of the Buddha, indicating a deep reverence for one's ancestors. However, to what extent this practise would be seen as specifically *Buddhist* and to what extent it correlates to the African conception of the ancestors remains a question that awaits empirical research.

While the *philosophical* cause of suffering may be craving, this does not preclude the possibility that sentient beings, human or otherwise, may act as causal agents to bring about the actual working-out of karmic effects. A truly indigenous African form of Buddhism would have to deal with the belief in ancestors and incorporate them in some way. We have seen in the previous chapter how great-tradition Buddhism has consistently been able to absorb local deities into its own pantheon. One can foresee a similar development in a future African Buddhism, with the ancestors, revered as always but now understood within a Buddhist paradigm, continuing in their task of guarding and leading the community.

In African religious thought, we may recall, the concept of reincarnation is not completely unknown, and ancestors are thought to remain actively involved for as long as they are remembered and revered by their descendants. Similarly, in Buddhist mythology, the various realms of existence are not separated by impenetrable walls. We read of the Buddha and other enlightened beings communicating with gods and spirits, even ascending into the heavenly realms to do so. From the Buddhist point of view, therefore, one could see the ancestors as residing in a blissful state of existence and kept there by the transmission of karma by their descendants as long as they are remembered and propitiated. In such a position, they would be able to influence the lives of their descendants (and other people) just as the Indian *devas* were thought to be able to do, yet when their karma (and the further

karma transmitted ritually by their descendants) was exhausted, they would be reincarnated in accordance with Buddhist teachings. Such a scheme, no doubt more fully developed than it is possible to do here, would encapsulate African beliefs within a Buddhist framework in a way that would do justice to both. But that would be looking at the problem from the Buddhist angle. Whether it would be emotionally, spiritually, *religiously* acceptable to Africa remains to be seen.

Here we also find something that Africa has to contribute to the debate: its respect for (though not the associated fear of) the ancestors speaks of a social solidarity that may serve as a salutary lesson to Buddhists. Not primarily Buddhists in settled Buddhist societies, but more especially the new western Buddhists. Here a personal note may be apposite: when white South African Buddhists hold a celebration, people arrive singly or, at best, as couples. When I attended a Baha'i Naw Ruz (New Year) celebration recently, I noticed the large number of children present. Considering how these two traditions have entered South Africa at about the same time, and exist in comparable numbers, the contrast was starkly etched and leads one to wonder whether only social isolates are attracted to Buddhism. African influence might well be a useful counter to such a development, not only in South Africa, but in western Buddhism generally.

### **5.5 Respect for elders: an African filial piety?**

African traditional reverence for ancestors has led, as one might expect, to a concomitant respect for those who are soon to become ancestors. Buddhism, too, has had a long tradition of respect for parents and elders. The consent of one's parents was needed to become a monk as far back as the time of the Buddha, as we can see in the *Raṭṭhapālasutta*.<sup>283</sup> In the Mahāyāna, evidence for the importance of revering one's elders can be seen in the production, or discovery, of texts such as the "Filial Piety Sutra". At times, the language used in these texts becomes quite intense:

If there were a person who, for the sake of his father and mother, used a sharp knife to cut out his heart and liver so that the blood flowed and covered the ground and if he continued in this way to do this for hundreds of thousands

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283. Horner (1975:250-267).

of kalpas, never once complaining about the pain, that person still would not have repaid the deep kindness of his parents.<sup>284</sup>

Sutras like these can be seen to be highly consonant with traditional Chinese, and especially Confucianist, ideas about the importance of filial piety. But there are indications in the Pāli Canon too that Buddhism took one's duties towards the parents seriously. In the *Singalovāda Suttanta*, for example, the layperson's duties towards parents are described as follows:

O householder's son, the mother and father, as the eastern direction, are to be tended by the child in five ways:

- (1) [He thinks:] 'I, once supported, shall support them'
- (2) 'I shall fulfill my duties towards them'
- (3) 'I shall maintain the family lineage'
- (4) 'I shall regulate my inheritance wisely'
- (5) 'Then, later, I shall give offerings to propitiate their spirits'.<sup>285</sup>

In this context, it is the last of these duties that is of special interest, for how does one "propitiate the spirit" of a dead relative who may already have been reborn in a new body? It may be a deferring gesture to popular religious practices at the time, or it may be a precursor to the Buddhist "transference of merit" ceremony still practised in certain Buddhist countries today after the death of a relative.<sup>286</sup>

If the only hope for immortality is to become an ancestor, then it stands to reason that fertility and procreation will be highly prized. And so it is in African society:

Unless a person has close relatives to remember him when he has physically died, then he is nobody and simply vanishes out of human existence like a flame when it is extinguished. Therefore it is a duty, religious and ontologi-

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284. Nicholson ([sa]:23)

285. My own translation in Clasquin (1992a:198,302,viz. pp. 213-228) see also Walshe (1987: 461-469), where the text goes by its alternate name of *Sigālaka Sutta*.

286. Clasquin (1992a:216).

cal, for everyone to get married ... Procreation is the absolute way of ensuring that a person is not cut off from personal immortality.<sup>287</sup>

It is in one's family that the living-dead are kept in personal memory the longest, after their physical death. I have heard elderly people say to their grandchildren who seem to wait too long before getting married, "If you don't get married and have children, who will pour out libations to you when you die?" This is a serious philosophical concern among traditional African peoples. Unfortunate, therefore is the man or woman who has nobody to remember him (her) after physical death. To lack someone close who keeps the departed in their personal immortality is the worst misfortune and punishment that any person could suffer. To die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to become disconnected, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind.<sup>288</sup>

Here lies a major potential clash between Buddhism and African thought. In conversations I had during 1998 with Tanzanian students at the African Buddhist College in Bronkhorstspuit, it quickly became clear that monastic celibacy is the single greatest stumbling-block in the way of the development of an African Buddhism, greater even than the onerous task, a compulsory one at this facility, of learning the Chinese language.

Buddhism has throughout its history been at best neutral towards sexuality and procreation.<sup>289</sup> More typical has been the idea that procreation, more than any other human activity, keeps the "wheel of birth and death" spinning and prevents us from attaining nirvana.

For householders, procreation was accepted, if grudgingly, as a duty: above, we have seen one of the householder's duties to be to "maintain the family lineage". But the ideal of a celibate monastic existence was regarded as being *in toto* superior to that of the householder. Though this emphasis on monasticism was somewhat lessened in the Mahāyāna, it never came to the point where the two lifestyles were regarded as

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287. Mbiti (1969:26).

288. Mbiti (1969:134).

289. Clasquin (1992c).

soteriologically equal. The Mahāyāna accepts that a householder *may* become enlightened, but this does not take away from the fact that the more regulated lifestyle of the monk or nun is far more conducive to the pursuit of enlightenment. And one of the prime regulations in that lifestyle is the requirement that monastic must be celibate.

While it is true that certain Tibetan schools have allowed lamas to marry, this must be seen in light of the development of Tantric Buddhism, in which a strictly defined form of sexuality was one of the ways in which enlightenment might be sought. Insight, not procreation, was the goal aimed at here. It has been suggested to me that the Bon (*p'ön*) religion has some similarities to African culture. While there may be interesting avenues of further research in this suggestion, it was chosen not to explore that path at the moment, because the academic classification of Bon seems to be in a state of flux. Snellgrove, for instance, sees Bon as having absorbed so much Buddhist influence that it might as well be considered as an unusual school of Buddhism: "All that it contains of religious worth is manifestly of Buddhist origin and yet it stoutly affirms its essential independence" (1989: 126).<sup>290</sup> In the light of such a debate, it would seem over-hasty to posit Bon simply as the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet and compare it to the pre-Christian religion of Africa. Its position, if Snellgrove is correct, would be more analogous to that of the African Initiated Churches, which have retained much that is authentically African, but are nonetheless recognisably Christian

Similarly, while certain Japanese Pure Land priests are married, and may even pass on the care of the local temple to their sons, this has to be understood with reference to the deferred enlightenment posited in Pure Land belief. In the Pure Land afterlife, where conditions are such that enlightenment is almost inevitable, there will be no sexuality or procreation. Until then, the Pure Land priest lives a life closer to that of the householder than that of the typical Buddhist monk. It is significant that Chinese Pure Land schools have not followed this line of reasoning and by and large maintain the celibate monastic ideal.

Yet this is not a new challenge: much the same problem existed when Buddhism entered China. There too, the maintenance of the familial line was thought to be one of the cardinal duties of people:

We must pay close attention to the fact that a person who accepted these (Buddhist) ideas was snatched away from the moral-ethical political system

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290. Snellgrove (1989:126, cf. pp. 42-45, 120-126; 1987:390-393)



of family and nation, and given a wholly new and independent way of viewing reality, a method quite the opposite of traditional Chinese thinking. Buddhism looked on the family as a sort of imprisoning cage, and on all acts proper to human nature, including marriage, as sources of human suffering. Because of this it advocated shaving the head, celibacy, poverty and cutting off all connections with family and society, in order to attain a life of peace and quiet away from the world. This sort of spiritual ideal China had never seen before, even from the most ancient of times. It was a complete and total reversal of a religious and ritual system based on blood ties and their relationships ...<sup>291</sup>

We can see the parallels between the Chinese and African situations clearly. The celibate ideal in Buddhism, on the other hand, lay deeply embedded in Buddhist values. Not that this ideal was never transgressed: when an imperial decree in 842 ordered more than three thousand monastics returned to lay life, one of the reasons given was that some of the monks maintained wives.<sup>292</sup> Even Kumarajiva, the great translator of sutras into Chinese, was said by legend to have been tempted by a woman's beauty:

He repented of his lapse, and it is reported that thereafter he would always begin his sermons with the apologetic exordium: "Follow my work, but not my life, which is far from ideal. But the lotus grows out of the mud. Love the lotus; do not love the mud".<sup>293</sup>

But the ideal remained, even if the execution was lacking in places. A closer inspection of how Buddhism managed to become a major part of Chinese religious and philosophical life despite this "handicap" may turn out to be of major value to our investigation.

By and large, the Chinese Buddhists did not abandon the ideal of clerical celibacy: instead, they integrated it into the Chinese worldview by positing it as an even higher form

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291. Du (1992:27-28) cf Singhal (1984:61,86), Pachow (1980:91-92).

292. Gernet (1995:251).

293. Singhal (1984:65). According to another version of the story, he had been forced into a eugenics experiment by imperial decree.

of filial piety. Hui-Yüan, for example, wrote that "... within the family, they deviate from the veneration due to natural relationships and yet do not swerve from filial piety",<sup>294</sup> implying *contra* Confucius that a deep feeling of veneration for one's parents is more central to filial piety than the performance of prescribed familial rituals an interiorisation of the exterior requirements. Others went even further and stretched the orthodox understanding of the Buddha's life to include an element of filial piety. Tsung Mi wrote:

Prince Siddharta did not assume the kingship, but left family and country because he wished to cultivate the Way and become enlightened, so as to repay for the love and benefactions of his parents. Siddharta thus becomes a filial son entirely acceptable to the Chinese.<sup>295</sup>

Buddhist texts stressing the importance of respect and love for one's parents were found, translated, and, according to some authors, even forged,<sup>296</sup> and this too was an important aspect in the popularisation of Buddhist ideals in China. In the end, these stratagems seemed to have been successful in persuading the Chinese that leaving the family circle and becoming a monastic was more meritorious than Confucius might have thought. Buddhist inscriptions found on monastic grave sites at Yün-kang and Lung-men contain innumerable references to the fervent wish that one's parents might gain rebirth in one of the Pure Lands, notwithstanding the fact that in theory, one cut off all ties with one's family upon entering the sangha.<sup>297</sup> The best way to serve one's family, it now appeared, was to leave it and prevent its continuation! Celibacy was not abandoned, but was sublimated in a particularly Chinese reinterpretation that Baumann would term as "innovative self-development". This would be a form of relational positioning that ended up firmly in favour of the Buddhist representation of the issue of celibacy vs. procreation.

It is clear that while reverence for one's forebears and familial line has not been as central to Buddhist thought as it has been to the African, the theme does exist and has been accentuated in certain Buddhist societies. One possibly fruitful avenue of Buddhist-African

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294. Singhal (1984:87).

295. Singhal (1984:88).

296. Pas (1987:73-74), Singhal (1984:88), Pachow (1980:93).

297. Ch'en (1964:208).

rapprochement might therefore be to develop this theme further in any African representation of Buddhism. This would not in itself solve the problem of sexuality per se, which remains a touchy issue even in western Buddhist society, but it would go a long way to addressing the procreation issue.

### 5.6 Blowing out different candles

It is striking that, in the first of the above quotations ("Unless a person ..."), Mbiti uses the simile of a candle being extinguished to illustrate the most undesirable fate possible. In Buddhism, of course, the same figure of speech is commonly used to illustrate nirvana, which in that system is the most *desirable* outcome of human endeavour (technically, one could say that nirvana is beyond desirability and undesirability, but in practice it serves as the much-to-be-desired Summum Bonum of Buddhist activity). Does this imply that there is a basic irreconcilability between Buddhism and African thought? Or does it exaggerate the importance of different uses of the same metaphor? Perhaps not. What Mbiti is describing is what he elsewhere calls "impersonal immortality", which is still far too positive a term to describe nirvāna, but even if we were to concede the point and accept it as such an African equivalent, we would still face the fact that the African and Buddhist worlds hold completely opposite attitudes towards it.

Even in the western world, which has its own traditions of social and sexual withdrawal into monastic seclusion, and its own mystical traditions that stress the otherness of God, it can be difficult to explain the Buddhist idea of enlightenment. Often it comes across as a rather complicated way of committing suicide. But let us recall that metaphysical speculation on nirvana was discouraged by the Buddha. This is expressed in many places in the Buddhist scriptures, most famously in the *Cūḷa-Māluṅkyasutta*, often called the "Parable of the Arrow" in the western world.<sup>298</sup>

The dharma, for all the metaphysical subtleties that have grown up around it, can be presented quite simply. It is presented in all of Buddhism as no more and no less than the end of suffering. And suffering, whether we think of it as caused by craving or as the result of the ancestors' displeasure, is universal. Buddhists would do well therefore, in Africa, to stress this pragmatic aspect of the Buddhist teachings rather than speculate on the existence

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298. Horner (1975:97-101).

or non-existence of the enlightened person, etc.<sup>299</sup> This is not a subterfuge: quite the contrary, it is consonant with some of the oldest, most traditional instructions that Buddhism has to offer. It is a skilful means, yes, and also the literal truth as understood by Buddhists for over two millennia.

In saying this, the intention is to minimise the differences between the Buddhist and African traditions. In my experience in teaching basic Buddhism to Tanzanian students at the African Buddhist College in Bronkhorstspuit over the past three years, any attempt to explain nirvana even in terms of non-suffering was met with many an uncomprehending gaze. This may well be an area where Buddhism and African religion will have to agree to disagree, much as has been the case in Buddhist-Christian interaction over the past few decades. A representation of Buddhism that does not include nirvāna, even if, as in Pure Land Buddhism, it is at one remove, would scarcely be Buddhist at all. At least not in great-tradition terms; when we look at it from the meta-tradition perspective, boundless openness is open to both Africa and Asia, to being and non-being alike.

### **5.7 Enlightened one or super-ancestor?**

If translating the dharma into African expressions is difficult, the same is true of the Buddha. Other religious traditions have experienced this dilemma; it may be difficult to describe the position of the Enlightened One in indigenous African terms, but Islam and Christianity have encountered the same problem: "The position of Muhammad ... seems difficult to relate to traditional concepts, just as Africans find it impossible to relate Jesus Christ to anything from their traditional concepts and histories".<sup>300</sup> Such difficulties have not prevented Christianity and Islam from making millions of converts in Africa. In the process, Islam seems to have been more successful at maintaining its doctrinal purity than Christianity, or to put it another way, Africans have been more ready to use Christianity as a base for the creation of a creative synthesis with African religion.

How Buddhism will approach this matter cannot be accurately predicted, but considering all we have discussed in the previous chapter, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the second option, that of a creative synthesis with existing ideas and practices,

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299. In Baumann's scheme, this would classify as reduction.

300. Mbiti (1969:251).

will be closer to the Buddhist style.<sup>301</sup> Even within Buddhism, one will find different answers to the question "who was the Buddha?", not to mention to the deeper (meta-tradition) question "what is Buddha?" Conceptions of the Buddha and Buddhahood vary from Theravāda to Mahāyāna, from orthodox Mahāyāna to Tantrism, from Pure Land to Zen. A recent (Nov-Dec 1998) debate on the Buddha-L mailing list showed that westerners can not help seeing the Buddha but through the idealised archetype of the Greek philosopher. All of these interpretations exist on the framework of the same simple story of a prince who left his palace to seek Truth, and who proceeded to teach what he had found.

A truly African representation of the Buddha may see him as a "super-ancestor", a position already occupied by Christ in some streams of African Initiated Church thinking. Without abandoning the traditional tale of Siddharta Gautama's quest, it will see him in terms that make sense to Africans, relating him to known and locally religiously acceptable concepts of ancestorhood. There may well end up being more than one African understanding of the Buddha, but they will be *African* understandings, not imported metaphysical exotica.<sup>302</sup>

## 5.8 Communalism and Ubuntu

Another aspect of African thought that crops up quite often in the literature is that of communalism. Africans, it is said, think and act not as individuals, but as members of a community. Of course, it was not too long ago that the same point was made about Asians, and it is an easy position to parody. The point of the argument seems to be rather to act as a rhetorical counterpoint to the presumed "individualism" of the western world. African men and women are certainly not worker bees or termites with no sense of individuality apart from their membership of the hive—they are thinking human beings who are perfectly aware of their individual existence, just as westerners are fully aware that they are members of a community.

Perhaps the difference lies not in levels of awareness, but in the **value** attached to individualism or communalism: "... individuality is not negated in the African conception of humankind. What is discouraged is the view that the individual should take precedence

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301. "Reinterpretation", in terms of Baumann's strategies.

302. Again using Baumann's terms, this would be a case of "reinterpretation".

over the community".<sup>303</sup> Perhaps we could think of this as constituting a continuum, with the practically untenable but theoretically important extreme positions of total individualism and complete immersion in the mass at the ends. All actual human beings would then be positioned somewhere in-between. Gyekye describes the situation as follows:

That the African social order was communal is perhaps undeniable. Nevertheless, I think it would be more correct to describe that order as amphibious, for it manifests features of both communality and individuality. To describe that order simply as communal is to prejudge the issue regarding the place given to individuality in African social thought and practice.<sup>304</sup>

It is of course dangerous to generalise on the population of an entire continent or a whole civilisation. Those who insist that all westerners are rugged individualists have yet to explain the legendary cohesion of the Italian family! But let us, for the sake of argument, accept that Africans, on average, do attach greater importance to their membership of a social group than westerners.

In Southern Africa, the popular expression of African communalism is *ubuntu*, from the Zulu proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye* meaning "a person is a person because of other persons". The Sotho equivalent of the term is *botho* or, in some dialects, *batho*. In recent years, much attention has been given by the business community to how *ubuntu* can be used to create an indigenously African management strategy.<sup>305</sup> There has also been some attention from the legal fraternity:<sup>306</sup> the term "ubuntu" was included in the "postamble" to the 1993 interim constitution of South Africa, where it reads:

(the) transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge ... can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for

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303. Teffo (1996:103).

304. Gyekye (1987:31).

305. Mbigi (1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997), Mbigi & Maree (1995), Lakhani (1995), Mittner (1996).

306. Carpenter (1996), Ellman (1995), Hatchard (1995).

reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation.<sup>307</sup>

The term did not, however, survive into the 1996 constitution. Attention has also been paid to the term's possible application in politics,<sup>308</sup> education<sup>309</sup> and public administration,<sup>310</sup> yet so far surprisingly little from philosophers<sup>311</sup> and from the side of organised religion. Pope John Paul II used the term in a speech made on Johannesburg International airport in 1995.<sup>312</sup> Ironically, three years earlier a papal encyclical was criticised by Garner for being based on "... a Western understanding of the person, running counter to ubuntu",<sup>313</sup>

The lack of interest from the side of religion is surprising, because inspection of the proverb shows that, far from being merely an expression of social solidarity, it contains metaphysical implications. If we are to construct a complete worldview from this proverb, as some claim able to do, then it demonstrates certain presuppositions about the universe and our existence within it.

And these presuppositions are surprisingly close to certain Buddhist ones: they include a view of the world as being primarily a web of relationships, not a monadic universe of distinct individual objects. If I exist because of you, equally you exist because of me. Let us try a little thought experiment: If we were to ask people from a variety of religious and philosophical backgrounds to complete the sentence "People are people because of ...", what might be the range of answers?

Materialist: people are people because of chance mutations and material conditions

Theist: people are people because of God's act of creation

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307. Both the 1993 and 1996 constitutions of South Africa are available on the Internet at [www.constitution.org.za](http://www.constitution.org.za).

308. Mbigi (1996a).

309. Du Toit (1995).

310. Clapper (1996).

311. More (1996), Teffo (1996).

312. Zondi (1995)

313. Garner (1992:167)

Buddhist: people are people because of the mutual interpenetration of all phenomena, sentient beings included

The above is of course a vast oversimplification: each of the three trends of thought could produce a dozen alternative endings to the sentence. But the sentence endings given here are not implausible ones, and they do indicate a certain nearness of Buddhist to African thinking. From a Buddhist point of view, ubuntu points towards an understanding of non-duality, of interconnectedness and *anatta*. Of course, one possible Buddhist critique might be that ubuntu is yet limited in its understanding, since it restricts its analysis to people only. But we can then ask: who are these people? And it will become clear that they do not include only living persons but also the ancestors, who are regarded as full members of the community for as long as they are remembered by the living. The ancestors are closer than we are to God the creator and his act of creation than we are. And so ubuntu is not merely an expression of social solidarity. It is that, but it also expresses a mystical connection with unseen beings and, indirectly, therefore, an intimate connection with the all-that-is, what in Buddhism would be called, in positive terms, suchness, or, in negative terms, emptiness.

Already, dissenting voices have sprung up. Mittner, for example, entitles his article "The question remains: what does ubuntu entail in practice?"<sup>314</sup> Manning is even more blunt: "An Afrocentric management paradigm? Rather spend your time on something that will really make a difference".<sup>315</sup> Lakhani warns against turning ubuntu into a "highly-packaged, Ndebele-designed corporate buzzword" and continues to say that "It is *not* the ethnic prerogative of a particular class of South Africans and it certainly is *not* the panacea for all our economic ills, except perhaps for those consultants who package it—Ndebele designs and all—for the corporate people to buy, in order to escape exactly what purveyors of ubuntu would want to encourage".<sup>316</sup> Even Mbigi, the most prominent advocate of ubuntu in the business world, warns against the danger of letting ubuntu be hijacked, trivialised or "bastardised into an exclusive racial concept".<sup>317</sup>

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314. Mittner (1995), my translation.

315. Manning (1995:35), my translation.

316. Lakhani (1995:11), emphasis in original.

317. Mbigi (1997:2).



There are many questions one could ask about ubuntu. Can one really deduce an entire philosophy from a single proverb, even if that proverb appears with minor variations in a number of related languages? Is ubuntu really the working philosophy of millions of people? Appiah, speaking mainly in a West African context, doubts that philosophical concepts attributed to Africans really play such a large part in their everyday lives:

I do not myself believe that any of Ghana's Akan peoples are dualist. But I do not think it makes sense to say that they are monists either: like most Westerners—all Westerners, in fact, without a philosophical training—most simply do not have a view about the issue at all.<sup>318</sup>

Soyinka has proved the Yoruba pantheon a powerful literary resource: but he cannot explain why Christianity and Islam have so widely displaced the old gods, or why an image of the West has so powerful a hold on the contemporary Yoruba imagination; nor can his mythmaking offer us resources for creating economies and politics adequate to our various places in the world.<sup>319</sup>

It is the claim of the proponents of ubuntu that this concept does offer us such resources, as can be seen from the fact that the lion's share of the attention it has received has come from the business world. But in the end, it may be just another instance of "mythmaking".

Finally, how uniquely African is ubuntu anyway? Some proponents of ubuntu freely admit that it is not unique, that it is the African equivalent of statements of interconnectedness and solidarity in other world-views:

Ubuntu is both a particularistic African concept and a universal concept found in other humanistic philosophies and religions such as Christianity. The British humanist philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, wrote extensively about

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318. Appiah (1992:160).

319. Appiah (1992:286).

it. His slogan was "The greatest good for the greatest number". This captures the essence of ubuntu. It is a positive aspect of African personhood.<sup>320</sup>

Despite any misgivings we might have about the ubiquity of ubuntu in the little tradition, we can see the concept as an African great-tradition teaching, and compare it with great-tradition Buddhism. The contention is that Buddhism, especially in its Mahāyāna form, is in some respects closer to ubuntu than, say, Christianity. Like Buddhism, ubuntu does not require a theistic element to make it work. People are people because of other people—sentient beings are dependent and interdependent on each other—these insights remain equally true with or without mentioning deities. Or, for that matter, Buddhas.

After this examination, it is not possible to say that Africans are "anonymous Buddhists", to paraphrase Raimundo Panikkar. African thought and African religion have their own beauty and uniqueness; they cannot be reduced to another religious form. But neither can we say that Buddhism and Africa have nothing to learn from one another. Buddhism can offer to Africa a compendium of thousands of years of learning—a philosophical legacy which has the undeniable political advantage of having come from people who never colonised Africa; indeed, many of whom have suffered under colonialism themselves. It offers a radical insight into reality and a clearly defined way to attain this insight. Africa, too, has something to offer. Like Confucianism in China, its main concern is with the question of people (alive and dead) living in a community, and with the maintenance of social harmony in that community. Social atomism, extreme individualism, is frowned upon as an aberration. Western Buddhism, in particular, might do well to listen to African sages as well as to Buddhist ones in this respect.

Such developments have yet to occur. At the time of writing, the vast majority of Buddhists in South Africa, indeed in Africa as a whole, either belong to ethnically Asian immigrant communities in which Buddhism long ago achieved the stage of respectability and establishment, or they are recent converts who are overwhelmingly middle-class and, if not necessarily professional intellectuals, certainly well-educated and thus part of a wider class of intelligentsia. In South Africa, this implies that they are overwhelmingly white. In this, the South African situation mirrors that of Buddhism in European and North American countries. I do not believe that this indicates a racial bias within Buddhism itself. If it did, it would surely be in favour of Asians, not Europeans. But it does indicate that Buddhism

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320. Mbigi & Maree (1995:40).

has a special attraction to members of certain social groups, and the next chapter will explore this situation and the effects it might have on transplantation.

## CHAPTER 6: SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS AND DIFFERENTIAL RE- CEPTIVITY TO BUDDHISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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#### 6.2 South African Buddhism as a white religion

#### 6.3 Buddhism as an elitist religious phenomenon

We have seen in previous chapters that South African Buddhism falls into two broad categories. There is the Buddhism of people who arrived here from Buddhist countries (e.g. the Chinese and Burmese) and who are maintaining links with their ancestral religion with varying degrees of success. Buddhism among low-caste Indians early in the twentieth century represents only a minor variation upon this theme: although India may not formally have been a Buddhist country at the time, nevertheless Buddhism had a historical link to that society. Turning to Buddhism was less of a wrenching experience for them than conversion to, say, Christianity would have been. Immigrating to a new country is a stressful experience at best, and moving from a society where one belongs to a religious majority (in a respectability and establishment phase) to one where one belongs to an obscure religious minority is no doubt doubly so. But as long as one does belong to such an ethnic and religious minority, it remains a case of a transplantation of Buddhist people, rather than of Buddhism itself. Indeed, it is an interesting case of "transplantation" following a "diaspora".<sup>321</sup>

The other main group of South African Buddhists are of European descent. Few Africans (in the ethnic sense of the word) have thus far shown an interest in Buddhism. We must now consider firstly whether this is an anomalous situation, both in western Buddhism and in the context of broader Buddhist history, and secondly, regardless of whether it is an

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**321.** See Baumann (1997).

anomaly or not, why this pattern has developed. If we find that this is a pattern unique to South African Buddhism or the western Buddhism of which it is a part, then the reason must be sought in the particular nature of South African (or western) society. If it reflects a pattern widely found elsewhere in Buddhist history, then a deeper reason must be sought, one that reflects something unique to Buddhism itself.

Of course, South Africa does have a particular social setup, as which place does not? But what makes South African society stand out is the extent to which class distinctions coincide with racial or ethnic divisions. Appiah<sup>322</sup> gives us a cogent argument why the entire concept of race is false and pseudo-scientific, but while his argument is philosophically sound, it still leaves us to deal with the public perception of "race" as a real entity, a perception that has had enormous implications in the history of the twentieth century, from the holocaust to apartheid.

Indeed, while one can see the apex of the peculiarly South African confluence of class and race in the apartheid state, it has a much longer history, one that reflects the entire colonial history of the country and going back to the first contacts between Africa and Europe. The result, certainly up to 1994 and to a very large extent even since then, was that the middle and upper classes of society were overwhelmingly dominated by whites. Not all whites were middle-class, but almost all middle-class people were white.

It is to this factor that we must look when we try to explain the predominance of whites in the transplantation of Buddhism to South Africa. When we view it not in racial terms, but in terms of a differentiated class receptivity to Buddhism in favour of the educated middle classes, we will be able to see a pattern that has played itself out not only in the recent development of a western Buddhism, but throughout Buddhist history. The question then becomes, not "why are white South Africans more interested in Buddhism than black ones?", but rather "Is there something intrinsically elitist within Buddhism that attracts the middle and upper classes rather than the working class?" The challenge for me is to explain such an anomaly.

I shall not attempt to define "middle class" at this point of the argument. What this term means in the context of Buddhist transplantation will emerge from the discussion as we go along.

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322. Appiah (1992:43-73).

## 6.1 Class, caste, race and Buddhism

Let us start at the end, with the contemporary situation, and work our way backwards. I have shown in chapter 3 that the development of South African Buddhism must be seen in the context of a wider spread of Buddhist ideas and cultic practices to the western world and that its developmental stages mirror those of western Buddhism, even if they are delayed by about a decade.

We can therefore ask what kind of people these western Buddhists are. Even the most cursory look at western Buddhism clearly shows it to be an overwhelmingly middle-class phenomenon. Bell remarks: "Though Asian monks and lay people have provided encouragement and some material assistance, the growth of Theravada Buddhism in Britain has been instigated and fostered by mostly white, *middle class* and *well educated* people ..." and again, "There are also British people of Asian and mixed Asian-British descent, but the majority of the visitors [to Amaravati monastery in Hertfordshire, United Kingdom] are relatively *prosperous and educated* British *middle class* people without Asian antecedents".<sup>323</sup> Croucher, commenting on Buddhism in Australia, states that a Buddhist spokesperson in the early 1970s

... often used to tell the press, not without some pride, that "professors at the universities at Sydney and Canberra are Buddhist. Eminent doctors, architects and a few politicians ... are secret worshippers of the Buddha." As research in America would indicate, those attracted to Buddhism and other Eastern religious philosophies were then, as now, generally well-educated—their backgrounds equipping them with an interest in novel ideas and a greater awareness of new cultural developments.<sup>324</sup>

In a fascinating earlier parallel, Australian census figures of a hundred years or so earlier show that "the Theosophical Society consisted of the best-educated women of any religious persuasion, and the second-best educated men, after atheists".<sup>325</sup>

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323. Bell (1994), emphasis added.

324. Croucher (1989:45).

325. Croucher (1989:9).

Such a pattern, once set, would tend to become self-perpetuating: Morgan, in a study of the contemporary spread of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, found that the tendency was for people to convert their friends, that is, people with most likely similar interests, backgrounds, levels of education and a comparable class background.<sup>326</sup>

Already we can see some pointers to the meaning of "middle-class" in this context. In each of the cases cited above, the high average level of education is stressed. It is, then, not simply control over the factors of production that define this Buddhist bourgeoisie, as it would be in a classical Marxist definition, but the specific factor of education, or as it might be put in this computerised age, access to information.

The most recent research in the demographics of western Buddhism is a survey of American Buddhists conducted by Coleman.<sup>327</sup> Although this survey was not conducted on a truly representative random sample of Buddhists in America, but instead used a "cluster" design that focussed on seven groups from different Buddhist traditions, the results are strikingly similar to the more informal observations discussed above:

Ethnically, the memberships of these Buddhist groups is overwhelmingly white. Only about one in ten respondents identified himself or herself as Asian, Black or Hispanic, a matter that has been of some concern to Buddhist leaders. ... [The] data indicate that American Buddhism clearly has its strongest appeal to the middle and upper middle class. About one-third of the respondents reported their family income to be between \$30 000 and \$60 000, while another 19 percent fell into the \$60 000 to \$90 000 range. About 20 percent of the respondents had incomes over \$90 000 and about 30 percent [made] less than \$30 000. While those income levels are somewhat higher than the national average, the educational level of American Buddhists is very high. Of the 353 people who responded to the question on education level, only a single person reported having failed to finish high school, and less than one in twenty said that their education stopped with high school graduation. Eleven percent reported that they had some college experience,

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326. Morgan (1987:115).

327. Coleman (1999).

32 percent were college graduates, and, surprisingly, more than half of the respondents (51 percent) had advanced degrees.<sup>328</sup>

Coleman continues to typify his respondents as predominantly to the left of the American political spectrum, and shows once again their high level of educational attainment by stressing the importance of reading in their involvement with Buddhism. "When asked directly about [how they first became involved with Buddhism] a majority reported that it was through reading a book",<sup>329</sup> and "Sixty-three percent said they 'frequently' read books or articles relating to Buddhism, and another 32 percent said they 'occasionally' do".<sup>330</sup> Coleman concludes that

The results of this preliminary examination ... can hardly be considered definitive. They do, however, paint an interesting picture of the practitioners of the new Buddhism which is quite consistent with the comments and observations I have gathered with [Buddhist] leaders and senior practitioners ... around the country. Demographically, the members of these new Buddhist groups tend to be white, middle and upper-middle-class people in their middle years, with a strong left/liberal leaning in their political views. One of the most striking characteristics of the respondents was their extremely high level of education. It would not seem unreasonable to conclude that these Buddhists constitute the most highly educated religious group in the United States.<sup>331</sup>

It would be a fascinating exercise to see if Coleman's findings could be duplicated among South African Buddhists, and this may yet figure as a future avenue of exploration. Although such empirical figures are lacking, informal observations on my own part over the last fifteen years suggest strongly that very similar patterns exist here, at least among the white (i.e. western) Buddhists. Perhaps not quite so many South African Buddhists may

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328. Coleman (1999:94-95).

329. Coleman (1999:95).

330. Coleman (1995:97).

331. Coleman (1999:98).



have advanced degrees, but then, university education is less ubiquitous in South African society than among Americans, even among whites. The general pattern would appear to be the same: non-Asian South African Buddhists too are white, middle-class, and highly educated.

Is this middle-class nature of contemporary western Buddhism an anomaly? It would appear not. When we look at Buddhist history, we will see a number of references to merchants and scholars, even to aristocrats, but only much later in the story do we hear of what would now be called the working class—the peasantry on whose labour all classical Asian societies, and indeed all pre-industrial societies, including much of contemporary Africa, ultimately depended.

In ancient China, for instance, "the Buddhist view of crossing over to the other shore ... found a market and was spread first and foremost among the scholar official class. Only then did it enter into the belief of the common folk and the court".<sup>332</sup> Given the social role of this scholar class at the time, it is clear that the process there mirrors the contemporary one. Note once again the importance of education.

In India, in China, in Tibet, wherever one looks, it seems that Buddhism as a mass movement started only after it had become well entrenched among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. It seems almost pre-ordained, so fixed is this historical pattern: a Prince Shotoku in Japan or a King Srongtsen Gampo in Tibet imports Buddhism into a new realm, or a Mahinda Thera brings it to the local king's attention. It spreads like wildfire among the middle and upper classes, but it then takes five to six hundred years for a Shinran or a Nichiren to develop it into a form that appeals to the masses. After an initial period of spreading among the Asian elite, Buddhism gradually became popular among a wider cross-section of society as new, simplified versions of the dharma, such as Pure Land and Nichiren Buddhism, evolved. Needless to say, as time progressed, these popular traditions inevitably developed their own deeper layers of complexity. Indeed, by the time of the T'ang dynasty (618-907) in China, it was thought that the majority of monks were from a peasant background.<sup>333</sup> But by then, of course, Chinese Buddhism was well on its way to the stage of respectability and establishment. The attraction that Buddhism seems to hold for an educated middle class appears to be a specific feature of a Buddhism still mainly engaged in representation and relational positioning. Of course, as indicated above, such a

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332. Du (1992:31), cf. p. 35.

333. Singhal (1984:90).

description perfectly fits western Buddhism in general, and South African Buddhism in particular.

And in the very beginning, in the days of the Buddha? Even then, it was accepted that receptivity to Buddhist teachings was differentiated. The *Āṅguttaranikāya*, for example, describes how not everyone who hears the dhamma will benefit from it.<sup>334</sup>

Theoretically, of course, the sangha was open to all, even to notorious criminals such as *Āṅgulimāla*.<sup>335</sup> But who actually listened to and conversed with the Buddha and who actually joined the order? Here I am indebted to the work of Sarao, who has indexed the settlements and persons mentioned in the *Vinaya* and *Sutta Piṭakas* of the Pāli Canon according to a variety of criteria.<sup>336</sup> By reinterpreting Sarao's data in the light of the above discussion, we can obtain a fairly clear picture of who the early Buddhists were.

In appendices II (pp. 75-78) and VI (p. 141) Sarao classifies the place-names of all settlements mentioned in the Pāli canon into urban and rural categories and indicates where and how often they are mentioned in the canon. For the sake of brevity, in the following table are listed only the ten most frequently occurring centres in each category:

Urban settlements—total 173	Rural settlements - total 49
1. Sāvattihī - 1377	1. Nāikā - 32
2. Bārāṇasī - 801	2. Pāṭaligāma - 18
3. Rājagaha - 566	3. Beluva - 16
4. Vesālī - 243	4. Icchānaṅgala - 15
5. Takkaṣilā - 147	5. Andhakavinda - 9
6. Kapilavattu - 117	6. Uruvelā - 9
7. Mithilā - 109	7. Koṭṭigāma - 8
8. Kosambī - 107	8. Sālā and Hatthigāma - 6
9. Pāṭaliputta - 66	9. Caṇḍalakappa and Ekanālā - 5
10. Āḷavī - 60	10. Bhaṇḍagāma, Dunniviṭṭha and Thūṇa - 4

**Table 6.1** Major urban and rural settlements mentioned in the Pāli Canon

Perhaps we should not be too surprised: if someone were to do the same analysis on the Bible or the Koran, one would expect the names "Jerusalem" and "Mecca" to crop up

334. Woodward (1979:103-104).

335. *Āṅgulimālasutta*, Horner (1975:284-292).

336. Sarao (1989).

quite often. Also, some of these cities are highly dependent on a single part of the canon for their high numbers. Bārāṇasī, for example, owes its second position to the fact that it is mentioned 712 times in the Jātakas. Nevertheless, we can see that cities play a more important part in the Pāli Canon than villages.

There are other clues to the urban genesis of Buddhism. Harris, in his analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and modern environmentalism, remarks that the *Cakkavatisīhanadasutta*

... describes an idealised future in which the degradation of human nature has been reversed and humans live to 80 000 years of age. This time is said to be right for the return of a new wheel-turning king (*cakkavati*). In Jambudvīpa cities and towns are so close to one another that a cock can comfortably fly from one to the next. In this perfect world only urban and suburban environments are left. The jungle has been fully conquered.<sup>337</sup>

A certain level of urban snobbery may even be observed in the passage the *Araṇavibhaṅgasutta*, in which monks are instructed not to use the dialects of the countryside while giving instructions.<sup>338</sup> This should not be mistaken as a call for a single, "sacred" language to be used. The linguistic situation in the Buddha's time was a complex one, and the Buddha himself probably spoke a variety of dialects.<sup>339</sup> It should rather be understood as a call to speak with clarity and precision, concepts that were not associated with rustic settings. To the extent that we can identify urban life with the bourgeoisie, all this shows that early Buddhism was a religion that was favoured by an urban middle-class elite.

And yet, early Buddhism did not favour city life: in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, for example, we find a comparison between the city and the jungle, in the latter's favour,<sup>340</sup> and elsewhere it is said that "the way of going forth is of the open air".<sup>341</sup> But just as

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337. Harris (1991:108).

338. Horner (1977:282).

339. See Norman (1991a, 1991b)

340. Hare (1979:223-227).

341. Woodward (1986:142).

romanticism received its first impetus from the dry intellect of the Aufklärung<sup>342</sup> and the grimy reality of the industrial revolution, so can we see this idealisation of life outside the city as being, paradoxically, an indication of the urban origins of the early Buddhists.

In Appendix IV (pp. 81-91) Sarao analyses the Jātaka tales according to the form (man, animal, deva), place of birth, professional background and caste of the bodhisatta described in these 547 stories of the former lives of the Buddhas. Not all these stories give the bodhisatta's place of birth (which is, of course, rather irrelevant if the bodhisatta is described as, say, an animal or "the king of the gods"), but of those that do, 231 (85%) describe it as being in a city and just 40 (15%) as in a village. As far as the caste of the bodhisatta in that particular life is concerned, the following figures emerge from this analysis:

Brāhmaṇa	163	(49.4%)
Khattiya	90	(27.3%)
Vessa	56	(17%)
Caṇḍāla and other low castes	21	(6.4%)
Total	330	(100 %)

**Table 6.2** Caste divisions in the Jātakas.

The most telling figures, however, come from Appendix V (pp. 93-139), where Sarao has compiled a list of all persons mentioned in the Pāli Canon (a total of 2 485) and classified them according to the following categories: (1) Caste, (2) Rural/Urban, (3) Name of

Settlement and (4) the parts of the Canon in which the person is mentioned. If we look at the rural/urban category (analogous to the city/village category used above), we find the same bias towards urban life as in Appendices II and VI, with 1 302 persons described as urban, 83 as rural and 1100 persons who are not classified as either one. If we remove the unclassified names, using the assumption that, if they could be classified, they would not alter the statistical picture significantly, this leads us to a staggering 94 percent as the percentage of people mentioned in the Pāli canon who are described as "urban". In terms of caste, the picture is as follows:

Brāhmaṇa	397	(29.2%)
Khattiya	699	(51.4%)
Vessa	110	(8.1%)
Low	154	(11.3%)
Total	1360	(100 %)

**Table 6.3** Caste divisions in the Pāli Canon.

But these numbers reflect only the population at large as mentioned in the canon. What about those people who are known to have been followers of the Buddha? Would their statistical profile alter the above picture

342. To avoid confusion, I shall use the German term rather than the English "enlightenment".

significantly? Among the 2 485 people named and classified by Sarao in Appendix V, 674 are explicitly titled "Thera" or "Theri", that is, monks or nuns. These cases were therefore isolated and sorted according to Sarao's classification, which gives the following table:

	<b>Brahmin</b>	<b>Khattiya</b>	<b>Vessa</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Unknown</b>	Totals
<b>Urban</b>	67	65	29	23	44	228
<b>Rural</b>	10	0	1	6	5	22
<b>Unknown</b>	27	6	2	17	372	424
<b>Totals</b>	104	71	32	46	421	674

**Table 6.4** Caste and domicile origins among the Buddha's immediate followers

An even larger percentage of these names seem to have insufficient data attached to them in the canon for Sarao to have classified them—perhaps not too surprising, considering that they were monastics and hermits dedicated to a life of humble anonymity and contemplation. But even if we remove all those labelled as "unknown" and consider only those monks and nuns about whom both their caste and their former domicile were known, the following picture emerges:

	<b>Brahmin</b>	<b>Khattiya</b>	<b>Vessa</b>	<b>Low</b>	Totals
<b>Urban</b>	67 (33.3%)	65 (32.3%)	29 (14.4%)	23 (11.4%)	184 (91.5%)
<b>Rural</b>	10 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (3%)	17 (8.5%)
<b>Totals</b>	77 (38.3%)	65 (32.3%)	30 (14.9%)	29 (14.4%)	201 (100%)

**Table 6.5** Caste and domicile origins among the Buddha's immediate followers, with "unknown" categories removed

Here we see the low castes somewhat better represented than among the population at large as the Pāli Canon presents them. Even so, the dominance of the Brahmin and Khattiya castes among the Buddha's immediate followers remains obvious: together they make up 70.6 percent of the total. Adding the Vessa group to include all the "twice-born" brings us to a staggering 85.5 percent.

These figures are open to criticism on a number of scores. How exactly does Sarao distinguish between a "city" and a "village"? Certainly the cities of ancient India were not

the vast conglomerations that bear that appellation today. Then, how do these categories relate to the "urban" and "rural" categories he employs elsewhere? On page 139, Sarao admits that it was sometimes necessary to use commentaries and other external texts to determine to which caste a given person belonged. This would imply that texts were used that might date to as much as a thousand years after the Buddha, and possibly indicates a reliance on an unknown oral history. No thorough consideration is given to the difference between Pāli and Chinese recensions of these texts. One should also keep in mind that if a person is said in the texts to have come from a specific city, it might mean only that he came from that general area. Nor were all the people mentioned in the Canon necessarily followers of the Buddha. Sarao's list includes not only non-Buddhists, but also known opponents such as Dighātapassī the Jain, who occurs in the *Upālisutta*. It is possible, of course (though we are given no reason to believe so), that all or most of those listed here as "unknown" were actually members of the lower castes, in which case the statistical pictures would change completely. However, we can only work with the data that are available.

Problems of a more philosophical nature also emerge. We are dealing here with three separate concepts: caste as it existed in the Buddha's time, caste as it exists in India today, and the western concept of social classes. All have to do with social stratification, but we should be careful not to conflate them simplistically.

What is clear, however, is that these proportions cannot reflect the actual demographics of ancient India, unless we are to suppose that this pretechnological society had worked out how to survive with only 6 to 11 percent of its population (the low caste) engaged in food production (assuming that only the lower castes were so employed, which is still a much-debated question).

What this list and the above tables do reflect is the social milieu in which early Buddhists moved. In it we see, not India as it was, nor even necessarily the actual composition of the early Buddhist subculture, but certainly that subculture's self-image, its own understanding of itself. We must therefore conclude that the early Buddhist subculture, at least in its own eyes, consisted overwhelmingly of an educated urban elite, a group of Brahmins, rulers/administrators and some merchants, a group with access to knowledge, power and money. This is, of course, precisely the kind of group that Bell describes as the current generation of British Theravāda Buddhists and that Coleman typifies as contemporary American Buddhists: in modern terms, the middle, even upper-middle, class. It seems that Buddhism has had a special attraction for this social group from its earliest days, and

it follows that Buddhism would be (and historically has been) most successful in highly literate cultures where this group is dominant.

Conversely, Buddhism has not shown itself to be particularly adept at converting people living in preliterate societies. Consider the Karen people: for hundreds of years, they have been sandwiched between the overwhelmingly Buddhist countries of Thailand and Burma, but the vast majority of them still practise their traditional "shamanistic" religion. Yet in little over a hundred years, Christianity has made deep inroads into Karen society.

Indeed, while this is not a comparative study, it can hardly fail to be noted that Buddhism and Christianity seem to be mirror images of each other as far as their missionary efforts are concerned. In a nutshell, Christianity has learned how to spread its message among people who are less advanced, at least in terms of the literary, and lately technological, culture that carries the Christian gospel. In its own terms of reference, of course, the non-Christian receiving culture may be quite sophisticated, but these terms are soon swept away. But Christianity has been less successful in spreading its message to cultures on an equal level of cultural development. Christian missionary efforts in the far east predate those in Africa by centuries, but,

Even though thousands of missionaries have spent their lives in China and Japan, and millions of dollars have gone to build schools, hospitals, churches and orphanages, the response has been slight. In Japan, Christians comprise less than one percent of the population. Chinese Christians are a tiny fraction of one percent. Chinese and Japanese cultures are sophisticated, complex and resilient. Their cultures are so coherent, powerful and adaptable that they have resisted or assimilated outside threats for thousands of years.<sup>343</sup> ... We recall that, as a general rule, most scholars of conversion agree that few conversions take place in areas with well-organized, literate religions supported by the economic, political and cultural powers of the region. Christianity gains few converts from Islam. In fact, few converts are made from any of the so-called world religions. The most "fertile" field of conversion in the [Christian] missionary setting has been among the so-called

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343. Rambo (1993:36).

animists, such as the various tribal groups in Africa, South America and India.<sup>344</sup>

Yet it was precisely in such "sophisticated, complex and resilient" (and, one could add, urban and literate) cultures that Buddhism scored its major successes. Sri Lanka was already an urban-based civilisation when Mahinda introduced Buddhism to it. The same was true to an even greater extent in China.

Tibet might initially seem to be an exception to this rule—it was a nation without a written tradition until the time (or fractionally before) it started to take an interest in Buddhism. But at the time, Tibet was in fact a wealthy and expansionist central Asian power, a *nouveau riche* people actively looking for the trappings of nationhood. From India it imported both an alphabet and Buddhism. Mongolia too, when it first received the Tibetan form of Buddhism, was in a stage of political ascendancy. Reat goes so far as to say that "the first clear indication of Buddhist influence among the Mongols was the conversion of Kublai Khan in approximately 1250 by the great Sakyapa scholar 'Phags-pa".<sup>345</sup> In both cases, we can see, perhaps not a pre-existing high level of learning and culture, but certainly a desire and perceived need for these, along with the religious needs that Buddhism might fulfill. The difference between these two cases and the others lies merely in a matter of timing.

Buddhism, we must conclude, is very good at disseminating its message to cultures that are at least on the same level of literary and technological development as the sending culture<sup>346</sup> or that has a clear incentive to raise itself to that level quickly, but fails miserably at converting the preliterate. In a sense, Buddhism more closely resembles the Christianity of the early Middle Ages, where a missionary like Saint Patrick in Ireland, Saint Cyril in Bulgaria or Saint Willibrord in Frisia concentrated on converting local kings and tribal chiefs (that is, the upper layers of society) rather than working among the general population.<sup>347</sup> Once the king and nobility were converted, the populace would follow—this

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344. Rambo (1993:47).

345. Reat (1994:273).

346. Cf. Biernatzki (1991:47), who comments that the transmission of Buddhism from India to China was unique in that the two cultures were equally sophisticated.

347. Cf. the comments by Hayes (1998:154-155) on Christian missionary activity in Anglo-Saxon England and among the Kievan Rus.



process would later be known as the doctrine of *cuius regio, eius religio*. The parallel is not complete, however; for the Slavic or Irish tribes to convert Christianity meant gaining access to, respectively, the Byzantine and Roman culture complexes with all that this entailed in terms of literacy, access to international contacts and enhanced international respectability, much like the cases, mentioned above, of Tibet and Mongolia. For an early Chinese to convert to Buddhism, there was no such payoff outside the strictly religious sphere. China already had a system of writing. It felt little need to adopt the ways of the "barbarians" outside the "Middle Kingdom". The early Chinese Buddhists, as we have seen in the previous chapter, were going deeply against the grain of accepted social behaviour. It would not be going too far to call them a counterculture. If the Chinese intelligentsia adopted Buddhism, it must have been out of a genuine interest in its intellectual and spiritual content.

After all this, it should come as no surprise to us that the modern expansion of Buddhism westwards displays the same tendencies once again to target the middle class and intelligentsia (the Vessa, Khattiya and Brahmin "castes" of western society) as its primary "market". Paul Badham expresses it as follows:

Buddhism differs markedly from all other non-Christian religions in Britain in that its primary impact comes not through immigration but through western conversions. Deirdre Green points out that there is some evidence that Buddhism is 'the fastest growing religion in Britain at the present time'. It must be admitted that this growth is from a small base. One hundred and twenty Buddhist centres does not compare with 39 000 Christian churches, and their total UK membership of 27 000 is half that of the Hare Krishnas. However, it is significant that Buddhism is increasingly attracting intellectual interest among both philosophers and theologians as well as the religiously minded but metaphysically sceptical inquirer. Don Cupitt explicitly described his own position at one stage as being a form of Christian Buddhism, and in the philosophy of mind, Buddha's denial of the substantial self has been seen as anticipating many of the insights of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy. In a department of religious studies, Buddhism appears to be the only other faith

to exercise a significant intellectual pull on Christian or post-Christian students.<sup>348</sup>

Even the timing of the development of western Buddhism becomes intelligible if we accept that Buddhism has a particular appeal to this class. While there had been some western Buddhists and western Buddhist organisations in the first half of the twentieth century, the real "boom" only started the late 1950's. One could cite many reasons for this: the development of a "youth culture" (and a closely associated drug culture that fostered an interest in all kinds of altered states of consciousness), the relaxation by many western countries of visa requirements for Asian teachers, even the ease of communication with the widespread adoption of telephones, air travel and so on. But another factor may have played an even greater role: the gradual disappearance of the working class and the rise of the educated communication worker. Naisbitt describes this process:

... a little-noticed symbolic milestone heralded the end of an era: in 1956, for the first time in American history, white-collar workers in technical, managerial and clerical positions outnumbered blue-collar workers. Industrial America was giving way to a new society, where, for the first time in history, most of us worked with information rather than producing goods.<sup>349</sup>

Elsewhere, Naisbitt continues his argument by informing us that "in 1979, the number one occupation in the United States became clerk, succeeding labourer, succeeding farmer".<sup>350</sup>

## 6.2 South African Buddhism as a white religion

The affinity between Buddhism and the bourgeoisie also explains the predominance of whites in the South African Buddhist community. Under the apartheid system, whites were officially favoured and successive governments made concerted efforts to have "poor whites" elevated into the middle class. Educational facilities for whites were far superior to

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348. Badham (1994: 496)

349. Naisbitt (1984:12).

350. Naisbitt (1984:14).

those for blacks. In South Africa, there was an officially sanctioned convergence between class and race, with whites forming the upper and middle classes, and blacks, coloured and Indians occupying, at best, the lower-middle class, and more likely the working class slots.

Similar situations exist in other countries, of course, but in South Africa it was bolstered by direct government intervention. It was therefore only natural for white South Africans, who constituted the middle class and much, perhaps most, of the intelligentsia, to be the first major group to evince an interest in Buddhism. This does not mean that the situation will remain like this for ever: it will be interesting to see whether an interest in Buddhism comes about once a black middle class arises in the country (as is slowly happening already) and black intellectuals are relieved of the burden of having to act as what Sono calls the "political intelligentsia".<sup>351</sup> In terms of the process described above, such a development would seem highly likely, but it is impossible to predict when this might actually happen.

### 6.3 Buddhism as an elitist religious phenomenon

To explain why Buddhism has this special appeal for the middle-class is problematical and forces one into the realm of speculation. What is it about Buddhism that appeals to the educated elite rather than to the masses? If we saw this pattern only in one instance of Buddhist transplantation, we might be able to explain it in extrinsic terms. We might then be able to explain the predominance of high-caste persons in the Buddhist scriptures in terms of tendencies in ancient literature to feature the mighty rather than the humble (the Iliad, for example, certainly features Greek heroes and generals rather than foot soldiers). We might point to the disintegration of the sociopolitical status quo with the expansion of the Magadhan empire, the precursor to the even greater Mauryan empire, and so on.

But that way is not open to us, for the pattern is too pervasive. It appears and reappears throughout Buddhist history and this indicates that it requires an explanation that deals with the problems in intrinsic terms, intrinsic to Buddhism, that is. Perhaps Ninian Smart can be read as referring to all of Buddhism when he writes about Zen:

Zen accords with some intellectual and artistic tendencies in the modern West. Its anti-intellectualism is a blessing to those who have intellectual

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351. Sono (1994).

difficulties about the truth of religion. It thus has a special appeal to the intellectual, since it is precisely the intellectual who has intellectual doubts.<sup>352</sup>

Something of this affinity for the intellectual and commercial elite of society can be seen to exist paradigmatically in the very foundation myth of Buddhism, when one contrasts it with those of other religious and philosophical traditions: before they embarked on their respective careers, Jesus was a carpenter, Confucius a minor bureaucrat, and Mohammed led caravans across the desert. But the Buddha was born a prince,<sup>353</sup> who even after his renunciation sought out the two greatest philosophers known in the region to further his education.

Something of the aristocratic tenor of his upbringing seems to have survived to this day in the system of thought named after him. To understand, even partially, a concept like conditioned co-arising requires a certain level of education: Buddhism was not designed from the outset as a simple abandonment of the self to faith, gaining philosophical depth only when later circumstances required it. On the contrary, it started where Upaniṣadic thought of the day left off, and built an imposing philosophical system on this long before any thought was given to the spiritual needs of the masses.

In terms of the theoretical perspective that informs this thesis, one can also point to the important role of the meta-tradition in Buddhism. If one concedes that other religions have a meta-tradition of their own, one can still ask whether the meta-tradition plays as large a role there as it does in Buddhism. In my opinion we can safely say that the Buddhist great tradition is closer to the meta-tradition than in many other major religious systems. Only rarely does the great tradition elsewhere achieve a life of its own, does it become an autonomous force. The radical perception of emptiness has remained the driving force in Buddhist history, the source of continual re-enlightenment that undercuts the possibility of respectability and enlightenment ossifying into a permanent state of religious complacency. It lies at the centre of the Buddhist impulse in a way that one sees far less clearly in most other religions, with the possible exception of Taoism. In Islam, as the very name indicates,

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352. Smart (1984:582).

353. According to the traditional version of the story, at least. Ling (1985:51,89) points out that the state of Kapilavaṣṭu was at the time not a monarchy, but a kind of tribal oligarchy. The Buddha's father may have been a rich, powerful and influential man, perhaps even a "first among equals", but we need not think of him in the stereotyped mould of an Oriental despot. Of course, dry historical fact does not negate the power that mythical archetypes exercise over the course of centuries.

the central impulse is submission to the will of God. In Christianity, at least in most modern Protestant forms of it, a personal relationship with Christ lies at the paradigmatic centre of the religious impulse. But while Buddhism has known and continues to produce analogues of these, as in submission to the guru and adoration of bodhisattvas, they are peripheral to the development of this radical vision of Boundless Openness, as we have seen Abe refer to it. True, not all Buddhists develop this insight to an ultimate degree, perhaps even very few do so. But how many Muslims can truly claim to have perfected submission, how many Christians can be said to have developed their relationship with their saviour to the ultimate degree? We are dealing here with the essence of a religious impulse, and this is not something that can be settled with a headcount.

But the Buddhist meta-tradition, as it is reflected in great-tradition teachings, is deeply counter-intuitive. In the end, perhaps, the enlightened person will see mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers, but before that, he or she must learn to see mountains as non-mountains, rivers as non-rivers. Buddhist teachings talk about rebirth with no "thing" actually being transmitted; about insubstantiality and impermanence where our experience is of substantial objects and if not permanence, then at least relative stability. It even says that happiness is suffering!

These are hardly doctrines designed to capture a mass audience. They are sophisticated philosophical musings that in structure, if not in content, are much like those produced by the Stoic and Epicurean philosophical schools in the Hellenistic world. Neither Stoicism nor Epicureanism ever developed a mass following (though one could argue that some aspects of Stoicism were later incorporated into certain strains of Christianity); the wonder is that Buddhism eventually did, by developing a little tradition that could serve other religious needs, without ever quite losing its links to the original mystical/philosophical impulse. It is as if, centuries after the death of, say, Plotinus, a popular version of neo-Platonism came into being and this version furthermore succeeded in presenting itself as a viable religious option to millions of people, while the neo-Platonic adepts continued their pursuits as if nothing had happened. With such a paradigm for its genesis, it is hardly surprising that Buddhism continues to exhibit an elitist streak, or that it should be the educated elite of any given society that first shows an interest in it. To understand such teachings, even only at the conceptual level, requires a certain amount of initial understanding of the conceptual basis on which Buddhist arguments rest, and this would generally be provided by education.

In various Buddhist texts we can find examples of illiterate or otherwise uneducated people attaining enlightenment. Hui Neng, the sixth patriarch of the Chinese Ch'an tradition, is perhaps the most celebrated example. But when we consider that Hui Neng went on to produce the highly erudite Platform Sutra, we can see this claim that he could not read as a rhetorical counterpoint to much of the scholarly Buddhism of the time, which was perhaps more concerned with the copying of sutras (a typical respectability and establishment activity) than with the re-enlightenment process represented by Hui-Neng. Indeed, in Hui-Neng's own career, from his initial enlightenment to the Platform Sutra, we can see the dynamic interaction between these two phases, each needing yet also opposing the other.

Undercutting all we have learnt in our conventional education is part of what the Buddhist meta-tradition entails, but before such an action can be undertaken, there first has to be a previous conventional education. Just as modern environmentalism arose largely as a city-based movement, meta-tradition Buddhism, as opposed to the Buddhism of the little and great traditions, is an intellectual revolt against intellectualism, rationality calmly and *rationally* destroying itself and coming out of the process as a transrationalism rather than irrationality.

In view of this, it should not surprise us that the first people in a given society who show an interest in Buddhism are its bourgeoisie and even its elite. It is not because of their elite status itself that they are attracted to Buddhism; but rather it is their level of education (always relative to the time and place in which they live) that influences both their social status and their interest in Buddhism. It is irrelevant in this context whether this education or the lack of it was obtained by means of family tradition and social customs (as in the caste structure of ancient India), forced upon the population by legislative inequalities in providing education (as in South Africa) or won through sheer ability in an egalitarian society (the modern west, at least in theory). All that counts here is that a group of people have obtained the factual knowledge and analytical skills that will both make them more affluent than the societal average and enable them to appreciate the philosophical subtleties of Buddhism. This relationship, one suspects, would hold even in the case of the "self-made man" who acquired an education outside the confines of formal educational structures.

In this sense only can we call Buddhism elitist: in the short term (and the "short term" can be a long time in a culture that believes in reincarnation) it will tend to create great-tradition representations of itself that lean towards the radical meta-tradition and thereby attract people who, because of their relative level of education, are able to handle such a representation. Only once this "elitist" Buddhism has gone through the process of

relational positioning (itself also a process requiring a relatively high level of education, since it requires insight into at least two different religious and philosophical traditions) and enters into the respectability and establishment phase does a more widely based form of Buddhism emerge.

Thus, from a given position early on in the process of transplantation, we see Buddhism forming new representations and engaging in relational positioning, and nearly all the people doing this are highly educated, middle-class people. We compare this to an old, settled Buddhist society like China or Tibet, where Buddhism is spread across a wide spectrum of the population, and are led to ask why Buddhism in this new society exhibits such an elitist streak. But a due consideration of the role played by the meta-tradition, the way it influences the representations that are created and the kind of relational positioning that is done, shows us that this is a necessary phase in the development of the newly transplanted Buddhism. It stems from something intrinsic to Buddhism, something we might describe as its particular genius: its insistence on maintaining a link to the Ur-experience of enlightenment, as known and transmitted by Siddharta Gautama.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

I believe that I have demonstrated that the theoretical model or framework proposed in this thesis is an effective tool for our understanding of the transplantation of Buddhism from one society to another. In this final chapter, we shall consider what else it can be used for, what other aspects of Buddhism and religion generally it illuminates. Before that, however, a brief recapitulation:

The theoretical framework relies on a few core assumptions. Perhaps the most basic of these is that Buddhism consists not only of a great and little tradition, but also of a meta-tradition. This meta-tradition is the original religious or spiritual impulse that drives Buddhism in the first place. It communicates with the great tradition, but is *sui generis*. By definition, it cannot take any inputs from great-tradition Buddhism without losing its meta-status and becoming itself part of the great tradition. Between the great and little traditions, however, there is a lively interaction. Thus the great tradition stands poised uneasily between the two.

Based on this assumption, four distinct, but constantly interacting phases in the transplantation of Buddhism were identified, namely:

- representation
- relational positioning
- respectability and establishment
- re-enlightenment

In addition to this, there is the epiphenomenon of reflexive feedback, a process that can occur during any of the four phases. Once a society has reached the stage where there is a continuous interplay between the last two phases, the first two having faded into the background, we can speak of the society in question as having a mature Buddhist culture, and can regard transplantation as essentially accomplished.

However, the fact that this theoretical perspective extends well beyond the stage in the evolution of a new Buddhist society normally indicated with the term "transplantation" implies that it has further dimensions. This perspective deals with more than just the initial hundred years or so when a non-Buddhist population first becomes aware of Buddhism and may or may not be attracted to it.



In a mature Buddhist society, the interplay between respectability and re-enlightenment becomes a form of internal transplantation. Within that process, we can again see elements of representation and relational positioning as: the re-enlightened form of Buddhism, at first perhaps the inchoate apprehension of Boundless Openness by a single adept, must once again be expressed in verbal, artistic or gestural symbols. Thus, a new great tradition, a new representation is born. This new representation must then find a way to relate its insights to the known, that is, to already existing Buddhist and non-Buddhist teachings. This involves the by now familiar process of relational positioning. Eventually, the re-enlightened representation itself becomes a new orthodoxy within the Buddhist fold, waiting in a state of respectability and establishment for the next moment of re-enlightenment to come along. During this entire process, reflexive feedback to the older, more established form of Buddhism, from which the original re-enlightenment stems, can occur: the older established form of Buddhism may adopt elements from the reinvigorated new form. This will change its representation in turn and create a new round of relational positioning activities.

Thus, what started out as a theory of Buddhist transplantation carries within it the seeds of a theory of Buddhism itself. It becomes less important whether we are looking at the transplantation of Buddhism into a new society or at the ongoing process of change and transformation within Buddhism itself. The same processes are involved in both cases. This perspective was largely taken from Pye's insight that "a religion may find itself running on the spot to reassert itself to changing cultural circumstances"<sup>354</sup> and that transplantation should be seen as an ongoing process, not something that is "completed" when the religion in question has become firmly established in the new society.

Of course, there will be differences in emphasis. In a transplantation to a new society, we can expect more and longer attention to be paid to representation and relational positioning. In the new society, Buddhism is an unknown quantity and many of the symbolic elements in the representation will have to be created anew or adapted from symbols already present in that society. In western Buddhism, for example, we note how "monk" has become the accepted translation for *Bhikkhu*. There are similarities between eastern Buddhist monks and western Christian ones, of course. Both lead celibate and communal lives. But the western concept of a monk also carries overtones of an unbreakable lifetime vow, something that never featured largely in the Buddhist tradition. In Buddhism,

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354. Pye (1969: 236). Also see page 19.

on the other hand, especially in the Mahāyāna, we find the concept of a vow stretching over millions of lifetimes, but which may be expressed in either monastic or lay activities. Only with the passage of time can we expect that two distinct meanings of a word like "monk" will come into being without any semantic confusion between the two.

In a process of internal transplantation, such problems are far fewer. A Buddhist vocabulary already exists and can be adapted to the needs of the new representation far more easily. Much of the relational positioning towards non-Buddhist traditions has already been done, and while some adjustments may be necessary in that area, the main task here is to relate to the existing form(s) of respectable and established Buddhism from which the new great tradition sprang.

This thesis started with a description of the theoretical approaches towards the dynamics and transplantation of religion made by various scholars, and it was stated explicitly that the approach later developed followed the lines of enquiry laid down by Pye, Whaling and Baumann. The question that arises, then, is whether it supersedes and replaces theirs. I believe that it does not, and wish to demonstrate this by contrasting it with Baumann's approach, being the most recent addition to this scholarly tradition.

Baumann's approach focuses on a narrow time-span. His interest is in the initial stage of transplantation, a stage currently open to detailed inspection because of the ongoing transplantation of Buddhism to the western world. This enables him to extract from observed data a large number of processes and categories that may partially overlap, but are immensely useful for contemporary research into the transplantation process. But "transplantation" as the term is used in this work covers a wider span of time. It extends the transplantation into a historical stage where, in terms of Baumann's view, the society in question would be a transplanting rather than a transplantee society. Covering such vast stretches of history lends itself naturally to fewer and broader scientific categories, such as the four outlined above. However, within each of these four, there can be subprocesses. Throughout this thesis it has been shown how the processes identified by Baumann can be observed acting within the broader categories advanced here, and more specifically within the phases of representation and relational positioning. Baumann works like a chemist, who sees water as a combination of hydrogen and oxygen atoms. I work like an oceanographer, who sees water in terms of swirling masses of fluid. The oceanographer too rarely acknowledges that the chemist's work is conceptually prior to his own.

Thus, this theoretical model is not a replacement of those put forward by Pye, Whaling and Baumann, but as an extension of their work that nevertheless requires this

earlier work to continue in its own right. It extends the meaning of "transplantation" until it is not just a description of the first steps Buddhism takes in entering a new society, but has become a metaphor for the continuing evolution of Buddhism in any society. In no way does this invalidate more specialised work on the earlier stages of transplantation.

If this theoretical perspective on the transplantation of Buddhism has such implications for a broader understanding of Buddhism itself, can the same be said about religion more generally? The answer to this question depends on a single issue: do other religions have a meta-tradition and if so, is it identical to that experienced in Buddhism?

Thus far, we have deliberately maintained an agnostic stance on this issue, and for good reason. By definition, a meta-tradition, prior to its codification in great-tradition texts, is not communicable. The only way to answer such a question either way is for one to pursue at least two religious paths to the ultimate extent and experience the summum bonum of each. There have been a few advanced mystics who are said to have done this—Sri Ramakrishna comes readily to mind. Even then, we would have just one person's verbal (great-tradition) affirmation of the identity or difference of these two meta-traditions, with no way of testing such an affirmation. This means that the answer is not amenable to being answered by means of standard scholarly techniques.

From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, however, one could pose a simple counter-question: "*Can there be more than one meta-tradition?*" From this perspective, the answer must clearly be "no". What is here called the meta-tradition is in fact the perception of Emptiness, Dependent Origination or Boundless Openness. All these are names or labels, and therefore great-tradition attempts to pin down and describe the knowable but indescribable. Our original question was therefore badly phrased. To the extent that one can attribute the predicate of existence to Boundless Openness (and this too, is a great-tradition approximation, for it is that from which existence and non-existence alike spring forth), it *is*, and religious traditions, including Buddhism, only point towards it. The real question, therefore would be whether a given religious tradition did not point towards Boundless Openness at all. The same question could be asked of "secular" traditions, such as Marxism.

This, therefore, gives us the kernel of a Buddhist-inspired (or, perhaps rather, Boundless Openness-inspired) definition of religion as a great-tradition attempt to point towards Boundless Openness, coupled with a little tradition that attempts to live out the great tradition's teachings in practice. Without the little tradition, what is left would be only a philosophy. Without the great tradition, there would be only superstition. If there is no

trace of the meta-tradition (Boundless Openness), it is not religious at all. Only when all three elements co-exist can we speak of "religion".

In terms of such a definition, the perennial question "Is Marxism a religion?" would be answered in the negative, for while it has a great tradition (the writings of Marx, Engels etc.) and a little tradition (May Day parades on Red Square before 1990 etc.), it, at least in its classical form, does not point towards Boundless Openness, but towards a closure embodied in the expected final triumph of the communist worker's state. The current revival of Paganism in the western world, on the other hand, *would* be a religion according to this definition—what it is seeing today is an attempt to gather a mass of unrelated little-tradition practices that have survived virtually underground, and to link them up with a sense of meta-tradition ultimacy by the creation of the new great tradition of goddess worship (Wicca) or by reviving as far as possible ancient mythologies (Asatru, etc.).

As we have seen in earlier chapters, the Buddhist tradition has generally been inclined to agree that other religious traditions also point towards Boundless Openness, if perhaps less efficiently than Buddhism. If so, one would expect them to follow phases in transplantation, both external and internal, broadly similar to those we have observed in Buddhism. Again, there may be differences in emphasis. But the main patterns laid down in this theoretical perspective appear to offer a fruitful avenue of future research into the dynamics of religion, which today, as in 1969 when Michael Pye first broached the subject, remains a neglected aspect in the phenomenological study of religion.

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