

British Buddhism or Buddhism in Britain?

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Author:	Robert Bluck		
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Robert Bluck's *British Buddhism: teachings, practice and development*, based on his PhD thesis *The Dimensions of Buddhism in Britain* from 2005, is recent and relevant, as it is, according to its book cover, »the first comprehensive account of Buddhism in contemporary Britain«. And indeed, a broad monograph on Buddhist traditions in Britain has not been published since Ian Oliver's *Buddhism in Britain* from 1979, although some articles and unpublished theses exploring this topic do exist¹.

If one compares the titles of Bluck's PhD thesis and his book, it is noticeable that there has been a shift from one concept to another. His thesis title refers to the *Dimensions of the Sacred*, Ninian Smart's model on which Bluck mainly bases his approach, whereas the book title deals with the phenomenon of a particular form of »Buddhism« whose existence and appearance his book intends to explore. Nevertheless, his publication covers both aspects: It aligns seven Buddhist traditions to Smart's well-known seven-layered grid and, at the book's end, it is concerned with the question of whether the traditions described show distinct British elements.

So, is Robert Bluck a numerologist pointing here to the 49 days of antara-bhāva? His first chapters might give this impression by presenting a lot of numbers and figures. However, his selection of seven groups is based on his analysis of the *Buddhist Directory*² by the Buddhist Society and Paul Weller's *Religions in the UK*³ through which he identifies the largest Buddhist groups in the UK in terms of numbers of affiliated groups. These turned out to be the Sōka Gakkai International UK, the New Kadampa Tradition, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, the Karma Kagyü tradition⁴, the Forest Sangha, the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition and the Samatha Trust.





In his first chapter Bluck starts with a short introduction to the field. He puts the development of Buddhism in Britain into a broader perspective of a Buddhism which began in India and spread into different Asian countries while, as he puts it, adapting to the »prevailing cultural, spiritual and psychological backgrounds of the countries« (p1). Thereby, he locates his overall aim »to trace the origins, development and characteristics of the various traditions of Britain« (p2) within the discourse of whether there is any emergence of a distinct British Buddhism and to what extent the different Buddhist schools have experienced adaptation in Britain.

This tracing is carried out by applying the Smartian model which, Bluck holds, is especially appropriate for the study of Buddhism, as it »avoids theistic overtones and may legitimately be used to draw comparisons within religious traditions as well as between them« (p2)

Consequently, each chapter on a Buddhist group contains, besides historical background and conclusion, seven different ways to explore the particular tradition. Hence, the ritual dimension, for instance, becomes »Chanting Nam-myōhō-rence-kyō« in the chapter on Sōka Gakkai, or the doctrinal dimension turns into »Lay Theravāda teaching and study« within the Samatha Trust, whereas »The Five Golden Rules and the monastic code« represent the ethical dimension of the Karma Kagyū tradition.

The second chapter gives a historical overview of Buddhism in Britain. For instance, it shows the increase of Buddhist vocabulary in the Oxford English Dictionary, via the appearance of writings on Buddhism, the romanticisation of Buddhism by Victorian scholars and the shift from an academic interest in Buddhism to a more practical one. We also learn about the links between the Buddhist Society and Buddhists in Britain which is portrayed as a main factor for the increasing popularity of Buddhism.

Bluck locates the beginning of an expansion of Buddhism in the 1960s, in the context of Asian immigration, the decline of institutionalised Christian religion, and the emergence of a religious market in which New Age also played a major role. This description of Buddhism on the increase is also underlined by his critical interpretation of the *UK 2001 Census*, which gives the number of 152,000 Buddhist in the United Kingdom, but, as Bluck points out, has to be treated with caution.



Chapters three to nine are devoted to the seven groups identified to be the largest in the UK. Bluck thereby enables the reader to get deeper insight into these traditions. It is not only because he uses seven different perspectives on one tradition but also because he incorporates opinions from his interviewees, the reader achieves a more colourful picture. As a result, the reader learns, for instance, about the humanitarian activities of the Rokpa Trust, a Swiss-Tibetan charity established by Karma Kagyü Samyé Ling's co-founder Akong Rinpoche, or about the special version of the »mindfulness of breathing« meditation technique of the Samatha Trust, brought to the UK by the former Thai-monastic Nai Boonman.

What is more, Bluck informs about problems within groups: For instance, he refers to tensions in the Forest Sangha between monastics and lay people who seem to have different expectations⁵ of each other (p45). Furthermore, he mentions the image problems of the FWBO, for example, during the late 1990s, which it experienced when the Guardian newspaper linked the movement with terms like anti-family, homosexuality and oppression (p155).

When describing a tradition he also focuses on the level of »adaptation« which a particular tradition has experienced. Hence, the Forest Sangha is portrayed as a form of Thai Buddhism which on the one hand appears to be conservative and »has adapted relatively little to life in modern urban Britain« (p47) but on the other hand shows a so-called »pragmatic« approach towards language or gender roles. In addition, he sees »evidence of traditional Asian Theravāda Buddhism« in the Samatha Trust, which is located »at the conservative end of a spectrum of adaptation« in British Buddhism« (p64), whereas the FWBO, »has made the most conspicuous adaptation from traditional Asian Buddhism«. (p177)

The final chapter »Buddhism in Britain and British Buddhism« is a very important one: He aligns the seven traditions vertically, which means that he considers each tradition's approach to adaptation within the seven different dimensions. Moreover, he devotes some space to the notion of so-called »new Buddhist movements« FWBO, Sōkka Gakai, and the New Kadampa tradition. He explains that these traditions have been criticised and even portrayed as »cults« by the media. Against these critical views Bluck holds »that all three movements have



teachings and practices which other Buddhists would recognize and historical links to traditional Buddhist schools«. (p188)

What is more, in his final chapter he makes an attempt to characterise British Buddhism, i.e. »Buddhism's specific appeal in Britain« (p191). He starts doing this by considering how this Buddhism might develop in the future and for this purpose compares the structural development of Japanese and Chinese Buddhist traditions. In addition, Bluck predicts that »[o]nly when the majority of British Buddhists find a common English vocabulary for Buddhist teaching and practice, a group of wholly Western teachers and full independence from Asian Buddhist organizations, will a genuinely British Buddhism emerge« (p191)

To shed light on the current state of British Buddhism, Bluck uses Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of »family resemblances« which Wittgenstein developed to illustrate use of language. This theory is based on the realization that individuals can be recognised as belonging to one family although they do not share one essential common feature but have some similarities.

Referring to this analogy, Bluck proposes the following »family resemblances« of British Buddhism: »traditional silent meditation, largely traditional devotional activities, traditional teachings, some emphasis on textual study, a programme of retreats and courses, ancient and contemporary narratives, a common ethical code for all members, an important teacher-pupil relationship, mostly Western teachers [and] increased lay participation« (p192)

However, Buddhist practitioner Robert Bluck is as cautious about this characterisation of a Buddhist family as he is about his final conclusion that: »[N]o dominant British Buddhism has yet emerged« (p196)

I think, it is no exaggeration to say that Robert Bluck's first monograph will certainly become a standard work for scholars of Buddhism in the »Western World«. It illustrates several different approaches to Buddhism in Britain, delivers insider information and provides a general introduction to the circumstances which led to the emergence of Buddhist groups in Britain. It is clear that a work covering seven groups of great diversity and such a huge topic has to omit some details. This explains why some pages in Robert Bluck's book leave the reader with open questions.



Some of these are minor points only: What methodology did he use to gain the empirical data his book is based on and what role did Smart's *Dimension of the Sacred* play before Bluck conducted his fieldwork? Furthermore, his justification of Smart's model as the most suitable strategy for his analysis is somewhat uncritical since he does not discuss other approaches.

When it comes to the description of groups, is there a special reason why he included the accusations against the FWBO whilst omitting to mention the reports on Karma Kagyü Samyé Ling's sex scandals⁶, thereby indirectly supporting the popular image of controversial »new Buddhist movements« (p187)? In addition, while other authors (e.g Kay 2004: 7-11; see generally Tweed 2002) spend several pages on clarifying their concept of Buddhist or the complex »ism« Buddhism, Robert Bluck's working definition can be found only between the lines.

Other questions seem more significant: It is apparent (p16) that Robert Bluck is aware of problems which arise from linking ethnicity and religious affiliation, especially regarding Buddhism in Britain which includes a huge number of people who have not been brought up as Buddhists. However, his view of how British Buddhism relates to Buddhism in Britain does not become entirely clear. His careful interpretation of the statistical data regarding the Buddhist population of Britain shows that there are more »Asian« Buddhists than so-called »convert« or »white« Buddhists. Nevertheless, his classification of British Buddhism is based only on the research on Buddhist groups which recruit predominately »convert« Buddhists.

What is more, his selection of groups representing British Buddhism is based upon the fact that these seven groups make up more than 75 per cent of all Buddhist centres in the UK (p3). Since it may be one element of a particular form of Western Buddhism to be institutionalized, it becomes extremely difficult to explore, for instance, »diaspora« Buddhisms, if one uses the level of institutionalisation and formal membership as criteria for the size of a group. Perhaps Buddhists with an immigrant background use their »groups« in a different way⁷ than convert Buddhists who may be more used to think of religion as institutionalised religion. Of course, it may be argued that this was not British Buddhism, but simply Thai, Burmese or whatever Buddhism in a diaspora situation. However, are Buddhists with an immigrant background not required to



adapt to their British environment like the British law, the climate, the social customs, etc? Some readers may find it misleading to speak of British Buddhism when not meaning all Buddhisms in Britain.

Though if British Buddhism means »Buddhisms in Britain without diaspora Buddhisms«, it would also not be clear to what extent a distinct British Buddhism is different from what most scholars refer to as Western Buddhism - even if one accepts the »family resemblances« of British Buddhism as being distinctive. Perhaps some people would find a book title such as »Western Buddhism in Britain« more precise.

On the other hand, this would also help the concept of »British Buddhism« not to appear like an unripe tomato⁸, dangling among »Japanese Buddhism« or »Chinese Buddhism«, on a (constructed) tomato plant representing *the* continuing Buddhism - even if some Buddhists may see such a continuity.

In addition, his overall aim, which is to explore the adaptation of these Buddhist groups, may cause some misunderstanding to some readers. For instance, when Bluck portrays the Samatha Trust as traditional Asian Theravāda Buddhism (e.g. p64) it would have been helpful to find out what this means exactly. What is this traditional Asian Buddhism that he refers to and when precisely did it exist? According to which templates does he use terms like »downplaying of mythical elements and rebirth« (p32; cf. p48) when describing the creative selection and interpretation of tradition or when judging the development of groups to determine levels of adaptation?

Despite these questions, Robert Bluck's multifaceted study offers the most up-to-date information on Buddhist groups in Britain in a unique compilation. As his book will have a strong influence on both the academic debate and the popular view of Buddhism in Britain, perhaps some of the questions mentioned above will be answered in a second edition for which there will certainly be a demand. Overall, the book is a significant contribution to the study of contemporary Buddhist traditions - not only in Britain.

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Notes:

- 1 See e.g. Waterhouse 1999 & 2001, Bell 1991 (especially FWBO and the Forest Sangha)
- 2 Murray 2003; Bluck uses the editions from 1981, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000 and 2003.
- 3 Weller 2001; Bluck uses the editions from 1993, 1997 and 2001.
- 4 Bluck focuses on groups affiliated with Samyé Ling (p3, p110)
- 5 Bluck refers to problems deriving from the differences between an »adopted« Thai monastic perspective on the one hand and »lay expectations of teaching and pastoral care« on the other. (p45)
- 6 Cf. e.g. *The Scotsman*, 20.06.2000, p10 or *The Independent*, 10.09.2000, p13.
- 7 Cf. Baumann 2002, p95
- 8 Here I am borrowing Eva Neumaier-Dargyay's analogy from »Is Buddhism like a tomato? Thoughts about the transplantation of Buddhism to Germany: A response to Martin Baumann« (Neumaier-Dargyay 1995:187).
In her response to Martin Baumann Neumaier-Dargyay questions whether the metaphor of »transplantation« for religious traditions is adequate. She argues that it obscures complex processes such as the filtering and altering of traditions even prior to »import«/»export«. For this debate see Baumann 1994, Neumaier-Dargyay 1995, and Baumann 1996.
Further thoughts about »transplantation«/»translation« in the study of Buddhism can be found in Mellor 1989.