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Research Article

The Emergence of Secular Insight Practice in Australia

by

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Abstract

In recent years insight (*vipassana*) practice in Australia has diversified in content and spawned new institutions that present a more secular face. These changes exemplify the development of global Buddhism elsewhere rather than some local, *sui generis* divergence from international trends. Nonetheless, the unusual prominence of Buddhist migrants in the Australian population has influenced the interaction between “traditional” and “western” Buddhists, and thus the emergence of the new trends. In interpreting the transformations in question, we make heuristic use both of Martin Baumann’s periodization of Buddhist history, with its characterization of the present stage as global, and Stephen Batchelor’s distinction between “religious Buddhism” and “*dharma* practice.” The Australian experience highlights the value of the earlier interaction between migrant and locally-born Buddhists, and the formative effect their later separation has on lay practice. This experience also points to the salience of forms of association when secular Buddhist practice melds with the Western values of inclusiveness and equality, not least in gender relations.

Introduction

In Australia over the last three years, secular insight (*vipassana*) meditation practice has increasingly drawn away from its Theravadin origins, thus exemplifying a wider trend in Western Buddhist circles over the second half of the last century. In 1998 Stephen Batchelor articulated the divergence by drawing a contrast between “religious Buddhism” and “*dharma* practice” in his *Buddhism without Beliefs*, a contrast with resonances in the changes now unfolding in Australia. He elaborated his key concepts, not least the “deep agnosticism” he discerned in the Buddha’s own teaching, in other writings published in the same year (Batchelor 1998a, 1998b and 1998c). The contrast acknowledges a strong tendency towards secularization in the re-rendering of Buddhism in culturally appropriate terms for Westerners who, from the 1970s, began to practice meditation seriously in this tradition in significant numbers.

As Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1998: chapter six) remind us, however, this trend now visible in Western countries such as Australia has Asian (not least Sri Lankan) precedents going back to the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The elements of that earlier Asian Buddhist confrontation with modernity — the focus on a fresh

re-reading of canonical texts, promotion of serious lay *dharma* practice; skepticism towards monastic authority, claims to orthodoxy, and the efficacy of ritual; and dismissal of the folkloric accretions to popular observance — all re-surfaced in the late-twentieth century developments in Western countries. Here, however, their expression has been mediated and complicated both through being melded with central Western moral concepts, and through the growth of serious *dharma* practice from the 1970s at a time when the certitudes of modernity were to some extent giving way to an embrace of uncertainty, ambivalence and fragmentation. This embrace has often attracted the catch-all (but contested and unstable) term “postmodernity.” We thus need to hold lightly any classificatory schema — be it “traditional” versus “modern” Buddhism; or Martin Baumann’s (2001) suggested heuristic periodization of Buddhism into canonical, traditional, modern and (today’s) “global” stages. (1) Nevertheless, so long as we honor his heuristic intent, appreciation of Buddhism’s current global character helpfully sensitizes us to the dangers of accounting for current developments in parochial (Western or national) terms, while avoiding the ironically totalizing assumptions of post-modern theory. In what follows, then, we present Australian developments in insight (*vipassana*) meditation practice as specific illustrations of global trends rather than as components of a national exceptionalism. More than ever today, little sense can be made of the Buddhism of one country without reference to this global context.

The authors are both veteran *dharma* practitioners and have gleaned the local historical content presented in this article from their own active engagement in Zen, Theravadin and insight groups on the Australian eastern seaboard over the last two decades. The first-named author recently completed a doctoral dissertation on the relation between experiential outcomes of long-term Zen and insight meditation practice among senior teachers of the discipline in various Western countries on the one hand; and on the other the foundational assumptions about the self in economic theory. The second author fulfilled teaching and administrative roles in (among others) Wat Buddha Dhamma and the Buddhist Library and Meditation Centre in Sydney (which feature as prominent examples in what follows), and is a member of the Insight Teachers’ Circle of Australia. The events described in this paper are drawn from discussions with key actors, first-hand observations of significant meetings, and a continual flow of internal written and verbal communications within the organizations concerned and are verifiable through documents in the public domain.

Background: Modern and Global Buddhist Developments in the West

In one sense there is nothing special about adapting Buddhism to a new cultural environment, in this case in the West. It is a process that has occurred many times before, for instance in China from the first century C.E.; Faure (1993) even argues that this example is still unfolding. A notable (though not unprecedented) feature of the Western adaptation, however, is the relative eclipse of monasticism and the emphasis on lay practice in lay settings. Monasticism has historically underpinned and dominated Buddhist development and survival in most other times and places, and lay *dharma* practice has typically functioned as a mere adjunct of monastic practise.

Many of the generation of teachers who brought serious *dharma* practise to the West from the 1970s (including Robert Aitken, Christina Feldman, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg and Christopher Titmuss) had received intensive monastic training in Asia.

Despite the acknowledged legacy of monastic institutions in Asia, these teachers returned to the West and disrobed, and insight (or *vipassana*) teachers in particular taught *dharma* practice in ways that made no necessary references back to the monastic world at all. Instead, they established pioneering (and these days internationally pivotal) lay institutions for intensive meditation practice, above all Gaia House in the U.K., and the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock in the U.S.A. This development diffused throughout other Western countries, not least the English-speaking ones — a matter we will return to when considering the Australian example.

At first the abandonment of monastic integuments excited little comment. With some exceptions in Burma, monasteries in Asia neither taught laity the finer points of meditation nor offered them intensive residential meditation retreats. If lay people in the West sought these boons, then a degree of institutional creativity was self-evidently required to provide them. That creativity was successful, but it often took time for the all-important ethical implications inherent in institutional choice to crystallize. When they did so, the ensuing tensions highlighted the way in which western forms of association — above all the model of the voluntary association — rested on the central western moral values of equality, inclusiveness and collective self-rule.

In the crucial decade of the 1970s, the West was coming under the influence of second-wave feminism, the peace movement, various other democratic protest movements, and the broader counter-culture, all of which sought to cultivate the values in question. Buddhism as such enjoyed a “radical” reputation in the West, thanks to such influences as the Beat Poets and popular writings such as those of Alan Watts. Thus many Western Buddhists took for granted an elective affinity — the institutional hallmarks of traditional Buddhism notwithstanding — between the *dharma* on the one hand, and the egalitarian, universalist *Zeitgeist* of the 1970s on the other. In several Western countries Buddhist intentional communities sprang up and melded dharmic principles with counter-cultural ideals.

In hindsight, the irony of imputing radicalism to religious or traditional Buddhism is clear. Like any other large-scale institutionalized religion, Buddhist monasticism in its homelands consorted with socio-political elites and adapted to their hegemonic values. Monastic establishments were socially and politically embedded; they performed social-integrative and regime-legitimizing functions. Many Western *dharma* practitioners only gradually came to realize that these institutions presented a tableau of resilient hierarchy, authoritarianism, patriarchy (edging into misogyny), dogmatism, ritualism, social conservatism and superstition. But by bracketing these features of inherited institutional forms as mere culturally-biased interpretations of the *dharma*, Western practitioners tended to trivialize the moral significance of forms of association as such.

A couple of factors fed this complacency. The Asian de-emphasis of intensive lay practice encouraged an assumption in the West that other values would “of course” assert themselves once lay people accounted for a majority of serious practitioners. Secondly, Westerners were aware of Buddhism’s historical reliance on monastic institutions, and at first saw that reliance as inevitable in the West as well. Thirdly, monastics themselves have learned that survival depends on deflecting conflict with lay communities, and so honed the art of sending conciliatory signals while resisting substantive change.

Fourthly, monasticism itself at first appeared adaptable when quasi-

monastic dharmic movements emerged and established themselves internationally. The most important of these hybrids have been the (Zen) Diamond Sangha and the (interdenominational) Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, founded respectively in the USA. in 1959 and Britain in 1968. While neither movement sought to replicate full-blown monasticism, both resorted to such monastic vestiges as lineage-based *dharma* transmission, quasi-ordination procedures, ritual and hierarchical authority. (The FWBO from its inception included a semi-autonomous nucleus, the Western Buddhist Order, that resurrected monastic hierarchy, nomenclature and usage to a considerable degree). Another hybrid form that appeared in the sphere of insight meditation was that espoused by the monastic-blessed lay associations connected to the tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw.

Inevitably, however, the clash of fundamental moral principles, above all over the inclusion of women on equal terms, was bound to emerge in institution-building. If the new vehicles of *dharma* practice in the West were not monastic, then what were they? In practice, they readily fell into that familiar category of Western civil society — the voluntary association. At least in the wake of second-wave feminism and comparable demands for civic “diversity,” the ethos of Western associational life has tended to be egalitarian, inclusive and democratic. In particular, decision-makers typically have to face regular elections, and discussion of the group’s affairs must proceed without undue influence, let or hindrance. Westerners who commit their time, energy and money to a voluntary activity of any kind might reasonably expect to enjoy full rights of membership, and thus to exercise an influence over it equal to that of any other activists.

So long as an aura of religiosity surrounded *dharma* practice, the demands of normal Western principles of association could to some extent be deflected by appeals to spiritual authority. But that aura inexorably faded the further *dharma* practice removed itself from monastic tutelage.

The Australian “Dharma Scene”

International influences and networks have moulded endeavors to establish *dharma* practice in the various Western countries. Prominent Western *dharma* teachers have tended to globalize their activities and lead meditation retreats in a number of different countries. Especially since the introduction of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, Australian *dharma* practitioners in particular have taken the opportunity to overcome their geographical isolation by not only going on retreat with overseas teachers, but also by following developments in (and debates around) *dharma* practice and doctrine occurring in locales a long way from their native shores. The search for an “Australian Buddhism,” then, will yield only an oxymoron.

Many individuals who would later become influential teachers of insight meditation in Australia originally spent time in Asia, sometimes in robes, in Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka. On their return, they typically also returned to lay life and practiced either in the quasi-monastic centers of the Mahasi tradition, or in entirely lay forms.

Practitioners with Asian experience were prominent among those who, in the 1970s, established two still-extant Buddhist intentional communities in the rural Northern Rivers region of New South Wales — Bodhi Farm and the Dharmananda community. These communities occupied adjoining land in spectacular rain forest, and quickly established the Forest Meditation Centre, which became a magnet for

those who wanted to practice insight meditation and a dharmic way of life that was self-evidently radical and non-monastic. It attracted a range of prominent overseas teachers, including Christina Feldman, Joseph Goldstein Thich Nhat Hanh and Christopher Titmuss, to run retreats there; the latter has maintained his influence in the area since that time. When insight practice established itself in nearby Brisbane, especially in the main lay insight *sangha*, DharmaCloud, the institutional ethos of the Northern Rivers set the tone there as well. Contact with monastic Buddhism has been negligible from the beginning.

Quite a different dynamic occurred in the major cities other than Brisbane, under the influence of the enormous influx of “ethnic” Buddhists in successive waves of Asian migration. Thanks to them, Buddhism as such has for some time been the country’s fastest-growing religion, as well as the country’s largest non-Christian one (1.9 percent of the population, according to the 2001 census). Australian *dharma* practitioners of Western background tend to be urban and middle-class, and Buddhist migrants (like all migrant groups) are largely concentrated in the big cities as well, but predominantly working-class. From the 1970s, the institutions of the immigrant “born Buddhists”, with their faith-inspiring ancient antecedents, often appealed to Western converts. And while the “ethnic” Buddhist institutions focused on upholding the immigrants’ ethnic identity, some of their leaders realized the value of engaging with local Western Buddhists, who could articulate and bolster their own position in the host society. As well, the converts’ presence might convince the migrants’ children that Buddhism was not a mere relic of their parents’ old world, but rather something universally valuable that attracted modern Westerners as well.

For these reasons, Western and Asian Buddhists probably tended to fraternize in Australian cities more than they did in most other Western environments. This co-mingling sometimes took institutional forms, albeit ones that came to exemplify what Numrich (1996: 63,67) dubbed “intersection without interaction” and “parallel congregation.” But enthusiasm for mutual contact for a time papered over the underlying conflict between the associational values that inhere in traditional religious institutions on the one hand, and Western voluntary associations on the other. A crucial example is Wat Buddha Dhamma (hereafter WBD), established in 1978 in the wilderness of the Dharug National Park less than two hours’ drive north of Sydney, the country’s largest city. W.B.D.’s mission was to provide a setting in which interested Sydneysiders and their near neighbours could learn and practice the *dharma*. The two founders (both of whom would enjoy international reputations) were an English-born Theravadin monk, Phra Khantipalo, and a German-Jewish refugee, Ilse Ledermann, who shortly thereafter ordained to become Ayya Khema. Khantipalo had had a long monastic training in India and especially Thailand, and came with a formidable international reputation as a Pali scholar.

The project received the enthusiastic support of both Western devotees and migrant communities from Thailand, Sri Lanka and Burma in particular. In hindsight, the early cooperation between these two contrasting constituencies was remarkable, with the eighty hectares occupied by up to thirty residents living the hippy dream with all its lifestyle implications, and regularly visited by devout Asian Buddhists who came to give *dana*, earn merit, and enact their time-honored rituals.

At the time there were no known precedents for such a center, and little thought was given to the principles of association underpinning what soon became one of the country’s most important incubators of Western *dharma* practice. WBD’s establishment predated today’s major

examples of large lay-based dharmic institutions in the West. Its newsletter, *Bodhi Leaf*, proclaimed the new institution to be a “Buddhist monastery–lay community–retreat centre,” with an abbot (Phra Khantipalo) and a committee of lay residents in charge. Its rudimentary constitution required that any future abbot, like the first incumbent, be “a *Bhikkhu* of the Dhammayut Theravada tradition,” but beyond that it neither laid claim to the center for any particular Buddhist sect nor specified what was meant by the word “monastery” in its mixed self-characterization.

For most of the community, the word “monastery” (or *wat* in Thai) was, in the absence of any alternative model, effectively coterminous with any place of Buddhist practice. There is scant evidence that anyone involved intended WBD to operate as an orthodox Theravadin monastery: it was surrounded by wilderness rather than a supportive town or village that could deliver the necessary support such an institution requires on a daily basis. On the other hand, the involvement and enthusiasm of the lay residents over WBD’s first decade is still evident today in the many buildings completed in that period, including a large, much-admired meditation hall. It also sported a rudimentary primary school for children living in the community. Women were prominent in its affairs; it hosted retreats by monastic and lay teachers of Theravadin, Zen and Tibetan persuasion. Those who led early retreats there included Joseph Goldstein, Robert Aitken and Thich Nhat Hanh.

In the late 1980s, however, WBD began to experience difficulties, the first of which showed how external forces can impact on such hybrid institutions. The hardening of economic conditions and the tightening of government labor-market and welfare policies made it increasingly difficult for WBD residents to take time out from normal employment by “going on the dole,” and their numbers dwindled precipitately, such that a small and numerically volatile community of six or so was left to maintain its now considerable infrastructure and mount its retreat program. The second difficulty WBD faced revealed the fragility of the ethical compromise involved in melding the trappings of monasticism with lay associational expectations. Phra Khantipalo who, in Ayya Khema’s long absences, dominated the life of WBD, began to question the Theravadin orthodoxy in general, and its gender order in particular. He had nurtured an ecumenical attitude to *dharma* practice at the center, including an early sympathy for the Mahayana, and became increasingly interested in it. In the late 1980s he announced the conclusion that “the eight serious conditions” imposed on nuns and ascribed to the Buddha in the Pali Canon — the Theravada’s main doctrinal support for subordinating and marginalizing women — were in fact apocryphal. “Due to the formulation of these conditions, we may conclude that they are a later insertion by someone who was biased against the ordination of women,” he wrote in *Bodhi Leaf* (Khantipalo 1990:10).

His high standing among both Western and Asian Theravadins contributed to an atmosphere of crisis around his supposed apostasy, and made the co-existence of the Wat’s “parallel congregations” difficult to sustain. The issues he raised brought into sharp relief fundamental differences between the givens of Theravadin Buddhism and the widespread view among Western practitioners that Buddhism was inherently progressive and offered a range of possibilities in associational principles. Phra Khantipalo disrobed, and a Theravadin faction came together and imposed a new constitution in 1992. It rewrote history and stipulated that WBD had always been — and must ever remain — an orthodox Thai-style Theravadin monastery. True to monastic hierarchical assumptions, the new constitution vested all power exclusively in five self-selected trustees who held office until death or

resignation, after which the surviving trustees alone would choose the replacements. A Laotian-born monk was appointed “interim abbot”, and is still in office fifteen years later.

It was one thing to assert Theravadin monasticism, but quite another to make a monastery work in the middle of the Australian wilderness. As a visiting senior monk from England, Ajahn Viradhammo, pointed out, no Theravadin monastery could survive there, and recommended that WBD should be operate instead as a “lay-based retreat center” with hermitage facilities for visiting monastics. The new trustees followed this advice, and a fragile compromise was restored. Under the de facto management of a lay committee, WBD returned to its former role as a busy and eclectic retreat center for the next ten years. Periodic eruptions occurred when orthodox Theravadin monks came on extended retreats and tried to assert their authority and gender exclusions, but the committee learned to dissuade their visits. Much more importantly, the center hosted the major lay insight retreats in the Sydney area, ones often led by overseas or interstate teachers, and in the Sydney region it acted as the spiritual home of lay insight practitioners outside the Goenka and Mahasi traditions. Once again, women played prominent roles in its spiritual life.

WBD had become a de facto voluntary association, but the trustees refused to negotiate any constitutional changes that would have seen their power diluted or the possibility of a reversion to Theravadin monasticism compromised. This institutional incongruity eventually doomed the compromise. From 2000 a series of interventions by the trustees (turned directors on WBD’s incorporation in 1998) into the management of WBD led to increasingly severe conflicts which eroded the lay support base, so undermining WBD’s ability to mount retreats and even maintain its buildings and land. In early 2005 the directors responded with a new attempt to turn WBD into a Theravadin monastery in practise, including reduced retreat activity and the enforcement of the *Vinaya* (traditional rules) on the monastic facilities, which essentially banished women to separate facilities yet to be built.

Lay insight practitioners and other progressive lay supporters thereupon abandoned the center. A dozen lay teachers, all members of the recently formed Insight Teachers’ Circle of Australia (ITCA), published a statement on the insight community website, dharma.org.au, saying that they could no longer teach at WBD, given the gender implications of the change and the democratic deficit it revealed. The affair brought home to many insight practitioners for the first time both the incongruities in their communion with the Theravadin institutions that had trained so many of their teachers, and the inescapable organizational requirements of lay insight practice.

This conflict over basic moral values suddenly left lay insight practitioners around Sydney without their accustomed institutional base and retreat center.⁽²⁾ A few months later they found themselves alienated from their most important inner-urban base as well, the Buddhist Library and Meditation Centre — also because of the incongruity between de facto status as a voluntary association on the one hand, and an authoritarian power structure on the other.

It, too, had been a lively, well-resourced meeting place for Asian and Western Buddhists, though here as well (to refer back to Numrich) intersection tended to occur without interaction. Nonetheless, the library had the physical capacity to host its many large gatherings and introductory courses on meditation and Buddhism, as well as the weekly sittings of several *dharma* groups, including insight groups. Several of

Sydney's insight teachers taught there for a number of years, and wrote for its quality newsletter, *Dharma Vision*. But its governance structure operated as essentially that of a private business. In mid-2005 the main powerholder imposed a closed management style driven by a business-like model; the Buddhist Library thereupon came to exemplify the widespread commodification of the *dharma* that Carrette & King (2005) analyze. In response to the changes, the entire staff of five resigned together in September 2005. At the same time, the lay insight teachers decided they could no longer justify working there, and their sitting groups left with them. Though the problem here was quasi-corporate rather than monastic authoritarianism, the refusal of normal civic-associational principles produced the same result of disrupting the pattern of "parallel congregations."

In the wake of these two crises in 2005, the institutional bases left to a large number of practitioners (not least those in Sydney) were sparse. However, the one that already existed grew rapidly, and new ones soon began to emerge. In 2000 a small suburban insight group, the Bluegum Sangha, had begun, and has experienced exponential growth since 2005, with several long-term practitioners taking up teaching roles in it. In 2004 the ITCA was formed, and with its current membership of sixteen insight meditation teachers from Sydney, Brisbane, the Northern Rivers, Perth, Adelaide, Alice Springs and Cairns (including the former Phra Khantipalo, now Laurence Khantipalo), it is the largest group of lay Buddhist teachers in Australia.

But in Sydney the main issue was how to replace W.B.D. as the main insight retreat center, especially in its role of inviting in visiting teachers. Out of a series of crisis meetings of WBD activists in 2005, a new organization — Sydney Insight Meditators (SIM) — arose to take over its organizational services to the insight tradition. In other words, it aimed to invite local, interstate and overseas teachers to give talks and lead retreats and workshops around Sydney on a sustainable scale. The institutional lessons of the W.B.D. crisis were foremost in the founders' minds: their documents insist on gender inclusiveness, progressive modern values (including ones appropriate to democratic associational life), and a secular orientation. For these purposes the organization's founders undertook the discipline of an incorporated voluntary association under NSW legislation.

In an implicit tribute to "global Buddhism" S.I.M. also consciously followed the precedent of the Santa Fe Vipassana Sangha in not tying itself to any particular teacher, group of teachers or approach to practice. It acts as an umbrella organization for a number of lay insight *sanghas* in Sydney, starting with the Bluegum Sangha; but now for two further groups — the Tortoise Mountain and Golden Wattle *sanghas*. At the time of writing, its retreat and course offerings have, in size and frequency, effectively replaced WBD's earlier contribution to insight practice.

Rethinking doctrine, reworking practice

The implications of that watershed year, 2005, speak to two important aspects of newly emerging variants of *dharma* practice. One concerns the nature and sources of spiritual authority; by moving away from the traditional authority structures of the Theravada, the question arises as to what dharmic texts should be regarded as authoritative? The Bluegum Sangha's response has been to distance itself from the commentarial tradition and initiate a sutta study program. An important impetus behind this move was a teaching tour by Stephen and Martine Batchelor in late 2004, and the former's critical view of the Theravadin

commentarial tradition — and approaches to insight meditation based on it — as against the Buddha’s own teaching in the Pali Canon. An important source of Batchelor’s skepticism is Nanavira Thera’s mid-twentieth century underground classic, *Clearing the Path*. That author puts the matter bluntly: having nominated the very few Pali sources — including the *nikayas* (themed collections of *suttas*) — that can claim authenticity, he adds: “no other Pali books whatsoever should be taken as authoritative; and ignorance of them (and particularly of the traditional Commentaries) may be counted a positive advantage, as leaving less to be unlearned” (Nanavira 1987:5).

The Bluegum Sangha has chosen as its textbook the first *sutta*-based biography, *The Life of the Buddha*, by Nanavira’s close friend, Nanamoli (1972). To their surprise, long time insight students have found themselves not simply learning the art of reading *suttas*, but also acquainting themselves with a radically different sense of the founder himself.

Religious Buddhism has tended to ignore hermeneutic questions and has treated the Buddha’s teachings as the timeless revelations of a transcendent being wholly removed from any earthly historical context. In this way they follow another general pattern: institutionalized religions focus on “privileged religious objects,” in Stephen Batchelor’s phrase, and the decontextualized “Lord” Buddha has filled the bill as an object of both religious veneration and of “authoritative” (orthodox) interpretation in the commentaries. Inevitably, much of that interpretation tends to be self-serving, in shoring up the claims to authority of the institutions producing it, their formulaic meditative techniques, and their own associational shibboleths – most spectacularly the concentration of power and the marginalization of women, as noted above.

Modern approaches to interpretation have headed off in the opposite direction: they seek to situate the source of original teachings as precisely as possible in an historical and biographical context. This approach accepts that all spiritual traditions are human artefacts, and the human founders — like all members of their species — are children of their time and culture. The relevant context thus not only specifies a time and place, but also a cultural framework (including religious culture) and the political and socio-economic dynamics that would have shaped the individual in question. All these factors inform our reading of their words and deeds, and give the student a new purchase on the words on the page and the practice they inform.

In spite of his pioneering the presentation of the Buddha as a concrete, historical figure, Nanamoli wrote as an orthodox Theravadin monk; in fact, he also translated (among much else) the commentary that defines the Theravadin orthodoxy, Buddhaghosa’s *The Path of Purification*. More recent contributors to the work of unearthing the historical Buddha have worked from quite different starting points, and have strongly influenced *dharma* study in Australian insight circles. For instance, Pankaj Mishra’s (2004) work, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*, starts with his surprise to find that the Buddha was not an *avatar* of the god Vishnu, born (in deep space, of course) from the mouth of Brahma, as his Hindu upbringing had claimed, but rather his most influential compatriot and a great contributor to the Indian intellectual tradition.

Here the student meets another Siddhattha Gotama, born into the entanglements of caste, clan, gender and political community, in the intellectually and politically turbulent world of the Ganges valley in the

throes of the fifth century BCE agricultural revolution. He joins the urban counter-cultural movement known as the *samanas*, one in opposition to the basically rural religious establishment and reigning religious culture of his time. Throughout his life the political and religious conflicts around him intensify until, shortly before his death, the king of Kosala massacres his entire people, the Sakyans.

A similar account of the Buddha's life and work emerges from Stephen Batchelor's series of eight hour-long *dharma* talks in 2006, "The Life and Death of Siddhattha Gotama." It, too, has had an impact on Australian insight circles. Batchelor emphasizes the Buddha's actual engagement with the world, including his confronting the difficulties and dilemmas of a human being living in those unruly times.

These new interpretations throw fresh light on the role of women as well. It is well known that the Buddha initially hesitated to admit women into the monastic *sangha* — such a move would have ridden roughshod over the Brahmins' deep-seated prejudices — but relented when pressed by his close friend and attendant, Ananda. The price of women's admission, Batchelor suggests, may have been that the Buddha and his followers were forced into exile from their base just outside the Magadhan capital of Rajagaha, and from the otherwise welcoming embrace of the devoted king Bimbisara of Magadha. The Brahmins of Rajagaha and their misogyny were simply too strong for a mixed-sex monastic community to stay there for any length of time. For the next eighteen years the Buddha and his monastics were forced to accept the protection of the far more problematic king Pasenadi of Kosala, until (for different reasons) the Buddha's position became untenable there as well.

Shortly after the Buddha's death, Brahmin misogyny erupted once more, Batchelor suggests, this time inside the *sangha* and in the person of the supposedly fully-awakened Kassapa, a convert of Brahmin background. Kassapa challenges the not-yet-awakened Ananda for having pressured the Buddha into admitting women into the monastic *sangha* in the first place, for constantly defending the nuns, and for having defiled the Buddha's corpse by allowing women to be the first to let their tears fall onto its feet. On this plausible view, factionalism was already present in the monastic *sangha* in the lead-up to the First Council, and gender politics appeared to provide one of its main sources. As Batchelor hints, at this stage the Buddha had finished proclaiming his *dharma*, and it was time for the history of religious Buddhism to begin!

The Siddhattha Gotama that emerges out of Mishra and Batchelor's efforts at retrieval is a brilliant and complex figure; like any of us, he is a work in progress throughout his long life. He appears to be more of a critic of religion than a religious figure, and he thrives in the free circulation of ideas and practices that the *samanas* as a whole uphold. Growing up in a small republic, he has a penchant for deliberative decision-making which he makes the hallmark of his small-scale communities of renunciants. A particularly radical and agnostic thinker, he is an unlikely candidate for the role of founder of a future established religion, still less of an icon that now teems in the streetscapes of Asia and the kitsch shops of the Western world.

To study "the word of the Buddha" is a hermeneutically fraught process, but to engage in a critical approach is not only to get a more vivid sense of what he might have meant, but also to gain a sense of how power plays a pivotal role in established institutions. Power fosters not just doctrinal distortions, apocrypha and prejudices, but shapes the very institutions of religious Buddhism themselves. At least in Sydney, recent

institutional crises have forced insight practitioners to unpick the power issues nestling in venerable institutions, and in this way they have triggered the development of an intellectually vibrant spiritual community.

This exploration has also had an impact on approaches to meditation in Australia. The commentarial tradition (including the Abhidhamma) has molded the widely disseminated, formulaic techniques of *vipassana* practice, such as the Goenka and Mahasi methods. A critical approach to the commentaries naturally inspires skepticism towards the techniques based on them, and calls for a more creative approach to applying “the word of the Buddha,” not least the foundational text for insight meditators, the *Satipatthana Sutta*.

Many east-coast Australian insight practitioners have thus welcomed the American teacher Jason Siff’s annual retreats in several centers. Another critic of the commentarial tradition and the formulaic techniques it has spawned, he recommends (in an echo of Nanavira’s words quoted above) “unlearning” them in favor of a more free and direct cultivation of awareness. Another American teacher, Gregory Kramer, has also established his influence and advocated fresh approaches to insight practice — “insight dialogue” and “*dharma* dialogue” — based directly on the *suttas*.

Receptivity to new winds like these illustrates the strengths of secular insight practice in Australia, thanks to its diversity and open architecture (to borrow an expression from the IT world). The move away from monastic traditions reflects the spiritual plurality of secular Western society, which militates against vested institutional interests and the orthodoxies that promote their claims. Like its counterparts overseas, once it has established its own institutional settings, the secular insight movement in Australia has had little difficulty melding the Buddha’s original ethical and spiritual undertakings with modern moral and associational principles. Indeed, the latter can appear as no more than a further specification of the Buddha’s own approach to communal issues. But the gulf between modern values and associational requirements on the one hand, and their monastic counterparts on the other, seems unbridgeable.

Conclusion

Given the strength of the international influences on it, the development of secular insight meditation practice in Australia has in many ways replicated its development elsewhere, especially in Britain and America. A peculiar aspect of the Australian development, however, has been the long and problematic attempt to work with monastic institutions, and at least one other major institution which operates with a corresponding autocratic power structure. That attempt grew out of Australia’s high proportion of Buddhist migrants, and the groping ad hocery in the search for appropriate associational forms.

The accommodation worked for a time, but at a rising cost in the form of conflicts to assert basic modern moral priorities such as gender inclusiveness and equality, and a democratic associational life. The conflicts revolved around the concentration versus the dispersal of power, and these power issues ultimately ruled out continued accommodation. Sydney-based practitioners in particular have learned a strong lesson in just how important the principles of association underpinning their spiritual life and practice really are.

Though these points are now reasonably clear in the rear-vision mirror,

there can be no sense in which Australian lay insight meditators and their organizations have reached some sort of terminus after a period of pioneering transition. On the contrary, there is every reason to regard existing arrangements as intractably tentative, even if they are a little less naïve and makeshift than they were two decades earlier. But then again, as human beings we live and breathe “contingency” in the dependent arising of events and conditions, which have given rise to the unique unfolding of Buddhist institutions “Down Under”.

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Footnotes

(1) We also have an equivocation with Baumann's use of the terms "traditional" in this context, for it implies that the Buddhism of the other stages is non-traditional – a usage that suggests that a tradition is necessarily something hidebound. Many of the innovations we deal with in this article are traditional in a perhaps more useful sense, one derived from McIntyre (1985) who conceptualizes a living (as opposed to a dead) tradition as an intergenerational "conversation" whose participants remain aware of the tradition's original, generative questions and how questions and answers have evolved from the beginning. In this sense, many of today's Buddhist innovators — especially in their enthusiasm for retrieving the original canon — are more "traditional" than their conservative critics. [Return to Text](#)

(2) In expressing the moral conflict in this way we adopt the widespread assumptions of contemporary moral philosophy, that moral knowledge needs to be contextualized in a particular culture and time, and that moral sensitivity develops over time: see, for instance, Taylor 1989: Introduction. While Buddhists as such adopt the original precepts, we need to avoid essentializing Buddhist morality as if it was something exhaustively expressed in those precepts, and thus treating later moral specifications as optional extras, as inessential "values". [Return to Text](#)