



Why Do European Buddhists Meditate? The Practical Problem of Inventing Global Buddhism

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Abstract

Globalising “Buddhism” beyond its pre-colonial homelands was a complex practical challenge. Actors seeking to bring Buddhism to new audiences in very different cultures met with failure far more often than success until recent decades. Modern-era Buddhist missionaries to Europe had to experiment, selecting elements of Asian Buddhism that could theoretically be transmitted – ordinations, preaching, textual knowledge, rituals etc. – and attempt to institutionalise these as conversion mechanisms.

This article uses the lens of Irish and British converts and sympathisers in Asia and Europe in the late C19th and early C20th centuries to explore the European situation – one with fewer Asian missionaries and different relationships between society and religion than those in North America. It explores the sources of their various versions of Buddhism; their organising techniques and repertoires of “Buddhist” activity, their audiences and how they defined “Buddhism” in relation to politics, ethnicity and colonialism. It argues that meditation (and “practice”) became central to European Buddhism because it solved a crucial organisational problem: what could Buddhist globalisers offer to turn audiences into Buddhists?

Keywords

Buddhism – Buddhist modernism – European Buddhism – global Buddhism –
Buddhist missionaries – meditation

1 Introduction: Two Versions of European Buddhism

In 1890 and 1891 the first Buddhist missionary to the west, Charles Pfoundes, was trying to work out how to turn his fairly substantial audiences, often numbering well over a hundred at weekly lectures in venues across London, into Buddhists. Already in 1889 he had told his Japanese (Jōdo Shinshū) sponsors “There is no one who is openly committed to our movement. [However] there are many who regularly attend my meeting.”¹

In July 1890, by which point he had been lecturing for nine months, Pfoundes offered a “possible course of lectures” in “practical philanthropy”, meaning first aid, in association with the St. John’s Ambulance Society. In January 1891 he appeared twice with a “Buddhist Priest in his Robes”, on at least one occasion offering a “sermon”: perhaps his 1889 requests for a “Buddhist ceremony modified for Britain” had resulted in a liturgy for these occasions.²

In November of 1891 he placed a notice in the spiritualist weekly *The Two Worlds*:

SPIRITUALISTIC ETHICS, &c. – We are requested to state that Captain Pfoundes, whose address is 29, Doughty Street, London, W.C. is desirous of holding discussions on weeknight evenings, or on Sundays, dealing with those interesting and vital subjects to which public attention has been attracted in connection with the recent Theosophic boom; and he will be pleased to arrange with any society or anyone who will give the use of their reception rooms, and gather together a few earnest thinkers and seekers after light and truth.³

Three weeks later this report appeared:

LONDON. Forest Hill, 23, Devonshire Road.-Thursday, Dec. 3, at 8 PM, Capt. Pfoundes has kindly consented to commence a class for the study of psychology, continued each Thursday. Friends welcome. Admission quite free. – H.W.B.⁴

It is not clear whether this implies a positive response to the previous notice or a new initiative. In any case the problem is fairly clear: what was a Buddhist

1 Pfoundes, *Letter*, 25.10.1889.

2 Bocking et al., *The first Buddhist mission to the West*.

3 Pfoundes, *Spiritualistic ethics*.

4 H.W.B., *London. Two Worlds*.

missionary to *do*, that could turn regular listeners into Buddhists? Would practical good works (teaching first aid) be appropriate? Or ritual? Perhaps a discussion forum? Pfoundes was an experienced public speaker, had turned his hand reasonably successfully to several trades and had reflected on the experience of Christian missionaries – but the answer was not obvious; and in fact his mission folded in 1892.⁵

Contrast this experience with the 1984 situation of British drop-out Peter Cornish. Having lived at the then-new Tibetan monastery Samye Ling in Scotland, Cornish moved to Garranes in southwest Ireland to build a retreat centre, today's Dzogchen Beara:

When I told people what we were doing, they usually asked the same question. 'Oh yeah? And who's going to play teacher, you?' ... So I told them that when the time was right, a Tibetan lama would appear.⁶

Nearly a century after Pfoundes, in other words, both Cornish and sceptics knew what was needed to run a retreat centre and how it would work – even before choosing an organisation (he had trained with Trungpa but the centre became a Rigpa one). These were familiar challenges, and known problems:

Though not quite ready to invite a lama, it was time to make a connection, and overcome my few reservations. One of which was the potential invasion of 'helpers' who'd come to watch us work, as they'd done in Scotland. The second and worse threat was the possibility of a sect developing; a closed and inward-looking, pseudo-spiritual clique of groupies, who had proof that only they were correct. When the time came, could I ensure that such cultish in-groups, which are entirely opposed to the philosophy of Buddhism, could *never* take control?⁷

The past fifty years of Buddhism in Europe are full of experiences like Cornish's, mapping out what is by now a routine problematic. The missionary, retreat centre builder, meditation teacher or whoever (allowing for differences between traditions) *knows* what a group, centre, organisation should look like and brings it into being. Of course there are false starts, mistakes, disappointments and crises, but it is fundamentally familiar and routine territory – what we now call "global Buddhism".

⁵ Bocking et al., *The first Buddhist mission to the West*.

⁶ Cornish, *Dazzled by Daylight*, p. 238.

⁷ Cornish, *Dazzled by Daylight*, p. 239.

Pfoundes' experience, however, underlines that these routines were far less obvious in the early years of missionary activity than they now seem with hindsight. This situation is familiar in relation to doctrine⁸ and cultural difference.⁹ However, scholarship has paid less attention to the practical aspects of the hoped-for European Buddhism: what should Buddhist organisers *do*? Our perspective is shaped by how today's institutions answer this question,¹⁰ and often ignores the complexities of working out an answer in practice, without ready models – and misses the other attempted solutions. To quote EP Thompson:

My quarrel with [this approach] is that it reads history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as in fact it occurred. Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten.¹¹

This article argues that a closer attention to past failures¹² can tell us something important both about that period but also about the successes we usually take for granted. Part I tries to theorise Pfoundes' problem of defining what globalising Buddhism should mean practically. Part II explores some answers that early Irish and British Buddhists offered to the problem, while part III asks how the problem was eventually resolved, some decades later – and how far organisers' own efforts mattered as against changing contexts. The article follows Tweed's observations on the underestimation of religious *practice* in the study of global Buddhism and his call for a greater attention to the "flows" of religion.¹³

1.1 *Empirical Focus*

To explore the process of globalisers attempting to work out an adequate repertoire for globalising Buddhism to new populations (whether European populations or western migrants in Asia), I focus on a particular sub-set of globalisers, consisting of Irish and British converts and sympathisers in Asia and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

There are differences between the North American experience and the European one (of which the Irish and British form a distinctive subset): this is

8 E.g. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

9 E.g. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*.

10 Turner et al., *Beachcombing, going native and freethinking*.

11 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

12 Bocking et al., *A Buddhist Crossroads*.

13 Tweed, *Theory and method in the study of Buddhism*.

partly due to the relative paucity of Asian Buddhist missionaries, and indeed Asian Buddhists, in Europe as against North America in the period. It is also, however, shaped by different relationships between society, state and religion. Without homogenising the complex European experience, or ignoring the interactions between the US, Canada, Britain and Ireland, it remains true that most literature in this area considers relationships between the US and East Asia. We should not assume that matters were always identical in Europe, particularly as between the homelands of the British empire and its colonies in South and Southeast Asia.

Concretely, my points of reference include Charles Pfoundes' Buddhist mission in London (1889–92); western members of Ceylon's Buddhist Theosophical Society, notably John Bowles Daly (fl. 1890–3) and others who took pansil between c.1883 and 1899; U Dhammaloka's Buddhist activity between 1900 and c.1913, particularly in Burma, Singapore and Siam; Ānanda Metteyya's international organising from 1903–1914; the Maha-Bodhi Society's presence in London from 1925–1939; Vivian Butler-Burke's Buddhist organising in Dublin between c.1927/9 and 1935/6; and other lesser-known "early western Buddhist monks" and "early Irish Buddhists".¹⁴

This excludes purely individual practitioners and those who did not attempt to make connections between Asian Buddhists and European seekers, whether in Asia or in Europe. There remains an extraordinarily wide range of globalising activities, which of course underlines the point that it was not obvious *what* Buddhist globalisers should be trying to achieve, *how* they should attempt to achieve it or even *where* they should do it – in Asia or in Europe?

Space does not permit repeating the already-published empirical data; this article rather draws some general observations from this "prosopographical" material, the comparison of partly-known individual biographies which share Wittgenstein's "family resemblances".¹⁵

2 Stating the Problem

The problem faced by Pfoundes in 1890, whose solution Cornish found ready-made in 1984, involved defining what "Buddhism" meant in practice, in the process of globalising it. This has multiple dimensions.

14 Bocking et al., *The first Buddhist mission to the West*; Cox/Sirisena, *Early western lay Buddhists*; Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*; Harris, *Ānanda Metteyya*; Cox, *Buddhism in Ireland*; Turner et al., *Beachcombing, going native and freethinking*.

15 Cox/Bocking, *Thinking beyond the island*; Cox, *Researching transnational activist lives*.

2.1 *The Lack of Effective Models*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was little or no living experience of how to bring Buddhism effectively to new cultures and societies. The last major phase of Buddhist expansion, northwards from Tibet among the Buryats, Kalmyks and so on, was well in the past and those modernising Buddhist institutions which were engaging in globalising efforts beyond Asia do not seem to have learned from any effective conversion processes among indigenous populations in SE Asia.

The Jōdo Shinshū globalisers who supported Pfundes underestimated the challenge he faced because they believed Theravāda to be prevalent in Europe, and assumed that what they saw as the Mahāyāna's theoretical superiority would lead to practical success – perhaps a natural belief for the theologically trained in a context which told the story of Buddhism as a history of more powerful ideas superseding older ones.¹⁶ This overestimation of theological factors was not unique to Buddhism: famously, the organisers of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions were confident in Christianity's inherent superiority and were taken aback at Vivekananda and Dharmapāla's success. Put another way, what existing Buddhist organisations had concrete experience of was internal reform processes and inter-sectarian polemic, not the practicalities of “bringing Buddhism” to new populations. They could reflect on the missionary experiences recorded in the Buddhist canon, in the origin myths of different sectarian traditions or national Buddhisms, but again seem to have read these as arguments for the effectiveness of theological polemic.

There was of course a very active *Christian* missionary effort in Buddhist Asia during this period, and Buddhist globalisers were strongly influenced by this. Often, however, they overestimated its effectiveness.¹⁷ (In the extreme case of Irish Catholic efforts in China, any successes achieved were *despite* and not *because of* the methods adopted.¹⁸) Put another way, Buddhists often failed to see the extent to which Christian missionary success had more to do with external factors (ethnic rivalries, its association with empire and modernity, opportunities for social advancement, access to education and health services, etc.) than with the overtly missionary methods imitated by Buddhists.

In this context, colonial-era Buddhist globalisers faced a complex challenge in simply *imagining* what globalisation might imply in practice, and it is unsurprising that failure was more common than success.

16 Yoshinaga Shin'ichi, personal communication.

17 Alicia Turner, personal communication.

18 Cox, *Buddhism and Ireland*, p. 142 et seq.

I use the term “globaliser” rather than “missionary”, “teacher” etc, not least because – as this article argues – part of what was being worked out in this period was what kind of activity was required.¹⁹ It has the merit of including the large proportion of “Buddhist Revival” activity which represented networks embedded *within* Asian Buddhist institutions, and not simply individuals who physically travelled. This article specifically concerns itself with Buddhist globalisers engaging with European populations, whether geographically in Europe or those like U Dhammaloka whose primary orientation in this respect was towards poor western migrants and “Eurasians” in Asia.²⁰ This is not to privilege that activity (many Asian Buddhist missionaries abroad primarily served their own diaspora,²¹ as did e.g. most Irish Catholic missionaries); rather, being uniquely difficult, it highlights the practical challenges of articulating what activity would define a committed Buddhist.

2.2 *Limited Cultural Understanding*

Another problem for Buddhist globalisers was that they typically lacked key dimensions of cultural knowledge. Most of those discussed here did not come from traditionally Buddhist societies, and therefore drew on a selective encounter (constrained by language, social position, personal contacts, etc.) with specific and rapidly modernising Asian Buddhisms. Even extensive discussions with (say) a young metropolitan reformer hardly provided Europeans with much practical information on how ordinary Buddhist institutions sustained themselves on a day-to-day basis – let alone how they could be made to work where they were not a traditional point of reference and lacked financial and political resources. Conversely, of course, Asian modernisers had equally constrained and potentially misleading encounters with everyday life in western societies. In both cases, there was no substitute for long periods of residence in the “other” context, which was rare.

The challenge of elaborating strategies for Buddhist globalisation where Buddhism lacked the financial resources and cultural prestige that Christian missionaries drew on, and could offer none of the same instrumental benefits, was very difficult. Unsurprisingly, those who even attempted the task were remarkable: their biographies show a great capacity to think on their feet, persistence verging on stubbornness, ascetic personal needs and a willingness to run organisations on shoestring budgets in near-perpetual crisis.²²

19 Learman, *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization*.

20 Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*.

21 Kemper, *Dharmapala's Dharmaduta and the Buddhist ethnoscape*, p. 47 et seq.

22 Bocking et al., *A Buddhist Crossroads*.

2.3 *The Problem of Translation*

Along with this lack of models and limited cultural understanding, Buddhist globalisers had to position themselves vis-à-vis Asian Buddhisms in rapid flux, from which they had to select elements of Buddhism that could effectively be transmitted to a “first generation” of converts. Whether textual knowledge, rituals, ordination, alms-going, ethical action or something else, these then needed to be institutionalised in the new context. As in more recent periods, very few groups were able to do this.

The process of disembedding,²³ abstraction and translation had to speak to the shifting realities which globalisers encountered among the new populations they engaged with, and the selective reception of what they offered. This translation process was at the same time a redefinition of “what it means to be Buddhist”.²⁴ If in the present day a western Buddhist is often (normatively if not always in reality) someone who meditates, this was not the case at the turn of the twentieth century. Here the definition (in Asia and in Europe) *might* be “a monk”, “someone who has taken the refuges and precepts”, “a lay supporter”, “someone who reads Buddhist books”, “someone who lives according to Buddhist ethics or philosophy”, or something else again.

Globalisers had to negotiate these definitions in practice with their institutional sponsors, lay supporters or ecclesiastical superiors. They had to negotiate them with European populations. They also had to negotiate between Buddhism and Christian definitions of affiliation, as new kinds of line were drawn between Buddhist and Shintō in Japan or Buddhist and Confucian in China; as South and Southeast Asian religious identities became politicised, and as spiritualists, theosophists and atheists problematised religious belonging. For the globalising Buddhist missionary, these were not abstract or theological concerns but went right to the heart of the question “what should I try to do?”

As we know from post-war biographies of Asian missionaries to the west and western Buddhists, the answers to these questions were often anything but simple, organisationally or personally. We can consider the lay westerners who took *pansil* (the refuges and precepts) in the context of Ceylon’s Buddhist Theosophical Society between 1886 and 1907. At the time this was also interpreted as “becoming Buddhist”, but in practice it symbolised a moment of institutional commitment to the BTS’ English-language schools which most who took *pansil* would work in, in effect a job requirement. Participants had

23 Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*.

24 Cox, *Buddhism and Ireland*, p. 215 et seq.

very different understandings of the implications vis-à-vis Christianity and Sinhala Buddhism alike.²⁵

2.4 Concepts

I want to make two conceptual propositions about the problems which globalisers faced in this period. The first is to think of “what Buddhist globalisers did in globalising Buddhism” as a repertoire. Social movement studies uses the term “repertoire of contention” to describe the set of possibilities which citizens can draw on when campaigning.²⁶ In different contexts this could mean the formal membership organisation, the public meeting, the petition and the demonstration; or the sit-in, voter registration and the boycott; or union organisation, go-slows, picket lines and strikes; or occupying public space, the hashtag and the publicity stunt. Activists in a given context are aware of the practical possibilities of a particular repertoire, whether or not they are personally experienced in them; such types of action can be presented as options to other participants, and deployed with a reasonable hope that both the opponent and the general public will recognise what is happening as a movement.

By analogy, contemporary “global Buddhism” now has such a repertoire, which includes the website, the teacher, the “practice” (meditation, ritual or something else), the course, the urban centre, the retreat, the book and so on. The details vary between and sometimes within traditions, but not so dramatically: as Cornish’s example illustrates, by the 1980s even scoffers knew that running a retreat centre required a proper teacher. The possibilities are known and chosen from according to situation and purpose.

However, in the high colonial period this was not true. Pfoundes and the other figures discussed here did not have such a repertoire available – or rather they were trying to construct one, in dialogue with other repertoires (that constructed by Buddhist modernisers for already “Buddhist” populations, that deployed by Christian missionaries in Asia, and that represented by theosophists and similar groups). It is this repertoire construction that we saw Pfoundes engaged in as he tried to work out what *else*, besides public talks, he could do that might “work” (whether to get people carrying out good works, to have them participate in Buddhist ritual or to engage them in discussion around ethics and / or psychology).

My second suggestion is that thinking of these processes in terms of cultural frames (“the construction of western Buddhism” according to an abstract logic, for example) is to centre our own academic skill-sets, much as Japanese

25 Cox/Sirisena, *Early western lay Buddhists in colonial Asia*.

26 Tilly, *Power in Movement*.

modernisers believed in the power of theology. For the organiser on the ground, practical constraints were crucial. “What worked” could come to define “what it means to be a Buddhist (convert)”: the globaliser’s goals were necessarily shaped (not always consciously) by the outcomes that could actually be achieved in practice.

Here we can draw on Gramsci’s distinction between “common sense” and “good sense”.²⁷ Common sense, broadly, is how people negotiate between a particular hegemonic ideology and their own practical experience: for example, how a Buddhist globaliser might explain their activities to a funder or a superior. Their practical experience, however, manifests as “good sense” – what the globaliser knows, in context, to work (even if their own ideas lead them to downplay or sidestep this awareness).²⁸

As noted, globalisers in this period were extremely determined and motivated, not liable to give up their original purpose in a hurry – but they were also struggling to make these religious purposes a reality in difficult circumstances and with only very problematic models to work with. What from a dogmatic perspective might seem sheer opportunism, as in the frequently messy lives of a Dhammaloka or a Pfoundes, may in fact represent the good sense of trying to land Buddhism in a challenging context: a typical case is Dhammaloka’s sudden abandonment of Burmese activities in pursuit of a proposed parliament of religions in Japan.²⁹

Conversely, of course, if such globalisers were to pay too much attention to good sense they would probably have given up far more quickly than they did, and left fewer traces. Unsurprisingly, then, many of their lives show a constant tension between the stubborn pursuit of the perhaps impossible and the quick leap towards the apparently possible – and a tendency to change country when the gap between the two seemed impossible to bridge.

3 What Repertoire Did Colonial-Period Globalisers Explore?

3.1 *Place and Anti-colonialism*

Japan and “British India” (including Ceylon and Burma) appear as defining centres for *these* Buddhist globalisers, in parallel with the wider picture including Asian and North American globalisers.³⁰ These are the countries

²⁷ Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*.

²⁸ Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, p. 16.

²⁹ Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*, ch. 4.

³⁰ Bocking et al., *A Buddhist Crossroads*.

where Buddhist revival most closely meshed with a cultural politics that was tendentially anti-colonialist (and as the twentieth century wore on became more straightforwardly culturally nationalist).

Another way of saying this is that Buddhist globalisation appears as related to a pan-Asian Buddhism which was itself in part anti-colonialist. There is nothing surprising in this: it was precisely a pan-Asian Buddhism, however inflected (very differently in Theravāda countries, in Japan and among Indian intellectuals)³¹ that was most motivated to “disembed” itself from local and national tradition and try to find a form which would be comprehensible abroad or to European migrants in Asia. Buddhist globalisation, in this period, is then an extension of this process.

3.2 Available Models

Much of the initial repertoire in Asia was straightforwardly calqued on Christian organisations, at least in name. The many different “Buddhist Text / Tract Societies” in different countries³² presumably often drew on the older reverence for the Buddhist book which did not always involve reading it (consider the tens of thousands of mostly English-language tracts which U Dhammaloka distributed in Burma), by contrast with the intention (at least) of Christian tract societies. (Buddhists and Christians shared the logic of enabling people to demonstrate piety through donations.) Young Men’s Buddhist (rather than Christian) Associations sprang up in several countries, playing a particular role in Ceylon. Also in Ceylon, modernising Buddhist schools appeared as a direct response to the success of Christian missionary schools.³³

These models, however, were not particularly effective when it came to globalising Buddhism *beyond* existing Buddhist populations, and here other strategies were tried. One, which could claim canonical legitimation, was the attempt to extend the bhikkhu-sangha to whites in Asia (Dhammaloka) and to European contexts (Ānanda Metteyya and, later, the Maha-Bodhi Society’s London mission). This involved ordinations, some creativity in applying vinaya rules in new contexts, and the attempt to construct donor arrangements. As is well-known, this strategy met with considerable practical difficulties, and indeed has proved hard to sustain to this day in European contexts.

Public ritual – for example, Wesak celebrations, ordinations as ceremonies, the public foundation of new institutions and so on – was also attempted as a strategy, but suffered from the obvious problem that rituals hallowed by tradition and familiar to participants have greater power than newly-introduced ones.

31 Ober, *Dust on the Throne*.

32 Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*, ch. 8.

33 Cox/Sirisena, *Early western lay Buddhists*.

Pfoundes' attempt at good works was rarely repeated in Europe. (In the US the secretary of the Dharma Sangha of Buddha, a convert group linked to the Japanese missions in California, stated that it had been incorporated to "found schools, hospitals, asylums and other institutions of any kind that would be helpful to mankind". Such activities would have been far easier with a pious laity motivated to make regular and substantial donations. In practice, they seem to have run small services: one such consisted of two talks, one by the resident priest and another by a western supporter, followed by singing a hymn.)³⁴

What *did* work up to a point was strategies based around public talks and discussion, the production of magazines or books, and at times newspaper interventions. These strategies were familiar to western audiences, whether in Asia or in Europe, from theosophy and spiritualism. They were shared to a great extent with other movements of the day such as socialism, anarchism, feminism, vegetarianism, temperance and freethought; and they constructed organisational networks by their very existence – as regular audiences at talks, as magazine subscribers, as correspondents and so on.

But as Pfoundes' complaint which opens this article shows, Buddhist globalisers wanted to go further than this. Theosophists and spiritualists could get their audience off the printed page or out of the lecture hall and into the initiation or the séance. Vegetarians and teetotallers naturally organised social events, established restaurants or temperance bars; freethinkers sometimes organised large outdoor festivals.³⁵ Political activists moved towards collective action of many kinds.

But what could become the defining activity of a committed Buddhist? What was the next step after attending a talk or reading a magazine? In Germany, the Buddhist Mission Society founded in 1903 planned a programme consisting of "(1) publication of Buddhist books, treatises and pamphlets, (2) publication of a magazine, (3) holding of lectures on Buddhism".³⁶ Ananda Metteyya's Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland (BSGBI), founded in 1909, equally found it hard to go beyond this. The Society held weekly talks, published the *Buddhist Review* and pamphlets, and supported Pāli translation and study. It held Wesak meetings which initially simply involved 5–6 talks but eventually expanded to include reading the *Mettā Sutta* and "tea and conversation", despite distributing Ledi Sayadaw's texts.³⁷ Discussions ensued as to how the Society should develop and if conversion was desirable or meaningful.

34 Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism* p. 148; *Tracing modernity's flows* pp. 50–52.

35 Royle, *Victorian Infidels*.

36 Nyanatutsita, *The Life of Nyanatiloka Thera*, p. 16.

37 Skilton et al., *Terms of engagement*, p. 10.

3.3 *The Power of Context*

Thus the formation of a suitable “repertoire” to globalise Buddhism was an unresolved problem in the colonial period. There was, however, also a broader problem. As noted above, Buddhists overestimated the effectiveness of Christian missionary *methods* in themselves, and failed to focus on the broader context which made those methods effective.

It is not that *no* thought went into context: Dhammaloka, for example, was clear about his positioning of Buddhism in relation to freethought, while Pfoundes noted “Spiritualists, socialists, free thinkers, and secularists respect me”³⁸ and further identified “some Christians” or elsewhere Unitarians as being sympathetic. European globalisers of Buddhism, having converted away from any traditional position in their own culture, were certainly alive to the internal tensions of their own cultures.

These local tensions included the church-state conflicts developing after the French Revolution, with consequent liberal and freethought movements and sectarian differences between Christian churches, sometimes linked to nationalisms. New religious movements such as spiritualism and theosophy, and various occultisms, developed; while broader political movements such as socialism, anarchism, feminism or vegetarianism grew.³⁹ Where Buddhism found a home in the west, it was often in these counter-cultural milieux. Perhaps like Christianity in Asia, conversions depended not only on the effective methods of Buddhist missionaries (though they certainly had to be present and persistent) but also on the receptivity of particular local cultures, or counter-cultures.⁴⁰

Part of the difficulty was one of timing. The dates of the early western Buddhist globalisers discussed here run from 1889 to 1939. While in 1889–92 the London Buddhist mission was drowned out by the conflict between Theosophy and freethought as counter-cultural positions, in later years – as first Ānanda Metteyya and then Dharmapāla attempted their own missions to London – the energy was going out of European counter-cultures. As Thompson writes in a different context, there was a “failure of the two traditions [Romantics and radical workers] to come to a point of junction”.⁴¹

Dhammaloka’s interest in freethought and religion would have been far more at home in the working-class London of 1890 than that of 1910, after the rise of a more tightly-defined socialist and union culture; but the *anti-colonial* implications of the Asian Buddhisms of the 1920s would have been beyond

38 Pfoundes, *Letter*, 18.10. 1889.

39 Skilton, *Elective Affinities*.

40 Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism; Cox, Buddhism and Ireland*.

41 Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 915.

the pale for most middle-class Romantic contemporaries. In this later context there was some logic to consuming a textual Buddhism far from political contention. Overshadowing these fractures, of course, are the larger ones of empire and capitalism and the trauma of the First World War.

My overall suggestion, then, is that Buddhist globalising drew on repertoires developed in Japanese, Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhism, but also formed organisations “calqued” on Christian models. The most successful repertoires were those which most closely mimicked western models of popular counter-cultural activity; yet these did not offer an answer to the question of how to go further and construct effective Buddhist organizations, while the conditions which created a brief cultural receptivity to Buddhism in some European contexts ebbed away with the fragmentation of the 1890s counter-culture.

4 Eventual Solutions

Highlighting cultural receptivity is perhaps an elaborate statement of the obvious: the spread of Buddhism to European populations primarily developed around the later counter-culture of the 1960s and afterwards. There was some institutional presence (the London Buddhist Vihara, the Buddhist Society, the English Sangha Trust) in mid-century England, but Pfoundes’ mass audiences were absent in the 1930s or 1950s.⁴² It was a new wave of deep rejections of dominant forms of *local* culture which led much larger numbers of Europeans to once again seek answers in Buddhism. Indeed autobiographies from this generation show that many had sufficient determination to seek out Buddhism for themselves, even had there been no readily available repertoire.

However, by this later point such a repertoire was widely available. It was not, in the end, invented by European globalisers but was borrowed from Asian reformers responding to the crises provoked by colonialism.⁴³ The revival in several Buddhist countries of the practice of meditation, its development in forms suitable for lay practitioners, and associated institutional developments such as the meditation *course* (to fit in with the weekly schedule of an educated urban laity), the urban centre, the short rural retreat, the publication of practitioners’ manuals – all this has its roots in the colonial period, as part of the broader Buddhist revival.⁴⁴ In this context meditation, as “mental science”,

42 Skilton, *Elective affinities*.

43 Crosby, *The shared origins of traditionalism and secularism*.

44 Braun, *The Birth of Insight*.

was effectively counterposed as an Asian area of strength to western mastery of “physical science”.⁴⁵

However, it was not adopted by any of their European contemporaries as an organisational repertoire: it became popularised in Europe half a century later, paralleling the throes of decolonisation. A new Asian Buddhist energy, expressed in events like the foundation of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (1950) or the Sixth Buddhist Council (1954–56), strengthened Buddhist revival networks in Asia and supported the propagation of meditation lineages aimed at the urban laity.

Federman’s invaluable survey argues that the main problem was that for various reasons meditation was not readily available in Britain. However, as seen above this is in large part because Buddhist globalisers did not recognise it as the strategic tool for popularising Buddhism that a later generation discovered it to be. As he acknowledges, Ānanda Metteyya’s 1908 meditation manual was never published in any European Buddhist context.⁴⁶

Warren’s *Buddhism in Translations* (1896), not mentioned by Federman, was certainly available in the UK. It included 22 Theravāda texts on “Meditation and nirvana”, including kasiṇa meditations and the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, but did not lead to any boom in meditation. Meanwhile Caroline Rhys David’s introduction to the 1916 translation of *Manual of a Mystic* comments that even the specialist reader’s “interest may be baffled rather than stimulated”.⁴⁷

Having run meditation groups in various contexts over the past quarter-century, I can testify that it is easy to underestimate the practical difficulty of making them last. While a handful of new practitioners may be “naturals”, most need some support in various dimensions (posture, learning the techniques, handling unexpected experiences etc.) and most teachers need a body of practical experience to draw on if beginners are to become regulars. It is this “repertoire” which enables the teacher not only to handle the routine problems of any new group but also to respond creatively to the *unexpected* problems that are likely to characterise globalising processes.

While canonical and classic texts were available, some in translation (and many in the original languages for those academics who could read them), the first published meditation *manual* in Europe seems to have been the (London) Buddhist Lodge’s 1935 text and Lounsbury’s simultaneous book.⁴⁸ At this period, most European globalisers still saw meditation as at best an individual

45 Crosby, *The Shared origins of traditionalism and secularism*.

46 Federman, *Buddhist Meditation in Britain*.

47 Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*; Rhys Davids, *Editor’s preface*, p. viii. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for these references.

48 Humphreys, *Concentration and Meditation*; Federman, *Buddhist meditation in Britain*.

activity for monks and other virtuosos, rather than a normative activity for all Buddhists which could be used to build new organisations.

ER Rost of the BSGBI, for example, wrote in 1911,

When lecturing in England, I was constantly asked to give some practical lessons in meditation. People actually believed that the trances [dhyānas] could be attained by some device which they thought could be taught like a conjuring trick. They used the word meditation as if they were quite advanced ... Much more time is required in the preparation of the mind for meditation than for the actual practice ... To practice meditation in a mind unprepared by non-adherence to the moral precepts and Right Understanding is like building a house on rotten foundations. We may build up the house, but it will fall.⁴⁹

In other words, *first* you had to be a Buddhist and *then* you could meditate – the opposite of what is now the normal order. Rost wrote: “It is hopeless to consider this subject further unless this fact is realised.”⁵⁰

This situation would only start to change for small numbers in the 1930s (in Britain, not Ireland), when meditation teaching became available in London via the Buddhist Lodge of the Theosophical Society and the Maha-Bodhi Society.⁵¹ However even in this context Christmas Humphreys still considered the establishment of a bhikkhu-sangha central to missionary activity.⁵² Eventually the new repertoire developed by Asian modernisers (not just meditation, but “meditation for the masses”), became widely available, providing an answer to Pfoundes’ problem of what to *do* with regular listeners: teach them meditation (or a functionally equivalent practice such as chanting, ritual, initiation etc.)

Practice now provided an adequate answer and definition of what “being a Buddhist” meant, or “what Buddhists do”. It also had the merit of paralleling other forms of self-improvement that Europeans associated with Asian religion, such as yoga: something that could be taught in an urban centre as a first step, practiced regularly as a second step, and enabled a stronger or looser religious or philosophical identification. As a result, the general understanding both of future European converts and wider society, of meditation or practice as a defining act, is intimately bound up with this repertoire as a solution to the missionary problem of how to globalise Buddhism. This is so effective that BCA

49 Rost, *Meditation*, pp. 304, 309.

50 Rost, *Meditation*, p. 304.

51 Cook, *Mindfulness and resilience in Britain*, p. 91.

52 Humphreys, *Ānanda Metteyya*.

(Jōdo Shinshū) teachers in America now sometimes offer meditation, soteriologically unimportant in their tradition, because of the demand.⁵³

Before this repertoire became available, however, early Buddhist globalisers faced enormous, perhaps insoluble, problems in the attempt to institutionalise Buddhism in European contexts. In this perspective we can theorise the periodisation of Buddhist globalisation rather differently, and offer stronger explanations for the difference between the exploratory but ultimately largely unsuccessful attempts of the turn of the twentieth century and the very different experience from the later 1960s onwards.

5 Conclusion

In 1961 the English ex-communist, anti-colonial activist and Buddhist Freda Bedi set up the Young Lamas Home School, teaching refugee Tibetans including Chōgyam Trungpa and Akong Rinpoche. She later enabled Trungpa's study in Oxford, following which the two set up today's Samye Ling. Bedi had learnt meditation from Mahasi Sayadaw in Rangoon, and could make this modernist Buddhist strategy available to her Buddhist "sons".⁵⁴ Peter Cornish, who we met at the start of this article, had learned his own understanding of Buddhism from Trungpa at Samye Ling, closing the circle.

This article has suggested that it was far from obvious to the first Buddhist globalisers how they could bring Buddhism to European populations: they lacked effective models, had limited cultural understanding and had difficult "translation" choices to make. This posed serious problems in their attempts to construct an effective repertoire for globalising Buddhism, and in fact much of the benefits of their efforts lay in the resultant process of trial and error.

Drawing on experiences from Japan, Burma, Ceylon and India, they explored models from Buddhist history and Christian missionary activity but found the talk- and periodical-based structure of western popular self-organising (political as well as religious) to be the most effective in practice. However, they were unable to use this repertoire to convert the audiences of talks or publications into participants in a deeper sense that could be defined as "becoming Buddhist".

This was only in part a technical problem; it was also shaped by wider social conditions which hindered receptivity. When those conditions changed, in the postwar period, the new repertoire associated with large-scale meditation teaching aimed at Asian laity had also become available, providing a ready-made model which a new generation of globalisers could import.

53 Strand, *Ordinary struggles*.

54 Whitehead, *The Lives of Freda*.

However, to understand how global Buddhism *did* eventually turn out, it is important to understand how the first globalisers *thought* it might develop, the strategies they employed and the problems they encountered in doing so. All this gives us a much better understanding of the kind of problem to which a “practice” (of meditation, chanting, recitation, ritual and so on) would eventually provide a solution – and in so doing redefine what it “means to be Buddhist” for Europeans.

European Buddhists, then, do not meditate so much because of a literary history of *ideas* about Buddhism. Rather, they meditate because it is “practice” that enabled the formation of lasting and effective Buddhist *organisations* in Europe.

Bio

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