

Buddhist Education in Britain

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Let me begin by thanking the venerable organisers of this conference for doing me the honour of inviting me to talk to you on the subject of Buddhist Education in Britain.

First of all I should say that it is not so many years since I spoke here in Bangkok on this very subject. In 1997 a conference was held here to survey the state of Buddhist studies internationally over the previous 25 years; it was organised by the Centre for Buddhist Studies of Chulalongkorn University under Dr Wit Wisadavet, Director of the Centre. A scholar was invited from each of some fifteen countries in which Buddhist studies could be presumed to flourish – which is more or less the same as saying, where the subject could be studied at university level.

Once the conference had begun, it became clear to me that what the organisers really wanted to know was how the rest of the world saw “engaged Buddhism”. Were Buddhist studies being pursued only in an entirely detached spirit, or was Buddhism being used to offer values and insights in other academic areas, such as politics or ecology? I suspect that they were rather disappointed at finding themselves alone in this concern; and this may largely explain the somewhat unsatisfactory aftermath of the conference. A volume containing versions (some radically revised) of ten of the papers, plus an introduction, finally appeared in 2000.ⁱ Thus material which was in any case doomed to obsolescence appeared in print only when approaching its sell-by date. Each contribution was now equipped with a bibliography, but – perhaps through some misguided notion of fairness – this included only books, not articles, so that much of the material some of us had gone to great pains to assemble was wasted.ⁱⁱ And misprints abounded. I wonder how many of you have even seen, let alone read, this volume. I suspect very few.

The title I was assigned on that occasion was “Buddhist Studies in Britain”; and though that obviously overlaps considerably with “Buddhist Education in Britain”, it is perhaps not quite the same. “Buddhist Studies in Britain” is obviously about work which is strictly academic. Buddhist education, on the other hand, is a broader concept. In fact, “Buddhist Education in Britain” has a slightly strange ring to it. I must begin by considering why this should be so.

All the world’s great religions have venerable traditions of studying their own scriptures, traditions which indeed lie at the heart of the academic tradition in most of the countries where one or another of those religions is established. On the whole, however, that study of the religious tradition into which one has been born has not been undertaken in any kind of critical spirit, but has been a matter of learning the received wisdom in order to benefit from it in one’s own life and pass it on to future generations.

The study of the history of religion as a part of the history of mankind is an aspect of secularisation. It has its roots in the European Enlightenment of the 18th century. The principles of the Enlightenment informed the American constitution, which separated church from state so effectively that to this day the public education system in America is prohibited by law from inculcating any religion – and this despite the fact that the vast majority of Americans have from that day to this been practising Christians. With the growth of the social sciences in the 20th century, the subject hitherto most widely known as “comparative religion” or “history of religions” is now most commonly known as “religious studies”; and it should come as no surprise that, whether one looks at the subject of “religious studies” in terms of teachers, students, institutional backing or publications, most of it, probably over 90%, goes on in North America.

Britain, like Thailand, has for many centuries had an established religion in the technical sense of a religion recognised as that of the state: here Theravada Buddhism, in Britain Anglican Christianity. In both cases this has meant that until quite recently the only religion to form part of the syllabus in the state educational system at any level has been the local established religion, and that has generally been studied not so much in a spirit of enquiry as in that of handing down a tradition – a tradition which of course is considered fundamental for the proper conduct of both public and -- especially -- private life.

It was largely British contact with the wider world, brought about by its colonial empire, that prompted a few outstanding individuals to take an interest in religions other than Christianity. The great scholar T.W. Rhys Davids acquired most of his knowledge of Buddhism as a young man when he was a colonial civil servant in Sri Lanka. His well informed sympathy for the religion led him to found the Pali Text Society in London in 1881. The finance needed to launch this society were provided by a few Sinhalese Buddhists and an anonymous donor who was probably Rhys Davids himself. The Pali Text Society was the first institution in the world to begin to print the Pali canon, though shortage of both money and workers (who donated their services) meant that long before the Canon could be completed a complete version had been published here in Thailand in the 1890s under the patronage of HM Rama V. However, the Thai version was of course printed in Thai characters, which meant that it could have virtually no impact overseas. The Pali Text Society, by contrast, following the tradition that Pali should everywhere been written in the local script, printed Pali only in roman characters, and was thus responsible for the first worldwide diffusion of Pali texts. The Pali Text Society also set up publishing English translations of the canon and some other Pali texts, and it has published dictionaries, grammars, and other works ancillary to Pali studies. The fact that it publishes Pali in Roman letters and uses English as its secondary medium has meant that it is really the Pali Text Society which must take the credit for bringing Pali studies to the wider world.

However, even while the PTS was doing this magnificent job, Buddhism was not mentioned during the education of the average British citizen. The first chair of comparative religion in Britain was founded at Manchester University in 1903 and held by T.W. Rhys Davids. Progress was however extremely slow. (I am now talking specifically about Buddhism, but concerning other major religions, such as Islam and Hinduism, the story was at that stage much the same.) When I came up to the University of Oxford as a student in 1957, the University employed no one to teach Buddhism at all, and I don't think it figured on any syllabus, undergraduate or postgraduate. I believe the same was true of Cambridge. When I took up my first post, in 1965, as Lecturer in Sanskrit and Pali at Oxford, there was not a single post in the British university system dedicated to the study of Buddhism; and I believe that my post, then newly created, was the only one to include Pali in its title.

The establishment of Religious Studies in the British university system must stand largely to the credit of another Buddhologist, Ninian Smart; he first occupied the chair in this subject at Lancaster University, where he set up a department in 1967. In its early days Ninian Smart's department at Lancaster had two or even three post-holders in Buddhism; but when I wrote for Dr. Wisadavet in 1997 the only centre for Buddhist studies which existed in Britain had recently been founded at Bristol University under the leadership of Paul Williams. In my contribution to that Chulalongkorn survey I published a table headed "British institutions offering teaching in Buddhism at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level" (pp.176-8). It is only slightly out of date; but I am pleased to report that there are now two other centres of Buddhist studies, one at SOAS and the other at Oxford. We at Oxford are proud and honoured to have the patronage of HRH Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn, who visited us recently. However, our financial base is still extremely insecure, and both I, as Academic Director, and my friend Geoff Bamford, as Executive Director, not only donate

our services but are still obliged to use our own money to keep the Centre afloat – a situation which obviously cannot go on for ever.

The great expansion in the study of non-Christian religions in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain must be linked to the fortunes of faith communities in the wider population, for they provide both demand and supply. When what is now called the British Association for the Study of Religions was formed in 1954, it was natural to make it primarily an association for the study of the history of religions, i.e., of their past, because their living presence was not a salient feature of the local landscape. The immigration which sharply increased at around that time, and the consequent rise in the population from non-Christian religious traditions, began to make it reasonable to regard Britain as a multi-cultural society. The impact was not immediate; but as the non-Christian immigrants began to send their children to school, it became necessary to cater for them in primary and secondary education. Here too, Ninian Smart was a pioneer: in 1969 he played a leading part in creating the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education. This small body of volunteers tried to offer the school system – and to some extent also other public services such as hospitals and the police, plus any inquirers from the general public – at least a minimum of accurate and not unsympathetic information about the various religious traditions now found in Britain. The Shap Working Party has annually published and distributed both a calendar of religious festivals and a compilation (known as the “Shap Mailing”), aimed specially at schoolteachers, which takes a new theme each year and contains articles on that theme applied to various religions.

Once these religious traditions were taught in schools, it became necessary to train teachers, and even in due course school inspectors, who knew something about them. This in turn meant jobs for some graduates of university departments of Religious Studies. This then led to a rise in standards and to formal examinations, so that it became possible to take “Advanced level” school certificate examinations in Religious Studies with papers devoted to specific non-Christian religions.

Because of the pattern of immigration, Buddhism benefited less from these developments than did Islam, Hinduism and even Sikhism. When I first joined the Shap Working Party, an extremely well-meaning senior figure, who was I believe responsible for the teaching of non-Christian religions throughout the Birmingham area, told me that Buddhism was not suitable for children! By that he meant that it was too intellectual and abstruse. It was Peggy Morgan who coined the response “Buddhists have children too”, and who began producing materials to help schoolteachers teach Buddhism in secondary schools; Anil Goonewardene followed with materials for younger children.

It is worth pausing to reflect at this point that one could argue that the relation between religious education and the wider society has not changed. Earlier the society was Christian, so it was Christianity that was taught in the educational system; now society includes communities adhering to other religions, so they are catered for by the educational system in the same way. So *has* anything changed? Well yes, it has. Earlier, Christianity could only be taught by believing Christians, and the assumption was that the pupils were believing Christians too. In fact, if a family was not Christian, parents could have their children excused from the religious classes at school. But the teaching of “religious studies” is quite unlike that. Teachers usually have to teach more than one religion, so obviously they cannot be required to be adherents of the religion they teach. By the same token, pupils are not required to believe anything, merely to be informed about the religious beliefs and practices of their fellow citizens. This distinction which I have just pointed out between traditional religious instruction and modern religious studies is so sharp that in Britain many Muslims object to having Islam taught by non-Muslims and prefer it not to be taught in the state system at all. I am glad to say that I have never come across this attitude among Buddhists.

Immigration into Britain is not the only impact that geo-politics has had on the study of religion. In higher education Buddhism has benefited from a tragedy and a success. The tragedy has been the Chinese invasion of Tibet. In particular, the conquest of Lhasa and the flight to India in 1959 of the Dalai Lama have had massive consequences for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism across the world and the academic study of Tibet. The Tibetan exodus was initially into India, where the majority of the Tibetan Sangha have stayed, but significant numbers have gone on to North America and, secondarily, to Europe.

Fifty years ago I don't think there was a department of Tibetan studies at any university in the world, and there was certainly no international organisation for the subject. Now many universities, including Oxford and SOAS, teach the Tibetan language and Tibetan studies; and the recent international conferences of the International Association for Tibetan Studies have been better attended than the corresponding meetings of the International Association for Sanskrit Studies. Tibetan studies are of course not all about Buddhism, but surely well over half of them are.

The success to which I have just alluded is the Japanese economic miracle. Japanese efforts to export their culture have not been in proportion to their economic clout – and one could say the same, later, of the Koreans. Nevertheless, some Japanese Buddhist organisations have been generous in supporting the study of Buddhism abroad, not least in Britain. The most notable donor has been the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, The Society for the Advancement of Buddhist Understanding, also known among us as the Numata Foundation, after its founder. In the 1980s Mr Yehan Numata, from his base in Tokyo, began to found chairs in Buddhist studies in the western world. There was some variation, but the general pattern was for a university to have a visiting scholar to teach each year, paid for by the BDK; and extra money was also paid, with the intention of building up the endowment of a permanent chair. Though Mr Numata himself was an adherent of Jodo Shinshu, the Pure Land Buddhist tradition founded by Shinran, the BDK has wisely and nobly supported Buddhist studies in general. Oxford was the first British university to benefit: an annual visiting fellowship, attached to Balliol College, began in 1989. Later SOAS and Cambridge received benefactions from the same source. Following my retirement, the Numata Foundation have most generously and far-sightedly agreed to convert the visiting position at Oxford into a permanently endowed chair, as Mr Numata originally envisaged. It is hoped that the money for this will be available in time for the chair to be filled in October 2007. This would be the first endowed chair in Buddhist studies not merely at Oxford but at any British university.

I trust that it has not escaped the notice of this audience that both of these developments, the Tibetan tragedy and the economic success of Japan and Korea, concern Mahayana Buddhists, and have consequently favoured the study of Mahayana. Sadly, there has been no comparable impetus to the study of the Theravada in Britain, or indeed anywhere else in the West. In Britain there are indeed a few indigenous sympathisers, such as myself, who ask how one can possibly study Buddhism without paying due attention to the words of its founder. Moreover, I have founded the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies with this idea very much in mind. When I retired in 2004 the study of both Pali and Theravada Buddhism could have ground to a halt in Oxford, but I was determined that after all my efforts over 40 years this should not happen. I have since devoted most of my time and effort to teaching and organising the teaching of the Pali tradition; but I do hope that at last there may be some help forthcoming from the contemporary upholders of that tradition, notably the Buddhists of Thailand.

I am absolutely convinced that the Buddhist tradition has so much to offer the world that some knowledge of it should be part of the education of every citizen in every country. I think that the best way forward in Britain would be to try to get Buddhism out of what is still

a kind of minority ghetto, the subject labelled “Religious Studies”, and have both the Buddha himself and the Emperor Asoka figure in courses on world history and civilisation, alongside thinkers like Plato and Aristotle and rulers like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

While I am convinced that this is an entirely reasonable proposal, I cannot see that it is likely to be adopted in the near future. Perhaps the best use I can make of the few minutes remaining to me is to consider why.

If I put myself in the shoes of a British educationalist who is asked to ensure that both schoolchildren and university students are taught about the Buddha, I am sure that I would begin by asking what Buddhist education is like in the rest of the world. And I would not, frankly, be much encouraged by the answer. Modern educationalists take it for granted that the primary aim of education is to get the pupils to think for themselves. In this they are of course doing no more than following the advice of the Buddha in his famous sermon to the Kâlâmasⁱⁱⁱ, in which he urged every one of them not to accept the words of any teacher, himself included^{iv}, merely out of respect for authority or tradition, but to find things out for themselves, relying on their own experience. In the same spirit, pupils in the modern West are encouraged above all to ask questions, to test the logic of arguments, to demand empirical evidence and to judge for themselves whether that evidence is sufficient to support the alleged conclusions.

Is that how Buddhism is taught in Buddhist countries today? Not always, I think. Much emphasis is still being placed on memorising facts. In an oral culture, as when the Buddha preached in the 5th century BCE, that was entirely necessary. Writing made it slightly less important; printing still less so. Now the computer has become so widely available that almost every schoolchild can “google” and find the information they need on the internet. But that, of course, does nothing to help them evaluate the information.

An important part of evaluating information is evaluating sources. What are our sources for the words of the Buddha? You will probably answer: the texts of the Pali Canon. But they were only committed to writing centuries after the Buddha’s death, and in fact we have very few Pali manuscripts more than 500 years old. Moreover, when you look closely it turns out that some of the texts in the Pali Canon contradict each other. But how many people who learn about Buddhism even know that or give it a thought?

Many years ago I published a short article called “Three Souls, One or None: the Vagaries of a Pali Pericope”.^v It concerns an expression, a set of phrases nine words long, which occurs in five texts in the Pali Canon. In only one of these does it make perfectly good sense – a text^{vi} in which a brahmin is criticising Buddhists. Once lifted out of that original context, the expression looks very strange, as it seems to suggest that ascetics can “blow out” a self – whereas the Buddhist position is that one has no such “self” in the first place. Not only do the commentaries on this expression in its secondary contexts have trouble in explaining it: their explanations are themselves discrepant. This seems to be an undeniable case in which neither the Canon nor the body of commentaries ascribed to Buddhaghosa can be made to agree; in other words, people who did not fully understand the expression have used it in the creation of canonical texts, and other people who did not understand it have given more than one interpretation of it in the commentaries.

This matters enormously, because this one example is enough to show that if we want to be sure what the Buddha preached we cannot simply rely on the authority of an unanimous tradition. Why? Because there is no such thing.

I can see no reason whatsoever why this should impair our faith in Buddhism or make Buddhism less worthy of study. My message is the opposite: that there is a vast, immeasurable amount still to be studied in Buddhism, and that the teaching of Buddhism urgently needs to recognise that fact.

Another thing that we all need to take to heart is that modern technology has in no way diminished the need to learn languages. That for the purpose of serious study original sources must be read in the original language is well appreciated in Thailand, where the study of Buddhism does normally involve the study of Pali. Here the problem is perhaps rather that the Pali must be intelligently taught, so as to bring home to students how the Pali sentences would be expressed in today's idiom. In Britain, alas, hardly anyone studies Pali, and this is mainly because people think it must be terribly difficult. In my view that is nonsense. I have been teaching an intensive 9-day course for complete beginners, promising that after the course pupils will be able to read Pali texts on their own with the aid of the normal resources, such as dictionaries and grammars. It seems to work.

Of course, no one expects schoolchildren in Britain to learn Pali; and it is far better for anyone to read the Buddha's words, or Asoka's inscriptions, in a decent translation than not to read them at all. But at university level it seems to me that anyone who wants to acquire detailed knowledge of the Buddha's teaching should be able to consult the original text; and when it comes to research, some knowledge of both Sanskrit and Middle Indo-Aryan in general is necessary.

In Thailand the boot is rather on the other foot. To study Buddhism at a respectable academic standard, one needs to be able to read what the rest of the world has had to say, and this requires fluent English. I believe that a sound knowledge of English is no less necessary for studying Buddhism than it is for any other subject, from micro-biology to computer science.

Am I then saying that the study of Buddhism is just like the study of any other subject? No. But it is alike in one crucial respect: that whereas once upon a time memorisation played a huge part in study, in the modern world it should play hardly any part at all, and what matters is understanding and the active use of the mind. As usual, we need only follow the Buddha's advice. At *AN* II, 135 he classifies people who hear his teachings into four types, putting the best first.^{vii} The first type (*ugghaṭita-ññu*) understands the teaching as soon as it is uttered; the second (*vipacita-ññu*) understands on mature reflection; the third (*neyya*) is 'leadable': he understands it when he has worked at it, thought about it and cultivated wise friends. The fourth is called *pada-parama*, 'putting the words first'; he is defined as one who though he hears much, preaches much, remembers much and recites much does not come within this life to understand the teaching. One could hardly ask for a clearer condemnation of what so often passes for education.

If properly done, Buddhist education can however transcend the purely academic realm. This brings me full circle, back to Dr Wisadavet's symposium. Of course Buddhism offers principles and insights which can and should be used in the whole of life, whether in Thailand, Britain, or any other country. I take "engaged Buddhism" to stand for that position, urging us to apply Buddhism in both public and private affairs. I applaud. Let me just issue a note of warning: that in our haste to *apply* Buddhism, we should not forget that first we must study it thoroughly and satisfy ourselves that we really do *understand* it.

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ⁱ Donald K. Swearer and Somparn Promta, ed., *The State of Buddhist Studies in the World 1972-1997*, Center for Buddhist Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2000.

ⁱⁱ It may however be useful if I reproduce from Donald Swearer's introduction his first footnote: "For earlier assessments of the state of Buddhist studies, see Edward Conze, 'Recent Progress in Buddhist Studies', *Thirty*

Years of Buddhist Studies (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968); J.W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (Tokyo, Kosei Publishing Company, 1997); Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1987).” Swearer and Promta, p.viii.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Āguttara Nikāya* I, 188-193.

^{iv} *Vāmaśaka Sutta*, *Majjhima* I, 317-20.

^v *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol. 11, 1987, pp. 73-8.

^{vi} *Āguttara Nikāya* I, 168ff.

^{vii} The terms are explained at *Puggala-paññatti* IV, 5 (= p.41). I follow the reading at *Āguttara Nikāya* II, 135 and give it my own interpretation. *Puggala-paññatti* 41 reads *vipaccita*; the commentary on the latter also reads *vipaccita*, but with a variant *vipañcita*, and glosses it as *vitthārita*, so that the second type becomes one who understands the teaching when it has been expanded. This latter interpretation is found in other post-canonical sources which read *vipañcita*.