

Buddhist Meditation Practices in the West

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In 1962 *The Middle Way* listed five Buddhist provincial groups.¹ *The Buddhist Directory* of 2004–6, published by the Buddhist Society, now lists 432 in the UK, many, if not most involved in the teaching and practice of meditation: Buddhist groups flower in the most unexpected places.² In this paper I will focus on Theravāda Buddhism in Britain, and lay meditation in particular, tracing its historical evolution. I will also indicate those aspects of Buddhist meditative practice which are proving particularly attractive.

I should say at the outset how revolutionary the idea of meditation has been to me and to many of my contemporaries. I was part of the hippy generation, looking for the meaning of life in Eastern philosophy. I was happily surprised by my introduction to the practice of breathing mindfulness in a Thai *samatha* form in the 1970s, because it was not only mysterious but practical too. I had never considered that watching the breath could be instrumental in changing a mental state or that the condition of my mind could be reflected in the simple process of breathing in and out of the body. The ancient lineage of teaching, which explored this relationship to an understanding of the world, provided an intellectual and emotional background utterly unlike any psychological system my generation had encountered. I sometimes meet Asians in Britain who are mystified by the appeal of Buddhist meditation in the West. For a long time the British have been fascinated with the East; meditation has shown us something down to earth we can do with this in the *ehipassiko* path and the chance to ‘do it yourself’.

A quick questionnaire amongst some fellow practitioners last week, of different ethnic groups and ages, elicited plenty of factors influencing our attraction: a sense of mystery, an inspiring philosophical tradition, applicability to modern circumstances,

scientific verifiability, practicality, an antidote to English gloom, and the fact that Buddhists make plenty of jokes all came into the equation!³ Most importantly, they all felt the wish for happiness – but, paradoxically, mentioned adventure too: the Buddhist system of meditation means that any event or day in one’s life, however apparently insignificant, can be filled with meaning. Mindfulness is always appropriate: a chance to discuss and practise its development imbues any moment with possibility. These are varied reasons, but a sense of exploration and a close link between practical observation and philosophy explain the great modern appeal that Buddhist meditation has had on the British, particularly, but not exclusively, amongst the more highly educated: perhaps they feel the need for it more. Before we investigate modern meditation practice, we should look a little into the history of Buddhist influence in Britain, which has affected its evolution.

History of Buddhist practice in Britain

The roots of British interest in South East Asian thought date from what we must acknowledge as the highly adventurous intellectual and geographical explorations of the nineteenth century. Britain’s historical links with countries such as Myanmar (Burma) and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) have not always been happy or worthy of pride. Despite the negative connotations of Victorian Orientalism it becomes clear from reading the scholarly material that consideration of Buddhism, and, because of historical links, Theravada Buddhism in particular, was inspired at that time as much by a sense of real intellectual search as by the desire to change what was found.

Buddhism’s impact on Britain had begun in the early Victorian period, when the term was applied to the geographically wide-ranging religious and philosophical traditions associated with the Buddha image as the focus of personal practice.⁴ Philological and philosophical research was making available some Buddhist thought in the West in translation. Although this work was often undertaken on the assumption that Buddhists should be commended mainly for the proximity of their tradition to Christianity, in practice many translators came to a profound appreciation of the philosophies of Theravada Buddhism, acknowledging the challenge they placed to modern Western thought.⁵ Rhys Davids’ translations of the *Dighanikāya* are, a hundred

years later, unsurpassed. He was struck by the ‘light in his eyes’ of the bhikkhu who preferred to teach him Buddhism rather than Pali.⁶ Rhys Davids’ introductions exhibit a breadth of literary and philosophical humanism, combined with an inherent sensitivity to the language and music of the traditional text, that have rarely been approached since. In the introduction to *The Dialogues of the Buddha* he enjoins us to bring to mind the atmosphere of teaching at the time of the Buddha, to note other occurrences of terms in the canon and to avoid glib translation of technical terms.⁷ One commentator observed recently that Oriental Studies was one of the first fields in Europe to overcome prejudice and ‘open the Western mind to the whole of humanity’.⁸ Certainly Rhys Davids’ passion has withstood the test of time: the three volumes of his translation have remained the bestseller of the Pali Text Society for a century, constantly reread by British meditators.

The world of fiction and poetry also unlocked a sense of imaginative and philosophical exploration of a kind which the British writer who had travelled to the East might not consider for his own practice. Late Victorianism is renowned for its appreciation of the simple art of storytelling and for its experimentation with narrative forms – as evinced, for instance, by the Pali Text Society’s decision to translate the entire collection of *Jatakas* into English.⁹ The publication of *The Light of Asia* (1879) by Sir Edwin Arnold established Buddhism in Britain and the West as a separate religious and philosophical tradition. It is the first sympathetic literary depiction in Britain of a figure practising meditation, the Buddha himself. The poem suggests, courageously for the time, that Buddhist meditation could offer visions of the world not available through conventional Christian practice. Arnold describes part of the process of enlightenment in the following way:

Also, Buddha saw
How new life reaps what the old life did sow:
How where its march breaks off its march begins;
Holding the gain and answering for the loss;
And how in each life good begets more good,
Evil fresh evil; Death but casting up
Debit or credit, whereupon th’ account
In merits or demerits stamps itself

By sure arithmic -- where no tittle drops --
Certain and just, on some new-springing life
Wherein are packed and scored past thoughts and deeds,
Strivings and triumphs, memories and marks
Of lives foregone:¹⁰

As even this short extract shows the poem is notable for some depth of feeling, richness of language and sympathy towards Buddhist ideas. It became a best seller, thus ensuring the dissemination of ideas such as *karma* and reincarnation to a wide reading public in Britain, a phenomenon reinforced by a series of popular articles and books on related subjects.¹¹ Other literary works indicate the extent of popular interest in Buddhism and its associated doctrines: Kipling's depiction of a Buddhist monk, in *Kim* (1901), the only successful literary rendition of a Buddhist monk in Western literature, has been continuously in print since its publication. A man of his time, Kipling could not subscribe to Buddhism, but he opens *Kim* with the invitation to 'be gentle' to those that 'pray' to 'Ananda's Lord, the Bodhisat, The Buddha of Kamakura'. Buddhist ideas affected narrative form: a novel by Arnold's son, Edwin Lester Arnold, *Phra the Phoenician* (1890), depicts the successive lives of a single European hero. On the evidence of Edwin Arnold's preface it is possibly the first British novel explicitly influenced by Buddhism.¹² The sense of intellectual exploration that animates these pioneer works is unfortunately forgotten in the often politically focused criticism instigated by commentators such as Said – and prevents us from acknowledging the effect Asian thought had on Britain over a century ago.¹³ By the end of the nineteenth century Buddhism had inspired in Britain poetic and narrative experimentation amongst mainstream authors of a kind which has not been emulated in Britain since. The only comparable undertaking to Arnold's poem that I know of is Professor Grevel Lindop's account of the life of the Buddha in verse, *Touching the Earth*, now popular amongst practising Western Buddhists around the world.¹⁴

For a long time this spirit of adventure did not extend to personal practice. In the social milieu of Victorian Britain, the idea of trying out meditation did not really arise. Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott took the five precepts in 1880 and were roundly

condemned.¹⁵ But Britain's link with Asian countries, and Theravada countries in particular, did soon bear fruit. The first British man to become a monk was Gordon Douglas, who died in 1900. The first British meditator for whom we have good evidence, is Allan Bennett (1872–1923), who ordained in Burma in 1902 as Ananda Metteyya, a step which led on his return to the formation of the Buddhist Society in 1907. In 1915 Bennett gives the first subjective description I have found of a British person conducting a Buddhist meditative exercise. He delineates the means by which the mind may be trained to the recollection of past lives. At the culmination of his account, described in minute experiential detail, he gives sound advice: that such recollections are not in themselves a goal but a by-product of investigation of the path itself.

Finally I would wish to impress upon you that you must not confuse progress into the more active stages of consciousness with progress on the path that leads to peace. *Samadhi*, rightly directed to the transitoriness and so forth, may indeed bring us that higher wisdom which constitutes progress on the path; but the direction, as it were, of the path lies not in the plane of our own life at all – it is as though at right angles to it; a new direction altogether.¹⁶

The First World War effectively delayed further exploration, perhaps for a whole generation. Ven Metteyya disrobed due to ill health and interest waned.

The effects of his work and the foundation of the Buddhist Society were profound, however, and the society was revived after the war. Although interest increased in the inter-war period there was still only a handful of Buddhists in Britain. The 1960s saw the real resurgence of interest. Cousins has identified a variety of groups likely to have become associated with Buddhism in this period. The largest group is those converted through reading; others are ex-colonials, scholars, esotericists, ritual magicians, kabbalists, universalists and the straightforwardly curious.¹⁷ This social mix is of course natural to Britain, where some eccentricity is considered rather the norm, and hybrid variations still colour many of local lay groups around the country. It is also, interestingly and importantly, oddly in line with the Buddha's own ability to appeal to a diverse range of people.

Variety of Buddhist Groups

The situation has changed dramatically over the past forty years. Of the groups I mentioned at the beginning, there are small numbers associated with the traditions of Korea, Nepal, Agon Shu and Chinese Ch'An. There are 7 Nichiren groups of various kinds, 8 Pure Land, 2 Vietnamese. The major groupings are 63 Chinese True Buddha Groups, 62 Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, 88 Tibetan Buddhist groups, 84 Zen groups and 104 Theravada groups. We cannot take the number of societies as indicative of numbers of practising Buddhists. Many small groups may be listed under one heading. It suggests however, something of the balance and weight of organised Buddhist interest in Britain. To modify this statement I ought to add that many of those who call themselves Buddhist – the 2001 census gives this as 0.3 of the population — do not subscribe to any organization, in my experience another characteristic of British Buddhist meditative interest.

Within these parameters, the strongest group is the Theravada tradition. This is a trend which may be traced in part through Britain's historical links, though in the last forty years a number of additional, sometimes associated features have come into play. The first is the establishment of temples by ethnic groups from Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka, including students, visiting workers and immigrants. These viharas often act as cultural and social centres as well, though they usually attract some British lay practitioners. By and large the British tend to be interested in meditation and philosophy, the ethnic groups more so in devotional practices, but there are exceptions in both groups: particularly when they see the effects of each on the others. The second is the great impact of the followers of Ajahn Chah, whose monastic orders have founded temples throughout Britain for monks and nuns. This Theravada movement has a large lay following too. Ven Sumedho, who established the first monastery along with Ven Viradhamma at Chithurst in 1979, was an ex GI who turned to Buddhist meditation after reluctant participation in the Vietnamese War. The emphasis of practice is *vipassana*, supplemented by some traditional *samatha* practices such as the *brahmaviharas* and the recollection of the Triple Gem. The group is particularly notable for the joie de vivre of their *vinaya* practice and the way they transform it into a kind of meditation practice:

their newsletter for instance includes many accounts of *dutanga* walks through the British countryside. Two nuns have just completed one of these; another nun, Sister Candasiri, has now been a *siladhara* for twenty-five years. These groups are predominantly Western, but not exclusively so.

Another characteristic of British Theravada practice is the popularity of lay meditative organisations, working in local groups. The Samatha Association, my own tradition, is probably the largest of these. Its teaching was initiated by Nai Boonman Poonyathiro, who introduced Samatha meditation through breathing mindfulness in 1963. Paul Dennison, our present chairman was a monk in Thailand for several years. L.S. Cousins, our ex-chairman, is a distinguished academic in Buddhist Studies. We have groups of meditators around the country, a busy centre in Manchester and a rural centre in 88 acres of Welsh hillside. We have been fortunate to receive, uniquely for a lay organisation, relics of the Buddha from the Thai people and are deeply grateful for this. A large Buddha rĕpa, Phra Buddha Dhammacakra, sponsored by the King of Thailand, together with a further set of relics from the Thai Sangharaja, was specially commissioned for our centre in Wales. Tan Suvit (Phra Sriyansobhon), from Rama IX temple has donated a Buddha rupa to three of our centres. The meditation is breathing mindfulness but its practice is diverse and, again like British plant life, subject to local variations. It often combines traditional forms with experimentation. Our group is unusual in placing considerable emphasis on meditation reports and the idea of the *kalyanamitta* at the heart of the practice. Within this there is some variety: some meditators like *abhidhamma* and *suttas*, some enjoy cultivating *sati* through physical work, such as building our shrine hall, some do more chanting. The group here in Bangkok chanting the *Mahasamaya Sutta* with Ven Maha Laow is one such offshoot. Some groups report to one another on their meditation within a small local lay *sangha*. Recent courses in Britain have included work on *kasinas* with Ven Sudhiro, on the *brahamaviharas* and last year, a course for more experienced meditators on formless meditation, given by Nai Boonman. This is possibly the first time the *arupa jhanas* have been taught in the British Isles.

Other lay groups in Britain are predominantly *vipassana*, and include those that follow the methods of Ven Kapilavaddho, Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin. In this regard

I would like to mention in particular the Buddhist Society of Manchester, which was formed in 1951 by a group of meditators influenced by Ven. Kapilavaddho. It would still, I think, call itself working class. The president, Russell Williams, one of the early members, was a welder before he retired. This group has met twice weekly for meditation, teaching and debate for over half a century. Group discussion and an experimental, investigative atmosphere characterise their attitude to meditation.

Many of these lay groups have also now followed traditional practice and found rural settings and parkland for meditation centres. This means we can have huts around the grounds. At my own centre, we have woodland projects, meadowlands, cascades and a bird sanctuary. All of these features give such groups as ours chances to develop mindfulness through activities like hedging, land maintenance and carpentry as well as interactions with the local community and work with local councils on the environment and maintaining the land.

Global factors have influenced this great increase in Buddhist groups. Travel and the practice of the 'gap year' has meant that many young people visit Buddhist countries, perhaps hear some chanting or meet someone who impresses them and, on their return to Britain, become interested in the practice of meditation. The internet and the possibility of reading Buddhist texts or finding local groups through the web has changed society dramatically. Many British people still love reading and discover Buddhism in this way: our historic love of the East is now sometimes translated into personal practice. Two institutions should be mentioned which have, by their continued presence, helped to sustain Buddhist practitioners over the last century. The Buddhist Society remains a centre for Buddhist groups, holding regular talks and meditation classes in a number of traditions, as well as selling books, tapes and CDs. Another legacy of nineteenth-century interest in South East Asia is the Pali Text Society, whose past presidents have included Rhys Davids, I.B.Horner, Professor Roy Norman, Professor Richard Gombrich and L.S. Cousins. The King of Thailand subsidised its first publications; the society has since then made available the whole of the Pali Canon in translation to the international community.

As I hope to have indicated Theravada lay practice in Britain is thriving, though in a small and unobtrusive way. The British take a long time to accept unfamiliar institutions and ideas, but once these are longstanding and have proved themselves

through friendly links to the community they are favourably and even protectively well disposed towards them. Buddha images are very popular amongst British non-Buddhists. I know for Asians this is strange, but it does indicate a real subliminal appreciation of Buddhism. This has been reinforced by, for instance, widely publicised scientific research showing that Buddhist meditation increases happiness amongst practitioners.¹⁸

Lay practice historically

Lay practice of an experimental kind seems to me to be the hallmark of British meditation practice. Ven Khammai Dhammasami once told me that it was the duty of the lay people to be happy as it supports the *sangha* better when they are. But lay meditators are sometimes criticised on the grounds that such a mode of practice is a modern phenomenon and that the picture presented, say in the Pali canon, gives an idealised version of events that cannot be applied historically to the practice of Buddhism. On the principle of the more difficult reading, whereby anomalies are regarded as more likely to be authentic, such instances as we find in the canon should then be taken very seriously.¹⁹ The Buddha lists many lay men and women as possessing particular excellences, often in the field of meditation.²⁰ In the *suttas* he suggests a number of meditation practices to lay people, even those who claim to be very busy!²¹ In modern Thailand there are of course many lay meditation teachers, some of whom are women, such as Ajahn Nisa, whom I met last year in Bangkok. In Britain this is the case too. On several occasions lay men and women are described as attaining *jhanas* in the canon: the pattern in the canon is for the monastic ideal to be that of the arahat, that of the laity as the never returner, such as Citta or Visakha. The historical perspective is less easy to assess but two factors should be considered. The first is the ancient Indian pattern of four periods of life, in which the last is given to meditation. This expectation is still prevalent in South East Asian countries and presumably exerted some influence historically. The other is the tradition of grown men becoming monks for extended periods in Thailand and Burma. In modern Thailand many ex-monks take an important part in rituals and have special honorific titles. It seems likely that there were historically in Theravada countries lay practitioners – royalty included – and perhaps even lay teachers who had spent periods in the *sangha*, who continued their practice of meditation in the lay life.

It is also sometimes said that modern meditative practice, with its lay emphasis, is an invented tradition. I suspect that the Buddha would have responded to this as he did to other intended insults and been delighted at the accusation.²² He approved similes that were *apubbasuttaṃ* and encouraged his own practitioners to find them. Many of the *Therīgāthā* and *Theragāthā* represent the poetic creativity of men and women who have become newly enlightened, and discovered their own formulations of the process.]

British Theravada meditation practice is still young, diverse and with plenty of local variation and experimentation. We like asking questions. With our weather we need to cultivate a lot of cheerful happiness too, as we can get a bit short on internal sunshine! Britain is a genuinely multi-cultural society and old East-West divides do not really apply: many Thais and Sri Lankans are now living in Britain, and vice versa. All sorts of ethnic and cultural mixes are occurring. It has been demonstrated that in a natural environment the richness of the oxygen depends on the greatest variety of plants and tree life: health lies in diversity.²³ Just as over systematic farming techniques can crush wild and new flowers, who need time and space to settle in their own environment, we need a few generations to allow Buddhist meditation practices in Britain to settle down in their own particular way.

¹ See L.S.Cousins, 'Theravāda Buddhism in England', *Buddhism into the year 2000*, Bangkok: International Conference Proceedings, Dhammakaya Foundation (1994) (141–150), 147.

² Martin Murray and R.B.Parsons ed., *Buddhist Directory: Buddhist Centres and Groups and Related Organizations in the United Kingdom and Ireland, ninth edition* (London: Buddhist Society Publications 2003).

³ Meditators at the Samatha Centre, Llangunllo, Wales.

⁴ See Cousins, *ibid*, 141–3.

⁵ The statements of the early transactions of the Pāli Text Society, formed in 1881, are evidence for this. For their underlying Christianity see, for instance, Charles Allen, *The Buddha and the Sahibs; the Men who Discovered India's Lost Religion*, (London: John Murray Ltd., 2002) 242.

⁶ Quoted in Allen, *ibid*, 240.

⁷ Introduction to T.W. Rhys Davids, *The Dialogues of the Buddha*, 3 vols., (Oxford: PTS Society, 1899/ reprint 1995), 1: xxi–xxiii.

⁸ Keith Windschuttle, citing recent research in the history of Islamic studies, in *The New Criterion* (January 1999) Vol.17, no.5.

⁹ The Jātaka translations were published in seven volumes under the editorship of E.W.Cowell by the Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1895–1913. For some recent reassessment of the way the British were actively influenced by contact with the East, see Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England 1662–1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Allen 2002 and Dr Alex Wynne, 'Why I am an Orientalist,' unpublished paper delivered at St. John's College, Oxford, 2005.

¹⁰ *The Light of Asia, or the Great Renunciation*, (London, 1884), VI (also at <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/books/lightasi/asia-hp.htm>). For an account of the poem's 'astonishing popularity' and some more critical reception, see Allen, *ibid*, 242–4.

¹¹ See R.H. Patterson, 'The Religions of India', *Blackwoods* (1857), LXXXII, 743–767, E.V. Neale 'Buddha and Buddhism', *Macmillan's* (1860), I, 434–448 and A.P. Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883).

¹² Arnold's introduction to *Phra the Phoenician* appeared as 'An Informal Introduction', in *The Windsor Magazine* (1898), IX, 58–60 and was used as a preface to the 1913 edition of the novel. A number of late Victorian stories employed the motif of reincarnation, such as Kipling's 'The Finest Story in the World' *Many Inventions*, Pocket Macmillan Series (1893/London 1907), 95–135, a powerful study of the metaphoric implications of the idea of 'past lives' acting in the present.

¹³ See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (1978/paperback London: Penguin, 1995).

¹⁴ Grevel Lindop, *Touching the Earth: a Poem on the Life of the Buddha*, Books 1-4, Sanghaloka Forest Hermitage, Callista, Australia (2001).

¹⁵ See Allen, *ibid*, 246

¹⁶ 'Buddhist Self Culture', *The Buddhist Review* (1915), 146.

¹⁷ The mix of groups is identified in Cousins, *ibid*, 143-4.

¹⁸ Research conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which appeared in *New Scientist* in an article by Professor Flanagan in May 2003. It was recorded in the front pages of most national newspapers in America and Britain, on 22–24th May, 2003.

¹⁹ A notable passage is M I 340. For the attainments of the householder Citta see S IV 301.

²⁰ See A I 23–6.

²¹ See A V 332, A I 206–211.

²² See J I 389 and M I 68.

²³ The thesis is propounded by the Harvard entomologist Edward O. Wilson, in *The Diversity of Life*, (New York: W.W.Norton and Co., 1999).