

**Transcultural migration and new religious movements:
a case study of Vipassana.**

Abstract

Although religions undergo change with geographical transmigration, western Buddhism differs significantly from diaspora forms of Asian Buddhism. Using Vipassana as a case study, it is argued that western Buddhism emphasises its 'nibbanic' elements. The ways in which Buddhism has been studied in the West has caused exponents of western Buddhism to assert the superiority of these nibbanic versions.

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by George D. Chryssides

The study of Buddhism has been seriously marred by an uneasy relationship between different interest groups: western scholars, spiritual seekers, indigenous and diaspora Buddhists, and ‘cult monitoring’ organisations. In this essay, I wish to show how the western uptake of Vipassana meditation has effectively created a new form of Buddhism, which aligns with much of the West’s scholarship, but rests uneasily with diaspora Buddhism and arouses the suspicions of critics who fear that it may be a new eastern ‘cult’.

Western scholarship on Buddhism has been dominated by text-based study — a tradition that still continues in European and American universities. It was Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860) who started the University of Oxford’s collection of Sanskrit manuscripts, and his interest in Oriental Studies was succeeded by Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) and Monier Monier-Williams (1819-1899), who did much to further the translation work on Sanskrit texts. Other translators continued the work: in the field of Buddhist Studies T. W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922), and his wife Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids (1857-1942) translated many of the key texts of the Pali canon. In France, Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) and Christian Lassen (1800-1876) are particularly renowned for their scholarship. This pioneering work was, of course, much needed, but it resulted in academic study of Buddhism that was very much modelled on that of Christianity, where it was customary for the student to study the Christian Bible systematically in its original languages, complementing such work with Christian history and theology. Accordingly, the study of Buddhism has typically been the study of texts, the history of the religion, and examination of the work of key Buddhist philosophical schools. The controversies between the Sarvastivadins, the Madhyamika and the Yogacara remain the staple diet of most students of Buddhism.

In the study of both Christianity and Buddhism, folk religion was ignored, and this created an imbalance of knowledge between the two religions. In the case of Christianity, the folk practices were ubiquitous and observable at first hand. In the case of Buddhism, while those who brought back texts from East had gained first-hand acquaintance with Buddhists and Buddhist practice, this could not be said of those westerners who were now able to embark on oriental studies. Even Max Müller, so renowned for massive translation work, had never visited Asia.

Western seekers have tended to be intellectuals, acquainting themselves with Buddhism either through reading primary source material or else by subjecting themselves to instruction from those in monastic orders. Unlike the Buddhist diaspora, they have not been brought up within an environment of Buddhist folk practices, and do not practise a form of Buddhism that merges into Hinduism, Daoism or animism, offers good fortune and longevity by means of charms and amulets, uses

fortune-tellers, and seeks to maintain favourable relationships with spirits. Western Buddhists practise meditation, chanting, studying books and going on retreats.

In Sri Lanka, for example, one phenomenon that is visually very evident is the setting up of effigies of fierce-looking beings or even human-like creatures that supposedly fend off evil. They are not mentioned in any text book on Buddhism that is known to the author, but they are well known in that country, and the inhabitants insist that they belong to Buddhism, and that these effigies are alive. There are implicit rules about the circumstances in which they are used: they are for projects that are in progress — specifically two in kind, namely the growing of crops and the construction of buildings — and their purpose is to fend off the ‘evil eye’. Although the phenomenon of the ‘evil eye’ is well documented in books on Hinduism, somehow it manages to escape western studies of Buddhism.

These folk practices, perhaps understandably, seem to dominate the followers of Buddhism in Asian countries. Devotees will queue up for a monk to tie a good luck amulet on their arm or sell them a yantra (a sacred geometric pattern), expecting them to bring good fortune. The monks themselves handled the money, and indeed were only too willing to take the author’s entry fee at Buddhist temples he visited in Sri Lanka. One monk to whom he spoke was obviously enjoying a day out with his family and eating a watermelon well after the “official” monastic eating times, and in no way appeared to regard himself as retrograde. On the contrary, he was extremely scathing of “those westerners” who wanted to take up meditation.

Dharma teachers and authors of religious texts share a common interest in the ideals of a religion — its high goals rather than its folk practices. If members of the Buddhist Sangha (the monastic community) are part of the Buddhist diaspora, they generally acquiesce in their communities’ folk practices, such as tying good luck charms or performing blessing rituals. The diaspora are not converts, but are displaced members of practising communities in which they and their religion have been cradled. By contrast, western Buddhists are not part of the diaspora. They are not Buddhists by upbringing, but converts who have familiarised themselves with Buddhism either by acquaintance with monastic practice or through literature. Buddhism was, and remains, somewhat of a curiosity, being seemingly an ‘atheistic religion’, and some of its appeal to westerners undoubtedly lies in the fact that it presents a genuine alternative to Christianity (and in some cases Judaism), being a religion that is not based on the fundamental tenets of theistic religion, namely belief in God.

The form of Buddhism that arose in the West was thus not a form of diaspora religion. Of course, all religions experience adaptation both from transmigration and from the conversion of members of new cultures, and — at least from the scholar’s perspective — there is no problem in acknowledging that religions adapt as they move geographically. However, transmigration creates tensions when western converts feel that they have appropriated the true and essential features of the religion and that its original followers are practising a debased form of it.

The westerners’ pursuit of these intellectual and spiritual goals of Buddhism can at times cause them to disparage the efforts of ethnically Asian Buddhists. At a

recent celebration of Wesak which the author attended, a number of Asian Buddhist children had performed dances on stage, and the adults had prepared tea and cakes for the attendees. When the time for speeches came, a western Buddhist monk in the Theravada tradition mounted the platform. He was wearing a single cotton saffron robe, and only a pair of flip-flops on his feet, in accordance with standard textbook practice, either oblivious to or disapproving of the tendency of Asian monks to wear warm sweaters underneath their robe and to put on thick socks when the weather is cold. Instead of expressing gratitude for these contributions, he proceeded to tell the audience that eating and dancing were all very well, but they would not enable them to make spiritual progress towards nirvana.

This is one of several occasions on which I have heard western Buddhists imply that Asian Buddhism is 'debased' or retrograde. Although Asian Buddhists usually receive such comments passively, one Asian Buddhist placed the following remarks on a web log:

Dharma centers, sitting groups, meditation retreats, lay teachers, Free Tibet mailing lists and Buddhism-themed magazines are all part and parcel of white Buddhist culture. . . But I can see that working with Asian Americans isn't part of the plan.

It's not just about excluding Asians. The participants made clear that the Buddhism they were talking about was white Buddhism. When they discussed "outreach", they talked about the East Bay Meditation Center's sitting group for people of color. Does this mean that the future of Buddhism is only for white people and maybe some other non-Asian minorities? Is the Buddhism of the future just some white-washed version of what was once an ancient Asian religion? (Arunlikhati, 2008).

The question raised by these observations is: who owns a religion? Is it the hierarchy, the officialdom, the student of the religious texts, the saint, the prophet, the mystic, the adept who is fast approaching enlightenment; or is it the rank and file follower, who is often unlettered, more concerned with pragmatic benefits, and whose religious practice runs the risk of being accused of naivety and superstition? The majority of text books present Buddhism as "the religion of reason", which, as Philip Almond (1988, p.130) points out, is how the Christian missionaries rated it, considering it to be the best extant form of religion, apart from Christianity of course, demonstrating the pinnacle of human reason's attainments, unaided by divine grace. Since the inception of serious academic study of Buddhism, from the nineteenth century onwards, its focus has tended to be on Buddhist scriptures and on the monastic life as the paradigm of Buddhist practice. There have been a few exceptions, for example the work of Melton E. Spiro (1970), S. J. Tambiah (1970), Richard Gombrich (1971) and, more recently Ian Harris (2005).

Spiro makes an important distinction between three expressions of Buddhism: the *nibbanic*, the *kammatic* and the *apotropaic*. The *nibbanic* is the dimension of Buddhism that is pursued by those who seek to obtain, or have attained final liberation. It is manifested in the life of those monks who practise meditation, seeking to make spiritual progress towards the final goal of nirvana. (It should be noted that, contrary to the impression given in many text books, this is by no means the majority of monks, most of whom in Buddhist countries are primarily concerned with the maintenance of their temples, and providing services to the laity, principally astrological information, ceremonies for good luck and longevity, and funeral rites; only a minority of monks in countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma are in meditative orders.) The *kammatic* dimension is exhibited by those members of the laity who support the Sangha, for example by contributing to their almsround, or donating essential requirements to a *vihara* (Buddhist monastery, in which monks reside). By so doing, the supporter is said to ‘gain merit’, enhancing the possibility of a better rebirth: such deeds cannot enable the lay supporter to attain nirvana, which is only possible through the spiritual practices that are normally reserved for certain monks.

It is the *apotropaic* expression of Buddhism, however, that tends to permeate Buddhist societies. *Apotropaic* means ‘having or reputed to have the power of averting evil influence or ill luck’ (Oxford English Dictionary). At this level of Buddhism, it is popularly believed that the world is a dangerous place, dominated by vicious forces and evil spirits that conspire against the unwary; hence precautions must be taken to ensure that such forces are turned back and that their influence on the individual or family is minimised. Hence the belief in the potency of effigies, or, as Spiro points out, the Burmese *weikza*, the practitioner of magic, who can use his powers to fend off evil.

Which level of Buddhism is the true level of Buddhism? It is tempting for the well-educated to assume that it is the *nibbanic* that defines Buddhism’s truly authentic form, that it is those who are pursuing the meditative life that leads to the final goal who ‘own’ the religion and define what is authentic in it. As a means of highlighting the contrast between western ‘*nibbanic*’ expressions of Buddhism and Asian ‘pragmatic’ ones, I have chosen to focus on the practice of Vipassana. It is clear that the practice relates to Spiro’s *nibbanic* level. Westerners who adopt the practice are not seeking pragmatic boons. Although exponents of Vipassana acknowledge that disease, anger and fear can be caused by internal unrest, and may be improved by Vipassana meditation, this is not its goal; the practitioner “aims for the total eradication of mental impurities and the resultant highest happiness of full liberation” (Vipassana, 2009). The practice is not designed to improve one’s karma, or to support the *nibbanic* activities of others, such as monks. On the contrary, they want to participate in (as they believe) the authentic practice, and, although nirvana may be too ambitious a goal for the average practitioner, making spiritual progress towards it would certainly be part of one’s aim.

Some explanation is needed of Vipassana at this juncture. It is a form of Theravada Buddhist and contrasts with *samatha* meditation. The latter calms the

mind, whereas Vipassana, (“insight meditation”) aims at the cultivation of *prajna* (wisdom), leading to enlightenment. The Vipassana practitioner meditates on the Buddhist’s three “marks of existence” — *anatta* (no self), *anicca* (impermanence) and *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) — which characterise all constituents of the universe. Vipassana is said to be an ancient form of Buddhist meditation, reputedly taught by Gautama the Buddha himself. Vipassana practitioners believe that it virtually died out by the fourteenth century, since a somewhat conservative Buddhist Sangha in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Burma and Thailand was more concerned with following the monastic precepts than with meditation. However, the fact that it did not become entirely extinct has enabled them to claim a continuity of transmission that goes back to the Buddha.

Vipassana experienced a revival from the 1950s onwards. It was initially rediscovered in 1914 by the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw (1856-1923), who wrote a treatise on Vipassana “for the benefit of European Buddhists”. This was written in Burmese, however, and made little impact. Other Buddhist monks who helped to revive the practice in Burma and Thailand included U Narada (1868-1955) and U Kyaw Din (1878-1952). They were responsible for a second generation of Vipassana teachers, most notably U Ba Kin (1899-1971), who learned the practice from U Po Thet (1873-1945), a pupil of Ledi Sayadaw. U Po Thet ensured that members of the laity, and not merely the Sangha, practised Vipassana. U Ba Kin in turn taught S. N. Goenka (born 1924) — a well-known teacher of western pupils — and Maharsi Sayadaw (1904-1982). Sayadaw taught Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, who jointly founded the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, in 1976. Kornfield also studied under Ajahn Chah (1918-1992), whose pupil the Venerable Sumedo — an American — now heads the English Sangha Trust, in which Vipassana is an important meditative practice. Another prominent Vipassana centre is the Dhiravamsa Foundation (formerly the Vipassana Fellowship of America).

Vipassana is a worldwide movement. Organisations can be found in the United States, Europe, Australasia, in some of the former Soviet bloc countries, and of course in Asia. Some Asian Buddhist temples offer Vipassana meditation sessions. A large centre (Dhamma Dipa, meaning ‘Island of Dhamma’ — *dhamma* being the Buddha’s teaching) has its own purpose-built meditation hall in Herefordshire, and organises frequent and extensive Vipassana retreats. In other parts of the country the organisation rents premises for such events. Unlike much of the New Age Movement, Vipassana is not a commercial enterprise. No fees are charged for its courses; instead, participants are asked for a voluntary donation on completion, and only if they feel that they have benefited. Thus Vipassana is organised in accordance with the Buddhist virtue of *dana* (‘giving’): one receives the course from the generosity of previous participants, and in return one creates the opportunity for another seeker.

The practice of Vipassana ‘aims at the highest spiritual goals of total liberation and full enlightenment’. This is pursued through intensive meditation, which involves self-observation. The practitioner is encouraged first to meditate on the process of breathing, becoming aware of in-breaths, out-breaths, and the manner in which they enter and exit the body. This process of self-awareness is extended to

one's thoughts and emotions. One should be aware of the way in which the mind acts on the body, by cultivating awareness of arising and departing of feelings such as hatred, anger and desire. Awareness of these mental states creates awareness of the body's dependence on them, and the practitioner aims to control the mind in order to achieve healing and well-being, and, eventually, to achieve the ultimate spiritual goal of 'seeing things as they really are'. One of the points on the Buddhist Eightfold Path is 'right (or perfect) view': in our unenlightened condition we typically suffer from false view (or delusion), and the Buddha offered a path to enlightenment through meditation.

Vipassana is practised by Buddhists of both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. Its roots are Theravada, and hence the practice tends to be promoted more within Theravada circles. One school that does not practise it is the Nichiren tradition (which includes the Soka Gakkai), which has developed its own technique of chanting, and emphasises material goals as much as spiritual ones. The Vipassana movement emphasises that it is non-sectarian, and seekers from any religious background (or indeed none) are welcome to participate in Vipassana courses.

A typical Vipassana course, as taught by S. N. Goenka's instructors, lasts for ten days, and participants must abide by a strict code of practice. All are asked to observe the first five of the Buddhist ten precepts — to abstain from killing any living being, from taking what is not given, from false speech, from sexual misconduct, and from intoxicants. Tobacco is also disallowed. 'Old students' (those who have undertaken five such courses or more) are subject to a further three precepts, which entail slightly stricter discipline. Participants are asked to suspend all other religious practices during Vipassana courses: a Christian should not pray or study the Bible, for example, and all religious symbols — crosses, talismans, New Age crystals and the like — must be removed. Throughout the period one should observe the Buddha's 'noble silence', and one should have no contact with members of the opposite sex, or with any family or friends who have accompanied the participant. No contact with the outside world is allowed, including mobile phones, reading newspapers, or watching television. During rest periods one may lie down or go for a walk, but not do anything more strenuous, such as jogging or hatha yoga. The student should not take notes: the importance lies in the practice itself.

The day is highly structured, starting with a 04:00 a.m. rise, and two hours' meditation before breakfast. There are five Vipassana meditation sessions, normally lasting two hours each, interspersed with meal breaks, short rest periods, a time for questions, and for an interview with the teacher. Meditation is done in groups in a meditation hall, but participants are instructed to meditate as if they were alone. The day ends at 21:30, when lights go out. Vipassana courses are also organised for children (aged 8 to 12) and teenagers (13 to 18). Children's meditation sessions last no longer than 30 minutes, and time is allocated for games and for a story time. Participants of all ages must take part in the full programme: no-one is allowed to 'skip' sessions or to leave in the middle, either of a session or the retreat. Such stringencies have caused concern from critics, and on one occasion the British 'cult monitoring' organisation FAIR (Family Action Information and Rescue), thought it

appropriate to include a short article on S. N. Goenka in the Vipassana movement in their *FAIR News*. (*FAIR News*, 1984.)

There is insufficient evidence to adjudicate on the Vipassana movement's claims about its history, in particular that there is an unbroken tradition that extends back to the Buddha. Certainly the Buddha taught the aim of seeing things as they really are (*dukkha*, *anatta* and *anicca*), and spiritual practices to attain that goal, including meditation. However, it is hard to determine whether the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw re-discovered or re-invented the practice. Whatever the truth of Vipassana's history, there can be little doubt that its present western form contains a number of less traditional features.

One noteworthy effect of the western appropriation of Vipassana is its uptake by a significantly high proportion of women. Certainly, the Buddha is reputed to have established an order of *bhikkhunis* (nuns) as well as *bhikkhus* (monks), and had some female disciples, but the female order died out, and while it lasted the nuns had a somewhat subordinate role. Within twenty-first century Vipassana, not only do male and female participants appear to be roughly equal in number, but women as well as men are allowed to teach. An on-line directory of Vipassana teachers indicates that roughly a quarter are women.

A further innovation is the commitment of Vipassana practice to writing: the more ancient tradition was that of oral teaching. The key instructions for Vipassana practice are found in the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta*, part of the *Digha Nikaya*, in the Pali canon. Apart from the study of such canonical texts, it is customary for monks to transmit their teachings orally to disciples, rather than commit them to writing. Ledi Sayadaw's *Manual of Insight* was therefore innovatory in being a modern text designed to propagate ancient teaching. In addition, a significant amount of secondary literature has now accrued, by present-day Vipassana teachers, notably S. N. Goenka, Jack Kornfield, William Hart, and Paul R. Fleischmann, among others.

A number of Vipassana teachers are lay practitioners, in contrast with the traditional convention whereby the Sangha taught Buddhist meditation. Although the appointment of lay teachers began in Burma with U Po Thet, the phenomenon has escalated with Vipassana's migration to the West, and lay teachers are now a normal expectation, rather than the exception. Because western Vipassana is predominantly a lay movement, organised in these relatively short, although demanding, residential courses, a number of monastic meditative practices are not undertaken. For example, the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* recommends the contemplation of the impurities of the body (a practice involving reflection on one's body parts, including internal organs, body fluids and emissions), and this section of the sutra is followed by instructions for meditating on death, which involves meditation on corpses in various stages of decomposition. The sutra explicitly addresses these instructions to *bhikkhus*, which is presumably one strong justification — apart from the sheer practicality of undertaking the second of these — for not encouraging lay participants to adopt these practices. The English Sangha Trust, which has monastic orders, practises the former. However, the laity's omission of such practices raises the question of why monks should be asked to perform them, if 'total liberation and full enlightenment' can apparently be

obtained through the lay practices alone. The Vipassana movement thus seems to offer a democratisation of Buddhism's nibbanic elements: enlightenment is apparently within the grasp of those who follow an otherwise conventional lay lifestyle.

I have argued elsewhere (Chryssides, 1994) that the western uptake of an eastern religion inevitably causes a transformation in its character as it migrates from one culture to another. Western expressions of eastern faiths differ from diaspora religions, in which those who have previously held a faith in its indigenous environment now seek to express it within a different culture, and may face pressures to compromise, or may lack the facilities such as the appropriate premises for worship and ritual. The westerner, by contrast, comes with a great deal of extraneous intellectual and religious baggage, which cannot be readily discarded as a new-found faith superimposes itself.

The westerner is likely to come at a religion such as Buddhism through reading. This is so, for various reasons. It is an enquiring rather than a closed mind that considers the possibility of embracing an eastern faith: indeed, early converts such as Christmas Humphreys and Sangharakshita disclose that their first encounters with Buddhism were through reading Buddhist scriptures, and, in Sangharakshita's case Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*. The Theosophical connection is an important one, since much of early British Buddhism developed within the context of Theosophy, where the emphasis was on study and on intellectual ideas — so much so, that the Western Buddhist Order accused the previous generation of western Buddhists of merely pursuing an intellectual hobby, rather than the practice itself. (Almond, 1988, p.36; Subhuti, 1983, pp.4-5.)

The study of a religion, of course, is dependent on the books that are available in the field. To the earlier generation of scholars, the religion was defined by its writing. The fact that folk practices received scant attention was no doubt partly attributable to the fact that they are transmitted orally or by example, rather than written dissemination, but also because the greater difficulty of travel precluded their study in any detail. The Christian missionaries, some of whom constituted the first generation of westerners to study world religions, understandably attributed a high degree of importance to scripture. Particularly in the Protestant tradition, the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* ('by scripture alone') holds sway in defining doctrine and revealing the means of salvation. The ability to read scripture presupposes literacy and education, and thus missionaries, as well as academics, have tended to disparage non-literate expressions of religion. It is only in recent times that this presumed intellectual superiority has been reappraised. Protestantism's emphasis on scripture also has the consequence that, unlike Roman Catholicism, Protestantism has very little by way of 'folk religion'. (It tends to disapprove of talismans such as St Christopher medals, veneration of sacred relics, shrines that claim to offer healing, such as Lourdes, and so on.)

The notion that the believer should aim for the supreme spiritual goal is also characteristic of Christianity. Salvation, eternal life, or the kingdom of God, is not a barely attainable goal reserved for a few adepts who have undergone years of austere and onerous spiritual practice. Divine grace, particularly mediated through Jesus

Christ's sacrifice on the cross, enables all (or at least all of the elect, according to Calvinism) to attain salvation. The fact that Christianity encourages the follower to aim for the ultimate goal no doubt facilitates the westerner's idea that, in pursuing another faith, it is reasonable to aim at achieving its highest aspiration. While converts to Buddhism do not typically come from mainstream Christianity, the fact that Christianity is the dominant religion in the west tends to make it the model which becomes available for understanding another faith. Since the salvific element is supremely important to the Christian, so the nibbanic component is of paramount concern to the western Buddhist. The predominant concern for belief in Christianity is further mirrored by the western interest in Buddhist doctrinal and philosophical elements. Thus, the western interest in Vipassana can be partially explained in the fact that it has a strong doctrinal component, affording answers to philosophical questions about the nature of reality.

To conclude, my argument has been that, although religions change through transcultural migration, the western uptake of Buddhism has given rise to a new form of the religion, which differs significantly from its diaspora manifestations in the West. In particular, western Buddhists have focused on Buddhism's nibbanic elements, causing them to use the religion to pursue its supreme spiritual goal, and to adopt the spiritual practices associated with it. The western adoption of such practices has itself involved adaptation — a phenomenon that has helped to further new western expressions of Buddhism, including its interest in Vipassana.

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