

AUTHORITY AND ADAPTATION:  
A CASE STUDY IN BRITISH BUDDHISM

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## ABSTRACT

Buddhism is transferring to Britain in a variety of contrasting forms which claim the authority of the traditions upon which they are based for the legitimization of practices and doctrines. The major part of this work is a detailed case study, based on fieldwork, of six such contrasting forms as they are represented in the city of Bath. These are, an eclectic group which is not formally affiliated to any one tradition, two groups which claim affiliation to Theravāda monastic Buddhism but practice in divergent ways, a local group of the Japanese based Sōka Gakkai, and two Tibetan derived forms of Buddhism. Chapter 1 introduces the phenomenon of Buddhism as practised by British people. Chapters 2 to 6 examine each of the six groups paying particular attention to the ways in which they are developing and adapting to British culture and the ways in which they legitimate such changes. Chapter 7 argues that the authority sources which the groups acknowledge determine how Buddhist practices and doctrines may be adapted and interpreted. The study achieves two objectives. First it extends knowledge about the practice of Buddhism by British people operating outside of the major Buddhist centres in Britain and second, it illustrates the importance of authority structures for individual practice and for the inevitable process of adaptation as Buddhism continues to adapt to British cultural norms. An understanding of the authority structures underlying contrasting forms of Buddhist practice is fundamental to an understanding of the ways in which Buddhism is adapting and also helps to explain sectarian attitudes which exist among groups making contrasting claims to legitimacy. The adaptation of roles played by women receives particular attention.

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## **PART I**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Buddhism has developed in Britain from being a religion of minor and primarily intellectual interest, into a diverse and expanding form of religiosity which attracts a significant and articulate following. This thesis will add to knowledge about the practice of Buddhism by people who are culturally British by examining their understanding and assimilation of Buddhism and the organizations and local groups which support their practice. The study began as an investigation into the variety of ways in which Buddhism has been adapted in this cultural setting. Fieldwork showed at an early stage that adaptations made within groups show similar trends thus confirming existing research findings.<sup>1</sup> It also became clear that the ways in which groups explain such adaptations are couched in the terms of the root traditions through which they trace their lineages and also reflect the authority sources which practitioners acknowledge.

#### **The Theory**

I am proposing that the authority sources claimed by practitioners for the practices they carry out determine the ways in which those practices and the organizations which control them can adapt. An understanding of the authority structures underlying contrasting forms of Buddhist practice is therefore fundamental to an understanding of the ways in which Buddhism is adapting and also helps to explain sectarian attitudes which exist among groups making contrasting claims to legitimacy.

#### **The Objectives**

This work has two objectives. These are first, to extend knowledge about the practice of Buddhism by British people through detailed accounts of contrasting Buddhist groups and second, to show the importance of authority structures for individual practice and for the process of adaptation within those groups. The study

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<sup>1</sup>Particularly those of Philip Mellor whose research is considered later in Part I. See page 25f below.

is divided into three parts. The first part sets the scene for a consideration of British Buddhism and introduces the concepts which underpin subsequent analysis. The second part, which forms the major content of the work, is a case study of the six Buddhist groups which meet in Bath and which have given rise to the theory. In order to understand the authority structures which operate within the groups Part II describes each group in detail. This has the effect of showing how authority operates in practical terms and grounds the subsequent analysis in phenomenological accounts of the case study groups. The third and final part examines the theory in the light of the fieldwork.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to set the scene for later description and analysis. I begin with an account of the methodology used for the study. This account explains how the data was gathered, acknowledges some of the assumptions which underlie subsequent analysis, and provides a rationale for why I have approached my subject in this way. Next I provide a brief quantitative review of the development of Buddhism over the last fifteen years. I then turn to consider the two major themes of the study, adaptation and authority. Here I review recent literature on adaptation within British Buddhism. The development of the roles which women play in the case study groups forms a recurring theme throughout the study, I therefore give an account of women's traditional roles within Buddhism in order to contextualize later consideration of how such roles are being adapted in Britain. Finally in this part, I introduce the concept of religious authority. I consider initially the broad concept of religious authority in the context of the cultural legacy of the twentieth century west and then review the nature of authority within Buddhism.

Throughout the study I use the term 'authority sources'. By this I mean the people or things upon which others rely to explain religious practices and doctrines, to confirm practices and experience and to provide legitimation and encouragement. The use of the term does not represent a value judgement on my part about the value or legitimacy of such sources nor about their authenticity in terms of Buddhist traditions. However, where this illuminates a particular point of analysis, I have suggested incidences where the use of authority sources is either continuous with or

not continuous with traditional practice.

## METHODOLOGY

Penner has argued and King agrees with him that many graduate students of religion are guilty of "theoretical illiteracy".<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons for this is that the methodology of the contemporary study of religion is ambiguous and the discipline, for whatever good reasons, is seldom clearly defined. This is not problematic of itself. It can be beneficial to study a subject through varied theoretical spectacles but variety may lead to the kind of theoretical naivety which Penner and King describe or perhaps to an individual researcher's methodological identity crisis. As Isichei has argued, the well known methodological textbooks for the study of religion often bear little relationship to actual research and research students have to look to other disciplines for their methodological technology.<sup>3</sup>

### The Research Technology

The methodological technology for this study is drawn from the social sciences. Data about the Buddhist groups studied was gathered using three methods: interviews; participant observation; and documentary analysis of the literature which the groups produce. The majority of fifty three interviews were tape recorded although where this was not possible, or was undesirable, notes were written up shortly after the interview in order to preserve, as accurately as possible, my memory of things said. Chance meetings often yielded valuable conversations which became just as useful as some of the formally arranged interviews. All the interviews were unstructured although where an interview had been prearranged I made use of an interview guide to ensure that specific areas were covered. The interview guide was developed gradually since at the beginning of the research I did not assume that I knew what the important questions were. Questions arose and developed as the process continued. Lofland has argued that a structured interview

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<sup>2</sup>*Impasse and Resolution. A Critique of the Study of Religion.* Toronto Studies in Religion, vol. 8. 1989 cited in King, U 'Impasse and Resolution' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXI/4.

<sup>3</sup>E Isichei, 'Some Ambiguities in the Academic Study of Religion' *Religion* Vol. 23, 1993, pp379-390.

"necessarily assumes knowledge of what the important questions are and, more importantly, what the main kinds of answers can be".<sup>4</sup> Assumptions of this type were precisely what I wished to avoid preferring instead, with Lofland,

...not to elicit choices between alternative answers to pre-formed questions but, rather, to elicit from the interviewee what he considers to be important questions relative to a given topic.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Case Study**

Buddhism in Britain is diverse and growing and it has therefore not been practicable to investigate its entirety within the constraints of this type of project. The approach adopted for this research has been therefore a case study of Buddhism in the city of Bath.

Yin has defined a case study as:

an empirical enquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.<sup>6</sup>

This is an apt description of the nature of this research. Religions are not finite, clearly defined phenomena which exist in isolation from the cultural conditions in which they are located. Buddhism exists in the real life context of the city of Bath. Since those who identify themselves as Buddhists also live in and around the city and partake in its life they bring to Buddhism their western cultural conditioning. It is not possible to disentangle Bath Buddhism from its geographical and cultural situation. As Bowman has shown,<sup>7</sup> Bath presents a mono-cultural façade and

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<sup>4</sup>J Lofland, *Analysing Social Settings*, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1971), p75.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p76.

<sup>6</sup>R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research; Design and Method*. (London: Sage, 1989), p23.

<sup>7</sup>Marion Bowman, 'Religion in Bath: Beyond the Facade', *Religion Today*, Vol.9, No.3, 1994, pp32-37.

epitomises, for many Bathonians as well as outsiders, the English city. However, behind the façade there is a mix of religious practices. Partly due to the reputation of its healing waters and the close proximity of Glastonbury and ancient ‘sacred sites’ such as Stonehenge and Avebury, Bath is a centre for New Age activity and for alternative healing techniques. But Bath is also condemned by some residents for being ‘cosy and parochial’. Bath Buddhism is unusually diverse for such a small city but the diversity and popularity of Buddhism in Bath probably owes as much to its respectable façade as it does to its ‘alternative’ side.

The method which has been selected for this research is a single case, case study with embedded subunits, and the design of the study follows Yin’s recommendations. The subunits are the six Buddhist groups which meet regularly within the city boundaries. These are:

1. the Bath Buddhist Group, an eclectic group with no adherence to a single school of Buddhism;
2. the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha meditation group;
3. the House of Inner Tranquillity, a ‘modernised’ Theravāda group, which has its residential centre just outside Bath, at Bradford on Avon, but also meets fortnightly in the city;
4. the Bath Sōka Gakkai (SGI) group;
5. the Bath New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) residential centre and;
6. the Karma Pakshi group, which practises in accordance with the Karma bKa’rgyud<sup>8</sup> tradition;

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<sup>8</sup>Since practitioners within this group are more familiar with the popular than with the scholarly spelling of this word I shall refer from now on to the Karma Kagyu school.

So far as I can establish, these six groups represent the only groups meeting within the city boundaries. If there are others they are not listed within any of the published directories and they do not advertise their presence in the city. A number of New Age practitioners incorporate Buddhist terminology within their operational sphere but do not define themselves as specifically Buddhist. The parameters of the case study include not only members who practise within the Bath groups but also the wider groups to which members are directly related. This means in the case of the SGI and NKT groups, for example, that teachers, lecturers and administrators, who relate to local members through the organizational structure, are included in the research where appropriate. The six groups represent a broad span of the Buddhist presence in this country although some traditions are entirely absent. For example the Friends of the Western Buddhist order (FWBO), one of the largest Buddhist organizations in Britain, does not have a meeting place in Bath and is therefore excluded from the case study although previous work on this movement is referred to in the analysis.

All studies made at the micro level encounter the problem of generalization to the macro level. The result of this case study will be a better understanding of Buddhism as it is practised in Bath. But, as Yin points out, a case study is not a sampling unit<sup>9</sup> and it is not possible to generalise from a case study to a population, using statistical methods. I have not attempted to extrapolate from the data in this way. Pye suggests that, "What is important in the face of complexity is careful attention to more of the living data."<sup>10</sup> This study is an attempt to pay such attention. The findings from this small study are complex and reliably indicate the greater complexity of the whole population of British and western Buddhists.

A particular feature of this study is that it concentrates on the views of self-defined Buddhists, the majority of whom are not members of monastic communities but who nonetheless represent Buddhism for British people who come into contact with their increasing numbers. Criteria for defining who is and who is not a Buddhist are

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<sup>9</sup>Yin, *Case Study Research*, p38.

<sup>10</sup>M Pye, *Syncretism versus Synthesis* (Leeds: The British Association For The Study of Religions, 1993).

difficult, if not impossible, to determine and self-definition is a way of avoiding value judgements about who can legitimately be studied in this context. This feature of the research accepts Mellor's findings<sup>11</sup> that British Buddhism is Protestant in its nature since I acknowledge here the influence of lay Buddhists on the development of British Buddhism.

During the course of the research I was able to build up relationships with many of the Buddhists in Bath, the majority of whose life circumstances broadly resemble my own. Their general goodwill towards my research meant that I was kept informed of important developments, often through chance meetings in the town, or a thoughtful telephone call. Each of the groups studied has a different organisational set up and this has meant that the field work for each has presented separate problems and opportunities. Instead of trying to treat all the groups in the same way, I decided, from the outset, to use whatever methods would yield the richest data. Different emphases in the data collection methods were appropriate for the six groups.

The Bath Buddhist Group was the subject of my undergraduate dissertation, research for which took place throughout the academic year 1992-1993. In order to bring this information up to date I attended seven further meetings of this group during 1994 and another in 1996. A total of eight interviews relating to the Bath Buddhist Group were completed, a number of which overlapped with research on the Thai Forest Theravāda Tradition meditation group. Because my contact with this group has been very extensive I was able to observe developments over several years. This has meant in this case that participant observation and many casual conversations have yielded more information than the formal interviews. The Thai Forest Theravāda Meditation group is a sub-set of the Bath Buddhist Group and although I attended a meditation meeting only once I have interviewed both regular participants and am able to draw on information about this tradition from knowledge of the larger group. Five further interviews relate to the meditation group.

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<sup>11</sup>Philip Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism? The Cultural Translation of Buddhism in England', *Religion*, Vol. 21:1 pp73-92. 1991. See page 25f below, for an account of Mellor's findings.

The biggest gap in the data I was able to collect relates to the House of Inner Tranquillity. Although this group expressed initial interest in the research and granted me interviews with the centre's administrator and a group of nuns, I was not given permission to attend any of the teaching sessions either in Bath or at the residential centre. This has meant a considerable loss in terms of my understanding of how this group functions. Three further interviews were carried out through unofficial personal contacts with group members before all contact was broken off and the centre declined to answer my letters. Unfortunately one of the interviews was lost through a technical recording error on my part.

During the research period the SGI group met in members' homes in and around Bath once per fortnight. Most local members attended these meetings. By regular attendance at a total of fifteen meetings, which took place over a period of several months in the first half of 1994, I was able to establish good relationships with members who became used to my presence. This research was supplemented by attendance at a residential course at the SGI national headquarters, Taplow Court, in order to see the movement in action under different circumstances. A total of nine interviews were completed.

Until the summer of 1996 the NKT group was based at a residential centre where teaching sessions took place several times per day and the group also held meetings in the town centre. In order to build up a rapport with members I attended meetings in the town and spent a week at the residential centre immediately prior to going, with residents, to their national headquarters in Cumbria for a festival weekend in the Spring of 1995. After this time I was often invited to the centre and attended several events, sometimes with my children. During the time I spent at the centre I was allowed access to all teaching sessions and spent many hours in the communal sitting room. In this way I was able to observe much of the daily activity and talk to residents and visitors on an informal basis. Hearing one side of telephone conversations proved to be a particularly useful source of information on this group and led to questions which I would not otherwise have thought of asking. A total of eight interviews were carried out.

Most of the fieldwork on the Karma Kagyu group took place in the Spring and Summer of 1994 although I had already attended several previous meetings of this group in 1991, when it was initiated. I attended nine meetings during 1994 and completed eight interviews. In addition I was able to familiarize myself with the Karma Kagyu tradition in its wider context through a week long visit to Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland during 1994 and a visit to the school's head monastery in Sikkim, Northern India, in early 1995. My first contact with Buddhism in Britain, as an undergraduate student in 1991 also took place at a Karma Kagyu centre, Marpa House in Saffron Walden.

In addition to this data, I have recorded seven interviews with members of groups outside the case study. These interviews mostly took place before the case study method was identified as being the most appropriate and include: three interviews with FWBO members; one with the leader of a Bristol Zen group; one with a member of a Tibetan group based in London; one with an ex-member of the Buddhist Society in its early days and; one with a member of the nearby International Meditation Centre, Burmese *vipassanā* group. Though not directly related to the six groups within the case study, each of these interviews has been useful to contextualize the data.

### **Underlying Assumptions and the Postmodern Challenge**

When people form the focus for academic research they will usually have a view of those who research them. As this study goes on to illustrate, British Buddhists are very often intelligent, educated people and many of them readily express their views, often in articulate ways. This has posed an interesting challenge to the collection of the data upon which this study is based. Two quite different attitudes to the process have arisen. On the one hand I have been reminded, during an interview, that it is not phenomenological to make a personal observation unless I make it clear at the time that that is what I am doing; in other words that I am speaking as an individual, with a view, and not as a researcher. On the other hand, some informants have declined to be treated as objects of research but have been happy to have dialogue with me, as an individual, on certain issues pertaining to my research area. Clearly these attitudes have to be reconciled and I have tried to be

aware of my own role in this process. Indeed the adaptation of the researcher's approach to the individual preference of informants is essential in a study of this nature. The information I have tried to elicit is not available via the more structured methods of the natural sciences. Highly structured methods cannot be scientific in this context because individuals respond to questions about personal issues in different ways. In order to provide equality of weighting to the views of informants I have adapted my own approach. This means that I have accepted both the personal nature of religious understanding and the effect of the researcher in the process.

Many contemporary theorists point to features of the social conditions in which we live and identify them as constituting postmodernity. This tentative and ambiguous term marks a number of attributes of contemporary social conditions which they variously argue may be continuous with, or at least related to, modernity or represent a break from it<sup>12</sup>. Modernity is represented by grand narratives, a sense of progression, industrialisation, and the questioning of traditional axioms, including religious axioms (which by the modernist, forward looking process developed into a theory of increasing secularisation). Postmodernity goes one further and applies the questioning process to itself. It questions the validity of all theoretical positions including the theories of modernity, as well as whether there is anything which can be known, and at the level of praxis, whether the researcher has authority to speak except for herself. Postmodernity relativises to such an extent that all narratives about postmodernity are to some extent flawed for "incoherence is the most distinctive among the attributes of postmodernity (arguably its defining feature)"<sup>13</sup>.

If we accept that social conditions may be represented in this way one response would be to halt the research process on the grounds that,

you can say anything you want, but so can everyone else. Some of what is said will be interesting and fascinating, but some will also be ridiculous and

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<sup>12</sup>Barry Smart, *Postmodernity*, (London, Routledge, 1993), p16.

<sup>13</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, (London: Routledge, 1992) p.xxiv.

absurd. Post-modernism provides no means to distinguish between the two.<sup>14</sup>

Physical scientist Steven Weinberg, representing arguably the most paradigmatic of the paradigms of modernity, counters the postmodern philosophical challenge with the view that "we learn about the philosophy of science by doing science not the other way around"<sup>15</sup>. In the same way we learn about the nature and impact of the contemporary practice of religion, or about social conditions, by observing and communicating about religious practice or social conditions, not the other way around. We cannot know that the conditions of postmodernity pertain, or assess their impact, if we do not study and reflexively feed back into the theory, interpretations of social conditions or, as here, religious practice.

The discipline of Religious Studies has a particular role to play in this exercise. The first reason for this is that scholars of religion have not accepted the view of modernity that religion is epiphenomenal in the contemporary world and scholars have continued to interpret and build up a picture of religions and the religious, albeit often with the presupposition of modernity that they were thereby contributing to real knowledge. Secondly, the philosophical extremes of some postmodern theorists - Baudrillard with his contention that there is no ultimately real,<sup>16</sup> is a good example - resonate with Eastern philosophies which were never adequately subsumed by modern reductionist theories about religion. Work is ongoing, in particular, on the similarities between postmodernity and madhyamika philosophy. An informant who attended one of the groups in the study for several weeks but decided not to continue the association also made this link.

It was just detaching yourself really. A bit like sociology really. It's like postmodernism really. It was like quantum mechanics. I thought, "oh shit not

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<sup>14</sup>Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p137.

<sup>15</sup>Steven Weinberg, 'A "zing" of truth', *The Times Higher*, January 6, 1995, p14.

<sup>16</sup>See chapter 6 'The World According to Jean Baudrillard' in Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*.

that again". Intellectually I accept that anyway, the transience of everything. I don't need Buddhism to help me detach myself.<sup>17</sup>

Thirdly, one feature of religious belief identified within postmodernity is that it is reconstructed and reconstituted as part of the tendency to regeneration of traditional forms of life.<sup>18</sup> Traditional ways of living, untouched by technology, urbanization and industrialisation provide a source of fascination and romantic idealism as well as providing fertile ground for the investigation of traditional forms of religious knowledge. The upsurge in the popularity of all things Tibetan provides but one example of this.

This makes it all the more important to be aware of assumptions which lie behind the analysis. Lofland has argued that it is essential to recognize that in the interaction of research, the researcher's attitudes, personality and circumstances must be taken into account.<sup>19</sup> David Martin has suggested that,

One needs to recall two standard points about sociology in general before coming to the sociology of religion-and secularization-in particular. The first point is that we need to recognize how our knowledge embodies a particular historical, cultural and even personal location. We are able to see precisely because we have a standpoint. That means that the sociologist does not present a package of certified knowledge, but begins a conversation.<sup>20</sup>

Knott would probably agree with this viewpoint. She writes of her own research:

There are undoubtedly....values, attitudes and areas of intolerance, some of

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<sup>17</sup>HOIT 5, interview 29 February 1996.

<sup>18</sup>Smart, *Postmodernity*, p109.

<sup>19</sup> Lofland, *Analysing Social Settings*, p99.

<sup>20</sup>David Martin, 'Sociology, Religion and Secularization: an Orientation', *Religion*, Vol. 25, 1995, p295.

which I am aware of<sup>21</sup> and perhaps others that I am not, which may well have influenced the reception of the data. These should not be suppressed: it is important that one should become aware of them, and of the effects and repercussions they may have.<sup>22</sup>

Some of the assumptions I have made within the research process are well known to me. For example, like Rita Gross<sup>23</sup> I think that in the study of Buddhism Sangha is as important as Buddha or Dharma; in other words, that there is a great deal more than texts to take into consideration. The community of practitioners, as one of the three traditional refuges of Buddhists deserves our attention. Further I think that in a culture where religious lay practice is generally given high status it is not sufficient to consider the leaders of Buddhist groups and their organizational structures. The actions and attitudes of the 'ordinary member' need to be taken into account. One subject on which the 'ordinary member' might be expected to voice an opinion is the role of women in British Buddhism. This was a particularly tricky area to research. Although of burning concern to 'Buddhist feminists' the issue of patriarchy in Buddhism is not generally one with which Bath Buddhists concern themselves and yet the issue is nonetheless there. A feature of Patriarchal society is that it teaches its women to remain in subordinate positions which are justified through tradition and philosophy. In view of this I felt justified in pressing informants to engage with this issue although I often had the impression that they would rather not have done so and indeed many of them had nothing to say on the subject. When writing the sections of the thesis which address this area I also had difficulty in keeping my own voice out of the accounts. This project would not have

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<sup>21</sup> e.g. she cites her annoyance at the expectations of Indian women and of her treatment by some Hindu men and her impatience when people tried to tell her Hindu myths which she already knew.

<sup>22</sup> Kim Knott, *Hinduism in Leeds*, (Leeds: Community Religions Project, University of Leeds. 1986), p2.

<sup>23</sup> 'Buddhism after Patriarchy', Paula Cooley, W. R. Eakin, J. B. McDaniel, eds. *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, (New York: Orbis, 1991). Gross argues that Buddhologists, "often present the *Sangha* as a poor third and devote significantly more energy to presentations of the Buddha and the *Dharma*." p73.

yielded quite the same results with another researcher and where the issue of gender is concerned this is all the more true. Although I have found my research into British Buddhism consistently fascinating I am conscious of having very little of myself invested in the development of Buddhism. I do however have a great deal invested in the development of the recognition of women's voices and I would be dishonest if I did not openly acknowledge that this is the case.

There have been occasions when I have been aware of my own effects on the research process and to an extent been aware also that I could not prevent those effects even where that may have been desirable. My own personality has certainly affected the way in which the research has been carried out. A positive example of this was my natural inclination to be self-effacing at Buddhist meetings. When reading about methodological issues I was surprised to find that adopting the attitude of socially acceptable and standardized incompetent i.e. someone polite and easy to get along with but clearly not an expert and apparently in need of being taught, is a recognized method of carrying out observational research. Lofland contends that what he calls older, male, professorial 'experts' may not be able to assume the role of one who has to be taught and therefore may not get the same kind of information fed to them by the community.<sup>24</sup>

A less positive example of how my personality and life experience impinged on the research took place when I visited the head monastery of the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism at Rumtek, in Sikkim. I already had a considerable interest in this school and was aware of important developments which were taking place with Rumtek at the centre. When I arrived I was therefore very anxious to make good use of my time there. My resolve was entirely destroyed as soon as I entered the main hall of the monastery where several hundred monks were taking part in Mahakala puja. My intellectual curiosity was completely overtaken by other aspects of my personality and I was compelled to leave. The aura in the hall was exceptionally powerful and I knew that although I should stay and experience this I was quite unable to do so.

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<sup>24</sup>Lofland, *Analysing Social Settings*.

Again I learnt about Buddhism by allowing, or rather being unable to disallow, my own reactions to dictate my behaviour. I was overcome by the power of the gathering and therefore unable to look around and take in an impression of the building, or other details, such as the age of the monks or their concentration on the ceremonials. What I was compelled to learn was that Mahakala puja at Rumtek monastery can create the kind of atmosphere which may compel a motivated and determined westerner to leave.

Birgit Kellner has argued that

The acceptance of science to be not absolutely objective does not and should not lead to an uncritical enthusiasm for the subjective. Rather, it should give rise to a refined position on objectivity in the sense of communicability or documentability.<sup>25</sup>

It has been my aim to document and communicate.

## **BRITISH BUDDHISM**

I am not concerned here to present an historical account of the general development of Buddhism in Britain since this has been covered in detail elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Where an historical context is necessary in order to illuminate the contemporary situation within specific groups this has been provided in subsequent chapters. This section will consider instead the prevalence of Buddhism in Britain in the 1990s and the relative popularity among British practitioners of its varied forms. Although this study concentrates exclusively on the practice and adaptation of Buddhism in Britain the same kinds of processes are taking place in the rest of

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<sup>25</sup>Contribution to the e-mail discussion list BUDDHA-L, 8 June 1995.

<sup>26</sup>Historical accounts have been provided in, for example: Philip Almond 'The Buddha in the West from Myth to History', in *Religion*, Vol.16, pp305-322, 1986 and *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Ian Oliver, *Buddhism in Britain* (London: Rider and Company, 1979); and, more recently, Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture: 543BCE-1992* (London: Aquarian, 1994).

Europe and in North America.<sup>27</sup>

### Numbers of British Buddhists

Brierley and Hiscock's *U.K. Christian Handbook*<sup>28</sup> estimates that there are 32,000 ethnically British Buddhists. This is said to include 5,000 members of SGI, 5,000 lay and 300 ordained members of the FWBO, and 15,000 practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>29</sup> The overall estimate for 1995 is extrapolated from surveys carried out in 1975, 1980 and 1985 in which Brierley sent questionnaires to all Buddhist groups listed in the Buddhist Society Directory<sup>30</sup>. A 1993 publication by the University of Derby and The Inter Faith Network,<sup>31</sup> records that there are 130,000 Buddhists in the UK "including a high percentage of the ethnically Chinese people of the UK"<sup>32</sup>. Baumann<sup>33</sup> has apparently misread Weller's figures and suggests that there are 130,000 European Buddhists in Britain in addition to those of Asian descent, an error which has been compounded by David Scott<sup>34</sup> who has quoted

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<sup>27</sup>See for example, Rick Fields, *How The Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, (London: Shambhala, 1986), Charles Prebish, 'Reflections on the Transmission of Buddhism to America', in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Understanding the New Religions*, (New York: The Seabury Press 1978), and Ian Harris, 'An American Appropriation of Buddhism' *The Buddhist Forum* Vol.4 (SOAS, University of London, 1996), on North American Buddhism and Martin Baumann, 'Creating a European Path to Nirvāna: Historical and Contemporary Developments of Buddhism in Europe,' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, (Vol.10, No.1, 1995) on Buddhism in Europe.

<sup>28</sup>P Brierley and V Hiscock, *UK Christian Handbook 1994/95* (London: Christian Research Association, 1993).

<sup>29</sup>Brierley extracted these four figures from Elizabeth Puttick's paper 'Why has Bodhidharma left for the West? The Growth and Appeal of Buddhism in Britain' (*Religion Today*, Vol.8, no.2 1993).

<sup>30</sup>Personal communication from Peter Brierley, 19 September 1994.

<sup>31</sup>Paul Weller, ed. *Religions in the UK: A Multi-Faith Directory*. (Derby: University of Derby, 1993).

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p74. I have been unable to ascertain how these figures were calculated.

<sup>33</sup>Baumann, 'Creating a European Path', p64.

<sup>34</sup>'Modern British Buddhism: Patterns and Directions' a paper delivered to the Buddhist Forum at The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 1995.

Baumann's figures.

There are considerable problems involved in calculating these kinds of estimates. For example, should we include anyone who has ever been to a Buddhist meeting or only those who take out membership of some kind? In addition, most Buddhist groups do not keep quantitative data of this nature. In spite of this it is useful to have an idea of the size of the phenomenon of British Buddhism. A good starting point for attempting a calculation is with a consideration of some of the largest groups.

In October 1996 the FWBO estimated that its British following was made up of 360 order members, 1,500 *mitras*, or friends, who have made a commitment to the organization and a much smaller, but difficult to quantify, number of people who attend meetings.<sup>35</sup> This is substantially lower than the figure of 5,300 suggested in Puttick's 1993 paper.<sup>36</sup> The lower estimate may reflect an increase in the movement's self confidence and its more firmly established status within the British Buddhist community with a consequent reduction in the need to present themselves as quite so dynamic and fast growing. The SGI has claimed that 6,500 members have a copy of the *Gohonzon*, the object of worship, the possession of which conveys formal membership. They estimate that maybe 3,500 to 4,000 of these members are active within the movement and regularly attend meetings.<sup>37</sup> The NKT are unwilling to estimate membership figures but in view of their recent growth and the rate at which they have purchased properties, their active membership must place them, in numerical terms, at least on a par with the FWBO. It is unlikely that any other Buddhist organization could claim this number of followers. This means that the three largest groups count between them probably no more than ten thousand members. Even were we to quadruple this figure, to forty thousand, to allow for members of the large number of smaller groups, this

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<sup>35</sup>Personal communication with Dharmachari Vishvapani of the Western Buddhist Order's Liaison Office.

<sup>36</sup>Puttick, 'Why has Bodhidharma left for the West?', p6.

<sup>37</sup>Kazuo Fujii, Vice General Director SGI-UK, interview 30 March 1995.

number does not begin to approach estimates of over 100,000 British Buddhists of European descent. If we add an estimated three hundred SGI local groups to the Buddhist Society's group listing to give a total number of British Buddhist groups of approximately six hundred, 100,000 Buddhists would give a mean of over three hundred attenders for each group. This figure is unrealistic.

A related question is the degree to which Buddhism has influenced British Society. Puttick has argued that "the influence of Buddhism on contemporary life is far in excess of the numbers involved"<sup>38</sup> and cites primarily the influence of Buddhism on western philosophical and psychological concepts. This is a view which is shared by some Buddhist communities who have a view of themselves which incorporates the idea that their influence on philosophical thinking has been extensive.<sup>39</sup>

However there have been no studies either to prove or disprove the existence of any practical impact of western Buddhism on western lives outside of the Buddhist communities. A paper presented to the 1996 conference of the British Association for the Study of Religions,<sup>40</sup> which aimed to explore the treatment of Buddhism within the media, shed little light on the extent to which Buddhism has infiltrated the British press. We simply do not know how influential Buddhism has been. A study of the incidence of reference to Buddhism in popular culture would be a good place to start any attempt to find out, but no such study has been carried out.

### **Group trends**

Although we cannot easily estimate the numbers of British Buddhists it is possible to consider the numbers of groups using Buddhist Society listings. Table 1 shows the numbers of groups by school for each of four years, based on the Buddhist

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<sup>38</sup>Puttick, 'Why has Bodhidharma left for the West?' p6.

<sup>39</sup>A paper by Steven Collins, 'Buddhism in Recent British Philosophy and Theology', *Religious Studies*, Vol.21, 1985, pp.475-493, argues that although a number of writers have influenced Christian Buddhist dialogue through a consideration of the Buddhist view of morals and the philosophical language through which that has been expressed, such dialogue, and indeed philosophical Buddhism, has had little practical impact on "the majority of mankind" (p493).

<sup>40</sup>David Scott, 'Buddhism and the Media'.

Society's Directories and a survey carried out by Church during 1980 and 1981.<sup>41</sup> Chart one illustrates the overall growth in the number of groups practising Buddhism in Britain while charts two to five illustrate the relative share of each school in each of the four years. From this we can at least detect the trends which have taken place as Buddhism has become more firmly established. The most marked increase is in the number of groups following Tibetan practices. Much of this growth is explained by the sharp increase over this period in the number of groups which follow the teachings of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. Of the twenty four Tibetan groups contacted by Church in 1980, just five mentioned the Manjushri centre where Geshe Kelsang was resident. By 1994 there were seventy four local groups affiliated to Kelsang's recently formed NKT. Other Tibetan groups have also increased in number and Tibetan Buddhism is overall the fastest growing sector.

Another trend which is perceptible from these figures is the reduction in the number of groups which claim to be eclectic or non-aligned to any particular school. In 1981 there were twenty six such groups or 18.6% of the total number of groups (see chart two), and by 1994 only twenty, 7% of the total number (see chart five). This indicates that as Buddhism has grown it has also become more sectarian. Groups are now more likely to align themselves with a particular teacher or school of Buddhism.

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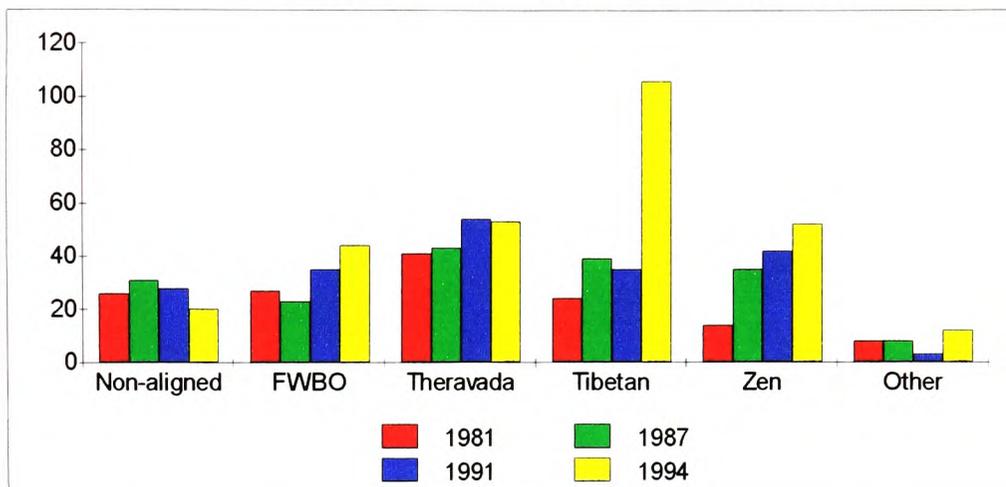
<sup>41</sup>Alison Church, 'Buddhist Groups in Britain - Adaptation and Development of Traditional Religious Forms Within a Western Environment', unpublished MA thesis submitted to the University of Manchester, 1982.

**TABLE 1 Numbers of Buddhist Groups in Britain 1981-1994**

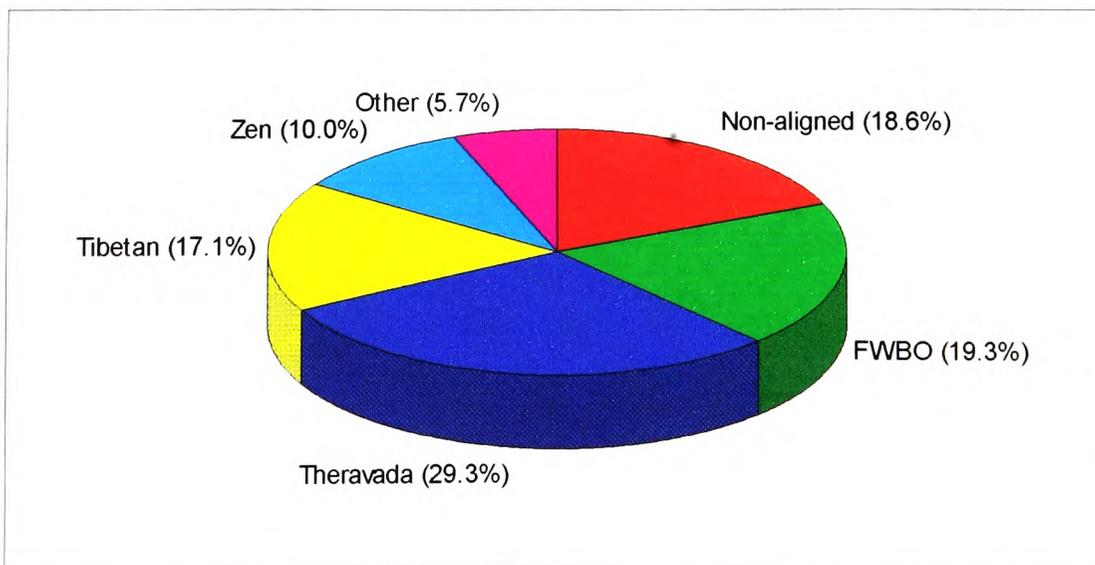
School	1981	1987	1991	1994
Non-aligned	26	31	28	20
FWBO	27	23	35	44
Theravada	41	43	54	53
Tibetan	24	39	35	106
Zen	14	35	42	52
Other	8	8	3	12
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>287</b>

Source: The Buddhist Society Directories & Church 1982

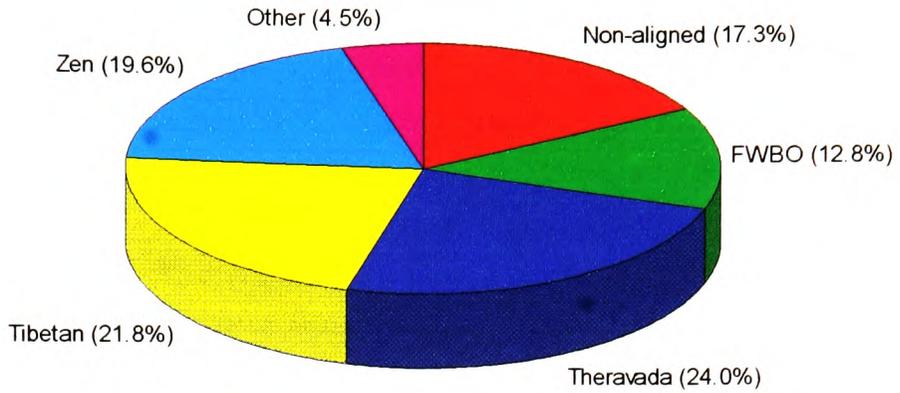
**CHART 1 Buddhist Groups in Britain 1981-1994**



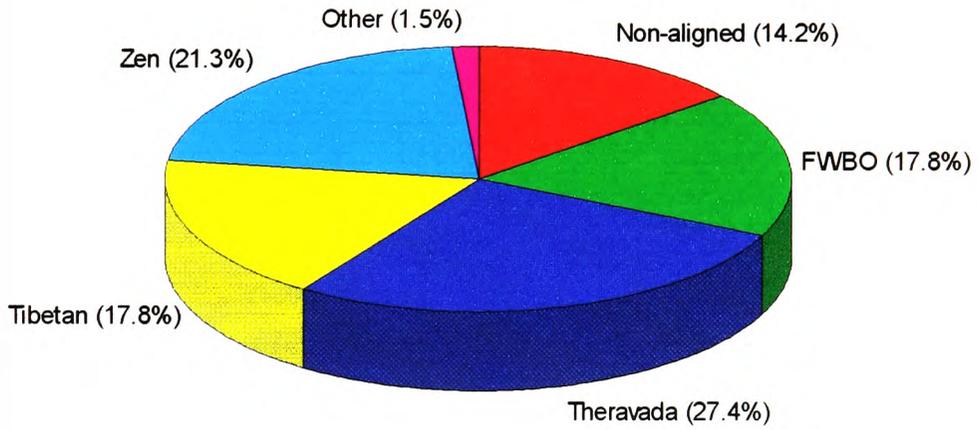
**CHART 2 Buddhist Groups by School 1981**



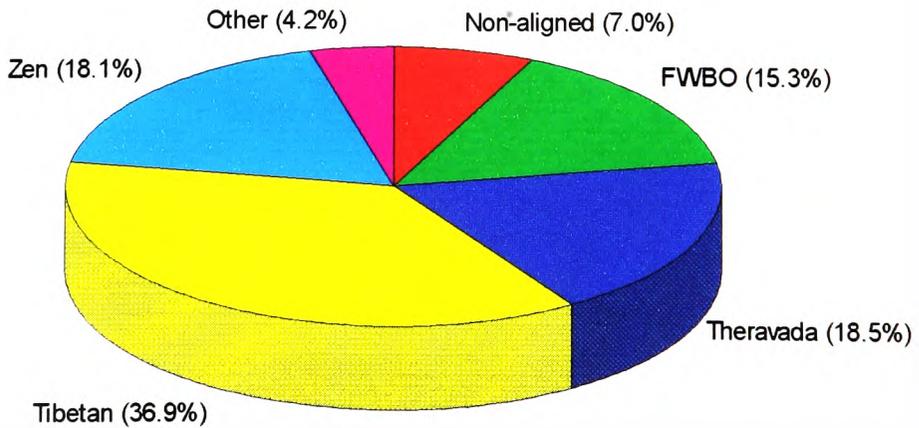
**CHART 2 Buddhist Groups by School 1987**



**CHART 3 Buddhist Groups by School 1991**



**CHART 4 Buddhist Groups by School 1994**



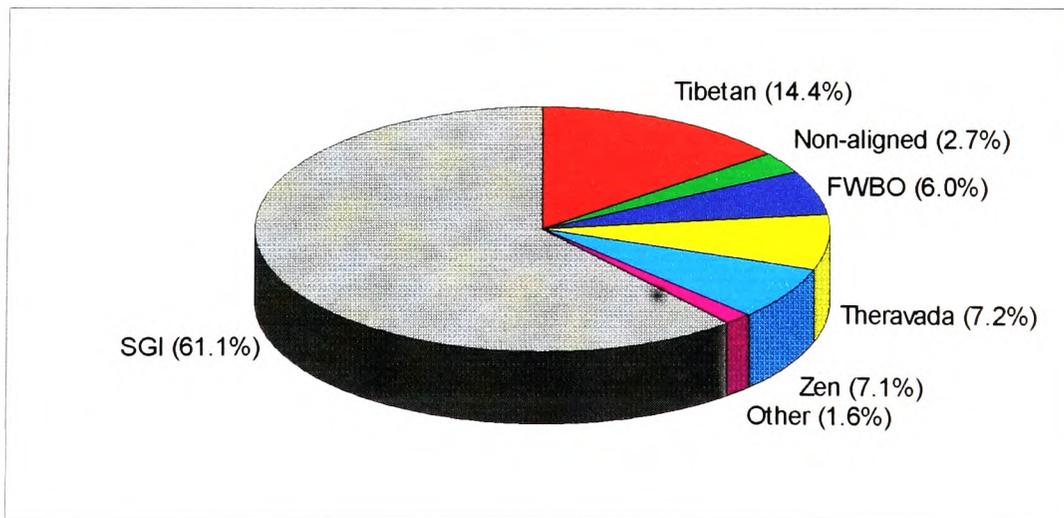
The SGI groups are omitted from the previous analysis because they have not been included in the Buddhist Society's Directories. SGI has estimated local group numbers for the years 1987 and 1991 at 334 and 450 respectively (Table 2). The closest we can come to a chart showing the current representation by group using 'official' figures is by adding the SGI 1991 figure into the 1994 chart. Chart 6 indicates that the NKT have a long way to go before they can match SGI's representation by locality.

**TABLE 2** Buddhist Groups by School

School	1987	1991
Non-aligned	31	28
FWBO	23	35
Theravada	43	54
Tibetan	39	35
Zen	35	42
Other	8	3
SGI	334	450
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>513</b>	<b>647</b>

Source: The Buddhist Society & SGI-UK

**CHART 6** Buddhist groups by school 1994 including SGI figures 1991



## ADAPTATION

### Recent Literature on British Buddhism and 'The Spectrum of Adaptation'

In the late eighties and early nineties British Buddhism was considered by a number of scholars all of whom chose the adaptation process as the focus of their analysis. It is these studies with which I am mostly concerned here. Later publications have considered other aspects. For example, in a wide ranging study Peter Bishop<sup>42</sup> has considered the transfer of Tibetan Buddhism to the west and argues that Tibetan Buddhism has been only partially transferred. Elements which form the "shadow and underside"<sup>43</sup> of the Tibetan system, Bishop argues, have been left behind leaving western converts to experience an emasculated form of Tibetan Buddhism which has no capacity to deal with "the pathologies of the west".<sup>44</sup>

Cush has added to the debate with a study of the relationships which exist between British Buddhist organizations and the New Age.<sup>45</sup> She traces a common ancestry for both movements in the 1960s counterculture but more particularly in the Theosophical movement of the nineteenth century and identifies areas where Buddhism and the New Age share similar approaches. While important similarities undoubtedly exist between these movements, there are also, as Cush points out, important differences. One such difference is the existence within Buddhism of forms of continuous tradition which authenticate Buddhist practices and doctrines and provide it with its philosophical rigour.

I turn now to the earlier studies of adaptation within British Buddhism. Deirdre Green<sup>46</sup> argues that since it is difficult to locate an essence within Buddhism that

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<sup>42</sup>Peter Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination*. (London: The Athlone Press, 1993).

<sup>43</sup>ibid., p20.

<sup>44</sup>ibid., p19.

<sup>45</sup>Denise Cush, 'British Buddhism and the New Age', *Religion*, Vol.11, No.2, 1996.

<sup>46</sup>Deirdre Green, 'Buddhism in Britain: Skilful Means or Selling Out?' Paul Badham ed. *Religion, State, and Society in Modern Britain*, (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1989).

could be accepted equally by all schools, the most productive way in which to regard British Buddhism overall, is through attention to the need it has to conform to British cultural norms in order to be useful within this culture. She argues that most British groups adapt to some degree and that groups may usefully be placed on a spectrum of adaptation ranging from wholesale adherence to tradition at one end, to a "cognitive surrender"<sup>47</sup> to the twentieth century western scientific worldview at the other. Following Pye,<sup>48</sup> Green argues that the process of adapting Buddhist practice and understanding to western cultural norms may be viewed in the light of the Buddhist doctrine of Skilful Means (skt. *upāya-kauśalya*). Green claims that some groups adapt very little, and she gives the English Sangha Trust's Thai Forest Theravāda Tradition as her example, claiming that it retains traditional practice in the new context. Others groups adapt more or less, in accordance with the Skilful Means doctrine. At the opposite pole some groups, she claims, go too far in their adaptations and in her terms "sell out" or surrender to western cultural norms. Green places the FWBO somewhere near the midpoint of her continuum and SGI nearer to the "pole of cognitive surrender".

As part of a general textbook of Buddhism, Peter Harvey also utilizes the idea of a spectrum of adaptation.<sup>49</sup> Harvey is also concerned with the attitudes of groups to "accommodation with Western culture". Like Green, Harvey places the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha at the traditional end of his spectrum but he places the FWBO at the opposite end. This is because although both groups have made adaptations their attitudes to the need to adapt are significantly different. The Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha wishes to avoid change for its own sake while Sangharakshita's FWBO makes a conscious effort to make Buddhism suitable for westerners and is happy to sacrifice 'cultural accretions' in the process, in an attempt to maintain only 'the essence of Buddhism'.

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<sup>47</sup>This is a term borrowed from Peter Berger's *A Rumour of Angels* (London: Allen Lane, 1970).

<sup>48</sup>Michael Pye, *Skilful Means*. (London: Duckworth, 1978).

<sup>49</sup>Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p316.

Chrissydes has observed, astutely, that:

It is precisely because western ways of thinking seem 'normal' to westerners that they have failed to note the distinctively western ways in which Buddhism has developed within the past century.<sup>50</sup>

He goes on to argue that it may be possible "that certain Buddhist groups in the western world have escaped... westernization completely"<sup>51</sup>. In a personal communication<sup>52</sup> he has indicated that the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha under Ajahn Sumedho may represent such a group. Philip Mellor disagrees. He has argued that no Buddhist group has 'escaped' the adaptation process. His 1991 paper<sup>53</sup>, drawn from research on the FWBO and the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha, concludes that although these two organizations demonstrate "different visions of how Buddhism should be understood and practised in the west"<sup>54</sup>, both organizations exhibit continuity with western cultural norms. He argues that Buddhism as it is practised in Britain by both organizations is not "completely at odds with western religious traditions"<sup>55</sup>, and has "many of the features of Protestant Christian discourse"<sup>56</sup>.

Mellor argues that Buddhism in Britain represents "a problematic category for the

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<sup>50</sup>George Chrissydes, 'Buddhism goes west', *World Faiths Insight*, new series, 20, 1988, p37.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>October 1996.

<sup>53</sup>Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism?' This paper was drawn from Mellor's doctoral thesis, 'The Cultural Translation of Buddhism: Problems of Theory and Method in the Study of Buddhism in England', submitted to The University of Manchester, 1989.

<sup>54</sup>Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism?', p74.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p73.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p90.

analyst"<sup>57</sup> because its development represents an exploration of existing religious channels, not the establishment of new ones. The FWBO has consciously attempted to distil an essence from Buddhism and maintain only that essence while the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha is not confident about what can be discarded and what cannot. Although Mellor regards the FWBO as highly 'protestant' and the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha as much more cautious in its adaptation to British culture, he finds support for his thesis in both groups and in four areas. First he addresses what he calls "the burden of self"<sup>58</sup> where he sees a tension between the western obsession with self, which results from Protestantism and the European Enlightenment, and the Buddhist teaching of *anattā/anātman*, no-self. In the modern west emphasis is placed on the construction or reconstruction of self (what Giddens refers to as reflexivity of the self<sup>59</sup>), but in spite of this Buddhism, which teaches deconstruction of self, has growing appeal.

Second, Mellor argues that Buddhism and Liberal Protestantism have much in common. He maintains that when Buddhists criticize Christianity they are criticizing its Catholic elements: authoritarianism, institutionalism, dogmatism, triumphalism, ritualism and formalism, thus reinforcing the argument that it is the traditional elements of Christianity which FWBO Buddhists reject. Both the FWBO and the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha have made more or less subtle changes in a Protestant direction. Sumedho, who heads the Forest Sangha, while wanting to remain true to the tradition has emphasized different aspects of the teaching in order that they 'fit in' with western attitudes. An important example of this is his stress on self discovery of truth rather than doctrinal definition of it. Similarly the FWBO encourages the use of ritual only where it is found useful by the individual practitioner.

Third, Mellor defines modernism as a perspective,

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p73.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p74.

<sup>59</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, (Oxford: Blackwells, 1991), passim.

...which coerces historical phenomena into an evolutionary, singular narrative where the modern constantly supersedes and therefore makes irrelevant, the traditional and the orthodox.<sup>60</sup>

Here the two groups diverge more clearly: for the FWBO, the new and therefore, in western culture, the personalistic, is better than the old, while for the Forest Sangha, Buddhist truths do not need updating and superceding. These attitudes affect the practice of the two groups, in particular the model of authority. For the FWBO authority comes from personal charisma (in the western understanding of the term as individual, forceful personality), while for the Forest Sangha authority comes from the traditional teaching lineage currently represented by Sumedho.

Finally Mellor considers culture and Buddhism and concludes that the FWBO, in attempting to distil an essence from Buddhism and transfer only that essence is not entirely rejecting indigenous cultural values. This means, among other things, that in accordance with liberal Protestantism all ritual action is treated with suspicion. The Forest Sangha however is nervous of divorcing Buddhism from Thai culture and therefore attempts to transfer Thai culture, in its entirety, into Britain. For example, Sumedho regards the maintenance of traditional ritual and symbolic action as an important part of religious practice. Mellor concludes that both organizations represent what he calls the translation, and not simply the transfer, of Buddhism; new ways to explore British religiosity but not entirely new channels.

Mellor has drawn attention to a significant element of the new British understanding of Buddhism. His methodology and findings were criticised in a subsequent issue of *Religion*<sup>61</sup> in which the FWBO Liaison Officer, Dharmachari Kulananda, responded with an objection to some of Mellor's observations, specifically with regard to ethics and authority within the movement. Sangharakshita

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<sup>60</sup>Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism?', p80.

<sup>61</sup>Dharmachari Kulananda, 'Protestant Buddhism' *Religion* , Vol.22, 1992.

also saw fit to devote an entire book to refuting Mellor's claims.<sup>62</sup> FWBO objections do not make Mellor's observations incorrect, as his own reply to Kulananda argued.<sup>63</sup> His observations about the protestant nature of British Buddhism have been taken up and applied to other Buddhist movements<sup>64</sup> and are accepted to a large degree as axiomatic in the context of the present study. But there are issues of methodology which can usefully be addressed.

Mellor claimed in his doctoral thesis from which his 'Protestant Buddhism' paper was drawn,

Although I have made a number of visits to the religious communities considered in this thesis, and have interviewed some of their leading figures, it has not been my intention to produce an 'empathetic' study, in the phenomenological sense of the term...this study is located at a public rather than private level, though the issue of the 'privatisation' of religion is not insignificant.<sup>65</sup>

Two related responses arise from this rather surprising claim. The first is that empathy and fieldwork are not synonymous. A study based on fieldwork need not be empathetic and conversely a study based on 'public sources' may be. Mellor did not aim to produce a study which would be acceptable to the communities however this did not exclude the value of fieldwork. This leads to the second response which is that Mellor has acknowledged the primacy of private religion but has based his study on public sources, a very few interviews with the representatives of communities, visits to the communities and published sources such as Sangharakshita's writings and the journals of societies such as the English Sangha

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<sup>62</sup>Sangharakshita, *The FWBO and 'Protestant Buddhism'*, (Glasgow: Windhorse, 1992).

<sup>63</sup>Philip Mellor, 'The FWBO and Tradition: A Reply to Kulananda' *Religion*, Vol.22, 1992.

<sup>64</sup>Brian Bocking, 'Is Nothing Sacred? The Protestant Ethos and the Spirit of Buddhism', *Journal of Oriental Philosophy*, Vol.5, 1993.

<sup>65</sup>Mellor, 'The Cultural Translation of Buddhism', p11.

Trust. A wider concentration on private views may have influenced and in some cases enhanced Mellor's conclusions. In particular the conclusions he draws about authority may have been different if the authority accepted by practitioners as well as the authority offered by the traditions had been taken into account. Just one example of this is the importance of charismatic authority within Sumedho's Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha. An informant who has historical links with both the Thai Sangha and the FWBO was amazed when I discussed with her Mellor's conclusions. There is no doubt in her mind that Sumedho is a far more charismatic character than Sangarakshita and that Sumedho's charismatic authority is probably just as important, if not more so, for lay practitioners than the authority of the traditional teaching lineage.<sup>66</sup> Subsequent analysis of the Bath groups will add weight to this claim, which at least challenges Mellor's analysis of the divergent authority structures of the two groups.

A study which did take account of the private sphere is Bell's doctoral thesis<sup>67</sup> which took as its focus of study the same two groups, the FWBO and the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha. Bell's study is an ethnography of these two groups. It examines their shared historical background and in particular what she calls,

the diametrically opposed perspectives they adopt over the relevance of monasticism to the spread of Buddhism to the West.<sup>68</sup>

Again the same two groups are found to represent opposing ways in which to understand the development of Buddhism in Britain. In Bell's study it is their contrasting attitudes to monasticism which are found to be in opposition. Whereas the Forest Sangha prioritizes the Monastic Rule and regards the sangha as an essential component of the transplantation of Buddhism, the FWBO does not accept that monasticism is appropriate in any form. Bell has recognized that further

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<sup>66</sup>Interview with ex-member of The English Sangha, 20 October, 1994.

<sup>67</sup>'Buddhism in Britain - Development and Adaptation' Ph.D thesis submitted to the University of Durham, 1991.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p6.

work needs to be done on other Buddhist groups in order to gain more than a very partial picture.

There is agreement among these studies that Buddhism in Britain may be characterised in terms of a 'spectrum of adaptation'. This idea is also taken up in a later study by Stephen Batchelor<sup>69</sup> which is much broader in its scope than those mentioned above. Like Harvey, Batchelor regards 'the spectrum' as a matter of attitude to adaptation rather than as one of adaptation as such.

Adaptation is not so much an option as a matter of degree. Even the most conservative Tibetan lama or Sri Lankan *bikkhu* tends over time to modify what he says or does simply in order to be understood in the modern West...Wherever one stands, one cannot ignore the calls either of the past tradition or of the present situation. Faith in the past must combine with compassion for the present in order to ensure a continuity of value for the future. At one end of this 'spectrum of adaptation' are those who see any change as a weakening of the pure tradition that has to be tolerated simply to survive in a hostile, un-Buddhist environment. At the other end are those who wish boldly to jettison all past forms of tradition as weighted down with cultural burdens that hinder the inner dynamism of the Dharma from bursting forth in fresh and vital ways.<sup>70</sup>

Batchelor goes on to argue that the FWBO lies at the dynamic end of the spectrum while most groups lie in the middle.

Although the notion of a spectrum of adaptation or of attitudes to adaptation is a tidy one there is the potential for this kind of framework to oversimplify the adaptation process. Although these scholars all use a spectrum framework they do not agree about where groups should be placed on that spectrum. Buddhist groups are multifaceted entities which incorporate a number of interrelated features.

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<sup>69</sup>Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, (London: Aquarian, 1994).

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, p337-338.

Among the elements which may be adapted are the ritual and symbolic dimensions, the roles played by women, social and authoritative structures, financial structures, sectarian and ecumenical attitudes and so on. Some elements may be substantially adapted within a group while others remain broadly traditional, in a complex mix. Further some Buddhist schools lend themselves more readily to adaptation to western culture than others. SGI Buddhism, for example, can retain all its practices (although not all of its cultural customs) in the translation from Japan to Britain arguably because it was developed against a western influenced background. And yet Green has placed this school in Britain, near her 'pole of cognitive surrender'.

The notion of a spectrum has been utilized elsewhere and in a different context. Writing about the New Age<sup>71</sup> movement, Heelas has suggested that there is a spectrum of attitudes to the 'mainstream' adopted by New Age practitioners which runs from a rejection of mainstream culture, to the employment of conventional, modern values. Heelas places Nichiren Shoshu (SGI) somewhere between his two extremes on the evidence of journalist Rachel Storm who based her research on the "Nichiren Shoshu City Business Group"<sup>72</sup>. Based on evidence which due to its source is inevitably partial, Heelas characterises SGI as existing somewhere between finding "the capitalistic rat-race...a barrier to what really matters, the riches within"<sup>73</sup> and finding within the 'rat-race' commitments through which to obtain maximum benefit when tapping into what lies within. Though there may be some justification for regarding SGI in this way within such a framework, this is also an illustration of just how constricting a spectrum framework can be. There is much more than this to consider about SGI.

This thesis will go on to argue that the reason why adaptation is similar but not identical among Buddhist schools is that though the cultural influences are similar and lead to changes which are broadly Protestant in nature, each school calls on

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<sup>71</sup>Paul Heelas, 'The New Age: Values and Modern Times', eds. Lieteke Van Vucht Tijssen, Jan Berting, Frank Lechner, *The Search for Fundamentals*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p150.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p148.

different authority sources to authenticate its practices in its indigenous setting. These contrasting authorities are transferred along with the school of Buddhism and inevitably influence the changes which can be made and the ways in which they are legitimated.

## **WOMEN AND BUDDHISM**

One of the areas which is subject to adaptation in Britain and the western world as a whole, is the range of roles which women can play in Buddhist practice. Buddhist philosophy teaches that ultimately there is no male and no female since no-one and no-thing has inherent existence. However, since most people do not live at ultimate levels, from where most women and most men are standing gender is not transcended.

The Buddha and the major Buddhist figures who followed him operated within patriarchal societies which saw clear roles for women in all aspects of life and these were roles which normally excluded women from the kinds of religious practices which men engaged in. In spite of that and in spite of opposition from some male members of the community, women were allowed to be full-time members of the Buddhist sangha; the monastic order.<sup>74</sup> Women and men carried assumptions about their status into their religious life: women were in need of protection; they should not be permitted to teach men; they should continue to be subordinate to men regardless of their seniority within the order.<sup>75</sup> Women also represented a temptation for men living celibate lives and there is a short step only from regarding men as weak and in need of protection from temptation to regarding women as evil. Rinzai Zen master Eisai (1141-1215) for example declared in the 12th century that:

Nuns, women or evil people should on no account be permitted to stay

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<sup>74</sup>*Cullavagga* X.1.4. cited in I.B. Horner's, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p103.

<sup>75</sup>*Cullavagga* X.4.1. *ibid.*, p118.

overnight. All degeneration of the Law begins with women.<sup>76</sup>

From their position of socially defined power, men set up institutions to continue Buddhist teaching which often excluded, and always marginalised, women. As these structures were developed, with very few exceptions, it became less common for women to be allowed to be full-time members of Buddhist monastic communities. They did not enjoy the economic support which was needed to maintain the nuns' orders and gradually nearly all the orders died out. There is no extant order of nuns which has not had its authenticity and continuity questioned.<sup>77</sup>

The teachings of Buddhism have been mediated through the male dominated institutions. Women were not excluded from these institutions but they played subordinate roles and because they did not have the same educational opportunities they relied on male elites for their understanding of the Buddhist path. Figures came along periodically and suggested new ways to approach the truth which the Buddha had proclaimed. Often these ways were universal and egalitarian in orientation, for example Nichiren and the Pure Land patriarchs taught simple practices available to all which did not depend on monastic lifestyles, but the teaching remained embedded in social structures which put men in dominant positions and made women and their practice marginal. Even where universalist teachings were accepted as true, they failed to have an effect on institutional structures. In spite of the androcentric picture I have painted here there have been many examples of remarkable Buddhist women.<sup>78</sup>

It is also worth pointing out that scholarship on Buddhism has been, and to an extent remains, gendered. Describing a network of Zen monasteries within

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<sup>76</sup>Yanagida ed., *Kozen gokokuron*, in *Chūsei zenka no shiso*, pp.80-81, cited in Martin Collcutt, *Five Mountains: The Rinzai Zen Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan*, (London: Council on East Asian Studies. Harvard University, 1981), pp188-189.

<sup>77</sup>Rita Gross, 'Buddhism', in eds. J Holm & J Bowker, *Women in Religion*, (London: Pinter Publishers Ltd., 1994), p25.

<sup>78</sup>See accounts in T. Allione, *Women of Wisdom*, (London: Arkana, 1986).

medieval Japan, Martin Collcutt has written:

In considering the overall scale of the medieval Zen institution, Zen nunneries, of which there were many should be taken into account.<sup>79</sup>

Although Collcutt claims nunneries should be taken into account he does not say how or why and he therefore fails to do what he advises; for which we might read, the nunneries existed but they were marginal.

Western practitioners form a small percentage on the world-wide Buddhist scene but, as we might expect, some western Buddhists have loud voices. Western Buddhists do not all readily accept the patriarchal structures through which Buddhist teachings are conveyed. There is a fairly substantial literature which addresses the roles of Women in Buddhism<sup>80</sup> and the topic is regularly aired in scholarly discussion particularly in the USA and through international conference networks.<sup>81</sup>

The issue of gender is just a part of the challenge which western Buddhists face as they try to understand an eastern religion in a western cultural setting. Like all the adaptations which are being made to Buddhist practice any new roles for women within Buddhism have to be legitimated or authenticated through structures which already operate. It would be difficult for women to go ahead and do what they want to do in disregard of male dominated structures.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Collcutt, *Five Mountains*, p225.

<sup>80</sup>See, for example, Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, (New York: SUNY, 1993), Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, (London: University of California Press, 1985) Kumiko Uchino, 'The Status Elevation Process of Sōtō Sect Nuns In Modern Japan' *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol.4:1-2 1983.

<sup>81</sup>Two examples of these are: the series, 'International Conference on Buddhist Women', the fourth of which was held in Leh, Ladakh in August 1995 and 'Buddhism After Patriarchy', a conference held at the University of Toronto, in April 1995.

<sup>82</sup>This is a strategy which has been advocated by Ann Bancroft, 'Women in Buddhism' in ed. Ursula King, *Women in the World's Religions*, (New York: Paragon House, 1987), but which is far more problematic to achieve than she suggests.

I will now consider the role of authority within religions in general and within Buddhism in particular.

## RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

Authority is a constant and pervasive phenomenon in the history of religions.<sup>83</sup> Just as there can be no culture without authority there can also be no organized religion without authority. One role of organized religion is to interpret religious truth and the appropriate way in which to move towards an understanding of that truth. In order to do this there must be a recognition that while truth, knowledge or salvation may be there to be accessed, it is made available through certain recognized, and approved practices. Authority may be vested in one or more elements of a religious movement: the religious community and its leaders or founders; the sacred writings or oral teachings recognized by that community which explain its doctrines and practices; the tradition or lineage through which the texts or oral instructions have been handed down; and the personal experience of believers and practitioners.

Individuals may choose whether to accept religious propositions as true. In doing so they also decide whether to accept or reject the vehicle for those truths. Power may be exerted by force and therefore have authority. On the other hand authority which is not recognized, either voluntarily or because of the exercise of force has no power. In other words, unless sanctions are levied, authority has to be recognized as well as claimed. For this reason religious truths have to be presented in a way which is accessible. Immediately after his enlightenment the Buddha had the authority to speak but until he decided to teach, *and his disciples decided to listen*, he had not exercised that authority.

Chatterjee has argued that authority is deferred to for a multitude of reasons and lists as examples:

...the possession of expertise, fear of punitive consequences if the authority is

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<sup>83</sup>Manabu Waida, 'Authority', in Mircea Eliade ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1987), Vol.2 p1.

not deferred to, coercion, absence of an alternative habit, being misled by another person.<sup>84</sup>

Chatterjee is sceptical of two claims made by D.E. Trueblood about religious authority.<sup>85</sup> These are, first, that one reason to rely on a religious authority is in order to gain specialist information and second, that people choose their faith, or reliance on religious authority, "after a process of deliberation".<sup>86</sup> Chatterjee disagrees with Trueblood on the first point because, she claims, it reduces religion to a skill which can be taught and subsequently utilized. Trueblood's point may be applied to Buddhist practices in the west however, since regardless of the particular nature of practices they are normally claimed by practitioners to be effective ways by which to move towards understanding. Chatterjee's argument with Trueblood's second point is that she does not accept that people make deliberate choices about their religious faith. While it may be correct that this kind of deliberate process is unlikely to occur where a religious authority represents a cultural norm, Trueblood's claims may be applied to 'converts' to an incoming religion such as Buddhism where potential converts must undertake a deliberation process in order to accept new ideas and practices. This is so even if their reasons for accepting the authority offered may not be identical to the reasons given for making the practices available. We shall see, as this study progresses, that there are often good social as well as 'spiritual' reasons to join a Buddhist group.

One of the circumstances in which religious authority is most consciously invoked is when changes need to be made. Such changes are not always so major as the transplantation of a religion into a new culture. A recent report on authority in the Church of England calls for the Church to "think through and articulate"<sup>87</sup> its position on a number of challenges to the church, of which the ordination of

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<sup>84</sup>Margaret Chatterjee, *Do we need authority in religious life?* (Leeds: The British Association for the Study of Religions), 1995, p2.

<sup>85</sup>D.E. Trueblood, *The Logic of Belief*, (New York: Harper, 1942), pp66-67.

<sup>86</sup>Chatterjee, *Do we need authority?*, p2.

<sup>87</sup>Robert Jeffrey, *By What Authority?*, (London: Mowbray, 1987).

women is a prime example. In the foreword to the volume, Michael O'Connor writes that behind the traumas which the Church faces,

...there lies a more fundamental disagreement about the nature of the different authorities of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Conscience, and what weight should be given to each of these when they appear to conflict.<sup>88</sup>

This is analogous to the situation in which Buddhism finds itself in its attempt to adapt to the western context. All change must be legitimated through recourse to contrasting authorities. In turn, contrasting authorities can give rise, of themselves, to disagreement and sectarian attitudes.

#### **AUTHORITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.**

Zygmunt Bauman suggests that one feature of postmodernity is that individuals construct a self-identity through a constant process of disassembly and assembly. Because all authorities are subject to questioning, this process cannot be measured against a final authority but instead makes use of different authorities or points of reference which may be taken up or dropped and are authoritative only in so far as the agent chooses that they should be so. As part of this process agents make use of other autonomous agents and adopt what he calls "*symbolic tokens of belonging*"<sup>89</sup>. The choice of such symbols is limited by their visibility and accessibility. It is not enough that symbols are there to be chosen they must also be visible and accessible to the individual.

In less abstract terms this means that in order for Buddhism (or any other authority religious or otherwise) to become authoritative in the construction of a person's identity it must be accessible. It must be physically accessible - people must be able to get to, or get at, the carriers of Buddhism, whether through books, or teachers, or practising Buddhists; it must also be accessible in the sense that it must be

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<sup>88</sup>O'Connor, in Jeffrey, *ibid.*, p.xi.

<sup>89</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p195.

represented in a form that they can understand, in their own language and through accommodation with cultural conventions with which they are familiar. Even though Buddhism may teach the truth it must be communicated to be effective.

### AUTHORITY IN BUDDHISM

According to the tradition, preserved for example in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, and broadly accepted throughout the Buddhist world, when the Buddha died in around 400BCE he declined to appoint a successor but left the teachings in the care of the Sangha with the instruction that they should take the Dhamma, the teachings and the *vinaya*, the monastic code as their guide.<sup>90</sup> Soon after the Buddha's death disputes began, about the content of the teaching and the monastic code, the meaning of the teaching and the status of the Buddha and his enlightened followers. The early Buddhist councils failed to resolve factional splits between monks (and presumably nuns) who could not agree about what the Buddha had said and about what he meant by those things they agreed he did say. The content of the *vinaya* was particularly prone to debate among monastics, in particular the ways in which monks could determine which of the rules were minor in nature and could therefore legitimately be adapted.<sup>91</sup>

Problems of interpretation have not lessened over the centuries. Although Buddhist communities have an interest in tracing a common core uniting the various schools these schools have diverged widely from each other in terms of their practices and the philosophical subtleties of their teaching.<sup>92</sup> Although scholars can trace the development of such differences, with the sources available at this time it is not

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<sup>90</sup>*Dīgha Nikāya* in *Dialogues of the Buddha Vol II*, trs. T W & C A F Rhys Davids, (London: Pali Text Society, 1959), p154.

<sup>91</sup>Bareau records that early disputes, "...remained at the level of more or less lively discussion and degenerated into more serious conflicts only when involving questions of economics or politics." ('Hīnayāna Buddhism', in eds. J Kitagawa and M Cummings, *Buddhism and Asian History*, (London, Collier Macmillan, 1989), p.195). This is a reminder of just how important economics and politics are and always have been within religious groups even though they may be dedicated to soteriological purposes.

<sup>92</sup>Bareau, *ibid.*

possible to be sure about what the Buddha said nor what he meant by what he said. Buddhist communities do not and indeed cannot depend on academic sources for their knowledge of Buddhism but none-the-less practitioners are concerned that the authority sources they acknowledge are authentic. They are concerned to avoid misinterpretation and misapplication of the teaching.

According to texts in the Pāli canon the Buddha had a lot to say about where authority does not lie and about how to discern the true teacher from the false. For example he applauded the distrust of visiting teachers expressed by the Kālāma people and claimed that they should not accept anything:

...on the grounds of revelation, tradition or report, or because it is a product of mere reasoning, or because it is true from a standpoint, or because of a superficial assessment of the facts, or because it conforms with one's preconceived notions, or because it is authoritative, or because of the prestige of your teacher.<sup>93</sup>

It is difficult to imagine an epistemology which is not excluded by the list in this passage. The sutta goes on to exhort followers to test the teaching through experience and by reference to the opinion of wise people. Discussion on BUDDHIST, the e-mail discussion list for Buddhist practitioners, during October 1996 indicated that though the advice to test the teaching is often voiced, there is no consensus about what this exhortation means in practical terms. Explanations range from 'the only thing you can really trust is personal meditative experience' to 'The Buddha meant his followers to accede to the authority of the Sangha'. Buddhist scholar and practitioner Richard Hayes commented on the discussion as follows,

The Kālāma Sutta is, I would suggest, one of those many texts that at first glance appears very appealing to westerners (or else why would it be quoted so frequently?) but whose appeal vanishes like smoke on a dark night if one

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<sup>93</sup> *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I.189, translated by Harvey in, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, p30.

gives it even a fraction of a second's serious thought.<sup>94</sup>

I shall return to the Kālāmas in Part III.

In spite of the importance of authority within Buddhism and the implications for the Buddhist world of a variety of authority sources very little seems to have been published on the subject. In a paper which explores hermeneutics in Pure Land Buddhism, Andrews<sup>95</sup> suggests that there are five hermeneutical principles at work in Hōnen's advocacy of the *nembutsu*, the invocation to Amida Buddha. These are:

- 1) A doctrinal analysis based upon a Buddhist view of history; 2) recourse to imperfect but helpful human reason; 3) the use of scriptural authority; 4) reliance upon the authority of an enlightened teacher; and 5) the weight of personal religious experience.<sup>96</sup>

Andrews concludes that although Hōnen invoked each of these five principles he based his interpretation of scripture ultimately on his teacher and his own experience of certainty that what the teacher taught was correct. Although Andrews does not make the point, the source of authority underlying both the teacher and experience is the scripture which Hōnen interpreted through these means. This paper is a reminder of the complex claims to authority which compete in interpretations of right practice within traditional Buddhism.

David Need, a contemporary Buddhist practitioner and scholar has expressed his personal difficulties with the concept of authority within Buddhist practice in a paper which acknowledges the desirability of an institution with living teachers who can articulate the truth in appropriate ways, in order to avoid "whimsical or

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<sup>94</sup>BUDDHIST e-mail discussion list, 22 October 1996.

<sup>95</sup>Allan Andrews, 'Pure Land Buddhist Hermeneutics: Hōnen's Interpretation of *Nembutsu*', *Journal of the Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol.10, no.2, 1987.

<sup>96</sup>ibid., p20.

idiosyncratic" interpretations.<sup>97</sup> He writes,

...authority guiding interpretation is not a casual feature of a tradition; rather it is integral to the aims of the tradition and, in those traditions articulating a soteriology, serves as a guidepost to liberation or salvation.<sup>98</sup>

Need acknowledges the necessity of authorized teachers but also draws attention to the difficulty of reconciling the traditional injunction for practitioners to confirm for themselves that the teachings are true with the necessity of relying on the teacher to transmit appropriate practices. He is unable to resolve this difficulty which is particularly challenging for newly transplanted Buddhist communities in the west used to the idea that individuals have both the right and the potential to reach an independent understanding of the truth.

This tension between faith in the teacher and the individual capacity to come independently to knowledge is not confined to the practice of Buddhism in the west but has also exercised contemporary western philosophers. Gadamer has argued that,

...the recognition of authority is always connected with the idea that what authority states is not irrational and arbitrary, but can be seen, in principle, to be true. This is the essence of the authority claimed by the teacher, the superior, the expert. The prejudices that they implant are legitimised by the person himself. Their validity demands that one should be biased in favour of the person who presents them.<sup>99</sup>

Although written from within the western philosophical tradition with no reference to Buddhism, Gadamer's words would not look out of place within a modernist

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<sup>97</sup>David Need, 'In the Absence of the Buddha' unpublished paper, 1993.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), p249.

explanation of Buddhist epistemology.<sup>100</sup> This acts as an argument in favour of the view, put forward by Mellor,<sup>101</sup> that part of the attraction of Buddhism for westerners is that it resonates with, or in Mellor's terms, is continuous with, influential, mainstream, twentieth century, western views of religious truth.

Countries where Buddhism is indigenous have been open to changes in their understanding about legitimate authority when they have come into contact with western ways of thinking. Gombrich has written in detail about the ways in which Theravāda Buddhism has changed within Sri Lanka<sup>102</sup>. Through complex causal relationships the sangha no longer acts as a final authority in matters of Buddhist practice.

If the traditional authority structure of the pantheon has broken down, this is because society too has no clearly perceived authority structure, and an important aspect of that human anomie is the displacement of the *Sangha* from the sole and undisputed position of authority in spiritual matters, so far as many Sinhalese are concerned.<sup>103</sup>

The Buddhism which is being transplanted to the west has already undergone significant change and, at least in the early days of British Buddhism, forms of Buddhism which were most likely to be accepted by a population which valued rationalism and humanistic ideals were most successful.<sup>104</sup> An integral part of that initial success was an attitude to authority which allowed for the selective process

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<sup>100</sup>See for example Jayatilleke's *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, which expresses similar sentiments.

<sup>101</sup>Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism'.

<sup>102</sup>Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988).

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p206.

<sup>104</sup>I have in mind here the early days of the Buddhist Society which took a rational academic approach to Buddhism. An exception to this would be some Theosophists, whose views of certain Buddhist teachings took them well beyond the rational. A P Sinnett discusses some of these interpretations in, *Esoteric Buddhism*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885).

identified by Zygmunt Bauman<sup>105</sup> to continue.

As an increasing number of forms of Buddhism become popular the tension between faith in a teacher and personal experience becomes of more immediate concern. One of the difficulties which this brings is a distrust of faith claims among many western practitioners and a consequent distrust of groups which prioritize the cultivation of faith.

## **Faith**

Rahula writes,

Almost all religions are built on faith - rather 'blind faith' it would seem. But in Buddhism emphasis is laid on 'seeing', knowing, understanding and not on faith, or belief.<sup>106</sup>

These two sentences characterise, in very general terms, British Buddhists' attitude to faith within their practice. Buddhism is regarded as superior to other religions because it allows and encourages personal investigation of the truth, while other religions, many Buddhists allege, favour 'blind' faith. A feature of the interpretation of Buddhist *saddhā*<sup>107</sup> in the western and modernist contexts is to distance it from faith as understood within the Christian traditions. Many British text books on Buddhism do this. Andrew Skilton's *Concise History of Buddhism* is a good example. He writes,

...'faith', in the sense of a passive belief of received-or revealed-dogma, is alien to the Buddhist outlook,...when we come upon references to 'faith' in a Buddhist context, as we frequently do, it must carry some meaning other

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<sup>105</sup>Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*.

<sup>106</sup>Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd., 1978) p8.

<sup>107</sup>*Saddhā* is the Pāli term most often translated as faith.

than that familiar to those with a theistic background.<sup>108</sup>

One of the ways by which an authority becomes authoritative is for practitioners to have faith in its authenticity. Harvey expresses it in this way.

While the Buddha was critical of blind faith, he did not deny a role for soundly based faith or 'trustful confidence' (*saddhā*); for to test out his teachings, a person had to have at least some initial trust in them. The early texts envisage a process of listening, which arouses *saddhā*, leading to practice, and thus to partial confirmation of the teachings, and thus to deeper *saddhā* and deeper practice until the heart of the teachings is directly experienced. A person then becomes an *Arahat*, one who has replaced faith with knowledge.<sup>109</sup>

As Harvey points out faith does not lessen as a Buddhist practitioner progresses along the path instead it becomes deeper. It is only at the point of enlightenment that faith is superseded altogether.

McKeon<sup>110</sup> has made a study of the scriptural foundations of *saddhā*, in the Pāli suttas.<sup>111</sup> He shows that there is plenty of evidence that faith was never presented as an initial stimulus to give Buddhism a try but goes much further than that. He argues that it is central to Buddhist life, and that it is highly meritorious. It leads to joy and love and its opposites are not only doubt but also delusion. In other words faith is skilful. Although faith for the Buddhist should be critical, questioning and rational it is inextricably linked to wisdom so that as knowledge and wisdom increase, faith grows. It does not diminish.

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<sup>108</sup>Andrew Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, (Birmingham: Windhorse publications, 1994), p.26.

<sup>109</sup>Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, p.31.

<sup>110</sup>Joseph McKeon, 'Faith Content of Theravāda: The National Religion of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), *The Journal of Dharma*, Vol.14, No.1, 1989, pp37-47.

<sup>111</sup>Also see Jan Ergardt's *Faith and Knowledge in Early Buddhism*, (Leiden: E J Brill, 1977).

In one sense, with the achievement of knowledge, one has confirmed by personal experience what was initially accepted on faith and thus faith can be said to be no more. But, from another point of view, the fullness of faith only comes in the enlightenment experience.<sup>112</sup>

Further although the hearer must have faith in the Buddha, the Buddha may suffuse the hearer with faith<sup>113</sup> so that faith is not just a virtue which can be cultivated but also a gift which may be bestowed.

Like other teaching in the Pāli canon the teaching relating to faith has to be interpreted. Masefield has argued,<sup>114</sup> also from Pāli sources, that Buddhism began as a religion of revelation and that the sound of the Buddha's word was instrumental in the salvific process. In spite of the mistrust which many Buddhists have of the concept of faith in Buddhism, there is probably as much to say about faith in Buddhism as there is about faith in Christianity since it raises just as many issues. Faith is pertinent to this study because of the relationship between faith and authority and I shall return to the problem of faith in authorities in the context of the subject groups as the study progresses.

Before turning to the fieldwork from which the theory arises I shall recap the theory which is being proposed. This can be summarised as follows:

1. Buddhism is transferring to Britain in a variety of contrasting forms which claim the authority of the traditions upon which they are based.
2. British people who wish to practise Buddhism reach compromise positions on the traditional authority structures which are offered, including the authority of experience.
3. The adaptational process is legitimated by the authority sources claimed by those

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<sup>112</sup>McKeon, 'Faith Content of Theravāda', p.46.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p39.

<sup>114</sup>Peter Masefield, *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism*, (Colombo: The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, and London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986).

traditions.

4. Attitudes to authority sources can lead to sectarian disagreements.

## PART II: THE CASE STUDY

The five chapters in Part II form the case study upon which analysis in Part III is based. The five chapters characterise each of the six Buddhist groups which meet in Bath. The first two groups in the case study, the Thai Theravāda Meditation Group and the Bath Buddhist Group (BBG<sup>1</sup>), have separate identities but in terms of membership the former is a sub-group of the latter and although BBG presents itself as an ecumenical group encompassing all schools of Buddhism, for the majority of attenders Theravāda Buddhism is regarded as normative. For this reason the two groups are considered together in one chapter.

The structure of the descriptions is based on the dimensions of religion identified by Ninian Smart. Smart has argued that this method "is useful for giving a rounded and realistic picture of a religion".<sup>2</sup> The specific dimensions used here are, organization which includes a brief history of each group, symbols, doctrines, practices, experiences, and ethics. In order to focus on the major arguments of this thesis, sections on gender, adaptation and authority are also included for each of the groups. Although none of the groups exists in isolation from teachers and institutions located elsewhere, only two, SGI and NKT, are very closely associated in both name and praxis with large, structured parent organizations. The descriptions of these two groups are correspondingly longer because the local groups need to be understood in relationship with those organizations.

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<sup>1</sup>Although this group is not known to members by the abbreviation BBG I have used it here in order to avoid confusion between *The Bath Buddhist Group* and other 'Bath Buddhist groups.'

<sup>2</sup>Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 2nd. edition, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1995), p6.

## Chapter 2: The Thai Forest Theravāda Meditation Group and The Bath Buddhist Group

### THE THAI FOREST THERAVĀDA MEDITATION GROUP

#### Organization

The Thai Theravāda Meditation group is the smallest of the Buddhist groups in Bath and often attracts only two or three participants at weekly meetings. The group meets in the home of a retired primary school teacher who is a long term Buddhist practitioner and serves on the committee of BBG. The group follows the Theravāda tradition of the Thai Forest Sangha. This sangha is led in Britain by Ajahn Sumedho who was taught in Thailand by Ajahn Chah (1918-1992).

Ajahn Chah's tradition is unusual within Thai Buddhism. Ajahn Chah spent a short time as a pupil of Ajahn Mun within the Mahānikāi sect and was regarded as an orthodox or 'purist' teacher strictly adhering to the Pali *vinaya* and opposed to the kinds of developments within Theravāda Buddhism which accompany the stability of state support.<sup>1</sup> Tambiah describes him in this way:

He has expressed anti-establishment views against the mainstream sangha: that Buddha images and sacralized water have no inherent power; that ghosts and deities have existence only in our minds; that monasteries should not be the venues of festivals, fairs, games, and idle gossip; and that meditation and direct contemplative experience are more important than the study of books.<sup>2</sup>

Ajahn Chah's presentation of Theravāda Buddhism gives it an appeal for many western practitioners who prefer forms of Buddhism which play down 'magical' aspects and favour meditative experience and psychological interpretation of doctrine. In an account of the Thai Theravāda sangha in Britain Goswell has

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p138.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

described the western interpretation of Ajahn Chah's sangha as,

...sophisticated Buddhism akin to the Christianity of some of our most eminent Western theologians and bishops.<sup>3</sup>

Another major reason why Ajahn Chah's form of Buddhism has been taken up by westerners is that he welcomed western practitioners. In 1975 he set up a monastery explicitly for westerners at Wat Pah Nanachat, in North-East Thailand.<sup>4</sup> He claimed that there is basically no difference between Asians and westerners.

Outer customs and language may appear different, but the human mind has natural characteristics that are the same for all people. Greed and hatred are the same in an Eastern mind or a Western mind. Suffering and the cessation of suffering are the same for all people.<sup>5</sup>

Ajahn Chah came to Britain in 1977 to visit the English Sangha Trust's premises in Hampstead, North London. Six years before, in December 1971, Kapilavaddho, the inspiration behind the House of Inner Tranquillity, had died leaving the Trust without a monastic representative. Ajahn Chah brought with him the American born monk now known as Ajahn Sumedho.<sup>6</sup> At that time Sumedho was the Abbot at Ajahn Chah's international monastery, Wat Pah Nanachat. Sumedho had previously served with the United States army in the Korean war and had practised meditation in South-East Asia since the mid nineteen sixties.<sup>7</sup> He was, and still is, a charismatic figure. He also understands at first hand the nature of traditional Theravāda practice as well as the nature of western culture and he was able to

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<sup>3</sup>Marilyn Goswell, 'Motivational Factors in the Life of a Religious Community and Related Changes in the Experience of Self', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bath, 1988, p285.

<sup>4</sup>Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook* p311.

<sup>5</sup>Ajahn Chah, quoted in Jack Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*, (Santa Cruz: Unity Press, 1977), p37.

<sup>6</sup>Formerly Robert Jackman, b.1934.

<sup>7</sup>Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook* p317.

establish a monastic sangha in Britain where others had tried and failed.<sup>8</sup> There are many accounts of the early years of the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha in Britain which will not be repeated here.<sup>9</sup> The sangha is administered by the English Sangha Trust. It has four monasteries in Britain; at Chithurst in Sussex, Honiton in Devon, Harnham in Northumberland and Amaravati at Great Gaddesdon in Hertfordshire. The abbot of each of the monasteries is a senior member of the sangha and all four come under the overall guidance of Ajahn Sumedho. There are other monasteries in this tradition outside Thailand, for example Bodhinyana Monastery near Perth, Western Australia.<sup>10</sup> The monasteries are closely interconnected and sangha members move between them. When the sangha was established in Britain neither Ajahn Chah nor Ajahn Sumedho was willing to sacrifice monastic form and discipline for expedience. The monks therefore aim to adhere closely to the *vinaya* rule with no unnecessary adaptation. Unlike the House of Inner Tranquillity whose teachers share the same English Sangha roots (see chapter 3), this sangha remains closely connected with the sangha in Thailand.

The link between the Bath Theravāda Meditation Group and the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha exists in so far as individuals choose to attend the monasteries and listen at local meetings to taped teachings by members of the sangha. At weekly meditation group meetings participants also chant in Pāli and English and meditate together. Bath is advertised in the Forest Sangha's Newsletters as a place where there is a local group of Buddhists visited regularly by monks and nuns. In practice monks based at the Devon Vihara visit the much larger BBG ecumenical group where some members follow the Thai Theravāda Tradition but do not attend the separate meditation group. Visiting monks speak at the Monday evening BBG

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<sup>8</sup>One example being Kapilavaddho (see Chapter 3), and another, Sangharakshita of the Western Buddhist Order.

<sup>9</sup>See for example: Mellor, 'The Cultural Translation of Buddhism', Bell, 'Buddhism in Britain', Goswell, 'Motivational Factors', Stephen Batchelor, 'The Forest Monks of Sussex', in *World Faiths Encounter*, No. 1 March 1992 and Batchelor, *Awakening of the West* 1994.

<sup>10</sup>See Enid Adam, *Buddhism in Western Australia*, (published by the author, 1995), and Enid Adam and Philip Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia*, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996).

meetings, stay overnight with a member of that group and receive the generosity (*dāna*) of members in the form of a meal the next morning.

Theravāda lay practitioners are traditionally assigned the roles of merit making for future rebirths and providing economic support for the monastic sangha. The notion of merit making is almost entirely foreign to Bath practitioners and the economic support of the sangha is not one which most British lay followers easily take on. A characteristic feature of 'Protestant Buddhism' as described in Sri Lanka by Gombrich<sup>11</sup> and applied to England by Mellor<sup>12</sup> is the practice of meditation by the laity. There is evidence that British supporters of the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha in Britain prioritize personal meditation practice over the traditional *dāna* role. A practitioner who attended a month long meditation retreat at Amaravati told me that the thirty participants who attended the retreat made a financial offering of, in total, about five hundred pounds for which they had received a month's full board and lodging as well as teaching.<sup>13</sup>

## THE BATH BUDDHIST GROUP

### Organization

The Bath Buddhist Group (BBG) was founded in 1977 by John and Heather Harvey, a young professional couple who were students of Rinzai Zen teacher Ven. Myokyo-Ni (Irmgard Schloegl). The Harveys had been living in London and attending classes at the Buddhist Centre in Ecclestone Square and at Myokyo-ni's Zen centre in St. John's Wood. They were encouraged by Christmas Humphreys, the founder and president of the Buddhist Society, to establish a group in Bath when they moved there for professional reasons. The Harveys advertised in the local press for people with similar interests and were able to start a small meditation group in their own home.

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<sup>11</sup>Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, pp.172-196.

<sup>12</sup>Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism', *passim*.

<sup>13</sup>BBG 1, interview 11 January 1994.

Zen teacher Myokyo-ni is Austrian by birth but has lived in Britain for many years. She was a member of Christmas Humphrey's Zen class at the Buddhist Society.<sup>14</sup> When Christmas Humphreys died in 1983 he left her his house in St John's Wood, London. Myokyo-Ni continues to teach at the house which has been renamed *Shoboan* 'Hermitage of the True Dharma'<sup>15</sup> and at the Buddhist Society. She was ordained in 1984 at Amaravati, one of the monasteries in Sumedho's Thai Theravāda Sangha, by Soko Morinaga Roshi, a Rinzai Master from Daishu-in in Kyoto.<sup>16</sup> In a forthcoming publication Rawlinson describes her in the following terms:

An Austrian woman being ordained by a Japanese in England at a Theravadin monastery run by an American - neatly captures the best of Western Zen: international, transcultural and untrammelled by the past while still acknowledging it.<sup>17</sup>

In August 1978 John Harvey engaged in extensive correspondence with other Buddhist groups in Britain in search of general advice and possible teachers. In the early days the group had a Zen focus because of the formal connection between founding members and Myokyo-Ni, but as a result of this correspondence the ecumenical ethos which reflects the group's Buddhist Society origins became formalized. In its nearly twenty year history the group has continued with these principles and still invites speakers from a number of traditions. Its avowed ecumenical approach, though in practice limited, as we shall see, makes this group different from the others in this case study.

Fieldwork on the group took place over nearly five years from September 1991 to

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<sup>14</sup>Myokyo-ni went to Japan in 1962 at the same time as Peggy Kennett the founder of Throssel Hole Priory in Northumberland.

<sup>15</sup>Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook* p237.

<sup>16</sup>Batchelor, *Awakening of the West* p221.

<sup>17</sup>Andrew Rawlinson, unpublished draft manuscript of *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1997 forthcoming).

July 1996. The reason for this extended period is that the group was initially researched for my undergraduate dissertation completed in 1992. In the early stages of research all interviews were informal and unrecorded. The result of this is that the group is known to me very well although I have fewer recorded interviews to draw upon. One advantage of the extended period of research is that I have been able to observe changes over a relatively long period, particularly changes in members' attitudes to the group's ecumenical ethos. The inauguration of Bath's two Tibetan groups during this period has meant that those interested in Tibetan Buddhism have mostly left BBG.

Two current BBG members are students of Myokyo-Ni and visit her in London on a monthly basis. Another occasionally attends Zen retreats in Oxford. Others site their practice within the Theravāda tradition and attend the Thai Forest Theravāda monasteries with more or less regularity. The majority of members of this group do not have a strong affiliation to a particular tradition of Buddhism although they may regularly practise meditation and accept teaching from the different teachers who visit. It is my impression that the majority of BBG attenders regard Thai Theravāda Buddhism as normative although few of the approximately forty attenders visit the monasteries connected with the Theravāda sangha.

The group meets weekly in a hall belonging to the Sea Scouts in Bath. There is a long term problem with financing activities and for this reason the group has moved on several occasions in search of cheaper rent. Activities are run by a committee of members who arrange programmes for three terms corresponding to the structure of the school year. A typical termly programme includes discussions led by members of the group and a number of visiting speakers as well as evenings set aside for meditation using the form of the Theravāda or Zen traditions. Regular speakers include monks from the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha, a lay teacher within the Thai Forest tradition who lives in nearby Bristol, and a lay practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. In addition the group also welcomes other teachers who practise within Tibetan, Theravāda or Zen schools when they are available. Attitudes to these occasional teachers are a useful indicator of the nature of this group and are discussed below. Meetings usually attract about twenty participants although the

Thai Theravāda monks may draw larger audiences.

The stated purpose of this group is twofold: firstly, it provides a place where interested newcomers can hear about several different kinds of Buddhism and secondly, it serves as a meeting place for practitioners who prefer not to belong to any school and for those who have an allegiance to a school or teacher but enjoy the opportunity which the group provides to meet with others. The emphasis in the group is always on the practical application of the teachings and there is no group study of a textual nature and little evidence that members engage in individual study. One mother of young children cited lack of time as the reason why this is the case for her but added.

If I had more spare time I'd meditate more.<sup>18</sup>

Intellectual understanding or exploration of Buddhism has a lower profile within this group than in any other within the case study. This is reflected in attitudes which some members have to doctrinal elements. One member favours the Theravāda teachings of Sumedho's sangha because she says they do not force her to 'bend' her mind.

...bending my mind is really when someone tells me something as fact that I don't believe is a fact. I have a very scientific background. If people tell me something is a fact then I bend my mind by trying to understand it as a metaphor.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the fact that BBG presents itself as an ecumenical group many members to whom I have spoken find some elements of the traditions taught at BBG unhelpful or even 'dangerous'. The traditions most likely to receive criticism are Tibetan while teachers in Theravāda schools seem to be universally approved.

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<sup>18</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1995.

<sup>19</sup>BBG 6, interview 13 September 1995.

BBG's regular Tibetan teacher is Andi Wistreich who runs a group practising Tibetan Buddhism in Taunton but travels to Bath to teach at least once a term. Although he has received teachings in the Gelugpa tradition he describes his own group as non-sectarian.<sup>20</sup> Wistreich is very popular and well-respected within BBG as an individual practitioner, however Tibetan practice in general is not. A member of the BBG committee criticised Tibetan practices in a review of Sogyal Rinpoche's best selling book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*<sup>21</sup>. He claimed that,

It is increasingly disturbing that Western Buddhism is, more often than not, interpreted through Tibetan Buddhism. This is to the exclusion of other, less aggressively marketed approaches which, as well as being available, are closer to the original teachings of the Buddha than the esoteric and occultist Tibetan teachings.... I suppose that begs this question: Is Tibetan Buddhism actually Buddhism at all, or simply derived from Buddhism? It needs to be addressed with some urgency by Buddhists in the West. Buddhism is simply *applying* the Buddha's teachings. Surely there is no need to borrow the exotic novelty of white magic from Tibetan culture, no matter how *attractive* it might seem.<sup>22</sup>

Tibetan teachings are also unacceptable to a female member; a retired psychologist who first came across Buddhism in a Tibetan form, in this case through the teaching of Chögyam Trungpa<sup>23</sup> at Johnstone House in Scotland.<sup>24</sup> When Trungpa left

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<sup>20</sup>*Buddhist Society Directory*, sixth edition, (London: Buddhist Society Publications, 1994), p42.

<sup>21</sup>Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, (London: Rider, 1992).

<sup>22</sup>Brian Tasker in, *Bath Buddhist Group, Newsletter*, Spring 1994.

<sup>23</sup>Karma Ngawang Chökyi Gyatso Künga Zangpo (1939-1987). Trungpa was one of the first Tibetan born lamas to have an impact in the West. He came to Britain in 1963 and studied at Cambridge University later establishing a centre in Scotland, with Akong Rinpoche, which later became known as Samye Ling. (Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook* p333).

<sup>24</sup>Johnstone House (which later became Samye Ling) was first opened as a Buddhist Centre by Ananda Bodhi (Canadian born, Leslie Dawson who is now

England for America traditional Tibetan practices were introduced at the centre on the instruction of Karmapa.

They abolished all the silent meditation and brought in a lot of instruments and began to say if you didn't take the refuges you would be reincarnated as ants, which is not my scene, so I left.<sup>25</sup>

At this point this member could no longer associate with Tibetan Buddhism and found a group which taught the kind of Buddhism and practised the kind of meditation she preferred. She does not attend BBG when Tibetan teachings are given.

Although group members lay stress on the low status of intellectual knowledge or understanding and the correspondingly high status of finding out for one's self, practices which are designed to assist with this process - or, more significantly, the means through which such practices are made available - are difficult for many to accept. Although BBG members present the group as ecumenical and Buddhist traditions as essentially the same, they prefer approaches which do not emphasize teachings beyond discussion of the daily life application of the Four Noble Truths or the Three Marks of Existence.

Some members express a desire to avoid sectarian attitudes. For those who have allegiance to a particular school this desire operates in tension with that allegiance. One Zen practitioner said,

It's unfortunately (sic.) how it is sometimes, that people think that what they're doing is better than what someone else is doing. There are comparisons, there's divisions. And the Bath group doesn't bring the

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known as Star One), who was influential within the English Sangha Trust in the 1960s as a Theravāda monk. He ended his association with the trust in 1963 amid accusations that he had 'gone wild' (see chapter III of Mellor, 'The Cultural Translation of Buddhism') and was subsequently recognized as a Tibetan tulku by the 16th Karmapa in the mid seventies (see Rawlinson, unpublished manuscript).

<sup>25</sup>BBG 6, interview, 13 September 1995.

traditions together but it brings practising people together so that each can appreciate the other's tradition and there's much more a sense of all walking the same path than different paths. For quite a while I fell into that same trap and I didn't realise it until some time afterwards. Because I was doing Zen it seemed like it was the best way.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time members commonly cite the idea that all religions are paths up the same mountainside. One member had a refreshing alternative on this theme describing all religions as analogous to doorways into the same space.

For me the different entrances are hedged about with different thorns or brambles. Some I wouldn't attempt to go through at all.<sup>27</sup>

#### Relationships with other groups

There is a degree of interaction between this group and others in Bath. For example the Karma Kagyu group contacted BBG before setting up there. There are also some BBG members who have maintained regular attendance at both BBG and one of the two Tibetan groups for short periods and, as we have already seen, the Thai Theravāda meditation group is effectively a sub-group of BBG. There are no links with the House of Inner Tranquillity although some members are aware of its existence. One member expressed her concern that the Thai Theravāda monks are not welcomed at the House of Inner Tranquillity although they are welcome at Catholic monasteries. The only Buddhist group in Bath which has had no contact at all with BBG is the Soka Gakkai group.

BBG possesses a library of about sixty books representing a range of schools and from which subscribing members may borrow. It also makes available journals and marketing literature from other groups. For example it subscribes to *Roots and Branches* the journal of the Network of Buddhist Organizations although BBG does not have a group membership of the Network. Several members of BBG retain a

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<sup>26</sup>BBG 5, interview 29 September 1995.

<sup>27</sup>BBG 6, interview 13 September 1995.

degree of interest in the Christian churches with which they have long standing relationships. One member continues to sing in her local Parish church choir and others attend Quaker meetings.

### **Symbols**

Although this group does not have its own premises, the hall in which the meetings take place is sectioned off each week with coloured cloths and a small Buddha image is placed on a central table with incense and sometimes flowers. Members are seated on cushions and mats on the floor according to the seating lay out which reflects the nature of the meeting. If there is to be Zen sitting meditation members sit in parallel rows facing inwards to each other whereas for a talk by a Tibetan or Theravādin teacher the rows face the speaker at the front. Meditation sessions are commenced and ended with a bell and duplicated sheets printed with chants appropriate to the evening's activity are distributed.

Adherence to form is most conspicuous for evenings of Zen sitting. Chant sheets are kept under individual mats until needed and participants are encouraged to sit without leaving empty cushions between themselves and others. Symbolic representations are difficult in a group which does not adhere to any one tradition, however they are kept to a minimum and I have never heard any discussion suggesting that this causes any difficulties.

### **Doctrines**

Within this group doctrine is assigned a low priority because of the ecumenical intention and the emphasis on meditation practice.

I know it has its critics but I'm quite an ecumenical Buddhist. If the truth is there it doesn't matter about the cultural trappings. The truth is accessible to me through Buddhist schools and there are lots of different teachers who have had teachings from different schools.<sup>28</sup>

Some of the critics to whom this member refers are regular attenders at BBG. They

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<sup>28</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1995.

argue that while BBG provides a useful introduction to Buddhism it does not provide sufficient teaching to take a member beyond an introductory level:

You can only really provide an introduction to the traditions. You can't really take it very far beyond that because once you are committed to a tradition there are specific practices which although fairly similar do differ and you can't practise in more than one tradition so unless you have a teacher outside the group who you go to specifically for teaching it's difficult to take it very far.<sup>29</sup>

After having argued for the need to commit to a particular tradition in order to *practise* Buddhism, this member continued as follows:

...there are some people in the group who would argue that you don't actually need to practise in a tradition at all if you stick to basic Buddhism.<sup>30</sup>

This quotation draws attention to a tension which operates within this group between the acceptance of Buddhist philosophical teaching and the practices or techniques taught within Buddhist schools which apply those teachings. The link made between schools which are considered to be 'genuinely' Buddhist is doctrinal. The majority of members, like the one quoted above, hold a view of what constitutes "basic Buddhism" which is generally accepted to be the Four Noble Truths and the Three Marks of Existence. Buddhist traditions or schools are regarded as connected by their common adherence to these doctrinal formulae.<sup>31</sup> Those schools which do not prioritize or emphasize these teachings are treated warily by BBG members.

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<sup>29</sup>BBG 1, interview 29 September 1995.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>In an unpublished manuscript Rawlinson has suggested that, "...the Western way of doing things is to bring the disparate together".

BBG members are not alone in their assumption that a 'basic Buddhism' may be discerned from the diverse traditions. Among both practitioners and academics there is a strong notion of basic Buddhist doctrine or a common underlying doctrinal core to which all Buddhists assent. However the teachings which are referred to as 'basic' are not necessarily prioritised in all schools. One of the Four Noble Truths is the Noble Eight-Fold Path which presents a form of practice. Although Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna schools usually claim to be 'based on' 'Hinayāna' or Sutric Buddhism, in practice and after the passage of many centuries the practices of those schools are arguably more basic to them than the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. Within some schools another path or practice may be considered basic to soteriology making 'basic' doctrinal formulae of peripheral concern.

Most BBG members stress that Buddhism is a matter for practice and not for belief and yet the practices taught by contrasting schools differ. This is the case even for the schools represented at BBG. In spite of the emphasis on practice which the group claims, the diverse nature of Buddhist practices means that the link between members of this group is in fact doctrinal and based on just a few Buddhist teachings. Much of the teaching which takes place at BBG consists of suggestions about how to apply these doctrines in life, for example by mindfulness in every activity and observation of how the mind chooses to feel anger.

The single doctrine which causes most problems for BBG practitioners is probably rebirth. In spite of interest and belief among British people in reincarnation or rebirth<sup>32</sup> many BBG Buddhists, who follow a religion within which rebirth is axiomatic and the process of which has been the subject of constant re-explanation, cannot accept it as true. BBG practitioners are not alone. Theravāda lay teacher Marilyn Goswell has written:

I asked a lunch table of twelve Buddhists at [a] conference how many

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<sup>32</sup>24% of the British population questioned in the European Values Study 1990 answered 'yes' to the question, do you believe in reincarnation? A research project in progress within the Sociology Department at the University of Reading will examine what respondents meant by an affirmative reply.

espoused this idea [physical rebirth] literally, and there was an embarrassed pause before the learned interpretations began, interpretations with which I am fully in accord. But are they really Buddhism?<sup>33</sup>

Some of these possible interpretations are advanced by BBG members. One member said,

I think the reason I have trouble with it is that my understanding of the Buddhist path is experiential and I have no experience of reincarnation. I don't recall previous lives and I have no near death experiences of my own...It's really not a problem for me because I can interpret it on a psychological level... the possibility of each moment being a life and so on.<sup>34</sup>

The interpretation of rebirth as existing from moment to moment is a common one and often advanced by Buddhist teachers alongside teaching about rebirth from life to life.<sup>35</sup> In this case the member's attitude to the doctrine of rebirth is clearly related to the authority which she accepts for her Buddhist practice. Those things which she accepts within Buddhism correspond with her experience and rebirth in the sense of a continuity from life to life does not fit into this category. Another member, who relies on beliefs she held before coming into contact with Buddhism (she says she "believes in science") said concerning rebirth,

I don't believe in it. One of the things I like about the Theravāda teaching that you get from Chithurst is that they say you don't have to believe anything you don't want to. It's not a faith. If somebody started telling me I couldn't do it unless I believed in rebirth I couldn't. At the moment they

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<sup>33</sup>Goswell, 'Motivational Factors' pp284/285.

<sup>34</sup>BBG, interview 4 April 1996.

<sup>35</sup>See for example, Sogyal Rinpoche, *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Chapter 6.

don't expect me to believe in rebirth.<sup>36</sup>

Ajahn Sumedho has described rebirth in this way:

You can see rebirth directly. You don't have to believe in a theory of rebirth. Rebirth is something that occurs in what you are doing all the time. Now, since there is no self, there is nothing to be reborn as a personal essence or soul, carrying through from one lifetime to the next. However, desire is being reborn: it is constantly looking for something to absorb into or something to become.<sup>37</sup>

The concept of rebirth within a religion which teaches that there is ultimately no abiding self which continues through one life and into another is complex. Within Buddhism different philosophical schools have advanced various explanations for how this can be the case. Since study is not prioritized within BBG most members have little knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and thought. They are therefore free to reject or accept doctrines according to their own experiences.

### **Practices**

The only practice which is characteristic of BBG is silent meditation. This is because any other practice is drawn from a particular tradition of Buddhism and cannot represent a group which aims to be ecumenical. This is not to say that other kinds of practice do not take place at BBG meetings; there may be Pāli or Zen chanting on appropriate evenings, however silent meditation is the only practice which all attenders accept as appropriate to all schools.

Attitudes to meditation are not homogenous. There are two broad approaches to this practice. The first points to meditation as the all important central practice

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<sup>36</sup>BBG 6, interview 13 September 1996.

<sup>37</sup>Ajahn Sumedho, *The Mind and the Way: Buddhist Reflections on Life*. (London: Rider, 1995) pp.52-53.

which all Buddhists should engage in.<sup>38</sup>

Meditation is the key practice. The question only is whether you have got competent meditation teachers.<sup>39</sup>

The second approach lays less emphasis on the centrality of silent meditation and more on Buddhist practice or mindfulness in daily life. This kind of practice is also emphasized by Ajahn Chah who as the teacher of Sumedho is very well respected at the group. He has said:

There is Dharma in emptying spittoons. Don't feel you are practicing [sic.] only when sitting still cross-legged. Some of you have complained that there is not enough time to meditate. Is there enough time to breathe? This is your meditation: mindfulness, naturalness in whatever you do.<sup>40</sup>

Although most members to whom I have spoken aim to sit silently in meditation every day many admit that they do not always achieve this. One member claimed that she is "incredibly awful about sitting meditation", but that meditation is "not just about sitting".<sup>41</sup>

Members and their teachers who emphasise practice in daily life come from within the Zen and Theravāda traditions and regard silent meditation as an important element in practice but not as the only practice.

The meditation is only a part of it. It's a very important part but it's part. There are three prongs; the daily life practice whatever form that may take from your tradition, meditation and study and the three actually support each

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<sup>38</sup>In this BBG strongly resembles the House of Inner Tranquillity, see Chapter 3 below.

<sup>39</sup>BBG 2, interview 9 March 1994.

<sup>40</sup>Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters* p.37.

<sup>41</sup>BBG 3, interview 27 April 1994.

other.<sup>42</sup>

Women practitioners in particular emphasize that meditation practice cannot be isolated from the activity of daily life. Many BBG practitioners have family responsibilities and part of their Buddhist practice is to try to be mindful in every activity for the benefit of their families. This is more important to them at this stage in their lives than ideas about enlightenment. One member went so far as to say,

I am not in the slightest bit interested in enlightenment.<sup>43</sup>

For those who lead busy lives BBG meetings represent an opportunity to put aside half an hour to an hour for silent sitting and the group also aims to organize a day retreat on an annual basis when sitting meditation is central.

BBG practitioners who regard themselves as students within a particular tradition may also go on longer retreats. One member who also attends the Theravāda Meditation Group normally attends retreats at the Theravāda monastery, Amaravati, twice a year. Like other Theravāda practitioners in Britain she chooses the retreats according to the monk or nun who will lead them. In 1995 for example she attended a retreat led by Viradhammo, the Abbot at Amaravati, in late August and another, led by Sumedho, in mid September. Although she would normally prefer to spread her two retreat experiences through the year the identity of the retreat leaders was more important for her than the timing.

A desire to be taught meditation is often cited as the reason why people become Buddhists. Sharf<sup>44</sup> has challenged the modern notion that throughout its history Buddhism has prioritized experiences induced by meditative states. He claims that the emphasis on inducing experience is part of the way in which westerners have

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<sup>42</sup>BBG 5, interview 29 September 1995.

<sup>43</sup>BBG 6, interview 13 September 1996.

<sup>44</sup>Robert Sharf, 'Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience', in *Numen*, Vol. 42, 1995, pp228-281. Sharf's argument is considered in detail in Chapter 7.

tried to reconfigure Buddhism as psychotherapy. He argues instead that Buddhist wisdom is not a mental event or some kind of enlightenment experience but a skill acquired through monastic training, ritual practice or continued participation and exertion in the path.

Westerners were attracted to Buddhism and Buddhist meditation by the promise of epistemological certainty acquired through systematic meditative training leading to exalted numinous states. The rhetoric of *upāya* (skilful means) provided Western enthusiasts with the tool they needed to shape Buddhism to their own liking: since the scriptural, ritual and institutional forms of Buddhism were mere "skilful means" they could be abandoned at will once the centrality of meditative experience was fully appreciated.<sup>45</sup>

Some long term lay practitioners have criticised the emphasis placed on meditation by beginners. A lay Theravāda practitioner who is Sri Lankan by birth and who teaches an introductory class at the Buddhist Society, London which is similar to BBG in intention said.

All they want is meditation but they come to Buddhism as adults and they haven't been brought up with it so they don't understand everything else which is a part of it. There is a lot more to Buddhism than meditation.<sup>46</sup>

BBG's regular Theravāda lay teacher was also keen to point out that meditation is just part of Buddhist practice. She regards it as essential for gaining insight but not a sufficient practice in isolation from giving (*dāna*) and morality (*sīla*).

I think for a lot of people in the west they feel that if they are not meditating they are not practising Buddhism. And I do think it is important to disabuse people of that...I mean all these peasants you see putting rice into the Sangha's bowls they don't go back and sit for an hour on their

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p267.

<sup>46</sup>BBG 11, conversation 18 January 1994.

cushion. They are much too busy to do that but they are practising *dāna*...So the foundation of Buddhism is the development of morality and generosity. And I feel that it is very important that people should remember that you can't meditate without a foundation of morality.<sup>47</sup>

Negative attitudes to the practices of those who are Buddhists by birth caused by the emphasis placed on meditation by British practitioners is recognized by the Thai Forest Sangha. In the *Forest Sangha Newsletter* of October 1996 Venerable Asabho has written,

If the Western meditator (with more than a hint of conceit) occasionally looks down on non-meditating fellow Buddhists and fancies himself in his attempts to meditate as the truer disciple of the Buddha, then such an attitude finds little justification in the scriptures.<sup>48</sup>

### **Experiences**

Personal experience is very important for members of BBG because, more than for any other group in this case study, it is through experience that members believe their practice of Buddhism is validated. The stated aim of one Zen practitioner, for example, is to gain a measure of contentment and to have a positive effect on the lives of those around her. She described the way in which the centrality of form within her practice relates to daily life situations,

...as soon as an I reaction flares up or some strong emotion, immediately the shoulders go up. Or if you're fed up, depressed, you slouch, the head goes down. And keeping the form enables those emotions to be contained, not suppressed and not let out. And it's much easier to be aware of them and to be aware of them through the body which is where they show before they get

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<sup>47</sup>BBG 1, interview 11 January 1994.

<sup>48</sup>'Sutta Class: Puñña and Papa', *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, No.38, October 1996, p6.

up into the head and you start making all kinds of judgements.<sup>49</sup>

This member gave as an example of this her experience of being close to someone who received news of the sudden death of a relative. By keeping to the form through her body and mind as it had been taught to her, she said she was able to show restraint and be of real use to her friend.

Another practitioner explained that the teachings which she receives from the Thai Theravāda Sangha do not set up conflicts within her and the practice of meditation helps her to make sense of the world around her. She said,

I've only ever found it useful. It's the meditation that has just allowed me to gain a lot of understanding of why I am like I am. That sums it up really.<sup>50</sup>

The member who says she is not interested in enlightenment also said,

I don't so much as I did in the past go into imaginary conversations.

Another member who told me she is working towards enlightenment said,

I know I am because I have woken up and the worst thing about waking up is then you can't be ignorant, because ignorance, true ignorance, is not not knowing something.. ignorance is knowing something and then ignoring the truth. And once you've woken up to truth then you know when you are not doing something in the spirit in which it should be done. So it's harder once you've woken up...It's truly not being asleep it's not deluding yourself to what is.<sup>51</sup>

## **Ethics**

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<sup>49</sup>BBG 5, interview 29 September 1995.

<sup>50</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1996.

<sup>51</sup>BBG 3, interview 27 April 1994.

We have already encountered the traditional Theravāda view that meditation must be based on a moral life to give it an appropriate foundation. This view was not articulated by BBG members but by their lay teachers. Moral or ethical issues are not often discussed at BBG although the five lay precepts are probably known to most attenders. In general members follow the ethical norms of the society in which they were brought up and the idea that there are Buddhist ethics which are separate from this has not been discussed when I have been present.

None of Bath's six Buddhist groups emphasizes social action as part of its activity. One member of BBG is a prison visitor at Shepton Mallet prison on behalf of Angulimala, an organization run by Khemadhammo, who now has his own monastery in Warwickshire but was at one time part of the Thai Theravāda Sangha in Britain. This member has talked to the group about this activity.

### **Gender**

By definition an ecumenical Buddhist group operates outside of any specified tradition. As we shall see in connection with the other groups in this case study, women's experience of unequal treatment usually comes from organizational aspects of those traditions and therefore many of BBG's female members do not regard themselves as directly affected by inequalities. Those women who do align themselves with a particular tradition practise as lay women within those traditions and therefore do not encounter a different experience from that of male practitioners. Women members of BBG may be unable to attend meetings or retreats because of domestic commitments but this relates to their roles within their families and within society in general rather than to their roles within Buddhism.

[My husband] can take ten days off work to go off on a ten day retreat whereas it's much more difficult for me because then he has to take ten days off work to look after the children. But that's because of our particular domestic arrangement rather than that he's a man and I'm a women. It could be the other way around.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>BBG 5, interview 29 September 1995.

In June 1992 a female member talked to the group about women's roles in Buddhism highlighting the unequal treatment that women receive in the monastic sangha and also drawing attention to some of the more remarkable women in Buddhist history. Feedback after this talk suggested that most of the women who were present are not troubled by differences between the roles of men and women within Buddhist history. They have found their Buddhist practice helpful and are not therefore concerned with organizational inequalities which may affect others.

Zen practitioners in the group have a female teacher in Myokyo-Ni and therefore do not feel disadvantaged. Myokyo-Ni acts as proof that women can achieve what she has achieved. Many members of the group however are more closely connected with the Thai Theravāda Sangha where the status of nuns is the subject of an ongoing debate. There is no full ordination for nuns within any Theravāda sangha and the nuns ordination line had already died out before Theravāda Buddhism reached Thailand.<sup>53</sup> According to the Theravāda *vinaya* the ordination of nuns requires the presence of other nuns operating within the Pāli *vinaya* rule. Therefore there can be no Theravāda nuns unless the sangha digresses from the *vinaya*. Sumedho has already departed quite radically from practice in Thailand<sup>54</sup> by establishing ten precept nuns within the Theravāda Sangha in Britain. In the view of members of the English Sangha Trust any further development along this line will almost certainly have to come from Thailand.<sup>55</sup>

Since all BBG members and attenders are lay people they do not personally encounter the kinds of difficulties which nuns experience. Although in general the women in BBG are more concerned by the difficulties facing the nuns than the men are, many of the women when interviewed said they thought the difficulties

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<sup>53</sup>There are several accounts of the position of women in Theravāda Buddhism. The situation in Thailand has been addressed by Chatsumara Kabilsingh in *Thai Women in Buddhism*, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991). Elizabeth Harris has written and presented conference papers about women in Sri Lanka.

<sup>54</sup>Both Goswell ('Motivational Factors') and Bell ('British Buddhism') address in detail the position of women in the Thai Theravāda Sangha in Britain.

<sup>55</sup>BBG 5, interview 1 June 1995.

experienced by nuns in the Theravāda Sangha was not a proper matter for lay concern.

The problem of western women becoming nuns is an intellectual problem that I occasionally think about but it's not really appropriate for me to address it. On a practical level and in terms of them living the life I don't think there's a problem, otherwise they wouldn't be doing it.<sup>56</sup>

This member makes a distinction between the Buddha's teaching and "cultural trappings"<sup>57</sup> for the purposes of her own interpretation and practice of Buddhism. She is therefore able to satisfy herself that women are not disadvantaged within Buddhist teaching and is untroubled by the status of nuns, first because she sees that as merely a cultural element and second, because she thinks women would not submit themselves to that status if they felt disadvantaged by it. She said,

I think as long as the precepts are observed and there is meditation and right intention and all the things in the Eightfold Path then it doesn't matter, like in the Theravāda tradition. The thing that women have less access to certain teachings than men, I think that is a cultural and a temporal thing and perhaps if Buddha had been around now and sat under an oak tree in Britain then there wouldn't have been these differences with women and the way they ordain. So that is what I mean by cultural trappings. People who are practising are using skilful means. It doesn't matter how many rules you are observing or not.<sup>58</sup>

This is not an uncommon view of Buddhism in Britain in which the concept of skilful means is used to legitimate the process of choosing certain practices or doctrinal elements and ignoring others. Mellor. identifies this as a feature of Protestant Buddhism and argues that the implication behind this attitude is that

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<sup>56</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1995.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

only 'ultimate' truth is of value while the means of 'provisional' truth are valueless.<sup>59</sup> Mellor cites Sumedho as an example of a Buddhist teacher who does value provisional truth.<sup>60</sup> In traditional terms it does matter a great deal how many rules are being observed in the Theravāda tradition. Adherence to the rule is what legitimates monastic practice and makes it Theravāda. According to Gombrich it is "a remarkable achievement",

On the one hand, no one could accuse it of losing sight of the wood for the trees: the Buddha is constantly reminding his hearers that it is the spirit that counts. On the other hand, if, while keeping this spirit in mind, you continue to follow these instructions to the letter, you are implicitly assured of a satisfying life.<sup>61</sup>

However, lay practitioners are not subject to the rule and lay women, even where they place themselves within the Theravāda tradition, are not subject to the differentiated role of nuns.

Others were more willing to express their concern for the nuns. One member who has had a close association with Buddhism over nearly three decades and is well aware of the issues surrounding the nuns in the Theravāda Sangha said,

I'm sometimes upset because nuns and monks are just ordinary people they don't become enlightened just because they are ordained. I have occasionally witnessed what I think is quite a curt order given from a monk to a nun which actually is slightly upsetting because then it must be, I think, quite difficult for the nun to know, is she responding, if she feels upset, and I know some of them do, whether they're dealing with their ego being upset or are they actually you know quite rightly sort of - I don't know if one can say quite rightly because it's all ego isn't it - just getting upset by the way

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<sup>59</sup>Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism', p79.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.88.

someone has spoken to them...I would find an incredible amount of dissonance being a nun I think I've got too much ego. I would find that difficult.<sup>62</sup>

This quotation illustrates the difficulty which women have in distinguishing between frustration about unjust practice and attachment to ideas of self. This woman's difficulty with articulating her view illustrates the fact that she is unable to disentangle, what she calls, the "dissonance" of the nuns' junior status, from the process of becoming detached from the ego which she knows is central to Buddhist practice.

### **Adaptation**

Adaptation within the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha is an ongoing process which has been touched on here for example in relation to the nuns' ten precept ordination. Adherence to the Theravāda monastic rule is arguably the Thai sangha's main distinguishing feature, especially in view of the fact that monastics may incorporate ideology from Mahāyāna traditions into their Buddhist practice.<sup>63</sup> For lay practitioners in Bath the rule is not a central or important issue "it doesn't matter".<sup>64</sup> The things which in their view do matter are the elements of Buddhist practice which they can be directly involved in as lay people.

Adaptation within BBG itself is more difficult to identify than within the Thai Theravāda monastic sangha or within the other groups which form the case study. This is because there is no one tradition on which to base observation. It is my impression that this group has been affected by the general trend within British Buddhism towards more clearly defined allegiance to recognized schools of Buddhism, whether they be presented as traditional or as newly developed for the west, as is the case with the FWBO in particular and to some extent at the House

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<sup>62</sup>BBG 3, interview 27 April 1994.

<sup>63</sup>See page 75 below.

<sup>64</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1995.

of Inner Tranquillity (see Chapter 3).<sup>65</sup> Although there are many BBG attenders who do not align themselves with a particular school there does seem to be a general trend towards following a particular tradition which may be demonstrated by the fact that many members are clear about the traditions they do not follow, principally the Tibetan traditions. The comment made by one member that

the Bath group doesn't bring the traditions together but it brings practising people together,<sup>66</sup>

is indicative of the fact that members who regard themselves as practitioners within a particular school are now less likely to look for common practices and beliefs and will acknowledge that they are carrying out practices from different traditions alongside each other. One of the aims of the group remains to be a place where newcomers can experience different types of Buddhism although I suspect that newcomers would detect a preference for the Theravāda school and corresponding suspicion of Tibetan practice.

There is a strong sense within this group that members identify an essential Buddhism which is embedded in "cultural trappings". Members have identified elements from the position of women to the doctrine of rebirth as 'cultural trappings'. These elements are thought to be secondary to 'real' practice.

### **Authority**

According to the Pāli suttas, authority was vested by the Buddha in the teaching and in the sangha,

Some of you may think that you have no teacher any more. But when I am gone the Dhamma and the Rule I have taught are to be your teacher.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>See page 19 above.

<sup>66</sup>BBG 5, interview 29 September 1995.

<sup>67</sup>Dīgha Nikāya II, quoted in Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.71.

Gombrich has pointed out that because Buddhism was an oral tradition for many centuries the teaching was only available through learned monks and therefore the laity as well as novices could not hear the teaching and its exegesis except from senior monastics who had committed it to memory.<sup>68</sup> The vesting of authority in the texts and the restriction of texts to the ordained sangha made learned monks into authoritative teachers. In the twentieth century the Pāli texts on which the tradition is based are available in English to any interested reader. Unlike the House of Inner Tranquillity which encourages study of these texts, within the British Thai Theravāda Sangha there has never been an emphasis on textual study. Ajahn Chah based his interpretation of the Theravāda on the meditative techniques developed by Ajahn Mun not on the memorization and exegesis of texts.<sup>69</sup>

The claim to authenticity for this monastic sangha lies in its close connection with the tradition in Thailand and in the wisdom of living teachers but primarily in its adherence to the Pāli *vinaya*. Harvey has placed the British Thai Theravāda Sangha at the traditional end of his spectrum of adaptation because it attempts to remain close to traditional Theravāda practice. He characterizes the tradition of Ajahn Sumedho's sangha as "a non-dogmatic, pragmatic traditionalism".<sup>70</sup> This is because Sumedho has attempted to introduce a traditional monastic lifestyle without a deliberate attempt at adaptation and also without rejection of tradition.

A member of the English Sangha Trust which administers the Thai Theravāda Sangha in Britain described the *vinaya* as the authority and Ajahn Chah's sangha as the structure through which that authority is administered.<sup>71</sup> Within monastic life the *vinaya* is the reference point for decisions about practice and adaptation. This process requires a degree of interpretation since *vinaya* rules were laid down according to circumstances at the time when the code was established and the sangha faces different problems in this culture. Just one simple example of this is

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>See, Sharf, 'Buddhist Modernism' p.254.

<sup>70</sup>Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, p.316.

<sup>71</sup>BBG 7, interview 1 June 1996.

that monastics are forbidden by the *vinaya* to handle gold and silver<sup>72</sup> and accordingly they do not handle notes or coins. However, there is uncertainty about whether cheques and credit cards, which were not known in fifth century BCE India, should be regarded as money. I was told that no agreement has been reached on this issue and that the leaders of the community wish to keep to the spirit as well as to the letter of the *vinaya* code.

There is no reason according to the *vinaya* why cheques should be regarded as money...but the standard of the Amaravati, Chithurst monasteries is the highest, the most refined.<sup>73</sup>

The process of dealing with this kind of new challenge is significantly different from adaptation intended to conform more closely with western cultural norms.

Goswell has shown that in spite of close adherence to the *vinaya*, and allegiance to the Theravāda tradition the activity of the sangha is eclectic in part because of its encounter with other forms of Buddhism. The concept of the Bodhisattva and the importance of altruistic practice for self and others is one example of this and is illustrated by the fact that there are pictures of the female Bodhisattva Tara, from the Tibetan traditions, on the walls of the nun's vihara at Chithurst.

...the English Sangha, though following Theravadan tradition very strictly in terms of practice and keeping the rules of the *vinaya* in this particularly austere form is nevertheless, in its eclecticism, quite uncharacteristic of the Theravada tradition in the East.<sup>74</sup>

Early splits in the monastic sangha (*sanghabeda*), always resulted from differences

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<sup>72</sup>See Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p92.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Goswell, 'Motivational Factors', p281.

in adherence to monastic discipline not from doctrinal differences.<sup>75</sup> Monks and nuns with different doctrinal viewpoints were able to live alongside each other so long as they were keeping to the same monastic rule.

Regardless of the complexities of the interpretation of the monastic rule, lay practitioners in this tradition cannot follow Theravāda orthopraxy because they are not subject to the *vinaya*. The focus of authority for lay practitioners is therefore elsewhere. Traditionally the laity are subject to guidance from the sangha but not from individual monastics. Individual monks have avoided gathering followers in part because the role of the laity is to provide economic support for the sangha as a whole and economic support directed at individuals is against the Theravādin rule.<sup>76</sup> The importance of individual monastics in Britain where lay practice is based on meditation not on economic support of the sangha is borne out by the way in which practitioners choose to attend retreats according to the monastic who will lead them. Goswell has described the charismatic leadership of Ajahn Sumedho as "antipathetic to him and to the Theravada teaching itself"<sup>77</sup> and yet the process of choosing a meditation retreat teacher is enabled by the advertisement of these details in the sangha's publications.

Over the last few years several senior monastics have left the sangha. One of these is Kittasaro who was based for four years at the Devon Vihara and had often taught practitioners in Bath. After disrobing Kittasaro married a former senior nun, Thannisara. Both Kittasaro and Thannisara are still held in very high regard by Bath followers. They have twice led weekend retreats in Bath and will lead a long retreat at Amaravati during 1997. Although the orthopraxy of the monastic rule is the sangha's claim to authenticity the continuing popularity of these two ex-monastics

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<sup>75</sup>Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, p48 and Williams, *Mahāyana Buddhism*, p4.

<sup>76</sup>The gift of a monastery by King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi to an individual monk, in the first century BCE is thought to be the cause of the division between the Abhyagiri and the Mahāviharins. This is the first recorded split in the Theravādin tradition in Sri Lanka. (Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p158.)

<sup>77</sup>Goswell, 'Motivational Factors' p281.

emphasizes the limited status of monastic orthopraxy for some British followers. The purity of the sangha is considered by many lay practitioners to lie in the perceived wisdom of its teachers and in its emphasis on meditation practice. The sangha itself does however continue to prioritize the rule and receives the recognition of the Thai monastic sangha and also the economic support of Thai laity because of that.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that all lay practitioners connected with this sangha are equally ambivalent about the importance of adherence to the rule. A member of the English Sangha Trust which supports the monastic sangha said,

Lay people should be practising as lay people but the Buddha did not set up the sangha by accident. He didn't just say, well let's have some monks. There is a reason for that and the reason is that although it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for enlightenment there's a lot of evidence that it sure helps. It's a form which is very helpful for full realisation.<sup>78</sup>

A second trust member said,

Monastic institutions form the solid foundations on which western Buddhism is going to grow.<sup>79</sup>

He added,

The idea was that you can't just import, whether its Theravāda or Zen or anything else, just like that. Well curiously enough it turned out that you can. You can import not only Theravāda but Zen and various forms of Tibetan Buddhism all of which seem to be running pretty successfully. I think because the very reason that they are run by people who know what they are

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<sup>78</sup>BBG 7, interview 1 June 1995.

<sup>79</sup>BBG 2, interview 9 March 1994.

doing, who have been trained in the tradition.<sup>80</sup>

In an attempt to access BBG members' attitudes to authority this section first examines attitudes to the Thai Theravāda monastic sangha in order to show where authority is acknowledged and second describes the visit of an NKT nun to a BBG meeting in October 1994. Although to an extent this encounter acts as a caricature of BBG members' responses to authority it does provide a useful focus for those responses.

For each of the groups in this case study authority is vested in a number of interrelated sources and members' practice does not always confirm the authorities which they apparently acknowledge. A long term practitioner and lay teacher in the Thai Theravāda sangha with close connections with BBG who has supported the monastic sangha since it began gave an account of her view of its role. This is reproduced here at length because it addresses many of the issues raised in connection with the role of Buddhist monasticism in this culture.

I feel a debt of gratitude to the sangha, the sangha as such in the sense that clearly when the Buddha gave his teaching if you hadn't had the sangha to chant it away and rattle through it every month and learn it we wouldn't have the teaching of the Buddha. And so to me that is precious. And so you know, so in a sense I think it is important. I feel that the practice of what the Buddha taught is a very personal thing... I had been practising Buddhism and meditation for a long time before I came in touch with the sangha you see from '56 when I first got into it... so there was 20 years when I was practising without the sangha. So to me the hierarchy is really not important.

It was a tremendous help to have the meditation retreats although having said that the first and the most powerful that I went to was actually run by a lay person a layman John Coleman. In theory if the sangha hadn't come over I could have continued. I think it's very inspiring to have the sangha although I am not uncritical of it either as a life style or as the way we sometimes

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<sup>80</sup>Tbid.

practise. I don't think this lineage thing is really quite so important to me because I feel, as the Buddha said, that the teaching is the thing and it's not something.. because he said I haven't hidden anything from you all the teaching has been revealed. I feel that Ajahn Sumedho is authentic, no matter who taught him, of himself. But the teaching that is given by any of the senior monks is also the Buddha's teaching and that in itself is sufficient too, if you practise it, to bring you to realisation. So that although it is nice to have the extra boost of seeing someone like Ajahn Sumedho who so lives the teaching, that is very inspiring, I don't think it's absolutely essential. So I have no interest in it and its not something that is ever plugged particularly by this sangha.<sup>81</sup>

This account points to four sources of authority which lay practitioners may accept. These are the authority of the teaching, which is accessed through the texts; the authority of personal experience of the truth of the teaching; the authority of lineage and the tradition and finally; the authority of the inspiration and personal charisma of individual teachers.

The first source of authority is the authority of text and therefore, since texts are accepted as such, of the Buddha's word. A BBG member in explaining the authority she accepts for her practice discussed the role of the teacher and of wisdom to discern genuineness which comes from the Buddhanature but finally concluded that, "the teacher is the scriptures and I think that is the authority really".<sup>82</sup>

Although this practitioner has claimed the authority of texts she also said she seldom reads books written by Buddhist teachers or Buddhist texts, she prefers instead to spend the time available to her in meditation practice. It is not uncommon for BBG practitioners to claim the authority of the Buddha's word while giving study a very low priority. Study in this group assumes a lower profile than within any of the other groups in the case study. The authority of texts therefore is

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<sup>81</sup>BBG 1, interview 11 January 1994.

<sup>82</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1995.

either mediated through teachers, in which case Bath practitioners, like the early Buddhists, accept the authority of the teacher, or knowledge of the teaching is limited to what has been read.

The second source of authority is that of personal experience of the teaching through application in daily life and through meditation. Again informant BBG 4 who has past experience of being taught within the Tibetan rNying-ma school, valued this form of confirmation of the teaching but found it difficult to disentangle this authority from that of the teacher who makes the practices available. She said,

If I didn't have that intuitive feeling then it wouldn't work at all....It is a practical path... which is putting me in touch with my Buddhanature. It's not faith... It's not looking outside oneself at constructs....It's having a degree of experience, I think you need someone to guide you into that experience...There's the trust in your initial teachers... but this is when it gets tricky because this is all about the ineffable so its very difficult to put it in words. I think this was probably the problem I had with the Tibetan path. I did have a problem with having someone else's authority to practice in a certain way... There's an ambivalence because I think one does need help with techniques but the knowledge is actually there. All one can say is there's a knowing.<sup>83</sup>

Another informant felt the situation was less tricky and more straightforward. He said,

Well I suppose in the last analysis one has to go by one's feeling as to what is genuine and what isn't.<sup>84</sup>

The third source of authority acknowledged by BBG practitioners is the authority of tradition and lineage. Members who follow Theravāda teachings and also Zen

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>BBG 2, interview 9 March 1995.

practitioners acknowledge this as a factor although as we saw above this aspect of Sumedho's sangha is not regarded as important for all Theravāda practitioners. Others refer to the sangha as "particularly pure"<sup>85</sup> and therefore regard it as authentic although the purity they identify is not vested in adherence to the *vinaya* but in the emphasis on meditation practice, which is not traditional.

A Zen practitioner, student of Myokyo-Ni said that her teacher's lineage is very important to her,

It is very much a verbal tradition and a living tradition so yes, I suppose it is important to see that it can be traced right back and to see that she hasn't just set up on her own; sprung up out of nowhere. Yes, it's extremely important. I think it is important as at least some kind of a guarantee of authenticity and even more so in the west where it is all new. In the east well it is taken as being important.<sup>86</sup>

The final source of authority which BBG practitioners acknowledge is the authority which pertains to individual practitioners who may or may not be monastics but who are thought to embody the teachings in their own lives. Such people may be regarded as inspirational. One member said she values Sumedho and holds him in high esteem but does not regard him as her teacher.<sup>87</sup>

The master disciple relationship is traditionally emphasized in the Zen schools. One of Myokyo-Ni's students when asked about her relationship with her teacher said that the authority for her practice comes from the Buddha but that Myokyo-Ni acts as her guide.

Because of her experience basically. I trust...I mean it would...it appears to me not only from initial meetings but long association that she is extremely

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<sup>85</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1994.

<sup>86</sup>BBG 5, interview 29 September 1995.

<sup>87</sup>BBG 3, interview 27 April 1994.

wise, she has trodden the Buddhist path has a lot of experience in human nature and is worthy of trust as a guide.

Although in the past this practitioner has felt resistance to some of the practices her teacher has suggested for her she now thinks,

...she would never ask me to do anything that I felt was intrinsically wrong or immoral or didn't feel quite right. The resistance actually comes from the ego, if you like; which is the resistance which is the whole point of the practice; which is what we're working with.

In October 1994 one of the nuns from the NKT was invited to teach at a BBG meeting and chose as her subject the Master Disciple relationship. This encounter, which challenged one of BBG members' most favoured Buddhist teachings; that sentient beings cannot rely on others but only on themselves, provoked lively questioning at the meeting and afterwards and a number of members avoided the meeting altogether anticipating that they would not like what they heard.

Subsequently one member described the encounter as follows:

I think she was selling a line. I shouldn't say that. Well she said she had very little practical experience and I think she was regurgitating teachings. I think she was doing that from a good heart because that is their tradition, I know something of that... It's funny the choice of that subject for our group. I don't know if it was particularly chosen because we are a general group and there are people with different teachers and some without teachers...I thought she was a very good speaker and I think she was speaking with good intention, but she didn't teach me.<sup>88</sup>

Another BBG member was more forthright. At a meeting of the Bath Interfaith Group in March 1995 she described NKT teaching as "very dangerous"<sup>89</sup> in spite

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<sup>88</sup>BBG 4, interview 4 April 1995.

<sup>89</sup>BBG 9, 28 March 1995.

of the fact that the NKT nun had presented a thoroughly traditional Tibetan teaching.<sup>90</sup> Another member, who lives near to the NKT centre and would like to have attended there said,

Buddhism is about looking into your own mind not obeying someone else's.<sup>91</sup>

The crux of the nun's teaching was that in order to make spiritual progress beings need a spiritual guide whom they should follow to the letter. She said,

If you keep trying a different path you won't get there. It's the same in all traditions of Buddhism. We have to do as our teacher says. Our minds are deluded; we can't know what practices we should follow.

You need to check out the teaching for a while but then you have to accept the teacher otherwise you could spend all your life checking out the teacher but never taking the teaching.

We should have a determination to follow our spiritual guide or if we don't have one, a determination to find one.

At the end of the talk questioner one asked,

How do you find a Spiritual Guide and how do you know if you can trust a teacher?

The nun replied that people should consider whether the teacher puts the teaching into practice and also ensure that the lineage back to the Buddha Śakyamuni is

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<sup>90</sup>Quite apart from Geshe Kelsang's teaching about the guru disciple relationship, this teaching is contained in sGam.po.pa's *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Herbert Guenther, (London: Shambhala, 1959), Chapter 3: Meeting Spiritual Friends. This text is also used by the Bath Karma Pakshi group.

<sup>91</sup>BBG 10, unrecorded conversation.

unbroken.

This reply provoked an immediate and assertive response from questioner two, a regular BBG attender who does not follow a particular tradition and who several years previously dropped out of training for the Anglican priesthood. He pointed out that whereas in Christianity there is both Apostolic succession and the authority of the Bible, the Buddha did not set up such structures but instead encouraged people to look into their own minds and not rely on someone else. The nun replied that our minds are deluded and we cannot therefore rely on our minds to rid us of delusion.

Questioner one then reasoned, if our minds are deluded then we cannot have the wisdom to choose a spiritual guide. He went on to suggest that the reason why we can rely on our own minds is that we have the Buddhanature within and because of that we do not need to rely on another's wisdom.

The nun agreed that we do have innate Buddhanature but countered that the wisdom we have comes from relying on a Spiritual Guide in a former life. When the meeting closed other members congratulated questioner one for 'catching out' the NKT teacher.

Although this exchange suggests that for members of this group teachers or spiritual guides are not legitimate authority sources for Buddhist practice, as we have seen, this is not entirely the case. There are other issues at stake here. For example, the nun lacked personal credibility for her audience which her monastic status could not counteract. At nineteen she was very young and had only recently left school. She also claimed during her talk that she had not yet learned to meditate; an admission which did not impress BBG members because of the status afforded to experienced meditators within the group. The exchange brings into focus some of the difficulties which surround the issue of authority within this group and in particular the difficulty which many members have with the principle of accepting the authority of teachers.

As we shall see in the account of the NKT group in Bath, Geshe Kelsang who is this nun's teacher, is presented as an appropriate Spiritual Guide because he is thought to have fully realised the Buddha's teaching for himself and is therefore able to guide his disciples to practices which will bring them to the same understanding. When BBG practitioners are confronted with this kind of testimony they generally assume that the disciple uncritically accepts her teacher's word without testing his teaching. This is because members of this group take very seriously the traditional Buddhist teaching that wisdom comes from understanding and understanding cannot be given by another but has to be directly experienced. "One is one's own refuge, who else could be the refuge?"<sup>92</sup>. This teaching is interpreted by some members to mean that they should not have confidence in anything of which they have no direct experience. The idea that there is no faith in Buddhism is very strong in this group. Taken to its fullest extent this idea leads some individuals to a state where they cannot start to practise the techniques offered through the various traditions because they have not confirmed the efficacy of that practice through experience. Buddhist doctrine and practice cannot 'prove' itself until it has been tested. A degree of faith is therefore needed in order to start out on the path.

The notion that there is any element of faith in Buddhist practice is strongly rejected by many practitioners in this group. Because of this some members may do no more than attend BBG meetings. Apart from the ethical behaviour which the fourth Noble Truth commends, interpreted through the ethical norms of western cultural understanding, they have little confidence in recommended practices or those who make them available. Those who take this view may accept the rationality of the Four Noble Truths but rely on their own judgement about how to apply that rationality in their lives.

The last word in this section goes to informant BBG 4 because she sums up neatly here the difficulty evident within this group about the idea and the experience of

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<sup>92</sup>This teaching which comes from, for example, the Buddha's teaching in the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and the *Dīgha Nikāya*, appears in Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p.1. This is one of the few books which contains primary texts which is read by BBG members with whom I have spoken.

relying on a teacher as **Spiritual Guide**. For some years this woman followed the teachings of Ngakpa Chögyam in the rNying-ma Tibetan school but she now prefers the meditational practice of the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha. She said she was drawn to the rNying-ma school by the teacher not by the teaching and the time came when she could no longer accept the teacher,

I reached a point where I was not sure about the direction in which he was leading...I had doubts about Chögyam which were mainly doubts about myself.

You know this question of having a guru... it was something of an anxiety for me because there was this thing about authority to teach and is this the right teacher for me to follow to the letter. And thinking about human frailty and questioning who has the authority and where does the authority come from and the thing for me is that if there is a spiritual path then anyone should be able to attain to it and I do actually feel this, which is probably heretical.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>BGG 4, interview 4 April 1995.

### Chapter 3:

#### The House of Inner Tranquillity: Buddhism "like neat gin"?.<sup>1</sup>

##### A Note on Methodology

As indicated in Part I, the House of Inner Tranquillity withdrew any support they had been willing to give to this research project in March 1995. When I first contacted the House of Inner Tranquillity in December 1993 my reception was courteous and welcoming. I carried out a substantial interview with the centre administrator who also arranged for me to return to talk with the three resident nuns early in 1994. I was assured that provided I was willing to meet with the criteria laid down for any newcomer to the organization I would be able to attend meetings in Bath and at the centre. These criteria were that I should agree to keep the five lay precepts and meditate for at least half an hour per day in accordance with the instruction given. In addition I would be asked to give up any other religious practice. At that time I was attending the meetings of another case study group and could not meet the third requirement. It was therefore agreed that I should return when I was able to do so. Just over a year later I approached the House of Inner Tranquillity again but the administrator declined to allow me further access. In addition, an ex-monk from the House<sup>2</sup> with whom I had made arrangements for an interview cancelled our appointment and avoided making another. The reason given was that I was not "seeking instruction based on the desire to gain personal experience of the Noble Truths of Buddhism".<sup>3</sup> I was advised to look for other Buddhist groups who would not object to my motivation.

This is the only group in the Case Study which was not willing to be part of the research project and indeed the only group to control admittance to meetings. The account of them presented below is based on the four interviews carried out before

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<sup>1</sup>The subtitle of this chapter is taken from Robert Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign land*, (Bradford on Avon: Aukana, 1996). "Because [the House of Inner Tranquillity] doesn't provide any of the exotic trappings often associated with Buddhism, for some it can seem a bit too much like neat gin." p2

<sup>2</sup>The House of Inner Tranquillity is often referred to as the 'House'.

<sup>3</sup>letter from Robert Mann, 6 March 1995.

access was denied, the tape of one of which was lost due to a technical error on my part; a copy of the *House of Inner Tranquillity Newsletter* of January 1994, seen at the library of a Thai Theravāda Sangha monastery; the Aukana Trust's World Wide Web site for late 1996 and; a further interview carried out in February 1996, with a personal contact who had recently started attending meetings but found the organization unsuitable for her needs. The account is therefore, of necessity, limited.

### **Organization**

The House of Inner Tranquillity was established in 1980 by Alan James (b. 1940) and his wife Jacqui James (1946-1988).<sup>4</sup> Alan James was ordained in 1967 at the Buddhapadipa Thai Theravāda Temple in London<sup>5</sup> and took the sangha name Dipadhammo Bhikkhu. He remained 'in the robe' until 1970 after which he worked with his teacher, Kapilavaddho (a.k.a. William Purfurst and Richard Randall), at the English Sangha Trust's Dhammapadipa Vihara in Hampstead, London. When Kapilavaddho died, aged sixty five, in 1971, James took over as teacher in charge at the Dhammapadipa Vihara at the request of the Trust. In 1972 James married Kapilavaddho's widow, Jacqui who acted as the centre's administrator.<sup>6</sup> James's incumbency at the English Sangha Trust lasted only a short time and from 1975 he worked as a lecturer in Computer Studies in London and Bristol.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile the Trust became virtually inactive until the arrival from Thailand of Sumedho who subsequently set up the kind of monastic sangha which had been always been the Trust's vision for British Buddhism.

After their break from full-time meditation teaching, Jacqui and Alan James

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<sup>4</sup>Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook* p312. Jacqui James died of Leukaemia in 1988.

<sup>5</sup>The Buddhapadipa Temple is located in the London suburb of Wimbledon. It caters mainly for the Thai speaking population and had a sufficient number of Thai monks in residence to carry out ordination in keeping with the rules of the Theravāda *vinaya*.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Randall, *Life As A Siamese Monk* (Bradford on Avon: Aukana, 1990) p198.

<sup>7</sup>Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook*, p312.

founded the House of Inner Tranquillity together in March 1980. The House was purchased with their own savings and the help of a long term pupil. The break from teaching acted as a period in which the James' were distanced from the English Sangha Trust.

For a while James kept up his paid employment but the increasing demand for meditation teaching led him to give up that work in 1985 to concentrate on the centre full-time. In the late 1980s the House was sufficiently established to support monks and nuns, 'ordained' by James in accordance with his interpretation of the Pāli *vinaya* code, but not in accordance with the continuous Theravāda tradition. From the beginning, the House has retained a striking level of independence from the Theravāda Sangha in Asia although in its teachings it claims the authenticity of the Pāli canon "the Buddha's original words".<sup>8</sup> James spent short periods in India in the 1960s but his main influence comes from Kapilavaddho.

Kapilavaddho Bhikkhu was instrumental in founding the English Sangha Trust in the 1950s, a period which he spent commuting between England and his teachers in Thailand<sup>9</sup>. In 1957 he returned to lay life and married<sup>10</sup> and the Trust was taken over by a succession of teachers including Sangharakshita who subsequently founded the Western Buddhist Order. The late fifties and the sixties were troublesome years for the Trust. Several incumbents came and went amid accusations and counter accusations about, among other things, personal standards of morality.<sup>11</sup> Many of the early figures are still active within British Buddhism and remember well the difficulties which arose. Disputes often focused on contrasting

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<sup>8</sup>*Aukana Newsletter*, July 1996, p5.

<sup>9</sup>Randall, *Life as a Siamese Monk*, p191ff.

<sup>10</sup>Kapilavaddho's son from this marriage is now a Buddhist practitioner at the House of Inner Tranquillity.

<sup>11</sup>Bell, 'Buddhism in Britain', and Mellor, 'Cultural Translation of Buddhism'. Both cover this historical period in detail.

visions about how Buddhism should be established in the west.<sup>12</sup> Much of the tension concerned the applicability of monasticism to western Buddhism. In 1967 Kapilavaddho left his family, reordained and returned to head the Trust until he disrobed again and married Jacqui just before his death in 1971.

The House of Inner Tranquillity, like the British Thai Theravāda Sangha and the FWBO, comes from English Sangha Trust roots. It operates more in the tradition of Kapilavaddho than the other two organizations. Kapilavaddho was highly critical of the development of Buddhism in Asia and encouraged the practice of Buddhism shorn of ritual and devotion.

The whole of Buddha's Teaching is contained within the famous "Four Truths". No matter where we go in the world, these truths are the substance of whatever "Buddhism" we find practised. the Four Truths *are* the Dhamma. the "Buddhisms" are largely what people in their weakness and ignorance have built around these Truths. What they have built is a thick wall of, rites, ritual, superstition, animism and a neo-theism which is vociferously proclaimed to be this or that kind of "Buddhism".<sup>13</sup>

Unlike Sangharakshita who favours the use of tradition where it is found to be helpful, Kapilavaddho wanted to see Buddhism established in Britain based solely on the Four Noble Truths and meditation practice.

Significantly for the ongoing development of the House of Inner Tranquillity, Kapilavaddho claimed to have verified for himself the truth of the Buddha's teaching. He also described in detail the experiences he had and the method

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<sup>12</sup>In addition to accounts preserved in the trust's journal, *Sangha*, I have recorded interviews with Maurice Walshe, a former Chairman of the trust and with Ann Bancroft who attended Trust meetings at this time. Both recount the bitter feelings which were expressed at meetings and the blatant opposition of some to Sangharakshita's activities. It is also clear that Sangharakshita and Christmas Humphreys, a leading activist in the Trust, were not on good terms.

<sup>13</sup>*Sangha*, Vol.1, no.1, Dec. 1956.

through which he attained them.<sup>14</sup> Rawlinson has described the form of Buddhism taught by Kapilavaddho as "liberal Theravāda" because it advocates meditation, specifically *vipassanā* or insight meditation, for lay practitioners and devalues the monastic *vinaya* as taught within "conservation Theravāda".<sup>15</sup> In this way, Rawlinson argues, liberal Theravāda places authenticity, "having attained correct realization", above legitimacy, "correctly appointed".<sup>16</sup>

In physical terms the House Of Inner Tranquillity is a large house in Bradford on Avon, a small market town not far from Bath. The existing rooms, including twelve bedrooms are simply furnished and there is a large shrine room with a large Thai Buddha image at one end. Rooms are large and airy with splendid windows overlooking a well kept market garden and the town. The house, though not isolated - it is only minutes from Bradford on Avon centre - gives the impression of a place set apart from the rest of life.

The house is used for meditation classes and retreats and can accommodate, in addition to five monks, three nuns and two full-time lay workers, six retreatants occupying single rooms. Although the main shrine room is larger than any other Buddhist meeting place in Bath, numbers attending fortnightly lectures are too large for its facilities and these meetings therefore take place at the Friends Meeting House in Bath city centre. Lectures are also held in London and there is an associated group meeting in Victoria, Canada. The meetings are not open to the public and casual attenders are turned away at the door. An average of sixty attend the Bath meetings and they are all known to the organizers by sight. The practice of controlling access is said to discourage disruption.

Lectures are advertised around the city, for example in the Library and on other publicly accessible notice boards. Interested people are asked to write to or

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<sup>14</sup>In Randall, *Life as a Siamese Monk*, especially chapter 11.

<sup>15</sup>The Transmission of Theravāda Buddhism to the West' *Aspects of Religion: Essays in Honour of Ninian Smart*, eds. P Masefield and D Wiebe (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) p364.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.*, p365,366.

telephone the House and an interview is then arranged to explain the commitment which is required. The interview provides an opportunity for the teacher to assess the motivation of the potential practitioner. These interviews are carried out by one of the full-time teachers. A new attender described this process as follows.

I feel totally not committed to Buddhism at all. Which I wasn't in the first place. I wasn't trying to be a Buddhist. That wasn't the point. I was finding out about going on a meditation course, that's why I contacted this place.<sup>17</sup>

This informant had her hour long interview with a nun at the centre. Although she enjoyed the interview she was surprised when an alarm sounded to mark the end of the hour session. She agreed to fulfil the commitment to keep the precepts and meditate for half an hour per day and began to attend the fortnightly meetings. She was met at the meetings by a 'mentor' who had been assigned to check on her progress. Most people under instruction are married with families and are said to lead fairly conventional lives.<sup>18</sup> The mentor assigned to my informant had a similar intellectual background to her charge and they were of similar age and of the same gender.

At the time of my main research period (Dec 1993 - April 1994) there were ten full-time residents at the House: five monks; three nuns; Robert Mann, the centre administrator and assistant to Alan James, and a male cook. Alan James lives elsewhere within Bradford on Avon. The centre administrator claimed that it is 'normal' for the monastics to ordain for a minimum of two years and a maximum of five years although the senior nun had been ordained for 6 years at that time and is still there in late 1996. The monastic precepts do not therefore constitute a life time's commitment. This is entirely in keeping with the lineage within which the House operates. Both Kapilavaddho and Alan James spent periods in the robe and periods in lay life. Other British Buddhist leaders also reflect this trend including Sangharakshita, the founder of the Western Buddhist Order a fully lay organization

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<sup>17</sup>HOIT 5, interview 29 February 1996.

<sup>18</sup>HOIT 1, interview 6 December 1993.

which does not uphold any kind of monastic tradition.

Lay people who are accepted for instruction are expected to have a lot of contact with the centre. In addition to the fortnightly lectures there are also personal meditation interviews, and sutta study. On alternate Wednesdays, when there is no lecture in the town, participants listen to taped lectures at the House.

The decor and furnishing of the house indicate that the group has not been short of financial backing. No charges are made for teachings or retreats although an appeal fund has been launched for funds to build extra accommodation and donations are requested in return for teaching and support. I was told in 1994 that there was no shortage of financial support. The shrine room completed in that year was built using donated labour and funds to a high standard. Informants reported at around that time that there is no problem with getting sufficient funds to support activities. The majority of followers are well-educated professional people, some are "very successful business people"<sup>19</sup> and this success is reflected in the amount of financial support which the house is able to draw upon. The Aukana Trust which administers the House is a registered charity "dedicated to the promotion of the Buddha's teaching,"<sup>20</sup> It receives its income from donations and from the sale of books. Early in 1996 the trust published its fifth book and the proceeds from the sale of all five are fed into the charity in order to finance its activities. It is a matter of principle that the trust be self financing and the administrator who is also a trustee of the Aukana trust expressed his concern about centres which allow their monastics and students to claim unemployment benefits.<sup>21</sup> During 1996 the Aukana Trust's World Wide Web site changed its wording on financial contributions. In August 1996 the 'financial section' of the web page was headed "No Charges" but by October 1996 this had changed in emphasis to "Donations". This may indicate a new approach.

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<sup>19</sup>HOIT 1, interview 6 December 1993.

<sup>20</sup>Robert Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign Land* (Bradford on Avon: Aukana, 1996), p163.

<sup>21</sup>HOIT 1, interview 6 December 1993.

## Relationships with other groups

The House of Inner Tranquillity is listed in the Buddhist Directory along with the affiliated group in London. The organization receives literature from other groups and its own newsletter is sent for example to Amaravati a monastery of the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha. Apart from these links the House keeps itself separate from other British Buddhist organizations including the Network of Buddhist Organizations which was unknown to all those I questioned. This is said to be not a matter of clear intention but a result of the attitude taken to the teaching and practice.

We are very busy. There is a lot of teaching to be done. If anyone wants to come under instruction that's fine but we're not very much into comparative religion.<sup>22</sup>

I was informed by an adherent of the Thai Forest Theravāda Tradition that when monks from the Forest Sangha travel around the country they are welcomed in monasteries belonging to Catholic and Protestant Christians but not at the House of Inner Tranquillity.<sup>23</sup>

Teachers at the House accept that there are other paths to enlightenment and that some of these are Buddhist paths but they are strongly committed to maintaining what they describe as the 'purity' of their own. The administrator however was openly critical of some aspects of other groups. He singled out some of the Tibetan groups.

I was very impressed with a lot of people who were very committed and doing an awful lot of work. And yet I found that the standard of instruction was very patchy. There are great troubles, I think, when teachers don't speak English. Meditation is very subtle and to try and give instruction through a translator is very difficult. In centres where a teacher isn't resident people

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<sup>22</sup>Mann, interview 6 December 1993.

<sup>23</sup>TFT 6, interview 13 September 1995.

can just subtly misdirect their endeavours. Meditation is difficult and as I said there is lots of very inspiring devotion and faith but unfortunately there isn't instruction in meditation.<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly the main criticism is of the teaching of meditation which, while it has very high priority at the House of Inner Tranquillity, is often secondary, in the form that the House understands it, to the recitation of *sādhana*s and *pūja*s at many Tibetan centres.

### **Symbol**

The symbolism of the House of Inner Tranquillity exists in three areas. The first is the house itself which represents the need to stand apart from the outside world while remaining within it. The house has an aura of having been set apart in spite of the fact that it is positioned only two hundred yards from the centre of the small but busy town of Bradford on Avon. The furnishing of the house is plain but comfortable and well kept and its gardens are an especially attractive feature. Indeed the gardens represent in part the House's wish to accommodate itself at least outwardly to its surroundings. Mann speculated within a published lecture, "Some people wouldn't mind what we did as long as we kept the gardens looking nice".<sup>25</sup>

There is a large shrine room in the House which symbolises the prevailing attitude to practice for westerners. The room is large with a Thai Buddha *rupa* at one end but no other decorative feature, symbolizing the emphasis on simplicity. The room contains several rows of conventional wooden chairs upon which the meditators sit during meetings. These two features symbolise the House's commitment to Buddhist practise 'without cultural additions'. The Buddha is represented because he made the teachings available and proved their efficacy but there is no other concession to Buddhism's eastern origins. The chairs provided for meditators to sit on symbolize the practical ways in which the needs of westerners with different

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<sup>24</sup>Mann, interview 6 December 1993.

<sup>25</sup>Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign Land*, p8.

seating habits - they are not used to sitting on the floor - are met.

## **Doctrine**

The doctrine of The House of Inner Tranquillity, the systematized explanation of the truth as understood by Alan James and his close followers, is contained within the lectures and writings of the organization. Doctrine is based on an interpretation of the Pāli Canon of the Theravāda school and followers are encouraged to study the suttas through the medium of the English language. The July 1996 newsletter gave news of an exam which has been developed as an aid to structured study. The translations of the Pāli text society, in particular those of I B Horner, are valued because they are said to translate the texts word for word with little regard to the aesthetic quality of the result. Conversely Maurice Walshe's translations are not used because they are said to attempt to make the English flow and thus risk losing accuracy.<sup>26</sup> Translations which are thought to provide simple, accurate representations of the Buddha's words are preferred.

The House's self identity is as an organization which sets out to teach meditation to people who are committed to overcoming suffering. Five key doctrinal points may be extracted from this. First, all teaching is based on the Four Noble Truths of suffering and the way to overcome it.

The core of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. That there is suffering and that there is a way to get out of suffering. The Buddha himself simply taught

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<sup>26</sup>This distinction, although made by the organization, does not stand up to critical scrutiny. All translations reflect the state of European understanding at the time in which they are made. The translation of ideas from one language to another inevitably involves the reinterpretation of Buddhist concepts in familiar Western concepts. Otherwise Buddhist ideas would not be accessible to an English speaking audience. Pāli scholar, Rupert Gethin has commented, in a personal communication, that both the Pali Text Society's translations and those of Walshe are good and flow well in English. His impression of Walshe's translations is that they are more literal than those of the Rhys Davids working under the auspices of the Pali Text Society. He adds that Walshe corrected some of Rhys David's errors in his translation of the Dialogues of Buddha but also introduces new errors of his own.

just two things, suffering and a way to overcome it and everything else is an elaboration upon it.<sup>27</sup>

The notion that the Four Noble Truths represent a Buddhist orthodoxy which underpins all Buddhist teaching is also present in Kapilavaddho's writing. In 1957 as part of an ongoing dispute with Christmas Humphreys, one of the most influential figures in the early teaching of Buddhism in Britain, Kapilavaddho replied to an article which Humphreys had written in the *Sunday Times* in this way,

What it does is to explain what Mr Humphreys "believes" the Buddhist beliefs to be. Personally having read the article and asking what has been said, it would appear that there is little difference between Buddhism, Theosophy, Monism, and the rest of the synthesist's paradise...One more point of mystery in Mr Humphrey's article is his statement in the opening paragraph, "But Buddhism is many sided, and as it recognizes no authority for what was the Buddha's teaching, it knows no orthodoxy." Surely Mr Humphreys would agree that there is common ground in all the "Buddhisms" in the form of the Four Truths. Are these not then in the real sense an orthodoxy?<sup>28</sup>

The House teaches, following Kapilavaddho's line, that worthwhile practice is based on living according to moral precepts and coming to understand the truth about suffering through meditation. Proper committed practice of meditation techniques under the guidance of an experienced meditator leads to the overcoming of suffering and nibbana, release from the suffering realm.

Second, commitment to practice, not monastic status, determines who will make progress. Monasticism provides an opportunity for full-time practice but is not necessarily an indication of commitment.

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<sup>27</sup>Mann, interview 6 December 1993.

<sup>28</sup>*Sangha*, Vol.1, No.4, March 1957.

Not everyone, by any stretch of the imagination, ordains because they want enlightenment like a drowning man wants air. Those who do so want enlightenment are generally committed anyway, whether they are in the robe or not.<sup>29</sup>

Third, enlightenment can be attained through committed meditative practice; it is available. In a chapter headed, 'Nibbana is Closer Than You Think', Alan James makes this clear:

Enlightenment is available. It is immediately available if you know where to look.<sup>30</sup>

In this, as in the group's devaluing of the role of the monastic sangha, there is a distinct move away from traditional Theravāda teaching that it is almost impossible to become enlightened outside of the sangha. Carrithers has commented that,

...the monk's way of life is more than merely a means to an end: it is very nearly the end in itself.<sup>31</sup>

The fourth doctrinal point is that other paths to salvation exist but that the practice of Buddhist meditation is not compatible with other techniques.

Commitment to the Buddhist way is just that: it is single-minded dedication to the Buddhist way of training, completely eschewing all other kinds of training as being superficial, tangential, irrelevant.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Alan James, extracted from a talk of June 1992 entitled 'What is Commitment?', in *House of Inner Tranquillity Newsletter*, January 1994.

<sup>30</sup>Alan James, *The Unfolding of Wisdom* (Bradford on Avon: Aukana, 1993), p16.

<sup>31</sup>Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study*, (Delhi, 1983) p281, cited in Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p88.

<sup>32</sup>James, 'What is Commitment?'.

Cush has observed that James is critical of New Age thinking and cites a 1987 Aukana publication which claims, "...the Buddha's teaching is not an alternative therapy."<sup>33</sup>

The fifth doctrinal point emphasized by the House is that Buddhism is available to all regardless of cultural background and must therefore be made accessible in suitable ways to twentieth century westerners.

The essence is the body of teachings which have come down over the ages and it's fairly clear from the suttas what is the teaching. Then you realise that on top of that have been centuries of cultural accretions which are a lot to do with the society in which it has developed, and yet which have very little relevance to our culture.<sup>34</sup>

The need to separate culture from Buddhism is stressed throughout House of Inner Tranquillity publications and teachings. In spite of the difficulty which this poses for the British Thai Theravāda Sangha it does not appear to lead to difficulty for the House of Inner Tranquillity. There is a clear sense here of what is essential in Buddhist teaching, and therefore of what is not. The lineage of western teachers from Kapilavaddho to Alan James and then on to his followers is important for facilitating this divide. Although informants have claimed initially that lineage within the organization is unimportant, when asked directly about their teachers they have cited this as an authenticating feature of the centre's role. The lineage is thought to ensure that the teaching is mediated through people who have a high level of understanding but are also grounded in western culture and as such can skilfully interpret the Buddha's teaching. The lineage of understanding gives them, in their view of themselves, a pure recension of the teaching which can be traced through the tradition, in particular through the textual sources which the Theravāda tradition has retained, back to the Buddha.

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<sup>33</sup>Alan James and Jaqui James, *Modern Buddhism*. (Box, Wiltshire: Aukana, 1987), p8. Cited in Cush, 'Buddhism and the New Age'.

<sup>34</sup>Mann, interview 6 December 1993.

## Practices

Mann refers to the ritual practices of Buddhism as being "a really exotic escapism which is very alien to the fundamentals".<sup>35</sup> This attitude comes over strongly in all Aukana publications and has developed from the teaching of Kapilavaddho. The editorial of the *English Sangha Newsletter* of January 1972, shortly after Kapilavaddho's death, described his teaching as:

...strict application to Satipattana (the setting up of mindfulness) with no ritual and no puja plus continual reference to the Pali canon.

Although the English Sangha went on to support the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha which attempts to avoid unnecessary adaptation of Thai forms of practice and therefore retains certain traditional practices, the House of Inner Tranquillity has adhered closely to Kapilavaddho's ideal. Aside from the stress on the need to practise *satipattana*, the nuns explained that there are two other practical reasons why ritual is not relevant to this culture.<sup>36</sup> These are first that westerners could be misled into thinking that by performing ritual practices they were doing all that is necessary and ignore the need for the correct state of mind to exist behind the practices and second that westerners could be "put off" the teaching because of the culturally unfamiliar actions they were required to perform.

There is no bowing or chanting included in this practice. Members stand when James enters the room as a mark of their respect for him and a bell is rung to end meditation sessions but these are the only features which the nuns described as ritual practice. There are however practices which are encouraged by the House. These are meditation, study and moral living according to the five lay precepts and according to the adapted monastic code. The meditation taught is both *vipassanā*, insight meditation, which is designed to give practitioners practical experience of impermanence and *metta*, loving-kindness meditation which complements insight

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>HOIT 2, interview 11 April 1994.

meditation and develops "a bias in the mind towards seeing positive qualities"<sup>37</sup>. As we have seen, study is of English translations of the Pāli canon which forms the stated basis of doctrine and participants are required to prepare in advance for weekly study classes. There is no tradition of encouraging study in the Pāli language.

These practices are considered to be essential for progress towards the ending of suffering. Everyone under instruction at the House is required to keep the five lay precepts, meditate for at least half an hour a day, attend a couple of retreats each year and refrain from any other broadly religious practices. The need for commitment to the practices is stressed and the practices are described as severe. A lay informant told me that he aims to meditate for half an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening, attend three weekend retreats a year and attend lectures in Bath fortnightly. Absent from his schema was any formalized study.<sup>38</sup>

### **Experience**

It seems clear that the experience that House of Inner Tranquillity practitioners hope to have is the experience of enlightenment, the complete overcoming of suffering. They believe, or at least their teachers do, that this is possible because the Buddha achieved and taught an effective path and because their teachers, Alan James and his late wife Jacqui James have also achieved this. One of the nuns said that the centre has been accused of being "a conveyor belt to enlightenment" and added "would that it were!"<sup>39</sup>

Practitioners believe they have experienced a clearer understanding of the truth of impermanence. They claim that their meditation affects the whole of their lives and leads them to see that they control their own responses to things which happen to them. It also confirms that the teaching they receive, which is described as the teaching of the Buddha, is true. For example, they come to see that rebirth occurs

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<sup>37</sup>Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign Land*, p10.

<sup>38</sup>HOIT 4, interview 26 May 1994.

<sup>39</sup>HOIT 2, interview 11 April 1994.

from moment to moment which leads them to an understanding of rebirth operating from life to life. More significantly they claim that they experience knowledge of the essential Buddhist teachings. In other words they confirm through their experience that the approach taken at the House is an effective one.

Using the favoured analogy of a mountain side with the goal at the top and many paths up the side, a lay informant told me:

At the moment I have nothing to lose and everything to gain from assuming that the mountain has a top. So far, in my limited experience, I have realised that there is a mountain side.<sup>40</sup>

### **Ethics**

All practice taught at the House is intended to be underpinned by ethical conduct as laid down by the tradition in the form of the lay and monastic precepts.

These rules are designed to render personal behaviour harmless to others and to oneself, thus maximising one's chances of developing the meditative mind.<sup>41</sup>

All those who are accepted for instruction are required to keep the five lay precepts, listed in publications as refraining from:

killing or harming living creatures.  
taking that which is not given.  
wrongful sexual conduct.  
lying, slander, gossip and all forms of wrong speech.  
strong drink and intoxicating substances.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>HOIT 4, interview 26 May 1994.

<sup>41</sup>James, *The Unfolding of Wisdom*, p64.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p65.

The monastics take vows of ethical conduct based on the Pāli *vinaya* but adapted by Alan and Jacqui James to be suited to the western cultural context. The group is not interested in social action. There is a degree of recognition that other groups are engaged in this kind of action but the House's emphasis on ending suffering is based firmly on the ending of suffering through means of understanding, not through practical changes in social circumstances.

### **Gender**

A feature of the House of Inner Tranquillity is its view that though the *vinaya* is an important part of the Pāli canon and of Theravāda practice, the *vinaya* is adaptable according to cultural circumstances. One result of this is that rules for nuns and monks are identical since this, "reflects the context in which the order finds itself".<sup>43</sup> A lay member told me that the idea of women being secondary to men or that they are women because they are living out past "bad karma" is a cultural one. He cited the view that the Buddha gave no discourse which implies that this is the case.

There were three nuns at the House during the Spring of 1994 when interviews were carried out. The most senior of these clearly played an important role at the centre as an experienced teacher. At that time she had been in the order for six years, one year longer than the stated usual maximum. She and the other two nuns told me they always leave the room after the monks but that that does not present a problem for them. Jacqui James who co-founded the centre with her husband Alan provides a role model for these women since they believe that on her death in 1988 she was released from samsara and took no further rebirth. In other words they believe that she was enlightened.

Although the House's teacher and his assistant are both men, the women told me they are treated in the same way that men are. The qualification to teach is experience and knowledge and this may be held by men or women. In addition they claim that the teaching which is given emphasises the need for a meditator to accept both masculine and feminine aspects of mind.

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<sup>43</sup>Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign Land*, p98.

Both women and men need to accept femininity and masculinity in order to develop spiritually. Chauvinism has no place in the mind of a meditator.<sup>44</sup>

This quotation which comes from a lecture delivered in September 1994 does not detail what is meant by masculine and feminine minds aside from identifying the caring, nurturing role as feminine. It does however reveal the writer's assumption that there are differences between the two. I was told by the nuns that, in general men taught at the House rely too much on thought and words in books and on analysis, while women need more analysis but are better at acceptance and devotion.<sup>45</sup>

The notion that men and women are different at the level of practice is also borne out by James's contention that women give up more when they begin full-time practice. This idea was relayed to me by the nuns. When questioned about why this should be so they explained that women have to give up families.<sup>46</sup> Since men have families too, it seems that the House uncritically accepts existing gender stereotyping within mainstream British culture.

### **Adaptation**

The House of Inner Tranquillity has a strong self-identity as an organization which has already adapted Buddhism for a western context. They believe that while other groups still talk about adaptation, they have already gone through that process.

...here in Bradford we have westerners being taught by a westerner who was taught by a westerner himself. So there is a lot of talk about it becoming westernized and yet here we have already, I think, gone through a lot of the adjustments and addressed a lot of the problems that do crop up.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p146.

<sup>45</sup>HOIT 2, interview 11 April 1994.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>HOIT 1, interview 6 December 1993.

The adaptations which are made at the House are based on an interpretation of the Pāli writings and this is thus adapted Theravāda Buddhism. It does not attempt, as for example the FWBO does, to take account of all extant forms of Buddhism.

Adaptation of Theravāda teachings concerning monastic discipline does not present a doctrinal problem for the House since it relies on canonical teaching that minor rules may be adapted.

The Buddha himself did lay down guidelines on how minor rules could be adjusted to fit in with local conditions....which obviously have nothing to do with overcoming nature and craving.<sup>48</sup>

This policy is confirmed by Mann in an Aukana publication which describes the process by which the House of Inner Tranquillity *vinaya* was drawn up. He points out that an adaptation process occurred during the Buddha's lifetime as he adjusted the code to fit new circumstances and also that some *vinaya* rulings are irrelevant to western life,

The code of discipline established for the monks and nuns retained all the major rules of the Vinaya. New minor rules were drawn up which reflected the cultural conditions of late 20th-century Britain rather than those of ancient India. And so rules about things like the almsround and robes have been replaced with rules relevant to a modern western lifestyle. To retain a rule forbidding the eating of elephant meat, for example, is not exactly pertinent to the spiritual search.<sup>49</sup>

Specific changes to the monastic lifestyle include a new monastic dress code. The monks and nuns wear blue trousers with tunics and yellow jumpers instead of

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<sup>48</sup>HOIT 1, interview 6 December 1993.

<sup>49</sup>Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign Land*, p98. None of the Aukana publications gives references to Pāli sources but Mann is probably referring here for example to *Culavagga* 189ff.

saffron robes. The reason given for this is that saffron robes are impractical for the British climate. For the same reason monastics also eat after midday. They do not go on almsround because this is not thought appropriate in conservative Bradford on Avon but instead grow vegetables and shop in the town. This latter also necessitates the handling of money.

The attitude taken towards adaptation of the *vinaya* code by the House of Inner Tranquillity may be compared with the early schisms within the Buddhist community after the Buddha's death. Nattier and Prebish<sup>50</sup> give an account of early sources relating to the first major schism which took place at the alleged first council at Rājagṛa and relate that early disputes concerned the precise content of the monastic code. The maintenance of orthopraxy was of fundamental concern to all parties. Although the Buddha had given permission for the Sangha to exclude or adapt the "lesser and minor points" he had not indicated which the minor points were. Nattier and Prebish point out that,

...since Buddha gave no indication of what the specific points were, the monks would have had to risk orthodoxy by guessing, however intelligently they performed their task.<sup>51</sup>

Alan and Jacqui James were not restrained by this early difficulty. Part of the reason for this is that the value of monasticism is regarded as existing in the opportunity which this gives for full-time meditation practice. Monastic practice is not "nearly an end in itself" in Carrithers terms but "merely a means to an end".<sup>52</sup>

The attitude taken towards adaptation of the *vinaya* makes the elevation of the status of nuns far more straightforward within this group than within the more conservative British Thai Theravāda Sangha which looks to the continuous tradition

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<sup>50</sup>Janice Nattier and Charles Prebish, 'Mahāsāṃghika Origins: the Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism', *History of Religions*, Vol.16, 1977. pp237-272.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p270.

<sup>52</sup>Carrithers, *The Forest Monks*, p30.

in Thailand to legitimate adaptations. The equality of monks and nuns is made possible because of the flexible approach taken to *vinaya* rules,

...laying down the same rules for recluses of both sexes reflects the context in which the new order finds itself.<sup>53</sup>

In spite of the parity of rule, nuns are still required to wait until the monks have left a room before they can leave.

Traditional ritual practices such as chanting and bowing are also dispensed with as unnecessary to spiritual practice. According to one informant, the retention of these practices would make western Buddhists into "small children clattering around in their mother's shoes".<sup>54</sup> The implication is that such practices look foolish and are also inefficient. The exclusive use of English translations of Pāli texts and the omission of references to Pāli sources within publications also has the effect of distancing the organization from its Asian roots.

The House of Inner Tranquillity's view of itself is that it has reached a correct balance between the retention of unnecessary 'cultural baggage' and, in Green's terms, selling out to western cultural norms.<sup>55</sup> In spite of the general criticisms of ritual practices, Mann also claims that some Buddhist groups are too hasty in rejecting certain practices such as *dāna*, and the respect for teachers which is inherent in *metta* or loving kindness practices. These groups, which he says attempt to popularize the teaching to make them less foreign, reject, along with these practices, "an integral part of the Buddhist way".<sup>56</sup>

### **Authority**

Three sources of authority emerge from the accounts of House of Inner Tranquillity

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<sup>53</sup>Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign Land*, p98.

<sup>54</sup>HOIT 4, interview 26 April 1994.

<sup>55</sup>See page 24 above.

<sup>56</sup>Mann, *Buddhism in a Foreign Land*, p12.

practitioners. These are the Buddha's words as represented by the Pāli canon, the authority of enlightened teachers and the authority of personal experience. Absent from this list is the authority of continuous tradition, which is not valued except insofar as the lineage from Kapilavaddho to Alan James is recognized. The first of these, canonical literature, is claimed as the source of authority for the nature of the practice and the lifestyle of followers, in particular the monastics. Texts, including the *Abhidhamma* are studied, in translation, at classes which are available to practitioners studying at different levels. All study is designed to lead to the advancement of meditation practice. Texts are not studied with any other aim. One practitioner, an academic with a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy told me that James advises that the study of texts for other purposes should be reserved as a way of earning a living and suggests that this be kept entirely separate from practice.<sup>57</sup>

A second source of authority is that of Alan James. James's authority is interpreted in different ways. One of the nuns who had tried to practise under the auspices of the International Meditation Centre at Splatts House in nearby Calne, Wiltshire where *vipassanā* meditation is taught in the Burmese Theravāda tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin,<sup>58</sup> left the Calne group because she perceived the need for a personal teacher who is available to give guidance.<sup>59</sup> James fulfils this role for residents at the House although other more distant practitioners are happy to be guided by his assistant teachers.<sup>60</sup>

Practitioners explained that the group's teachers made changes to traditional

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<sup>57</sup>HOIT 3, interview 17 April 1994.

<sup>58</sup>The Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, U.K. presents a form of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism which aims to produce altered states of consciousness over very short and intensive periods. In this it bears little resemblance to traditional Burmese practice as presented in ethnographic studies (see, for example, Bechert's 'Buddhism in Burma', in Bechert and Gombrich eds. *The World of Buddhism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991). The trust organizes regular ten day *vipassanā* meditation retreats which are open to anyone to attend, although those who do so are not permitted to continue with their regular practices while on retreat. (Interview at Splatts House, 3 March 1994).

<sup>59</sup>HOIT 2, interview 11 April 1994.

<sup>60</sup>HOIT 4, interview 26 May 1994.

Theravāda practice in accordance with precedents laid down in canonical accounts but also on their own authority. I was unequivocally told that Alan James is enlightened and that he does not deny that this is the case. The nuns in particular made it clear that Jacqui James was also enlightened and at her death passed into *parinirvāna*.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately I did not get the chance to ask James about these assertions which amount to a claim that he is personally free from all greed, hatred and delusion. Following this logic, it is because James is enlightened that he is in a position to know what is essential to practice and what is peripheral and can be discarded.

Another practitioner expressed a different view of James,

Whether he is enlightened or not makes no difference to me because he is... as far as I am concerned he knows me better than I know myself. His instructions are unsurpassable....It is possible that he could be enlightened and not be a good teacher. Now that's no use to me. If you were not a good teacher before enlightenment you will not be a good teacher after enlightenment...My trust in Alan is on the basis that he has always been right.<sup>62</sup>

This informant also explained that the enlightened or unenlightened status of his teacher is unimportant because the final authority is personal meditation experience.

Ultimately no-one has an authority...I think you have the authority on the grounds that you are practising.<sup>63</sup>

He claimed that "at the end of the day you have to cut down the jungle for

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<sup>61</sup>HOIT 2, interview 11 April 94.

<sup>62</sup>HOIT 4, interview 26 May 1994.

<sup>63</sup>HOIT 4, interview 26 May 1994.

yourself".<sup>64</sup> The corollary of personal authority for this practitioner is that adaptation of traditional teaching is unproblematic in terms of the tradition.

If one has an aim that one must safeguard this teaching for ever and a day in its pure form and defend it from every cultural assault or cultural change, I think again I imagine the Buddha would be the first to say, 'well everything changes....everything changes....'. If one is carrying out the general principles, to me, I don't see the problem.<sup>65</sup>

It is more important within this group that the teaching can be effective at a personal level than that it is continuous with tradition. In Rawlinson's terms<sup>66</sup>, its 'authenticity' is primary while its legitimacy is secondary. For this reason James's experience and the personal experience of practitioners is substantially more important within this group than the continuous orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the Theravāda school.

Like all religions which are doctrinally sophisticated the House of Inner Tranquillity has an explanation for why their path is not appropriate for some people which is that it requires a high level of commitment and is a 'severe' path, 'like neat gin'.

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Rawlinson, 'The Transmission of Theravāda Buddhism', p365.

## Chapter 4: Sōka Gakkai

### Organization

Sōka Gakkai (Society for the Creation of Value) is a lay Japanese Buddhist movement which was started in the 1930s by the radical Japanese educationalist Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871-1944). Makiguchi found that the educational theories which he had developed<sup>1</sup> could be enhanced through association with the religious practice of the Nichiren Shōshū (Orthodox Nichiren Sect).<sup>2</sup> Nichiren Shōshū is a priestly lineage which claims to uphold the true teachings of Nichiren (1222-1282), a thirteenth century Buddhist monk who, having studied within the Tendai school of Buddhism, came to believe that he lived in the last age of the law (*mappō*), which had been predicted by Śākyamuni Buddha. Unlike the Japanese Pure Land patriarchs, Hōnin and Shinran, who also accepted that the age of *mappō* had begun, Nichiren believed that it was possible to overcome the degeneration of the age through the transformatory power of the Lotus Sūtra which could turn the degenerate age into an age when salvation was easily achieved and in which Japan could enter a stable and peaceful state<sup>3</sup>.

In the tradition of Nichiren, the Sōka Gakkai teaches a universalist practice of the twice daily recitation of portions of the Lotus Sutra and the chanting of its title, the mantra *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* (*daimoku*<sup>4</sup>) in front of a physical representation of the mantra (*gohonzon*). The organization is the most successful of the many post-

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<sup>1</sup>See Educational Department of Sōka Gakkai 'Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Sho Sect' in *Contemporary Religions in Japan*, Vol.1 No.1, pp.55-70, for an explanation of Makiguchi's Theory of Value.

<sup>2</sup>For an historical account of the movement see Daniel Mettraux, *The History and Theology of Soka Gakkai: a Japanese new religion*, (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>See Kenneth Dollahide's introduction in *Nichiren's Senji-shō*, (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1982), pp.9-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Daimoku* means great title. Within Nichirenite Buddhism the term always refers to the recitation of the title of the Lotus Sutra *Myōhō-renge-kyō*.

war lay religious movements in Japan<sup>5</sup> where it claims up to sixteen million members as well as a substantial following throughout the rest of the world, including thirty thousand members in Europe<sup>6</sup>.

The British organization was established in 1961 with just two members both of whom were Japanese women who had followed their English husbands to Britain. In 1975 when the British movement gained legal status as a registered charity there were two hundred members. Richard Causton who joined the movement in 1974 and was its leader until his death in 1995 saw it grow rapidly to become one of the largest Buddhist groups in Britain.<sup>7</sup> The estimated membership in 1995 was six and a half thousand, three and a half to four thousand of whom are described as "active"<sup>8</sup>; in other words in regular attendance at meetings. The remaining members, who still retain the *gohonzon*, the object of worship, may maintain a loose affiliation with the organization and practise on an irregular basis. An indicator of active British participation is the number of subscriptions to the fortnightly news sheet the *SGI-UK Bulletin* subscriptions to which stood at 1,930 in October 1995<sup>9</sup>. It would not be unreasonable, in view of the importance of familial and friendship networks within the organization, to assume that each copy is read by an average of one point five members.

As presently constituted, SGI is a highly structured hierarchical organization with several administrative layers. The British General Director, Ricky Baines and his two Japanese nationality Vice General Directors oversee the British operation and represent it within Europe and are also answerable to the central administration in

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<sup>5</sup>Brian Bocking, 'Of Priests, Protests and Protestant Buddhists: the Case of Sōka Gakkai International', in *Japanese New Religious Movements in the West*, eds. P Clarke and J Somers (Folkestone: Japan Library, 1994), p118.

<sup>6</sup>*UK Express*, No 278, August 1994.

<sup>7</sup>Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere describe it as "almost certainly the school of Buddhism with the largest body of support in Britain". *A Time to Chant*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), p.13.

<sup>8</sup>Kazuo Fujii, Vice General Director SGI-UK, interview 30 March 1995.

<sup>9</sup>*Bulletin* no.166, October 1995.

Japan. The overall British administration is run by a Central Committee which includes representatives from five geographical areas covering the entire country and from each of four divisions, of women, men, young women and young men. The country is divided into progressively smaller geographical regions which provide a network for communications. The Bath group is situated in *West and Wales Area*. At the next level down is the *Avalon Headquarters* which is one of two Headquarters around the locality of Bristol. The next structural tiers are *Chapter*, here named *Wellspring*, followed by *Starlight District* and finally *Bath Group*<sup>10</sup>. For each geographical tier, there are theoretically leaders for each of the divisions so that each chapter for example, should have four leaders, often called 'chiefs'. In practice there are often vacancies. For a long period during the early nineties the Women's division leader in the Avalon chapter was the only chapter chief.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the formal structure, common interest groups, for example the Arts group and the Mothers or Parents group may also meet locally if the demand is there.

One role of the hierarchy is to provide a structure through which members with questions or difficulties have information about where to turn for help. It also provides a means through which new members can be taught correct ritual observance, for example the correct care of the *gohonzon*. In the absence of a monastic order or priesthood, members often turn for advice to more experienced practitioners, and senior leaders up to the highest echelons of the organization try to make themselves available to give 'guidance'.

The declared purposes of the structure are to provide an effective way of disseminating information throughout the organization and to support members' practice. Members and leaders often express the view that the organization is like an inverted pyramid with leaders supporting practising members. A men's group

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<sup>10</sup>Heavily populated parts of the country may divide down further into smaller geographical units.

<sup>11</sup>A recent attempt to split Avalon Headquarters into three instead of two chapters faltered partly as a result of its general unpopularity and the fact that three chapters would require sixty leaders when there were only thirty five available.

leader said:

It can work on the inverted pyramid model where the ordinary members are up here supported by a layer of group leaders supported by more senior leaders and then down to the very senior people at the bottom. In a way it's a hierarchy but it's been inverted in a sense... It's not set up to be a top down. It's a supportive hierarchy.<sup>12</sup>

Recent proposals for changes in the hierarchical structure are discussed below.

In the first half of 1994, when most of the fieldwork was carried out, the Bath group was small but cohesive and active. It maintained close links with the structural levels immediately above and supported fortnightly meetings. There were six regular attenders each of whom had practised chanting for between two and fifteen years. All the regular members were women although one Japanese male member attended occasionally. Group members were supportive towards each other and the atmosphere at meetings was congenial and welcoming.

In addition to personal practice ordinary SGI members are encouraged to participate in the organization by attending discussion and study meetings and other social or practice oriented gatherings. In a typical month, November 1995, Bath group members had an opportunity to attend discussion and study meetings in Bath, a Saturday 'Chapter Day' in a local village hall, a '*Daimoku* for Peace' meeting, a *Kosen Ruffu gongyo*<sup>13</sup> and a family weekend. It was not usual for Bath members to attend meetings outside Bath except for special chapter or national events. They did however place emphasis on the two core meetings; the monthly group meetings for discussion and for study.

The structure for discussion and study meetings is well established. Most take place in the afternoon or evening and commence with evening *gongyo* with approximately

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<sup>12</sup>SIGI 5, interview 8 April 1994.

<sup>13</sup>*Kosen ruffu* means to widely declare and spread Buddhism. *Kosen ruffu gongyo* is therefore invoking the power of the practice to bring about this aim.

twenty minutes to half an hour *daimoku* chanting. This part of the evening takes place in members' homes in the room where the *gohonzon* is enshrined. During January to July 1994 I attended fifteen such meetings held in four different locations but usually with the same few participants. Members either sit on the floor or on a chair and chant together under the leadership of the evening's 'moderator' who may be any one of the regular members.

In spite of SGI's reputation for aggressive proselytizing including the controversial *shakubuku* (break and subdue), Bath meetings are not advertised in the town and most people, including those in other Buddhist groups, are unaware of the presence of SGI members in Bath.<sup>14</sup> Wilson and Dobbelaere have shown that most new members are recruited through personal contact with family members and friends<sup>15</sup> and these observations are born out in the conversion accounts of most Bath members. Many local members have been practising for several years and there is little evidence in Bath of significant growth. Very few non-members attended the meetings at which I was present. A potential convert attended meetings three times but showed little interest in practising chanting. On another occasion a woman who had met with SGI Buddhism elsewhere attended a meeting and expressed an interest in receiving a slow *gongyo* tape<sup>16</sup> however she was not seen again at a Bath meeting. Other friends of members sometimes attended out of curiosity or in one case, because she likes the sound of the chanting.

A senior leader expressed the view that attracting people to the practice by promising material benefits, a strategy which has given SGI a bad press over a

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<sup>14</sup>I made initial contact with this group through the Taplow Court Headquarters. Although I was warmly welcomed by the group as soon as direct contact was made, I did experience difficulty in obtaining a contact name in Bath. Since all my later dealings with the organization were open and friendly I can only account for the delay by suggesting that the central organization is either very busy or not quite as efficient as it might like to be.

<sup>15</sup>Wilson and Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant*, p50.

<sup>16</sup>New members are taught *gongyo* practice through the use of a prerecorded tape of a slow recitation of the relevant chapters of the Lotus Sūtra. Slow *Gongyo* meetings are also held to assist newcomers.

number of years, is less popular now than it was fifteen years ago.

I think that's gone now, I think people are quite embarrassed by that. For some reason that does seem to work but as you practise more it doesn't work. I know that it's my life that is creating that. It's not magic... You draw things into your life because of what you are. The more you chant the more you put your Buddhahood out there and that's what draws.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of this new perspective many existing members were drawn to the organization because it promised the kinds of benefits they were looking for. One local Young Women's leader described the way in which she had first encountered the practice while at university in Birmingham. She had been introduced by a fellow student who told her,

"...if you chant *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* for ten minutes in the morning and evening you can become happy and you can achieve the impossible". And those were the two things, you know, if I could have picked the two things I really wanted especially at that moment in my life. I felt very unhappy and I've always been a very depressive person and I also felt that there were these limitations on my life and I wanted to do the impossible and so I was definitely going to try it out.<sup>18</sup>

This kind of testimony was not unusual. Because the movement has gained a reputation for chanting for material possessions members often joke about chanting for cars, but are much more likely to chant for less tangible benefits, for example, good relationships and the means by which to earn a living. Some members did say they chanted for "things" but they were a minority within the field work sample. Two members of the wider organization who had chanted for cars, and acquired serviceable second hand vehicles, told me they needed them in order to earn their living and get to SGI meetings. In other words material benefits are not an end in

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<sup>17</sup>SGI 9, interview 2 October 1995.

<sup>18</sup>SGI 6, interview 8 July 1994.

themselves but lead to financial security and therefore to the opportunity for further Buddhist practice.

SGI-UK is set up so that individual members and the groupings in which they operate can make donations to the central organization to cover the expenses of running a complex operation. Members contribute to the *kosen rufu* fund which allows SGI Buddhism to maintain its operations. It is usual for the parent organization in Japan to make initial purchases of premises and this has applied in Britain but whereas France and Italy, with their large membership figures, are now largely self-supporting, the British organization still relies heavily on an inflow of funds from Japan. Taplow Court was purchased entirely from Japanese donation and ninety five percent of the cost of maintaining the centre still comes from Japan.<sup>19</sup> The organization aims to become self supporting for the development of the centre but cannot yet be so. The only fund which is wholly supported by British donation is that which supports ongoing activity: staff costs, insurance, the costs of publishing the monthly journal the *UK Express* (UKE), and the fortnightly *Bulletin*.

Members are asked to pay for the benefits which the organization provides, for example the publications, and may also be asked to contribute in order to cover costs at special meetings. When attending residential courses at the Taplow Court Headquarters members are asked to pay the full cost, which in 1996 amounted to thirty pounds per day, per person. This means that members must have access to sufficient funds to allow participation in these events and they are encouraged to chant for this particular benefit. The same applies if members wish to join a course at the Trets European centre in France or make a trip to Japan.

One of the two Vice General Directors of SGI-UK, Kazuo Fujii, is optimistic about the financial future of the British operation and explains the shortfall in British generated funding by referring to its comparative youth. He said,

Giving money depends on practice. My mother has practised 40 years.

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<sup>19</sup>This information was supplied in an interview with Vice General Director of SGI-UK, Kazuo Fujii on 30 March 1995.

Therefore she is very grateful and gives a big donation. Majority here very young. Struggling in a time of recession. Be nice to receive more money. As people benefit we get bigger donations. Those who donate more than £250 per quarter are increasing.<sup>20</sup>

Members in Bath regularly purchase the two publications but did not discuss their contribution to the organization's funds.

#### Relationship with other groups

The relationship between SGI-UK and other Buddhist and religious groups has undergone substantial change in the last few years. As we have already seen, Buddhist groups do not always acknowledge the authenticity of other Buddhist traditions. In my experience, many teachers and members in Buddhist groups across the traditions readily dismiss SGI as, at best, not genuinely Buddhist and, at worst, as positively dangerous.<sup>21</sup> The following extract, from an interview with a generally well-respected teacher who operates within another form of Buddhism, illustrates this kind of suspicion which, as here, is often acknowledged to be based on incomplete information.

I don't know much about this but it does seem to me that the people who sit around chanting *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* don't have much of a kind of philosophy behind that. Or if they do it's mostly very very naive and simple. It's like Christian fundamentalism...It's just another form of superstition really; being comfortable about the world. It isn't really challenging. It doesn't really put you, your nose, hard up against the fact of life and death. In fact it's a way of avoiding having your nose up against life and death. So that, in a way, I think it's a form of escapism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>In addition to accounts of this nature which I have personally heard, undergraduate students at Bath College of Higher Education have reported meeting with similar attitudes during residential placements in Buddhist communities.

<sup>22</sup>General 1, interview 29 December 1993.

This view has a long pedigree within British attitudes to Nichiren Buddhism.

Edward Conze, in a book first published in a series edited by Sangharakshita of the FWBO, describing Nichiren's Buddhism claimed that, "On this occasion Buddhism had evolved its very antithesis out of itself."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Pye has observed that,

...Nichiren and his various followers have had an undeservedly bad press among western observers. Nichiren himself was a subtle medieval theologian, and many of his modern followers have a view of Buddhism at least as broad as that held in other Buddhist sects.<sup>24</sup>

More recently, Steven Batchelor, who enjoys considerable status as both a practising Buddhist with monastic training in more than one tradition and a reputation for academic analysis has described Sōka Gakkai as having,

...just as sound a pedigree as any other. Nichiren's interpretation may be eccentric, but his views are well founded in Mahayana canonical texts and the T'ien-t'ai exegetical system.<sup>25</sup>

As we have seen the latest *Buddhist Directory*<sup>26</sup> does not include information about SGI groups although the library of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, a subsidiary of SGI is included. When asked about the non-inclusion of SGI in the Directory, a Buddhist Society representative wrote:

About the time of compiling The 1994 Directory, the General Secretary of the Buddhist Society had been concerned at the number of disturbing

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<sup>23</sup>Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p.114.

<sup>24</sup>Michael Pye, *Skilful Means*, (London: Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1978), p154.

<sup>25</sup>Steven Batchelor, 'Buddhism and European Culture in Europe', in eds. Sean Gill, Gavin D'Costa, Ursula King, *Religion in Europe: Contemporary Perspectives*, (Kampen: Pharos, 1994).

<sup>26</sup>The Buddhist Society, *Buddhist Directory*.

complaints received from members of the public who 'thought we ought to know', against a few groups. These usually involved 'fractured families.' In view of these concerns they were left out of the Directory this time.<sup>27</sup>

The letter goes on to say that fewer complaints have been received this year and that SGI will be included in the next *Directory*. Interestingly, the independent information service INFORM which collects and makes available information about new religious movements report that over the last few years they have received very few inquiries about SGI.<sup>28</sup>

Nichiren traditions are historically antagonistic towards other schools of Buddhism. Nichiren taught that other forms of Buddhism, including Zen, Pure Land schools, Shingon and Ritsu, were examples of "incorrect faith" or "evil things"<sup>29</sup>. In line with SGI's recently formulated statement of aims,<sup>30</sup> SGI-UK has manifestly softened its attitude towards other Buddhist groups and since 1995 has been a member of the Network of Buddhist Organizations. Vice General Director Fujii, explained the reasons for this as follows:

Nichiren was very firm about not correct teaching. But he could get on with the people. We may have a debate in the future but the friendship with the people should be there. I think it is very important to have confidence in your belief and open dialogue. The two things go hand in hand. It may not lead anywhere but listening to one another. For example, we could help

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<sup>27</sup>Personal communication from J. C. Swain, the compiler of the Directory. 1 December 1994.

<sup>28</sup>The Director of INFORM, 1 June 1995.

<sup>29</sup>Both these terms appear in Dollarhide, *Nichiren's Shenji-shō*, in a chapter entitled, "The Three Calamities called the Nembutsu, Zen, and Shingon Sects" pp.86-105. Nichiren was very rude about other Japanese schools of Buddhism claiming, for example, that the Zen school is suitable for "young monks who are not inclined to study", and "prostitutes of the gay quarter" p.89.

<sup>30</sup>The aims were presented to the 20th SGI General Meeting in Hyogo, Kobe, on 17 October 1995 and are reproduced in SGI-UK *Bulletin* No 166, 27 October 1995. See page 157.

society or do something or have a conference. The teaching may not reach any agreement. At least we would know our differences...We can open our minds. It's up to them to judge it. But the point is we can open our minds. I must admit that at times we have been accused of being paranoid. We still have difficulty but we try our best. That's important.<sup>31</sup>

Another example of this change in attitude is that SGI officers participate in interfaith dialogue initiatives and at least one member, in the North of England, represents Buddhism on his local Interfaith group and on the Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education (SACRE).<sup>32</sup>

Presented here are the personal experience and attitudes of Bath group members. The tensions in their own understanding of the status of other religious paths, including other Buddhist paths are reflected in the changes made at organizational level.

All the local members to whom I have spoken express a respect for other religious paths although none of them claims to have much academic or experiential knowledge of any except for the past experience of several members of the Christian churches in which they were brought up. Several expressed a liking for Churches and said they feel happy to join in with the Christian activities of their families by sitting in Church chanting silently. For example, a local senior male leader, a former Catholic said,

It's a traditional thing to go to midnight mass. And I go. And I'll chant at the back of the church. It doesn't bother me.<sup>33</sup>

One woman who holds a leadership position in Bath is very positive towards

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<sup>31</sup>Interview, 30 March 1995.

<sup>32</sup>SGI 5, interview 8 April 1994 and see the account in *SGI-UK Bulletin* No.166 27 October 1995, p.3.

<sup>33</sup>SGI 1, interview 19 November 1993.

spiritualism and at a discussion meeting in February 1994 gave a detailed account of a vision experienced by a clairvoyant friend which the member equated with the account of the Treasure Tower rising out of the earth in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>34</sup> This member sees no contradiction between her Spiritualist beliefs and SGI Buddhism, although when urged by other members to send an account of this experience for possible inclusion in the organization's journal she felt hesitant about whether it would meet with the approval of the hierarchy. In spite of that she felt no personal contradiction between the two systems.

Members know, through reading SGI literature, that Nichiren was intolerant of other forms of Buddhism and this is problematic for some who instinctively regard Nichiren's uncompromising attitude as conflicting with the respect for the other which SGI teaches.

I feel that everybody believes what they believe for good reasons. I don't like saying to somebody, "you got it wrong," and that's what Nichiren Daishonin did. I sometimes think there could be an aspect of lack of compassion.<sup>35</sup>

Using the analogy of blind men touching different parts of an elephant, this member went on to say, when pressed, that in spite of her inclination to respect the views of others she does regard her chosen path as the *most* true,

...you get people coming round knocking on doors and I think "you've really got that wrong". On the other hand I accept that they believe what they believe in because of their experience of life. But I don't think it's a true representation of what life is. I think they may have aspects of it right but they haven't got the whole picture. I feel like maybe they've got the trunk right, or the foot, but they don't know they are looking at an elephant.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Chapter eleven, in Kumarajiva's version.

<sup>35</sup>SGI 6, interview 8 July 1994.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

Another member, a woman in her early thirties with a non-practising partner, expressed the same tension in her thinking about other beliefs and practices.

I have to sit on the fence because...I do believe that *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* is right for everybody, that it would work for everybody because everybody has Buddhahood and *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* brings out Buddhahood, so theoretically it must work. But because we are all different, you know, we have all made different causes, our karma is different, who am I to say that it is right for everybody? I'm not so sure.<sup>37</sup>

Most were more willing to express a negative view about other Buddhist schools than about other religions and they are familiar with the SGI teaching which understands Theravāda and other Māhayāna paths as provisional teachings superseded by the Lotus Sutra, as taught by Nichiren. There is a lack of accurate knowledge about other schools of Buddhism which members readily acknowledge. Even so when visitors or newcomers are present at meetings they do explain reasons why other forms of Buddhism are not as appropriate as SGI Buddhism. For example, at a discussion meeting in February 1994 a first time attender asked whether anyone had read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.<sup>38</sup> The answer given was that Zen is quite different from SGI Buddhism and that whereas SGI believes that enlightenment or Buddhahood are attainable in this life, Zen Buddhism, which was condemned by Nichiren, is about making better karma for the next life. The member said she thought Zen was a bit like Christianity in this respect.

Among members there is a degree of naivety about Buddhism in general terms; a feature which is not missing in other groups. But within SGI there is also a growing contingent of well informed members, many of whom have studied Buddhism or at least religions, at university level, and who are feeding into the organization their more structured knowledge of other religious paths. There is no doubt that these

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<sup>37</sup>SGI 4, interview 6 April 1994.

<sup>38</sup>Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1974).

members will eventually have an effect on the organization but on the question of historical elitist attitudes to Buddhism the solution is no clearer for those who are better informed. A local member who is a graduate in Religious Studies expressed her view in this way,

I accept that people have beliefs and need religions. I think we are all moving in a similar direction but I do think that Buddhism has got the right message, particularly SGI Buddhism, but it's a dilemma that I'm tackling at the present moment. Are we unique? I'm hopefully on the fence. I'm uncomfortable with holding that flag up. I think in Nichiren's time he probably had to. He had a lot of ammunition and a lot of targets but I wonder these days if we need to be so special.<sup>39</sup>

### **Symbol**

As we have seen SGI is not without its detractors, many of whom know little about the organization's history and philosophy. Direct criticism often results from sensationalist accounts presented in the media and the organization's symbol of prosperity, the Japanese funded mansion house and National Headquarters, Taplow Court, near Maidenhead in Buckinghamshire. The house is an overt reminder that this organization has access to a far greater level of funds than do others.<sup>40</sup> Other groups own properties, for example the NKT has purchased several large country houses, but none of them compares with the opulence of Taplow Court and none is situated in a prime residential area in the London commuter belt. Among members there are some who dislike the ostentation which Taplow Court represents and to some extent the dependent relationship with the Japanese parent organization of which it is a constant reminder.

As obvious a reminder of the wealth of the international organization Taplow Court

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<sup>39</sup>SGI 9, interview 2 October 1995.

<sup>40</sup>A small group from the many participants at the Network of Buddhist Organizations meeting held at Taplow Court in 1995 privately expressed the view that the house and its luxurious internal fittings suggest that the movement cannot be genuinely Buddhist in nature.

is, far more symbolic as a representation of the beliefs and practices of this group, is the *gohonzon*. This is not just because it is the object of worship but also because it was recently central to a debate within the organization following the mass excommunication of the lay movement by the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood. Members' understanding of what the *gohonzon* is, or what it represents, is not only important for understanding adaptation in this group but also for understanding the nature of members' perceptions of the whole basis of the practice.

In physical terms the *gohonzon* is a paper copy, produced by the most up to date photographic printing methods, of the mantra *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* embodied in the form of a mandala in which it is surrounded by the ten worlds of Tendai philosophy and the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, inscribed in Japanese. According to Nichiren Shōshū orthodoxy, all *gohonzon* derive from the original *gohonzon* inscribed by Nichiren on 12 October, 1279.<sup>41</sup> While Nichiren's mantra is available for anyone to use, the mandala is strictly controlled by the organization and copies are made available only when members have proven a degree of dedication to the practice and received a home visit to check that a suitable site is available on which to place the *butsudan*, the wooden cabinet which houses the paper scroll. *Gohonzon* are handed out to members<sup>42</sup> at ceremonial occasions which, before the split from the priestly lineage, were usually attended by a priest acting as proxy to the High Priest in his capacity as tantric initiator in the "blood lineage" of Nichiren.<sup>43</sup> After a member has received the *gohonzon* it is enshrined in the home *butsudan* by a senior leader at a ceremony (*okuri*) which requires careful ritual performance. Such is the reverence with which the scroll is treated

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<sup>41</sup>See Tomohira Matsuda ed. *A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms and Concepts* (Tokyo: Nichiren Shōshū International Centre, 1983) pp141-142 for a detailed description.

<sup>42</sup>On the ninth of June 1994 I attended such a ceremony, the first in Britain since the split with the priesthood, at which over fifty members stood in line to receive their *gohonzon* from the then Vice General Director of SGI Ricky Baines. Over 220 members from all over the country received *gohonzon* in four ceremonies performed over two days.

<sup>43</sup>See Bocking 'Of Priests, Protests and Protestant Buddhists', p121-122 on the High Priest as tantric initiator.

that those who handle it directly, are required to hold a leaf in their mouths in order to prevent the transfer on to it of droplets of saliva.

After the *gohonzon* has been enshrined the *butsudan* is opened only for the purpose of ritual practice and always with due attendant ceremony. If a member has to be away from home the *gohonzon* is carefully removed from the *butsudan*, wrapped for protection, and taken to another member's house so that it can be correctly cared for. Members who travel about the country on SGI business (or who were fortunate enough to be in Japan when the Japanese President Daisaku Ikeda chose to make a distribution), may also be given an *omamori gohonzon*; which so far as members are concerned are small versions of the *gohonzon* which may be worn around the neck<sup>44</sup> and are therefore very convenient when travelling or for group *gongyo* practice at an SGI social or cultural event held in a public place.

One of the most significant outcomes of the separation of SGI from the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood was that access to *gohonzon* was denied to SGI members by the High Priest, Nikken. This meant that for the three years which ended in June 1995, no *gohonzon* were issued to new members. Those who were waiting included a Bath member who had declined to accept a *gohonzon* at the last ceremony carried out under the auspices of the priesthood because she could not ensure its safety. This was a challenging time for the organization since the *gohonzon* was fundamental to practice as conceived by the organization. Murata has argued that the *Dai-gohonzon* enshrined at the Nichiren Shōshū Head Temple at Taiseki-ji, "is the chief basis of Nichiren Shoshu's claim to orthodoxy in the succession of Nichiren's teachings".<sup>45</sup>

In 1994 SGI was able to access a *gohonzon* enshrined at Joen-ji Temple which was now under the care of members of the priesthood who had seceded from Nikken at the time of the expulsion of the lay movement. The Joen-ji *gohonzon* had been

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<sup>44</sup>The usual interpretation of *omamori* within Japanese religions is that it is a protective amulet or charm often distributed at shrines and temples (See Brian Bocking, *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto* Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995, p138). Although *omamori gohonzon* are highly prized, British members do not understand them in this way.

<sup>45</sup> Kiyooki Murata, *Japan's New Buddhism*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1969), p18.

transcribed in 1720 by Nichikan, a High Priest who, appropriately for SGI, is often associated with reform. At this time the well-oiled organizational machine was set in action to reinterpret the significance of the inaccessible *Dai-gohonzon* at Taiseiki-ji and to reassure members who possessed Nikken transcribed *gohonzon* that it is not the High Priest who confers the power but Nichiren himself and the power of the mantra. The organization drew on the writings of Nichiren and of former High Priests to show that it is not necessary to have literal, physical access to the *Dai-gohonzon* in order to connect with its power.<sup>46</sup> In April 1994 the first Nichikan *gohonzon* were distributed and the British organization decided to replace the Nikken *gohonzon* at the two centres at Taplow and Richmond on Thames in keeping with other SGI centres throughout the world.<sup>47</sup> The attempt to reassure members about the authenticity of their personal copies of Nikken *gohonzon* failed partly because SGI saw fit to replace the two centre *gohonzon*, and subsequently all members who possessed Nikken *gohonzon* were given the opportunity to exchange them for the new version. By this time there was a considerable feeling of animosity towards Nikken which had been fuelled by SGI publications. One Bath member told me her 'Nikken *gohonzon*' had grown "smaller and smaller"<sup>48</sup> and another that she wanted nothing to do with "that man" or the *gohonzon* he had issued.<sup>49</sup> Inevitably this episode raised questions in members' minds about the nature of the *gohonzon* especially since for a considerable period it seemed that SGI might be denied acceptable access to new *gohonzon*.

Within the organization there are several interpretations of what the *gohonzon* is or what it represents. Shimazono has suggested that SGI has been successful in

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<sup>46</sup>For example, Nittatsu, the sixty sixth high priest is quoted in the *UK Express*, July 1994, in an attempt to show that direct access to the *Dai-Gohonzon* which had previously been presented as a basis of faith is not necessary: "Wherever the Gohonzon is enshrined, that place, in a broad sense, takes on the significance of the high sanctuary. The sincere daimoku you chant to that Gohonzon with a concentrated mind free of all erroneous thought is instantly received by the Dai-Gohonzon of The High Sanctuary of True Buddhism."

<sup>47</sup>*SGI-UK Bulletin* No.132, 1 April 1994.

<sup>48</sup>SGI 9, interview 2 October 1995.

<sup>49</sup>SGI 2, interview 31 January 1994.

transferring to other cultures because it presents a "straightforward magical practice".<sup>50</sup> However a straightforward magical practice is inevitably compromised when elements which are said to be essential to its operation are denied to practitioners. Changes in the availability of the *gohonzon* have led to a reassessment of its nature and this has caused members to reassess the source of the power on which the practice is based. A range of meanings is accepted and some members are challenged by the different interpretations.

I mean the gohonzon. That is another thing I don't really understand. I mean different high priests inscribed them and, like, why is it? What is the mystic thing? What is there to stop someone writing down *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* in Japanese and all these characters written there. I mean I don't understand it but I certainly... like, I would be very careful about what I chanted to. It's just a matter of faith that I believe in this, that I chant to a scroll. But I don't understand it.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most quoted passages from the translated letters of Nichiren (*goshō*) is from *The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon*<sup>52</sup>.

Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō.....The Gohonzon is found in faith alone.<sup>53</sup>

The *gohonzon* is often described as a mirror which reflects back the practitioner's true nature.

The reason why it is mystic is not because it is magical but because it is very

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<sup>50</sup>Susumu Shimazono, 'The Expansion of Japan's New Religions into Foreign Cultures', in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol 18, Nos. 2-3, 1991.

<sup>51</sup>SGI 4, interview 6 April 1994.

<sup>52</sup>Published in, *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Volume 1 (Tokyo: Nichiren Shōshū International Centre, 1979).

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.213.

hard to put into words. There's an element about it that's very hard to quantify. Yes it's a... it acts as a mirror in a way. You'll always hear different people describe their *gohonzon* in different ways.<sup>54</sup>

Interpretations of the nature of the *gohonzon* presented in the movement's literature range between a symbolic representation of what is already latent within an individual and which needs to be activated and an object which has its own intrinsic power.<sup>55</sup> The linking feature is the faith which a member must have in both the practice of chanting and the object of worship to which she chants. Both interpretations of the nature of the *gohonzon* are held in tension in members' understanding; a tension illustrated by the fact that although attracted to the idea that the *gohonzon* is internal and not 'outside' or 'other' many were also distressed by the idea that their personal *gohonzon* had been transcribed by a discredited High Priest.

A supplement to the *Bulletin*, which tried to address these concerns, was made available to all British members in April 1994. In it the SGI-UK General Director reminded members that the power of the *gohonzon* is in the relationship between the mandala and the practice.

Buddhism teaches the principle of the four powers: the first two are the powers of the Buddha and the Law, which are infinite and are embodied in the Gohonzon; the extent to which they are manifested in our lives depends on the extent to which we bring out our powers of faith and practice. Therefore, we will naturally see actual proof of the power of the Gohonzon in our lives when we chant daimoku before it....It therefore does not matter which kind of Gohonzon you have, as long as it is a replica of the Dai-Gohonzon which Nichiren Daishonin inscribed for all mankind.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>SGI 3, interview 24 February 1994.

<sup>55</sup>The word mandala is not used by SGI members.

<sup>56</sup>Richard Causton, *SGI-UK Bulletin Special Supplement*, April 1994.

While the idea that the *gohonzon* is at one level a reflection of innate or potential Buddhahood is attractive, the intrinsic power of the *gohonzon* is also acknowledged. Part of this is its power to enhance practice,

...not only is it a mirror but there is something very mystical and powerful about chanting to it. About how it brings...brings things out for you from within...It's very strong and it's very powerful. I mean the main power is actually in *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* anyway and when you are faced with a focus and the *gohonzon* to actually chant to, you are chanting to *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* when you are chanting *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō*. When you are chanting to a blank wall you are chanting *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* but its not... it's almost a physical thing. It's harder to actually bring out. I mean the things that actually happened in my life after I got my *gohonzon* are nobody's business. It's like things really moved and I don't think it was because it's magical but because of the combination of having that focus.<sup>57</sup>

Kazuo Fujii, Vice General Director of SGI-UK summed up the need to balance the power of personal faith and practice and the power of the symbol and its regulation, in this way:

From the viewpoint of Buddhist teachings four types of power exist. Two types are, the power of faith and the power of practice, which the believer has, the power of Buddha and the power of the Law. Without the power of faith and the power of practice, the power of Buddha and the power of the Law remain inactive; they cannot be activated. So for example if someone made a photocopy of the Gohonzon and then enshrined it, it is questionable; his power of faith and power of practice. I cannot say he has not the power of faith and the power of practice. Say if in Iceland someone was going away to the North and I didn't know anything about regulation. Out of compassion if I happened to have a photocopier available I made a photocopy and gave it to him. He is totally innocent. If he chanted and practised I'm sure it would work. If you like it's in order to control, in a sense like copyright we

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<sup>57</sup>SGI 3, interview 24 February 1994.

decided to issue only through authority.<sup>58</sup>

It is clear from the above that the confusion of members about the role and nature of the *gohonzon* reflects an ongoing attempt within the organization to clarify the precise status of this symbolic representation.

### Doctrines

The doctrines of SGI are readily available to members and also to outsiders in the publications which the movement produces.<sup>59</sup> Doctrine is based on the teaching of Nichiren whose unique doctrinal contribution was that repetition of the name and content of the Lotus Sūtra was and is the only worthwhile practice for the age of *mappō*. The Lotus Sūtra is revered as the last teaching of the Buddha and the only teaching which is complete. This is the most important SGI doctrine because it is the basis of practice. Other doctrine derives from the T'ien T'ai/Tendai school, for example, the doctrine of the ten worlds which teaches that an individual may live in any one of ten life states in each moment. These states range from hell to Buddhahood. Each state encompasses all the others so that even when a member is experiencing one of the lower states, the potential for Buddhahood is still inherent within that. The aim of practice is to experience Buddhahood at all times. There is a degree of further interpretation of doctrine as it filters through the organization some of which is based on a rather loose conflation of SGI teaching and modern western notions of self. For example, at a discussion meeting on 26 January 1994 one member talked about her 'intuition'. The others asked her if she meant her Buddhahood and the ensuing discussion showed that they would also have been happy with the term 'self'.

The Ten Worlds Doctrine is frequently referred to in meetings. Within SGI literature it is developed into the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen* or '3,000 realms in a moment of life'. This doctrine connects individual lives (in their ten states each of

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<sup>58</sup>Kazuo Fujii, interview 30 March 1995.

<sup>59</sup>See in particular, Richard Causton, *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism*, (London: Rider, 1988), which was reissued as, *The Buddha in Daily Life* (London: Rider, 1995) following the split with Nichiren Shōshū.

which contains all the other ten states), with society and land, and also with the ten factors of life such as appearance, nature, entity, inherent and external causes and latent and manifest effects. By multiplying together all the possible life states of individuals, land and society, the figure of 3,000 is reached. This doctrine connects everything in the phenomenal and non-phenomenal world and explains why no thought or action is taken in isolation.

Although some members may be aware of the detail of *ichinen sanzen* doctrinal explanations given at meetings usually stop short of this level of complexity and I have no evidence which would lead me to think that the majority of members understand for example latent and manifest effects. The doctrine is not usually taught separately from the law of cause and effect which SGI teaches. Members are encouraged that good causes created now will lead to greater experience of higher lifestates in the future. Causality is, more often than not, presented with a positive emphasis on changing karma for the future and SGI interpretation of doctrine always comes back to the idea that the best possible cause is the practice of chanting *nam myōhō-renge-kyō*. This is neatly summed up in the following affirmation made by a local men's division leader:

You see I think that most people look to the truth as being some kind of transcendental, almost escape from this life; this mundane life. And Buddhism is not an escape it's absolute reality. So when you say the truth, well the truth is reality; the reality of life, this is heaven, this is hell, you know. You can experience both here and you have a lot of control over what you experience if you accept that first.<sup>60</sup>

### **Practices**

Causton has described the three 'essential' practices of SGI Buddhism as follows:

There are three essential aspects to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism: *faith*, which means to determine to attain enlightenment through practising to the Gohonzon for the whole of one's life; *practice* for oneself and others, which

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<sup>60</sup>SGI 1, interview 19 November 1994.

means to perform *gongyo* twice a day and to chant *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* 'to your heart's content', while making efforts to teach others about this Buddhism and to work for their fundamental happiness, whether they practise Buddhism or not; and *study*, which means to read and try to understand the profundity of the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.<sup>61</sup>

While the notion that there are 'essential' practices does not change, over time the constituents of these essentials do. In 1991, for example, before the ex-communication of the lay movement from the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood the *U K Express* published an article which began with the words:

What is the correct practice in the Latter Day of the Law? It boils down to nothing other than doing *gongyo*, chanting *daimoku*, and doing *shakubuku*.<sup>62</sup>

Faith is not absent from the essentials because it is integral to *gongyo* and chanting practice, as we shall see. Study does not figure here as an essential practice although it has always been central to SGI and formerly to NSUK.<sup>63</sup> Of more interest is the inclusion in this version of *shakubuku* which no longer receives the same emphasis in the organization partly because of the new attitude which it has to other religions and other forms of Buddhism and partly because this kind of aggressive proselytising is unpopular and ineffective. This account is based on the three practices identified as essential by Causton. They are dealt with here in reverse order since an explanation of faith in this context depends on practice and study.

### Study

There is a formal study programme in operation in Britain which has been established at national level and which operates within chapters. A two year rolling

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<sup>61</sup>Causton, *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism*, p243, original emphases.

<sup>62</sup>*U K Express*, No.244, October 1991, p22.

<sup>63</sup>NSUK stands for Nichiren Shōshū of the United Kingdom - the name of the British organization before the ex-communication.

study curriculum was drawn up by a study committee and based on the content of twenty four *goshō*.<sup>64</sup> Every month a *goshō* excerpt is published in the *UK Express* along with a commentary which points to features which the movement wishes to emphasize. This has the effect of constantly reaffirming the fundamental teachings which SGI wishes to put across and has the benefit of introducing new members to important doctrines. This system provides a unifying element for the national organization since all chapters study the same *goshō* in any given month and also an element of control over the reading which members undertake. If a particular aspect of Nichiren's teaching requires reinforcement due to prevailing circumstances the opportunity is there to allow this to happen. Members may become study lecturers by understudying a qualified lecturer for two years and passing an exam.<sup>65</sup> They may then present the monthly *goshō* at study meetings.

Although study is encouraged the majority of members to whom I have spoken admit that their personal study is not as good as they would like it to be. Wilson and Dobbelaere have argued that because of the lack of an ethical code within the organization "there is no place for guilt"<sup>66</sup> and in theory this is the case since members regard themselves as free to take responsibility for their own lives and actions, however in the matter of study and other practices many members do seem to feel guilty that they do not make sufficient effort and many apologised for their lack of structured knowledge.<sup>67</sup>

Members read the *UK Express* and attend chapter study meetings where they chant evening *gongyo* together and then read and discuss the *goshō*. Since none of the Bath group members is qualified to give lectures, each month a lecturer from a nearby group attends these meetings. Lectures are always based on the *goshō* text

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<sup>64</sup>Kazuo Fujii, interview 30 March 1995.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Wilson and Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant*, p32.

<sup>67</sup>This view was endorsed by Vice General Director, Kazuo Fujii (interview 30 March 1995) who commented that British members are also prone to feeling guilty about missing practice whereas, due to cultural differences, this is uncommon among Japanese members.

and the usual pattern is first to read the text aloud followed by discussion of its content. Commentary in the *UK Express* often contextualises the *goshō* and offers explanations of unfamiliar terms. On occasion, when Nichiren's words seem uncompromising in comparison with members' understanding of what is required of them, those words are given a liberal interpretation. For example, the study lecture given on 2 March 1994 was based on the *goshō*, *The Three Kinds of Treasure*<sup>68</sup> in which Nichiren wrote to his loyal disciple Shijo Kingo:

If you should fall into hell for some grave offence, no matter how Shakyamuni might urge me to become a Buddha, I would refuse; I would rather go to hell with you. For if you and I should fall into hell together, we would find Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra there. It would be like the moon illuminating darkness, like cold water pouring into hot, like fire melting ice, or like the sun dispelling the darkness. But if you depart from my advice even slightly, then do not blame me for what may happen.<sup>69</sup>

The written commentary in the *UK Express* interprets the passage to refer to the ten worlds doctrine:

Underlying the Daishonin's conviction is the principle of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds. As each of the Ten Worlds contains the other nine, so Buddhahood exists even in the extreme sufferings of hell. We have the power through chanting sincere daimoku, to change our attitude to the causes of our suffering and so release ourselves from the suffering itself.<sup>70</sup>

Characteristically this interpretation brings readers back to the need to chant to raise their lifestates.

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<sup>68</sup>Nichiren, *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol.2 (Tokyo: Nichiren Shōshū, 1981) pp.278-281, quoted in *UK Express* No.272, February 1994.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p28.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, p32.

When the passage was discussed at chapter study the sentence, "But if you depart from my advice even slightly, then do not blame me for what might happen," was problematic because of its suggestion of 'dogmatic' adherence to the form of practice. Members therefore interpreted this to mean that they could miss *gongyo* for a day provided they adhere to the principles behind the practice. They avoided the question of how they might interpret slight departure from the principles behind the practice.

Most study meetings follow this kind of interpretive line and serve to reemphasize basic teachings: the importance of chanting; the need for respect for self and others; the promise of benefits for those who follow SGI Buddhism. These interpretations are usually qualified by the view that sincerity is more important than strict adherence to form. Lectures always include an element of personal testimony which may on occasion dominate so that members often leave a meeting inspired but without having increased their knowledge of doctrinal issues. The organization itself acknowledges that 'study' for SGI bears little resemblance to academic study since it serves a different purpose.<sup>71</sup> It is also very different from 'study' as understood by the NKT where students are encouraged to commit the teachings to memory. Its most important purpose seems to be to reemphasize the movement's aims and allow an opportunity for affirming the benefits of *gongyo* practice.

There is sometimes a tension between members' desires to express their own opinions and the content of a given study lecture. At a meeting in July 1994 discussion became very speculative and the lecturer called attention back to the content of the *gosho*. One member asked why they could not allow the discussion to take its own course and was told that there is no benefit in speculation but only in going back to what Nichiren taught. There is some discontent among members, including some of those connected with the Bath group, about the quality of chapter study. Many would like to see a more rigorous approach to the general study programme. Others would welcome the reintroduction of a more advanced

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<sup>71</sup>Causton, *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism*, p265. Also quoted in Wilson and Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant* p18.

programme<sup>72</sup> which might include information on other schools of Buddhism. As SGI comes increasingly into contact with other Buddhist groups this may become more attractive. Members who are serious about their interest in wider issues within Buddhism are able to attend lectures under the auspices of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy - European Centre which has welcomed several academics to Taplow over recent years. Most of these are experts in fields other than Nichiren Buddhism.

One such lecture addressed the role of women as portrayed in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>73</sup> The lecturer, who had expected to address an expert audience, was surprised to find that SGI does not encourage direct study of the Lotus Sutra. The reason given for this is that,

...the study of the Lotus Sutra is unnecessary for us to deepen our faith and help us attain Buddhahood in this lifetime. Rather, it should be studied only once we have been able to master Nichiren Daishonin's teachings and can thus view the Lotus Sutra from the correct historical perspective.<sup>74</sup>

Most members, including those in Japan, have no interest in the content of the Lotus Sūtra and are happy to chant two of its chapters in Sino-Japanese without understanding their content. Bath group members were surprised to hear that English translations are readily available from High Street bookshops. This in spite of the fact that SGI owns the copyright on a new translation published in 1993.<sup>75</sup> The aim of study within the movement is to deepen faith. Unless a focus of study fulfils that end it is unlikely to be encouraged.

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<sup>72</sup>Advanced study was discontinued because the leadership considered it led to disrespect for Chapter Study and that it did not help to deepen faith. (Kazuo Fujii, interview 30 March 1995).

<sup>73</sup>Rebecca Clare, 22 October 1994.

<sup>74</sup>*UK Express*, No.233, Nov 1990.

<sup>75</sup>Burton Watson (trans.) *The Lotus Sutra*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

## *Gongyo*

*Gongyo* is the formalized repetition of the Hōben and Juryo chapters of the Lotus sutra and includes prayers of appreciation to: the *Shoten Zenjin*, the guardian deities of Buddhism; the *Dai-Gohonzon*; Nichiren and the High Priests in his lineage as well as prayers for the attainment of *Kosen Rufu* and for the deceased. An integral part of *gongyo* is *daimoku* the repetition of the mantra, *nam-myōhō-rence-kyō* which may also be practised outside of or instead of *gongyo*. Members are advised to perform *gongyo* in front of the *gohonzon* every morning and evening, the form for both being slightly different. The member starts to chant *nam-myōhō-rence-kyō* while lighting candles which represent Buddha's wisdom and the inherent wisdom to perceive innate Buddhahood, and incense, representing the essence of Buddha's life, or innate Buddhahood itself.<sup>76</sup> The *butsudan* is opened and the member then kneels or sits in front of the *gohonzon* holding prayer beads (*juzu*) which are periodically rubbed together. The form of the beads, which are manufactured according to a design exclusive to Nichiren Buddhism may be explained in detail although members are advised they should not, "...get absorbed in the symbolism of the beads" or constrain themselves "with the external formalities of *gongyo* and chanting".<sup>77</sup> Most members also follow the liturgy in a small *gongyo* book which they keep, with the beads, wrapped in a decorative cloth (*fukuson*).

Within the context of Buddhist tradition *nam-myōhō-rence-kyō* represents a tantric transformatory mantra for which the sound itself, regardless of its meaning, is sacred and intrinsically powerful. Indeed Nichiren claimed that scholars who argued the view that there is no value in reciting *nam-myōhō-rence-kyō* with faith but without understanding the meaning "will be unable to avoid the deepest hells".<sup>78</sup> British members who chant *nam-myōhō-rence-kyō* are however unhappy with the description of the mantra as 'magical' and prefer to attempt a more rational

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<sup>76</sup>*UK Express*, October 1994.

<sup>77</sup>Masuko Forsythe, 'What is the significance of the prayer beads?' in *UK Express*, July 1994, p35.

<sup>78</sup>Laurel Rasplica Rodd, *Nichiren: Selected Writings*, (Hawaii:University of Hawaii, 1980) p83.

explanation. The effort behind the chanting is often valued above the sound as illustrated by the following comment made by the lecturer at a Bath study meeting in July 1994.

It is more important for each *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* to count than to sit there for hours and hours.

This is similar to the attitudes expressed towards the *gohonzon*, the physical embodiment of the mantra. The power of chanting is acknowledged but members are unclear about the source of that power; whether it resides in the mantra itself or within the life of the individual.

...it all comes back to you, I think. It's something I'm still debating with myself...When I was first chanting people would say, "what is it?", "is it magic?" and I would say, dutifully, "well, no it's not magic" and then I would think well, what is it if it's not magic? And then I gradually realised that it's commitment. The words *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* actually contain all you need to attain enlightenment.<sup>79</sup>

One local leader said: "people can do a lot of *daimoku* and not change their life".<sup>80</sup> Real change or Human Revolution,<sup>81</sup> she said, "comes from using the practice to challenge your life"<sup>82</sup>. She seemed to me to be referring to concepts analogous to calming and insight meditation and when asked a leading question about whether this was the case interpreted the question in the following way:

I think you have to do both to do human revolution. Chanting to calm your mind can't do that, because you haven't got an intent to get insight. Now

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<sup>79</sup>SGI 9, interview October 1995.

<sup>80</sup>SGI 10, interview 28 April 1996.

<sup>81</sup>According to the Glossary in the back of each issue of the *U K Express*, Human Revolution is, "The concept that a profound change in the depths of an individual's life effects a change in the social and natural environment."

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

often you will get insight anyway because you have calmed your mind...I personally feel if I have an aim or direction it enables me to bring more out. So for me, chanting to have insight has more power.<sup>83</sup>

Members use *daimoku* as a technique through which to enrich and empower their lives as the following interview excerpts illustrate:

...there is something very special about ritualistically giving something to yourself, giving yourself that space. You can go and lie down and say, I am giving myself ten minutes but it isn't giving to yourself in the same sense. It's not feeding your spirit in the same way. And this is really making it absolutely conscious. There's nothing... it can't be anything but conscious because of the ritual involved in it.<sup>84</sup>

In a sense I don't need to be able to explain it I simply get up in the morning and with almost one hundred percent constancy, I set aside an hour in the morning, between six thirty and seven thirty and I do *gongyo* and chant for half an hour. And that sets me up, not just for the day, but as an ongoing thing, as part of my life. And I just feel that when I do that, and because I do that, I do what I do as a teacher with more respect and much more effectively. I am empowered if you like....I can't prove it to anyone else but I don't think I need to. To my own satisfaction I know it works for me. At the very bottom line that is all I need to say about it.<sup>85</sup>

Members are encouraged to do 'good' *gongyo*, which usually means getting the pronunciation accurate and some express like or dislike for the public *gongyo* performed by leaders. Even so experienced practitioners often admit that they "tend to rattle through it".<sup>86</sup> Recent 'guidance' from Ikeda has removed the emphasis on

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>SGI 3, interview 24 February 1994.

<sup>85</sup>SGI 5, interview 8 April 1994.

<sup>86</sup>SGI 4, interview 6 April 1994.

strict adherence to twice daily *gongyo* and many members affirm that the organization is not as strict as it used to be.

Just because you chant today it doesn't mean that you're a Buddhist tomorrow. You know, you can wake up tomorrow and think I don't want to chant today. I just don't feel like doing it. There's no guilt. There's no like, "oh my god I didn't chant today," you know. So it's not like a conditioning or a brain washing or anything like that.<sup>87</sup>

### Faith

Faith is the third fundamental practice of SGI and is thought to be the *most* fundamental since it gives rise to practice and study which in turn serve to deepen members' faith<sup>88</sup>. In this SGI resonates strongly with NKT practice since in both organizations faith is acknowledged as essential and plays a part in a circular logic in which each element reinforces the others. Many of Nichiren's letters address the subject of faith and he exhorts his disciples to deepen their faith through practice. For example:

The Gohonzon is found in faith alone. As the sutra states, "only in faith can one enter Buddhahood".<sup>89</sup>

As we have seen members often find it hard to express faith in something which is outside themselves, a position which may be supported by Nichiren's writings.<sup>90</sup> Faith in the *gohonzon*, or in *daimoku* is bound up with faith in the potential for Buddhahood. Since faith in SGI always implies activity, in expressing faith members affirm their own potential as well as the practices they do.

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<sup>87</sup>SGI 1, interview 19 November 1993

<sup>88</sup>See the entry on faith in, *A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms and Concepts*, p.91.

<sup>89</sup>'The Real Aspect of the *Gohonzon*' in *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* vol.1 p213

<sup>90</sup>See page 129.

Nichiren also recognized that sustaining faith is difficult<sup>91</sup> since the practice attracts a degree of adversity and requires faithfulness as well as affirmation through experience. Many of his writings are inspirational and promise benefits regardless of circumstances. For example:

Even if the earth were to be flipped away with a finger, if there were someone who could link the heavens, or if the tides should cease to ebb and flow or the sun cease to rise in the west, it could never happen that a prayer of a votary of the Lotus Sutra would go unanswered.<sup>92</sup>

This passage was discussed with joy and excitement at a Headquarters Course at Taplow Court in November 1994.

One proof of the practice that members look for is benefits in their own lives and in the lives of others. The many 'experiences' recounted in the organization's publications and at meetings attest to the importance of this kind of affirmation. However there are members who do not see the results they are looking for in spite of regular and sustained chanting. In order to continue with the practice such members must rationalize the lack of expected results and they often do this by questioning the depth of their faith or the sincerity of their practice.

### **Experience**

The ultimate purpose of practising SGI Buddhism is increasingly to experience life in a state of Buddhahood and members aim to move toward this. More immediate concerns are however usually more pressing. The movement has a reputation for promoting the view that members can chant for material benefits. Although this is often seen by members to be a subsidiary aim most have at some time chanted with the purpose of attaining a particular benefit for example a house, a job or a

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<sup>91</sup>See for example the *goshō* 'The difficulty of Sustaining Faith', in *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Nichiren Shoshu International Centre, 1979) pp.127-129.

<sup>92</sup>*Goshō Zenshu* p.1351. This *Goshō* had not been fully translated at the time of the meeting. A new translation has now been published as 'On Prayer', in Vol.7, p.46

successful relationship. Most material benefits members have chanted for would not normally be regarded as luxury items in this culture.

Members report that they do not always get benefits in the way they expect them. For example one member who was living with high levels of work related stress chanted for the same money with fewer working hours. What she got was a job which she disliked but which did indeed provide her with the same income and required her to work eighteen to twenty four hour shifts which added up to fewer hours over a week. Her advice to those listening to her 'experience' was to be specific when approaching the *gohonzon* for benefits. Another member confirmed that there is never anything to lose by chanting even though the benefits may not be exactly as anticipated:

A typical young women's division thing is, "if I chant to get married then it might turn out not to be Johnny who I think I'm in love with". But you always win in the end you know, you don't lose out. I mean why do we chant for successful careers, big cars and big houses? Because we think that makes us happy and the thing is you get what makes you happy. So when you start on your...to sort of challenge that point, you start on your quest to get a big house say, you might actually end up somewhere else but you know why and you're happier. You realise then with hindsight that you're happier with not having that.

Bruce has argued that members' readiness to interpret the results of chanting in this flexible way has allowed the movement to endure in spite of the apparent failure of the practice to fulfil its promises in respect of specific goals. He writes,

To put it rather harshly, movements which promise empowerment often actually deliver acceptance of the status quo.<sup>93</sup>

All SGI events incorporate listening to accounts of the experiences of others. At

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<sup>93</sup>Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p101.

monthly discussion meetings members often recount the benefits they believe they have received from chanting. In January 1994 most of those who attended the Bath group meeting gave such accounts. There was nothing remarkable in these achievements which may have been matched by any group of people intent on presenting a positive account of life. One young woman reported that in the past she had never tried really hard to do something in case she failed but that the year before she had worked really hard on a piece of work and had succeeded. Another young woman had extricated herself from a bad relationship and felt sufficiently confident in herself to turn down two offers of work she did not really want to do. One member had moved house and had realised that she had been storing up a lot of anger in her life as a result of a childhood experience and another thought she had 'grown more inwardly'. Another had turned down the chance of promotion and opted for a more supportive role at her workplace and at the same time had let her work colleagues know that she is a Buddhist.

Members also report that positive changes are recognized by their friends.

I have friends who turn round to me now and say, "I don't know how you manage; how you still manage to be reasonably bright and cheerful and caring. How do you manage to do all that and still have gone through what you've gone through?" And I don't think it's me. It's having had this aspect of my life that has made it possible. It's not that I'm any great person. It's not that I'm so fabulous as a human being. I think I am a good human being. I work hard at trying to be honest with myself but you know what I mean. I think it's having that spiritual aspect to your life that's so important I really do and it's given me enormous support.<sup>94</sup>

Regardless of the results which members have achieved and the motivation which they have, the benefit is thought to be intrinsic in the relationship between the practitioner and the practice. Or as one member put it:

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<sup>94</sup>SGI 3, interview 24 February 1994.

It doesn't matter why you chant, what matters is that you chant.<sup>95</sup>

## Ethics

SGI is an exclusively lay Buddhist organization and as such has no need of a monastic code. As we have already seen one of the attractions of SGI teachings is that in following its interpretation of the teaching of Nichiren there is no need for such guidelines.

Unlike in the provisional teachings, where people follow a teacher to uphold the precepts, simply having faith in this Lotus Sutra itself is upholding the precepts.<sup>96</sup>

Wilson and Dobbelaere found that the lack of moral constraint in the form of rules acts as an attraction to potential converts.

The moral freedom of members appealed to some, and the fact that in this age-the last age of *mappō*-Nichiren Buddhism taught that moral rules were set aside as individuals took responsibility for themselves, thus endowing the movement with a spirit of toleration and permissiveness unusual in religious bodies.<sup>97</sup>

Nichiren taught three great secret laws or mysteries, the *gohonzon*, *daimoku* and *kaidan*. *Kaidan* is the place where the moral precepts upon which all Buddhist practice is built are received. Since the physical body partakes of Buddhature it is the *kaidan* and the moral law which it receives is completely contained in *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*.

Freedom from a code of conduct allows members to take responsibility for the ethical rules by which they live. This does not mean that unethical behaviour is

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<sup>95</sup>SGI 9, interview 2 October 1995.

<sup>96</sup>Nichiren, *Gosho Zenshu*, quoted in *UK Express* July 1994, p33.

<sup>97</sup>Wilson and Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant*, p.57.

encouraged or condoned by the organization or that SGI notions of right moral conduct are not compatible with cultural norms or for example the five lay precepts of the *vinaya*. Indeed part of members' reported experience is that chanting leads to moral behaviour even when an attempt is made to leave behind Christian notions of what is acceptable. This is because chanting is thought to heighten awareness of the needs of others and also of the real connection which exists between causes and their effects. A leader in the men's division, a man in his forties, divorced with two children in his care gave the following account of his experience of this process:

The only rule is to chant. Chanting can make the right causes to create value. Sometimes I feel that that's not compatible with a Christian upbringing. For example, you could chant to have a casual relationship with someone if that's what you felt you needed at the time and nobody is going to get hurt. Which we have all done, you know, a physical thing. And well that would be looked upon as being, well a bit naughty, if you are a Catholic, you know.... But then at some point...that leads you to look deeper into like the faith aspect. You can chant for material things but if that's all you chant about, in the end you become...you don't grow as a human being, you don't maintain the Buddhahood state; it becomes a selfish thing..... you chant to meet girlfriends then when you start realising that actually after a while you're making really bad causes by disrespecting them and then you meet someone you really like and they disrespect you and you think, well why is this? You see that connection then you've got to observe it. But that's not somebody saying to you you've got to respect the rules.

Without even lay precepts members become responsible for observing individually how certain actions lead to benefit for self and others and that the converse is also true. Respect is a key term within the organization. Members are encouraged to respect self and others "with your whole life"<sup>98</sup>. The polarity between respect and disrespect represents a standard against which to make individual judgments about whether attitudes and actions are moral or immoral. In contrast with the other Buddhist groups in this study, SGI members are free to interpret this teaching. SGI

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<sup>98</sup>*U K Express*, No 276, June 1994, p36.

gatherings have a far freer atmosphere than the other groups. One example of their public face is that many members have a tolerant attitude to alcohol and tobacco. So much so that a group at a Headquarters Course at Taplow Court were prompted to refer to themselves when smoking between sessions as members of "*Smoker Gakkai*".

Another outcome of this lack of monastic or preceptive recognition is that certain *goshō* passages have been freely interpreted. For example former General Director of SGI-UK Dick Causton produced a commentary on, *The Twenty-Six Warnings of Second High Priest Nikko Shonin* in May 1994. The fifth warning reads:

You should refrain from indulging in poetry or non-Buddhist works, or from engaging in idleness and chatter without [having the aim of] rebuking slander.<sup>99</sup>

Causton interpreted this as follows:

This sounds very quaint in these times, but we should remember that this is guidance for priests and monks living in medieval times. It doesn't mean that today, as laymen and women, we cannot go out and enjoy ourselves.<sup>100</sup>

Again this is not presented as a licence to behave without restraint since the advice is qualified as follows:

If we live for *kosen-rufu* we can gain value from everything we do - and enjoy ourselves, too.<sup>101</sup>

Causton went on in this passage to use the Twenty-Six Warnings as evidence of the corruption of the Nichiren Shōshū priests who, he claims, should be observing the

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<sup>99</sup>*UK Express* No.275, May 1994, p35.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*

warnings literally. This serves as a reminder of the contrast between the proper roles of the priests and the laity as perceived by the British branch of SGI. The practice is equally available and efficacious for both groups but while lay members are able to make their own decisions, based on their practice, about what is right behaviour, priests are constrained by their role; a role which, in the view of SGI, carries little in terms of compensatory benefit and can in any case be largely circumvented.

In spite of the movement's freedom from precepts<sup>102</sup> it does make use of a concept which comes from the form of *vinaya* passed to the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood via the Tendai school. *Zuihō Bini* is defined by the organization as:

Adapting precepts to the locality. A phrase appearing in *Gobun Ritsu*, the *vinaya* or monastic rules of the Mahishāsaka school. In matters in which the Buddha did not expressly permit or forbid, one may act in accordance with local custom, provided the fundamental spirit of Buddhism is not violated.<sup>103</sup>

Although *zuihō bini* formally refers to *vinaya* rules, in particular to instances where the Buddha has not prohibited certain actions, in other words, to correct *ethical* behaviour, Nichiren Shōshū and SGI, for whom ethical behaviour is not prioritized, use the concept to refer to the adaptation of *practice* to suit the circumstances of a new location. *Zuihō bini* is not invoked with reference to specific adaptations but is used instead to legitimate flexibility,

...the principle of *zuiho bini* can...be applied to districts, areas, groups - even individuals. Thus, the time we do morning gongyo, say, or how much *daimoku* we chant, is also an expression of *zuiho bini*, since in this very small

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<sup>102</sup> Gombrich has suggested that no form of Japanese Buddhism, with the exception of the Ritsu school observes the *vinaya* and that Japanese Buddhism lays more emphasis on ritual than on ethics. 'A Buddhologist's Impression of Japanese Buddhism', in *Japanese New Religions in the West*, pp22/23.

<sup>103</sup> Matsuda, *A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms and Concepts*, p.520.

way we are adapting the precept to our own individual or 'local' circumstances.<sup>104</sup>

## Gender

Nichiren taught a universalist practice which is available to anyone, regardless of gender. In the *Hokke Daimokushō*<sup>105</sup> he confirmed that the Lotus Sutra is so powerful that it is effective even for women. This does not mean that Nichiren regarded women to be identical, in their existing state, to men. Within the same text he refers to descriptions of the nature of women from other sūtras which describe women as "inconstant as water" and by nature "unsteady".<sup>106</sup>

Just as they were in thirteenth century Japan, religious teachings are still embedded in organizations which even though they may accept universality of salvation and the universality of practice, as this one does, usually distinguish between social roles appropriate for men and women and also their 'spiritual' status. SGI is regarded by some as patriarchal because of the perception that its structure is dominated by men although one Bath member claimed that, "the whole thing is kept going by women".<sup>107</sup> The Japanese parent organization is male dominated in keeping with Japanese cultural norms however apart from the three most senior British leaders SGI-UK women are represented at all leadership levels, including the Central Committee, on the same basis as men since representation is through the four divisional groups which, reflecting Japanese practice, are established on gender lines. Indeed due to the vagaries of positions in the organization overall there were marginally more women than men on the committee during 1995.

Apart from the organizational hierarchy there are other factors which because they distinguish separate gender roles distract women from contentment about the universality of the practice. Until very recently, for example, it was common for a

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<sup>104</sup>*U K Express*, No.220, October 1989 p9.

<sup>105</sup>Rasplika Rodd, *Nichiren: Selected Writings*, p89.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, p89.

<sup>107</sup>SGI 2, interview 31 January 1994.

'family *gohonzon*' to be formally accepted by the male partner.

When I received *gohonzon* a friend, a married couple, were receiving *gohonzon* for their family, so they were receiving one *gohonzon* between them. He had to sign for it although she was allowed to receive it and that really bothered me. I couldn't see the necessity for that and only recently that's changed because the British members objected strongly... My fellow chapter leader, male chapter leader and his wife ...had opted to change their *Gohonzon* and went to receive it and only agreed to receive it on the condition that they could do it as a couple. ...So they both signed and they both went up to receive it.<sup>108</sup>

Part of the ongoing reassessment of the organizational structure concerns the appropriateness of the gender divisions.

Comments with regard to gender which emanate from Japan often reflect the view that women grace an SGI gathering with their special womanly qualities.

The opinions of women are full of truth. It is indeed by respecting the pure faith and sensitivity inherent in women that we can advance the kosen-rufu movement along the right path.<sup>109</sup>

Young Women are encouraged to join the Lilac group in which one of their roles is to act as hostesses at gatherings; to serve refreshments; hold open doors and ensure that everyone is comfortable. The Lilac group was named by President Ikeda at lilac blossom time in 1974 at the request of a group of young women who had been carrying out these duties and wished to regularise this service. The Lilacs are now required to wear a very feminine and extremely unpopular uniform to perform these duties. The Young Men also don a uniform and act as VCGs, (Value Creating Group). The names suggest that the women are decorative and fragrant.

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<sup>108</sup>SGI 9, interview 2 October 1995.

<sup>109</sup>SGI-UK *Bulletin*, 29 April 1994.

like lilac blossom, while the men create value. Typically the VCGs take on the more traditionally masculine tasks of putting out chairs or directing traffic. Several Lilacs to whom I have spoken could see the sense in the gender division of labour. A common response to my questions about gender stereotyping was a laugh and the comment, "you should speak to...she gets cross about these things". Several Young Women told me they hate their Lilac duties, especially lighting the candles for *gongyo*, which has to be performed in a very specific way with immaculate timing, but a common response is also that they could see how such duties had helped them in their practice. The uncompromising Headquarters Women's leader for Bath commented on this point,

What we've sometimes said in the past is if you do VCG or Lilac you'll deepen your faith. Well bollocks! Yes, it gives you training in service, it gives you training in serving other people but it's not teaching you about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.<sup>110</sup>

In a weekly, *Bulletin* during October 1995 the SGI-UK National Lilac leader was quoted as saying,

Some people feel it is time for us to work together as individuals rather than on the basis of our sex. They want the opportunity to do what they do best regardless of whether they are male or female.<sup>111</sup>

This sentiment is in keeping with a general reassessment of the organization. It is likely that the divisions between men and women will be reassessed and indeed in some areas this has already taken place, however there are still women who appreciate the opportunity which women's groups present and enjoy discussion meetings without the presence of men.

One view which is often expressed is that women need to be different types of

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<sup>110</sup>SGI 10, interview 29 March 1996.

<sup>111</sup>*SGI-UK Bulletin*, No.165, 13 October 1995, p1.

leaders. One woman talked about a meeting she had recently attended:

...we talked about women in leadership positions in the organization because they aren't very, or as, visible as men. So we talked about, you know, what kind of leaders women are and how it's changing. And that, yes, we do need women leaders but the whole thing about leadership is changing so why should we try and become like men leaders? The whole thing is changing and women are probably going to be the impetus of this change. It's going to be based more on, like, you've got to be happy to be a leader. You know? It's not going to be about making the right moves or showing up at meetings and giving a talk or whatever.<sup>112</sup>

This view has been endorsed by President Ikeda who, addressing a Women's conference in Tokyo claimed that,

Buddhism...expounds the basic principle of equality between men and women. If only men hold positions of leadership, there is a risk that it will become bureaucratic.<sup>113</sup>

The elevation of the status of women commonly accompanies the relaxation of structural rigidity or the reinterpretation of the importance of adherence to form. This raises the question of whether women can be fully accommodated within a traditional structure or whether in order to allow women equal status, status has to be reduced. An extension of this is whether structure has to be relaxed because women are *unable* to operate within it or because they are *unwilling* to operate within it. Although this data raises these kinds of questions it does not answer them.

### **Adaptation**

Throughout this account attention has been drawn to the ways in which SGI is

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<sup>112</sup>SIGI 6, interview 8 July 1994.

<sup>113</sup>SIGI-UK Bulletin, 29 April 1994, p5.

changing in the British context. Within the organization much has been made of the idea that everything can be reassessed. Shortly after he took over the British leadership in 1995, following Richard Causton's death, Ricky Baines the UK General Director declared that,

...nothing will be done without consultation with the membership and nothing will be changed for the sake of it. At the same time, everything is up for discussion.<sup>114</sup>

In spite of the rhetoric that "everything is up for discussion" there are areas which are more likely to see change than others. There is no suggestion, for example, that the text of *gongyo* should be translated into English - not, according to members, because of the mantric power of the sounds but because it would take too long to chant - although there has been a move away from the use of Japanese terminology especially where this expressed unpopular attitudes.

The main word I hated was *shakubuku*. I don't know why I hated it but I really disliked it. And in fact it's not used particularly nowadays. It's said that we don't *shakubuku* we *shōju*<sup>115</sup> or something, which is much nicer. I think it was coming from this sort of fear of mine that was saying you must do this or this is right. And *shakubuku* to me felt that, you know, it was saying you've got to do this. It was a bit too hard. So I really didn't like that. And I think a lot of other words will fizzle out of our dictionary of terms. They will slowly become English terms. So now I feel that way I can accept them because I think... well that's OK, they are needed to begin with to help us start understanding it. But I don't think it is necessary for them to continue

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<sup>114</sup>*SGI-UK Bulletin*, No.164, 29 September 1995.

<sup>115</sup>*Shōju* is a term which means, alternatively, to lead people to the true law without refuting their views or, to practise Buddhism with the intention of being enlightened without actively propagating Buddhist teachings. According to Nichiren Shōshū it represents an approach which was more appropriate to the ages before the degeneration of the law.

with Japanese words.<sup>116</sup>

During fieldwork which took place in 1994, it was evident that, in the view of members, essential requirements for the practice of SGI Buddhism were reducing in scope. When asked what is essential for SGI Buddhism most members cited: the chanting, although not necessarily full *gongyo* practice; the *gohonzon*; and the study material, the *goshō*. This was not fully in keeping with accounts concerning essential practices within SGI literature. For example, in a book of lectures on the Hōben and Juryō chapters of the Lotus Sutra *gongyo* is described as the "most basic practice in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism"<sup>117</sup>. There is a tendency for members to consider full *gongyo* practice as indicative of commitment but not so essential as *daimoku*.<sup>118</sup>

The main area where change is being sought and is likely to happen is in the structure of the organization. Although most ordinary members do not, in my experience, have a clear idea about the structure of the hierarchy, suggesting that organization is effective and efficient, there has been a trend, led by members who have leadership roles, towards the evaluation of the structure. This resulted in the formation of a Reassessment Group at national level. The Chair of the group, the Headquarters Women's leader for the Bath group, tried out some of her ideas within the Avalon Chapter in a pilot study which commenced in January 1996. She said,

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<sup>116</sup>SGI 4, interview 6 April 1994.

<sup>117</sup>Nichiren Shoshu International, *Lectures on the Sutra*, (Tokyo: Nichiren Shoshu International Centre, 1978), p.24, my emphases.

<sup>118</sup>Instructive in this respect is a non SGI or Nichiren Shōshū translation of Nichiren's *Hokke Daimokushū*, in Rasplia Rodd, *Nichiren: Selected Writings*, p.84, which reads: "Receiving, keeping, reading, reciting, adoring, and protecting the entire twenty-eight chapters in eight rolls is the broad practice. Receiving, keeping, reading, reciting, adoring, and protecting the chapters 'Expedient Devices' and 'Life-span of the Tathāgatha' is the curtailed practice. Reciting, protecting, and keeping just one four-line verse or even the Title alone is the essential practice. Among the broad, curtailed, and essential practices, the *daimoku* is the essence of the essence."

It's like this structure is for admin. The intention behind it was to be open and honest so that everybody got every bit of information. There wasn't secrecy - but somewhere there is secrecy, you know, there's a feeling that there's a 'them and us'. But the intent behind it was that. So therefore ...these layers appeared...then you have to discuss everything at every level in the four divisions and it's mostly admin that was coming out. The balance changed....We were having meetings about being leaders.<sup>119</sup>

As part of the scheme the hierarchical levels below the level of Headquarters were collapsed into one with seven locations operating directly beneath the Headquarters level. This substantially reduced the need for leaders from each of the four divisions for each geographical tier. Corresponding changes in attitude towards the leadership role meant that instead of leaders being asked to oversee all aspects of their responsibility area they were instead able to offer their particular expertise, such as in study or administration, which members or localities could draw on as they required. One aim of this was to spread the load of responsibility.

In April 1996 the Reassessment Group reported back to members about their findings.<sup>120</sup> Their proposals were based on five principles or characteristics: an acknowledgement that individuals should be allowed to develop their lives without a "we know best"<sup>121</sup> attitude from the organization; the embracing of diversity which would allow for individual differences and for space within the movement for those who do not wish to chant *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*; a move away from leadership directives towards joint responsibility and support; the eradication of cultural differences between individual members, the organization and society, particularly a move away from Japanese inspired organizational structures and, finally; the encouragement of communication systems which cut across former structural levels.

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<sup>119</sup>SGI 10, interview 29 March 1996.

<sup>120</sup>Bulletin Special Supplement: *SGI Reassessment Group: A Report of the Meetings held between 25 November and 13 April 1996.*

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., p.5.

The group proposed that the existing geographical structure be reduced to three geographical areas of operation: locations, which would replace local groups and which would be free to decide on appropriate local activities; regional bodies, which could offer support to the locations as well as initiate activities in response to demand; and a national body, which would replace the Central Committee and operate as a coordinating body for all British activities.

At the same time SGI activities would be divided into three departments responsible for the three distinct areas of activity: first, study; second, support which includes administration, publications and service activities such as *keibi* or service<sup>1</sup> which in practice, involves the care of *gohonzon* enshrined in the organisation's premises; and third, cultural activities which includes festivals and other SGI productions as well as Inter-Faith initiatives and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy. There is no place within the new proposals for the gender based Divisions which are described in the report as culturally based and "not essential to the practice of Buddhism".<sup>122</sup>

These proposals, many of which were successfully 'tested' in the Avalon Chapter pilot scheme and received an enthusiastic welcome in that context, represent a natural extension of trends within the organization since the split with the priesthood and the death of the first British leader, Richard Causton. The individual, rather than the object of worship or the practice of chanting, is at the centre of these changes and the proposed new departmental structure increases the opportunities for non-practitioners to be involved in SGI activities. The proposals are driven by a desire, which has come largely from the membership, to further adapt SGI to British cultural norms and make the organization effective and welcoming. Little emphasis is placed in the report on the 'essentials' of practice which are given such prominence in Nichiren's writings and which, up to now, members have acknowledged. This does not necessarily mean that those 'essentials' have changed but it suggests that the organization may increasingly see itself as a socio-political rather than, or as well as, a religious group.

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<sup>122</sup>Ibid., p.6.

The movement's Statement of Aims which were formulated in October 1995 by representatives from Japan, France, the United States as well as the UK was published in the *Bulletin* in October 1995.<sup>123</sup> The first aim refers to Peace, Culture and Education, the second to Human Rights and the third to the respect and protection of freedom of religion. Not until aim four is the practice of Nichiren Buddhism mentioned.

It seems that SGI may have reached a recruitment plateau in Britain and this along with the trend away from ritual orthodoxy which the split with the priesthood represents, may lead it in increasingly more liberal directions. It will be interesting to see how these aspects of the movement will affect its future growth and stability and its recent reception within the British Buddhist fold. If Shimazono is right, and the attraction of a "straightforward magical practice"<sup>124</sup> has been instrumental in establishing SGI outside Japan, a more rational and liberal attitude to the practice may be convenient from the point of view of establishing SGI as a separate entity from the priestly hierarchy but at the same time may also ensure that the organization becomes more like other cultural societies and therefore less attractive to people seeking a 'spiritual' path or religion.

The form of the structure will certainly change and with that the role of leaders. Fujii was characteristically realistic about British members and their difficulty with accepting the authority of leaders. When asked whether members ought to follow the advice of senior leaders he said, "I don't think so, no. They don't anyway!" Increasingly common is the view that senior leaders should not be respected because of their position but because of their abilities and there is an attempt to move away from assigned leadership roles to team working and consensus.

### **Authority**

For the first two decades of its life in Britain SG Buddhism remained small enough to allow for a sense of community in which members were likely to meet often with

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<sup>123</sup>*SGI-UK Bulletin*, no.166, 27 October 1995.

<sup>124</sup>Shimazono, 'The Expansion of Japan's New Religions'.

each other. Attendance at meetings or courses usually meant meeting up with old friends. As the organization grew the hierarchical structure, which was imported from Japan and which worked because it had the authority of the priesthood through the lay organization, retained the sanction of a growing membership. As we have seen members did not regard figures in the hierarchy as authoritative but saw the structure as a method of ensuring good communication throughout the increasingly diverse organization. Individual leaders were respected for their experience rather than for their positions. Members still go for 'guidance' to their leaders but guidance is understood as advice not as instruction. Even so vestiges of the past still remain. During fieldwork a senior leader was heard on one occasion to instruct Bath members to act upon the advice of senior leaders even though they may disagree with it.<sup>125</sup> There has been a general acknowledgement that those who reach senior positions in the hierarchy do not necessarily show evidence of a greater understanding or assimilation of Nichiren's teachings. Leadership may fall to those who have practised for many years or are willing to take on the responsibility for administration.

The developing emphasis on the freedom of individuals to make decisions about the extent and, to some degree, the form of their practice along with the proposed widening of the organization to encompass 'non-practising members', almost certainly results in part from the loss of traditional authority which the split with the priesthood has entailed. The split has challenged the notion of authority even for the lay organization. Bocking has argued, in relation to the SGI as a whole, that the difficult relationship between Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū before the excommunication of the lay movement was maintained although at cost to Sōka Gakkai because,

...the lay leadership derived its authority from the priestly succession, and any rupture with the Nichiren Shōshū lineage could have diminished the authority of the lay leadership, and hence the power of that leadership to

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<sup>125</sup>SGI 13, Chapter Study 29 June 1994.

govern Sōka Gakkai.<sup>126</sup>

The contemporary challenge is indeed to the authority of the lay leadership, a challenge which they have so far met by proposing adjustments in the organization which recognize the ambivalence which members feel to authority structures of any kind. Whatever applies to the priesthood also applies to lay authority as is illustrated by the following comments by a local men's division leader:

...when this stuff came out about the priesthood I was a bit uneasy. I thought, mm well, if they've been practising all that time, how can they be like that? And then the High Priest, he came out with this thing more or less saying, "there's two sides now. There's the Sōka Gakkai and there's us, choose. And if you don't choose us you're going to be excommunicated." Well that to me was outrageous. Immediately whatever his reasoning had been up to that point about his attitude, he was completely unreasonable. It was like saying, you know, this is the greatest teaching in the world as long as you do what I tell you to do.<sup>127</sup>

Without traditional, priestly authority to legitimate the practice and the way in which it is organized members and their advisers are more likely to return to Nichiren's writings and thus a scriptural source of authority. In this way they can ignore the intervening centuries of priestly control where this does not accord with new attitudes and emphases.

Anything you have to explain that is not based on philosophy or *goshō* then we should leave that. That's not Buddhism it's Japanese. Anything you couldn't intellectually explain you call culture. For instance, someone may say why should we kneel when we do *gongyō*? The *goshō* didn't say that we should do that. *Goshō* said, up straight; good posture. Kneeling is very much Japanese culture so there is nothing wrong with using a chair as long as you

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<sup>126</sup>Bocking, 'Of Priests, Protests and Protestant Buddhists', p.126.

<sup>127</sup>SGI 1, interview 19 November 1993.

are up straight with respect to posture.<sup>128</sup>

Bath members were positive overall about the split with the priesthood although some qualified their approval for the new situation. Those who had seen the *Dai-gohonzon* were particularly disapproving of the High Priest's attitude because it meant that SGI members were unable to have access to the chief object of worship. Others regretted the conflict inherent in the dispute but saw the split as an opportunity for reappraisal and renewal of the organization.

In some ways I think it's a really good thing that's happened. It's a funny thing to say. I think it's really good because it has reaffirmed some of the really important basic principles of what the practice is really about. It isn't acquisition. It isn't greed. It's not about hierarchy. It's not about a lot of things which it would be very, very easy to fall into. So I think it's a good thing. I would like to see it all together. I don't like to see anything in conflict...but in some ways it sometimes takes a bit of conflict in order to be creative.<sup>129</sup>

Also instructive with regard to the issue of relationships between leaders and members is the notion of the master-disciple relationship. The master may be presented as a senior leader, the Director-General of the British organization, or President Ikeda. Members are uncomfortable with this kind of relationship where the master is another living being, as a discussion meeting in Bath in April 1994 showed.

There's been this whole load of writing done about the master/disciple relationship. And the master has as much to learn from the disciple as the disciple has to learn from the master.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup>SGI 8, interview 30 March 1995.

<sup>129</sup>SGI 4, interview 6 April 1994.

<sup>130</sup>SGI 3, interview 24 February 1994.

Ikeda and the British leaders are respected among members for their dedication to the practice and the energy which they put into SGI but members are unwilling to regard them in the same way as Nichiren or Śākyamuni Buddha.

Someone said to me, "Mr Causton is never wrong". Now I can't embrace that. Because he's only human he's just as liable - this is just my personal opinion - to make a mistake as anyone. There are some people who think just because of his responsibility it pulls out so much...his dedication to his responsibility pulls out so much enlightenment...that he is always dead on course. Some people might hear me and say you are slandering Dick Causton by saying that but, he himself wouldn't say that he is infallible.<sup>131</sup>

Members reluctant to accept any living master use words attributed to Ikeda to legitimate that view:

President Ikeda never says follow me he says go back to the *gohonzon*.<sup>132</sup>

In view of the range of understanding of the *gohonzon* which members have 'going back to the *gohonzon*', can mean relying on their own innate authority as much as it does relying on the ultimate law. This assertion of Ikeda's view was immediately followed by the affirmation, "Which is yourself".<sup>133</sup> The only authority, apart from individual authority, which members claim to accept is the authority of Nichiren himself, as represented by the practice he taught and the advice he gave to his followers in the *gosho*.

The thing that I feel very strongly is that Nichiren Daishonin is my master and I study the Gosho. And I think President Ikeda says a lot of good things and I can accept that on a certain level, but ultimately, the ultimate is

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<sup>131</sup>SGI 2, interview 31 January 1994.

<sup>132</sup>SGI 12, Chapter study meeting 27 July 1994.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.

The whole notion of authority for SGI-UK is in a process of change which has largely been initiated by the membership. At the time of writing (October 1996) the reassessment group has reported both to the Central Committee and to the membership and, in view of the positive comments made about consultation, some changes which are made are likely to follow these recommendations quite closely. The new directions in which the organization is moving have been initiated in part by the split with the conservative priesthood and, at least so far as the British organization is concerned, in part by a membership which wants to see the movement adjust to its new cultural setting and the needs of the late twentieth century.

Remarks made by Ikeda on the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus are quoted at the beginning of the Reassessment Group's report.

Truly new discoveries and innovations cannot be properly measured against old, established theories. Their value is realised for the first time only when they have been validated by clear evidence. This is perhaps the only way that new discoveries can gain acceptance.

The message seems clear. The proposals which have been made represent a new way of appropriating Nichiren's teaching which is both relevant and acceptable. They are set against: a split with a priestly hierarchy; a new arrangement whereby the *gohonzon* is nonetheless made available to new members; a rationalisation in which a thirteenth century mantric tradition is understood in terms which resonate with contemporary individualism; and a perceived need to recognize that late twentieth century, western society is pluralistic and intolerant of intolerance.

The authority of the priesthood, tradition, the lay organization, experienced practitioners and, in effect, of the *goshu*, since they are perceived to need interpretation, are accorded different degrees of respect but ultimately authority is

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<sup>134</sup>SGI 6, interview 8 July 1994.

vested in an individual's Buddhahood potential and the practice itself.

It does ultimately come down to faith but I think the only thing that we would say in this Buddhism that never changes is *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* and that that represents the nature of life and who can grasp that with their mind?<sup>135</sup>

A Japanese religion can't just come and plonk itself on our shores and suddenly become English. I suppose it has to have that change over period and that takes time doesn't it. And thirty years is nothing compared to eternity.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>SGI 6, interview 8 July 1994.

<sup>136</sup>SGI 4, interview 6 April 1994.

## Chapter 5: The New Kadampa Tradition, Amitabha Centre

### Organization

The fifth Buddhist group in this case study is the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). Between 1992 and 1996 the NKT maintained a small residential centre, called the Amitabha Centre, in one of Bath's suburban villages, about two miles from the city centre. The Amitabha<sup>1</sup> Centre was founded,

...to provide a sociable environment to come and learn about Buddhist thought, meditation and way of life.

Until the group moved out of the city to much larger premises near Taunton, Somerset in the Summer of 1996, the Bath centre was home to a small monastic and lay community, and acted as a focus for the activities of non-residential lay followers and for twelve satellite branches in towns across the South-West. By May 1994 in spite of initial, local opposition<sup>2</sup> the centre was so well established in the village that the Vicar of the Parish Church, which is almost directly opposite, was prepared to write a letter to the local council supporting a planning application for change of use of the premises from residence to teaching centre.

Fieldwork on this group took place mainly during the Spring and Summer of 1995 while activity in Bath was at its height and the group was led by its second successive female residential teacher. During the Autumn of the same year this teacher was sent to set up a new centre in Paris and was succeeded at the Amitabha centre by another nun. Although none of the groups in this case study is static it has been possible to characterize them by describing their activities over a

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<sup>1</sup>Amitabha is normally described as the Buddha of 'Infinite Radiance' whose Buddha field is the Western Pure Land known as Sukhāvati. NKT publications refer to him as, "The manifestation of the aggregate of discrimination of all Buddhas", for example in the Glossary to, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Heart Jewel* (London: Tharpa, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>The *Star*, the Bath local paper, carried an article on 23 July 1992 with the Headline, "Buddhists' plan brings protest". The first sentence read, "Angry Bath residents have launched a petition to prevent Buddhists moving in to a house in the area."

short fieldwork period. The NKT however is in a dynamic phase of its life and it has been difficult to draw a line under the research. Over the summer of 1996 there were significant developments in the organization which are described here where appropriate but the main account of the organization is based on fieldwork which took place during 1995. In the interests of consistency with the descriptions of other groups the account is written as though the centre continues to operate as it did before the move to Taunton.

In the early seventies Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa, lamas in the Gelug tradition, came to England from Nepal where they were in exile from Tibet. They were 'successful in attracting a Western following and in 1975 set up the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) which provided a structured network for centres in many Western countries and had its administrative headquarters in the United States of America. The administrative pattern was such that as each new centre was established Lama Zopa would appoint a Tibetan geshe<sup>3</sup> to oversee its running but the two lamas retained overall control of the network. In 1977 Lama Yeshe invited Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, a former classmate, to oversee a new centre, the Manjushri Mahayana Buddhist Centre, located at Conishead Priory in Ulverston, Cumbria. The centre became very successful and the thriving community began to feel closer to Geshe Kelsang than to Lamas Yeshe and Zopa.<sup>4</sup> When the FPMT began to make decisions about the Manjushri centre which residents opposed, tension between the FPMT and the centre mounted and after several difficult years, Geshe Kelsang's organization declared its formal independence from the FPMT in 1991. The NKT was officially founded at this time and was registered as an independent charitable organization.

The Gelug school, the 'followers of the way of virtue', in which both the FPMT and the NKT have their roots is the most recent of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism and since the seventeenth century the most prominent in terms of

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<sup>3</sup>A geshe is a Buddhist practitioner, usually in the Gelug school, who has successfully completed an advanced programme of study. The title is analogous in western academic terms to the award of a doctoral degree.

<sup>4</sup>Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, p202.

political power. The Gelugpa was founded in the fifteenth century when Tsongkhapa Lobzang Tragpa (1357-1419) established the Ganden monastery near Lhasa. Tsongkhapa was influenced by the Kadam school<sup>5</sup> which had been founded by the Indian master Atīśa (982-1054) in the second phase of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. The Gelugpa are sometimes known as the New Kadam school and the NKT in taking the name 'New Kadampa' have made a statement about their perceived roots within the 'pure' transmission of Indian Buddhism into Tibet. Tsongkhapa, who is always referred to in the NKT with a prefix of respect as *Je* Tsongkhapa, is presented as a reformer who attempted to return Tibetan Buddhism to the pure form in which it was first transmitted by Atīśa.<sup>6</sup> The mythic power of Tsongkhapa's reformatory activity is significant since Geshe Kelsang is presented as fulfilling a similar role both in presenting Buddhism to the West and, according to Bath practitioners, in helping to reestablish 'pure' Buddhism among Tibetans.<sup>7</sup> Gelugpa Buddhism stresses "monastic austerity and formidable learning"<sup>8</sup> and is a tradition which encourages structured study. The early Gelugpa legacy is one which the NKT wishes to emulate.

Geshe Kelsang was born in 1932 and from the age of eight attended Sera monastery in Lhasa. He left Tibet in 1959 and until he came to Britain in 1977 spent most of his time in retreat. He teaches in English with a strong Tibetan accent. He is an endearing character to look at; petite with slightly downcast eyes which look about him as he walks or teaches his devoted students. Many female NKT members describe him as "really sweet", and they are sometimes heard to be

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<sup>5</sup>Kadampa means 'bound by command'.

<sup>6</sup>This view of Tsongkhapa as great reformer is not uncommon (see for example John Blofeld, *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet*, Boston: Shambhala, 1987 p41). Per Kvaerne regards this as misleading since there was "no all-embracing 'church' to reform" (see 'Tibet: The Rise and Fall of a Monastic Tradition', in *The World of Buddhism*, Bechert and Gombrich eds. London: Thames and Hudson, 1991 p26).

<sup>7</sup>I am grateful to David Kay for his comments on an earlier version of this chapter among which are that the reestablishment of Buddhism in Tibet and among Tibetans in exile is not an aim of the organization since Tibetan Buddhism is regarded as a 'lost cause'.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, (London: Routledge, 1989) p192.

wondering out loud what Geshe-la, their usual name for him, is doing at any particular time. One young woman described how when at Manjushri she had followed his progress around the house and grounds in order to arrive at a place just before he did and have the pleasure of greeting him again. There is a strong sense that his followers both respect and love him and rely on his knowing what is best for them.

### Ordination

During the first half of 1995 there were four monastics resident at the Amitabha centre, three nuns including the resident teacher and one monk. The mean age of the monastics was around the mid twenties. Later in the year two further lay residents, both in their twenties, were ordained. One of these, a young woman, has been closely involved with the centre since its early days and acts as its Education Coordinator. The other, a young man, first visited the centre in April 1995, gave up his job in early May in order to attend a course at Manjushri later that month and was ordained the following August, just three months later. When I met him in May he claimed to have complete faith in Geshe Kelsang in spite of the fact that he had not met him and had received very little teaching. Progression from non-Buddhist to ordained Buddhist monk with such marked rapidity is not usual at the Bath centre. Most monks and nuns take about eighteen months to two years to make the decision to ordain.

At the moment Geshe Kelsang is the only ordaining abbot. Those who wish to ordain must first ask his permission and then the permission of their parents. In theory it would be possible to ordain at the age of seven or eight following traditional Tibetan practice however child ordinations are not expected to take place in the west.<sup>9</sup> The centre runs a group for children and also supports several very young practitioners including one fourteen year old boy who has already shaved his head in preparation for his future ordination.

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<sup>9</sup> Notes of a meeting between officers of INFORM and Gen Thubten Gyatso 18 May 1994 at Heruka Centre, 13 Woodstock Road, Golders Green, London, NW11 8ES.

One of the youngest ordained members, an intelligent and motivated nineteen year old nun, who had been expected to go on to university and a successful career, related how she had encountered NKT Buddhism.

I became interested when I was 16, when I was doing exams, well just after my GCSEs. It was a completely bored holiday. I had no money, nothing to do. One of my friends said, 'why don't you come along to these evening classes I've been going to, they are really good'. I had no interest in Buddhism or any religion. In fact religions in general seemed like a dirty word. I didn't want to become interested either. But then I went along just out of...well I don't know why, I was just bored I think. And that was it really, it just made so much sense. Everything she said, it was common sense. The way she was talking about how our problems come from our minds and if we want to solve them we have to sort them out for ourselves by working on our mind. It's not like what boyfriends we've got or haven't got, or how much money you've got or what you do; how much people like you...

I moved in as soon as I had finished my A levels, the day of my last exam actually. I ordained that same September. But I had wanted to get ordained for at least 18 months beforehand because I wanted that actual commitment and I knew it would really help me in my practice. It was so easy to kid myself; I'm giving up attachment; I'm not really attached; I'm transforming all these things. I just thought that I needed this actual commitment.

I asked her what her parents had thought,

I thought they would be really shocked and they were shocked because it's not the kind of thing you do every day. It's not like I was some weird kind of kid. I was an ordinary kid, like the kid next door. Maybe if I was some kind of hippy kid or some spaced out kid they would have understood. It would have seem more expected. In some ways I think they were expecting it and a lot of people assume that if you are a Buddhist you will ordain after a while.

They were OK. It certainly wasn't their first career choice.<sup>10</sup>

Her parents had in fact taken a lot of trouble to find out about the organization, including consultation with INFORM the information network for new religious movements and with other local Buddhists, before giving their permission. They eventually gave permission after being assured that their daughter would be able to remain at the Bath centre for a year and in the hope that after a year 'in the robe' she would return to her original plans. Her year as a nun would then act as a 'year out' between school and university. Over two years later she is still as dedicated as ever to the NKT. She left Bath in the Autumn of 1995 to become assistant to the organization's then second in command, Gen Thubten Gyatso but when Gen Thubten disrobed in the summer of 1996,<sup>11</sup> she returned to the Amitabha centre.

Not every person who joins the group in a committed way goes on to be ordained. Since ordination does seem to be the normal progression for unmarried members it may require more determination for an individual not to ordain and thereby confound the expectation of others than to take that step. One resident, a school teacher in his forties who has lived at the centre since it opened, and who represents the NKT as a teacher of Buddhism at some of the satellite centres was asked by his audience when he would be ordaining. He replied that he would not because he is too attached to the world. He had considered the option carefully and others were expecting him to take the step as a natural progression although there is no evidence of pressure from the organization for him to do so. One of the nuns, the resident teacher, told me,

...everyone thinks about it when they go along to Buddhist teachings. You try to visualise it for yourself.

But she added that,

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<sup>10</sup>NKT 7, interview 14 June 1995

<sup>11</sup>No official explanation has been given for why Gen Thubten (Neil Elliott) left the movement. Those members I have asked reply that he left for personal reasons which he has not discussed.

...there is one path to enlightenment and you can follow that in one of two ways. So just because for me I felt it as best to be an ordained person other people may have a family or feel that living with a partner actually enhances their practice rather than takes away from it.<sup>12</sup>

This emphasis on the appropriateness of lay practice, a feature of 'Protestant Buddhism' is particularly significant here since Kadampa Buddhism in Tibet emphasized the importance of adherence to strict monastic rule<sup>13</sup> and Tsongkhapa reserved tantric practices for the "most accomplished monks" who were "subjected to an extremely rigorous code of discipline".<sup>14</sup>

There are several lay residents ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties most of whom do no paid work but live a similar kind of life to the monastics. Moving into the house is an individual decision which does not require any official sanction, although in the interests of harmony residents may undergo a trial period to see if they will fit in. When the house first opened several of the residents were not NKT practitioners and it was described to me as "a chaotic place with lots of arguments."<sup>15</sup> In the intervening years however the community has settled into a pattern and all residents have a common interest in presenting it as an ideal place in which to put into practice their teacher's instruction.

A lay resident, a female graduate in her early twenties, described the way in which she became very rapidly involved at the centre after first encountering the organization in January 1994:

I moved in, in September 1994...I'd come to the point in my life when I realised that what I wanted to do was just spiritual. I wasn't interested in just ordinary...I mean I'd be prepared to work, definitely, but ...if you like that

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<sup>12</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 1994

<sup>13</sup>Per Kvaerne, 'Tibet: The Rise and Fall', p260.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p264.

<sup>15</sup>KK 2, Interview 20 July 1994.

wasn't my career choice. So I was just doing jobs and having trouble like a lot of people...I was asked to move in very soon after I started coming to the centre...I just decided to give it a shot because I thought I could always go if I didn't like it. It's a challenge. It depends on the person but sometimes to me it feels as though things are going a little bit too fast, but on the other hand I wanted everything to happen really quickly.<sup>16</sup>

Those who live at the centre enjoy a structured day and week. The day starts at seven in the morning with Vajrayogini puja for which participants need to have received an initiation. The young women in particular have much difficulty in getting out of bed in time for this first daily activity and often discuss new strategies for dealing with the problem. Between nine o'clock and eleven o'clock residents all attend the Teacher Training Programme session which is led by the resident teacher. The Teacher Training Programme is one of three structured courses which the organization promotes and is discussed in detail below. At eleven the residents recite the Wishfulfilling Jewel *sādhana*<sup>17</sup> together and they are then free to pursue the business of the day. The one communal meal is usually eaten at lunch time and is cooked on a rota basis. All meals are vegetarian.

Residents spend their days performing their duties which range from general administration of the centre or a national NKT activity, housework, making Buddha rupas and the brocade clothes which they wear, preparation for lectures to be given at the satellite centres, private study and practice. The house is usually very busy, the telephone often in use and there are frequent visitors. Each day one or more of the residents travels to the satellite centres in order to teach. Each of these satellite centres is described as having a unique character. Some of the venues have attracted sufficient interest to support more than one weekly session while the class in Swindon, for example, was discontinued because attendance became too low to support any kind of activity.

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<sup>16</sup>NKT 3, interview 6 June 1995

<sup>17</sup>See the section on study below for an explanation of this *sādhana* practice.

Activity within Bath is vigorous, and this attracts people to the group. One attendee although not in agreement with much of what the NKT represents, particularly in terms of its separation from other groups, cites the level of activity as the reason why she continues to attend.<sup>18</sup>

The one thing about the NKT tradition is that they are so active and there is that community there and it does keep it alive in your mind. Maybe I don't agree with them minding about us looking at other books but at the same time you can't fault them for the energy which they put into it. It's almost evangelical isn't it. And it is excellent that they are doing that.<sup>19</sup>

There are activities through the week based on study and meditation to which anyone is invited and there is a very congenial atmosphere at these events some of which are followed by a meal.

Periodically the centre arranges very well attended study days. Supporters travel to Bath from all the satellite centres. Individuals known to be interested in the centre are also invited to social events ranging from summer barbecues to visits to possible new properties. Newcomers who wish to be are very quickly drawn into the group and encouraged to participate as fully as possible.

Bath members are fully involved in NKT national activities and attend major events at which Geshe Kelsang gives initiations or empowerments. The two major annual events are the Spring and Summer festivals which take place at Manjushri and attract members from Europe and North and South America. Members also go for empowerments to other centres and attend 'working holidays' at Manjushri and elsewhere when they work in many different capacities in exchange for bed and board.

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<sup>18</sup>This woman continued to criticize elements of the movement and as a result of publicity concerning conflict between Geshe Kelsang and the Dalai Lama she severed her connection in July 1996.

<sup>19</sup>NKT 2, interview 12 May 1995

## Marketing

The NKT is very good at marketing its product. Members produce leaflets advertising the centre's activities and these are distributed widely around the towns in which they teach. During September 1995 a large stand advertising the centre was prominently displayed in Bath Central Library. No other Buddhist group was displaying leaflets at that time. Marketing of the NKT is assisted by the prominent place played by Geshe Kelsang's books. These books, which are written in English, are mostly condensed versions of Tibetan texts with commentary by Geshe Kelsang. They are distributed widely and may be seen on the shelves of popular booksellers as well as in university libraries.

The books are described in an NKT leaflet as follows,

All Geshe Kelsang's books are commentaries to Je Tsonkhapa's teachings. He has published fifteen books in English...Ranging from highly accessible books for beginners to detailed lucid expositions of the profundities of Buddhist philosophy, they form the most comprehensive presentation of the Buddhist path to enlightenment available in any Western language...Geshe Kelsang is the only Lama to have provided a complete re-presentation of the Buddhist path in accordance with the needs and inclinations of the modern world.<sup>20</sup>

Early editions were published by Wisdom, a publishing house established under the umbrella of the FPMT, which specialises in books about Buddhism but has no allegiance to a particular school. By 1989 Geshe Kelsang's books were being published by Tharpa Publications which was set up with the express purpose of providing an exclusive publication medium for his books. This represents part of the separation of the NKT from other Buddhist teachers and groups and also the organization's financial astuteness.<sup>21</sup> Early Tharpa publications include, in their

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<sup>20</sup>NKT leaflet, no date.

<sup>21</sup>I was told by Tharpa's representative in Bath (NKT 8, interview 25 July 1996) that the company expects to break even for the first time in 1996 but that until now it has lost money. No decision had been made, at that time, about where profits will

bibliographies, the writings of other teachers and scholars<sup>22</sup> but by 1990 the bibliographies of new editions and publications include only books written by Geshe Kelsang. The 1995/96 Tharpa catalogue lists the fifteen books written by Geshe Kelsang. It is the content of these books which members of the organisation study.

Those who attend meetings are also encouraged in enthusiastic terms to attend further courses. At the 1995 Spring festival an announcement was made that Geshe Kelsang would be giving Haruka Body Mandala empowerments at Manjushri in the summer. This was presented as a unique occasion; "the first time the empowerment has been available in the west" and "a once in a life time opportunity". Such activity is often described by casual attenders or critics of the organization as "evangelical" to which the stock NKT reply is, "we just want to help people".<sup>23</sup>

#### Finance

The financing of the Amitabha Centre and the NKT as an organization is structured and efficient. Unlike other groups' meetings it is not possible to attend an NKT event without contributing financially. At regular meetings and special events there is always an attendant on the door to check that the correct fee is paid. The fee to attend the General Programme teachings for example was three pounds per meeting in 1995 and to attend a Study Day at the centre twelve pounds, fifty pence. A large notice advertises a 'Centre Card' available for fifty pounds per month which covers all local facility fees. Part of the value placed on the teachings given is a financial charge. The three day Spring Festival cost between forty five pounds for a camping space to eighty seven pounds for a single room. There was no shortage of people to pay the money and fill the spaces.

It is normal NKT practice to buy properties which are run down and in need of

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be directed.

<sup>22</sup>For example, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Meaningful To Behold* (London: Tharpa, 1989) has a general bibliography in the back of the book which include books by authors such as, Cowell, Guenther, Conze, Sprung, Hopkins, Geshe Rabten, and the Dalai Lama.

<sup>23</sup>NKT 9, interview 29 June 1995.

renovation and therefore provide optimum space for minimum cost. Purchases are often made with an initial loan from a development fund but new centres are expected to be self supporting. Residents pay two hundred and twenty five pounds per month to stay in the Bath centre or in an overspill house nearby. This covers the mortgage on the centre and the rent on the second house. An additional forty pounds per week covers the one communal meal per day. The charges apply to all residents, including the monastics, with the only exception of the centre teacher who is sponsored by contributions. Although residency at the centre is open to anyone willing to abide by a few simple rules in practice all residents are on the Teacher Training programme. Most, though not all, residents are dependent on state benefits for their economic support and monks and nuns change into lay clothes in order to 'sign on' at the benefit office. Monastics and lay followers are also expected to fund themselves at the Spring and Summer festivals and any other events they attend elsewhere in the country. While the English Sangha Trust finances a monastic community, the NKT funds buildings and centres.

The majority of residents work hard and occupy themselves fully with NKT activities. This poses the question of whether the organization would be able to run as efficiently as it does without the state support it enjoys because of current high unemployment rates. Residents who are also on the Teacher Training Programme would not be available to take most work they may be offered because the programme takes place on four mornings every week. There is an awareness among some residents that they may not be fully complying with the requirements of the benefit office and that the situation could change if rules were more rigorously applied. At the same time they value what they are doing in making NKT teachings available. One young lay woman told me,

I just try to go along with what they [the benefit office] tell us to do. They say we have to be looking for work, so I do. I look for work that doesn't really affect TTP. I'm doing some designing but I haven't been paid yet. It is something that I've wondered about. It's probably not a very good thing to ask me about because I don't really understand. My own feeling is that it's unrealistic to think that we are going to be able to continue signing on. It is

difficult. I think it would be great if we could get sponsors...I'm going to see what happens.<sup>24</sup>

Others have thought through the implications of allowing the state to fund NKT activities and justify them in this way,

...the government is creating an awful lot of merit training teachers of Dharma who are going throughout the world bringing peace and really deep happiness...that's why Britain has been such an excellent place to establish Dharma centres. Because we have this motivation we are not stealing even though we are not actively seeking work. The people who are signing on are not stealing or deceiving anyone...Geshe-la says that if things change we will have to find another solution. Another solution would have to come about. It's becoming more difficult already because they are bringing in a new system and we will have to show that we are actively seeking work.<sup>25</sup>

The motivation to use state support to enable people to work full time at establishing Buddhist Centres is a strong one,

a lot depends on the individual motivation. If I am drawing dole to have an easy life to shelter from the world then this is poor motivation and I will be losing a lot of merit. I will be creating a lot of bad karma, definitely. From my point of view it is very good that the situation allows Buddhism to flourish in this country and that will help it flourish in the world. Because from my point of view there isn't any other way. If Buddhism doesn't flourish in this country and in this world there will be nothing to save it. I think it will just get from bad to worse. So the situation now allows Buddhism to flourish and that's really good it's not just good for the people who are in the organisation it's good for everybody.

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<sup>24</sup>NKT 3, interview 6 June 1995.

<sup>25</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

I mean if you have a very narrow view you can say, "bad scroungers taking money off the dole," but then you are not looking at the broader ramifications and the broader results that could come from this.<sup>26</sup>

There are plenty of people who would not look favourably at the NKT justification for financing the organization in the way that they do. Though not citing the NKT specifically, a House of Inner Tranquillity informant expressed his disquiet at the idea of monastics claiming benefits,

...at one centre the monks and the students who were in full time training were on the dole, which to me didn't seem quite right. I asked about it and they said "oh well the teacher" (it was a Tibetan teacher), "said it's all right because the government was going to earn lots of merit." And I thought...this was someone who had no concept of social security who had come out of what was basically a medieval society. And little things like that do, I think, run the risk of discrediting Buddhism. Imagine if *The Sun* gets hold of it - Buddhists on the dole. It's not the sort of thing that will go down well with the general population.<sup>27</sup>

*The Guardian* newspaper July 6, 1996 published a long article on the NKT with a front page headline. The article was principally concerned with the NKT's attitude to the impending visit of the Dalai Lama but also criticised the ways in which the movement is financed. It suggested that members are coerced into loaning the NKT large sums of money which they are subsequently unable to retrieve. I saw no evidence that this was the case at the Bath centre. The house was purchased with a grant from the central NKT fund, loans from local supporters and a business mortgage controlled by directors. Neither Geshe Kelsang nor the NKT owns the centres and written into the constitution of the business is a clause stating that the house must be used as a Buddhist centre. Directors are not empowered to alter this

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<sup>26</sup>NKT 8, interview 15 October 1995.

<sup>27</sup>HOIT 1, interview 6 December 1993.

proviso.<sup>28</sup>

The NKT is also criticised for their financial arrangements in an unpublished sociological account made available to me through INFORM.<sup>29</sup> The movement is aware that it has exposed itself to criticism through the claiming of benefits.

Although most people were happy to talk to me about this, one informant said, "In general it is better to keep this private."<sup>30</sup> When I pointed out that it was not private and that I had already see criticisms of this aspect of the organization she declared, "People have such a liking for gossip; anything negative."<sup>31</sup>

#### Relationship with other groups

Relationships between the Bath NKT group and other local Buddhist groups and between the NKT and national Buddhist organizations exist only in relationships between individuals. Like the House of Inner Tranquillity the NKT does not get involved with other groups and does not take part in intergroup or interfaith initiatives. For the NKT this a matter of doctrine and the purity of their lineage and as such it will be dealt with below. Leaving aside this issue however there are connections between NKT practitioners and other groups some of which are historical and some ongoing.

One of the attractions of the Amitabha Centre is its very active nature. It is possible to be at the centre and taking part every day of the week. This contrasts with BBG and the Karma Pakshi group which meet on a weekly basis but provide little other support or activity. This level of support is cited as attractive by NKT members who have attended the other groups. Because this group started very close to the time the Karma Pakshi group started and because both groups are Tibetan in origin there are a number of people who have been actively involved in both particularly at the beginning of the two groups. One member moved into the

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<sup>28</sup>NKT 8, interview 25 July 1996.

<sup>29</sup>Edward Reiss, unpublished paper.

<sup>30</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

Amitabha centre when it opened and dropped the Karma Pakshi group at the same time. This member considers the Amitabha centre to be the only true Dharma centre in Bath, arguing that the odd visit from a lama is not enough if the practitioner is to make real progress unless that practitioner is already "very strong".<sup>32</sup>

Another regular NKT attender still attends both groups and also BBG on an occasional basis although she is sometimes urged at Amitabha that she should not do so. One former resident at the Amitabha centre now prefers the Karma Pakshi group, principally because she found the NKT emphasis on study unattractive. There are others who have no strong allegiance to the NKT and still attend other groups. One such attends BBG and has also been to meetings at the Lam Rim Sakya Centre in Bristol, another local Tibetan group of a different school. She also goes occasionally to the Devon Vihara belonging to the Thai Forest Theravāda Tradition. In chapter two I gave an account of a BBG meeting at which an NKT nun taught the importance of having a spiritual guide.<sup>33</sup> This meeting highlighted what is perhaps the major difference between the two groups and proved to be influential for some BBG attenders who felt they had had their worst fears about the NKT confirmed.

The majority of Bath NKT practitioners know very little about other forms of Buddhism and few have any desire to extend that knowledge. The resident teacher during the main fieldwork period was however outspoken in her view:

...its obvious isn't it. It's evident to all that other teachers are just giving the odd teaching then going or just giving the odd teaching on a very general basis. They haven't established study programmes and it's only by establishing study programmes and getting people to commit themselves to long term study that you will be able to ensure the long term continuation. Some of these lamas have passed away. They may be Buddhas. Their subtle

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<sup>32</sup>NKT 8, interview 15 October 1995.

<sup>33</sup>See page 81f.

body never dies but their bodies will die and you've got these western pure disciples but what have they got? They may have received lots of empowerments but they have not been thinking all these years about training to be teachers and to develop their spiritual guide's views so that they can pass that all on to others.<sup>34</sup>

When asked about other Buddhist schools or other religions most NKT members suggest that there may be other paths to enlightenment but claim that they do not know sufficient about other paths to comment. One former Catholic suggested that the Christian Church although in theory good, because it teaches moral and charitable attitudes, fails because it does not provide tools to transform lives.

OK, it tells you to love your neighbour but it doesn't tell you how you can do that.<sup>35</sup>

One young nun claimed,

Some people like to say all religions are good but some religions were started by a person with cranky ideas and don't seem to be going anywhere. Maybe some are. Maybe some aren't.<sup>36</sup>

## Symbols

The symbolic dimension for this group is not difficult to find as there are many physical representations of Tibetan culture on display. Inside the house the public rooms indicated clearly the centre's purpose. A large sitting room houses the centre's saleable book stock and there are displays on the walls of NKT activities. There is also a shrine room, referred to as the *gompa*, of about twenty feet square. The room is used for teaching and for communal practice. Along one wall a specially fitted wooden cabinet, reaching nearly to ceiling height, houses

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<sup>34</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 1994.

<sup>35</sup>NKT 8, interview 15 October 1995.

<sup>36</sup>NKT 7, interview 14 June 1995.

representations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas including Tara, Chenresig and Manjushri. All NKT statues are painted gold and dressed in elaborate brocade clothes which are carefully made to traditional patterns. Also in the cabinet there are approximately twenty Tibetan style books, the works of Tsongkhapa, written in Tibetan script and therefore unused. Where funds are available, the best materials and workmanship are used for NKT treasures. The room also contains Geshe Kelsang's seat, made of flat dark red cushions such as might be seen in any traditional Gompa. The seat is normally unoccupied except for a large framed photograph of Geshe Kelsang. Next to the seat Geshe Kelsang's china tea cup is always laid ready.

Pictures, including traditionally painted *thang kas*, wall hangings produced by artists at Manjushri adorn the walls. All pictorial material produced by the NKT is carefully controlled to maintain accuracy in the smallest detail.<sup>37</sup> Every flat surface is covered with offering candles, water bowls, flowers, and sweets, many of which are shiny and highly coloured. The overall effect is symbolic of the cultural mix. All the individual elements of the room are such as might be found in a traditional Tibetan monastery in India but the carefully plastered and painted walls and the directed spotlighting give the room a clean, modern look highlighting the colour and the careful positioning of the items but reducing the mysterious aura it might have were it not situated in the modern west.

Although the shrine is very well cared for and obviously treasured by some, not everyone shares this attitude. When asked how she felt about the shrine one member answered, somewhat to her own surprise,

It doesn't mean very much to me. God this is honest isn't it..course it doesn't, it's not my culture. Everyone says, it's beautiful, it's lovely and I

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<sup>37</sup>A Bath printer responsible for the production of some of the NKT's most recent publications, told me that the movement's representatives had been so particular about the reproduction of some of the illustrations in Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Guide to Dakini Land*, (2nd. edition, London: Tharpa, 1996) that the whole print run had to be repeated because a moon symbol had been omitted from one of the diagrams.

think, "no, actually to my eyes it's not". I can see that it would be beautiful to someone else and it's not unpleasant to look at, but actually it means nothing to me.

Others thought it would be good to see Buddha rupas with western faces but most people appreciate the shrine and many have personal versions in their private rooms.

In October 1995, the third resident teacher at the Amitabha Centre taught that in previous lives we had the claws and teeth of lions or sharks and acted accordingly, thereby accumulating negativity which needs to be purified. An outsider might expect this kind of language to be symbolic however on one level it is expected to be taken literally. One of the major motivations to practice which is offered at the centre is the desire to avoid rebirth in the lower realms. The hell realms are therefore presented as terrible places and a *symbolic* hell realm is not frightening. An explanation which is as literal as the explanation for present experience is necessary. One practitioner explained it as follows:

I think my mental continuum once thought I was a shark, like my mental continuum now thinks I am a person. If you understand emptiness then you will see that this is quite plausible. I can't really say that I was a shark because obviously what appeared to my mind then was like a shark's body, a shark mentality; what appears to my mind now is a human body and a human mentality. But they are both just appearance to mind. But I think it is the same mental continuum that experienced shark and is now experiencing this body, this mentality now... I think it's very difficult to take on karma and accept rebirth until you have got some idea of emptiness or dream nature. I mean I could easily in my bed tonight fall asleep and dream I was in hell and be tortured and that is as real as this. Different but as real.<sup>38</sup>

### **Doctrines**

NKT doctrine is not different from that of mainline Gelugpa and as such is

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<sup>38</sup>NKT 7, interview September 1995.

available in English language summaries written by Tibetan teachers.<sup>39</sup>

Philosophically it holds to the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka and the doctrine of interdependent arising (pratīyasamutpāda) is stressed to show that all things are empty of own nature and do not function independently. Structured study is emphasized by the NKT just as it is within the Gelug school as a whole. Within Tibetan Buddhism it is customary for texts to be studied through commentaries made by scholars from the monastic colleges and it is this custom which Geshe Kelsang follows. There is nothing remarkable in the texts which Geshe Kelsang has chosen to make commentary on. What is perhaps remarkable is the way in which these publications are presented as containing the whole of what is necessary and the emphasis placed within the organization on the pure lineage of the practices which Geshe Kelsang teaches. The account of doctrine given here concentrates on the notion of the purity of Geshe Kelsang's lineage and the importance of maintaining that purity in practice.

As an introduction to this section, reproduced below is a close approximation of an exchange between the Amitabha Centre resident teacher and members of the public who attended the General Programme meeting in Bath on 20 June 1995.

Teacher: Some people go in good faith to a Buddhist talk and are given wrong information, or they may read Buddhist books and be misled. For example they may be told that rebirth is a gradual process of higher and higher rebirths.

Questioner: Are there different Buddhisms which emphasise other things?

Teacher: This Buddhism contains all of Buddha's teachings. It is complete. This is pure unadulterated Buddhism. We don't mix with anything. We keep separate. We don't mix with crystals, Tai Chi, etc., with anything, like some people do.

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<sup>39</sup>For example, The Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995) and Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, *Buddhist Civilization in Tibet*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), chapter 4.

Questioner: I've heard this before in other places.

Teacher: I'm not saying that this is the only pure Buddhist path. What I'm saying is that we don't mix.

Questioner: I've heard that Buddha taught that the way to enlightenment is to follow an eight fold path.

Teacher: I can't comment on that because I haven't studied it.

Questioner: Why is the Dalai Lama not mentioned in your prayers?

Teacher: He is not one of our teachers. Our teacher's lineage goes right back to Shakyamuni Buddha himself. It doesn't include the Dalai Lama.

Fundamental to the NKT's self-identity is the notion that Geshe Kelsang holds and has passed on, a pure lineage which has not been mixed and has therefore neither been diluted nor corrupted. One corollary of this is that NKT practitioners should continue to practice purely and not mix NKT doctrine and practice with other lineages of Buddhist practice, other mind training techniques or other religious views.

Sincere practitioners of Kadampa Buddhism should have heart commitments to cherish Kadampa Buddhism and practise Kadampa Buddhism ourselves purely without mixing other traditions. When we teach it we should teach it purely without mixing other traditions. These kinds of commitments are called heart commitments. The basic conditions for receiving Dorje Shugdän's protection, blessing and care. He is ready to give it but from our side some conditions are necessary: to cherish it, to practise it purely - without mixing, to teach it purely without mixing, so that pure Dharma flourishes.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Teaching on *Heart Jewel* practice given by Geshe Kelsang at The Manjushri Institute, Cumbria, 29 May 1995.

The sentiment which Geshe Kelsang expresses here is interpreted in two different ways by Bath practitioners. A view often presented is that although the NKT path is, in theory, not the only pure path available, in practice that is probably the case. This view was expressed by the teacher at Amitabha during the main fieldwork period.

...it is possible that others possess pure lineages but the indications are that this has been lost. For example, I have just mentioned Tibetans asking Geshe Kelsang for Mahamudra teachings.<sup>41</sup>

This view is unpopular with many members who prefer to interpret Geshe Kelsang's teaching about purity in a more liberal way. For example one member said,

...personally I think there are pure lineages in other traditions. It may be that other practitioners are not following pure lineages. I don't know. I'm sure there are some corruptions of lineage but I'm sure there are other pure lineages as well.<sup>42</sup>

And a young female member said she gets cross when people are disparaging about other paths because Geshe Kelsang does not teach that the NKT is the only path.

He says that you need to practice the path purely but not that other paths are not good ones. This includes other Buddhist paths and other religions.

Another corollary of Geshe Kelsang's teaching about purity of practice, is that it is not helpful and could be counterproductive to read books other than those written by him. In other words reading books by other authors could lead to impure practice. This is a contentious issue within the Bath group and the advice is not followed by all members.

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<sup>41</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

<sup>42</sup>NKT 8, interview 15 October 1995.

I do look at other books about Buddhism. On my shelf I have other books. I've got Sogyal Rinpoche's book.<sup>43</sup> I do look at them. I don't base my *practice* on any other books. I base all my *practice* on Geshe-la's books because there are just so many practices in Buddhism. Even Geshe-la's books have more practices than I can handle at the moment. So I don't do practices from other traditions. But I do look at other books. Sometimes if I want an easy read I might look at Sogyal Rinpoche's book because that is a nice easy read. I find it inspiring as well. So I'll read that but if I want to study then I'll choose Geshe-la's books... So the advice not to... [read other books]... I don't know. I don't know if it's blanket advice anyway. I've only received that advice from one person anyway. I know lots of people who do look at other books.

Those on the periphery of the organization who have not developed faith in Geshe Kelsang find the advice not to read other books frustrating and often ignore it although they may feel guilty for doing so. One such member said:

I can understand the logic of it. It's almost like saying don't confuse yourself with anything else. Just follow this path and you will be alright and you won't get confused and I can understand the reasoning for that and I think it's probably a good motivation... But...It isn't useful I don't think. Only this way and not that way, that's intolerant. What I suppose, to be honest, I don't like is the way we are not even allowed to speak about it up at Amitabha. the fact that you do read other books. It's almost like you mustn't say it. No I find that quite disturbing and it's the only thing that puts me off.<sup>44</sup>

The notion of purity of lineage also extends into the NKT's view of other western Buddhist organizations, a view which is often expressed in stark terms. The FWBO, who take a very different view of the value in taking teachings from various Buddhist schools and indeed are defined by a willingness to accept teachings from

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<sup>43</sup>Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, (London: Rider, 1992).

<sup>44</sup>NKT 2, interview 12 May 1995.

diverse lineages, providing they are useful, act as something of a rival organization for the NKT. This is evident at the annual Glastonbury Rock Festival, a local event with a national and international following where both organizations set up tents with the express purpose of attracting young people.

The organization's desire to maintain the purity of the teachings and its emphasis on the purification of negative karma through ritual practice are probably linked. Douglas has argued that "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience"<sup>45</sup>. The notion of the need for purity is strong within this organization and as well as providing an incentive for regular ritual practice it serves to draw clear boundaries which have not been crossed by other Buddhist organizations or other religious world views in spite of the rhetoric of acceptance and tolerance.

The notion of purity which Geshe Kelsang holds conflicts with the actions and teaching of the Dalai Lama who is opposed to sectarian divisions. Most NKT members, including those in Bath, are aware that the Dalai Lama is not given the status within the organization which he enjoys among other British practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. I have illustrated how enquiries about the Dalai Lama are sidelined by the Bath NKT teacher.

In response to persistent questioning about the status of the Dalai Lama within the organization the same teacher told me:

Geshe Kelsang is a fully enlightened being. I don't know about the Dalai Lama. To say that there is bad feeling is to say that you don't see your spiritual guide as Buddha basically. The main emphasis among Tibetans is on getting back to Tibet not gathering disciples. Geshe Kelsang is in touch with some isolated lamas but Tibetan Buddhism has become riddled with politics. As soon as you mix pure religion with politics then of course... we saw it with Christianity, you can't mix the two. Geshe Kelsang came to England, obtained British citizenship and became a little bit separate because you can't mix supreme wisdom and understanding with politics. If you do that, it

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<sup>45</sup>Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (London: Ark, 1984) p2.

wouldn't survive. Back in Tibet they are saying they don't want western teachers trained. Of course they don't. They want to hang on to that possession they want to use it. The whole thing is horrible. Of course we feel for Tibetan people but we work for all beings and we are not going to use dharma in that way. This kind of explanation you won't hear anywhere else.<sup>46</sup>

Other members expressed discomfort with the attitude displayed by the NKT to the Dalai Lama but were unable to explain its cause beyond Geshe Kelsang's disapproval of the Dalai Lama's political activity.

The NKT's attitude to the Dalai Lama's political activity is as much a political statement as any made by the Dalai Lama. It also echoes the example of Tsongkhapa in the political situation of his time. Franz Michael has claimed that,

Tsongkhapa - in contrast to the other sects' leaders at the time - refused to take part in the political power game, an abstention that was intended to keep the religious purpose free from such involvement and may have contributed to the attractiveness of the new order.<sup>47</sup>

But as Samuel has pointed out, in taking this stance Tsongkhapa managed to instigate a politically successful synthesis between clerical and shamanic elements of Tibetan practice<sup>48</sup> as a result of which the Gelugpa assumed political prominence in Tibet.

When the Dalai Lama visited Britain in July 1996 the underlying cause of the tension between the Dalai Lama and Geshe Kelsang came to prominence both inside and outside the movement partly as a result of a Special Report in *The*

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<sup>46</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 1994.

<sup>47</sup>Franz Michael, *Rule by Incarnation: Tibetan Buddhism and its Role in Society and State*, (Colorado: Westview, 1982).

<sup>48</sup>Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, p500.

*Guardian* newspaper<sup>49</sup>. Until this time the majority of practitioners, at least in Bath, were not aware that the central practice of the NKT, Dorje Shugdän Protector Practice, has been condemned by the Dalai Lama.<sup>50</sup> In 1994 Batchelor described the allegiance of Geshe Kelsang and his followers to this practice as one reason for the organization's distance from both the FPMT and the Dalai Lama and the Gelug school because the Dalai Lama has criticized Dorje Shugdän practice, "on grounds of its sectarian and schismatic effects"<sup>51</sup>.

Prior to July 1996, only one Bath member,<sup>52</sup> who had read Batchelor's account, was able and willing to discuss the conflict over Dorje Shugdän practice. When asked why there was so much secrecy surrounding the issue within the NKT he suggested that most people simply did not know about it and added that he personally has a very high regard for the Dalai Lama who in attempting to balance religion and politics faces an impossible task.

Dorje Shugdän practice has been described within the NKT as "the very essence of the New Kadampa Tradition".<sup>53</sup> The *Heart Jewel sādhana* combines the guru yoga practice of Tsongkhapa with the condensed *sādhana* of Dorje Shugdän and the *Wishfulfilling Jewel sādhana* combines the guru yoga practice of Tsongkhapa with the middle length *sādhana* of Dorje Shugdän. Both were "compiled from traditional sources by Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso Rinpoche and translated under his compassionate guidance"<sup>54</sup> and one or the other practice is recited on a daily basis by many of the practitioners connected with the Bath group several of whom

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<sup>49</sup>Madeleine Bunting, 'Shadow Boxing on the Way to Nirvana,' *The Guardian*, Saturday, July 6, 1996.

<sup>50</sup>Kay's experience among NKT Buddhists in the North of England confirms my own impressions (personal communication 29 October 1996).

<sup>51</sup>Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West* (London: Aquarian, 1994) p203.

<sup>52</sup>NKT 8.

<sup>53</sup>In the introduction to, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Heart Jewel Sādhana*, (London: Tharpa, 1995) p3.

<sup>54</sup>Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Heart Jewel* (London: Tharpa Publications, 1991) p176.

received the Dorje Shugdän empowerment at the 1995 Spring Festival.

In his commentary to the *Heart Jewel* practice Geshe Kelsang describes a Dharma protector as,

...an emanation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva whose main functions are to avert the inner and outer obstacles that prevent practitioners from achieving spiritual realizations, and to arrange all the necessary conditions for their practice.<sup>55</sup>

Geshe Kelsang identifies Dorje Shugdän as a Dharma Protector and not as a worldly deity who can help only with worldly activities. Dorje Shugdän, according to Geshe Kelsang, is concerned with what Samuel has called the Bodhi orientation and not the pragmatic orientation, in other words he is concerned with salvation and not with "this-worldly goals such as health and prosperity".<sup>56</sup> Indeed Geshe Kelsang identifies Dorje Shugdän as an emanation of Manjushri<sup>57</sup> the Bodhisattva of wisdom and in so doing elevates him to supreme status and as able to assist a practitioner toward enlightenment.

Dorje Shugdän's status is further raised since he is identified as the deity *most* able to help practitioners:

...the beings of this present time have a stronger Karmic link with Dorje Shugdän than with other Dharma Protectors. It was for this reason that Morchen Dorjechang Kunga Lhundrup, a very highly realised Master of the Sakya tradition told his disciples, 'Now is the time to rely upon Dorje Shugdän.' He said this on many occasions to encourage his disciples to develop faith in the practice of Dorje Shugdän. We too should heed his

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p73.

<sup>56</sup>Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, (London: Smithsonian, 1993), p7.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p75.

advice and take it to heart. He did not say that this is the time to rely on other Dharma Protectors, but clearly stated that now is the time to rely upon Dorje Shugdän.

Geshe Kelsang cites Trijang Dorjechang, his own teacher and a junior teacher of the present Dalai Lama, as the main recent protagonist of the Dorje Shugdän practice. Trijang Dorjechang was a disciple of Pabongka Rinpoche (1878-1943) a Gelugpa lama renowned for his sectarian attitudes and intolerance to non-Gelugpa orders. Unlike a number of his contemporaries (including the thirteenth Dalai Lama) who received teachings from rNyingmapa lamas and others, Pabongka promoted a strict and 'pure' practice of Tsongkhapa's tradition. Geshe Kelsang follows in Pabongka's tradition declaiming against the mixing of Gelugpa practices with those of other schools in the method espoused by the fourteenth Dalai Lama and lamas in the Rimed tradition who wish to move away from sectarian differences.

At the NKT Summer Festival in 1995 Geshe Kelsang gave Dorje Shugdän empowerments to several hundred people along with the warning that,

If we have broken our heart commitments and developed wrong motivation or have received teaching from other teachers we should make offerings to restore our broken commitments and then concentrate. Otherwise Dorje Shugdän's blessings will cease. We are keeping Kadampa Dharma purely because we are cherishing people. If mixed, pure Dharma will disappear from this world.<sup>58</sup>

There is not, so far as I can tell, a full and unbiased account of all the factors involved in the disagreement between Geshe Kelsang and the Dalai Lama. A brief account of the Dorje Shugdän controversy is attempted here for three reasons. First, the Dorje Shugdän practice is central to the NKT and many members include *Heart Jewel* or *Wishfulfilling Jewel sādhanas* in their daily practice often very early in their association with the organization. Second, the inclusion of a protector practice

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<sup>58</sup>Geshe Kelsang. Teaching 29 May 1995 at Manjushri, Cumbria.

within a form of Buddhism which has self consciously attempted to present Buddhism in a form suitable for westerners is significant. Many westerners aim to go 'straight to the heart' of Buddhist practice and the recitation of *sādhana*s to protector deities does not fit into the usual mould. And third, the separation of the NKT from other western groups and in particular from the mainstream Gelug tradition is highlighted by the NKT adherence to this practice. The following account draws exclusively on English language sources; in other words sources intended for western scholars or practitioners.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore necessarily simplified since the complexity of the issue is embedded in Tibetan mythology and praxis which has yet to be explored.

Accounts of the origins and importance of the protector deity Dorje Shugdän vary. In opposition to Geshe Kelsang's account in *Heart Jewel* de Nebesky-Wojkowitz has described Dorje Shugdän as *'jig rten pa'i srung ma*, a deity who operates "within the spheres inhabited by animated beings" and therefore a worldly deity and not as *'jig rten las'das pa'i srung ma*, one of the high-ranking deities who have "passed beyond the six spheres of existence",<sup>60</sup> among whom are Palden Lhamo one of the chief deities of the Gelug tradition and an important figure in this account. Recounting the "comparatively recent origin" of this deity, de Nebesky-Wojkowitz describes the process by which Sonam Dakpa (*bSod nams grags pa*), a wise and learned sixteenth century Gelugpa lama suffered at the hands of the Tibetan Government who were jealous of his influence. Sonam Dakpa had developed magical powers which protected him from attempts on his life but tired of constant interference he suffocated himself by stuffing his mouth with a blessing scarf. Subsequently, in the form of spirit, the lama took revenge on his persecutors causing calamity and misfortune in Central Tibet. One of his main targets was the fifth Dalai Lama. In order to pacify the spirit of Sonam Dakpa the Tibetan Government acknowledged their own mistreatment of him and requested him to become a protector deity.

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<sup>59</sup>This account is based mainly on translations of transcripts of talks given by the Dalai Lama to Tibetan practitioners. The transcripts were supplied by the Dalai Lama's administrative office in Dharamsala.

<sup>60</sup>Réne de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1956), 3f.

Taking the name *rDo rje shugs ldan* [Dorje Shugdän] he then became "one of the chief divine protectors of the *dGe lugs pa* order and a dutiful guardian of its monasteries"<sup>61</sup>.

The Dalai Lama has provided several possible versions of the origins of Dorje Shugdän none of which ties in entirely with de Nebesky-Wojkowitz's account.<sup>62</sup> He has also described his own history of Dorje Shugdän practice which, in spite of his predecessor the Thirteenth Dalai Lama having banned the practice, commenced during negotiations between Tibet and China prior to the 1959 Chinese takeover. The Dalai Lama's reason for first consulting with Dorje Shugdän was his need to decide between two courses of action and the absence at that time of the oracles with which he would normally consult in order to access wisdom beyond the human realm.<sup>63</sup> For many years the Dalai Lama carried out private Dorje Shugdän practice and also encouraged the practice in Gelug monasteries but he gradually came to view the practice as not only unhelpful but also harmful.

The Dalai Lama first made public his changed view of Dorje Shugdän practice in 1978. At this time he explained that he had come to believe that reliance on Dorje Shugdän would bring calamity to the practitioner.<sup>64</sup> The source of his change of heart seems to lie in the relationship between Dorje Shugdän and the two main Gelugpa protectors, Palden Lhamo and the Nechung Oracle. According to the Dalai Lama's account, it is disagreement outside the worldly sphere, between two deities; Palden Lhamo and Dorje Shugdän, which has led him, after careful

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p136.

<sup>62</sup>Talk given by the Dalai Lama to a gathering of senior Gelugpa monks on 13 July 1978 at his residence near Dharamsala.

<sup>63</sup>This revealing account also describes other ways in which the Dalai Lama makes decisions among possible choices. These include the use of dough balls containing pieces of paper on which are written three alternatives and also *mo* (dice-divination). Described as 'Skilful Means', these methods are used in conjunction with the consultation of oracles or representations of deities.

<sup>64</sup>"...anyone who strongly relies on Gyalchen [Dorje Shugdän] is eventually subject to calamity, whatever he may do." P14 of transcript of talk given on 13 July 1978.

consideration and consultation with Palden Lhamo and the Nechung oracle, to ask that the Dorje Shugdän practice be discontinued. Significantly however he also repeatedly confirms, in a series of talks on this issue given between 1978 and 1991, that personal Dorje Shugdän practice is permissible. The transcription of a talk he gave on 25 June 1980, for example, reads,

Some great learned and spiritually evolved persons have proclaimed Gyalchen [Dorje Shugdän] as a valid protector and even in their personal lives they have achieved amazing success; there are such persons to this day who we can see for ourselves.....

Now, if an individual personally has a special Karmic relationship with Gyalchen or through his own experience has found him favourable or his teacher after perceiving some significance has instructed him to turn to him and propitiate him, since he is at liberty to practice [sic.] religion, he is free to decide what protector to rely on; no one can say this is allowed or not allowed. It is his own choice.

As the teacher of both the Dalai Lama and Geshe Kelsang, Trijang Rinpoche is a central character in the unfolding of this matter. Geshe Kelsang, as we have seen, relies on Trijang Rinpoche as his root guru. Trijang Rinpoche was perhaps the chief advocate of Dorje Shugdän practice and therefore passed on the practice to both Geshe Kelsang and the Dalai Lama and as a senior Gelugpa lama to many other Gelugpa practitioners.

The Dalai Lama became suspicious that his Dorje Shugdän practice was displeasing his main protector deity, Palden Lhamo. At this time he consulted with the Nechung or state oracle and used 'dough ball' divination techniques to confirm that the practice should be discontinued. He did not however make this public at the time in deference to practitioners who relied on Dorje Shugdän's protection. In 1975 a book described by the Dalai Lama as "awful"<sup>65</sup> was released. The text assigned to a senior Gelugpa lama Zemey Rinpoche, was known as the *Oral*

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p5.

*Transmission of the Intelligent Father* and was interpreted by some monastics as teaching that Gelugpa practitioners should not make use of practices from the other three Tibetan schools, the Sakyapa, Kagyupa and Nyingmapa. The Dalai Lama like his predecessors had been in the habit of incorporating such practices into personal and monastic life on the understanding that the advice not to 'mix' practices referred not to mixing practices but to mixing terminology with different meanings. The disagreement about the meaning of mixing practices was tied inextricably to recognition of Dorje Shugdän as a preeminent protector deity.

Geshe Kelsang in teaching that NKT Buddhism should not be mixed is probably referring to this dispute. Mixing Gelugpa practices with the practices of other schools is for him the process by which the pure lineage of Tsongkhapa's teaching is corrupted, a view promulgated by Pabongka Rinpoche who strongly relied on Dorje Shugdän as Dharma Protector. This view is easily understood as sectarian since it entails separation from other Tibetan schools, a matter of significant concern to the Dalai Lama who is anxious to promote unity among Tibetans in a time of exile. Geshe Kelsang takes the view that Gelugpa practice should be followed without the introduction of practices from other schools and also that Dorje Shugdän is the most appropriate protector deity for this time. In this he differs from the Dalai Lama who prefers Tibetans to be united and for Dorje Shugdän practice to be avoided, not because it is harmful in general terms but because at the present time it is displeasing the main Gelugpa protectors.

In July 1996 NKT members, including a number from Bath, and members of the Shugdän Supporters Community which claimed to represent Dorje Shugdän practitioners in India, demonstrated in London against the Dalai Lama's stance on Dorje Shugdän practice. Some Bath members felt very uneasy about the protest but took part nonetheless. A number of people operating on the periphery of the NKT in Bath severed their links with the movement at this time because they objected to the organization's treatment of the Dalai Lama but none of the core members were affected beyond feeling uncomfortable and guilty.<sup>66</sup> The situation was further

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<sup>66</sup>David Kay found similar responses among members in the North of England. Those who protested felt guilty about criticising the Dalai Lama and those who did

confused in Bath by the fact that the controversy coincided with the move out of the city, which in any case meant that some Bath residents would leave the group. In view of the general popularity of the Dalai Lama among Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike the public dispute was potentially destructive for the NKT. However, the movement seems to have weathered it well.

The NKT's stated desire is to present Buddhism in a form which western people can easily understand. This dispute therefore seems a strange paradox. Here we have an example of Geshe Kelsang teaching a practice in apparently clear and unambiguous terms which conceal very complex ideas about Tibetan deity practice, the consultation of oracles and so on; ideas which are not clearly explained but are assumed, and indeed ideas which characterise Tibetan Buddhism and give it its identity within Buddhism as a world religion.<sup>67</sup> This is another reminder that the role of faith in this form of Buddhism is preeminent. In order to accept Geshe Kelsang's teaching about Dorje Shugdän, the practitioner is also required to take on trust the very idea that a deity can provide real assistance and further that a deity can be displeased by certain actions. Most practitioners do not concern themselves with such issues; indeed they are unaware of them. It is foundational faith in their teacher which allows them to find NKT Buddhism rational.

One of the attractions of Buddhism often cited by British practitioners is that within Buddhism there is no God who can have a direct influence on the affairs of individuals. Although Buddhism is not atheistic in the sense that the Buddha did not deny the existence of god or gods, a typical western academic understanding of Buddhism often plays down the role of gods or other supernatural beings. Within the NKT however Dharma Protectors who play this kind of role are central to practice.

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not felt guilty about letting down Geshe Kelsang (personal communication, 29 October 1996).

<sup>67</sup>Kay has suggested (personal communication 29 October 1996), that an aim of this simplification process might be to gloss over historical disagreements.

## Practices

The path presented by the NKT is structured and clear. There are people who hover on the margins of the organization disliking elements of the way in which the path is presented but for those who have faith in Geshe Kelsang and commit to this path the way is clearly laid out. As one member told me,

It's a structured path which has been laid out for us to follow. It's easy for us like a map...It's possible to go beyond structures but you need to follow it first.<sup>68</sup>

The NKT does not tend to divide its practices into categories. The organization teaches that in order to be successful in training the mind every element of NKT practice is essential. However for analytical purposes it is useful to distinguish study, which is encouraged through formal programmes, from other formal practices which include śamatha meditation and the recitation of *sādhana*s for which practitioners receive oral instruction and empowerments. The two elements are dealt with here in that order. This section will then conclude with consideration of the *sādhana* practice of Dorje Shugdän. The element which connects these practices together is faith in Geshe Kelsang. This acts as a form of authority as well as a practice and is covered in detail below.

## Study

All study is based on the books written by Geshe Kelsang. The Bath teacher told me,

Geshe Kelsang's books are very central. We say that it is a lineage of Scripture. Geshe Kelsang says no less than memorizing all of his books is what we have to do. But that is a lineage of scripture. More important of course is the lineage of realisation which is gaining internal realisation of the meaning of those books. Only once we hold those two lineages of scripture

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<sup>68</sup>NKT 10, 15 May 1995.

and realisation can we become a spiritual guide ourselves.<sup>69</sup>

The memorization of Geshe Kelsang's books is prioritized by members. Experienced teachers who have successfully memorized large sections are able to draw on them for teaching. This very effective tool gives the impression of spontaneity in teaching since questions can be readily answered with confidence. Emphasis is placed on the need for structured study and members join study programmes in order to benefit from discipline and support. The programmes are arranged on three levels which require progressive degrees of commitment. The first level is the General Programme. This is the first programme offered when a group starts in a new location. The General Programme in Bath attracts between twenty and forty people in any week of whom some are regular attenders though others may attend for just one or two sessions. The programmes are widely advertised in the town and have attractive titles, for example, 'Meditation and Positive Thinking'.<sup>70</sup> The General Programme is the least structured of the three programmes although in each new course the material is continued and developed from week to week.

The General Programme in Bath is taught by the resident teacher who like all NKT teachers closely follows one of Geshe Kelsang's books.<sup>71</sup> Although General Programme sessions are taught at an introductory level there seems to be no attempt to conceal any element of the NKT's philosophy or structure.<sup>72</sup> Reiss has suggested that "inner doctrines" are kept hidden and that in this way the movement deceives newcomers. This is based on the observation that teachings about hell realms are not given at this introductory level. In my view this is not a deliberate

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<sup>69</sup>NKT 1, 20 May 1994.

<sup>70</sup>This was the theme for the classes in Spring and Summer 1994.

<sup>71</sup>The text for the Spring and Summer 1994 session was Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Universal Compassion*, (London: Tharpa, 1993), which, according to the organization's promotional literature, is, "A commentary to Bodhisattva Chekhawa's *Training the Mind in Seven Points*".

<sup>72</sup>In contrast with, for example, The Unification Church where the identity of the organization is concealed at the introductory level. See Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, pp100-103.

attempt to mislead but the natural result of time constraints at such meetings. The teacher could not express the whole of NKT doctrine in a series of short sessions. Teaching about the NKT (and therefore the Tibetan) view of hell realms is always available in Geshe Kelsang's books which are not subject to any control. Sessions are preceded by Preparatory Prayers, Geshe Kelsang's picture is displayed and his publications are always available. The lecture is followed by a time for discussion and in typical NKT fashion the teacher always answers according to Geshe Kelsang's teaching often referring to a passage in one of his books which she knows by heart. Indeed when she is unsure how to reply she will dismiss the question by saying, I can't say, I haven't studied that. Meetings at the centre are always advertised at these talks and the teacher stresses that the best way to put into practice the things which she teaches is to be often in the company of Buddhists. This is often balanced by an assurance that the aim is not to make every listener a Buddhist.

The purpose of the course is to understand the mind not to make Buddhists out of you or to get you to wear these clothes or this hairstyle but to help you to understand the mind. If I do this it gives me job satisfaction.<sup>73</sup>

The second level programme is the Foundation Programme which requires considerable commitment. The classes take place on Saturdays at the Amitabha centre and participants travel from a wide area to attend. Students work steadily through one of Geshe Kelsang's books with the teacher giving 'oral transmission' of the text. They are expected to study individually as well as at the class and at the end of a course there is an examination which is marked by the resident teacher and sent to Manjushri for moderation. In order to do well in the examination the student needs to have a thorough knowledge of the text. There is no call for interpretation or drawing on other sources apart from cross referencing, where appropriate, to Geshe Kelsang's other texts. To know the text is to be able to repeat it by heart. Each text has a series of 'outlines' which break up the content into structured portions to assist memory. On Monday evenings Foundation Programme members join together again for discussion on the previous Saturday's

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<sup>73</sup>NKT 1 General Programme Meeting, 25 April 1995.

teaching. When participants discuss the text or answer the discussion questions set by the teacher the very best answers draw directly from the text.

On Monday, 15 May 1995 nine people (excluding myself) met in the shrine room at the Amitabha centre to discuss the text and oral transmission they had received two days before. The participants were: a young married couple; a middle aged woman who had recently joined the course and had not yet learned the technique of sticking closely to the text but made use of her previous life experiences, including her knowledge of Indian culture and religion when answering the questions put by the teacher; five young men including a lawyer and two school boys; and the teacher a nun who had been ordained for about two years but studying with Geshe Kelsang for eleven.

The session followed a familiar pattern. After reciting the Preparatory Prayers two of the men, who were facilitating the session, went through the outline of the previous Saturday's teaching, which they had memorized, and then summarised the content of the text. The teacher had given questions for which everyone had prepared answers. One of the facilitators then acted as scribe while the answers were presented so that the group could come to joint 'conclusions' which could be typed out and distributed the following week. When one participant congratulated the married couple on their good answers they laughed and said they came to their conclusions by copying straight out of the text. This was clearly a commendable practice.

The text under discussion at this session was *Meaningful to Behold* a commentary on Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (Skt. *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*)<sup>74</sup>. The text is considered by NKT students to be among the most difficult because of its philosophical content. The passage under discussion on this occasion was about the two truths of conventional and ultimate truth and based on the *Prāsāṅgika* interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy as taught by Shantideva and Tsongkhapa.

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<sup>74</sup>Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Meaningful to Behold*, (London: Tharpa, 1994).

On 22 July 1995 these same students sat their examination on this text at the Amitabha Centre. As they emerged from the examination room many of the comments resembled what one might expect to hear from students having just sat examinations at a secular institution: "I could have done better if I had worked harder," "my mind just went blank". Other comments however were reminders that this exam had been taken with a very different motivation: "It's such great stuff I loved writing it," "You just have to trust Geshe-la to remind you of it."

The final study level is the Teacher Training Programme. This programme is taught on four mornings per week and it is usual for those on the programme to live at the centre. Geshe Kelsang is committed to the programme which he regards as a western equivalent to the traditional Tibetan Geshe degree. The training of teachers is important to the continuity of the organization. In a talk on the subject of Teacher Training given by Geshe Kelsang in 1992 and reproduced in the organization's journal *Full Moon*, he said,

...if I have one thousand students of whom one hundred attain enlightenment and become Buddhas through studying and practising my teachings, but one student becomes a qualified Teacher, then for me that single person is more important than all the others.<sup>75</sup>

Foundation Programme and Teacher Training Programme classes follow a similar pattern. At the time the fieldwork was carried out all the residents were enrolled on the Teacher Training Programme and because there are so many satellite groups many of them already teach on either the General Programme or the Foundation Programme. The decision to allow someone to teach is made by the centre's resident teacher who said,

I don't order people to teach. I ask people if they would like to teach. How much they have covered would be very low on the criteria list. Mainly it would be their practice of dharma, their faith in Geshe-la. The connection

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<sup>75</sup>Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, 'Training as a Qualified Dharma Teacher' in *Full Moon*, Summer 1994.

that they have made with the tradition. Whether you can teach or not depends on your ability to function as a channel for Geshe-la rather than your knowledge. Some people have years of knowledge but it is still up here [taps temple] because they don't have a special connection with Geshe-la. It doesn't come over. It is not inspiring.<sup>76</sup>

Although study is paramount, knowledge of the lineage of scripture does not operate as a qualification to pass on that knowledge. Good NKT teachers are those who have faith in Geshe Kelsang and can therefore act as channels between Geshe Kelsang and the listener.

The study element is not favoured by all NKT members. One young resident told me:

I don't really like studying...I think I'm getting on OK because I find a lot of meaning in it. The actual teachings have helped me very much....I don't really like having such a rigid structure. Sometimes it seems academic but I don't think you need intellectual and academic skills to understand it. But I wonder if I wasn't a university calibre kind of person whether I would be able to handle it.<sup>77</sup>

### *Sādhanas*

Apart from study the other main practice is meditation and the recitation of *sādhanas*.<sup>78</sup> The *sādhanas* which the NKT uses are printed in readily available booklets and like the texts they are written in English. The language is rich and colourful and reflects the complex nature of Tibetan Buddhist practice. The most commonly performed *sādhanas* are *Wishfulfilling Jewel* the Guru yoga of Tsongkhapa combined with a middle length version of Dorje Shugdän practice, and

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<sup>76</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

<sup>77</sup>NKT 3, interview 6 June 1995.

<sup>78</sup>On *sādhanas* see John Blofeld, *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987) pp216-217.

*Heart Jewel* which is a shorter version of the same practice. In the *Heart Jewel* practice the practitioner first goes for refuge to the three jewels; Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and then generates bodhicitta or compassion by dedicating the virtue accumulated through carrying out the practice to all sentient beings. The next section is the 'Prayer of seven limbs' in which the practitioner visualises and praises the gurus for their concern for sentient beings. A mandala offering is made symbolically to the Guru and requests for blessing made to Tsongkhapa in the haunting *migtsema* prayer which is often recited in Tibetan as a mark of gratitude to the Tibetan people for preserving the practices.

Tsongkhapa, crown ornament of the scholars of the Land of Snows,  
You are Avalokiteshvara, the treasury of unobservable compassion,  
Manjushri, the supreme stainless wisdom,  
And Vajrapani, the destroyer of the host of maras;  
O Losang Dragpa<sup>79</sup> I request you, please grant your blessings.<sup>80</sup>

According to the printed instructions the prayer may be repeated up to or beyond one hundred times although I have never heard repetition to this extent in Bath. The practitioner then requests the Guru's blessings and dedicates herself to the guru in return. *Heart Jewel* practice then goes on to invite the Dharma Protector Dorje Shugdän and his retinue through visualising the deity in his wrathful form subduing demons and obstructions. Offerings are made to the Protector and his strength and action are invoked to increase the spread of the Dharma and protect practitioners from negativity. The eight stanza section concludes:

In short, from now until I attain the essence of enlightenment,  
I shall honour you as the embodiment of my Guru, Deity, and Protector.  
Therefore please watch over me during the three periods of the day and the  
night

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<sup>79</sup>Losang Dragpa is the ordination name of Tsongkhapa.

<sup>80</sup>Geshe Kelsang Gyatso Rinpoche. *Heart Jewel*, (London: Tharpa, 1995) p7.

And never waver in your actions as my Protector.<sup>81</sup>

Next the practitioner requests the fulfilment of wishes including the increase of the tradition which upholds Tsongkhapa's doctrine. The prayers are concluded with a dedication of virtue for the benefit of every living being, prayers for the tradition and finally a three fold repetition of the *migtsema* prayer.

Geshe Kelsang<sup>82</sup> acts as the initiator for all the *sādhana* practices and although it is possible to do them without formal initiation it is usual for serious practitioners to receive an empowerment for a practice and at the same time make a commitment to perform it regularly. One lay resident said, "I really want the empowerments for the practices I do".<sup>83</sup>

Those who operate on the periphery of the Bath NKT group often find this element of the practice difficult. One male in his late thirties who attends meetings at the Amitabha Centre, because he says he finds some of the teaching helpful described *sādhana* practice as:

...the downside. I find them quite idolatrous. They have got a lot of ritual which I am alienated by.<sup>84</sup>

For those who are committed to NKT practice however empowerments and the related *sādhana* practices are central to the NKT method. The resident teacher explained the empowerments as follows:

When we receive an empowerment the spiritual guide generates himself as the deity. For example...he generates himself as Buddha Chenresig and in

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p13.

<sup>82</sup>Geshe Kelsang's 'Heart disciple', Gen Thubten Gyatso also acted as an initiator. Gen Thubten disrobed and left the movement in September 1996.

<sup>83</sup>NKT 10, May 1995.

<sup>84</sup>NKT 9, interview 29 June 1995.

that state grants very special blessings... At the time of receiving the empowerment the spiritual guide leads you through various guided meditations and through those guided meditations you feel energy coming. It's a very charged atmosphere...<sup>85</sup> Then you go away and take that into your daily practice. You practice it everyday and try to every day improve the germination of the seed.<sup>86</sup>

Empowerments are readily available to anyone who has the means to get to and pay to enter the location where they are being given and due to the very large number of people now involved, empowerments are usually given en masse.<sup>87</sup> Again the resident teacher explained,

When there are empowerments we explain to people beforehand what is involved. So for example the other week Gen-la gave an empowerment and before that I explained and people decide on that basis. Of course it is not our fault if people come in with the wrong motivation gathering intellectual knowledge or something. But we would leave it entirely up to them to decide.<sup>88</sup>

After the empowerment for a practice has been received, practitioners are encouraged to carry out their commitment to recite the *sādhana* with the

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<sup>85</sup>On a personal note, I attended the Dorje Shugdān empowerment at Manjushri in May 1995. Several hundred people were given preparatory teachings on *Heart Jewel* practice by Geshe Kelsang and then guided through the visualisation by him. At this time they received the empowerment and commitment to practice. There was an excited and expectant atmosphere in the marquee but I would not have described it as 'very charged'. My own experience which doubtless reflects my own state of mind resonates with accounts given by several Amitabha practitioners who expected that an encounter with Geshe Kelsang would be somehow amazing and holy but experienced it as altogether less dramatic.

<sup>86</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

<sup>87</sup>Samuel, has observed that, "Some empowerments carry the obligation to perform a short version of the *sādhana* daily, but most Tibetan religious practitioners, lay or monastic, acquire far more practices than they can perform on a regular basis." *Civilised Shamans*, p245.

<sup>88</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

accompanying visualisations with constancy. It is possible to be present at an empowerment but refrain from attempting the visualisation and making the commitment to do the practice, in which case one is said to have received ‘a blessing’.

All NKT practitioners with whom I have spoken commit time to their practice which may vary from several hours a day spent in study and the fulfilment of commitments to twenty minutes spent in silent meditation. Two lay practitioners’ accounts of their daily practices are described below. The first has been a resident at the centre since it opened.

I do Heart Jewel every day and ten minutes Lam Rim meditation. Maybe that takes about forty five minutes or an hour. And then I do dakini yoga everyday. That varies. That can take an hour, an hour and a half, or forty minutes... And then I do another practice whether it be Tara or Vajrasattva or maybe just some settling meditation. Maybe that’s half an hour. And then...I might do prostrations and then we have two hours study in the morning and we have got a bit of our own study and then I teach a couple of times a week. There’s preparation for that. Then there’s work for the centre like going shopping or doing some cooking or whatever. That’s our formal practice. But the practice should be every moment.<sup>89</sup>

The second practitioner has not received any empowerments but makes use of Geshe Kelsang’s *A Meditation Handbook*<sup>90</sup> to provide a framework for meditation.

I’ve never been so disciplined about anything before. I can honestly say. It was something that I wanted to do 20 years ago I think but I knew I didn’t have the will power or discipline to do it. I’ve always known as well that you can’t mix it. You’ve got to be pure. You can’t take drugs or smoke or anything in order to effectively meditate so apart from caffeine I don’t drink

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<sup>89</sup>NKT 8, interview 15 October 1995.

<sup>90</sup>Geshe Kelsang, *A Meditation Handbook*, (London: Tharpa, 1990).

or smoke.<sup>91</sup>

## **Experience**

As we have already seen there are people who enjoy NKT activities for social as well as 'spiritual' reasons but are not committed to the organization or the path it teaches. Other experiences of the NKT are experiences of its teacher and of the practices which he teaches. Geshe Kelsang is central to NKT practice. Practitioners place their faith in his lineage and in his own realisation of the truth of his teaching. They describe him as compassionate and pure with an incredible mind. In order to progress on the path they speak of making a connection with Geshe Kelsang although seem unable to articulate what this might mean. Some also admit that they had expected their first meeting with Geshe Kelsang to be extraordinary when in fact it was less disruptive and more foundational for future gradual experience. In retrospect the first meeting is often described as a point of real change.

The practice of meditation as it might be understood at the House of Inner Tranquillity or the Bath Buddhist Group is often referred to as difficult. Many NKT practitioners say they are not very successful at it or they find it hard. One of the nuns told me:

It's hard. Some people are better at meditation and could do it for longer. I just can't concentrate. Ten minutes trying to meditate used to be a nightmare and I used to think I wish we could stop this so I could really think about what she was saying! But it's a lot easier now. I suppose it comes from more aspiration. I get results now. I still can't concentrate properly.<sup>92</sup>

A lay resident was even less optimistic,

Actual meditation is when your mind is single mindedly placed on a virtuous

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<sup>91</sup>NKT 2, interview 12 May 1995

<sup>92</sup>NKT 7, interview 14 June 1995.

object. Actual meditation is impossible for me.<sup>93</sup>

Another lay member was able to be more specific about her difficulties,

I don't seem to get any peace of mind. I'm too attached to wanting that you see. I go through the twenty one meditations.<sup>94</sup> I try to get the motivation right. I mean it's so important to be serious about it. I've taken it seriously from the start but even remembering why I'm doing it it's so easy just to drift off. I'll be struggling in my mind and thinking, 'I can think about that later', 'think about that later', and a voice comes, 'no, I want to think about that now, it's really important. If I don't think about that right now I'll lose it.'<sup>95</sup>

She also admitted - for she felt that this was almost heretical - that not only did she find meditation difficult but also that she did not find that Geshe Kelsang's teaching on meditation made the process any easier. Her admission was made against the movement's self image that it makes available teachings which are not only effective but also easy to carry out. The same practitioner did find her experience of a retreat weekend beneficial.

In that retreat weekend I actually took precepts and tried not to talk about anything unless it was really important. Just for a day, twenty four hours; altogether six hours of meditation and teaching; no talking in morning; only about important things in the afternoon. By the end I felt I was getting somewhere. I didn't have to think about what I was going to eat next because I was not eating.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>NKT 3, interview 6 June 1995.

<sup>94</sup>The twenty-one meditations are detailed in Geshe Kelsang's *Meditation Handbook*.

<sup>95</sup>NKT 2, interview 12 May 1995.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

All the longer term practitioners gave positive accounts of their experience. One young lay male explained how *sādhana* practice has helped him to develop his faith,

Empowerments are like planting a seed. It takes about six months to a year before you can look back to see how you have benefitted from it.<sup>97</sup>

Study also helps practitioners to develop their faith and therefore confirms its own worth.

I'm really glad there is a lot of study because wisdom leads to faith and faith leads to understanding. I wouldn't have a very strong foundation for the practice if I didn't study. If I didn't know how to attain enlightenment in a very basic way how could I possibly do it?<sup>98</sup>

Others cited less specific benefits which they had had from listening to and applying the teaching. These ranged from a new understanding of how the mind chooses to take on a particular attitude to any circumstance, to practical ways of making the world a better place.

The aim of the practice of NKT Buddhism is to achieve a fully realised state or enlightenment. This is the state which practitioners believe their teacher Geshe Kelsang to have reached and they refer to him as a fully realised being. In teachings various levels of 'realisation' are referred to. The Amitabha Centre teacher explained that there are twenty one realisations which extend to deeper and deeper levels and begin with the realisation of *bodhicitta* and the realisation of emptiness. Realisations, she said, are permanent and can never be lost. She also said she has not accumulated any. The experiences practitioners do have, however, appear to provide them with a stable and satisfying life even though their aims for their practice have not been realised beyond that.

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<sup>97</sup>NKT 10, May 1995.

<sup>98</sup>NKT 7, interview 14 June 1995.

In his criticism of the NKT<sup>99</sup> Edward Reiss has suggested that once they have joined the organization practitioners are pressured not to leave. I saw no direct evidence for this but understand how it might happen. One attraction of the centre is its high levels of activity. It is easy for the centre to become the focus for a practitioner's social life as well as a focus for receiving Buddhist teachings. New practitioners receive a warm welcome at the centre and early on are likely to hear teaching about the blessed human existence, the opportunity to escape from samsara and, alongside that, teaching about the hell realms. One teacher at the centre explained that we are about to be eaten by crocodiles but because we cannot see them we think we are safe.<sup>100</sup> Other such analogies are used to instil a fear of hell realms and thereby encourage practice to ensure a good rebirth. The fear of death and the karmic results of actions in this life are frequent themes and practitioners are encouraged not to break their commitments for fear of future suffering.

NKT teachers are chosen for their connection with the tradition and they follow the organization's line very closely very often using a common phraseology. They therefore certainly sound like they believe in what they teach including the terror of hell realms and the way to avoid them. Someone who does not develop faith in Geshe Kelsang they claim, who, in the resident teacher's terms, does not loose their "stubborn, opinionated arrogance and let go of their wrong views"<sup>101</sup> will directly experience those hell realms. These views are very firmly held but do not constitute, in the view of practitioners, undue pressure to join or stay with the organization. If they constitute a pressure at all that pressure comes from the truth that Buddhism teaches and not from the organization. One practitioner explained it in the following terms:

I believe if I stop practising dharma I will suffer as a result because I would have done anyway... At least I've purified some suffering I suppose. But I

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<sup>99</sup>See note 29.

<sup>100</sup>NKT 11, study day, 14 October 1995.

<sup>101</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

would never want to stop. This is somewhere where you really need the faith of the lineage... In no way do I feel it is used as a device by a modern organization. Buddha himself talked about the hell realms and if you have faith in Buddha you just know that you have got to practise in this life. You've got to use most of your moments to purify and create good karma. Staying within the NKT or not within the NKT, to me, that doesn't come into the equation. I would not stop practising because I would fear for my own suffering in this life and in future lives. I have no fear about what the NKT would do.<sup>102</sup>

### **Ethics**

The ethical code of the NKT is based on the strong belief in karma and on the monastic vows. Much of the teaching at the Amitabha Centre is focused on cause and effect. Good or skilful action will lead to good results while unskilful, or thoughtless action will lead to bad results and unfavourable rebirth. Lay practitioners are not asked to take vows before attending retreats or receiving empowerments although they may do so.<sup>103</sup> Such vows would however be seen as lasting for a lifetime and not just for the duration of a retreat period.

Ordination vows, which so far as most NKT monastics are concerned are the same for men and women, are regarded as lifelong and are equivalent to traditional *gets'ul* (Sanskrit *upāsaka*) vows. Vows taken by newly ordaining men and women are as follows,

Throughout my life I will abandon, killing, stealing, sexual conduct, lying and taking intoxicants. I will practice contentment, reduce my desire for worldly pleasures, abandon engaging in meaningless activities, maintain the commitments of refuge, practise the three trainings of pure moral discipline,

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<sup>102</sup>NKT 8, interview 15 October 1995.

<sup>103</sup>Personal correspondence from Samten Kelsang, the head monk at the Manjushri Centre, Cumbria, 7 July 1996.

concentration and wisdom.<sup>104</sup>

The vows, which have changed recently, are thought to be more meaningful than the former vows which included a vow not to eat after midday. These changes are discussed further below.

### Gender

There are three levels of monastic vow available to monks in Tibet.<sup>105</sup> A monk who has taken full monastic ordination, a *gelong* (Sanskrit *bhikṣu*) takes the full Prātimokṣa vows of the *Vinaya*. There is no readily available equivalent of the *gelong* for women since this level of ordination did not reach Tibet. Two lower forms of ordination, *genyen* (Sanskrit *upāsaka*) which is usually associated with the laity and *gets'ul* (Sanskrit *śrāmanera*) a type of novice ordination are however available to women and NKT nuns have taken a form of *gets'ulma* ordination. Most NKT monastics, monks and nuns, have taken only the *gets'ul* novice ordination, there is therefore no difference between them. In traditional Tibetan terms it is quite usual for monks to take only the lower novice vows until they are "well advanced in their monastic careers"<sup>106</sup> and novice ordination does not constitute a handicap to serious Buddhist practice.<sup>107</sup>

Since the majority of monks do not take full *gelong* vows nuns are not discriminated against at this time and indeed there are many well respected nuns who play leading roles, although not *the* leading roles, in the organization. Many of the teachers I met during fieldwork were women. One of the Amitabha Centre teachers told me:

Women are treated as equal... Buddha said that men and women are completely equal therefore any insinuation that women are in any way

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<sup>104</sup>Printed version of vow distributed to new ordinands.

<sup>105</sup>Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, p286.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p206.

inferior to men is not Buddha's teaching... It's not an issue at all in the NKT. Men and women are completely equal. Anything a man can do a woman can do anything a woman can do a man can do.<sup>108</sup>

I interviewed this nun twice during research on the NKT and listened to her teaching at the Bath centre on many occasions. Each time I heard her speak she was decisive and clear on almost every issue put to her. She has an impressive knowledge of Geshe Kelsang's writings which she has gained over her eleven years on the teacher training programme and is easily able to recall her teacher's writings on doctrinal issues often correcting my own more generalised knowledge of Buddhism with an exact explanation from the NKT viewpoint. Her own role as a ten precept nun was however clearly difficult for her to understand. As we talked about this issue it emerged that the notion of men and women being completely equal was not quite so clear cut for her as she would have liked.

My understanding...is that it must be possible to receive the same ordination; to give the same empowerments; to perform exactly the same functions. Personally I believe that must be the case, that must be the case.

Most of us have only received a simple like a novice ordination where we received 10 vows. There are a few fully ordained monks. There aren't any fully ordained nuns so far. There was a time when I heard that the lineage for the fully ordained nuns had been lost but my understanding is that I think that Geshe-la possesses that lineage although I am not completely sure on that. Geshe-la intends us perhaps to take full ordinations later but to live within these vows first.<sup>109</sup>

Having betrayed her unease about the issue of the ordination of women she then returned characteristically to NKT teaching.

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<sup>108</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 94.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

It's not an issue for us. We don't tend to bring politics into our dharma practice because everyone has such a pure mind of faith these things are irrelevant.<sup>110</sup>

In spite of her attempt to defuse her earlier expression of concern with the party line on peripheral issues she had already clearly expressed her unease with the current situation. This was all the more significant because in teaching and in her relationships with others this woman did not usually hesitate or display uncertainty. Her view on this issue as a young, intelligent, educated western woman contradicts her faith in her teacher and puts her in a paradoxical situation. Because of the reluctance of NKT practitioners to distract themselves with written material other than those of their teacher she has no clear idea of the facts of the case and no knowledge of the debate about the role of women and nuns in Buddhism which is continuing elsewhere. She is caught in the trap which while acknowledging the injustice of women's positions privileges philosophical concern over those of the social contexts in which they find themselves.

The other issue to be addressed here is the concern of the organization with women's traditional parenting roles and the ways in which these fit into their Buddhist practice and the help the NKT can offer them.

Typically the NKT are making strides with these problems although not necessarily in the ways which we might have expected. Ordained nun Kelsang Rigma is the resident teacher at the NKT centre in Hull. She is also the mother of five children all of whom live at the centre with her along with her husband. The willingness of the NKT to ordain her in these unusual circumstances and allow her to continue with her role as a mother suggests that the organization values not only the contribution which women can make but also the parental role.

Rigma claims that her children have been "wonderfully challenging" to her spiritual practice and says:

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

Your children are your Teachers, and in this sense are like emanations of your spiritual guide.<sup>111</sup>

During my fieldwork with the NKT in Bath I was welcomed at the centre with my own children and effort is certainly being made at a local level to recognize parental responsibilities. There is however room for change. Two of the young women attached to the NKT group in Bath expressed their disappointment that there was no creche facility at the Spring Festival during May 1995. The Spring Festival is an important event in the NKT calendar and provides an opportunity for Geshe Kelsang's disciples to meet at Manjushri over a three day period and be taught there by their Spiritual Guide in person. Attendance or non-attendance at the Spring festival is regarded as important and sets up a temporary class division where inequality is able to creep in. Members prevented by family responsibilities from attending festivals are therefore disadvantaged. There were very few children around the site for the 1995 Spring festival. Although the lack of creche provision was not necessarily the only factor here it must have been *a* factor.

### **Adaptation**

In order to consider adaptation within the NKT I will first present two views of adaptation expressed by Bath attenders. The first is the NKT's 'official' view as expressed in its literature,

Geshe Kelsang's main quality has been to extract Buddhism from the east and bring it to the west and re-present it in a form that is suitable and accessible to us as westerners and to do that without losing any of the essence, any of the essential practices but in such a way that it is not mixed with the eastern culture. Like extract it from its cultural context because we need Buddhism in a western cultural context otherwise we couldn't practice.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>'A Day in the Life of Kelsang Rigma' in *Full Moon* the journal of the NKT, Summer 1995.

<sup>112</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 1994.

An uncritical interpretation of this view is that Geshe Kelsang has "taken Tibetan culture out of Tibetan Buddhism".<sup>113</sup>

A second view was expressed by a Bath NKT attender who remains on the periphery of the group and it points to some of the problems with the adaptation of Buddhism for the west which are evident in the NKT.

...its very clear, what he is saying, but he doesn't interpret it enough for my western mind. He expects you to know quite a lot already. And also I feel that the examples he gives...I can't see the relevance of them. They are to do with...he tells some little story about some Buddha back in the ninth century and that's not an example...I need. I need one now.<sup>114</sup>

As we have seen the NKT is established on two things, the teacher Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and the English language texts and *sādhanas* which he has initiated. There can be no doubt that this organization presents *Tibetan* Buddhism. It retains the pivotal role of the lama as Tantric initiator and the *Tibetan* method of mind training through the recitation of *sādhanas*. The iconography which is much in evidence at the centres and in line drawings in the publications is also clearly *Tibetan*. The philosophical interpretation of Buddhism, the figures which the texts draw on for examples of Buddhist practice and which add credibility, and the literal presentation of certain doctrines look and sound *Tibetan*. Since this is the case the 'essential Buddhism' which Geshe Kelsang has presented to the west must be essential *Tibetan* Buddhism unmixed with other versions of Buddhism and also, to a degree, unmixed with the tendency of many westerners to present traditional Buddhist teachings as symbolic and not literal.

There have been visible adaptations to this presentation since Geshe Kelsang first took over at Manjushri. The major adaptation is undoubtedly the use of the English language. When the Bath centre opened in 1992, like the Manjushri centre, it

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<sup>113</sup>NKT 4, May 1994.

<sup>114</sup>NKT 2, interview 12 May 1995.

provided classes in the Tibetan language since the intention was that practitioners should study Tibetan texts. There is now no need for practitioners to learn Tibetan since the understanding is that everything necessary to successfully practice Buddhism is in Geshe Kelsang's English language publications. In general, where the Tibetan people retained the Sanskrit language for mantras Geshe Kelsang has also done so.

We use the Sanskrit mantras because they are blessed and the tunes but we need to understand the meanings. We used to chant in Tibetan and when we changed it felt very funny at first. We were very attached to the Tibetan and we also learned some Tibetan and got used to looking at the meanings on the side of the page. But you get used to it by doing it.<sup>115</sup>

One resident at the Bath centre explained how the Sanskrit mantras were in her view inherently powerful:

I don't really know if there is any logic I just like the sound of it. It makes it seem special. I can't intellectually understand it yet sometimes it sounds very meaningful... Some essence still comes through. It's that understanding that gives rise to special feeling.<sup>116</sup>

Although Geshe Kelsang's versions of texts are now available in English, the books and the teachers who transmit them orally still make use of stories about Tibetan characters to explain points of doctrine or practice.<sup>117</sup> This is clearly a problem for some, the practitioner quoted above is an example, but others regard references to the great historical figures of Buddhism as lending credibility and authenticity to the teachings:

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<sup>115</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 1994.

<sup>116</sup>NKT 3, interview 6 June 1995.

<sup>117</sup>There are examples of this throughout the books. Stories are told of Buddha Śakyamuni's encounters with his disciples in e.g. Geshe Kelsang, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune*, (London: Tharpa, 1990), p67/68 and about great Tibetan adepts e.g. Milarepa whose exploits are referred to in Geshe Kelsang, *Meaningful to Behold*.

This is to lend credibility; to show that the teachings are authentic; to show that the lineage is still intact; to show that there is the whole weight of the lineage and tradition behind what we are learning, so it's not just somebody's idea which has been made up just recently. It goes right back to Buddha Śakyamuni. So that's why scriptural references are used<sup>118</sup>.

When asked about Tibetan images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas NKT members usually agree that their faces could be westernized and some would like to see them wearing western clothes but no one suggested that Buddha images are not essential to practice. Like the devotional practices which members perform, the images, though they look Tibetan, are considered to be Buddhist in origin and in use. *Sādhana* practices have been translated into English but they will not be abandoned because they represent powerful ways of training the mind. The fact that Tibetans have successfully used them for centuries is interpreted as meaning they work, not that they are culturally Tibetan.

You can't change those things very much because if, for example, you get a lot of merit by making offerings to the Buddhas then OK this is a traditional practice but we should continue to do it because we are getting lots of merit.<sup>119</sup>

Other adaptations have been made recently, for example to the vows of monastics. The current vows are reproduced above but until 1993 monks and nuns were still promising not to eat after midday, a vow which they regularly broke in order to maintain their health within a very active lifestyle. This adaptation was made by Geshe Kelsang as ordaining abbot.

It is not clear what elements of Tibetan culture NKT Buddhism has been extracted from unless it is the political situation in Tibet and what NKT members refer to as the degeneration of Tibetan practice into career paths within monasteries. Geshe

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<sup>118</sup>NKT 8, interview September 1995.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

Kelsang teaches practices in apparently clear and unambiguous terms which depend upon very complex ideas about Tibetan deity practice, the consultation of oracles and so on; ideas which are not clearly explained because they are not questioned. These are the concepts which characterise Tibetan Buddhism and give it its identity within Buddhism as a world religion. This is a reminder that the role of faith in this form of Buddhism is preeminent. In order to accept Geshe Kelsang's teaching about Dorje Shugdän, for example, the practitioner is also required to take on trust several complex ideas, that deities not only exist but that they can provide real assistance in purifying the effects of negative karma and that a deity can be displeased by certain actions.

### **Authority**

Since Faith is the root of all achievement it should be our main practice.<sup>120</sup>

Practitioners who attend the Amitabha Centre have two principal authority sources for their practice. The first is their Spiritual Guide Geshe Kelsang who represents for them the lineage of teaching, all the Buddhas and the scriptural canon and the second is their own experience that the teachings are true. Most of those who say they are committed to following NKT Buddhism say they believe that their experience confirms the teaching and that it will continue to do so. There are some who express complete faith in Geshe Kelsang very early in their encounter with him a position which is explained as resulting from past life experience by some but mistrusted by others who require a slower and more grounded experience. Those who say they are not yet committed to following NKT Buddhism trust their own experience and do not rely on Geshe Kelsang to know better than they do; instead of testing their own experience against NKT teachings they test NKT teachings against their own experience.

My authority is just my own personal conviction. That's what its got to be isn't it. I don't want to be somebody who just starts reading something and

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<sup>120</sup>Geshe Kelsang, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune*, p106.

following it. Just saying, well OK that's fact.<sup>121</sup>

Geshe Kelsang's authority is ascribed to him by his followers through their faith in him. Faith in Geshe Kelsang is the foundation of the organization. He is attributed with the authority to present teachings, to select which teachings are essential and suitable to the western mind, to adapt the practice of Buddhism for the western context, to agree who can be ordained and so on. Before Geshe Kelsang's close or heart disciple Gen Thubten Gyatso disrobed and left the movement in the Summer of 1996 he almost certainly made day to day decisions but practitioners claimed that, "Gen-la's view is exactly Geshe-la's view".<sup>122</sup>

Geshe Kelsang is vested with authority by his followers for several reasons, all of which are traditional in terms of Tibetan Buddhism. The first is that he is regarded as a fully enlightened being. He has realised that what he teaches is true through his own experience and he therefore knows what westerners need to be taught because he knows which elements of Buddhist teaching are appropriate to their needs. For this reason he can adapt Buddhism for this cultural setting. His second source of authority is thought to be his lineage:

Of course lineage is important. Geshe Kelsang's teacher was Trijang Rinpoche he was one of the tutors to the present Dalai Lama. He was the root guru of all the Gelugpa lamas alive today. He had thousands and thousands of disciples in Tibet. Before that Pabongka Rinpoche. And of course the lineage goes right back to Buddha Shakyamuni.<sup>123</sup>

Thirdly, Geshe Kelsang has studied the sutras and tantras and not only applied them to his own life but also retained that knowledge so that he can pass it on. The combination of experience, lineage and knowledge makes Geshe Kelsang ideal as a

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<sup>121</sup>NKT 9, interview 29 June 1995.

<sup>122</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 1994. Gen Thubten left the movement in the summer of 1996. No official explanation for his leaving has been given.

<sup>123</sup>NKT 1, interview 20 May 1994.

teacher. He has the credibility of a genuine Tibetan teacher and the vision to instigate an organization to present that teaching to westerners. Individual practitioners also cite as proofs of Geshe Kelsang's authenticity the fact that he always appears to be so happy<sup>124</sup> and that he does not appear to make any personal gain from the teachings,

There are times when I have no doubt at all that he is like a Buddha and there's other times when I am really questioning. Like, is it really true what he says? But questions like, what if he is not genuine? doesn't really occur because he doesn't seem to show any sign of having any personal gain from this at all.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup>NKT 7, interview 14 June 1995.

<sup>125</sup>NKT 3, interview 6 June 1996.

## Chapter 6: The Karma Pakshi Centre<sup>1</sup>

### Organization

Unlike the other Bath groups, the Karma Pakshi Centre did not emerge from the interest of local people or from the activities of a single teacher anxious to set up a centre. It was instigated and also established by representatives of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu at its highest levels. The Karma Kagyu is a major sub group of the Kagyupa, one of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. There are currently serious disagreements between lineage holders within this school which are described later in this chapter and the relationship which the group has with Karma Kagyu representatives in Tibet, Northern India and in the west is complex and has affected the ways in which this group has developed and now operates.

There are other well established Karma Kagyu centres in Britain. One well known example is Samye Ling in Dumfriesshire, which is under the direction of meditation master Lama Yeshe and Akong Rinpoche, a lama who retains strong links within Tibet. With the sanction of Karmapa's regent Tai Situ Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe has introduced some new ideas into monastic training<sup>2</sup> and Samye Ling is arguably therefore less 'traditional' than the parent monastery of the Karma Pakshi Centre. Another well established, though smaller British Karma Kagyu Centre is Marpa House in Saffron Walden which is directed by Chime Rinpoche. Both Samye Ling and Marpa House have affiliated centres in London. Like these two organizations, the Karma Pakshi Centre is able to draw upon the expertise of some of the most high profile lamas in the Karma Kagyu school. Since the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, the school's administrative seat is at Rumtek monastery in Sikkim, Northern India. Batchelor describes the Karma Kagyu school as one of "the most prolific and energetic schools in Europe today"<sup>3</sup>. In spite of that this school

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<sup>1</sup>A version of part of this chapter was published as 'Who is the Karmapa? Western Buddhist Responses to a Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority'. in *DISKUS*, Vol.3, No.2 1995, pp59-73. A copy of the paper is attached as Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup>For example one year 'trial' ordinations for young people. KK 7, interview 9 June 1994.

<sup>3</sup>Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, p157.

probably does not rank among the largest in Britain. The administrator at Samye Ling has estimated that that monastery represents "a home base for between 4,000 and 5,000 British Buddhists,"<sup>4</sup> however this estimate is not confirmed by the number of local support groups operating within the Karma Kagyu tradition.

The Bath Karma Kagyu group was founded in 1991. Twenty five years earlier the sixteenth Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu school and as such one of the major figures in Tibetan Buddhism, expressed a wish, while visiting England, that a centre should be set up in the South West. The sixteenth Karmapa died in Chicago in 1981 before his wish had been fulfilled and the leadership of the Karma Kagyu school then passed to four regents, all incarnations of high lamas, who were responsible for identifying the next Karmapa incarnation. Ten years later, in 1991, one of the regents, Shamar Rinpoche, oversaw the establishment of the Bath centre. Shamar asked Julian Pollock to identify a suitable location in the South West and to advertise, and establish a group there. Pollock, who lived at Rumtek as a lay follower, had previously completed a traditional three year, three month retreat in Burgundy, France under the auspices of Kalu Rinpoche (1905-1989) a prominent lama in the Karma Kagyupa and the closely related Shangpa Kagyu.<sup>5</sup>

The group was inaugurated at a visit from Lama Jigme Rinpoche (born 1949, Kham Tibet). Lama Jigme is Shamar Rinpoche's brother and a nephew of the sixteenth Karmapa. At that time Shamar gave the centre the recognition of the lineage by giving it its official name, the Karma Pakshi<sup>6</sup> Centre. It was hoped that Shamar himself might visit the group after it had become established, a visit which has not yet taken place. There was a strong intention at that time to build up the centre so that it could support permanent premises and a resident teacher. We might see the inauguration of this centre as part of a genuine desire on the part of Tibetan lamas, to make Tibetan Buddhist teachings available for the benefit of westerners. It is

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<sup>4</sup>These figures were estimated by Ken Holmes, who is part of the administration at Samye Ling, on 9 June 1994.

<sup>5</sup>See Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, pp349-351.

<sup>6</sup>Karma Pakshi was the name of the second Karmapa incarnation (1204-1283).

also possible that it represents an attempt by refugee Tibetan lamas to establish new avenues through which to recruit politically and economically important lay supporters.<sup>7</sup>

Although recognized by the tradition at the highest level the group was never large. For the first few months about twenty five people met together weekly. Some of these founder members already had established master/disciple relationships with one or other of the Karma Kagyu lamas operating in this country, including for example Lama Chime Rinpoche of Marpa House and Ato Rinpoche who lives in Cambridge, but they were happy to get together with other practitioners from the same school. At the instigation of Shamar, the group was most closely affiliated with the monastic centre Dhagpo Kagyu Ling which is situated in the Dordogne in France and is headed by Lama Gendun Rinpoche.

Lama Gendun (born 1918, Kham, Tibet), unlike many younger Tibetan teachers in the west was able to complete his Buddhist studies in Tibet before the Chinese military takeover. During the sixties and seventies he was resident in Kalimpong, in Northern India from where he made annual visits to Rumtek monastery, to receive instruction from Karmapa. In 1975, when he was nearly sixty and had spent most of his life in retreat, he was sent to the Dordogne to oversee Dhagpo Kagyu Ling monastery and its satellite centres in western Europe.<sup>8</sup>

Lama Monlam Puntsok an English monk who was resident at Dhagpo Kagyu Ling was given responsibility for the Bath group. He first went to Bath in October 1991, and subsequently made regular, though infrequent, visits to teach at the centre. He also taught on a residential retreat organized by Bath members in 1993. His visits were supplemented by visits from Lama Tenpa an American born monk from the same monastery. Both men had completed two traditional three year, three month

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<sup>7</sup>See Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, pp148,149 who suggests that the establishment of Buddhism in the west may be regarded in this light. This is similar to attempts made by Japanese Buddhist organizations to set up centres in the west. The Sōka Gakkai is a good example of the potential success of this type of initiative.

<sup>8</sup>Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, p114.

retreats under the guidance of Lama Gendun at Dhagpo Kagyu Ling.

Lama Monlam died in a swimming accident in 1993 and since that time other lamas have visited Bath to teach at the group or at public meetings attracting audiences of up to eighty.<sup>9</sup> When there is no lama in attendance the group is run by the members, principally by a local school teacher who has taken on administrative responsibility and leads the pujas. Membership is not static and young people, in particular, may attend for several months before moving on elsewhere. This is not regarded as problematic but as indicative of the nature of the group.

We can afford to have people come and go because that's what happens. People come and stay for a while and then go. It's the nature of young people. The people who are attracted tend to be people who are not settled so they come for a while and then they go on. If B... doesn't go to Australia now he'll be going somewhere else soon.<sup>10</sup>

The group now attracts less than ten regular attenders and still has no permanent premises meeting instead, on Sunday evenings, in a centre for alternative therapies in Bath city centre. In 1993 the group was required to make a formal connection with Dhagpo Kagyu Ling in order to ensure that teachers would continue to be sent. This commitment, which is discussed below, meant entering into a relationship with the Dhagpo Kagyu Ling administration and becoming a Karma Teksoum Tcheuling (KTT). In the French language newsletter of Dhagpo Kagyu Ling, KTTs are described as:

...des lieux d'échange et d'enseignement associés à Dhagpo Kagyu Ling qui existent dans plusieurs villes de France et d'Espagne.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>This figure was given to me by group members. I have witnessed audiences of about forty people at most. Very often audiences are a quarter of this size, even when lamas are in attendance.

<sup>10</sup>KK 3, interview 26 July 1994.

<sup>11</sup>*Tendrel* the journal of Dhagpo Kagyu Ling, no date, p19.

The article goes on to list the twenty KTTs which existed in France and Spain in late 1993 before the inclusion of the Bath group. The Bath Karma Pakshi Centre was the first KTT in Britain and remains the only one of its kind. It continues to support regular visits from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling. During a typical year, 1994, the group received visits from monks in January and November and from a lay ex-retreatant in June. Cambridge based Ato Rinpoche, who has no links with Dhagpo Kagyu Ling taught over a weekend in April and Traleg Rinpoche, a Tibetan born Karma Kagyu lama normally resident in Australia, gave teachings in September. When the Dhagpo Kagyu Ling monks visit they usually stay for two consecutive weekends and talk twice on both Saturdays and Sundays. These talks provide the only opportunity for any degree of sustained teaching. The lamas are also available for private interviews while they are in Bath. The lamas from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling have in common their close relationship with Lama Gendun who is not known, except by reputation, to Bath members. Major direct teaching influences on this group are therefore the western monks from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling and Ato Rinpoche who has attended the group for one weekend every year since 1992.

In spite of the group's decision to formalise connections with Dhagpo Kagyu Ling members also value Ato Rinpoche who has been trained within the Kagyupa but is also influenced by the non-sectarian Rime movement. Ato is not formally attached to any of the British Karma Kagyu centres and operates on an independent basis. Several regular attenders at the Karma Pakshi centre formally took refuge<sup>12</sup> with him and they value his independence and his personal charisma. I asked a member why he prefers to approach Ato with questions about meditation and he replied:

You wouldn't need to ask that if you knew him. What I like about him is his simplicity; his very, very profound simplicity....Every time you ask a question he brings it down to the most practical level.<sup>13</sup>

Another member claimed:

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<sup>12</sup>Taking refuge in Buddha, *Dharma* and *Sangha*, the three jewels of Buddhism, is often regarded as a commitment to practice.

<sup>13</sup>KK 5, interview 9 June 1994.

He has a way of answering your questions before you have a chance to ask them. Either he is just very good at explaining things or he is picking up the vibes from the people listening.<sup>14</sup>

Although Ato is highly respected by group members none would regard him as their spiritual guide or guru though several have indicated that they are looking for a figure to fulfil that role.

### Finance

Group activities are advertised in the town and the group also maintains a list of about fifty interested parties who are periodically mailed with advertisements of forthcoming events. Maintaining the mailing list and paying for stamps represents part of the financial burden with which this group finds it hard to cope. Most teachers come over from France at a cost of approximately one hundred and fifty pounds per visit and since there are no other groups with which to share these costs this represents a significant expense. Those who attend regular Sunday meetings and special events are asked to contribute financially. In contrast to the charges of the NKT group this contribution is usually represented as a donation and is collected in a discreet donation bowl which can be easily ignored. Financial difficulties provide a constraint on group activities and effectively mean that a very few people carry the major financial responsibility for the group. The fact that Ato Rinpoche's visits attract good audiences and therefore generate income is one reason why they are likely to be continued<sup>15</sup> in spite of the fact that Ato does not operate within the Dhagpo Kagyu Ling lineage.

### Relationships with other groups

No formal relationships exist between the Karma Pakshi group and other Buddhist groups in Britain and the group leader was not aware of the existence of the Network of Buddhist Organizations. However the group's activities are influenced by other local Buddhist groups because of several personal connections with those

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<sup>14</sup>KK 2, interview 20 July 1995.

<sup>15</sup>Ato Rinpoche made a further visit to Bath in October 1996.

groups. Some people who attend the Karma Pakshi Centre have also attended lectures at the House of Inner Tranquillity and some have taken part in *vipassana* meditation courses under the direction of The Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, U.K. at Splatts House.<sup>16</sup> Several Karma Pakshi attenders have listened to and appreciated taped teachings of Ajahn Sumedho from the British Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha. Others attend BBG from time to time. A young woman who regularly attends Karma Pakshi meetings lived at the NKT residential centre in Bath for eighteen months when it opened and another woman regularly attends both the Karma Pakshi Centre and NKT. Another strong Karma Pakshi supporter was involved with the FWBO for several years and attended FWBO training courses for intending Order members during that time.

The group leader has been to the NKT Centre and he reported that the teacher from the NKT Centre has attended Karma Pakshi Centre meetings on occasion. There is an element of competition between the two Tibetan groups which is sometimes expressed lightheartedly at Karma Pakshi Centre meetings. Although they both operate with Tibetan traditions there are clear differences in emphasis. Karma Pakshi practitioners are aware that the NKT group is more sophisticated in its marketing and financial arrangements but they perceive the main difference to exist in the emphases placed on meditation at the Karma Pakshi and on study at NKT. This difference reflects their respective roots in the Kagyupa and Gelugpa. The Karma Pakshi view of NKT is not entirely accurate since study is not in fact isolated from meditation in NKT practice but it is perceived by Karma Pakshi practitioners to be so:

...you study for seven years then you start meditating. What's the point when you can meditate straight away?<sup>17</sup>

The emphasis on study at NKT is not attractive to Karma Pakshi practitioners one of whom cited this emphasis as the reason why she changed groups. This also works

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<sup>16</sup>See Chapter 3, note number 58.

<sup>17</sup>KK 3, interview 26 July 1994.

the other way around. An NKT practitioner who started with the Karma Pakshi group was drawn to the NKT because of the emphasis on structured study.<sup>18</sup>

The other group which attracts comment by Karma Pakshi members is BBG which is thought to be less than ideal as an aid for making spiritual progress.

Well how close to enlightenment do you get with the Bath Buddhist Group?  
I don't know...if you are a Mahāyāna Buddhist your main aim is to get to enlightenment, and to sit in the Sea Scouts Hall listening to three sorts of Buddhism all the time... I think in the end you have to commit. You have to do it and if you don't do that somehow I don't think you are actually a Buddhist.<sup>19</sup>

One member, although presenting himself as "committed" to the Karma Pakshi Centre, does not rule out attendance at either the Bath Buddhist Group or the NKT. He said that he is not interested in "shopping around" but also that he does not want to be "blinker".<sup>20</sup> This attitude is not uncommon among some Karma Pakshi Group members, some members of the Bath Buddhist Group and certain people on the periphery of NKT.

### **Symbols**

There are three significant symbolic expressions of this group, its name, the meeting place and the shrine. The name of the group, The Karma Pakshi Centre, was given at the inauguration of the group by Shamar Rinpoche in his capacity as a regent of the Karmapa. It thus represents the position which the group holds in relation to the Kagyu lineage. The group was established at the instigation of the highest lamas of the order and the name represents the continuing relationship between Dhagpo Kagyu Ling, which operates in Shamarpa's lineage and the Bath group. As we shall see below, when Karma Pakshi group members were forced to make decisions

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<sup>18</sup>See page 179.

<sup>19</sup>KK 3, interview 26 July 1994.

<sup>20</sup>KK 5, interview 19 November 1994.

about the group's future, the threat of the withdrawal of the given name was influential.

The meeting place, a centre for 'alternative' therapies, is a base for several practitioners of healing techniques such as homeopathy and acupuncture and represents the way in which Buddhism has found a niche for British people within the general trend towards investigating non-conventional world views. It also represents the lay status of this group. Meetings are not held in a monastery with all the backup which a monastic community can provide but in a room in the middle of a western city under the immediate direction of a relatively inexperienced practitioner. One young man who had attended the group quite regularly for many weeks but decided to stop going told me he needs a guru figure and cannot see the group's leader in that way.<sup>21</sup> It is not the lay status of the group's administrative leader which makes the group unusual but his readily acknowledged lack of expertise. The three year retreat is normally regarded as a liminal phase which leads to expertise. Samuel has argued that during the three year retreat the adept learns how to gain control over *tsalung*, "internal psychic currents," and consequently become "a competent ritual performer."<sup>22</sup> This means that traditionally a lama, an expert, is not necessarily a monastic since a lay person can fulfil this role.

The third symbol is the shrine which is built each week from tables covered with cloth on which are placed some of the visual symbols of Tibetan practice. These include thankas, the pictures which assist in visualisation practices, offering bowls and Buddha rupas. Sometimes members bring to the meeting flowers which they offer as devotional practice to adorn the shrine. The shrine has been built up over the five years this group has been in existence and its current form symbolises the growing understanding of and commitment to Tibetan modes of practice which continues to develop in spite of the group's marginal status.

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<sup>21</sup>KK 13, 2 September 1994.

<sup>22</sup>Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, p278.

## Doctrines

The teachings which group members have received from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling teachers have been consistently within the Karma Kagyu lineage the philosophical basis of which is Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka.<sup>23</sup> The Madhyamaka school, literally the 'middling' school attempts to systematize the teaching of the Perfection of Wisdom literature to show that nothing has inherent existence or own nature (*svabhāva*). The Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka is characterised by the reasoning method which it uses to show that no view whether eternalistic or nihilistic can be sustained. Kagyu doctrine is summarised and systematized in sGam-po-pa's *The Explanation of the Stages on the Mahāyānic Path towards Liberation, called a Jewel Ornament of Liberation or the Wish Fulfilling Gem of the Noble Doctrine* usually known as, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*.<sup>24</sup> In the terms of the Kagyu tradition, this text represents a structured guide or manual which explains the conditions of samsara and describes the path or stages by which the mind can be trained to understand rightly. These stages are essential to achieve the *mahamudra* or Great Seal experience in which the true nature of mind is realised when it is freed from all obscuration.

Although *The Jewel Ornament* is known to Bath practitioners some report that they find it, "very difficult to read"<sup>25</sup> and the majority to whom I have spoken prefer to read texts written specially for western audiences. Lamas from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling all teach from translations of texts approved by Lama Gendun. They therefore teach from what they have been taught themselves but as they teach they provide a commentary which applies the teaching to the listener. An example of one such teaching was given during November 1994 by Lama Puntsok, a Belgian monk from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling. Puntsok gave eight public teachings about 'The Dharmic Day' the content of one of these, the eighth, is paraphrased here.

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<sup>23</sup>Herbert Guenther, *Treasures on the Tibetan Middle Way*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971) p9.

<sup>24</sup>Translated into English by Herbert Guenther, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, (London: Shambhala, 1986).

<sup>25</sup>KK 2, interview 20 July 1994.

Puntsok taught that everything should be done with the intention of compassion; that compassion should be the "colour of the dharmic day". Every action is designed either to build the ego or to dissolve it. When practitioners meet with adversity their suffering is not unique since the suffering of others is stronger. It is good practice to exchange happiness for the suffering of others. This motivation leads to a positive environment. At the moment of waking the mind should be put into the proper attitude for the day by an intention not to be separated from the mind of compassion and emptiness. At the end of the day practitioners should check to see that this intention has been preserved. If compassion has not been sustained they should feel regret but although this will happen again there is no need to feel guilt but deal lightly with negativity - realise it, regret it, have the intention not to do it again, and dedicate any merit which has been achieved for the benefit of others, then sleep well, unconfused by guilt. They should not be confused by negativity. Everything the practitioner meets with is the result of past karma and can be used as a base for the practice of transformation. They should not be depressed but use the understanding of suffering as a base to take on the suffering of others. If circumstances are good practitioners should not become indifferent to the *dharmā* but use good circumstances and happiness as the basis of practice. Both negative and positive circumstances can be a base to enrich spiritual life.

Practitioners should defend the precepts even if it costs them their lives because what they do now sows seeds for the future. They should keep the ethical vows of the Hinayāna, the Bodhisattva vows of the Mahāyāna and the pure vision of the Vajrayāna. Positive behaviour leads to positive circumstances in the future. These are not heavy rules to follow but a dynamic way to deal with life. They should train themselves in the three hard disciplines, which are to recognize negativity, to dispel negativity and to stop the non-stop flow of negativity. Practitioners should bring meditation to daily life to transform mental habits and tendencies, use the methods which deal with emotions and recognize their essence. Making a commitment not to repeat negative behaviour helps to create the proper tendencies.

The tenor of this teaching is typical of Tibetan teachings given to students in the west and its expression would be familiar to students associated with other Tibetan

teachers, including NKT practitioners. It incorporates within it key Buddhist concepts of compassion, emptiness, karma and morality. The teaching is practical; it suggests ways in which the techniques can be put into practice for example by forming a waking intention and by assessing the day before sleep. It is reassuring; it provides confirmation that the teaching will eventually bring positive results, in spite of setbacks, provided it is put into practice and assiduously followed. It is also inspirational because it provides clear instruction.

The Tibetan word, Kagyu which literally means ‘continuity of the Buddha word’<sup>26</sup> indicates the emphasis in this tradition on the Guru/disciple relationship in which difficult textual material is always accompanied by commentary from the teacher. When there is no teacher present the group studies books suggested by the Dhagpo Kagyu Ling lamas. These are often books written by teachers from other schools of Buddhism<sup>27</sup> specifically for a western audience for example, *Old Path White Clouds*<sup>28</sup> the life story of the Buddha written by the Vietnamese teacher Thicht Nhat Hanh, and *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*<sup>29</sup> by Nyingmapa teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche.

At Sunday evening meetings there is often discussion of doctrinal issues. At these times the absence of qualified teachers means there is sometimes uncertainty about the orthodox view. This leads to confusion which is compounded by the connections which some members have had with other British groups and the knowledge which they have already acquired about other schools of Buddhism. For example, on 24 July 1994, the meeting was led by KK 4, the member who has previously been a regular attender at FWBO meetings. During discussion KK 4 referred to the three marks of existence, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not self. The three marks

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<sup>26</sup>Guenther, ‘Buddhism: Buddhism in Tibet’ p410.

<sup>27</sup>The Vajrayāna path is taught as a complete path which incorporates all three of the Buddhist vehicles. It is therefore not incompatible for lamas to suggest the teachings of other Buddhist schools.

<sup>28</sup>Thicht Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, (London: Rider, 1991).

<sup>29</sup>Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, (London: Rider, 1992).

teaching, which is often regarded as a basic teaching of all Buddhist schools was unfamiliar to the group's leader. KK 4 assured him that though he might be unfamiliar with the teaching in those terms it is probably known as something else within Tibetan teachings.<sup>30</sup> The group leader conceded the point but countered that the teaching is not emphasised within the Karma Kagyu school. Also present at the meeting was a young woman who had not attended before and who was understandably surprised by this exchange. This element of eclecticism makes it difficult for leaders without formal training or years of experience to give guidance on doctrinal understanding.<sup>31</sup>

The group has clearly defined links with the Karma Kagyu lineage, so much so that, to an extent, it is controlled by Dhagpo Kagyu Ling and depends on it for teachers and its status. Yet because there is no resident teacher the teaching given to members when there is no lama present is not always clearly Kagyu or even necessarily Tibetan in its orientation. I discuss below the effect of the dispute within the Karma Kagyu lineage on this group and suggest that one of the reasons why the group was affected by that dispute was the desire by some members to receive teachings from within one lineage. And yet the mixture of influences which impinge upon this group suggest that it may not be possible for this desire to be fulfilled without the kind of formal study programme followed by the NKT group or the marked separateness of the SGI group or the House of Inner Tranquillity.

A member of the NKT who had previously been involved with the Karma Kagyu group gave this inconsistency and lack of guidance as his reason for joining NKT. It seems then that the purity of the doctrinal content of what is taught may not be a strong element in the group's identity as a KTT even though the status of the group as fulfilling the sixteenth Karmapa's wishes through this association has mythical power. The group, though in theory in the tradition of the Karma Kagyu which

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<sup>30</sup>The three marks teaching translates into the teaching of the four seals in Tibetan Buddhism, "All composite phenomena are impermanent. All contaminated things and events are unsatisfactory. All phenomena are empty and selfless. Nirvana is true peace. (Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism*, p31.)

<sup>31</sup>To my consternation, I was referred to several times to assist with disagreements, a role which I neither sought nor fulfilled.

teaches a gradual and graduated path based on a close relationship with a spiritual guide, is distant from its teachers, and teachings are therefore mostly given in an unstructured, non-graduated way.

### **Practices**

As we saw with the NKT group, the central tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhism are the *sādhana* which evoke bodhisattvas or deities. One of the most common of these is the Chenresig (skt. Avalokiteśvara) *sādhana* and it is this practice which has been taught to the group by lamas from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling. The purpose of the practice is to train the mind to the correct Buddhist view and it is part of the structured Tibetan method.

Chenresig practice begins, like all Tibetan practices, with the refuge prayers and the arousing of *bodhicitta*, the thought of enlightenment, for the benefit of all beings. This prayer is followed by the visualization of Chenresig. The visualisation is assisted by the descriptive verses which practitioners repeat and which help them to build up a complex picture of Chenresig in his four armed form.<sup>32</sup> Pictures of Chenresig in this form are traditionally represented on handpainted *thankas* surrounded by elaborate brocades but are readily available in the west as printed posters. The pictures help practitioners to know what Chenresig looks like. When the picture of Chenresig has been carefully built up, the visualization is held in the mind and a verse of homage to Chenresig is repeated. In response to this entreaty Chenresig is said to emit rays of bright light from his body. The rays purify impure karma and confusion. At this stage the practitioner becomes one with Chenresig and recites the mantra, *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* usually counting the repetitions of the mantra using a mala, a string of beads. One hundred and eight repetitions are traditional.

After repeating the mantra many times skilled practitioners see the visualization dissolved into emptiness and rest in that emptiness without conceptualizations. As they emerge from this state practitioners see themselves and all beings as Chenresig

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<sup>32</sup>See the illustration of Avalokiteśvara in this form in Bechert and Gombrich, *The World of Buddhism*, p257.

and hear all sounds as the six syllable mantra. The final part of the practice is to dedicate all the merit generated by the practice, for the benefit of all sentient beings. This is accompanied by the wish to attain enlightenment quickly in order to be able to help others reach that state.<sup>33</sup>

Chenresig practice was first taught to the group by Lama Monlam in January 1992 and lamas continue to teach it when they visit. Sunday group meetings as well as personal daily practice take this form. One female member sometimes substitutes Tara puja.<sup>34</sup> Members sit in silent meditation for variable periods within the structure of the formal practice although within Tibetan traditions, it is difficult to separate sitting meditation from recitation of mantras and tantric visualisation.

It is traditional within the Karma Kagyu school for practitioners to complete the preliminary or *ngöndro* practices prior to embarking on tantric practices.<sup>35</sup> These are: the refuge practice, which consists of physically demanding prostrations; repetition of a one hundred syllable mantra with visualizations; and guru yoga which opens the disciple to the blessings of the guru. There is reluctance among some Bath practitioners to embark on these gruelling practices:

I've been battling with myself about whether to start the *ngöndro* practices; the prostrations. I don't really want to but think I should really do it. I've had a lot of instruction. It's something that has been bothering me for quite

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<sup>33</sup>The practice has been translated in scholarly sources e.g. Janet Gyatso, *A Technique For Developing Enlightened Consciousness: A Traditional Buddhist Meditation on Avalokiteshvara by the Tibetan Saint Tangtong Gyalbo*, (Buddhist Association of the United States, 1980), cited in Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, but also by teachers of Tibetan Buddhism for their disciples. The Bath group recite the *sādhana* in Tibetan using transliterated Roman script with the English translation printed alongside. The same was true in 1991 for Lama Chime Rinpoche's students at Marpa House in Saffron Walden.

<sup>34</sup>KK 1, interview 20 June 1994. Tara is a female emanation of Chenresig sometimes said to have been born from one of the tears shed by Chenresig on seeing the state of sentient beings.

<sup>35</sup>A description of the Kagyu *ngöndro* practices is given in Kalu Rinpoche, *The Gem Ornament of Manifold Oral Instructions*, (New York: Snow Lion, 1987).

a while.<sup>36</sup>

The taking of refuge in the three jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, *Dharma* and *Sangha* is often taken formally in front of a lama on an initial occasion as well as being repeated within daily practice. The taking of refuge is an expression of faith in the three jewels. One practitioner expressed it in this way:

You take refuge in the Buddha, the *Dharma* and the *Sangha* rather than refuge in politics, or alcohol, or the family. What you do is you surround yourself in these three.<sup>37</sup>

For Bath practitioners refuge is a personal commitment but also a public statement of intent which represents a form of initiation into the group. Missing from the above account of 'going for refuge' is the importance within Tibetan Buddhism of refuge in the guru who within the context of Tibetan practice should be regarded as *Buddha*. Thurman has argued that,

The essence of Tibetan culture is defined by this experience of real Buddhas dwelling among them...This is the characteristic that distinguishes Buddhism in Tibet from the Buddhisms in other civilisations.<sup>38</sup>

Although Bath practitioners formally repeat the refuge prayer to the guru/lama as well as to the Buddha, *Dharma* and *Sangha* within the Chenresig sādhana, refuge in the lama does not figure in their accounts of the practices they do. The reason for this is that the lama does not assume the traditional high status for most Karma Pakshi practitioners. Such practices would normally be performed by Tibetans within a monastic setting, with others, or with the constant support of a guru or spiritual guide. No group member to whom I have spoken has a relationship with a

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<sup>36</sup>KK 1, interview, 20 June 1994.

<sup>37</sup>KK 3, interview 26 July 1994.

<sup>38</sup>Robert Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), p1.

teacher which they would characterise as a guru/disciple relationship although some said they were actively seeking such a relationship. Whatever the connection with Dhagpo Kagyu Ling provides it is neither structured teaching nor a guru to follow. I shall return to this in the section on authority below.

There is every reason to think that Bath practitioners are not confident that they understand why they practice as they do or how the practices 'work.'

I find it weird hearing myself saying these things because it is so unscientific it is so anti all my upbringing. But it's a view that you adopt, you know? Something that you take on. It's to do with faith.<sup>39</sup>

When I asked members to describe their practices the explanations were often tentative and were conditioned by comments such as: "I probably don't understand it correctly but that's how I understand it."<sup>40</sup> Practitioners are also typically modest about their practice. Although most commit a regular part of their day to meditation and puja they often add that they are only learning the processes.

The basic practice is about visualizing yourself as Chenresig, then the dissolution practice, dissolving everything into mind, except I can't do that yet.<sup>41</sup>

### **Experience**

The people who attend this group, like other Buddhist practitioners, continue to do so because though they may not fully understand the process they believe they experience positive results as a result of continuing with the practices. One interviewee explained that there would be no point in continuing without this experience.

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<sup>39</sup>KK 3, interview 26 July 1994.

<sup>40</sup>KK 1, interview 20 June 1994.

<sup>41</sup>KK 2, interview 20 July 1994.

If you have the attitude that you are looking for the truth; that you want to discover what the Buddha said there was to discover, just do so, and if you don't discover that you say, 'well that was a load of crap' and you go off and do something else.<sup>42</sup>

Faith is important for these practitioners. Initial faith is needed before they try Buddhist practices for the first time and faith is also needed to assure them that changes they see in their lives come from the practice of Buddhism and not from other sources. Their accounts suggest a continuum of experience which often starts with being able to cope better with life, in particular with personal relationships and goes on to confirm doctrine, for example rebirth and the existence of other realms, the nature of mind or the wrong view of the existence of separate selves. From this practitioners are able to make the leap to practising to help with death .

The practical nature of Buddhism appeals to me. You look after yourself to look after the other and you get a practical tool to help you when you die, so when the day comes you are not overwhelmed by the strange experiences.<sup>43</sup>

One practitioner, drawing on his experience of a painful medical condition, used the analogy of anaesthetic to explain how he experiences meditation:

If you meditate it provides you with this quite positive absorbed state of mind so that you can go then and do other things; so that you can then go and look at the nature of your existence, which is bloody scary and very very painful, with the epidural of the meditation.<sup>44</sup>

## **Ethics**

Part of the self-identity of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism is that they incorporate all three vehicles of Buddhism. Their ethical foundations are based on the vinaya of

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<sup>42</sup>KK 4, interview 1 July 1994.

<sup>43</sup>KK 5, interview 9 June 1994.

<sup>44</sup>KK 4, interview 1 July 1994.

the Mūlasarvāstivāda. Members of the Karma Pakshi group aim to live according to the five ethical precepts for lay practitioners. One member illustrated the conscious and committed way in which these precepts may be adhered to:

I can actually remember making the decision that I would follow the precepts. I actually made a positive decision to always tell the truth. Killing things was a bit more problematic because we were in farming but we did resolve that by getting out.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond the keeping of these precepts members did not discuss ethical issues at group meetings while I was present.

### **Gender**

As in other groups, the issue of gender divisions within the Karma Pakshi Centre did not arise naturally from the research. The administrative leader of the group is male but his confidence to take on this role, or to accept it, comes more from his role as a man in society in general than from any specific Buddhist notion of a rightful subordinate place for women. There are women in the group who play important supporting roles and it is often the women who take the lamas into their homes when they visit Bath. There is no difference in the practices which men and women perform as lay Buddhists. In just the same way, nuns in retreat at the major western centres including Dhagpo Kagyu Ling have the same opportunities to practice as the monks.

Of the teachers who have attended the group only one, Lama Rinchen, is female. Rinchen, who is English by birth leads the nuns retreat at Dhagpo Kagyu Ling and has a high status in the group particularly because she is admired for her intellectual prowess including her knowledge of the Tibetan language. Rinchen was instrumental in formalising the link between the Karma Pakshi Centre and Dhagpo Kagyu Ling at a time when the group was looking for strong leadership. In addition to her responsibility for the nuns' retreat at Dhagpo Kagyu Ling she is also responsible for translating Tibetan texts into English. A Karma Pakshi informant

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<sup>45</sup>KK 3, interview 26 July 1994.

described her in these terms:

Knowing Lama Rinchen, I know she will do the best she can. She speaks Tibetan fluently. She has been the translator for Lama Gendun for 10 years as far as I understand it. There are different dialects and she knows what she is talking about. For transcribing she has written her own computer programme.<sup>46</sup>

There is no hierarchical structure which impinges directly on this group and since the group organizes very few activities gender differences are minimal.

### **Adaptation**

From its inception in 1991 to its present state, the Karma Pakshi Centre has gradually adapted to take account of changes in the group and changes in the influences which have impinged upon it. Of the six groups represented in this study this is the only group observed at its inception. In the early days, under the guidance of a very experienced lay practitioner, the group was first taught sitting meditation and introduced to the doctrine of the six realms of existence<sup>47</sup> and the idea that a human rebirth is a very precious opportunity to leave the wheel of birth, death and rebirth.<sup>48</sup> It was not until the lamas from Dhagpo Kagyu Ling attended regularly that a specific practice, the Chenresig puja, was taught.

Future development of the group is discussed at meetings but there is a strong feeling that development and growth should be gradual. In spite of the decision to align with Dhagpo Kagyu Ling and therefore the formalizing of the connection with Shamar Rinpoche's lineage there is still a strong sense that future development depends on the group acting together. Members have identified a group dynamic

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<sup>46</sup>KK 5, interview 9 June 1994.

<sup>47</sup>The realms of, gods, demigods or asuras, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings are depicted on the Wheel of Life diagrams which adorn the walls and gateposts of Tibetan gompas.

<sup>48</sup>See Guenther *The Jewel Ornament*, Chapter 2, for an explanation of this teaching.

which gives them the potential to make the group what they want it to be. Their vision of the future has within it the sustained teaching of the Dhagpo Kagyu Ling lamas and they retain the view that a qualified teacher in residence would enhance their practice and attract outsiders. Since this looks unlikely to happen in the near future, members feel they are responsible for the continuing development of the group.

Two areas were specifically highlighted as ripe for adaptation. These are study and the use of English in puja. At the moment Chenresig puja is spoken in Tibetan although an English translation is printed alongside the Tibetan text. Members think that understanding of the practice and its aims would be enhanced if an English translation were used. Lama Rinchen, is working on a translation which would scan well with the 'tune'.

The role of study within the group is a matter for debate between members. One member expressed the view that the group will remain a beginner's group unless a new arrangement is made for more advanced study. There are often people in attendance at Sunday meetings who have never attended before and know nothing of the doctrinal basis of the teaching. On 4 September 1994, for example, there were seven people present at the weekly meeting who had never attended before. One of these had been to the House of Inner Tranquillity and another had lived in India and had also been to one of the French Tibetan monasteries. Questions raised by the discussion included: what is different about Tibetan Buddhism? What sort of meditations do they use? Do they use loving kindness meditation? Do they have "spirits and things"? In order to accommodate the needs of newcomers, discussion seldom moves beyond a very 'basic' level and this highlights the problem of accommodating opportunities for 'advanced', or perhaps more realistically, 'consistent' teaching. The same constraint arises for BBG.

### **Authority**

Members of this group debate the same issues of authority which are common to the other five groups. The same tensions exist between the personal authority of the practitioner and the authority of texts and teachers. In this case these tensions have

been highlighted by disputes with the Karma Kagyu lineage about the identity of the seventeenth Karmapa. The encounter between group members and Karma Kagyu lineage holders has brought into focus the ways in which these tensions manifest in practical terms.

One of the major sources of authority for Tibetan Buddhism is the belief that the lineage of Buddhist understanding is preserved through the rebirth of important teachers or lamas. The head of the school, the Karmapa, was the first Tibetan lama believed to incarnate from one life to the next through taking deliberate and recognizable rebirth in a new human body. The best known incarnate lama, the Dalai Lama the religious and political leader of Tibet, is in his fourteenth rebirth; the Karmapa is now in his seventeenth.<sup>49</sup>

Although members know that the Karmapa is the head of the Karma Kagyu school, the question of his identity arises for these practitioners for three reasons. First, there is disagreement about the current human identity of the seventeenth Karmapa, second, there is ambiguity among western practitioners about who the Karmapa is in terms of the relevance of his role as head of the Karma Kagyu school to western practitioners and third, it is also possible to interpret this question as being one about the nature of an incarnate lama. Franz Michael has claimed that the most important sanction for the authority and charisma of the lama is to be found in the notion of rebirth.<sup>50</sup> Much of the reason for this importance is that the reincarnate lama is thought to represent a living example of a supreme being or bodhisattva who, though enlightened, postpones his or her entry into final nirvana in order to help sentient beings. The Karmapa, like the Dalai Lama, is at one level an emanation of Chenresig, the embodiment of compassion. When we add to this the philosophical thinking of the Prāsanghika Madhyamaka, which teaches that at the ultimate level all these ideas, like all other conceptualizations, are not the way things really are, we can get an idea of the complexity and

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<sup>49</sup>For a description of the Karma Kagyu lineage see Douglas and White, *Karmapa the Black Hat Lama of Tibet*, (London, Luzac and Company, 1976).

<sup>50</sup>Michael, F. *Rule by Incarnation: Tibetan Buddhism and Its Role in Society and State*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), p2.

ambiguity of the incarnate lamas' role.<sup>51</sup> In spite of this view (or non-view) of ultimate reality, madhyamaka philosophy also has a respect for conventional truth and conventional truth generally tells us that in order for a system to survive it needs an organization and therefore a system of authority. As a system of authority the recognition of incarnate lamas has ensured that, Tibetan Buddhism has not only survived but thrived even under the most difficult conditions.

In order to investigate who the Karmapa is in terms of his human identity and the relevance of his role to Bath practitioners, I will describe the current dispute within the Karma Kagyu school and then go on to show how the dispute has highlighted the different authority sources which Karma Pakshi Buddhists acknowledge.<sup>52</sup>

### The Karmapa dispute

When Lama Monlam died in September 1993 the group was forced to encounter, for the first time, the effects of the dispute about the identity of the successor to the sixteenth Karmapa who died in November 1981. It is traditional for Karmapas to provide a letter predicting the place of their next rebirth but in this case more than a decade passed before a letter of prediction was found. In March 1992 one of the regents, Tai Situ Rinpoche presented to the other three a letter which he claimed to have found inside a protection amulet which the sixteenth Karmapa had given him 11 months before his death. The letter was interpreted and a child quickly identified in Tibet. A second regent, Jamgon Kontrul Rinpoche was killed in a car accident while on his way to Tibet to meet with the new Karmapa incarnation in April 1992. In the following June the Dalai Lama was consulted and gave his formal approval of the new incarnation through the issue of the seal of confirmation, on 30 June 1992, in spite of the fact that one of the three remaining

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<sup>51</sup>See Samuel *Civilised Shamans*, pp244-257 for a fuller explanation of this ambiguity.

<sup>52</sup>This account is based on copies of documents supplied to me by a Karma Pakshi group member. These include Indian newspaper cuttings and letters sent between Tibetan officials and monasteries. An article in the journal *Reincarnation* (April 1994, No. 2) written by Norma Levine, a practising Karma Kagyu Buddhist and supporter of Tai Situ's candidate, gives an account of the official view on these events.

regents, Shamarpa, the lama who had instigated and named the Bath group, had publicly announced two weeks before that he had doubts about the authenticity of the prediction letter and therefore about the discovery of the seventeenth Karmapa. The disagreement between Shamarpa and the other two surviving regents and their followers developed into a bitter and violent power struggle. One of them, Tai Situ Rinpoche is currently banned from India for allegedly plotting against the government, and the other, Tshurphu Gyaltshap Rinpoche, is resident at Rumtek the administrative headquarters of the tradition in Sikkim and oversees monastic activities there. Ugen Thinley Dorje, the child recognized from the prediction in Tai Situ's letter has now been officially recognized as the seventeenth Karmapa by the Karma Kagyu lineage as well as by the Dalai Lama and was enthroned at Tshurphu monastery in Tibet in September 1992. Shamarpa continues to support an opposing child, Tenzin Chentse, a Tibetan whose place of birth has not been disclosed and enthroned him in a ceremony in Delhi in March 1994. Neither of the two children has so far been permitted to enter Sikkim although both parties claim that their favoured candidate will be installed there, at Rumtek monastery, in the near future. In physical terms it is not clear who the Karmapa is. He may be one or other, or indeed both, of two boys.

This struggle is highly political. Each party has accused the other of acting as a puppet of the Chinese government. This has been fuelled in part by the fact that the Chinese government has given official recognition to Tai Situ's candidate who remains in Tibet. There is some speculation that the Chinese would favour his remaining there and eventually acting as a focal point for Tibetans thus diluting the power of the Dalai Lama inside Tibet.<sup>53</sup> The dispute has also resulted in physical violence between the two camps both at Rumtek and in Delhi. At Rumtek monastery there is a permanent and high profile presence of military personnel placed there by the Indian government in order to prevent further fighting among monks (or, if we are to believe the reports, among mercenaries dressed as monks) from the opposing camps; fighting which broke out again in August 1995. The ritual

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<sup>53</sup>I owe this information to an informant in India who would prefer to remain anonymous. The reluctance of several individuals to talk about these issues is indicative of the politically sensitive nature of the information.

implements belonging to the Karmapa are locked away and closely guarded in his quarters at Rumtek, in particular the legendary black hat,<sup>54</sup> the possession of which, along with other treasures, would have significant symbolic and financial consequences for either party.

Shamarpa has claimed that his candidate does not need the approval of the Dalai Lama and that he will not seek it since this is a spiritual and not a political matter.<sup>55</sup> The monks who support Shamarpa are small in number in India and much of his support appears to come from outside, particularly from Germany where his Danish disciple, Ole Nydal is influential. Travelling in Sikkim in early 1995 it was my impression that Sikkimese support for Tai Situ's candidate is strong. For example there are photographs of the child in many of the Kagyupa and Nyingmapa monasteries.

Although many British Buddhist practitioners have told me that they would like to keep away altogether from what is often referred to disparagingly as 'Buddhist politics' this is not an option for those who are responsible for the continuity of the lineage. Geoffrey Samuel has shown that rebirth lineages carry considerable political power. From the outset, the process of recognizing incarnate lamas as young children (*trulku*), unified spiritual, political and economic structures in Tibet.<sup>56</sup> Because China has annexed Tibet Tibetan Buddhist administrations are now divided by political conflict external to religious structures and under these circumstances the incarnate lamas represent a primary focus for both religious and political authority for Tibetans living in exile or under Chinese occupation.

Although the Karmapa's status as a representative of a system of continuous

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<sup>54</sup>See Richardson H E 'The Karma-pa Sect. A Historical Note'. In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1958 pp139-164, for an account of the black hat legend.

<sup>55</sup> This is not the first time the Shamarpa incarnation and the Dalai Lama and his government have been at odds with each other. In the late eighteenth century Shamarpa recognitions were banned for political reasons. There was no official rebirth between the death of the tenth incarnation in 1792 and the birth of the twelfth in 1880. (Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, p271)

<sup>56</sup>Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, p496

teaching through an uninterrupted lineage is clear to Tibetan practitioners this is not necessarily the case for British practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. I therefore turn now to consider the Karmapa's role for Bath practitioners.

Because Monlam had been pivotal in the group's development, members were at first protected from events taking place within the lineage elsewhere. There had been no need for a close relationship to develop between Bath and Dhagpo Kagyu Ling, the French monastery, or any other Karma Kagyu centre and therefore no need for Bath group members to have opinions about the lineage at its top level, or to face the consequences of the crisis. The current leader of the group explained Monlam's role:

...because he was English; because he came to England quite a lot; because of his way, there was never any real need to consider these things but in the same way we never really exactly established what our position was because he was so strong and we could get anybody coming in and talking because he was always the central point. He could always handle it all. That was his way. So there was no problem. But once he went the whole thing kind of fell apart and people were searching around for direction.<sup>57</sup>

After Monlam's death, in 1993, the Bath group was forced to make very practical decisions about its future. Members were presented with three broad options: they could continue their links with the monastery in France, thereby furthering their relationship with people known to be loyal to Shamarpa, an option in keeping with indigenous Tibetan practice since the group was already connected to a monastery in the Shamarpa lineage; they could affiliate instead with Samye Ling where the presiding lamas support the officially recognized candidate, thereby aligning themselves with the British and the majority of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu community; or they could become independent of both monasteries and invite teachers from other centres on an informal basis. The third option was rejected on the grounds that without consistent teaching within a single school individuals would be unlikely to make any progress in their practice and the group would in

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<sup>57</sup>KK 3, interview 26 July 1994.

any case become too much like BBG in its eclecticism.

Although an approach was made to Samye Ling about links with the community there, a decisive factor in the decision making process was that soon after Monlam's death the group received a prearranged visit from Lama Rinchen. Rinchen was characteristically direct and persuasive. She made it very clear that the group were at liberty to make their own decision about their future but that if they did not affiliate more strongly with the French monastery it would no longer guarantee to send teachers to Bath and more significantly the Bath group would no longer be the Karma Pakshi Centre; in other words they would forfeit the official recognition bestowed on them through the giving of their name. Many of the group's regular attenders were present when the decision was made but there was not unanimous agreement about the best way forward. In a majority vote, which was supported by the administrative leader, the group decided to affiliate with Dhagpo Kagyu Ling, effectively isolating the Karma Pakshi group from other British Karma Kagyu centres. In spite of the democratic decision, individual members have responded in different ways to the crisis in the lineage because they acknowledge different primary sources of authority for their practice.

The sixteenth Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu school and in traditional terms the holder of an unbroken lineage in which the enlightened mind of the previous incarnations existed had suggested the setting up of the centre. Members of the group therefore see themselves as the vehicle for Karmapa's hopes and as representatives of the Karma Kagyu school. From this position they feel they are participating in a powerful tradition with the sanction of its highest authority.

Although some group members had no detailed understanding of the significance of lineage for the tradition there was always at least the feeling that they were participating in something old and established and therefore reliable. The introductory leaflet which the group produces is clear about its roots in the Tibetan tradition. Most members are unaware of and uninterested in the history of the Karma Kagyu lineage except for its living representatives and its great Indian and Tibetan founders for example Tilopa, Marpa and Milarepa who represent ideal

practitioners.<sup>58</sup> They are therefore also unaware of disputes in the lineage which have led to splits in the past but so far as the group identity is concerned the authenticity of the lineage, as an idea, is very significant.

As soon as the link with the French monastery became established the connection was made with Lama Gendun, Monlam's teacher and the abbot of Dhagpo Kagyu Ling. Gendun is presented as a highly realised being; in other words he is regarded by his followers as having effectively appropriated traditional practices in order to achieve an unusual level of understanding about the way things really are and as such is regarded as a proper person to be adapting Tibetan Buddhism for westerners. Although the Dhagpo monks who come to teach in Bath have the respect of the group, the unifying factor, particularly important after the group lost Monlam, is that these teachers all share the same root lama and therefore give consistent teaching, teaching which has proven its effectiveness in the living enlightened example of the Dhagpo abbot. Lama Puntsok described the consistency in this way.

The lamas come from the same centre. They have received the same transmission. They all have the same master. That's why they say the same things. They don't say it in the same way but they transmit the same seed. That's why the Sangha is so important. I was amazed. I have never followed any teaching of other western lamas and a few weeks ago I had to translate from French to English for someone, so I was obliged to follow and I was amazed how this western lama explained and transmitted the same thing but in a different way, with his own words and his own way of putting things. We all give the same teaching.<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of their skills as teachers, the monks sent from Dhagpo have all

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<sup>58</sup>This may be seen as a Protestant element within British Buddhism in its disregard for continuous tradition. I am indebted to Dr Paul Williams for pointing out that most British Buddhists look to the early beginnings of lineages and largely ignore the intervening centuries.

<sup>59</sup>Lama Puntsok, KK 6, interview 15 November 1994.

completed one or two traditional three year, three month retreats. Again this fact is normally cited in the literature advertising public talks in the city and the lamas' traditional qualification or accomplishment is part of the claim to authority which they hold and which lay practitioners value. Although individual teachers possess, in the view of members, different degrees of charismatic authority this seems to be of less importance than their traditional qualification to teach and the suggestion it makes that such lamas have considerable personal experience of the practices.

For this group, as for the majority of British Buddhists the follower's personal experience is also a major factor. The teachings are regarded as true and effective because the practitioner's experience confirms this. If the first practice they are taught at the centre is found to be beneficial they are likely to go on and try another.

It has been hard for members of the group to ignore altogether the threat to religious authority which the dispute within the lineage has posed and they have dealt with this threat in different ways. Each of four different approaches described below, has been taken by practising Bath Karma Kagyu Buddhists with whom I have spoken. They illustrate how although similar forms of authority operate for practitioners they vary with regard to which is of primary importance. Each of these approaches represents a compromise position between the conflicting claims to authority which group members have perceived to be in operation.

#### Personal experience

For KK 4 the dispute within the lineage is of little significance because the authority for his practice lies primarily in its effectiveness. Transmission of the teachings is required but once taught and put into practice the teachings are inherently powerful. To become involved in the dispute, even to consider it, is to confuse religious practice with politics and is therefore unhelpful. What KK 4 calls the 'core' or the 'essence' of the teachings is much more important than the form which they take or any dispute which might surround them. He believes that it is beneficial to practice in a group context because a group can provide encouragement and support. He would prefer it if the Bath group had what he calls

a "daddy or a mummy" figure but he also regrets that practitioners are not happy to take responsibility for themselves and their own practice, and argues that everyone in the west has read enough about Buddhism to become enlightened, if they would only put it into practice.

KK 4 is aware of the problems within the Karma Kagyu school but for him the purity or impurity of the Karma Kagyu lineage is not an issue because it represents institutionalized religion or what he calls "cultural Buddhism". For him it is important simply that the practices he is doing will lead him to understand the nature of his own mind or at least improve the quality of his life at a profound level. The main authority he looks to therefore is his own experience of the effectiveness of the practices.

#### Teachers

The second position has been most clearly articulated by a Belgian lama from the French monastery. He thinks that the question of authority is an important one and that practitioners must have a clear understanding of the authority which they acknowledge and also that the dispute has challenged confidence in that authority. But for him to make decisions about supporting one or other Karmapa is not a "Buddhist way of thinking".<sup>60</sup> It is his belief that in good time the true Karmapa will be recognized by the other candidate a circumstance which he claimed has occurred before. He says:

I believe in that. That's why I am not too worried about the situation because we just have to be patient and let the Karmapa have space to recognize himself, the one or the other. For me it is just a question of patience and tolerance.<sup>61</sup>

In order to cope with the challenge to authority which this situation has brought about, the Lama has a practical solution not open to most group members. He

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

claims that a practitioner has only to follow his own teacher:

It is so important to have a root lama which means a lama in which you can have full confidence; a lama in which you can rely. And if you have such a relationship you follow what the lama says... For us we have somebody like Gendun Rinpoche he is a fully realised being able to give the proper advice.<sup>62</sup>

I suggested that although this may be a satisfactory answer for a practitioner thousands of miles distant from the seat of the trouble it was hardly an answer for the highest lamas of the tradition who have been confronted by the reality of the dispute, to which he replied "But the highest lamas too have their Karmapa to follow."<sup>63</sup>

I am in no position to question the validity of the Lama's reply. However its alluring simplicity while clearly genuinely expressed and certainly in accord with tradition<sup>64</sup> does not resolve the dilemma for the practitioners who have had to make decisions based on a far looser connection with a teacher than that described here and have also been obliged to make decisions with practical consequences.

In keeping with the traditional advice to check out a lama carefully over a number of years before establishing a master/disciple relationship with him or her, few of the practitioners in the Bath group have this kind of relationship. Those who have, have all loosened their ties with the Bath group as a result of the decision to remain loyal to Shamarpa's lineage. Many of those who remain have taken refuge with a particular lama. In other words they have made a formal commitment to the Buddhist path in the presence of a representative of the Buddhist Sangha but although they are looking for a personal teacher who could potentially become their

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>See for example the chapter entitled 'Meeting Spiritual Friends' in Guenther, *The Jewel Ornament*.

guru they do not yet enjoy the kind of strong faith in an individual which this position requires. If authority rests with a master/disciple relationship, the position of lay practitioners who live and practise away from the major centres and have not developed this kind of relationship is problematic when the sources of authority which they do acknowledge are challenged.

The flexibility of tradition

Another possible solution to the two Karmapa problem was offered by a group member and also by a Tibetan born Karma Kagyu lama and supporter of Shamarpa who came to teach at the Bath centre. After his public talk the lama was challenged by a monk from another Tibetan centre who asked:

Where in your mind does Karmapa live today?

He replied,

There is no reason why Karmapa should not manifest in more forms than one. He is not Jesus. There can be thousands of Karmapas. It is only our imagination that restricts us and our language.<sup>65</sup>

The questioner persisted:

If that is so, why do so many people say you have to choose?

and the lama replied:

It's a westerners' problem. They think you either are or are not.<sup>66</sup>

This position could provide a solution for Western practitioners and has been cited by more than one Bath practitioner with whom I have spoken. According to the

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<sup>65</sup>Lama Tralag, public talk, 13 September 1994.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

tradition the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa (1110-1193) also implied that this might be so<sup>67</sup>. This solution has however been clearly contradicted in this case by at least two statements emanating from prominent Tibetan Lamas. In a statement made in Gangtok, Sikkim on April 4 1993, Ven. Karma Gelek the secretary of the Department of Religion and Culture, Dharamsala, said:

According to Buddhism it is even both possible and proper to have hundreds and thousands of incarnations for one lama. However, according to the unique tradition of Tibet, when it comes to identifying reincarnations, and especially, in the case of high lamas like the Gyalwa Karmapa, it is not possible to have more than one incarnation at a time. This is a traditionally set system, you may call it "the way of society".

And in a letter from the Dharma Chakra Centre in Rumtek to Shamarpa we find another clear statement:

From the founder of the Karma Kagyu tradition, Lord Dusum Khyenpa, right up to the 16th incarnation, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, there has *never* been the precedent of recognizing a second Karmapa at the same time. (original emphasis.)

Press statements and letters originating from the opposing camps, suggest that so far as they are concerned this is not being considered as an option in spite of the fact that coincident high lamas have been recognized before. For example, there are currently two recognitions of Pema Karpo the head of the Drukpa Kagyupa<sup>68</sup>. However convenient the 'two Karmapa solution' may seem it is unlikely to resolve the difficulty within the Karma Kagyu school in the near future. It may nevertheless continue to provide an explanatory device for Western Buddhists.

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<sup>67</sup>Douglas and White, *Karmapa*, p36.

<sup>68</sup>Geoffrey Samuel, personal communication.

## The authority of lineage

The fourth position has been assumed by KK 1, one of the founding members of the group and until recently one of its chief financial backers. She has decided that she cannot continue to be associated with a group which indirectly supports Shamarpa against the other two regents and the Dalai Lama. She is in an unhappy position particularly since because of her respect for the purity of Tibetan lineages and the unique position of the Dalai Lama, this is the second Buddhist group she has felt obliged to leave. She wishes to practice with others but for her the authority of the lineage and of Tibetan Buddhism cannot be sacrificed for personal expediency. Of all the group members she is the best informed about the dispute although most of her information has been supplied by supporters of Tai Situ's candidate. She is also in contact with practitioners in other centres who support the official candidate. In spite of her personal practice, and her respect for Lama Gendun and his Sangha, the authenticity of the Karma Pakshi group is compromised for her by its indirect role in supporting what she is quite clear in her own mind is the wrong side.

Since KK 1 was a major supporter of the group and expressed that support in financial terms her loss has been significant. Rent for the regular meeting place and the costs of bringing lamas over from France have to be met. There has never been a group policy of charging at the weekly meetings and the group has also preferred to ask discreetly for donations when lamas give public talks. This lack of rigour in extracting money from those who benefit from group activities has left a shortfall in the funding and the loss of a major contributor had the kind of practical effect on the group which could not be ignored. For a time weekly meetings had to be postponed until new arrangements could be made.

KK 1 knew that if she left the group there would be consequences for its continued existence and that her departure would be bound to create doubt in the mind of some of those who remained, she therefore consulted with Tai Situ, who was in Britain at the time before making her decision. Her decision to speak with Tai Situ was entirely in keeping with her respect for the position of the highest lamas of the lineage.

Tai Situ sympathised with her predicament. He acknowledged that the way forward was quite clear for him because his first duty was to the preservation of the lineage but that practitioners in her own position had been placed in very difficult situations where they were obliged to make decisions which affected those around them. KK 1 put to him the idea that it would be better if practitioners could keep out of politics and he replied that the situation could not work like that because by not making a decision in favour of the true Karmapa, practitioners were effectively making a decision against him. As a result of her audience with Tai Situ this practitioner decided to leave the group. She is not the only Karma Pakshi group member to leave but probably the most significant in terms of the practical effect which her leaving has had.

This data suggests that although modern Britain and traditional Tibet have relied on different structures for the resolution of problems of authority, spiritual practices cannot be separated entirely from the political and economic processes within which those practices are embedded in either culture. Samuel has argued that the reincarnate lama represents a unity of spiritual, political and economic thought and action appropriate to the cultural milieu of Tibet at the time when the system arose.<sup>69</sup> This suggests that religious, political and economic structures cannot be easily separated within Tibetan Buddhism. Although the politics at issue so far as these Buddhists are concerned do not directly involve matters of state we do see here an instance of the need to recognize that spiritual, political and economic factors are inevitably held in some degree of tension with each other in religious activity. This group demonstrates how this tension has manifested itself within a challenge to religious authority. The challenge to the Bath Karma Pakshi Centre has incorporated spiritual, political and economic elements in spite of the fact that some would like to see the spiritual as separate from the political. The economic implications existed in the withdrawal of support from the group by those for whom the spiritual and the political could not be separated and economic difficulties have threatened the continuing existence of the group and therefore its role in making spiritual teachings available.

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<sup>69</sup>Samuel *Civilised Shamans*, passim.

## **PART III**

### **Chapter 7: Authority and Adaptation.**

Chapter 1 of this study outlined a theory of adaptation which I am proposing for the development of Buddhism in Britain. Part 2 gave an account of the six Buddhist groups in Bath from which the theory has arisen. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the theory is supported by the fieldwork. The chapter is therefore structured to coincide with the outline of the theory as it was presented at the end of Chapter 1, as follows,

1. Buddhism is transferring to Britain in a variety of contrasting forms which claim the authority of the traditions upon which they are based.
2. British people who wish to practise Buddhism reach compromise positions on the traditional authority structures which are offered, including the authority of experience.
3. The adaptational process is legitimated by the authority sources claimed by those traditions.
4. Attitudes to authority sources can lead to sectarian disagreements.

#### **A REVIEW OF AUTHORITY SOURCES**

The case study indicates the variety of forms of Buddhism which are available to British practitioners. Within one small city six groups present contrasting forms of Buddhism all of which claim to legitimate their practices through different authority sources. These authority sources fall into only a small number of categories but their specific focuses are different. In this section I shall examine the authority sources which each group presents using an adapted form of Weber's tripartite model. I have already argued in connection with the dispute about the identity of the new Karmapa, that individual practitioners reach compromise positions about which authorities they accept as primary. This became evident within the Karma Pakshi group because the authorities which group members acknowledged were subjected to challenge. It is probable that members within each of the groups reach different compromise positions on authority but without the challenge of splits and disputes these positions are not tested. I have therefore presented the authority

sources for each of the groups as though they are accepted alike for each group member in spite of the fact that this is almost certainly not the case.

Within each of the groups, members claim the authority of personal experience to authenticate practice but with the exception of BBG each group locates itself within a particular school of Buddhism and claims a degree of adherence to the authority sources which that tradition promotes. At an organizational level we are not dealing here with what Hine<sup>1</sup> has called SPINs, Segmented Polycentric Integrated Networks, in which belief in personal power and the injunction to "do your own thing"<sup>2</sup> is central. While I agree with Cush that,

...there is a close, entangled and ambiguous relationship between British Buddhism and the New Age Movement...<sup>3</sup>

the fieldwork undertaken for this study suggests that British Buddhists do not 'do their own thing' but choose to site themselves within traditional doctrinal positions which acknowledge the authority of that tradition's scriptures and the exemplary nature of that tradition's past and present teachers.

The authority sources which traditional schools of Buddhism proclaim are newly interpreted within the British cultural setting but retain their traditional identities. Theravāda Buddhism, for example, is traditionally defined by its adherence to the Pāli canon and it would be difficult to imagine Buddhism designated as Theravāda which did not claim the authority of the Buddha's word as recorded in the Pāli suttas. Practitioners are free to accept or reject the authority sources which groups offer but those sources are nonetheless presented as authoritative. Bishop has argued that,

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<sup>1</sup>Virginia Hine 'The basic paradigm of a future socio-cultural system.' *World Issues*, (April/May, 1977). A discussion of this type of organizational structure can be found in Michael York, *The Emerging Network*, (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>York, *The Emerging Network*, p326.

<sup>3</sup>Cush, 'British Buddhism and the New Age', p206.

Within the communities of Westerners practising...Buddhism, the *whole structure* proclaims a particular truth prior to any investigation.<sup>4</sup>

Weber identified three types of legitimacy for the exercise of power and applied these types to religious and political organizations. The types are; traditional authority, charismatic authority, and legal-rational authority. Turner has pointed out that these three are forms of domination; a "sociology of command" and not a "sociology of compliance"<sup>5</sup> and that this is so because Weber considered that "the exercise of coercion is an essential ingredient of the social order".<sup>6</sup> In other words, according to Weber, these are not the authorities which individuals choose to accept, but ways of legitimating authorities imposed upon societies. To apply Weber's model of legitimating authority to the forms of compliance of British Buddhists therefore is to misrepresent Weber's analysis, since traditional Buddhist authority sources are not imposed on practitioners but accepted by them.<sup>7</sup> Weber's model is valuable in so far as it can supply insights in its application. The model fits and I shall therefore use it, although not without adaptation.

Chaves has argued that religious organizations are composed of parallel authority structures: a religious authority structure which may be based on traditional or charismatic leadership, the purpose of which is to control access to "religious goods"; and an agency structure which is responsible for the rational control of the organization and its engagement with the world.<sup>8</sup> Chaves's analysis resonates with Weber's tripartite distinction between charismatic, traditional and legal-rational authority but draws attention to the fact that religious and agency structures operate alongside each other. Though based on his research among Christian

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<sup>4</sup>Bishop, *Dreams of Power*, p103.

<sup>5</sup>Bryan Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, (London: Sage, 1991) p189.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>I am not arguing that all British Buddhists remain free to reject an authority once it has been accepted. Authority may be misused.

<sup>8</sup>Mark Chaves, 'Denominations as Dual Structures: An Organizational Analysis', *Sociology of Religion*, (Vol.54, No.2, 1993), pp147-169.

denominations, Chaves's model is salient for Bath's Buddhist groups because it emphasizes the fact that authority for religious groups is not just a matter of presenting doctrinal truths and practices aimed at salvation but that these "religious goods", to use Chaves's term, must be made available. The structure which makes them available must engage with the economic and sociological conditions in which it finds itself. Among Chaves's conclusions are that while religious authority must deal with the uncertainties surrounding religious matters which, though profound, are relatively stable and resolved through established doctrine, agency structures must deal with the instabilities inherent in operating within the world. Agency structures must deal with matters such as finance, publications and proselytising. Religious and agency structures operate in parallel and the two types of authority may or may not be vested in the same person.<sup>9</sup> Authority sources for each of the six case study groups are reviewed below using Weber's distinctions but bearing in mind Chaves's assertion that religious and agency authority operate alongside each other.

The Thai Forest Theravāda monastic sangha is very conscious of the need to keep close ties with the sangha in Thailand in order to be legitimated by the continuous tradition. The rational control of the sangha is administered by the English Sangha Trust. From the outset the trustees were committed to the establishment of a British monastic sangha<sup>10</sup> and they remain convinced that this is the way forward.<sup>11</sup> The trust supports the sangha's activities and handles necessary financial transactions but always in close consultation with the traditional monastic hierarchy. The sangha however exerts minimal control over its satellite lay groups. For example, monks and nuns teach at lay groups provided those groups meet certain conditions related to transport and accommodation but there is apparently no

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<sup>9</sup>Chaves cites Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints as examples of religious organizations characterized by a unitary structure (p165). Brear's analysis of the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission also describes a movement within which religious and agency authority are vested in the same person ('The Authority of Pramukh Swami within the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission', *Diskus*. Vol.4, No.1, 1996).

<sup>10</sup>Mellor, 'Protestant Buddhism', p80.

<sup>11</sup>BBG 7 (an English Sangha Trust trustee), interview 1 June 1995.

attempt by the sangha to exert any control over the activity of affiliated lay groups such as BBG or the Bath Thai Theravāda meditation group. The reason for this may be that the authority focus for the sangha is the *vinaya* and the *vinaya* is not applicable to lay practitioners except in so far as it has traditionally been regarded as meritorious for lay Buddhists to support a sangha which is seen to adhere strictly to the monastic code. The British sangha's close adherence to the monastic code is a strong part of its self-identity. However this aspect of the sangha does not interest most Bath Theravāda practitioners who value the opportunity for tuition in meditation practice and the ability of individual teachers to inspire, both of which the monastic sangha offers, over the traditional merit-making role.

We have seen that for lay practitioners in Bath who are affiliated with the Thai Forest Theravāda Sangha the presence of a monastic sangha is not as important as it is for the English Sangha Trust. Although lay practitioners value what they perceive to be the lineage back to the Buddha and the idea that Theravāda Buddhism is close to 'original' Buddhism, the charismatic authority of individual sangha members, in particular Sumedho, is more important than the authority of his monastic status. This is clearly illustrated by the continued prestige of Kittasaro even after he decided to leave monastic life. Charismatic authority is also more important for these practitioners than the authority of the Buddha's word as presented in the Pāli canon. None of the Thai Forest Theravāda practitioners to whom I have spoken reads the Pāli texts except when on retreat at the monasteries, although they claim to regard the Pāli Canon as the container for Buddhist truth. They are far more likely to read the writings of Sumedho or other prominent western Buddhists.

Other teachers connected with BBG confirm the importance of charismatic authority for lay practitioners. Andi Wistreich, the group's regular Tibetan teacher, is a lay practitioner who is valued for his personal qualities (he comes across as a wise and caring man), more than for the experience he has of Tibetan practice. Traditional Tibetan teachings and the traditional status of monastics do not impress BBG attenders who want to know that their teachers have personal experience of meditation. Myokyo-Ni's status is somewhat different. One of her students

confirmed that her teacher's lineage is important because it ensures continuity of teaching and that Myokyo-Ni has not "sprung up out of nowhere".<sup>12</sup> Myokyo-Ni's traditional standing assures her students that what she teaches is not idiosyncratic.

Within the House of Inner Tranquillity, Alan James acts as the central "charismatic" figure who commands authority because of his personal experience of the truth. Several informants claimed that he is enlightened. Members claim the authority of personal experience to validate their trust in James. His own lineage of teachers and therefore traditional authority is of little interest to them. The Pāli canon is the subject of study but the purpose of that study is not to continue the tradition of sutra recitation or remembrance but to find ways in which the scriptures can speak today. James's status does not rely on unbroken tradition but on a new application of ancient teachings. Legal-rational authority within the House of Inner Tranquillity also rests with James although it is shared to an extent with the centre's administrator. Since in order to attend meetings potential practitioners must agree to a certain level of commitment and have their 'progress' monitored through the mentor system, part of this group's identity is the control it retains over the teachings it offers. However this control ensures that practitioners adhere to the preferred modes of operation of The House of Inner Tranquillity not of the Theravāda sangha in any traditional sense.

SGI-UK, is among the largest Buddhist movements in Britain and has a clear agency structure. An important part of the success of SGI-UK has been the accessibility of the practice and the enfranchisement of the membership which this structure has allowed. Stark has identified the enfranchisement of a movement in this way as an influential factor in its success.<sup>13</sup> During his lifetime, Dick Causton exerted a degree of charismatic authority but religious authority for SGI-UK rests less with personalities than is the case with other groups in this study. Ikeda remains important to the international lay movement as a whole, but as we have seen, there is some evidence that his charismatic authority is decreasingly influential

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<sup>12</sup>BBG 1, interview 29 September 1995.

<sup>13</sup>Rodney Stark, 'Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, (Vol.11, No.2, 1996).

on the British movement. Some members of the central committee are highly respected and Ricky Baines, the new British leader, is admired but he cannot be said to exert charismatic authority over the movement. The authority of the continuous tradition carries little weight especially since the split from the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. The practice of this group is authorized by Nichiren through his writings, albeit through the interpretation of approved committees within the organizational structure.

Heelas has identified the Sōka Gakkai as part of the New Age movement.<sup>14</sup> I find little justification for identifying the movement in this way. SGI bases its doctrines and practices on the writings of Nichiren and it is these that are taught within local groups. Among SGI members there are those who resent the authority which is presented to them and are unable to accept it but the movement's corporate identity is based on a traditional Buddhist practice. It does not teach its membership to 'do its own thing'. In Bishop's words, "the whole structure proclaims a particular truth".<sup>15</sup>

Of all the groups in this case study the NKT group has the clearest lines of religious authority. Geshe Kelsang acts as the charismatic founder leader of the movement and much of his status derives from the fact that he is said to be a fully realised being. His status within the Tibetan tradition, although controversial outside the movement, is also emphasised. Geshe Kelsang's teaching lineage is constantly remembered in daily recitation practice. This provides the movement with its identity and with the notion of its purity in which the continuity of the tradition is a strong legitimating factor. There is very little evidence however that Geshe Kelsang is in close contact with other teachers within the Gelugpa tradition so that although the tradition is used to legitimate his status he is distanced from it. This fact is explained by the NKT claim that Tibetan practitioners in Tibet and in exile in India no longer adhere to the pure tradition.

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<sup>14</sup>Heelas, 'The New Age', p150. Heelas confirmed his identification of SGI-UK (although not SGI in Japan) as a New Age movement at a conference at INFORM on 7 December 1996.

<sup>15</sup>Bishop, *Dreams of Power*, p103.

Legal-rational authority within the group is formal and centrally controlled through a limited process of devolution to regional centres which are economically independent but operate according to an organizational pattern. Though large, the NKT is appropriately structured to maintain good contact between the local groups and to retain a coherence which means that teachers and practitioners can easily move between its different locations.

Sources of authority for practitioners who attend the Karma Pakshi group are complex as we have seen in the consideration of attitudes to the Karmapa dispute. Agency authority is exercised from the French centre in so far as the group is obliged to submit to a formal link with Lama Gendun's community in order to ensure a continuing supply of teachers. The authority of tradition has been significant for some members and the completion of a three year, three month retreat legitimates the regular teachers. Lama Gendun's role in this is difficult to identify since he is a rather shadowy figure for most Karma Pakshi practitioners. Ato Rinpoche, who has no formal connection with the group although he visits it annually, is probably more significant in terms of charismatic authority than Lama Gendun. Members of the group have expressed the feeling that they lack a sustained source of authority and guidance and it seems to be accessible charismatic authority which they feel they lack. The traditional relationship established with the sangha in France does not adequately fulfil some members' desire for support although they continue to attend the group in spite of this.

The eclectic BBG poses a challenge to the argument that each group is sited within a traditional doctrinal position. I have suggested that developments within this group have led it closer to delineated traditional positions and away from a more general 'appreciation' of Buddhism understood in very non-specific terms. This move towards acknowledging schools of Buddhism and away from eclecticism may be prompted by BBG members' desire to find an authoritative path. The authority of personal experience and the inspiration of a small number of charismatic figures who are rather distant from the group are probably most widely acknowledged within BBG although there are exceptions, for example the Zen practitioners have a formal relationship with their teacher. Bath's most experienced Buddhist

practitioners are to be found within this group and yet the authority sources recognized at BBG probably resonate more closely with New Age ideology on authority than do the sources recognized by any of the other groups in the study.

The authority sources acknowledged by members of the six case study groups in the course of my fieldwork fall into four broad categories. These are the authority of the Buddha's word as represented in texts, the authority of lineage, the authority of teachers as exemplars and the authority of personal experience. In what follows I shall consider in more detail two of these sources of authority, the authority of texts and the authority of personal experience.

### **THE AUTHORITY OF TEXTS**

Each of the groups in the study acknowledge the teaching of the Buddha as it has been variously preserved in texts which carry the authorization of the different traditions. The texts are the carriers of doctrine and of instruction in right practice. They proclaim the truth which can be experienced and are therefore central to the identities of those traditions.

The canonical texts for these contrasting traditions were written in ancient eastern languages and are loaded with cultural meanings which may be difficult for twentieth century English speakers to access. Jayatilleke's comprehensive survey of ways of knowing approved within the Pāli texts<sup>16</sup> is ample evidence that interpretation is not straightforward even within a fixed canon. Jayatilleke puts forward his own interpretation of these texts but throughout his chapter on authority and reason according to the Theravāda tradition, he refers to alternative interpretations of his sources.<sup>17</sup>

Need has identified the problem which alternative interpretations may cause for

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<sup>16</sup>K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963).

<sup>17</sup>For example those of Poussin and Keith. This is particularly the case in relation to the meaning of faith or *saddhā* in the Pāli Buddhist texts (Ibid. p 384-385).

individual practitioners.

The Buddha's speech endures as a source of valid knowledge...and each reading serves as an encounter, albeit requiring interpretation. This process has the effect of preserving an image of an authoritative Buddha; but it is one that cannot innovatively respond to a student. Rather, the student is forced to search through the canon for passages that strike him or her as meaningful, all the while wondering what can serve as a sign of that meaning's authority.<sup>18</sup>

In other words although parts of Buddhist scriptures may seem to be relevant, there is no guarantee that the reader has read them in a way which accords with traditional orthodoxies. Gombrich has identified the free availability of texts which have been removed from the control of the monastic sangha and subject to individual interpretation as a feature of Protestant Buddhism.<sup>19</sup> The twentieth century convert to Buddhism is faced with the difficulty of knowing whether she has rightly understood the passages she reads and/or whether organizationally approved interpretations are correct.

Although there have been no structured studies of the educational levels of British practitioners of Buddhism (this study is no exception), it is my impression and one which I share with other researchers<sup>20</sup> that the educational levels of British practitioners of Buddhism are generally higher than the national average. A high proportion of Buddhists in Britain have been educated at least to first degree level

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<sup>18</sup>Need, 'In the Absence of Buddha'.

<sup>19</sup>Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p172ff. This was a much earlier characteristic of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism due to the development of printing methods in China in the eighth century. On this see Julia Ching's chapter, 'Scripture and Hermeneutics: Entry into China' in *Chinese Religions*, (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp121-136.

<sup>20</sup>I am unable to cite published sources for this observation apart from Wilson and Dobbelaere's study of SGI-UK (*A Time to Chant*, p115). The observation is supported by the fact that I met with no puzzlement when I informed practitioners that my study was intended to result in a PhD thesis.

or have engaged in professional training. Informants have suggested that this is because Buddhism is subtle and attracts people who are willing and able to engage with ideas which are intellectually challenging. If this is the case then we might expect that Buddhism's canonical texts would be the subject of hermeneutical study. However it would be wrong to imagine that the Buddhists in Bath are all reading textual material and subjecting it to individual interpretation. Many of the Buddhists in this case study do not study texts at all and none of those who do read the texts in their 'original' languages. Most rely on translations approved by the organizations with which they are affiliated.

House of Inner Tranquillity and SGI-UK interpretations of texts are filtered through organizations which have consciously split from continuous traditions in an attempt to adhere more closely to earlier roots. Their interpretations of the texts may be idiosyncratic but at an organizational rather than individual level. Nichiren's writings are easily accessible to members in English translations. Passages from the texts are reproduced in the movement's membership publications along with interpretations which are always inspirational in nature and are designed to elucidate the movement's purpose and practices. I have suggested that the links between Nichiren's letters and the official gloss given to them are not always immediately obvious; an observation which was confirmed by a practising member.<sup>21</sup> Such interpretations serve to confirm SGI doctrine and practice and may be used in creative ways when there is a need to legitimate a new development. As we saw in chapter 4, the movement made good use of this strategy in relation to the split with the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood.

NKT members are encouraged not to read authors other than Geshe Kelsang and they therefore encounter canonical material only alongside and in the light of Geshe Kelsang's commentary. NKT publications, although drawing heavily on older traditional textual sources, are presented as commentaries written by Geshe Kelsang. In other words the material is newly interpreted by Geshe Kelsang specifically for his western audience. This written transmission, by a teacher who is regarded by his students as a Buddha, avoids for NKT members the problem of

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<sup>21</sup>SGI 5, interview, 8 April 1994.

interpretation. As we have seen study within the NKT consists of a laborious process of learning the texts and understanding them in the approved way. An NKT practitioner has not 'understood' the texts until she can explain them in the terms of the texts themselves; there is no place for further personal interpretation.

Theravāda practitioners do not prioritize study but are most likely to read the writings of Sumedho and therefore a reformed Thai Forest Theravāda interpretation of Theravāda canonical writings. BBG practitioners who do not feel themselves aligned with the Theravāda tradition and Karma Kagyu practitioners are those most likely to read texts without organizational interpretation. However, they are more likely to select their reading matter from recent publications written by contemporary practitioners than from volumes which Buddhist scholars might regard as canonical. The shelves of the largest bookshop in Bath provide a substantial selection of this type of material. A random count during October 1996, for example, revealed that there were ninety books on Buddhism available for purchase. Very few of these were translations of primary source material. Such publications represent orthodoxy for some practitioners in spite of the fact that they have no canonical status in traditional terms.

The necessity for interpretation may be viewed in a positive light. As Harrison has observed,

...a religious tradition is never bound by its scriptures, but rather submits to them, reinterprets them, and ignores them in a unique and complex pattern.<sup>22</sup>

Hubbard argues that the Buddhist tradition is well known "for its nondogmatic or even anti-authoritarian attitude toward the notion of scriptural orthodoxy", but asserts that "it is equally true that Buddhists everywhere have gone to great lengths

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<sup>22</sup>Paul Harrison, 'Buddhism: A Religion of Revelation After All?' in *Numen*, (Vol. 34, No. 2, 1987), p263.

to secure just such a textual orthodoxy".<sup>23</sup> Textual orthodoxy is authoritative for some Bath Buddhists who, though they may not read them, claim the authenticity of the texts recognized by the tradition with which they are affiliated. It is important for these practitioners to regard the canon recognized by their school as authoritative and accurately transmitted. That does not mean however that texts are the subject of study for all practitioners.

### **THE AUTHORITY OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

The second authority source to be considered in detail is the authority of personal experience. Practitioners within each of the groups claim to validate Buddhist doctrines through personal experience and therefore claim to practise as they do on their own authority. I have argued that all the informants in this case study belong to groups of practitioners and therefore accept, at least tacitly, the doctrines which those groups present. Western converts to Buddhism look for authoritative voices to validate Buddhist practices, but also value twentieth century, western educational and social values which normally prioritize individual understanding. The result of this is that teachings such as that given to the Kālāma people and recorded in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, become central for western practitioners.<sup>24</sup>

In this sutta the Buddha tells the confused Kālāmas, who do not know which teacher to follow, that they should not accept anything on account of the following: hearsay, tradition or lineage, rumour, distinction or expertise in the canonical scriptures, speculation, methodical reasoning, study of appearances, contemplation of and acquiescence to opinions, something which appears plausible or, thinking 'the ascetic is our guru'. The Buddha goes on to say,

when you yourselves know these properties are unhealthy, these properties are shameful, these properties are reproached by the wise, these properties when fulfilled and undertaken lead to harm and distress then, Kālāmas,

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<sup>23</sup>Jamie Hubbard, 'A Heretical Chinese Buddhist Text', in *Buddhism in Practice*, Donald S Lopez, Jr. (ed.) (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1995), p272.

<sup>24</sup>See page 39f.

should you reject them.<sup>25</sup>

If this advice of the Buddha is followed, questions arise about what is to be known through experience and how, if one may not acquiesce to the opinions of others or take account of tradition, one can know what is 'reproached by the wise'. Although this passage is often cited by western practitioners, including those in Bath, when the passage is studied in any detail it becomes clear that its message is not straightforward.

A part of the Buddha's message as a result of his experience under the Bodhi tree was that the truth of the way things are can be seen directly. The Buddhist path (*mārga*) is presented within the different traditions as a way in which to move towards an understanding of this truth, either at some time in the future as taught by, for example, the House of Inner Tranquillity or by living always in the state of Buddhahood, as taught by the Sōka Gakkai. The Theravāda and Mahāyāna canons include detailed expositions of such paths in texts such as Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, Asanga's *Bodhisattavabhūmi* and Tsongkhapa's *Lam rim chen mo*.<sup>26</sup> Such texts are studied in monasteries and by many lay practitioners. Although Buddhists in Bath do not study these texts they are aware of their existence and the notion that Buddhism is a structured path - although not one that is necessarily clear or easy to follow - underlies the understanding of Buddhism which practitioners accept. The validation of the truth of Buddhism is preserved as an ideal within all traditions but until a state of Buddhahood has been realized 'internal', personal experience cannot be the sole authority for practice.

In a clearly argued and convincing paper Sharf has challenged the legitimacy of the centrality of the emphasis on "transformative personal experience"<sup>27</sup> within western accounts of Buddhist practice and in particular within modern meditation

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<sup>25</sup>This translation was provided by Richard Hayes on The BUDDHIST e-mail discussion list 17 October 1996.

<sup>26</sup>These texts and others like them are cited in Sharf, 'Buddhist Modernism'.

<sup>27</sup>Sharf, *ibid.* p232.

movements developed from the Theravāda<sup>28</sup> and Zen traditions. He calls for an examination of the centrality of this emphasis and argues that part of its function is to "shield religion from secular critique",<sup>29</sup> since in locating religious authority within private experience it places religion beyond the reach of conventional methods of enquiry. Sharf does not deny that individuals experience meditative states but he does question the status of such experiences within Buddhist traditions. Since individual confirmation of Buddhist teachings is important within each of the Bath groups I shall look in some detail at Sharf's argument and attempt to locate the experiences claimed by Bath practitioners within the framework which he utilizes.

Sharf accepts that there is a traditional role within Buddhism for experience which incorporates observable physical action and testable mental development, but he argues that ethnographic evidence points to a traditional understanding of experience different from the one which is now current within modernist movements. He distinguishes between experience defined as "to directly encounter, participate in and live through" and experience defined as "to directly perceive, observe, be aware of, or be conscious of".<sup>30</sup> The former understanding of the term, he argues, is consistent with ethnographic accounts of Buddhist practice and leads to publicly demonstrable experiences, such as leading a moral life, the correct performance of ritual, or a testable knowledge of texts; all of which may be confirmed by the community according to agreed criteria. The latter understanding of experience, in contrast, is contained in private mental events and cannot be

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<sup>28</sup>Among which is Ajahn Mun's Thai Forest Tradition developed by Ajahns Chah and Sumedho.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p229.

<sup>30</sup>Sharf, *ibid.* p265. The term 'experience' has been recognized as both evasive and ambiguous. Gadamer claims that "the concept of experience is among the least clarified concepts which we have." (*Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1975) For an alternative academic discussion of the place of experience within the encounter between east and west see, Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988) in which Halbfass argues that experience is important in this encounter because an understanding of the significance of experience aids the reconciliation between ancient and modern and defends Indian traditions against the charge of irrationalism.

subjected to public scrutiny.

Sharf argues that the *mārga* texts do not claim to describe their authors' personal meditative experiences. He points out that Buddhist practitioners do not normally make claims for their own experience though they may do so for their teachers. In this way they legitimate the practices taught by their teachers and the authenticity of their teachers' credentials. Sharf's argument is supported by ethnographic data from a number of traditions as well as by reference to texts. He concludes that,

...public enactments of enlightenment-ceremonial affirmations of the reality of *nirvāṇa* in the here and now-constitute the proper domain in which to situate the Buddhist rhetoric of experience. Whatever ineffable experiences might transpire in the minds of Buddhist meditators, such events do not, and indeed cannot, impinge upon the ideologically charged public discourse concerning experience and enlightenment.<sup>31</sup>

In this way Sharf challenges the modernist view that experience within a Buddhist framework is private and claims instead that traditionally Buddhist experience has been subject to confirmation by the community.

Regardless of whether 'private' personal experience is traditional from a Buddhist perspective it is still the case that it has considerable status within western and some eastern Buddhist schools and, as Sharf argues, its centrality is assumed by western Buddhist practitioners. Part of the reason for the centrality of the authority of self-oriented experience which cannot be publicly verified is that all external authorities have been undermined. As we saw in Part I, this has been identified as a feature of late/high/post modernity.<sup>32</sup> Because no claimant to authority may command authority without the economic sanctions of power this process cannot be measured against a final authority. Any authority is authoritative only in so far as the individual chooses that it should be so at any given time. Personal experience

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<sup>31</sup>Sharf, *ibid.* p270.

<sup>32</sup>See page 37.

acts as a comparatively stable authority which is not subject to challenge by others and cannot easily be undermined. Applied to personal experience of Buddhism this means that,

The urge to reduce the goal of Buddhist praxis to a mode of non-discursive experience would seem to arise when alternative strategies of legitimation, such as the appeal to institutional or scriptural authority, prove inadequate.... By privileging private spiritual experience Buddhist apologists sought to secure the integrity of Buddhism by grounding it in a trans-cultural, trans-historic reality immune to the relativist critique.<sup>33</sup>

Self-oriented experience can lead practitioners to devalue dogma as orthodoxy and replace it with experience. This is part of the explanation for textual study not being prioritized within all of the groups. In the face of authenticating experience, doctrines, and the texts in which they are presented, may assume marginal status.

Yandell has pointed out that religious experiences are not in fact ineffable where they are located within religious traditions. The reason for this is that religious experiences confirm the doctrines of those traditions. He writes,

The meditative traditions themselves are shaped by the doctrines... [W]hat counts as a religiously genuine experience in part is decided by whether it is an experience in which the correct doctrine is "seen to be so." Thus if one appeals to a Jain meditative tradition and its experiences, one will have "verified" Jainism, and if one appeals to a Buddhist tradition... and its approved experiences, one will have "verified" Buddhism. The appeal to meditation accomplishes nothing in terms of assessing the experiential evidence, since what is approved as a result of meditation is only what conforms to the relevant already approved doctrine.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Sharf 'Buddhist Modernism'. p268.

<sup>34</sup>Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p292.

Yandell's position may equally well be extended to other religious traditions and serves as a reminder that practitioners in every religious tradition, including western forms of Christianity, claim to have confirmed that religion as true in their own experience, a fact which should alert us to the need to be careful of Buddhist claims to sole possession of the means to confirm doctrine through experience.

#### Authority based on private experience

All Buddhist practitioners encountered within this case study claim to legitimate their Buddhist practice through personal experience of some kind. But not all the experiences which Buddhist practitioners claim fall into Sharf's personal, private category. Those who do claim to have had private meditational experiences are most likely to be found within BBG, the Thai Forest Theravāda meditation group, the House of Inner Tranquillity and to some extent the Karma Kagyu group. Some House of Inner Tranquillity members to whom I have spoken also claim enlightenment for their teachers Alan and Jacqui James.<sup>35</sup> Contemporary practitioners within these groups hold up their experience as more reliable than a teacher, a tradition or its texts. Such experiences are used as a kind of shibboleth separating those who have 'deep personal knowledge' and those who don't; those who rely on themselves and those who rely on a teacher (as well as those who practise and those who merely research!). Unverifiable and ineffable personal experiences thus act as an authority in the face of other competing authorities. While confirming the doctrines and practices which the practitioner has embraced they are also used to throw doubt on the authority sources accepted by others.

#### Authority based on shared experience

Other Karma Kagyu group members and NKT practitioners aspire to such personal 'realisations' but do not claim to have experience of them. In confirmation of Sharf's findings however, they do claim such experiences for their teachers. Geshe Kelsang is said to be fully realised and Lama Gendun is declared to be a highly

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<sup>35</sup>Kapilavaddho, the inspiration behind the House of Inner Tranquillity professed to have had such experiences and described them alongside an account of the public verification which he received from the monastic community under whose guidance he was operating. Randall, *Life As a Siamese Monk*, esp. Chapter 11.

realised being. Within the NKT ‘realisations’ are discussed as though they are ‘things’ which can be achieved and possessed. Although none of the NKT practitioners to whom I have spoken claims to have such ‘realisations’ (when teaching, monastics often make a point of denying that they have had such experiences) personal experience still operates for them as a powerful confirmation of the practices they follow although in a form more in keeping with the publicly verifiable forms which Sharf claims are traditional. That is, these practitioners accept the logic of the doctrines they have been taught and which they are obliged to learn, and affirm that the doctrines confirm their experience of life. For example, they confirm through observation that anger arises in the mind and is not dependent on external circumstances. Their experience of the regular recitation of *sādhanas* is that this gives rise to a better understanding of how anger arises and therefore of how to avoid it and a corresponding increase in faith in the teacher and his teachings. They do not suggest that they have had experiences which cannot be described. A further ‘verifiable experience’ within the NKT is knowledge of Geshe Kelsang’s commentaries. This knowledge is tested through examinations, the results of which are publicly posted within the centre.

SGI Buddhists who chant regularly also point to tangible and therefore more publicly verifiable experiences which may be material or, more likely, represented by positive changes in the way they live their lives. Proof that the practice works lies in the experience of achieving something chanted for or in an increase in a positive virtue such as patience or faith which can be confirmed by the community.

#### Authority based on reason

Related to the centrality of experience in confirming doctrine and practice is the role of reason. Practitioners in each of the Buddhist groups studied claim to confirm, by rational analysis, the Buddhist doctrines they are taught. That practitioners come to different rational conclusions, which are said to confirm distinctive interpretations of doctrine, supports Gadamer’s contention that rationality is not value neutral and does not exist in pure form outside of cultural influence.<sup>36</sup> The whole issue of experience and rationality within Buddhism,

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<sup>36</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

particularly in the west where personal experience is claimed as central to the validation of practices, deserves further detailed investigation. This is not the place to attempt that task but this data does suggest that there is as much to look at within Buddhism as there is within western philosophical or religious traditions.<sup>37</sup>

## AUTHORITY AND ADAPTATION

All the schools of Buddhism represented in this case study acknowledge the need to adapt the practice of Buddhism for its new cultural setting. Most have regarded adaptation as an ongoing process while at the House of Inner Tranquillity informants consider that process to be complete. Adaptations which have been made are similar across the groups. For example all the groups use the English language for study and/or in their liturgy and there is a general trend to reduce the emphasis on ritual enactment. Specific adaptations cannot be identical since the schools of Buddhism which are being translated are not identical and some groups lend themselves more easily to transmission across cultures than others.

We have already considered the role which authority plays in providing the groups with their identities and legitimating the practices which they teach. The authorities which they acknowledge are also invoked to legitimate the process of adaptation. The contrasting attitudes to the adaptation of *vinaya* rules within the Thai Forest Theravāda tradition and the House of Inner Tranquillity provide a clear example of how this legitimation operates.

Although the important role which the *vinaya* plays within the Thai Forest Theravāda sangha does not impinge to a great extent on Bath meditation group practitioners it is important within the sangha itself that adaptations to the monastic code are legitimated by the tradition. For this reason adaptations are not made without consultation with the sangha in Thailand. Examples of this are adaptations made to the style of dress of the British monastics. Alterations to take account of British weather conditions were not made in Britain without approval from

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<sup>37</sup>See Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), for a good example of the debate within Christian based philosophy and D.Z. Phillips, *Faith after Foundationalism*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1988 and 1995) for a more contemporary collection of views on this issue.

Thailand. Similarly the sangha is concerned to keep strictly to the spirit of the monastic rule with regard to the handling of money.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, at the House of Inner Tranquillity in spite of Alan James's monastic roots the tradition in Thailand has little influence. James decided *with his wife* Jacqui, on their own authority, that blue trouser suits and not saffron robes are suitable for British monastics, it is also considered admissible for monastics to carry and use cash and to eat after midday. The justification offered for this kind of adaptation is that the Buddha allowed changes to minor rules. The decision about what represents a minor rule although seemingly clear to the James' was not clear within the early Indian schools and was probably responsible for early divisions.<sup>39</sup> This freedom to interpret the traditional *vinaya* indicates that the authority for this group lies principally in the person of Alan James. He is considered by some to be enlightened and by others to be sufficiently advanced in wisdom to be in a position to know which of the rules has minor status and can be adapted.

Other groups also legitimate adaptations through the authority structures which they acknowledge. The Sōka Gakkai group in Bath accepts the guidance of the UK organization and follows the form of practice that the organization suggests. Adaptations for this group are therefore the adaptations which the movement as a whole has made. Because of the split with the Japanese priesthood and the recent change in national leadership, the late 1990s have been a time of reassessment for the movement. At the time of writing (December 1996) it is not clear how the movement will continue to adapt although it is clear that major changes will be made to the organizational structure. Adaptation to the understanding of the *Gohonzon* discussed in chapter 4 illustrate how the lay movement takes a flexible approach to traditional practice although the authority of Nichiren's writings provides a check on adaptations to practice. This group, like the House of Inner

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<sup>38</sup>See page 74.

<sup>39</sup>The early division between the Mahāsāṃghikas and the Sthaviravādins is an example of the divisive nature of disagreements about minor rules. See J Nattier and C Prebish, 'Mahāsāṃghika Origins: The Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism' *History of Religions*, (Vol.16, pp237-272, 1977).

Tranquillity, is not constrained by traditional methods of operation. Nichiren taught a universalist form of Buddhism which does not rely on monasticism or rigidly defined gender roles and his authority is routinely invoked to justify substantial organizational changes.

The New Kadampa Tradition presents itself as an ideal form of Buddhism for twentieth century westerners and claims to have 'extracted' Buddhism from Tibetan culture and politics. However the form of Buddhism which it presents is very traditional in many ways. The rift between Geshe Kelsang and the Dalai Lama, though unpopular, has historical precedents and is a reminder that the Dalai Lama's high profile in the west and apparently unifying role among the Tibetans in exile does not typify his former role in pre-modern Tibetan society. The NKT claims the authority of the continuous tradition and of Geshe Kelsang as a fully enlightened being. It is in that context that Geshe Kelsang has prepared new English language translations and commentaries on traditional texts and all NKT practices are based on this new textual material. In spite of the organization's rhetoric, it retains a strong Tibetan flavour and elements of Tibetan Buddhism such as protector deity practices, which are minimized or absent within other Tibetan groups in Britain, are prominent within the NKT. Geshe Kelsang's authority, however it is disseminated and interpreted, is central to the adaptations made within this organization.

Finally, the Karma Pakshi group continues to adapt very slowly. The death of Lama Monlam initiated a tightening of the control of this group by Sharmapa's branch of the Karma Kagyu lineage but that control remains distant. The group is not free to adapt because authority for this group lies within a largely unknown tradition to which they are tied because of the decision to align with the sangha in France. There is no authoritative figure for the group, in Bath. Although members are free to express preferences, for example for an English language liturgy, adaptations can only be made during visits from those who have the authority of the sangha. This is the price Karma Pakshi group members are willing to pay for recognition as an 'authorised' centre.

## Gender roles revisited

In chapter 1 I briefly outlined the traditional status of women within Buddhism and roles played by women have been highlighted within the case study. Just as adaptations to the *vinaya* code or adaptations to forms of practice need to be authorized by a recognized authority source, adaptations to the roles which women have traditionally played will need to be backed by legitimate authority.

One of the most controversial elements of the *vinaya* code and therefore of all monastic practice, for westerners and for some groups in South-East Asia is the subservient role which it lays down for nuns. According to the *vinaya* Nuns were required to keep an extra eighty four<sup>40</sup> rules and even the most senior nun was always junior to a newly ordained monk. The Thai Forest Theravāda sangha and the House of Inner Tranquillity with their different authority structures have taken different attitudes to this inequality and to the revival of a form of *Bhikkuni* ordination. Although changes made in the status of nuns at the British Thai Forest Theravāda monasteries have meant a significant divergence from the situation in Thailand where there have never been nuns, the western ten precept Theravāda nuns are still junior to all monks and cannot progress to full ordination. At the House of Inner Tranquillity where the authority of the continuous tradition is not recognized, the nuns and monks take the same ordination vows and there is not such a rigid division between their roles.

Nuns within the two Tibetan schools represented in this study are not so obviously disadvantaged as Theravāda nuns since full ordination, though denied to women, is not so important for men within these schools and most of the monks are not fully ordained. A charismatic leader backed by sympathetic agency structures can ensure that traditional differences between men and women are minimized. This is apparent among the nuns in the Bath NKT group who are mostly very able and articulate and play roles which are at least as responsible as those played by the

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<sup>40</sup>This figure applies to the Pāli *Vinaya*. The Mūla-Sarvāstivāda code used in northern Buddhism lays down an additional 108 rules for nuns (although the nun's ordination was never introduced into Tibet) and the Dharmaguptaka code used in eastern Buddhist countries has an extra 98 rules (Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, p225).

monks. Senior teachers at the Bath NKT group have always been women. By expressing her concern that women should eventually be able to take full ordination vows, the Bath teacher suggested indirectly that NKT nuns will not happily accept a role which has lower status than that of the monks. However this problem has yet to arise and there is no indication that it is likely to do so in the near future.

SGI-UK practitioners are not disadvantaged by traditional or charismatic authority but by their status within legal-rational authority structures which reflect Japanese and to some extent British cultural norms. As we have seen, some women within SGI-UK are no longer content to accept their traditional roles. Increasing independence from the Japanese parent organization may result in more equality in practical terms, to correspond with the theoretical equality which the practice allows. Among the changes taking place within this movement in late 1996 is discussion about the proposed dismantling of gender defined divisions. If such dismantling takes place it may lead to greater equality for women but the structures which divide men and women also ensure that women are well represented at 'middle management' levels within SGI-UK. The dismantling of gender based divisions may lead to the loss of a discriminatory structure which has the potential to work in favour of women.

Gross has argued that serious lay practice, not monasticism, may be the best way forward for western women practitioners. She has also recognized that lay practitioners have to be authorized in order to lead communities and to teach, and argues that if that authority does not come from traditionally based communities it will come instead from the legitimation of "inner transformation".<sup>41</sup> The inner transformation which Gross invokes is not of a private ineffable nature but very much concerned with demonstrable change. She advocates lay Buddhist practice because it can revolutionize family relationships and claims that "post-patriarchal Buddhism will need to emphasise connection, community and communication".<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Gross, 'Buddhism', p27.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p28.

Most of the women in this case study are lay practitioners and they assume the same relationships with lay men within Buddhist groups as they do with men within the rest of society. They do not express their experience of life and of Buddhism in the spirited language of Rita Gross. Lay women involved in this research project do not see themselves as disadvantaged by their Buddhist practice and are largely unaware of the feminist debates about the status of women within Buddhism which are taking place elsewhere. They are concerned with their individual Buddhist practice but to a lesser degree with the ways in which the organizations they are affiliated to are run. Lay Theravāda practitioners feel uncomfortable about the status of Theravāda ten precept nuns but do not regard the nuns' status as a proper concern for the laity.

If the organizations which make teaching available and support practitioners are patriarchal then most women cope by prioritizing the teaching and regarding the organization as secondary. Since most secular organizations in Britain are patriarchal women are used to operating within patriarchal structures. The patriarchal nature of Buddhist organizations is as much a matter of proper concern as the patriarchal nature of other social structures but the relatively complacent attitude of the women in this study may mean that these women choose not to fight that particular battle within the context of their Buddhist practice. Since the problems which confront women outside the Buddhist organizations have yet to be resolved, Buddhist groups with their teachings about equal opportunity are not the first place women turn to for the inequalities of the wider society to be addressed. This is partly explained by the fact that fighting for equal treatment is difficult within a religious milieu which teaches that the reason that life is unsatisfactory is that we mistakenly cling to the idea that we have a permanent unchanging self. These women are concerned that the desire for equality of treatment may be easily confused with such ego-grasping.

This paradox is summed up powerfully in the following quotation. The speaker, a well educated, intelligent and cosmopolitan young woman with a sophisticated understanding of contemporary political issues and a PhD in economics, when questioned about this issue said:

It's funny you know. If I thought about it I might get really annoyed.<sup>43</sup>

## **AUTHORITY AND SECTARIANISM**

In spite of efforts to present Buddhism as a unified religion with a common essence, different attitudes to authority lead to tensions between groups. It has always been the case that when in contact with each other, schools of Buddhism have tried to establish their own legitimacy vis-à-vis that of their rivals. Disputes between the early schools in India,<sup>44</sup> the Northern and Southern Zen schools in eighth century China<sup>45</sup> and between and within the four major Tibetan schools<sup>46</sup> are ample evidence for this. In the twentieth century west there is more opportunity than ever before for disputes between schools which have been forced into close proximity in this new setting and clearly to some extent compete for the same membership, as the study shows. Contrasting approaches have been taken by Buddhist groups to resolve and account for differences in Britain. The Western Buddhist Order, for example, has tried to reconcile differences through establishing a new tradition which draws on all schools and tries to find the common ground between them.<sup>47</sup> At the other extreme, the NKT emphasizes the purity of its lineage and the danger of 'mixing'. Other groups loyal to particular lineages have met together under the auspices of the newly formed Network of Buddhist Organizations (NBO) or the Network of Western Buddhist Teachers, and Buddhists from different traditions have also worked together on local Standing Advisory Committees for Religious Education (SACREs).

Inter-Buddhist dialogue does not however guarantee full agreement. The NBO was inaugurated in the summer of 1994 with the aim of inviting the Dalai Lama to

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<sup>43</sup>SGI 6, interview 8 July 1994.

<sup>44</sup>See, Nattier and Prebish, 'Mahāsāṃghika Origins'.

<sup>45</sup>See Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, (London: Columbia University Press, 1967), p4ff for an account of the formation of the legitimating, founding legend of the Ch'an sect.

<sup>46</sup>See Samuel, *Civilised Shamans*, chapter 24.

<sup>47</sup>See Dharmachari Subhuti (Alex Kennedy), *Buddhism for Today: A Portrait of a New Buddhist Movement*, (Glasgow: Windhorse, 1983).

Britain. Of the forty one groups who belonged to the network at that time, only twenty seven were signatories to the visit, which took place in the summer of 1996.<sup>48</sup> SGI-UK for example though a member of the network naturally did not support the Dalai Lama's visit since they neither recognize his authority nor the practices he teaches.

In spite of leadership initiatives to encourage dialogue between groups many of those interviewed for this study were ready to question the legitimacy of other groups operating in this country. At the beginning of the study in 1993 SGI was most likely to be singled out in this way while towards the end of the fieldwork, in 1996, it was the NKT which was criticised most frequently and often in bitter terms due mainly to adverse press coverage in the summer of that year as a result of NKT demonstrations against the Dalai Lama's attitude to Dorje Shugdän practice.<sup>49</sup> These criticisms work both ways. While BBG members criticise the NKT, NKT members suggest that the ethos of BBG is unlikely to assist in the path to enlightenment.

This kind of sectarianism does not seem to result merely from differences in tradition or practices, differences which practitioners may accept as representing alternative paths suitable for different kinds of people. Criticism results instead from two other factors. The first is the views of members of one group about the *attitudes* of members of other groups to religious authority sources. I will use the example of faith in a spiritual guide to illustrate this. The second factor is concerned with agency structures within organizations. I will use the example of criticism of the methods used by groups to finance their activities to illustrate this.

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<sup>48</sup>Figures extracted from NBO publicity in consultation with the SGI representative to the NBO.

<sup>49</sup>see page 191f.

## **Faith in a Spiritual Guide**

Regardless of the Buddhist school a western practitioner joins, there is more or less explicit agreement that one of the attractions of Buddhism is that, unlike Christianity, it is not based on 'blind faith' but on faith in truth which can be known. The tradition records that the Buddha came to know the way things are and did not have to accept that knowledge by taking someone else's word for it. It is this kind of knowledge that Buddhist practitioners are ultimately aiming for. There is disagreement between members of different groups about the role which faith plays within the process of gaining such knowledge. Within SGI-UK and the two Tibetan groups faith is openly acknowledged to be an important and central part of Buddhist practice. Zen practitioners and attenders at the House of Inner Tranquillity to whom I have spoken have acknowledged a role for faith as the impetus to begin and continue with practice. By contrast certain members of BBG and of the Thai Forest Theravāda meditation group cannot accept that there is any role for faith within their practice except in so far as it represents an initial suspicion that Buddhist practices *might* be effective in leading them to knowledge. Faith in the spiritual guide within the NKT is considered here in order to illustrate intergroup disagreement about right attitudes to faith in teachers.

NKT members well versed in the books of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso are able to give clear explanations of the importance of faith, the ways to develop faith and the consequences of not having faith.<sup>50</sup> Newer members are less likely to answer questions about all matters, including faith, using Geshe Kelsang's explanations and are more likely to speak of having doubts and the practical ways in which they dispel those doubts.

There are two ways in which to interpret this. First it may be that faith does indeed develop, just as Geshe Kelsang says it does, as members are in close contact with the organization and its teacher and put into practice the techniques which they are taught. Sceptics without faith may equally argue, and do, that the increase in faith comes as a result of contact with the organization not because the teachings and

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<sup>50</sup>The NKT publication, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune* gives a clear exposition of the role of faith in the movement, especially on pages 105-108.

practices are true and beneficial but because of the reflexive effect of the constant reassurance that they are true and the increasing personal investment which individuals have in believing that they are true. The dedicated practice of NKT Buddhism requires considerable commitment in terms of the time, energy and to some extent money which members invest. Those who live at the centre study and practise for several hours each day and it is difficult to work and earn an independent living while undertaking the Teacher Training Programme. Even those who lead more conventional lives away from the centre but undertake the Foundation Programme commit a great deal of their time to study and the recitation of sādhanas. This kind of commitment must have a payoff in terms of personal experience or fulfilment or else a desperation that it should have.

One Bath teacher described faith as, "the most difficult thing for sceptical westerners to get hold of".<sup>51</sup> She added,

If you don't have faith then you won't be able to learn, so to some extent the fault is with you but people are not castigated because of that. I mean everyone's faith is limited and we all have to improve our faith. If you find it impossible to have faith in the teacher then ultimately you won't progress and that's all there is to it really.<sup>52</sup>

This teacher was sensitive to the fact that the organization has been criticized for placing newcomers under pressure to develop faith in Geshe Kelsang. She acknowledged that people do feel under pressure to do this but claimed that this kind of pressure comes from the person and not from the organization.

It would be difficult to argue that faith in a spiritual guide is not a traditional Tibetan practice and therefore not a legitimate Buddhist teaching.<sup>53</sup> Faith is

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<sup>51</sup>NKT 1, interview 7 June 1995.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>sGam po pa's *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* is an example of a Traditional Tibetan text, which drawing on earlier sources emphasizes the need for devotion to Spiritual Friends. This teaching is also emphasized in Robert Thurman, *Essential*

however a problematic area for many western practitioners of Buddhism who find it difficult to reconcile the idea of faith in a teacher with teachings like those given to the Kālāmas. Bath practitioners influenced by Theravāda and to some extent Zen schools choose to interpret a statement similar to, 'Faith in Buddhism is not blind faith but a critical questioning faith which leads to practice and therefore to knowledge,' as meaning, "there is no role for faith in Buddhism" instead of "continuing faith is essential on the Buddhist path." The result of this is that such practitioners look upon traditions which emphasize the role of faith as aberrant, and at faith in a teacher as blind obedience. This then becomes a source of sectarian tension between groups. Theravāda practitioners do not reject Geshe Kelsang and other Tibetan teachers as such but they do accuse NKT followers of blindly following their teacher without a critical questioning attitude. In fact I have found that this is not the case. NKT practitioners claim to confirm the doctrines and the efficacy of the practices for themselves as we have seen. Equally NKT practitioners counter such claims with the criticism that members of other groups do not have faith in pure lineages and cannot therefore expect to make progress on the Buddhist path.

Buddhist practitioners in this country have criticised the NKT for its attitudes to the Dalai Lama and to Dorje Shugdän practice. Non-NKT Buddhist practitioners in Bath have criticized the NKT for requiring practitioners to invest faith in their teacher. These sectarian positions have their basis in the attitude to authority which NKT practitioners express.

### **Finance**

A further source of sectarian tension and disagreement concerns agency authority structures and contrasting attitudes to the ways in which the groups are financed. The NKT and SGI are subjected to criticism because of the degree of material success they demonstrate. Material success is seen by some to indicate a concern with 'this worldly' goals which they consider inappropriate for Buddhist practitioners. The NKT is also criticised for supporting monastics by encouraging

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*Tibetan Buddhism*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

them to claim state benefits.<sup>54</sup> Recent publicity concerning disagreement between Geshe Kelsang and the Dalai Lama has led to public scrutiny of this funding policy. Both the NKT and SGI-UK have access to sufficient funds to finance vibrant, high profile organizations. Although they both make strong claims to religious authority to legitimate the practices they teach, they also have efficient agency structures which support their work and provide a source of cohesion among subgroups situated up and down the country. Their sources of funding and patterns of expenditure are different but both groups have been able to purchase suitable premises and maintain full-time administrative staff.

The wealth of SGI-UK comes mainly from the Japanese parent organization although the UK organization is increasingly able to support its own activities. In the movement's own terms, its financial stability acts as proof of the efficacy of the practices taught by Nichiren and is therefore legitimated by the religious authority sources of the movement. In Japan there is little inhibition about linking the truth of Buddhism to worldly success - quite the reverse in fact. The NKT on the other hand does not legitimate its financial stability through the philosophy which underpins the movement but by the perceived need to establish 'pure' Buddhism in the west, a goal which is legitimated by the charismatic authority of their teacher. The NKT recognizes that it is necessary to have agency structures which make Geshe Kelsang's teachings available. In fact as we have seen, the organization itself is not as wealthy as press accounts have suggested, however it is efficiently administered and makes advantageous use of the benefit system. The British social security system and high unemployment rates has made Britain a good place in which to establish the movement.

I have considered here two sources of tension between groups, the status afforded to faith in teachers and the ways in which contrasting agency structures control the methods through which groups are financed. These areas of tension do not arise simply because the groups accept different texts or teachers, different *focuses of authority*, although that is a factor, but also because they acknowledge different

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<sup>54</sup>The NKT is not the only group to do this. Samye Ling Karma Kagyu monastery in Dumfriesshire is also partially financed in this way.

*attitudes to authority.*

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has shown that the authority sources which the case study groups acknowledge provide them with their contrasting identities. Texts, teaching traditions, teachers and personal experiences are authoritative for members of each of the groups although the precise content of these four sources differs within each group. Each of the groups must adapt within the western cultural setting and the authority sources which legitimate practices also legitimate adaptation. The chapter has also shown that contrasting attitudes to authority sources, whether they represent religious or agency structures, may lead to sectarian tensions.

The individual interpretation of texts, though identified as a feature of lay Buddhism in the modern world, is not prominent within the Bath groups. However private experiences are important to many Bath practitioners. Drawing on Sharf's research I have questioned the rhetoric of private experience as a traditional authority source for these practitioners and argued that in the terms of continuous Buddhist traditions, private experience is not an adequate substitute for publicly demonstrable personal development and knowledge. Practitioners within each of the groups refer to both private experiences and publicly verifiable experiences. Both types of experience may be held successfully in tension by practitioners. Conversely traditional authorities may be devalued in ways which resonate with New Age types of spirituality.

## Conclusion

This thesis has argued that Buddhism is undergoing a process of adaptation in Britain which is driven by a desire on the part of eastern Buddhist teachers and western Buddhist teachers and students to make Buddhism accessible and understandable for British people. Buddhism is not homogenous but has undergone a process of interpretation and adaptation in its synchronic and diachronic development. The process of translating Buddhism for western audiences has therefore faced the challenge of diverse interpretations of what Buddhism is and of what it can be. The case study has shown that diverse groups can exist in close proximity to each other but that this sometimes leads to tensions and sectarian attitudes. Each group has a view of what is authoritative in Buddhism and adaptations as well as more traditional practices depend upon the authority sources which the groups acknowledge. There are discernible trends in the kinds of adaptation which are taking place but groups legitimate such adaptations by drawing on a number of different authority sources.

The case study of Buddhism in Bath has shown that practitioners from each of the schools represented hold two types of authority in tension with each other. These are firstly, the personal authority which comes from the experience of practising Buddhism and from previous life experience and secondly, the traditional authorities claimed by the schools of Buddhism with which the groups are aligned. Practitioners negotiate compromise positions on authority in response to tensions between these two authority types, which may be challenged by developments within the groups.

Central organizations are important to practitioners but the views of those organizations are not necessarily replicated at local level. This suggests that the variety of British Buddhism is much more than the variety of the organizations and their leaders. The limitations of the methodology for the study have meant that the results obtained reflect a very small percentage of groups and practitioners. Only fifteen miles from Bath the Bristol conurbation offers at least nine Buddhist groups only two of which (the Sōka Gakkai and the NKT) have been represented in this

study. Even closer to Bath, an English Shingon priest, who represents yet another strand of Buddhist thought and practice, moved into an outlying village and set up a small centre during the course of the research. This serves to confirm the rich diversity of 'Buddhisms' on offer. The small scale of the study does not however undermine its value. I have not suggested that Buddhism in Britain as a whole can be characterized beyond its broadly Protestant tendencies. I have suggested that the diversity of Buddhist roots, and therefore of sources of authority, will ensure that adapted Buddhism and intergroup relationships will remain diverse. Two corollaries of this are that a wider study could not have suggested less diversity, only more, and that, at present and for the foreseeable future, no one group or person can represent British Buddhism.

Appendix 1 has been removed from this digitized version.  
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