

THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

(Focusing on America and Canada)

*Text of a talk given by Dr. Thynn Thynn in
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Blessings, the honorable Dr. Aung, Venerables and honored guests. I would like to thank Dr. Aung and the International Buddhist Friend Association for inviting me to give this talk. I am very humbled and honored.

I would like to begin this talk by recalling that in 1897, exactly 110 yrs ago, the first-ever Wesak celebration in San Francisco was presided over by Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka. This was perhaps the initiation of Theravada Buddhism in the New World. But it was not until the mid- 1960s that Theravada teachings were actually transplanted to America. During the 1950's, both Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism were brought to America and made it their Western home. Before Theravada teachings arrived here, there was an extremely important development in the teachings in Southeast Asia, especially in Burma.

At about the same time that the World Parliament of Religions was taking place in Chicago in 1893, Ledi Sayadaw, the foremost scholar and meditation master, translated the Pali Canon into lay Burmese and thus planted the seeds of vipassana meditation amongst monks and lay people alike. This was a watershed event in the annals of Burmese Buddhism, because for the very first time the Pali Canon became accessible to the lay community. Ledi Sayadaw delegated a layman -- Saya Thet Kyi -- the task of bringing vipassana meditation to the lay Burmese community. Saya Thet Kyi, who was actually a farmer, became the first lay meditation master in Ledi Sayadaw's tradition to popularize vipassana meditation and began teaching organized retreats around the country. Many meditation centers were set up in Burma, and small groups of Westerners began coming to study with Saya Thet Kyi in the early part of the 20th century.

Prior to that, for 1500 years vipassana meditation and the scriptures were confined to the monastics. Vipassana was practiced sporadically by monks, mostly on their own. With the coming of Ledi Sayadaw, a new era dawned for Burmese Buddhism. So in reality, the Vipassana movement amongst the larger lay community in Burma is actually just a little over a century old.

From Saya Thet Kyi grew a long line of lay Vipassana teachers beginning with U Ba Khin, a high government official. In the late 60s, Westerners began to visit and explore meditation with U Ba Khin, the first of whom were Robert Hoover and John Coleman, from England, and notably Ruth Dennison from America. That trio brought vipassana meditation to England and America in the early part of the 1970s. In the meantime, Sayagyi Goenka, an ethnic Indian in Burma, studied with U Ba Khin and went to India and began teaching there; he also was a key teacher who spread the teachings and practice all over the world.

Another lineage was developing in the wake of Ledi Sayadaw, begun by Thaton Mingun Sayadaw. From him a long line of famous Burmese Meditation teachers evolved, the first of whom was the famous Mahasi Sayadaw. During the Burmese independence period in the 50s, Wai Bu Sayadaw and Mahasi Sayadaw were the most famous Meditation Masters and were instrumental in spreading the Vipassana practice amongst the lay population. In the Post-independent Period, Mahasi Sayadaw was invited by the Burmese Government to establish a meditation center in Yangon, and this created the ideal situation for Westerners to come to Burma to practice vipassana meditation. In the same era many famous Burmese Masters such as Monhnyin Sayadaw, Sun Lun, and Mogok Sayadaw appeared on the Burmese Buddhist scene, making Vipassana in Burma a household word.

In the 1960s, young American explorers of Asian spirituality also flocked to Budh Gaya in India and were exposed to Burmese vipassana practice there as well. Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Jacqueline Schwarz-Mandell were initiated into the Vipassana meditation tradition by Munindraji, an Indian who was trained in Burma by Mahasi Sayadaw. These four American aspirants also went to Burma and studied with Mahasi Sayadaw himself as well as Sayadaw U Pandita. Jack also ordained in Acharn Cha's tradition in Thailand. They returned to the West and in the mid-70s began to teach Vipassana in America.

Ledi Sayadaw's lineage is carried in the West to this day by lay meditation teachers such as Daw Mya Thwin, Sayagyi Goenka, and Ruth Dennison, whereas Mahasi Sayadaw's lineage branched out into two streams. A monastic stream to the West was carried by Burmese abbots such as Sayadaw U Pandita, Chan Myei Sayadaw, U Lekhana, Satamaranthi Sayadaw. This monastic track serves both Burmese and western meditators during their annual visits. The other Mahasi stream is carried by lay American Vipassana teachers such as Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salsberg, and Jack Kornfield.

Meanwhile Sri Lanka had its own meditation Masters and was producing the best scholars, for example the late Sri Lankan monk Walpola Rahula, and Western scholars such as the late Nyanitiloka, Nyanaponika Thera from Germany and later Bhikkhu Bodhi who is of American origin. Their English translations of the Pali Texts were invaluable to Westerners studying and practicing Theravada Buddhism. Aya Khema, a German nun ordained in Sri Lanka, founded the Nun's Island in Sri Lanka, which served as an important venue for Western women to practice meditation in Asia.

Thai Buddhism was also developing in the 1950s with the advent of Acharn Cha, a forest monk to whom a group of young Americans flocked to study with. Among the first from the West were Acharn Sumedho, Acharn Passano and Acharn Amaro. One notable Thai teacher was Acharn Nyeb a lay Thai woman.

Theravada Comes To the West

The first Theravada Sri Lankan and Thai monasteries were established by their respective immigrant communities around the 1960s in Washington DC, LA and NY. Later other Sri Lankan and Thai monasteries were founded in LA, Denver, and Chicago in the 70s. The same happened in Canada where Southeast Asian immigrants started setting up their own centers.

At the same time, the Mahasi stream of lay teachers Joseph, Jack, Sharon and Jacqueline established the Insight Meditation Society in late 70s in Massachusetts. IMS offered practices from all Theravada traditions: from Mahasi, U Ba Khin, and Acharn Cha.

A new development took place in 1979 -80 was the visits of the famed Burmese Masters Mahasi Sayadaw and Taungpulu Sayadaw to America. Mahasi Sayadaw was accompanied by the late Sayadaw U Silananda and U Kelatha. The latter monks stayed behind and founded monasteries in California and Maryland respectively. Later on additional viharas were started in NY, LA, Chicago, Texas and other towns in US. Taungpulu Sayadaw also set up a monastery in Santa Cruz in California with the help of an Indian-Burmese teacher Dr. Rina Sircar. She later became the Chair for Buddhist Studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, and was the very first Burmese-born woman to make any mark in America. Meanwhile, Laotians and Cambodians also established their own temples. The first higher ordination of an American, Scott DuPrez, took place in Wat Thai in 1979 in LA.

By the end of the millennium, there were more than forty temples in the US and Canada. Vipassana meditation began to be popularly known as Mindfulness or Insight Meditation amongst North Americans, and sitting groups in towns and cities were springing up all over the US and Canada. This was a new phenomenon,

never seen in Asian Buddhist countries. Mindfulness or Vipassana sitting groups initiated by American Dhamma teachers totaled about 90 in 32 states by the year 2000. Spirit Rock Meditation Center was founded in Marin County north of San Francisco in the early 90's by Jack Kornfield and others as a west-coast extension of the Insight Meditation Center in Massachusetts. In Shelburne Massachusetts a center was founded in the Goenka tradition. Bhavana Society was founded in late 80s by Bhante Gunaratana a Sri Lankan monk. Abhayagiri Monastery in the tradition of Acharn Cha was established in 1986 in Northern California with co-abbots Acharn Amaro, from the UK, and Acharn Passano, a Canadian from La Pas, Manitoba.

Having grown up secluded in a Buddhist country in the Orthodox Theravada tradition, when I moved to America in 1990 I felt like Alice in Wonderland. Suddenly there they are -- the many Buddhist traditions and schools flourishing in the West -- Zen , Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land , Chan, Korean Zen, Vietnamese Zen, Theravadan temples, Vipassana centers, engaged Buddhism, the Buddhist women's movement and so on. It was a great eye-opener to know that the various Northern Buddhism Schools and as well as Theravada Buddhism had been growing on the fertile ground of the North Americas for a century already.

From the time I migrated from Burma to Thailand in the early 80s to the time I established a Dhamma center in Northern California in 1998, it was like being fast forwarded from 19th century to 21st century Buddhism overnight. I witnessed the turn of the millennium of Buddhism in the West in Dec 2000 exactly 10 yrs after setting foot in US. As a newcomer to the American Buddhist scene, it took me quite a while to get the whole perspective.

Currently, about 180 ethnic Theravadan monasteries all over US are settled in their own enclaves and are serving the religious and cultural needs of their respective ethnic communities. There are 18 Sri Lankan, Thai, Khmer, Laotian and Burmese monasteries in Canada and Lay Buddhist organizations like the International Buddhist Friend Association. Amongst the ethnic monasteries, Sri Lankan monasteries drew the most Westerners compared to Burmese and Thai Temples due to the Sri Lankan monastic's' fluency in English. Unfortunately, the only abbot who was fluent in English amongst the Burmese Sayadaws was the late Sayadaw U Silananda but he was in great demand by the expatriate Burmese communities not just in America but all over the world. The only branch monastery he established was in Mexico.

The lay Vipassana movement began by Sayagyi Goenka and the pioneer Western teachers took off and exploded all over North America. According to Sharon Salzberg, it all started innocently by them simply teaching what they had experienced in their own practices in Asia, but it seemed to have a life of its own. Mindfulness has been taken up by not just the average American but by professionals, lawyers, Universities and colleges. Stanford University has an accredited course in mindfulness, UC San Francisco started a mindfulness club, and UCLA followed suit. Mindfulness has been incorporated into the popular stress-reduction clinics begun by Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts. Steven Smith from Hawaii took it into the business world as did Mirabai Bush of Mind and Life Institute. Psychotherapy is being integrated with mindfulness, as pioneered by Jack Kornfield, and now hordes of psychotherapists are integrating mindfulness into their own practices. But the interesting thing about this development is that many in the public who take up mindfulness meditation do not seem to know where this practice comes from, and most of them have not even heard the term Theravada Buddhism. Such is the paradox of the fast growth of vipassana as a meditative trend.

IMS is more traditional and sticks to the traditional Theravadan model. They also have a Buddhist Studies Center to provide scriptural studies: its west-coast counterpart, Spirit Rock, is more eclectic in its approach and incorporates other traditions such as Tibetan retreats, Shamanic work, more of a smorgasbord or cafeteria approach. Dhamma Dena, a meditation center founded by Ruth Denison in Southern California, focuses mainly on the U Ba Khin tradition with innovative additions of movement and dance.

On the more orthodox front, Bhavana Society founded by Sri Lankan abbot Bhante Gunaratana provides a traditional form of practice and Buddhist milieu for Westerners and Asians alike. In the mid 90s Abhayagiri a Western monastery from the Archan Chaa tradition was established in Northern California and attracts Americans as well as Thais and Cambodians. Metta Monastery in San Diego is headed by Thanissaro Bikkhu a scholar and meditation teacher trained in the Thai forest tradition of Archan Lee Dhammadaro. These two monasteries maintain the strict Thai forest monastic tradition. The impact of these traditional monastic models on the American community is slow and gradual. The strict monastic codes of conduct and the patriarchal model of Theravada Buddhism in the West seem to be the stumbling block for Westerners, especially women.

Most of the traditions present in America seem to be represented in Canada -- the Mahasi , Goenka, Achan Cha lineages, and teachers from IMS and Spirit Rock teach retreats here. The first ordination of a Canadian Bhikkhu by Canadian monks -- Venerable S. Nanada abd Oavaro -- took place at Birken forest monastery, and is a first for Canadian Theravada Buddhism.

One could say that Theravada Buddhism is the last wave of Buddhism to arrive in the New World and we are to a certain extent riding on the popularity of Buddhism began by Zen and the Beat generation, plus the success of Zen Masters like Suzuki Roshi, Maezumi Roshi and later Tibetan Buddhism brought by Chogyam Trungpa and other Tibetan Lamas. It is also important to note that the immense popularity of Dalai Lama in the West has a tremendous impact on the public in the New World, paving the way for new comers like Theravada Buddhism and vipassana to follow.

Engaged Buddhism

Buddhism arriving on American soil also encountered political and social activism, and as such was absorbed into the field also. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship is one outcome, and members are from across the board of Buddhist traditions. Joanna Macy a famous activist is well respected in Western Buddhist circles for her work in Deep Ecology and the anti-nuclear movement.

Women In Buddhism in America

Although Western women teachers in the Zen and Tibetan traditions and the Vipassana movement have become prominent in America, very few Asian Theravadan women have achieved prominence other than Dr. Sircar. Another woman teacher from U Ba Khin's tradition -- Sayama Gyi Daw Mya Thwin -- lived in England and came to teach in America off and on. From the Thai tradition there is Bikkhuni Dr. Prem, a psychotherapist who founded a temple in Massachusetts. I am a late arrival and my Dhamma center in Northern California was established in 1998. There are three retreat centers recently founded by Burmese women, Thanti Thitsa in LA was founded by Dr Khin Thi Oo a physician, a monastery was founded in Springfield Illinois by Dr Khinne Swe Myint, and a retreat center in Canada by a Burmese nun Daw Khemernandi. These centers invite Burmese abbots to teach retreats to Burmese and Westerners. Two Western Bhikkhuni, Ven. Sucinta and Ven Sudhamma, are abbesses of the Sri Lankan temple Carolina Buddhist Vihara in South Carolina. This is the first of its kind -- two Western Bhikkunis in charge of an ethnic Sri Lankan Vihara --because most Sri Lankan monks who were in residence there could not stay long because of loneliness and homesickness.

In my own experience of starting a Dhamma center in California and the experiences of other women, unfortunately I feel that female Asian Dhamma teachers are not taken seriously by the Burmese Buddhist community nor the Western Dhamma community. It may be so because we are a rare breed and a new phenomenon. In Burma there have only been nuns who founded nunneries teaching vipassana and there has been little lay attention paid to Asian women teachers teaching in US. Hence my gratitude to Dr. Aung and the

IBFA is boundless for inviting me as a Dhamma teacher and in recognition of my work in the US. It is a very rare honor indeed. My sense of the North American Dhamma scene is that -- unless we female Dhamma teachers can successfully publish books -- the work of female teachers will not be widely known or appreciated.

According to the well known Buddhist writer Sandy Boucher, when Buddhism arrived on the shores of America, feminism was already full blown and the patriarchal system of Theravadan monasticism did not sit well with Americans. Women in our era began to examine the status of women in Buddhism and finally started to find their own voice. Thereafter began an era of empowerment for Western women. In the early 80s, the first International Conference for Women called Sakyaditha (daughters of the Buddha) took place in Budh Gaya presided over by His Holiness Dalai Lama. Participating women from all Buddhist traditions from Asia and the West converged and founded their own forum and interconnectedness.

One of the stickiest points in Theravada Buddhism is the discontinued Bhikkhuni tradition in Theravadan countries. This issue is frequently addressed at the conference by such Buddhist women activists such as Prof Chartsuman Kabilsingh of Thailand, Karma Lekshe Tsomo a Tibetan nun, Aya Khema and others. Sakyaditha Conferences have been held every few years.

Against great resistance from Theravadan orthodoxy, some women persisted and got themselves ordained in Taiwan and South Korea. The struggle to set up the Bhiddkhuni Sangha was on, and the first male monastics to relent were the Sri Lankans. The Bhikkhuni Sangha was revived in Sri Lanka in 1998 with the ordination of 23 Bhiddkhunis in Danbulla. Currently over 200 Bhikkhunis have been ordained in Sri Lanka. A few Thai and Burmese bhikkhunis were ordained in Sri Lanka but the two Burmese bhikkhunis live in America where the spiritual climate is more conducive for them. In 2005 the first Bikkhuni Vihara was founded by Bhikkhunis Tathaaloka and Sucinta in Fremont, California. There is indeed a glass ceiling for all women in Buddhism, whether Western or Asian, ordained or laywomen, and it is a high ceiling to crack. My experience teaching and setting up a Dhamma center in America is no exception.

My attempt to establish a yogi center (semi-renunciate) from the Burmese tradition has had to contend with and overcome the great obstacle of gender issues. I chose this yogi tradition because it is neither hierarchical nor patriarchal and does not require ordination. It simply allows the person to commit and live a religious life and is not encumbered with rigid rules that do not work well in Western societies. So far I have found that it works very well and at my center the gender issue is a non-issue. Both men and women students are able to focus on their own practice and study without the distraction of gender struggles and biases.

I have been asked many times by Burmese friends why I don't have a monk preside at my Center. This shows how foreign the tradition of lay women teachers is to the Burmese Buddhist community. It was an enigma for a lot of the Burmese Buddhist expatriates when I began to establish the center in America. For one thing, having a monk and a woman teaching in the same center is setting up for a split in the community. Most Burmese will support the Burmese monks, while Westerners on the other hand will relate better to a lay person. And most important of all I need the freedom and flexibility to chart my own course for the Center and carve out a path that will fulfill my aspirations to bring Theravada Buddhism to the West in addition to building lay Dhamma community of practitioners. Hence my center does not conform to any of the traditional Theravadan silent retreat centers nor simulate monasteries or nunneries in Burma or in the west.

Experience of setting up a Dhamma center in US

It is in this cultural environment that I had started my own center in Northern California nine years ago bringing Vipassana in Daily Life Meditation. When I was studying Buddhism in Burma, I thought the monastic

tradition was too rigid and orthodox and tried to be more eclectic in my own journey. But when I arrived in America, I saw how Buddhism can become diluted and even distorted or admixed with different popular trends and practices, so I realized *that* I had to carve out my own traditional/non-traditional path when I began to teach in America. It was also part of my own evolution as a Dhamma teacher from Asia, to learn to steer the middle way between orthodoxy and excessive liberalism in creating my own Dhamma Center. It was in seeing the American Dhamma scene that I came to the realization of the importance and significance of the orthodox traditions. Without the strict monastic lineage of scholarship and practice in the Burmese tradition in Burma, vipassana practice would not have had a chance to survive and even be brought to the West. But it is also true that the Theravada monasticism which served so well in Asia is not going to be suitable for the kind of Dhamma work I wanted to carry on in America. Hence my decision to find an alternative way of approaching the situation by establishing a Theravadan Center for householders in order to preserve and propagate the Dhamma.

I had to find a way to keep the identity of Theravada Buddhism, yet not stymie the atmosphere with an overkill of rigid Buddhist religious culture. How to bring the ancient teachings to bear in this day and age in the West within an alien culture and yet maintaining the original Buddhist thoughts without diluting them is an enormous challenge. But I regard it as a wonderful opportunity to use creative sensitivity to transcend the cultural differences of East and West, This has been the most exciting part for me, to meet these challenges, and to find the common ground of human expression that speaks to the heart and to the depth of our being. I came to realize that it is not just the meeting of the minds but of the hearts that close the cultural divide of East and West.

I wanted to experiment and let the center and the community grow organically at a comfortable pace, loose enough yet not too lax. Along the way I fashioned a way to the assimilate Buddhism and the North American psyche. I have come to understand and respect the spirit of independence of Americans and their willingness to explore and take risks. I felt it was important not to stymie these qualities, but instead to help Americans how to temper that spirit with wisdom and empathy. Americans also have a certain paranoia about authority, and in order to circumvent this in building community, the first thing I did was to form a horizontal organization rather than a top-down management style that Americans are wary of. Taking a leadership role yet also building consensus was what I found to be most successful with my American students. My goal is to show Americans that when authority is conferred with wisdom and metta, there can be a synergistic relationship of mutual respect and love on both sides, with the authority intact and the result I found is an empowered group of American Dhamma practitioners at our Sae Taw Win II Dhamma Center.

With these perspectives in mind I began teaching how to incorporate Vipassana and the Noble Eightfold Path in everyday life, with the fundamentals of Theravada Buddhism supporting the practice as opposed to the silent sitting retreat models taught in most Theravada centers. Later I began to introduce the essence of Abhidhamma to help my students understand the mental landscape of the untrained mind and how to transform one's mental conditioning using mindfulness of mind states. The incorporation of the Noble Eightfold Path and Abhihamma teachings have been crucial to help American students bring Vipassana into their everyday life and ultimately become a way of life for them. I also developed a curriculum of graduated and continuing courses of theory and practice which runs about two years. This gives the students a well rounded education in classical Theravada teachings and this was crucial in deepening their own practice at the same time developing a healthy respect for classical Buddhism.

I also began to design a conflict resolution model and called it "Bringing Harmony to Conflict based on the Noble Eightfold Path." My nine years of experience in community building in America have shown me that the most difficult stumbling block is the lack of integrating the Noble Eightfold Path in the student's practice, where untrained mind and speech were the causal factors in bringing about disruption and disintegration of

spiritual communities and families. I began to introduce Right Speech during the third year of setting up the center and by the fifth year I had developed the conflict resolution model. This has proved to be a pivotal step in the success of building a more stable growing community through the deepening quality of the students' mindfulness practice.

Another facet was using modern educational science in creating the curriculum and using hands on training methods adapted from Montessori school and other alternative educational systems. This was also very much enhanced by using modern high tech means in presenting ancient teachings, which are very abstract, and also using technology to make the teachings and practice available for long distance students from America and elsewhere in the world who track our ongoing classes online.

I also surmised that for Theravada Buddhism to be established in the West there is a need to train lay Westerners to be teachers in Theravadan tradition. So far I have been training four of my senior American students as Teachers in Training who have become the central core of the small community. They are able to provide not only teachings but also be role models for our growing community of students. My goal in to developing classical Theravadan teachings and practical courses at our center using modern educational techniques and technology, is with the intention that these courses can be repeated and adopted by other centers if they so wish.

Teaching Modules

Over the last two years my assistant teachers and I have been designing and refining our courses. Currently we are trying to develop them into teaching modules that can be used by any other group who would like to use these modules at their own center.

Whither Theravada in the West

One question that comes up for me on Theravada Buddhism in the West is "where do we go from here? " In the West we seem to have two ends of the spectrum in the Theravada tradition: the strict monastic tradition on the one end, and at the other end of the spectrum the loose and eclectic mindfulness movement which has more or less left traditional Theravada identify behind. Will the mindfulness movement in future generations become like Yoga in the West, just a stress reduction technique? Will Theravada Buddhism be confined to Asian ethnic groups and a few Western Monasteries? Are we not going to examine or find a way to make Theravada Buddhism and Vipassana meditation relevant to Westerners without losing our identity? With this question I would like to end my talk.

May all beings be peaceful! Sadhu sadhu sadhu!