

Theravada Buddhism in Scotland; Its Introduction and Adaptation

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At the beginning, it appears that the Theravada Buddhist form was introduced to Scotland for the first time just a century ago. Now, Buddhist associations from all three major schools, Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana have established and have become a part of the host society. Buddhism as a result gradually began to blend into contemporary Scottish society. Scottish Buddhist groups have skilfully adapted Buddhism to the local culture, blending traditional Buddhist practice with Scottish ways of life. Theravada Buddhism is one such tradition that since its emergence in Scotland, has transformed to accommodate and adapted to the context of Scottish Society. This article studies the history of Buddhism in Scotland from Theravada perspectives and its skilful methods of integration of its cultures, rites and rituals and meditation with a hope to localise its teachings.

Keywords: Scotland, Theravada Buddhism, Introduction, Adaptation

Introduction and Background

Buddhism began in central Asia - and has significantly contributed to the emergence of different societies since the time of the Buddha. The religion has crossed all boundaries of race, culture, and tradition - establishing multiple subcultures and disciplines throughout the continent. Buddhist cultures adapted and adjusted with local customs and beliefs that

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embraced almost every aspect of the areas it reached; and came to be represented as one of the major world religions. Buddhism later increasingly divided into different schools, mainly Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana and most of them are practiced in the west.

Scotland is one of the four main nations of the Great Britain or United Kingdom (UK), bordering with England to the south and surrounded by the Atlantic and North Sea. In 1999, the Scottish Parliament was re-established for the first time since Scotland entered a political union with England in 1707. The Scottish Parliament was established within a devolved unicameral legislature having authority over domestic policy across several administrative areas (Lloyd et al., 1999). Currently, it is divided into 32 administrative subdivisions with 129 members of the Scottish parliament (MSPs). Christian protestant ‘Presbyterianism’ as overseen by the Church of Scotland is the main religion (Bradley, 2014)

Scotland is one of the western countries where Buddhism has been introduced over the course of the 20th century and there are all forms of denominations, and its practice are found including their traditions and cultures (Roedel, 2008). According to recent Scotland's Census in 2011 result indicates that 54 per cent of population of Scotland stated their religion as Christian, whilst 37 per cent state no religion, 12,795 people declared as Buddhist in Scotland making 0.7 per cent of total population (National Record of Scotland, 2011). Meanwhile, people with no religion are almost two million. On the other hand, Church of Scotland dropped to 32.4% of total population, which is 10 % decrease from 2001 record (Scotgov, 2011). Buddhist representation has substantively increased to 0.24% in 2021 and most likely to increase in the future. The report also reveals that Buddhism has a most ethnically diverse than any other religion in the Scotland. Further, the Scottish government website under the equality headings suggests that Buddhists are most likely to be in elementary occupations in Scotland. There are almost 6,000 Buddhist declared as white and rest are Asian, Asian Scottish, or Asian British just over 6,500, in which Chinese is being majority (ScotGov, 2011).

According to the Online Buddhist directory (Buddhanet, 2024) there are 47 active Buddhist organizations in Scotland, in which, six groups are classified under the Theravada School of Buddhism. Most groups are affiliated with an umbrella organisation. For example, Mindfulness Stoke Newington group is affiliated with Satipanya Buddhist Trust in England. Another three groups, Edinburgh Theravada Buddhist Group. Glasgow Theravada Buddhist Group and Forres Dhamma friends are affiliated groups with Arun Ratanagiri Harnham Buddhist monastery, a Thai Forest Sangha. The other two Buddhist groups are established by monks and are monasteries. They are Scotland's Buddhist Vihara in Glasgow and Varapunya Meditation Centre in Aberdeen (Buddhanet, 2024). There are obviously many other Theravada Buddhist groups which exist in Scotland but are not listed in the directory such as the Dhammapadipa Temple in Edinburgh, the Thai Buddharam Temple and cultural centre in Aberdeen, Milntuim Hermitage Nunnery in Perthshire, and The Wat Phra Dhammakaya Scotland (Maharjan, 2015).

In recent years, the growth of Scottish people identifying as Buddhist indicates the Buddhist influence has been playing an influential role in Scottish society. This has contributed many benefits to the practicing community and beyond; supporting physical and mental wellbeing through the practice of meditation; the promotion of religious harmony and cooperation; as well as being positively portrayed in the media, often presenting Buddhism as an alternative to western thinking that provides mutual understanding on certain social and national issues, i.e. drug abuse issues, human rights, and LGBTQ+ rights etc. Relatedly, Buddhist literatures have become common in public discourse and Buddhist studies have spread widely from school level to higher studies. In addition, Buddhist centres have been established almost all major cities and attracts many interested community members. Buddhist studies has become part of Religious Studies curriculum in school and mindfulness practice has taken a central role in mental health discourse both in the healthcare sector, private sector and popular media.

The flexible nature and adaptability of Buddha's teachings have contributed to this popularity and success. Theravada school of Buddhism since its introduction to Scotland, has been adjusting into local customs, traditions, and cultures, skilfully adapting and on the progress of merging into the host culture.

Previous studies on the introduction of Buddhism in Scotland include Mckenzie's work mainly focusing on history and work of Rokpa, a Tibetan Buddhist activity in Scotland (Mackenzie, 2008). Whereas Rodel's (2007) studies on comparative Buddhist activities in the community which Theravada school, a part has observed, and commented on the phenomenon that Theravada Buddhism with little reference to its existence and development in Scotland. Rawdon Goodier (2006) however, wrote few newsletter articles providing early Buddhist accounts in Scotland was Theravada Buddhist. Similarly, Maharjan (2015) studies Theravada Buddhist introduction and its establishment into Scottish culture as well as skilful means of adaptation. The context, therefore, of this paper, is to discuss and present some way to illuminate its existence and skilfully yet psychologically adapting to the host culture as a part of propagation and establishment.

Buddhism in Britain

Buddhist introduction to the west began in Britain in the 19th Century. Although according to Mackenzie, Buddhism was previously introduced to west during the time of King Ashoka (Mackenzie, 1928); although did not exist as a discourse in the West until the nineteenth century (Almond, 1988. Maharjan, 2007). By the late 20th century, a significant number of Buddhist texts had been translated into English that developed interest in the Buddhist philosophy, and as eastern religion' (Weller, 2007).

Theravada Buddhism is one of the three major Buddhist denominations (*Mahayana* and *Vajrayana*) that survived in India until the seventeenth century (Peter Harvey, 2000). Gombrich argues that around 3rd

century BCE it reached Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and ‘(it) went from Ceylon to Burma; ...diffused into the areas which are now Thailand, Laos and Cambodia (Gombrich, 2006)’. On the contrary, Thai scholars deny its validity and claim that Buddhism was introduced before first century BCE from India (Sirikancana, 2012).

At the beginning, Theravada Buddhist form was introduced and established its root in British society in three ways: colonial, academia and practical (Almond, 1988. Maharjan, 2015. Oliver, 1979. Weller, 2007). The British colonies in Sri Lanka and Myanmar introduced a western audience to Buddhism and that connection grew through the pursuit of western academia. The academic pursuit led to the establishment of the Pali Text Society in 1881 by T.W. Rhys Davids in England. This lead to further Buddhist study groups expanding in the West. In 1899 a practical side of Buddhism began with an ordination of Gordon Douglas, the first recorded British person to be ordained in Theravada Buddhism. In 1901 Allan Bennet, later known as Ven. Ananda Metteya, took ordination in Myanmar and in 1908 returned to the United Kingdom as the first Buddhist monastic missionary to the west. He eventually went on to lead the first Buddhist mission in the United Kingdom.

The establishment of the Buddha Society and the Maha Bodhi Society of London between the 1920s played essential role to establish Buddhist activities and the propagation of Buddhism (Shine, 2002). In 1926, the London Buddhist Vihara was established that enabled, for the first time, a Sri Lankan *dhammaduta* monk to take residence in London that slowly expanded. Today, there are monasteries from all three main Theravada countries from Asia; Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.

According to current statistics the number of Buddhists in the UK is growing both physically and practically. According to statistics in 1952 there were only five Buddhist centres which increased up to 371 by 2003. Further, according to the statistics in 2001 Buddhists constituted 0.3% of total the population in the UK (Weller, 2007, 104). Further, the 2021 United Kingdom census indicates Buddhists represent 0.5% (272,508) of the total population in the England and Wales.

Buddhism Institutionalised

Buddhist teaching began emerging in Scotland by 1912 (Goodier, 2006) as a discourse in academia (Maharjan, 2015). Interest on Buddhism and its teachings gradually extended and established in Scotland when the Buddhist Society opened its branch in Edinburgh in 1952. Buddhism from individual group's intellectual interest Buddhism officially institutionalised in Scotland with the opening of the branch.

The early Buddhist introduction to Scotland would appear to be Theravada Buddhist form. The records also indicate the establishment of Buddhist centre, Johnstone House, by a Theravada monk known as Venerable *Anandabodhi* in early sixties, who was a Canadian and a disciple of a Thai monk, Chaokhun Phra Rajsiddhimuni (Oliver, 1979). Oliver recalls, the Johnstone House in 1967, with the Johnstone House Trust, a mansion was purchased, and later it was sold to Tibetan Teachings group that subsequently Samya-Ling Tibetan Centre was born. Since then, Buddhism has begun to flourish in many forms in Scotland. As the migration from Theravada countries increased more Buddhist centres are established. Meanwhile, general public with no relationship with East who have shown interest on Buddhism gradually progressed, which also demanded suitable place and proper instruction in Buddhist practices. As a result, current Buddhist centres can be divided into two; ethnic based Buddhists and non-ethnic base Buddhists (Maharjan, 2015).

Theravada Culture in Scotland

The meaning of culture is contentious. It can be introduced and implemented in the daily rituals of life. Buddhism in Scotland is diverse but still in its early stages. This is, rather than a summary of Theravada in its entirety, a case study of Theravada Buddhism in Scotland.

As previously stated, Buddhism is a very adaptable tradition and capable of absorbing local culture and beliefs into practice. It has developed

throughout the centuries with ritual practices blending with local culture and its beliefs systems creating unique new culture in the host countries. This is in part an unavoidable trend according to Social Science; known as ‘cultural hybridisation’ (Robertson, 1995).

Buddhism witnessed significant transformation; going from conservative to modernised, in every Theravada country from the 19th through the 20th centuries. The Theosophists in 1900s played significant role that spread its momentum across all Buddhist nations (Swearer, 1970,64). In this circumstance, it can be expected that each group have different approaches and different needs. These approaches and needs are presented in a various form of rites and rituals, celebrations, and events. Thus, the major activities that are being practiced by Theravada Buddhists that Scotland is experiencing will be highlighted and examined to understand its existence. How these are being practiced in accordance with the host country cultures and traditions. The major activities are: Rites and Rituals, Chanting, Buddhist Etiquettes, Monastic practices, and Mindfulness meditation

1. Rites and Rituals

There are various forms of rites and rituals in every religious faith. Likewise, there are different types of rites and rituals practiced in Buddhism that also fulfil that purpose. Buddhist rites rituals are different according to each nation and tradition. The rituals that would have been a strict requirement back in the origin countries have become optional, such as birth, initiations, and death ritual etc. The quality of psychological support appears to matter more to Buddhists in Scotland than the numbers of the monks for the rituals or necessity of rituals. For instance, in Thailand, wholesome events generally invite odd numbers, whilst even numbers for unpleasant ceremonies, i.e. funerals, whereas ideally more than four monks, which signifies a community of monks according to *vinaya* rules are desired number for the Sri Lanka Buddhists. In Scotland these practices have been introduced with skilful means of adaptation as well as adjusted

into the host society in order to provide religio-psychological support to the people. As a result, almost every rite and ritual would focus on fulfilment of a ritual than concern with number of monastics (Maharjan,2015). Traditional monastic rituals, however, are still performed by inviting enough monks to fulfil the quorum as required by Vinaya rules, i.e. Kathina robe offering ceremony and higher ordination.

2. Chanting

Chanting is one of many ways to express personal devotion and faith in all spiritual traditions of the world. Chanting in Buddhism is as old as Buddhism itself (Khantipalo, 1974,40-41) and continues to be practiced in the monasteries for various reasons; cultivation of mind, preservation of the teaching and transmitting of the teaching etc. Buddhist centres in Scotland also introduced similar chanting to the country of origin,; and since this emergence recently two distinctive differences can be noticed.

Firstly, a language that is used for chanting, *pali*, is not only unfamiliar, difficult to understand, and many who has shown interest in Buddhism found it is very unaccustomed to begin with. Secondly, it is a ‘must sell themselves for piecemeal’ that is unavoidable to the pursuit of the path. Therefore, religious practices have been privatized and individualized. Buddhist chanting is minimized in a very sensible and effective way to accommodate audience preference and also universalised for wider communities that accessible to many. These have been, as a result transliterated and translated into English in almost every monastery. This new effort rather than exclude it has given a new distinctive form that could easily be blended into the modern secular and multi-cultural society of Scotland. The verses are transliterated into Pali English and English translation alongside has further beautified the chanting as well so that the taste of the dhamma became accessible. Thus, chanting has been, consequently, reformed and introduced into Scotland to accommodate both traditional and wider community.

3. Buddhist Etiquettes

Etiquettes are not essential in Buddhism, but it is a basic practice to unify differences as well as a form to mindful practice losing self-identity. Most of these etiquettes may be found awkward; and can be both exquisite and bewildering in equal measure ie. taking shoes off while entering to the monastery, bowing & paying respect, offering food to the Buddha and monks etc. Nevertheless, these practices have also been through modifications. Further, blessing ceremonies for different occasions have been also strange to many, nonetheless they are part of spiritual path providing psychological comfort to both communities. It has appeared that the resistance faded away once there is a clear explanation before or after of each etiquette and service. The most essential part of introduction of these are in reality what and how these are presented. It is a matter of skilful acceptance would made by non-Buddhists background. In due course these etiquettes are being accepted and adapted by new-Buddhists comfortably as a part of their spiritual cultivation.

4. Festivals and Celebrations

Scotland is primarily a non-Buddhist country and the Buddhist population is not only small by number but diverse in practice also, there is not been recognised or given Buddhist identity to any days of the ritual calendar in Scotland yet. As a result, Buddhist festivals and celebrations are often organised on weekends of different days than the traditional dates, which will encourage members to attend the event. Otherwise, Buddhist would not be able to join as there are no public Buddhist holidays available in Scotland until now.

Buddhist festivals and celebrations are based on the lunar calendar (Weller,2007). Therefore, day of celebration generally different each year. It has, however, never been an obstacle for global Buddhists to celebrate on different days the tradition dictates, and so Scotland is not unique in this. Among festivals and celebrations that are widely practiced in Scotland are Vesak Puja, Asalha Puja and Kathina. Apart from these events *Magha Puja* and *Pavarana* day are also regarded as important days in Thai

whereas Sri Lankan culture recognises the days but less significance. Rather, a full moon day of June, Posan as a day to celebrate Sri Lankan conversion to Buddhism during third century BCE (Weller, 2007,118). Meanwhile, Thai and Burmese Buddhists pay more importance to the Songkran, a New Year, in which, monasteries organise events to support Thai-ness and Burmese respectively. It is similar to Sri Lankan Buddhists that celebrate New Year and Sri Lankan Independent day.

5. Monastic Practices

Buddhist monasteries in the Europe are not big as in Asian countries and facilities seldom fulfil in accordance with Vinaya requirements. However, Buddhist centres are serving the purpose. In a similar way, these are functioning in three simple ways in Scotland.

Firstly, as a place of conducting religious rites and rituals and other religious services according to *dhamma-Vinaya* and customs. Secondly, it is a gathering place for Buddhist migrants which tunes between homeland and the host country. Lastly, it is a place of abode or a dwelling place where venerable monks and nuns continually reside in service of people.

A Buddhist monk and nun are important factors of the Theravada centres and essential part of a centre to serve Buddhist community. The monastic lives at a centre and the centre looks after their material needs and accommodation. There will be no charges made for their lodging and basic requirement. In return, they fulfil initial two aspects of the centre, caretaker of the centre and religious minister as a pastor, a counsellor, a psychologist and also provide a spiritual guide. It is fundamentally on the second aspect that the monastic provides psychological support in various occasions in different issues (Khintipala, 1964).

6. Mindfulness Meditation

Over the last few decades, mindfulness meditation and its application has been of much interest in the modern world. It has been introduced all sector of social activities, incorporated into educational

practice, psychological praxis, government offices and professional practices (Srikruedong, Iamsupasit, Tanakornnuwat. 2019). Mindfulness meditation although introduced in a secular form it has strong foundation in Buddhist practice.

Buddhist centres are offering meditation sessions in different way, weekly or monthly, one off or as a few day retreats. These have been introduced as a way to deal with daily sufferings. Almost all Buddhist monasteries have introduced according to their own traditional way of mindfulness practice in a Buddhist environment, which could be classify as one of the barriers for outreaching. Similarly, majority of monastic does not have sufficient local language to teach the meditation.

It appears that majority of Buddhist centres in Scotland offer a meditation session in a weekly basis whereas Varapunya Meditation Centre does not only offer 2 to 3 times a week, but it also offers mindfulness meditation sessions for different organisation, such as Health Village Aberdeen, Aberdeen in Recovery, Aberdeen Royal Infirmary regularly. In collaboration with Aberdeen City Health and Social Care Partnership, (NHS Grampian), Varapunya Meditation Centre has been offering mindfulness sessions since January 2017, which has developed into further other short courses. These courses are free of charge. The 2019 Varapunya Meditation Centre carried out independent survey among 60 practitioners from different sessions suggested that these sessions have helped to cope with their life issues and ways to come to terms. They are able to relax more, sleep better and sense of wellbeing increased.

Conclusion

The introduction of Buddhism in different countries from centuries had gone through serious skillful adaptation that has been viewed differently in different period and different spectrums. The adaptation has been taken mostly in order to be useful within the existing culture, which could be surrender or to fight for the existence. It could also provide religious and psychological support to relevant community.

The Communication is the key for mutual understanding of two different cultures. In order to attract or to provide knowledge on Buddhism and Buddhist practice Buddhist centre in Scotland are offering in classes and session in English as well as suitable modernised Buddhist studies. Meanwhile Buddhist events and activities are also mostly organised to accommodate in the Scottish climate.

These transformations of Theravada Buddhist activities in Scotland could be blending into new society, which has created self-awareness of religious identity and reached beyond the original culture. It is, however, would not claim as a completely new culture nor cultural hybridization as such but skilful means to provide religious and psychological support to a particular community.

It is a Buddhism that is being introduced to Scotland and is accommodating local culture skilfully. As a result, Theravada Buddhism has adapted and modified ways of practice and discourses in a 'skilful means' in order to smoothly laying its roots into the Scottish soil. The movement is providing its teaching and technique to lead a mindful living in the host country. Possibly in few decades it will produce a distinctive feature of Scottish Buddhism or Scottish Theravada Buddhism than what is being practiced now.

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