

Critical Note

Development of Interest in Buddhism  
in the Czech Republic (1)

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Buddhism has been a subject of study for scholars of Indology, religious studies, theology, or sinology at the Czech universities since the end of the nineteenth century. But until the 1990s, there were fewer Buddhist centres on the Czech Buddhist scene than individual Buddhists. The early period of development of interest in Buddhism was influenced by the national perception of the Catholic Church as the church of the Hapsburg empire. After Czechoslovakia gained independence from the Hapsburg monarchy in 1918, Czech intellectuals viewed Buddhism as an individual spiritual pilgrimage, which they preferred to passive membership in rigidly hierarchical religious institutions and churches (Rozeňalová, 2008), and consequently the practice of individual meditation became popular among thinkers and intellectuals.

Many well-known historical personalities influenced the formation of the Czech Buddhist scene. František Drtikol, an art photographer and painter, translated some basic texts of Mahaayaana Buddhism for his own use and for a group of his disciples. In his practice of meditation he

combined different directions and schools. Kvetoslav Minařík, also a teacher of meditation, wrote many texts to popularize Buddhist ideas, aiming to disseminate Buddhism in a European and Christian context.

From the 1970s until the end of the 1990s, academic texts were used and studied in Czech Buddhist circles; an example worth mentioning is the book *Buddha* (a biography of Buddha) published by the philosopher Egon Bondy in 1968. It was the only book on Buddhism published under the Communist regime. These texts point to the fact that, even before centres were set up, Buddhism in Czechoslovakia engaged the interest of a certain circle of thinkers, yoga instructors, academics and artists, even though the boom of interest in Eastern thought of the 1960s and the 1970s largely passed the Czechs by.

In the Czech Republic the first meditation groups started to emerge in the 1990s. According to Baumann (2001: 18) this is the period in which centres emerged throughout Western Europe. Baumann states (ibid.) that more than 60 per cent of the Buddhist centres in the West have been founded within the last twelve years, and that these represent more than the total number of centres established within the first eighty-five years of the twentieth century. This supports the assumption that the establishment of centres in the Czech Republic was not due only to the social changes that took place there. Moreover, it would be simplistic to associate developments in the Czech Republic only with the social changes that took place in 1989. In 1990 only fourteen meditation groups existed; in 2007 there were fifty-seven active centres (Buddhanet.net). It is also worth comparing the number of centres in the Czech Republic (fifty-seven centres in a population of 10.3 million), with that in countries such as Ireland (twenty-six centres in a

population of 4.2 million), Poland (eighty-four centres in a population of 38.1 million) and Slovakia (twelve centres in a population of 5.3 million), all of which are countries in which traditional religion – in their case the Catholic Church – has a significantly stronger social impact than in the Czech Republic, which is by contrast one of the least religious countries in Europe. I would suggest that the widespread secularism in the Czech Republic helped the expansion of Buddhism. This corresponds with the “strictness” hypothesis that Wuthnow (2004: 366) presents in his article. He concludes that Buddhism is more attractive to people who are not affiliated to another religion. The strict belief system of some churches functions, according to Wuthnow, as a barrier to the rate and extent of the spread of Buddhist teaching in a social setting. He extends this hypothesis by suggesting that the teachings of Buddhism are more attractive to those who, though not already affiliated to a religion, are searching for some ethical framework or for certainty about an afterlife (Wuthnow, 2004).

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Buddhism appeared also on the Czech political scene. Czech intellectuals felt an affinity between Buddhist and humanist ideals, and sought to sympathize with the “oppressed” Tibetan nation. In 1989, the Czechoslovak president Václav Havel was the first head of any European state to invite and receive the Dalai Lama in a celebration of human freedom and the end of the totalitarian regime (Batchelor, 1994, xvi). From the 1990s until very recently, a number of Czech politicians have continued to show public support to Tibet. Buddhism began to be presented by the media and perceived by Czech society as a variant of a universal humanistic philosophy of human rights and equality. The media picture of Buddhism in the Czech Republic as well as in other European countries was (and to some degree still is) influenced by the

nineteenth-century European intellectual stress on the rational and pragmatic aspect of Buddhist thought, and on its universal humanist values in harmony with science, in contrast with religions based on revelation and dogma (Baumann, 2001). In the presentation of Buddhism in Czech society we can also trace the notion of “Protestant Buddhism” (Baumann, 1997), which emphasizes personal responsibility and moral autonomy, and rejects ritualism.

### **Mapping the Form of Buddhism in the Czech Republic – Outlining the Methodology of the Research**

The goal of this phase of my doctoral research was to determine which lines of Buddhism are active in the Czech Republic, and whether these groups emerged autonomously in the local environment rather than being a part of the global network of Buddhist organizations operating in Europe and the US. A questionnaire comprising thirteen questions dealing with different subjects was sent to all eighty-seven centres listed on the Internet. Of the eighty-seven questionnaires sent out, ten of them (11.5 per cent) were returned as undeliverable, and a further twenty centres (23 per cent) failed to reply even after a repeated mailing. Thus fifty-seven centres (65.5 per cent), representing different schools of Buddhism, participated. It is possible to say that the character of Buddhism represented in the Czech Republic corresponds to that of Buddhist schools in other European countries, where Tibetan Buddhism is also the variety represented most often (Lenoir, 1999).

The majority of Buddhist centres in the Czech Republic follow the lines of global Buddhism. One of these is the “Diamond Way” Buddhism of the Karma Kagju lineage, registered with the Czech Ministry of Culture in June 2007 as a religious association or church. With the growth

of Diamond Way Buddhist centres, local meditation groups have emerged, belonging to the same Buddhist stream of the Kagju lineage. However, for various reasons, they are unwilling to be members of this global Buddhist organization. In addition, there are local groups practising engaged Buddhism. In the case of Theravada Buddhism, there is a marked tendency to work directly with spiritual teachers and organizations from Asian countries rather than to co-operate with Western centres.

In each centre that responded in the Czech Republic we can identify different degrees of activity among the participants and sympathizers, from “active” to “anonymous” or “passive”. Tweed (1999) introduced the term “*dharma*-shoppers” to designate those who do not take an active part in any particular Buddhist community, but are influenced by the public and media presentation of Buddhism. My respondents also indicated that besides the reported number of active members (1,547 in all the participating centres) there can be traced a group of persons characterized by the respondents as “meditating”, “sympathizing” or “co-operating”, and their number in some cases exceeds the number of those attending regularly. To this peripheral group also belong the remaining 7,000 people who registered as Buddhists in the population census in 2001.

Furthermore, according to the records of the Czech-Vietnamese Society in the Czech Republic, there are more than 55,000 Vietnamese immigrants legally resident in the country, 90 per cent of whom are Buddhists. Obtaining Czech citizenship is a lengthy process which can take decades, and therefore these Buddhists do not appear in the population census records. Nevertheless we can expect some changes as the first generation of Czech citizens of Vietnamese background comes to age. In 2008, the first Buddhist temple in the

country was opened in the town of Varnsdorf by the Vietnamese community. Like in many other countries, the Buddhist communities of Czech converts and of Vietnamese immigrants have separate practices, because the Vietnamese Buddhist temples also serve cultural and educational needs other than spiritual ones.

In Buddhist centres established by Czech converts, occasional events are preferred to regular weekly meetings by all groups. Such occasional, but intense, activities are designed to help and develop individual spiritual practice. Buddhist centres are not perceived as temples or as hubs of the community, but as centres of information. This corresponds to the activities they offer, providing instructions for the practice of meditation, and information about Buddhist doctrines. The centres also present their activities to new adherents in strictly informational terms. Despite the evident efforts made by all centres to appeal to outsiders, all respondents reported that they do not actively aim at recruiting new members. These findings correspond with the analysis of Obadia (2001: 96), of the intellectual resistance to the term “mission” in referring to the spread of Buddhism in the West.

The age range of the Czech Buddhist groups proved to be different from the average age reported in polls in European countries and the United States (Smith 2007, Henry 2006). The age range (80 per cent of answers) in the Czech Republic is between twenty-five and thirty-five. Smith (2007:313) conducted a survey of the American Buddhist Organizations, where he found that the most frequently declared age of its members (60.3 per cent of all responses) fell within the range of forty to fifty-nine. Smith (2007: 313) shows that the youngest respondents in the US range between twenty and thirty-nine, but this represents only 10 per cent of the responses he received. A similar study carried out in the

UK showed the most frequently indicated average age of members as forty-eight (Henry 2006: 12). When we compare the average ages of members with the division of time reported by each centre between meditation and lectures, we can see that the lower age range of Czech Buddhists (twenty-five to thirty) prefers less meditation and more lectures on Buddhism or other activities.

Besides their age ranges, particular communities are characterized by the proportional representation of men and women. An analysis published by the Czech Statistical Office (CSO), “Compositions of population by religion, gender and by age” ([www.czso.cz](http://www.czso.cz)), states that women represent 56.7 per cent of all believers, and that women predominate in established traditional churches. Also according to the CSO data, in most of the “new” religions the proportion is reversed: more men than women adhere to Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. My findings correspond with the data of the CSO, reporting a majority of male members of Buddhist groups. A more specific division taking the type of Buddhism into account suggests trends in which women and men prefer particular Buddhist lines: in descending sequencing, the results show that the choice depends on the extent of the social engagement of the groups and on the techniques employed for meditation.

On the basis of data previously recorded, I infer that women are more active in groups which are socially engaged to a greater degree. Groups with a higher representation of women (e.g. Tibetan Buddhist groups, with 52 per cent of women, Socially Engaged Buddhism and Diamond Way Buddhism, with 47 per cent) seek to locate Buddhism in the cultural context of the West; their primary focus is not only to provide guidelines for individual spiritual experience, but also to concentrate on social engagement – whether at a local level (for example,

organizing exhibitions and workshops on Buddhism) or at a global level (for example, human rights issues in countries such as Tibet and Burma). Furthermore, they are active in specific charitable projects (such as organizing long-distance adoptions, or setting up Buddhist kindergartens in Sri Lanka). By contrast, in schools of Buddhism such as Theravada (32 per cent women) or Zen (Kwan Um Zen 41 per cent, Soto Zen 25 per cent women), women form a minority in both of these groups, although in Zen schools women hold senior positions both in local groups and in the national Sangha leadership. Why there is such a division between women and men in the Czech Republic would require further qualitative research in the field.

### **Social Engagement and Non-Engagement, and Spiritual Orientation, of Buddhism in the Czech Republic**

In Western Europe social commitment quite significantly affects the form of the Buddhism presented in Western Europe. For this reason, the questionnaire included a question about the areas in which Czech centres are active. Unless groups are established primarily for engaging in human rights issues in Tibet or Burma, a very low degree of social activities is a common feature for all the Buddhist groups studied. From the responses it is very clear that each group has an interest in increasing the number of its centres; publishing was often mentioned. Participation in inter-religious dialogue was mentioned in only two cases. Buddhism in the Czech cultural setting, therefore, cannot be defined as engaged Buddhism, as it makes no attempt to engage with the environment outside its centres.

Although centres do not always present themselves as religious, it can be concluded that all of them focus primarily on spiritual practice, carrying out activities that the members perceive as religious rituals. The



respondents perceive the recitation of Buddhist texts and *mantras*, and in some cases meditation, as religious rituals. Different Buddhist schools and directions are not combined in Czech centres, nor is Buddhism combined with any other spiritual practices. According to their responses, the members see the present fixed form of Buddhist thought in a very positive light as they prefer to be labeled as Buddhists and not followers of some form of a New Age amorphous movement.

### **Conclusion**

In the Czech Republic Buddhism is becoming the object of interest to a growing number of people who have created groups for meditation. Also it has become subject to a process of institutionalization, as one of the Buddhist groups (Diamond Way Buddhism) has been registered by the state, and has the same legal status as traditional churches. The evolution of a Buddhist group into a centre for meditation and then into a state-registered religious association enables us to understand the ways in which contemporary religious groups are formed and differentiated, with their members actively taking part in shaping their own forms of religious character and practice. Despite their fluid organization, some characteristics of local Buddhist groups can be established on the basis of available studies. Their age range is significantly lower than that of groups in other countries, they exhibit a substantially lower rate of social engagement, and their focus is on purely religious and spiritual activities. It is also clear that their members are aware of the different characteristics offered by specific directions.

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