

So where are all those black Buddhists, then?

By Michel Clasquin

Abstract

For almost as long as population statistics have been kept in South Africa, census reports have reported the existence of hundreds of black Buddhists. And for nearly as long, it has been obvious that there are two Buddhist communities in this country: an Asian community that brought Buddhism with them as part of their heritage; and an overwhelmingly white convert community. Why should Buddhism, or any new religion for that matter, be a more popular choice among one racial group than another? This chapter examines the strange ways in which discourses of race, class, and faith have become intertwined in this country.

From the first countrywide census in 1911 onwards, Buddhists start to appear in the official records of the Union, later the Republic, of South Africa. They do not always feature prominently in the statistical reports – in some publications, we must assume that they have been lumped with other small communities to form "Other Religions". But when we do find them, they are of course classified by race.

In the 1982 edition of SA Statistics, for example, we are informed that the Buddhist community in this country consists of 1100 whites, 200 coloureds, 640 Indians and 8840 blacks¹. By 1995, the same source informs us that there were 615 white, 139 coloured, 1097 Indian and 540 black Buddhists in the country.²

The problem is that no-one in the Buddhist community has ever been able to find those black Buddhists: indeed, even the coloured and Indian figures are suspect. While one cannot dismiss the possibility out of hand,³ it seems more likely that the official figures have been fatally skewed by statistical manipulation. Some anonymous statistician in a dark office back in the apartheid era must have thought that if there were Buddhists in the country, then there must be Buddhists equitably distributed among the four groups that dominated apartheid thought.

The South African Buddhist population consists of two clearly distinguishable groups: an emigrant Asian Buddhist population and a white convert group. Of these two, the immigrant group is the elder. There was a large Chinese community in the Cape from the eighteenth century onwards: "Out of a total of 1 417 seamen at the Cape of Good Hope in 1792, for example, there were almost as many Chinese sailors as there were Europeans".⁴ But these were mostly a transient community, and left no trace of their religious practices behind. Lasting settlement of Chinese in South Africa did not commence until the early twentieth century. Among these Chinese settlers, conversion to Christianity was frequent and what Buddhist practice existed among them slowly faded away. Until 1992, when the Nan Hua temple near Bronkhorstspuit was established, there

¹Central Statistical Services (1982:1.25)

²Central Statistical Services (1995:1.15).

³After all, recent genetic research has confirmed that the Lemba are a genuine group of black Jews.

⁴Wratten (1995:179)

was no clearly-defined Chinese Buddhist presence in South Africa. They have now been joined by Burmese and Thai groups scattered across the country.

Another interesting development was the conversion to Buddhism of low-caste Hindus in Kwazulu-Natal province in the 1920s and 1930s-strictly speaking this is not an "ethnic" Buddhism, in the sense that these people's ancestors were not Buddhists, but one of the factors that caused them to adopt Buddhism as an alternative to Hinduism was that, unlike Christianity and Islam, it was at least of Indian origin. Calling it an "ethnic Buddhism" is therefore not too far off the mark. In any case, most of this movement was eventually reabsorbed into Hinduism.⁵ That leaves the convert community, and this will be our main focus of interest.

Little is known about the position of white South African Buddhists prior to about 1970. Most likely they were solitary practitioners, gaining some support from books and correspondence with institutions such as the Buddhist Society in London. Other may have found their spiritual homes within Theosophical lodges. It is known, however, that literary figures such as Olive Schreiner and C. Louis Leipoldt were, if not practising Buddhists, at least highly sympathetic to the Buddhist cause. Later in the twentieth century, the poet, painter and activist Breyten Breytenbach continued this tradition of artistic involvement in Buddhism by expressing his identity as a Zen Buddhist. The involvement of artists and performers seems to be a common trend in western Buddhism, most noticeably in the case of film actors and musicians who declare their involvement Richard Gere is perhaps the best known example

From about 1970 onwards, small Buddhist groups started to spring up in the main metropolitan centres of South Africa, each one generally associated with one or two leading founder members, who in many cases are still leading figures in the Buddhist community. Although many of these groups were in some way associated with the main streams encountered in western Buddhism, at this stage they tended to be open to practising Buddhists and sympathisers of all persuasions. Only by 1985 would sectarian divisions start to harden and official affiliation to overseas institutions start to play a more important role. Similar small groups have come into being since then and many have disappeared, eventually to be replaced by others. The range of representations on offer to South Africans did not differ much from those available elsewhere in western Buddhism. Seen from the sectarian level, they included Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism, Nichiren and Zen. But South Africa was lagging behind the west where the transplantation of Buddhism was concerned, and by this time a new western understanding of Buddhism was starting to emerge, based largely on a modern interpretation of Theravada, but with large infusions from Zen and an outward-looking concern for social and environmental issues.⁶

In each of these groups, activities have been going on quietly, with no active attempts to convert people, but with positive outreach to explain Buddhist ideas to society at large where this was thought appropriate. Not all the "members" (or rather attendees) of these groups would call themselves Buddhists. Some continue to practise their original religion (mostly Christianity) in addition to practising Buddhist meditation. Significantly, all the forms of Buddhism practised at these centres were introduced not from their original areas of origin (Thailand, Tibet, Korea), but through intermediary Buddhist organisations in western countries, where Buddhism is only slightly older and more established than it is in South Africa. It was therefore not necessary for the founders of these groups to create

⁵See Van Loon (1979, 1980).

⁶Informal observation suggests that, as elsewhere in western Buddhism, the South African form is characterised not only by a small number of committed Buddhists, but also by a much larger group of sympathisers, or what Tweed (1999) calls "night-stand Buddhists".

new representations of Buddhism, as this had already been done in Europe and America and they could simply use the existing presentations. The reverse side of this is that the Buddhism they have presented has appealed only to people whose demographic profiles mirrored those of existing western Buddhists: well-educated middle-class people, which, in the South African situation, meant mostly whites. Black South Africans have not really been affected by it. This was thrown into clear relief by some field research I did in 2003 on the Buddhist Retreat Centre (BRC). The oldest Buddhist establishment in the country and in many ways the one from which most others have sprung, the BRC is situated near the town of Ixopo in Kwazulu-Natal province.

Like most South African Buddhist organisations, the BRC has yet to draw significant support from outside its traditional white, middle-class following. As one respondent put it, "When I go out there, all the cars are like mine, only a lot newer; everybody comes from a similar background, and I do think that is a pity; it isn't necessarily wrong, but it is a limitation".⁷ It is a problem that is not unique to the BRC nor even to South African Buddhism. However, the rural setting of the BRC throws the dilemma into sharp relief: the divide is not only white vs black, and middle vs working class, but also urban vs rural.

That is definitely not to say that the BRC is in any sense a racist organisation. In fact, it threw its doors open to all races from the very beginning, a time in South Africa's history when it could be dangerous to do so - and was in fact visited by government agents for its pains, as mentioned by Van Loon.⁸ The problem is rather that few non-white, non-middle class, non-urban people have felt the need to go through those doors.

As a black middle class develops, the BRC is only now starting to see the first beginnings of black interest in Buddhism and black attendance at retreats. But it is early days yet, for some time to come the BRC will be living with the typically South African situation where "The blacks are still the servants, while the whites are called staff".⁹ Again, it must be stressed that no staff position at the centre has ever been restricted to whites; it is rather the case that no black has ever applied. In a sense, this is understandable: to take a "gap year" at a retreat centre is an action that presupposes a comfortable middle-class existence into which one can easily fall back. As another respondent noted, even among South African white Buddhists there is less of a tendency to take out major periods of time for self-development than among their overseas counterparts: "There is no safety net, so one can't easily say, 'I'll just take a year off'".¹⁰ One can only speculate how much more this would apply to black South Africans. It is just not something that is easily done by people whose memory of poverty and repression is only one or two generations old (cf Van Loon 1999:41-42).

The result of this is that the BRC's social upliftment activity, like so much charitable work in South Africa, always runs the risk of appearing as noblesse oblige. However good the relations between individual staff members and the nearby Zulu village are (and there have been many such relations over the years) the centre and the village remain separate entities that remain unintegrated. The BRC's *sangha* (community) lives in the suburbs of Durban and other major cities, not on the hill across the valley.

It is not necessarily a problem, but it certainly is something that people need to be aware of; it mirrors South African society very clearly. It seems unsettled to

⁷interview: Antony Osler.

⁸Van Loon (1999:42-43).

⁹interview: Antony Osler.

¹⁰interview: Thanissara

me, but then again the whole country is unsettled that way. The more specialised Buddhist centres avoid the problem by having the retreatants do all the work, but that only "solves" the problem in that particular situation.¹¹

This is not to say that there are no South African Buddhists at all except among whites and Indians, but the number of Black Buddhists are extremely small. The Kagyu Buddhists, in particular, have from time to time conferred with African traditional healers, and they report a number of black members in their Harare branch. In South Africa, however, the only group to have attracted significant numbers of black members has been the Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

We must now consider firstly whether this is an anomalous situation, both in western Buddhism and in the context of broader Buddhist history, and secondly, regardless of whether it is an anomaly or not, why this pattern has developed. If we find that this is a pattern unique to South African Buddhism or the western Buddhism of which it is a part, then the reason must be sought in the particular nature of South African (or western) society. If it reflects a pattern widely found elsewhere in Buddhist history, then a deeper reason must be sought, one that reflects something unique to Buddhism itself.

Of course, South Africa does have a particular social setup, as which place does not? But what makes South African society stand out is the extent to which class distinctions coincide with racial or ethnic divisions. Appiah¹² gives us a cogent argument why the entire concept of race is false and pseudo-scientific, but while his argument is philosophically sound, it still leaves us to deal with the public perception of "race" as a real entity, a perception that has had enormous implications in the history of the twentieth century, from the holocaust to apartheid. Indeed, while one can see the apex of the peculiarly South African confluence of class and race in the apartheid state, it has a much longer history, one that reflects the entire colonial history of the country and going back to the first contacts between Africa and Europe. The result, certainly up to 1994 and to a very large extent even since then, was that the middle and upper classes of society were overwhelmingly dominated by whites. Not all whites were middle-class, but almost all middle-class people were white.

It is to this factor that we must look when we try to explain the predominance of whites in the transplantation of Buddhism to South Africa. When we view it not in racial terms, but in terms of a differentiated class receptivity to Buddhism in favour of the educated middle classes, we will be able to see a pattern that has played itself out not only in the recent development of a western Buddhism, but throughout Buddhist history. The question then becomes, not "why are white South Africans more interested in Buddhism than black ones?", but rather "Is there something intrinsically elitist within Buddhism that attracts the middle and upper classes rather than the working class?" The challenge for me is to explain such an anomaly.

Let us start at the end, with the contemporary situation, and work our way backwards. I have shown elsewhere¹³ that the development of South African Buddhism must be seen in the context of a wider spread of Buddhist ideas and cultic practices to the western world and that its developmental stages mirror those of western Buddhism, even if they are delayed by about a decade. We can therefore ask what kind of people these western Buddhists are.

¹¹interview: Antony Osler.

¹²Appiah (1992:43-73)

¹³Clasquin 2000, ch 3.

Even the most cursory look at western Buddhism clearly shows it to be an overwhelmingly middle-class phenomenon. Bell remarks: "Though Asian monks and lay people have provided encouragement and some material assistance, the growth of Theravada Buddhism in Britain has been instigated and fostered by mostly white, middle class and well educated people . . ." and again, "There are also British people of Asian and mixed Asian-British descent, but the majority of the visitors [to Amaravati monastery in Hertfordshire, United Kingdom] are relatively prosperous and educated British middle class people without Asian antecedents".¹⁴ Croucher, commenting on Buddhism in Australia, states that a Buddhist spokesperson in the early 1970s

. . . often used to tell the press, not without some pride, that "professors at the universities at Sydney and Canberra are Buddhist. Eminent doctors, architects and a few politicians . . . are secret worshippers of the Buddha." As research in America would indicate, those attracted to Buddhism and other Eastern religious philosophies were then, as now, generally well-educated—their backgrounds equipping them with an interest in novel ideas and a greater awareness of new cultural developments.¹⁵

In a fascinating earlier parallel, Australian census figures of a hundred years or so earlier show that "the Theosophical Society consisted of the best-educated women of any religious persuasion, and the second-best educated men, after atheists".¹⁶ Such a pattern, once set, would tend to become self-perpetuating: Morgan, in a study of the contemporary spread of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, found that the tendency was for people to convert their friends, that is, people with most likely similar interests, backgrounds, levels of education and a comparable class background.¹⁷

Already we can see some pointers to the meaning of "middle-class" in this context. In each of the cases cited above, the high average level of education is stressed. It is, then, not simply control over the factors of production that define this Buddhist bourgeoisie, as it would be in a classical Marxist definition, but the specific factor of education, or as it might be put in this computerised age, access to information.

The most recent research in the demographics of western Buddhism is a survey of American Buddhists conducted by Coleman. Although this survey was not conducted on a truly representative random sample of Buddhists in America, but instead used a "cluster" design that focussed on seven groups from different Buddhist traditions, the results are strikingly similar to the more informal observations discussed above:

Ethnically, the memberships of these Buddhist groups is overwhelmingly white. Only about one in ten respondents identified himself or herself as Asian, Black or Hispanic, a matter that has been of some concern to Buddhist leaders. . . . [The] data indicate that American Buddhism clearly has its strongest appeal to the middle and upper middle class. About one-third of the respondents reported their family income to be between \$30 000 and \$60 000, while another 19 percent fell into the \$60 000 to \$90 000 range. About 20 percent of the respondents had incomes over \$90 000 and about 30 percent [made] less than \$30 000. While those income levels are somewhat higher than the national average, the educational level of American Buddhists is very high. Of the 353 people who responded to the question on education level, only a single person reported having failed to finish high school, and less than one in twenty said

¹⁴Bell (1994).

¹⁵Croucher (1989:45).

¹⁶Croucher (1989:9).

¹⁷Morgan (1987:115).

that their education stopped with high school graduation. Eleven percent reported that they had some college experience, 32 percent were college graduates, and, surprisingly, more than half of the respondents (51 percent) had advanced degrees.¹⁸

Coleman continues to typify his respondents as predominantly to the left of the American political spectrum, and shows once again their high level of educational attainment by stressing the importance of reading in their involvement with Buddhism. "When asked directly about [how they first became involved with Buddhism] a majority reported that it was through reading a book", and "Sixty-three percent said they 'frequently' read books or articles relating to Buddhism, and another 32 percent said they 'occasionally' do".¹⁹ Coleman concludes that

The results of this preliminary examination . . . can hardly be considered definitive. They do, however, paint an interesting picture of the practitioners of the new Buddhism which is quite consistent with the comments and observations I have gathered with [Buddhist] leaders and senior practitioners . . . around the country. Demographically, the members of these new Buddhist groups tend to be white, middle and upper-middle-class people in their middle years, with a strong left/liberal leaning in their political views. One of the most striking characteristics of the respondents was their extremely high level of education. It would not seem unreasonable to conclude that these Buddhists constitute the most highly educated religious group in the United States.²⁰

It would be a fascinating exercise to see if Coleman's findings could be duplicated among South African Buddhists, and this may yet figure as a future avenue of exploration. Although such empirical figures are lacking, informal observations on my own part over the last fifteen years suggest strongly that very similar patterns exist here, at least among the white (i.e. western) Buddhists. Perhaps not quite so many South African Buddhists may have advanced degrees, but then, university education is less ubiquitous in South African society than among Americans, even among whites.

The general pattern would appear to be the same: South African Buddhist converts too are white, middle-class, and highly educated. Is this middle-class nature of contemporary western Buddhism an anomaly? It would appear not. When we look at Buddhist history, we will see a number of references to merchants and scholars, even to aristocrats, but only much later in the story do we hear of what would now be called the working class-the peasantry on whose labour all classical Asian societies, and indeed all pre-industrial societies, including much of contemporary Africa, ultimately depended.

In ancient China, for instance, "the Buddhist view of crossing over to the other shore . . . found a market and was spread first and foremost among the scholar official class. Only then did it enter into the belief of the common folk and the court".²¹ Given the social role of this scholar class at the time, it is clear that the process there mirrors the contemporary one. Note once again the importance of education.

In India, in China, in Tibet, wherever one looks, it seems that Buddhism as a mass movement started only after it had become well entrenched among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. It seems almost pre-ordained, so fixed is this historical pattern: a Prince Shotoku in Japan or a King Srongtsen Gampo in Tibet imports Buddhism into a new realm, or a Mahinda Thera brings it to the local king's attention. It spreads like wildfire

¹⁸Coleman (1999: 94-95).

¹⁹Coleman (1999: 95, 97).

²⁰Coleman (1999:98).

²¹Du (1992:31).

among the middle and upper classes, but it then takes five to six hundred years for a Shinran or a Nichiren to develop it into a form that appeals to the masses.

After an initial period of spreading among the Asian elite, Buddhism gradually became popular among a wider cross-section of society as new, simplified versions of the dharma, such as Pure Land and Nichiren Buddhism, evolved. Needless to say, as time progressed, these popular traditions inevitably developed their own deeper layers of complexity. Indeed, by the time of the T'ang dynasty (618-907) in China, it was thought that the majority of monks were from a peasant background.²²

But by then, of course, Chinese Buddhism was well on its way to the stage of respectability and establishment. The attraction that Buddhism seems to hold for an educated middle class appears to be a specific feature of a Buddhism still mainly engaged in representation and relational positioning. Of course, as indicated above, such a description perfectly fits western Buddhism in general, and South African Buddhism in particular.

And in the very beginning, in the days of the Buddha? Even then, it was accepted that receptivity to Buddhist teachings was differentiated. The *Anguttaranikaya*, for example, describes how not everyone who hears the dhamma will benefit from it.²³ Theoretically, of course, the sangha was open to all, even to notorious criminals such as Angulimala.²⁴ But who actually listened to and conversed with the Buddha and who actually joined the order?

Here I am indebted to the work of Sarao, who has indexed the settlements and persons mentioned in the *Vinaya* and *Sutta Pitakas* of the Pali Canon according to a variety of criteria.²⁵ By reinterpreting Sarao's data in the light of the above discussion, we can obtain a fairly clear picture of who the early Buddhists were. In appendices II (pp. 75-78) and VI (p. 141) Sarao classifies the place-names of all settlements mentioned in the Pali canon into urban and rural categories and indicates where and how often they are mentioned in the canon. For the sake of brevity, only the ten most frequently occurring centres in each category are listed in the following table:

Urban settlements-total 173	Rural settlements - total 49
1. Savatthi - 1377	1. Nāika - 32
2. Baranasi - 801	2. Pataligama - 18
3. Rajagaha - 566	3. Beluva - 16
4. Vesali - 243	4. Icchanangala - 15
5. Takkasila - 147	5. Andhakavinda - 9
6. Kapilavatthu - 117	6. Uruvela - 9
7. Mithila - 109	7. Kotigama - 8
8. Kosambi - 107	8. Sala and Hatthigama - 6
9. Pataliputta - 66	9. Candalakappa and Ekanala - 5
10. Alavi - 60	10. Bhandagama, Dunnivitha and Thuna - 4

Perhaps we should not be too surprised: if someone were to do the same analysis on the Bible or the Koran, one would expect the names "Jerusalem" and "Mecca" to crop up quite often. Also, some of these cities are highly dependent on a single part of the canon for their high numbers. Baranasi (Benares), for example, owes its second position to the fact

²²Singhal (1984:90).

²³Woodward (1979:103-104).

²⁴Angulimalasutta, Horner (1975:284-292).

²⁵Sarao (1989).

that it is mentioned 712 times in the Jatakas. Nevertheless, we can see that cities play a more important part in the Pali Canon than villages.

There are other clues to the urban genesis of Buddhism. Harris, in his analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and modern environmentalism, remarks that the *Cakkavatisihanadasutta*

. . . describes an idealised future in which the degradation of human nature has been reversed and humans live to 80 000 years of age. This time is said to be right for the return of a new wheel-turning king (*cakkavati*). In Jambudvipa cities and towns are so close to one another that a cock can comfortably fly from one to the next. In this perfect world only urban and suburban environments are left. The jungle has been fully conquered.²⁶

To the extent that we can identify urban life with the bourgeoisie, all this shows that early Buddhism was favoured by an urban middle-class elite. And yet, early Buddhism did not favour city life: in the *Anguttaranikaya*, for example, we find a comparison between the city and the jungle, in the latter's favour,²⁷ and elsewhere it is said that "the way of going forth is of the open air".²⁸ But just as Romanticism received its first impetus from the dry intellectualism of the Aufklärung and the grimy reality of the industrial revolution, so can we see this idealisation of life outside the city as being, paradoxically, an indication of the urban origins of the early Buddhists.

In Appendix IV (pp. 81-91) Sarao analyses the Jataka tales according to the form (man, animal, deva), place of birth, professional background and caste of the bodhisatta²⁹ described in these 547 stories of the former lives of the Buddhas. Not all these stories give the bodhisatta's place of birth,³⁰ but of those that do, 231 (85%) describe it as being in a city and just 40 (15%) as in a village. As far as the caste of the bodhisatta in that particular life is concerned, the following figures emerge from this analysis:

Brahmin (priestly caste) 163 (49.4%)
Khattiya (warrior caste) 90 (27.3%)
Vessa (merchant caste) 56 (17%)
Candalla and other low castes 21 (6.4%)
Total 330 (100 %)

The most telling figures, however, come from Appendix V (pp. 93-139), where Sarao has compiled a list of all persons mentioned in the Pali Canon (a total of 2 485) and classified them according to the following categories: (1) Caste, (2) Rural/Urban, (3) Name of Settlement and (4) the parts of the Canon in which the person is mentioned. If we look at the rural/urban category (analogous to the city/village category used above), we find the same bias towards urban life as in Appendices II and VI, with 1 302 persons described as urban, 83 as rural and 1100 persons who are not classified. If we remove the unclassified names, using the assumption that, if they could be classified, they would not alter the statistical picture significantly, this leads us to a staggering 94 percent as the percentage of people mentioned in the Pali canon who are described as "urban".

But these numbers reflect only the population at large as mentioned in the canon. What

²⁶Harris (1991:108).

²⁷Hare (1979:223-227).

²⁸Woodward (1986:142).

²⁹*Bodhisatta* – in Early Buddhism and later in Theravada Buddhism, which is what we are dealing with here, this term simply refers to the Buddha before his enlightenment, a Buddha-to-be. In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of the *bodhisattva* was extended considerably.

³⁰Which is, of course, rather irrelevant if the bodhisatta is described as, say, an animal or "the king of the gods".

about those people who are known to have been followers of the Buddha? Would their statistical profile alter the above picture significantly? Among the 2 485 people named and classified by Sarao in Appendix V, 674 are explicitly titled "Thera" or "Theri", that is, monks or nuns, and for 201 of these we have sufficient information to work with. These cases were therefore isolated and sorted according to Sarao's classification, which gives the following table:

	<i>Brahmin</i>	<i>Khattiya</i>	<i>Vessa</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Urban	67 (33.3%)	65 (32.3%)	29 (14.4%)	23 (11.4%)	184 (91.5%)
Rural	10 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (3%)	17 (8.5%)
Totals	77 (38.3%)	65 (32.3%)	30 (14.9%)	29 (14.4%)	201 (100%)

Here we see the low castes somewhat better represented than among the population at large as the Pali Canon presents them. Even so, the dominance of the Brahmin and Khattiya castes among the Buddha's immediate followers remains obvious: together they make up 70.6 percent of the total. Adding the Vessa group to include all the "twice-born" brings us to a staggering 85.5 percent.

These figures are open to criticism on a number of scores. How exactly does Sarao distinguish between a "city" and a "village"? Certainly the cities of ancient India were not the vast conglomerations that bear that appellation today. Then, how do these categories relate to the "urban" and "rural" categories he employs elsewhere? On page 139, Sarao admits that it was sometimes necessary to use commentaries and other external texts to determine to which caste a given person belonged. This would imply that texts were used that might date to as much as a thousand years after the Buddha, and possibly indicates a reliance on an unknown oral history. No thorough consideration is given to the difference between Pali and Chinese recensions of these texts. One should also keep in mind that if a person is said in the texts to have come from a specific city, it might mean only that he came from that general area. It is possible, of course (though we are given no reason to believe so), that all or most of those listed here as "unknown" were actually members of the lower castes, in which case the statistical pictures would change completely. However, we can only work with the data that are available.

What is clear, however, is that these proportions cannot reflect the actual demographics of ancient India, unless we are to suppose that this pretechnological society had worked out how to survive with only 6 to 11 percent of its population (the low caste) engaged in food production (assuming that only the lower castes were so employed, which is still a much-debated question). What this list and the above tables do reflect is the social milieu in which early Buddhists moved. In it we see, not India as it was, nor even necessarily the actual composition of the early Buddhist subculture, but certainly that subculture's self-image, its own understanding of itself. We must therefore conclude that the early Buddhist subculture, at least in its own eyes, consisted overwhelmingly of an educated urban elite, a group of Brahmins, rulers/administrators and some merchants, a group with access to knowledge, power and money. This is, of course, precisely the kind of group that Bell describes as the current generation of British Theravada Buddhists and that Coleman typifies as contemporary American Buddhists: in modern terms, the middle, even upper- middle, class. Which in apartheid South Africa meant whites.

It seems that Buddhism has had a special attraction for this social group from its earliest days, and it follows that Buddhism would be (and historically has been) most successful in highly literate cultures where this group is dominant. Conversely, Buddhism has not

shown itself to be particularly adept at converting people living in preliterate societies. Consider the Karen people: for hundreds of years, they have been sandwiched between the overwhelmingly Buddhist countries of Thailand and Burma, but the vast majority of them still practise their traditional "shamanistic" religion. Yet in little over a hundred years, Christianity has made deep inroads into Karen society. Indeed, while this is not a comparative study, it can hardly fail to be noted that Buddhism and Christianity seem to be mirror images of each other as far as their missionary efforts are concerned. In a nutshell, Christianity has learned how to spread its message among people who are less advanced, at least in terms of the literary, and lately technological, culture that carries the Christian gospel. In its own terms of reference, of course, the non-Christian receiving culture may be quite sophisticated, but these terms are soon swept away. But Christianity has been less successful in spreading its message to cultures on an equal level of cultural development. Christian missionary efforts in the far east predate those in Africa by centuries, but,

Even though thousands of missionaries have spent their lives in China and Japan, and millions of dollars have gone to build schools, hospitals, churches and orphanages, the response has been slight. In Japan, Christians comprise less than one percent of the population. Chinese Christians are a tiny fraction of one percent. Chinese and Japanese cultures are sophisticated, complex and resilient. Their cultures are so coherent, powerful and adaptable that they have resisted or assimilated outside threats for thousands of years . . . ³¹

As a general rule, most scholars of conversion agree that few conversions take place in areas with well-organized, literate religions supported by the economic, political and cultural powers of the region. Christianity gains few converts from Islam. In fact, few converts are made from any of the so-called world religions. The most "fertile" field of conversion in the [Christian] missionary setting has been among the so-called animists, such as the various tribal groups in Africa, South America and India.³⁴⁴ Yet it was precisely in such "sophisticated, complex and resilient" (and, one could add, urban and literate) cultures that Buddhism scored its major successes. Sri Lanka was already an urban-based civilisation when Mahinda introduced Buddhism to it. The same was true to an even greater extent in China. Buddhism, we must conclude, is very good at disseminating its message to cultures that are at least on the same level of literary and technological development as the sending culture, but fails miserably at converting the preliterate.

After all this, it should come as no surprise to us that the modern expansion of Buddhism westwards displays the same tendencies once again to target the middle class and intelligentsia (the Vessa, Khattiya and Brahmin "castes" of western society) as its primary "market". Paul Badham expresses it as follows:

Buddhism differs markedly from all other non-Christian religions in Britain in that its primary impact comes not through immigration but through western conversions. Deirdre Green points out that there is some evidence that Buddhism is 'the fastest growing religion in Britain at the present time'. It must be admitted that this growth is from a small base. One hundred and twenty Buddhist centres does not compare with 39 000 Christian churches, and their total UK membership of 27 000 is half that of the Hare Krishnas. However, it is significant that Buddhism is increasingly attracting intellectual interest among both philosophers and theologians as well as the religiously minded but metaphysically sceptical inquirer. Don Cupitt explicitly described his own position at one stage as being a form of Christian Buddhism, and in the philosophy of

³¹Rambo (1993:36).

mind, Buddha's denial of the substantial self has been seen as anticipating many of the insights of post- Wittgensteinian philosophy. In a department of religious studies, Buddhism appears to be the only other faith to exercise a significant intellectual pull on Christian or post-Christian students.³²

Even the timing of the development of western Buddhism becomes intelligible if we accept that Buddhism has a particular appeal to this class. While there had been some western Buddhists and western Buddhist organisations in the first half of the twentieth century, the real "boom" only started the late 1950's. One could cite many reasons for this: the development of a "youth culture" (and a closely associated drug culture that fostered an interest in all kinds of altered states of consciousness), the relaxation by many western countries of visa requirements for Asian teachers, even the ease of communication with the widespread adoption of telephones, air travel and so on. But another factor may have played an even greater role: the gradual disappearance of the working class and the rise of the educated communication worker.

The affinity between Buddhism and the bourgeoisie also explains the predominance of whites in the South African Buddhist community. Under the apartheid system, whites were officially favoured and successive governments made concerted efforts to have "poor whites" elevated into the middle class. Educational facilities for whites were far superior to those for blacks. In South Africa, there was an officially sanctioned convergence between class and race, with whites forming the upper and middle classes, and blacks, coloured and Indians occupying, at best, the lower-middle class, and more likely the working class slots. Similar situations exist in other countries, of course, but in South Africa it was bolstered by direct government intervention. It was therefore only natural for white South Africans, who constituted the middle class and much, perhaps most, of the intelligentsia, to be the first major group to evince an interest in Buddhism.

This does not mean that the situation will remain like this for ever: it will be interesting to see whether an interest in Buddhism comes about once a black middle class arises in the country (as is slowly happening already) and black intellectuals are relieved of the burden of having to act as what Sono calls the "political intelligentsia".³³ In terms of the process described above, such a development would seem highly likely, but it is impossible to predict when this might actually happen.

To explain why Buddhism has this special appeal for the middle-class forces one into the realm of speculation. What is it about Buddhism that appeals to the educated elite rather than to the masses? If we saw this pattern only in one instance of Buddhist transplantation, we might be able to explain it in extrinsic terms. We might then be able to explain the predominance of high-caste persons in the Buddhist scriptures in terms of tendencies in ancient literature to feature the mighty rather than the humble.³⁴ We might point to the disintegration of the sociopolitical status quo with the expansion of the Magadhan empire, the precursor to the even greater Mauryan empire, and so on. But that way is not open to us, for the pattern is too pervasive. It appears and reappears throughout Buddhist history and this indicates that it requires an explanation that deals with the problems in intrinsic terms, intrinsic to Buddhism, that is. Perhaps Ninian Smart can be read as referring to all of Buddhism when he writes about Zen:

Zen accords with some intellectual and artistic tendencies in the modern West. Its anti-intellectualism is a blessing to those who have intellectual difficulties about the truth of religion. It thus has a special appeal to the intellectual, since it is precisely the

³²Badham (1994: 496).

³³Sono (1994).

³⁴The Iliad, for example, certainly features Greek heroes and generals rather than foot soldiers.

intellectual who has intellectual doubts.³⁵

Something of this affinity for the intellectual and commercial elite of society can be seen to exist paradigmatically in the very foundation myth of Buddhism, when one contrasts it with those of other religious and philosophical traditions: before they embarked on their respective careers, Jesus was a carpenter, Confucius a minor bureaucrat, and Mohammed led caravans across the desert. But the Buddha was born a prince,³⁶ who even after his renunciation sought out the two greatest philosophers known in the region to further his education.

Something of the aristocratic tenor of his upbringing seems to have survived to this day in the system of thought named after him. To understand, even partially, a concept like conditioned co-arising (*paticcasamuppada*) requires a certain level of education: Buddhism was not designed from the outset as a simple abandonment of the self to faith, gaining philosophical depth only when later circumstances required it. On the contrary, it started where Upanishadic thought of the day left off,³⁷ and built an imposing philosophical system on this long before any thought was given to the spiritual needs of the masses.³⁸

The Buddhist philosophical tradition is deeply counter-intuitive. In the end, perhaps, the enlightened person will see mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers, but before that, he or she must learn to see mountains as non-mountains, rivers as non-rivers. Buddhist teachings talk about rebirth with no "thing" actually being transmitted; about insubstantiality and impermanence where our experience is of substantial objects and if not permanence, then at least relative stability. It even says that happiness is suffering! These are hardly doctrines designed to capture a mass audience. They are sophisticated philosophical musings that in structure, if not necessarily in content, are much like those produced by the Stoic and Epicurean philosophical schools in the Hellenistic world. Neither Stoicism nor Epicureanism ever developed a mass following;³⁹ the wonder is that Buddhism eventually did, by developing a popular tradition that could serve other religious needs, without ever quite losing its links to the original mystical/philosophical impulse.

With such a paradigm for its genesis, it is hardly surprising that Buddhism continues to exhibit an elitist streak, or that it should be the educated elite of any given society that first shows an interest in it. To understand such teachings, even only at the conceptual level, requires a certain amount of initial understanding of the conceptual basis on which Buddhist arguments rest, and this would generally be provided by education.

In various Buddhist texts we can find examples of illiterate or otherwise uneducated people attaining enlightenment. Hui Neng, the sixth patriarch of the Chinese Ch'an (Jap. Zen) tradition, is perhaps the most celebrated example. But when we consider that Hui Neng went on to produce the highly erudite Platform Sutra, we can see this claim that he could not read as a rhetorical counterpoint to much of the scholarly Buddhism of the time, which was perhaps more concerned with the copying of sutras than with the re-enlightenment process represented by Hui-Neng. Indeed, in Hui-Neng's own career, from his initial enlightenment to the Platform Sutra, we can see the dynamic interaction

³⁵Smart (1984:582).

³⁶Admittedly, a prince of a minor Indian border state. Deconstruction of the Buddha legend is proceeding apace, but the consensus is that he must at least have been the well-educated son of a leading citizen of the Sakya clan and a hereditary member of the ruling oligarchy.

³⁷Needless to say, Upanishadic thought and Hindu philosophy generally soon rose to the challenge.

³⁸Cf. Clasquin (1993).

³⁹Though one could argue that some aspects of Stoicism were later incorporated into certain strains of Christianity

between these two phases, each needing yet also opposing the other. Undercutting all we have learnt in our conventional education is part of what the Buddhist philosophical tradition entails, but before such an action can be undertaken, there first has to *be* a previous conventional education.

Just as modern environmentalism arose largely as a city-based movement, so philosophical Buddhism, as opposed to popular Buddhism, is an intellectual revolt against intellectualism, rationality calmly and rationally destroying itself and coming out of the process as a transrationalism rather than irrationality. In view of this, it should not surprise us that the first people in a given society who show an interest in Buddhism are its bourgeoisie and even its elite. It is not because of their elite status itself that they are attracted to Buddhism; but rather it is their level of education (always relative to the time and place in which they live) that influences both their social status and their interest in Buddhism.

It is irrelevant in this context whether this education or the lack of it was obtained by means of family tradition and social customs (as in the caste structure of ancient India), forced upon the population by legislative inequalities in providing education (as in South Africa) or won through sheer ability in an egalitarian society (the modern west, at least in theory). All that counts here is that a group of people have obtained the factual knowledge and analytical skills that will both make them more affluent than the societal average and enable them to appreciate the philosophical subtleties of Buddhism. This relationship, one suspects, would hold even in the case of the "self-made man" who acquired an education outside the confines of formal educational structures.

In this sense only can we call Buddhism elitist: in the short term⁴⁰ it will tend to create representations of itself that lean towards the radical philosophical tradition and thereby attract people who, because of their relative level of education, are able to handle such a representation. Only once this "elitist" Buddhism has gone through the process of relational positioning towards other traditions present at the time⁴¹ and enters into a phase where it becomes an established religion does a more widely based form of Buddhism emerge.

Thus, from a given position early on in the process of transplantation, we see Buddhism forming new representations and engaging in relational positioning, and nearly all the people doing this are highly educated, middle-class people. We compare this to an old, settled Buddhist society like China or Tibet, where Buddhism is spread across a wide spectrum of the population, and are led to ask why Buddhism in this new society exhibits such an elitist streak. But a due consideration of the role played by the philosophical tradition, the way it influences the representations that are created and the kind of relational positioning that is done, shows us that this is a necessary phase in the development of the newly transplanted Buddhism. It stems from something intrinsic to Buddhism, something we might describe as its particular genius: its insistence on maintaining a link to the Ur-experience of enlightenment, as known and transmitted by Siddharta Gautama.

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⁴⁰Of course the "short term" can be a long time in a culture that believes in reincarnation.

⁴¹Itself also a process requiring a relatively high level of education, since it requires insight into at least two different religious and philosophical traditions

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