



Book Review

Jørn Borup, Mitra Härkönen, Knut A. Jacobsen & Katarina Plank (eds): *Buddhism in the Nordic Countries*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2025, 212 pp.

Buddhism in the Nordic Countries is a welcome anthology, providing the first overview of historical and contemporary Buddhist movements in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. It is a product of the maturing of the study of immigrant Buddhism, providing much to consider on the marked difference between migrant and native interest in Buddhism. The book is divided into ten chapters, composed of an introduction, five country presentations, three sections highlighting selected Buddhist individuals, and a joint conclusion.

The editorial team of Jørn Borup, Mitra Härkönen, Knut A. Jacobsen, and Katarina Plank is well equipped for its task, incorporating a multifaceted knowledge of the topic. Associate Professor Jørn Borup from the University of Aarhus specializes in Japanese Buddhism. Academy Research Fellow Mitra Härkönen from the University of Helsinki is a specialist in Tibetan and Thai Buddhism. Professor Knut A. Jacobsen from the University of Bergen has an encyclopaedic knowledge of several Asian religions. Associate Professor Katarina Plank from the University of Karlstad specializes in contemporary meditation movements and new spiritualities. Four

other scholars have contributed to the volume: Stefan Larsson and Predee Hongsaton from Sweden; Johannes Cairns from Finland; and Haraldur Hreinsson from Iceland.

The book starts with the Vikings, who brought the first Buddhist material object that has been found: the bronze Helgö Buddha on Helgö island, Sweden. The small statue was probably produced in the eighth century in the Swat Valley in modern Pakistan. It remains an isolated find: the actual history of Buddhists in the Nordics starts during the eighteenth century, when Buddhist Kalmyks were among the soldiers of the Russian Army occupying the Finnish part of Sweden. The nineteenth century brings an emerging academic knowledge of Buddhism, the rise of the Theosophical Movement, and Nordic emigrants encountering Buddhism elsewhere in the world, especially in the United States. These early influences remained fairly marginal. It was the growth of Buddhist New Religious Movements such as Soka Gakkai and the immigration of Buddhists to the Nordic countries after the Second World War that saw Buddhism becoming gradually better known and more popular.

The book makes a basic distinction between the Buddhism of converts and the Buddhism of immigrants. While convert Buddhism can be understood in the context of New Religious Movements and new spiritualities, immigrant Buddhism

is better viewed in the context of globalizing migrant flows and integration. Although there are some overlaps with singular converts, mixed marriages, and joint representational platforms, convert and migrant Buddhism are in practice quite distinct – for example, regarding the focus of religious practice. However, both phenomena are characterized by extensive transnational linkages and the influence of a gradually diversifying religious environment.

While proving numbers is not without its challenges, the authors offer the following estimate of the key characteristics of the Buddhist population and its movements in the Nordics: 200,000 Buddhists; around 200 monks and nuns; roughly the same number of associations; and at least 100 temples. The estimate of adherents per country is as follows: Denmark 36,000; Finland 30,000; Iceland 1,500; Norway 40,000–50,000; and Sweden 80,000. Immigrant Thai and Vietnamese Buddhists are the largest groups, but there are also Burmese, Chinese, and Sri Lankan communities. Thais are clearly the largest group, both in the number of temples and followers, but they also have a very specific demography, with high rates of intermarriage with native Nordics. The Vietnamese are a much more ethnically endogamous group. These demographic features reflect distinct migration histories, with Thais being primarily international marriage migrants, and Vietnamese to a large extent being refugee and more recently work migrants.

Among converts Tibetan and Zen Buddhists are the most common. Zen was popularized in the West by popular books at an early stage, supported by interest in Japanese martial arts. Tibetan Buddhism arrived a little later, popularized worldwide by the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet in 1959 and later Tibetan activism. Diamond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai International are important movements in most countries, including some arriving as immigrants from non-Buddhist majority societies. Besides the more formally organized communities, activities such as Buddhism-based mindfulness and vipassana meditation are quite popular.

The country chapters provide detailed insights into Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish Buddhists' histories and particularities. Common features include the role of the state, which basically encourages religious communities to organize themselves as either recognized religions or associations. Funding may also serve as an incentive to supplement the communities' often meagre resources. Such processes make the communities subject to national interests and bureaucratic regulation. A further issue concerns invited religious specialists' visa regulations. For example, how can a monk living on donations acquire the income required for a work visa? In such cases help is often needed from people familiar with national legislation and bureaucratic practices, such as the native spouses of immigrants.

The three chapters on selected individuals are a wonderful addition to the book. The texts focus on Tibetan teacher Lama Ngawan and Thai missionary Phra Chamnong Chutinatharo from Sweden, and Mauno Nordberg, who established the first Buddhist organization in Finland, the Friends of Buddhism. The chapters discuss these individuals' role in the making of Nordic Buddhism. Simultaneously, they highlight wider societal changes affecting emerging Buddhist organizations and communities. I would have liked to have read more such chapters, though several similar personalities are discussed in the other chapters. However, if there is something missing from the book, it is a full chapter on Diamond Way Buddhism and its leader, the Dane Ole Nydahl, who in my understanding is the most internationally prominent, if controversial, Nordic Buddhist personality.

Although the book fulfils its role well as it is, more comparisons between the Nordic countries would have been useful for the reader. For example, comparative tables summarizing key features of Buddhist populations and movements would have made the similarities and differences between the countries more explicit. A joint discussion of the many, especially Tibetan, groups would also have been helpful, as well as more discussion of how transnational networks link communities with each other and the rest of the Buddhist world. As I am not myself immersed in Buddhist studies, read-

ing the volume was sometimes challenging because of the wide variety of actors among convert Buddhists. While many of these groups are usually centred on local teachers and devotees, they are nevertheless highly transnational and well connected, which also makes them interesting for a non-Nordic readership.

Altogether, *Buddhism in the Nordic Countries* is an excellent addition to the literature on contemporary religious minorities, both immigrant and native, as well as the first general presentation of the topic. It provides historical depth and a current overview of the scholarly understanding of Buddhism in Northern Europe. Overall, the anthology is well edited, and despite their country-specific features, the chapters provide sufficiently similar information for the totality to read well. Although the book is obviously suitable for people interested in understanding the variety of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Buddhism, it should also be of interest to people studying contemporary religious diversity, both among immigrants and the majority population. The book will be suitable reading from graduate studies onwards and for people pondering their eventual thesis on Buddhism, as the final paragraph of the book is solely composed of further research questions.

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