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**Teaching Buddhism in Britain's schools:  
redefining the insider role**

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## Introduction

Buddhism has appeared in aspects of English state-funded schooling since the 1930's (Backus & Cush 2008, 231) and in spite of objections (Cush 1986, 36), has become mainstream in the course of education policy revisions. Continuous attention from the Shap Working Party, especially its South Coast conference of March 1985 and the resulting Buddhism Resources Project (Connolly 1986, 45) had had Buddhism included in some of the more influential GCSE textbooks (e.g. Bancroft 1984a; b; Cole 1984) by the mid-1980's. The 1988 Education Reform Act officially 'implied' Buddhism a principal world religion to be studied in the Religious Education (RE) of England and Wales – a trend continued in the non-statutory national framework (QCA 2004). In practice, by following most current Agreed Syllabuses (AS's) in state-funded education<sup>1</sup>, an estimated 70.8% of schoolchildren will come in contact with Buddhist RE content (Kay & Smith 2002, 115) for a cumulative total of eleven hours of lesson time, mostly as non-examination RE at Key Stage 3 (Watts 2001) – there being only one voluntary-aided school in Britain where Buddhism is the mainstream faith (Erricker 2005, 240).

Despite efforts to include Buddhism in British education, anecdotal and published evidence suggests room for improvement in the quality of teaching. For example, a Thai girl who drew a Buddha statue for an RE task 'the symbol of my religion' was marked wrong by her teacher (Khemadhammo 2004, 2). The Learning & Skills Council requirements for multi-faith 'quiet space' in colleges overlooks Buddhists (LSC 2007, 36). Census statistics show up to half the Scots brought up Buddhist lose their religion during their school years (Voas 2006, 110). A recent A-level textbook claims that Buddhism can never offer a workable system of ethics for society as a whole (Cole & Gray 2008, 191). A significant group of Buddhist insiders maintain they would prefer *not* to have anything about their religion taught in school (Backus & Cush 2008, 246; Khemadhammo 1997). This paper argues that many such shortcomings could be avoided if Buddhist insiders had been more involved with education processes –

examining the obstacles to such involvement and proposing appropriate roles should such obstacles be overcome.

### **The marginalisation of insiders from classroom religion**

Provisions statutory for English state-funded education include daily collective worship (CW) and RE from reception until age 16. Education about religion formerly involved not only teachers, but insiders from local faith communities – to an extent depending on the salient trends in RE where the aim was to learn critically about and from religion (White 2004, 161). In the earliest phase of RE, lasting until the 1970's, when confessional Christianity dominated English RE, to have it taught by an 'insider' was seen as an advantage (Stringer 2002, 3). However, in RE's second phase, with the shift to non-confessional RE, any relationship between personal faith, advocacy and religious education in English schools was discouraged, marginalizing the role of Christian insiders but allowing newfound contact with the insiders of five other world religions. The shift to include the study of non-Christian world religions, apart from being more 'representative' of a multicultural society, sought to distinguish indoctrination from educational aims (Barnes 2007a, 20). On one side, the phenomenologist approach to RE tried to transcend the insider's viewpoint by objectively comparing the facts and features of different religions (Schools\_Council 1971, 21). On the other side, those following the experiential or life themes approach to RE transcended the insider's viewpoint by comparing the features of shared human experience crossing the boundaries between faiths (Grimmitt 2000, 101). Either way, teachers were expected to be procedurally neutral in the classroom (Donovan 1999, 247) and distance themselves from the insider stance.

With the late post-modernist resurfacing of religion in the public domain across the globe, RE has entered a third phase since its content has been increasingly contested by faith communities (Nesbitt 1998, 112). The UK, like other modern pluralistic democracies, currently has difficulty in reaching agreement about educational aims

(Vokey 1999, 91; Wardekker & Miedema 2001) – especially on the issue of whether neutrality or religious autonomy should govern the educational agenda (Strieb 2001, 241). Twenty years' experience of trying to achieve a neutral perspective in RE may at best have fostered indifference to the worldviews of others (Keightley, 1986:10) or at worst indirectly indoctrinated children with secular worldviews (Copley 2005, 2). There has been a renewed interest in non-reductionism (Said 2003 [1978]; Smith 1978) with scholars now attempting much more earnestly to understand each religion *in its own terms*. Although late post-modernism has fostered several approaches to RE, the consensus seems to be that the student's *interaction* with insider material has come to be more important than the *content* (Baumfield 2003, 174; Grimmitt 1981, 48) – a balanced understanding of worldviews coming out of the dialogue rather than being framed by an artificial or external notion of neutrality. In this context religious insiders have regained an important role as a source of authentic religious experience for learning activities.

This paper takes these latest aims of RE as a framework to redefine the role of religious insiders within state-funded education about religion in England, focussing primarily on Buddhism. In some ways this paper is an exercise in personal reflection for the present author who occupies what Wendy Dossett refers to as a 'danger zone' (1996, 28) of dual commitments – as an 'insider' to Theravāda Buddhism and as an 'outsider' in a range of civic policy-making and school teaching duties. What scant literature that *is* available specifically on the teaching of Buddhism in British RE tends to be *descriptive* rather than prescriptive and has scarcely mentioned the role of the insider in the light of the latest trends in RE. Also limits of space mean that this paper can investigate only superficially issues such as Buddhist philosophy of education, authority, adaptation, identity and immigrant history which also bear on how Buddhism is presented in the classroom.

## Some Key Terms

The insider-outsider dichotomy is a by-product of the essentialist view of religion. It would be simple if being an insider to a religion could be equated with being a member, adherent or a believer, or even having a particular religious style<sup>2</sup> – but the reality is more complex with a full continuum of positions, styles and viewpoints (McCutcheon 2007, 52). Thus rather than equating the insider with a particular sort of person, for the purposes of this paper, it is more useful if used to denote the particular religious *worldview* a person may have all or some of the time or which they might choose to keep to themselves. Sometimes instead of talking about insiders and outsiders, it is more practical to talk about detached and engaged postures respectively – as it is possible to be committed to religion in different ways (Grimmitt 1981, 46). If commitment is channelled appropriately, especially towards religious search or depth of faith (Stringer 2002, 11), there are unique redeeming features for insiders, giving them the (possibly unique) potential to address the shortcomings mentioned earlier, that have emerged in education about Buddhism.

As the insider-outsider dichotomy is applied to Buddhism, it appears that adherence to Buddhism in the UK is far from a homogenous all-or-nothing phenomenon. Buddhist adherence can be distinguished in terms of degree, denomination and ethnic type. As with most demographic research, the figure of 149,157 English Buddhists published in the UK 2001 census assumed Britons to be Buddhist because they *said they were* (Tweed 2002, 24). It also assumed that a person would belong to only *one* religion at a time. Although these assumptions may sound trivial, they may inform misleadingly low figures for the number of Buddhists in England as there is a tendency in theory (Gombrich 1996, 11) and in practice (Law 1991, 36) for Buddhists not to categorize themselves as such, often more mindful of *quality* of adherence than quantity (Luce & Sommer 1969, 113). The dichotomy between Buddhist ‘adherents’ and ‘non-adherents’ in the West is further complicated by the category of ‘sympathizers’ (Tweed 1999, 71-2; 2002, 20) – a subgroup which has proved significant in countries like France (Lenoir

1999). Even those who say they are Buddhist in Britain may belong to any of several different largely autonomous Buddhist denominations (Church 1982, 194; Padgett 2002, 201). Those who are ‘insiders’ to one denomination may not consider insiders from other Buddhist denominations as insiders to their own, as there is a wide spectrum of practice and teacher loyalty (Stringer 2002, 2-3; Waterhouse 1999, 21). Like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism in Britain, attracts adherents from a full range of ethnicities (Bluck 2004). In trying to make sense of Buddhist plurality in the West, scholars have observed a twofold typology of Buddhist identity between ‘migrant’ and ‘convert’ Buddhists (e.g. Baumann 2002). In the present day, three-fifths of the self-identified British Buddhists are non-white (Bluck 2008, 2) and for the purposes of this paper it is important to note that the majority of schoolchildren professing Buddhism belong to the ‘migrant’ ethnic category. In any case, when describing ‘Buddhist insiders’, it is inaccurate to essentialize to a single ‘ideal type’ (Mellor 1989, 341-2).

Furthermore, the word ‘neutrality’ can be ambiguous. There is generally a need for policy-makers *to be seen to be neutral* – and to avoid relativism in the case that freedom of expression results in hostility – such an approach is known as ‘*procedural* neutrality’. When dealing with insider contribution to dialogue, some have called for a greater effort to replace procedural neutrality with *substantive* neutrality, where religious values and commitments voiced are given a compensatory footing in an increasingly secular and suspicious society (Moore 1995, 216; Slee 1992, 51).

### **Factors impinging on the ‘chalkface’ of Buddhism in RE**

There are many factors impinging on the interface between school and pupil which affect the quality of teaching about Buddhism – with eight enumerated here for elaboration below. Supposing pupils practise Buddhism at home, they bring with them to the classroom their experience of informal home nurture, of possible formal nurture from attendance of temple activities and their own sense of Buddhist identity [1].

The teacher, whether they are Buddhist or not, also brings several contributing factors to the classroom – namely an AS which may be more or less well informed about Buddhism [2], teaching materials and media which may represent Buddhism in a more or less well-informed way [3], the teacher’s own expertise in interpreting the available materials [4] and an openness or otherwise to involving Buddhist insiders in presenting Buddhism to their pupils [5]. The school ethos they are working within [6], and the representation of Buddhism in the national bodies that control RE [7] also indirectly affect the contribution the teacher can potentially make to the pupils’ understanding of Buddhism. Finally, as there are a choice of pedagogies available by which teachers can convey and understanding of Buddhism through RE [8].

The remainder of this paper describes how appropriate involvement of Buddhist insiders in each of the eight ‘chalkface’ factors could be key to improving Buddhist teaching quality in schools

### **Involving Buddhist insiders in education**

In spite of the requirement that the principal non-Christian religions of Great Britain be represented in state-funded RE (HMSO 1988), even today, teaching on Buddhism remains nominal, patchy and variable in quality, especially in Primary schools (Backus & Cush 2008, 244, 246). Inclusion of Buddhism for public examination has been objected to on the grounds that it is too difficult (for children), understandable only by those who practise and insufficiently supported by trained teachers and resources (Connolly & Connolly 1986, 29-30; Cush 1986, 36) – difficulties which could be overcome if suitable insiders were encouraged to enrich the modes of dialogue between insider and outsider (Southard & Payne 1998, 51). Secular educational discourse on religion is usually from outsider to outsider. Religious discourse, such as preaching within a faith community, is usually from insider to insider. However, for discourse to be both authentic and educational in the classroom, the modes of insider to outsider and outsider to insider need to be included as ‘checks and balances’ to allow a religion to be



expressed in its own terms (Reat 1983, 463-4; Taves 2003, 194) – only then can these checks and balances of dialogue reliably replace ‘neutrality’ in protecting the aims of critical RE. Although there is a tendency in RE literature to dwell on curricular and pedagogical theory (English et al. 2003) ultimately the role of insiders has to be applied to real situations of classroom teaching and learning about religion and eight possible areas are elaborated below, noting precedents where available:

**1. Home Nurture:** The eclectic nature, especially of migrant Buddhists, leaves them particularly vulnerable to coercion by other dogmatic religions as illustrated by the case of the Japanese Buddhists migrating to the United States of America after the Second World War (Spencer 1951, 105). Similar issues take place on a smaller scale where teachers are insensitive to the needs of children whose home religion is Buddhism. However, if Buddhists are valued for their beliefs, the effect would be the opposite – giving child-centred education in its truest sense. Only in the case a Buddhist pupil’s views seem unintegrated or if they find the world meaning-threatening should they be invited to reflect further (Strieb 2001, 242). Buddhist pupils have already proven a valuable teaching resource. When Amy Whittall taught gifted children about Buddhism in RE (2005; 2006) she asked them to play the ethnologist in examining what Buddhists practise. Their subjects consisted in part of pupils professing Buddhism from the same school. Through the e-bridge arrangement, such dialogues could take place beneficially between students of *different* schools (McKenna et al. 2008, 103).

**2. Agreed Syllabuses:** AS’s are the legally-binding curriculum to which RE teachers must teach in any Local Authority (LA). They are revised every four years by an independent body called a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) made up of representatives from the LA, the Church of England, the Association of Teachers and representatives of other faiths and Christian groups. The SACRE system has been accused of having been put in place merely to appease the faith communities (Grimmitt 2000, 11). Although this criticism might not be entirely justified, much of the SACRE agenda concentrates on keeping the LA procedurally

neutral instead of focussing on educating schoolchildren to respect, understand and assess religions. As far as AS's relate to Buddhism it would appear that those Buddhists who *are* representatives on SACREs had insufficient knowledge of the Buddhism practiced by traditions other than their own [Beesley in (Fossey & Munisha 2006, 10)]. In practice, it would take a great deal of trouble to update AS's to reflect the latest trends in faith community composition or new pedagogies of RE (Revell 2008). Even to monitor the national picture of AS content is difficult as they are often available only locally (Bausor & Poole 2002, 20). AS's could be improved by involving education-savvy Buddhists more widely in the AS Conference<sup>3</sup>, rather than merely having Buddhists ratify AS's that have been written by others.

**3. *Buddhist Teaching Materials:*** Insiders can help to restore a sense of (substantive) neutrality given the privileged cultural discourse in the UK tends toward liberal secularism (Barnes 2007a, 25). Without such 'witness', presentation of Buddhism in schools may succumb to orientalist bias, meaning that Buddhism is treated as exotic (Berkwitz 2004, 141; MacPherson 1996, 456) and marginalized since it runs counter to the western emphasis on rationality, the progressivity of history, originality and the fundamental non-perfectibility of human understanding (Thurman 1984, 6). Western moral philosophy has, for example, separated questions of 'justice' from questions of the 'good life' – an assumption alien to Buddhist teleology (Jagodzinski 2002, 84). If such differences are not taken into account, and it is attempted to package Buddhism neatly within the framework of other religions (Backus & Cush 2008, 245; Stringer 2002, 10) or social sciences (Baumann 1998; Choompolpaisal 2008, 39), a skewed perspective of Buddhism results – equivalent to the Mercator projection of the globe (Cush 2005, 101). This was the case in the 1980's when textbook Buddhism was represented as primarily 'convert' (Waterhouse 2001, 121-2) and in terms attractive to Westerners (Backus & Cush 2008, 237, 244-5). Where it is considered that authentic Buddhist content has the *implicit* ability to spark inspiration in a student (Dossett 1996, 28; Grimmitt et al. 1991, 124-5), Buddhist insiders would have the important role of

ratifying the authenticity of teaching materials and artefacts used in the classroom. Involving insiders in production and review of teaching aids helps to give voice to the non-orientalist position, although drawing exclusively upon 'convert' Buddhist sources may not be the whole solution as some may suggest (Berkwitz 2004, 151). In this respect, textbooks that follow the lives of Buddhist children of a similar age to those studying the subject and which have content pre-agreed with Buddhist parents including those of the 'migrant' category (e.g. Barratt 1994) are particularly valuable.

**4. *Teacher Expertise:*** Buddhist teachers can also be a valuable resource – but must declare their faith stance (Hulmes 1989, 44) amongst other 'rules of engagement' (Cole & Mantin 1994, 15-6). Sid Brown, a Buddhist teacher of environmental science, gives examples where dialogue in the classroom was brought down to the level of personal values to good educational effect for pupil and teacher alike (2008, 86). Nonetheless there is debate about whether the awareness of an insider's faith stance really ensures neutrality when neo-confessional and crypto-confessional stances remain widespread (Donovan 1999, 242) but given that in certain narrative approaches, the teacher's voice is no more privileged than that of the pupils (e.g. Erricker & Erricker 2000), the importance of striving after neutrality has diminished. Nonetheless, for teachers with no experience of Buddhism, but who are required to teach it, Buddhist-led in-service training may help build familiarity.

**5. *Openness to insider input:*** Insiders to Buddhism would have an important role in bearing witness to a worldview that is coherent but non-theistic – forcing students coming from a society where for the 'religious', belief in God is taken for granted, to examine their assumptions in a way relevant to the aims of critical RE (Morgan 1986, 21). Inviting a Buddhist insider into the classroom to speak about their religion would seem a valuable opportunity for the students to have contact with an 'authentic source', but being an insider has both potential problems and redeeming features for education about religion. The potential problems associated with insiders who have a '*do-ut-des*' style include the assumption that their own faith is valid and also necessary for others

and that their own faith is the *only* true or valid one (Barnes 2007a, 27), that outsiders can only teach about their religion in a way that is inherently reductionist, misleading and harmful (Grimmitt 1981, 44). They may have an unabashed intention to induct others into their own faith commitment (Hulmes 1989, 19), lacking the objectivity, critical distance and historical consciousness of an outsider (Neville 1996, 129), not bothering to define key terms concerning their own religion, but accepting them on the basis of assumption (Taves 2003, 187). Ironically, they may be unable to put anything of importance about their 'faith' into words (Stringer 1999, 95). Nevertheless, the majority of insiders belong to religious styles which are *not* 'do-ut-des', and in practice an individual will never be a complete 'insider' or a complete 'outsider' in relation to a religion (Stringer 2002, 16). Ensuring insider to outsider dialogue also forces insiders away from *do-ut-des* religious style towards a dialogical one. The question arises of what to do when an insider is unwilling or unable to make the shift. In this respect, guidelines have been issued to assist teachers in their choice of speaker (PCfRE 2003), where they might have no alternative but to declare an insider unsuitable as a contributor to education. Teachers should also note that insiders making themselves available to go into classes to assist teaching are often the less experienced *new* converts more motivated to speak up for Buddhism than long-standing insiders (Waterhouse 2001, 136). Hesitant teachers might instead choose more easily controllable ways to allow their pupils to interact with insiders e.g. by e-bridges or website interaction (e.g. Culham\_Institute 2009) - while at the same time fulfilling Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) objectives. Such interaction with insiders helps teachers to go beyond mere content, helping pupils to respect the sensibilities and values associated with each religion (Haldane 1986, 171). Without the input of insiders, as with all religions, Buddhism is often taught as if it were 'just another religion' (Baxter 1986, 23).

Visits to Buddhist places of worship, if in earnest and with pupils that have been given due preparation (Southard & Payne 1998, 55), can be an educational way to have

contact with Buddhist insiders yielding enthusiasm and insight into meditation practice as described for a group of Hampshire 11-13 year olds who, with their parents' permission, paid regular visits to a Buddhist monastery with the school (Levete 2001, 11).

**6. School Ethos:** Chaplaincy is one of the more common spiritual features of school ethos, but is usually restricted to institutes of Further Education (FE). Generally it is thought to have merely a passive pastoral role, such as providing on-campus prayer rooms and counselling facilities – but in the latest initiatives of FE chaplains take an increasingly proactive educational role – and if any of the chaplains are Buddhist, offers a readily available source of insider expertise for classes in their school. In the early 2000's half of England's 400 FE colleges had chaplaincies – but only 40 of these were multi-faith (CofE 2005, 4).

**7. National Buddhist representation:** Since the 1980's when most strands of RE were 'convert', the influx of immigrant Buddhist families into Britain has changed the ethnic balance described previously in educational literature. The migrant Buddhist community is now numerically superior but the representation of Buddhism for national organisations such as the National Framework for Religious Education (NFRE) and the National Association for Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (NASACRE) has not changed to reflect the demographic shift and now fails to reflect the identity or needs of the 'average' British Buddhist (Fossey & Munisha 2006, 9). There are some concerns specific to the *migrant* Buddhist community which tend to have been overlooked, especially concerning the 'perpetuating structures' of Buddhism such as wise people and texts which are arguably essential to traditional Buddhism (Mellor 1989, 343; Waterhouse 1999, 30). 'Migrant' Buddhist parents express a need for support in formal nurture (Baumann 1994; Miller 1992, 234) more than convert Buddhist parents, but such concerns have not been recognized in the agendas of the national bodies representing Buddhism in British RE. Representation of Buddhism in the English education system may have fallen behind that of other world religions, but

like other faith communities (Layard & Dunn 2009, 178) increased participation of concerned Buddhist insiders in the processes of education would do more to ensure authentic voices of Buddhism are heard in the classroom, than merely defending the place of Buddhism in education.

**8. Pedagogy:** Where it is considered that an understanding of Buddhism relies upon a particular methodology insiders may have unique pedagogical expertise for explaining Buddhism in the classroom – for example that Buddhism should be taught in an anti-intellectual way or by an insider who exemplifies commitment to it (Hayes 1999, 172; Keightley 1986, 4). Examples of insider-style teaching include a task on ‘impermanence’, where primary school pupils were asked to search their school (in vain), for any object that would last forever (2006, 9) and a task on the power of consumerism where students described their feeling as they walked through Wal-Mart exercising restraint from buying anything (2008, 125-6). Meditation in the classroom has scarcely been mentioned as part of provision for spiritual education (Erricker 2001, 57) and in some cases has been trivialized (e.g. Barnes 2007b, 164). Nonetheless, there is compelling evidence of profound positive changes in pupils’ cognitive capacity in 12-13 year old children (Mann 2001, 43) and remains relevant to teaching about Buddhism even though experiential RE has gone out of fashion for other parts of the subject. Experience of Buddhist meditation makes an instructor a *de facto* insider to Buddhism – expertise that would be vastly preferable in answering pupils’ questions about meditation compared to (mere) theoretical knowledge of the subject. Insider input is also an essential part of the interpretive approach to RE where both teacher and student are encouraged to ‘build bridges’ between their own lifeworld and three levels of insider data, whether it be the individual, the membership group or the cumulative faith tradition and as a by-product of the process to ‘edify’ their own experience (Jackson 1997, 130-131) – such ‘checks and balances’ in pedagogy helping to overcome the tension insiders often feel between the secular aims of RE and those of the Buddhist path (Backus & Cush 2008, 245) while avoiding teaching Buddhist values non-

committally or bogging pupils down in the detail of exotic rituals, disconnected pieces of information and sectarianism [Miller in (Fossey & Munisha 2006, 10)].

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, dialogical approaches to RE have opened the subject to input by Buddhist insiders more than ever in its history. With the proviso that insider content can move beyond the ‘*do-ut-des*’ religious style, this paper describes eight possible areas of input to the classroom experience where Buddhist insiders can make a beneficial contribution. Of these, examples could be found in the educational literature where Buddhist pupils’ home background, Buddhist-designed teaching materials, Buddhist teacher expertise, Buddhist speakers visiting the classroom, pupils visiting Buddhist places of worship and Buddhism-specific pedagogy had been drawn upon to good effect in the classroom. However, in the areas of the Agreed Syllabuses for RE, school ethos and national representation, input was found lacking or skewed toward ‘convert’ Buddhist expectations, while the voice of the more numerous ‘migrant’ Buddhist community remained relatively unheard. (4,355 words – 6,492 total)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> State-funded education includes community schools, voluntary-controlled schools, foundation schools without and without religious character, trust schools and institutes of Further Education. Only voluntary-aided schools and academies are independently funded and are exempt from the requirements of AS's and CW.

<sup>2</sup> Strieb (2001, 238-9) proposes a development model of religious styles developing from subjective  $\Rightarrow$  reciprocal-instrumental/*do-ut-des*  $\Rightarrow$  mutual  $\Rightarrow$  individuative-systematic  $\Rightarrow$  dialogical, but which for fundamentalists occupies the reciprocal-instrumental/*do-ut-des* style exclusively.

<sup>3</sup> The members of which are generally non-subject specialists

## Abstract

Dialogical approaches to Religious Education in Britain's schools have opened the subject to input by Buddhist insiders more than ever in its history although shortcomings remain in the way Buddhism is portrayed in the classroom. With the proviso that insider input can move beyond the 'do-ut-des' religious style, this paper describes eight possible areas of classroom experience where Buddhist insiders can make a beneficial contribution. Of these, examples could be found in the educational literature where insider input through home nurture, teaching materials, teacher expertise, insider input and pedagogy had already been applied to good effect in the classroom. However, in the areas of the Agreed Syllabuses for RE, school ethos and national representation input was found lacking or skewed toward 'convert' Buddhist expectations, while the voice of the more numerous 'migrant' Buddhist community remained relatively unheard.

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