

**Original citation:**

Thanissaro, Phra Nicholas (2018) Beyond precepts in conceptualizing Buddhist leadership. Journal of Buddhist Ethics, 25 . pp. 119-145.

**Permanent WRAP URL:**

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Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 25, 2018

# Beyond Precepts in Conceptualizing Buddhist Leadership

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# Beyond Precepts in Conceptualizing Buddhist Leadership

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Monastic *saṅgha* members may be seen as monopolizing leadership in traditional forms of Buddhism. The usual Theravādin justification for this is that monastics keep a greater number of precepts than laypeople and therefore provide a higher standard of ethical leadership as well as being symbols of their religion. Such allocation of authority to monks breaks down where the monastic-lay distinction blurs. This paper presents a review of literature, anthropological and attitude research findings to explore how the demand for alternative modes of leadership, such as charismatic, visionary, servant, facilitative, strategic, or participative leadership or management, has opened up opportunities for lay people to take more prominent roles in Buddhist leadership in Western Buddhism as well as contemporary Asian contexts.

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## Introduction

In early Buddhism, although Buddhist discipleship diversified from an exclusively monastic community to a fourfold assembly (*parisā*)—male monastics, female monastics, laymen, and laywomen (e.g., A.ii.132) monastics continued to be regarded as *de facto* leaders in religious tasks. Subsequent Buddhist history, however, shows that many of the leadership roles such as teaching, previously reserved for celibate monastics, were shared with, or delegated to, non-celibate clergy or even lay people. Given that Buddhism has the flexibility to adapt to socio-historical circumstances in a way that facilitates the wellbeing of the many, the loosening link between monastic precepts and leadership might be seen as a progressive diversification of leadership needs.

This article is chiefly a review of literature, but also offers anthropological evidence and some attitude survey findings in consideration of the extent to which leadership roles have diversified beyond the “ethical leadership” epitomized by monastic precepts. First, I outline the range of leadership styles current in business administration. Second, I examine evidence for examples of Buddhist leadership confirming with each of these styles. Finally, I offer reasons for this diversification, speculating on the applicability of these leadership styles to contemporary Buddhism in the West and beyond.

## Modes of Leadership

Leadership is claimed to be one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth (Burns, 96). Theories of leadership attempt to explain the factors involved in the emergence and nature of leadership and its consequences (Bass and Stogdill, 37). Although a complete list of leadership styles might include ethical, symbolic, charismatic, visionary, servant, facilitative, strategic and path-goal leadership as well as man-

agement, a recent comparison of Buddhist and American leadership styles (Fan) concluded, perhaps prematurely, that only ethical leadership is relevant to Buddhism. This article examines evidence that although ethical leadership remains an important *mainstay* of Buddhist leadership, situations in Buddhism where monastics have been sidelined as leaders mean that other forms of leadership (besides ethical leadership) have relevant historical precedents. Diversification beyond ethical leadership reflects both a diminishing role in leadership for monastics and the contemporary social reality of Buddhism where there is a diminishing tendency to allocate leadership based on precepts, particularly in reformed traditions of Buddhism.

### **Ethical Leadership**

Ethical leadership means leadership with the aim to demonstrate moral standards of conduct and direct followers' intentions toward common moral purposes (Bennis and Nanus). Ethical leadership conforms with a rationale of leadership in traditional Buddhism which commonly favors monastics. Monks (usually) are considered more worthy as leaders than lay persons since they have renounced the household life<sup>2</sup> for the sake of the religious life, and have taken upon themselves a larger number of rules of training or precepts than are normally followed by lay Buddhists. The assertion that monks are good examples of ethical leadership also revolves around the monks' means of economic support (a subject dealt with separately in the "management" section), since having renounced working for a living, a monastic cleric is dependent on the gen-

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<sup>2</sup> In the sense of meaning of the monk as a renunciant (*pabbajita*).

erosity of the population at large<sup>3</sup> rather than being expected to support themselves or be given wages for teaching (Gethin 85).

Precept-keeping is an understandable leadership quality for teachers of ethics since they must exemplify the virtues they preach in order to avoid hypocrisy. Precepts in this case are equivalent to “integrity” in ethical leadership. Although many monks may still be on the journey toward enlightenment, the properly-kept *Vinaya* is designed to foster enlightenment—a leadership quality in itself, examined below under the heading of “visionary leadership.”<sup>4</sup>

The 227-rule<sup>5</sup> Theravādin *Vinaya*, the 253-rule<sup>6</sup> Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* of Northern Buddhism (Tatz 21) or the 250-rule Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* ensure that monks remain distinct from the lay community by having a very different appearance, reliance on the generosity of others, minimal possessions, and distance from the family life (Gethin 86, 88). Although in Theravādin monasticism the precepts are largely followed literally,<sup>7</sup> in Mahāyāna Buddhism monastic discipline is often followed more in spirit than in letter, with *bodhisattva* or Tantric vows often taking precedence over *Vinaya*. In practice, in the Mahāyāna, there is a degree of adherence that is generally strictest in China, moderate in Korea, and lax in Japan (Harvey *Buddhism* 294). In actuality, the Precepts may be *studied* rather than followed and in Japan monks came to follow the *bodhisattva* vows (i.e. charismatic leadership) *instead* of *Vinaya* precepts (Strong 323).

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<sup>3</sup> In the sense of meaning of the monastic as dependent on alms (*bhikkhu*).

<sup>4</sup> One of the ten concerns of the *Vinaya* (*sikkhāpada-paññatti atthavasa*)(Vin.iii.20, A.v.70).

<sup>5</sup> 311 precepts for female monastics (*bhikkhunis*).

<sup>6</sup> 364 precepts for female monastics (*dge-slong ma*) (Batchelor 186).

<sup>7</sup> Handling of money is currently less strictly followed.

In Southern Buddhism, precepts (ethical leadership) could be seen to be *more* important than attainment (visionary leadership) because the commentaries prescribe that a lay stream-enterer should bow to a monk of lesser attainment (Miln.162–4). In the early Mahāyāna, it was stipulated that the *bodhisattva* should also renounce the family life (Harvey *Buddhism* 157). Later in Mahāyāna history the distinction between lay and monastic bodhisattvas became blurred, but several early Mahāyāna texts<sup>8</sup> continued to distinguish linguistically in Sanskrit and Chinese between *bodhisattvas* with lay and monastic status as if this distinction were important (Harrison 74). Mahāyāna also saw a change in interpretation of the precepts—acting from the spirit rather than the letter (Harvey *Buddhist Ethics* 149) with aspiration in “charismatic leadership” (see below) taking increasing precedence over the precepts of ethical leadership. In Southern Buddhism, where ethical leadership is measured in terms of precepts but adaptations are needed, conservative traditions have generally avoided changing the *Vinaya* itself or wholesale reform of monastic status by means of adaptation outside the text (*pāli-muttaka-vinicchaya*) or consensual agreement amongst monks (*kati-kāvata*). Such changes have been applied by Theravadin monastics in the West to *pāṭimokkha* recitation and clothing, with relations towards women remaining largely unchanged (Numrich “Vinaya”).

In the Mahāyāna, monks do not monopolize Buddhist leadership as they do in Southern Buddhism. Lamas (*bLa mas*), as a source of the liberating truth, can be either celibate monks (or more occasionally nuns) or non-celibate tantric ritual specialists (Harvey *Buddhism* 204). As we shall see for strategic leadership, ethical leadership has been undermined by the “other power” concept making any form of self-cultivation (including maintenance of the precepts) as futile (*jiriki*) in the face of the

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., the *Pratyutpanna-buddha-sammukhāvasthita-samādhi Sūtra* T.418 and throughout the *Sutra on Upāsika Precepts* T.1488 (Shih Heng-ching).



saving power of Amida Buddha. The role model of the lay bodhisattva Vimalakīrti, in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sutra* which is popular in Eastern Buddhism (Williams *Mahāyāna Buddhism* 22), being able to visit prostitutes or indulge in gambling and drinking without becoming attached (Barber 85) has probably promoted the ideal of the lay Buddhist at the expense of monasticism or any rigid attachment to precepts. For Buddhist non-monastic leaders, priesthood is regarded as a professional qualification rather than a vocation with a soteriological goal.

### Symbolic Leadership

Symbolic leadership means leadership that refers to and is based on the category of “meaning.” It arises by popular recognition mostly in the mass media—by the ability to convey a social message and respond to a human need for community. The effectiveness of such a style of leadership lies in the ability of a leader to make activities meaningful for those in their role set—not necessarily by changing followers’ behavior but by giving a sense of understanding of what they are doing. Symbolic leaders have their effect, not because of their achievements, but because they symbolize certain things that can satisfy and influence the followers (Winkler; Rejai and Phillips). In the case of Buddhism, monks often adopt the role of a “symbol” in cases of Buddhist nationhood, especially where they are perceived to represent an unbroken lineage. The presence of monks and nuns within society was seen as a positive good and of benefit to all, and monastics were not overly scrutinized or expected to give something material in return to society (Gethin 86). The same symbolism sustained the symbiosis between laity and monks.

The assertion that without monasticism, Buddhism would not enjoy a *complete* transmission (for example, to the West) is based on a symbolic premise, conforming with the assertion in the *Samantapāsādikā*

(i.102) that you need indigenous ordinations for religious roots to be made deep (Numrich “Vinaya”). Lack of deep roots would lead Buddhism to be spread in a diluted form—as exemplified by New Age offshoots of Buddhism or the “mindfulness movement” in the West. Even monasteries have been imbued with symbolic value in the West, showing a concrete alternative to prevalent Western mores such as sex, violence, and greed—overcoming indulgence and moral transgressions where the monastic communities of other religions have failed. They consider the long-standing Buddhist monastic communities in the West to be living proof that this way of spreading Buddhism is both successful and viable (Schedneck 234-237).

Symbolism also comes into play where leaders come from a community for which the *legitimacy* of an ordination or reincarnation lineage remains important (Waterhouse). Where monks qualify for leadership only in symbolic terms, there runs the risk of possible erroneous application of ascetic values to political and social decision-making (Jenkins, 70-71). Monks have more potential than laypeople to be considered leaders based on ordination lineage and seniority using the symbolic rationale. By contrast, where other modes of leadership are valued more, for example in Northern Buddhism, menial monks (*tramang* or *tragyü*) might be almost completely overlooked as leaders (Kvaerne 255a), whereas a reincarnated teacher (*rin po che*) or a living Buddha emanation (*sprul sku*) may be considered a leader, even if not a monk. This is especially the case in the Northern Tradition, rather than the classical Mahāyāna, where a new hierarchy of symbolic status is bestowed by *initiation* (Gombrich “Introduction” 14b).

### Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leadership means a person who gains their leading power through their personal charm rather than rules, codes or regulations—the degree to which they are set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities—a power to attract followers through a compelling vision and perceptions of extraordinary capabilities—the ability to inspire followers, to amplify followers’ commitment and motivate followers to comply with the leader’s statements and action (Parson). In Buddhism this form of leadership is particularly linked with an authenticity of *aspiration* since a Buddhist leader would generally be expected to have a higher level of aspiration than the people they lead. The aspiration might be couched in sociological terms (Spiro) or in terms of Mahāyāna Buddhism’s emphasis on the *bodhisattva* ideal.

A variety of levels of *aspiration* is found among lay people. Generally, Southern Buddhism would expect laypeople chiefly to involve themselves with what Spiro called the karmatic level of aspiration by practicing meritorious activities or with what he called the apotropaic level by seeking blessings from monks. Although it is theoretically possible to ordain with an ulterior motive such as wishing to obtain a free education, in terms of Spiro’s (11-14) threefold categorization, monks in Southern Buddhism might be expected to focus primarily on the nibbānic aspiration<sup>9</sup> rather than the lay preoccupation with karmatic or apotropaic aspirations, although Nibbānic aspiration might be clearer among the forest-dwelling (*ārañṇavāsin*) monks, although city-dwellers (*grāhavāsin*) may invest equal effort into scriptural study (*gantha-dhura*)

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<sup>9</sup> The aspiration “for release from all sufferings and for the realization of Nibbāna” (*sabbadukkhā nissarāna nibbāna sacchikarānatthāya*) is a central part of the Theravāda ordination vows.

(Strong 76). More dedicated lay devotees, however, blur the distinction with monastics (on the Nibbānic level of aspiration) when they practice more intensely, taking additional precepts (8) upon themselves or meditating in daily life (Strong 76-78); but they would not expect to be treated as “Buddhist leaders” for doing so.

Four or five hundred years after the passing of the Buddha, *arhats* were few and far between. The ever-receding ideal of the *arhat* meant hope had to be kept alive instead, in the form of the *bodhisattva* ideal (Harrison 86). In the Mahāyāna, the *bodhisattva* ideal replaced the *arahat* ideal as the main Buddhist goal. In later Buddhist movements, monastics and laity alike aspired to the *bodhisattva* ideal. In terms of aspiration, monastics were no different from the laity in adopting 58 bodhisattva vows (from the Chinese *Brahmajāla Sūtra*) that required vegetarianism, preaching, caring for the sick, and exhorting others to give up immoral behavior.

This mode of leadership would help to explain how, in the modern era, lay Southern Buddhists such as S. N. Goenka (1924–2013), A.T. Ariyaratne (b.1931) and B. R. Ambedkhar (1891–1956) have received reverence *almost* on a par with Saṅgha members for their charisma in establishing mass Buddhist movements. In conclusion, although it is possible to describe lay roles of importance in the Southern tradition it must be emphasized that lay people are often overlooked as Buddhist leaders. In the present day, with Santi Asoke as an example, there seems to be a limitation in extrapolating ascetic values to the wielding of socio-political power, requiring new forms of leadership. Thus, where charismatic leadership based on aspiration comes to the fore—whether described in Spiro’s terms or in terms of the bodhisattva ideal, the monastic community will have a reduced role in leadership.

### Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership means the ability of leaders to inspire extraordinary levels of achievement in followers through an inspiring vision and through other behaviors, and empower others to enact the vision and achieve goals (Westley and Mintzberg). In the Buddhist context, since the achievements in question are soteriological, often the leadership potential would be perceived as having attained or the potential to attain enlightenment or the ability to induce such experiences in their followers. The traditions of Buddhism have differing views on the lay person's potential for enlightenment, as compared to monastics that may affect their potential to lead. Visionary leadership may become the criteria for choice of leader in situations where the *authenticity* of attainment is prioritized over the legitimacy of a symbolic lineage (Waterhouse).

In Southern Buddhism, the lay life is depicted as un conducive to enlightenment<sup>10</sup>—so usually ethical and visionary leadership would be expected to be synonymous. Even in early Buddhism there may have been some cases where circumstances have meant laypeople gained vision beyond the expectations of their ethical level. In cases such as Bahiya Daruciriya or Suddhodana, arahantship was attained as laypeople (Strong 76). Some controversy exists as to whether arahantship is the same for laypeople as it is for monastics since attainment of the paths and fruits of *nibbāna* in the historical lay communities of the early Buddhist texts is portrayed as numerically equal,<sup>11</sup> but it appears that at the highest level, lay attainers have “seen *nibbāna*, the deathless (*amataddāsa*)” rather than attaining arahantship *per se* (Schumann 190-191).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A narrow way, filled with dust (sambādho gharavāso rajāpatho) (M.i.240)

<sup>11</sup> The number of attainers for lay and monastic communities is estimated to be around 1,000 alike.

<sup>12</sup> The 21 names of these lay “arahants” is listed with pre-eminent laymen at A.iii.450.

Laypeople in Southern Buddhism might have been precluded from leadership to avoid undermining the *arahat* ideal and the associated gradual path of attainment—lay people were likely considered very different from monastics in their lifestyle and duties even from early times (J. Samuels 231)—probably owing to the origin of Southern Buddhism as a renunciant movement. In Eastern Buddhism by contrast, the importance of attainment seems to have disappeared along with decline of the *arhat* ideal, the rise of sudden enlightenment, and “other” power. The *saṅgha* has taken on a role that is more social and there is an equality in soteriological potential between monastics and laypeople.

An additional conflict of interest between ethical and visionary modes of leadership has grown up in the Northern Tradition has been with the higher Tantric practices where certain high attainments *require* uncelibacy. Attempts to revive *Vinaya* in the history of Northern Buddhism, by Atiśa (982–1054) and Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), insisted that monks be restricted to symbolic practice of the Tantra (Williams *Buddhist Thought* 234–235; Harvey *Buddhism* 208). This conflict has caused monastic precepts and attainment to become disconnected. Idealization of the laity was more obvious in Tantric schools (emphasizing sudden enlightenment) than for gradual path schools (such as that of “Lam Rim”). From the time that sudden enlightenment became an option, monasticism lost its exclusive importance since monastics could not follow the Tantra to the highest level. To be a lay practitioner was seen as an advantage (Williams *Buddhist Thought* 195–196; Sanderson 92). The Tantric teacher Saraha went as far, in his *Dohā-kośa* as to state,

perfect knowledge may be developed without being a  
monk, but while married and enjoying sense pleasures,

with monasticism unfavorably compared to dying of thirst in the desert, and forgoing the ideal of practice under a guru (Harvey *Buddhism* 193).

### Servant Leadership

Servant leadership means those who lead by meeting the needs of the people they lead—rather than coming from the normal top-down style but through collaboration and trust (Greenleaf). Even though a Buddhist layperson may be committed<sup>13</sup> to keeping five precepts, upholding faith, rejecting superstitious belief, and supporting the monastic community by right livelihood (Gethin 107-110), in Southern Buddhism he or she would not be regarded as a “Buddhist leader” for doing so. Buddhist leadership status is withheld even in the case of laypeople who are resident monastic attendants (*kappiya-kāraka*), otherwise remunerated with food and lodging by a temple. The importance of being a monastic diminished as the center of gravity of Buddhist ethics shifted from personal development and self-control to a “dynamic other-regarding quality” (Keown 131, 142). A new inclusivity in the precepts also opened the way to “engaged Buddhism” by going beyond the ethics of restraint (*samvara*) to uphold personal wholesomeness and the welfare of other beings—as exemplified by Avalokiteśvara and most high-level *bodhisattvas* who were portrayed as actively engaged in *helping* beings (Harvey *Buddhism* 177)—meaning worth as a leader would be perceived in terms of the benefit brought to others.

### Facilitative Leadership

Facilitative leadership means an individual’s behavior that can enhance the collective ability of the group to adapt, solve problems and improve the group performance to conserve a common goal (Conley and Goldman). In the Buddhist context, this might involve access to specialist Buddhist knowledge or acting as a gatekeeper to the scriptures or scrip-

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<sup>13</sup> According to the prescription at A.iii.206.

tural languages. The rarity of lay people being acknowledged as specialist gatekeepers to Buddhist knowledge may show that facilitative leadership is limited to the monastic community in Southern Buddhism but has become more broad-based in the Mahāyāna. Lay religious *virtuosii* elevated to pre-eminence by the Buddha (Gombrich *Theravada Buddhism* 73) included Citta (A.i.26), Ugga (A.iv.212–6), and Matika Mata (Dhp-a.i.294), who helped unattained monks to reach enlightenment. Early Mahāyāna, by contrast, was open to mobilizing the laity in leadership roles, for example, as reciters of the *Dharma* (*dharmabhāṇakas*), employed in the important role of composing and disseminating early Mahāyāna scriptures. It seems that lay people were reciters of the *Dharma* as well as, or in place of, monastics, and were respected and rewarded for doing so (Drewes). Recruitment for such laity-turned-dharma-preachers shifted the focus of facilitative leadership away from the monastic community towards laity of the countryside, villages, and towns reflecting a unique ability of the laity to contextualize Buddhism in terms of popular beliefs about the gods (Kent 321).

Northern Buddhism has a particularly diverse range of categories of facilitative leaders. Laypeople as well as monastics can hold the status of *sprul sku* or lama. In certain schools of Tibetan Buddhism the role of the laity as teachers and ritualists has become more developed and formalized—especially tantric yogis (*ngakpas*) in the Nyingma lineage or married yogins associated with the monastic Sakya (*Sa skya pa*) lineage (Gethin 271). Other non-celibate Buddhist leadership roles included lay lamas, *genyen*, village tantric priests, scripture readers (Harvey *Buddhism* 296), and civilized shamans (G. Samuels). Historically, non-celibate *siddhas* were exemplified by Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa (Harvey *Buddhism* 189; Gethin 106–107). Unlike the Southern Tradition, these lay specialists *would* be considered Buddhist leaders in a way that has unlinked keeping of numerous monastic precepts from the role as gatekeepers and guardians of the scriptural heritage controlling how it is



disbursed to their followers. In this connection, it is also interesting to consider to what extent academic specialists in Buddhist studies have become facilitative leaders, eclipsing monastics and becoming de facto experts and spokespersons in the name of Buddhism.

### Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership refers to a leader's experience, capabilities, values and personality in responding to situational needs (Finkelstein, Hambrick and Cannella). Certain historical conditions have brought strategic leadership to the fore in Buddhism - for example, the severe suppression of Buddhism in 845 CE being directed *only* against the monastic Saṅgha serving to open the way to the prosperity of Buddhism as a lay movement (Zürcher 125). Buddhism fell afoul of Confucian principles, which looked unfavorably on monastics as undermining family and filial values by not getting married (Wheeler 23), for accepting alms rather than working industriously for a living, and for being autonomously governed instead of submitting to the pre-existing social hierarchy, with lay leaders also stepping into the breach (Harvey *Buddhism* 211-212). Also women and lay teachers took on a situational leadership role in the 1890s in Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz, 45).

The Kamakura period saw other situations that reframed the prerequisites for leadership with the shift to “other power”—a worldview that considered the era to have become degenerate (*mappō*) and required suitably drastic measures to cope with it (Harvey *Buddhism* 229) and this included a level of secularization unique to Eastern Buddhism (Heinemann 212a). Precluding situations for such leadership would include Japan's “top-down” diffusion of Buddhism with state support for the laicization of Buddhism from the time of Prince Shotoku (574–622 CE)(Heinemann 214b) and popularization of “this-life” enlightenment

where one is already enlightened in the here and now (Heinemann 223b), rendering intense monastic practice or renunciation of marriage superfluous.

### **Path-goal Leadership**

Path-goal leadership is a form of leadership where the main aim is to achieve the satisfaction, motivation, and performance of followers by joint decision-making, empowerment, and power-sharing. Although it can mean supportive, directive, participative and achievement orientated trends in leadership, it is of particular significance to the Buddhist context in its specifically *participative* mode. Participative leadership is particularly noticeable in the case where modern Japanese Buddhist sects have no remaining place for professional religious specialists like a monk or a priest (Gombrich “Introduction” 14b). Japanese Buddhists either value priesthood over monkhood or replaced monastic authority entirely. The rejection in Eastern Buddhism of the lay/monastic distinction is different from *lamas* in Tibet where lay specialists *co-existed* alongside monks (Williams *Mahāyāna Buddhism* 260). In the present day, Jōdo-shin-shu and Nichiren schools have very little need of priests, let alone monks (Harvey *Buddhist Ethics* 148). In the modern period (since World War II) the majority of Japanese Buddhist organizations are lay-led.

### **Management**

Where leadership is the organization of people, management usually refers to the organization of *things* (DeLuca 2). For Buddhism, such a form of “leadership” may come to the fore where material survival for a community becomes more critical than leading the people in it. The ethical example of monks may be important to material survival where *alms*

or charitable donations are the major source of income, but may be insufficient where income follows a business model. Monks lack financial acumen.

Alms-based economies fronted by the monastic community made sense when, as with India in the times of earliest Buddhism, there was agricultural surplus facilitating support of a renunciant community and the continuing symbiosis in Southern Buddhism between lay and monastic communities whereby monks give teachings to the laity and the laity give economic support to monks (Ling 133-135). Leadership in Buddhism may also include the concept of distancing oneself from the wielding of economic or political influence (a monastic may tell truth to power but is prohibited from wielding power directly—in the way that would normally be considered necessary to leadership). In Southern Buddhism, monks have distanced themselves from power and politics, meaning that leadership roles of a “worldly” nature are reserved for the lay community.

Although the alms round remains the most widespread means of economic support for the monastic community on a personal level, even in Southern Buddhism there has been some diversification in the way *temples* are supported, where income may, beyond financial donations, be derived from land bought in the temple name, produce sold, money invested in merchants’ guilds, or pilgrim hospitality (Harvey *Buddhism* 304; Quli 272). The management of wealth becomes even more important in the Mahāyāna since the monastic economy of Northern Buddhism tends *not* to rely on alms, but donations—with donations surplus to need being lent out at interest in the name of the temple. Individual monks may invest in herds and seed-grain. In pre-Communist Tibet, the monasteries were key economic institutions at the center of a web of trading and donations in relation to nomadic herdsmen and agriculturalists. (Harvey *Buddhism* 304). Temple economies in *Eastern Buddhism* similarly minimize reliance on almsfood (Harvey *Buddhism* 304) although there is

some begging for money by monks (Welch 207-8). In China, pressure for monks to engage in productive work means that often they grew their own food (Ch'en 363; Welch 104). Historically, monks have supplemented temple income by pawn broking, lending grain and cloth, owning grain-mills, oil-presses and trading ships, or running markets to sell incense and Buddha images (Harvey *Buddhism* 304). Throughout Asia, monks have also received fees in return for ritual services to the laity (Strong 312; Reader 77f.).

### **The Special Challenge of the West for Buddhist Leadership**

There is a historically unprecedented situation for Buddhism in the West where many Asian lineages are represented cheek-by-jowl with home-grown Buddhisms, and open up a whole potentially new set of demands on leadership since westerners place a whole new set of demands on Buddhism that cuts across traditional boundaries (Rawlinson 96-97). Nonetheless, instead of seeing a completely new set of solutions to Buddhist leadership in the West, it might be expected that a mix of traditional and modern approaches to leadership might be apparent that differ from that seen in Asia. Especially when the followers of the same temples and Buddhist centers of the West may exist as *parallel* congregations (Numrich *Old Wisdom*; McLellan) that practice different *styles* of Buddhism, it is not surprising that there may be a variety of opinions on the emphasis in their Buddhist leadership. In the West there is often a polarization of opinion with heritage Buddhists, Theravāda Buddhism, and leadership in their ethical and symbolic modes at one end of the debate, and convert Buddhists, Mahāyāna Buddhism, and other more adaptive modes of leadership at the other end.

There is evidence for adaptive modes of leadership even in heritage Buddhist practice in the West since practically speaking, even the

most conservative monastic community in the West is subject to some degree of reform, owing to compromises that need to be made in the face of Western social and legal requirements. Problems facing conservative Southern Buddhist monastics in the West include gathering for *pāṭimokkha* recitation, clothing appropriate to a cold climate, and proximity to women. In coming to the West, monks may be required to cover up their robes in public spaces (like France), may not be allowed to go on alms round outside the temple grounds, or since poverty has been criminalized (Wacquant) carry with them a minimal amount of money in order to avoid the illegal status of vagrancy—issues that could potentially threaten their ethical or symbolic leadership. Even supposedly conservative Southern Buddhist monasteries in the West have adapted themselves towards increasing involvement of the laity in management, founding, funding, and ownership of temples (Quli 270). Lay teachers and leaders can certainly be more approachable and engaging and may be respected for their contribution and expertise.

The convert stance on leadership in spreading Buddhism to the West tends to encourage reform of leadership style, which may mean playing down the role of monasticism. Reformists maintain that if leadership is to be relevant to Western Buddhism, reforms would be necessary to extend it beyond the scope of the ethical or symbolic to make it appropriate for Western consumption. To some extent these views reflect the expectation that a westerner's appreciation of monastic conservatism may not be sufficiently robust to overcome strong "indigenous" cultural sentiments favoring lay-orientated religiousness (Numrich "Vinaya"). Thus, a situational approach to leadership might expect a filtering out of aspects toxic to the Western consumer such as authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal, self-serving Buddhism hung up on Asian cultural accretions. In this respect, monks are often targeted by convert Buddhists as escapist, neurotic, parasitic, and failing to face up to the challenge of intimate relationships. Numrich (*Old Wisdom* 150) amongst

others, blames Southern Buddhism particularly, for being pre-modern and backward, and temple life for seeming artificial and anachronistic—none of these attributes being values westerners would idealize in its leaders. By contrast, reformists say, Western culture values freedom, equality, anti-authority, individualism, and responsibility. The leaders that reformists would like to see at the forefront of Buddhism would therefore need to be universalist and pure. Reformists estimate that lay teachers of Buddhism are more effective in their teachings than those who merely wear Buddhist robes (Harris)—justifying lay leadership for Western Buddhism in their eyes (Gombrich “Introduction” 14b). Others merely worry that the West would be unable to support the *material burden* of a large number of monastics (Schedneck 237-239).

However, that ethical leadership, especially “moral leadership” has not become an anachronism in the West.<sup>14</sup> Research shows that there is room for a variety of approaches to Buddhist leadership in the West. A recent survey of teen Southern, Northern, and Eastern Buddhist teens living in the UK (Thanissaro *Denomination*), found that Southern Buddhists were significantly more likely than those of the Northern or Eastern Buddhists to agree with<sup>15</sup> and think it beneficial<sup>16</sup> for Buddhists to take ordination as a monk or nun, to agree with lay support for the monastic community,<sup>17</sup> and think monks did a good job.<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that even though Northern and Eastern Buddhists were less enthusiastic

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<sup>14</sup> Apparent especially in the context of application of charitable funds is illustrated by the UK overseas aid scandal current at the time of writing: Brindle, D. (2018) Oxfam scandal is a body blow for the whole UK charity sector. *The Guardian*, February 13, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Southern agree = 72%; Eastern agree = 63%; Northern agree = 55%;  $\chi^2=6.6$ ;  $p<.05$

<sup>16</sup> Southern agree = 60%; Eastern agree = 42%; Northern agree = 51%;  $\chi^2=8.7$ ;  $p<.05$

<sup>17</sup> Southern agree = 85%; Eastern agree = 68%; Northern agree = 62%;  $\chi^2=19.7$ ;  $p<.001$

<sup>18</sup> Southern agree = 82%; Eastern agree = 69%; Northern agree = 60%;  $\chi^2=15.1$ ;  $p<.01$

about monastic leadership than Southern Buddhists, half (or more) of their number still saw the value of monasticism in the West.

Since most countries in the West have entered a state of postsecularism, the modernist expectation that “one size fits all” has become rather anachronistic. It is therefore disenfranchising to claim that *no* style of Buddhists in the West prioritizes ethical of symbolic leadership over the reformed alternatives already discussed, especially in the case of heritage Buddhists who, at the time of writing in the UK (at least), appear to form the majority of self-identifying Buddhists (Thanissaro “Other Perspectives” 159). Many sorts of Buddhism in the West have “set out their stalls” on the same street and *variety* of approaches to Buddhist leadership approaches would most likely strengthen Buddhism as would probably be the case also, in other regions of the world.

## Conclusions

The question this article has tried to answer in a way acceptable to the Southern, Northern, Eastern, and possibly Western traditions of Buddhism, is what makes a person a Buddhist *leader* if it is not the fact that their monasticism forces them to keep more precepts? To assume Buddhist leadership can be polarized into traditional versus western styles as Fan has done may be premature. If it can be termed “traditional,” certainly Southern or Theravāda Buddhism seems to prioritize ethical leadership, but also, as I have shown, encourages a symbolic role for leaders. This explains why monastic leadership has remained at the fore.

Although the Mahāyāna (Northern and Eastern Buddhism) is to some degree reformed, it still contains traditions going back millennia, but has allowed an increasingly prominent leadership role for lay people alongside monastics because leadership roles include charismatic, facilitative and visionary conceptualizations of leadership. Part of this new

direction in leadership is characterized by the eclipsing of “legitimacy” in leadership by the new consideration of “authenticity” which includes charismatic and visionary components. There are some common features of the Mahāyāna as it became distinct from its Indian roots that have influenced leadership considerations of both Northern and Eastern Buddhism—namely the characteristics of the *bodhisattva* (ideas associated with altruistically aspiring for Buddhahood), the *Cakravartin* (compassionate action in society), sudden enlightenment, and “other” power.

In keeping with Waterhouse’s observation, it would seem that the answer to what makes a Buddhist leader depends on whether the Buddhists of a particular tradition give precedence to legitimacy or authenticity in leadership. A question which could usefully be discussed beyond the scope of this article (which seeks merely to describe the *variety* of leadership styles in Buddhism) is whether “dove-like” monks have relinquished leadership willingly, under duress from “hawk-like” non-monastics, or whether the task of contemporary Buddhist leadership requires both hawks and doves. Nonetheless, it is likely that Buddhism cannot dispense with ethical leadership completely—it remains a mainstay with a need to have five precepts in tandem with the other modes of leadership to avoid the antinomian scandals that have become apparent in other areas of Buddhist ethics.

### Abbreviations

- A.     Aṅguttara Nikāya (translated as Woodward and Hare)
- D.     Dīgha Nikāya (translated as Rhys\_Davids and Rhys\_Davids)
- Dhp-a. Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā, commentary on the Dhammapada  
          (translated as Burlingame)
- It.     Itivuttaka (translated as Masefield)



- M. Majjhima Nikāya (translated as Horner *Middle Length Sayings* (in 3 Volumes))
- Miln. Milindapañha (translated as Horner *Milinda's Questions* (in 2 Volumes))
- T. Taishō shinshū daizōkyō (Buddhist Canon Newly Compiled in the Taisho Era)
- Vin. Vinaya Piṭaka (translated as Horner *The Book of the Discipline* (in 6 Volumes))

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