

BIRKEN BUDDHIST FOREST MONASTERY:

Asian Migration, the Creative Class, and Cultural Transformation in the New Pacific British Columbia

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ONE NIGHT IN THE MID-1990s police and ambulance responded to a medical emergency at a broken-down shack on the road between Mount Currie and D'Arcy in the Birkenhead Valley near Pemberton, two hundred kilometres north of Vancouver in the Coast Mountain range. Bumping their heads against the low doorframe, they were surprised to find inside a collapsed neighbour from down the road being tended to by a dozen young Thai women, a thirty-year-old German man, and a Canadian in his early forties. The men were wearing ochre robes and were bald, beardless, and eyebrow-less.

This was Birken Forest Monastery. The Canadian was Venerable (Ven.) Sona (né Tom West), a Buddhist monk born and brought up mostly in the suburbs of Vancouver but now following the orthodox Thai forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism. In June 1994, he travelled from the Sri Lankan Buddhist Vihara Society (BVS) temple in Surrey, BC, to a cluster of unwinterized, off-grid shacks on the gold rush-era Pemberton Portage Road near Pemberton. There, along with his German-born fellow monk, Ven. Piyadhammo, he succeeded in establishing only the second North American foothold of the Thai forest tradition founded by a non-Asian monk.¹ This tradition has since spread globally to become one of the most successful Theravada monastic orders outside Asia, particularly among non-Asian converts.

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¹ Wat Metta, near San Diego, was North America's first non-Asian-led Thai forest monastery, established in 1991.



Figure 1. Venerable Sona at the “shack” monastery, Gramsons, BC, ca. 1995. Photo credit: Birken Forest Monastery.

The monks in this tradition follow a strict discipline unfamiliar to mainstream North American culture and society: it includes behavioural rules that prohibit not only sex but even being alone with a woman, and it forbids not only wealth but even touching money. These rules make monks utterly dependent on laypeople for food but ban them from soliciting it. In short, they are Buddhist fundamentalists whose beliefs and practices also diverge, sometimes enormously, from the secularized “mainstream” of North American Buddhism, from other schools of Asian Buddhism, and even from other forms of Thai monasticism.²

Hence, a Thai forest monastery in this tradition was an unlikely institution for someone to establish in the forests of British Columbia, especially three hours from Vancouver and from anyone else who understood the tradition and its rules. In order for it to take root, a group of British Columbians with widely divergent backgrounds, religious and otherwise, had to unite to serve the mendicant monks. Those who sustained them included regular visitors from Vancouver (i.e., Thai Buddhist graduate students and nannies as well as Sri Lankan and white convert Buddhist professionals and academics) along with local people (i.e., non-Buddhist

² Jens W. Borgland, “Some Reflections on Thich Nhat Hanh’s Monastic Code for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Buddhist Modernities: Re-Inventing Tradition in the Globalizing Modern World*, ed. Hanna Havnevik, Ute Hüsken, Mark Teeuwen, Vladimir Tikhonov, and Koen Wellens (New York: Routledge, 2017), 259–81.

foresters, entrepreneurs, self-described hippies and dropouts, and a Baptist church secretary). Furthermore, these interactions happened in a rural and reputedly “redneck” place: there, visiting Thai and Sri Lankans encountered familiar robes and rituals surrounded by an alien cultural and physical environment; there, non-Asian seekers from Vancouver and Whistler found a demanding and devotional Buddhism different from the accessible, urban forms with which they were familiar; and there, the rural neighbours of the monastery defied stereotypes to connect with both groups in ensuring Birken’s survival and even prosperity.

THE CULTURAL NEW CLASS AND NEW ASIAN MIGRATION IN THE NEW PACIFIC: BRITISH COLUMBIA’S GLOBAL COUNTRYSIDE

What light can BC studies shine on Birken monastery and its participants? In what ways can this extraordinary institution speak to different facets of BC studies?

Examining the success of this unlikely enterprise through interviews with almost forty members of this motley group of British Columbians allowed us to explore some of the cultural manifestations and implications of global British Columbia in the late twentieth century, widening the lens beyond the metropole to the periphery, and shaking up the notion of global cosmopolitanism as being a purely urban phenomenon. Birken invites us deeper into the possibility of understanding the reverberations of expanding Asia-Pacific networks. Scholars have rightly focused their attention on the impact of mass immigration to British Columbia from China, India, and their diasporas, but what about the multitude of smaller groups of migrants from across Asia? What has been their impact on British Columbia’s culture? Studying this singular site (Birken monastery) in a marginal place and time (1990s Pemberton), and the peripheral groups of people (Sri Lankan and Thai migrants, non-Asian converts) who supported it, demonstrates both the profundity and scope of the cultural impact of the Pacific world on British Columbia’s recent history.

The Thai forest tradition and Pacific British Columbia both have deeply global backstories. The history of the Thai forest tradition is complex, but its ancestry dates back to the nineteenth century, when King Rama IV – famous in the West because of the musical *The King and I* – created a national Buddhism that went back to basics as a defence against Western cultural imperialism. In tandem with this anti-Western revitalization in

Thailand, on the other side of the ocean immigrants from around the world were converging on the Fraser River gold rush. British Columbia's origin as a resource-extraction settler colony was largely based upon what is now theorized as the "Global Countryside," with a global labour force building the railway, mining, logging, trapping, and farming. The Pemberton Portage, for example, the road on which the Birken Monastery was founded, was once part of the Douglas Road, an early thoroughfare linking the gold mines at Lillooet to the coast. The five hundred men who built it included Chinese, Mexicans, Scandinavians, Hawaiians, and Germans as well as British and Americans, both black and white.³

But that was the "old immigration," and what historian Henry Yu has called the old "Pacific" Canada, before four decades of Asian exclusion attempted to create a "White" British Columbia. What about the "new" Pacific Canada/British Columbia since the opening up of Canadian immigration policy from 1967 onwards to a great wave of non-Europeans, especially Asians, to fuel the demand for skilled workers in a new service economy? What about the concomitant expansion of the largely white "creative" or "cultural class" of that new economy, with its affinity for so-called "Eastern spirituality," through yoga, martial arts, and mindfulness? In this context Birken is less an anomaly than an emblem of the new Pacific British Columbia and the transformed political economy that created it.⁴

TOM WEST, VENERABLE SONA, AND THE CULTURAL NEW CLASS

Ven. Sona's life story and family's fortunes chronicle significant shifts in the province that presaged the advent of the New Pacific British Columbia. He was born in 1954 and spent his boyhood in new suburban neighbourhoods, like Sea View in Port Moody, that had been carved out of Lower Mainland mountainsides. The forest abutted his back door, just as it had the back doors of early settlers. But, unlike the loggers, miners, and farmers of his grandparents' generation, Tom West made the outdoors a site of wonder and play, not work and exploitation. His parents had a canny knack for capitalizing on changes in the province's economy, society, and culture in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1963, Tom's father Ralph left his job as a nurse at the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital; he and his wife, Irma, moved their family to a small dude ranch they

³ Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); Irene Edwards, *Short Portage to Lillooet and Other Trails and Tales* (Lillooet, BC: Irene Edwards, 1978), 120, 131–32.

⁴ Henry Yu, "Global Migrants and the New Pacific Canada," *International Journal* 64 (2009): 101–26.

had purchased near Penticton, at the bottom of the road to the newly opened Apex ski resort. When the Wests sold the ranch after a couple of years and returned to the Lower Mainland, Ralph became a commercial real estate broker, understanding similar development potential throughout British Columbia's hinterland. Capitalizing on this success, and while voting Social Credit in the 1972 provincial election – a source of debate with his eighteen-year-old son, who cast his first vote for the New Democratic Party – Ralph took advantage of the Dave Barrett government's loosening of British Columbia's restrictive liquor laws to open Coquitlam's first pub. Thus Ven. Sona's family history maps neatly onto that of a modernizing province in the mid-twentieth century, in which a century-old social order based on the political economy of resource extraction and the conservative cultural codes and practices of middle-class British settlers faltered before post-industrial economic opportunities, new forms of leisure and recreation, modern psychology, and cultural liberalism.⁵

Tom West pioneered his own path through the New Pacific Canada and its new culture. Since childhood he withdrew into nature to ponder philosophical questions, and as a young man he was drawn to the environmentalism of Greenpeace (newly founded in Vancouver), the writings of American romantics like Henry Thoreau, and the poetry of Beat poet Gary Snyder (a fellow Cascadian), which introduced him to Zen thinking. After rejecting Western, academic philosophy at Simon Fraser University, in the late 1970s, while studying classical guitar performance at the University of Toronto, he began to meditate with Buddhist communities there. In 1983, he abandoned worldly life and returned to British Columbia, intent on becoming a forest hermit dedicated to meditation and early Buddhist texts. The shack he rented in the Birkenhead Valley was his hermitage for five years before he left for the Bhavana Society in West Virginia to train as a Theravada monk under the Sri Lankan missionary monk Bhante Gunaratana. After several years in Thailand for further monastic training at the “Western” monastery of the Thai forest master Ajahn Chah, in 1994 he returned to that same shack to found Birken Forest Monastery.⁶

⁵ Irma West and Ralph West, interview by Luke Clossey and Karen Ferguson (interviewers unless otherwise noted), 2 March 2018; Ven. Sona interview, 28 August 2017; Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 322–37.

⁶ Ven. Sona interviews, 28 August 2017, 10 November 2017, 11 November 2017; Ven. Sona, “Equanimity (1) – The Gourmand” (2018), audio recording.

The social, intellectual, and cultural proclivities that brought West to Buddhist monasticism were typical of his social type and generation. As a baby-boomer artist brought up in the Lower Mainland, he was at the centre of a new social and cultural formation that had emerged throughout the global North, a product of the 1960s counterculture and the transition to a post-industrial, service-based economy. Using 1990s Vancouver as a case study, David Ley first named this “cultural new class” – later popularized by Richard Florida as the “creative class” – and described its “cultural and social professionals” who shared “a vocation” and the necessary leisure time to “enhance the quality of life in pursuits” focused on self-gratification and self-actualization. This group, which in 1990s Vancouver was predominantly of British descent, rejected the “repressive conformity” of the “Protestant work ethic and Eurocentric rationalism” of previous generations. Most of them replaced the church-going of their childhoods with hedonistic, secular pursuits like working out, Sunday brunch, or engaging in contemplative expressions of Asian spirituality, most often as New Age pastiche or in secularized forms – like the mindfulness movement.⁷

At the edge of the counterculture’s mainstream, a countercurrent developed that included Ven. Sona and his white supporters embracing the orthodox practice of Asian religion, most often Buddhism. Despite the counterculture’s general aversion to the discipline and renunciation that defines monasticism, Ven. Sona’s own exposure to the practice of Buddhism in North America was through monk-led examples. These encounters happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Toronto – just in time for the great wave of Asian immigrants to big Canadian cities. He joined two communities comprised of both Buddhist immigrants and non-Asian converts led by teachers who were recent arrivals to Canada: the first was that of the refugee Tibetan monk Zasep Tulku, and the second was the Zen Lotus Society led by Samu Sunim, a Korean monk (both would become major figures in North American Buddhism in their respective traditions). West, and presumably the other non-Asian

⁷ David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15, 180. See also David Ley and R. Bruce Martin, “Gentrification as Secularization: The Status of Religious Belief in the Post-Industrial City,” *Social Compass* 40, no. 2 (1993): 217–32; Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

supporters, prized these monks' teachings as well as their discipline, restraint, and adherence to classical forms.⁸

THE "SUPERNATURAL" BIRKENHEAD VALLEY IN THE GLOBAL COUNTRYSIDE

West's relocation to the Coast Mountains was part of the cultural new class's late twentieth-century resettlement of many parts of rural British Columbia. If the old Pacific British Columbia correlated to the "opening" of the colony-then-province's vast territory for resource extraction and settlement, the new Pacific British Columbia corresponded to a re-"opening" of many areas of the province a century later to reflect a changing meaning for the countryside as a place of respite and renewal, spiritual and otherwise, for the urban middle class.⁹ Now an eco-tourism hub and a bedroom community for workers in Whistler's global outdoor recreation behemoth, in the mid-1980s, when Ven. Sona first arrived in the area as a hermit, Pemberton was known by locals as "Pemberbush," a small town with a single gas station, grocery, and general store, serving the farming and logging economy. There was no television reception and no liquor store. The settlements along the Pemberton-Portage Road lacked electricity until the mid-1980s and landline phone service until 2000; road improvements only came with Sea-to-Sky corridor infrastructure development for the 2010 Olympics.¹⁰

When he arrived in the area, West joined a stream of similar newcomers seeking isolation and rusticity, who in turn belonged to a 1980s regional trend of intentional, "back-to-the-land" communities (some

⁸ Ven. Sona interviews, 28 August 2017, 10 November 2017; "Zasep Tulku Rinpoche Buddhist Teachings: Buddhist Teachings for the West," <http://www.zaseptulku.com/>; Henry C.H. Shiu, "Buddhism after the Seventies," in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, ed. John S. Harding, Alexander Soucy, Victor Sögen Hori (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 91–92.

⁹ This is a story of resettlement that reflects the legacy of earlier colonialism and the new social dynamics in British Columbia and is part of a new history of settler colonialism – corresponding to the new Pacific British Columbia and emerging global countryside – which, like the older history, includes both white and non-white settlers. The monastery was located in the territory of the St'at'imc people, sandwiched between the Lil'wat First Nation reserve in Mount Currie and the N'Quatqua First Nation reserve in D'Arcy, but there was little contact between the area's Indigenous people and the Theravadin newcomers. Ven. Sona only remembers a handful of Indigenous visitors to the monastery, most of them friends of Joe Bowman, the monastery's first steward (lay helper), who had lived on and off in the valley for twenty-five years and was the only monastery supporter we interviewed who even mentioned the area's predominant Indigenous population. Bowman recalls his Indigenous friends as being indifferent to the shack monastery and the non-proselytizing monks. Ven. Sona interview, 20 March 2018; Joe Bowman, interview with Luke Clossey, 11 May 2019.

¹⁰ Joe Bowman interview, 11 May 2019; Mary Jo and Wim Tewinkel interview, 14 October 2018.

of them spiritual) of erstwhile city dwellers established in mountain valleys and coastal areas of southern British Columbia.¹¹ Akin to the classic pattern of urban gentrification, these outliers were the pioneers who heralded the Pemberton area's cultural transformation. When early monastery steward (lay helper) Joe Bowman first visited the monastery in 1995, he said it was "not unusual" for people to be "living on the side of the river in a shack, getting their water out of the river." Some of these off-grid settlers were "old timers," bachelors who had been there for a generation or two and had connections to the resource industry. Since the 1970s the area had begun to attract a different group – a cosmopolitan collection of young artists and bohemian types hoping to live off the land and practise their craft in this spectacular mountain setting. According to Bowman, these outsiders came from around North America and Europe, and a large number on his communal farm were recent graduates of the National Theatre School in Montreal. When he was a hermit in the area, Ven. Sona's fellow shack dwellers at the Downing Street property included a series of single gay men also seeking a solitary life, including one who built a harpsichord in his cabin. Across the road lived Wim and Mary Jo Tewinkel – he was a Dutch-born karate master and visual artist who made his living as a forester, and she had lived in Thailand and Japan. Another hermit neighbour, an Austrian-Canadian engineer exiled from Vancouver, whom Ven. Sona described as a "Daoist," had built himself a tiny eccentric and ingenious off-grid house. Asian culture often inspired this group's creative and countercultural aspirations.¹²

In the sparsely populated valley, this cultural transformation was not obvious in the human landscape, but it was there for those who were looking for it. For example, the Birken property had long been a local landmark of British settler colonialism. Local lore had it that, since the

¹¹ For example, in this period the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (a.k.a. Hare Krishna Movement) established Saranagati Village in the Venables Valley. See Saranagati Community Network, "History of Saranagati Village," <https://saranagati.ca/history-saranagati-village>. For secular back-to-the-land movements in this period, see Judith Plant, *Culture Gap: Towards a New World in the Yalakom Valley* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2017); Lou Allison with Jane Wilde, eds., *Gumboot Girls: Adventure, Love and Survival on the North Coast of British Columbia* (Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2014); Lou Allison with Jane Wilde, eds., *Dancing in Gumboots: Adventure, Love and Resilience: Women of the Comox Valley* (Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2018).

¹² Joe Bowman interview, 11 May 2019; Ven. Sona, "Contemplation subjects for meditation," (n.d.) audio recording; Mary Jo and Wim Tewinkel interview, 14 October 2018. Rural geographers have begun to study the transformation of rural areas through globalization and gentrification. See Michael Woods, "Engaging the Global Countryside: Globalization, Hybridity and the Reconstitution of Rural Place," *Progress in Human Geography* 31, no. 4 (2007): 485–507; Martin Phillips and Darren P. Smith, "Comparative Ruralism and 'Opening New Windows' on Gentrification," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8, no. 1 (2018): 51–58.



Figure 2. Venerable Piyadhammo and Venerable Sona outside one of the shacks, ca. 1995. Photo credit: Birken Forest Monastery.

late nineteenth century, it had been known as “Number 10 Downing Street” after locals had graffitied the main building as such in a jibe against the officious local census taker who lived there. Then, in the 1920s, First World War veteran Ab Gramsons bought the property and covered an adjacent building with folk art commemorating his military service in famous battles. As Whistler’s *Pique* weekly put it in a 1995 profile about the monastery, “amidst these ... icons of Western culture” Ven. Sona and Ven. Piyadhammo founded their “Shangri-La of solace.” While their landlord wouldn’t allow the monks to advertise Birken with a roadside sign, when Ven. Piyadhammo tied a saffron-coloured blanket to a hydro pole adjacent to the monastery to alert visitors to their turnoff, he was signalling a new kind of settlement in the area, one that looked to postcolonial Southeast Asia rather than to imperial Britain for inspiration and tradition.¹³

¹³ Kevin Damaskie, “Floating the Karmic Freeway with the Birken Buddhists,” *Pique*, 6 January 1995; Hemal and Hemi Ratnakara interview, 23 August 2019. Ven. Sona and Piyadhammo did not start this spiritual reorientation of the countryside to the new Pacific British Columbia; instead, it began with an infusion of Asian religion during the last decade of the era of “White” British Columbia. Swami Radha (Sylvia Hellman, from Germany) and Anagarika Dharmadina (Anna Burian, from Austria via Britain) arrived in Canada in the 1950s as participants in a process of religious globalization centred in India and spurred by the positive orientalism of German and American romanticism. Despite their origins, the two figures defied the Eurocentric intentions of Canada’s racially exclusive postwar immigration policy. Hellman

BIRKEN'S NEW-WAVE ASIAN MIGRANTS

Despite its location in the rural bohemia of the Birkenhead Valley, many of the monastery's original supporters were recent Sri Lankan and Thai Theravadin immigrants living in the suburbs of the Lower Mainland. Most of the Sri Lankan supporters arrived in Canada from the 1970s to the 1990s with professional training and designation thanks to Canada's post-1967 "points"-based immigration system. The Thai supporters held Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) scholarships for graduate students, participated in the federal Live-In Caregiver Temporary Worker program (LCP), or had been sponsored for immigration by their professional Canadian spouses. These groups' arrival from Asia marked a new global era in Canada's immigration and international development history when the nation no longer closed its doors based on race or national origin but, rather, focused on the potential economic contribution of migrants in a post-industrial and neoliberal context. Like members of the cultural new class, these new Canadians were better educated than were members of the overall Canadian-born population and most came from middle-class or affluent backgrounds. Even those who entered through the LCP tended to be university-educated and overqualified, in part because, after two years of employment, this coveted program offered a path to permanent residency. Similarly, Canada's overseas economic development efforts in this era and since have focused on elite "human resource development" and forging "Canadian partnerships," particularly in rapidly developing countries like Thailand with a relatively large, extant middle class. These initiatives pointed to Canada's effort to compete for the settlement of a highly mobile global workforce of skilled workers and investors as well as to its instrumental focus on multiculturalism as a benefit in forging stronger economic connections to rapidly developing nations, particularly

would establish yoga ashrams, first in Vancouver in 1957 and then in Kootenay Bay in 1963. After a seven-year spiritual quest in India and Sri Lanka, in 1965 Burian became Hellman's neighbour and pioneered the establishment of Theravada Buddhism in North America. As Anagarika Dhammadina, Burian would become a trail-blazing teacher of Theravada in Western Canada, working with Sri Lankan migrant Kirithi Senaratne to organize meditation retreats with visiting monks, including one at which Tom West learned about the Bhavana Society in West Virginia, where he would ordain. See Don Baker and Larry DeVries, "Introduction," in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, ed. Larry DeVries, Don Baker, and Dan Overmeyer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 10. See also Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts across Cultures* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2004), 50, 98; Larry DeVries, "Hindu and Other South Asian Religious Groups," in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, 21–22; Mavis L. Fenn, "Dhammadinna and Jayantā: Daughters of the Buddha in Canada," in *Flowers on the Rock: Global and Local Buddhisms in Canada*, ed. John S. Harding, Alexander Soucy, and Victor Sögen Hori (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 313–32.

in Asia, from which since 1980 the vast majority of immigrants to British Columbia have arrived.¹⁴

Just as federal officials intended, these members of or aspirants to a global middle class shared with their Canadian-born peers professional identities, aspirations, and familiarity with institutions – like the university or the engineering firm – at the centre of the knowledge economy. They hit the ground running on the job and in the lab and seminar room. Spiritually, however, Canada was a foreign country. In the mid-1990s, when Birken was founded, both the Sinhalese (Sri Lanka's dominant Buddhist ethnic group) and Thai Buddhist communities each comprised about one thousand or fewer people, most of whom had arrived in the past fifteen years. They represented a tiny minority of the Asian migrants in the new Pacific British Columbia, especially when compared to those joining established and already numerically dominant groups, like Chinese Canadians. In 1996, 200,000 immigrants from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan lived in what is now Metro Vancouver. As Paul Crowe has noted, Chinese Buddhists in the Lower Mainland enjoyed the numbers to support the building and sustenance of a diversity of Chinese-language temples and monasteries without any need to integrate into the Canadian “mainstream.” By contrast, in 1994, when Birken was founded, only a single Thai temple in East Vancouver (Yanviriya Buddhist Temple) and the Sri Lankan Vihara in Surrey (BVS) had just been established, the latter only because its members had joined forces with an even tinier Burmese group. While both temples were vital to all three communities both spiritually and culturally, they were a far cry from the diversity of Theravadin institutions, expressions, and practices available back home.¹⁵

¹⁴ James Walsh, “Navigating Globalization: Immigration Policy in Canada and Australia, 1945–2007,” *Sociological Forum* 23, no. 4 (2008): 796–808; David R. Morrison, *Aid and Ebb Tide: A History of CIDA and Canadian Development Assistance* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), 198–99, 209, 293; Bandu Madanayake, “Sri Lankan and Myanmar Buddhism,” in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, 137; Rachel K. Brickner and Christine Strachle, “The Missing Link: Gender, Immigration Policy and the Live-In Caregiver Program in Canada,” *Policy and Society* 29, no. 4 (2010): 312, 315.

¹⁵ Statistics Canada, “Admission Category and Applicant Type, Period of Immigration, Place of Birth, Age and Sex for the Immigrant Population Who Landed Between 1980 and 2016, in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2016 Census – 25% Sample Data,” 2016 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-400-X2016202, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=110558&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=120&V-ID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=>, last modified 17 June 2019; CHASS, Canadian Census Analyzer, 1996 Census Profile of “Census Divisions, Citizenship, Immigration and Place of Birth.”

One notable gap identified by our Asian interviewees was the absence of meditation monks in British Columbia. A common distinction made in the literature on North American Buddhism is that immigrants born in Buddhist cultures do not meditate, while their largely white convert counterparts do. Actually, today's global mindfulness meditation movement had its roots in a nineteenth-century religious revival in Burma, which, by the mid-twentieth century, had spread throughout Theravada Asia and is still growing, especially among laypeople from the urban middle class, Asian analogues to the middle class created by the new service economy in Canada and around the world. Birken's Sri Lankan and Thai supporters were already connected to this modern Buddhist meditation movement prior to arriving in Canada. In the case of the Sri Lankan immigrants we interviewed, all but one told us about close family connections in their homeland to committed lay or monastic teachers of meditation. In fact, the Surrey Vihara was founded by a Sri Lankan meditator, Kirthi Senaratne, who settled with his family in the Lower Mainland in the 1970s. Through his Sri Lankan connections and organizing acumen, he worked in the decade before Birken was founded to put western Canada on the circuit of globe-trotting missionary monks who visited both Theravadin temples and meditation retreats around the world, teaching both "ethnic" Buddhists and Western newcomers and converts to the faith, like Ven. Sona. Senaratne's original vision for the Vihara was to institutionalize these efforts by creating a multi-ethnic location for Theravadin meditators before financial exigencies remoulded it into a more traditional temple and de facto cultural centre for the Sri Lankan community. In the case of the Thais, at least two of them were adherents of the popular Dhammakaya meditation technique, which has been practised by monastics and laypeople in a number of different contexts in Thailand since the early twentieth century; others were attracted to Birken because of its connection through Ven. Sona to the great Thai forest monk and meditation teacher Ajahn Chah.¹⁶

<http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca/cgi-bin/census/1996/displayCensusCD.cgi?c=cip#>; Paul Crowe, "Dharma on the Move: Vancouver Buddhist Communities and Multiculturalism," in *Flowers on the Rock*, 150–72; Madanayake, "Sri Lankan and Myanmar Buddhism"; James Placzek and Ian G. Baird, "Thai and Lao Buddhism," in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, 107–23.

¹⁶ Richard F. Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Catherine Newell, "Two Meditation Traditions from Contemporary Thailand: A Summary Overview," *Rian Thai: International Journal of Thai Studies* 4 (2011): 81–110; Priyanut Dharmapiya (a.k.a. Piboolsravut) interview, 11 October 2018; Thai supporters' group interview, 29 July 2018; Shamina Senaratne interview, 29 September 2019; Kannangara

In addition to these prior connections to the lay meditation movement in Asia, our interviewees began or intensified their existing practice after arriving in British Columbia. In their new, largely non-Buddhist environment, they sought reaffirmation of “principles” and “teaching” they knew they could “rely on,” as Priyanut Dharmapiya put it, and turned to practices like meditation as they explored the origins and orthodoxies of their religious birthright. This phenomenon among some American Thai Theravadins has been described by sociologist Wendy Cadge as a consciously “achieved” post-migration religious identity distinct from the “ascribed” one inherited at birth. Thus our participants saw that there were what Birken supporter Mali Kannangara called “two different ways of being Buddhist.” They made a distinction between the predominant congregational and “ritual” Buddhism practised at the Thai temple and Surrey Vihara, which made mundane life better, and a Buddhist “philosophy” and individual meditation “practice” – exemplified by cloistered meditation monks – that offered to laypeople a path to enlightenment and nibbana (nirvana).¹⁷

To pursue this “other” way of being Buddhist, a number of our interviewees began personal study and meditation practice as part of their experience of immigration to Canada. For example, prior to moving to Vancouver and while living by himself in Saskatoon as a university student far from any Buddhist institution, Tissa Kannangara realized that, despite growing up in Sri Lanka, he “didn’t know about Buddhism, the real essence of Buddhism.” Thus he started a period of study by taking out a library book on the complex Buddhist causation doctrine called dependent origination. After Hemi and Hemal Ratnakara met Ven. Sona during their first visit to the Surrey Vihara, soon after arriving in Canada, they decided to take advantage of being in a new place to pursue their spiritual life, away from family obligations in Sri Lanka and the social hubbub of expatriate communities in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where they had lived for several years. Encouraged by Surrey Vihara founder Kirthi Senaratne, “a big proponent of meditation,” who told her “this is what will get you through,” Rajnikanth Eparatchy began a sitting practice for stress relief during a period when she was caring for young teenagers and a very ill husband while working full time. This

family interview, 14 August 2018; Sahabandu-Eparatchy family interview, 15 September 2019; Rasika Rajapakshe interview, 23 July 2018; Hemal and Hemi Ratnakara interview, 23 August 2019.

¹⁷ Priyanut Dharmapiya interview, 11 October 2018; Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 158; Kannangara family interview, 14 August 2018.

personal search for authenticity and spiritual foundation, contemplative alternatives to conventional religiosity, and stress relief also characterizes those Theravadins in Southeast Asia who do meditate.¹⁸

BIRKEN'S CREATIVE CLASS

The shack monastery's non-Asian supporters were also both largely middle class and outliers from the mainstream. While Ven. Sona often likes to separate Birken's lay community in this period into two opposing categories – one, the most “refined” sectors of society (this category also includes his Asian supporters), and the other, affectionately named “runaway boys” – both represented British Columbia's new service-based knowledge/tourism/recreation/leisure economies and the broadly defined “creative class” that characterized them. Ven. Sona sums up his supporter group as “the arts class, the intellectual class, the philosophical class, the adventurer class.” Those who hadn't been born in a Buddhist country had to be at least somewhat adventurous, given the novelty of Buddhist monasticism in North America. As Ven. Sona put it, while as monks he and Ven. Piyadhammo “were the top of the social spectrum from the Asian point of view,” they were “weirdos on the edge” for almost everyone else in British Columbia in the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, throughout its history British Columbia has proven particularly receptive to such eccentrics; the flowering of rural, intentional communities in the 1980s was part of a longer history since the 1860s in which the province has hosted hundreds of isolated, communal, and idealistic utopian communities, religious and otherwise.¹⁹

Indeed, a diverse group of responsive people who hadn't been born Buddhist quickly began to show up and support the monks. Bohemian locals appeared, like Joe Bowman and his fellow monastery steward Bo Klima who both came from the communal Langstaff Farm down the road. Young “lifties” and other curious service workers from the Whistler ski resort dropped by the monastery. Meanwhile, from Vancouver professional supporters, including Judith Williamson (a human-rights lawyer) and couple Miguel Romero and Elizabeth Lund (research chemists at the University of British Columbia

¹⁸ Kannangara family interview, 14 August 2018; Sahabandu-Eparatchy family interview, 15 September 2019; Neena Mahadev, “Secularism and Religious Modernity in Sri Lanka and Singapore: Trans-Regional Revivalism Considered,” in *The Secular in South, East, and Southeast Asia*, ed. Kenneth Dean and Peter van der Veer (Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 287–311.

¹⁹ Justine Brown, *All Possible Worlds: Utopian Experiments in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books), 11.

(UBC)), regularly joined the Thai and Sri Lankan supporters. Local supporters who were sustained materially by the Pemberton Valley's older resource economy still participated in the area's new, alternative culture, including monastery neighbours the Tewinkels. Similarly, Baptist Roberta Carson, whose husband owned a pole yard in Mount Currie, learned about the monastery from Mary Jo Tewinkel while attending a Pemberton yoga class. She was familiar with and curious about Asian culture through her lifelong friendships with Japanese Canadians, starting when she was a girl in postwar Lillooet. Arthur Halle, a recently arrived local from Vancouver who commuted to Whistler to run a small business servicing vacation properties, met the two monks while horseback riding, just a day after finishing Peter Matthiessen's book *The Snow Leopard*, about Tibetan Buddhism. What all of these groups and individuals shared along with their quest to end their suffering was the cosmopolitanism, individualism, lifestyles, and resources to explore the Asian spiritual traditions gaining traction in the new Pacific British Columbia.²⁰

THE TWAIN MEET AT BIRKEN

The new Asian migrants and the cultural new class, groups kept apart as separate entities in the scholarly literature of BC studies and Buddhist studies, came together at Birken monastery. David Ley found Vancouver's cultural new class in the 1990s to be parochially urban and overwhelmingly white: as cosmopolitan hedonists on the Pacific Rim they consumed Asian food and decorative arts, and practised yoga, tai chi, and meditation, without having a social or cultural connection to Vancouver's large and growing Asian communities. This latter group, the literature tells us, largely settled in "ethnoburbs," preserving their diasporic communities and identities, especially as recent arrivals to Canada. Furthermore, the limited literature on Buddhism in the West has often made crude distinctions between a traditional, ritual-based "ethnic" and monastic Buddhism for immigrants and a modern, meditation-based "convert" lay Buddhism for whites.²¹

²⁰ Ven. Sona interview, 10 March 2018; Ajahn Sona, "My 40 Years of Buddhism in the West," Ho Center for Buddhist Studies, Stanford University, 3 November 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcTb9QLecvg>; Roberta and Bill Carson interview, 24 July 2018; Kevin Damaskie, "Peek a Boo," *Pique*, 6 January 1995.

²¹ Jiemin Bao questions these tropes through analysis of another cross-cultural, middle-class Theravadin community in *Creating a Buddhist Community: A Thai Temple in Silicon Valley* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015). See also Ley, *New Middle Class*; David Ley, "Transnational Spaces and Everyday Lives," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*,

However, our interviews revealed that more connected than separated these two groups of Birken supporters. Similar to the Asian migrants who sought monastic orthodoxy to ease their culture shock, Canadian-born members of the monastery's lay community found Birken at a turning point or crisis in their lives, "when the rubber hits the road," as Bo Klima put it. They were seeking relief from suffering caused by common triggers in late twentieth-century British Columbia, like addiction, divorce, illness and death, midlife crises, along with chronic mental health issues like depression. Beyond these triggers there were other, more deeply rooted similarities between the two groups of supporters. Judith Williamson found out about Birken from monastery neighbour Arthur Halle – at a meditation retreat at UBC – and became a stalwart of the Birken monks and monastery because, like Tissa Kannangara, she realized she lacked an understanding of the foundations of her Buddhist practice. She told us that, while she had been meditating and attending retreats for ten years, Birken was the first place where she had a context for what she had learned. The teachings were demystified for her because she was able to hear them in a monastery built around Buddhist precepts: "It was just like, 'Oh! This is what I've been doing all these years. This is what it's about. Oh, right!'" Miguel Romero and Elizabeth Lund moved back to British Columbia from Ottawa, where Miguel had introduced Elizabeth to the Theravadin teachings and monks he had originally found through Kirthi Senaratne. Their settling in Vancouver as a couple, as for the Ratnakaras, led to a mutually reinforcing deepening of their practice and faith, especially after they started to visit Birken. Monastery neighbour Roberta Carson, while a devout Christian, like Rajnikanth Eparatchy sought stress relief to deal with serious illness – in this case her own – through meditation taught by the Birken monks.²²

In their shared engagement with this unlikely enterprise, some supporters made great spiritual friendships across the ostensible cultural divide. Even before Miguel Romero knew about Ven. Sona and Birken, Kirthi Senaratne supported him on the path, including by introductions

n.s., 29, no. 2 (2004): 151–64; Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); Engin F. Isin and Myer Siemiatycki, "Making Space for Mosques: Struggles for Urban Citizenship in Diasporic Toronto," in *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, ed. Sherene H. Razack (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 185–209; Wakoh Shannon Hickey, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2011): 1–25.

²² Ven. Sona, interview, 10 March 2018; Bo Klima interview, 6 November 2017; Judith Williamson, interview 18 April 2018; Miguel Romero interview, 1 March 2018; Elizabeth Lund interview, 26 June 2018; Roberta and Bill Carson interview, 24 July 2018. On the "mystification" of Buddhism in North America, see Wilson, *Mindful America*, 44–45.

to visiting monks and invitations to participate in the practice groups and retreats of his multi-ethnic network of Theravada meditators. The graduate student Thai supporters, including Priyanut Dharmapiya and Anak Iamaroon, formed a sutta (Buddhist scripture) study group in Vancouver that included Romero and Elizabeth Lund. When the Thai supporters invited a number of eminent Thai forest ajahns (senior monks) to Vancouver and to the shack monastery, they asked Lund to participate in the visit, which resulted in her accepting an invitation to become a maechee (lay nun) in Thailand, where she remained in the robes for a decade. Roberta and Bill Carson accommodated the visiting Thai monks during their sojourn at Birken, deepening their family's understanding and respect for the Thai tradition. Despite an age difference of several decades, Dharmapiya and Roberta Carson became so close while supporting the shack monastery that Dharmapiya came to recognize that Carson was her mother in a former life. Furthermore, these supportive intercultural relationships, begun in Birken's remote outpost, helped expand the global networks spreading all forms of Theravada from its Asian foundations. So, for example, while living in Vancouver, "ethnic" Birken supporter Dharmapiya attended a retreat at the headquarters of the "convert" and lay teacher-led Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, where she learned about the Siladhara, an order of non-Asian female monastics established by the British male monasteries in the Thai forest tradition. Upon her return to British Columbia, she told convert and fellow Birken supporter Judith Williamson about this group, sparking Williamson to inquire about visiting this monastic community. According to the binaries constructed between "ethnic" and "convert" Buddhists by much of the scholarship on Western Buddhism, "ethnic" Dharmapiya wasn't supposed to visit non-monastic convert-led meditation centres like IMS, let alone expose "convert" Williamson to convert adaptations of Thai forest monasticism in the West.²³

BOTH GROUPS SUPPORT AND ARE SUPPORTED BY BIRKEN

Ven. Sona's orthodoxy was matched by an appealing informality beyond the proscriptions of the vinaya (the monastic rules and discipline as laid out in the Pali Canon), first written down in what is now Sri Lanka about two thousand years ago. As Ruwan Eparatchy put it, Ven. Sona was "very

²³ *My Life, My Practice: Ajahn Sona in Conversation with Miguel Romero*, 10 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPBivFGHHlc>; Priyanut Dharmapiya interview, 11 October 2018; Elizabeth Lund interview, 26 June 2018; Roberta and Bill Carson interview, 24 July 2018; Judith Williamson to Chandasiri, 27 July 1995.



Figure 3. Priyanut Dharmapiya and Roberta Carson. The two women became great supporters of the monastery and great friends. Photo credit: Roberta Carson.

disciplined” and “by the book,” but his teachings were “presented in a very accessible way.” So, for example, it is a Sri Lankan custom – but not part of the vinaya – for some monks to distance themselves from laypeople by speaking behind a fan and avoiding eye contact. Typically, they did not volunteer to walk supporters’ children to school, as Ven. Sona did when he lived at the Surrey Vihara for a few months in 1994 upon his return from Thailand and before founding the monastery. Unrestricted by the cultural conventions of the other temple monks, Ven. Sona had a direct and friendly rapport with Sri Lankan laypeople, especially the meditators among them, which they found unusual in a monk – and appealing. His method of teaching, inculcated by his training in the Thai forest tradition, was based on extemporaneous talks customized to best reach the particular audience and to relate the dhamma (Buddhist teachings) to everyday life. Because he taught in English and was Canadian born, he could connect to Sri Lankan immigrants’ Canadian-born children, like Ruwan Eparatchy, who was fluent neither in Sinhala nor in Sri Lankan religious custom. Ven. Sona’s jokes and games taught Tara and Timal Kannangara lifelong lessons in the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of impermanence.²⁴

²⁴ Madanayake, “Sri Lankan and Myanmar Buddhism,” 128–29; Sahabandu-Eparatchy family interview, 15 September 2019; Kannangara family interview, 14 August 2018; Shamina Senaratne



Figure 4. Meal offering to the monks at the Buddhist Vihara Society, Surrey, BC, 1994. Venerables Sona and Piyadhammo are in the foreground. Photo credit: Hemi and Hemal Ratnakara.

The Thai followers were introduced to Ven. Sona when he and Ven. Piyadhammo, who joined him briefly at the Surrey Vihara, decided to move to the Pemberton shack to found the monastery. The two monks went to the Thai temple to let this other Theravadin community know about a forest-tradition monastery now available to them. The Thais were struck by Ven. Sona's lack of didacticism – Priyanut Dharmapiya, who had first learned to meditate in another Thai tradition, noted that the Birken monks encouraged laypeople to meditate without telling them “what we are doing is right or wrong, or they like it or dislike it” – and how he met them where each of them was in his or her dhamma teachings. Somrudee Sritubtim remembered that “you [could] ask questions at your level” about anything you wanted. Buoyed by this encouragement, the Thais pushed themselves by meditating all night with the monks during their monthly weekend visits to the monastery. Ven. Sona, in his

interview, 29 September 2019. The handful of North American monasteries in the Thai Forest tradition, like Birken, which have been successful in ordaining homegrown monks, like Ven. Sona, play a vital role in the perpetuation of Theravada in North America beyond the first generation of migrants, especially among diaspora groups like Thais and Sri Lankans, for whom language and cultural retention are more challenging due to population size and other factors. See Cadge, *Heartwood*, 199–202. See also Rasika Rajapakshe interview, 23 July 2018.

typical combination of discipline and informality, cheekily called these marathon sessions “dhamma pyjama parties.”²⁵

As with its Asian supporters, a large part of Birken’s appeal for non-Asian newcomers came from its monks’ openness, informality, and acceptance. Buddhism, particularly in the pluralistic societies of the West, is notable as a “low-barrier” religion that does not require one to formally adopt a “Buddhist” identity, thus making it particularly suited for “irreligious” British Columbia. As Miguel Romero pointed out, British Columbia is not a “faith culture,” especially compared to Thailand, Sri Lanka, or his native Mexico. Despite the extremity of the monks’ austere, orthodox life and ethos, they were remarkably undogmatic, meeting visitors where they were, only asking newcomers to “come and see” for themselves, as the Buddha asked those who were curious about his teachings. Vancouverite Judith Williamson relished the “freewheeling talks” at the monastery, as did Arthur Halle, who likened Birken to a meeting of a “theosophical society.” Roberta Carson appreciated that the monks, unlike some of her church friends, never denigrated or barred followers of other religious faiths, including her Christianity. Despite never identifying as a Buddhist, she and her husband Bill joked that Birken made her a “born again meditator” and stalwart supporter of the monks. Mary Jo Tewinkel remembers crossing the road to visit the monks at various times of day. Politely asking whether she was intruding, Ven. Sona would cheerfully invoke the Buddhist virtue of equanimity by answering, “You can’t bother us; we’re monks!” Roberta Carson felt that such experiences spoke to the “acceptance” that suffused the atmosphere at Birken: “I felt good about that. I didn’t have to turn into something to belong there.”²⁶

Ven. Sona may have been informal and accepting in his encouragement of supporters, but at its heart Birken was a monastery in a centuries-long orthodox tradition, not a meditation “centre” or therapeutic retreat. This orthodoxy distinguished it from new religious movements in British Columbia’s history, like those of the Doukhobors or the Christian socialists of the Sointula settlement, which were defined by their rejection of established religious traditions and hierarchies. In fact, the

²⁵ Priyanut Dharmapiya interview, 11 October 2018; Thai supporters’ group interview, 29 July 2018; Joe Bowman interview, 11 May 2019.

²⁶ Miguel Romero interview, 1 March 2018; Judith Williamson interview, 18 April 2018; Arthur Halle quoted in Damaskie, “Peek a Boo”; Roberta and Bill Carson interview, 24 July 2018; Mary Jo and Wim Tewinkel interview, 14 October 2018. As Tina Marie Block and others have pointed out, British Columbia and Cascadia in general are notable for their “irreligiosity” in relation to the rest of North America. See Tina Marie Block, *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

monks' conservatism even put them outside of the mainstream of North American Theravada, which had adapted many of the fundamentals of the faith. The American-born founders of the IMS, the first widespread North American Theravadin movement and the dominant form of "convert" Theravada in British Columbia in the 1990s, deliberately chose to build a secularized vipassana (insight) meditation movement led by lay teachers, even though many of them had been ordained as monks in Thailand and Burma. As IMS founder Jack Kornfield put it, "We left much of the Eastern culture, ritual, and ceremony ... behind in Asia" as what he called "an unnecessary barrier," establishing instead "a container provided by the West," according to Kornfield's associate Joseph Goldstein, which was focused on individual meditation practice outside of the monastic tradition. By the 1980s, this effort at domestication had brought secularized elements of Theravada to the mainstream through the adaptation of "mindfulness" by clinical psychology and its worldly concerns.²⁷

Whereas the convert Theravadins who established the insight movement in the 1970s felt it essential to abandon or adapt monasticism and devise a largely secular, culturally specific "container" for Theravada to succeed in North America, Ven. Sona and his fellow pioneers of Thai forest monasticism in North America believed just the opposite. In other words, they felt that their tradition's strict adherence to the vinaya was the only path forward for Theravada in the West. They believed that this orthodoxy would provide them with the "protective envelope" they needed to establish the order and maintain "the purity of the teachings" in North America, just as it had throughout Buddhist monasticism's history as one of the world's oldest, continuously operating voluntary organizations.²⁸

Those monastics who choose the Thai forest tradition treasure what Ven. Sona calls its "pristine" vinaya, a rulebook intended to enforce and protect their renunciation of the world and thus open the path to

²⁷ George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977); "Sointula, British Columbia," Canadian Utopias Project: Built Utopian Settlements to 1945, last modified 26 May 2019, <https://canadianutopiasproject.ca/settlements/sointula-bc/>; Kornfield, quoted in Cadge, *Heartwood*, 29; Goldstein, quoted in Abhi Hudson, "IMS Turns Twenty: A Guest's Reflection," *Insight* (Fall 1996), 7. On the IMS movement in British Columbia, see James Placzek and Larry DeVries, "Buddhism in British Columbia," in *Buddhism in Canada*, ed. Bruce Mathews (London: Routledge, 2006), 9–10.

²⁸ Paul David Numrich, "Theravada Buddhism in America: Prospects for the Sangha," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 157, 161. See also Sandra Bell, "British Theravada Buddhism: Otherworldly Theories, and the Theory of Exchange," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13, no. 2 (1998): 149. On the mindfulness movement, see Wilson, *Mindful America*.

enlightenment. In Ven. Sona's words, this millennia-old container for the "Theravada forest tradition is about as disciplined as it gets in the entire world [among monastic traditions] ... You won't find anything more contained ... than that." While the Birken monks had to make minor, practical adjustments to the vinaya – for example, by wearing snow boots rather than sandals in the winter, along with parkas over their robes – they adhered as strictly as possible to the rules. The remoteness of Gramsons prevented them going on almsround, but the monks maintained the principle that undergirded that practice – reliance on laypeople for their food. When laypeople didn't offer meals, the monks didn't eat. In one lean period, Ven. Piyadhammo even took the drastic move of disrobing temporarily so that he could buy food and cook for Ven. Sona, keeping the monastery, and his strict observance of the vinaya, alive.²⁹

For the Sri Lankan and Thai seekers who supported the monastery, this orthodoxy was welcome and reassuring. They committed to this unlikely project in part because Vens. Sona and Piyadhammo were "doing it," as Shamina Seneratne put it, "without [the] cultural background" of the Sri Lankans and Thais. Priyanut Dharmapiya believed that only "someone who really knew about Buddhism," or had what Seneratne called "an inner motivation and a knowing," would try to replicate this monastic model in such an unlikely place. Ven. Sona and Birken offered these seekers an opportunity, which none of them expected in British Columbia – a charismatic and approachable Canadian-born meditation monk trained in their tradition who had founded an austere and orthodox forest monastery strictly following the vinaya. As Rasika Rajapakshe told us, Birken might have been the only Theravadin monastery available, but "the only one [was] a very good one."³⁰

Despite the rigidity and idiosyncrasy, the monastery's non-Asian supporters also appreciated the vinaya's rules and discipline, in particular those regarding sexuality. Birken, several pointed out, was founded during the exposure of widespread sexual abuse in established religious institutions like the Roman Catholic Church as well as in new, convert-dominated Buddhist communities, including Shambhala International and multiple Zen centres, not to mention the bioterrorism perpetrated by the Rajneesh ashram in Oregon. In this context, the "protective envelope" of ethical behaviour upheld by the Birken monks reinforced supporters' trust in them. The vinaya so directly bases monasticism on

²⁹ Ven. Sona interviews, 28 August 2017, 9 March 2018; Borgland, "Some Reflections."

³⁰ Shamina Seneratne interview, 29 September 2019; Priyanut Dharmapiya interview, 11 October 2018; Rasika Rajapakshe interview, 23 July 2018.



Figure 5. Meal offering to Venerable Sona and visiting Thai monks at Mary Jo and Wim Tewinkel's home, Gramsons, BC, 1996. Photo credit: Mary Jo and Wim Tewinkel.

celibacy that sexual intercourse is “an absolute, disrobing offence,” as Ven. Sona put it. Bo Klima, who had experienced first-hand the scandals that undermined the San Francisco Zen Center community, was on the lookout for any “deviant behaviours or questionable practices” by the monks and was relieved to find that they were “very disciplined” and without any “ambiguity” in their conduct. While Judith Williamson was irritated by some of the gender-based vinaya restrictions, like the proscription against women handing items directly to male monastics, overall she found that the “very clear boundaries” of the vinaya made her relationship with the Birken monks “much more relaxed on a personal level than any kind of interaction [she’d] had with any of the lay teachers at an organized retreat.”³¹

Birken was a world away from lay retreats. Travelling to this outpost from the Lower Mainland required a three-hour drive into the Coast Mountains, travelling the pothole-ridden Pemberton-Portage Road,

³¹ Ven. Sona interview, 11 November 2017; Bo Klima interview, 6 November 2017; Judith Williamson, interview 18 April 2018; Roberta and Bill Carson interview, 24 July 2018; Tracy J. Trothen, *Shattering the Illusion: Child Sexual Abuse and Canadian Religious Institutions* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012); Victor Sōgen Hori, “Buddhist Monasticism in Canada: Sex and Celibacy,” in *Flowers on the Rock*, 173–97; Carl Abbott, “Revisiting Rajneeshpuram: Oregon’s Largest Utopian Community as Western History,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 116, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 414–47..

which was bad enough in the summer but terrible in the long, cold, and snowy winters. There they experienced what Elizabeth Lund called “Canadian asceticism” – an unwinterized shack with no electricity, plumbing, or phone, where a trip to the outhouse might mean an encounter with a bear. Throughout the year these supporters would leave the Lower Mainland in the wee hours, laden down with food and supplies, so that they could reach Birken to feed the monks their one daily meal, which, according to monastic rules, had to be consumed before noon. Nikki Barkasy, who had just received her driver’s licence, would drive more than a dozen Thai supporters to the monastery in a rented van in all weather conditions, including a blizzard that buried them in snow. Supporters were particularly impressed by the austerity of the project, unattached, as Anuchida Seger explained, to any “big temples, or [a] convenient, comfortable place.” For Seger, what Miguel Romero called “a very extreme way of life” demonstrated that Ven. Sona had transcended desire, a major spiritual accomplishment.³²

The austerity and the orthodoxy gave Asian and non-Asian supporters alike a sense of the monumental and extraordinary attempt to translate an Asian discipline into a deeply foreign environment. In the eyes of all of our research participants, practising meditation with and supporting the monks at the “shack” monastery was an unbelievable opportunity. Many of the Asian supporters were familiar with how esteemed forest monasteries in Sri Lanka and Thailand attempted to replicate the austere lives of the first Buddhist monks. However, they had never experienced a monastery quite so “back to basics” as Birken, as Thai supporter Nikki Barkasy put it. Nor had they imagined themselves participating in the founding of Theravada monasticism in North America. Miguel Romero, who later would become the first monk trained by Ven. Sona, at Birken’s second location, remembers sitting in the shack asking himself: “What are we doing here? What is *he* [Ven. Sona] doing here?” But the very unlikeliness of the place also attracted Romero, who counted himself among the “romantics” and “idealists” who came to Birken in the early days. All of the supporters had a sense of participating in something momentous and new in Canada that was, at the same time, an authentic expression of the ancient roots of the Buddhist tradition.³³

³² Elizabeth Lund interview, 26 June 2018; Thai supporters’ group interview, 29 July 2018; Miguel Romero interview, 1 March 2018.

³³ Thai supporters’ group interview, 29 July 2018; Miguel Romero interview, 1 March 2018.

SKILLED WORKERS AND BIRKEN'S SPIRITUAL ECONOMY

While these relationships suggest a collective enterprise and understanding among the diverse lay supporters, if the monastery were to survive, converts had much catching up to do in understanding its spiritual economy. The monks depended on the unsolicited generosity of laypeople. Deeply engrained in the Sri Lankan and Thai understanding of Buddhist monasticism, this notion required significant learning on the part of the cultural newcomers. In Theravadin countries, the monks' mendicancy has worked traditionally because of what is called in English a "merit" economy. Laypeople improve their potential for an auspicious rebirth through their dana (generosity) in sustaining the monks, who in turn offer the laypeople teachings, an example of renunciation, and the opportunity to contribute to monastics' survival in the holy life. The merit exchange, in particular, is difficult for Westerners, even Buddhist converts, to appreciate: it requires an understanding and acceptance of the doctrine of karma and rebirth (both a mundane and cosmic doctrine of cause and effect), which secularized forms of North American Buddhism have greatly underplayed or ignored. The resulting practices of ostentatious and ritualized giving are culturally unfamiliar and sometimes even off-putting to many in the West.

However, as anthropologist Sandra Bell has shown, both in Theravada Asia and throughout the rest of the world, many laypeople have reasons to support monastics and their monasteries beyond the spiritual materialism of merit. Like Birken, the monasteries Bell studied were a "collaboration of monks and lay people," which provided a "spiritual and ethical example," a "haven of therapeutic promise," and a unique opportunity to practise "wholesome spiritual pursuits" in ascetic, countercultural spaces that spurned mainstream materialism. However, even understanding the monastery as a moral enterprise of monks and laypeople, converts struggle to grasp their essential role in sustaining monks, especially when prohibitions keep the monastics from asking for needed support and when the laypeople's prior Buddhist experience might only have been at pricey meditation retreats that openly solicited additional donations – a practice contrary to the vinaya and disconcerting to Asian Theravadins but common in the container created by the insight movement and other forms of Western Buddhism.³⁴

³⁴ Bell, "British Theravada Buddhism," 160, 161, 164. See also, Thanissaro Bikkhu, "No Strings Attached: The Buddha's Culture of Generosity," *Head and Heart Together: Essays on the Buddhist Path* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2016), 12–17; Sandra Bell, "Being Creative with Tradition: Rooting Theravada Buddhism in Britain," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1 (2000): 1–23.

The newcomers to monasticism who caught on most quickly to the monks' dependency were the monastery neighbours Mary Jo Tewinkel and Roberta Carson, who ultimately provided essential meals, groceries, and rides to town for the monastery stewards to do the monastery shopping. Roberta Carson remembered that her first well-meaning donation was a bag of potatoes, useless to the monks who were prohibited from cooking. Tewinkel marvelled: "even if we brought them bread and peanut butter, they couldn't put them together." The reasons that Carson and Tewinkel offered for giving were instinctive. Carson worried about the monks, like she did about her own sons, who were the same age. The Tewinkels talked about the mutual support of neighbours as an essential part of the culture of remote rural communities like theirs. Both told us that they expected nothing in return for their generosity, and, in fact, Carson rolled her eyes at the traditional notion of merit, which she summarized as monks telling laypeople "consider yourself very fortunate that we will accept your kindness."³⁵

By contrast, some of the Thai supporters rejoiced in the merit opportunities that Birken represented. Priyanut Dharmapiya saw as "falling from heaven" the fact that she and her fellow impoverished students and nannies were not only helping forest monks but also helping them establish Theravada in Canada. As she put it, "the greatest merit that we can make is to establish [a] temple" and to "assist" its monks, so in Thailand equivalent merit opportunities would be reserved only for the elite. However, other Thais and Sri Lankans were more like Carson and Tewinkel in expressing a reflexive generosity, without any explicitly assumed reciprocity; but, unlike the converts, they already knew the rules and had a deeply ingrained desire to donate. Tissa Kannangara explained: "You just give things, and in the Buddhist culture that's one of those things we do. It's not something we think about, it's something we like to do." As Nikki Barkasy put it, the "happiness" she received from giving to the monks was a kind of worldly "merit." It was an opportunity she had been looking for ever since arriving in Canada from Thailand, providing her with spiritual sustenance and grounding in her new home akin, she said, to the fundamental cultural comfort of finding Thai ingredients in the grocery store. These examples of joyous generosity rubbed off. As Elizabeth Lund put it: "it doesn't take much" to start to understand the role laypeople play – "just going to the monastery when Thais or Sri Lankans are there." As she elaborated, their "level of

³⁵ Roberta and Bill Carson interview, 24 July 2018; Mary Jo and Wim Tewinkel interview, 14 October 2018.



Figure 6. Roberta Carson's grandson, Matthew, offers gift to visiting Thai Ajahn (senior monk) Lee Thitadhammo, 1996. Photo credit: Roberta Carson.

generosity is something [extraordinary]"; those who observed it could then aspire to develop the same "natural" impulse to give.³⁶

Despite these helpful precedents and hopeful signs, throughout its existence the shack monastery was, in Ven. Sona's words, a "house of cards, to say the least." Notwithstanding increasing lay support, records from the shack monastery show that cash and in-kind donations from the monks' families were essential to Birken's survival in the early days, suggesting that the monastery's present and future viability was less than certain. In fact, even when the monastery was able to buy a property near Princeton and move to its second location, times could be very lean: that first winter, the dwindling of supplies to one bag of rice and one bottle of fish sauce prompted discussion of retreating to Thailand, where locals would compete to feed the monks. The Thais and Sri Lankans understood this vulnerability but could only visit the monastery so often from Vancouver. Nikki Barkasy remembers that she and other Thai supporters had persistent worries about the monks' survival, concerns that finally abated with the 2001 establishment of the monastery's third, well-supported location in the Nicola Valley near Kamloops. Anuchida

³⁶ Priyanut Dharmapiya interview, 11 October 2018; Kannangara family interview, 14 August 2018; Nikki Barkasy interviewed by Karen Ferguson, 8 May 2020; Elizabeth Lund interview, 26 June 2018.

Seger elaborated by describing a visit to the Kamloops monastery, where she witnessed non-Asian visitors offering enormous platters of food at mealtime. Amazed, she told herself: “Ajahn Sona, you’re very good. You’ve gotten white people to give like Thai people!”³⁷

Those white people had learned from Asian people over twenty-five years in rural settings across southern British Columbia, allowing the Birken forest monastery to take root and flourish. It’s still going strong, still in the BC forest. Its current location, sixty-five hectares up a logging road above the Nicola Valley, consists of a one thousand-square-metre main building for visitors and ten cabins for monastery residents.³⁸ The monastery’s current circumstances as an established, popular, and well-supported institution make it easy to forget that, even within the unlikely story of the westward migration of Thai forest monasticism, Birken was a particularly unlikely undertaking.

This ostensibly idiosyncratic development actually exemplifies the transformative global and local conditions of the new Pacific British Columbia, including economic shifts that produced creative class culture, transformed immigration policy, and extended the reach of global Asia. Birken’s success was thanks to Canadian-born “cultural-new-class” and migrant “global-middle-class” seekers coming together under the tutelage of a son of the era of “White” British Columbia who wholeheartedly embraced Theravadin orthodoxy. Working against the grain of modern secularism, he and his supporters created an orthodox Asian container of Buddhist monasticism in the BC countryside. They did so by connecting British Columbia to a modern global Theravada network with nodes in Sri Lanka, West Virginia, Massachusetts, and Thailand. As the forests disappeared in Thailand due to modern development pressures, the Thai forest tradition – created under pressure from 1800s modernity – came to the vast forests of Canada, where people suffering from 1990s modernity regenerated it. This is a sophisticated globalization, with ideas and people flowing with enough ease to enable the Thai forest tradition to jump an ocean to find a new niche in the mountains of British Columbia.

³⁷ Miguel Romero interview, 1 March 2018; Thai supporters’ group interview, 29 July 2018.

³⁸ “About the Monastery,” Sitavana: Birken Forest Monastery, <https://birken.ca/about/>.