



Research Article

A Monastery for Laypeople: Birken Forest Monastery and the Monasticization of Convert Theravada in Cascadia

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Theravada as practiced by most converts in the West is distinguished by the absence of monasticism, its dominant institution. Nevertheless, Thai Forest monasticism has managed to gain a foothold in the convert West, thanks to the efforts of convert monastics trained in Thailand. This article analyzes the missionary project to “monasticize” Western lay converts through the history of Birken Forest Monastery in British Columbia, Canada, founded in 1994. To establish a monastery in Birken’s isolated, non-Buddhist environs, the abbot, Ajahn Sona, in effect created a lay village to attract converts to and to teach them their role in orthodox Thai Forest monasticism. The all-consuming nature of the monasticization project among laypeople has cut short the training of a homegrown Sangha at Birken, demonstrating the challenges of establishing a domestic convert monasticism and the continuing dominance of the laity in North American Theravada.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism; Buddhism in Canada; forest monasteries

THERAVADA Buddhism as practiced today by most North American converts is distinguished by its removal or great diminishment and decontextualization of many foundational elements of the religion as it has been and is practiced elsewhere in the Theravadin world, including monasticism—the fundamental institutional container that has perpetuated the faith since the time of the Buddha (Wilson 2014). Nevertheless, starting in the 1970s in England, in the 1980s in Western Europe and Australasia, and in the 1990s in North America, convert meditation (*kammaṭṭhāna*) monks trained in Thailand and belonging to lineages in the ultra-disciplined Thai Forest Tradition began to establish monasteries supported by convert laypeople whose understanding of Buddhist practice had heretofore largely excluded monks and monasticism. This project to establish Theravadin monasticism in a laicized Buddhist environment has made impressive progress; for example, only a quarter century after planting roots in North America, more than 50 Western convert Thai Forest monks are associated with at least 10 monasteries and hermitages in Canada and the United States. Convert laypeople, often numbering in the thousands for individual monasteries, have joined members of Thai and Sri Lankan diaspora communities to provide critical support to these institutions in which the monastics, adhering strictly to the Vinaya, do not handle money, drive cars, farm, cook, or store food, and thus need laypeople to ensure their daily survival let alone the development of Buddhist monasticism as a North American institution. Furthermore, several senior North America-based monks are part of a growing global network of convert Thai-forest monastic teachers who draw students from every continent.¹

Convert support of this fundamentalist monastic tradition in North America is notable given that it is where the most influential strain of Western convert Theravada first developed. The American founders of the

¹ Thānissaro Bhikkhu is the most prominent of these, but many other North American Thai forest monastics, including Birken Monastery’s abbot, Ajahn Sona, have worldwide followings thanks to the proliferation of online dhamma teachings.

dominant “Insight” movement, among them prominent figures like Jack Kornfield, founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California, who himself had been a forest monk in Thailand, extended the work of modernist Burmese lay meditation movements, such as those initiated by U Ba Khin and S. N. Goenka, to remove those “anachronisms” of Buddhism, including and embodied in monasticism, which they felt were incompatible with the secularized culture and ideology of the overwhelmingly white, cosmopolitan, middle-class, and liberal seekers who formed their core constituency. In addition to these erasures, since the beginning of this project of adaptation in the 1970s, these lay teachers and their followers developed novel practices, institutions, and a culture built on ideals of individual rather than communal practice; gender equality and democratic principles rather than the patriarchal authority of senior male monastics; and a distillation of Buddhism to meditation, as a practice primarily for instrumental, this-worldly, psychological benefit rather than the world-escaping transcendent goal of nibbana. Furthermore, they established a fee-for-service model of meditation courses and retreats antithetical both to monastic discipline that requires the dhamma be freely taught, and the merit (*puñña*) economy that undergirds lay support of monasticism elsewhere in the world (Braun 2013: 161–65; Cadge 2005; Wilson 2014; Gleig 2013; Thānissaro 2016).

How did monasticism take root in this laicized environment? Or, as Sandra Bell put it, how did “orthopraxic monks” convince “unorthopraxic” convert laypeople, mostly totally unfamiliar with monasticism, to join them in establishing Thai Forest monasteries, whose orthodoxy and discipline allowed for little adaptation of the monastic rules while requiring absolute reliance on the support of laypeople (Bell 1998: 167; see also Bell 2000)? What kind of monasteries have been the result? Few scholars have studied convert Thai Forest monasticism in North America, while the larger literature about this form of convert monasticism elsewhere has focused particularly on gender roles and the tensions, ruptures, and new monastic movements resulting from the contested proscription, emanating from Thai Sangha authorities throughout global monastic networks, against women taking full monastic vows and ordaining as nuns, or *bhikkhunīs*. (Placzek 2014; Husken 2017; Angell 2006a, 2006b; Starkey 2020; Halafoff, Tomalin, and Starkey 2022). My research question takes a step back from this vital issue to ask how Thai Forest monasteries established themselves in North America in the first place among convert laypeople, despite being fundamentally out of place and out of time, as demonstrated by the *bhikkhunī* controversy.

Using monastery publications and records, as well as a collection of almost forty interviews with monastics and laypeople, I examine these questions through the example of Birken Forest Monastery, located in British Columbia, Canada. In 1994, Birken was founded as a primitive and isolated hermitage in the Coast Mountain Range by Venerable (now Ajahn) Sona, a Canadian convert monk born Tom West in 1954 (Clossey and Ferguson 2021). In 1989, West was ordained by the Sri Lankan missionary monk, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, who founded North America’s first Theravadin forest monastery, the Bhavana Society in West Virginia (Gunaratana and Malgrem 2003: 235–52). Venerable Sona then left for Thailand to experience a Buddhist culture and pursue the strict discipline of the “pristine Vinaya” of the Thai Forest Tradition at Wat Pah Nanachat, the groundbreaking “international,” English-speaking training monastery for (mostly) Western convert novices and monks established by the great Thai Forest monk, Ajahn Chah (Jayasaro 2017: 481–547).

The monastery Venerable Sona established upon his return to North America, whose support base has grown steadily, and which has upgraded its location twice since being founded, is associated with the international Forest Sangha of the Ajahn Chah tradition. However, while Ajahn Sona maintains close ties to that lineage—for example by maintaining regular dialogue with his fellow abbots, hosting Forest Sangha monastics at Birken, and avoiding the major Vinaya violation of schism within the order by conforming to its ongoing

prohibition of bhikkhuni ordination—he has deliberately chosen not to become an official branch monastery (Placzek 2014: 118; Sona 2000a). In doing so, he has sacrificed institutional and financial support from the Thai Sangha, state, and lay supporters that comes with branch status.² Instead, by establishing what he playfully calls the “independent kingdom of Birken,” he has chosen the path of his first teacher, Bhante Gunaratana, who felt that his ability to establish the Buddha’s teachings and practice (*Buddha-sāsana*) through monasticism in convert North America depended on his ability to adapt and maneuver unconstrained by the Sri Lankan monastic hierarchy, which knew little or nothing about the cultural context in which he was operating. (Ajahn Sona quoted in Placzek 2014: 109; Gunaratana and Malgrem 2003: 234–35; Sona 2018a).

For Birken, this independence has meant that the monastery and its monastics have been wholly reliant on local supporters in the less-than-ideal religious environment of British Columbia, Canada’s westernmost province. While its largest city, Vancouver, is an Asia-Pacific hub to which hundreds of thousands of migrants from throughout Asia have moved over the last fifty years, only a tiny proportion of this group, mostly Thai and Sri Lankan, are Theravadin, and have largely focused their energy on building urban temples to support monastics from Asia (Madanayake 2010; Placzek and Baird 2010). Furthermore, British Columbia’s majority white population is marked by what scholars have called a notable and longstanding culture of “irreligiosity”—expressed variously through widespread rejection of mainstream organized religion; prevalent secularism and atheism; and considerable and eclectic spiritual experimentalism—which is a distinguishing feature of the transnational Cascadia region stretching along the Pacific coast from Northern California to Alaska (Bramadat 2022). Unsurprisingly, then, Cascadia is a stronghold of laicized convert Theravada in North America; for example, British Columbia is both a prominent node in the West Coast Insight movement emanating out of California’s Spirit Rock and is the only province in Canada with two Goenka retreat centres. Despite this less-than-fertile ground for monasticism, Birken’s founding—like that of other forest monasteries outside Asia—depended on the local support of a diverse group of both “born Buddhist” and convert supporters, all of whom in this case turned away from their cultures’ prevailing Buddhist practice in British Columbia and towards the establishment of orthodox, convert-led monastic forest Theravada (Clossey and Ferguson 2021).

While this support was essential to Birken’s founding, especially given its arm’s length connection to Thailand and the rest of the Forest Sangha, to sustain this “house of cards,” as Ajahn Sona himself put it, Birken had to attract laypeople far beyond this vanguard group (Sona 2018b). Meeting this challenge meant convincing convert visitors to adopt a more expansive notion of Buddhism, focusing on monasticism and how it could serve them. In other words, Ajahn Sona had to work towards the monasticization of convert laypeople so that they would back the monastery as the best container for their spiritual development.

“Monasticization” is a concept used originally to describe reformist innovations in Burmese and Thai Theravada where the laity have taken on both practices—like meditation and scriptural study—and the role of religious experts, which latterly had been the reserve of the ordained Sangha (Cook 2010; Braun 2013). In North America, I argue that the process has been reversed, given its opposite starting point. In other words, monasticization in North America is a reformist innovation in which convert lay Buddhists in a non-monastic culture come to understand their practice, namely meditation, as benefitting from monastic institutions and communities whose roles for local laypeople have latterly been the reserve of the meditation retreat and lay teachers. The success of this conversion project among local laypeople has been an essential step for the successful establishment of orthodox Thai Forest monasticism in North America, and Birken specifically, given its utter dependence on support from Canadian-born laypeople. Ajahn Sona, as a Canadian-born monk, has proven especially adept at demonstrating Birken’s value to laypeople in culturally relevant terms, as well as teaching them their necessary role in sustaining Birken, while maintaining Vinaya discipline. However,

² For example, four-fifths of the funding for Amaravati monastery in England is estimated to have come from Thailand (Bluck 2006: 26).

this essential but all-encompassing focus on expanding lay support for the monastery has hindered the simultaneous development of monasticism's fundamental aspect—the ordained Sangha. In short, even at a Thai Forest monastery like Birken, North American Buddhism retains its lay focus.

Remote but Still Accessible: The Monastery as Countercultural Refuge

The challenge of establishing Thai forest monasticism in a culture of laicized convert Buddhism has been compounded by the realities of British Columbia's geography and demography. Forest monasteries are secluded for a reason: since their origins in the late nineteenth century, monks in this tradition have understood withdrawal from human settlement to the wilderness as creating the ideal conditions for fostering renunciation, developing the mind, and moving towards nibbana. Nevertheless, in Thailand these monasteries, and indeed wandering monastics, have always been located within walking distance of enough laypeople so that the monks can go on a daily almsround to receive food from local people who sustain them, a fundamental practice that is symbolic of the broader interdependence of monastics and laypeople in sustaining Buddhism through monasticism (Silaratano 2003: xi–xii). In the notably vast, mountainous, and underpopulated regions of British Columbia in which Birken has been located, forest locations are far beyond walking distance from populations large, let alone Buddhist enough to support monastic communities (Clossey and Ferguson 2021).

Birken's "intermediate" monastery (Birken II, founded in 1997)—10 kilometres from Princeton, BC (2001 population 2600)—was more than three hours from Vancouver by car, while its current site (Birken III, founded in 2001)—forty kilometres from the small city of Kamloops, BC (2001 population 86,000)—is over four hours away. Both locations require trips from Vancouver over high passes in the Coast Mountain range, and visitors to Birken III need to navigate 15 km of unpaved logging road before reaching the off-grid monastery. In fact, as soon as Ajahn Sona had enough support at the Princeton location, which was visible to neighbours and within earshot of a two-lane highway, he deliberately sought out even more isolation for Birken's "final" site, which is far out of sight and sound of other human settlement.

Birken's primary existential achievement has been Ajahn Sona's ability to attract lay people to visit and support the monastery. As he put it, because the Birken monastics couldn't go on almsround in the local village, he had to find a way to "bring the village...to the forest" (Sona 2004a: 53). His first job, then, was to alert potential visitors to the "eight precept village" he intended to build at Birken (*ibid.*). To do so, he engaged in relentless regional and trans-Canada travel to teach the dhamma and to introduce the monastery and monastic Buddhism to laypeople. From 1995 to 2013 he accepted virtually "any invitation...anything that came through"—from interfaith forums, to Sri Lankan viharas and their children's dhamma schools, to a new-age men's group, to Insight meditation circles, to classrooms at every level, to cancer patients, to environmentalists, to other monasteries in the Forest Sangha network—"barnstorming the country," as he put it (Sona 2018c). His missionary work particularly paid off in cultivating regional support in the widespread, largely rural, and overwhelmingly white and non-Buddhist Thompson-Okanagan region of British Columbia in which both Birken II and III were located, for example attracting an audience of 90 to a 1998 talk in Kamloops—three years before he established Birken III nearby (Adam 2017). Accurately predicting that this invitation and others like it throughout the area would create "a spider's web of nearby meditation groups," he lay the foundation for a local convert Theravadin network in the erstwhile non-Buddhist hinterland, anchored by the monastery (Sona 1998a).

Once he had alerted potential visitors to the monastery's existence, Ajahn Sona had to figure out the fundamental matter of "how...you get people out here who will stay" to feed and otherwise support the monks. In other words, unlike forest monasticism in Thailand, which was established deliberately to limit

monastics' contact with householder life, Birken had instead to become a magnet for laypeople, a place they would visit "very deliberately, intentionally, flying there, traveling there, to spend time at the monastery" even when, in the case of Birken II, it was only an unprepossessing place consisting of a prefabricated postwar bungalow surrounded by a few trailers and a couple of tiny cabins (*kutis*) (Sona 2018c). In other words, laypeople totally unfamiliar with monasticism had, at the very least, to be induced to stay overnight at the monastery, abide by fundamental aspects of monastic discipline by following the eight precepts, and offer the monks their daily requisites.

Nevertheless, Ajahn Sona saw the potential in these locations and conditions for the monasticization of laypeople, especially given that "modern transportation" meant that a "forest monastery" could now be "remote but still accessible" to anyone with a sturdy vehicle (Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery 1997). Thus, he could offer visitors a taste of forest monasticism, living with monastics in a wilderness environment separated from the householder world and devoted to the holy life. Historically, spatial segregation of religious communities from mainstream society has resulted in a "concentration of spirituality," with the missionary effect of creating converts and deepening their faith (Lindenfeld 2021: 18). In this case, the opportunity for temporary refuge in or retreat to forest monasticism proved enormously attractive to the Birken's convert visitors, given their baseline ideas about Buddhism and Ajahn Sona's astute understanding about how elements of forest monasticism might appeal to them.

It may go without saying that developing laypeople's zeal for monasticism was predicated first on how it could serve their meditation, given the centrality of this practice in convert Buddhism in Cascadia, as throughout North America. Unlike lay-led meditation retreats, Birken had the advantage of being "available on a full-time basis" to meditators who found the monastery's on-demand accessibility, largely unstructured daily schedule, peaceful mountain setting, and free accommodation to be conducive to developing their practice (Williamson 1999). For example, longtime meditator and spiritual seeker, David Bodhi Adam, who worked full time, was first drawn to Birken's convenience as "a place to go" as often he liked and "on my own schedule," as opposed to the strictly scheduled 10-day Goenka retreats he had been attending. For those converts who had the time and the means to get to Birken, a "self-retreat" at the monastery had enormous appeal, given that their Buddhism was defined by individual meditation practice (Adam 2017).

Beyond its superior conditions for meditation, Birken also offered an accessible retreat, in a broader sense, from the secular world. Sandra Bell found that British Forest Sangha monasteries provided a "haven of therapeutic promise" for their lay supporters—a unique opportunity to practice "wholesome spiritual pursuits" in ascetic, counter-cultural spaces that spurned mainstream materialism (Bell 1998: 161, 164). Similarly, Birken was "a place where westerners can go for answers to why their lives are so unfulfilled," as one early supporter put it (Watson 1997). In a monastery newsletter article explaining "how to use" a forest monastery, Ajahn Sona set the tone for his promotion of Birken as an approachable, relevant, and restorative destination for laypeople. Suggesting it as "a wonderful day's jaunt" or an opportunity for a visit of a few days or a few weeks of "spiritual development," he described the monastery as an inclusive "spiritual community centre" for ordinary laypeople, Buddhist or not, deliberately designed as a countercultural oasis "to be calming, simple, and inward-pointing" (Birken Forest Monastery 1999; Sona 1998b). He recommended, for example, that "a Buddhist monastery can be an awfully good place to spend December.... One can emerge from the monastery on January 2nd, slim, sober, undepressed, and without an avalanche of bills to pay!" ("News" 1999). Similarly, in a 2011 TEDx talk and essay on "green" monasticism, he told despairing environmentalists that monasteries like his offered them "the silence, the space, the opportunity to reflect, and the opportunity to create an ecology of mind" (Sona 2011). Furthermore, Birken presented a "relevant," millennia-tested

model from which they could learn, of “simplicity and sufficiency, both in view of a community’s practical organization as well as teaching and transmitting useful attitudes” (Sona 2010: 153).

The fact that he himself was a BC-born convert helped Ajahn Sona to make this appeal to potential supporters about the benefits of forest monasticism. Ajahn Pavaro (then Philo Hove) was typical among Birken’s predominantly white, baby-boomer convert supporters in explaining how Ajahn Sona bridged the gap between Canadian culture and Thai Forest monasticism; he was a monk who “spoke in a very contemporary way” as a “man from western Canada” who was “even from basically my part of the world” and of the same generation (Pavaro 2018a; see also Locheed 2018; Roehrig 2018; Adam 2017). North American-born converts from beyond Ajahn Sona’s generation and background, for example the Canadian-born children of Theravadin parents who hadn’t identified with their parents’ “ethnic” religious expression, also cited this “Canadianness” as key to their acceptance of monasticism (Rajapakshe 2018; Senaratne 2019).

As a “Western” man in every sense, Ajahn Sona understood, like scholars of modern Buddhism, that most convert seekers view Buddhist meditation and philosophy as therapeutic sources of psychological healing from the suffering of their daily lives (Gleig 2013; McMahan 2008). An ethic of spiritual care to meet this emotional need drove Ajahn Sona’s treatment of Birken’s visitors, reinforcing their experience of the monastery as a refuge from lay life. For example, he trained Birken’s resident stewards (lay monastery helpers) to treat fragile visitors gently; with laypeople’s “defenses...down” at the monastery, they could be “shattered” if “the kitchen steward...snarks at them” or “somebody says something harsh” (Sona 2018b). Capitalizing on his unique position as a bridging figure, Ajahn Sona derived a great deal of his authority among lay supporters thanks to his paternal, hands-on pastoral role for those many visitors coming to the monastery at a moment of emotional vulnerability. As he sees it, “everybody is crazy” from the Buddhist perspective of the delusion that fuels samsara; by this reckoning “every lay person, no matter how distinguished or confident [who] walks in the door...[has] trouble” (Sona 2018b). One of his key services for lay visitors is to address this trouble one-on-one in what Birken’s first website called “private consultation[s] with the abbot regarding personal/family/spiritual etc. issues” (Birken Forest Monastery 1999). Ajahn Sona estimates that he has given over 10,000 private interviews with laypeople about their lives beyond meditation, introducing them to “Buddhist psychology,” which he explains to them differs from Western modalities by offering them the possibility of transcending, not simply ameliorating, their suffering (Sona 2016).

Such attention to addressing laypeople’s preoccupations and problems has been part of a process of constant experimentation, improvisation, and tinkering at the monastery to ensure that the strict rules and discipline of Thai Forest monasticism remained at the forefront at the same time as “a flow of lay-people come and go,” most of them new to monasticism (Sona and Thitapuñño 1998; Sona 1997; Adam 2017). Unsurprisingly, then, within the confines of the Vinaya Ajahn Sona has struck a balance between visitors’ necessary adaptation to novel monastic routines and discipline, and a pragmatic accommodation of his lay visitors’ worldly conditioning, limits to the amount of renunciation they can tolerate, and their widespread initial ignorance about monasticism. While visiting laypeople had to abstain from intoxicants, eating after noon, sexual activity, and lying on “high and luxurious beds”—Ajahn Sona made sure to make their stay as comfortable as possible within those strictures. In the case of feeding converts, for example, he knew that missing dinner was a primal distraction for most monastery newcomers brought up eating their biggest meal in the evening, and so instructed the monastery cooks always to prepare more than enough food (offered or purchased through lay donations) at morning mealtimes so that everyone could eat their fill. In bringing the “village” to the monastery through these gestures, he fulfilled his objective of obtaining adequate daily support so that the Birken monastics could receive the requisites from laypeople, including a daily meal offering, and thus preserve the Vinaya. However, in attracting enough visitors to feed the monastics at Birken’s isolated

location he found himself in turn in the novel but necessary position of thinking a great deal about how best to care for and feed those visitor-“villagers,” who were indispensable to the symbiotic relationship between monastics and laypeople.

These efforts at domesticating laypeople to monasticism paid off. Shamina Senaratne, who was raised in Vancouver in a mixed Ismaili-Theravadin immigrant family, found that Ajahn Sona made monastic Buddhism legible to her. For example, she appreciated that he deliberately taught his visitors to chant in Pali or, more commonly, English translation, whereas at the Sri Lankan vihara her father attended, Pali chanting was assumed to be a cultural learning absorbed since childhood (Senaratne 2019). Exposed to what for him were completely novel practices like chanting, Adam learned that visiting the monastery and immersing himself in its daily life was quite different from the secular Goenka meditation retreats he had attended regularly in the years before he discovered Birken. It was through these visits that he began to experience Buddhism differently, in a place that was “deliberately and...really fundamentally religious” (Adam 2017). Ajahn Pavaro also found that the context of the monastery deepened his faith. During his first visit to Princeton as a layman, he “just got into the rhythm” of daily life at Birken; he found that “just breathing the air” was different “in a monastery and not a retreat,” as was participating in the ritual meal offering to the monks (Pavaro 2018a). While Judith Williamson had attended lay retreats with Spirit Rock teachers for years, the dhamma was demystified for her when hearing it in a monastery built around the 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!’” (Williamson 2018).

These ongoing efforts to create a North American showcase of Thai Forest monasticism have required a constant balancing act to maintain the “pristine Vinaya,” renunciation, and atmosphere of meditative quiet and calm while attracting lay support to monastery locations that, due to the monks’ dependence on laypeople, required a constant stream of short-term overnight visitors, most of whom, at least at first, were new to Buddhist monasticism and experiencing some degree of emotional upheaval. As Ajahn Sona put it, it is a constant effort “to get [the] tone” right at the monastery, one that “you have to keep re-describing” to inexperienced laypeople, explaining to them that “It’s not a business. It’s not a resort,” but “It’s not a halfway house either” (Sona 2018b). Notably, the monastery is such a foreign institution for laypeople that he had to describe it in terms of what it is not.

Ajahn Sona’s relentless promotion of Birken and monastic Theravada paid off, as did his understanding of what would make the monastery and its monastic forms attractive to laypeople, no matter, and in fact because of, its distance and isolation. Visitors to the Princeton monastery doubled every year, so that by the time that the monastery moved to its third location in the fall of 2001, over 500 laypeople arrived annually (Sona 2000b). They came from Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Washington State, and other locations, as well as from throughout Southern British Columbia, including Metropolitan Vancouver and what some call the “redneck” British Columbia interior. With those visitors came growing lay support, from small donations by grateful overnight and day visitors, to windfalls of CA\$150,000 and then CA\$300,000, along with a CA\$100,000 interest-free loan, received from individual convert supporters (Sona 2001, 2002). These one-time offerings and an increasingly reliable stream of generosity, or *dāna*, allowed the monastery the funds both to pay off its mortgage and then to make a down payment on Birken III, with a reasonable expectation to be able to cover daily expenses and renovate the new, much larger property. At Birken’s current location, Ajahn Sona intended to achieve his ultimate vision of a monastery that could meet the demand of lay visitors, doubling the number of them it could accommodate to twenty-four, and to allow for the training of monastics (Sona 2018a, 2001).

The Lightbulb Goes On: Teaching Laypeople Their Role in Monasticism

Ajahn Sona's success at attracting visitors who then became donors was impressive, given that while Birken is wholly reliant on lay generosity, according to the Vinaya it cannot be solicited. Translating this necessary mutuality between laypeople and monastics has been a fundamental challenge to overcome in the monasticization of Buddhist converts in the West. The concept of merit that undergirds *dāna*, for example, is difficult for most Western converts to appreciate; it requires a supra-mundane understanding and acceptance of kamma and rebirth, which mainstream convert Buddhism has greatly underplayed or ignored. Even for those many laypeople from Buddhist countries who do not subscribe to this metaphysical notion of merit, supporting monastics is nevertheless ingrained as wholesome and beneficial for the giver (Bell 1998; Clossey and Ferguson 2021).

Convert Buddhists coming from mainstream Canadian society had no conception of generosity as merit. Rather, they associated giving with a one-way transfer to the less fortunate; to expect something in return, as in the merit exchange, was seen as ethically suspect, while generosity to those who were considered more elevated than the donor was all but unknown. Most Canadians were also used to making voluntary charitable donations as the result of direct solicitation, even begging, without conceiving of giving outside of family as an unsolicited, lifelong commitment. More specifically, convert Buddhists familiar with paying for pricey meditation retreats did not understand their role in the collective enterprise of the spiritual economy undergirding monasticism. Like laypeople elsewhere in the convert West, it took Birken's convert lay community some time to grasp that the monastery's survival depended on them giving to, not only receiving from the monks, especially given the lengths Ajahn Sona had taken to offer them a congenial and comfortable refuge without asking anything from them in return (Bell 1998; Wilson 2019; Thitapuñño and Pavaro 2003).

Building this foundation of support among convert laypeople required prompting. Without directly soliciting support for the monastery, Ajahn Sona did regularly discuss the important role of generosity on the Buddhist path, especially in terms of the "joy" and "freedom" it offered in relation to "the dreadful and grim business that the world is endlessly about—grasping" (Sona 2000b). He also suggested ways in which laypeople could personally benefit from their generosity to the collective enterprise of the monastery. For example, in explaining how to "use" a monastery, he offered the option to converts that they could follow the lead of "Asian Canadians" by "bring[ing] the morning meal to the monastery" and thus "make the traditional offering going back to the time of the Buddha, of food to the monks." He promised potential donors that "you get to eat too!" and that such generosity "brings you merit and provides an indispensable support to the monastery—food" (Sona 1998b). While mentioning merit, he didn't explain it, thus implicitly framing the exchange in terms of worldly benefits of virtuous actions that would appeal to Canadian converts—the satisfaction of contributing in a fundamental way to the daily life of the monastery, deepening faith and understanding of Buddhism by participating in an age-old aspect of monasticism, and the bonus of being rewarded for a good deed with a shared meal in the refuge of the monastery.

Supporters reading Ajahn Sona's cheerful encouragement to offer a meal in Birken's Spring 1998 newsletter likely did not know that the monks had endured a meager first winter in Princeton; they had even contemplated a move to Thailand after food dwindled to a bag of rice and a bottle of fish sauce. Although Miguel Romero, then Venerable Thitapuñño, recalled that the monks always had enough food after that lean season, many convert laypeople remained clueless about how the monastery supported itself—a significant problem once it moved to its third location, which was large and expensive to maintain, let alone renovate and build according to Ajahn Sona's vision (Romero 2018). As Stephen Roehrig, who was Birken III's first treasurer, put it, the proscription against monastics asking for requisites and the often-repeated injunction

that the dhamma was “priceless” led to confusion and misconceptions. Coming from a consumer society in which everything had a monetary value, many laypeople wondered what the “priceless” dhamma was actually worth. They also assumed that because the monastery did not ask for money, even for lengthy stays, a “monastery mothership” in Thailand or elsewhere paid the bills so that there was no need to contribute (Roehrig 2018). Convert visitors thus didn’t know whether or how much to give; it wasn’t uncommon during the early days of Birken III for visitors to stay a week and leave just \$10, when it cost at least triple that a day just to feed and shelter them. Roehrig, a successful businessman in lay life who underwent monastic training under Ajahn Sona after he was Birken’s treasurer, understood that the new monastery could not survive on this deficit basis. He and others began what he called a protracted “conversation” with Ajahn Sona about whether it would contravene the Vinaya if they were “to create an awareness of what it actually cost per day for a person to stay there.” In the end, they reached a “consensus” that it “would be a good idea to post that” on the donation box without directly soliciting funds (Ibid.). Linda Furrow, the longtime office steward—akin to the monastery manager—was also forthright in telling visitors how much it cost to house them (Locheed 2018).³

Roehrig and Furrow’s efforts point to the instructive role of Birken’s lay renunciants (*anagārika*) and stewards as monastery residents who were situated between lay and monastic life. These most “monasticized” of laypeople, who have almost always outnumbered monastics at Birken III, have provided indispensable support to maintaining the Vinaya in Forest Sangha monasteries in non-Buddhist countries as “legalizers” who engage in activities like handling money, cooking, and storing food, that are prohibited to monastics but required to run monasteries (Borgland 2017: 262–263). They also serve lay visitors by setting an example and providing explicit training for newcomers in the mysteries of monasticism, including the *dāna* economy (Bell 2000: 19).⁴

Similarly, Birken’s “born Buddhist” supporters provided critical examples to converts, particularly in terms of their role in supporting the monastery. Rasika Rajapakshe, an immigrant from Sri Lanka whose family contributed significant gifts to Birken III—including for the monastery’s first solar power array—in addition to countless *dāna* meals feeding both monastics and lay visitors, felt that their generosity has both supported the monastery materially and in “the value of the knowledge that we bring in” teaching convert laypeople their role in monasticism (Rajapakshe 2018). Convert Elizabeth Lund confirmed that effect: “It doesn’t take much” to understand *dāna*, “just going to the monastery when Thais or Sri Lankans ... are there” to witness their “level of generosity” (Lund 2018). Thus, Roehrig explained that “the light bulb goes on” when some convert laypeople witness the generous behaviour of others, “and they decide that they really want to participate with it, eagerly.” “Then,” he continued, “other people, who are on the sidelines can observe how [the spiritual economy] actually works. Then this becomes the kindling for the fire” of generosity supporting the monastery (Roehrig 2018).

The “eager” participants in Roehrig’s taxonomy made up a core group of convert supporters who developed a deep affinity for Buddhist monasticism when witnessing and participating in it at Birken; they relished the

³ Between 2006 and 2010, even after the monastery had begun posting these costs, the average dana left by visitors staying at the monastery for a 10-day visit was CA\$444 per person—still considerably less than the cost of most comparable lay-teacher-led retreats—and netted CA\$129 per retreatant beyond the monastery costs of feeding and sheltering overnight visitors (“Retreat Dana Summary” 2010).

⁴ Joanna Cook’s work on monasticization in Thailand focuses on *maechee*—ordained eight or ten-precept female renunciants who play a similar intermediary role in Thailand—conceptualizes this group as central to and emblematic of the Thai laity’s adoption of monastic practices and roles. Significantly, Birken is home to “Sister Mon,” a Thai woman who received eight-precept ordination from Ajahn Sona in the first year of Birken III, making her perhaps the only *maechee* at a convert monastery anywhere in the world. As befitting her title, lay visitors follow Ajahn Sona’s lead in treating Sister Mon as an honorary member of the ordained Sangha at Birken, but like the *maechee* in Cook’s study she nevertheless takes a more active role than other Birken monastics in providing a visible example to lay residents and visitors of renunciation, spiritual development, and monastery comportment. Also, like the *maechee* in Cook’s study, she plays an indispensable role in the management and labor required to run the monastery (Cook 2010; Sister Mon 2018).

opportunity to participate collectively in the monastery's development beyond writing a cheque.⁵ Individual convert laypeople have offered countless hours of legal, accounting, engineering, and architectural services, carpentry, drywalling, landscaping, sewing, cooking, and chauffeuring. They have served on Birken's board of directors. They have funded construction projects and donated tractors, computers, and hand-knit socks and hats for the monastics. In doing so they have demonstrated the extraordinary commitment required of laypeople to build and maintain the monastery. In fact, as has been the case elsewhere in the West, support has multiplied because of the opportunities building and developing monasteries have given laypeople to become actively involved in and hence understand monasticism's collective nature (Bell 1998: 158, 165–66). Ajahn Sona compared this phenomenon to “joining a choir or something like that,” in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts. He called many laypeople's participation in the joint enterprise of building the monastery “the thrill of their lives.” “People discover,” he found, as they “work all day for the benefit of the community and...interact [that] it's very livening,” and “it's an opening of perspective” of Buddhist practice beyond the individualism of meditation (Sona 2018b). Adam confirmed this view; sparked by working with and learning from some of the Princeton monastery's Thai supporters who had been steeped in Buddhist monasticism all their lives, he began to understand that, as Ajahn Sona had been emphasizing in his promotional efforts, the monastery was indeed a “community centre” that “doesn't actually belong to the monks,” but is “our place too” (Adam 2017).

A Monastery's Central Function: Supporting the Holy Life

From the start, Ajahn Sona's tireless efforts to overcome the obstacles to cultivating lay support for monasticism had a larger objective than “a mere meditation centre” (Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery 1997). Rather, through this groundwork he hoped to achieve a higher goal of Birken becoming a monastic training monastery (Sona 1997). He saw this dream “come true” with the 1997 novice (*sāmaṇera*) ordination of Romero (renamed Thitapuñño), which inaugurated the opening of the Princeton monastery, reinforcing the aspiration that Birken's and all monasteries' “central function,” as Bhikkhu Thitapuñño would put it six years later, was to “support the practice of Buddhist monks and nuns” (Thitapuñño and Pavaro 2003).

With Ven. Thitapuñño as his monastic partner, Ajahn Sona welcomed four lay renunciants in 2001, just as Birken III was opening. These were men who wanted to test out their monastic vocation for a year, while aiding the monastery by performing the duties otherwise the responsibility of lay resident stewards. Two of them, Roehrig (Venerable Nanda) and Hove (Venerable Pavaro) ended up ordaining as monks at Birken—making their commitment like Ven. Thitapuñño had at the “auspicious” moment of the relocation and expansion of the monastery. In addition, Naruemon Teneralli (Sister Mon), a Thai woman who began visiting the Princeton monastery during its last year requested ordination by Ajahn Sona as an eight-precept female renunciant, or *maechee*, around the same time as Bhikkhus Nanda and Pavaro (Sister Mon 2018). Ajahn Sona described this group as “very competent people, as good as you could possibly get,” especially during the dawning days of both the Princeton and Kamloops monasteries; they were mature, successful professionals in their 30s and 40s who had many years of experience on the Buddhist path (Sona 2017, 2018c).

With Nanda and Pavaro's higher ordination, which occurred at the monastery in 2003, Birken had the requisite four bhikkhus in residence to perform the monthly recital of the monastic discipline (*Pāṭimokkha*) at the heart of monastic ceremonial life, making it a full-fledged monastery. On the cusp of the ordination, Ven. Thitapuñño and about-to-be Ven. Pavaro described this promising moment as “a hinge point” rather than a “terminus” for the monastery, which now had the potential to “offer a guiding role” in establishing monastic Theravada in

⁵ Between 1997 and 2008 approximately 80% of the monastery's top 100 money donors were converts (“Top Donors 1997 to 2008” 2008). There is a rough correspondence in this list to the group of lay converts who offered Birken the most in terms of sweat equity and in-kind donations.

Canada through “further monastic training, communication, travel, and publishing” (Thitapuñño and Pavaro 2003). In a series of articles, the two monks and Ajahn Sona laid out a vision of the potential fulfillment at Birken of monasticism’s virtuous cycle, in which the missionary and pastoral work of Birken monastics—“a budding crop of Dhamma teachers...guid[ing] growing groups of lay meditators”—resulted ideally in growing lay monasticization, including “contributions of resources, energy, and funds” to the monastery, thus fuelling the further growth of the ordained Sangha (Sona 2004b; Thitapuñño and Pavaro 2003). These articulations and outreach began around the time of the November 2003 ordination, with the Spring 2004 newsletter promising that “over the next few months” all of the resident Birken monastics would be “making several teaching trips to Vancouver, Seattle, Kamloops, the Okanagan and Calgary,” while the Fall 2003 issue announced that Ven. Thitapuñño—now living in a hermitage established as a Birken outpost in his native Mexico—was going to represent the monastery during the fifth-anniversary celebrations of Dhamma Vihara, the only Theravada monastery in Los Angeles. (*Northern Lotus: The Birken Forest Monastery Newsletter* 2004; “News” 2003)

However, within a year of Nanda and Pavaro’s ordination, the samsaric uncertainty underlying the monastery enterprise exposed itself, when, over the course of a few months, Vens. Thitapuñño and Nanda disrobed and Sister Mon, although she would later return to play a critical managerial and spiritual role at the monastery, left Birken for what was then an unknown period. The Mexican vihara closed, and while Ajahn Sona continued his punishing teaching schedule, he, Ven. Pavaro, and Sister Mon could not do the work of five monastics. In fact, contrary to common practice for junior monks, Ven. Pavaro did not leave Birken for six years after ordaining, because he said, “Ajahn Sona didn’t feel like he could spare monk power” (Pavaro 2018b). Ajahn Sona continued to accept lay renunciants for training at the monastery, and in 2006 three more men became novices at Birken and then ordained as monks in 2008 (*Northern Lotus: The Birken Forest Monastery Newsletter* 2007). One member of this new group disrobed in 2010, after which another moved to California’s Abhayagiri monastery and left the monkhood within a year, while the third, today Ajahn Subharo, left Birken when Ajahn Sona went on a yearlong retreat in 2013. Subsequently, Ajahn Sona made the decision to stop training monastics, leaving that role in North America to the Thailand-supported North American Forest Sangha branch monasteries, Abhayagiri (founded 1998 in Northern California), Tisarana (founded 2006 in Ontario), and Jetavana (founded 2014 in New Hampshire).

Underlying these events were fundamental challenges to establishing the Sangha at Birken and in North America. A primary one was the Sangha’s lack of seniority. For example, despite having already accepted him as a student, Ajahn Sona did not ordain Miguel Romero as a novice before opening Birken II because he could not act as monastic teacher (*ācariya*) to a novice before reaching ten rains (*vassas*) or years in the robes. Compounding the inexperience of the Birken Sangha, Vens. Thitapuñño, Pavaro, and Nanda found themselves as novices and very junior monks opening a new monastery that for over a year was an active construction site. As Roehrig put it, this was “not an ideal environment” for “transitioning” into monastic life.

What made these challenging conditions even more difficult in establishing the ordained Sangha at Birken was the fact that the monasticization of laypeople had to take precedence over monastic training. Venerable Dhammavaro (now Jamie Jamieson), a member of Birken’s second group of novices who had first become lay renunciants in 2006, reflected on this obstacle when asked about the challenges and opportunities of being a junior monk at an independent monastery focused necessarily on the development of lay support. While in the robes, Jamieson understood that if a monastery needed maintenance in Thailand, nearby local people would pitch in at a moment’s notice for such a meritorious opportunity. However, he knew it was unrealistic to expect any but a small minority of lay visitors to form a work party when visiting Birken on retreat; for the most part they were motivated to come to Birken by meditation, not merit, and after taking time off from work and family to travel a long distance to the monastery he knew they “didn’t come there to fix roofs.” Furthermore,

it was his sense that at larger training monasteries in Asia and the West the “monk power” would allow more senior monastics to shield their juniors from monastery duties that required extended contact with laypeople, and the outside world and its affairs. By contrast, despite training at Birken in a more established period than Vens. Nanda and Pavaro, he found himself spending long days felling dead trees and chopping wood for winter heat, fixing the water pump, negotiating contracts for the heating and solar panel systems, arranging the purchase of a van, and plowing the road to the monastery in winter, largely to serve the constant rotation of laypeople who always outnumbered monastics. This was a fundamental inversion of the traditional order of things at a training monastery (Jamieson 2018).⁶

In understanding their time in robes at Birken, the first group of ordinands also expressed an implicit understanding and appreciation of Birken as a monastery serving laypeople first, both as a retreat centre and as a showcase of monasticism. Roehrig explained that despite the turmoil of building a monastery while a novice, the fact that he and the rest of the “core group of people...made the whole thing happen,” in the creation of “a wonderful place for people to come and practice,” made “all of that worthwhile” (Roehrig 2018). Ajahn Pavaro recounted the care that he took while living at Birken to ensure that “people brand new to this place” had a positive first encounter with monasticism (Pavaro 2018a). Miguel Romero explained that because of his monastic experience at Birken, he had “in a very natural sort of organic way” become an effective teacher of laypeople both in and out of robes (Romero 2018). Finally, Sister Mon explained as an eight-precept renunciant from Thailand she has played an important intermediary role between the monastery’s lay and ordained communities. She has offered laypeople inspiration, “support,” and “encouragement” to commit to “eight precepts too,” and to realize that, like monastics, they also can be “true disciple[s] [of] the Buddha” (Sister Mon 2018).⁷

Implicitly, this group articulated what Birken was at its core—a missionary monastery focused on the monasticization of laypeople. Ajahn Sona acknowledged this fact when he explained in 2018 that Birken was not a “monks’ monastery,” but rather one “where we have a lot of lay people coming for meditation, and just a few monastics” (Sona 2018c). More recently he has called it a “retreat centre monastery,” or in other words a monastery for laypeople (Sona 2021). Compounding this lay focus, apart from Sister Mon he now also relies on lay stewards to maintain the monastery, rather than those in the robes or on the road to ordination.

Conclusion

Ajahn Sona’s evolving understanding of Birken’s role and limits as a monastery was in part the consequence of its independence from the Thai Sangha; he learned through experience that monastic training for now in North America probably required support “by Asia,” including monastic institutions and “wealthy people,” for whom monasticism and the merit economy were intrinsic (Sona 2018c). However, Birken’s form of lay-centered Thai Forest monasticism might also be understood as a necessary bridging step in the development of Buddhist monasticism in North America, as a missionary institution focused on attracting convert laypeople to and training them in the operation and appreciation of monastic Theravada.

In Theravadin societies where monasticism is an ancient and engrained institution, the monasticization of laypeople refers to their taking on of practices and duties heretofore reserved for the ordained Sangha. By contrast, I argue that in global contexts where non-monastic Buddhism is prevalent, like the Cascadia region of North America, this term describes something more fundamental—the process by which convert laypeople first come to understand and embrace monasticism as intrinsic to Buddhism. The Birken Monastery case provides an acute example of the importance of the monasticization of convert laypeople in North America

⁶ Cook (2010: 2) and Starkey (2020: 188) also explore this tension between monastic practice and service to laypeople’s spiritual development in Thailand and Britain, respectively.

⁷ See note 4.

to the establishment of monasticism, given the existential need to establish the spiritual economy that undergirds the institution. To make that happen in the isolated, non-Buddhist environs of Birken and without support from Thailand, Ajahn Sona created a virtual lay village in the British Columbia forest to demonstrate the value to visiting laypeople of orthodox monasticism in the context of their pre-existing laicized, deracinated, and psychologized notions of Buddhism. The project to acculturate laypeople to monasticism—in other words their monasticization—paradoxically has cut short the training of a homegrown Sangha at Birken, a vital aspect of the project of Buddhist monasticism over time and space, demonstrating the challenges of establishing a domestic convert monasticism and continuing dominance of the laity in North American Theravada.

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