

Buddhist NRMs – Soka Gakkai International and Diamond Way Buddhism

Jørn Borup
Aarhus University

Abstract:

Buddhism in the West has been studied by scholars from different fields using various concepts and models to analyze its diverse configurations. Focusing on the groups' relations to an old Asian religious context, transformations and adaptations have been perspectives for mainly historians of religion, while the focus on their 'newness' has made it obvious for sociologists of religion also to compare these with other groups within the category of 'New Religious Movements'. This article will describe two such Buddhist groups with Asian origin in a Western setting, namely Diamond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai in Denmark. While being different in many ways, the two groups also are interestingly comparable with their transnational histories, local developments, institutional structures, charisma agency, sectarian consciousness and general popularity. Their characteristics and developments will be analyzed individually and comparatively as both exemplars of modern Buddhism and Buddhist NRMs.

Keywords:

Buddhism, Buddhist NRMs, Diamond Way Buddhism, Soka Gakkai, Denmark

Buddhist New Religious Movements

It is rather understandable that neither the charismatic and controversial 'white lama' Ole Nydahl nor the followers of the Danish branch of Soka Gakkai International are interested in being characterized by the term New Religious Movement (hereafter NRM). While the 'newness' might signal dynamic innovation and for some religious groups have strategic relevance, most contemporary Buddhists would insist on belonging to the broader, time-transcending family of 'Buddhism'. Ole Nydahl's *Diamond Buddhism* and *Soka Gakkai Denmark* are thus in their own understanding not NRMs, but simply *Buddhism*, and even prototypical exemplars thereof.

Conceptual and classificatory clarity challenge also scholarly approaches. While sociologists of religion can legitimately focus on the newness and the obvious comparisons to other NRMs,

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historians of religion with equal legitimacy can refer to the historical continuations of a 2,500 years old axial religion living by and transmuting into always new transfigurations of itself as a typical *traditional* religion. Buddhism in a (post)modern Western and global context is thus a field studied by both historians and sociologists of religion, anthropologists and (to a lesser extent) Buddhologists, typically each with their own theoretical and methodological research take.

The diversity of Buddhism has itself become a scholarly genre in the last couple of decades. Modernization and globalization have opened for hitherto unprecedented communication means and channels within the Buddhist worlds, but also produced new forms and groups. Western Buddhism – or Buddhism in the West – has become a research topic of its own, and B. R Ambedkar's concept from 1956 to designate his new kind of boundary crossing Buddhism, 'Navayana' ('New Buddhism'), is occasionally used as a generic term for such modern Buddhism. The plural representations of the religion are sometimes just termed 'Buddhisms', and the diversity typically categorized according to sectarian traditions (Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Nichiren, Zen, Kagyu etc.) or analyzed in relation to topics and phenomena (diaspora, migration, spirituality, secularization, globalization etc.) or historical developments (e.g. historical, traditional, modern, post-colonial, postmodern).

One often used designator to conceptually categorize the diversity of contemporary Buddhism in America (and later, the rest of the West) has been the so-called 'Two Buddhisms', analytically identified and characterized variously by ethnicity or religiosity. The immigrant or heritage Buddhists are thus those with an Asian origin as refugees, migrants, or descendants who practice a form of lived religion 'carried over' and transformed from its Asian origin, initially by some scholars termed 'ethnic Buddhism'. The transnational relations with the ancestral traditions are typically important as assets of diaspora or heritage preservation, sometimes sanctioned institutionally by missionary interests. Jan Nattier thus from a supply perspective called Soka Gakkai in America a form of 'export Buddhism' or 'evangelical Buddhism' (Nattier 1998), since its organizational setting with its proselytizing efforts can be seen as a strategic push factor of a typical modern Buddhist NRM.

The 'converts' on the other hand, are typically understood as being the 'white Buddhists' with a Euro-American ethnic origin and Christian-Jewish religious background, who use and practice Buddhism according to ideals filtering out elements considered 'cultural' or even 'religious' (e.g. magic, miracles, ancestor belief) and typically focusing on individualized self-development. This kind of Buddhism is based on a long reception history going back to enlightenment ideals of rationality and romanticist ideas of mystical experiences, balancing between a secularized and re-enchanted version of elite religiosity. The counter-cultural movement and post-modern individualization helped shape the contours of a popular religion also for the masses, not least in its psychologized version catering to contemporary cultural ideals of spiritual authenticity. Both Christians, Jews, spirituals and 'the none's' have thus appropriated and participated in elements of this kind of 'convert Buddhism', not always enthusiastically appreciated by the 'true Buddhists'.

While the 'Two Buddhisms' model has worked as an analytical tool to describe and explain the apparent existence of separate communities and kinds of religiosities, in recent years it has been

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criticized both from scholars and the Buddhists themselves (in the U.S. quite often being the same). The concepts are too vague (e.g. many ‘converts’ have not converted) and essentialized (how many generations does it take to become an American rather than ‘an immigrant?’), and often based on problematic normative assumptions (e.g. the spiritual convert Buddhism being more ‘authentic’ than the ‘cultural Buddhism’ of the immigrants). It is a fact, however, that there tends to be separate religious communities, especially so in European contexts with a much shorter history of migration from Asian countries. Thus, typically Thai immigrants and descendants go to Thai temples, Vietnamese to Vietnamese temples, while ‘whites’ go to Zen centers or Tibetan temples (primarily because these cater to contemporary spirituality and because there are very few Japanese and Tibetans to use them).

Typically, it is the individualized, spiritualized, globalized ‘convert Buddhism’ rather than the ‘heritage Buddhism’ which is compared to other NRMs. It is, however, very difficult to apply the generalized models directly to the empirical landscape, and several of the ‘immigrant Buddhist’ communities (such as Dhammakaya, Foguanshan or even some of the ‘traditional’ groups) share as much of the defining characteristics of NRM, as do the ‘convert’ groups. Some focus on hagiographically legitimated charismatic leadership in organizations based on membership of new or transformed traditional religions. Some of them display various degrees of sectarian exclusivism pointing to religious innovation, but also opposition to existing religious orders with new authority structures and highly committed members. While some of the latter might have been ‘seekers’ in ‘movement milieus’ (Lewis 2013), specific Buddhist networks, practices and values have established its own tradition of what could be termed ‘Buddhist milieus’.

This article investigates two specific lay Buddhist groups in Denmark, one (*Diamond Way Buddhism*) based on a Tibetan tradition originating in Denmark before globally expanding, and the other (*Soka Gakkai Denmark*) with an origin in Japan having transnational trajectories throughout the world. Both groups insert themselves into the Buddhist tradition but are at the same time also exemplars of NRMs with mutually corresponding but also interestingly distinctive characteristics. Both groups were established in Denmark in the 1970s at a time, where ‘foreign’ religions were very rare in a religiously and ethnically homogenous nation with a *de facto* Protestant state church. They were granted official status as ‘recognized religious groups’ in 1989 (Diamond Way, under the name of Karma Kadjy Skolen) and 2019 (Soka Gakkai Denmark) which 16 Buddhist groups have acquired in 2020.¹ Both groups were also typical products of what Colin Campbell called ‘Easternization’ (Campbell 2007), being representations of ‘Eastern spirituality’ with its relevance and symbolic capital for both (early) counter-cultural hippies and (later) spirituality seeking postmaterialist individuals. The two groups’ identities as Buddhist groups and their characteristics of also being Buddhist NRMs will be the main aim of the article. The historical

¹ Recognized religious groups outside the Evangelical-Lutheran Church have the right to perform legal marriages and to get access to indirect state subsidies. Not all religious communities in Denmark have or are interested in getting this official recognition, which mainly function as a ‘blueprint’ of being a ‘real religion’. On legal rights of religious communities in Denmark, see https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/Trossamfund/Freedom_of_religion.pdf. On Buddhism in Denmark, see Borup 2019.

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developments and transformations will be described before analyzing and comparing them as typical Buddhist NRMs. Both Danish and English primary sources will be used, as will references to previous research projects conducted by the author and Center for Contemporary Religion at Aarhus University.²

Diamond Way Buddhism

[Diamond Way teachings] are, above all, in well-educated Western societies an enormous enrichment for the people who bravely want to shape their own future.

Ole Nydahl 2005, 10 (*my translation*).

Charimatization of a Viking Buddhist

After Ole Nydahl (b. 1941, hereafter ON) with his late wife Hannah (1946–2007) in 1968 went to Kathmandu on honeymoon, a youth life with fast motorcycles, boxing and drug experiments was gradually changed into a religious life after meeting Tibetan Buddhism. Ole's conversion was characteristic for also his later emphasis on sensory experiences with mystical insights:

“Then the lama leaned forward, laid his hands on our heads, and gave us his blessing. He transferred the power of the Kagyupa lineage to us, and I still sweat so many years after just by remembering this: everything became light, and a powerful energy went through us. We shook from head to toe and everything was perfect.”

(Nydahl 1983, 38-39, *my translation*)

Their meeting with the Karma Kagyu lamas Kalu Rinpoche and the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa were institutionally rubber-stamped by the latter giving both of them the Buddhist refuge and Bodhisattva vows. The Karmapa also asked him to spread the Vajrayana tradition in the West, sending the Queen of Denmark a recommendation letter.³ In ON's own account this was the fulfilment of the 8th Century guru Padmasambhava's prophesy "When the iron bird flies and the fire horse rides and the Tibetans are scattered like ants in the world, then Buddhism will come to the land of the red faces".⁴ The Nydahls did not spend the traditionally required three years' ascetic training in Tibetan monasteries. This has since been a point of critique from other more traditionally oriented Buddhists in the Tibetan lineages, but ON has often referred to Karmapa's acceptance of this as unnecessary and in accordance with his wishes. Eventually, the official

² Center for Contemporary Religion (<https://samtidsreligion.au.dk/>) has mapped and analyzed religion in Denmark since the early 2000s, and I have been responsible for investigating Buddhist perspectives in all projects. While Ole Nydahl and his Diamond Way Buddhism is sporadically mentioned in other research, surprisingly very little thorough analysis has been done. Bee Scherer's work in particular is valuable, not least since he as an 'insider' (until 2012) and scholar-practitioner has followed the group from both the inside and outside, the latest years also from a more critical distance. Eva Saalfrank has done ethnographic fieldwork amongst Tibetan Buddhist groups in Germany, including Diamond Way (1997). While Soka Gakkai has not previously been studied in its Danish and Scandinavian context (see, however, Borup forthcoming), its Japanese (e.g. McLaughlin 2019) and global (e.g. Métreux 2013 and Porcu 2018) presence has received quite a substantial attention.

³ https://www.lama-ole-nydahl.de/dokumente/k_letter_01.pdf.

⁴ The quote has been used in several of Nydahl's writings and talks. It is directly aimed at in the title of the Danish book *Når jernfuglen flyver* ('when the iron bird flies') from 1983.

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bestowing the title of ‘lama’ to ON came after the death of the 16th Karmapa by the lineage holder the 14th Shamarpa.⁵ ON’s intimate belonging to the tradition has later been asserted by his proclamation of being an emanation of the protector deity Māhākala and by seeing his life as a modern version of the master Milarepa – auto-hagiographic elements of spiritual authority suggested to be examples of “self-mystification and self-aggrandisement”.⁶

Achieving status as a lama is part of a tradition based on esoteric transmission from previous enlightened masters, with the religious authority being recognized by the institution. But his ascribed charisma from his later followers was also based on characteristics blending traditional ‘religious’ traits with modern, often controversial, attributes. He inscribes himself into a long Tibetan tradition of enlightened masters, and throughout his career has had a network of important representatives from the tradition around him. But he is also quintessentially a modern, Western lama. His hippie background is still portrayed positively in his talks, and his individualized spirituality proclaiming freedom and self-development fits well with the appearance of a strong, healthy, masculine white man who also in the prime of his life enjoys fast motorcycles, parachuting and women.⁷ The charismatization of him as a religious rock star entering the scene for devoted followers is also a performance of the aura of religious power.

Stephen Batchelor, another influential Western (British) Buddhist, describes ON as a “sun-tanned Viking” having an “ecstatic, sensuous version of Tantric Buddhism” with “fundamentalist and sectarian overtones” (Batchelor 1994: 114). The Viking image has been used by ON himself; in recent years, he has increasingly seen his own role as a religious warrior fighting against Muslims and defending Western freedom⁸ with controversial anti-Muslim utterances having made the German Buddhist Union (Deutsche Buddhistische Union) expel the Diamond Way group. The image of a strong Viking Buddhist not being constrained by – or rather defending what he sees as pure and uncontaminated - cultural values and norms has turned Western Buddhist away from the group, but it seems also to be a ‘selling point’ attracting others.

The composite figure of the Buddhist lama and charismatic leader of a NRM is inherent also in its teachings and practices. It is very modern and Western, with its proclaimed democracy, gender equality, instrumental relevance and individualized spirituality having ‘filtered away’ irrelevant Asian and premodern elements. But it is also very traditional with transferal of magic power (through amulets, telepathy and *phowa* rituals), devotion to gods and lamas, religious paraphernalia, and belief in supernatural cosmologies (including miracles). The devotees see themselves as belonging to an “elite of the most capable people who in past lives accumulated

⁵ https://www.lama-ole-nydahl.de/dokumente/kenpo_choedrak.htm

⁶ See Scherer’s informative article https://info.buddhism.com/Ole_Nydahl_and_Diamond_Way_B_Scherer.html#DiamondWayBeginnings. Scherer also quotes Saalfrank 1997: 131–132 for such critical remarks.

⁷ ON’s view on gender is rather traditional and has been critiqued by Scherer as ‘macho Buddhism’ (Scherer 2011).

⁸ ON’s critique of Islam has increased in the last decade, but it has been part of his worldviews throughout his career. He is fond of the mythological figure Holger the Dane who was said to stop Muslim invasion in the Pyrenees, and in recent years he has met with people considered to be part of the far-right movements in Europe. That Buddha was Arian with Ukrainian immigrants parents (and thus also had blue eyes) was apparently explained by ON in a now deleted newsgroup (but referred to by Trimondi 2002, 618n 250).

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good karma [with] the possibility of using spiritual methods at one's disposal in everyday situations" (Klingorová & Vojtíšek 2018, 296). The primarily young seekers are 'structurally available' (Dawson 1999) for institutional belonging into a very accessible religion offering self-discovery and conversions with the possibility of also 'tapping into' the experiences and charisma of ON. The most experienced students even get the possibility of being 'empowered' by the lama as teachers and 'ombudsmen' of the group.⁹

From Danish NRM to global religion

When Ole and Hannah Nydahl in 1972 established the first Buddhist center in Denmark, they probably had not in mind that they had begun the journey a global religious organization 50 years later having more than 650 centers worldwide. The first center was expanded to three villas in the 'embassy quarters' of Copenhagen, inhabited by lay Buddhists (after an initial test period with monks and lamas). It has since spread to eight local centers nationwide, and since 1989 with the help of anticult leader Johannes Aagaard (who had an interest in defining and defending 'true religion') the group has been an officially approved 'recognized religious community' as the Danish representation of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu lineage. Danish members, the number of which has been stable for many years with only a few hundreds, like their international co-members get access to the whole package with institutional fellowship with committed followers, a worldwide network, and an active media organization strategically publishing and filtering information about ON and the religious group.¹⁰

Diamond Way Buddhism has often presented its universality as simply 'Buddhism', and for many years, ON was in Denmark often portrayed in the media as 'the Danish lama'.¹¹ ON's promotion of a 'Western' Buddhism can, however, also be seen as a process of de- and re-culturalization, with many of his followers even insisting that Buddhism is not a religion, but rather a spiritual technique pointing to – as also one of ON's books is titled – 'the way things are'.¹² The welcoming spirit at the centers (for also temporary visitors) combined with making lay Buddhism relevant in modern societies through accessible programs and activities contribute to underlining the success of a contemporary, global Buddhist group. The many young and predominantly 'white' members - by ON simply referred to as 'friends' - are probably not even aware of the sectarian

⁹ <https://www.diamondway-buddhism.org/diamond-way/>.

¹⁰ The group is very active in presenting its own versions in SoME. Their own homepages are very professional and informative, and the lack of critical information on Wikipedia sites seems to legitimate the often-voiced criticism from ex-members of pro-active censorship. On critical investigations of ON and the Diamond Way, see Tenzin Peljor's blog <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2014/06/30/propaganda-the-making-of-the-holy-lama-ole-nydahl/>.

¹¹ Some years ago, they even succeeded in having a text book on (their) Buddhism published as (general) Buddhism for Danish school children, and a Danish TV documentary in a public service station on Buddhism was seen through the perspectives of the group. In 2004, Ole Nydahl was the official representative of Buddhism as spiritual supervisor in the Olympic Games in Athens and in 2015 he received an award for dialogue, coexistence and peace from the UNESCO Association for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.

¹² From her fieldwork in the Netherlands, Wiering thus writes that "all practitioners stubbornly emphasize their 'non-religiousness'" (Wiering 2016, 385). This has often been voiced to me in a Danish context, both from Diamond Way Buddhism members as well as from members of other Buddhist groups. It cannot be an official statement, however, since the advantages of the status of being a recognized religious organization demands fulfilment of criteria defining as a religion.

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conflicts within the Karma Kagyu school over the recognition process of choosing the right inheritor after the death of the (Tibetan) 16th Karmapa in 1981. The controversies had reverberations in also Danish and European contexts, dividing the Tibetan Buddhist communities into two, one for and one against ‘the Ole Nydahl wing’.¹³

On the other hand, the group self-consciously also understands and promotes itself as a specific kind of Buddhism. It inscribes itself into a patriarchal lineage of previous masters going back to Buddha Shakyamuni with a continued transmission of authority from teacher (lama) to pupil (disciple) (<http://buddha.dk/buddhisme/diamantvejsbuddhisme/>). Diamond Way is described as a translation of Vajrayana, which is a common concept for one of the main Buddhist traditions mainly existing today in the Himalayan region. Vajrayana, being “the most direct of the three levels of Buddhist teachings” (<https://www.diamondway-buddhism.org/diamond-way/>) and “one of the old schools of Tibet” (ibid.), has thus been appropriated as an emblem for the specific global network of Ole Nydahl-adhering Karma Kagyu Buddhists with their European center being inscribed into the aforementioned prophecy as the new home in the Western world (<https://europe-center.org/history>). With centers also in Asian countries (Nepal, Thailand, Mongolia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan), the Easternization process beginning with counter-cultural hippie Buddhism has circulated and returned to its Asian context in a new, ‘Westernized’ and globalized form.¹⁴

Bee Scherer’s characterization of the group as a “‘neo-orthoprax’” Tibetan Buddhist lay movement” (Scherer 2012) with a “mixture of modernist features, old boy’s charm and apparent hedonist trappings” (Scherer 2018, 9) thus seems quite plausible. Blending and oscillating between an open, global and modern version of a universal Buddhism on the one hand and a sectarian exclusivist group with no relations to other Buddhist groups and strong demands of unilineal commitment¹⁵ on the other hand are the main characteristics of the Diamond Way group. It is both a typical modern Western representation of a classical religion and a typical Buddhist NRM easily compared to other NRMs.

SGI Denmark

“They shouted and screamed, and all wore the same black suit. I did not understand what they were saying or what was going on and felt like a dog in a game of skittles”

(Soka Gakkai Denmark 2012, 25: The present leader of SGI Denmark, Jan Møller, about his first experience of a Soka Gakkai meeting in Japan)

From revitalistic prosperity NRM to global lay Buddhism

¹³ Apart from Diamond Way Buddhism (Karma Kadjy Skolen), there are today six Buddhist groups with Tibetan orientation in Denmark.

¹⁴ On the circulation between East and West of Eastern spiritual traditions, see Borup and Fibiger 2017.

¹⁵ In a letter to his students, ON warns against mixing methods and teachers <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2016/03/20/a-warning-letter-from-lama-ole-nydahl-dont-mix-tantric-methods-and-teachers/>. Scherer speculates whether such ‘late-charismatic paranoia’ mixed with ‘Ole-ist’ sectarianism will define the future or not (Scherer 2018, 10).

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The Japanese group Soka Gakkai ('Value Creating Society') has equally inscribed itself into the tradition of a classical Buddhist lineage. Nichiren (1222-1282) was a Buddhist monk living in Kamakura Japan, reforming what he saw as degenerate Buddhism with his insistence on reading and reciting the Lotus Sutra as the main means of approaching enlightenment. In 1930, the educational reformers Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1871-1944) and Toda Jōsei (1900-1958) joined the Nichiren Shōshū sect, and thereafter institutionalized Soka Gakkai as a semi-independent lay organization, legally functioning as a distinct religious group. Soka Gakkai in the post-war period later became Japan's largest NRM, further continuing its expansion with the establishment of Soka Gakkai International (hereafter SGI) and its charismatic leader Ikeda Daisaku (1928-). In 1991, Soka Gakkai split from its mother organisation, and has since then become the world's largest lay Buddhist group with 12 million followers in 188 countries with own rituals, personnel, terminology and a structured organization. It can be characterized as both a nationalistic revitalization as well as a globalistic movement (Dawson 1998, 590), and its exchange models of economic and religious capital makes it suitable to also term it 'prosperity Buddhism' (Borup 2018). Levi McLaughlin refers to it as a "mimetic nation-state" (McLaughlin 2019, 19), since in Japan its institutions, activities, and ideologies are like nation-state enterprises. Soka Gakkai in Japan is listed by Agency of Cultural Affairs under 'other' as a NRM (*shin shūkyō*), rather than as a Buddhist group. It sees itself, however, as the true, living representative of Nichiren Buddhism, and internationally often simply as 'Buddhism'. As a globalized modern religion, it has been successful in "skilfully adapting their religious practices to each culture [and] the Buddhist teachings of SGI worldwide help to provide a sense of uniformity and unity worldwide among SGI members [...] applicable to everyone everywhere" (Métreaux 2013, 427, 428). While Soka Gakkai in Japan has been entangled in scandals and controversies and known especially in its early phase to be rather aggressive in its missionary approaches, this has only to a lesser extent been the case abroad. It does, however, have a "clear evangelist strategy" and a "clearly articulated recruitment strategy" (Waterhouse 2002, 111) making local and national SGI groups continue their exclusivistic isolation from other Buddhist groups. In most countries, SGI – like the Diamond Way Buddhist groups - does not participate in other trans-sectarian Buddhist families and activities. It provides its own members with an entire package not needing alternative approaches and practices. Many of its adherents do not have much previous knowledge about or interest in Buddhism and religion, although the characteristics and social backgrounds of the followers in Europe (as well as in Japan) has changed in the last decades.¹⁶ Other Buddhist groups, on the other hand, will typically not recognise SGI as 'true Buddhism', placing them instead in a less prestigious terminological family of NRM.

From immigrant Buddhism to spiritual convert Buddhism

¹⁶ Lucas Pokorny's description of the social composition of SGI members in Austria is probably not unique: "the majority of practitioners throughout the 1970s and early 1980s belonged to the lower middle-class, which was in line with the contemporary situation in other overseas branches and in Japan, something which would gradually change in Japan and the West in the 1990s and 2000s with the emergence of a more upper middleclass basis" (Pokorny 2014 22).

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“While he was [sightseeing] Copenhagen, he chanted *daimoku* inside with a fervent wish that bodhisattvas would also appear from the ground here” (SGI Danmark 2012, 19, my translation), Ikeda wrote about his visit to Denmark in 1961, prophetically foreseeing or strategically planning later establishments of SGI in also Nordic hemispheres. Ikeda’s travels around the world are legendary for his devotees and narrates the contours of a spiritual world-conqueror and globetrotter transcending cultural borders and expanding the religious empire of a successful religion. Ikeda is not promoted as an enlightened master and has not been ascribed the same attributes as Tibetan lamas of being part of an esoteric chain of patriarchs. He is neither a priest, since the lay group stresses the importance of a non-monastic community for the people. Ikeda, like his predecessors Makiguchi and Toda, is a professional lay person and a teacher (*sensei*) ambitiously propagating a ‘human revolution’ for the world. His ascribed charisma is typically attributed to his human skills as both a teacher, thinker, author, artist, musician and spiritual world leader. What has pejoratively been termed ‘Ikedaism’ does not, however, phenomenologically differ substantially from the almost superhuman characteristics, which the group’s hagiographic descriptions imply. When Ikeda has visited a country, it is an institutional blueprint of recognition. And it is a sign of almost theophanic power.

The first phase of SGI abroad was typically constituted by Japanese families having emigrated from Japan carrying their religious affiliation into a new cultural and geographic context. As opposed to the imported ‘convert Buddhism’ of ON and the Diamond Way Buddhism, it was thus an ‘immigrant religion’ with focus on ethnic identification. In the U.S. it was part of the religious market with other diasporic Japanese religions, some of which were introduced already in the late 19th century with working migrants in Hawaii and California (Porcu 2018), where the ‘heritage religion’ was a means cultural integration. Also Soka Gakkai members later in history saw their religion as a religious and cultural capital helping to build a sense of social cohesion in diaspora. With its expansion and global ambitions especially from the 1970s, the organization saw a missionary potential in supporting and propagating such ‘export Buddhism’. Ikeda’s visits abroad was part of such missionary activities in spreading the teaching (*kōsen-rufu*).

Most hippies and counter-culture youngsters interested in ‘things spiritually Asian’ looked for Zen, vipassana or Tibetan Buddhism with its monks, lamas, masters and self-developmental meditation techniques. Some seekers also found Soka Gakkai through different paths¹⁷, especially later when SGI turned global and books, rituals, and material elements of the religion became more accessible and international. Today, Soka Gakkai International is the largest Buddhist organization in Europe (Borup forthcoming).

Some individuals also travelled the other way, finding or re-inventing their ‘own religion’ abroad. One such example is Masaaki Kamio. In 1965 he landed in Helsinki with a one-way ticket. Fascinated by the Nordic countries and escaping Japanese society as a 21-year old life-explorer, he later ended up in a Danish folk highschool Askov Højskole. He changed his name to Mark, and was open-mindedly absorbing Danish and Western language, culture and religion. Kamio’s family

¹⁷ See Borup forthcoming on Japanese Buddhism in Europe, including discussions of Zen and Soka Gakkai’s different trajectories.

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were Soka Gakkai members, and Mark did bring his own *gohonzon* (sacred object) with him, and occasionally he would chant in front of it in his room. After studying the tradition of Danish education and *højskole* philosophy, including the teachings of the Danish educational Christian thinkers N.F.S. Grundtvig and Christen Cold he came to further deepen and appreciate his Soka Gakkai identity. He shared his growing enthusiasm with his roommate, Jan Møller, and after some years of practice and transnational travel to and from Japan, the two of them in 1983 established the Danish section of SGI. Kamio became the first national leader, followed by Møller in 2002, neither of whom having expressed personal competences of a charismatic nature. Kamio retrospectively describes himself as “an ordinary member” who only later really understood his responsibility of spreading Buddhism in Denmark (SGI Denmark 2012, 27).

Before the establishment of the group, a few Japanese Soka Gakkai members gathered in small groups for practice or social meetings. They spoke Japanese, and no ethnic Danes were invited or interested in joining the groups, whose commonality was cultural as much as religious, with a diversity also containing “fanatics, moralists and hippies” (SGI Denmark 2012, 39). With a strong “missionary spirit” (ibid., 85), new propagation ideals, easier access to an alter (*gohonzon*), and an interest in engaging children in the “future group” (ibid., 88) the membership increased substantially. In 2020, there are more than 1,300 members participating in events in the main headquarters (*kaikan*) at Nordisk Kulturcenter in Copenhagen, or in one of the organisation’s six main regions and almost 70 local groups. In 2018, the group gained status as a recognised religious organisation, signalling its identity as a ‘true religion’. While there are still some of the Japanese members ‘from the old days’, the vast majority today are ‘convert Buddhists’ of ethnic Danish origin. The teachings, meetings, activities and publications are all in Danish, with transnational relations to Japan being one of the factors making also the Danish group participate in the global family.

Like Diamond Way Buddhism and other NRM Buddhist groups, Soka Gakkai Denmark adheres to a worldview and practice oriented towards progress. Ikeda’s ideas of a human revolution are cherished, as are the overall global and societal potentials for development. Reaching out to society has increasingly been an ideal. The group arranges exhibitions and seminars related to peace, participates in interreligious dialogues and activities for young people at museums and music festivals. Askov Højskole, where Møller and Kamio met before establishing the group, has since been a center of exchange between Soka Gakkai in Denmark and Japan, and mutual educational ideals have been voiced also in the media by some of the school’s teachers. Societal ideals of a ‘human revolution’ are also reflected at individual level for self-developing spiritual seekers, whom Ikeda calls ‘the earth’s bodhisattvas’.

“An inner motivated change in the individual person has an extremely positive effect on their surroundings and life as a whole, resulting in the rejuvenation of the whole society”

(<https://sgi-dk.org/pages/soka-gakkai-international-sgi>, my translation).

A leader in one of the group’s magazines described 2019 as

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“the year of soka victory. Soka victory means that everyone rises and wins. The victory is to find the courage to challenge the part of the heart that is trying to hold back our lives. The victory also lies in continuing along the path we have decided to follow, and sticking to our decision. The most important thing is to remain faithful. If we continue, we will definitely win.”

(Green 2019, 3, my translation)

Both at meetings and in their periodic journal *Soka Rennæssance* commitments to such ideals are expressed through personal conversion stories and narratives of how the practice with chanting the *daimoku* (the Soka Gakkai ‘mantra’ *namu myōhō rengekyō*) and reading Ikeda’s books bring transformative values into the members’ lives. While societal upward mobility was a main driving factor in the groups early phases in Japan, it has increasingly been a global NRM re-enchanting also a postmodern world with ‘world-affirming’ values based on ideals of personal self-optimization. As such, it caters to contemporary individual seekers, who do not necessarily have much previous interests in or knowledge about the Japanese cultural and religious backgrounds. Members in Soka Gakkai in Denmark as in most European countries (Borup forthcoming) typically see their specific kind of Buddhism as simply ‘generic’ and universally applicable Buddhism. They are, however, also consciously belonging to an exclusivist family of ‘special’ Buddhists, being also from other Buddhists pejoratively ‘othered’ as such. Like Diamond Way Buddhists, they are thus typically expressing characteristics of belonging to a NRM Buddhist group insisting not to be classified as such.

Conclusion

After a long process of cultural translation, Buddhism in the West has matured and institutionalized as part of the growing religious diversity of a globalized world. While many groups keep transnational relations with their Asian roots, individualized identities have increasingly formed also new networks and organizational formations. ‘Westernization’ with its local interpretations and representations have given such groups a historical context in which their status as NRMs has developed into also the existing mainstream religious landscapes.

Religion in Europe, as opposed to the ‘market’ in the U.S., has historically been framed through its position to national churches, and although Denmark is often considered a rather secular country, religious minorities at the same time are part of a religious and cultural context primarily defined by a de facto state church. Both Daimond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai originated in Asian contexts, and gained status and accordingly specific privileges as officially recognized religious communities under the names Karma Kadju-skolen (in 1989) and Soka Gakkai Denmark (in 2018). They both ascribe to a religious self-understanding as specific Buddhist groups with an exclusivist agenda having formed communal bonding not least in light of previous controversies. Just like the break from the Nichiren group in Japan sparked a sectarian commitment throughout Soka Gakkai’s global institutions, the Karmapa conflict originating in the Himalayan region had strong repercussions in the Danish and European contexts within the Karma Kagyu lineage. Neither Soka Gakkai nor Diamond Way Buddhism relate to other Buddhist groups in Denmark, and ex-members

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are not reluctant to voice their criticism of the communities they were formerly devoted to. On the other hand, neither of the groups have appeared in the general public or amongst representatives of the dominant religion as "unacceptably different", a key characteristic Melton (2004, 79) finds for NRMs. Both groups have culturally accommodated their versions of Buddhism into European and Danish contexts, where Buddhism in general has become popular with a high degree of symbolic capital. Both groups offered re-enchantment in times challenged by secularization, then and now being accessible for individuals seeking religious experiences and communal bonding in an otherwise 'world-affirming' worldview.

With different religious and cultural origins, they are of course also characteristically different. While being the most global religious movement originating in Japan, SGI everywhere in the world is mainly focused on Ikeda's thoughts, writings and personality. Ikeda is not a religious master blue-stamped by a clerical hierarchy. He is considered a noble superhuman with a spiritual agenda open to all, and translated through a committed group of members. The processual change in Japan from a blue-collar middle class 'prosperity religion' to a mainstream religion with also ambitions of transferring the institutionally acquired religious capital beyond sectarian boundaries has also begun to show its contours abroad. The Danish group has increasingly appeared as a Buddhist group with interests in also promoting social, educational and cultural activities, while still focusing on the instrumental value of ritual chanting as a means of cultivation. Originally being a religion for ethnic Japanese, its function as 'export' or 'immigrant/heritage' Buddhism has changed into mainly having become a religion for 'convert Buddhists'.

Tibetan lamas are thought of as religious virtuosos, some of whom are also considered human manifestations of celestial beings. The different lineages have all appeared in the West, also the Karma Kagyu lineage with the Karmapa lamas, the 16th of which encouraged Ole Nydahl to spread the teaching and the 17th of which (the one recognized by the Diamond Way tradition) gave him the title of lama. ON's personality as an individual not constrained by norms and cultural constraints is far from the image of SGI's Ikeda, but harmonizes well with both the narratives of previous Tibetan yogis and other 'Westernized' Tibetans such as Trungpa and his 'crazy yoga' image of the 1970s. His 'white Viking Buddhism' caters to individuals not concerned by accusations of 'political incorrectness' who are mainly interested in personal (rather than societal or cultural) transformation.

Both groups have become older since their beginnings in Denmark in the 1970s. In the present 'late-charismatic' period with an ageing ON, the future of the group will be a main issue in the years to come. Will his charisma be routinized, and will the effervescence of exclusivistic bonding and the 'energy of the margin' be transferable to new people in new times? Ikeda has not been seen for years, and speculation of continuation of his office is part of both media gossip and member conversation. Will its success continue also with a less charismatic future figure, or if mainly administered by national and local offices? Will Buddhism's status and brand as a popular kind of spirituality catering to postmaterialist individuals outlive the attractions of institutionalized religiosity so characteristic for Buddhist groups appearing in the 1970s deserving (also) the emblem 'NRM'?

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Buddhism in the West has been analyzed through models and concepts serving to comprehend its characteristics in historical, social and institutional contexts. The groups self-definitions typically have focused on their Buddhist universality or sectarian particularity. The question of authority has been almost inherent to most of these, not least when described by others in the 'same family'. 'New religious movement' is thus a term never used by the groups themselves, but sometimes applied by other groups self-identifying as more genuinely Buddhist. Both Diamond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai have been ascribed such pejorative terminology by other Buddhist groups. Other categories and concepts such as 'convert', 'immigrant', 'heritage', 'import', 'export', 'postmodern' or 'global' have been suggested as allegedly more neutral and specific to the transfigurations of Buddhism in the West. While these naturally also have their explanatory limitations, they do have potential functionality as both contextually specific or universally comparable concepts. Models are plastic, and are applicable and changeable according to an ever-changing reality. Some scholars prefer to avoid what they see as too generalized typologies, insisting instead on singular focus on particularities. In the comparative study of religion, analytical concepts and models are necessary. Using NRM as a category with which to analyze specific Buddhist groups and compare them to other NRMs through the theoretical and methodological apparatus developed primarily within the sociology of religion is of course obvious, just like the specific Buddhist cases can contribute to the general analyses of NRM. This also applies for the two groups described in this article, both of which specifically in a Scandinavian context need more future research, not least in the years to come with the challenges of generational changes.

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Jørn Borup is an associate professor at, and holds an MA and PhD degree from, the Department of the Study of Religion at Aarhus University. He has conducted research and published in Danish and English on Japanese Buddhism, Buddhism in the West, religious diversity, spirituality and religion and migration. Besides publications in Danish, he is the author of *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism: Myōshinji, a Living Religion* (Brill) and articles in *Numen*, *The Journal of Global Buddhism*, *The Journal of Contemporary Religion* and *Japanese Religions*.