

## Multiple Buddhist Modernisms: *Jhāna* in Convert Theravāda

Natalie Quli

Graduate Theological Union

THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES on the meditative *jhānas* as they are encountered by Western, English-speaking Buddhists in popular Buddhist writings and teachings available in the United States. I ask: how do the most popular teachers frame *jhāna* meditation? Do their teachings and writings reveal “traditional” or “modernist” ways of understanding? Are there significant differences between the various *jhāna* teachers’ presentations, particularly in their constructions of authority in the Buddhist tradition? Do they display the qualities of “Buddhist modernism” cited in the Buddhist studies literature?<sup>1</sup>

Given the tendency of Western Buddhists to cleanse Buddhism of beliefs and practices that they perceive as “irrational,” I wondered how *jhāna*—which is deeply connected to cosmology and various superhuman powers (such as levitation and telepathy)—might be popularized among Western convert Theravādin or Insight Meditation-oriented Buddhists. The fact that the so-called “dry-insight” model of meditation is followed by the bulk of convert Theravādin Buddhists<sup>2</sup> in the United States led me to wonder if there would be any interest in *jhāna* meditation, or if those who are interested in the *jhānas* would be attracted to the magical powers (Pāli *abhiññā*) attained through meditation.<sup>3</sup> Such interest would complicate our models of “convert” Buddhism because this orientation is so different from the highly rationalized Insight Meditation movement.<sup>4</sup> As it turns out, the academic literature on Western *jhāna* practice is remarkably bare.<sup>5</sup>

While some academics have been busy decrying the “colonization” of Buddhism by Westerners, convert Buddhists in the United States have been busy discovering and studying Buddhist traditions. These

Buddhists have been described as rather “rationalist” in their selective appropriation.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, and quite to my surprise, the *jhānas* (the meditative absorptions described in the suttas and especially in Buddhaghosa’s famous treatise, the *Visuddhimagga*), though until recently largely ignored by convert Insight Meditation Buddhists in the United States, have been increasing in popularity in the past several years. One lay convert *jhāna* teacher commented to me in an interview that there has in fact been a great increase in interest in the *jhānas* over the last few years. She commented that there have been more retreats on *jhānas* offered recently and that *jhāna* “has become kind of a buzzword” among American convert Buddhists in Insight Meditation circles.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper I will examine the teachings of some of the most popular Western *jhāna* teachers whose writings and teachings are readily available to English-speaking American converts and are likely influencing the practice and interpretation of *jhānas* among these converts. My main interest in this endeavor is to analyze the kinds of Buddhist modernism that their *jhāna* teachings reflect. After talking to lay convert teachers, searching in vain for scholarly literature on *jhāna* practice in America, and surveying the popular writings in magazines, books, and on the Internet, I focused my attention on a few key individuals who are the most visible and widely known among American convert Buddhists pursuing *jhāna* practice. My findings regarding these teachers’ understandings of *jhāna* suggest certain similarities and differences that warrant a more careful label than simply “Buddhist modernism.” Each of these teachers is, to be sure, a “modernist” by conventional Buddhist studies standards, but their approaches, as well as what they consider reliable sources of authority, are quite different from one another. These orientations, in turn, have an effect on the way that *jhāna* practice is presented by these teachers.

Before delving into the details of these Buddhist modernists’ teachings, I would like to clearly explain what I mean by “Buddhist modernism.” As has been detailed quite extensively elsewhere, the concept of Buddhist modernism was developed by Heinz Bechert in describing changes around the globe in Buddhist practices and beliefs in the last two hundred years or so as a result of Buddhist interactions with Western missionaries, colonialism, and modernity.<sup>8</sup> Gombrich and Obeyesekere similarly noted changes in Sri Lankan Theravāda, though they used the term “Protestant Buddhism” rather than “Buddhist modernism” to describe these changes.<sup>9</sup> The most comprehensive definition

of Buddhist modernism that I know of comes from Donald Lopez, who provides a rather lengthy list of qualities and orientations that comprise it.<sup>10</sup> Other studies have focused on Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhism to describe similar processes of rationalization and modernization.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the widespread use of the term in recent Buddhist studies literature and upon the definitions imparted by the researchers mentioned above, Buddhist modernists can be described as having an orientation towards Buddhism that entails a number of features, many of which are interrelated. I offer the following as a brief list of descriptive features:

- the extolling of reason and rationality;
- a rejection of ritual, “superstition,” and cosmology;
- the understanding of doctrine and text as more authentically Buddhist than ritual practices such as relic veneration or Buddha-name recitation;
- an ecumenical attitude toward other sects;
- an increase in the status of women;
- an interest in social engagement;
- the tendency to define Buddhism as a philosophy rather than as a religion;
- a belief in the compatibility of Buddhism and modern science;
- an emphasis on meditation, including the hitherto unprecedented widespread practice of meditation among the laity;
- a desire to return to the “original” teachings of the Buddha, particularly as ascribed to the Pāli canon;
- the conviction that nirvana can be obtained in this very life, hence downgrading the importance of karma, merit, and rebirth;
- the rejection of “spirit” or “folk” religion (Spiro’s “little tradition”<sup>12</sup>) as mere cultural accretions to be separated from the rational core of Buddhism; and
- democratization and laicization.

This is only a partial list, but it is one that I hope draws a basic outline of Buddhist modernism for the purpose of describing the *jhāna* teachers in this study, to which we will now turn.

## AYYA KHEMA

The Western nun Ayya Khema, beloved by many convert Buddhists in the Western world, was born in Germany in 1923 and ordained a Buddhist nun in Sri Lanka in 1979. She taught for many years internationally and in the United States before her death in 1997. Among her more interesting writings are those concerned with the *jhānas*. Khema learned the *jhānas* not from a teacher but from reading the suttas and the *Visuddhimagga*. While in Sri Lanka, she sought a *jhāna* master and was introduced to Mātara Ñānarama Mahāthera, a monk who confirmed that she was doing the *jhānas* correctly and suggested that she begin teaching them. According to him, the *jhānas* were becoming a lost art.<sup>13</sup>

Her most in-depth consideration of the *jhānas* is made in her book *Who Is My Self? A Guide to Buddhist Meditation*.<sup>14</sup> In this work, she takes the reader on a tour of each of the eight *jhānas*. Though she clearly uses the *Visuddhimagga* in her explanation of the various *jhānas*, she places its authority as secondary to the suttas, drawing heavily on the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta*. In one case where the *Visuddhimagga*'s instructions differ from her understanding of attachment in the first *jhāna*, she returns to the suttas, reminding the reader that "the Buddha never said so" in the suttas, and argues that the later commentaries added this idea. So while the *Visuddhimagga* remains an important work for Ayya Khema, it does not hold the same primacy as the suttas.

Unlike Buddhaghosa, who says that among those who attempt the *jhānas* only a very small fraction will reach them, Ayya Khema insists that they are not difficult to achieve.<sup>15</sup> Citing the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* in which the Buddha remembers entering *jhāna* as a child during the annual plowing festival, she insists that children often spontaneously enter the *jhānas* and that "Everyone who possesses patience and perseverance can get to the *jhānas*."<sup>16</sup> This attitude toward the achievability of the *jhānas* leads her to believe that Buddhists who attained the *jhānas* had the same experience as those reported by Christian mystics; the experience of *jhāna* is a universally human one. According to Ayya Khema, Buddhist meditation, which she equates with the *jhānas*, is the "science of mind" because the *jhānas* are "explainable and repeatable."<sup>17</sup>

But lest we are led to believe that Ayya Khema falls into the "Buddhism without beliefs" category of converts, we should also consider

her understanding and teachings regarding karma and rebirth. She is unwavering in her acceptance of rebirth and suggests that practicing right concentration (*jhāna*) will decrease craving and eventually eradicate it, removing one from the wheel of samsara. Karma is of course important in the endeavor to exit samsara, as it leads to better circumstances for practice; for example, Khema notes that it is good karma that brings people to meditation retreats.<sup>18</sup> But, she insists, making good karma for the purpose of experiencing a pleasant next life is “commercial,” as she puts it, and in so doing suggests a modernist view of the rebirth goals among many traditional Theravādins.<sup>19</sup>

Other, more traditional beliefs she expresses include the conviction that higher realms, such as the Brahma realm, really do exist. She also argues that the “Buddha used his clairvoyance to ‘catch’ anyone who might be ready” to enter the path.<sup>20</sup> However, in addressing the magical powers (*abhiññā*) that are said to arise as a result of advanced *jhāna* practice, Khema omits a description of clairaudience and so on, and suggests to the reader that these powers are simply seeing the pleasant in unpleasantness and vice versa.<sup>21</sup> Whether she made this statement to discourage attachment to magical powers or to show the teachings are “rational” and consistent with modern science is unclear.

#### HENEPOLA GUNARATANA

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana is a Sri Lankan American monk who arrived in the United States in 1968 at the behest of the Sasana Sevaka Society after working in India for the Maha Bodhi Society and in Malaysia as a missionary.<sup>22</sup> He now spends much of his time at his Bhavana Center in West Virginia. He teaches *vipassanā* meditation to both lay and monastic practitioners and insists that “You could attain enlightenment right now, if you are ready.”<sup>23</sup> Though his *Mindfulness in Plain English* is probably the most well-known of his writings, his dissertation from American University, “A Critical Analysis of the Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation,” has enjoyed wide circulation.<sup>24</sup>

Gunaratana makes extensive references to the commentaries, the suttas, and the *abhidhamma* in his explanation of the *jhānas*. For example, he teaches both access concentration and single-pointedness (*ekaggatā*), both of which become suspect in the hands of *jhāna* teachers who rely on the suttas alone (see Vimalaramsi and Thanissaro, below).<sup>25</sup>

Gunaratana clearly accepts the doctrines of rebirth and karma, stating that *jhāna* can serve as wholesome karma leading to improved circumstances in one's next life.<sup>26</sup> He espouses a number of traditional beliefs, such as the importance of monasticism. In addition, he argues that each one of the four levels of awakening (stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner, and *arhat*) "always arise as states of jhanic consciousness." In other words, *jhāna* is absolutely necessary for nirvana.<sup>27</sup> He praises the *abhiññas* and accepts them as very real, noting that the Buddha in one sutta declares those possessing *abhiññas* as worthy of offerings and reverence and that they are a "supreme field of merit."<sup>28</sup>

#### PA-AUK SAYĀDAW

Pa-Auk Sayādaw runs a meditation center in Burma. He is cited by many of the convert practitioners as an important *jhāna* teacher, some of whom have traveled to Burma to study with him.<sup>29</sup> He considers the canon, commentaries, and sub-commentaries authoritative, particularly the *Visuddhimagga*. Like Khema and Gunaratana, Pa-Auk Sayādaw believes people can obtain nirvana in this very life, and that is the stated goal of the center he runs.<sup>30</sup> He insists that meditation is the only way to end the cycle of rebirth.<sup>31</sup> He teaches both pure *vipassanā* (dry-insight) and *jhāna*. For most students, he suggests first practicing *jhāna*, after which *vipassanā* meditation should be introduced.<sup>32</sup>

Pa-Auk Sayādaw also advocates using *jhāna* to examine past lives, and further suggests that one can look into the future to see one's *parinibbāna*.<sup>33</sup> Like more traditional Buddhists, he believes in *devas* and other realms of existence, and suggests that being reborn in a *deva* realm is a desirable goal.<sup>34</sup> He also recommends developing the *abhiññas* by practicing particular meditations mentioned in the *Visuddhimagga*, such as *kaṣiṇa*-based *jhāna* meditation.<sup>35</sup> He advocates certain practices that many modernists would consider "superstitious," such as the use of the *Khandha Paritta* to heal and ward off snake bites, which he contends is quite effective.<sup>36</sup>

#### AJAHN BRAHMAVAṂSO

Another somewhat controversial Western *jhāna* teacher is Ajahn Brahmavaṁso, whose book *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* is likely on the bookshelf of every serious American convert *jhāna* practitioner. A theoretical physicist before ordaining under the Thai *bhikkhu* Ajahn Chah, he was born in the UK and now runs a monastery in Australia.

Not surprisingly given his background, he uses science as proof for various Buddhist teachings, suggesting that “Buddhism is not a belief system. It is a science founded on objective observation, i.e. meditation...and it is evidently repeatable.”<sup>37</sup> He even goes so far as to state that the Buddha, when he mentions “wheel systems” in the suttas, is talking about different galaxies, which he was able to see without a telescope.<sup>38</sup> Brahmavaṃso suggests that levitation is not only possible but may even be occurring at his monastery in Perth.<sup>39</sup> He speaks matter-of-factly about the development of psychic powers, the reality of ghosts and *devas*, and the very real existence of different *jhāna* realms without a hint of the agnostic skepticism common among lay convert practitioners in the United States.

According to Brahmavaṃso, science has proven that rebirth is a fact.<sup>40</sup> He states definitively, “rebirth is not a cultural addition but a central pillar of the teaching.”<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere he argues that all stream-enterers believe in rebirth and karma. In fact, the issue of rebirth is central in his book, where he offers multiple sutta citations to “prove” rebirth and offers practical suggestions for the reader to use *jhāna* practice to remember past lives.<sup>42</sup>

According to Brahmavaṃso, the goal of *jhāna* is nirvana, and “data obtained from reviewing *jhāna* form the basis of insight that leads to nibbāna.”<sup>43</sup> He argues against the so-called “dumbing down of nibbāna” in modern interpretations of Buddhism, insisting that nirvana is the highest happiness and that “you deserve to bliss out.”<sup>44</sup>

Although Brahmavaṃso teaches laity (including through his books), he asserts that “if you get a few of these *jhānas*, you’ll probably want to become a monk or nun.”<sup>45</sup> If one is to reach stream-entry, Brahmavaṃso maintains he or she must hear the dharma from a stream-enterer or above; these enlightened ones are found only in monastic centers.<sup>46</sup> A sign that one’s teacher is not enlightened is that they don’t have unshakeable faith in the monastic sangha. Likewise, if one does not believe in the suttas, one is not enlightened.<sup>47</sup>

Some of Brahmavaṃso’s ideas are a bit controversial. For example, he makes the rather surprising contention that the *jhānas* are original to Buddhism, that is, that the Buddha discovered *jhānas* rather than learning them from his teachers.<sup>48</sup> Brahmavaṃso is also unabashedly sectarian, calling certain Zen ideas “foolish,” saying it is impossible to postpone enlightenment out of compassion, and contending that *jhāna* practice is the one and only path to nirvana.<sup>49</sup> This last remark seems

to have made popular Insight Meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, who trained under the same teacher as Brahmavaṃso, a bit uncomfortable; he states in the foreword to Brahmavaṃso's book that *jhāna* is only one of a number of legitimate spiritual paths.<sup>50</sup>

Brahmavaṃso argues for a very deep level of concentration—*ekaggatā*—that other teachers often criticize. He states that in *jhāna* the body disappears, so that one can no longer see or hear.<sup>51</sup> He also states bluntly that *jhāna* is not possible during walking meditation, perhaps a statement made in reference to Vimalaramsi's light, sutta-based *jhānas*, discussed below.<sup>52</sup> Finally, he argues that “some teachers today present a level of meditation and call it *jhāna* when it is clearly less than the real thing.”<sup>53</sup> Among the sources Brahmavaṃso reveres and cites throughout his work are the *Vinaya*, the *Visuddhimagga*, and even the *jātakas*—which are very rarely mentioned by Western Insight Meditation teachers.

#### BHANTE VIMALARAMSI

Another Westerner popular in American convert *jhāna* circles is the American Theravāda monk Bhante Vimalaramsi, who runs the Dhamma Sukka monastery/meditation center in Missouri. Vimalaramsi is particularly interesting in his strong desire to return to the “original” teachings of the Buddha, a phrase he uses often in his talks and writings. Part of this effort to return to the origin of Buddhism has led Vimalaramsi to revere the suttas and *Vinaya* but reject the later commentaries and the *Abhidhamma*. He is particularly critical of the *Visuddhimagga*. For example, he notes:

So you have the *Visuddhimagga* teaching one kind of meditation, that doesn't lead to nibbāna, and you have the sutta, that teaches another kind of meditation, and it leads directly to nibbāna. And now, because we're so far away from the time of the Buddha, there's a lot of monks that take the *Visuddhimagga* as the same as the teaching of the Buddha, and then there's other monks that don't take that as the teaching of the Buddha, they take the suttas as the true teaching.<sup>54</sup>

Though Vimalaramsi initially studied in the *vipassanā* centers in Burma, he became convinced that this style of meditation was not authentic because it was based on commentaries rather than the suttas.<sup>55</sup>

In fact, this sutta-based interpretation of meditation has led him to teaching what he calls “tranquil-wisdom meditation,” a joint *samatha/vipassanā* meditation. He teaches mainly from the *Anapanasati-sutta*

and the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, and maintains that *jhāna* should not be considered ecstatic or one-pointed (*ekaggatā*). Rather, it is a light, relaxed state in which various Buddhist insights are examined. He maintains that (1) those who follow the commentaries' descriptions of *jhāna* are practicing a non-Buddhist meditation that does not lead to nirvana and (2) those who follow the commentaries in practicing a separate *vipassanā* practice are mistaken in following a non-canonical authority.

Vimalaramsi maintains more traditional beliefs as well, such as rebirth and supernormal powers. However, he cautions against trying to remember past lives (an ability that the commentaries suggest results from *jhānic* powers). He notes, "I've been asked by people if I would teach them how to remember past lifetimes.... These people that are doing hypnosis [*Visuddhimagga jhānas*] and fooling around with past lifetimes—it's really dangerous...."<sup>56</sup> Superhuman powers are possible as a result of sustained practice according to Vimalaramsi, including "psychic abilities—like the Divine Eye, or the Divine Ear, or flying in the air, reading other people's minds."<sup>57</sup> In this sense we can see that he has not rationalized or explained away Buddhist ideas that many Westerners might find "superstitious."

#### THANISSARO BHIKKHU

The American monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu was trained in a Thai monastery and is currently abbot of the Metta Forest Monastery near San Diego. He is very well-known in the United States through the popular Web site [AccessToInsight.org](http://AccessToInsight.org). His teacher, Ajahn Fuang, emphasized that concentration is essential for developing insight.<sup>58</sup>

Thanissaro Bhikkhu teaches *jhāna* exclusively from the suttas and not from the commentaries. After noting that the *jhānas* as taught in the *Visuddhimagga* include elements not mentioned in the suttas, Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes, "Some Theravadins insist that questioning the commentaries is a sign of disrespect for the tradition, but it seems to be a sign of greater disrespect for the Buddha—or the compilers of the Canon—to assume that he or they would have left out something absolutely essential to the practice."<sup>59</sup> He concludes that *jhāna* in the commentaries is "something quite different" than *jhāna* in the canon.<sup>60</sup>

Unlike others who advocate the "deeper" states described in the *Visuddhimagga*, Thanissaro Bhikkhu argues that extremely deep states of meditation are "wrong concentration."<sup>61</sup> One must be fully aware of the body; powerful *ekaggatā*, as discussed in the *Visuddhimagga*, can

lead to one losing a sense of sounds, thoughts, or perceptions, which is not ideal for insight in his opinion. People who advocate such deep meditation are, according to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, blocking out certain areas of awareness and are “psychologically adept at dissociation and denial.”<sup>62</sup>

In what sounds like a Protestant American version of *jhāna* practice, Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggests that one has to look to oneself and not to an outside authority when it comes to the *jhānas*; he clearly valued his teacher’s hands-off instructional approach to *jhāna*, which cultivated in his students a sense of what Thanissaro Bhikkhu calls “self-reliance,” a theme that runs through much of Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s teachings.<sup>63</sup>

#### LEIGH BRASINGTON

Leigh Brasington is an American student of Ayya Khema who now teaches regularly on the *jhānas* across the United States, mainly to students at Insight Meditation centers. Like his teacher, Brasington suggests that the *jhānas* are not difficult to learn or practice.<sup>64</sup> He notes that “The *jhānas* as discussed in the suttas are accessible to many people” but maintains that the *jhānas* presented in the *Visuddhimagga* are actually qualitatively different from those described in the suttas; he speculates that the *Visuddhimagga jhānas* were developed during a later period and are more difficult to achieve.<sup>65</sup> In fact, Brasington has suggested that we distinguish between “*sutta jhānas*” and “*Visuddhimagga jhānas*,” which he considers quite different from one another. Brasington favors the lighter *sutta jhānas*.<sup>66</sup>

When I asked him about his opinion of the authority of the written tradition, including the canon and commentaries, he stated that he reads the texts often and tries to understand “the main strands” of the teachings and “let the rest go.” His approach is in many ways very pragmatic, a difference that distinguishes his interpretation from more traditional Buddhists. In noting that debate continues over the nature and interpretation of *jhānas*, he contends that rather than trying to determine the most authentic form of *jhāna*, a more fruitful line of inquiry is, “Is there some level of *jhāna* that people can actually learn and will help them in their spiritual growth?”<sup>67</sup> Given this very practical approach, I wondered what his attitude toward rebirth is. When I prodded him, he smiled and said simply that he doesn’t know what happens after death.<sup>68</sup> The goal of *jhāna*, he said, was developing

insight that leads to nirvana—given his view of rebirth, I think it is safe to assume that he considers nirvana possible in this very life.

#### SHAILA CATHERINE

The second lay American of the *jhāna* teachers presented here, Shaila Catherine is the founder and head teacher of Insight Meditation South Bay in the Palo Alto area of Northern California. Her book, *Focused and Fearless* (forthcoming), is a manual dedicated to teaching the *jhānas* to a Western, English-speaking audience, and it assumes a background in Insight Meditation on behalf of the reader.<sup>69</sup> Her work appears to be directed to a lay audience, whom she insists are perfectly legitimate in practicing the *jhānas*—“traditionally this practice was not reserved for special people nor restricted to the monastic order.”<sup>70</sup> Throughout the book, Catherine cites various authorities, teachers, and inspirations, ranging from the Buddha of the Pāli canon to contemporary *vipassanā* teachers like Ajahn Chah, a variety of Tibetan teachers such as Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Tenzin Palmo, Kalu Rinpoche, and Longcheпа, and non-Buddhists such as the Advaita teacher Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj and her own teacher, H. W. L. Poonja. Expressing this spirit of ecumenicalism, she notes, “there is no single right way to experience the truth of the present.”<sup>71</sup>

The textual authorities she uses to support her assertions about *jhāna* practice include the Pāli canon and the *Visuddhimagga*. Although she concedes that access concentration is not mentioned in the suttas and is found only in the commentarial tradition, she nevertheless teaches access concentration in her book.<sup>72</sup>

Like Brasington (whom she later cites), Catherine suggests there are two different *jhāna* traditions being promulgated, each requiring different levels of absorption. She asks, are these “two valid but different jhanic systems within the Buddhist tradition?” and goes on to dispassionately describe the two approaches.<sup>73</sup> Later, she notes that “some teachers in Asia and the West recognize fairly light levels of natural samadhi (unified concentration)...they liberally apply the term jhana to any arising of the designated configuration of jhanic factors. Other teachers reserve the term jhana for a depth of seclusion that permits no sensory impressions whatsoever. Most teachers fall somewhere between the two extremes.”<sup>74</sup> Hesitant to be pinned down to a correct interpretation, Catherine instead suggests that the “academic debate” be sidelined in favor of a “practical attainment of jhana,” but at the

same time suggests that the two approaches are simply different experiences of the same jhanic states.<sup>75</sup> In her book she notes Brasington's interpretation approvingly, namely, that one can swim deeply in a pool of water (a deep *ekaggatā* interpretation of *jhāna*) or merely swim at the surface (the light sutta *jhāna* approach of Vimalaramsi and Thanissaro), but the pool remains the same.<sup>76</sup> Having skillfully addressed the question of authentic versus inauthentic *jhāna*, Catherine is free to express her trust in the *ekaggatā* approach, choosing to define *jhāna* in her book as referring to "a traditional sequence of specific states of absorption where the mind is secluded from sensory impingement and deeply unified with a chosen object."<sup>77</sup> Still, she prefers "to let the individual practitioner determine this for her- or himself," coaxing the reader, "you can gauge for yourself..."<sup>78</sup>

This last theme runs throughout the book. Where debate muddies the water, Catherine prefers to allow *experience* to operate as the ultimate authority, suggesting to the reader again and again that he or she is the final judge of truth, and that one can trust—a word used copiously throughout the work—one's own experience.<sup>79</sup> "In the absence of authoritarian requirements," she comments, "we must each discover for ourselves the tender discipline that sustains us."<sup>80</sup>

In terms of expressing the sort of belief-free agnosticism often attributed to Western convert Buddhists,<sup>81</sup> Catherine expresses a clear belief in the attainability of nirvana, suggesting that while *jhāna* meditation itself cannot produce enlightenment, it can support liberative wisdom.<sup>82</sup> But elsewhere she is more guarded and ambiguous about traditional Buddhist teachings. She mentions karma only once, and even then only in passing.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps most significantly, she completely (and rather diplomatically) avoids the question of the supernatural powers traditionally attributed to the practice of the *jhānas*: "The ancient discourses present the possibility of using the fourth jhana as a springboard for 'wielding the various kinds of spiritual power,' such as mind-reading, seeing into the future, or recollecting past lives—even duplicating the body, or flying through the air. Although these possibilities are interesting, this book limits itself to a discussion of the two other traditional options [the four formless *jhānas* and *vipassanā*]."<sup>84</sup>

## MANY MODERNISMS

We would benefit from developing a less monolithic understanding of contemporary Buddhisms than “Buddhist modernism” to describe what is, in my estimation, a very wide range of beliefs and practices. For example, like the other teachers mentioned in this study, Ayya Khema’s interpretations of Buddhism and the *jhānas* offer a mishmash of modernist and traditional qualities. In some areas, her perspectives clearly fit the ideal type of “modernist”: she focused on meditation in her Buddhist practice, was rather ecumenical, and considered Buddhism consonant with science. On the other hand, she believed in the supernatural powers of the Buddha and retained many traditional beliefs regarding karma and rebirth.

On the whole, Ayya Khema, Bhante Gunaratana, and Pa-Auk Sayādaw share much in their orientations to Buddhism. Like the other *jhāna* teachers in this study, they share the largely modernist emphasis on meditation and the belief that the laity can and in fact should practice meditation. Each of the teachers in this study expresses what Bond has described as “optimism,” that is, the belief that nirvana is still reachable in our time so far removed from the Buddha.<sup>85</sup> For all of these reasons, and a host of others, all of the teachers in this study can be described as modernists. Ayya Khema, Bhante Gunaratana, and Pa-Auk Sayādaw are traditional, however, in other ways, and it is this particular mix of modern and traditional orientations that I would like to call here a “mainstream” modernism. Unlike the American convert monastics Vimalaramsi and Thanissaro, these mainstream modernists teach from the entire canon as well as from extra-canonical works such as the *Visuddhimagga* and see the entire written tradition as a valuable guide to *jhāna* and Buddhist practice. They share an emphasis on rebirth and karma as essential Buddhist doctrines, and at least acknowledge the reality of *abhīñña*, with each teacher placing more or less emphasis on these powers. Neither Khema, Gunaratana, nor Pa-Auk shy away from traditional Buddhist cosmology regarding various realms of existence and the beings who reside there, ideas that in the hands of lay American converts are often rationalized or discarded as superstitious. These teachers acknowledge that the *vipassanā* movement’s methods are useful, and some of them recommend either *vipassanā* or *jhāna* for students on a case-by-case basis. In other words, they see multiple paths to awakening existing in the Buddhist tradition. This shines through in their willingness to acknowledge the authenticity

of other traditions. For example, Pa-Auk Sayādaw is more than willing to teach to Mahāyāna monastics without trying to convert them, and Ayya Khema suggests that the mystics of the Christian tradition discovered and practiced *jhāna*.<sup>86</sup>

Overall, Ajahn Brahmavaṃso shares much in common with Khe-ma, Gunaratana, and Pa-Auk: he cites the suttas, the *Abhidhamma*, the commentaries, and the *jātakas* as authoritative and appears to accept the authority of the entire written tradition. He also teaches the doctrines of rebirth and karma, in many ways more forcefully than the other teachers in this study. He insists that one necessarily believes in these things if one is on the path to awakening. In fact, with his background as a physicist, it is not entirely surprising that he asserts science *proves* these doctrines; the above teachers are not particularly concerned with confirming Buddhist teachings through Western science. He likewise emphasizes *abhiññā*, teaches past-life recall,<sup>87</sup> and emphasizes levitation and other superpowers in a vigorous way that the other teachers do not. But perhaps the most important distinction between Brahmavaṃso's style of modernism and those of the other teachers in this study is that he does not view *vipassanā* meditation as a legitimate path to awakening. In fact, Brahmavaṃso makes it very clear that there is only one possible way to awaken, and that is through *jhāna*.<sup>88</sup> His emphasis on *jhāna* as the one true way, as the only legitimate Buddhist path, leads him to criticize other traditions with a certain freeness that one rarely associates with Buddhist modernists. Although his particular blend of modernist and traditional orientations brings him quite close to the "mainstream modernists," his unique anti-ecumenical approach and fervent claims of the "proof" of Buddhist belief through scientific means is a unique blend of traditional and modernist Buddhism.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu and Bhante Vimalaramsi, both of whom trained in meditation centers in Southeast Asia, show some striking similarities in their contextualization of *jhāna* and overall approach to Theravāda. What is particularly salient to me is that each suggests returning to "original" Buddhism, that is, the Buddhism of the Buddha as preserved in the Pāli canon, and therefore relies almost exclusively on the suttas and *Vinaya* rather than the commentaries, *Abhidhamma*, or any other writings that appear to have been composed at a later time. The two trained in different centers, one in Burma and the other Thailand. Though Vimalaramsi studied in the *vipassanā* centers in Burma in

the 1980s, he became convinced that this style of meditation was not authentic because it was based on the commentaries rather than the suttas and decided to stop giving any authority to the commentaries.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, Thai-trained Thanissaro Bhikkhu completely rejects the authority of the commentaries in terms of *jhāna* practice. Both of these teachers agree that the *jhānas* are a light state of meditation because *ekaggatā*, deep one-pointedness, is mentioned only in the commentaries. Thanissaro argues that the deep state of meditation advocated by some Buddhist teachers is “wrong concentration,”<sup>90</sup> while Vimalaramsi suggests that the *jhāna* practices endorsed by *Visuddhimagga* followers is “hypnosis,” not *jhāna*.<sup>91</sup> To me this orientation suggests a more Protestant, or at least American, attitude in which religious specialists, like those monastics who wrote commentaries, are seen as fallible and not particularly trustworthy.<sup>92</sup> The Theravāda tradition in Asia in the post-Buddha era is looked on with a critical eye, and the only source of true authority is the Buddha himself—and the words of the Buddha are found only in the earliest suttas and the *Vinaya*. It suggests to me a more text-centric orientation, perhaps fed by the work of early Orientalists who sought “true” Buddhism in the early Buddhist writings rather than in traditional practices, and in fact Paul Numrich in his study of Theravāda Buddhism in the United States suggests that American converts to the more traditional Theravāda (in contrast to the Insight Meditation movement) frequently appear to come from fundamentalist Christian backgrounds.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, he notes that “American-convert Theravāda *bhikkhus* have uncovered a clear strain of conservatism on *vinaya*,”<sup>94</sup> and Thanissaro Bhikkhu has in fact been branded elsewhere as a “*Vinaya* fundamentalist.”<sup>95</sup> What is most interesting to me about these two *jhāna* teachers is that while they diverge in teaching lineage, they nevertheless share a strong suspicion of the commentaries (and hence teach “light” *jhānas*) and other items not “original” to the Buddhism of the Buddha as presented in the Pāli canon; they also became monastics rather than practiced as laypeople (suggesting a more “traditional” approach to Buddhism). Their similarities lead me to describe them as “original Buddhism” modernists.

Brasington and Catherine—the last of the teachers discussed here—share a more pragmatic, lay-centric approach that places the authority to interpret the Buddhist tradition firmly in the self (and I suspect a great deal of lay convert practitioners in the United States have a similar orientation).<sup>96</sup> In other words, competing truth claims are set-

tled not by appealing to the authority of text, tradition, doctrine, or science, but through experience or “inner wisdom.” This leaves the practitioner with the ability to pick and choose among the teachings in the entire written and living tradition, and even from beyond the Buddhist religion altogether. For example, though Brasington tends to reject the authority of the Buddhist tradition in the post-Buddha era, he still draws on ideas such as access concentration and *vipassanā* as a separate practice, which are only mentioned in the commentaries. Such an orientation leaves considerable space for interpretation, reinterpretation, and even creative invention. I would like to call these two Buddhist teachers “pragmatic modernists.”

My analysis revealed that divergent interpretations of authority among these teachers affect their *jhāna* teachings and practices, and in some cases there is significant overlap in distinct orientations, such as the commonalities shown in Vimalaramsi and Thanissaro’s “original Buddhism” approach and the “experience as authority” of Brasington and Catherine. Is this related to distinct modernist lineages? This question would be less complicated if we were comparing, for example, the so-called “modernism” of the Thai forest tradition versus the modernist Burmese or Sri Lankan traditions. But each of these teachers has been affected not only by their birth region’s norms but also by the global flow of culture and religion, and in the contemporary period it becomes near impossible to untangle distinct lineages of modernism in a manner such that we could then identify various unique modernities. For example, is Thanissaro’s orientation due to his training in the Thai forest tradition, or to the legacy of the “original” Buddhism espoused by the Western Orientalists that informed so much of America’s understanding of Buddhism, or perhaps to his own religious upbringing? Likewise, is Gunaratana’s modernism the result of Burmese influence on Sri Lankan Buddhism, more “traditional” Sri Lankan Buddhism (or even a distinct brand of Sri Lankan “Protestant” Buddhism), his residence in the United States, or something else? Furthermore, all the various Buddhist modernisms described here display only some “modernist” traits in conjunction with other, more “traditional” traits. This makes it very worrisome to place all of these teachers under the simple rubric of “Buddhist modernism” generally, or even within specific “lineages” of nationally-circumscribed modernisms (i.e., “Sri Lankan Buddhist modernism”). And given the simultaneous flow of multiple Buddhist traditions not only into Western cultures, but across Asian

national borders as well, tracing specific Buddhist modernist “lineages” is likely to become increasingly difficult if not impossible in some cases.

Both Bechert and Lopez have cautioned that the label “Buddhist modernism” purports to describe what is in fact a very diverse group of people; Bechert notes that “Buddhist modernism is by no means a uniform movement,” but to date no researcher that I know of has taken on the task of untangling the many different orientations subsumed under this very general term.<sup>97</sup> Complicating matters further is the fact that many of the people we call “Buddhist modernists” retain very traditional practices and/or beliefs in addition to more modernist ones. Our definition of Buddhist modernism needs to become more nuanced and plural in nature; we need to avoid lumping together into a single undifferentiated category (“Buddhist modernism”) such a wide variety of orientations, many of which are antagonistic to one another.

We would benefit greatly from a model that recognizes multiple modernities, such as I have tried to suggest. As Rofel noted over ten years ago, “That which has been taken as homogenous and called ‘modernity’...obscures a range of diverse practices.”<sup>98</sup> How have various modernist notions been adopted, transformed, and localized, even among so-called “traditional” Buddhists? Eisenstadt notes:

The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world—indeed to explain the history of modernity—is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs. These ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity, holding very different views on what makes societies modern.<sup>99</sup>

This study has indeed demonstrated that different sorts of modernity underlie the *jhāna* teachings being presented to the West, with some teachers emphasizing the authority that tradition (esp. the commentaries) carries, some rejecting anything not said by the “Buddha himself” in textual accounts, and some locating authority in the de-traditionalized self.

As I have demonstrated, distinct strands of modernism may exist even in one nation. The modernism of what I called here the “original Buddhism” converts differs considerably from that of the “pragmatic”

modernists not just in their *jhāna* practices, but more fundamentally in their vision of Buddhism in the contemporary period. While the proponents of “original” Buddhism envision a religion led by monastics and relying exclusively on the textual works directly attributable to the Buddha, the more “pragmatic” Buddhists seem to reject traditional authority altogether and espouse a more “spiritual but not religious” Buddhism that relies on the self as the ultimate arbiter of truth. This difference in orientation reveals two rival interpretations about the proper boundaries of religious authority in the contemporary period, particularly as related to the lay/monastic distinction and who can claim a legitimate interpretation of the Buddhist tradition, as well as differing conceptions regarding the authority of text. That both of these strands exist in the United States suggests that we reconsider not only the homogenizing term “Buddhist modernism,” but even nationally-derived descriptors such as “Sri Lankan Buddhist modernism” or “Vietnamese Buddhist modernism.” The flow of cultural and religious capital across national boundaries in the emerging global ecumene demands that we reconsider such narrow methods of categorization, particularly in places such as the United States where a wealth of different Buddhist traditions are practiced side by side.

## NOTES

1. I'd like to express my appreciation to Shaila Catherine and Leigh Brasington for taking the time to grant me interviews regarding *jhāna* meditation in the American Insight Meditation context, including their own understandings of *jhāna*.
2. Some colleagues may challenge my choice to describe these Buddhists under the rubric of "Theravāda," particularly given Peter Skilling's objection to the use of the term based on its modern history and scarcity of use in Pāli sources (see "Ubiquitous and Elusive: In Quest of Theravāda," unpublished paper presented at the conference "Exploring Theravāda Studies: Intellectual Trends and the Future of a Field of Study," National University of Singapore, August 12–14, 2004). However, my intent here is not to point toward a historic continuity of a particular ordination lineage, nor to suggest that "Theravāda" as a term is appropriate for discussing ancient or pre-modern Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, nor even to determine whether convert Buddhists who claim to be Theravādin are *really* Theravādin or even Buddhist. Rather, I employ the term in describing a group of persons who self-consciously use it to describe themselves. I will therefore leave questions of authenticity to those better suited for Buddhist "theology" and the discernment between heresy and orthodoxy. However, I should like to mention that my own field research in Sri Lankan American Buddhist communities revealed that many of these Asian American Buddhists are perfectly content to call the Insight Meditation movement a "Theravādin" group.
3. There are such individuals, though my research indicates they are considered heterodox in the Insight Meditation and Theravāda communities. See, for example, the self-ordained (and self-declared "stream-winner") Sotapanna Jhanananda's writings at <http://www.greatwesternvehicle.org>.
4. For a good introduction to the Insight Meditation movement in the United States, see Gil Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 163–180.
5. In examining the literature, I found no academic treatments of the topic of *jhāna* in Western Buddhism. The dearth of research on this topic is likely related to the reluctance of many scholars to treat Western Buddhists as worthy of study. Furthermore, when the concepts of modernity and Westernization are collapsed into one, scholars decry the tainting of Asian Buddhism with Western influences, producing an attitude toward Buddhist modernism that views it as nothing more than an Orientalist product leading to the demise of so-called "traditional" Buddhism, rather than as a way for *Buddhists themselves* to keep Buddhism applicable to their contemporary lives. For more on

this see Natalie Quli, "Western Self, Asian Other: Modernity, Authenticity, and Nostalgia for 'Tradition' in Buddhist Studies," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* (forthcoming).

6. See, for example, Martin Baumann, "Protective Amulets and Awareness Techniques, or How to Make Sense of Buddhism in the West," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Bauman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

7. Interview with Shaila Catherine, September 2007.

8. See Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Landern des Theravada-Buddhismus*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966–1973); and for an English discussion see his "Buddhist Revival in East and West," in *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture*, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 273–285.

9. Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

10. Donald Lopez, introduction to *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), vii–xli. See also David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (forthcoming).

11. See, for example, Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Robert Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42, no. 3 (October 1995): 228–283. Other fine studies include George Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); and Elizabeth Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

12. Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

13. Mary Talbot, "A Mind Pure, Concentrated, and Bright: An Interview with Meditation Teacher Leigh Brasington," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 67.

14. Ayya Khema, *Who Is My Self? A Guide to Buddhist Meditation* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997).

15. See *Visuddhimagga* XII.8, where Buddhaghosa states that only one in one hundred million reach absorption.

16. Khema, *Who Is My Self*, 47.

17. *Ibid.*, 50.

18. Ayya Khema, *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere: Meditations on the Buddhist Path*

- (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 18.
19. Ibid., 78.
20. Ibid., 54.
21. Ibid., 68.
22. Henepola Gunaratana, *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 267.
23. Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, rev. and updated ed. (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 168.
24. A revised version of this work was published under the title *The Path of Serenity and Insight: An Explanation of the Buddhist Jhanas* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1985).
25. Many examples of his reliance on these works can be found in the titles above (*Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, and *The Path of Serenity and Insight*), as well as in his many other published and unpublished works. *Ekagattā* and access concentration in particular are discussed throughout *The Path of Serenity and Insight*, his most complete work on the *jhāna* system of meditation.
26. Ibid., 139.
27. Ibid., 175; see also 213.
28. Ibid., 206.
29. For more on Pa-Auk Sayādaw in the context of Burmese political culture, see Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999), 134, 272, and 323.
30. Pa-Auk Sayādaw, *Knowing and Seeing: Talks and Questions-and-Answers at a Meditation Retreat in Taiwan*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tullera, Australia: Buddha Dharma Education Association, Inc., 2000), 8–9.
31. Ibid., 15.
32. Ibid., 36.
33. Ibid., 196.
34. Ibid., 108.
35. Ibid., 175–176.
36. Ibid., 256.
37. Ajahn Brahmavamso Mahathera, "Buddhism, the Only Real Science," *Lanka Daily News* (Colombo), March 28, 2007. Available online at <http://www.daily-news.lk/2007/03/28/fea04.asp>.

38. Ibid.
39. Ajahn Brahmavaṃso, “Buddhism and Science,” dharma talk presented at the Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre, Nollamara, Western Australia, 19 October 2001. It is available online at [http://www.bswa.org/audio/mp3/Brahmavamso\\_2001\\_10\\_19.mp3](http://www.bswa.org/audio/mp3/Brahmavamso_2001_10_19.mp3).
40. Brahmavaṃso, “Buddhism, the Only Real Science.”
41. Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator’s Handbook* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 185.
42. Ibid., 250; 187.
43. Ibid., 154.
44. Ibid., 212; 132.
45. Ibid., 98.
46. Ibid., 211.
47. Ibid., 249–250.
48. Ibid., 127–130.
49. Ibid., 257, 229, and 129.
50. Jack Kornfield, foreword to *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, ix.
51. Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, scattered references throughout.
52. Ibid., 75.
53. Ibid., 128–129.
54. Bhante Vimalaramsi, “Factors of Enlightenment,” <http://www.dhammasukha.org/Study/Talks/Transcripts/factors-aug00-ts.htm>. His critique of the *Visuddhimagga* is significantly more biting in “The Noble Eightfold Path,” <http://www.dhammasukha.org/Study/Talks/Transcripts/8-fold-path-mar02-t.htm>.
55. “The Teachers [sic] Background,” [http://www.dhammasukha.org/About/teacher\\_background.htm](http://www.dhammasukha.org/About/teacher_background.htm).
56. “Anuruddha—Master of the Divine Eye,” <http://www.dhammasukha.org/Study/Talks/Transcripts/ANURUDDHA-OCT06-TS.htm>.
57. Ibid.
58. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Seeing for Yourself,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 74–76.
59. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Wings to Awakening* (1996), 287. Available online at <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings.pdf>.
60. Ibid., 287.

61. *Ibid.*, 261.
62. Thanissaro, “Seeing for Yourself,” 76.
63. However, compare this with his statement that “the determining factor in deciding a correct understanding is not personal authority but consistency. Only if a statement stands up under comparison with what is known of the Canon should it be accepted as true Dhamma or Vinaya.” Thanissaro, “Buddhist Monastic Code I,” <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/bmc1/bmc1.intro.html>.
64. Leigh Brasington, “A Mind Pure, Concentrated, and Bright: An Interview with Leigh Brasington,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Winter 2004): 66–71.
65. Leigh Brasington, “Interpretations of the Jhānas,” <http://www.leighb.com/jhanantp.htm>; interview with the author, August 2007.
66. Personal interview with the author; see also Brasington, “Interpretations of the Jhānas.”
67. Brasington, “A Mind Pure, Concentrated, and Bright,” 67.
68. Interview with the author, August 2007.
69. Shaila Catherine, *Focused and Fearless: A Meditator’s Guide to States of Deep Joy, Calm, and Clarity* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, forthcoming).
70. Catherine bases this assertion on the *Pīti-sutta*. *Ibid.*, xii.
71. *Ibid.*, 187.
72. *Ibid.*, 6–7, 113, 117.
73. *Ibid.*, 127.
74. *Ibid.*, 153.
75. *Ibid.*, 128.
76. *Ibid.*, 154.
77. *Ibid.*, xii.
78. *Ibid.*, 154.
79. She notes, “you need to trust mindfulness as your mind’s guard” (*ibid.*, 62) and “Trust the capacity of the heart” (*ibid.*, 65), just two of many possible examples found in this book.
80. *Ibid.*, 79.
81. See Baumann, “Protective Amulets,” 58.
82. *Ibid.*, 64, 142–143, 163, 176, 181, 182, 219.
83. *Ibid.*, 74.
84. *Ibid.*, 151.

85. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*.
86. Pa-Auk Sayādaw, *Knowing and Seeing*; Khema, *Who Is My Self*, 50.
87. Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, 185–188.
88. *Ibid.*, 129.
89. See Vimalaramsi, “The Teachers Background” (n.p.): “I had the opportunity to meet many Sri Lankan monks and, after long conversations with them, I realized that many of the writings I had been studying in Burma were actually commentaries on the Pali texts, rather than the original texts themselves. The monks said that, upon close examination, some of the ideas conveyed in these commentaries are somewhat different from those contained in the original suttas. Surprisingly, one monk even suggested that I disregard the commentaries and go straight to the Pali texts for the best teachings. Another teacher showed me how to meditate as described in the suttas—a method remarkably different from the forms I had learned.” Note that here the conflict is between a Burmese modernist movement’s interpretation and a Sri Lankan modernist one, which then plays out in the interpretation of scripture by an American Buddhist modernist. Once again, this suggests that we need better descriptive models for understanding the multiplicity of Buddhist reactions to modernity.
90. Thanissaro, “Seeing for Yourself,” 76.
91. Vimalaramsi, “Anuruddha: Master of the Divine Eye.”
92. This is *not* to say that these venerable monks do not have a deep respect for tradition or love for their teachers. Both Vimalaramsi and Thanissaro regularly express profound and clearly heartfelt appreciation for their teachers.
93. Paul Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 119.
94. Paul Numrich, “Vinaya in Theravāda Temples in the United States,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 1 (1994): 26–27.
95. See, for example, Sravasti Dhammika, *The Broken Buddha: Critical Reflections on Theravada and a Plea for a New Buddhism* (Singapore: Nimmala Group, 2006). I refer here to the online version, available at <http://www.buddhistische-gesellschaft-berlin.de/downloads/brokenbuddhanew.pdf>, 15.
96. For more on the authority of the inner self in American religiosity, see Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998). Thanissaro Bhikkhu also appears to embrace this approach, at least in part, when he emphasizes self-reliance, as noted above.

97. Bechert, "Buddhist Revival in East and West," 276.
98. Lisa Rofel, "Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China," in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 160.
99. S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," in *Multiple Modernities*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 2.