

Buddhism in the Nordic Countries

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2 Buddhism in Sweden

Religious institutions, secular applications
and Christian meditations

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Introduction

Interest in Buddhism and Eastern thought began to fascinate Swedish intellectuals around the turn of the nineteenth century (1800–1900). However, it was only after the Second World War that the first Buddhist teachers, often converts themselves, began teaching in Sweden. In 1980, the first retreat facility was established at Solbo, near Fellingsbro, founded by Kalu Rinpoche and the Sixteenth Karmapa to enable full-time training in the Tibetan tradition, including several three-year retreats. In 1988, the fourteenth Dalai Lama inaugurated the first *stūpa* in northern Europe here. Increasing migration, primarily following a European pattern, has shaped the Buddhist landscape in Sweden. However, the Buddhist groups vary in their internal composition, mainly due to the different types of migration. Vietnamese Buddhists, who arrived as refugees, have since established viable communities in Scania and Gothenburg, with several Pure Land temples. In Malmö, the large and aging community of Vietnamese refugees contributed to establishing a Buddhist cemetery in 1989, the first of its kind in Sweden. The Chinese community came early on, primarily to work in the restaurant industry, and although many are secular, there is a Chinese temple in Rosersberg, Stockholm. More recently, Thai Buddhism has become the most widespread Buddhist tradition in Sweden, with temples in more than thirty localities from south to north. Other Asian Buddhist traditions represented include those of Sri Lanka and Burma. The mobility of ordained monks and nuns makes it difficult to estimate how many reside in Sweden, though it is likely that around a hundred monks and nuns serve Buddhist communities. Regular Buddhist practices are estimated to occur at over a hundred locations, including convert Buddhists and their retreat centres. However, only half of the temples are members of the Swedish Buddhist Community and thus receive state funding.

This chapter will provide an overview of the reception of Buddhism, focusing on religious thought and practices, including early converts and Asian Buddhists. It will also discuss religious and Buddhist demographics in Sweden and how Swedish legislation shapes how faith communities organise themselves. The chapter will also discuss new emerging frontiers, where practices like meditation and yoga have not only been secularised and used in the healthcare sector but are now re-sacralised in new religious settings, such as the Church of Sweden.

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The data on which the following chapter is based (document analyses, fieldwork including interviews and observations, netnographic observations of homepages, and archive studies) has been collected within the framework of four different research projects conducted between 2020 and 2025. By mainly using a methodological perspective of lived religion, where the lived experiences of individuals are highlighted, the interplay between individual and institutionalised forms of religion can be considered (Enstedt & Plank 2018). The chapter prioritises individual stories that, to different degrees, have contributed to or shaped Buddhism in Sweden, thus giving precedence to the lived aspects of religion. Micro-histories of people and places do not aim to give a full biography but to point to a cultural context (Lepore 2001). Thus, it is through the lives of individuals that Nordic and international intersections become visible, sometimes in surprising ways. Buddhism in Sweden has never existed in a vacuum, and influences have come from Asia and Western countries.

As this chapter is based on data that deals with lived Buddhism, including insights into people's religious affiliation and practice, sensitive personal data has been handled. The different research projects have all undergone rigorous ethical reviews and have been approved, ensuring the integrity and ethical conduct of the research.¹

The early reception of Buddhism

The oldest preserved Buddhist artefact found in the Nordic countries is the Helgö Buddha, which was discovered during archaeological excavations in 1954. The 8.4-cm-tall Buddha statue was probably made in the sixth century in the Swat Valley in present-day Pakistan (Gyllensvärd 2004). The small island of Helgö is situated in Lake Mälaren, not far from Birka, an important Viking centre, which was the hub for trade in Northern Europe during the 700s–900s. Viking trade networks were extensive, and archaeological analyses of the Helgö Buddha, along with finds of Chinese silk and Arabic silver coins found in Birka, suggest that the Vikings travelled far eastward along the Silk Road and thus had contact with several different cultures. Helgö held a central role in the region and was used during a period spanning from 200 to 900 CE, which extends from the Roman Iron Age up into the Viking Age. Helgö had many religious functions and knowledge of advanced metalwork. It is impossible to determine with certainty when the Helgö Buddha reached Sweden. However, the archaeological site on Helgö, where the Buddha statue was found together with other religious symbols, indicates that the Vikings “were aware of the power that the objects were thought to possess” (Hedenstierna-Jonsson 2020: 56). It is, however, unlikely that residents of Helgö had any knowledge of Buddhism.

Several hundred years would pass before early knowledge of Eastern and Asian religions reached Swedes in various ways, such as through Jesuit travel letters that circulated in Europe during the sixteenth century, reporting on the religion of Fo. In 1731, the Swedish East India Company was established to trade with South and East Asia, fostering growing enthusiasm for China during the Age of

Enlightenment, with imported goods like porcelain, silk, cotton, paper, tea, spices and art becoming part of cultural life. This laid the foundation for the later reception of Buddhism in Sweden during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Swedish travelogues from China contained representations of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, where Buddhism were portrayed as superstitious paganism (Spence 1999: 98–100; Nyberg 2001: 83–89; Gregory 2002: 36–49, 116–128). Offermanns notes that these early representations focused more on lived traditions than on religious texts, which later became the subject of academic work (Offermanns 2002, 2005). For an overview of the scholarly study of Buddhism in Sweden, see Myrvold, Plank, and Sardella (2024).

The growing interest in Eastern goods and thought contributed to the so-called Oriental Renaissance that Hedda Jansson (2023) suggests influenced the Swedish mystic, mathematician and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Swedenborg was later given the epithet “the Buddha of the North” by various authors from different continents who were inspired by his teachings: in 1835 by the French author Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) in his novel *Séraphita*; in 1887 by one of the first American Buddhists, Philangi Dasa, who was born in Sweden; and in 1913 by D.T. Suzuki in Japan (Jansson 2023). Today, Swedenborg’s works may be largely unfamiliar; however, he had a broad impact on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Devin Zuber argues that elements of Swedenborgian doctrine “enabled certain Western authors to approach and adumbrate Zen concepts . . . [while on] the other hand, Swedenborg’s ideas can be seen to ferry in the other direction, from the East towards the West . . . where Zen authors . . . adapted and translated Buddhist concerns into a Western Judeo-Christian framework” (Zuber 2010: 4). To some extent, this mention of the Buddha of the North may also have contributed to the favourable reception of Buddhism in the Swedish alternative and esoteric milieu (Faxneld, Plank & Nilsson 2024).

Swedenborg and the later Theosophical currents influenced several Swedish intellectuals at the turn of the century, 1800–1900. The Swedish Theosophical Society was founded in 1889, the same year as the eighth International Orientalist Conference took place in Stockholm and Christiania (Sweden and Norway were in union at this time). Leading Theosophists like Henry Steel Olcott, Annie Besant and Katherine Tingley visited Sweden during the 1890s. Swedish newspapers also reported on the World’s Parliament of Religion held in Chicago in 1893, which contributed to an interest in Eastern religions. At this time, the term *Buddhist* could apply to either a “free-thinker, truth seeker, theosophist or a plain agnostic” (Jansson 2023: 169), as Theosophy and Buddhism were intertwined. Like their European and American counterparts, Swedish Theosophists were interested in South Asian religious traditions and esoteric interpretations of Christianity. Theosophical ideas influenced several prominent Swedish intellectuals. Hedda Jansson (2023) has written extensively about the life of the educational reformer Ellen Key (1849–1926) and traced how Buddhist and Theosophical teachings influenced Key’s *Life Faith* (*Livstro*). Key read, for instance, Max Müller, Paul Carus, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Tolstoy, who may have influenced her thinking. She also had a strong interest in Japan during the 1890s and read, for instance, Lafcadio Hearn’s book *Exotica*

(Jansson 2023: 171–177). Another prominent exponent of Theosophy in Sweden was the author Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895), who, in 1888, translated Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* and also wrote a preface in which he identified Christ as Maitreya, the coming Buddha. Among other intellectuals with an interest in Theosophy were the author August Strindberg (1849–1912), the Social Democrat Kata Dalström (1858–1923), the artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and the poet Dan Andersson (1888–1920), all of whose works have had an impact on Swedish society (Almqvist & Passmark 2023).

Thomas Tweed (1992) identified two proponents with strong Scandinavian connections as part of the early Buddhist developments in North America. As mentioned earlier and in the introduction, one of them was Philangi Dasa (1849–1931). He was born as Herman Vetterling in Småland, southern Sweden, and migrated to America, where he, after several years as a Swedenborgian minister in a church in Philadelphia, trained as a homoeopathic doctor and later established the first Buddhist journal. Vetterling took the pseudonym Philangi Dasa, meaning “Western devotee.” The other was the Danish-born Harry Holst (1875–1932), who, like Vetterling/Philangi Dasa, trained as a homoeopathic doctor in Chicago. In his book *The American Encounter with Buddhism* (1992), Thomas Tweed mentions that, in 1899, the newspaper *Chicago Record* reported on Harry Holst as he taught about Buddhism in the streets of Chicago. This was also mentioned about two weeks later in *Chicago Bladet*, a Swedish Christian newspaper providing “Christian and Political News for Swedes in America.”² On 22 August 1899, under a heading featuring reports from “the mission field,” a short article mentions “a Danish Buddhist” named Harry Holst. This raises questions about the impact these two might have had on the early reception of Buddhism in the Nordic countries.

A search in the digitised archive of the Royal Library, where Swedish newspapers from 1645 to today are available, shows no indication that the Swedish press ever mentioned Vetterling/Philangi Dasa during his lifetime. However, there are several reports on Harry Holst, the first mention appearing in September 1899. Thus, the story of the Danish “Buddhist apostle” continues on the other side of the Atlantic. Since transatlantic news was of interest to many due to the great migration from Sweden and the Nordic countries, several Swedish newspapers, such as *Aftonbladet* (1899-09-08), *Öresundsposten* (1899-09-15), and *Sundsvalls Dagblad* (1899-09-15), picked up on the reports from *Chicago Record* and *Chicago Bladet*, and they also informed their readers that Harry Holst had used the name Tyagananda. However, according to the newspapers, Holst never claimed to be a Buddhist. Instead, he saw himself as a disciple of Buddhist philosophy and spoke about reincarnation and karma. A review of other digitised archives and newspaper archives³ illuminates the global dimensions of Harry Holst’s life and provides insights into his extraordinary life as a non-Christian. His Nordic roots included his birth and christening in Skovby, Denmark; Christian confirmation in the parish of Helsingør Cathedral; and marriage to his Norwegian wife, Ane Marie Lai Hansine Laursen. This marriage took place in London in 1905, and later that year, their daughter, Radha Sakuntala, named after the consort of Krishna, was born in Östersund, in the province of Jämtland, where Holst also worked at Sweden’s largest

homoeopathic institute, founded by O. T. Axell (Ellert 2009). Holst and his family moved several times, as he practised homoeopathic medicine in Stockholm and Småland. Harry Holst published two books on homoeopathy (Holst 1909, 1914) and one on vaccination (1912).

Holst's interest in spiritualism, Eastern philosophy and religion took him and his family on several extended tours. Holst had the financial means to travel (at least) three times to America, twice to London, and to take the family with him to India and Ceylon. Together with his wife, his close friend Sigurd Trier and his colleague O.T. Axell, Holst undertook a "spiritistic journey" to London in 1907. A lengthy travel report was published in the journal *Efteråt – Tidskrift för spiritism och dermed beslägtade ämnen* (no 6, 1907), where it was revealed that Holst was given a greeting from his late teacher Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) during a séance. During one of Holst's early stays in America, he appears to have met Swami Vivekananda and become his disciple. A small advertisement published in December 1912 in *Svenska Dagbladet* confirms this. In the ad, Holst sold stenographically (shorthand) reproduced lectures by his teacher on the topic of Vedanta, and more specifically "The Idea of a Universal Religion. Bhakti Yoga. Man – What She Is and How She Presents. Atman" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 1912-12-16). Meeting Vivekananda and becoming his disciple under the name Tyagananda are probably what led him to propagate Buddhist philosophy in Chicago. However, it is not clear from the sources if he also followed his teacher's unified view on religion, in which Buddhism was considered to be the fulfilment of Hinduism.

During his life in Sweden, Holst seems to have kept an interest in religion as well as a distance to Christianity and the Lutheran Evangelical Church. His daughter Radha was never baptised, and in the 1910 Census, it is stated that Harry and his wife, Marie, professed Hinduism. Around 1911, Harry Holst also created an *Ex Libris*,⁴ where he drew books and manuscripts to frame a map of India. The *Ex Libris* also contains the text *Ex Oriente Lux* (the light comes from the East) and a verse from *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.11.⁵ In later church records from when the Holst family was living in Jönköping, a priest notes that he cannot attest to their knowledge of Christianity and that they did not take communion.

Harry Holst and his colleague O.T. Axell were charged multiple times with quackery, and both Swedish and transatlantic newspapers reported on the trials. In 1916, the legislation regulating the medical profession was tightened, making it more difficult for Holst to continue his practice. This prompted the family to travel to India, though they returned to Sweden a year later, in 1917. The couple divorced in 1925, after which Harry Holst remarried, this time to Maria Cecilia Jeppesen, a Danish woman. They lived in Gothenburg until Harry Holst's death in 1932 at the age of 57. Based on the available source material, Harry Holst was a seeker rather than a spiritual teacher and was primarily known to the public for his profession in homeopathy. If we can conclude that Harry Holst affiliated himself with Hinduism rather than Buddhism, then it was the Social Democrat and agitator Kata Dalström (1958–1923), who was the first in Sweden to declare herself a Buddhist. This took place during a public debate in 1907 when Kata Dahlström was in Vansäter, in the Gävleborg region, to debate with a theologian on the role

of religion in politics. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as Sweden experienced industrialisation, women's liberation and mass migration, people began to look for other religious alternatives, as exemplified in the life of Harry Holst. During the discussion, attended by an audience of over 1,000 people, Kata Dalström advocated for complete religious freedom. At that time, the Dissenter Acts of 1860 and 1873 permitted individuals to leave the Church of Sweden only if they joined another denomination approved by the state, which limited alternatives to becoming a Methodist or a Catholic. Thus, the debate also highlights how Christian doctrine was publicly challenged as Kata Dalström declared herself a Buddhist and a Social Democrat at the same time (Plank 2009b).

It is unlikely that Swedish intellectuals at the turn of the century had any direct contact with Asian Buddhists. However, there is a possible exception in the remarkable life story of Hilma Svedal, née Wounsch (1870–1965). She was never part of the Swedish intellectual scene; instead, she was born into a fishing family on the West Coast. As noted in the introduction, she was a Swedish gold digger who took part in the Klondike Gold Rush. She migrated to New York in 1897, where she worked as a maid for a few years before travelling to California and Alaska. There, she met and married Norwegian John Svedal in 1912. The couple returned to Sweden in 1925, when Hilma inherited the island of Nord Långön in the northern archipelago of Strömstad on the West Coast from her deceased father. (This was around the same time that Belgian-French explorer Alexandra David Néel travelled to Tibet.) Hilma Svedal's husband did not settle well, and he returned to America the same year. Hilma, however, started planning and constructing a stone and cement garden filled with exotic flowers, creating her own Alaska in the Swedish archipelago, with a temple dedicated to the wind and an igloo, to name a few of her buildings. She was in her 60s when she began building her Alaska, and the island soon became a major tourist attraction, featuring music, dance and moonlight tours (Dave 2018; Jägerbrand 2011). Her family recounts how Hilma Svedal met a Chinese cook during her time in America, who gifted her a small ivory Buddha that she kept close to her, day and night. They claim she had a Buddhist outlook on life, encapsulated by the words “Don't worry,” which are inscribed on her gravestone (Haglund 2017).

It was, however, not only Swedes who travelled westwards and eastwards. A notable event occurred in 1897 when King Chulalongkorn, Rama V of Siam, visited Sweden. He had been invited by King Oscar II of Sweden to visit the Stockholm Exhibition, which highlighted art and industry. During his visit to Sweden, he went on an excursion to Norrland. King Chulalongkorn, a moderniser of Siam, was interested in the Swedish sawmill industry, and they therefore visited Bispgården and Utanede in the Ragunda area of Jämtland to observe timber rafting on the river Indalsälven. The visit was considered exotic at the time, and large crowds came to greet the King of Siam. The event lived on in the memories of local residents, and some fifty years after the visit, the small gravel road the king had travelled was named Kung Chulalongkorns väg [King Chulalongkorn's Road]. In 1992, a Thai dance group visited this road when they came to the Ragunda area to perform. The group was excited to learn about the road's history and formed an association

to honour the memory of their beloved King Chulalongkorn. In 1997, one hundred years after the royal visit, a royal pavilion was built with support from both Thai and Swedish sponsors. The pavilion is the only one of its kind outside of Thailand. Inside, a statue of King Chulalongkorn was placed, and his memory is honoured there on 19 July of every year, a celebration organised by the Royal Thai Embassy, the Thai communities in Ragunda and Ragunda Municipality. The royal pavilion is not a religious site. However, it has become a significant attraction for both Thais and Swedes. In 2007, a meditation centre and temple, Wat Piyadhammaram, was established a few kilometres away, and it also houses a small museum commemorating King Chulalongkorn's visit. King Chulalongkorn also gifted Sweden three complete copies of the Theravāda canon, the *Tiṭṭakā*, printed in 1893. These copies were given to the Uppsala and Lund University libraries and the Stockholm Royal Library.

The early reception of Buddhism in Sweden contains several elements that influenced the later development of lived Buddhism. Theosophy and eastward travels would continue to be important for the early converts who started to practise and teach Buddhism, and westward travels, whether through forced or voluntary migration, would shape when and how Asian Buddhists established their traditions in Sweden. Today, Buddhism in Sweden is interconnected with both Western and Asian teachers and traditions, and Sweden plays a vital role for other Nordic Buddhists since many retreat facilities have been established there.

Convert Buddhism: from unity to diversity

In the 1950s, when full religious freedom was granted, Buddhism attracted converts, many of whom were still influenced by Theosophy. From this time, Buddhism can be recognised as a lived religion with identifiable elements from Asian traditions where meditation, puja, teacher-disciple relations and the study of texts were central. Thus, when Buddhism began to be practised as a religion in Sweden, it was by and through Swedes. This led the author and translator Gunnar Gällmo (1946–2023) to somewhat provocatively argue that Buddhism is the most Swedish of all religions, contending that Christianity arrived with foreign missionaries, while Islam came with migrants from outside Europe. However, by the time migration from Buddhist countries began, Buddhism had already established a foothold in Sweden (Gällmo 1999a: 4). This argument is echoed by Trudy Fredriksson, Chairwoman of the Swedish Buddhist Community, who states that this made Sweden unique in that Swedish Buddhists early on formed networks and a joint Buddhist union together with Asian Buddhists who had migrated to Sweden. In regard to similar Buddhist unions in Europe and the United States, Fredriksson observes that most members are converts, with limited interactions with Asian Buddhists (Fredriksson 2013: 95).

Two early converts were instrumental in establishing and domesticating Buddhism in Sweden: Ingrid Wagner, née Svensson (1910–2001), and Marcel Sirander (1912–1983).⁶ Both promoted a unified view of Buddhism, Ekayāna. However, it was not until the 1970s that more organised teachings began to emerge. Marcel

Sirander, born in Nice, France, travelled to China in the 1930s and was ordained as a *bhikshu* in 1933 at Tsz Shan Monastery near Nánjīng (belonging to the Tiāntái tradition). He left China in 1936 and arrived in Sweden as a married layperson in 1948. He settled on the West Coast near Gothenburg, and as he began teaching Buddhism in the 1950s, he became known as Acarya Shunyata. In 1954, he established a Buddhist society that became a regional centre for the World Fellowship of Buddhism. Sirander became an influential teacher for a group of ten to fifteen Buddhists who met with him regularly (Hultberg 1971; Plank 2004).

In 1955, four years after full religious freedom was granted in Sweden, the artist Ingrid Wagner was the first Swedish woman to take renunciant vows. This occurred in Nepal during a Theravāda ordination. According to Annakarin Svedberg, one of her close disciples, it took place at the Swayambhunath *stūpa* in Kathmandu, where Wagner received the ten precepts as *dasasīlamātā* and the name Amita Nisatta (Svedberg 2011: 242). Two years earlier, Ingrid Wagner had travelled to India with her then-husband, Karl-Henrik Wagner, to study art and Buddhist religion. The couple had been involved with the Theosophical Society for several years and had thus become acquainted with Buddhism. Six months after Ingrid Wagner had taken the ten precepts, Karl-Henrik Wagner received an anagarika-ordination, committing to a celibate and ascetic lay life and adopting a homeless existence without formally joining the monastic community. Even though neither spouse took full ordination, they still viewed the ceremonies as the beginning of a new life, one in which they would live as a nun and a monk.

When Amita Nisatta returned to Sweden, she wore robes that she kept for the rest of her life and maintained a shaved head. She also considered it appropriate to be called Sister Amita, in keeping with the way Catholic nuns are addressed. In the late 1950s, Amita Nisatta was invited to Burma to learn meditation from Mahasi Sayadaw. Upon her return, Anagarika Sugata moved to Norway to teach Buddhism, while Amita Nisatta remained in Sweden. Her apartment on Södermalm in Stockholm became a gathering place for a growing group of interested people who adopted the name Friends of Buddhism (Buddhismens Vänner). Starting in 1969, she also frequently taught in the Chinese temple room at the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm on Saturdays. Between eight and ten people would attend her teaching and meditation sessions. On an altar made of red lacquer stood a Buddha statue, along with candlesticks, vases and offering bowls. Seated on the floor in front of the altar, with her shaved head and yellow robes, Amita Nisatta exuded a concentration and austerity during meditation that contrasted with her otherwise lively demeanour, and her teachings included puja, meditation and dharma talks (Plank 2004, 2009a).

Later, Sister Amita took two additional ordinations: one in the Tibetan tradition and another in the Chinese tradition. Svedberg recalls how Amita Nisatta once showed her lower arm, where she had received three small burn marks during the Chinese ordination ceremony as part of the bodhisattva ceremony (Svedberg 2011: 242). Amita Nisatta received several dharma names through her ordinations. At the Tibetan ordination, she was given the name Tin Lei, and as a fully ordained nun in the Chinese tradition, she was given the name Kwang Liu. The additional ordinations she undertook within the various Buddhist traditions were likely an

expression of the ecumenical and unified view of Buddhism that seems to have permeated her teaching. Her theosophical background likely influenced her view of Buddhism as a fundamentally unified religion. Also important was the recognition of becoming a fully ordained nun (Svedberg 2011: 96), as taking full ordination in the Chinese tradition follows a path that other Asian nuns have taken (Lindberg Falk 2004).

Marcel Sirander was reordained in 1975. According to one of his disciples, the reordination took place in the same temple where Amita Nisatta was ordained as a bhikshuni nun in the Tiantai tradition in Hong Kong. Sirander was given the name Tao Wei Kwong Wu and permitted to establish the Lotus Buddhist Order in Sweden, a branch of the Lotus Buddhist Association in Hong Kong.⁷ He passed away in 1983 and was buried at Nolby Cemetery, Alingsås.⁸

Both Sirander and Amita Nisatta represented an approach that included the centrality of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, and they made efforts to find ways “to highlight a culturally stripped-down Buddhism that fits in the West” (Fredriksson 2013: 56).

During her lifetime, Amita Nisatta maintained a Buddhist network of national and international contacts, connecting with other convert monastics in Sri Lanka, such as Piadassi Thera and Narada Thera (Svedberg 2011: 96–97). She also brought together both Asian and convert Buddhists in Sweden to form the Swedish Buddhist Union around 1980, which the newly formed Thai, Sri Lankan and Zen organisations joined (Fredriksson 2013).

After Amita Nisatta died in 2001, her ashes were enshrined in a *stūpa* in Nepal (Gardell 2001; Almqvist 2009).

For a long time, Marcel Sirander and Amita Nisatta were the only Buddhist teachers in Sweden, and they came to play a crucial role in the early development of Buddhism there. Neither would establish a Swedish tradition of their own. However, their legacy can be seen in the networks of Buddhists who have cooperated and celebrated Vesak in the Malmö and Stockholm areas. In Malmö, where Marcel Sirander had several disciples, the Ekayana group was founded in the 1970s. The group later became Föreningen Malmö Buddhistcentrum, where several Buddhist groups, both converts and Asian, cooperated and held joint Vesak celebrations. Malmö Buddhistcentrum was dissolved in 2006. Another group promoting a broader, non-sectarian practice without a clear lineage is the association for Tibetan Buddhism in Gothenburg, established in 1994, which invites teachers from several Tibetan traditions.

In Stockholm, the Buddhist Union, formed in 1980, was followed by Sveriges Buddhistiska Samarbetsråd (SBS) in 1993, which in 2020 became a faith community called Sveriges Buddhistiska Gemenskap (the Swedish Buddhist Community, SBC). Today, the SBC serves as an umbrella organisation for both Asian and convert groups and facilitates state grants to faith communities. The SBC currently has twenty-four-member organisations that collectively serve around 11,000 registered individuals.⁹

In 1974, the Sixteenth Karmapa visited Sweden and performed the Black Crown Ceremony at Kulturhuset in Stockholm in front of a large audience. In 1976, the

organisation Karma Tenpe Gyaltzen was established, and Dorje Lopön lama Ngawang¹⁰ (1927–2011) was responsible for the Karma Kagyu tradition in Sweden until his death (see also the chapter by Stefan Larsson). In September 1980, the first traditional three-year retreat in Sweden began; six out of eight participants (all converts) completed the entire retreat, with some later becoming active as teachers. The retreat centre Karma Dechen Ösel Ling, located at Solbo, north of Fellingsbro, also houses the first Scandinavian *stūpa*, built in 1988 and inaugurated by the Dalai Lama. The official name of the *stūpa* is Du Khor Djangchub Chöten Töndröl Chenmo. The retreat centre also has an ash cemetery called the Mandala Grove, where memorial ceremonies and funerals are held. In Hägersten, Stockholm, the society also operates a meditation centre called Karma Shedrup Dargye Ling, where meditation sessions, sadhanas, dharma teaching and study circles are organised throughout the year.¹¹ Karma Tenpe Gyaltzen is also represented in Örebro.

Several other Tibetan groups have also been established in Sweden. Another organisation which was founded early, in 1979, is Sakya Changchub Chöling, by Khenchen Sherab Gyaltzen Amipa Rinpoche. They offer study and meditation in accordance with the Tibetan Buddhist Sakya tradition. Since 2014, when Khenchen passed away, Khenpo Tashi Sangpo Amipa has served as the head teacher of the centre. He resides in Switzerland at the Thubten Changchub Ling centre and travels to Sweden several times a year to teach.¹²

Other Tibetan groups include Karma Yönten Ling in Scania; the Yeshin Norbu meditation centre in Stockholm, which is part of the Foundation for the Preservation of Mahāyāna Tradition (FPMT); the New Kadampa, with meditation centres in Stockholm and Gothenburg; and Diamond Way Buddhism in Stockholm.

The growing interest in meditation during the 1970s and 1980s led to Swedish meditators inviting prominent *vipassanā* teachers to visit Sweden. Since the mid-1980s, the Vipassana group in Stockholm has regularly organised meditation retreats, and since the early 1990s, Swedish representatives in S.N. Goenka's meditation tradition have arranged intensive ten-day courses. Since 2007, Dhamma Sobhana in Ödeshög has served as the Nordic centre for *vipassanā* meditation in the tradition of S.N. Goenka, offering 20–25 courses every year, attended by around 2,000 meditators.¹³

Triratana (formerly Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) has been active in Sweden since the early 1980s, with a centre in Stockholm (Stockholms buddhist-center) and a retreat facility, Dharmagiri, located north of Sala. In Sweden, there are about thirty ordained members (mitras), who also lead local groups in Gothenburg, Linköping, and Hudiksvall.¹⁴

In 2004, one of Marcel Sirander's disciples in southern Sweden founded a Chan temple in Malmö, the Tao Zen temple, which caters to converts and focuses on puja, meditation and studies. It also conducts naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals.¹⁵ Another of Sirander's disciples became involved with the Arya Maitreya Mandala, AMM and was appointed dharmacarya¹⁶ (teacher and priest). He later left the AMM and continued teaching independently, including teaching meditation at the state prison in Malmö.¹⁷

Several traditions of Zen Buddhism have become established as convert groups in Sweden:

The Zenbuddhistiska Samfundet, established in 1982, stemming from Sanbō Kyōdan through the tradition of the American teacher Philip Kapleu, operates a training temple, Zengården, in Fellingsbro, as well as city centres for meditation in Stockholm, Göteborg, Lund, Tampere (Finland), Cologne (Germany) and Glasgow (Scotland). At Zengården, full-time training and retreats are offered. The teachers, Sante Poromaa and Kanja Odland, trained with Philip Kapleau and later with his successor Bodhin Kjolhede. They have been teaching full-time since 1998 and 2001, respectively.¹⁸

The Swedish Soto-Zen Association, in the tradition of Taisen Deshimaru and closely connected to the main temple La Gendronnière in France, was established in 1984. In Sweden, the Soto-Zen Association has *dōjōs* in Uppsala, Göteborg, Lund and Stockholm.¹⁹

In Gothenburg, the So Gyo Zen Dojo is part of the international Kosen sangha and is led by Rei Kiku Femenias, who received dharma transmission in 2015.²⁰

In Umeå, in northern Sweden, Ordinary Mind is connected to Tavallinen Mieli Zendo in Tampere, Finland.

Svalornas sangha is part of the Zen Peacemaker tradition of Bernie Glassman, focusing on socially engaged Buddhism and interreligious work. Pake Hall, who received dharma transmission from Barbara Salaam Wegemüller in 2023, has also been involved with interfaith pilgrim walks, teaching meditation in prisons and the Books Behind Bars project (where inmates can borrow books on Buddhism and meditation), and ordaining trees in order to help preserve old forests.²¹

Another association of converts consists of meditators connected to the Order of Interbeing and students of the late Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, practising in the Plum Village Tradition (Fredriksson 2013). The association was founded in 2021 and promotes mindfulness and Zen meditation.²²

Asian Buddhists in Sweden

The Asian Buddhist groups are very diverse; their internal compositions vary, as do their immigration backgrounds. Asian immigration to Sweden dates back to the first decades of the twentieth century, when some Chinese peddlers travelled around Sweden, but it was only in connection with the Second World War that Asian immigration to Sweden truly began. Among the first to settle in Sweden were Asian sailors from Hong Kong and Indonesia who had served in the Swedish merchant navy (Hübinette 2024: 42).

The first group of Asian Buddhists came to Sweden in the 1960s. In 1964, thirty-three Tibetan girls, aged 14 to 19, were sent from India to Småland to receive an education, while a corresponding group of boys was sent to Norway. The Swedish NGO, IM (Individuell människohjälp, Eng: Swedish Development Partner), guided by the principle of religious freedom, had responded to the Dalai Lama's appeal to support Tibetans in exile through education. The girls were accommodated

at the IM home, Strand, in Småland, along with an elderly Tibetan couple who were responsible for the girls' language lessons. Sister Amita Nisatta oversaw their religious education, and, occasionally, lamas from Copenhagen visited (Davidsson 2000). The thirty-three Tibetan girls were trained in healthcare and agriculture and were eventually able to return to India. Some of them, however, stayed and started families in Sweden (Svanberg 1988b: 424). Today, the Tibetan exile community consists of a small handful of individuals, primarily concentrated in the Jönköping area. To support education back in the homeland, the Swedish-Tibetan School and Culture Association was established in 1988 and works to build schools in Tibet (Plank 2015a).

During the 1960s and 1970s, several left-wing students from Japan and other Asian countries came to Sweden, including guest students on Sida scholarships from South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia. Some of these students stayed in Sweden after completing their studies. Additionally, several Japanese women came to Sweden to marry Swedish men, and Nichiren Buddhism came with them. Thus, Soka Gakkai has had members in Sweden since the late 1960s. The organisation was formally established in 1981, and in 1989, the Villa Baggås in Saltsjöbaden, outside Stockholm, was purchased and became the Swedish centre for Nichiren Buddhism. According to the organisation, the Swedish branch of Soka Gakkai has approximately 600 members and is organised in three districts, focused on Stockholm, West Sweden and South Sweden.²³

In the 1970s, a larger group of Cantonese- and Hakka-speaking Chinese came to Sweden, primarily from Hong Kong. Many established themselves in the restaurant industry and thus became concentrated in the major cities (Svanberg 1988a: 222). With financial support from Taiwan, the Chinese community established a temple in Rosersberg, outside Stockholm, in 1996: the International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS) Sweden.²⁴ It is a branch of the main temple Fó guāng shān, promoting the Humanistic Buddhism of Xīng Yún.

When refugees from Vietnam began arriving in 1979, it marked the first time that a larger Asian group immigrated to Sweden, totalling around 5,000 individuals. The Vietnamese refugee group was one of the most homogeneous refugee groups that came to Sweden. This homogeneity resulted from specific humanitarian selection criteria: refugees were required to speak Cantonese (to facilitate interpretation, as Cantonese-speaking Chinese were already in Sweden); entire families were selected; priority was given to those whom other countries could not accommodate; and preference was also given to those who were disabled or ill. Subsequent family immigration has been encouraged to support reunification (Ragvald 1982; Beach 1988; Londos 2004). Many belonging to the Sino-Vietnamese group had lived in Vietnam for several generations, and some children spoke Vietnamese more fluently than Chinese. Due to the high concentration of Vietnamese Buddhists in Scania, Sweden's first Buddhist burial site was established at Fosie Cemetery in Malmö in 1989.

One of the main Vietnamese temples is Phật Quang Temple in Gothenburg (Pure Land-tradition), with three branches in Stockholm, Kalmar and Gävle. They are organised under a joint association, the Vietnamesiskt Buddhistförbund i Sverige,

to qualify for grants for faith communities in Sweden. Another Vietnamese temple, *Đai Bi Tâm* in Bjuv, is seemingly not part of the SBC, although it has previously received state grants for faith communities. This temple also has a branch in Gnosjö.

During the 1980s and 1990s, female immigration from Asia to Sweden increased, as women from the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan married Swedish men. The Asian population in Sweden doubled during this period, reaching approximately 32,000 people of East or Southeast Asian origin. This period also marked the shift when adoptees became a minority among Asians living in Sweden (Hübinette 2024: 45–46).

Unlike other Buddhist diaspora groups, which are typically based on family immigration, the demographic profile of the Thai group in Sweden is distinct: eight out of ten Thais who come to Sweden through family immigration are women, and their temples are spread across the country, not only concentrated around major cities like Gothenburg, Stockholm, and Malmö as with other Buddhist groups (Plank 2004, 2015a, 2015b). The Thais are therefore one of the few immigrant groups that are widely distributed throughout Sweden, in both sparsely populated areas and large cities (Hübinette 2009). Additionally, in recent years, since 2006, Thais have formed one of the largest groups of labour immigrants, with the majority coming to work seasonally in agriculture and forestry, especially as berry pickers.

The institutionalisation of Thai Buddhism in Sweden started in 1984, when Phra P. J. Chutinatharo Thera was invited by Buddhists of Thai, Sri Lankan and Chinese origin to establish the country's first Buddhist temple. This was made possible after several years of donations and savings, which allowed for the purchase of an older house in a summer cottage area on the island of Värmdö, some 20 kilometres east of Stockholm. Here, the Buddharama Temple was established as a branch of the Mahānikāya order. As the only Thai monk with Swedish residency, he became well known as Luang Ta among the gradually growing diaspora in the Scandinavian countries (Plank 2004: 251–252; Chutinatharo n.d.). (See also Chapter 4 by Pree-dee Hongson.) With the exception of two temples (in Bispgården and Fredrika), all Thai temples in Sweden have been established due to the efforts and religious needs of the Thai Buddhist women living in a particular geographical area (Plank 2015b). Supporting the sangha sometimes also occurs in remote areas and at unexpected places (see Figure 2.1).

The establishment of a temple typically follows a pattern. (1) A group of Buddhists in a locality comes together and invites a monk from a nearby temple, which may be located in another Scandinavian country. (2) The monk then begins making regular visits to the congregation, and a discussion is initiated about the desire to house a monk on a permanent basis. The monk assesses whether the congregation is robust enough to assume the responsibilities (expenses and food logistics) required to operate a temple association. (3) If so, the next step is to register an association and rent an apartment or house where a monk is invited to reside. The temple association then usually corresponds to a *samnak song*. (4) To achieve the status of a *wat*, at least three monks need to live there permanently, and the association must also obtain official authorisation from the Mahathera Samagom, the



Figure 2.1 A special meeting. When migrating to a new country, supporting the sangha sometimes occurs at unexpected places and in new material forms. The Thai Buddhist nun has lived in south Sweden for twenty years and has regularly received packages with food gifts from the laywoman. This is the first time they meet in person, in a parking lot in Mora, where the self-employed woman has her food truck. The picture was used with permission from the nun. Editing: Kristian Niemi.

highest Buddhist council in Thailand. The Department of Religious Affairs, the governmental body that oversees all activities between the Thai state and the Thai sangha, is responsible for missionary monks who travel abroad, and requests for new monks to a locality are sent to this department (Payutto 2009). Occasionally, a monk from a nearby temple relocates to the new locality. As mentioned, two exceptions to this general pattern are notable: in Bispgården in Jämtland, where the royal pavilion was built in commemoration of King Chulalongkorn's visit, there was a need for representation from the monastic sangha; and in Fredrika in Lappland, the successor at the Värmdö temple had a vision in 2004 to establish a large-scale retreat facility, raising hopes for religious tourism and economic growth in an area heavily affected by depopulation. Known as the "Temple Mount," it remains, some twenty years later, one of the most widely reported topics on Buddhism in Swedish newspapers, with both national documentaries and local coverage, due to the extraordinary financial liabilities and attempts of fraud by outsiders (Plank, Rad-dock & Selander 2016).

Today, the Thai temples belong to either the Mahā Nikāya or Dhammayuttika Nikāya orders and function as nodes for the Thai diaspora in Sweden, with their catchment area often extending over several regions. It is not uncommon for laypeople to drive one to three hours to reach a temple on weekends. The temples also function as transnational arenas for Thai Buddhism, especially visible during major holidays and festivals celebrated in Swedish temples – monks can travel from neighbouring countries to participate (primarily from the larger temples in Norway, Denmark and Finland), as do also other Theravāda monks of various Asian nationalities. Most importantly, groups of laypeople also travel to different temple locations to make merit by offering financial support during major celebrations. A temple typically needs to organise two or three such celebrations a year to secure funding for heat, rent, and other expenses.

In addition, the new Buddhist religious movement Dhammakāya has been present in Sweden since 2010, with its main temple in Borås and branches in Stockholm and Gävle.

The first Sri Lankan Buddhist temple, Stockholm Buddhist Vihara, was established in 1985 with assistance from the Sri Lankan Embassy. It belongs to the Siam Nikaya order. The *vihāra* has housed several prominent Sri Lankan monks who learned Swedish and taught in many places in Sweden. The community consists mostly of families who immigrated from Sri Lanka. Bhante K. Sri Dhammaratana Maha Thera, who arrived in 1989, is the Chief Prelate (Sangha Nayake) of Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in Scandinavia, and the longest staying monk in Sweden.

There is also a Burmese Buddhist Association (BBFSE), formed in 2007. In 2012, Sweden's first Burmese Buddhist temple, Tiratana, was inaugurated in Hjortkvarn in Örebro County, where the association is based. It has approximately 170 members from ethnic groups from Burma/Myanmar.

There can be significant differences between the Buddhist groups in terms of segregation and integration, even though they might be situated in the same city. In our research project *Lived Religion and Social Mobility among Migrants in Sweden*, we conducted fieldwork in Gothenburg among Mahāyāna Buddhists connected to the Vietnamese temple and Theravāda Buddhists associated with the Thai temple. We observed that these communities face different challenges. The Vietnamese community, located in Angered, tends to be quite segregated in terms of language, culture, and religion. They have minimal interaction with other religious groups in the area but maintain strong transnational connections with other Vietnamese temples, including one in France, which they occasionally visit. Many community members struggle with the Swedish language, and for some, interactions with Swedes remain limited even after living in Sweden for many years, especially among first-generation immigrants.

In contrast, the Thai temple on Hisingen demonstrates higher levels of language proficiency and civic literacy, particularly among women who moved to Sweden after marrying Swedish men and having children. This difference is also reflected in the temples' organisational structures. The Thai temple benefits from the support of Swedish-born and raised men who are knowledgeable about managing nonprofit associations and navigating building permit applications.

Both temples have a strong presence of and active participation from women, who often describe their temples as a small part of Vietnam or Thailand within Sweden. Many laypersons, primarily women, assist with tasks such as cooking in the temple. Both temples host cultural events, including the dragon dance at the Vietnamese temple and various musical performances and dances at both locations. These temples serve as important social and cultural hubs, especially during holidays like New Year's celebrations. They offer overnight accommodations during holidays and other occasions, often used for short weekend retreats. Extended stays, typically lasting up to a month, are also possible, especially during times of distress or for meditation purposes. Many interviewees have shared personal experiences of finding solace and refuge in Buddha within the temple, particularly during periods of depression, burnout or domestic problems. The Thai temple has also provided support to women needing to return to Thailand after divorcing their husbands, and the monks can also provide assistance with various everyday matters.

Sociologist Erika Willander (2019) notes that there over 100 localities in Sweden where Buddhists meet and practise together, and she is likely correct if all smaller and informal groups are counted. However, when considering only organisations and groups with an address and a physical meeting place, either their own or shared with another group, the number is approximately seventy-five (see complete list in Table 2.2). The Theravāda groups encompass more than thirty Thai temples established across the country, from south to north, as well as four Sri Lankan and one Burmese temple. These temples have 124 registered monks, but probably around 80 are actively serving. The Mahāyāna groups encompass one Chinese temple in the Stockholm area with two nuns, and eight Vietnamese temples, with the main ones located in Gothenburg, Bjuv, and Malmö. Approximately fifteen to twenty monks and nuns are associated with these temples. Although converts are fewer in number, they have established around thirty city temples and city meditation centres, along with five retreat centres in rural areas.

Since there are few second-generation Buddhists born to native Swedes, the use of convert and Asian Buddhists as analytical categories is still applicable to distinguish between those who have taken up a Buddhist practice as adults and those who have migrated to Sweden or are born to migrant parents and thus have a relation to Buddhism as a culturally transmitted heritage through their families. This is in line with what Prebish (1979) identified as two distinct lines of development for Buddhism in America, which he later (1993) typified as “ethnic Asian-American Buddhist groups” and “mostly members of European origin” (Prebish 1993: 189). Other scholars, such as Numrich (1996), Fields (1998) and Seager (1999), have referred to these as immigrant and convert groups. As in other Nordic countries, convert Buddhists mainly focus on meditation and reading as religious practices, whereas Asian Buddhists mainly engage in devotional practices centred on merit-making. However, several of the Asian temples include meditation either as part of the daily rituals in the temple or as part of training during larger celebrations or lunar observance days. Baumann (2002), like McMahan (2008), argues that the significant difference in interpretations of Buddhist doctrine and practice is about traditional or modernist branches that affect both Asian Buddhists and converts.

Stefan Larsson has argued that the boundaries between convert and Asian groups may not be that distinct. He has also noted that “diaspora Buddhists can be modernists and convert Buddhists can be traditionalists” and that they may also influence each other (Larsson 2020: 86). This is especially true regarding a particular sub-category of convert Buddhists that I have termed the “Svensson-Buddhists” (Plank 2004), named after one of the most common Swedish surnames. One informant used this term to describe himself as a non-practising Buddhist who wants to support the temples as cultural institutions in the same way that many Swedes continue to pay church tax to support the activities of the Church of Sweden. This could be understood as “belonging without believing” (Marchisio & Pisati 1999; McIntosh 2015; Oakes 2015). As a gendered category, with predominately Swedish men in relationships with Thai partners, the Svensson-Buddhists can relate to the Buddhist tradition in many different ways. Not only do they take part in rituals and social interactions in the temples, thus learning traditional forms of Buddhism, they also help out in various practical ways by running temple boards, managing finances, filling in forms, driving monks, doing carpentry and more. In short, their support helps the temples function as religious institutions, and their involvement may also facilitate their partners’ connections to a temple. They might have different ways of relating to religion and to Buddhist practice, where some might be meditation oriented, others might be devotionally oriented, while still others might have no interest in religion.

However, most Asian Buddhists in Sweden are not members of a temple, nor do they visit the temple regularly. Instead, they might come to the temple for New Year celebrations, birthdays, national holidays or other festivities, or when a loved one is ill or has died. There is a knowledge gap concerning the role religion plays in their everyday lives and the extent to which their self-understanding also includes a secular outlook. A recent study by Thurfjell and Willander (2023) on secularity in a multireligious Sweden shows that men are generally more secular than women. This aligns with what many other researchers have noted: that women tend to be more religious than men across most religious cultures and traditions (Trzebiałowska & Bruce 2012). However, another observation made by Thurfjell and Willander is that the most important factor determining if one views oneself as secular is close relationships – if a mother, father or partner is secular. This raises questions about how the intermarriages between Thai women and Swedish men might affect the development of Buddhism in Sweden in the coming decades. What does Buddhist secularity look like for those born into families with a Buddhist background? And how might this affect their affiliation with Buddhist temples? Could these mixed marriages contribute to the secularisation of Buddhism and to the next generation becoming post-Buddhists, that is, individuals born into a family with a Buddhist background but who do not necessarily identify as Buddhist?

Translations and publications by Swedish Buddhists

Converts have come to fill an essential role as translators and interpreters of Buddhist teachings. In Sweden, however, few female Buddhist teachers have written or

received assistance writing their biographies or publishing their teachings. Therefore, reading the history of Buddhism in Sweden through published books tends to be done through an overrepresentation of male Buddhist voices. Male teachers have been assisted in publishing their life stories, anecdotes or Buddhist teachings. As a telling example, the teachings of Marcel Sirander were published in two books: *Buddha, Dharma, Sangha* (Sirander 1973) and *Den buddhistiska livsåskådningen* (Sirander [Tao Wei] 2000). The teachings of Amita Nisatta, however, have not been collected or printed.

Early books written in Swedish included short introductory texts and translations of the *Dhammapada* from Pāli. Several were written by Gunnar Gällmo (1946–2023), an author of science fiction and translator of Pāli and Esperanto: *Praktisk buddhism (Practical Buddhism)* (Gällmo 1986), *Några fakta om buddhismen (Some Facts on Buddhism)* (Gällmo 1997) and *Buddhas liv (The Life of Buddha)* (Gällmo 1999a). Gällmo also translated the *Dhammapada* from Pāli (Gällmo 1999b).

However, the first translation of the *Dhammapada* directly from Pāli to Swedish was completed in 1967 by Rune E. A. Johansson (1918–1981). Neither a historian of religion nor a classically trained philologist, he held a Lic Phil in Psychology. Johansson became an internationally recognised scholarly voice. His exceptional knowledge of languages, particularly Pāli, combined with a deep personal interest in Buddhism, enabled him to bring fresh interpretations to Buddhist texts, using psychological perspectives to explore central Buddhist concepts. In doing so, he also broadened the academic discipline of Psychology, which until then had primarily focused on studying the human psyche based on a Judeo-Christian cultural context. Johansson worked for a period as a university lecturer at Lund University, conducted research at Tel Aviv University, and studied Sanskrit at the University of Calcutta and Pāli at the University of Ceylon. He also spent some time working at the Norwegian Defense Research Institute. In addition to directly translating both the *Dhammapada* (1967) and the *Sutta Nipāta* (1976) from Pāli into Swedish, he published a teaching aid for learning Pāli that came to be used internationally (1973), as well as three books in English: *Citta, Mano, Vinnana: a Psychosemantic Investigation* (1967), *The Psychology of Nirvana* (1969) and *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism* (1979). In 1972, Rune E. A. Johansson, together with his wife Margot, established a scholarship foundation aimed at promoting scientific research that sheds light on the development of Buddhism and its ideological content. Over the years, the foundation has supported researchers in the fields of the History of Religions and Philology at Swedish universities. The foundation is managed by Uppsala University.²⁵

Several contemporary Swedish Buddhist teachers have published books: the Zen Buddhist priest Sante Poromaa (b. 1958), who lives at Zengården and oversees several Zen centres in Sweden, Finland and Scotland, has authored several books on topics including Buddhist practice (1997), science and rebirth (2008) and the climate challenge (2019). His wife, Kanja Odland (b. 1963), also a priest and teacher, has published a collection of notes on Zen practice (2013).

Another female author is Marie Ericsson (b 1948), a *vipassanā* teacher who learned to meditate with Goenka in India in the early 1970s. She has trained with several Western and Asian *vipassanā* teachers and is active in Vipassanagruppen in Stockholm. Ericsson has written a commentary on the central meditation text the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (Ericsson 2011a) and a book introducing meditation and Theravāda Buddhism (Ericsson 2011b).

Several Buddhist groups have translated and published texts specific to their tradition. Triratana has its own bookstore at their Stockholms Buddhistcenter, where various translations of Sangharakshita's texts are sold, along with puja texts for recitations and Jataka stories in Swedish.²⁶

Humanistic Buddhism, as taught by the Fó guāng shān order, has been translated into Swedish by Buddhists affiliated with the Buddha's Light International Association at the temple in Rosersberg, Stockholm (e.g., Hsing Yun 2003, 2016, 2019).

Also among the male voices are several celebrity Buddhists who have gained public recognition. The first of these was Henning Sjöström (1922–2011). Born in Burträsk, in the northern region of Västerbotten, he came from a poor farming family and was one of twelve siblings. Sjöström moved to Stockholm, where he worked as a defence attorney and became known in connection with the “Haijby scandal” when he defended Kurt Haijby, who was accused of blackmailing King Gustav V of Sweden. Sjöström was also a disciple of Marcel Sirander, and together they published *Vägen till Buddha* (The Path to Buddha) in 1967. In this book, Sjöström, in a dialogical format, asks his teacher the classical question that also preoccupied the Greco-Bactrian King Menander I (Pāli: Milinda) in his dialogue with the monk Nāgasena: What is it that identifies as “I,” and how can the doctrine of *anatta* be understood?

However. I, Henning Sjöström, say – this is me! My body is mine. My mind functions are mine. /---/ Would I then all of a sudden deny my own body. Not recognise it? Impossible! [my translation]

(Sjöström & Shunyata 1967: 80–81)

Henning Sjöström continued to be involved with high-profile cases and converted from Christianity to Buddhism during a stay in Sri Lanka, which he wrote about in his autobiography *Dagbok från Djungelklostret* (Diary from the Jungle Monastery) (Sjöström 1968).

Another celebrity Buddhist is comedian and actor Claes Malmberg (b. 1961), who, in two books, has described his controversial life, marked by fame, drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, and his journey to finding the Tibetan temple in Stockholm, where he learned to meditate with Lama Wangchuck (Malmberg & Ohlson 2008; Malmberg & Karlsson 2016).

However, the most loved and appreciated public Buddhist was Björn Natthiko Lindeblad (1961–2022), who, in 1992, took up the ordained life as a Thai monk and lived at the Wat Pah Nanachat monastery in northeastern Thailand. After facing several health issues, he disrobed in 2008, keeping his monk's name as his middle

name. Upon returning to lay life, he experienced a life crisis and deep depression, eventually redirecting his path to become a lay spiritual teacher. He married, taught meditation, gave lectures and shared his life wisdom on social platforms and through Swedish media. Twice he spoke on the Swedish radio show *Summer*: the first time in 2012, when he was chosen as the listener's summer host, and in 2020, when he was marked by the disease ALS and addressed, in a deeply personal way, questions about facing difficulties and suffering in life and how to approach death and leaving loved ones behind. His autobiography, *Jag kan ha fel* (Lindeblad et al. 2020) was translated into more than twenty languages and, in 2022, it was published in English as *I May Be Wrong and Other Wisdoms from Life as a Forest Monk*, thus making Björn Natthiko Lindeblad widely known internationally.²⁷

Natthiko Lindeblad initiated a public discussion on the right to euthanasia. In his last post on Instagram, after his death, he wrote: "If you think, like me, that everyone, under certain circumstances, should receive society's help for a dignified and safe death, then make yourself heard. Lex Natthiko, I wouldn't mind [my translation]."²⁸ He died peacefully at his own chosen time, around noon on 17 January 2022 at age 60.

Figuring out the Buddhist demographics of Sweden

Estimating religious demographics in Sweden is a challenge due to the absence of public data on religious affiliation. Since the last government religion census in 1930, Sweden has not maintained public data sets specifying individuals' religious affiliations. As a result, there is a lack of registered data on religious affiliation. Instead, the Swedish system relies on religious communities to register their members. This data is then utilised by the Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities, which plays a crucial role in administering grants to these communities, thereby supporting their activities and initiatives.

Since no reliable statistics exist on religious affiliation, various estimates have been made to approximate the number of Buddhists. Additional data on religious affiliation is generated via the SOM institute (Society, Opinion, Media) at Gothenburg University, which has conducted an annual survey since 1986 on issues related to politics, media and lifestyle. The survey is based on responses from approximately 20,000 randomly selected Swedes. Other research institutes, such as Novus and Kantar Sifo, also conduct surveys based on voluntary and anonymous survey responses.

In the 1930 census, the last time religious affiliation was recorded, 99.7 per cent of all residents in Sweden reported that they were members of the Church of Sweden, that is, Lutheran Christians belonging to the state church (Willander 2019). At that time, only fifteen individuals answered that they belonged to Asian religious traditions, such as Bramaism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, as well as Sufism, Islam and Muhammedanism (Sorgenfrei 2018).

Almost a hundred years later, in 2024, Sweden had a population of 10.5 million, of which more than 2 million, or 20 per cent, were born abroad (Statistics Sweden 2024-02-22). Sweden has been identified as one of the world's most secular

countries and also one of the most multireligious in Europe (Thurfjell & Willander 2022), alongside Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. Membership in the Church of Sweden has almost halved since the 1930 Census, dropping to 52.1 per cent in 2023 (Svenska kyrkan 2023). The Muslim minority constitutes the largest non-Christian group in Sweden, with several hundred local congregations across the country. The Jewish and Buddhist minorities have been regarded as roughly equal in size. However, the Jewish congregations are primarily concentrated in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, whereas Buddhists meet regularly at more than a hundred locations nationwide (Willander 2019: 22).

According to the Swedish Buddhist Community (SBC), they serve more than 11,000 registered members, which is 0.1 per cent of the total population (SBC no date). However, this figure reflects only a smaller portion of the Buddhist population. The SOM Institute, in their 2019 survey, estimates that 0.8 per cent of the population identifies as Buddhist, which would correspond to approximately 80,000 Buddhists (Weissenbilder 2019). The SOM surveys are representative of the entire population, and the statistics are not dependent on the administration of governmental grants and membership fees and are thus “not limited to those eligible for grants” (Willander 2019: 42). However, another research institute, Novus, using their “Swedish Panel,” a public opinion panel consisting of approximately 50,000 randomly recruited members and claiming to provide a representative picture of Sweden’s population, argues that the proportion of Buddhists is 0.3 per cent (approximately 31,500 individuals). Novus claims that the public space in Sweden is too inclusive and that minorities have been given a disproportionately large space, leading to a picture of a society that is not representative: “the focus on minorities leads to a delusion about what Sweden looks like . . . [the adults are not] particularly religious, regardless of skin colour or origin. Sweden is a very secularised country, and a tiny group consider themselves to be very religious [my translation]” (Novus 2023-11-05).

Demographic data from Statistics Sweden can also give an indication regarding the largest Asian groups in Sweden and some of their distinct features (see Table 2.1). However, the statistics are difficult to interpret in terms of religious belonging, as some migrant groups are not representative of the religious majority of home countries. For example, many Sri Lankans in Sweden are part of the Tamil diaspora. Similarly, many Chinese migrants may have a secular outlook on life and no religious affiliation. These statistics also include adopted children and Swedes born in Asia.

Swedish legislation and faith communities

The Swedish constitution regulates religious freedom, and the legislation in place stipulates certain conditions for faith communities. A religious community can apply to be registered; however, practising religion is neither dependent on community membership nor on the community being officially registered. The Instrument of Government (SFS 1974: 152) emphasises the freedom to “practice one’s religion alone or together with others” as an absolute right (ch. 2, § 1). Additionally,

Table 2.1 Swedish demographic patterns in the twenty-first century, with ten-year intervals. The statistics show the number of people born in foreign countries, categorised by gender. The Asian countries selected in the table all have potential Buddhist populations that may have migrated to Sweden. However, there are many objections that could be made, since it does not account for adopted individuals, or Swedes born abroad. The three largest groups with Asian origins are those born in Thailand (total: 45,109), China (total: 37,172) and Vietnam (total: 21,528).

		2001	2011	2021
Cambodia	male	149	207	295
	female	184	313	477
China	male	3,589	10,155	15,284
	female	5,370	15,502	21,888
Japan	male	915	957	1,116
	female	1,393	2,140	2,681
Laos	male	182	202	188
	female	196	284	323
Mongolia	male	15	550	2,388
	female	33	800	2,923
Myanmar	male	81	754	798
	female	48	682	767
Singapore	male	220	314	435
	female	272	440	623
Sri Lanka	male	2,592	2,981	3,564
	female	3,372	3,809	4,378
South Korea	male	3,379	4,086	4,666
	female	5,941	6,413	7,129
Taiwan	male	233	411	760
	female	432	770	1,295
Thailand	male	2,820	7,352	9,732
	female	8,365	26,261	35,377
Vietnam	male	5,288	6,973	9,811
	female	5,928	8,202	11,717

Source: Statistics Sweden, born in a foreign country.

Sweden has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights, and the convention has been part of Swedish domestic law since 1995.

When the Church of Sweden was separated from the state at the turn of the millennium, a law (SFS 1988: 1593) on faith communities was added, which regulates how faith communities can be registered and outlines their rights and obligations. At the time, the definition of faith communities was based on a Christian understanding as “a community for religious activity, which includes organising worship.” In 2025, this law will be updated to better reflect a multireligious society, adopting a broader understanding of what activities can take place. A faith community will now be defined as “a community that practices religious activities in which worship, prayer, meditation or other rituals are included” [my translation].

Support to faith communities is regulated by law (SFS 1999: 932), which stipulates in Section 3 that such support may only be given if a faith community “1. contributes to maintaining and strengthening the fundamental values on which

society rests, and 2. is stable and has its own vitality.” A planned update to this law is expected to specify minimum requirements. Under the proposed changes, an association must serve at least 2,500 individuals who are residents of Sweden and have been operating in the country for at least five years to qualify for support. A further condition is that the community must derive its primary funding from residents of Sweden. The many Buddhist temples and organisations are primarily local, and very few, if any, would individually meet the criteria of serving 2,500 people. Thus, the umbrella organisation, the Swedish Buddhist Cooperation Council, decided to change its name to Sweden’s Buddhist Community, the SBC, and register as a religious community in 2020, enabling individual temples and associations to become members of the SBC. In § 1 of the SBC’s statutes, it is made clear that the member organisations retain their independent activities and distinctiveness “with the Buddha’s teaching and practice common to all.” To qualify for state grants and state fee assistance (Buddhist *dāna*), § 2 of the statutes clarifies the democratic principles guiding the SBC’s operations: opposing racism, discrimination and violence; promoting equality; and advocating for basic democratic values, including gender equality. In addition, it is made clear that the member associations must “promote Buddhist principles and ways of life in theory and practice that are based on the Buddha’s teachings on the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path” [my translation]. The SBC’s activities also aim to support the development of Buddhist activities in Sweden, foster peaceful coexistence regardless of cultural and religious backgrounds, advocate for environmental sustainability, and promote humanity and compassion in Sweden and the rest of the world. The SBC has two types of membership: an ordinary membership for Buddhist organisations that want to operate based on the SBC’s purpose, and a membership called friends of the SBC, consisting of private individuals or organisations that sympathise with the community’s activities as well as so-called *dāna* members, which allows one to contribute Buddhist *dāna* through the tax bill.

Buddhist *dāna*, administered through the tax system, is a form of state fee assistance that has its basis in how the Church of Sweden has been financed via the so-called church tax. Religious communities can thus receive government assistance in administering membership fees determined by income. In addition to these membership fees, all residents of Sweden pay a funeral fee, regardless of religious affiliation. This fee finances funeral services and goes to the Church of Sweden, which has a state mandate to ensure that funerals can take place. The funeral fee covers expenses for crematoria, funeral chapels, burial grounds and funeral staff. “Simply put, the funeral fee is used to ensure that all people, regardless of faith and denomination, receive dignified treatment when they die” (Svenska kyrkan 2024). The Church of Sweden thus administers the Buddhist burial sites in Sweden as they are part of existing cemeteries.

The first Buddhist burial site in Sweden was established in Malmö at Fosie Cemetery to meet the needs of an aging Vietnamese community. Quarter number 9 was put into use in 1989 and included approximately 140 graves. In 2022, the Buddhist burial sites were expanded by another block, Quarter number 8, which provided 104 new graves expected to suffice for another twenty years (Svenska

kyrkan 2022). In Stockholm, the cemetery administration, in collaboration with the SBC, has developed a Buddhist burial section at Strandkyrkogården, where a *stūpa* has been erected. The site has room for 130 coffin burials, 225 urn burials and anonymous ash burials (Stockholms stad Kyrkogårdsförvaltningen, n.d).

As noted, Swedish legislation emphasises the absolute right to “practice one’s religion alone or together with others.” However, the United Nation’s Special Rapporteur Nazila Ghanea has pointed out that the Swedish formulations are narrow and that international conventions recognise the right to express one’s religion more comprehensively in ways that also include religious holidays and clothing and view religion as more than just a private matter: the “historical homogeneity of Swedish society and its secular model has informed an understanding of ‘religion’ as being individual and private. However, societal structures have significantly changed, including as a result of recent migration. The reality is that religiosity is now far more diverse within society.”²⁹

The Special Rapporteur has also commented on the consequences of viewing religion primarily as a private matter, noting that this perspective can impede equal access to rights. Additionally, lack of data on religious belonging was also identified as an obstacle to working with human rights issues. Ghanea called for improved statistical data and research on the situations of different religious groups. The Special Rapporteur also noted that there are regional and local differences that must be taken into account, as these can affect how individuals exercise their right to freedom of religion and belief.³⁰

Although no hate crimes targeting Buddhist temples were reported in the 2023 report from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ 2023), there have been several examples of how societal norms and legislation have struggled to accommodate an ordained lifestyle and understand the material aspects of religious practice. A narrow understanding of religion led the Swedish Tax Authority to question *piṇḍapāta* (almsround/food gifts) as a religious practice and argue that food and living at a temple should be considered taxable benefits for monks, classifying them as food and housing allowances. In 2020, Swedish local media reported that monks at Wat Pah Sokjai in Brunflo, Jämtland, left the temple because the temple organisation lacked sufficient funds to cover the additional taxes. This was not the first such case. In a series of tax disputes, dating back to 2013, the Tax Authority maintained that food gifts constituted taxable fringe benefits and that living in a Buddhist temple should be understood as a taxable housing allowance and that the monks’ activities should therefore be taxed. The tax authority argued that food and lodging could be understood as compensation for the services provided by the monks. Not only did this have devastating economic consequences for the affected Buddhist associations, which did not have the finances for this and were consequently forced to reduce their activities, but the SBC also viewed the interpretation as a threat to the entire Buddhist community in Sweden. It also, the SBC argued, violated the principle of equal treatment, as Christian monasteries have been exempted from tax under a praxis of “free vivre.” The SBC raised funds to challenge the decision in court and was assisted by a defence lawyer. In 2021, the case was decided in the Administrative Court, which ruled in favour of

the Buddhist congregations. The court recognised that Buddhists temples were part of an ancient religious tradition and determined that living in a temple should be treated equivalently to the practice of “free vivre” granted to Christian monasteries.

Buddhist associations have significantly contributed to civic engagement across local, regional, and national levels, both in regard to crisis preparedness and in providing spiritual care within healthcare institutions. In Sweden, religious communities can be viewed both as a resource but also as a risk; they can be seen as a resource when included in welfare provision but, at the same time, also as a potential problem that needs to be regulated and controlled, thus an emphasis on adhering to democratic principles to be eligible for state grants (Lundgren 2021).

The Swedish Buddhist Community as well as individual temples is engaged in the work of emergency preparedness and spiritual care. This work is done both on a national level through the coordinating work of the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities and on local and regional levels in several parts of Sweden, where the cooperation around crises and emergencies is organised through inter-faith and intercultural councils, or through hospitals.

Here, Jönköping is a forerunner, where spiritual care can be asked for on the platform 1177, the national web-based communication platform for information and services regarding healthcare.³¹ Spiritual care is a collective term for interventions carried out in health care by representatives of different life views and beliefs. Those who participate in spiritual care have a duty of confidentiality and do not keep records. The services are free of charge. The Swedish spiritual care is based on a model from Great Britain.

New emerging frontiers

The presence of Buddhism in Sweden is not limited to the numerous groups of Asian and convert Buddhists. It can also be observed in secular applications within the healthcare sector (Plank 2010) as well as in neo-spiritual contexts (Hedenborg White 2023) and the commercial sector (Plank 2014). Additionally, influences are evident in Christian spiritual practices, where Zen meditation was introduced during the 1970s and where secularised practices are currently undergoing a process of resacralisation (Plank, Lundgren & Egnell 2023). In the therapeutic sector, healthcare centres and licensed healthcare professionals (e.g., psychologists and psychotherapists) increasingly offer mindfulness-based treatments, usually within the framework of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) aimed at addressing anxiety, depression and pain. Here, the Center for Mindfulness Sweden and Camilla Sköld, a physiotherapist with a doctorate in neuroscience, have, since 2007, been instrumental in developing university-level courses on mindfulness at Karolinska Institute, Stockholm’s medical university, as well as providing teacher training in MBSR and MBCT. That same year, Mindfulnesscenter was founded by Ola Schenström, a medical doctor who has also trained many Swedish mindfulness teachers.

In the neo-spiritual sector, where mindfulness is commercially framed, coaches, meditation teachers and yoga teachers target private individuals and companies that offer mindfulness training focusing on the private and public sectors (see also

Hornborg 2012). In a mapping study conducted in 2016 (Stålnacke & Plank 2016) where we examined mindfulness producers in Gothenburg, we found 122 producers, of which 82 were women and 17 were men, while 24 were made up of organisations, companies, institutions or Buddhist centres. Around 60 per cent were identified as working with mindfulness for self-development and optimisation purposes, 25 per cent for therapeutic purposes, and the remaining were unspecified or a mix of both.³² In an American context, sociologist Jaime Kucinskas has observed that distancing from both traditional Buddhism and the new spiritual landscape is a critical factor in the legitimisation of mindfulness in healthcare, schools and businesses (2019). In Sweden, such a double distancing is apparent when mindfulness is used in the healthcare sector; however, whether this is the case in schools or businesses needs to be explored further.

Another way to distinguish between “religious” and “therapeutic” mindfulness is by examining the extent to which a practice is promoted with salvific (liberating) or salvetive (healing) qualities, or a combination of both (Schlieter 2017). The emphasis on health and healing plays a vital role in understanding how meditation practices have entered the Church of Sweden and how they are now part of holistic practices that are framed within a culture of care that focuses on bodily and spiritual well-being.

Buddhist influences on Christianity in Sweden can be traced back to the 1970s. Two Christian meditation centres founded by priests from the Church of Sweden teach Zen-inspired meditation: Berget in Dalarna, and Enekulla Zendo in Höör. Both are strongly influenced by the Sanbō Kyōdan tradition.

The priest and professor of Philosophy of Religion Hans Hof (1922–2011) introduced Zen Buddhism to Sweden through his close relationship with the German Jesuit priest Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, who had studied Zen meditation in Japan under the Sanbō Kyōdan tradition.

Hans Hof (1922–2011) grew up in a Chartauan environment on Sweden’s West Coast. He was ordained in the Church of Sweden in 1946 and served as a priest in Luleå Diocese during the 1950s. He earned his doctorate in theoretical philosophy with a thesis on Master Eckhart, whose theology came to shape his own. In 1969, he was appointed professor of Philosophy of Religion at Uppsala University. In 1972, he co-founded Rättvik’s Meditation Centre, in connection with St Davidsgården, where he taught Zen meditation. The construction of the centre was described in an article in *Svenska Dagbladet* as one of “the newest and most remarkable signs of the times within our Swedish ecclesiastical province” (Ekman 1973). When he was in his 20s, Hans Hof had been taught a contemplative relaxation method to alleviate nervous stomach problems. In addition to the physical benefits, the exercises led to a mystical experience, convincing him that “the way to a changed state of consciousness can go through the body.” This realisation transformed his understanding of religious practice: “I was freed from the compulsion to suspend my faith in formulations. I had been given a path to a personal experience of God” (Hof 1983: 39). This experience later led him to establish contact with Catholic priests who incorporated Zen meditation into their theology and practice, as well as with the Zen master Taisen Deshimaru. Hans Hof regarded Zen

meditation as a religiously neutral practice, with a particular emphasis on bodily posture. In his book *Bli mer människa*, a central theme is that Zen meditation can contribute to physical and mental well-being. That Zen meditation is a bodily practice was emphasised by the inclusion of eutony exercises, led by Gun Kronberg, in the courses offered at the meditation centre and St Davidsgården. Eutony is a physical education and therapeutic method developed by the Dane Gerda Alexander. Eutony means “good tension,” and Hans Hof found the method helpful when teaching the sitting posture in *zazen*. It became an integral part of the practice in both Rättvik and Sigtuna. Additionally, courses in Tai Chi were offered. Hof also collaborated with the Catholic nun Sr Monica Bexell, OP, who used meditation and relaxation in her work as a psychotherapist.

Criticism also arose within the Church regarding the activities at Rättvik’s Meditation Centre, where Hof was accused of syncretism. When the Zen Buddhist teacher Philip Kapleau was invited to Rättvik in 1982, tensions surfaced between the management of St Davidsgården and Hans Hof and the circle around him. This led the latter to establish the Association Zenvägen in 1984, which continued to practise and teach a religiously unbound form of meditation. At St Davidsgården, meditation activities continued but took on a more explicitly Christian confessional interpretation under the leadership of the Carmelite Wilfrid Stinissen, who had previously collaborated with Hans Hof, and eutony pedagogue Gun Kronberg. The meditation practice was rebranded as “Christian deep meditation,” which was also introduced at the Refugiet in Sigtuna and at Stiftsgården in Båstad (Karlsson 2011: 15).

Disappointed by what he perceived as a betrayal of spiritually seeking individuals, Hans Hof resigned from the priesthood and left the Church of Sweden in 1982. Over the following years, he expressed his criticism of the Church in a number of articles and lectures. He argued that a gap exists between institutional religion and people’s lived realities. Church representatives, he contended, did not understand the “spiritual paradigm shift” that was taking place and that Hof had come into contact with in those who applied to the meditation courses. He wrote: “[When] the church in its representatives does not understand and therefore rejects the many expressions of new spirituality for border-crossing, and authentically religious, experience, then the church shows that it has lost contact with an important part of its true identity” (Hof 1983: 18, translation by Helene Egnell). However, he returned to the priesthood five years later when he felt that openness had increased within the Church.

Priest Pelle Bengtsson (b. 1951) introduced Zen meditation into the activities of the Student Priests at Liberiet in Lund’s cathedral parish. He began meditating in the mid-1970s and, in 2003, was appointed a teacher by his teacher, the German Lutheran priest and Zen master Gundula Meyer. Today, he runs the meditation centre Enekulla Zendo in Höör. Although the practice of meditation continues at Liberiet under the Student Priests, it is not explicitly advertised as Zen meditation.

Over the past fifty years, many new spiritual practices have emerged within the Church of Sweden that fall under holistic practices that engage the body, soul and spirit. These practices are no longer taught exclusively in retreat settings but have

become an integral part of daily church activities. In the Diocese of Stockholm, eight out of ten parishes now offer meditation and movement-based bodily practices such as yoga, qigong and dance (Lundgren, Plank & Egnell, 2023). These activities are framed within a culture of care that emphasises both bodily and spiritual well-being (Plank, Egnell & Lundgren 2024). The new spiritual practices in the Church of Sweden have not been standardised in the same way as Borup (2016) has noted is the case in Danish churches where a special brand of “Christfulness” has been implemented. Instead, individual teachers, including ordained priests and deacons as well as lay persons, have more freely developed and taught holistic practices (Plank, Egnell & Lundgren 2024).

Another strand of development outside of the Church is the merging of yoga and Buddhist practices. Several individual (Buddhist) meditation teachers, many of whom many are connected to a broad *vipassanā* community, lead retreats at yoga-based retreat facilities such as Shambala Gatherings and Oshofors, where courses in Advaita Vedanta, nondual meditation, Tantra, various yoga traditions and qigong are held. Here, Buddhism and neo-spirituality intermingle, as the practices have an emphasis not only on bodily health but also on personal and spiritual development. Using Schlieter’s distinction salvific and salvative, the Christian use of body-mind-practices puts emphasis on the healing qualities, the salvative aspects of meditation, and the neo-spiritual use of meditation tends to focus on a combination of both liberating and healing qualities. Hence, this indicates the importance of contextual field studies to understand future developments.

Conclusion

Although there are early examples of Swedish teachers emphasising a unified presentation of Buddhism that have left traces in the form of intra-Buddhist collaboration, there is no indication today of a distinct kind of “Swedish” Buddhism or a “Swedish Buddhist tradition” developing. However, the Swedish Buddhist Community has been registered as an intra-Buddhist faith community. Swedish legislation is based on an understanding of religious communities as nationally organised entities, whereas Buddhist groups operate locally and regionally and thus do not individually reach the required 2,500 members to qualify for state grants and state fee assistance (Buddhist *dāna* through the tax system). This necessitates that, particularly for Asian Buddhist communities, groups have strong Swedish language skills, master administrative procedures, and, most importantly, are able to cooperate with other Buddhist groups belonging to different traditions than their own through the Swedish Buddhist Community.

One of the major challenges that Asian Buddhist temples are likely to face in the future stems from changing Buddhist demographics. As the first generation of migrant Buddhists ages and with second-generation Buddhists increasingly marry outside their ethnic groups, there is a growing trend towards secularisation among individuals with Buddhist family backgrounds. This may make it difficult for Buddhist groups to maintain their membership numbers and influence. Since

the strongest predictor of developing a secular outlook is having close relationships with a parent or a partner who is secular, the high incidence of mixed marriages between Thai women and Swedish men suggests that it is within this group that we will first be able to find “post-Buddhists,” individuals born into families with Buddhist background but who no longer identify as Buddhist. On the other hand, “Buddhist *dāna*” via the tax system makes it possible and easier for individuals who want to support Buddhist temples, that is, “belonging without believing.”

Although there are some studies on Asian Buddhism in Sweden and mindfulness and convert Buddhism, there is still a lack of in-depth research on specific communities and traditions, particularly among Vietnamese, Chinese and Sri Lankan groups. The outskirts of Buddhism, where Buddhist practices merge with yoga, Christian and neo-spiritual traditions, or become post-Buddhism, also need to be explored further.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

Table 2.2 Buddhist groups in Sweden.

Buddhist establishments in Sweden (as of February 2024)

<i>Name of facility</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Specific tradition</i>
<i>Meditation centres in Sweden</i>		
Byvalla retreat centre and Buddhist collective housing	Horndal	Nondenominational
Dhamma Sobhana	Ödeshög	Nordic Vipassana Center in the tradition of S.N. Goenka
Dharmagiri retreat center	Sala	Triratana
Enekulla zendo	Höör	Sanbō Kyōdan
Karma Dechen Osel Ling	Fellingsbro	Buddhistiska gemenskapen – Karne Tenpe Gyaltzen (Karma Kagyu)
Tyresö Retreat center	Tyresö	Diamond Way
Zengården	Fellingsbro	Zenbuddhistiska samfundet

Umbrella organisation and its membership organisations

Sveriges Buddhistiska Gemenskap (Swedish Buddhist Community)

Groups of mainly migrants and migrants' children

Thai

Buddharama Tempel Fredrika	Fredrika, Lappland	Mahā Nikāya
Buddharama Temple, Värmdö	Värmdö	Mahā Nikāya
Dhammangalarama tempel	Sundsvall	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Buddhabhavana	Västerås	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Buddhasothorn	Uppsala	Mahā Nikāya
Thaiföreningen Prakatbuddhakon	Borlänge	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Sam Naksong Ludvika	Ludvika	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Pha	Göteborg	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Pah Sokjai	Brunflo	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Santinivas	Haninge	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Sanghabaramee	Eslöv	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Thai Karlstad	Skattkärr	Dhammayuttika Nikāya

Burmese

Tiratana Buddhist Temple	Hjortkvarn	Theravāda
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Chinese

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

<i>Buddhist establishments in Sweden (as of February 2024)</i>		
<i>Name of facility</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Specific tradition</i>
International Buddhist Progress Society, Sweden	Rosersberg	Fó guāng shān
<i>Sri Lankan</i> Stockholm Buddhist Vihara	Järfälla	Theravāda
<i>Vietnamese</i> Vietnamesiskt buddhistförbund i Sverige	Göteborg	Pure Land
Chùa Phật Quang	Gävle	
Ngoc Dien	Stockholm Kalmar	
<i>Groups of mainly converts</i>		
Buddhistiska gemenskapen – Karme Tenpe Gyaltsen	Stockholm	Tibetan/Karma Kagyu
Karma Shedrup Dargye Ling	Fellingsbro	
Karma Dechen Ösel Ling	Örebro	
Karma Machik Chöling		
Buddhistiska gemenskapen Triratana		Triratana Buddhist Community
Stockholm buddhistcenter	Stockholm	
Dharmagiri	Sala Malmö Göteborg Linköping Hudiksvall Östersund	
Föreningen 3Juveller	Stockholm	Insight meditation
Föreningen för tibetansk buddhism i Göteborg	Göteborg	Tibetan/Nondenominational
Karma Yönten Ling	Malmö, Lund	Tibetan/Nondenominational
Sakya Changchub Chöling	Stockholm & Uppsala	Tibetan/Sakya
Svenska Soto-Zenföreningen		Association Zen Internationale
Sanbodojo	Göteborg	(Soto-shu)
So Gyo Zendojo	Göteborg	
Lunds zendojo	Lund	
Uppsala Soto-Zendojo	Uppsala	
Stockholms Zengrupp	Stockholm	
Vipassanagruppen	Stockholm	Insight meditation
Yeshin Norbu meditationscenter	Stockholm	Foundation for preservation of the Mahayana tradition (FPMT)
Zenbuddhistiska samfundet		The Cloud Water Sangha
Zengården	Fellingsbro	(Philip Kapleau/Bodhin Kjolhede)
Stockholm Zen Center	Stockholm	
Göteborg Zen Center	Göteborg	
Lund Zen Center	Lund	

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Buddhist establishments in Sweden (as of February 2024)

<i>Name of facility</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Specific tradition</i>
<i>Other Buddhist groups (not affiliated to SBC)</i>		
<i>Groups of mainly migrants and migrants' children</i>		
<i>Thai</i>		
Buddharam Temple	Boden	Mahā Nikāya
Buddharam Temple	Grums	Mahā Nikāya
Buddharam Temple	Ragunda	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Buddhabhavana	Västerås	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Buddhathothorn	Uppsala	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Piyadhammaram	Utane	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Siammin Mangkalaram	Norrköping	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Thai Norrtälje	Muskö	Mahā Nikāya
Wat Thai Uppsala	Uppsala	Mahā Nikāya
Mae chii/Nun retreat	Blentarp	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Phoyhitham Meditation Center	Morjärv	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Prakatsangkhakhun	Jönköping	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Prakatsatjatam	Eskilstuna	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Prakas Santidham	Umeå	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Tipaksong Watpha Dhammaratana Förening	Halmstad	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Thailändska föreningen Santidham	Sandviken	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Buddha Udayana	Landvetter	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Dhammarangse	Sollentuna	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Pha Buddhabucha	Kyrkhult	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Khemago	Månkarbo	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Wat Thai Eskilstuna	Eskilstuna	Dhammayuttika Nikāya
Buddhawajana Sweden	Knivsta	Buddhawajana
Wat Dalarnavanaram	Ulvshyttan	Buddhawajana
Wat Pha Boabocho	Unnaryd	Buddhawajana
Wat Pha Dhammakāya	Borås	Dhammakāya
Wat Pha Dhammakāya	Stockholm	Dhammakāya
Wat Pha Dhammakāya	Gävle	Dhammakāya
<i>Vietnamese</i>		
Chùa Dai Bi Tam	Bjuv	Pure Land
Chùa Trúc Lâm	Malmö	Pure Land
Katrineholm Viet Buddhistisk förening	Katrineholm	Pure Land
<i>Sri Lankan</i>		
Helsingborg Buddhist Vihara	Helsingborg	Theravāda
Skåne Pansala	Ljungbyhed	Theravāda
Tapovanarama Buddhist Vihara	Norsborg	Theravāda
<i>Groups of mainly converts</i>		
Diamond Way		Tibetan/Ole Nydahl
Tyresö Meditation Retreat Center	Tyresö	
Stockholm Buddhist Group	Stockholm	

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Buddhist establishments in Sweden (as of February 2024)

<i>Name of facility</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Specific tradition</i>
Göteborg Buddhist Group	Göteborg	
Malmö Chan Buddhist Temple	Malmö	Chinese Linji-lineage/Jing Hui
New Kadampa Tradition		Tibetan/Geshe Kelsang Gyatso
Hjärtjuvel Kadampa Buddhiscenter	Göteborg	
Kadampa Meditation center	Stockholm	
Ordinary Mind	Umeå	Ordinary Mind/Charlotte Joko Beck
Rosensanghan	Göteborg	Thích Nhất Hạnh
SGI Sverige	Saltsjöbaden	Nichiren
Zenvägen	Lund	Nondenominational

Notes

- 1 *The Ethical Review Act* (SFS 2003:460) mandates an ethical review of all research, including the humanities, that involves sensitive personal data in Sweden. Data was collected as part of the following research projects with approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (EPM): Buddhism in the Nordic Countries, EPM: Dnr 2023-01308-01; Religion in Times of Crises (Swedish Research Council), EPM: Dnr 2023-03992-01; Lived Religion and Social Mobility among Migrants in Sweden (Swedish Research Council), EPM: Dnr 2021-02719; The New Faces of the Swedish Folk Church (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond), EPM: Dnr 2021-05807-01. (Note that the Act is under revision and may be amended in 2025, potentially allowing research in the humanities and social sciences to conduct fieldwork and interviews without EPM approval.)
- 2 CARLI digital collections, *Chicago-Bladet (Trinity International University)* https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/tiu_bladet (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 3 Digitised archives include Arkivdigital, Befolkningen i Sverige; Riksarkivets special-sökningar: Medicinalstyrelsen 1876–1915, Folkräkningar 1910, 1930; Libris, Kungliga biblioteket; Bebyggelseregistret at Riksantikvarieämbetet; Carlotta; Jamtli; Ancestry; FamilySearch; parish and church records; Rotemansarkivet; Swedish America Newspapers (Minnesota Historical Society). Special thanks to my colleague, historian Kristin Mikalsen, for guiding me!
- 4 The Ex Libris is part of a collection from Nils Rosén, a bequest to Malmö Museum in 1928. <http://carlotta.malmo.se/carlotta-mmus/web/object/84267> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 5 The verse, written in Devanagari script, reads: “In whatever way they approach me, I reward them accordingly. People follow my path in every way, oh son of Pṛthā (Arjuna).” The translation was provided by my colleague Pawel Odyniec, a trained Indologist.
- 6 The presentations of the two teachers are based on my early research on Buddhism in Sweden (Plank 2004).
- 7 <https://buddhaways.wordpress.com/2010/10/10/tao-wei-kwong-wu/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 8 <https://svenskagravar.se/gravsatt/a63a510e-a945-4c2d-9e02-8fc048ee64da> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 9 <https://www.sverigesbuddhister.se/about-sbc/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).

- 10 According to his passport, Lama Ngawang was born in 1927, but his actual birth year was 1929.
- 11 <https://tibetanbuddhism.se/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 12 <https://www.sakya.se> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 13 <https://www.dhamma.org/sv/schedules/schsobhana> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 14 <https://stockholmsbuddhistcenter.se/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 15 <https://www.taozen.se/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 16 The AMM-movement uses this spelling.
- 17 <https://buddhaways.wordpress.com/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 18 https://www.zazen.se/index_en.php (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 19 <https://www.soto-zen.se/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 20 <http://www.zen-goteborg.se/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 21 <https://www.svalornassangha.org/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 22 <https://plumvillage-traditionen.se/om/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 23 <https://www.ssgi.se/sgi-i-sverige> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 24 <https://en.ibpssweden.se/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 25 This book results from several generous stipends provided by the foundation that enabled the authors to meet at workshops and conduct fieldwork together.
- 26 <https://stockholmsbuddhistcenter.se/bokaffar> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 27 A 12-minute video with English subtitles was published on his Instagram account on September 25, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/natthiko/p/CWsQYtHD-0O/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 28 <https://www.instagram.com/natthiko/p/CY2146oIpqi/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 29 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/sweden-must-strengthen-dialogue-faith-communities-combat-religious-or-belief> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 30 <https://mrinstitutet.se/nyheter/flera-utmaningar-for-religions-och-trosfrihet-i-sverige/> (accessed 16 Nov 2024).
- 31 <https://folkhalsaochsjukvard.rjl.se/vardstod/omvardnad/andlig-varld/?accordionAnchor=69316>
- 32 Producers were classed into six groups to capture differences and similarities in their professions, mindfulness training and how, and for what purpose, they use mindfulness. Psychologists and healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and psychotherapists) are producers with a protected professional licence from the Swedish National Board of Healthcare and Welfare. The wellness instructors and the body-oriented instructors, such as yoga instructors and coaches, are also producers who possess knowledge in healthcare but who do not hold such a license. The group of Buddhist and mindfulness meditators draws knowledge primarily from Buddhist traditions or mindfulness. The group creative professions encompass producers engaged in different creative activities.

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