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McAra/Land of Beautiful Vision

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Introduction

In August 1993, a group of convert¹ Buddhists purchased a steep section of land in the enclosed, forested Tararu Valley, around 120 kilometers (75 miles) from New Zealand's largest city, Auckland. The purchase was the culmination of a decade-long search for a suitable place to build facilities for solitary and group meditation retreats. One summer weekend in 1997, I made my first visit to the property, arriving on the Friday evening before two days of rituals for their newly built stūpa. The glimpses I caught of the stūpa spire as I traveled on the winding dirt road up the valley and the colorful banners on bamboo poles near the entrance to the property hinted that this was no ordinary part of the New Zealand landscape.

From the old farmhouse near the creek I walked up the hill for my first full view of the seven-meter-high (twenty-two feet) concrete-and-steel structure. Its whiteness and its geometric, sharp-edged lines and curves contrasted starkly with the ragged scrub and dark green ridge behind. In preparing the site, a digger had cut into the hillside, exposing rough banks of ocher clay. On either side of the muddy path leading to the monument two clusters of tall bamboo poles flew banner-style prayer flags that fluttered in the breeze. Shaped like a big white bell, the stūpa seemed almost to hover above the freshly disturbed soil on the rough, grassy slope.

The next morning I visited the stūpa again. Final preparations had now been made for the weekend's ceremonies. Strings of flags and colored ribbon ran up from stakes in the ground to meet at the stūpa's spire (Fig. I.1). It seemed to me that these additions somehow helped integrate the structure's stark shapes with the broken ground and bright sky around it.

Representing the enlightened mind, stūpas often contain relics of the Buddha or other revered teachers and are traditionally objects of devotion. A stūpa generally consists of a dome sitting on a base and topped with a spire, and variants on this style are a familiar part of the landscape in many parts of Buddhist Asia. However, they are not a familiar sight in New Zealand, and in 1997 there were, as far as I was aware, only three or four others at Buddhist venues around the country.

The people who designed, built, and dedicated the stūpa in the Tararu Valley were of Anglo-European cultural origins and affiliated with the British-based



FIGURE I.1.
Stūpa with flags, immediately prior to dedication ceremony. (Photographed by S. McAra in 1997.)

international movement known as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). Their decision to construct the stūpa at all may seem something of a puzzle to people familiar with the literature on Buddhism's modern and Western interpretations. The FWBO had initially purchased the 86-hectare (214 acre) property with the intention of building a retreat center, a place where people, alone or in groups, from near or far, could spend quiet time in a natural setting, undertaking meditative practices and seeking stillness. What they most needed in a practical sense to bring about this vision was accommodation: a large facility that could host up to fifty retreatants, with a shrine room, kitchen and dining space, bunkrooms and chalets, and an ablutions block. While they had fulfilled part of this vision by constructing four self-contained cabins for solitary retreat and were able to accommodate group retreats of less than fifteen people in the old farmhouse, they had continued to defer the construction of the purpose-built retreat facilities. When they needed facilities for larger gatherings they either hired larger venues or used tents and other temporary shelters. Indeed, when they constructed their stūpa in the southern summer of 1996–1997, the lack of facilities meant that people vol-

unteering on the project stayed in bunkrooms in the house or in old caravans set in clearings around the property, and on the weekend of the dedication ceremony, the overnight visitors slept under canvas.

By early 2006, the first stage of the retreat facility was in fact under construction. The delay was the result of a significant shift in priorities in which participants began talking about developing a new relationship with what they had come to regard as a damaged piece of land, and this took precedence over the pragmatic aim of fund-raising for and construction of retreat facilities. The narratives that people wove around this transformation entailed re-imagining their relationship to the land. These stories, and the themes that they evoke, provide the basis of this book.

TRANSFORMING A LOCALE/A TRANSFORMATIVE LOCALE

Until the stūpa dedication, the FWBO referred to the property as Tararu, the established Māori name for the valley and its main creek. After this they adopted the name Sudarshanaloka, which translates from Sanskrit as “Land of Beautiful Vision.”² They also conducted a ritual aimed at making peace with and befriending the unseen spirit entities they felt were present in the land. The stūpa, the spirits, and the renaming of the land constitute important elements in my account of the unexpected twists and turns entailed by the creation (or conversion) of a sacred place far beyond the original Buddhist homeland (cf. Granoff and Shinohara 2003, 2–3).

The literature on Western Buddhism, which I discuss in chapter 1, highlights the FWBO’s reformist stance that seeks to discard the supposed cultural accretions of the previous two and a half millennia and return to the essence of the Buddha’s teachings. Somewhat controversially, theologian Phillip Mellor (1991, 1989, 1992) has applied the term “Protestant” to the FWBO in an attempt to theorize their British translation of Buddhism. While FWBO *literature* often takes a reformist approach that fits Mellor’s characterization, FWBO *practice* has aspects that complicate it, as will become clear in this book. If Western Buddhists took such an approach, would a stūpa take precedence over the more apparently practical need for a retreat venue? Would nature spirits play a role, or would the notion of their existence be rejected as the animist cultural baggage of localized Buddhist traditions? These questions supply the basis of my investigation of the processes and strategies involved in the vernacularization of Buddhism. Theorization about material culture, in particular the study of the biographies of things (Kopytoff 1986)

and, indeed, the social agency of the land itself, provides a medium for negotiations between the abstract universalist ideals of Buddhism and the mundane social actuality in the establishment of FWBO Buddhism in a new cultural and physical landscape.

The FWBO's utopianist vision of creating a New Society inspired by Buddhist ethics speaks to the theme of alternate religious critiques of contemporary, postindustrial society. FWBO literature has often made strong social critiques, identifying and seeking to address what it portrays as the ills of our time, such as environmental destruction, social injustice, and violence. FWBO members hope that by developing spiritual insight and transforming their own way of being in the world, they will have a transformational effect on society.³ Through attention to members' stories, I explore how the discourses of personal and social transformation that Sandra Bell (1996) identifies in the movement in Britain inform the way New Zealand-based members of the FWBO (hereafter FWBO/NZ members) talk about transformation of the land itself. I also inquire into how emerging settler identities interact with an adopted Buddhist identity, thus tying my research to issues of place and belonging. The relationships between Pākehā (i.e., settlers of European [primarily British] ancestry), the land, and unseen forces perceived in it all play a part in the story of Western Buddhism in a new land. The fraught history of the relationship between Pākehā and the indigenous Māori has influenced how these Buddhists conceptualized their project, so I provide a discussion of this in chapter 3, with the remaining chapters entailing an exploration of the ways that FWBO members involved with Sudarshanaloka engaged with these issues and attempted to redress what they regarded as past harm done to the land.

I draw all of these apparently disparate themes together through the notion of the conjuncture, which is useful for examining the period of intersecting influences that converge during the establishment of Sudarshanaloka. Marshall Sahlins (1981), from whom I borrow the concept, is concerned with the reproduction and transformation of cultural structures in a very different contact episode, that is, the visits of Captain Cook to Hawai'i, which ended with Cook's death in 1779. In reflecting on the interpretations and responses of Hawaiians to their European visitors, Sahlins contends that the challenge to historical anthropology "is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered" (8). People's cultural presuppositions, he says, affect how they respond to situations. But there are occasions in which events fall outside of pre-existing categories, and this creates a process of sedimentation of "new functional values on old categories. These new values are likewise resumed within the cultural structure, as Hawaiians incorporated breaches of tabu by the logic of tabu"

(67–68; quote on 68). I, too, am concerned with what Sahlins calls “the clash of cultural understandings and interests” (68) in a period of contact and how both reproduction and transformation of the existing cultural structures ensue.

The conjuncture I am concerned with is very different, however. During the early period in the history of Tararu/Sudarshanaloka, members encountered obstacles while undertaking activities on the land that culminated in a reevaluation of their purpose. Four events illustrate key moments in the transformation: the sudden death of a man who was deeply involved with Sudarshanaloka; a tale of an unsettling encounter with hostile spirit presences on the land (both discussed in chap. 4); the dedication of the stūpa (chap. 5); and a ritual of redress that attempted to heal past wrongdoings (chap. 6). These pivotal events entailed both continuation and, in some ways, transformation of the sociocultural milieu of participants, influencing ongoing conjunctures: Māori-Pākehā, Pākehā-land, and New Zealand in relation to global Buddhism. The human participants are not the only characters in my account; key sites play important roles in the events I discuss, as does the land itself. These landmarks act as both “summarizing” and “elaborating” symbols encapsulating the “cultural schema” (Ortner 1973, 1990) at Sudarshanaloka.

In chapter 6 I also discuss the role of the key symbolic landmarks and the stories woven around them in the creation of a sense of place. This may seem to be a tidy interpretation, but the final chapter, in discussing developments in the decade following the stūpa dedication, shows that its cohesion is fleeting. The conjuncture, an idea that I have developed further since my earlier interpretation (McAra 2000), begins a new process of reconfiguration: for those who would create typologies depicting adaptive phases of cross-cultural religious transmission, this is an apposite reminder that we are concerned with processes that are living, contingent, and fluid.

TRANSCULTURAL RELIGIOUS BRICOLAGE

The concept of “transculturality”⁴ is an umbrella term that helps to explain how contemporary cultures permeate one another and intermix, encompassing the competing processes of globalization and particularization and allowing for the complex conditions of cultures where both internal differentiation and external networking take place (Welsch 1999, 204–205). Concepts such as synthesis, syncretism, creolization, and bricolage are useful for thinking about these “dynamic intercultural and intracultural transactions” (Stewart 1999, 55). I take the term “syncretism” and its synonyms to refer to the ongoing dynamic transmission of

ideas, practices, and material culture, characterized by the creative appropriation of hitherto alien forms of knowledge from other cultural milieus. This syncretism entails translation into indigenous terms of reference, and its outcome is a trans-cultural religious bricolage:⁵ a synthesis of apparently disparate material-cultural elements that people continually weave into a coherent, albeit shimmering and mutable, fabric.

Scholars of Buddhism (e.g., Baumann 1997b, 205–206; Lewis 1997, 345–349) have called for more detailed research into the domestication of Buddhism in new environments beyond Asia. Cristina Rocha's exploration of *Zen in Brazil* (2006) is one of the first books to bring anthropological analysis to bear on the intermixture that this entails, using the trope of creolization. Members of the FWBO in New Zealand constitute a religious minority belonging to the majority settler group, and they are involved in “settling” or establishing their religious community in a new sociocultural and physical landscape (cf. Bouma 1997). They are therefore, in two senses of the word, an instance of “settler Buddhism.” Fusions of “native” and adopted forms, symbols, and practices occur creatively, sometimes with full awareness, sometimes not, but in the FWBO there is a conscious attempt to create a locally appropriate expression of Buddhism that retains dynamic connections with its wider international Buddhist network. All religions have “composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure” (Shaw and Stewart 1994, 7), so rather than focusing on syncretism as a “category,” it is more useful to investigate “processes of religious synthesis and . . . discourses of syncretism” (emphases in original). Recasting syncretism as “the politics of religious synthesis,” Shaw and Stewart acknowledge that people defending specific religious boundaries often perceive academic discussion of syncretism as an accusation of inauthenticity and impurity. The term “syncretism” is often limited to religious and ritual phenomena “where elements of two different historical ‘traditions’ interact or combine” (10, citing Werbner 1992). In contrast, “bricolage” is used to describe “the formation of new cultural forms from bits and pieces of cultural practice of diverse origins” (10). The term was first introduced into anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966). It is based on the metaphor of *bricoleurs*, that is, people who adapt resources at their disposal rather than obtain specialized materials. Lévi-Strauss is particularly concerned with distinguishing scientific from mythical thought. He regards the latter as expressing itself through a “heterogeneous repertoire” that can be thought of as “a kind of intellectual ‘bricolage’” (1966, 17). While Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach has been criticized (e.g., MacCormack and Strathern 1980), his concept of bricolage has taken on a new life in the growth of works on cultural hybridity and syncretism

in recent years. Along with the term “synthesis,” bricolage is particularly useful for referring to the strategies and processes of drawing on diverse materials and concepts that play a major part in the vernacularization of FWBO Buddhism, and I choose this term among the many possible metaphors because it fits well with my focus on material culture.

The FWBO makes a conscious attempt to render an adopted universalist religion locally meaningful, because of its explicit emphasis on creativity and innovation. Christian missionary efforts have been based on a premise that their spiritual truth, despite being “transcendental, timeless and transcultural,” is “adaptable into local [temporal] idioms and symbolic repertoires” (Shaw and Stewart 1994, 11). For such missionary work, “proper enculturation” or “indigenization” is good and “illegitimate syncretism” is not, despite the impossibility of defining where the boundaries between the two lie (11, citing Hastings 1989). For Buddhists, too, there is always a question of how far a doctrine can be indigenized without losing its fundamental truths. From my own observations, different Buddhist teachers and organizations have vastly different concepts of where the boundaries lie. My analysis suggests that the FWBO provides a particularly marked instance of the strategies and processes of synthesis; many of its members draw on forms and practices of diverse origin in the manner of bricolage, whereby practitioners selectively and consciously draw upon their particular sociocultural environments.

Much of the anthropological literature on religious syncretism focuses on colonized peoples, while the domestication of Buddhism in the West is taking place in very different political circumstances. Many of the activities I describe in this book are consistent with numerous other instances of domestication or indigenization that have occurred in the 2,500-year history of the diverse religious expressions that derive their core doctrinal content from the vast body of teachings attributed to the Buddha. At the same time, the conjuncture of people, events, things, and places that I discuss here provides an opportunity to investigate how members of a settler culture explore issues of belonging. Thus the wider sociocultural setting and the land, the particular place, come to play an active role in shaping the imported religion, informed by the rich narratives of key members about the creation of the “myth of Sudarshanaloka.”

WHY STUDY THE FWBO IN NEW ZEALAND?

One of the main themes of this book is how people are re-imagining their identities and connections with particular places as a response to an era of increasing mobility. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson observe,

[t]he irony of these times . . . is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient. It is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities (Anderson 1983) come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorial anchors in their actuality (1992, 10–11).

This quote sets the scene for the ways that contemporary, transcultural Buddhist movements are putting down roots. The FWBO as an *international* movement draws from an enormous diversity of Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources to constitute and, through its media, imagine itself as a global Buddhist community. At the same time, New Zealand-based members of the movement engage in the creation of a new *local* Buddhist, spiritual homeland in a difficult-to-access, rough, and bush-clad valley. In this book I investigate the question, Does Sudarshana-loka serve as a “territorial anchor” in which FWBO members create a re-imagined place, and if so, how?

Anthropological literature on intercultural religious conversion and the vernacularization of foreign religions has focused on power relations in the context of colonization. The spread of Buddhism into new sociocultural settings provides an opportunity to investigate the manner of adaptation to the new locale in distinct political circumstances.⁶ Increasingly in the last two decades, researchers are writing about Buddhism in various strata of society in national and international contexts, investigating the kinds of transformations taking place in Buddhist practice.⁷ My book contributes to this literature, while also speaking to other themes, including the role of material culture in religious transplantation, combined with settler identities.

APPROACH

According to an outdated archetype that persists in popular representations of the discipline, the anthropologist undergoes a period of immersion in fieldwork in some distant, exotic location, returning to produce an authoritative monograph detailing such matters as kinship structures and modes of subsistence in his or her chosen society. However, this approach was based on an assumption that “different cultures inhere in discrete and separate places” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 35) and cannot speak to contemporary conditions. The outdated methods do not allow for

research in “spatially dispersed phenomena” (34) or processes of transculturation. In the last two decades, cultural anthropology has entered a new phase, entailing an increasingly reflexive and self-critical approach (Brettell 1993, 1). Further, it is no longer appropriate to adopt the authoritative, omniscient stance that Edward Said (1978) and others associate with imperialism. Rather, ethnographies are fictions “in the sense of something made or fashioned” (Clifford 1986, 6), and they are “partial” in the senses of being incomplete and of being inextricably shaped by the observer’s worldview.

In the last decade I have attended meetings, talks, classes, and study groups at the Auckland Buddhist Centre and retreats at Sudarshanaloka and hired venues. In 2004 I joined the committee that manages the business of Sudarshanaloka, both to keep in touch with developments there and to contribute to the retreat center project. My approach is participatory: my earliest visits to Sudarshanaloka were part of my personal exploration of Buddhism, and, even after deciding to undertake this research in 1999, I attended retreats and talks more as participant than observer, albeit with both an openness to research-related ideas and an awareness of the need for respecting others’ privacy and confidentiality in personal matters. However, I should also stress that I am wary of homogenizing terms such as “insider,” since research relationships usually entail multiple complexities and ambiguities (Narayan 1993). I acknowledge that the “multiplicity of perspectives” (Northcote 2004, 94) does not get full coverage due to the fact that my focus was on a small, core group’s narratives and I did not seek views of those less involved and that ultimately the work remains in my overall control, so the “dialogue” is weighted in favor of my views. I participate in a dialectic between personal and academic involvement, having sometimes engaged in FWBO activities as part of my own personal search, at other times feeling as if I was a somewhat distanced and skeptical observer. As I discuss in chapter 1, my personal exploration of Buddhism led to my participation in events that ultimately provided the inspiration for this research, which has important consequences for this book.

In 1999–2000 I undertook in-depth audiotaped interviews with six individuals closely associated with Sudarshanaloka and had numerous informal conversations with members from various parts of the FWBO.⁸ I was also privileged to be able to access a wealth of written materials, including books, personal musings, newsletters, Web sites, and magazine articles. Many FWBO talks, including transcripts and audio and video recordings, are readily accessible at FWBO centers. Further, photograph albums provide a visual record of Sudarshanaloka that supplemented my visits there and provided invaluable help for my analysis of the material culture of the retreat center.

During the time period I focus on in my research, my key interlocutors were members of the Friends of Tararu team, the group most closely involved with projects at Sudarshanaloka. Their purpose, as the name indicates, was to be friends to the land—that is, to keep in touch with the overall vision of creating a place of healing. I have focused on their stories because it is they who have been most actively and consciously involved in Sudarshanaloka. In referring to Tararu/Sudarshanaloka’s visionaries and key people I have struggled to find a suitable collective word. I have chosen to use the terms “Friends of Tararu” and “the trustees” and occasionally “FWBO/NZ members” in a fairly loose sense, rather than aiming for absolute accuracy, because the membership of groups of people associating with Sudarshanaloka in various ways has changed over time.

I have not used pseudonyms and retain actual place and personal names. In considering this I asked my interlocutors for their views. Taranatha said that the names and places “are part of our history,” and he continued that he did not think publishing them would do any harm, “because the people who matter don’t care for their own sake, and the posterity will want to know who those people are; that brings life and personality to it” (27 August 1999). I have also discussed my research, as it has evolved over the last six years, with several of the Sudarshanaloka trustees, and they have read earlier drafts of this book. I have attempted to work with their responses, highlighting where necessary the differences between my anthropological approach and their spiritual focus.

THE SLIPPERINESS OF WORDS

The complexities of terms like “the West,” “convert,” “Buddhist,” “religion,” and “culture” all have ramifications for this research. Such terms act as a shorthand, but we need to avoid the trap of believing that any cultural phenomenon possesses some homogeneous, unitary essence. Words are no more than a set of necessary glosses or abstractions, which are always inadequate and ambiguous, evoking ideal types that do not exist empirically. Still, it is unfortunate that words often have the effect of simplifying and freezing complex concepts, and it is all too easy to fall into using them in ways that do not allow for difference. Abu-Lughod (1991, 149–152) complains that generalization is a “language of power,” hiding behind a “professional discourse of ‘objectivity,’” although it can also be a language of resistance. This facilitates detached abstraction and reification and allows the ethnographer to impose a false sense of coherence, flattening out differences among community members.

The term “West,” then, as a term denoting a form of culture should be used with extreme caution. Just as Said cautions with regard to representations of the

“East,” we should be wary of making the “West” into a “mythically unitary culture” (Okely 1996, 5). The term, often used interchangeably with the equally problematic “First World,” encompasses aspects of life in Western Europe, Britain, North America, Australia, and New Zealand but socioeconomically incorporates the wealthier strata of capitalist societies around the world. In this book, then, I use the word “West” as a generalized reference to a particular transnational cultural context with secular, post-industrial features, but also distinctive Judeo-Christian influences.⁹ The very idea of the West does convey something about the FWBO as an institution shaped by its English and Western countercultural origins. While the label “Western Buddhism” fails to adequately categorize one recognizable cultural form, I have a further reason to use it, in order to be consistent with the term that FWBO and other Buddhist Westerners have adopted. Because the movement has centers in places that are not widely considered Western, members recognize that the term is problematic (see, e.g., Sangharakshita 1992b, 21–27; Subhuti n.d.), and indeed the Indian wing of the movement adopted another name: Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG). Sangharakshita, the FWBO’s founder, notes the complexities of the term, suggesting that FWBO centers around the world “are united by a common spirit” (1992b, 23) rather than by being Western.

In looking at the nexus of phenomena frequently referred to as Western Buddhism, we should also acknowledge that on its own “Buddhism” remains a problematic category, having been created “as an object of western knowledge” by nineteenth-century European Orientalists (Lopez 1995b, 2). Scholars of Buddhism also note the problems of such terms. For example, Rick Fields argues that the term “Western Buddhism” does not “distinguish between the very different national styles of, say, British and French Buddhist groups” (1998, 127), to which I would add that it also fails to distinguish the many different adaptations of Buddhism that transcend national styles, often following particular international networks such as the FWBO, where centers in diverse countries have a similar overall style.¹⁰ By Western Buddhism I mean the phenomenon of Buddhism as adopted by converts who can be considered “Westerners” in terms of their cultural baggage. Following many Buddhists (e.g., Sangharakshita 1992b, 48–49), I use the term “Buddhism” to include cultural aspects of the various Buddhist traditions and “Dharma” to refer to the doctrinal aspects (see glossary).

LAND OF THE STŪPA AND SACRED PŪRIRI

Taranatha, Satyananda, and Prajñalila are the three main characters in this book whose stories about Sudarshanaloka I draw upon. All three, despite the impres-

sion given by their Sanskrit ordination names, are Pākehā New Zealanders. Satyananda was ordained in 1984 and so is the most senior Order member of the three, although in years he is younger. He has long been involved in social and environmental issues; he worked with Greenpeace and some Auckland low-income housing projects, and his path to Buddhism came via his countercultural interests. Diane Quin (ordained as Prajñalila in 1999) came from a farming family, has been interested in Buddhism since the early 1980s, and studied social sciences at university. After she encountered the FWBO she went to Britain and worked as a production manager at the FWBO's publishing house, Windhorse, in Glasgow for three years. She returned to New Zealand in 1993 to complete a Master of Fine Arts degree at Elam, the fine arts school at The University of Auckland (from which she graduated in 1998), and because, having heard that the Tararu Valley property had been bought, she wanted to be involved.

Prior to his 1992 ordination Taranatha had worked as a general practitioner; he was raised on a farm in Taranaki. It was not until he was close to retirement that he encountered Buddhism, after which he became involved with establishing the retreat center, undertaking solitary retreats, and providing vital support in terms of finances (loans and donations) and various voluntary activities such as teaching meditation at the Auckland Buddhist Centre and helping with activities at Sudarshanaloka. He wrote about his reasons for being involved with Sudarshanaloka.

It is not the home of my childhood consciousness, responding animal-like to the beauty of sight, sound and smell, and hardening itself to the birth, exploitation and death that is the battle for human survival in the bush. The home I come to is the land of the Stūpa and of the Sacred Pūriri; the land of transformation of abundant, wild energy and beauty into devotion, love and understanding (Taranatha 1997, 3).

I take his story of transforming his way of relating to the land in tandem with his journey of personal transformation, Satyananda's aspiration to create a spiritual home, and Prajñalila's vivid engagement in creating and documenting stories and rituals at Sudarshanaloka as the central narratives of this book. Other people's stories are no less valid, but these accounts provide the most telling insight into how personal engagement with the land became an essential part of the story of transforming self and place.